National Organic Training Skillnet

Quality Assurance Manual

Version 2.1

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Chapter 1

National Organic Training Skillnet -

Governance and the Management of Quality

(Aligned to QQI Core QA Guideline 1)

1.1. National Organic Training Skillnet (NOTS) Profile

Established in 2007, NOTS is a non-profit training and education membership network which serves the training and development needs of the expanding organic agriculture/agri-food, food/beverage sectors. NOTS offers high-quality, low-cost, subsidised training throughout the Republic of Ireland. It is co-funded by Skillnet Ireland and network members/companies. Skillnet Ireland is funded by the National Training Fund through the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. NOTS has a specific focus on organic production methods and biological/regenerative farming practices. NOTS enjoys strong support and endorsement by the agri-industry and has been actively engaged in the sector for the past 15 years. In addition to the core activity of training, we also promote organic producers and processors networks that address issues and opportunities for the sector and host a series of nationwide events such as farm walks and local group meetings that facilitate this networking. NOTS' long-term strategy is to develop Ireland's organic sector by supporting the growth and sustainability of organic farmers, growers, processors, food businesses and advisors by providing a range of support services including training and education.

NOTS Members use the network to avail of grant-assisted training and networking opportunities for their owners, managers, and staff. To avail of funding support for training, employers, self-employed and sole traders must be members of the network. Membership is free and automatic when booking a course.

NOTS operates from an administrative office located in the Drumshanbo Enterprise Centre, Drumshanbo, Co Leitrim.

1.2. NOTS Aims

National Organic Training Skillnet's aims are to:

- Assist businesses from the organic agriculture/agri-food and food & beverage sectors to identify and address their skills needs – including guiding members on achieving value for money when investing in learning and development;
- Provide Industry specific, quality assured, flexible, training programmes (both accredited and non-accredited) tailored to the needs of the sector, including certified and non-certified technical and non-technical training to members and new entrants to improve competitiveness including core agricultural training and other core skills;
- Inform members regarding successful approaches to agricultural knowledge-sharing, learning, and talent development, as well as advising members on how to evaluate the benefit and effectiveness of training;
- Provide access to members to a business network / active community within the sector; and
- To organise conferences, seminars, and other non-formal and formal learning and networking events in response to members' needs.

1.3. Scope of Provision

NOTS provides a wide range of credited and non-accredited programmes and short courses that are designed to meet specific needs of the organic and agri-food sectors. We also facilitate progression pathways for graduates by providing funding mechanisms with higher education institutes. See Appendix 5 – Current Training Offered by NOTS.

We have been operating as a second provider for the Drumshanbo Enterprise Centre (DEC) operating under DEC's Quality Assurance system, offering programmes leading to *Fruit and Vegetable Production 5N2552* and *Organic Production Principles 5N1747* awards. This collaborative arrangement ceased in October 2022 as DEC discontinued its relationship with QQI. NOTS are progressing this IAV to get these two programmes Validated as our own.

Additionally, we have a close working relationship with An tIonad Glas - Organic College, Dromcollogher, Co Limerick which delivers accredited organic horticulture programmes which lead to Level 5 and 6 awards on the NFQ. We fund learners on the these programmes, and the certification is provided by LCETB.

We work with the South East Technological University (formerly Waterford IT) in the delivery of a MSc/Postgraduate Diploma in Organic and Biological Agriculture. The Network Manager sits on the programme board and is in involved in the monitoring and evaluation of the programmes and updating of programme content.

We have a working relationship with Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) whereby we fund learners to undertake the MSc in Organic Farming.

1.4. Learner Profile

Learners are predominantly employees of NOTS member companies, and range in age from 18 - 65. The largest group of learners are in the 30-50 age range, working in practical roles as farmers, growers, processors, food businesses, agricultural professionals, and consultants working throughout the organic, food, and agricultural sectors. Our learners also include new entrants and commercial producers interested in developing organic and new agri-food business enterprises. The majority of learners are male, though the percentage of female participation has increased steadily over the past five years.

1.5. Organisation Structure

The Network Manager manages NOTS and is responsible for all day-to-day operations. There is a core staff of four who report to the Network Manager:

- The Finance Manager is responsible for procurement, internal verification, financial management and reporting;

- The Communications Manager is responsible for public information, advertising, public and media relations (including social media), website management and learner induction;
- The Network Administrator is responsible for learner and trainer support, training administration and admissions; and
- The Quality Officer is responsible for the management and coordination of the QA system

Detailed descriptions of these roles are set out in Appendix 2

We contract suitably qualified trainers and subject matter experts to design and develop programmes.

Our organisation chart (See Figure 1) identifies the areas of governance that have a recommendation role and an approval role. The organisation chart is designed to be consistent and fully reflect the role and responsibilities set out in the QA manual.

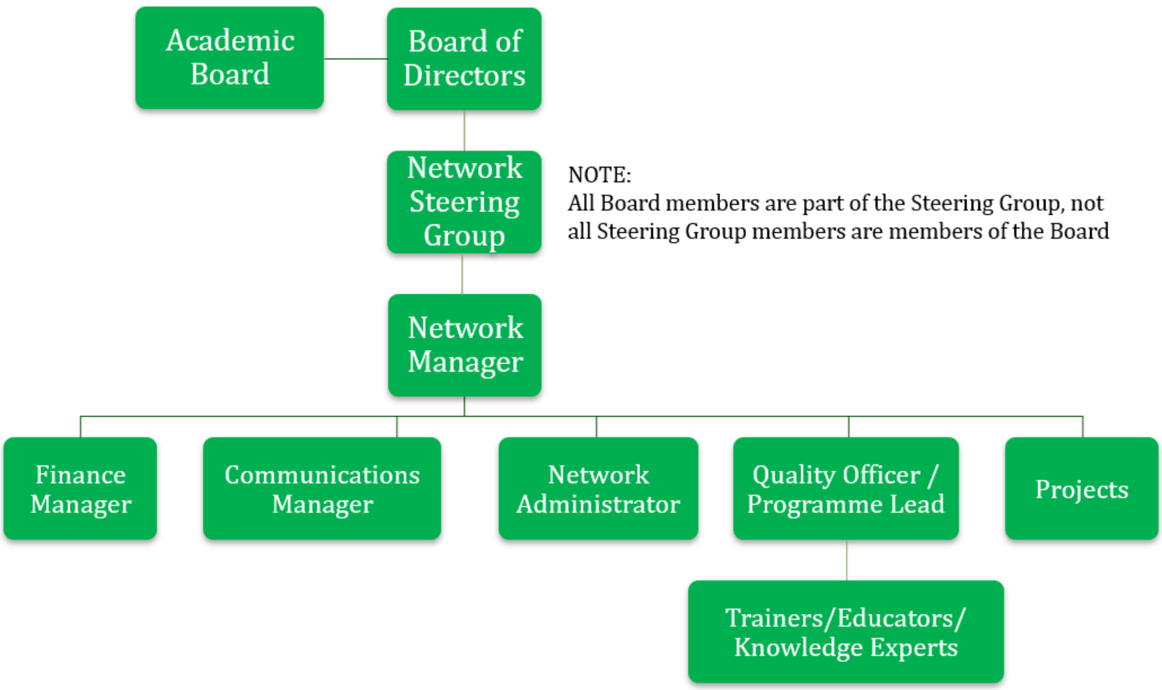

Figure 1. NOTS Organisation Chart

1.6. Governance

National Organic Training Network (CLG) is a Company Limited by Guarantee and trading as National Organic Training Skillnet (NOTS)

- Reg. Number: 450937
- Registered On: 18/12/2007
- Registered Address: The Enterprise Centre, Hill Road, Drumshanbo Co. Leitrim, N41Y1F6, Ireland.

1.6.1. Organisation Governance

Our governance system is designed to reflect and meet the needs of NOTS and our context within the organic / agri-food sectors. It includes a corporate decision-making unit responsible for strategic planning and financial matters (NOTS Board of Directors) and an academic decision-making unit (Academic Board). The Academic Board maintains oversight of the academic standards, the quality of the academic provision and the protection of learner interests.

This system of governance facilitates the involvement of all key stakeholders including trainers, learners and staff and external experts.

1.6.2. Governance Principles

NOTS is fully committed to ensuring that its corporate governance arrangements are

- Efficient and effective;
- Open, inclusive, and transparent;
- Meet all relevant legal requirements and obligations;
- Provide for proper accountability;
- Provide for externality; and
- Promote integrity and impartiality in the conduct of business.

1.6.3. Board of Directors

The Board of Directors is the highest level of governance in NOTS. The Board of Directors has primary responsibility for corporate governance and oversight of NOTS and is responsible for ensuring that NOTS is governed effectively and responsibly. The Board of Directors operates according to a documented Terms of Reference (Appendix 1)

1.6.4. Network Steering Group

The Board of Directors has delegated responsibility for oversight of the management of NOTS to the Network Steering Group (NSG) which consists of twelve representatives from participating network members. Membership is reflective of the various branches of the industry sectors we serve, and includes members from the Leitrim Organic Farmers Cooperative, the organic certification bodies Irish Organic Association (IOA) and Organic Trust (OT), as well as farmers. Membership of the Network Steering Group is voluntary, and any member can put themselves forward for membership. The Network Steering Group operates according to a documented Terms of Reference (Appendix 1) which have been agreed by the Board of Directors.

1.6.5. Academic Governance – The Academic Board

The Board of Directors has delegated responsibility for oversight of academic standards academic decision making to the Academic Board. The existence of this Board helps to separate corporate and academic decision-making. The Academic Board reports directly to the Board of Directors. We have also ensured that the membership of Programme Development Teams is sufficiently distinct from the membership of the Academic Board. This is to ensure a separation of responsibilities between those who produce/develop programme materials, and those who approve them. This structure is designed to reflect a clear alignment to QQI's *Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines.* The Academic Board operates according to a documented Terms of Reference (Appendix 1) which have been agreed by Board of Directors.

1.6.6. Risk Management

The Finance Manager assesses and monitors risks specific to NOTS at a corporate and provider level. We categorise risk under the following headings:

- Governance and financial risks;
- Operational risks; and
- Education and programme-related risks.

Risks and mitigating measures are recorded on the Risk Register (Appendix 3) which is reviewed by the Network Manager on a monthly basis and data is presented to the Network Steering Group and the Academic Board. Risk is a standing item on the agenda for meetings of the Network Steering Group, the Academic Board, and the Results Approval Panel.

1.7 Quality Statement

We aim to promote the philosophy that quality is the responsibility of all - and create a culture that enables all staff, trainers, and learners to "live" quality in their actions. We want to foster an environment where everyone associated with NOTS is passionate about quality, as a personal and corporate value, rather than simply compliance. We define a culture of quality as an environment where we not only follow quality guidelines but also consistently take quality-focused actions, talk, and learn about quality, and are able to identify what quality looks like in NOTS. This is grassroots, peer-driven approach, with a leadership emphasis on quality that permeates the entire organisation.

1.7.1. Embedding Quality in NOTS

- NOTS provides sufficient resources to ensure quality and a fit-for-purpose QA system;
- Quality is a standing agenda item at all governance meetings;
- All members of our governance units including members of the Academic Board, are familiar with our QA system, how it operates in NOTS and are asked for their input;

- Our Quality Assurance Manual is published on our website and is easily accessible to all staff on a shared online folder. A copy of the Manual is available for reference at each governance unit meeting and is provided to the external authenticator; and
- Staff and management use the QA system in daily activities and involve stakeholders such as trainers, learners, and other staff in quality enhancement, through stakeholder surveys and other forums.

1.7.2. Responsibilities

- The Board of Directors/NSG has ultimate responsibility for the QA system;
- The Academic Board is responsible for oversight of its implementation;
- The Quality Officer coordinates the implementation of the system on a day-to-day basis, maintains quality assurance documents and reports on its effectiveness; and
- Trainers have a defined responsibility for implementing the system which is written into the role description.

1.7.3. Scope of the Quality Assurance System

Our Quality Assurance system is designed to meet the requirements set out in the following QQI guidelines:

- Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines published by QQI (April 2016);
- Sector-Specific Quality Assurance Guidelines – Independent/Private Providers;
- QQI Quality Assuring Assessment Guidelines for Providers 2013 Revised 2018); and
- QQI Policies and Criteria for the validation of programmes of education and training (2017).

Our Quality Assurance manual is divided into chapters and each chapter is clearly aligned to a heading set out in Section 2 of the Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines

1. Governance and the Management of Quality
2. Documented Approach to Quality Assurance
3. Programmes of Education and Training
4. Staff Recruitment, Management & Development
5. Teaching and Learning
6. Assessment of Learners
7. Learner Support
8. Information and Data Management
9. Public Information and Communication
10. Self-Evaluation, Monitoring and Review

The Quality Assurance system applies to all who work with or on behalf of NOTS in the design and delivery of training – including staff and trainers, and to the learners. It also applies to those who are responsible for governance, and to those who have direct responsibility for assuring quality. Our legal, financial, and quality advisors guide and update us on changes and amendments to relevant legislation around health and safety, equality, revenue, employment and data protection and regulations.

Our Quality Assurance system is underpinned by the following pieces of legislation:

- The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012;
- Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) 2019;
- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018;
- Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005;
- Employment Equality Acts 1998–2015; and
- Equal Status Acts 2000-2015.

1.7.4. Aims of the Quality Assurance System

The aims of the NOTS Quality Assurance System are to:

- Demonstrate compliance with QQI's guidelines and a commitment to ongoing quality enhancement;
- Help to ensure regulatory and legislative compliance;
- Protect the integrity of programmes leading to awards on the NFQ;
- Identify, promote, and standardise best practice:
    - Provide the necessary information to appropriately inform day to day work; and
    - Help to easily identify gaps in quality.
- Help position NOTS as a proactive and progressive education and training provider:
    - Enhancing the learner and trainer experience; and
    - Supporting staff and trainer development.

1.7.5. Learner Input into Quality Assurance

Our aim is to have high levels of learner input in quality assurance. We have measures in place to ensure that learners have a voice, and learner surveys are key tools in this regard. Our trainers encourage learners to complete survey forms. The data collected provides us with invaluable ideas and feedback which is essential for learner-centred education. We are committed to acting on recommendations and concerns raised in learner surveys to inform our quality improvement policies.

Details of the Quality Assurance system which impact directly on learners are contained or signposted in the Learner Handbook which is discussed at induction. Learners are encouraged to provide feedback about any aspect of the learning experience to their trainer and/or the Quality Officer - and may also use the complaints procedure. The external evaluator links directly with learners as part of our self-evaluation exercises. There is also a learner representative on our Academic Board.

1.7.6. Maintaining the Quality Assurance System

An external quality assurance specialist reviews the QA system with us every two years and submits a report and recommendations to the Network Steering Group and the Academic Board. Agreed changes are actioned by the Quality Officer.

We regard the use of an external reviewer as a core element of our quality cycle. An external review provides an independent dimension to our quality assurance activity - which we consider very important. The external review provides us with an opportunity to evaluate and reflect on the effectiveness of our QA system and get an outside perspective on how we can enhance the system. It also offers assurances to learners and the public that the learning experience at NOTS is being monitored.

New, or significantly revised policies, must be approved by the Academic Board before they are adopted.

The Quality Officer reviews our procedures every year and has authority to approve new procedures and supporting documents. He works with the document owners to update them (if needed) to ensure they continue to be effective and fit-for-purpose. If the Quality Officer identifies a gap in procedure, he tasks the person who is responsible for the procedure to address it and design a new procedure if it is needed (using our standard procedure template).

Chapter 2

Documented Approach to Quality Assurance

(Aligned to QQI Core QA Guideline 2)

2.1. Quality Assurance Policy

The QQI Core Quality Assurance Guidelines (2016, page 9) requires that our 'quality assurance system is fully documented'. To comply with this, we have robust, documented policies and associated procedures designed to assure the quality and standards of provision in NOTS. The documents that make up our QA system are designed to be consistent, accessible, and easy to read. We do our best to ensure that all references and cross-references are correct and easy to follow. Policies are, by definition, high-level statements that set out clearly the 'why' we do something and the principles that inform our approach to a particular quality area. We support our policies with procedures which we write with a level of detail that makes it clear how we do something. The acid test we use is to ask a new person in a role if they would know how to do something based on the detail contained in a particular procedure. . We have documented arrangements for monitoring, evaluating, reviewing, and renewing our policies and procedures. We have a robust approach to document control and standardisation in support of our QA system.

2.1.1. Definition of a Policy

A *policy* is a statement or series of statements that sets out our position and commitment on a particular area of education and training provision. It should show that we are aware of our obligations in the area and committed to deliver on these obligations.

A *policy*:

- Is written for all stakeholders (internal and external) to inform them of our position on a particular aspect of our role;
- Sets out broad parameters;
- Has the understanding and backing of governance and senior management;

- Informs staff of what is expected of them, and provides protection and support in carrying out their work;
- Informs the learners of what they should expect from NOTS; and
- Is available to all stakeholders on our website.

2.1.2. Definition of a Procedure

A *procedure* describes a process intended to deliver all or part of a policy commitment.

A *procedure*:

- Is written to be easily available and understood by those who operate the process or engage with it;
- Addresses the practicalities of the process – definitions, purposes, responsibilities, actions, supporting and reference documents, the 'how', 'when' and 'by whom';
- Is designed with the intention of delivering quality and consistency;
- Must be capable of being monitored i.e. records and/or indicators will be generated which should show if the procedure is being followed and, crucially, if it is effective; and
- Evolves over time as improvements are identified and implemented.

2.2. Responsibilities

- The Network Steering Group is responsible for ensuring that the resources are in place to ensure a well-documented Quality Assurance system;
- The Academic Board maintains oversight of the documents that make up the system; and
- The Quality Officer is responsible for designing, issuing, controlling, and managing the documents.

2.3. Elements of our Quality Assurance System

The following are the elements that make up our QA System:

- **Quality Assurance Manual** – core document organised in chapters that align with the QQI Quality Assurance Gore Guidelines

- **Procedures**
- **Role Descriptions** - for individuals who have a role in implementing the Quality Assurance system;
- **Terms of Reference** for governance units
- **Risk Register**
- **Corporate policies** e.g. Risk Management, Health and Safety, Data Protection
- Learner and Tutor **Handbooks**
- **QA Document Register** – Excel file that tracks the documents that make up the system;
- **QA Reference documents** (documents that provide pertinent details for consultation e.g., QQI Quality Assurance Guidelines, Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012)
- **QA Support documents**. Documents used to implement procedures e.g., Internal Verification form, learner evaluation form, complaints form
- **Flowcharts/graphics** e.g., QQI Quality Assurance Schema, organisation chart, (generally included in the QA manual)
- **Glossary** of commonly used terms in the system (useful for ensuring consistency of use of language and terminology)
- **Style guide** - set of standards for the writing, formatting, and design of documents

2.3.1. The Quality Assurance Manual

The manual is the core document in our Quality Assurance system and is structured to align to QQI Quality Assurance guidelines to help to ensure and demonstrate compliance. It is formatted to match the chapter headings set in Section 2 of the *Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for use by all Providers*. These guidelines detail the Quality Assurance principles that underpin the design of our Quality Assurance system. The Quality Assurance manual is maintained electronically on Google Drive and is also published on Moodle. All stakeholders have access to our Quality Assurance manual on our website.

2.3.2. Style Guide

We have a documented in-house style guide which we use when writing. The Style Guide is designed to reflect our values and acts as a reference point that sets standards for writing documents. It helps us to ensure that everyone who writes uses a consistent approach, style, and tone and that we communicate clearly and concisely in the way that is easy to understand. The benefits of using a Style Guide include:

- Makes life easy for the readers of our documents/website;
- Defines NOTS writing style and tone of voice;
- Defines a file naming convention which helps to ensure that folders and files are named in a consistent, logical and predictable way so that information can be located, identified and retrieved by users as quickly and easily as possible;
- Empowers staff to write clearly, concisely, and professionally;
- Helps to differentiate NOTS, reinforces our voice and supports our brand identity;
- Helps us to comply with guidelines from regulatory bodies; and
- Helps new writers to understand best practice within NOTS.

2.4. Design of Quality Assurance Documents

2.4.1. Principles of Document Design and Use

- Aim to have clear, concise communication that is easily understood;
- Use simple and accessible language;
- Know your audience;
- Write with the user/s in mind – test with the user;
- All documents are readily identifiable by name, version number and date;
- Every policy and procedure has an identified owner;
- Remove obsolete documents from use and securely destroy or archive them; and
- All documents are approved prior to issue.

We use plain language when writing; a style of writing that is intended to help the reader to understand the message the first time they read it. It involves the orderly and clear presentation of information so that readers have the best possible chance of understanding it. We do not include personnel names in our Quality Assurance documents – we use role titles.

2.4.2. Use of Visuals

We use visuals in our Quality Assurance documents where they help to clarify the meaning of the text and support the user's understanding of the text. Visuals take many forms; process maps, schema, organisation charts, flowcharts. The following are the key visuals included in the Quality Assurance manual:

- A visual representation of the governance structure;
- A visual representation of the organisational structure; and
- A process map of our Quality Assurance system based on the Quality Assurance schema designed by QQI.

2.5. Learner and Trainer Handbooks

We regard the learner and trainer handbooks as key Quality Assurance documents. They are designed to be consistent with the relevant information contained in the Quality Assurance manual. The information presented is adapted in both format and style to suit the reader, while ensuring consistency with the manual. The QO updates them annually with the input of users and reissues them with a new version number and date. The handbooks are written in reader-friendly language and signposted in a manner that makes it easy for users to navigate. The contents provide or point to the Quality Assurance policies and procedures which are most relevant to the audiences using hyperlinks to the more detailed documents or signposting to the website/Learning Management System (LMS).

