Achieving Quality in Further Education and Training:

A study of the Quality Assurance Network of Education and Training Boards, Ireland.

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List of Abbreviations

ABE	Adult Basic Education
AEO	Adult Education Officer
AIS	Assessment Instrument Specification
ALL	Adult Literacy for Life
ATSO	Assistant Training Standards Officer
BIM	Bord Iascaigh Mhara
BTEA	Back to Education Allowance
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
CAO	Central Applications Office

CAS	Common Awards System
CE	Chief Executive
CEDEFOP	The European Centre for the Development of VET
CEEOA	Chief Executive and Education Officers Association
CERT	The Council for Education, Recruitment and Training in Tourism
CIDESCO	Comité International d'Esthétique et de Cosmetology
CLT	Complexity Leadership Theory
CoP	Community of Practice
CotF	College of the Future
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CTC	Community Training Centre
CVET	Continuing Vocational Education and Training
DCU	Dublin City University
DE	Department of Education
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DFET	Director of Further Education and Training
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Innovation, Research and Science
DSP	Department of Social Protections
EA	External Authentication/External Authenticator
ECDL	European Computer Driving Licence
EEC	European Economic Community
EFQM	European Foundation for Quality Management
ELC	Early Learning and Care
EQAVET	European Quality Assurance for VET
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ESF	European Social Fund
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
EU	European Union
FARR	Funding Allocations Request and Reporting
FÁS	An Foras Áiseanna Saothair
FE	Further Education
FEMPI	Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest
FESS	Further Education Support Service
FET	Further Education and Training
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
GERM	Global Education Reform Movement
HE	Higher Education
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
IRQ	Irish Register of Qualifications
IRQ	Inaugural Review of Quality
IUQB	Irish Universities Quality Board
IV	Internal Verification
IVEA	Irish Vocational Education Association
IVET	Initial Vocational Education and Training
LDA	Locally Devised Assessment

LO	Learning Outcomes
LTI	Local Training Initiative
MIMLO	Minimum Intended Module Learning Outcome
MIPLO	Minimum Intended Programme Learning Outcome
NAO	National Apprenticeship Office
NCEA	National Council for Educational Awards
NCVA	National Council for Educational Awards
NCVQ	National Council for Vocational Qualifications
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NIHE	National Institute of Higher Education
NQAI	National Qualifications and Awards, Ireland
NTCB	National Tourism Certification Board
NTF	National Training Fund
NTO	National Tertiary Office
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OSD	Organisational Support and Development
PAA	Programme Approval Agreement
PD	Professional Development
PDCA	Plan, Do, Check, Act
PLC	Post-leaving Certificate College
PLD	Professional Learning and Development
PLSS	Programme Learner Support System: the national data collection system for all FET learner records
PSO	Public Service Organisation
QA	Quality Assurance
QDA	Qualitative Data Analysis
QM	Quality Management
QMS	Quality Management System
QQI	Quality and Qualifications, Ireland
RAP	Results Approval Panel
RCCRS	Results Capture and Certification Requests System. The FÁS system for collation and upload of results to QQI
REC	Research Ethics Committee
RTC	Regional Technical College
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SLO	Specific Learning Outcome
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SMT	Senior Management Team
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachas Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna
SST	Specialist Skills Training
STA	Skills to Advance
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
TC	Training Centre
TQAS	Temporary Quality Assurance System
TQM	Total Quality Management
TSO	Training Standards Officer
TU	Technical University
TVET	Technical Vocational Education and Training
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
VET	Vocational Education and Training

VPTP	Vocational Preparation and Training Programme
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme
VUCA	Volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous

Angela Higgins

Achieving Quality in Further Education and Training:

A study of the Quality Assurance Network of Education and Training Boards, Ireland.

Abstract

Achieving Quality in Further Education and Training: A study of the Quality Assurance Network of Education and Training Boards, Ireland.

Author: Angela Higgins

Achieving Quality in Further Education and Training (FET) is a study of a network of individuals responsible for implementing quality assurance (QA) of further education and training (FET) programmes in Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in Ireland. This network has existed in different forms since 2006, and was formalised in 2012, with its establishment as a QA Forum of Education and Training boards, Ireland (ETBI), outlasting significant change, including the considerable restructuring of the FET system through legislative changes brought about by the 2013 Further Education and Training Act.

The QA Network, draws together practitioners from sixteen ETBs, meeting regularly and working collectively to address policy challenges.

The research aim is to explore the concepts of quality and communities of practice (CoPs), the role of the ETBI QA Network and its impact on quality in FET. This research explores the Network through the lens of Etienne Wenger's Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity (1999), which brought the concept into explicit focus (p.7). Through the research, I set out to answer the following questions:

1. Does the QA Network function as a CoP as envisaged by Wenger et al?
2. How does the QA Network contribute to educational standards in FET?
3. Does the QA Network contribute to policy learning? If so, how?
4. Does the QA Network have an impact on policy implementation and if so, how?
5. Is the QA Network part of a constellation or landscape of practice?

Taking a pragmatic approach, I will seek to understand and co-construct the world of network members and key agents, finding meaning and interpreting their world (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2010, p.26), while respecting their perspectives and interpretations (Habermas, 1984, pp. 109 – 10, in Cohen yet al. 2010), which develop in the socially constructed spaces of

FET. Research findings will be informed by participants' experiences and involvement, through focusing on Network conventions and practices (Cohen Mannion and Morrison, 2010, p.23, quoting Harold Garfinkle), and it is my task to seek the most effective methods to inform these insights.

In this social situation, I am an insider, having been a member of the QA Network and various other communities and working groups within the constellations of the QA enterprise in FET. As an insider, I am concerned with the individuals' experiences, while possessing insider knowledge about members' work spanning local and national interests.

Rooted in pragmatism, research methods included a review of relevant documentation, extensive review of community of practice, QA and FET literature, a qualitative survey of QA Practitioners who are members of the QA Network, qualitative semi-structured interviews with key agents associated with the QA Network and a focus group with members of the Network.

The research raises questions about the development of the network as a locus of social learning and professional development for QA Practitioners who lead QA, change and policy implementations in the sector. It also raises questions about the limitations of boundaries based on hierarchy, creating homogeneity, limiting the possibilities for shared learning and knowledge transfer across the levels and strata of the sector.

Through the research, a new approach encompassing a more conscious use of community of practice theory and theories of quality is proposed, reorienting the practice of the QA Network towards systems for quality management, quality culture and quality literacy (Ehlers, 2007).

Thesis Introduction

Quality Assurance (QA) Practitioners work in the domain of Further Education and Training (FET), across all sixteen Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in Ireland. Charged with implementing national policies for further education and training covering accredited and unaccredited programmes, their work is varied and challenging. It draws on their expertise in pedagogy, communications and policy. The following vignettes represent some, but not all of their tasks, and are designed to provide a flavour of their daily activities.

Alicia starts her week reflecting on the first meeting of the Quality Council which she has convened in her ETB, preparing for the induction of new council and sub-group members.

Brian checks his diary to schedule time to review a new Quality and Qualifications, Ireland (QQI) draft policy and contribute to Education and Training Board, Ireland's (ETBI) submission.

He chooses to sacrifice leisure time to meet the deadlines because he is already committed to numerous meetings, but really wants to participate in the consultation.

While assigning External Authenticators (EAs), Tatiana chases missing submissions, assigns tasks, and arranges inductions for new EAs, recalling the Quality Assurance (QA) Network's support in developing EA procedures, and referring to them in the planning process for the certification cycle.

George urgently addresses a data breach involving a lost learner portfolio, liaising with the centre, his line manager, and the ETB Data Controller, and reschedules other commitments to handle the crisis.

Susie delivers a QA briefing at a college, fielding concerns about outdated assessment criteria, and explains the process for module review, linking with QA Network colleagues.

The Education and Training Board (ETB) QA Team meets to review updates, noting challenges in meeting Quality Action Plan timelines.

Caoilfhionn attends her second QA Network meeting, eager yet daunted by technical complexity, and enjoys the energy and enthusiasm of the members.

Michael, delighted by an invitation to present awards at a major ETB event, sees this as a highlight of his work.

These fictional but realistic vignettes illustrate Quality Assurance (QA) Practitioners' work in FET, forming the context for exploring the ETBI QA Network's role in supporting policy implementation.

Research Aims

QA Practitioners from sixteen publicly funded Education and Training Boards (ETBs) participate in the QA Network hosted and supported by Education and Training Boards, Ireland (ETBI). ETBI is an umbrella body supporting the work of those sixteen statutory bodies in delivering excellence in education provision across primary and post-primary education and further education and training (FET) in Ireland. This research features FET delivered and supported by ETBs, which are public service organisations (PSOs), referred to in this thesis as 'the sector' and distinguishing it from private providers and non-government organisations (NGOs) that provide FET. These private organisations are also concerned with providing high-quality education and training, but are outside the focus of this research.

The research aim is to explore the role of the QA Network as a long-standing group within FET which has been involved in the implementation of national policies for education and training quality and qualifications, through seeking the perspectives of Network members and key agents who have been involved. The format of the QA Network is similar to communities of practice, as developed by Lave and Wenger (1989; 1991), and consequently, the research explores whether the QA Network functions as a community of practice (CoP).

Through the research, the history of QA in FET is traced, the literature on quality and quality management is interrogated, as is the literature on communities of practice (CoPs). The lived experience of Network members is interrogated, and the views of key agents are gathered, prompting reflection on the possibilities for further developments for the Network and the sector.

Main Topic and Aims of the Thesis

The ETBI QA Network brings together QA Practitioners implementing QQI policy across ETBs. Established formally in 2012 as the QA Forum, and becoming the QA Network in 2014, following FET restructuring, it continues an earlier history of collaboration. This thesis traces QA's history in FET, reviews literature on quality management and communities of practice (CoPs), and explores whether the QA Network functions as a CoP, its influence on QA knowledge, and its role in policy implementation.

Literature

The literature on quality management and on communities of practice (CoPs) is reviewed. A gap in the theoretical and cultural knowledge and understanding of quality management and systems in the sector was indicated by an external review panel who reported on quality in the ETBs (QQI, 2023) following inaugural reviews which took place in 2021 and 2022. There are further possibilities for exploring how quality literacy (Ehlers, 2007) and a quality management model can become more embedded in the sector.

Wenger's *Communities of Practice* (1999) suggests that there are strengths in the CoP model, while studies by Duryan & Smith (2019) and others provide starting points for exploration of CoPs within bureaucracies and PSOs. Literature on CoPs in FET is limited, and suggests that this research could contribute to the body of knowledge in this area.

QA in FET has grown in visibility, especially after QQI's inaugural reviews of quality in ETBs which took place in 2020 and this research focuses on QA Practitioners' lived experiences

within that context and on how the QA Network influences standards, policy learning, and implementation in the sector, as well as considering the nature of the Network.

Through focusing with interest on the QA Network's impact on policy implementation, and considering the worldviews of network members and key agents, questions emerge about leadership of quality, and about the responsibility of leadership to ensure that there is strategic prominence for quality within the FET sector (Regmi, 2019).

Insider Researcher Positionality Statement

My positionality as an insider researcher is central to this study. I have spent the majority of my professional life within the structures of the former Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and, following their reorganisation in 2013, within the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). This long-standing involvement positions me as a deeply embedded practitioner with extensive experiential knowledge of Further Education and Training (FET), its policy evolution, and its quality assurance (QA) systems.

Professional Embeddedness and Sectoral Knowledge

My career trajectory—from Youthreach practitioner to centre manager, prison educator, QA coordinator, and national working group, evaluation panel and network member - has given me a comprehensive understanding of the FET landscape. I have been directly involved in the development and implementation of QA systems at both local and national levels, since 2006. I have been involved in various iterations of the QA Network ever since, collaborating, learning with colleagues, developing and promoting practice and knowledge of quality in education.

This embeddedness provides privileged access to the lived realities, challenges, and collaborative cultures that shape QA practice within ETBs. It also means that my interpretations are informed by long-term relationships, shared histories, and tacit knowledge that external researchers may not possess.

Personal History and Values

My understanding of quality is rooted not only in professional experience but also in formative personal encounters with education. My early experiences as a working-class student navigating a more middle-class art college environment cultivated a deep empathy for learners who lack social, cultural or financial capital, though this is not of their own making. Understanding the effort required to succeed in these environments, and those experiences

continue to shape my commitment to equity, learner-centred practice, and the recognition of diverse learning pathways.

Similarly, my background in craft design, as a silversmith and metalworker – my original specialism - and exposure to the concept of hallmarking, as one of the oldest quality assurance systems we know, used to ascertain the purity of certain metals, profoundly influenced my conceptualisation of quality as inextricably linked to the composition of systems, programmes, content, and learner experience. In the same way as the composition of precious metals, produced in a crucible, solder, the quality of the gems, the design and the finish in a piece of jewellery are essential to the value of the piece, so too a system with functioning components is critical to the enhancement and quality of FET and of learner experiences.

Insider Advantages

My insider status offers several strengths:

- Access and trust: Long-standing professional relationships facilitate open dialogue with participants, particularly within the QA Network, which has been sustained in different formats since original QA agreements with the Further Education and Training Council (FETAC) in 2006.
- Contextual sensitivity: I possess nuanced understanding of organisational cultures, policy histories, and the evolution of QA practices in FET and the wider education system.
- Interpretive depth: My experiential knowledge enables me to recognise subtleties, implicit meanings, and sector-specific dynamics that might be invisible to an outsider.

These advantages enhance the richness and authenticity of the data and support a more grounded interpretation of participants' experiences.

Insider Challenges, Limitations and Reflexive Strategies

Insider research also carries risks, including assumptions of shared understanding, potential bias, and role duality. To mitigate these challenges, I adopt the following reflexive strategies:

- Maintaining analytic distance**:** I consciously bracket my own experiences and remain attentive to participants' perspectives, even when they align with or diverge from my own.

- Transparency: I explicitly acknowledge my positionality, values, and professional history to make visible the interpretive lens through which I approach the research.
- Critical reflexivity: Throughout the research process, I engaged in ongoing reflection on how my insider status shapes data collection, interpretation, and representation.
- Ethical sensitivity: Given my professional relationships with participants, I prioritised confidentiality, voluntary participation, and respectful boundaries.

These strategies support the credibility and trustworthiness of the study while recognising that complete neutrality is neither possible nor desirable in qualitative research.

Rather than viewing insider status as liability, it is a valuable resource that enriches this study. My long-term engagement with QA policy and practice, combined with my personal and professional history, provides a unique vantage point from which to explore the experiences of QA Network members. As an informed insider, I bring my own knowledge and insight to bear upon the research. This positionality enables a deeply contextualised, critically reflective, and practice-informed analysis that aligns with the aims of the study.

Methodology

Taking a pragmatic, interpretive stance (Cohen and Manion, 2010), co-constructing insights with participants and spiralling back and forth between the literature, data and emerging themes, a picture of quality in FET is constructed in the thesis (Zilber and Meyer, 2022).

Five research questions were developed for exploring the characteristics of the QA Network, and its role in the implementation of quality and qualifications policy in the FET sector:

- Does the QA Network function as a community of practice (CoP)?
- How does the QA Network contribute to educational standards in FET?
- Does the QA Network contribute to policy learning?
- Does the QA Network have an impact on policy implementation?
- Is the QA Network part of a constellation or landscape of practice?

Structured as a four stage process the research contextualises the situation through exploring career histories and experiences, gathering leading opinions and thinking about critical incidents, culminating in a reframing and recontextualising of the situation (Trafford and Leshem, 2008). Complexity theory and complexity leadership theory provided useful lenses with which to study the situation (Snyder, 2013; Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2018; Turner and Baker, 2019; Pacheco and Paul, 2025; and Bond, 2023). Applying complexity theory gave an opportunity to engage with the concept of warm data (Bateson, 2017). Wenger's Indicators of

a CoP (1999), developed and extended as McKellar's Value-types (2019, 2020) acted as another lens with which to analyse the data gathered, make sense of the situation and draw conclusions.

A document review featuring 245 Network documents supported my understanding of the history of the Network, checking of events and contextualisation of the situation.

A questionnaire circulated to seventy QA Network members and former members via the ETBI's membership list, yielded sixteen responses, contributing to the gathering of career histories and information about the roles and practice of QA Practitioners. Nine participants were members for less than five years, and six for between six to ten years. One participant was a member for eleven years (Survey Data). Wenger defines levels of involvement by community of practice (CoP) members, with different levels from peripheral to core membership (1999). Participants were asked to rate their involvement in the network in a Likert scale, from 1 to 5, with 1 being peripheral to activities and 5 being a core insider in activities. Likert scales can provide useful and analysable data (Tuckman, 1972, in Cohen and Manion, 2010, p. 360), and are generally used to ask participants to agree or disagree with statements, although, in this case, a rating scale was used, and the small scale of the research meant that the usefulness of the data from that particular question was limited. On the scale, 12 out of 13 respondents to this question placed themselves at the higher level of the spectrum, with 9 placing themselves as 'core insiders'.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with eight key agents who have supported and brokered the work of QA Practitioners and the Network, providing leading opinions about QA in FET.

Five QA Practitioners participated in a focus group, based on their indicated willingness to do so through the initial survey, and thus, these participants overlapped with the original survey respondents, and there was a final interview with one practitioner, who was the only one of three who had originally indicated they would attend a second focus group. In the focus groups, we considered the questions:

- What should the Network continue doing?
- What should the Network stop doing?
- What should the Network stop doing?

This focus group also reflected on an evolving map of the landscape of practice, exploring system complexity. In total, there were twenty-nine individual research participants.

Data analysis was conducted during each phase of data collection. An online data analysis tool was used to allocate codes to the data, and to develop a framework matrix, supporting data visualisation, reduction and drafting of results and recommendations.

The research showed that the QA Network fulfils most of the characteristics of a CoP. The homogeneity of the Network, and stratified hierarchical structures work against the potential for shared discourse, deliberation and knowledge transfer across the organisations involved. Reframing the QA Network, modelling good practice as a CoP and with a focus on quality management and quality literacy would enable the development of an integrated commonly understood quality management system that would underpin innovative and flexible responses to short- and long-term challenges in the sector. This echoes Tummons's suggestion that, while the theory of CoPs is somewhat light, it can be supplemented with other theories to extend its potential (2022). Tummons argues that through research, we can find additional ways to enrich Wenger's tools (2022, p.70).

Thesis Outline

Chapter one includes background information about the QA Network and provides a comprehensive history of FET, the influence of European policy, and the impact of legislative changes.

In chapter two, I present a two-part literature review, focused on quality systems, management, literacy (Ehlers, 2007) and communities of practice. In the section on quality management, I explore what is meant by these concepts, the development of quality through five phases, and consider some of the ramifications for FET in the context of attempting to build cultures of quality. The section on communities of practice identifies some definitions, unpacking what is meant by 'domain', 'community' and 'practice'. I consider the literature on CoPs in public service organisations (PSOs), and go on to explore the concepts of constellations and landscapes of practice in brief.

Chapter three details the methodology used to carry out the research, including ontological and epistemological positions; data collection and analysis methods, and refers to some ethical considerations. It follows Trafford and Leshem's model for research design (2008), and in it, I refer to Saldaña's work on data analysis (2021) and Bateson's work on gathering warm data (2017), and record the outcomes of a process of reflexive thematic analysis.

In chapter four, I present a compilation of some of the extensive data gathered, aligned with the themes which emerged through reflexive data analysis. Those themes are:

- Community of practice characteristics
- Roles and evolution of QA in FET: Career histories
- Policy in practice
- Fault lines and frustrations
- Contributing to standards in FET

Chapter five explores these themes, and insights into the QA Network are presented. The picture regarding roles within FET emerges, and the main issues associated with implementing policy are explored. These were linked to review and academic governance; programme development, review and validation and how policy learning takes place.

In chapter six, I return to the research questions and present recommendations, based on the work of Fundin et al. (2025), reframing the work under the headings of 'people', 'purpose' and 'process'. I reveal the contribution of the research, and present opportunities for further research, and finally make a concluding statement. More research into QA professionals' role is required (Krooi et al, 2024), and this study goes some way to starting an enquiry into that role in Irish FET, providing avenues for further research.