We make these handbooks available at or in advance of induction and there is a copy of the learner handbook on the LMS. There is a copy of the trainer manual in the shared online trainer folder.

2.6. Maintaining Quality Assurance Documents

We regard our Quality Assurance procedures as dynamic processes that evolve and adapt as our provision and content grows and changes. While our policies change infrequently, we are constantly reviewing, amending, updating and/or archiving our procedures and the documents we use to implement them to reflect experience, changing context and changing QQI requirements. We maintain our documents on SharePoint for ease of use, access, and security. The electronic format makes revision and version control easier to manage and reduces the need for emails and paper. We share the documents with users using shared online folders. We use a system of hyperlinks across Quality Assurance documents to ensure that if a procedure or document is updated, the change is consistent across all sources of information. We have a version control system to manage different versions and drafts of a document. Version control involves a process of naming and distinguishing between a series of draft documents which lead to a final (or approved) version, which in turn may be subject to further amendments. This provides an audit trail for changes made to documents.

We use a QA Document Register - an Excel file to track and record all Quality Assurance documents

Chapter 3

Programmes of Education and Training

(Aligned to QQI Core QA Guideline 3)

3.1. Programmes of Education and Training Policy

NOTS aim to provide education and training programmes that cater for the specific needs of our members and the industry sectors we serve. We are committed to developing and delivering high-quality, tailored, and flexible programmes designed to meet the standards set by the NFQ for which there is demand and meet a genuine education and training need. This is achieved through careful planning, consultation with a range of stakeholders, the use of appropriately qualified programme design teams, and the ongoing evaluation and development of all aspects of our training provision. The rationale for providing QQI validated programmes and the associated financial, time and human resource costs are carefully considered by the Network Steering Group. The academic and quality perspectives are considered by the Academic Board before a decision is taken to progress a programme. We ensure that the resources to support the development, design, planning and delivery of programmes are in place, and that the facilities and resources for delivery are fit-for-purpose and meet learners' and programme needs. We secure QQI validation before enrolling learners on any programme that is designed to lead to an award on the NFQ and we initiate discussions with QQI about a proposed application of validation at an early stage of the process.

Definition

"A 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."

QQI Policies and criteria for the validation of programmes of education and training validation of programmes of education and training, 2017, p.5

3.2. Responsibility

- The Board of Directors is responsible for overall programme approval based on Academic Board (academic) and Network Steering Group (commercial) recommendations;
- The Academic Board maintains oversight of programme design and approval, delivery, quality, and resources;
- The Programme Design Team is responsible for programme design and development; and
- The Quality Officer is responsible for the coordination of all quality processes underpinning programme design and development.

3.3. Programme Lifecycle

The Programme Lifecycle is pictured below (see Figure 2. Programme Lifecycle).

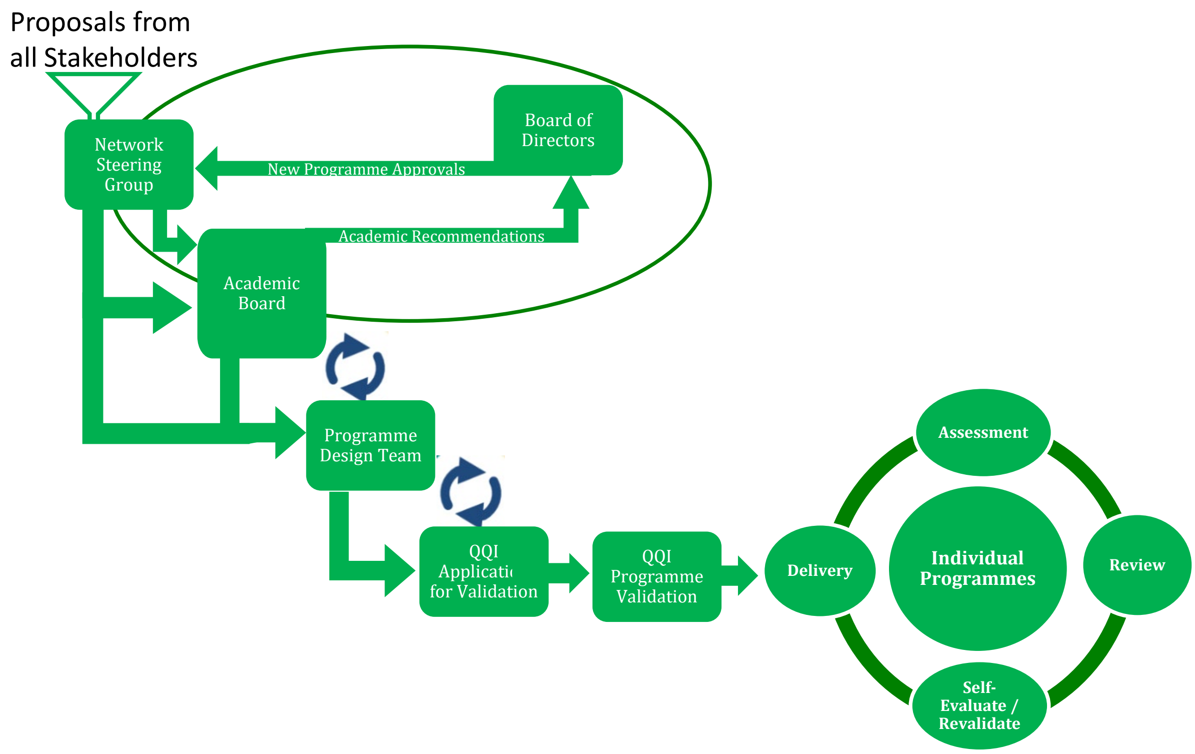

Figure 2. Programme Lifecycle

A detailed step guide follows:

1. Open invitation to propose a programme (ongoing);
2. Proposer discusses the programme concept with the Network Manager;
3. Proposer collects data to support a proposal;
4. Network Manager completes Programme Proposal Form;
5. Network Manager brings Programme Proposal to Network Steering Group;
6. Network Steering Group progresses the Programme Proposal to Academic Board (or not);
7. Approved by Academic Board, academic recommendation to the Board of Directors;
8. Board of Directors Approval
9. Network Manager appoints programme design team/programme lead, allocates budget and agrees project plan/ timeline;
10. The Programme Lead initiates discussion with QQI (if being submitted for validation);
11. Programme Design Team produces programme descriptor;
12. Programme Lead presents the programme descriptor to Academic Board;
13. Changes if needed;
14. Approved by Academic Board;
15. Programme Lead presents the programme descriptor to Network Steering Group;
16. Programme Lead prepares application for validation;
17. Network Manager signs application;
18. Quality Officer submits application via QBS/pays invoice;
19. Quality Officer tracks the progress of the application;
20. Quality Officer coordinates preparation for panel visit;
21. Programme validated by QQI;
22. Programme delivered;
23. Programme assessed;
24. Programme reviewed every two years – minor amendments/updating; and
25. Programme self-evaluated/revalidated every 5 years (or retired).

3.4. Needs Analysis

We are constantly monitoring and assessing the training needs of members of the Network, the industry sectors we serve and government and EU regulation and legislation that impact on our stakeholders. We encourage members of the network, members of the Network Steering Group, the Academic Board, staff, trainers, past and present learners, and industry stakeholders to suggest new programmes which may be based on a specific need and/or on the emergence of new or updated regulations issued by the Department of Agriculture or other governance agencies. If the Network Manager considers that a suggested programme might be viable, he completes a *Programme Proposal Form* and presents it to the Network Steering Group who consider the rationale for providing the programme from a strategic, commercial and resource perspective. A programme proposal includes details of;

- How the proposed programme meets skills, training, or educational needs
- The gap/s the programme is intended to bridge
- The learner profile/target group
- The anticipated number of applicants
- Data on similar programmes already available to the target group
- Stakeholder engagement e.g., employer engagement in identifying skills needs.

The proposal must be backed up by supporting data resulting from research within the sector**.** Data sources we use to determine the need:

- Networking within the industry sectors/feedback collected at industry/networking events;
- Knowledge of the sector and planned changes;
- Feedback/requests from current and past learners, trainers, and staff;
- An analysis of enquiries received; and
- Discussions with our collaborating providers.

The Network Steering Group may progress the proposal to the Academic Board who considers the proposal from an academic and quality perspective.

3.5. Programme Design and Development, Approval and Validation

If the proposal is approved by both governance units, the Network Manager allocates a budget for programme design and appoints a Programme Design Team and a Programme Lead who must be appropriately qualified and experienced to lead the design process. The programme design must be learner-focused and based on the learning outcomes and the content must align with relevant standards and the requirements of the proposed level of award on the NFQ.

The following are addressed as part of the design process;

- The teaching and skills expertise required;
- The teaching and learning strategy appropriate to the programme context and programmes aims;
- Capacity to succeed/entry requirements;
- Arrangements for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL);
- Assessment strategy designed to meet the needs of the programme and the learner profile, including formative and summative assessment requirements;
- Learner supports - human, physical and academic supports and resources needed;
- Programme materials;
- The timetable and structure;
- Transfer and progression opportunities ensuring, where possible, that graduates have the opportunity to transfer or progress, should they wish to do so, either immediately or at a later date; and
- Protection for Enrolled Learners (if applicable).

During the design process, the Programme Design Team populates a Programme Descriptor Template which includes a programme outline, presentation materials, assessment materials (assessment briefs, marking schemes, lesson plans and programme and assessment timetables. The use of this descriptor by trainers during delivery helps to ensure consistency in delivery.

3.5.1. Programme Approval

The Programme Lead presents the programme descriptor to the Academic Board first who considers the programme from an academic perspective, with a view to agreeing that academic outcomes can be achieved by the programme. The Academic Board approval progresses a recommendation to the Network Steering Group who have final approval responsibility. The Academic Board and/or the Network Steering Group may make suggestions for amendments and, if agreed, the Programme Lead makes the required amendments. Programme Approval by both Governance Units triggers a Programme Validation process to QQI.

3.5.2. Programme Validation and Revalidation

'*Validation is a quality assurance process intended to ensure that a proposed programme can enable a learner to acquire and demonstrate the necessary knowledge, skill or competence to justify the award(s) being offered in respect of that programme.'* QQI

Before we offer a programme leading to a QQI award, we apply to QQI to have it validated. In development, we ensure that the programme is consistent with the QQI award standard, if there is an award standard in the case of a CAS award and is in line with QQI validation processes prevailing at the time. Information relating to making a validation application to QQI is available on the QQI website.

When the Programme Design Team has completed its work and the programme descriptor has been approved, the Quality Officer;

- Prepares an application for validation in a standard format, in line with QQI requirements and consistent with *QQI Policies and Criteria for Validation 2017;*
- Contacts the manager of programme validation in QQI ten days prior to submission to advise QQI of the proposed date of submission;
- Undertakes the self-evaluation and completes the self-evaluation report which accompanies the application;

- Checks the final drafts for compliance with our QA system and QQI guidelines/requirements;
- Arranges for a colleague who was not involved in the process to proof-read, format and check the final version of all documents for consistency of language and terminology;
- Arranges for sign-off by the Network Manager;
- Uploads the application documents to the SharePoint folder created by QQI;
- Arranges for payment of the validation fee;
- Tracks the progress of the application; and
- The application is desk-reviewed by QQI.

3.5.3. QQI Evaluation of the Application

A key step in the evaluation of the application is the panel meeting when the NOTS panel meets members of a panel of experts appointed by QQI to discuss, query and evaluate the application. The Network Manager appoints members of the NOTS Panel – usually those centrally involved in the development and design of the programme and the chair of the Academic Board. The Quality Officer coordinates preparation for the visit and the visit itself.

The QQI panel produces a report with a recommendation to QQI to:

- Approve the application; or
- Refuse to approve pending mandatory changes. This outcome allows us to submit revised documentation, which the panel reviews in order to make a final recommendation to QQI to approve or refuse to approve the application.

The QQI panel makes a recommendation to the QQI Programmes and Awards Executive (PAEC) Committee which validates or refuses to validate the programme. The PAEC may request some changes to the programme under "specific advice" or make recommendations. We may appeal the PAEC decision if validation is refused. The QQI appeals process is outlined on the QQI website: https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/appeals.aspx

Validated programmes may be reviewed by QQI at any time and QQI can decide to withdraw validation. If this happens, we can appeal this decision. We review our capacity to uphold the terms and conditions of validation and ensure that our programmes meet the validation criteria as part of our programme reviews.

We arrange for the revalidation of continuing programmes every 5 years (or in accordance with the expiry of the duration of the validation if different). We carry out a programmatic review to coincide with revalidation – data from this review is used to inform and support the revalidation decision (i.e. to retire or apply to QQI to revalidate the programme) and the process.

3.5.4. Programme Planning and Delivery

- The Network Manager allocates a trainer from our approved panel, and identifies a suitable backup trainer, agrees arrangements, and issues a contract for services; and
- The Quality Officer inducts the trainer if the trainer is new to NOTS.

3.5.4.1 Pre-Programme Briefing

The Programme Lead and the trainer meet for a pre-programme briefing to discuss;

- Programme and assessment timetable
- Updates to programme content
- Assessment and Feedback Plan
- Resources, equipment, and facilities
- Learner induction
- Review applications/learner profiles
- RPL applicants
- Arrangements for reasonable accommodation (if any)
- Health, safety, and risk
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Dates and arrangements for certification
- Contents of the Trainer QA folder

Trainer QA Folder Contents:

- Learner and trainer Handbooks

- QQI Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines published by QQI (April 2016)
- QQI Sector Specific Quality Assurance Guidelines – Independent/Private Provider
- QQI Quality Assurance Assessment Guidelines for Providers 2013
- QA Manual
- Learner Induction Presentation
- Assessment Portfolio Checklist
- Programme Descriptor
- Programme materials
- Timetable/assessment schedule
- Assessment briefs
- Marking sheets
- Attendance Register
- Learner Registration Forms
- Training Evaluation Form

3.5.4.2 Programme Delivery

- The Communications Manager reviews published programme information on the website and elsewhere and updates as necessary - linking in with the programme lead as necessary;
- The Network Administrator coordinates programme preparation ensuring that the trainer, venue/s, appropriate IT infrastructure, trainer and learner information and other resources are in place and fit-for-purpose;
    - The Programme Lead reviews and prepares programme resources, supporting materials and equipment;
    - If the Programme Lead identifies a gap in equipment or resources, they alert the Quality Officer who sources what is needed and consults with the Network Manager if significant expenditure is required; and
    - The Network Administrator prepares the Trainer and Learner folders.

- The trainer inducts the learners using the NOTS Learner Induction Presentation which is based on the contents of the learner handbook;
- The learners complete the *Learner Registration Form* at induction which includes their contact details, the form of their name they want to appear on the award certificate, proof of both their date of birth (e.g. passport/drivers licence) and PPS number (e.g. pay slip containing PPS number and their name/Public Services Card) and returns them via the trainer to the Network Administrator; and
- The Network Administrator checks in with the trainer regularly throughout the programme and if there are issues of concern or queries, she resolves them or escalates them to the appropriate colleague.

3.6. Admissions, Application and Registration

We welcome all applicants if:

- They meet the minimum entry requirements or are eligible for entry by RPL;
- We can accommodate them if they have specific declared needs; and
- We are confident that they have the capacity to succeed.

3.6.1. Determining Learners Needs

The Network Administrator replies promptly to all applicant queries, and we encourage anyone interested in applying for a place on our programmes to talk the details through with us before they apply. We have a detailed conversation with applicants (by phone or face-to-face/virtual meeting) to determine if the programme they are interested in is suitable for them and if not, if there is another programme that might suit them better. We ask them if they have any condition or circumstance which may affect their participation on the programme/if they wish to declare any specific needs. There are details of the entry requirements on the application form, and we ask the applicant to confirm that they understand and meet these requirements which are meaningful but reasonable.

In the case of programmes leading to an award, learners should have reached the standards of knowledge, skill and competence associated with the preceding level of the national

Framework of Qualifications. This may have been achieved through a formal qualification or through relevant life and work experience. We may ask applicants to provide evidence of previous qualifications or work experience.

All programmes have a ***Capacity to Succeed*** statement, which details what is required of a learner who can expect to successfully complete the programme.

English Language Requirement for Entry

In programmes offered to learners whose first language is not English, the statement details the level of English they need to participate in the programme. If an applicant whose first language is not English does not already have a test result, they can take an online English test before applying. They can take an online test at englishtest.duolingo.com/applicants at a cost of approximately €40 and the test result is available within 48 hours). Applicants must submit the test score directly to us. We can organise for the applicant to do this online test from our office if needs be.

Some, or all, of the following may apply, depending on the programme:

- English language proficiency requirements;
- Hardware, software, and IT competence requirements;
- NOTS ability to provide reasonable accommodation if required;
- Time commitment – face to face, synchronous and asynchronous;
- Hours of self-directed learning; and
- Work placement requirements (if any).

Applicants complete an application form and submit it to the Network Administrator who reviews it to evaluate/ensure that the applicant meets the entry requirements. If the application is approved, the Network Administrator gets back to the applicant and offers a place and lets them know the commencement dates and asks them to pay a deposit (online) to secure a place. The place is not guaranteed until a deposit is paid. If the application is not approved, the Network Administrator notifies the applicant outlining the reason/s and advises them of the appeals process.

If the Network Administrator has any doubt about the suitability of the applicant e.g. not meeting the entry requirements or NOTS not being able to provide the support they need; she escalates the application to the Quality Officer who may meet the applicant to establish the suitability of the programme for the applicant and vice versa. If an applicant is requesting reasonable accommodation, the Network Administrator contacts them directly to ascertain what type of accommodation they need and discusses the application with the Quality Officer and the trainer who delivers the programme to see how they may be accommodated.

3.6.2. Deferrals

If a learner cannot complete a programme for any reason, they can apply for a deferral if they have a valid reason using the *Deferral Application Form.* The Network Administrator reviews deferral requests and if it is practically possible and in the best interests of the learner, we facilitate the deferral. If the deferral is granted, the Network Administrator notifies the programme tutor and contacts the learner to agree arrangements to complete the programme at a later stage. Details of the deferral arrangements are updated on the learner record. If the deferral is not granted, the Network Administrator contacts the learner to explain why not.

3.6.3. Transfer and Progression

We facilitate learners to transfer and progress inwards and outwards from our programmes and let them know that they have the option of transferring or progressing to other providers. This may include progression to further or higher education institutes that offer programmes leading to awards on the National Framework of Qualification in related areas.

Successful completion of component module awards may enable learners to transfer to programmes leading to other certificates where the component module is either a mandatory or an elective requirement.

The programme design team research transfer and progression options and consults with other providers who may be able to offer progression pathways. The options are documented in the programme descriptor and agreed with QQI as part of the validation process. We provide information on transfer and progression and the options available to learners in programme brochures, in the Learner Handbook and at learner induction. We explain the NFQ and the level and type of award to which the programme leads and how learners might use the award to progress at induction. We also let them know about the funding mechanisms we have in place to support learners who wish to progress to higher level programmes. Trainers encourage learners to investigate transfer and progression options if they are interested in continuing in education and training. We provide academic references, on request, for learners who are applying for entry to other programmes.

3.6.4. Recognition of Prior Learning

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) can *"be used by the learner to gain entry to a programme; gain exemptions within a programme; gain credit towards an award: a learner may gain a credit towards an award using previous certification and/or attain an Award: a learner may be awarded a Major or Minor Award on the basis of previously acquired learning for which they do not have a formal certificate"* (CEDEFOP, 2011, p7).

We recognise RPL as a mechanism for some learners to gain entry to a programme. We encourage learners who do not meet the minimum entry requirements but who have significant prior experiential learning to apply for entry to their desired programme by the RPL route – the Recognition of Prior Learning process is explained to candidates during initial discussions with them. The Quality Officer guides and supports applicant through the RPL process and considers applications for admission by Recognition of Prior Learning on a case-by-case basis.

We also recognise RPL as a mechanism for learners to gain exemptions for equivalent modules on applicable programmes. An RPL applicant must be able to demonstrate learning based on what they achieved through another programme of study, their work or other learning experiences and must submit evidence with their application to verify this. The applicant completes and submits an RPL application form and evidence that is consistent with the award standard. Evidence may include, but is not limited to:

- CV;
- References;

- Certificates or testimonials;
- Job descriptions; or
- Evidence of attendance at training courses or workplace assessments.

The Quality Officer:

- Assesses the application/supporting evidence and benchmarks it against the award standard. This assessment may include an interview/discussion with the applicant;
- Advises the applicant of the outcome;
- Explains the rationale behind the decision and advises the applicant that they can appeal the decision if the application is not accepted;
- If the applicant appeals, an external member of the Academic Board examines and decides on the appeal. This decision is final; and
- The Quality Officer advises the Trainer at the pre-programme briefing if there are any RPL applicants and asks the trainer to monitor and report on their progress.

Chapter 4

Staff Recruitment, Management and Development

(Aligned to QQI Core QA Guideline 4)

4.1. Staff Recruitment, Management & Development Policy

Quality can only be achieved by recruiting, developing, managing, and resourcing a team of staff and trainers who have appropriate expertise and competencies, a strong sense of purpose, are passionate about the quality of the learning experience, and are learner focused. Our aim is to employ skilled and qualified staff who work with learners and each other in a supportive and collaborative manner and are responsive to our learners' needs and concerns. We have a robust recruitment process that focuses on attracting and retaining qualified subject-specific trainers, particularly in areas of technical expertise. We also ensure that trainers and staff are up to date in their areas of expertise and plan for retraining and upskilling trainers as industry and workplace needs change. The NSG is responsible for ensuring a supportive environment for staff and trainers that allow them to carry out their work effectively and enhance the teaching and learning environment. We treat all applicants for positions fairly and with respect and make appointments based on their ability to do a specific job. We facilitate a work environment that promotes dignity and respect for all; staff, trainers, learners, and stakeholders. Our trainers are contracted part-time and are subject to a similar procedure for their recruitment and selection as full-time staff. We recognise the key role that these trainers play in ensuring the quality of our programmes and supporting our learners and seek their input into programme monitoring and decision-making. We regard our trainers as full members of our programme teams and they are treated accordingly.