Chapter One: Context

1.1 Chapter Introduction

1.1.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter explores the evolution and contemporary configuration of the Further Education and Training (FET) system in Ireland. It traces the key legislative and policy developments, and analyses how these have shaped the roles and responsibilities of Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and Education and Training Boards, Ireland (ETBI) regarding quality assurance of FET, especially through a national Quality Assurance (QA) Network. I will go on to describe the range of FET provision, including funding streams, commonly referred to as 'programmes' and will outline some of the pedagogical approaches that characterise the sector. The chapter is informed by my own personal history as a FET practitioner, by the contributions of research participants, and by the grey literature on FET, and quality and qualifications in FET.

1.1.2 Statutory Organisations

ETBs are statutory regional education authorities that deliver services across primary and secondary education, FET, music education and youth services, located in sixteen regions in Ireland. The 16 ETBs were established under the *Education and Training Act* in 2013, which rationalised 33 Vocational Education Committees (VECs) originally established under the Vocational Education Act of 1930. ETBI is the national representative body for ETBs, promoting the development and enhancement of education, training and youth work in Ireland. It comprises its own staff, forums of ETB Chief Executives (CEs), Directors of FET (DFETs); Directors of Schools; Directors of Organisation, Support and Development (OSD) and other networks and groups associated with these areas. ETBI has a statutory role in assisting ETBs to comply with Ministerial directions (*Education and Training Boards Act*, 2013, Section 10 (5), 2013, p.11), in negotiating 'at national level on behalf of member Boards, and in supporting them in the discharge of their functions (ETBI, 2026). In this chapter, I describe a developing provider-owned system established through legislation, in which ETBs as providers are responsible for quality and qualifications.

1.1.3 Introducing the Concept of Quality in FET

The concept of quality in education and training, and its associated processes for quality assurance (QA) are highly contested (Krooi et al. 2024). When considering FET as it is delivered

by ETBs, and the nature of education and training as a humanistic endeavour that goes beyond instrumental, mechanistic and purely canonical approaches (Murphy, 1973; ESRI, 2014; McPartland, 2020), there is scope for debate about what is meant by 'quality'. 'Quality provision' was identified as one of five key themes in the FET Strategy for 2014-2019, with excellence in programme development as a sub-theme (2014, p122). In practice, the concept has been interpreted and enacted with varying degrees of enthusiasm and consistency, depending on the roles, commitments and perspectives of practitioners responsible for implementing legislation and participating in governance processes, and this variation was reflected in the inaugural review of quality in ETBs and the sectoral report which followed (2023).

Quality and Qualifications, Ireland (QQI) articulates a vision of adding value to FET and higher education (HE), informing policy formation and ensuring that high quality, highly valued education and training are available in Ireland (*Statement of Strategy 2022-2024*, p.3). System and language changes are visible in the *2025-2027 QQI Statement of Strategy*, where the vision is reframed for a tertiary education system and is for

> *a flexible, responsive and quality assured tertiary education system where learners can have confidence that their learning experience will be of a high quality and their qualifications and learning will be valued nationally (2025, p.4).*

QA in FET has evolved since the 1990s in response to legislative and strategic changes. It is now a recognised professional activity referenced in corporate literature, which expresses a goal of achieving high quality in FET (SOLAS *Transforming Learning, 2020*, McGuinness et al, 2018). The FET system is the subject of *'a programme of continuing modernisation and reform…*[to] *promote quality in teaching, learning and research'* (DFHERIS Statement of Strategy, 2021, p.13) with good governance of quality proposed as a central mechanism for achieving this (QQI, 2023).

1.1.4 Learners and Practitioners – Terminology in FET

Within FET discourse, beneficiaries of programmes are referred to as 'learners' while teachers, trainers, instructors, and guidance personnel are often described collectively as 'learning practitioners'. Administrators, middle managers and senior managers provide the structures and supports that enable learners and practitioners to achieve their goals. For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the term Quality Assurance (QA) Practitioners to describe individuals employed and active in QA in FET. This term is not associated with any particular grade, as QA Practitioners are employed across multiple grades, contracts and job descriptions in the various ETBs. I will use the term 'FET Practitioners' to encompass teachers, trainers, instructors

and other professionals employed to deliver FET in FET centres and colleges from levels 1-6 of the National Framework of Qualifications. The term 'practitioner' was adopted by SOLAS in strategic documents as a blanket term for those delivering FET, due to numerous existing legacy contractual arrangements, terms and conditions.

The term Integrated FET College will occur in the text. This term represents newly integrated FET services, in the process of being implemented during the writing of this thesis, as an element of FET strategy, drawing together existing FET centres and colleges as the operationally linked campuses of a single entity. The concept is in its infancy, and thus, for the most part, I will be referring to integrated FET colleges, centres and colleges throughout the thesis, in recognition of the current situation which is at different stages of development across the 16 ETBs. Given the period of change, services will be referred to using multiple titles.

There are implicit assumptions of quality, and aspirations for 'quality' and 'excellence' throughout FET, in strategic statements, plans, agreements and reports. There is often limited articulation of how 'quality' is to be achieved in practice however, and no real articulation of what we mean by 'quality' exists. Providers are required to develop action plans for quality which should, over time, support greater awareness and integration of quality concepts in strategic planning within ETBs.

QQI is the statutory national authority for quality and qualifications across what is referred to exclusively as the tertiary education system in their *2025-2027 Statement of Strategy* (QQI, 2025, p.7) from Levels 1 to 10 of the *National Framework of Qualifications* (NFQ). This reflects policy changes since the establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Innovation and Research (DFHERIS) was established in 2020, and policy for a unified tertiary education system published in 2023 (DFHERIS, 2023) a. QQI, as an authority, seeks to ensure a comprehensive tertiary system based on integrity, trust and shared responsibility that enables clear information, transparent standards, and ease of access, transfer and progression for learners across the NFQ levels, and ease of reference for employers and other stakeholders. It does this through policy-making, publication of guidelines and provider review processes (*QQI Statement of Strategy, 2025-2027*). Within the ETB sector, at the time of writing, the commonly used term is 'further education and training' or 'FET', although this will shift to the term 'tertiary education' as systems become more integrated.

1.2 Understanding Further Education and Training (FET)

Provision of education and training to adults, including vocational education, has existed in the education system since the foundation of the State, in various forms. A *Vocational Education Act* in 1930 formally established the Vocational Education Committees with responsibility for vocational education on a county-by-county basis. In 1931, the *Apprenticeship Training Act* established apprenticeships as a separate element in the Irish system (Irish Statute Book). This history is well documented by McPartland (2020) and Croke (2017), and in grey literature, such as legislation, strategies and policies, with a notable increase in the number of such publications and initiatives during the 1980s and 1990s. The report of the Murphy Commission (1973) presented a vision for a system of 'permanent adult education' (p.17), based on the concept of lifelong learning and fully integrated with other forms of education in Ireland. *The Murphy Report* represented a holistic vision of 'adult education', encompassing education, technical vocational education (TVET) and continuing vocational education (CVET).

Although this cohesive integrated vison was never fully achieved, a rich landscape of provision emerged, featuring state-funded initiatives, and voluntary initiatives. Organisations such as AONTAS and the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) were established to promote adult basic education, holistic adult education and education in the community (Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2024). adult education, evening classes, CVET, and TVET were considered by the Murphy Commission as adult education, because they targeted adults over the age of 18.

In Irish contemporary usage, the term adult education tends to be associated primarily with adult basic education (ABE) and community education (CE). Within the ETB sector these now fall under the broader title of 'Further Education and Training'(FET), alongside labour-market programmes; the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI); Vocational Training Opportunities Schemes (VTOS); Youthreach; Community Training Centres (CTCs); Skills to Advance (STA); Post Leaving Certificate Colleges (PLCs); Apprenticeships; Traineeships; Contracted Training; Supported Training and Prison Education Services. These are managed through the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and funded through an tSeirbhís Oideachas Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (SOLAS). Adults in Ireland can access accredited and unaccredited education and training by attending on a full-time and part-time basis in person; in the workplace or through blended or online modes. The ETBs are the largest providers of these programmes nationally. 7,500 staff are employed nationally to deliver FET programmes through ETBs and in 2022, there were 186,740 unique enrolled learners. In 2022, 79,955 participants achieved certification (*Report of the Independent Panel on Irish FET Practitioner Staffing Structures in ETBs*, March, 2026).

The FET system serves individuals who want to upskill, reskill, access higher levels of education, retrain to meet the requirements for specific employment sectors, or engage in learning for personal interests and development, or simply for the joy of learning something new. Some learners participate following referral, for example, young people referred to Youthreach programme through the courts system, who receive an allowance to attend or individuals referred by InTreo, whose participation may be linked to their social welfare payments. Motivations for engaging in FET are varied, and progression to higher education is not necessarily the primary or sole goal for learners. Fitzsimons and O'Neill (2024) highlight the potential of FET to contribute to the development of society, through the socially oriented goals of adult education (p.13), and they welcome a recent shift away from previous discourse dominated by labour market readiness and the needs of the economy (p.10).

This research focuses on the ETBI QA Network and examines their efforts to assure high-quality education and training within this complex and challenging environment. Each ETB has two representatives on the ETBI QA Network, nominated by their ETB Chief Executive (CE) and/or the Director of Further Education and Training (DFET). As will emerge in this thesis, these representatives are considered experts in QA for FET, while also bringing their own experiences as practitioners and pedagogues within the system to their tasks.

During the late 1980s a distinct further education sector emerged under the Department of Education (DE), featuring initiatives for 'second chance' education (White Paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life, 2000, p.15) including Vocational Preparation and Training Programmes (VPTP), Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), Youthreach, Traveller Training Centres, Community Education, Prison Education and Post-leaving Certificate Colleges (PLCs). In a parallel system, training programmes were delivered under the Department of Labour, provided by an industrial training authority called 'AnCO', which was reconstituted as an Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS), under the *Industrial Training Act, 1987*. In a familiar cycle, new legislation in 2013 brought these systems together into a distinct sector called Further Education and Training (FET), funded through SOLAS, and placed under the remit of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). The SOLAS Corporate Plan 2024-2026 describes a vision of 'powering *the potential of individuals through lifelong learning and workforce transformation*', with an emphasis on responding to rapidly changing environments, reforming apprenticeships, widening participation and increasing capability (2024, pp.4-5). The sector is characterised by a discourse which features change and responsiveness; however, despite this, the pace of change in the implementation of quality and qualifications policy has been relatively slow, and

was noted by a QQI panel that produced an overview of the findings of the first cyclical review of quality in ETBs (QQI, 2023).

1.2.1 FET Programmes as Funding Streams

Within the FET system, the term 'programme' is used in two overlapping ways: to describe initiatives (for example, 'the VTOS programme' or 'the Youthreach programme') and to denote curricula and courses (for example, 'the Retail Sales programme' or 'the Early Learning and Care (ELC) programme'). Providers are responsible for the delivery of curricular programmes under the *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999* and the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012*. QQI's *Statement of Strategy 2025-2027*, recognises national shared responsibility for ensuring there is continuous improvement in education and training, with the aim of creating a trustworthy and reputable tertiary education system (2024, p.5). The *QQI Sectoral Guidelines for QA* (2017, p. 8) explicitly provide for ETB-to-ETB and external collaboration in the interest of achieving the goal of continuous improvement, supporting this concept of shared collective responsibility.

FET programmes are accredited across levels 1-6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), described as *'the single, nationally and internationally accepted entity through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way'* (Quality and Qualifications, Ireland (QQI), 2024, p.6). The FET sector delivers both accredited and unaccredited programmes from levels 1-6, and the HE sector delivers programmes leading to accreditation from levels 6-10. An Early Learning and Care (ELC) programme is one of the first programmes designed and developed collaboratively and intentionally by the sector with a strong emphasis on progression from level 5 to 6 and onwards to HE, fulfilling new policy directions for the early learning and education sector.

SOLAS is an agency of DFHERIS and a body corporate established in 2013 (SOLAS, 2025). QQI is the state agency responsible for *'promoting the quality, integrity and reputation of Ireland's further and higher education system'* (QQI, 2025*),* and for ensuring that qualifications achieved by learners are highly valued nationally and internationally. ETBI is the national representative body for its members, the sixteen ETBs, with objectives that include representing ETBs; advancing education and training, and collectively promoting education, training and youthwork development in Ireland (ETBI, 2025).

ETBs deliver accredited programmes aligned with the NFQ levels and standards up to and including Level 6, leading to awards from the Common Awards System (CAS), awards based on new QQI 'Professional Award Type Descriptors' (PATDs), and awards from other awarding

bodies such as City and Guilds, as well as unaccredited programmes. Programmes must meet specific quality standards, demonstrated through provider led quality assurance systems, and this must be evident in governance, delivery and evaluation, in line with QQI policies and guidelines.

FET participation grew by 17% in 2023, according to a *SOLAS 2025-2029 FET Strategy Consultation* document (2025). In 2022, there were 375,373 FET beneficiaries, and 186,740 unique individuals enrolled in FET. €978.2m was disbursed to the ETBs for FET programmes and initiatives (*SOLAS Annual Report,* 2023, p11). Sixty-four FET training centres deliver NFQ levels 5 and 6, and 293 'community-based' facilities primarily deliver NFQ Levels 1-4. In addition, there are 58 PLC colleges, delivering programmes at levels 5 and 6 (*Future FET: Transforming Learning*, 2020a, p21).

The NFQ offers the FET sector an opportunity to present a coherent and well-understood prospectus for provision across levels 1-6 of the framework, supporting effective access, transfer and progression. Standards are defined through a grid of level indicators (QQI), existing Common Awards System (CAS) standards, revised broad standards for Levels 1-4, and Professional Award Type Descriptors (PATDs). Programme developers and providers use these standards when designing programmes. Where no standard exists, providers may develop 'programme derived award standards' (PDAS). Updated QQI policies and guidelines provide considerable scope for innovation in curriculum development, while reiterating the centrality of learners and the 'provider-owned' principle, the centrality of learning outcomes, and FET provider responsibility for programme development (QQI, 2024).

1.2.2 National FET Strategies

FET is defined as *'education and training that occurs after second-level education but that is not part of the third-level system'* (DFHERIS, 2021). Its development is closely linked to European Union (EU) and international vocational education and training (VET) policy and it is affected by EU initiatives. The Irish system differs from European systems, in that it encompasses adult education, adult basic education, English language learning, community education and informal learning as well as initial vocational education and training (IVET), apprenticeship, skills training, work-based learning and traineeships, although internally, the strands are still somewhat defined by separate funding strands and operational guidelines. Many Irish initiatives were developed in response to specific social or economic issues arising at different times, targeting specific groups, for example, the Youthreach programme. This responsiveness is reflected in a complex delivery system, characterised by multiple funding

streams, varied operational guidelines; diverse employment contracts for practitioners and differing norms for administrative and financial support, which are being addressed through strategic initiatives to integrate services.

SOLAS strategic documents identify three broad categories of FET programmes: programmes focused on employment outcomes; progression-oriented programmes and transversal skills programmes (2022, p14). In these documents, transversal programmes are associated primarily with NFQ levels 1-4, and progression programmes with Levels 5-6. This language is evolving as the FET system moves towards greater cohesion and integration, in line with the *Transforming Learning Strategy* (SOLAS, 2020). Lifelong learning, widening participation and meeting workforce and skills needs are central to FET strategy. Given that transversal skills are valuable across education, training and employment contexts, limiting their association to levels 1-4 risks undermining and excluding their integration into programmes at levels 5 and 6.

FET was restructured in 2013, with the goal of creating a more cohesive system, that could be logically linked to post-secondary and higher education, while also encompassing lifelong learning and skills developed through unaccredited, non-formal and informal learning and various forms of recognition of formal and informal achievements. Traditional apprenticeship in Ireland is governed by the Industrial Training Act, 1967, which covers craft apprenticeships. The National Apprenticeship Office (NAO), established in 2022, works in partnership with employers, education and training providers, and QQI and maintains an employers' register. ETBs deliver apprenticeships, act as leads in new apprenticeship programme consortia and QA for apprenticeship provision in collaborative arrangements. New 'post-2016' apprenticeships have been introduced in areas such as technology, finance, construction and biopharma, complementing the traditional 'pre-2016' apprenticeships in trades such as plumbing, plastering and electrical work. In 2024, there were approximately 27,000 apprentices across 70 programmes, with 6,500 employers supporting apprentices (National Apprenticeship Office, 2025).

The expansion of apprenticeships and new FET strategies was a response to a 2021 DFHERIS review of higher education and FET sustainability (2021, p.5) which recommended reducing the proportion of learners progressing directly to higher education in order to address over-qualification and skill mismatches, echoing concerns in other European countries. Strategically, the goal is to make FET a more attractive option for school leavers by prioritising *'vocationally focused education and training options'* through development and enhancement (DFHERIS 2021, p.5). This implies that strategic planning and resource allocation for enhancement

should be a priority. At the same time, the DFHERIS review identified a lack of effective pathways between FET and HE (Rami et al. 2016, pp12-13), which provided the impetus for the establishment of a National Tertiary Office (NTO) and tertiary education programmes, discussed later in this chapter.

Meeting workforce and skills needs, supporting pathways to employment and higher education and moving towards a coherent system are high priorities, alongside transforming organisational design, resourcing and staffing structures within FET (SOLAS, 2025, p.4). FET Colleges of the Future, also referred to as integrated FET colleges are central to this reform agenda (SOLAS, 2020, p.16). Over the course of this study, the FET College is emerging as a recognisable national brand across the ETBs. The discourse justifying FET in strategic documents tends to foreground the language and needs of business, with more limited reference to inclusion and the holistic possibilities of engagement in FET, adult education, or community education, echoing concerns expressed by McPartland (2020, p.19).

FET is increasingly presented *'as a pivotal driver of equality and inclusion and ensuring access to education for all'* (SOLAS, 2025-2029, p.2), while responding in an agile way to skills needs, and aspiring to make Ireland an *'OECD world-class skills leader'* (2025, p.1). A 2014 Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) report described FET provision as heterogeneous, wide-ranging and '*extremely difficult to define'* (ESRI, 2014, p viii). McPartland similarly characterises FET as a concept lacking clear definition with existing definitions described as '*chameleon-like'* (2020, p14), and containing little that is specific to further education (p19). Despite significant policy recommendations and changes since 2014, this heterogeneity persists, albeit with slightly altered names and structures. In this research, it appears as complexity that exerts both positive and negative influences on the FET system, generating flexibility and agility, but incoherence too. In this paradoxical context, it may be necessary to harness heterogeneity, leveraging its strengths to achieve greater coherence while recognising the risks of excessive homogeneity.

1.2.3 FET Colleges of the Future, and the Tertiary Education System

The SOLAS strategy *Future FET: Transforming Learning* articulates an aspiration for greater coherence in FET provision proposing 'FET Colleges of the Future' as integrated entities with larger scale facilities in specific geographic locations, delivering programmes leading to level 5 and 6 awards. Unaccredited and accredited programmes at levels 1 to 4 would be delivered in integrated community settings (2020a, p60). Significant capital funding to support this plan was announced by the then Minister for Further and Higher education, Simon Harris in

December 2022. This vision is increasingly evident in policy and strategy documents, reflecting the State's response to previous reports (Indecon, 2022, McGuinness et al., 2018). However, the vision is rooted in a 'bricks and mortar' model that risks retention of existing philosophical and cultural boundaries, structures and perceptions across the system. It may contribute to continued stratification of education and training opportunities rather than promoting greater equity and the removal of barriers, equitable supports, geographical access, resources and recognition for all learners and staff.