4.1.1. Responsibility

- The Network Steering Group has overall responsibility for staffing;

- The Academic Board maintains oversight of programme-related staffing;
- The Network Manager is responsible for the management of staff and trainers; and
- The Network Administrator communicates with and supports trainers.

4.1.2. Role Descriptions

There are documented role descriptions for all roles depicted on our organisation chart. These are set out in detail in Appendix 2. The trainer role description is included in the trainer handbook, discussed at induction, and regularly reviewed and updated as needed by the Network Manager.

4.1.3. Staff Recruitment and Selection

The Network Manager is responsible for the recruitment of NOTS administrative and support staff in line with NOTS corporate HR policies.

4.2. Trainer Recruitment and Selection Procedure

We work with a core panel of contracted trainers and select from this panel as required.

- The Network Manager initiates the process of trainer recruitment. Following approval, the Quality Officer draws up/updates the role description detailing:
    - Statement of required qualifications reflecting the experience, qualifications, and expertise appropriate to the programme;
    - Role responsibilities; and
    - The duration and terms of the contract.
- The Communications Manager advertises the vacancy inviting candidates to submit a CV and cover letter and a statement of suitability for the role by email.
- The Quality Officer and the Network Manager shortlist candidates based on an assessment of their suitability and invites shortlisted candidates to attend an interview.

- The Quality Officer and the Network Manager interview candidates. Candidates are required to make a 10-minute prepared training presentation in their subject matter area as part of the interview process.
- The Network Manager provides information on the programme, the learner profile, terms, and conditions of the contract.
- The Network Administrator follows up with referees (details provided by the candidate) and then checks copies of the award certificates and details of other qualifications (submitted prior to interview) for authenticity
- The Network Administrator contacts the successful candidate by email within 2 days of the interview and also contacts the unsuccessful candidates.
- If the candidate accepts the position, the Network Administrator asks them to submit evidence of Professional Indemnity Insurance and Tax Clearance and issues a draft contract
- The Quality Officer makes arrangements for induction when the contract is signed.

4.2.1. Required Trainer Qualifications

Trainers must submit copies of all relevant, current award certificates and evidence of their pedagogical and professional qualifications when they apply for a position and update them if there are changes (if they are appointed to the panel). They must be capable of delivering the specified programme. Qualifications and skills required include:

- A teaching/training qualification a Level 6 on the NFQ (minimum);
- Educational qualification at Level 8 on the NFQ (minimum) in a relevant subject matter area;
- Ability to deliver and assess programmes at a level appropriate to learners' educational background;
- Ability to draw from their own practical work experience to enhance their training delivery;
- Strong interpersonal communication skills;
- In-depth knowledge of relevant industry sectors;

- Ability to work on own initiative and as part of a programme team; and
- Good planning and organisational skills.

4.3. Supports for Trainers

We work hard to provide a high level of support for trainers and particularly recently recruited trainers. Supports include:

- Induction – the Quality Officer inducts new trainers using our trainer induction checklist and trainer handbook;
- Trainer Handbook – trainers are given a copy of our trainer handbook in advance of induction and are required to read it and discuss it at induction raising any queries or concerns;
- Detailed role description/contract – clarity around the specific role responsibilities detailed in the trainer handbook;
- Trainer QA folder – trainers can access programme materials and other resources on a shared online folder which is maintained by the Network Administrator;
- Complaints procedure – we encourage trainers to let us know what they think and to make a formal complaint if necessary;
- Administrative support – the Network Administrator provides ongoing administrative support for the duration of the programme;
- Support of the Programme Lead and the Quality Officer. The Programme Lead is available to trainers to provide academic and subject matter support;
- All new trainers are assigned an experienced trainer to buddy with them for their first programme. The experienced trainer provides support and guidance and contributes to the (new) trainers' evaluation of the programme; and
- We also offer experienced trainers an opportunity to work with another trainer if they highlight any areas they would like support on or if they would like to observe new delivery methodologies.

4.4. Monitoring Trainer and Staff Performance

NOTS staff performance is reviewed annually through a system of performance appraisal. This is a review of the employee's job performance and overall contribution to NOTS. The performance appraisal evaluates an employee's skills, achievements, and growth and identifies areas for training and development. The review process is undertaken collaboratively between the staff member and the Network Manager.

- The staff member completes the annual appraisal form/performance development plan;
- The Network Manager reviews the form/plan, the staff member's performance and achievements and agrees on a development plan with the staff member;
- The performance development plan includes annual work goals and training needs; and
- The Network Manager retains copies of the performance plans for the next performance review meeting.

4.4.1. Trainer Observations

The Programme Lead sits on one class per trainer per programme to observe the class. The aim of these observations is to provide constructive feedback, facilitate the sharing of best practice and identify training needs. For new trainers, the Programme Lead observes an early session and may carry out a further observation later in the programme if it is deemed necessary/beneficial.

- The Programme Lead and the trainer meet after the observation to give feedback to each other and the Programme Lead documents the observation in a Trainer Observation Form and makes recommendations;
- The Programme Lead and the trainer agree on areas for improvement that can be addressed relatively easily and immediately;
- If the Programme Lead and/or the trainer thinks that additional training/upskilling is required, they agree arrangements for this with the Network Manager; and
- The Quality Officers collates the completed Observation Forms, and the data is used for monitoring, evaluation, and programme review.

The Quality Officer monitors trainer performance on an ongoing basis using the following metrics:

- Learner attendance and drop-out rates;
- Data from the trainer observations;
- Assessment results;
- Complaints and appeals register;
- Learner feedback on trainer performance;
- Trainer feedback and self-reflection;
- External authenticator feedback;
- Feedback from buddies; and
- Feedback from other stakeholders.

4.5. Staff and Trainer Communications

We communicate with staff and trainers through telephone, email, WhatsApp, SMS messaging and face to face or virtual meetings (using the Zoom platform).

The Network Administrator and the Quality Officer meet the trainers for pre-and post-programme briefings. The trainers keep in regular contact with the Network Administrator with updates on progress, completed attendance registers and raising any issues that need attention. The Network Administrator escalates serious issues to the Network Manager. We ask staff and trainers to make suggestions at team meetings or to the Network Administrator.

The Network Manager talks through the learner and trainer evaluations at the post-programme briefings and highlights positive and negative feedback.

If the Network Administrator receives a complaint from a learner, she contacts the trainers to discuss the complaint.

4.6. Continuous Professional Development for Staff and Trainers

We provide ongoing Professional Learning and Development opportunities to ensure staff update their skills and competencies and keep abreast of best practices in teaching, learning and assessment. We use the Skillnet training network and other sources.

All NOTS contracted trainers require a minimum Train the Trainer (QQI L6) and it is expected that they are active in the field within which they are delivering training. We expect contracted trainers to keep up to date with developments in their field of expertise, industry trends and regulation. It is also expected that trainers maintain membership of recognised professional bodies and manage the development and progression of their own careers. We support trainers in accessing programme-related training and development events that will enhance a programme or the learner experience. Trainers are invited to participate in all events run by NOTS.

The Network Manager encourages staff and trainers to bring details of suitable training and development events to his attention. If the Network Manager or any member of the programme team identifies any gaps in trainer or staff knowledge or skills, the Network Manager organises training and/or upskilling. There is a NOTS budget allocation for staff and trainer Continuous Professional Development (CPD). Occasionally we organise in-house CPD workshops.

4.7. Contingency Plan for Trainer Absence

The Network Administrator confirms trainer availability a month before the programme is scheduled to begin. If a trainer is unavailable at short notice, the Network Administrator tries to organise a replacement trainer from our trainer panel. However, due to the specialist nature of our programmes, it is generally not possible to do this. If a qualified trainer is not available to cover for an absence, the trainer reschedules the class following a discussion with the learners and lets the Network Administrator have a copy of the revised timetable. We ask the trainers to keep certification dates in mind if they have to make a change to the timetable as we don't want to delay certification.

Chapter 5

Teaching and Learning

(Aligned to QQI Core QA Guideline 5)

5.1. Teaching and Learning Policy

We work hard to ensure that trainers and learners achieve the best possible outcomes by doing everything we can to create and sustain a positive, appropriate, and inclusive teaching and learning environment. All stakeholders, from the members of our governance units to our learners, have a role in contributing to creating and sustaining this environment. We seek regular feedback from trainers, learners, and other stakeholders and provide our trainers and learners with the resources they need to achieve their potential. The quality and expertise of our trainers is central to ensuring high-quality learning as is the provision of appropriate programme materials which are easily accessible, well-structured, and detailed. We document a Teaching, Learning and Assessment (TLA) strategy for each programme at the design stage which is aligned to our overarching strategy. This strategy is appropriate to the NOTS context and considers our learner and programme profiles. Our learners can expect;

- A learning experience that they will enjoy, challenges them, and enhances their career prospects and professional development;
- To learn from committed, knowledgeable and experienced trainers who are focused on their success; and
- High quality facilities and a supportive and safe learning environment;
- To be treated as partners in the learning process where their responsibilities are clear, and they are expected to take ownership of their learning to a degree that is commensurate with the level of the award.

5.1.1. Responsibility

- The Academic Board maintains oversight of the teaching and learning environment and teaching, learning and assessment strategies;
- The Network Manager is responsible for ensuring that the appropriate facilities and resources are in place to ensure a high-quality teaching and learning environment;
- The Programme Leader is responsible for ensuring that the teaching, learning, and assessment strategies are implemented for their programme; and
- The trainers are responsible for creating an environment that optimises learners' potential to succeed.

5.2. NOTS' Approach to Teaching and Learning

For NOTS, the key components of an effective learning environment are as follows:

- Placing the learner and their success at the centre of the learning process;
- A commitment to quality provision at all levels and in all we do;
- Quality of the teaching and support staff;
- Access to high quality indoor and outdoor teaching and learning environments which are suitable, safe and risk assessed;
- Having an effective support system designed to meet the needs of our learner profile;
- The appropriate use of technology as an enabler to enhance the learner experience and strengthen teaching and assessment;
- Clarity of responsibilities;
- Attention to the health, safety, welfare, and wellbeing of all;
- The promotion of a collaboration environment and learner connectedness; and
- Hard work on everyone's part and celebration of success and achievement.

Programmes are delivered at rented training rooms, and we use adjacent farms for on-farm demonstrations and assessment at selected venues across the country, dictated by demand.

All programmes are trainer-led and while delivery is primarily a traditional face-to-face model, we occasionally supplement this by using a Zoom virtual classrooms session. Programme duration is in line with QQI recommendations on directed and self-directed learning. Our approach to teaching and learning is based on an andragogical model of helping adults learn. We regard learners as active partners on the learning journey, and we expect learners to commit and own the learning and to share responsibility for learning. This approach guides how we deliver training, how we give feedback, and the assessments we set. When planning a lesson, the trainer considers the best way to communicate the relevant information to ensure the best possible learning experience and outcome for the learners. They consider the learner profile, the programme context, NOTS teaching and learning approach and their own teaching preferences. The focus of the constructivist approach which we use, is the idea that the learners are active rather than passive participants and learn through experiences and reflection. Constructivist pedagogy places the learner at the centre of the learning and is based on the pedagogical research of Jean Piaget where the role of a teacher is to create activities that facilitate learning and enhance their progression. We see learning as a collaborative process with the trainer and the learners working together to achieve the best outcome. The trainers encourage learners to bring their own knowledge, past experiences, and ideas into the classroom to enhance and broaden the learning experience. The trainers recognise and acknowledge individual learners' interests, abilities, and learning styles and act as facilitators of learning.

5.2.1. Delivery Methods

We document programme content to include the activities, strategies, methodologies, and resources in programme descriptors, and agree it with QQI at the programme validation (if the programme is designed to lead to an award on the NFQ). We design a range of methodologies as part of our delivery strategy and expect trainers to use a range of delivery methods taking the different learning styles into account when preparing their programme materials.

- Directed Classroom-based delivery in a face-to-face and virtual setting. Impart information and create a learning environment for class discussions, explore issues that have arisen as part of programme content or assessments;

- Group work to help learners develop their analytical and communication skills and to create a collaborative learning environment which our learners enjoy and benefit from as part of their experience;
- Inquiry and problem-based learning;
- Project-based learning;
- Use of the flipped classroom model;
- Practical demonstrations and training – demonstrations of practical skills via face-to-face delivery (access to farming facilities and equipment is sometimes required), are given in line with best practice and learners are supervised in carrying out practical skills with feedback given throughout practice;
- On-the-job learning via work placement gives learners an opportunity to apply what they have learned in a real working environment;
- Field trips and the use of guest lecturers which help to bring the programme content to life;
- One to one (trainer-learner) tutorials in the context of additional support; and
- Self-directed learning by the learner.

5.3. Learner Participation, Attendance and Engagement

Key to learner success is their level of engagement. We expect learners to attend on time for 100% of the scheduled contact hours (or as close as is possible) to help ensure a successful outcome. We set out clearly the hours of self-directed learning that a learner is expected to invest in the programme in the pre-programme information, in the Learner Handbook and at induction. The trainer records attendance for each class. We ask learners to notify the trainer if they are going to be absent. If a learner is absent without being excused, the trainer contacts them and discusses the reasons for absence. The trainers carefully monitor learners' engagement with the programme content and activities. This is a good indicator of their progress and a predictor of success in achieving the learning outcomes.

5.4. Academic Integrity

Another important contributor to learner success is a high standard of academic integrity.

QQI defines academic integrity as the commitment to, and demonstration of, honest and moral behaviour in an academic setting and it applies to learners, trainers and all members of the programme team.

We expect and promote high standards of academic integrity and address it in the trainer and learner handbooks, at trainer and learner induction and throughout the programme. See Appendix 7 – Academic Integrity Policy. The trainer is the main source of guidance and information for learners in this regard. We access and use the resources of the **National Academic Integrity Network,** a peer-driven network coordinated and supported by QQI that actively supports education institutions to:

- Effectively engage with the challenges presented by academic misconduct;
- Embed a culture of academic integrity among providers; and
- Develop national resources and tools for providers to address the challenges presented by academic misconduct.

5.5. Independent & Self-Directed Learning

We regard independent and self-directed learning as being a critical element of the learning journey and key to bedding in the learning. The trainers discuss what we mean by independent and self-directed learning at induction and throughout the programme. The trainers discuss different approaches and strategies with learners and check in with the learners regularly to confirm that they are engaging effectively in self-directed learning. The focus on independent learning helps learners to develop (or reinforce) an autonomous work and learning ethos.

Methods of self-directed learning are specified in the programme descriptor and may include:

- Preparation for assignments;
- Reading and online research;

- Off-site observations where the learner observes a particular skill or approach in action;
- Participation in NOTS farm walks and other NOTS events (e.g. Annual Biological Farming Conference);
- Face-to-face group discussions;
- Study groups; and
- Use of our LMS (Moodle) for discussion and collaboration.

5.6. Programme Resources

We ensure that the resources necessary for programme success are allocated and maintained and that learners have access to the facilities and resources they need, including learners with additional needs. The trainers monitor the adequacy of the resources throughout the programme and note on the programme descriptor any identified additional requirements required, bringing it to the attention of the Quality Officer if necessary. NOTS uses Moodle as their Learning Manager System. We use Moodle for discussion and collaboration and to create a social space for learners and trainers. The trainers use Moodle to design online activities to support formative assessment. Learners submit assignments via Moodle, and they are marked, and feedback provided by the trainers using Moodle. The Programme Leader keeps trainers informed with regard to facilities and resources required and allocated to their programme and asks for their feedback as part of our monitoring and evaluation. Programme meetings and feedback forms include review of facilities and resources.

5.7. Training Infrastructure

The Quality Officer checks out training facilities, indoor and outdoor and benchmarks them against our Training Facilities Checklist before we approve them for use as appropriate as effective teaching and learning environments (see Appendix 4). While we deliver training at venues throughout the country, we give due consideration to the location of the training site, with regard to the distances learners would have to travel. Where possible, we use facilities which are centrally located. Some programmes require skills demonstrations and assessments to be conducted on farms. The Programme Leader checks the facilities on host farms in advance and confirms that they meet all programme needs and are fully compliant with health and safety requirements. The farms we use must be independent of the participating learners.

The following criteria apply:

- The premises must meet all health and safety regulations;
- Must be suitable for the programme and for the learner profile;
- Where appropriate the premises must be accessible to those with special requirements i.e., wheelchair access;
- There must be access to toilet/washroom facilities;
- There must be adequate heating, lighting, and ventilation;
- There must be appropriate fixtures and fittings i.e., tables and chairs;
- There must be appropriate IT resources and facilities; and
- There must be adequate parking facilities and ideally accessible via public transport (if possible).

5.7.1. The Mobile Training Unit (MTU)

In 2021, NOTS purchased a Mobile Training Unit (MTU) which is expandable to seat up to 25 learners, classroom unit which is 8 metres long, and 7.5. metres wide when expanded. The MTU can be towed to any farm or suitable course location. This unit gives NOTS the opportunity to have the “theory” element of courses on-site at a practical location – where participants learn in the unit in the first half of the day and undertake practical lessons in the second half of the day. The Unit is powered by its own generator or by plugging into a nearby mains. This gives trainers the opportunity to use live tech-based slide shows alongside their teaching material and methods.

5.8. Health and Safety

Due to the nature of our programmes and our use of high-risk equipment and facilities we have a strong focus on health and safety, and each programme is risk assessed for health and safety before we begin delivery. We aim to be fully compliant with all relevant health and safety legislation. We have detailed arrangements to ensure the health and safety of the learners and the trainers while undertaking live onsite skills demonstrations. The trainer advises the learners about health and safety before each farm session and talks through a health and safety checklist. Learners must be cognisant of the potential dangers of the farm environment and obey all safety signs. The learners complete and sign a Farm Visit Agreement in advance. This form is designed to highlight the potential dangers and the learner's responsibility in ensuring their own and others' safety

The following must be in place for farm visits:

- An up-to-date Farm Safety statement and hazards lists;
- Adequate insurance;
- A staff member who is trained and nominated as a safety representative; and
- First aid facilities.

5.9. Engagement with a Community of Practice (CoP)

Definition: *Communities of Practice (CoPs) are naturally forming groups of individuals who come together through a shared passion or goal and learn collectively by reciprocating knowledge and experiences* (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Our vision is to create a learning environment that promotes ongoing professional development for learners, trainers, members, staff and alumni and the sharing of expertise amongst all our stakeholders. We aim to facilitate a continuum of learning which extends beyond certification and offers learners the opportunity to develop their professional practice by participating in a Community of Practice (CoP) which will afford the opportunity for ongoing participation in NOTS activities. The aims of the CoP:

- Maintain communication and develop relationships within the community;
- Facilitate informal learning and networking between members of the CoP;
- Disseminate information on innovative and best practice in our sector and keep members abreast of the latest trends, thinking and research;
- Influence key stakeholders and policymakers;

- Promote the active participation of members in conferences, seminars, CPD and educational events organised by NOTS and associated organisations;
- Provide trainers with the opportunities to engage with peers;
- Evaluate the impact of NOTS programmes on our learners' careers;
- Identify additional training needs; and
- Let members know about opportunities for employment, further study/professional development.

Chapter 6

Assessment of Learners

(Aligned to QQI Core QA Guideline 6)

6.1. Policy Statement

NOTS assessment policy and procedures are designed to be consistent with QQI's assessment policy and to meet the requirements of the following QQI guidelines:

- *Quality Assuring Assessment, Guidelines for Providers, Revised 2018*
- *FET Guidelines for Internal Verification AC*
- *Quality Assuring Assessment Guidelines for External Authenticators*

It is our policy to ensure the integrity of assessment practices in use be consistent, fair, and transparent and based on QQI guidelines. A key element of quality assuring assessment is the approval and sign off of assessment results before we submit them to QQI for certification. We have a range of assessment specific policies and procedures focussed on ensuring the integrity and the validity of the assessment process.

6.2. Responsibilities:

- The Results Approval Panel maintains oversight of our assessment processes, approves results, and make recommendations for corrective action to the Academic Board;
- The Quality Officer has overall responsibility for assessment;
- The Finance Manager is the internal verifier; and
- The trainers are the primary assessors and are responsible for assessment, marking and submission and ensuring all assessment activities are carried out as set out in the programme descriptors.

6.3. Overview of the Assessment Process

We develop and agree our assessment processes and procedures with QQI and regularly review and update them.

- **Assessment:**
  - The programme design team devise assessment criteria, the assessment instruments and marking schemes when developing the programme;
  - The trainers assess the learners and mark and grade the assessment evidence; and
  - The trainers submit the documents as set out in the assessment portfolio checklist.
- **Authentication:**
  - The Finance Manager records the outcomes and verifies that assessment procedures have been applied consistently across all assessment activities and that the assessment results are recorded accurately;
  - The Academic Board appoints an external authenticator based on recommendations from the Quality Officer; and
  - The External Authenticator moderates assessment results by sampling learner evidence according to NOTS sampling strategy.
- **Results Approval and Issue:**
  - The Finance Manager convenes meetings of the Results Approval Panel;
  - The Panel reviews, approves and sign-off assessment results; and
  - The Finance Manager emails approved results to learners and advises them of appeal deadlines and the date they should receive their QQI award certificate.
- **Certification**
  - The Finance Manager submits learner results to QQI via the QBS
  - Learners are allowed 10 working days to lodge an appeal
  - The Quality Officer processes appeals
  - The Network Administrator issues award certificates to successful candidates by post

6.4. Assessment Planning and Design

The Programme Design Team considers all aspects of assessment and sets out a comprehensive assessment strategy at the design stage which is subsequently agreed with QQI as part of the validation process. The assessment strategy contains details of how formative and summative assessment and feedback is provided, assignment briefs, marking schemes, assessment schedules, exam questions and solutions, based on award specification, the programme and learner profile and resources required for assessment. The detail of this assessment strategy in set out clearly in the programme descriptor.

When a programme is scheduled for delivery, the Programme Lead sets out the assessment schedule with all significant dates and checks that the assessments are appropriate and in line with the validated programme and best practice.

- The Quality Officer makes arrangements for reasonable accommodation for assessment and informs the trainer;
- The Network Administrator arranges for the exam (if there is one); ensuring a suitable room is available and the invigilator is briefed;
- The Quality Officer agrees the appointment of a suitably qualified external authenticator with the Academic Board; and
- The Finance Manager inputs learner details on to the QBS allowing sufficient time to deal and resolve invalid entries and updates the *Annual Certification Calendar* which sets out dates for return of the assessment portfolios, internal verification, external authentication, results approval and issue of results.

6.4.1. Marking Schemes

A marking scheme sets out the specific assessment points against which the assessment evidence is judged and applied by the assessor to determine to what extent the learner has demonstrated the required standard. Marking schemes must be consistent with the relevant detail in the module; the assessment criteria, the learning outcomes mapped to the assessment technique/task in question and the assessment guidelines. They must also be consistent with the detail in the assessment brief. In other words, the marking scheme must allocate marks to everything asked of the learner in the assessment brief

6.4.2. Outline Solutions / Model / Sample Answers

The trainer develops outline solutions alongside an examination paper and related marking scheme and an outline solution for non-examination assessments. Depending on the nature of the assessment, the outline solution/model/sample answer may be:

- One answer;
- A range of acceptable answers;
- A list of minimum acceptable key points; or
- An indication/guideline of what form a response may take.

6.5. Information to Learners and Trainers on Assessment

We make assessment information available to learners in the learner handbook, at induction and on Moodle. The trainers distribute copies of assessment timetables, exam notices and regulations at induction and put them up on Moodle. The assessment timetable includes submission deadline and examination dates. The trainers give learners detailed assessment briefs (a set of instructions outlining the assessment requirements, deadlines, submission procedures and assessment criteria) for each piece of assessment. The briefs are based on the assessment strategy validated by QQI and are designed using a standard template.

Learner responsibilities around assessment and examination regulations are detailed in the learner handbook and are reinforced throughout the programme by the trainer.

Trainers must be familiar with the *QQI Quality Assuring Assessment Guidelines for Providers V2 2018* on which the design of our QA procedures is based and with this chapter of the QA manual.

There are resources to support assessment in the Trainer QA folder.

The Quality Officer and the trainer discuss the assessment strategy, the assessment schedule, assessment portfolio checklist, assessment briefs, marking sheets, arrangements for examinations and any reasonable accommodation arrangements at the pre-programme briefing.

6.6. Security of Assessment Materials & Related Processes

We have systems in place to protect the integrity of assessment documentation and materials, assessment evidence, assessment results and records. The Finance Manager is responsible for secure storage (hard copy and electronic) and stores all documentation etc in an electronically protected storeroom and/or password protected shared drive, granting access on a needs-only basis.

The Finance Manager adds details of assessment submission and results for each learner to their learner record which is maintained electronically under programme name and number.

Assessment materials are stored on a secure area in Moodle which is encrypted with restricted password protected access. Copies of assessment materials are printed only when they are needed.

The Finance Manager records the outcomes of assessment and uploads results data to the QBS at the earliest available time.

Trainers are responsible for the security of assessment related materials while in their possession and must report any breaches to the Finance Manager as a matter of urgency.

Our procedure for dealing with breaches of academic standards is highlighted at induction and in the handbooks and there is a copy on Moodle.

6.7. Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is the expectation that trainers and learners act with honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. Breaching academic integrity is known as academic misconduct.

Academic misconduct is any action which gains, attempts to gain, or assists others in gaining or attempting to gain unfair academic advantage.

We assume that trainers and learners will be honest and act with integrity in all matters. NOTS have a procedure in place to deal with incidents or suspected incidences of academic misconduct if they occur. Learners are informed about assessment malpractice in the learner handbook and at induction. The trainer is the main source of guidance and information for learners in relation to academic integrity and they refer to the standards of academic integrity we expect throughout the programme. We also provide guidelines, video content and reference documents on Moodle which explain the concept of academic integrity and guide learners in relation to the use of the Harvard referencing system. Learners must complete, sign, date and submit an authorship statement (part of the assessment brief) when they are submitting an assignment confirming that the work they are submitting is their own, is genuine, not plagiarised and properly referenced. All assignments and authorship statements are submitted via Moodle ensuring that we have a secure digital record of assignment submission.

Practices that may breach academic integrity include:

- Plagiarism. the presentation of someone else's work as one's own. Examples of plagiarism include taking texts from websites, using essay mills, and presenting works or sections of works written by another person;
- Falsification of data;
- Collusion and cheating in examinations;
- Submitting the same or similar work for more than one assessment; and
- Failing to reference sources of information or data appropriately.

6.7.1. Dealing with Breaches of Academic Integrity

If a trainer or any member of the programme team suspects that a learner has sought to gain an unfair advantage, they bring the details and any evidence they have to the attention of Quality Officer to decide how to deal with it. The learner may be interviewed, and a judgement reached about whether academic integrity has been breached. If we conclude after investigation that a breach has occurred, we may impose penalties up to and including removal from the programme. We regard academic misconduct by a trainer (e.g. fabrication of evidence or interference with results) as gross misconduct. See Appendix 7 – Academic Integrity Policy

6.8. Conduct of Examinations

The trainers prepare the examination papers based on the validated programmes, and the Programme Leader proof-reads and checks for any errors, ensures that these are rectified and then approves them. Drafts and approved examination papers are kept confidential at all times and access is restricted to the Programme Leader and the Network Administrator and stored in electronic format only.

Learners must have no contact with any examination paper or drafts. If any member of the programme team suspects that confidentiality is breached, the trainer drafts a new examination paper.

6.8.1. Prior to the Examination

The Network Administrator checks the examination room in advance to ensure that;

- The room is appropriately equipped with question papers, answer books and other requirements;
- A reliable clock is provided and visible to all learners;
- There is adequate seating, lighting, ventilation, and any special facilities required by disabled learners;
- There is no outside interference or potential interruptions to the conduct of the examination (for example excess noise); and
- Seating arrangements are appropriate. Learners must be placed at such a distance from one another as to preclude the possibility of copying, and so that the invigilator can clearly see each learner. Learners must sit at their allocated desks.

The Network Administrator places the following documents on the invigilator's desk

- A copy of the examination regulations;
- Details of assessment specifications for the examination;
- A list of the names of the learners who have confirmed their attendance;
- Details of agreed reasonable accommodation arrangements, including those who have been permitted extra time and learners who are allowed to bring additional items into the examination room;

- Contact details for the Programme Leader and the Network Administrator;
- Attendance Register;
- Seating Plan; and
- Invigilator’s Report Form

After this, the Network Administrator:

- Checks that reasonable accommodation arrangements have been made;
- Prints final copies of the examination paper, and stores them securely in a locked press until they are issued to, and signed for, by the invigilator;
- All exams are invigilated by an invigilator appointed from a panel of invigilators. Invigilators must be familiar and comply with the Invigilators Guidelines which are talked through at the invigilator briefing. If a candidate takes an exam in a room away from the main examination hall, an invigilator must also be present in that room;
- The invigilator takes the required numbers of examination papers into the examination room and places them face down on the desks in advance of the examination starts. S/he distributes all materials required for the learner to undertake the examination;
- Once the examination room is prepared, the invigilator does not leave the examination room unattended at any time; and
- Takes a record of learners attending at the commencement and end of the examination, and records any absences and details of learners who leave the examination prior to the end of the examination, including the time of their leaving

6.8.2. Commencing the Examination

Learners are not admitted entry to the examination room earlier than fifteen minutes before an examination is scheduled to begin.

The invigilator:

- Ensures that learners remove any unauthorised items which may assist them from the examination room or hands then to the Invigilator before the start of the examination;
- Instructs learners to turn off all mobile devices and place them with their bags or other personal belongings at a designated location in the examination room;
- Reminds learners to read the instructions on examinations paper carefully, to complete the front cover of the answer book;
- Announces clearly to the learners when they can begin and the time the examination is due to end;
- Reminds learners that they must not communicate with each other during the examination;
- Reminds learners that they may not leave the room without permission. If any learner leaves the room without permission, he/she is not allowed to re-enter under any circumstances; and
- Reminds learners that they may not leave the room during the first thirty minutes or the last 15 minutes of the examination.

6.8.3. During the Examination

- The Invigilator maintains continuous supervision throughout the examination so as to preclude the possibility of learners consulting unauthorised materials or each other.
- If any error becomes evident on the examination paper or if there is any query during the first 30 minutes, the invigilator contacts the Programme Leader who is available to answer queries.
- If the invigilator suspects a learner of cheating, s/he retrieves the evidence of cheating and completes a Misconduct Report Form, which s/he forwards, with the alleged evidence, immediately to the Quality Officer.
- Only one learner can leave the examination room (for example to go to the toilet or for a medical reason) at a time to ensure that no communication takes place outside of the examination room. Learners may leave the room only when accompanied by a member of staff.

- A learner is allowed to leave the examination room at any time after the first 30 minutes and up to 15 minutes before the end if they have handed in the examination paper and answer book.
- If there is an unexpected emergency (for example a fire scare), the invigilator ensures that the learners evacuate the room quietly. Learners are not allowed to remove anything from the room without the invigilator's permission. Learners remain under the supervision of the invigilator, until a decision is taken as to whether they may return to the examination room or not. In the event that it is impossible to continue the examination, the Programme Leader advises on the course of action to be followed.
- The invigilator may immediately discontinue the examination of any learner for suspected academic misconduct or disturbing behaviour. Expulsion from the examination room occurs only in exceptional cases if there is no immediate doubt and where it is felt that such disciplinary action is essential.
- Where an invigilator believes that the learner is engaging in misconduct, he/she approaches the learner and asks the learner to surrender any suspect materials and inform the learner that he/she will be making a formal report to the Programme Leader. If the learner refuses to surrender any requested evidence the invigilator contacts the Programme Leader and notes the details and circumstances of the refusal in his report. The invigilator retains any evidence related to the incident
- The invigilator notes the full particulars in the Invigilator Report Form which is submitted to the Programme Leader and the Chair of the Results Approval Panel and noted in the formal record of the examination.

6.8.4. End of the Examination

The invigilator advises the learners:

- That there is 15 minutes remaining for completion of scripts, and that they are not permitted to leave the examination room from this time until the exam is over, and all papers and scripts have been collected
- to stop writing and remain seated in silence until their scripts have been collected and they are given permission to leave

- To ensure that their answers are correctly numbered and that question numbers are entered on the front of the answer book
- That they must not remove any documents, used or unused, from the examination room

After the learners have been advised of the above four points;

- If extra time has been allowed to any learner for any reason (e.g. disturbance in the examination room or reasonable accommodation), the invigilator notes it in the Invigilator Report Form.
- Collects the scripts, places them in an agreed order, checked against the learner list to ensure that none have been overlooked and the list of attending learners signed.
- Give the learners permission to leave the examination room giving consideration to any learner who has been given extra time
- Collects any unused examinations answer books
- Completes and sign the examination attendance register, invigilation report and seating plan Invigilator Report Form mentioning absences, breach of examination rules/misconduct, irregularities and/or difficulties during the examination using the templates provided
- Secures the examination scripts and returns them to the Network Administrator immediately who counts them, checks them against the attendance register and seating plan and stores them securely.
- If the trainer invigilated the examination, they can take the scripts away immediately for marking after the Network Administrator has checked them

The Network Administrator stores scripts locked in a secure place until they are collected for marking

- Examination scripts are seen and discussed only by those responsible for marking.
- The trainer returns the marked scripts to the Network Administrator as soon as possible but not later than the final deadline agreed
- Staff must not give any information directly or indirectly to a learner regarding assessment performance until the results are approved by the Results Approval Panel.

6.9. Quality Assuring Assessment in the Workplace

Learners undertaking a work experience or work placement module must participate in a work placement as part of their studies. The employer who provides the placement must appoint a workplace supervisor to support and supervise the learner. One of the responsibilities of the workplace supervisor is to assess and rate the learner's performance under a number of stated criteria and complete the *Workplace Supervisor Report* using the template provided by NOTS. The trainer:

- Ensure that all stakeholders in the learning process – the learner, employer and the supervisor are well-informed on the goals, processes, and assessment
- Briefs the workplace supervisor in advance of the assessment detailing clearly the expected learning outcomes
- Gives them a copy of our *Guidelines for Workplace Supervisors w*hich guides them in assessing and rating the learner's performance.
- Reviews the reports submitted by the supervisors, countersigns them and may comment on them.

We make the completed reports available to the external authenticator who reviews a sample, focusing on the work of supervisors who are assessing for the first time. We ask the external authenticator to comment on the quality of the assessment by the workplace supervisors

6.10. Presentation and Submission of Assignments

The trainer sets out details of how an assignment is to be presented and submitted in the assessment brief. The learners submits assessments in the format required via Moodle. We advise learners to maintain copies of all submissions for their own reference. In order to ensure fairness all assessments must be submitted on or before the dates set out on the assessment timetable unless otherwise notified in advance by the trainer. We do no not accept assignments received after the due date unless an extension has been granted in advance. We grant extensions to learners who have genuine difficulty in meeting a submission deadline. Requests for extensions must be submitted in advance of the submission date to the trainer using the *Extension Request Form* with supporting verifiable evidence if relevant e.g. medical certificate in case of sickness.

6.11. Repeating and Deferring Assessment

We allow one opportunity to repeat an assessment if a learner fails an assessment. The trainer contacts the learner directly and gives them detailed feedback on the areas where they fell short. Information relating to repeating is included in the learner handbook. A learner must notify the Network Administrator in writing if they wish to repeat an assessment and the trainer agrees the arrangements with them. We do not charge a fee to repeat

6.11.1. Deferrals

If a learner cannot complete the programme for any reason, they can apply for a deferral using the Deferral Application Form. If the deferral is granted, the learner can complete the programme at a later stage. The learner must give a valid reason for the deferral request. The Quality Officer reviews the request and if it is practically possible and in the best interests of the learner, grants the deferral. The Network Administrator contacts the learner to make arrangements and maintains details on the learner record.

6.12. Reasonable Accommodation (assessment)

We clearly explain what we mean by reasonable accommodation in the context of assessment at induction and in the **Learner Handbook**. Examples of adaptions we can make:

- Rest Breaks during examinations;
- The allocation of a separate room for examinations;
- Splitting the assessment into two or more sessions;
- The use of computers and other technology;
- Audio-recording;
- Enlarge print i.e. A3 size;
- Examination papers in colour;

- Use of a scribe or reader;
- Oral (as opposed to written) examinations; or
- Extended time to complete assignments.

We urge learners to let us know when they apply or as soon as possible into the programme if they think they need or may need additional supports for assessment. We ask them to complete and submit the *Reasonable Accommodation Request* form to the Network Administrator. The Network Administrator:

- Reviews individual requests;
- Discusses the request with the trainer;
- Signs-off on a request only if it is reasonable and practicable for us to accommodate the learner and that the arrangements do not affect the standards of the given award;
- Agrees the proposed arrangements with the learners and the trainer; and
- Advises the Finance Manager about the arrangements so he can include details in the **Internal Verification Report** making the external authenticator aware of arrangements.

6.13. Marking and Grading

The Quality Officer monitors the standards of marking and grading. Marking and grading is addressed at trainer induction and in the trainer handbook. If additional training is required, it is organised by the Network Manager. Detailed marking schemes, based on the validated assessment plans, show clearly how assessment evidence is to be marked and graded, are available to trainers. The marking schemes are reviewed and updated, if required, as part of programme review. An overview of the Assessment sign-off process can be seen in Figure3.

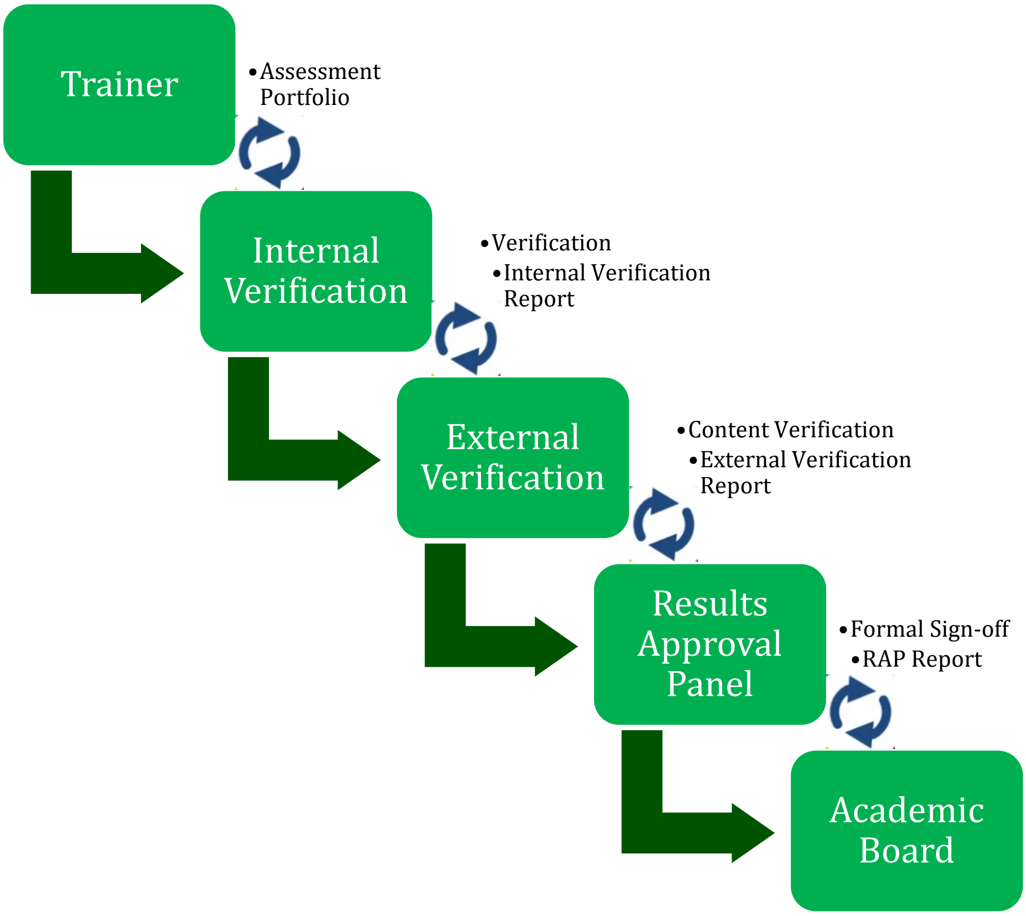

Figure 3. Assessment Sign-off Process

The Finance Manger is asked to comment on the consistency of marking and highlight any concerns/inconsistencies in the internal verification report. We ask the external authenticator for feedback on consistency of marking and grading and to record any observations in their report. If there are any concerns, they are discussed at the Results Approval Panel meeting and a decision made regarding corrective action/s.

6.14. Internal Verification

We carry our internal verification in line with QQI guidelines set out in the '*Quality Assurance Assessment Guidelines for Providers 2013 (pages 24 and 25)*'.

6.14.1. Role of the Internal Verifier

- Check that trainers have adhered to our assessment procedures and applied them consistently across assessment activities

- Check that assessment results are calculated, transcribed, and recorded correctly and accurately
- Highlight any irregularities or deviations from the normal distribution of marks
- Checks the master folder submitted by the trainer contains:
  - List of all learners alphabetically by surname with a breakdown of marks
  - Module descriptor
  - Assessment Briefs
  - Marking Schemes
  - Exam papers
  - Sample solutions
  - Evidence of cross moderation (Where appropriate)
  - Video/Audio evidence (clearly labelled)
  - If the master folder is not complete, the internal verifier returns it to the trainer with notes
- Takes corrective action if results and/or assessment evidence is missing: contacting the trainer, rechecking assessments and/or evidence for mislaid items, reviewing attendance registers and submission logs to ensure evidence was received
- Completes and signs the internal verification report including observations and recommendations
- Makes the internal verification report available to the external authenticator in advance of authentication and to members of the Results Approval Panel in advance of the Results Approval Panel meeting
- Presents the internal verification report at the Results Approval Panel meeting, highlighting any concerns or issues documented in the report, particularly issues which may need to be addressed with corrective action.

6.15. External Authentication

We arrange for the authentication of assessment by a suitably qualified independent person as part of quality assurance of assessment. Through a process of moderation, the authenticator confirms that learners have been assessed fairly and consistently, that the marking and grading is valid and reliable, and that the assessment evidence meets the national standard for the award.

6.15.1. Selection and Appointment of the External Authenticator

External authenticators play a very important role in monitoring the quality of assessment in NOTS. We have a rigorous recruitment process and ensure the authenticator receives all documentation in time and follows our processes and procedures systematically. The Quality Officer sources suitably qualified external authenticators based on their match to our selection criteria and makes a recommendation to the Academic Board regarding the appointment. When the Academic Board has approved the appointment, the Quality Officer;

- Records evidence of the suitability of the appointment
- Liaises with the external authenticator and issues a contract and guidelines setting out what is involved and our expectations
- Let the trainers know about the arrangements for authentication and ask them to make themselves available if the authenticator needs to contact them to discuss results (usually by phone)
- Makes a copy of the *QQI Quality Assuring Assessment Guidelines for External Authenticators* available to the authenticator
- Makes arrangements for the site visit
- Submits an agenda and a copy of the Internal Verification Report to the external authenticator by the agreed date prior to the authentication visit.
- Agrees payment and date for submission of the completed authentication report
- Invites the authenticator to attend the results approval panel meeting to report on the outcomes of authentication and to help us to identify strengths, gaps and areas for improvement.