FET services embedded in communities are identified as a major strength. *Future FET: Transforming Learning* (2020) argues that such provision offers individuals 'pathways', by linking personal development, community and social networks and enabling progression to higher level programmes, or employment. At the same time, the strategy aims to 'grow the FET contribution to a more cohesive tertiary system for Ireland' (SOLAS, 2020, p.8). This vision has materialised in the form of tertiary degree programmes co-designed and co-delivered by higher education institutions (HEIs) and ETBs. These programmes bypass the traditional Central Applications Office (CAO) points-based route to higher education. Instead, individuals Make choices and apply through a separate National Tertiary Office course listing. Tertiary programmes allow learners to complete the first two years of their degree programme at a PLC campus or newly integrated College near their home, and include embedded awards that allow recognition of partial completion. There are now twenty-four tertiary education programmes available nationally. The tertiary project is one example of a Minister drawing on ETBI's capacity to address system-level challenges, consistent with ETBI's statutory purpose as defined in the *Education and Training Boards Act*, 2013. Other examples include the provision of capital funding for FET Colleges of the Future, the resolution of issued regarding payment of External Authenticators (EAs) and the creation of an EA panel for the sector (*ETBI DFET Forum Newsletters*, 2023 - 2024), and the development of the *Adult Literacy for All (ALL) Strategy*.

1.2.4 The Roots of Vocational Education and FET

Historically, vocational education occupied an indistinct and often marginal position within the Irish education system, shaped by an agrarian economy with limited industrial development (McPartland, 2020, p80). Following the Vocational Education Act, 1930) vocational schools were established to deliver programmes leading to the Group Certificate - subsequently known as the Intermediate Certificate, and then the Junior Certificate. These programmes were delivered through full-time and day release courses under the VECS, and targeted 14–16-

year-olds. Provision included continuation education which extended this elementary schooling and focused on practical preparation for trades and industry, and technical education, defined in the Act as education relating to *'trades, manufacture, agriculture, commerce and other industrial pursuits (including the occupations of girls and women connected with the household'* (1930 Act, Part 1, Section 2). In contemporary European terms, these strands align broadly with Initial Vocational Education (IVET), Continuing Vocational Education (CVET) and Technical and Vocational Education (TVET).

1.2.5 A Vision for an Integrated System of Holistic Adult Education

The *Murphy Commission Report* of 1973, identified four roles of adult education: vocational, personal development, remedial and political. Although presented as categories, the report emphasised that these roles should overlap holistically. Adult education, understood at the time as all education for those over 18 outside the higher education system, was expected to address the full spectrum of human development:

> *If adult education neglects any aspect of the development of a person then it cannot be termed true adult education. Therefore, any such process, vocational or otherwise, must provide for the specifically human and non-vocational (emotional, artistic and intellectual) potential of the individual; liberal adult education provides for this. (Murphy Report, 1973, p.12).*

The report articulated an ambitious vision of lifelong learning - described as 'permanent education' - spanning the entire life course and enabling individuals to access learning and personal development opportunities on a recurring basis (1973, p.17). It argued that adult education should be an integral component of the Irish education system and cautioned against reducing it to 'second-chance education'. Ironically, the term later became widely used in the sector, particularly in relation to the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS).

The Murphy Commission recommended the establishment of an enabling structure and framework through which adult education could '*function, develop and give satisfaction' (1973, p.43).* Despite the report's radical nature, (McDonnell, 2003, p.48), little action was taken. McDonnell later observed that the Commission had highlighted issues such as literacy difficulties and early school leaving decades before they became mainstream policy concerns, yet successive governments failed to implement its recommendations (2003, p.48). The integrated, permanent adult education system envisaged in 1973 never materialised, and the sector evolved instead into the fragmented landscape now known as Further Education and Training (FET), with elements increasingly described as part of a broader 'tertiary education' system spanning FET and higher education.

1.2.6 The Dualities of Labour Market Activation and Social Inclusion

Contemporary adult education in Ireland is shaped by a persistent tension between labour-market activation and social inclusion. It is a currently fragmented system, although efforts are ongoing to create a more integrated system, through the tertiary education policy for example. Glanton (2023) argues that 'labour market activators' employed by SOLAS alongside economists, have become the dominant authorities in adult education, shifting the sector away from holistic personal development towards a training model focused on economic productivity. She contends that meeting labour-market needs has come to override the sector's parallel objective of countering social exclusion.

This introduces the compromises often taken by practitioners in FET, who can feel they must deliver curricula without professional autonomy and control over content, partly due to dominant discourse focused on outcomes and performance. As revealed by research participants Anastasia and Odette, practitioners are frequently surprised when they are given permission to make changes or participate in programme updates, supporting this sense of lack of professional autonomy. Fleming raised the issue of tensions between the possibilities of adult education as an element of civic society, and the challenges and dependencies based on the funding of adult education, which in its interpretations, was expanding towards meeting the needs of economic development, with growing emphases on job skills and upskilling (2004, no page numbers available), claiming that even the rhetoric of social inclusion and equity has economic dimensions.

Drawing on Ball's observation that '*words and propositions will change their meaning according to their use and the positions held by those who use them*' (Ball, 1990, pp17-18, in O'Sullivan, 2005, p.24), Glanton highlights how power imbalances shape policy discourse. This duality - between economic imperatives and socially oriented goals - remains a defining feature of FET, influencing decisions and underpinning the structural and pedagogical tensions explored in this research.

1.2.7 Community Education and Adult Basic Education (ABE)

Ireland has a long tradition of community education, emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a response to structural inequalities relating to gender, class and race (Golding and Harvey, 2019, p. 22) This movement drew on feminist activism (Connolly, 2008), a politicised voluntary literacy movement (NALA, 2010) and anti-poverty and community development initiatives (Fitzsimons, 2017, in Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2019, p.39). AONTAS, founded in 1968, by Fr. Carey, advocated for the rights of adults to access learning and sought to unify voluntary efforts (Golding and Harvey, 2019, 19 p.19).

Adult education during this period took place in homes, community centres, vocational schools, 'farm schools' and in trade union settings (Murphy, 1973, p.13). Interestingly, trade unions were among the first to highlight issues of functional illiteracy and numeracy in the workforce (1973, p.83). Murphy argued that *'adult education is merely an aspect of an integrated system of education'* (1973, p.17), reinforcing the idea that community-based learning should not be peripheral to other education provision.

Adult basic education (ABE) originated as a voluntary community-based initiative, eventually leading to the establishment of the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). Community education expanded significantly in the 1980s, with voluntary, community and women's groups offering 'second chance' education; personal development; arts and literacy courses, through networks of community centres and new community resource centres. One such centre - The Family Resource Centre in St. Michael's Estate in Inchicore, for example, was founded with the local community, by Sr. Jo Kennedy, a Mercy nun, connected with the local convent, Goldenbridge. It's ethos strongly reflected Freirean principles. It was here that I took my first steps into working in FET, and where Bertie Ahern, then Minister for Trade and Enterprise, launched Youthreach centres in 1988.

The 1980s were a period of rapid development, and Ted Fleming noted that developments were 'taking place too fast in adult education to allow time for reflection and debate' (1985, in Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2019, p.42). The theme of insufficient time for reflection reappears in this research, suggesting that reflective practice remains undervalued in the apparently fast-paced operational environment of FET.

Fleming also highlighted the competitive ethos embedded in Irish policy discourse, citing a Justice Minister's assertion that *'a dynamic liberal economy like ours demands flexibility and inequality in some respects to function'* (quoting Niall Crowley, 2004). Such statements, he argues, shape cultural beliefs long after their authors have left public life. Fleming and McGrath, 2012 emphasise lifelong learning as a right, not a privilege, and argue that it must be reclaimed from narrow economic interpretations. If lifelong learning is a public good, then state actors have a responsibility to ensure that all learners - regardless of level or accreditation can experience high-quality provision. Essentially, this raises a challenge for public servants to be strong advocates for those who participate in services, and to seek their own agency and confidence in promoting the benefits for them during policy debates, discussions, consultations and implementation.

A review of the *Adult Learner Journal* by Golding and Harvey (2019), reveals that despite the central role of women in establishing adult education services, and acting as volunteers and practitioners, the majority of editors between 1985 and 2017 were men (10 men, 2 women). Popular themes featured in the publication included community education (8%), policy (7%), second-chance education (7%), literacy (6%), women (5%) and reflection (5%). Interestingly, there appears to have been limited coverage of quality, if any, despite the existence of early quality frameworks developed by AONTAS and NALA in the 2000s.

National policy for community education and adult basic education was largely absent until the 1990s, when dedicated budgets were introduced. Meanwhile, vocational schools delivered self-financing adult education programmes in the community, ranging from arts to accountancy. Over time, VECs, and later, ETBs became the primary management and funding channels for adult education. ABE transitioned from a predominantly voluntary activity to an integrated part of the system, while community education became a powerful force within local communities, particularly when Community Education Facilitators were appointed.

In a holistic vision, the Murphy Commission located apprenticeship and work-based learning within the remit of adult education arguing that vocational education, personal development, remedial and political education, which could be integrated or delivered independently, depending on need (1973, p.11). Historically however, apprenticeship and work-based learning continued to be delivered separately from the VECs.

1.2.8 Pre-employment Courses, Youthreach, Community Training Centres, VTOS and Industrial Training

Economic recessions in the 1970s and early 1980s prompted the introduction of pre-employment courses in 1977, designed to *'bridge the gap between the values and experiences normally part of traditional education and those of the adult world of work'* (Williams and McNamara, 1985, p8). Schools had autonomy to design programmes within national guidelines (1985, p.9), reflecting trust in the professionalism of practitioners, and respect for their experience of being closely engaged with pupils, and their flexibility in programme planning, providing opportunities to take a holistic perspective in the planning of delivery. These programmes evolved into Vocational Preparation and Training Programmes (VPTP 1) funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and were intended as alternative senior-cycle pathways for young people for whom mainstream programmes were unsuitable.

A second year (VPTP 2) was later added, offering vocational curricula (McNamara, 1991, p. 346). In 1985 VPTPs were transformed into Post-leaving Certificate (PLCs) programmes (ESRI,

2014, p.11; Hannan and Whelan,1999, p.289), often located in repurposed former post-primary vocational schools. Large PLC colleges emerged in urban centres such as Dublin, Limerick, Cork and Galway while smaller PLC units developed in rural areas, linked to existing post-primary schools, delivering one or two education programmes. The cohort served shifted from 15- to 16-year-olds to 17- or 18-year-olds at the time, who first completed the Leaving Certificate before progressing to a PLC. Now, learners can be 19 or 20 before they start a PLC vocational programme, and the PLCs also serve mature students who are reskilling or upskilling.

Full-time training initiatives and programmes to address early school leaving, youth unemployment, and physical, social and health disadvantage, were established (O'Brien, 2011, P5) as Youthreach (funded by the Department of Education (DE) and VECs), Community Training Centres (CTCs, run by FÁS and the Department of Labour) and VTOS, funded by the DE/Dept of Labour) between 1986 and 1989 (Williams and McNamara, 1985). Between 1986 and 1989, Youthreach, Community Training Centres (CTCs) and VTOS were established to address early school leaving, youth unemployment and social disadvantage (O'Brien, 2011, p.5).

During this period, the state training agency, AnCO was reengineered to become An Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS), with responsibility for vocational training programmes for the purpose of preparing for, reskilling, upskilling and employment placement in predominantly industry and trades environments. Purpose-built training centres were established as regional centres across the country under AnCo/FÁS management, to deliver industry-approved vocational programmes.

McPartland (2020) draws on Freire's warning about reducing education to training '*filled with technique'* (Freire, 2004. P.84). However, systematic teaching and learning strategies can support mastery in vocational, academic and personal domains, as can be seen in the literature on competency-based education (CBE) (Spady, 1977).

1.2.9 Tertiary Programmes

A 2021 DFHERIS report identified misalignment between FET and HE system outputs and highlighted under-developed progression pathways *'despite a significant policy focus'* (DFHERIS, 2022, p.115). In response, a policy for a unified tertiary sector was published (DFHERIS, 2022) and the National Tertiary Office (NTO) was established in the same year.

Tertiary Degree Programmes are co-delivered by ETBs and Technological Universities (TUs). These are now in their fourth year of delivery, with twenty-four programmes available at

Bachelor level (Level 8) (Appendix D). These programmes provide '*diverse and progressive pathways'* and promote lifelong learning (NTO, 2025). They operate outside the CAO system and do not require Leaving Certificate points for entry. Learners complete the early stages of their degrees in ETB FET colleges, paired with specific TUs, with no tuition fees during that earlier phase.

Current policy aligns NFQ levels 5 and 6 with the tertiary system (DFHERIS, 2022) and levels 1-4 with education in the community (SOLAS, 2022). ETBs and HEs collaborate on programme development in vocational fields deemed nationally important, creating shared services and improving access, transfer and progression. Whether the tertiary system will contribute to a more coherent identity for FET remains to be seen.

McPartland (2020) attributes aspects of FET's current shape to European tools including the EQF, QA Framework and the *Copenhagen Declaration* (2002). An Indecon report, *Increasing the Sustainability of Higher and Further Education*, published in 2021, suggests that recent developments may support greater transparency, fairness and accountability.

1.2.10 Skills, Competence, Mastery and Learning Outcomes

The *Lisbon Strategy* (2000) placed education and training at the centre of the European agenda, promoting transparency of qualifications and increased worker and learner mobility. Some argue that the shift towards skills formation represented a move away from citizenship towards a focus on producing future workers (Powell, Bernhard and Graf, 2012, quoted in O'Sullivan, 2017, p.84). O'Sullivan (2017) suggests that this emphasis oscillates like a pendulum in response to political priorities.

Shannon (2019), like Glanton (2023) critiques the 2014 FET strategy for adopting a narrow view of adult learners and prioritising skills as the primary mechanism for addressing social mobility and inclusion (SOLAS, 2014, p.4). She argues that the strategy fails to account for the complexity of educational inequality (2019, p.108). The 'skills agenda' has dominated discourse since 2008, often overshadowing the broader value of lifelong learning. Fitzsimons and O'Neill welcome recent shifts towards more holistic goals (2024, p.13), and encourage educators to embrace the vision articulated in *Future FET* (SOLAS, 2020a).

Historically, FET programmes were often been introduced in response to social crises. Youthreach and CTCs emerged in the 1980s in response to joyriding, early school leaving, and youth unemployment, while VTOS was introduced to address high unemployment by offering adults opportunities to upskill.

The term ‘skills’ is frequently used in policy discourse without sufficient clarity or discussion of its relationship to mastery or pedagogical approaches. This lack of definition risks rendering the term meaningless. *The Common Awards System* (CAS), developed in the early 1990s, was based on detailed learning outcomes, and has shaped FET programme development ever since its inception in 2010. It offered programme developers opportunities to determine the skills to be learned and criteria for assessment. In the former FE sector, these standards and programmes still have currency and delivery is based on this system. Competency-based education (CBE) and training underpin much of this work, yet there is limited professional dialogue in FET about pedagogical approaches, despite extensive literature in other sectors, (e.g. Sutherland et al. 2022; Gruppen et al. 2016, and Morcke et al. 2012). Morcke et al. point out that uncritical acceptance of outcomes - or competency-based education may not enable the realisation of its benefits (2012, p.851). There is a challenge for education and training system practitioners to determine how their programmes contribute to progressive development of competence, skills and mastery through good design and linkage for progression, and there is a need to bring this discourse into a more central position involved in conversations about practice.

European developments - including the *Copenhagen Declaration* (2002) and the *Lisbon Strategy* work programme - further influenced Irish FET policy (CEDEFOP, 2004). Current strategic priorities include lifelong learning, mobility, efficiency, equity and social inclusion, creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship (European Directorate for Education, Training and Youth, 2025). The favoured approach to curriculum in FET was one of ‘competency-based’ education, and when NCVA descriptors were introduced, the standards for each module were expressed as learning outcomes, reflecting a dominant approach to vocational training systems at the time. Competency-based education (CBE) was an approach devised for high schools in the United States, particularly in north-western education districts (Spady and Mitchell, 1977, p.9). The approach emphasised three minimum conditions for high school graduation: personal development, social responsibility and career development, and these were designed to be delivered as an addition to regular subjects delivered in high schools. As an approach, they are similar to the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), due to be replaced by a specification called ‘Life, Community and Work in September, 2026 (Curriculum Online, 2026). Spady and Mitchell explain that competency refers to *‘the ability to perform successfully in patterned activities’* while capacities are the *‘building blocks on which competencies rest’.* Spady describes CBE as

> *a data-based, adaptive, performance-oriented set of integrated processes that facilitate, measure, record and certify within the context of flexible time parameters the demonstration of known, explicitly stated, and agreed upon learning outcomes that reflect successful functioning in life roles' (1977, p.10)*.

The concept of CBE relies on criterion-based standards, and Spady and Mitchell identify four variables that must be managed by leadership: content planning as it relates to the programme or curriculum, developing commitment and ownership by students and staff, providing motivational rewards for students and staff and developing the expertise of staff to use new instructional, assessment, evaluation and administration approaches and procedures (1977, p.15).

While the literature on adoption of CBE in the Irish system is sparse, those who were present and used the original NCVA descriptors will recognise that these were often adopted in a way that mirrored the traditional schooling model of individual subjects. In PLC colleges for example, directly mirroring the traditional leaving certificate timetable. CBE is characterised by the mnemonic FACTS: Flexibility, Authenticity, Coordination (of student involvement), Training (for staff in the technical aspects of goal-based education) and Supervision (of students in an expanded network of settings and range of pursuits, sometimes negotiated with students), (1977, p.15). It is possible through CBE to meet learners at their starting point because there is a focus on achieving definite goals while providing appropriate time for the achievement that is flexible according to student needs, and to adjust instructional techniques if necessary to enable achievement.

The Finnish system for vocational education and training provides a valuable insight into the structuring of CBE within a national system where the concept of lifelong learning is a key fundamental value throughout the education system. According to the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, students' prior learning is identified and recognised and students can use the available qualification units to meet their competence needs, and to acquire missing competences, giving students responsibility for their own learning and accumulation of credits. This applies from initial vocational education, which commences as an upper secondary pathway at the age of sixteen (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2026). The same options are available to adults who want to upskill or reskill.

In the European context, the concept of learning outcomes is a reflection of the possibilities of CBE, and of qualification frameworks, and application of the concept has developed in different ways in different jurisdictions. CEDEFOP, the organisation that contributed to the shaping of European and national qualifications frameworks, has published a manual for

European curriculum developers, *Defining, Writing and Applying Learning Outcomes* (2022), and the concept is recommended as central to good practice for programme developers. In Ireland, this has been embedded in the *QQI Policies and Criteria for Validation of Programmes of Education and Training* (2017). Minimum Intended Programme Learning Outcomes (MIPLOs) and Minimum Intended Module Learning Outcomes (MIMLOs) must be devised by those developing programmes to be submitted for validation.

Linked to the concept of engagement in learning that is connected to life beyond formal education and training institutions, Boud and Soler advocate 'sustainable assessment' (2016). Sustainable assessment is based on the principle of preparing learners to meet future learning needs, rather than associating assessment with single, stressful life experiences (2016). The concept arises from the principles of the *World Commission on the Environment Report* of 1987, which increased awareness of sustainability, and which prompted the inclusion of the concept in thinking about the impacts of education. Later in this thesis, Deleryd and Fundin's work around 'Quality 5.0' will feature, illustrating new thinking in this area too (2024). The concept of sustainable assessment represents a move away from assessing disciplinary knowledge, reorientating outcomes and pedagogy towards developing the ability to engage in assessment for learning, recognising that this is a skill that is pertinent throughout life and is relevant to the concept of lifelong learning. Allais warns us about the risks of overreliance on outcome-based qualifications frameworks which may neglect of the acquisition and development of bodies of knowledge, and of creeping commodification of learning (2014, p.237), a risk also identified by Leney et al. in 2007 in their analysis of the Irish FE system. Allais argues that knowledge is holistic, connected and acquired in structured social relationships rather than isolatable, measurable, discrete objects (2014, p.237).