We rotate the use of authenticators and do not contract the services of the same authenticator for more than three consecutive certification periods. Both the authenticator and the Finance Manager, acting as the internal verifier, sign the external authenticator reports and the Quality Officer stores them securely in hard copy and electronically and maintains them indefinitely.

External Authenticator Selection Criteria:

- General technical/subject matter expertise
- Competent to confirm that we are implementing our quality assurance policies and procedures
- Understand and appreciate our context, approach and learner profile
- Experience of external authentication and/or external examining
- Independent of NOTS, our programmes and trainers

6.16. Results Approval and Issuing of Results

The Academic Board appoints a Results Approval Panel which operates under a documented Terms of Reference (see Appendix 1) to formally review and approve results and check that the assessment results are fully quality assured and signed-off prior to submission to QQI for certification and issued to learners. The panel maintains systematic oversight of assessment outcomes and trends in NOTS and advises the Academic Board accordingly. The panel also highlights any issues identified and makes recommendations for improvements/corrective action. The Quality Officer is responsible for ensuring that the recommendations are implemented and reports to the panel on the progress of implementation. The Results Approval Panel carefully considers any changes to marking and grading recommended by the external authenticator and makes a decision. If the panel decides not to accept a recommendation for change/s, a detailed justification of this decision is recorded in the Results Approval Panel report

The Network Administrator:

- Convenes a Results Approval Panel meeting for each certification period
- Issues an agenda and supporting documents (internal verification and external authentication report) to members in advance.
- Prepares a report of the meeting which is signed by the Chair and retained for auditing and monitoring purposes.

6.17. Issue of Results and Certification

The final steps in the results approval process are the submission of results to QQI and the issue of results to learners.

The Finance Manager:

- Makes results available to learners in writing as soon as possible following Results Approval Panel approval;
- Double-checks the transfer of marks;
- Completes the data entry, quality assurance and data edits;
- Submits the results to QQI (at this point, the data can only be edited by QQI);
- Completes the signoff / declaration on the QBS that the data is ready for certification confirming that we have implemented all elements of the authentication process and adhered to all agreed procedures; and
- Prints off the *Final Statement of Results* from the QBS (available after the certification date for the period).

6.17.1. Issue of Results

Provisional results may be released by the trainers to the learners. The trainers point out that the results are provisional and may be changed by the **Results Approval Panel**. We do not discuss approved results with anyone other than the learner themselves, in accordance with data protection legislation. We do not fax or email results or disclose them over the telephone. The Network Administrator posts the approved results to the learner's home address as registered and makes them available on Moodle. We advise learners to ensure that their home address is correct on our learner record system and to let us know immediately if it needs to be amended. The learners can ask the Network Administrator for copies of result transcripts at any time.

6.17.2. Issue of Award Certificates

QQI issues award certificates for all results received except those flagged as being under appeal according to a predefined schedule, at the end of February, April, July, August, October and December each year. We receive the award certificates from QQI approximately 2 to 3 weeks after the Final Submission Date for the certification period.

On receipt of the award certificates, the Network Administrator:

- Logs receipt of the award certificates in our *Award Certificate Register;*
- Checks the certificates to make sure the name and other details are correct; and
- Stores the award certificates in a locked press until they are presented or posted to the learners.

6.17.3. Corrective Action

We take corrective action if any error, omission and/or deliberate act on the part of a learner or trainer/assessor or anyone involved in the assessment process impacts or potentially impacts on the validity of the assessment process. We ask the external authenticator to identify any areas where they consider there is a need to instigate corrective action and/or to identify any irregularities and to detail their concerns in the external authentication report, providing sufficient detail to enable the Results Approval Panel to make recommendations for corrective action. Any areas of areas of potential vulnerability identified by the internal verifier or the external authenticator, or any trainer/staff member involved in assessment is considered by the Results Approval Panel. In particular, recommendations and comments from the External Authenticator in relation to grade changes are considered. The Panel considers any issues identified and makes recommendations. Decisions regarding corrective actions are recorded on the Results Approval Panel report. If the implementation of corrective action results in a delay in the issue of results to a learner, the Network Administrator contacts the learner to explain.

6.18. Feedback to Trainers Following Results Approval

Trainers are responsible for providing timely and constructive, formal, and informal, formative and summative feedback to learners throughout the programme which helps to ensure a successful outcome to assessment. Feedback must contain enough detail to enable learners to evaluate and improve their performance. Trainers make themselves available throughout the programme to provide formative feedback on a one-to-one basis to the learners. The trainers also encourage learners to ask for additional feedback and/or further clarification if they need it.

The Quality Officer provides the feedback from the external authenticator and the results approval panel to trainers at a programme team meeting and integrates it into programme review and development. The trainers and other members of the programme team use the learning from results approval process and Results Approval Panel recommendations to inform and improve future practice.

6.19. Feedback to Learners

How, when how often and in what format feedback is provided to learners is agreed at the pre-programme briefing. It is usually given at specific stages of the programme and provided in the form of written comments on learners' work, or, in some instances, written feedback is provided using the *Assessment Feedback Form.* We use formative assessment and feedback throughout the programmes to support the learning process, aid revision and inform learners on their progress. Feedback may be provided on a one-to-one basis and/or group basis and should contain enough detail to enable learners to evaluate and improve their performance. *Guidelines on Providing Feedback to Learners* is included as an appendix to our trainer handbook and this is also addressed at trainer induction. Trainers are required to comment on the assessment scripts when they are marking, and the Finance Manager checks for evidence of this during internal verification.

6.19.1. Recheck and Appeals

Definitions:

- **An appeal** is a request to a higher authority for the alteration of the decision or judgement of a lower one
- **Review:** A review is the re-consideration of the assessment decision by a competent person. A review may result in one of the following outcomes: grade unchanged, grade increased, or grade decreased. A review is an integral part of the appeals process

- **Recheck:** A recheck is the administrative rechecking of the recording and addition of marks. A recheck may result in one of the following outcomes: grade unchanged, grade increased, or grade decreased.

We enable learners to request a recheck, review, or lodge an appeal against an academic decision. The Quality Officer is responsible for coordinating the appeals process in accordance with our Assessment Appeals Process, ensuring that learners are aware of and familiar with the procedure, and that the procedure is implemented fairly and effectively. The trainers let the learners know about our appeals process at induction and it is also addressed in the learner handbook. We remind learners of the opportunity to appeal when the approved results are issued to them. After the approved results have been issued, we offer learners the opportunity to discuss their results with the trainer/assessor to help them understand their results and provide guidance for future assessment. This discussion can provide useful clarification and feedback and helps to inform a learner's decision on whether to proceed with an appeal or not.

6.20. Monitoring & Evaluation of Assessment

- The Results Approval Panel examines assessment outcomes and trends, benchmarking assessment outcomes against those from previous years and against national data and makes recommendations for corrective action accordingly. The recommended corrective actions are presented to the Academic Board as part of the Results Approval Panel report and are considered and agreed by the Academic Board.
- The Quality Officer monitors the implementation of the agreed actions and reports back reports at subsequent Results Approval Panel meetings.
- We ask learners for their views of the adequacy of feedback provided in the Learner Evaluation forms.
- When the trainer is reviewing a work placement with the learner, they ask them for feedback on the quality of the assessment, records anything of significance and submits it as part of the assessment portfolio.

Chapter 7

Supports for Learners

(Aligned to QQI Core QA Guideline 7)

7.1. Learner Support Policy

NOTS learner-centred ethos permeates everything we do in relation to training and education and we aim to embed learner support into our programmes at every stage. Learner support focuses on what we do to help learners beyond the formal delivery of the content of a programme. We build in a range of appropriate learner supports into the design of our programmes. Our supports kick-in when an applicant first contact us and continues until the programme concludes, and beyond if required. We make every effort to ensure that learners are aware of the supports that are available and can easily access them. We aim to provide an inclusive environment recognising the diversity of identities and experiences and treat each person with honesty, dignity, fairness, and integrity. We provide training that is accessible for individuals with additional or diverse needs insofar as this is possible and practicable. We have an Equality Diversity and Inclusion Policy that clearly sets out our commitment to facilitating diversity and difference.

7.2. Responsibilities

- The Network Steering Group is responsible for ensuring that the resources are in place to support our learners;
- The Academic Board maintains oversight of the quality of learner supports;
- The Quality Officer is responsible for coordinating learner supports and monitoring their adequacy and effectiveness;
- Trainers monitor the supports and learner progress while delivering and bringing any issues to the attention of the Quality Officer; and
- All staff have a responsibility, directly or indirectly, to support learners.

7.3. Information on Learner Support

We let learners know about the full range of supports in the learner handbook, on Moodle and at induction. There is also information on the website.

We provide essential information to learners and ensure there is consistency in the approach across trainers and programmes. Trainers make learners aware of key information regarding coursework, learner supports, assessment dates, and policies. We also give learners a tutorial on the use of Moodle.

Information for trainers about their responsibility in supporting learners is in the Trainer QA Folder, and in the Trainer Handbook.

7.4. Determining Learners Needs

We determine the needs of individual learners by;

- Asking them (by phone or face-to-face/virtual meeting) when they are applying if they have specific needs that we will need to cater for;
- Analysing the information on the learner application form carefully, paying particular attention to a request for additional support/s and the level of English of the applicant;
- Analysing the feedback from the workplace supervisors (learners on the Work Experience module);
- Requests from learners for additional support at any point during the programme; and
- Trainer observations and analysis of quality of the draft assignments submitted.

7.5. Supports For Learners

PEL aims to safeguard a learner's academic journey. It refers to arrangements made for specific programmes to ensure that a learner can complete the programme that they have begun if we discontinue the programme for any reason. An appropriate PEL Solution for NOTS will be developed when an applicable course is developed.

7.5.1. Learner Complaints

We let learners know about their right to complain at induction and in the learner handbook. We have a complaints procedure which is referenced in the handbook. We aim to resolve complaints promptly, confidentially, and informally if possible. Our complaints procedure is designed to ensure the necessary degree of independence from any earlier decision making. We do not accept anonymous complaints. A complaint may be made in relation to any aspect of programme delivery, conduct of the trainer or in any area in which a learner feels aggrieved.

7.5.2. Reasonable Accommodation (training delivery)

We try to identify the diverse and individual needs of learners when they apply but also encourage learners to approach their trainer or any staff member at any point if they have a specific need. We consider each request on a case-by-case basis and we have documented procedure for dealing with requests. While we make every effort to accommodate special needs and non-standard learners, we can only respond to requests that are reasonable and practicable and applicants must meet minimum entry requirements for the programme. We discuss equality and diversity training at staff and trainer induction, address it in the learner and trainer handbooks and on an ongoing basis to ensure staff are aware of equality and diversity issues and have the capacity to accommodate diversity (refer to NOTS Equality Diversity and Inclusion Policy – Appendix 6).

As a rule, an adaptation to the form of delivery, which makes learning possible, also helps to make assessment possible. The learner is usually best placed to know what is best and most effective. However, we must ensure that the standard of work required by the assessment is not compromised. We can only adjust the method by which the learner demonstrates his/her attainment of the standard.

The following are not considered grounds for Reasonable Accommodation:

- Where English is not the first language of the learner;
- Literacy ability. We must be clear about the difference between a learner’s need for reasonable accommodation and a literacy requirement; and

- Injuries/disabilities that do not have an impact on the learner's ability to demonstrate the required standard of knowledge, skill and competence.

7.5.3. Compassionate Consideration

Occasionally a learner will not be able to participate in an assessment due to extenuating circumstances e.g. death of a close relative, illness or accident. In this case, a learner may apply for compassionate consideration to defer the assessment or submit an assessment on an alternative date. (see: The Compassionate Consideration Procedure; Compassionate Consideration Request Form). Due to the sometimes-sensitive nature of certain requests, the Network Administrator has leeway to handle this type of request with the utmost of compassion e.g. not forcing a documented request form. When considering an application for compassionate consideration, fairness to the learner and all other learners is the overriding principle. The Network Administrator makes the decision in agreement with the Trainer.

7.5.4. Additional Academic Supports

- Trainers and the other members of the programme team are available to offer advice and assistance whenever learners ask for it; and
- We organise individual and group tutorials when learners need additional assistance.

National Organic Training Skillnet

Chapter 8

Information and Data Management

(Aligned to QQI Core QA Guideline 8)

8.1. Information and Data Management Policy

We regard the data we generate and hold as a key asset that we must manage effectively to ensure that NOTS functions to a high standard. the effective use of reliable information and verifiable data is critical for informed decision-making to help us identify what is working well and what needs attention. We ensure that all our data processing activities are GDPR compliant and demonstrate best practice. We are committed to full compliance with the data protection legislation and privacy rights of learners and others from whom we collect and maintain personal data. All the personal data we collect is covered by the NOTS Data Protection Policy and Procedures. We are aware of the data security implications of online applications and bookings and the need for security around the digital process. This includes the controlling and processing of data by third parties and securing learners consent to use their data for specific purposes. We limit the collection of data to that which is necessary and keep it for the minimum time required. All personal data is securely destroyed when we no longer need to maintain it. Our record retention timelines are guided by **data protection** legislation and are set out in our data protection policy.

Definition

Data is a general term meaning facts, numbers, letters, and symbols collected by various means and processed to produce information. Data may include personal or sensitive personal elements and needs to be managed in accordance with current data protection legislation and regulation.

8.2. Responsibilities

- The Network Steering Group has ultimate responsibility for the management, safeguarding and proper use of information and data;
- The Academic Board maintains oversight of the data which relates to the quality of programmes;
- The Finance Manager is responsible for managing, maintaining, and securing data and information and acts as the Data Protection Officer; and
- The Quality Officer is responsible for ensuring that the information and data presented to governance units is robust, comprehensive, and timely.

8.3. Learner Records

A learner record encompasses all records, files, documents, and other materials that directly relate to a learner. Documents included in the learner record include (as applicable);

- Personal data/ PPSN
- Assessment results
- Attendance records
- Disciplinary records (academic misconduct)
- Records of certification
- Record of reasonable accommodation provided
- RPL data

We have an in-house record management system where we maintain learner records. We set out clearly why we are collecting personal data and how we secure it on our application and registration forms. The Network Administrator inputs the data from our application forms, certification records and attendance records onto our **learner records.** We let the learner know that we are required to share data with other organisations / individuals e.g. QQI, Skillnet Ireland, external authenticator and the reasons for the sharing. We maintain learner records and statistics securely on a password-protected computer drive with access limited to the Quality Officer and the Finance Manager. We have strong IT security procedures to protect the information we hold in digital form. All computers are password protected and situated in securely locked offices. IT audits occur once per year.

All hard copy records are held in a secure cabinet on site.   This cabinet hosts all assessment documentation and materials, learner work, assessment results and records, assessment events (examinations and skills demonstrations), learner enrolments, retention, completion, and progression. We keep hard-copy data to a minimum and only for the period of registration of an individual learner. Data related to reasonable accommodation may be highly sensitive and is shared with us in confidence. We have additional security measures around sensitive personal data and use it only for the purpose of providing the agreed support.

8.4. Securing Assessment Data

The trainers input assessment results onto a secure online database. We retain one full set of assessment evidence and associated documentation from one certification period to the next. We securely destroy assessment evidence and all sensitive data related to applications for reasonable accommodation in a secure and timely manner in line with our data retention schedule after the assigned retention time has expired. We let learners know how long we retain assessment evidence for, who has access to it and for what purpose, and how it is destroyed.

8.4.1. Securing PPSNs

A learner's PPSN is used by QQI to uniquely identify individual learners. It is a valuable piece of personal information which we must safeguard against misappropriation or misuse. We uphold data protection principles regarding the PPSN and take all reasonable steps to secure PPSNs and associated data. We do not disclose a person's PPSN to anyone, unless we are satisfied that the person is entitled to that information. The Finance Manager is responsible for managing PPSNs and uses them when inputting learner data on the QQI QBS and for payroll purposes (staff; trainers). All staff and trainers who have access to PPSNs through their work, must treat the number confidentially and securely. We understand that it is an offence for any person or body to request or hold a record of a PPSN unless they are permitted by law to do so.

8.5. Reports Presented to Governance Unit

Report Title	To/From	Frequency	Presented by
Programme Reports	To Academic Board	Annually	Quality Officer
Risk Register	To Academic Board	At each meeting	Quality Officer
Self-Evaluation Reports/Programmatic Reviews	To Academic Board	Every 5 years	Programme Leader
New Programme Proposals	To Academic Board	As required	Programme Leader
Applications for Validation/Validation Manuals	To Academic Board	As they arise and prior to submission to awarding body	Programme Leader
Results Approval Panel (Results Approval Panel) reports	To Academic Board and the Network Steering Group	Following each Results Approval Panel meeting	Quality Officer
External monitoring reports and implementation / action plans arising	To Academic Board + Network Steering Group	As they arise	Quality Officer

External Authentication reports	To Results Approval Panel (Results Approval Panel)	Each certification period	Internal Verifier (or the external authenticator if attending the Results Approval Panel meeting)
Internal Verification reports	To Results Approval Panel	Each certification period	Internal Verifier
Academic Board Reports	To the Network Steering Group	Following each meeting	Chair of the Academic Board

8.6. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

A key performance indicator (KPI) *is a measurable value that demonstrates how effectively we are achieving our objectives.* All the data collected during monitoring provides important information about the success of our training provision, areas requiring improvement and opportunities for further developments. The Quality Officer monitors the following KPIs and reports on them to the Network Steering Group and the Academic Board:

- Number of queries/conversions to applications
- Number of applications/registrations (benchmarked against targets)
- Number of programmes
- Number of RPL applications
- Drop-out/completion rates
- Progression rates
- Assessment results compared to national standards
- Number of CPD events – internal and external
- Number of incidents of trainer poor performance
- Learner rating of tutor and staff performance
- Tutor and learner ratings of the standards of programme resources and learner supports

- Number of applications for reasonable accommodation for assessment/ number granted
- Number and level of seriousness of complaints
- Number of accidents/incidents

The reporting requirements for the different governance unit are set out clearly in the terms of reference for each unit.

8.7. Reporting of Data to QQI

We use the QQI Quality Business System (QBS) to submit assessment data, to access other QQI systems, e.g., validation and Q-help and to submit reports and data to QQI. Access to the QBS is limited to the Quality Officer and the Finance Manager and is through a password-protected link. All certification data is double-checked for accuracy by the Finance Manager and the Quality Officer before it is submitted to QQI.

Chapter 9

Public Information and Communication

(Aligned to QQI Core QA Guideline 9)

9.1. Communication Policy

From a NOTS perspective, effective communication:

- Builds trust and drives engagement;
- Is as much about listening as talking;
- Is timely and responsive; and
- Is objective, up-to-date, easily accessible and designed with the specific audience in mind.

We recognise that public information is the primary means through which we communicate with prospective and current learners, as well as other stakeholders and the general public. We publish and disseminate information about NOTS, our programmes and supports and how we quality assure what we do through multiple media platforms and at face-to-face events. It is always our aim to ensure that we make up-to-date, accurate, and impartial pre-entry information easily available to prospective applicants to help them make an informed decision about enrolling on a course or programme. We make this information available on our website and in programme brochures. We are also committed to actively listening to our stakeholders and making it easy for them to communicate with us. This policy applies to the information we publish about NOTS and our programmes of training and education. In relation to our QQI programmes, the information we publish must be compliant with the terms of Section 67 of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 which requires provider institutions to specify:

- Details / Title of the award
- Name of the awarding body
- Whether the award is recognised on the NFQ & the level of recognition
- Whether the award is a Major, Minor, Special Purpose or Supplemental
- If completion of a programme does not entitle the learner to an award
- Arrangements for the protection of enrolled learners (if applicable)
- Entry arrangements, transfer, and progression routes
- Content and learning outcomes
- Reasonable accommodation/supports
- Assessment strategy
- Fees / How to apply

9.1.1. Responsibilities

- The Academic Board maintains oversight of the programme and quality assurance information we publish;
- The Network Manager is responsible for the quality of all public information; and
- The Quality Officer approves programme information prior to publication
- The Communications Manager updates programme materials and manages the website and social media platforms.

9.2. Communicating with Applicants

Applicants can view our training calendar, access details of our programmes and supports and be guided through the steps to applying for a place, be signposted to support and guidance from staff on our website. The Network Administrator responds to all queries within 24 hours (or, if not possible, sends a holding email) and follows up queries with emails and/or phone calls and escalates them to a trainer if she cannot deal with them. We retain contact details of all who contact us on our CRM database (with their permission).

9.3. Information for Learners

The trainer inducts the learners using the standard induction presentation, our Learner Handbook and where applicable, programme specific induction. The aim of induction is to ensure that learners have all the information they need to ensure a successful outcome to the programme, and that all learners understand the importance of Academic Integrity to NOTS. The trainer also distributes programme and assessment timetables at Induction and directs learners to the LMS for all academic, programme and operational reference materials. The trainer is the primary point of contact and source of information for learners throughout the programme and responds to all requests for information, directing learners to the LMS where applicable and escalating queries to the Network Administrator if s/he is unable to respond/does not have the information.

9.4. Communicating with the Public

We use a range of media to communicate information about our programmes, with our website www.nots.ie being the primary means of communication. We have a dedicated section on the website which is easily accessible that holds current, accurate and accessible information about NOTS, Skillnet Ireland, our programmes, learner supports, QQI and the NFQ. Other channels of communication include;

- Skillet Ireland website https://www.skillnetireland.ie/networks/national-organic-training-skillnet/
- Skillnet Ireland “Kinetic” Newsletter - https://mailchi.mp/skillnetireland.ie/welcome-to-the-march-kinetic-newsletter?e=[UNIQID]
- Facebook https://www.facebook.com/nationalorganicskillnet
- Twitter: www.twitter.com/NatOrgSkill
- Instagram: www.instagram.com/nationalorganicskillnet
- We issue regular ezines using the Mailchimp marketing automation platform https://mailchi.mp/NOTS.ie/spring-learning-NOTS-courses-in-march-april?e=c0020f917f. There is a sign-up facility on our website;
- Attendance at industry-led events and conferences; and
- Industry publications/trade press.

9.5. Publication of QA Documents and Evaluation Reports

To ensure visibility of our QA practices, we publish our QA manual and key findings from quality evaluations, quality improvement plans, self-assessment reports in an easily accessible format and location on our website as soon as practicable after the evaluation event and in line with QQI requirements.

Schedule of Documents Published on NOTS Website:

Document Report Title	Frequency	Approved by
QA Manual	When agreed by QQI and thereafter updated every two years	Academic Board
Programme / Quality Reports	As they arise	Network Manager
QQI Panel Reports	As they arise	QQI / Network Manager
External Monitoring Reports	As they arise	QQI / Network Manager

9.6. Self-Evaluation, Monitoring and Review Policy Statement

We continually monitor and evaluate our programmes, the quality of provision and the learning and teaching environment in order to ensure high quality programmes and to identify opportunities for us to develop and improve. This is essential if we are to ensure that we are meeting the requirements of learners, staff, trainers, QQI and other stakeholders, that our programmes are updated, regularly renewed, and refreshed and public and learner information reflect new and updated QA procedures.

Review and self-evaluation differ in frequency and scale. Programme review has a narrow focus, involves internal personnel only and typically focuses on specific indicators. Self-evaluation has a broad, systemic focus and is conducted at specified intervals. To ensure effective and thorough self-evaluation we take the views of all stakeholders; learners, graduates, staff, trainers, employers, QQI, external authenticators and governance units into account and regard them as central to the process. We regard the selection of a suitable external evaluator who is competent to make a positive contribution to future plans for the programme as being key to the success of a self-evaluation exercise. The outputs of all our review and evaluation processes are reported on in aggregate form to the Network Steering Group and our Academic Board and used to implement change and improvement, to help us to identify examples of best practice and stay abreast of developments that impact on our programmes.

9.6.1. Responsibility

- The Academic Board maintains oversight of all self-evaluation, monitoring and review processes and reviews reports;
- The Network Manager is responsible for ensuring that evaluation and monitoring processes are properly resourced; and
- The Quality Officer is responsible for coordinating self-evaluation, monitoring and review processes.

9.7. Information Relating To QQI

As a QQI provider, we comply with QQI's requirements with regard to providing public information. If we provide enrolled learners with information that is false or misleading, intentionally or unintentionally, we are committing an offence and QQI is obliged to take appropriate steps to ensure that we address any concerns it raises promptly and comprehensively. We ensure that all references to QQI and the NFQ are correct and that we use only the current versions of the NFQ graphic and the QQI award brand. We clearly identify which of our programmes are validated by QQI. Award codes and level are clearly identified, and a link is provided to the QQI web page listing the award

9.7.1. Use of the QQI Award Brand Logo

The QQI Award brand logo is strictly controlled and is available to us to use only when we are promoting our programmes leading to QQI awards. We understand the reproducing of the QQI Award logo implies agreement with the terms and conditions of usage detailed on the QQI website (on Qhub). We use appropriate wording when displaying the QQI brand on our website and in promotional and marketing materials.

Chapter 10

Other Parties Involved In Education And Training

(Aligned to Core Guideline 10)

10.1 Policy

NOTS recognise the value of having constructive and collaborative peer relationships with other parties in the education and training community. These relationships open up opportunities for NOTS learners and contribute to the enhancement of our programmes, supports and services. We are open to collaborating to provide insight into areas that are new to NOTS and to contribute to strategic development and capacity building for the sector. However, any individual or organisation we work collaborate with must subscribe to NOTS philosophy and vision of continuous quality improvement. We view collaboration as being central to make our programmes as widely available as possible to learners and to open routes to accreditation for learners which may not otherwise be available to them.

If NOTS engages with second providers in the delivery of QQI accredited programmes the Academic Board will evaluate and approve the arrangements in advance. As a provider with a quality assurance agreement with QQI, we understand it is our responsibility to ensure the quality of all programmes and supports we deliver in collaboration with other providers as the first provider. We have the same responsibilities to all learners; whether we deliver programmes ourselves or in collaboration with another provider. It is our policy to monitor the achievement of programme objectives and learner satisfaction on programmes or parts of programmes delivered in collaboration with other providers.

We will have a written statement of agreed arrangements detailing respective responsibilities signed by both parties in place before we contract any external expertise.

Opportunities to develop, sustain and maintain peer relationships include:

- Attending and presenting at conferences, seminars and CPD events to network with both education and training professionals and sectoral representatives;
- Membership of professional bodies and organisations e.g. The National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN);
- Engaging with QQI and other awarding bodies and attendance at QQI briefings and workshops;
- Engaging with other training providers both formally and informally;
- Introductions facilitated by external members of our governance panels; and
- Engagement with external stakeholders as part of our training needs analysis and programme design processes.

10.1.1 Responsibilities

- The Network Manager maintains oversight of all collaborative arrangements and has responsibility for monitoring the quality and performance of external experts and collaborations; and
- The Quality Officer is responsible for ensuring the procedure for engaging external expertise is consistently applied.

10.2 Current Peer Relationships with the Broader Education and Training

NOTS has strong peer relationships which help to support its activities in education and training:

- We have a close working relationship with An tIonad Glas - Organic College, Dromcolliher, Co Limerick which delivers accredited organic horticulture programmes which lead to Level 5 and 6 awards on the NFQ. An tIonad Glas - Organic College provides the facilities and delivers the programme. The certification is provided by LCETB. We fund learners;
- We collaborate with the South East Technological University (formerly Waterford IT) in the delivery of a MSc/Postgraduate Diploma in Organic and Biological Agriculture. South East Technological University provides the facilities, delivers the programme and certification . We fund learners and contrite to governance of the programme. The Network Manager sits on the programme board and is in involved in monitoring and evaluating the programmes and updating programme content; and
- We have a working relationship with Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) whereby we fund learners to undertake the MSc in Organic Farming. We have no involvement in the delivery or governance of the programme.

10.3 Appointment of External Experts and Advisors

We appoint and contract external experts and advisors to provide expert, independent and informed advice and guidance on academic and quality matters. Appointments include:

- External Authenticator/s;
- External Chair of the Academic Board;
- External Chair of the Results Approval Panel;
- External QA Advisor to review the QA system and provide independent oversight of the effectiveness of the system; and
- External Subject Matter Experts in programme design.

10.4 Selection Criteria for External Appointees

External Appointees must:

- be independent of NOTS with no conflict of interest;
- be appropriately qualified and competent in the areas which they are engaged to provide support in;
- Have experience / involvement in further education and training;
- Have education, training / industry expertise in the broad subject area of the programme; and
- Have experience in external authentication and have broad subject matter expertise (external authenticator).

10.5 Process of Appointment

The Quality Officer is responsible for appointments:

- Sourcing suitable candidates through references, networking and referrals and collates supporting evidence;
- Carrying out due diligence;
- Presenting the details of the candidates to the Academic Board who make the decision;
- Agreeing the terms and conditions with the candidate on appointment;
- Asking the candidate/s to declare any direct or perceived conflicts of interest or loyalty prior to their engagement;
- Inducting the appointee/make copy of the QA manual available to them; and
- Maintaining records of all external advisors and experts engaged by NOTS.

Chapter 11

Self-Evaluation, Monitoring and Review

(Aligned to QQI Core QA Guideline 11)

11.1 Ongoing Monitoring and Evaluation

Evaluation Method	Who is monitoring?	Frequency	What do we review?
Analysis of informal feedback from learners and other stakeholders	NOTS Team, Network Administrator, Communications Manager, Finance Manager	After each course	Public, learner and key stakeholder perception of Organisation and Programme/Course Quality
Analysis of key performance indicators (KPIs)	Finance Manager, Quality Officer, Network Manager		Learner Record System
Analysis of learner feedback	Network Administrator, Communications Manager	Following each programme	Post programme learner evaluation forms / One-to-one feedback provided by learners / Focus group meetings
Analysis of trainer tutor feedback forms	Network Administrator; Finance Manager	Following each programme	Trainer Evaluation Forms
Analysis of recorded complaints	Finance Manager (Compliance Officer)	Quarterly	Complaints Register
Review any changes to documented risks. Add details of new risks are identified	Finance Manager	Quarterly	Risk Register
Analysis of trainer performance	Quality Officer	After each rollout of a programme	Trainer Self-Evaluation Learner Feedback Complaints / Results / Attendance
Learner Attendance data	Trainer, Network Administrator	Following each Programme	Attendance Records submitted by the trainers
Learners drop-out/early exit data		Following each Programme	Attendance Records

Adequacy of facilities and resources	Quality Officer, Trainers		
Monitoring of tutor performance	Finance Manager, Network Manager	Ongoing	Learner feedback / complaints / assessment results / learner attendance. Informal communication with learners/Iv and EA reports
Monitoring of Quality of Work Placements	Work experience trainer	Ongoing and at the end of the work experience modules	Workplace supervisors' reports/feedback / External authenticators' comments / Learner feedback / Personal observations / Quality of the work experience journals / Assessment results for the work experience module

Figure X: Schedule of Ongoing Monitoring Activities

11.2. Learner and Trainer Feedback

We invite learners to complete evaluation forms during and at the end of a programme, and to give one-to-one feedback and raise concerns and queries with trainers and other members of the programme team at any stage. We design our feedback forms to maximise the potential of getting honest and useful feedback about the programme content, quality of training delivery, learner supports, teaching and learning methodologies, the venues and facilities, and any other issues our learners want to raise. Trainers complete an evaluation/self-assessment form at the end of each programme. The Quality Officer reviews the completed forms and discusses the feedback with the trainer at the programme debriefing.

11.2.1. Monitoring and Evaluating of Learner Supports

We have questions on our learner and trainer feedback forms about supports and resources and consider this feedback. We also ask for feedback from learners who have availed of reasonable accommodation or compassionate consideration arrangements.

11.2.2 Monitoring Early Exit Learners

We ask learners who exit early/do not complete a programme for feedback. If the learner who leaves lets the trainer know, the trainer discusses the reasons with them and records details. If it is an issue we can help with, we put whatever supports we can in place. If not, we assure them we will be happy to welcome them back in the future. If the learner does not contact us, the trainer follows up with the learner when monitoring attendance and asks the learner to confirm if they have exited the programme, discusses the reasons with them and asks if there is anything we can do to help or support them.

11.3 Programme Review

Monitoring and evaluation is ongoing and continuous. These processes are linked to and supplemented by programme review which is undertaken by the programme team every two years. Related programmes are grouped together for review purposes. The aims of programme review are as follows:

- To facilitate a critical self-assessment of the programme by all those involved in its delivery;
- To get input and analyses, including feedback, from current learners, trainers, members, industry and other stakeholders;
- To review the content, relevance, curriculum design and delivery of the programme and check that quality standards are maintained; and
- Check that programme content is aligned to current national and EU regulation.

The Programme Leader collates and analyses data from a range of sources for the review, including ongoing monitoring data and involves key stakeholders in the review as appropriate, as well as consulting with employers or sector representatives in respect of programme outcomes and content. The following are reviewed as part of the programme review

- Programme content and materials;
- The QQI published award specification (if applicable)
- Compliance with the conditions of validation set out in the QQI Certificate of Validation
- Need for staff/trainer CPD
- Quality assurance processes and procedures which underpin the programme
- Learning resources, facilities and learner supports

- Published programme-related information
- Application, attendance, completion, retention and progression rates
- Transfer and progression routes
- Entry requirements/RPL arrangements
- Feedback from learners, trainers and stakeholders
- Appeals and complaints
- Assessment results
- Certification reports
- Comparison of award outcomes with that of other providers
- The information contained on the QQI register of providers and the database of awards and programmes

The Programme Leader produces a programme report which is submitted to the Network Manager and the Academic Board which agrees changes and amendments to the programme within the bounds of validation. A copy is also submitted to the Network Steering Group. As part of the review process, the Programme Leader deletes or archives old and obsolete programme content to ensure that trainers can only access up-to-date materials and information. The Quality Officer monitors the implementation of the agreed changes.

11.4 Self-Evaluation

"The self-evaluation by a provider of its programmes and services is a fundamental part of its quality assurance system. It is a way of developing the programme through constructive questioning leading to positive recommendations and improvement planning. It should be viewed as a process primarily for the benefit of the programme, its current and future learners and the staff working on it'. QQI

We carry out an extensive self-evaluation of our programmes every five years in line with revalidation of our programmes. This is a comprehensive review of all aspects of the programme and the quality assurance processes that underpin it. It is forward-looking and we use the outputs to inform the development and future planning of the programme. The review considers the views of learners, graduates, trainers, employers/industry and other stakeholders, all members of the programme team and an external evaluator. We use the FESS Self-Evaluation Resource as a guide when evaluating programmes. The Academic Board agrees on a plan, a timeline and the appointment of a suitably qualified external evaluator recommended by the Quality Officer. The Network Manager ensures that the resources including time, budget, and expertise are in place to undertake an effective evaluation and there is clear corporate commitment to the process. The most recent self-evaluation of the programme is used as a starting point for the next evaluation exercise.

11.4.1. Self-Evaluation Process

The Quality Officer:

- Agrees the terms of reference with the external evaluator. This includes role responsibilities, timelines, payment, aims of the evaluation;
- Invites employers and other relevant stakeholders to input into the process by give their opinions on the programmes either through the use of an online questionnaire or telephone survey;
- Collates and analyses all new data collected and data collated during the 5-year period being addressed by the review;
- Conducts a SWOT analysis of the programme;
- Compiles a summary report, which provides an accurate representation of the current state of the programme from the data and outcomes from the discussions with stakeholders, which includes recommendations for improvements made;
- Completes a draft Self-Evaluation Report; and
- Arranges an on-site meeting with the external evaluator to discuss the Self Evaluation Report, the data collected, and the findings in detail.

The external evaluator reviews the Self Evaluation Report, meets learners, graduates and trainers, and submits an external evaluation report and may observe a number of training sessions as part of the evaluation process.

The Quality Officer considers the findings of the external evaluation report and adds it to the Self Evaluation Report and draws up an improvement plan based on the evidence and findings and the external evaluator's input, taking care to identify and highlight all strengths, areas for improvements and recommendations.

The Quality Officer circulates a copy of the draft Self Evaluation Report (including priority areas for development and improvement) to members of the Network Steering Group and members of the Academic Board for consideration and discussion in advance of their meetings

The Network Steering Group and the Academic Board discuss the draft Self Evaluation Report and provide comments and feedback to the Quality Officer who makes modifications to the Self Evaluation Report as appropriate.

Following approval, the Quality Officer circulates copies of the agreed Self Evaluation Report to staff and trainers. The Quality Officer submits a copy of the Self Evaluation Report to QQI via the QBS in the format prescribed by QQI and arranges for a copy to be published on our website.

The Quality Officer monitors and reports on the implementation of the approved changes/recommendations. The implementation of the improvement plan is a recurring agenda item for programme teams meetings. As part of this process the following are considered:

- If the programme is viable/is there a continuing need for the programme. The outcome of this may be a decision to retire or replace the programme
- Relevance of outcomes to the sector
- The degree to which the programme has met/is meeting its stated aims
- Programme reports and implementation of recommendations
- Findings of QQI monitoring reports (if any)
- Changes to QQI award specifications
- Results approval panel reports
- Relevant legislative and regulatory changes
- Feedback from all stakeholders
- Competitor analysis/ numbers certified by competitors, format of programme offering

- QQI analytics /benchmarking data
- Accident and Incident reports
- Programme Risk Register
- Insurance/PEL (if applicable)
- Suitability and appropriateness of the physical facilities and anticipate changing needs in the future.
- Current programme entry requirements and appropriateness for the current context
- Technical/IT infrastructure
- Programme staffing.

11.5. Selection and Appointment of an External Evaluator

According to the QQI Quality Assurance guidelines the role of the external evaluator is to "*offer objective comparisons with similar programmes available elsewhere. This role of this person should be that of a 'critical friend', i.e. someone who can bring support, recognition and positive suggestions for improvement*." This is the starting point for us to select a suitable evaluator who is objective and brings a fresh perspective to what we do and externality to our process of continuous improvement. The Quality Officer sources a suitable evaluator and obtains CVs, details of professional qualifications and relevant experience confirming the suitability of the appointment. Following approval by the Academic Board, the Network Manager details the arrangements in a contract which is signed by both the Network Manager and the External Evaluator. We use peer reviewers whenever possible i.e. a person from another provider who is capable of giving an informed view on the success of the programme and able to contribute to its improvement.

11.5.1. Selection Criteria for External Evaluator

The person appointed must have:

- An understanding of evaluation procedures and methodologies;
- Subject matter expertise;
- Competent to compare the quality of the programme with that of similar programmes and give an informed view on the success of the programme;

- No personal, professional or business interest in NOTS or any direct connection to our trainers; and
- Experience of adult education and training.

11.6. Learner Involvement in Self-Evaluation

Data from learner evaluations feed into our self-evaluation. The external evaluator consults with both learners and graduates as part of the process. The learner representative on the Academic Board has an opportunity to comment and give feedback on the draft Self Evaluation Report.

11.6.1 Outputs of Self-Evaluation

- Self-Evaluation Report / Improvement Plan.
- Updates to the Quality Assurance system/documents.
- Revised programme content and documentation.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Terms of Reference

- **Appendix 1a – TOR Board of Directors**
- **Appendix 1b – TOR Academic Board**
- **Appendix 1c – TOR Network Steering Group**
- **Appendix 1d – TOR Results Approval Panel**
- **Appendix 1e – TOR Programme Team**

National Organic Training Skillnet

Board of Directors

Terms of Reference

Terms of Reference	Board of Directors
Associated policies	CG1 Governance and Management of Quality
Approved by	Board of Directors
Version number and approval date	V2.1 (October 2022)
Document owner	Chairman
Review date	+ 2 years

Role
The Board of Directors is responsible for Strategic Direction and Corporate Governance of National Organic Training Network. It ensures that there are sufficient resources in place to fulfil its strategic and commercial objectives and supports the Network Steering Group in the execution of its responsibilities.

Membership and Tenure

The Board of Directors comprises 5 members. The chair and the members serve a term of six years, with the possibility of a second term. The Chair must have experience of governance and chairing governance groups.

Role of the Chair

- To provide leadership for the Board
- To ensure that the Board functions properly
- To ensure full participation during meetings, all relevant matters are discussed and that effective decisions are made and carried out
- Make sure that meetings are planned effectively and that matters are dealt with in an orderly, efficient manner.

Responsibilities

- Corporate Governance;
- Fiduciary Responsibility

Meetings

- Typically the board meets quarterly;
- The Company Secretary issues an agenda and supporting documents, agreed with the Chair to members at least 10 working days in advance;
- A quorum is at least 75% of members (to include the Chair/nominee);
- Issues for discussion are usually determined by consensus. If consensus is not possible, the issue is decided by a majority of the members present voting and, in the case of an equal division of votes, the Chair has the casting vote; and
- Network Manager or members of the Network Steering Group may be invited to join the meeting to discuss specific items.

Administrative Support

The Company Secretary:

- provides administrative support and maintains minutes, reports and all other documentation;
- Drafts agendas and supporting papers in consultation with the Chair;
- Prepares meeting notes and information; and

● Writes up minutes/action plans and distributes them in a timely fashion.

Governance and Authority
● The Board of Directors delegates operational responsibility to the Network Steering Group; and ● The Board of Directors delegates academic responsibility to the Academic Board.

Supporting Documents
● Meeting Agenda ● Report Template

Report Schedule			
Report/document received	**From**	**Frequency**	**Presented by**
Board Meeting Minutes	Board of Directors	After each Board Meeting	Company Secretary
Financial Reports	Network Manager /	Each meeting	Network Manager
Annual Accounts	Network Manager	Annually	Network Manager

National Organic Training Skillnet

Academic Board

Terms of Reference

Terms of Reference	Academic Board
Associated policies	CG1 Governance and Management of Quality
Approved by	Board of Directors
Version number and approval date	V2.1 (October 2022)
Document owner	Quality Officer
Review date	+ 2 years

Role
The Academic Board has delegated authority to oversee matters relating to education and training and protecting learner interests. It maintains oversight of the standards and quality of all NOTS programmes.

Membership and Tenure

Members comprise a combination of internal and external members. There are at least two external members, one of which acts as chair. The chair is appointed by the Board of Directors. The chair and the committee serve a term of three years, with the possibility of a second term. The chair must have experience of governance and chairing governance groups.

Internal Members

- Member of the Board of Directors (Grace Maher)
- QA function/Programme Lead (Andrew Chilton)
- Trainer (Paula Pender)
- Learner - period of tenure to include the time registered as a learner plus two years thereafter

External Members

- Chair (Jim McAdam, Hon Professor, QUB and Associate, Ulster Wildlife Trust)
- Independent (Stephen Alexander, Teagasc Horticulture Specialist - Retired)

Role of the Chair

- To provide leadership for the Board
- To ensure that the Board functions properly
- To ensure full participation during meetings, all relevant matters are discussed and that effective decisions are made and carried out
- Make sure that meetings are planned effectively and that matters are dealt with in an orderly, efficient manner.
- Oversee an annual review of the board's performance and report on it to the National Steering Group
- Represent the board from time to time e.g. at QQI panel meeting

Subject to approval by the Board of Directors and the National Steering Group, the Academic Board may appoint additional members if needed

Selection Criteria for External Members

- Be independent of NOTS, NOTS funders, trainers and staff;
- Able to provide objective, expert advice and relevant insight and experience;

- Be of good standing in the education and training community; and
- Understand and appreciate NOTS context and learner profile.