Bennett and Brady critique the concept of learning outcomes assessment, and raise issues with the concept of curriculum as an instrument of social regulation, associating this with risks that the use of the learning outcomes approach may result in curriculum that limits potential for some sections of the population (2012). Within quality assurance arrangements for programme validation in Ireland, there is a layer of approval that calls on external independent evaluators to determine whether the proposed programme is valid and appropriate (QQI, 2017). The interrelated ethical responsibility of developers and evaluators is a key barrier to inappropriate design, as long as developers and panel members have developed their own neutrality, competence and independence. In QQI policy, processes of academic governance and quality are deliberately separated from commercial and financial concerns to ensure that the focus is on the quality and integrity of the education and training

experience that is offered. The challenge in a State-funded system is to ensure that the autonomy and rights of humans in the system are respected, and that this respect is maintained when developing curricula and programmes of education and training (Allais, 2014, p.239).

Spady recognises the commonly cited risk that such outcomes- and goal-oriented approaches may reduce flexibility, spontaneity or individuality for practitioners and learners, but highlights the possibilities of allowing for electives, and flexibility for achievement in programme design. He presents the outcomes-based approach as an opportunity to address the problems of selection biases that emphasise differences between students, through enabling learners to achieve mastery in the time appropriate for them (1977, p.11), as reflected in the Finnish system, where students are enabled to address the gaps in their competence within flexible timeframes. Education and training institutions can adopt a variety of instructional approaches and settings to meet student needs and embrace assessment and evaluation methods that appeal to intrinsic motivation, although there are challenges associated with managing more flexible approaches such as continuous assessment. One daunting aspect of the CBE model described by Spady is the propensity of CBE to reflect adequacy or appropriateness of instruction, or criteria, creating a system which must be sensitive enough to respond to issues and that enables practitioners to engage in continuous improvement (1977, 12) through reflection, review and evaluation.

In the history of FET and of curriculum development in FET, there has been a tendency to cling to the subject-oriented norm and what is often called the one-to-one model, which maintains the traditional concept of single-subject modules, rather than embracing the possibilities of innovation which tends to be perceived as more complex, costly and challenging. This would require more concerted application of the FACT mnemonic cited above, and the impact of this will be seen later in descriptions of emerging approaches to programme development and validation in the sector.

1.2.11 Planning, Reporting, Review, Evaluation and Monitoring

The Public Service Management Act, 1997 introduced business planning and performance management across the public service (Gleeson and O'Donnabhain, 2009, p.29), influencing VECs, FÁS, and later FET. Reporting requirements intensified after the economic crash of 2008, (O'Sullivan, 2017, p.86). Following the 2012 restructuring, new rigorous funding allocation and reporting systems (FARR) were introduced, to enhance transparency and accountability.

Executive self-evaluations of quality were introduced in ETBs in 2018, alongside Action Plans for Quality and annual dialogue meetings with QQI. The QQI inaugural review of quality in ETBs took place in 2022. The QQI Review panel recommended the introduction of key performance indicators in annual QA reports (QQI, 2023). ETBs now publish self-evaluation reports, external quality review reports and a sectoral quality report in the public domain (QQI, 2023). Each ETB also has a strategic performance agreement with SOLAS, linked to a new funding model introduced in 2023, with reporting based on inputs, outputs and outcomes (SOLAS, 2022, p.8). The emphasis on monitoring and review has significantly shaped governance and practice in ETBs.

1.2.12 New FET Policies and Environments: 2012 Onwards

The period following the 2008 financial crisis marked a profound restructuring of the FET sector. Recommendations for cost-saving, fiscal discipline, transparency and accountability, articulated in the *McCarthy Report* (2009) and implemented through the *Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (FEMPI) Act* in 2015, prompted a series of seismic reforms. These included the dissolution of the VECs and FÁS, and the establishment of new statutory bodies responsible for FET governance, funding and quality assurance.

During this period, the needs of the labour market became a dominant policy priority. Strategies to retrain unemployed individuals and reskill those in employment were shaped by the work of bodies such as the Expert Group on Future Skill Needs (EGFSN). The Momentum Programme for example was one such strategy, launched in 2012 and targeted 6,500 participants. That programme signalled and bridged the transition from FÁS to SOLAS (Momentum Final Report, 2014a), and supported the emergence of a more unified ETB system, following a FÁS scandal (Irish Independent, 2009). Ultimately, legal reform of the sector occurred through the two FET Acts of 2013.

1.2.13 A Fragmented System

This era of substantial development led to a somewhat dispersed, fractured and fragmented system focused on specific target groups, rather than on a universal, learner-centred system of education or training programmes, qualifications and standards, focused on promoting learning - which includes self-awareness, competence, skills, and mastery - progression and self-actualisation at all levels from 1-6. Originally delivered by VECs, FÁS and community groups and organisations, this fragmented system was the subject of considerable legislative change and restructuring in 2012 and 2013.

Nonetheless, in the fragmented system, adults who want to extend their education, upskill or reskill can access accredited and unaccredited education and training programmes through ETBs delivered in local community centres; further education and training centres; adult night courses; and post-leaving certificate colleges (PLCs), which are becoming the 'flagships' for new integrated FET Colleges, delivered by ETB employees or by trainers, employed by specialist private contracted training companies whose services are procured through the Office of Government Procurement (OGP).

Adults can access education and training delivered by private companies and providers directly, too, including private English language schools, Community Schools, and charitable organisations, some of whom are recognised by QQI, delivering programmes accredited by QQI, and other awarding bodies. In recent years, there has been considerable growth in training and education through organisations concerned, for example, with the environment, such as Hometree, Common Knowledge and Rewild Wicklow, in the field of outdoor education and leadership, and in wellness and fitness too. These are all opportunities for formal, informal and non-formal learning for adults, growing and developing outside State, publicly funded channels, albeit only accessible to those who can afford to pay for them.

1.3 Further Education and Training Programmes in Education and Training Boards.

The ETB FET system is in a period of transition, with traditional programme titles gradually being subsumed into integrated, multi-campus FET college structures. To support readers who may be unfamiliar with FET in Ireland as it is delivered by ETBs, this section outlines the main programme strands that currently comprise FET provision. This section does not include support services for learners, such as adult guidance, counselling, the Youthreach Advocacy Service and learner well-being supports.

1.3.1 Adult Basic Education (ABE)

Adult literacy and numeracy were first formally recognised as national issues in the *Murphy Report* (1973). Demand for literacy provision increased in the 1970s, following a BBC broadcast highlighting adult literacy challenges (Ward and Ayton, 2019). Early provision emerged through voluntary efforts in vocational schools, private houses and community centres leading to the establishment of the first Adult Literacy Service in Dublin in 1974.

ABE services, initially volunteer-led, became professionalised in the 1980s, and have since been a consistent source of innovation. They have developed intensive literacy models, work-place basic education, family learning programmes and English for Speakers of Other

Languages (ESOL) programmes (Vaughan, 2004; Ward and Ayton, 2019). ABE remains a cornerstone of inclusive FET provision.

1.3.2 Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)

Launched in 2000 and fully operational by 2002, BTEI expanded access to part-time accredited learning for adults, addressing needs identified in the White Paper *Learning for Life* (2000). Delivered through ETB FET services, and funded through the European Social Fund (ESF), the BTEI was designed with rigorous documentation and reporting requirements and was comparatively well-funded when compared to VTOS.

Fleming critiqued the increasing bureaucratisation of adult education, arguing that administrative demands often served '*an insatiable bureaucratic system'* rather than enhancing learners' experiences (1985). While such oversight is partly attributable to ESF reporting requirements it raises broader questions about the balance between accountability and humane, learner-centred practice.

Another support, not to be confused with BTEI, is called the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) provides financial assistance to adults over 21 in receipt of qualifying social welfare payments who wish to pursue further or higher education (Citizens Information, 2026). The purpose of this allowance is to remove preventative barriers that affect ability to return to learning, such as childcare, transport and ability to purchase equipment.

1.3.3 Community Education

Community education emerged in the 1980s as voluntary and community groups offering adult literacy, second-chance education and personal development programmes (Golding and Harvey, 2019, p.40), became more connected and networked.

Fleming (1985, pp9-16) proposed three paradigms of Community Education:

1. Liberal – focused on individual transformation and learner choice.
2. Reformist – involving State intervention on behalf of disadvantaged groups.
3. Radical – grounded in Marxist principles and aimed at structural change (2019, p.43).

The *Murphy Report* (1973) envisioned adult education as an integrated system encompassing vocational, personal, remedial and political dimensions. Today, however, there are assertions that community education has been forced to operate within a much narrower remit, shaped by labour-market discourses and accountability frameworks such as competitive bidding processes introduced in the White Paper (DES, 2000), and by outcomes-based rhetoric.

Crow and Mah (2012, p.27) call for reclaiming the radical roots of community development, questioning the extent to which state-funded community education can genuinely support transformational change. The *White Paper on Adult Education* (2000) cited community education in Ireland as being innovative and pioneering in approaches to teaching and learning (DES, 2000, p.110), playing an important part in addressing educational disadvantage. Paradoxically, the same document set the scene for the rigorous approaches to accountability and 'competitive bidding' process that are often perceived as contrary to the ethos of community education.

1.3.4 Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Colleges

Post-leaving Certificate Colleges evolved from VPTP courses, and secretarial courses delivered by VECs, originally established as post- group certificate and intermediate certificate programmes, in vocational schools, as pre-employment courses. There was a transformation of these programmes into post-leaving certificate courses, some occupying former vocational school buildings completely, and others operating as a unit on sites where post-primary education was also delivered, particularly in regional and rural towns.

These colleges delivered programmes originally leading to NCVA awards at level 2, which, when the NFQ was formalised, became Level 5 awards. The PLC colleges expanded, adding programmes leading to Level 6 awards, and delivering programmes leading to the awards of other awarding bodies such as CIDESCO; City and Guilds and BTEC awards. Some of these colleges specialised in particular fields, for example, Ballyfermot PLC is renowned for its delivery of animation programmes, a development prompted by the arrival in Dublin 8 of an animation company called Sullivan Bluth in 1985, and a need for trained individuals to work in the industry (RTE Archives, 2025). This programme was funded through the ESF. A number of PLC programmes are also delivered through voluntary, community and comprehensive schools.

The PLC is a significant, powerful element of the FET sector, functioning according to the same operational guidelines and structures as post-primary schools, with similar management structures, including principals, deputy principals and posts of responsibility. PLC Principals are members of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD). There are 32 colleges countrywide, and they cater for the vast majority of full-time FET learners. Programmes are one-or two years in duration, and learners can now complete an initial two years of a tertiary programme in a PLC before progressing to complete a degree programme at a higher education institution.

The development of integrated colleges of further education and training was a major element of the FET Strategy 2020-2024, and since then, some ETBs have been rebranding FET services to a multi-campus model across their regions, moving away from the connection with a single premises and from a fragmented structure, as exemplified by the Limerick Clare ETB website (2026).

1.3.5 Prison Education Service

Prison Education Services are delivered through partnerships between ETBs, the Irish Prison Service, public library services, the Open University and the Arts Council. Teachers and supervising teachers employed through ETBs provide FET programmes, distance learning support, personal development, sports programmes, and pre-release education, as well as supporting learners participating in Open University programmes (Irish Prison Service, 2026).

1.3.6 Skills to Advance

Skills to Advance (STA) is a national upskilling and reskilling initiative targeting employees in vulnerable sectors or undergoing workplace change. ETBs deliver newly validated micro-qualifications through the STA initiative in areas such as digital skills, artificial intelligence and green skills, aligned with EU competency frameworks (SOLAS, 2026).

1.3.7 Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)

Established in 1988, VTOS provides full-time education and training for unemployed adults aged 21 and over who have been in receipt of social welfare payments for at least six months. Programmes typically lead to NFQ level 5 and 6 awards. VTOS participants can register for programmes at PLC colleges through a 'dispersed mode' or in more local community-based dedicated FET centres. As integrated FET colleges become more established, programme titles such as 'VTOS' are gradually being replaced by the single identifier 'college', 'tertiary programme' or 'College of FET'.

1.3.8 Youthreach and Community Training Centres (CTCs)

Launched in the late 1980s, Youthreach provides full-time education, training and work experience for early school leavers aged from 15-20 years of age. Programmes typically lead to awards at NFQ levels 3 and 4, although in some cases, they may access Level 5 programmes, complete the Leaving Certificate or the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (This is FET, SOLAS, 2026).

CTCs operate similarly, but are run by independent, community-based organisations. Both services are supported by ETB-employed Youth Advocates.

1.4 Pedagogy in FET and Emerging Influences on Programme Development

ETB FET services have the opportunity to adopt pedagogical approaches and strategies that respond to diverse learner needs and support multiple purposes, from personal development to vocational preparation. National policies and validation requirements provide a framework that ensures fairness, transparency and alignment with NFQ standards.

Programme development processes allow practitioners to draw on a wide repertoire of teaching strategies, including experiential, transformative, competence-based and behaviourist approaches, to meet the needs of specific target groups or specific purposes. This information is included in 'programme descriptors'. Programme descriptors contain information about how learners can achieve the standard for the award and guide practitioners, assessors and external authenticators, ensuring consistency while allowing flexibility through QA polices such as those for programme review, reasonable accommodations or compassionate considerations. These documents enable decisions about the creation of timetables, course materials, assessment instruments and marketing information.

The provider-owned model enables ETBs to design their own programme development systems, collaborate across ETBs and engage with external partners for programme design. Practitioner engagement and stakeholder representation are essential, as their expertise and inputs inform programme relevance, design quality and the development of valid assessment instruments. Programme evaluation is carried out by a panel appointed by QQI, or by the developing provider where devolved responsibility has been granted. The panel must include learner representatives and external subject matter and pedagogy experts, ensuring that there is robust evaluation of the suitability of the programme submitted for validation (QQI, 2017).

Pedagogical considerations intersect with ethical and societal concerns. Humanistic perspectives, including those articulated by McGrath (2012), emphasise the importance of learner-centred and rights-based approaches. Emerging concepts such as 'Quality 5.0' (Deleryd and Fundin, 2025) highlight the need to integrate sustainability and intergenerational responsibility in curriculum and programme design and delivery, reflecting the concerns of the Gro Harlem Brundtland Report (1987).

Fleming (2004) noted tensions between adult education as a civic endeavour and its increasing alignment with economic objectives. This concern persists for some, and raises questions about the purpose of FET, the motivations of learners and the responsibilities of practitioners. It challenges practitioners to consider their ethical responsibilities and the relevance of addressing broader social issues, such as climate change, digital transformation and social

justice, in all fields, programmes and in programme design. It also challenges those concerned with creating and developing programmes of further education and training to be advocates for learners, and for what they believe is correct, beyond mere 'tick-box' exercises to fulfil bureaucratic requirements.

Duguid emphasises the dual importance of '*knowing that'* and '*knowing how'* and challenges us to think about the importance of balance between the two, drawing on Polanyi's concept of 'tacit learning' and the tension between that concept and the capturing of the concept of explicit knowledge and knowledge transfer by economists invested in the so-called 'information society' or 'knowledge society' (2005, p.111). The greater good may not be served by prioritising concepts associated with the 'knowledge society', 'information society', artificial intelligence (AI) and large language models (LLMs) blindly without considering their effects, implying a serious level of responsibility for policy-makers, pedagogues and programme development experts in their undertakings.

Before AI, and before large language models, for Fleming, the alternative to biases towards industry and economy included learning about the common good, justice, care, and the exercise of power (2004). In 21st century Ireland, there is growing interest in learning skills to counteract the impact of climate change, and this is slowly becoming visible within the FET sector, in the form of 'micro-qualifications', designed for upskilling employees to adapt to industry requirements around sustainability under the STA programme. The community education services have also embraced the challenges of sustainability and climate change in their programmes, taking a perspective rooted in critical pedagogy and empowering local communities to act locally.

Engaged and qualified practitioners have the capability to recognise and apply changes in how we perceive learners, for example, there is more awareness now of different kinds of indigenous knowledge, and of diverse learning needs, that go beyond knowledge defined by industrialised societies. There are known approaches and teaching strategies which can be used to design adaptive and universal environments for learning, for example, Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Co-creation with learners, recognition of diverse knowledge systems and the use of UDL principles can support more responsive and equitable provision (CAST, 2024).

Despite these possibilities, current programme structures, templates, validation processes and perspectives, and their interpretation by practitioners may constrain pedagogical innovation. The challenge for the sector is to activate the enabling elements of quality and qualifications

legislation to support creativity, responsiveness and learner agency, particularly when the need arises to develop programmes designed to address some of the 'wicked' problems we face.

Practitioners and administrators within the FET system should be politicised, and should act as radical advocates for what is fair and just according to Fitzsimons (2024, p.25), embedding their own self-awareness, radical perspectives and policy awareness in their practice. As engaged practitioners, they possess the skills and knowledge to participate in programme design and development, to co-create the prospectus and programme delivery with the learners who participate in those programmes, acting as advocates and acknowledging the agency of learners who are adults, through their inclusion in feedback and evaluation cycles.

Ultimately, the strength of FET lies in its people and their expertise, commitment and passion for learning. While systems evolve, it is essential that QA structures, policies and governance processes support, rather than inhibit, the realisation of individual and societal goals and transformation. This transformation can draw on the existing expertise, knowledge and competence of pedagogues, practitioners, participants and other stakeholders. National policies and guidelines offer possibilities for more engagement in creative and innovative approaches to FET. if there are enough motivation and energy to activate these elements.

1.5 From Multiple Awarding Bodies to a Single National Framework of Qualifications and Authority

The qualifications landscape was also undergoing significant transformation during this period. The National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA) had been established as the validating and awarding body for Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs) and for the National Institutes of Higher Education (NIHE) (Ryan, 1993, p.274). Apprenticeship awards were made through City and Guilds (Ryan, 1993, p.563), although proposals for a technical leaving certificate did not progress (Ryan, 1993, p.273). Over time, technical subjects became integrated into the senior cycle curriculum, as former vocational schools began to deliver a common national curriculum for post-primary education (Croke, 2017). The Leaving Certificate and Intermediate Certificate, established in 1966 following the abolition of the Group Certificate, became widely regarded as the 'gold standards' of Irish compulsory and mainstream education.

In 1991, the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) was established, echoing the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), in the United Kingdom. Ryan (1993) notes that the NCVA did not possess the same breadth of vocational and employment relevance as the NCVQ, being more 'education oriented' than focused on vocational and workplace learning (p.698). Its initial remit was to make awards to participants in VPTP and

adult education programmes (1993, p.697), providing alternatives to the Leaving Certificate and the Junior Certificate.

The NCVA became the awarding authority for programmes delivered across the further education (FE) strands, including PLCs, Youthreach, VTOS, Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Back to Education Initiatives (BTEI). National standards were designated, and overseen by programme boards assigned by NCVA. At its inception, NCVA awards were pitched at Level 1, as foundation level and Level 2 as progression level. When the NFQ was introduced, a new 10 level framework came into being, with 6 levels relevant for vocational and adult education or further education as it came to be known. The Level 2 standard became Level 5 of the new framework, and a major award at this level was intended to have the same value as higher level leaving certificate awards, while a major award at Level 3 was equated with the value of the junior certificate. NCVA worked in partnership with community groups to develop programmes and to offer accreditation in both formal and non-formal settings. This expanded access to learning and accreditation, provided flexible and modular pathways and enabled community organisations to become recognised, quality-assured providers (Fitzsimons & Dorman, 2013, p.49). NCVA was one of a number of awarding bodies at the time.

Centres and colleges were responsible for the quality of admissions, teaching, learning and assessment, while national standards were verified through the NCVA external examination system, which later became known as 'external authentication' (EA). The practice of cross moderation was also used for a period, in an effort to engage practitioners in standards maintenance and awareness. Alongside NCVA awards, other awarding bodies such as City and Guilds BTEC, Bord Iascaigh Mara (BIM); Pitman, European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) and CIDESCO continued to operate, particularly in PLC colleges, training and specialist vocational programmes delivered by the national training organisation An Foras Aiseanna Saothair (FÁS) at the time.