Responsibilities
● Reports to the Board of Directors on any substantive concerns about quality or standards; ● Advise the Network Steering Group on all matters of academic planning; ● Maintain organisational oversight in terms of quality assurance, and advise on and approving significant decisions in relation to the QA system; ● Approve the appointment of external authenticators and external evaluators; ● Maintain oversight of academic standards; ● Maintain oversight of the quality of public information related to programmes and quality assurance; ● Approve quality assurance evaluation reports for publication; ● Confirm compliance with (QQI) conditions of validation; ● Monitor the overall quality of teaching and learning; ● Make recommendations for staff and trainer CPD; ● Consider and approve teaching, learning and assessment strategies; ● Review proposals for programme development; ● Consider and approve programme validation/revalidation applications prior to submission; ● Consider and approve programme reviews and self-evaluation reports and monitor the implementation of agreed recommendations; ● Consider results approval panel reports and agree recommendations; and ● Review the outcomes of appeals (no access to personal information).

Meetings
● The frequency of meetings reflects our operating context and may vary. Typically, the Academic Board meets quarterly; ● The Network Administrator issues an agenda and supporting documents agreed with the Chair to members at least 5 working days in advance; ● A quorum is at least 75% of members (to include the Chair/nominee) and the external members; ● Issues for discussion are usually determined by consensus. If consensus is not possible, the issue is decided by a majority of the members present voting and, in the case of an equal division of votes, the Chair has the casting vote; and ● Members of staff, trainers or the National Steering Group may be invited to join the meeting to discuss specific items.

Administrative Support
The Training Administrator: ● Provides administrative support and maintains minutes, reports and all other documentation. ● Drafts agendas and supporting papers in consultation with the Chair

- Prepares meeting notes and information.
- Writes up minutes/action plans and distributes them in a timely fashion

Governance and Authority
• The Academic Board reports to the Board of Directors

Supporting Documents
• Code of Conduct • Meeting Agenda and Minutes Template • Academic Board Report Template

Report Schedule

Report/document received	From	Frequency	Presented by
Results Approval Panel Report	Results approval panel	After each Results Approval Panel meeting	Network Manager
TBC			

National Organic Training Skillnet

Network Steering Group

Terms of Reference

Terms of Reference	Network Steering Group
Associated policies	CG1 Governance and Management of Quality
Approved by	Board of Directors
Version number and approval date	V2.1 (October 2022)
Document owner	Network Manager
Review date	+ 2 years

Role
The Network Steering Group has delegated authority from the Board of Directors to advise the Network on organic farming matters and communicate the needs of the sector to the employees of the Network.

Membership and Tenure
Member company representatives and representatives of; ● Leitrim Organic Farmers Co-op / Western Organic Network ● Irish Organic Association organic certification body ● Organic Trust organic certification body **Term of Office** The Chair and members are appointed for a three-year term, with the option of renewal, by the Board of Directors

Selection Criteria for Members
● Must be embedded within the sector, this can include working farmers, policymakers, entrepreneurs, businesspeople, and persons with a working knowledge and enthusiasm for organic farming and the agri-food sector ● Competent to ensure that there is a close alignment of NOTS activities with industry needs. ● Independent of and not directly engaged with or employed by NOTS ● Be of good standing in the organic farming and the agri-food sector

Responsibilities
● Advise the Network on organic farming matters ● Communicate the needs of the sector to NOTS ● Suggest potential courses, avenues and events that the Network should pursue

Meetings
● The Network Steering Group meets quarterly; One of these meetings will be an Annual General Meeting (AGM) ● There is provision for these meetings to be held virtually via Zoom as an element to increasing our green agenda. ● A quorum is 50% +1 of the members ● The Network Administrator issues an agenda and supporting documents agreed with the Chair to members at least 10 working days in advance ● Issues for discussion are usually determined by consensus. If consensus is not possible, the issue is decided by a majority of the members present voting and, in the case of an equal division of votes, the Chair has the casting vote. ● Members of NOTS staff, the Academic Board or the Board of Directors may be invited to join the meeting to discuss specific items

Administrative Support
The Network Administrator; ● provides administrative support and maintains minutes, reports and all other documentation ● Drafts agendas and supporting papers in consultation with the Chair ● Prepares meeting notes and information. ● Writes up minutes/action plans and distributes them in a timely fashion

Governance and Authority
● The Network Steering Group reports to the Board of Directors

Supporting Documents
● Meeting Agenda and Minutes

Report Schedule			
Report/document received	**From**	**Frequency**	**Presented by**
Results approval panel report	Results approval panel	After each Results approval panel meeting	

Terms of Reference	**Results Approval Panel**
Associated policies	CG1 Governance CG6 Assessment
Approved by	Academic Board
Version number and approval date	V1 xxxxxx
Document owner	Quality Officer
Review date	+ 1 year

Role
To maintain oversight of assessment outcomes and trends and formally review and approve results data prior to submission for certification and issue to learners.

Membership and Tenure

Members are appointed by the Academic Board and serve for no more than 3 years.

- Chairperson (external)
- Trainers
- Programme Lead
- Quality Officer/Internal Verifier

Occasional Members

The Chair may invite occasional members e.g., the External Authenticator to present their report or to attend all or a particular section of the meeting as appropriate. Occasional members do not have voting rights on the approval of results or participate in the decision-making process.

Selection Criteria for External Chair

- Independent of and not directly engaged with NOTS
- Able to provide objective, expert advice and relevant insight in relation to quality of assessment
- Be of good standing in the education and training community.

Responsibilities

- Review assessment results comprehensively and thoroughly and confirm that they are quality assured
- Consider reports from the Internal Verifier and External Authenticator
- Examine assessment outcomes and trends
- benchmark assessment outcomes against those from previous years and against national data

- Make appropriate decisions regarding the outcome of the assessment, verification and authentication processes
- Confirm that assessment procedures are adhered to, and appropriate evidence and records are available
- Arrange for any suspected irregularities to be notified to the appropriate person/body
- Make recommendations for corrective action
- Review the implementation of agreed corrective actions/recommendations from previous meetings
- Sign off the approved results prior to requesting certification from QQI
- Consider assessment-related risk

Meetings

- Meetings are convened as required for certification.
- All members must be present
- Majority decision-making. The chair has the casting vote if there is an equal number of votes cast.
- Members must conduct their roles without bias and make their determinations based on the information provided to the Panel.
- Members of staff or the NSG may be invited to join the meeting to discuss specific items

Administrative Support

The Network Administrator;

- provides administrative support and maintains minutes, reports, and all other documentation
- issues an agenda and supporting documents agreed with the Chair to members at least 10 working days in advance
- Prepares meeting notes and information.
- Writes up the RAP report, agrees it with the Chair who signs it and issues it to Academic Board and the NSG as soon as it is agreed and signed

Governance and Authority

- The RAP reports and makes recommendations to the Academic Board and produces an agreed report following each meeting which is considered by the Academic Board

Supporting Documents

- RAP Meeting Agenda
- RAP Report Template

Report Schedule

Report/document	From/To	Frequency	Presented by
Results approval panel report	Academic Board	After each Results approval panel meeting	Quality Officer

Terms of Reference	Programme Team	Approved by the Academic Board
Associated Policy	**CG3 Programmes of Education and Training**	**Approval Date:**
Version Number and Date	**V1 062022**	**Effective From:**
Owner	**Quality Officer**	**Review Date: +1 year**

Role

- Design and development a programme
- Prepare application for validation
- Contribute to the ongoing monitoring and improvement of the programme and learner supports.
- To advise and support the Programme Lead

Membership

- Quality Officer
- Programme Lead/subject matter expert
- Trainer/s
- A industry/sector representative/employer (if appropriate)

Responsibilities

Pre Validation / Design

- Design the curriculum and the teaching, learning and assessment strategy
- Develop the programme handbook, lesson plans and resource materials
- Consider the needs of learners with specific needs and design programme structures and materials which are inclusive and accessible
- Ensure that design for a programme intended to lead to a QQI award is based on:
    - QQI Policies and Criteria for Validation of Programmes 2017
    - The published award specification (if a CAS award)
    - The requirements of programme validation
- Draw up admission requirements, including arrangements for Recognition of Prior Learning for applicants that do not meet the entry requirements
- Research and document transfer and progression options and consult with other providers who may be able to offer pathways
- Consult with employers, stakeholders, etc. as required
- Identify likely programme-related threats and risks and mitigating measures
- Devise assessment strategy; guidelines, instruments, marking schemes
- Design a formative and summative assessment strategy
- Draw up the Programme Descriptor, the application for validation and a copy of all programme materials and present it to the Academic Board and the Network Steering Group for approval
- Present the application for validation to a QQI panel

Post-Validation / Delivery

When a programme is validated and scheduled for delivery the programme design team assumes the role of the programme team. The programme team has the following responsibilities

- Share learning and examples of best practice.
- Discuss changes to programme content.
- Monitor programme content, delivery, assessment, and learner progress.
- Identify ways to improve the learner experience and learner supports.
- Contribute to programme review, evaluation and improvement

Meetings

The team meets as required. Meetings are convened and coordinated by the Quality Officer who

- Writes up and circulates minutes/action plans to members within five working days of a meeting
- Maintains minutes, reports and all other documentation

Governance and Authority

Reports to the Academic Board

Supporting Documents

- Programme Descriptor Template

Reference Documents

- QQI Policies and Criteria for Validation of Programmes 2017

Report Schedule

Report/Document Title	**To/From**	**Frequency**	**Presented by**
Draft Programme Descriptor	Academic Board	As they arise	Programme Leader
Application for validation	QQI	As they arise	Quality Officer

Appendix 2: Role Descriptions

- **Appendix 2a – Network Manager Role Description**
- **Appendix 2b – Finance Manager Role Description**
- **Appendix 2c – Communications Manager Role Description**
- **Appendix 2d – Network Administrator Role Description**
- **Appendix 2e – Quality Officer Role Description**
- **Appendix 2f – Programme Lead Role Description**
- **Appendix 2g – Trainer Role Description**

Role Description	Network Manager
Approved by	Board of Directors
Version number and approval date	V1 xxxxxx
Document owner	Network Manager
Review date	+ 1 year

Responsibilities
• Manages NOTS and all day-to-day operations including management of staff and trainers • Promote a culture of quality within NOTS and ensure a well-supported learning environment and an adequately resourced QA system • Manage finances/budgets and resources • Responsible for ensuring that evaluation and monitoring processes are properly resourced • Overall responsibility for quality assurance and NOTS's relationship with awarding bodies • Completes and brings Programme Proposal Forms to the NSG • Appoints programme design team/programme lead and allocates budgets • Deal with issues of poor trainer performance • Ensuring the quality of all published information • Approval of QA reports published on NOTS Website • Inducts new trainers and staff members and oversees ongoing training and upskilling • Deals with serious issues escalated by other members of staff • Manage risk and PEL arrangements • Attend Academic Board meetings when invited to by the Chair • Sign-off on programme validation applications

Role Description	Finance Manager
Approved by	Network Manager
Version number and approval date	V1 xxxxxx
Document owner	Network Manager
Review date	+ 1 year

Responsibilities
● Prepare and report on monthly management accounts ● Coordinate risk, implement the risk management procedures and maintain the risk register ● Act as the Data Protection Officer for NOTS ● Analyse and report on key performance indicators (KPIs) ● Management of learner fees, payments, and related matters ● Act as the internal verifier ● Records the outcomes and verifies that assessment procedures have been applied consistently across all assessment activities and that the assessment results are recorded accurately. ● Secures storage (hard copy and electronic) of all assessment materials, records, evidence and results ● Investigates any reported breaches of security as a matter of urgency. ● Manages the assessment portfolios ● Verifies that assessment procedures have been applied consistently across all assessment activities ● Checks and ensures that assessment results are recorded accurately. ● Convenes meetings of the Results Approval Panel ● Emails approved results to learners and advise them of appeal deadlines and the date they should receive their QQI award certificate ● Inputs learner data on the QBS and deals with invalid entries ● Records the outcomes of assessments ● Double-checks results and certification data for accuracy and uploads it to the QBS

National Organic Training Skillnet

Role Description	Communications Manager
Approved by	Network Manager
Version number and approval date	V1 xxxxxx
Document owner	Network Manager
Review date	+ 1 year

Responsibilities
● Initiating, planning and managing NOTS' Communications, Marketing & PR strategy with the aim of driving growth of membership and sales ● Strengthen the network's position as a key organisation within the industry. ● Managing and updating the website and social media platform content from course content to contact information, haptics, accessibility, and ease-of-use. ● Ensuring that there is up to date, accurate and sufficient information easily available to prospective learners for them to make an informed choice about programme participation ● Maintain and coordinate the implementation of the NOTS inhouse style-guide ● Adhere to the standards and guidelines established by the network and funders. ● Ensuring the network is professionally represented and that the brand image is effectively communicated and maintained at all levels ● Build strong relationships with all Key Stakeholders at all organisational levels, both internally and externally. ● SEO, marketing database, email, social media and/or display advertising campaigns. ● Management of social media platforms (Website; Facebook; Instagram; Twitter; Linkedin) and content creation (engaging, creative, innovative) using all formats (video, images and written) ○ Optimizing Google AdWords campaigns, Facebook Ads Manager etc.. ○ Blog content; photo and video content; press releases for print; and ○ Graphic design / Creation and development of marketing material as required. ● Represent NOTS at tradeshows and course events as required. ● Ensuring management is aware of any potential issues or risks regarding communications.

Role Description	Network Administrator
Approved by	Network Manager
Version number and approval date	V1 xxxxxx
Document owner	Network Manager
Review date	+ 1 year

Responsibilities
● Book and confirm trainers, venues ● Provide admin support for trainers ● Receipt of completed programme documentation attendance registers, feedback forms etc. ● Take bookings from applicants and process applications ● Ensure that learners and trainers can contact them easily if any difficulties arise. ● Process appeals and complaints and coordinate the relevant procedures ● Respond efficiently to queries from learners on a day-to-day basis, alerting the Quality Officer to any areas of concern or potential areas for improvement ● Deals with applications for reasonable accommodation ● Maintain records of attendance, drop-out and completion rates and provide a monthly report to the Quality Officer. ● Maintenance of the QA registers; accident and indent, trainer CPD, assisted learners, appeals, complaints ● Receiving and checking completed assessment portfolios from trainers ● data entry to the QQI Quality Business System (QBS), ● Managing the internal verification and external authentication processes ● Organising Results Approval Panel (RAP) meetings ● Issue learner results, certification and the handling of appeals.

Role Description	Quality Officer
Approved by	Network Manager
Version number and approval date	V1 xxxxxx
Document owner	Network Manager
Review date	+ 1 year

Responsibilities
• Disseminates communications from QQI within NOTS • Acts as the first point of contact with QQI • Prepares and submits applications for validation on the QBS/pays invoice • Tracks the progress of applications and coordinates QQI panel visits/meetings • Coordinating self-evaluation, monitoring and review processes • Coordinates preparation for panel visits • Oversees and coordinates the implementation of the QA system • Maintains the QA system (including and design, issuing, control and management of the QA documents)   ○ Initiates Bi Annual Review of the QA System • Reviews the procedures and supporting documents annually and works with the document owners to update them if needed • Approves new procedures and supporting documents • Acts as a member of the Academic Board and the Results Approval Panel • Presents a progress report at each meeting of the Academic Board • Ensures that RAP recommendations are implemented and report to the panel on the progress of implementation • Presents the Results Approval Panel (RAP) reports to the Academic Board and the NSG • Monitors the agreed KPIs and reports on them to the NSG and the Academic Board • Ensures that the information and data presented to governance units is robust, verifiable, comprehensive, and timely • Ensures that programmes are adequately resourced and bring gaps to the attention of the Network Manager • Coordinates learner support and monitors the adequacy and effectiveness of the supports

- Ensure the learner voice is heard and acted on
- Sources suitably qualified external authenticator and external evaluators based on their match to our selection criteria and makes a recommendation to the Academic Board regarding the appointment
- Inducts new trainers
- Analyses tutor and learner feedback and acts on it as appropriate
- Deals with incidents or suspected incidents of academic misconduct
- Coordinates the appeals processes
- Monitors the standards of marking and grading
- Coordinating self-evaluation, monitoring and review processes
- Coordinates the production and presentation of programme reports

National Organic Training Skillnet

Role Description	Programme Lead
Approved by	Network Manager
Version number and approval date	V1 xxxxxx
Document owner	Network Manager
Review date	+ 1 year

Responsibilities
● Update the programme content and assessment strategy to ensure continued relevance ● Check in advance that the trainer to be appointed to deliver a programme has the required qualifications reflecting the experience, qualifications and expertise appropriate to the programme. ● Deals with applications escalated by the Network Administrator ● Deals with applications for reasonable accommodation if escalated by the Network Administrator ● Deals with RPL applications ● Organise pre-and post-programme briefings with the trainers ● Produce programme reports and present it to the Academic Board

Role Description	Trainer
Approved by	Board of Directors
Version number and approval date	V1 xxxxxx
Document owner	Network Manager
Review date	+ 1 year

Responsibilities
- Act in the best interests of their learners at all times   - Create a safe, inclusive, and positive learning environment that optimises learners' potential to succeed   - Be familiar with the content of the learner and trainer handbooks, the NOTS QA system and the QQI QA guidelines   - Keep up to date with developments in their field of expertise, maintain membership of professional bodies and manage their CPD.   - Act as the main source of guidance and information for learners   - Double-check that all the required resources are in place before a programme starts and contact the Network Administrator if there are any gaps   - Induct the learners using the NOTS Learner Induction Presentation which is based on the contents of the learner handbook.   - Advise the learners about health and safety before each outdoor session and talk through a health and safety checklist   - Access the Trainer QA folder on the LMS regularly to check on updates and alerts   - Use a variety of delivery methodologies suited to adults learners to engage the learners (in line with the documented teaching and learning strategy)   - Advise learners with regard to a range of self-directed learning strategies and check in with the learners regularly to confirm that they are engaging effectively in self-directed learning.   - Ensure that all programme documentation is distributed to learners as when they need it and completed e.g. attendance register,, feedback forms etc   - Complete and submit assessment portfolios according to the assessment portfolio checklist by the agreed date and the agreed format   - assessment, marking and submission and ensuring all assessment activities are carried out as set out in the programme descriptors   - Ensure high standards of academic integrity are maintained   - Complete mid and end programme of feedback forms which include a reflection on own performance and overall programme effectiveness.   - Deliver the programme according to the lesson plans set out in the programme descriptor to ensure consistency in delivery.   - Attend pre and post-programme briefings with the Programme Lead   - Actively engage with the monitoring and improvement of the programme

- Complete and return the trainer report form(s) to the administrator highlighting any issues, problems or challenges and make recommendations that will enhance the delivery of quality training and the learner experience
- Proactively engage in trainer observations and act on any feedback provided by the observer
- Alert the Network Administrator immediately if you are not available for any reason (for class)
- Keep in regular contact with the Network Administrator and avail of the support provided by the Quality Officer, the Programme Lead and the Network Administrator
- Encourage learners to investigate transfer and progression options if they are interested in continuing in education and training.

- Monitor each individual's engagement with the programme content and activities and monitor the progress of all learners carefully, paying particular attention to the RPL learners and those who have availed of reasonable accommodation
- Provide one to one (trainer-learner) tutorials in the context of additional support (discuss and agree the arrangements with the Quality Officer in advance)
- Submit copies of all relevant, current award certificates and evidence of pedagogical and professional qualifications
- Actively engage and contribute to the NOTS Community of Practice (CoP)

Appendix 3: Risk Register

National Organic Training Skillnet

NOTS Risk Register

Version History		
Last Reviewed	**Governance Unit**	**Version**
29/06/22	Network Steering Group/Board of Directors	V2.0
12/10/22	Network Steering Group/Board of Directors	V2.1
14/12/22	Network Steering Group/Board of Directors	V2.2
08/02/23	Network Steering Group/Board of Directors	V2.3

Matrix for Assessing Impact, Likelihood and Effectiveness of Existing Controls

Each risk is scored in terms of:

- likelihood i.e., the probability of future occurrence, how likely the risk will occur and how frequently it has occurred in the past.
- impact i.e., the impact on NOTS and external stakeholders if the risk occurs
- effectiveness of existing controls i.e., given the controls which are currently in place, how effective are they at mitigating the risk.