NCVA and the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) offered alternatives to other awards from levels 1-6. The NFQ potentially served marginalised communities, improving access to awards when returning to education, for reskilling and for enabling lifelong learning. The publication of descriptors of standards to be attained, featuring outcomes for learners, provided opportunities to deliver programmes based on alternative teaching strategies, structures and methods, using flexible timeframes for achievement and providing for diverse student bodies. Teaching in Youthreach centres at the time, and later, in prison education, I sought to learn and develop alternative approaches and strategies, for teaching and

assessment, drawing on my own inventiveness, and collaborating with colleagues to design high-quality experiences for learners, while supporting their achievement of these recognised awards. The new systems challenged existing norms, and as teachers, we drew on our innovative and creative skills, to promote success in learning, although sometimes marginalised, as Artemisia, a research participant described:

> *…there was enormous resistance to these awards being made because they didn't come from the formal sector. So, PLC was very acceptable because these were real teachers that were teaching. They were sort of odd bods* [people working in alternative and community programmes]*. And it just wasn't people who maybe didn't have proper formal qualifications, or, you know, who were sort of on the margins (Artemisia: Interview Data).*

Responding to the emerging FET system, processes for assuring quality developed organically, within a distributed model in response to policy and information briefings from the national awarding bodies, including NCVA, FÁS, Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM), Teagasc, and The Council for Education, Recruitment and Training in Tourism (CERT). These awarding bodies were united as the Further Education and Awards Council (FETAC) in 2001 when the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) were established as a result of the Qualifications Act, 1999. The Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA), FÁS and the Further Education Support Service (FESS) provided support in the developing approaches to QA and standards.

The *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999* and the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012* further consolidated the system. The 2012 Act dissolved FETAC, HETAC, NQAI and IUQB, replacing them with a single authority - Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). This restructuring aimed to create a more coherent, standardised and well-understood system of qualifications and quality assurance across all providers, from Levels 1–10. It formalised expectations regarding standards of practice, learner experience and pedagogical delivery.

1.6 European Union Influences

This restructuring reflected EU priorities around coherence, transparency and the creation of unified national systems capable of interfacing effectively with European frameworks. European Union (EU) policy has exerted a significant influence on the development and restructuring of adult education and FET in Ireland. Since the early 2000s, EU strategies have emphasised lifelong learning, mobility, transparency of qualifications and the creation of a competitive, knowledge-based economy. These priorities have shaped national reforms,

particularly in relation to quality assurance, qualifications frameworks and the alignment of vocational education and training (VET) with European standards.

The *Lisbon Strategy* (2000) and the subsequent *Copenhagen Declaration* (2002) placed VET at the centre of European social and economic policy, promoting cooperation among Member States and encouraged the development of tools such as the *European Qualifications Framework* (EQF), Europass and the *European Credit System for VET* (ECVET). These instruments aimed to enhance comparability of qualifications, support mobility and strengthen the responsiveness of VET systems to labour-market needs. Ireland's adoption of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in 2003 aligned national awards with the EQF and contributed to greater transparency and coherence across the education and training system.

The *Osnabruck Recommendation* recorded frustration with the fact that while EQAVET '*stimulated reforms in national QA systems, it did not contribute significantly to the improvement of transparency of QA arrangements'* (CEDEFOP, 2020), which were mostly applied in 'school-based initial VET' (IVET). There is a struggle to achieve more standardised central approaches, showing tensions between local indigenous policy implementation and external control, between autonomy and authority, and these struggles are visible in the Irish system.

EU funding mechanisms, particularly the European Social Fund (ESF), have also shaped the evolution of FET. Many initiatives - including Youthreach, Community Training Centres (CTCs), VTOS and BTEI - were developed or expanded with ESF support. These programmes reflected EU priorities around social inclusion, employability and lifelong learning, and required rigorous reporting, monitoring and evaluation processes. This contributed to the emergence of a more formalised and accountability-driven culture within the sector.

The economic crisis of 2008 intensified the influence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) the European Central Bank (ECB) and consequently, the influence of EU fiscal and labour-market policies on Irish education and training. Recommendations for cost-saving, efficiency and public-sector reform, articulated in national and EU-level reports, accelerated the restructuring of FET. The dissolution of FÁS, the rationalisation of the VECs into 16 ETBs, and the establishment of SOLAS and QQI were all shaped by this broader context of austerity, public-sector reform and alignment with new European governance norms.

More recent EU strategies, such as the *European Skills Agenda* (2020), the *Council Recommendation on VET* (2020) and the *European Pillar of Social Rights* (2021), which specifies that everyone has a right to access quality education and training throughout their lives -

continue to influence Irish FET policy. These strategies emphasise digital transformation, green skills, inclusion, flexible learning pathways and the development of micro-credentials. Ireland's Skills to Advance initiative, the expansion of apprenticeships and the development of micro-qualifications in areas such as digital and green skills reflect this alignment.

EU policy has played a central role in shaping the restructuring of adult education and FET in Ireland. It has contributed to the development of a more coherent qualifications system, strengthened quality assurance processes, and supported the creation of pathways that promote mobility, inclusion and lifelong learning. Concurrently, the influence of EU labour-market priorities has reinforced the tension between economic and social goals within the sector - a theme that continues to shape debates about the purpose and identity of FET in the 21st century.

1.7 The Restructuring of Adult Education, Further Education and Training

1.7.1 The Further Education and Training Act, 2013

The *Further Education and Training Act, 2013* represented a major restructuring of the Irish FET landscape and marked a decisive shift towards a more coherent, nationally coordinated system. The Act established SOLAS as the statutory authority responsible for funding, planning and coordinating FET provision, replacing the former national training agency, FÁS. It also provided the basis for The *Education and Training Boards Act, 2013*, which followed rapidly. These Acts were intended to streamline governance, reduce duplication and enhance the strategic capacity of the sector.

The Act formalised the relationship between SOLAS and the ETBs, assigning SOLAS with responsibility for developing national FET strategy, allocating funding, and monitoring performance, while ETBs were designated as the primary providers of FET at regional level. This restructuring aligned with broader public-sector reform objectives following the 2008 financial crisis, including increased accountability, transparency and efficiency in the use of public funds.

A central aim of the Act was to create a more integrated and responsive FET system capable of meeting national skills needs, supporting labour-market activation and promoting lifelong learning. It required SOLAS to prepare a five-year strategy for FET, developed in consultation with ETBs, employers, learners and other stakeholders. The first such strategy, published in 2014, set out priorities for quality, progression pathways, labour-market responsiveness and organisational reform. The 2014 strategy refers to QQI as the authority responsible for monitoring quality, and SOLAS has made a commitment to establishing systems for monitoring

quality in education and training (SOLAS, 2014). A second strategy, Future FET, Transforming Learning was published in 2020, and consultation for the 2025 strategy is ongoing at the time of writing.

The Act also strengthened the governance and oversight of FET provision. ETBs were required to prepare annual service plans and report on performance against agreed targets, while SOLAS was mandated to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of FET programmes. This introduced a more formalised performance-management culture into the sector, reflecting both national and EU expectations for evidence-based planning and accountability.

The Act positioned FET within a broader tertiary education landscape. By emphasising pathways, progression and alignment with national skills strategies, it laid the groundwork for later developments such as the expansion of apprenticeship and traineeship models and the establishment of the National Tertiary Office (NTO) in 2021. It also reinforced the need for coherence and linkage between FET and higher education, anticipating the more integrated tertiary system that is now emerging.

Overall, the *Further Education and Training Act, 2013* was a foundational moment in the modernisation of the sector. It consolidated provision, clarified roles and responsibilities, and established the structures through which FET could evolve into a more strategic, learner-centred and nationally coordinated system. Its influence continues to shape policy, governance and practice across the ETB sector today.

In the SOLAS Strategy, *Future FET: Transforming Learning*, quality assurance is named as a core attribute forming a '*foundation for future FET'* and as a priority to support apprenticeship delivery (2020a, pp.35, 42). The need to support and resource staffing and provide professional development within a structure for QA in FET is highlighted (2020, p.56). The FET strategy prioritises support for enhancing existing quality assurance practices and systems across ETBs (2020, p.56). It is worth noting that a separate QA architecture was embedded in the apprenticeship system which was the subject of coordinated strategic reform, including the establishment of a National Apprenticeship Office by SOLAS and the Higher Education Authority on behalf of the government, recognising that apprenticeship programmes straddle levels 6 - 10 of the NFQ. Existing QA practices in other parts of the system appear to have been deemed acceptable at the time, and their development remained within the providers' remit, instead of becoming more unified.

1.7.2 The Education and Training Boards Act, 2013

The *Education and Training Boards Act 2013* provided the legislative foundation for the establishment of the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs), on July 1st, 2013, replacing the 33 Vocational Education Committees (VECs) that had existed since 1930. This restructuring was one of the most significant reforms in the history of Irish education and training, reflecting national priorities around efficiency, accountability and modernisation in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.

The Act consolidated responsibility for further education, training and a range of youth and community services within the ETBs, creating larger, regionally based statutory authorities with enhanced governance structures. Each ETB was established as a corporate body with responsibility for managing and coordinating education and training services across its region, including schools, FET centres, Youthreach, adult education services, training centres (following the dissolution of FÁS) and a range of community-based initiatives. Fifteen training centres (TCs) were transferred to eleven ETBs in January 2014. Other training provision such as Local Training Initiatives (LTIs); Specific Skills Training (SST) and Skills to Advance (STA) were transferred to the ETB for their region. ETBs without training centres in their region developed their own approaches to delivery and management of training services. In total, 800 FÁS staff were redistributed to ETBs in a transfer arrangement, to support this, paving the way to a more integrated further education and training system (Gov.ie,2014). These included Training Centre Managers, Training Standards Officers (TSOs), Assistant TSOs, Instructors and Principal Officers, among other grades transferred.

A key purpose of the Act was to strengthen governance and oversight. ETBs were required to operate under formal codes of practice, maintain strategic plans, and ensure that public funds were used effectively and transparently. The Act also clarified the roles of Chief Executives, Boards, and Directors of Further Education and Training (DFETs), establishing clear lines of accountability and decision-making. ETB senior management teams (SMTs) include Directors of FET (DFETs), Schools Directors and Directors of Organisational Support and Development (OSD), reporting to the Chief Executive (CE) and reflecting the three main administrative departments in any ETB. Middle management structures in FET services are gradually being reengineered through localised decision-making, to develop QA teams, internal academic governance units and improved integration of services, for example, with dedicated roles for learner support and well-being and professional development. A report of an independent expert panel into staffing in FET was published in March 2026, and may have an influence on future development (DFHERIS, 2026).

The Act positioned ETBs as central actors in the delivery of FET, working in partnership with SOLAS, which had been established under the *Further Education and Training Act 2013*. ETBs were required to prepare annual service plans aligned with national FET priorities and to report on performance against agreed targets. This introduced a more formalised performance-management culture, reflecting broader public-sector reforms and EU expectations for evidence-based planning and accountability.

Importantly, the Act also recognised the need for collaboration across ETBs and with external stakeholders, including employers, community organisations, higher education institutions and national agencies. This emphasis on partnership laid the groundwork for developments such as the National Tertiary Office (NTO), shared services initiatives and collaborative programme development across ETBs.

The Education and Training Boards Act 2013 therefore played a pivotal role in reshaping the governance and delivery of FET in Ireland. It created a more coherent and strategically aligned system, strengthened accountability, and provided the structural foundation for the modern FET landscape. Its influence continues to be felt in the organisational culture, governance practices and collaborative structures that underpin the ETB sector today. Combined with Quality and Qualifications legislation, this period introduced considerable reporting, performance and monitoring arrangements at a policy level.

1.8 Quality Assurance and Qualifications

Quality assurance (QA) and qualifications policy have played a central role in shaping the development, governance and identity of the Further Education and Training (FET) sector. Over the past three decades, Ireland has moved from a fragmented landscape of multiple awarding bodies to a unified national system grounded in shared standards, transparent processes and a coherent national framework of qualifications. This evolution has been driven by legislative reform, European policy influences and the increasing professionalisation of education and training provision.

The NFQ introduced a common language of learning outcomes, which has become the foundation for programme design, assessment and quality assurance across FET. This shift to outcomes-based education aligned Ireland with European developments such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), supporting greater transparency for learners, employers and international partners.

The *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999* laid the groundwork for a national approach to quality assurance by establishing bodies responsible for setting standards, validating programmes and overseeing provider quality systems. However, the system was complex, with separate agencies - the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), maintaining distinctions between delivery from Levels 1-5 and Levels 7-10 and with a constantly contested overlap at Level 6, because both the FET and the HE sectors delivered programmes leading to awards at Level 6. When QQI was established by the 2012 Act, they were mandated to oversee quality assurance across all non-school education and training, validate programmes, set standards, conduct institutional reviews and maintain the NFQ.

The 2012 Act formalised the principle of 'provider-owned' quality assurance, placing responsibility for the design, implementation and continuous improvement of QA systems with providers. This represented a significant cultural shift for the FET sector, requiring ETBs and other providers to develop comprehensive QA policies, governance structures and review processes. QQI's role became one of external oversight, guidance and enhancement rather than direct control.

Subsequent legislation, including the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019*, further strengthened QQI's powers in areas such as protection for learners, validation, and the regulation of English language education. These developments reflect a broader national and European emphasis on accountability, transparency and the assurance of high-quality learning experiences.

Within the ETB sector, the implementation of QA has been shaped by the consolidation of FET provision, the integration of former FÁS training centres, and the emergence of new collaborative structures such as the ETBI QA Network. The first cycle of external reviews of quality in ETBs, conducted by QQI in 2022, highlighted both the progress made and the challenges that remain in embedding consistent, effective QA practices across a diverse and evolving system. The reviews also underscored the importance of professional expertise, organisational culture and collaborative networks in sustaining quality.

Overall, the development of quality assurance and qualifications policy has been central to the transformation of FET. It has provided the structures, standards and governance mechanisms necessary for a coherent national system, while also shaping the professional identities and practices of those who work within it. The following subsections examine the key legislative milestones, policy frameworks and operational processes that underpin QA in FET today.

1.8.1 The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 1999

The *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999* marked the first major attempt to create a coherent national system for qualifications and quality assurance across further and higher education in Ireland. Prior to this Act, the landscape was characterised by multiple awarding bodies, inconsistent standards and limited transparency for learners, employers and international partners. The 1999 Act sought to address these issues by establishing three key bodies: the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC).

The Act laid the groundwork for the development of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), which was formally launched in 2003. The NFQ provided a unified structure for all awards from Levels 1 - 10, enabling comparability, transparency and progression across the education and training system. As outlined in a previous section the NFQ introduced the language of learning outcomes outcomes-based and became the foundation for programme design, assessment and quality assurance across FET.

The Act introduced a national approach to the development of awards, the setting of standards and the validation of programmes. It required providers to develop quality assurance procedures and submit them for approval, marking a shift towards formalised QA processes in the FET sector. For the first time, adult education, training centres, community organisations and PLC colleges were required to operate within a national framework of standards and oversight. The introduction of requirements for governance of quality was contentious at that time, with the post-congress issue of the *Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) News* in May 2006, recording a motion from the Dun Laoghaire and Dublin City Post-primary branches:

> *Congress rejects the manner in which FETAC is attempting to change our working conditions, (e.g. QA system). This is the role of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and should be negotiated as part of the implementation of the McIver Report. Congress agrees to direct all members not to implement such changes to our working conditions as sought by FETAC.*

The process continued, and VECs signed the QA agreements with FETAC. There was compromise, however, within FE, acknowledging the former one-to-one centre-based relationship with the NCVA which was maintained, so that each individual PLC or FE centre retained a separate QA agreement with FETAC, as well as the whole-organisation agreement.

Policies for teaching, training, delivery and assessment were interpreted locally, sometimes at centre or college level (Leney et al. 2007). Responsibility for attendance at briefings and

seminars was often delegated from central level to centre- and college practitioners and this may have resulted in gaps in strategic approaches to policy implementation and knowledge development. FESS was highly influential in QA policy interpretation and information dissemination, often acting as a first contact point for ETB learning practitioners, despite their position as an external organisation.

In the long term, individual, centre-based approaches to QA have persisted, and these were criticised in the 2023 QQI sectoral report on quality as extending adherence to legacy arrangements and procedures and operation of different QA approaches in centres within ETBs (2023, p.14), reflecting the continuing, fragmented environment.

1.8.2 The Common Awards System (CAS)

The Common Awards System (CAS), introduced by FETAC in the early 2000s was a significant development in the standardisation of FET provision. When the CAS was established, duplicate awards and associated programme descriptors originally published by NCVA and the other awarding bodies were deactivated, and replaced with certificate and award specifications featuring standards, clearer learning outcomes (QQI, 2021) and assessment requirements. Addressing duplication and replacing a diverse range of legacy awards, it enabled greater consistency in programme design, assessment and certification.

Programmes leading to these indigenous awards in the CAS were to be delivered by State-funded providers as a priority over other awards not associated at the time with the NFQ, but traditionally favoured within the education and training sector, for example, City and Guilds (ESRI, 2014 p.10). In the legislation formalising the NFQ, a programme leading to an external award could only be delivered if there was no suitable award available within the CAS (QQI, 2018). This was addressed in updated 2019 legislation to allow greater flexibility and the establishment of an *Irish Register of Qualifications* (QQI, 2025).

CAS was built on the principles of learning outcomes, modularity and flexibility. Each award specification included detailed learning outcomes, and assessment requirements, providing clear guidance for programme developers and practitioners, who expand on these details in the preparation of programme descriptors that include required and indicative content about how the programme should be delivered. This structure supported transparency for learners and employers, facilitated recognition of prior learning (RPL) and enabled providers to design programmes that were responsive to local needs while maintaining national standards.

The introduction of CAS strengthened quality assurance processes. Providers were required to demonstrate alignment with award specifications and internal QA procedures during

programme development and validation and to implement assessment procedures that ensured fairness, consistency and reliability. Procedures for ensuring fair and consistent assessment, including Internal Verification (IV), External Authentication (EA) and Results Approval were introduced to verify the integrity of assessment decisions, with a view to the upkeep of standards.

CAS played a central role in professionalising FET provision and remains influential today, even as new award types -such as Professional Award-Type Descriptors (PATDs) and micro-qualifications - are developed. Many validated programmes, developed around 2012, leading to CAS awards continue to be delivered across ETBs, and the system has shaped the pedagogical and assessment practices that underpin much of the sector's work, through the involvement of practitioners in a range of programme development and validation projects, and through the use of programme descriptors as the key guiding documents for FET programmes, defining outcomes, purposes, assessment instruments to be used, credit structures, and offering indicative content to inform practitioners of how the programme might be delivered.

1.8.3 The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012

The *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012* represented a major restructuring of the national qualifications and QA system. creating a single integrated authority: Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). This consolidation aimed to create a more coherent, efficient and transparent system capable of overseeing all education and training in Ireland with the exception of that covered by the 1998 *Education Act*.

The 2012 Act strengthened QQI's statutory powers in areas such as programme validation, institutional review, protection for learners and the maintenance of the NFQ. It also formalised the principle of "provider-owned" quality assurance, placing responsibility for the design, implementation and continuous improvement of QA systems with providers themselves. QQI's role shifted from direct control to external oversight, enhancement and regulation.

This Act envisaged and reiterated the responsibilities of providers for the quality of their programmes and services. 'Provider' refers to those organisations delivering education and training programmes. A communication in 2014 from QQI, discovered in the archive of QA Network documents, held in the ETBI online QA Network hub, which I was allowed to access for the purpose of this research, firmly established the concept of a 'one-to-one relationship between QQI and each ETB, and stating:

> *'Named ETB' accepts the role of provider in respect of corporate governance and responsibility for the quality assurance agreements listed overleaf made between the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the former VEC providers now incorporated into the (named ETB)' (*ETBI QA Network Document Archive).
>
> In signing this, CEs agreed to operate QA procedures in respect of QQI awards*, 'pending the establishment of a unitary quality assurance system for the ETB, to be developed following publication of appropriate guidelines by QQI'.* Furthermore, the CEs agreed that the ETB *'will either maintain or replace the programme governance structures previously implemented under its programme approval agreement'…*and each ETB *'agreed to independently submit its programmes to QQI for validation, identifying for each only those certification centres with the capacity and resources appropriate to that programme' (*ETBI QA Network Document Archive).

This communication required a Chief Executive's signature agreeing to adoption of this approach. Immediately, the ETBs became engaged in a comprehensive administrative process to ensure that all validated programmes were linked to all centres so that there would be no likely future qualification recognition issues if programmes were delivered in a centre not registered. In 2014 Temporary Quality Assurance Systems (TQAS) were put in place to ensure continuity when the former VECs and FÁS training services were combined.

In the FET sector, the Act had profound implications. ETBs and other providers were required to develop comprehensive QA policies and procedures, informed by Core Statutory QA Guidelines, covering areas such as programme development, assessment, learner supports, governance and self-evaluation (2017a). Providers were also required to undergo cyclical external reviews conducted by QQI, with the first cycle for ETBs taking place in 2022.

The increased visibility of award structures, through the NFQ and improved awareness of quality assurance and standards as a result of the 2012 and 2013 Acts paved the way for greater alignment between FET and Higher Education. Possibilities for pathways, progression routes and a more integrated tertiary system were emerging. The 2012 Act shaped the development of governance, culture and professional practices within the FET sector, and underpins the work of ETB programme developers, practitioners and QA professionals.

1.8.4 The Qualifications and Quality (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act, 2019

The 2019 amendments to the 2012 Act further strengthened QQI's regulatory powers, particularly in relation to English language education and the validation of new award types. It addressed some gaps in the NFQ and established an Irish Register of Qualifications (Irish Statute Book, 2019), extending QQI's remit to include regulation of access for listed awarding bodies to the NFQ and strengthening its role in monitoring academic integrity. In its *Statement of Strategy (2022-2024)*, QQI makes a commitment to add value to FET and HE, inform policy

formation and ensure that high quality, highly valued education and training are available in Ireland. This is closely aligned with the DFHERIS 2022 strategy, which is

> *to develop Ireland's further and higher education and research systems to support people in reaching their full potential shaping national innovation, talent, international leadership, inclusion and engagement* (p6).

QQI acts as a steward for the qualifications system, informing FET and HE system modernisation, integration and cohesion (QQI Statement of Strategy, 2022 - 2024), and to meet the sustainable development goal of quality education (*2030 Sustainable Development Agenda in 2022*, p.7).

QQI has made a commitment to provide opportunities for 'mature providers' to apply for delegated authority to make awards. The ETBs are in an excellent position to achieve this, but must first demonstrate robust governance systems, QA, curriculum development and self-evaluation procedures to support the reputation and standards of awards made (2022, p.14). It is important here to distinguish between 'delegated authority' and 'devolved responsibility' to avoid any confusion later. 'Delegated authority' refers to the authority to make awards, as provided, for example, to HEIs. Devolved responsibility refers to the provision for QQI to devolve responsibility to providers that are deemed competent, to arrange independent evaluation reports for new programmes being submitted to QQI for validation (2017, p.16).

In Ireland, further education was delivered autonomously with a pragmatic approach to further education development, and with power and decision-making resting at centre level rather than regional level although increasing commitment to partnership with external stakeholders was developing (Leney et al. 2007, pp.6 - 8), to inform programme design. A gap was identified by Leney et al., however, in the reported perception that each centre in Ireland had to develop its own policies in response to the new QA requirements, reflecting the one-to-one relationship with the regulators. Based on findings from their research in PLC colleges Leney et al. reach the conclusion that a focus on localised QA procedure development resulted in a neglect of learning and pedagogy (2007, p. 83). Leney et al. comment on the possibilities of *'appropriate interplay between local and national levels'* to allow opportunities for *'creative local innovation'* acting as a *'key lever'* for successful reform, while balancing the tension between external regulation and trust (2007 p21) This research will focus on the interplay across the levels (2007 p.8) and the potential for better understanding through boundary spanning. Leney et al. identify leadership, well-trained vocational professionals and functioning partnerships as being critical for successful QA implementation at practice level (2007, p.6).

Allais quotes Buchanan, who states that education professionals need to be part of a system for the 'acquisition and application of knowledge' which enables the population as confident learners because the institutions within that system are characterised by 'conceptual coherence, and are part of societal structures (2020, p.14, in Allais, 2025, p.83). Echoing the Murphy Commission vision of 1973, for adult education in Ireland, Buchanan recommends a stable environment where time, resources, structures and good conditions of employment can support the work of educators and pedagogues, suggesting that rather than treating quality as an outlier, requirements to implement policies can provide support in the form of stability.

1.9 Quality and Qualifications Policies and Guidelines for Providers

Quality assurance (QA) in the Further Education and Training (FET) sector is underpinned by a comprehensive suite of policies, and statutory guidelines developed by QQI and implemented by providers. These policies articulate the expectations for programme development, assessment, governance, learner support and continuous improvement. They also reflect the broader shift towards a provider-owned model of QA, in which ETBs and other providers hold primary responsibility for designing, implementing and reviewing their own quality systems.

QQI's policies and guidelines are designed to ensure that learners experience high-quality, fair and transparent education and training, and that awards made within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) are credible, consistent and valued. For ETBs, the implementation of these policies has required significant organisational development, including the establishment of QA units, governance structures, programme development processes and mechanisms for monitoring and review, representing considerable change in recent years, and contributing to the reshaping of the FET landscape.

The following subsections outline the key components of the QA policy environment and their implications for FET providers.

1.9.1 Guidelines for Providers

QQI's *Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines* (2017a) set out the minimum requirements for all providers of education and training. These guidelines cover areas such as governance, programme design and approval, assessment, learner supports, information management, staff development and self-evaluation. They are supplemented by *Sector-Specific Guidelines for ETBs* (2017b), which recognise the unique organisational structures, scale and diversity of ETB provision.

The guidelines emphasise the provider-owned model of QA, requiring ETBs to develop systems that are appropriate to their context while meeting national standards. This includes

establishing governance structures such as QA committees and units, programme boards and results approval panels; developing policies for assessment, reasonable accommodation and learner engagement; and implementing processes for programme validation, monitoring and review.

The guidelines also highlight the importance of continuous improvement, requiring providers to engage in regular self-evaluation, gather learner and stakeholder feedback, and use evidence to inform enhancement activities. This approach aligns with international best practice and supports the development of a culture of quality across the FET sector.

1.9.2 Quality Reviews

Quality reviews are a central component of QQI's oversight of providers. Under the 2012 Act, QQI conducts cyclical external reviews of ETBs to evaluate the effectiveness of their QA systems. The first cycle of ETB reviews, completed in 2022, provided a sector-wide analysis of strengths, challenges and areas for improvement.

Quality reviews assess governance structures, programme development processes, assessment practices, learner supports, staff development and the provider's capacity for self-evaluation. They also examine how well QA systems support the provider's mission, strategic priorities and responsiveness to learner and labour-market needs (QQI, 2020).

The review process includes self-evaluation by the provider, site visits by an external panel, comprehensive stakeholder engagements based on the self-evaluation report, and the publication of a review report. ETBs are required to develop follow-up quality action plans to address recommendations, contributing to a cycle of continuous improvement. The reviews have played a significant role in shaping QA practice across the sector and in strengthening collaboration among ETBs through shared learning and sectoral initiatives. A national review panel published an overview of quality in the ETB sector in 2023, and QQI conduct annual reviews of quality action plans for each ETB.

The review was welcomed as a positive event, as a challenge, cited as a lengthy process. As a new process, organising the reviews within each ETB required persistence and tenacity because it was the first time a comprehensive insight into quality was sought. It was a source of personal learning by research participants:

> *The External Review of Quality Assurance presented as a new and significant challenge within the sector (Frank: Survey Data).*

> *And then we had our inaugural QA Review…. so that was extremely helpful to have the report from that, because that really is in some ways the blueprint of what we need to do (Siúin: Interview Data).*
>
> *You know, the review has been very positive for quality assurance (Maurice: Interview Data).*
>
> *The inaugural review process was a core part of what we used, I suppose, and that was quite a lengthy process. And quite a self-reflective process as well. So we had to look at how we're operating as an organization…there were different approaches to quality assurance in each of the areas…they could be quite different in (different parts of the region). So, we identified that we needed that consistency… a driving factor, too, was around the resourcing of quality assurance. (Robert: Interview Data).*
>
> *…both the QA Net and the Inaugural Review in a short timeframe allowed my understanding to significantly mature (Kim, Survey Data).*

The review highlighted gaps within the ETB systems, and provided a specific impetus to think about those systems coherently across functions of the ETB for the first time. While some perceived it as an opportunity to identify resources required, Maurice described it as 'an act of gross self-harm' for the sector (Interview Data), implying that it represented a lost opportunity for sectoral development, and that there may have been a need for improved debriefing and learning following the experience. The review process brought quality to the forefront, and reiterated the concept of provider responsibility and progressing the establishment of governance units and QA teams.

Robert described the review's impacts and effects within an ETB:

> *I suppose the QQI inaugural review process…was quite a lengthy…self-reflective process … we were bringing two different VECs together as one ETB, and even by 2020, while lots of areas had developed significantly, a learner could go from a centre in (named location)- to a centre in* (a town in the east of the region)… *and actually have totally different experiences of quality assurance at that time (Robert, Interview Data).*

A positive outcome is that ETBs now publish details of documented arrangements for QA, of their QA Teams and governance units on their websites (Appendix B). Procedures and frameworks are developed locally in consultation with practitioners, co-constructing knowledge and ownership of systems, and the development of QA units has improved cross-organisation ownership of the concept of quality in FET.

Describing the challenge of leading QA in her ETB, one participant, Audrey described numerous policies and policy consultations, and her role in ensuring they are applied locally:

> *…all of these policy documents came…within a short time… I think what happens us then is that we read…we're a diligent sector…so I read all those policies, but I have to keep saying to my colleagues, if I tell you at the moment that the guidelines say this, you've to listen to me, but you also have to realize that I'm telling you that the interim guidelines are saying this, and the guidelines are going to say…So I'm always very aware that…I am remembering what was in the consultation that I thought would change, or am I actually remembering what's in the real document? (Interview Data).*

The imprimatur and urgency around policies tends to be driven by their publication by QQI, the external regulatory agency, or by other external events, for example, COVID 19, the approach to programme adaptation; increasing demands to ensure academic integrity provoked by the march of artificial intelligence (AI), and the role of the *2021-2022 Review of Quality in the ETBs* in 'providing a blueprint' (Siúin, Interview Data). And yet, it appears that this external force is not reflected in internal strategic drive, as illustrated by reference to 'unspoken misunderstandings' and 'truths that were not truths' by research participants. A challenge arises around how implementation is driven, and whether it is appropriate to treat strategic developments as crisis-driven, or better to create systems proactively in calmer environments where there is time for consideration, consultation and co-construction of knowledge in anticipation of challenges arising. As Iverson and McPhee pointed out when reporting on their research with emergency services, enabling the development of competence through communities of practice in less stressful times can enhance responses when stresses are high (2008).

1.9.3 Programme Development and Validation

Programme development and validation are key mechanisms through which providers ensure the quality, relevance and coherence of their educational offerings. Under the provider-owned model, ETBs are responsible for designing programmes that align with NFQ standards, meet learner needs and reflect national and regional priorities.

Experience and knowledge of programme development within the sector has grown through participation in programme approval agreements (PAAs), which created reciprocal processes within the sector, work as Process Coordinators for programme development, experience of centralised development within the former FÁS structures, and large-scale collaborative programme development projects, honing the expertise of QA practitioners. Current practices are informed by previous experiences, and it is important to pay attention to how those practices evolve, and what aspects of those practices draw the attention. Is it the administrative practices or the innovative and creative practices associated with programme development and validation that draw the highest levels of attention, effort and resourcing?

Programme development involves identifying learning outcomes, designing assessment strategies, selecting appropriate pedagogical approaches and ensuring alignment with award standards such as CAS specifications or Professional Award-Type Descriptors (PATDs). Developers must also consider learner supports, access and progression pathways, and the principles of universal design for learning (UDL) and other strategies for creating inclusive programmes of education and training.

Validation is the process through which QQI confirms that a programme meets national standards and is fit for purpose. Providers must demonstrate that the programme is coherent, appropriately resourced and supported by robust QA procedures. Validation panels review programme documentation, meet with developers and stakeholders, and make recommendations for approval or revision.

Programme development and validation processes have become increasingly collaborative across ETBs, with shared programme development initiatives emerging in areas such as Early Learning and Care (ELC), digital skills and green skills. This collective approach is emerging as the preferred option within the ETB sector.

Through the 'provider-owned' model, there are opportunities for individual providers to develop their own systems for programme development, to share programmes developed with other ETBS, to participate in collaborative projects with other ETBs, and to collaborate with external partners. These opportunities are embedded in existing policies. The challenge for providers is to develop structures to enable engagement in programme development. Participation by practitioners is vital, as it is their knowledge and experience that can inform good design and relevance, and their involvement promotes their ownership of the quality of the programme, and contributes to the validity and reliability of assessment instruments. Practitioner involvement also acts as a professional development mechanism, increasing competence and expertise.

The validation process ensures that programme learning outcomes (LOs) meet the minimum standards with reference to NFQ levels (CEDEFOP, 2018), and in the FE sector. Programme approval agreements (PAAs) between clustered VECs were an early attempt at collaborative and reciprocal approaches to programme development and validation. This set the scene for collaborative programme development, with practitioners from the sector jointly developing new programmes or agreeing to share programmes developed by consortia or single ETBs. In response to national policy changes in childcare delivery for example, an Early Learning and Care (ELC) programme (Levels 5 & 6), was developed by a consortium of ETBs applying QQI's

professional award-type descriptors (PATDs) (QQI, 2014) for the first time. It was validated in 2020. A system of communities of practice for learning practitioners was put in place across the ETBs to support, track and improve initial delivery of the programme, contribute to practitioners' adoption of the programme and adjustment or update of teaching and assessment practices, if necessary, in the pilot phase. The QA Network serves as a hub for large-scale curriculum projects like this, and FESS and QQI have provided information and advice in the undertaking. Generally, the ETBs have favoured the provision in the legislation for ETB-to-ETB collaboration for programme development, and the ELC programme illustrates how practices around programme development are evolving.

There are tensions and challenges in the programme development sphere. In a 2004 critique, Keyes raised the problem of formulaic curricula which may result in a subject-centred curriculum rather than a learner-centred curriculum, and the growth of a 'passive consumer-led approach' (in Fitzsimons and Dorman, 2013, p.50). Fitzsimons and Dorman criticise the learning outcomes approach as a management device for 'developing performance indicators, and a marketing tool in the commodification of education' becoming an administrative burden for programme developers (2013, p.50).

Requirements for compliance and documentation can affect the possibilities for innovation, due to strong inclinations to succeed in the validation process. To date, opportunities to embed good practice in programme and curriculum development and to share those good practices have been limited, with the focus largely on ambitious large-scale projects. The ELC programme provided an opportunity for the first time to quantify the process through the appointment of a team of subject matter experts and a coordinator to develop the programme, but Maurice, one of the key agents interviewed was perplexed by the secondment of eight teachers to this team for a year. Experience in the sector has led to the anecdotal belief that the process of programme development is demanding, requiring significant time, expertise and coordination, and while programme development is an intensely technical undertaking, there is an argument to be made for supporting localised development of skills in programme development and quality assurance within each ETB, and sharing those skills and experiences throughout the sector. There are benefits on the other hand, to promoting innovation and encouraging sharing of experiences collectively to build expertise throughout the FET system, however, including development of competence, ownership of programme content and recognition of professional value, expertise and competence, but this may cause problems with competence and inappropriate weighting in favour of more powerful organisations and institutions in the future.

The ELC programme was based on a new template published by QQI, for Programme Award-Type Descriptors, shifting away from the familiar CAS award structures. Providers are gradually shifting mindsets towards the greater flexibility and responsibilities required to embrace newer templates. These more flexible templates enable a move away from the older interpretation of modules as defined subjects in the one-to-one model, potentially giving greater flexibility and creativity to programme designers. Familiarity with elements such as Minimum Intended Programme Learning Outcomes (MIPLOs) and Minimum Intended Module Learning Outcomes (MIMLOs) is growing, but there is a challenge in relation to how time and resources are allocated to practitioners to do the work of writing Learning Outcomes, modules and assessment criteria. There is also a need to ensure that programmes are devised based on theories of learning, pedagogy, knowledge- and personal development and to avoid misuse of theories such as Bloom's taxonomy (Fitzsimons & Dorman, 2013, p.51), the concepts of transversal skills and 'learning styles' inventories for example.

There is a need to develop more capacity for internal autonomous action within the sector. Capacity can be interpreted as time, space, equipment, ability, knowledge and expertise, separately or combined, and perceptions about resource allocation are inextricably linked to the concept. While there have been large-scale developments like the ELC programme, QQI data shows limited evidence of ETB providers developing innovative new programmes that meet the QQI mantra of 'one destination, many routes' (QQI presentation, October, 2024). QQI data records that since 2012 the bulk of programme validations were for shared programmes developed in older programme development processes, rather than for new programmes.

Based on independent evaluation reports, the data specifically for QQI awards shows periods of high and low activity, illustrated in Figure 1.

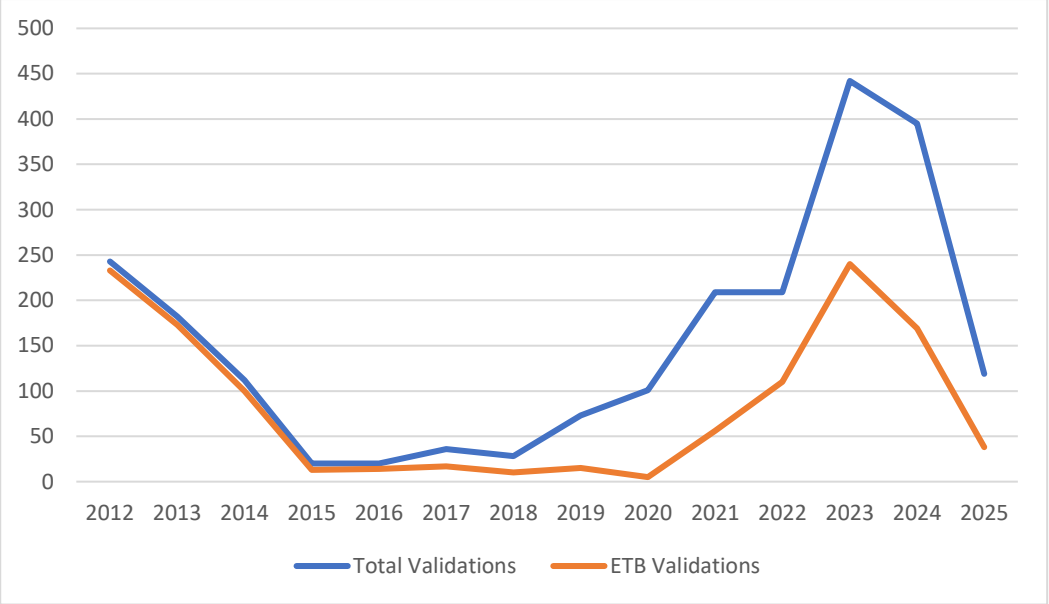


Figure 1: Programme Validation Activity

High levels of validation from 2012 to 2015 reflect the validation of the original suite of programmes leading to CAS awards. From 2015 to 2020, ETB activity was extremely low, then began to rise again from 2020 onwards. In 2023, there were twenty-three validated programmes leading to micro-qualifications (CEDEFOP, 2024), delivered to learners on Skills to Advance Programmes (STA), who numbered 23,591 out of a total of 375,353 FET learners in 2023 (SOLAS Annual Report and Accounts, 2023, pp23 & 54).