A scale of 1 to 5 is used for Likelihood and Impact, and 1 to 3 is used for the effectiveness of existing controls, according to the following matrix:

Likelihood Scale of 1 - 5	Impact Scale of 1 - 5	Controls Scale of 1 – 3
1 = Rarely, if ever	1 = No significant impact	1 = Controls highly effective
2 = Possible	2 = Minor impact	2 = Controls effective, but could be improved
3 = Likely	3 = Significant but containable impact	3 = No controls / controls are ineffective
4 = Very Likely	4 = High impact	
5 = Unavoidable / already occurring	5 = Extremely detrimental impact	

The risk score is determined by multiplying the risk impact by the risk likelihood by the effectiveness of the controls. The following traffic light system is used on the register to highlight/prioritise risk:

Risk Level	Action / Response
High	Act immediately using outside expertise if necessary.
Medium	Put as a standing agenda item and plan to improve over a 12-month time scale
Low	Monitor on an annual basis

NOTS Risks are Categorized into 3 broad categories:

1. Governance and Financial
2. Operational
3. Education and Programme Related

Risk Category 1: Governance & Financial

Risk No	Description of Potential	Description of Potential Impact	Risk Owner	Steps to Mitigate	Monitoring Frequency	Likelihood (1-5)	Impact (1-5)	Controls (1-3)	Risk Rating
1.1	Poor budgeting and the failure of expenditure controls	Inability to pay trainers / venue / etc	All Staff	Keep track of bookings, calculate minimum number of trainees to run the event	Constant	2	4	1	
1.2	Poor project management	Venue not booked Trainer not booked Dates not confirmed Learners not sent reminder emails	All Staff	Well trained & capable staff Pre-event checklist	Constant	2	4	1	
1.3	Loss of Government funding	course cost would have to increase potentially lower quality facilities / trainers Inability to pay staff	NM	Constantly meet or exceed Skillnet Ireland KPI's	Monthly	2	4	1	
1.4	Wrong skills mix on NSG/loss of key members of the NSG	No strategic planning Areas of opportunity missed	NSG	Training and induction for Governance Committee members Documented procedure for recruitment Documented role descriptions for members Regular discussion of skills required	Ongoing	2	3	2	
1.5	Non-viable programmes	Loss of income Loss of credibility Loss of trainers Applicant frustration	All Staff	Marketing and Promotion plan for each programme Strategic scheduling to meet applicant needs (future direction for the National Steering Group and other Stakeholders Close monitoring of number of applications Procedure for dealing with cancellations/postponements	Constant	2	3	1	
1.6	Failure in QQI processes / negative	• Loss of QQI provider status	All Staff	Internalisation of quality into all NOTS processes; Regular review and updating of the QA system	Annually	2	5	2	

	outcomes from QQI monitoring	• Standards of quality compromised/ substandard programmes		Training for staff and trainers in implementation of the QA system NSG allocate specific budget for quality assurance					
1.7	Skillnet / Government Audit	Loss of funding Possible legal issues Company may be forced to stop trading	NM Finance Network Administrator	Follow all financial rules / regulations Send all required documents to accountant Follow Skillnet tendering and tax clearance guidelines	Constant	2	4	2	
1.8	Late / incorrect reporting to Revenue	Possible fines Loss of tax clearance	Finance	File on time / send documents to accountant on time	Constant	2	3	1	

Risk Category 2: Operational

Risk No	Description of Potential	Description of Potential Impact	Risk Owner	Steps to Mitigate	Monitoring Frequency	Likelihood (1-5)	Impact (1-5)	Controls (1-3)	Risk Rating
2.1	Succession planning for staff Long term sickness / pregnancy	Noone being able to fill a vacated role Tasks not carried out / understood Courses being delayed / cancelled	NSG	clearly documented roles and responsibilities of individuals comprehensive terms of reference for committees within the draft QA procedures	Ongoing	4	4	2	
2.2	Risk to the health and safety of staff, trainers and/or learners	Claims Death/serious illness	Network Manager	Health and safety training and induction for staff and trainers Health and safety induction for learners Regular review of Accident and Incident register for trends and recurrences Annual review of NOTS's Health and Safety policy and procedures Prominent display of NOTS's Safety statement in the training rooms, on the website and the LMS. Adequate insurance cover Undertake a risk assessment in advance of agreeing a training venue. Expand induction to include health and safety information for remote learners (including farms or outside events)	Quarterly	2	3	2	
2.3	Issues with Website / data storage / accessing data	Bookings made but not recorded Booking lists lost	Communications Manager	All bookings going through the website. Maintenance contract with website developer to correct issues Income reconciled with bookings	Ongoing	2	3	1	
2.4	Data breach	Reputational damage Cost of time and resources to make good the damage Loss of commercially sensitive information	Network Manager	Documented data protection policy and procedure Training for staff Address data protection in handbooks and induction Firewalls and remote access	Monthly	2	3	1	

		Fines and claims		Data Encryption. Regular data audits					
2.5	Covid 19 or significant unplanned interruption to operations	Serious illness Loss of business / revenue	NSG	Comply with all government and public health guidelines and advise Move training online Organise remote phone and IT access for staff and trainers Training for staff in relations to remote working Training for trainers in relation to remote delivery	Monthly	3	4	2	

Risk Category 3: Educational & Programme Related

Risk No	Description of Potential Risk	Description of Potential Impact	Risk Owner	Steps to Mitigate	Monitoring Frequency	Likelihood (1-5)	Impact (1-5)	Controls (1-3)	Risk Rating
3.1	Risk of competition from other institutions	Alternative academic offering from competing providers	Network Manager	Continue to develop innovative offerings that follow stakeholder demand; Ensure engagement at Strategic Level with all stakeholders	Annually	1	3	1	
3.2	Lack of qualified trainers	Implications for delivery of desired programmes lack of opportunity to develop new courses and programmes	Network Manager	When deciding on a course ensure specialists are available to deliver the knowledge Offer / provide train the trainer course to those with the knowledge but without training qualification	Ongoing	2	3	1	
3.3	Loss of key trainers	Implications for quality of programmes Loss of revenue (if unable to deliver programmes) Learner dissatisfaction	Manager	Organised and planned approach to trainer succession planning. Clearly documented roles and responsibilities. Regular review of trainer panel Encourage our own graduates to work towards becoming trainers Encourage trainers to communicate with us on an ongoing basis particularly if they are dissatisfied for any reason	Ongoing	3	3	2	
3.4	Complaints by learners	Adverse media coverage reputation damage Learners drop-out	Training Administrator	Staff training Detailed complaints procedure	Ongoing	4	3	2	
3.5	Access to suitable training facilities	Difficulty hosting learners in suitable learning environment	All Staff + Trainers	Moving to new offices with tailor made classroom Use of the Mobile Classroom to in suitable instances (e.g. on farms, at events) Utilisation of 3rd party facilities (hotels and Community Centers	Ongoing	3	3	1	
3.6	Inability to register	Learners won't get a certificate	Network Administrator	Stress the importance and the reason for, of providing details required for QQI registration	Ongoing	1	2	1	

	students with QQI			Learner Induction Process					
3.7	Change in regulations makes course obsolete	All / Parts of a course can become obsolete	Network Manager; Academic Board	Keep up to date on trends where regulations will be going.	Annual	2	4	1	
3.8	Technology and LMS (Moodle)	Learners having issues using computer technology and LMS (Moodle)	Network Administrator	Ensure learners are computer literate. Guide in the Learner Handbook on how to use Moodle; Learner support during exams/submissions	Quarterly	3	2	1	
3.9	Plagiarism in assessment	Reputation damage to NOTS and QQI Impact on the integrity of award Under skilled person having the qualification	Network Manager; Quality Officer	Academic Integrity Policy Guidelines to detect plagiarism Training for trainers Use of plagiarism detection software	ongoing	3	3	2	
3.10	Marks incorrectly counted on papers	Learners will get the wrong results Can lead to a student failing who should have passed, or a student passing who should have failed	Network Administrator / Finance Manager	Follow internal verification procedures	Ongoing	2	2	1	

Appendix 4: Training Facilities Checklist

Appendix 4 - Training Venue Checklist

Criteria used to assess the suitability of training venues	**Yes or No**	**Comment**
Does the venue comply with Health and Safety Regulations?		
Does the venue comply with fire regulations?		
Is a current Health and Safety Statement signed and dated?		
Is the venue accessible?		
Is the venue served by public transport		
Is there parking available and easy to find, close to the venue		
Is there access to additional stationery if required, e.g. paper, pens, highlighters etc.		
Availability of other practical equipment (refer to the specific programme requirements section of the Programme Descriptor)		
Are the sanitary facilities adequate and clean		
Is the training room of sufficient size		
Are suitable tables/ desks provided		
Is there wireless and wired internet access		
Flexibility with room layout with plenty of space to move around for activities		
Catering – arrangements for refreshments		
Good room lighting with plenty of sunlight with blinds to block out if required		

Data projector, flip chart/whiteboard and audio system available		
Adequate power points without trailing cables		
Are there suitable breakout spaces?		
Photocopying/printing/ email available onsite		
Storeroom/ secure space for training resources and equipment		
Is there a secure facility for onsite storage of assessment materials (lockable with key available to tutor only)		
Contact Details for onsite coordinator – email, landline and mobile phone number		
Will the onsite coordinator be onsite during training delivery		

Is there any follow-up action required / Additional Notes

Appendix 5: Current Training Offered by NOTS

Courses NOTS fund that are not Certified

- 9 Day Regenerative Farm Scale Design
- Advanced Quantum Agriculture
- Agronomy Programme
- Business of Food with Blathnaid Bergin
- Christmas Floral Design & Wreath Making
- Climate Proofing Your Farm with Hugh Lovel
- Composting Masterclass with Bruno Follador
- Creating and Maintaining an Ecommerce Website for your Business
- Dry Stone Wall Courses
- Growing in Polytunnels (Online) with Klaus Laitenberger
- Heritage Orchard Development & Management
- Holistic Management Courses (5 different courses)
- Homeopathic Seminar on Tree Remedies
- Homeopathy at WELLIE Level (HAWL)
- Intro to No Dig Market Gardening
- Intro to Organic Market Gardening
- Intro to Pastured Layers / Egg Production
- Intro to Pastured Poultry Production
- Intro to Soil Health - With Dave Beecher
- Intro to Soils & Biological Agriculture
- Introduction to Biochar with Kim McCall
- Introduction to Hemp Production with Ed Hanbidge
- Introduction to Practical Composting with Jim Cronin
- Introduction to Radionics with Hugh Lovel
- Introduction to Seed Saving

- Kays Floristry Modules
- Korean Natural Farming with Chris Trump
- Organic Combinable Crop Agronomy
- Organic Legumes & Cash Crops
- Principles of Soil Health for Horticulture with Niels Corfield
- Requested courses for Flower Farmers of Ireland
- Requested courses for Tipperary Organic Farmers Group
- Soil Health & Regenerative Agriculture for Livestock Farms
- Sourdough Bread Making
- Starting a Horticulture Business
- Syntropic Agroforestry
- Train the Trainer Online - for Food courses
- Whole Farm Planning / Agroforestry Principles

Events / Conferences that NOTS Organise

- Agroforestry Conference
- BioFarm Conference
- Organic & Biological Farm Walk Series
- Feeding Ourselves Conference
- Future Growers Conference
- Hemp Federation Ireland Conference

Appendix 6: NOTS Equality Diversity and Inclusion Policy

National Organic Training Skillnet

Equality Diversity and Inclusion Policy

Policy Title:	**Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)**
Policy Owner:	Network Manager
Version:	V1.0
Approved:	Network Steering Group (October 2022)
Review Date:	September 2024 (every 2 years)

Purpose
To set out NOTS's commitment to Equality Diversity and Inclusion

Scope
This policy applies to members of governance units, management, staff, trainers and learners

Policy

NOTS is committed to creating an environment that promotes equality, diversity and inclusion at work and in the classroom and to treating all of employees, trainers, learners and all stakeholders equally, regardless of gender, civil status, family status, sexual orientation, religious belief, age, disability, race or membership of the Traveller community or socio-economic background. Our culture is one that promotes equality, diversity and inclusion.

This policy is informed by:

- Employment Equality Acts 1998-2011(as amended) which prohibit discrimination in employment, including recruitment, promotion, pay and other conditions of employment;
- Equal Status Acts 2000-2012 (as amended).This Act prohibits direct and indirect discrimination, sexual harassment, harassment and victimisation in relation to nine specified equality grounds: gender, family status, civil status, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, ethnicity and membership of the Traveller community in access to and provision of services, accommodation and educational establishments;
- The Disability Act 2005 (as amended); and
- The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014.

We achieve this through:

- The development of a fulfilling and progressive work culture and learning environment, one that strengthens and promotes NOTS values and ensures that learners and staff support, value and respect each other;
- The design and implementation of initiatives which support equality, diversity and inclusion;
- The design and implementation of positive actions and initiatives to address inequalities that may exist, to ensure a fair, welcoming and unbiased work and learning environment for everyone; and
- The promotion of a positive culture which encourages and facilitates openness and responsiveness.

NOTS believes that embracing equality, diversity and inclusion in the workplace and in the classroom benefits everyone; members of governance units, management, staff and learners, members and all stakeholders. All staff, trainers and learners bring their own background, work and learning styles, distinct capabilities, experience and characteristics to their work. We recognise that NOTS should reflect the diversity of the wider community outside of NOTS and we want to utilise the widest range of skills, knowledge and experience available to us while complying with legislation and regulation.

As well as treating people with dignity and respect, we strive to create a supportive environment in which both staff, trainers and learners can flourish and reach their full potential, regardless of differences, experience or background.

We are committed to non-discrimination (direct or indirect) in access and participation in education and employment. We seek to ensure that the provision of all services is free from any form of discrimination or harassment. We do not tolerate harassment or bullying of staff, learners or other members of the community. Failure to comply can result in disciplinary action.

We are committed to identifying barriers to equality, diversity, inclusion and full participation and do our best to redress any imbalances we identify in practice.

NOTS formulates and implements policies and practices that value diversity, provide equality of opportunity and ensure that no learner, job applicant, staff member, member or any person from the wider community receives less favourable treatment on any of the nine aforementioned grounds. We also ensure that other policies and practices reflect our commitment to treating people fairly, promoting an integrated way of always working and respecting the dignity of our community.

NOTS's recruitment policy is designed to reflect our belief that diversity in all areas, including cultural, generational, language and national backgrounds, is necessary in helping us achieve our aims. We do not discriminate against any prospective employee during the recruitment process. Interviews are carried out objectively and individuals are judged on merit and their ability to do the job. It is our policy to reasonably accommodate individuals with disabilities and special needs in the recruitment process, in the workplace and in the classroom.

We offer the same development and training opportunities to all staff to achieve high standards of performance. We are committed to rewarding excellence and staff are promoted on the basis of merit.

We provide reasonable accommodation to learners, staff and others with disabilities or specific needs.

We are committed to widening participation and facilitating access to programmes by learners from under-represented groups.

Monitoring And Review

The implementation of the policy is reviewed on a regular basis and the policy is updated on foot of this review or legislative changes. We actively seek feedback on the implementation and review of this policy from staff, learners and members.

Appendix 7: Academic Integrity Policy

National Organic Training Skillnet

Academic Integrity

Policy

Policy Title:	**Academic (aligned to QQI CG5 – Teaching and Learning**
Policy Owner:	Network Manager
Version:	V2.1
Approved:	Network Steering Group (October 2022)
Review Date:	September 2024 (every 2 years)

Contents

Definitions

- QQI defines academic integrity as the commitment to, and demonstration of, honest and moral behaviour in an academic setting and it applies to learners, trainers and all members of the programme team;
- Plagiarism is incorporating material derived from pre-existing work (published or unpublished) without the permission of the originator or without an established form of acknowledgement/referencing. It includes self-plagiarism where a learner re-uses work previously submitted for assessment; and
- Academic integrity is the expectation that trainers, and learners act with honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. Breaching academic integrity is known as academic misconduct. Academic misconduct is any action which gains, attempts to gain, or assists others in gaining or attempting to gain unfair academic advantage. We foster a culture of academic integrity and aim to have high standards by advising, guiding and educating trainers, learners and all members of the programme team. The programme design team design assessments which are valid, mitigate against cheating and reflect real learning progress or achievement, with a focus on learners conducting ‘real world’ tasks in meaningful contexts where appropriate. We have procedures in place to deal with incidents or suspected incidences of academic misconduct if they occur. Learners are entitled to draw on other people’s ideas, and some assignments may involve working collaboratively with others for a combined submission.

Practices That May Breach Academic Integrity

- Plagiarism. The presentation of someone else’s work as one’s own. Examples include copying text from websites, using essay mills, and presenting works or sections of works written by another person;
- Falsification of data;
- Colluding and cheating in examinations;
- Submitting the same or similar work for more than one assessment; and
- Failing to reference sources of information or data appropriately.

Responsibilities of the Quality Officer

- Guide trainers in what constitutes plagiarism and the degrees of plagiarism and on the distinction between acceptable collaboration with others and collusion in plagiarism;
- Conduct an initial investigation of any alleged misconduct and determines if there is a case and if an incident requires further investigation;
- Ask the trainer to complete an Academic Misconduct Report Form and submit evidence of the suspected misconduct and a (marked-up) copy of the assessment work if plagiarism is suspected;

- Notify the trainer giving reasons for the decision if he concludes that there is no case invites the learner and the trainer to a meeting to discuss the concern. The learner may be accompanied at the interview;
- Interviews all the learners involved if two or more learners present identical pieces of work;
- Appoints an independent advisor to assist the learner/s in dealing with a plagiarism case if a learner/s seeks assistance;
- Asks the learner to bring any evidence that refutes the incident and evidence of their work to give them the opportunity to demonstrate that the work presented is their own original work in the case of plagiarism;
- Explains the purpose of the meeting and includes a copy of the marked-up piece of work (if plagiarism);
- Clearly outlines what has been alleged, shows the learner a copy of his/her work, gives the learner an opportunity to justify the work and invites the learner to admit or deny responsibility;
- Decides on an appropriate penalty if satisfied that the case exists. The severity of the penalty is based on learner's plagiarism record (if any) and the extent of the plagiarism;
- Notifies the learner, the trainer, and the Results Approval Panel (in the internal verification report) in writing, of the decision and any penalty imposed;
- Refer the case to the Results Approval Panel if considered to be sufficiently serious;
- Raise and discuss any concerns with the external authenticator; and
- Sources appropriate external expertise for complex cases.

Learners Responsibilities

- Inform themselves – read the materials and guidelines provided and ask about anything they do not understand. Details of how we deal with breaches of academic integrity is highlighted at induction and in the leaner handbook;
- Use the guidelines, video content and reference documents on Moodle that explain the concept of academic integrity and guide them in the use of the Harvard referencing system;
- Use other people's work in a principled way, with due acknowledgement of authorship;
- Observe the guidelines provided; and
- Complete, sign, date and submit an authorship statement (part of the assessment brief) when they are submitting an assignment confirming that the work, they are submitting is their own, is genuine, not plagiarised and properly referenced.

Trainer Responsibilities

- Guide and act as the main source of guidance and information for learners in relation to academic integrity, academic writing and citation/referencing;
- Discuss expected standards of acknowledging the work of others;
- Promote high standards of academic integrity throughout the programme;

- Ensure that the training materials they use are correctly referenced (academic integrity is addressed at trainer induction and in the trainer handbook); and
- Be vigilant and raise any concerns with the Quality Officer as soon as possible if they suspect cheating or academic misconduct of any form with due cause.

Dealing with Breaches of Academic Integrity

If a trainer suspects a candidate of attempting to cheat or otherwise gain unfair advantage in coursework and other forms of assessment s/he;

- Brings the details and any evidence they have to the attention of Quality Officer who decides how to deal with it;
- Endorse the candidate's work on the front cover with a note detailing the location of any plagiarised passages and identify as much collaborative evidence as possible;
- Prepares a written report on the allegation and send it with copies of any plagiarised passages and their source(s) where appropriate to the Quality Officer;
- The learner may be interviewed, and a judgement reached about whether academic integrity has been breached;
- If we conclude after investigation that a breach has occurred, we may impose penalties up to and including removal from the programme; and
- We regard academic misconduct by a trainer (e.g. fabrication of evidence or interference with results) as gross misconduct.

Procedure when cheating in an examination is suspected

The invigilator:

  - Confiscates any unauthorised material in the possession of the candidate;
  - Endorses the candidate's script on the front cover with a note of the time when the alleged infringement was discovered;
  - Endorses the scripts of all candidates in the case of suspected collusion;
  - Allow the candidate(s) to continue with the examination; and
  - Inform the candidates(s) at the end of the examination, that a written report of the incident will be submitted to the Quality Officer.
- The Quality Officer prepares a written report on the alleged incident and send it with the scripts and any confiscated materials and their source(s) to the Chair of the Academic Board.

Penalties

Where plagiarism is established, one or more of the following penalties may be imposed:

- A caution or written warning to the learner for several unattributed sentences or use of an unattributed paragraph
- A maximum mark of 50% for the assessment – for use of a moderate number of unattributed paragraphs or sections (or where there is evidence of large amounts of material taken directly from other sources, even with acknowledgement of the sources)
- A mark of zero for the assessment with the possibility of re-submitting the assignment for a maximum mark of 50% – for use of a greater number of unattributed paragraphs (or where there is evidence of very substantial or disproportionate amounts of material taken directly from other sources, even with acknowledgement of the sources).

Penalties in serious cases may include failure of the assessment without the right to be reassessed, restriction of grade classification, or termination of the programme. Gross plagiarism, use of unauthorised materials in examinations, and all second offences are considered serious offences.

If the learner:

- Admits to plagiarism;
- Cannot confirm that what is presented is their own original work; or
- Does not engage with the process, by not responding or by refusing to attend an interview.

They are given a mark of zero for the assessment:

- The learner has the right to appeal the decision to the Results Approval Panel using the appeals process.

Supporting Documents

- Guide to Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism – Guidelines for Learners (under development)
- Plagiarism Determination – Guidelines for Trainers (under development)
- Plagiarism Report Template

References

- Beginners' Guide to Plagiarism (D Hill)
- Referencing Handbook for the Further Education and Training (FET) Sector (FESS) 2019
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVC_bwpvKcM&list=PLfoxtqBemVVWkh5T6Wbi0xKueaAPSKBOS&index=2&t=2s (QQI Learner Academic Integrity Video) https://myownwork.qqi.ie/
- Academic Writing Handbook for Learners in FET FESS
- National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN) resources. NIAN is a peer-driven network coordinated and supported by QQI that actively supports education institutions