Much of this data reflects the differential validation of programmes for each ETB, relevant to administrative differences between the organisations rather than unique or innovative programme content. The programme content is evaluated once, showing that there tends to be more limited activity in innovative programme and curriculum design. The 'differential' validation aspect referred to details about each ETB's governance and system for management of quality, which, incidentally, is also covered and interrogated in engagement, reengagement and cyclical review processes. Programme content remains the same until such a time as the programme is reviewed - usually after five years of delivery, at which time again, either a localised or consortium-based approach to review can be adopted. In 2024, thirteen ETBs applied for differential validation of Level 1 and Level 2 special purpose programmes for English as a Second Language (ESOL). There is nothing wrong with sharing programmes and curriculums. It can be a very efficient approach, but it may deny practitioners opportunities to engage in programme development and associated professional development activities, if they are in an ETB that decides to apply for sharing of programmes rather than developing

programmes. The outcome of the QQI review of quality in the ETBs recommended a sectoral approach to update existing programmes before considering new programme development.

Programme development, review and validation have been a consistent challenge for the sector, but a new process for programme review and revalidation was agreed with QQI in 2022 as a result of Network efforts. This was based on the feedback from the expert panels who engaged in the Inaugural Review of Quality in ETBs, which noted that noted that within the current staffing and operational arrangements of ETBs, programme development by individual ETBs would not be manageable, and that it would be unreasonable to expect all ETBs to engage in course development (QQI, 2023, p.18). The panel report recommended that all existing programmes be brought up to date, and indicated that ETBs 'cannot be regarded as implementing fully their QA responsibilities' while there are programmes that need to be changed substantially (2023, p.18). One outcome of the review was that the review team reported that there was continued uncertainty about whether QQI or providers were responsible for the update of programmes, reflecting the challenge of disseminating accurate information about QA in a dispersed and fragmented environment.

Despite the challenges, programme development remains a key site of engagement for FET practitioners, and a major element of the work of the QA Network as a hub. It can provide opportunities for collaboration, reflection and integration of practice-based knowledge into curriculum design, given the correct conditions.

1.9.4 Review and Revalidation of Programmes

The QA Network has been instrumental in developing knowledge of programme development policy, as was CPD provided as a Level 9 Special Purpose Award for practitioners by FESS and Maynooth University. Network working groups developed templates for programme descriptors, programme self-evaluation and evaluation, and participated in consultation on the QQI Policies and Criteria for Programme Validation.

Earlier, the introduction of the CAS was a key moment in programme development for the sector. The experience informed approaches to programme development across the sector. At the time, there was competitive interest from PLCs due to the high incidence of programme delivery at levels 5 and 6, as illustrated by one research participant:

> *…and people were putting their hands up volunteering for the module writing.… It became like everybody wanted everything, you know.…there was this competitive*

> *nature to it…where the big colleges, the further education* (colleges)*, were putting their hands up. (Odette, Interview Data).*

QQI requires providers to conduct periodic reviews of their programmes, drawing on evidence such as learner feedback, assessment data, labour-market information and stakeholder consultation, typically every five years, unless a specific issue emerges with a programme.

Reviews may lead to minor modifications, major revisions or the development of entirely new programmes. Revalidation is required when significant changes are made or when a programme reaches the end of its validation period. This process ensures that programmes continue to meet national standards and align with evolving policy priorities, technological developments and learner needs.

ETBs have increasingly adopted structured approaches to programme review, supported by QA units and programme boards. Collaborative review processes across ETBs have also emerged, enabling shared learning and the development of common programmes in key areas. From 2012, to the 2019 legislation, there was a change, where QQI became responsible for broad standards, relieving QQI of the responsibility to update CAS awards, but imposing a greater responsibility on providers:

> *…. It is also driven by the fact that we don't have the capacity to …. we don't have the capacity to manage updating the standards. (Artemisia: Interview Data).*

> *…but it has the disadvantages that we're now experiencing… in terms of maintenance of those standards, the number of different awards… So, I do think there is a need for an awarding system… where the cumulative nature of CAS is useful and attractive but the reliance on us (QQI) as the main way of developing awards I think personally - that has a limited usefulness (Quentin: Interview Data).*

Programme validation has emerged as an imperative once again, driven this time by the report of the sectoral inaugural review panel which stated that *'arrangements for reviewing and updating programmes offered by ETBs are insufficient to ensure learners receive the most up-to-date, industry-relevant content' (2023, p.13),* and highlighted the need for greater staff expertise and commitment. They reported that *'quality assurance of the development and revision of programmes is not sufficiently robust'* and that there is lack of clarity about who is responsible for developing and revising programmes (2023, p. 13), prompting questions about how groups operating nationally on behalf of the sector can nurture more activity and innovation by through scaffolding policy knowledge, process and practice development.

In 2022, in response to the QQI review of quality and in consultation with QQI, a project was brokered through the QA network to establish processes and structures to support new

programme development, review, replacement and revalidation of the legacy programmes and agreement was reached on a workplan to address the issue with three main deliverables:

- a revised process for programme documentation, validation and sharing among ETBs
- prioritisation of programmes for development or renewal
- a process for QQI to devolve responsibility to ETBs for programme evaluation, pre-validation and programme maintenance post-validation. (Document Review Data).

The focus is currently on existing programme review, redevelopment and revalidation to bring legacy programmes into QQI cycles, and a commitment was made to review a single programme leading to a major award by the end of 2024, temporarily deferring support for innovative sector-wide development. Subsequently, the brief shifted to prioritisation of 28 individual programme module descriptors, rather than review of programmes leading to major awards.

There are different influences on how programme development occurs, and differing perspectives on the task, however, and participants described some of the challenges associated with the processes:

> *Proposals of methods of redeveloping the CAS awards. "drove" the agenda with QQI and DFET (Glenn: Survey Data)* and Dana cited working *with QQI to produce an accepted process for a simplified validation process* (Survey Data) as a significant challenge.
>
> *…Even the writing of that (*ELC) *programme showed an incredible naivety…* - (We) *didn't need 8 people full time in ELC, and then a huge amount of the quality assurance issues came out… I sent an email out to the board prior to submission, saying, you haven't considered the training centres… part-time…night school (Maurice: Interview Data).*
>
> *The micro credentials development, so that's the Skills to Advance (STA) - because it's skills to advance funding, but that's been a huge influence on programme development…and it only addresses the needs of a small proportion of our learners (Eva: Survey Data).*

The idea of naivety referred to by Maurice, is probably more accurately represented as a problem with capacity to scope the project of programme development so that there is consideration of the target groups for the programme and the purpose of the programme, from the beginning of the design process. It also reveals a gap in how resources required are analysed and predicted. The issue may be a manifestation of the difference between knowing *that* and knowing *how* explained by Duguid (2005, pp.111-112), who tells us that it is knowing *how* that makes knowing *that* actionable. Could the delays in implementation be simply down

to the fact that while the sector knows that the policies exist and that development and validation processes must be followed, there is a lack of knowing 'how' to take action.

The QA Network were instrumental in the establishment of the working group for programme review and revalidation, and members participate in that working group. An offshoot of the DFET Quality Strategy Group, a 'task and finish group' was set up to ensure that momentum was maintained. In their contributions, research participants described the decision-making chains and events leading to agreement and a workplan and there is an air of positive expectation around the project:

> *It's been driven through yourselves in the network and the work of the working group. And that's feeding very much into that task and finish group, which is the spoke or the key in the ignition, for all the programme development (Leona: Interview Data).*
>
> *And I think we're still in a state of flux, really…where we now basically need to review the common awards that exist which is a massive piece of work…so I know from the quality steering* (strategy)*group we're trying to look at a mechanism to do that in conjunction with QQI (Siúin: Interview Data).*
>
> *So again, go back to the programme validation proposal…that came through the QA Network and was shaped by a group of people into a recommendation that was brought to the quality strategy group… then to the directors of FET Forum… and it was approved there right, and then went to the CE Forum, and was approved (Robert: Interview Data).*
>
> *Well say, for example, the work plan that we have agreed with the ETBs… it was agreed between our chief executive, and his ETBI counterpart, and the individual ETBs as well … initially we want to issue certificates of validation for (all) programmes to get them into the review cycle (Quentin: Interview Data).*

The project for programme review and revalidation features selected minor awards, even though there was sectoral commitment to review and revalidate a programme leading to a major award in 2024 and there is significant consultation ongoing in relation to draft programme changes across all ETBs:

> *The ETBs have said that there is going to be a major award, a programme for a major award rewritten this year* (2024) *as a model. Now, they're also gonna focus on minor awards. (Quentin: Interview Data).*
>
> *There are 28 modules I'm aware of being redeveloped at the moment, but do you know that I couldn't tell you what the 28 are so how can we have a sort of a national consistency if that's happening? (Robert: Interview Data).*

It is not clear how the project goals shifted from a focus on major awards, to minor awards, although it is possible that the decision was informed by the micro-qualifications development

project funded, lead, commissioned and administered by SOLAS. This micro-qualifications project and COVID adaptations were a testing-ground for internal programme governance structures in the ETBs, informing administrative processes for QA and new programme approval, and there is growing trust in the processes:

> *The validation of the newly developed* (micro-qualifications) *programmes was a testament to the quality assured programme development processes and governance structures (Eva: Survey Data).*

Multiple recent challenges provide common ground for practitioners and key agents alike, and the QA Network has supported navigation of these, and the challenges encountered have informed development of practice and visibility of QA:

> *I do think COVID was very positive. Because suddenly we were writing position papers on predictive marking that QQI rejected (Maurice: Interview Data).*
>
> *We needed to be together on these inaugural reviews. We needed to be hearing what the themes coming up were… and thinking about this collectively (Robert: Interview Data).*
>
> *…the module update process… is a really good example where we have spent time on going, are we talking about a programme module? Is it a module? Is it a component? Is it indicative content? Suggested content? Recommended content? (Audrey: Focus Group Data).*

1.9.5. Standards in FET

Standards in FET are defined through the NFQ, award specifications (such as CAS awards), PATDs and, where necessary, programme-derived award standards (PDAS). These standards articulate the knowledge, skills and competencies expected at each level and provide a reference point for programme design, assessment and certification.

The shift to learning outcomes has supported transparency and comparability across the system, enabling learners to understand what they will achieve and allowing employers to interpret qualifications more easily. Standards also support recognition of prior learning (RPL) and facilitate progression within and between FET and higher education. A QQI report on standards review however, for Levels 1-4 (2023, p.23) identified confusion in the sector about award types and classes; assessment and grading; title conventions; and access, transfer and progression in the sector. It also identified problems with comprehension of the difference between learning outcomes for award standards and programme learning outcomes, and between CAS awards and other awards (2023, p.33). This may indicate low levels of technical competence in curriculum development, which is understandable, given the continued reliance on a suite of outdated programmes and centralised collective development.

When the NCVA and FÁS were established as awarding bodies, the emphasis was on centre, school, or college-level accountability and individual professional responsibility. The concepts of quality culture, oversight, governance and organisational vision, mission and values are becoming more recently embedded in ETBs. There is a risk however that local knowledge may become marginalised, and local experts disenfranchised, potentially losing the wider benefits to learners (Boocock, 2015). This may happen for example, through exclusion of practitioners from standards, programme and curriculum development processes, through their exclusion from governance processes and through outsourcing and sectoral procrastination.

As the sector evolves, new forms of standards, such as micro-credentials and occupational standards, are emerging, reflecting changing labour-market needs and the increasing emphasis on flexible, modular learning. A challenge arises in terms of defining responsibility across nested levels of curriculum and programme development from national standards to local decision-making and approval processes, to oversight of those processes, and provision of incentives to innovate and participate in research and development.

1.9.6 Policy Implementation

Implementing QA and qualifications policies within ETBs requires significant organisational capacity, leadership and cultural change. ETBs must balance national requirements with local contexts, ensuring that policies are meaningful, workable and aligned with the needs of learners and practitioners.

Policy implementation involves developing governance structures, training staff, establishing communication channels, monitoring compliance and fostering a culture of quality. It also requires collaboration across departments, centres and campuses, as well as engagement with external stakeholders such as employers, community organisations and higher education institutions. Central to policy implementation is commitment to learners and provision of high-quality and consistent learner experience across all levels of the NFQ.

The *CEDEFOP Handbook for Vocational Education and Training Providers (2015)* is a guide for implementing quality assurance and quality management in European VET. The focus is on leadership and it recommends internal self-assessment or evaluation carried out in cyclical processes, contributing to continuous improvement. The European philosophy of quality in education and training values student satisfaction and recognises its role in promoting and making vocational education and training attractive (2015, p.1). It draws on the humanist principles espoused by Deming and Juran, who emphasise the need for leadership training so

that leaders can support localised engagement in quality assurance and management comprehensively across teams and organisations at all levels.

Challenges include managing the administrative burden associated with QA, ensuring consistency across diverse provision (ESRI, 2014, p.65), and supporting practitioners to engage meaningfully with QA processes. The system's fragmented and diverse nature, with gaps between local and national approached has an impact on its visibility and recognition. FET practitioners described policy reform as *'fragmented, contested and driven by dominant stakeholder agendas or international initiatives'*, only responding with urgency when there was a need to react to a crisis (Croke, 2017, p.281), illustrating the organic, reactive history of the sector which has resulted in complexity and duplication. In 2017, there was limited clarity among practitioners about who had the authority and responsibility for localised policy initiatives, despite the emergence of practitioner networks reported by Croke (2017, p283), illustrating perhaps the challenge with communications in fragmented environments. More recently, the QQI sectoral report highlighted a need for greater clarity about responsibility for programme review and development, highlighting a gap in responsibility for QA at organisational governance level (2023, pp.14-16). Effective implementation can enhance learner experience, strengthen organisational coherence and support the development of a more integrated and responsive FET system.

Croke stresses the importance of the practitioner voice in shaping practice in quality assurance (2017, p.300). Critically, she states:

> *…when it comes to policy reform and development, they represent a group who are not heard when the system scaffolding and organisational structures that should serve to include them are not a feature of the decision-making process of professionalisation of practice, policy development and policy reform' (2017, p 301).*

Sadiq identifies power and status issues which can distract from the collective benefits that are possible and can undermine valuable deliberative processes, arguing for leadership that enables interaction (2021). These can be addressed through good governance of QA where multiple stakeholders are included in equitable situations (2021).

QA Network members who are QA practitioners are located on the boundaries between learning practitioners and decision-makers, and are connected to their peers across the ETBs and other organisations involved. Familiar with sectoral boundaries and with working across them, whether linking the QA systems of two formerly separate organisations, or connecting practitioners in a common field who can work together, QA Practitioners may be able to counteract some of the issues of policy implementation.

1.10 Communities of QA in FET

Communities of practice have played a central role in shaping the development of quality assurance (QA) within the Further Education and Training (FET) sector. As the system evolved from a fragmented landscape of multiple awarding bodies and diverse local practices into a more coherent national framework, practitioners increasingly relied on collaboration, shared learning and collective problem-solving to interpret and implement new policies. These communities have provided essential spaces for dialogue, professional identity formation and the development of shared understandings of quality.

Within the ETB sector, the most significant of these communities relevant to QA is the national QA Network, coordinated through Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). The Network brings together QA practitioners from all 16 ETBs and has become a key mechanism for supporting consistency, developing shared approaches and building capacity across the system. Its work reflects the broader shift towards a provider-owned model of QA, in which practitioners play a central role in shaping the quality culture of their organisations.

The following subsections trace the origins, development and experiences of the QA community and the ETBI QA Network.

1.10.1 Four collaborative groups which became a network

The QA Network emerged from the convergence of four earlier collaborative groups which operated at different times, in response to different challenges, and coincided with the appointment of a Development Officer for QA within ETBI in 2014. The national representative organisation provided a logical locus for national support of VECs and then ETBs, as public statutory bodies, to explore how the emerging policy requirements of quality and qualifications legislation could be approached collectively. Through champions like Pat O'Mahony (Deceased), an officer of IVEA; Cynthia Deane (former CE of Kilkenny VEC) and Fiona Maloney (Deceased), an officer of ETBI, Andrina Wafer and Walter Balfe of FETAC and then QQI, networks driven by the theme of quality have flourished. The four main groups identified through a review of the QA Network's archive were:

1. The IVEA Assessment Task Group – the 'Ginger' Group (2007 – 2011)
2. The Process Coordinator Group (2011)
3. ETBI/QQI Collaborative FET Forum (2011- 2018)
4. ETBI QA Network (2018).

The IVEA Assessment Task Group – the 'Ginger' Group (2007 – 2011)

The IVEA Assessment Task Group (the 'ginger' group) was the foundation for connecting QA practitioners nationally, building on the first QA agreements with FETAC. Members were fulfilling various other coordination and management roles within their VECs at that time, as well as being tasked with implementing new QA policies. Many had been active in the preparation for FETAC quality assurance agreements. Members of this group are still active in the sphere of quality within ETBs now.

The Process Coordinator Group (2010-2012)

Process Coordinators were assigned to coordinate the programme development and administrative processes associated with programme validation, and to liaise with their counterparts in other VECs when the CAS was launched in 2012. The sector embarked on a large-scale programme development project. This group supported the collation of work completed, ensured a flow of communications, and linked with the national project coordinators, FESS (Fields, 2016, p.241*)*. This project informed the sectoral collective approach to programme development and validation, and members of the group found their work expanding to cover other areas of quality (Appendix V) as they emerged, becoming QA Officers as the roles emerged over the years, and remaining as members of other networks. Process Co-ordinators remained involved and took leading roles in QA in their organisations as structures evolved.

The ETBI QQI Collaborative Forum (2011 – 2018)

The ETBI QQI Collaborative Forum was established to promote collaboration between the ETBs and QQI, under the auspices of ETBI and QQI, to support the transition to requirements identified in new policies and guidelines, such as the *QQI Core Statutory QA Guidelines (2017a)*; *QQI Sector Specific QA Guidelines (2017b)*; and *Policies and Criteria for the Validation by QQI of Programmes of Education and Training (2017)*. Membership of this group was heterogeneous, reflecting the heterogeneity of the sector and included Coordinators, Principals and Managers such as AEOs, and following the FET legislation, Training Standards Officers and Training Centre Managers. The common thread was that all had an interest in quality and a commitment to the benefits of the new policies for learners. The forum was chaired by a CE, and attended by the Quality Development Officer from ETBI, QQI representatives and staff of FESS.

The QA Network (2018), the DFET Forum and the QA Strategy Group

In 2018, there was a shift in the nature of arrangements, and the group was renamed the QA Network. A FET Directors' Forum and QA Strategy Group had become more established, and

ETBs had been appointing individuals to manage quality centrally, or designating AEOs with responsibility for managing quality. The membership of the Network gradually became more homogeneous, with membership drawn from the group of QA practitioners, who were becoming the recognised experts in the field of quality. The QA Network was chaired by a Director of FET from the QA Strategy Group of the FET Directors' Forum.

The Task and Finish Group (2022)

More recently a Task and Finish Group, of the DFET QA Strategy Group was added, to provide oversight of a project to update FET programmes for revalidation, resulting in a more hierarchical structure for decision-making and oversight. Key agent participants in this research noted that they had lost their more direct contact with QA practitioners as a result of the restructuring, although the QA Network is linked across boundaries in a landscape of practice through members' engagement in other networks and groups, across the education and training eco-system. Members are positioned as knowledgeable, informed changemakers connected with learning practitioners in FET.

Additional Sub-groups, Working Groups and Networks

Within the eco-system, working groups and project groups are set up as the need arises, and the QA Network intersects with other network such as the RPL Practitioner Network and the National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN).

The current landscape is a complex system that includes ETBs; ETBI; SOLAS; QQI; DFHERIS (Figure 10 and Appendix H) and those within the extended landscape of practice, such as networks, forums and working groups, all with their own purposes, and socially constructed boundaries and routines including procedures and rules (Aldrich & Ruef 2006, quoted in Graf et al., 2023). Within this system, resulting from institutional logics, there are likely to be conflicting perspectives and competitive instincts held by the various governance constituencies (Sadiq, 2021).

The QA Network has been a key element in QA development in FET, contributing to initiatives that serve learners' needs nationally, and collaboratively supporting high-quality standards and programme development through their own informed professional practice. Moving away from hierarchical models and ensuring practitioners are included collectively rather than punitively (Boocock, 2015 p.185) can further support the vision of integrated FET services. The QA Network can form a bulwark against an extreme focus on an audit culture that may exclude good practice principles in teaching, learning and assessment. The Network reflects

the sector's capacity for collaboration, innovation and collective leadership, and continues to play a central role in shaping the quality culture of the ETB system.

1.10.2 Introducing the QA Network of ETBI

The ETBI QA Network was formally established in 2014, building on the existence of other Networks to provide a national structure for collaboration among QA practitioners across the 16 ETBs. Each ETB nominates two representatives, who are typically individuals with responsibility for QA, programme development or assessment, to participate in the Network. These representatives bring their diverse professional backgrounds, in teaching, training, administration, curriculum development and management to their roles and to their QA Network engagement.

Operating principles for ETBI networks are defined in a document agreed when ETBI was established in 2013. In its current format, the QA Network has existed for 12 years. As a member of the QA Network and a member of previous groups and working groups, I have a deep knowledge of, and interest in its work and impacts. I value and respect my peers who are members of the Network, and who have become friends during many adventures, crises and celebrations over the years, and it was a privilege to engage with them for this piece of work.

The Network serves multiple functions. It provides a forum for interpreting QQI policies, sharing practice, developing common approaches and addressing sector-wide challenges. It also acts as a conduit between ETBs and national bodies such as QQI and SOLAS, enabling coordinated responses to policy development and supporting the implementation of national initiatives. Throughout the years, the Network and its precursors have been involved in policy consultations and negotiations with QQI, FETAC and other awarding bodies on behalf of the sector, in an environment where cross-organisation interactions were valued and encouraged.

Networks and working groups under the ETBI DFET Forum aim to *'support and inform draft proposals, policies, procedures, information and resources in key strategic areas identified by the forum'* (ETBI, 2020, 2024). While no formal charter or terms of reference existed during data collection, a recent publication (ETBI, 2024) describes its projects (Figure 2). Currently, the Network focuses on programme development and validation, external authentication, academic integrity, quality action plans, and consulting with QQI on online and blended learning guidelines (Figure 2).

Quality Network

Aim/Purpose	Networks and working groups are established under the ETB Directors of Further Education and Training Forum structure to support and inform draft proposals, policies, procedures, information and resources in key strategic areas identified by the Forum. These groups may have an advisory, consultative or operational focus as appropriate. *(ETBI Professional Associations V2, 2020)*
Membership	• **2** DFET representative Co-Chairs • **16** Representatives of ETBs-1 Primary and 1 secondary (in absentia). • Representatives of FESS. • ETBI representative .
Meetings	• Monthly meetings from Feb-Jun and Sept-Nov. • 8 meetings across the year- 3 In-Person and 5 online. • Subgroups meet outside Quality Network meetings as needed. • Thematic sessions held in addition to Quality Network meetings as needed.
Communication Style	• Email. • TEAMS Channels • SharePoint.
Current Projects/themes	• Programme Development and Validation project. • External Authentication. • Academic Integrity. • QAPs review. • QQI Blended Learning Guidelines.

2024 Structure

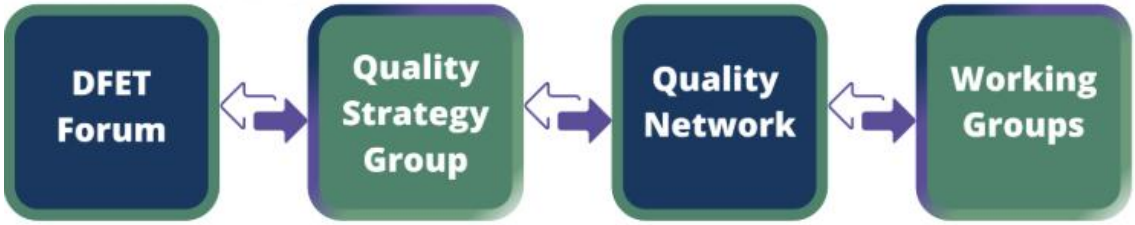


Figure 2: ETBI QA Network Description, 2024

1.10.3 QA Network Membership

While there are 16 ETBs, and there is an understanding that one person from each will attend, document analysis showed up to forty-seven people recorded as present at online meetings, illustrating perceptions of the Network as a useful site for information sharing perhaps. Meetings are attended by QA Practitioners, ETBI Development Officers, Further Education Support Service (FESS) team members and two Co-Chairs drawn from the Directors of FET (DFET) Quality Strategy Group. Practitioners are nominated for the QA Network by Directors of FET or Chief Executives of their ETBs.

50% of the 16 research participants drawn from membership, had been members for five years or less, and were nominated by line managers or Chief Executives (CEs) to attend. In the Network, there are core members and newcomers (Wenger, 1999). Further data about the network membership is required to draw more in-depth conclusions, but those who were newcomers reported that they benefitted from the Network for their own professional knowledge development.

The majority of research participants rated themselves as 'core insiders' in the Network, illustrating their level of interest and engagement, and the role of the Network in their professional lives. This is reflected in focus group participation, with participants who described never missing a meeting of the Network, and getting to meetings at all costs.

This newcomer talked about leadership and influence within the Network:

> *I think there are definitely some people who are viewed as being very experienced and provide real leadership (Audrey: Focus Group Data).*

Often participation in the Network is QA Practitioners' first introduction to the wider national context of ETBs, and learning about the similarities and differences between the ETBs and about the FET eco-system is a Network membership side effect, influencing awareness of issues and practices:

> *But I always find it really interesting in the meetings, that people will have different views on what maybe we're being requested to do, because within certain ETBs, we might have certain emphases on… apprenticeships, for example, (Audrey: Focus Group Data).*

> *…how QA is seen within a particular ETB. It does raise that issue - kind of there being a difference between the ETBs… So, I didn't have any idea about any of this until I came onto the QA Network (Eva: Focus Group Data).*

> *…but you know, there is* (are) *inequities for QA staff and structures between the ETBs... No, I think that does affect the membership of the QA Network as well, and how QA is*

seen within a particular ETB… because of the differences in the numbers, but also in the staff instructions that are there (Eva: Focus Group Data).

1.10.4 QA Network Activities

Network members have engaged collaboratively with QQI, designing templates to meet evaluation requirements. Before these policies were published, QA Network members were already responding to policies for standards maintenance, for example, *Quality Assuring Assessment (2009)*; *Guidelines for Developing Programmes of Education and Training* (FETAC, 2010); and Core Statutory and Sectoral QA Guidelines (2017 a & b), and participating with peers in the sector, reviewing standards from Levels 1-4, in a project led by QQI (2023, p.35).

The QA Network serves as a hub for QA practice in ETBs, creating templates for practice and informing the implementation of national policy in ETBs. Boundary objects, which are used across the sector, include procedures for internal verification and external authentication of assessment, a system for managing the panel of EAs, their recruitment and training, collaborative new programme development following the establishment of the Common Awards System in 2010- 2012, resulting in Programme Approval Agreements (PAAs) between ETBs, participation in a feasibility study on the proposed *Core Statutory Guidelines for QA* informing the development of sector specific statutory guidelines, and a Referencing Handbook for Learners in FET, in collaboration with FESS.

The Network acts as a communication hub, facilitating sharing of information about relevant developments and projects, such as the work of the Recognition of Prior Learning Practitioner Network of Ireland, which aims to implement the *European Council recommendation of 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning* (VNFIL).One example of the kind of synergy that can occur through the constructive boundary-spanning that takes place across ETBs in the interest of improving quality was a *Toolkit for RPL (2023)*, devised collaboratively by Donegal ETB and Limerick and Clare ETB, funded through the Skills to Advance programme of SOLAS and launched in 2022. This constructive boundary spanning is an effective conduit for communicating information about new opportunities and developments across ETBs. As one key agent interviewed pointed out, the QA Network provided a single location for communications from QQI to the sector in relation to issues associated with quality and qualifications. The QA Network, could be described as an intentional inter-organisational CoP, with membership representing sixteen different ETBs, FESS and ETBI staff, existing within a landscape of practice associated with FET.

Over time, the Network has evolved into a highly active and influential community of practice. It has contributed to the development of collaborative programme development and validation processes, common assessment procedures, and sectoral responses to QQI consultations. The Network has also played a key role in preparing ETBs for the first cycle of QQI external reviews, supporting self-evaluation, evidence gathering and enhancement planning.

The collaborative ethos of the Network reflects the complexity of the FET system and the need for collective interpretation of policy and co-construction of knowledge in a context where providers hold responsibility for their own QA systems. It has become a central mechanism for building capacity, fostering consistency and strengthening the professional identity of QA practitioners.

1.10.5 Experiences of the QA Network

Members of the QA Network consistently describe it as a supportive, collegial and highly productive community. The Network provides a rare space within the FET system where practitioners can engage in reflective dialogue, share challenges and co-create solutions. This collaborative environment has been particularly valuable given the pace of policy change, the diversity of provision within ETBs and the complexity of implementing provider-owned QA systems.

Practitioners report that participation in the Network enhances their confidence, deepens their understanding of QA and strengthens their ability to influence practice within their own ETBs. The Network also fosters a sense of shared purpose and collective responsibility for the quality of FET nationally. Many members describe the Network as a professional lifeline and an essential support in navigating the demands of QA work, which can be both technically complex and organisationally sensitive.

The Network's work has contributed to the development of a more coherent national QA culture. Through shared templates, collaborative programme development, joint training initiatives and sectoral discussions, the Network has helped to reduce duplication, harmonise practices and promote consistency across ETBs and Network artefacts are in daily use across the sector.

1.11 Introducing FET QA Practitioners

Quality Assurance (QA) Practitioners occupy a pivotal position within the Further Education and Training (FET) system. They work at the intersection of pedagogy, governance, administration and policy implementation, translating national requirements into local practice

and supporting the development of coherent, high-quality provision across diverse contexts. Their work is shaped by the provider-owned model of QA, the complexity of ETB structures and the evolving expectations of learners, employers and national agencies.

QA Practitioners have a wide range of professional backgrounds, including teaching, training, curriculum development, administration and management. This diversity aligns with the rich variety and complexity of the FET sector and its QA landscape, enabling them to draw on pedagogical expertise, operational knowledge and organisational insight. The role is a complex one, and QA practitioners must navigate multiple identities and expectations while working within rapidly changing policy environments.

The following subsections explore the roles, experiences and emerging professional identities of QA Practitioners within the ETB sector.

1.11.1 QA Practitioners in the ETBs

The domain of QA in FET has evolved, especially since the formation of the ETBs after the 2012 Act, and gradually, roles associated with QA emerged:

> *…the whole amalgamation of FÁS and VECs took place, and the creation of ETBs, and within that the role of quality assurance officers (Leona: Interview Data).*

The Network is made up of individuals who hold a variety of titles linked to pre-existing contracts and grades, including those of Adult Education Officer (AEO); Training Standards Officer (TSO) or Training Centre Manager, and research participants also reported titles that reflected the role, such as Director, Manager or Coordinator of QA. Formal roles emerged organically, as the intricacies of the new policies became clearer. Some QA practitioners, like Anastasia, for example, were seconded out of existing roles from time to time, as required, to prepare applications for recognition of QA or reengagement with both FETAC and QQI in 2006 and 2013:

> *… at that time my VEC asked me that September (2006) before the deadline in December would I come out of my role as a centre director, and actually put our application together to make sure we didn't lose out…. I again was asked to come out of my role to manage our (ETB) reengagement (2013) and the ongoing QA for my ETB. (Anastasia: Interview Data).*

Leona illustrated how her trajectory has mirrored the evolution of FET, with new roles emerging constantly, reflecting the organic growth of FET initiatives, which were established based on availability of funding, and expected to be terminated if funding ran out. As a result,

contracts were renewed annually until new legislation to protect employees resulted in the introduction of contracts of indefinite duration:

> *I suppose (the) only (*kind of) *job ever in my career has been a new job. So, when I was very young, I was the coordinator of a programme… so I had to kind of, I don't know what I did, but you know, I had nobody to ask, well, how did you do this job… I learned by doing; I learned on the job* (Leona: Interview Data).

New legislation, policies and guidelines for QA emerged in parallel with the period of austerity following the financial crisis of 2008, and there was an expectation that implementation would occur within the existing available resources, both human and financial, influencing the rather organic nature of developments. This created barriers to the introduction of new roles and systems, as it was expected that all new initiatives would be drawn from those existing resources.

QA Practitioners in ETBs are responsible for designing, implementing and maintaining quality assurance systems that meet QQI requirements and support high-quality learner experiences. They do this in consultation with management teams, programme, college and centre managers, learning practitioners, learners, administrators and other stakeholders. Their work includes developing QA policies, coordinating programme validation and review processes, supporting and coordinating assessment and results approval procedures, facilitating external authentication, and ensuring compliance with national guidelines. They have also acted as leaders, conveners and secretariats in the development of QA teams and governance units in their ETBs.

QA Practitioners play a key role in supporting centres, teachers, tutors and instructors to engage with QA processes. This involves providing guidance on assessment, advising on programme development and delivery, supporting self-evaluation activities and contributing to staff development. In many ETBs, QA Practitioners act as intermediaries between senior management, practitioners and external bodies such as QQI, SOLAS and ETBI, working within and across teams effectively.

The role requires a combination of technical expertise, pedagogical understanding, administrative skill and relational capacity. Practitioners must interpret complex policy documents, communicate expectations clearly, and support colleagues in implementing QA processes in ways that are meaningful, relevant and sustainable. In their work, they contribute to organisational learning and strategy by identifying areas for enhancement, supporting change, improvement and the development of cultures of quality.

1.11.2 Dual Roles

Many QA Practitioners occupy dual or hybrid roles, and in the early days of QA policy, often combined QA responsibilities with teaching, training, programme coordination or administrative duties. This practice has continued, reflecting the evolving nature of the domain, and there is no defined structure for how quality and qualifications policy are to be applied across the sector. Participants in this research recorded their own dual roles, describing their responsibility for QA and, for example, professional development, learner wellbeing or coordinating Erasmus activities (survey data). The dual roles reflect the historical evolution of FET, where QA responsibilities often emerged informally and were taken on by, or assigned to, practitioners with an interest or aptitude for quality-related work. *The CEDEFOP Guidelines for Quality in VET*(2015), recommend that processes for QA be closely connected with the locus of practice, for example, through short term secondments of pedagogic staff into roles in development planning for example, and this model is followed in some European systems, for example, by the Bavarian State Institute for Quality in Education, which recruits and trains pedagogical staff as associates of the institute for defined periods of time from six months to one year (personal experience through Erasmus partnership). In Bavaria, secondment is critical to policy implementation, and provides a virtuous loop of learning, exchanging pedagogical and subject knowledge for knowledge of planning, improvement and quality systems and vice versa. Robert described how dual roles evolved in the ETBs where he worked as a practitioner, coordinator and DFET, demonstrating a pragmatic management approach:

> *So, they'd be doing something else…coordinating a programme; a resource worker; or a development worker with a significant responsibility around QA… (Robert, Interview Data).*

Dual roles offer significant advantages. Practitioners with teaching or training experience bring deep pedagogical insight to QA processes, enabling them to understand the realities of classroom practice and the challenges faced by colleagues. Their credibility as practitioners can also support the acceptance and implementation of QA policies.

Dual roles also present challenges however. Balancing other commitments with QA responsibilities can be demanding, particularly during periods of intense activity such as programme validation, external authentication or QQI reviews. The dual identity can also create tensions, as practitioners navigate the expectations of colleagues while upholding the requirements of QA systems. These tensions are a recurring theme in the experiences of QA Practitioners and contribute to the complexity of their professional identity.

1.11.3 The Work and Practice of QA Practitioners

The work of QA Practitioners is multifaceted and dynamic. It involves interpreting national policy, developing local procedures, supporting practitioners, in improvement of practice, coordinating governance structures and ensuring the integrity of assessment and certification processes. Much of this work requires practitioners to build trust, negotiate expectations and support colleagues through change, taking a satellite's perspective of practice and delivery while empathising with the experiences of practitioners delivering FET programmes, often drawing on their own personal experiences.

Describing their day-to-day work in survey responses, members most frequently used the terms quality assurance; programme development; governance; oversight; enhancement and improvement; QA frameworks and systems; professional learning and development; and leadership (Appendix O). Their work spans technical and human elements, combining the two. Firstly, they must ensure compliance with QQI guidelines, maintaining documentation, managing data and overseeing formal processes such as appointment of EAs, results approval and programme approval. Secondly, they must support practitioners' professional development, address their concerns about change, facilitate dialogue, and promote a shared cultural understanding of quality and commitment to quality that goes beyond compliance.

As members of the QA Network, their practice includes contributing to national consultations and decision-making and they develop artefacts that are used comprehensively across the ETBs. Their work is shaped by the pace of policy change and the diversity of provision within the ETBs. They must adapt and learn about new award types, emerging pedagogical approaches, evolving assessment practices and shifting organisational structures, requiring resilience, flexibility and a commitment to their own continuous learning.

1.11.4 Experience of the QA Network

Participation in the ETBI QA Network is a defining aspect of the professional experience of QA Practitioners. The Network provides a collaborative space where practitioners can share challenges, develop common approaches and collectively interpret national policy. Many practitioners describe the Network as a vital source of support, learning and professional identity.

Experience of QA for practitioners who are newcomers was gleaned through involvement in specific tasks and in on-the-job learning, in response to crises such as COVID19, through covering for colleagues, or through learning from more experienced peers in the QA Network.

These newcomers referred to the benefit of network membership in expanding their knowledge of the national context for FET and QA.

Through the Network, QA Practitioners engage in sector-wide initiatives such as shared programme development, collaborative validation projects, collective artefact development, joint training events and coordinated responses to QQI consultations. These activities contribute to greater consistency across ETBs and strengthen the collective capacity of the sector.

Practitioners frequently highlight the collegiality, openness and mutual respect that characterise the Network. In this research, a rich eco-system of support, relationship and friendship became apparent, among peers with the same professional concerns across geographical and organisational boundaries. The opportunity to engage with peers who understand the complexities of QA work is highly valued, particularly given the often-isolated nature of QA roles within individual ETBs.

1.11.5 Passion

The passion of QA practitioners and their innovative traits were recognised by key agents, with perceptions of enthusiastic QA practitioners ready to go above and beyond, aligning with the notion that specific interests often bring CoP members together too:

> *You know, so both of them* (the QA team) *would work savage hours. But your only problem with that is if you work a 70-hour week for years, when you leave the job, the next person can only do the job if they work a 70-hour week (Maurice: Interview Data).*
>
> *… we employ people* (to QA roles) *because we see their potential…But then, when we have them, they become so overworked (Siúin: Interview Data).*
>
> *…So, I have one AEO who took it upon themself on top of their own day job to go about finding a company to work with, to develop a module around virtual reality that we're now delivering in our healthcare program (Siúin: Interview Data).*

A recurring theme in the narratives of QA Practitioners is passion - passion for learning, for quality, for fairness and for supporting learners. Tully, however, quotes Bourdieu, who reminds us that criteria for what is defined as 'good work' is often contrived through power relations, which are subjective and interest-driven and may simply reflect the goals of management, and reinforce a field's hierarchies and divisions (2023, p.30), citing Schinkel & Noordegraf (2011). Tully makes a distinction between 'service' and 'sacrifice' and writes about how teachers in further education describe their work as a 'social mission', while complaining of being excluded from decision-making, representing a feeling of being under-valued and devalued as

professionals. Tully describes how the struggle of practitioners to do their work in the face of diminishing resources can be perceived as 'honourable', and there is a struggle too in the way practitioners can view their own work from a vocational perspective, sometimes incurring personal costs that are never recouped. This echoes the sense of heroism praised by key agents (2023, p.35), and also echoes what QA practitioners said about needing to support one another, but raises questions about fairness and support for professionalism in the FET sector and in relation to the careers of those involved in QA in FET. QA practitioners describe a deep commitment to ensuring that learners experience high-quality education and training and that assessment and certification processes are fair, transparent, valid and meaningful.

This passion often stems from practitioners' own experiences as educators or learners. It also reflects a broader ethos within the FET sector, where values such as inclusion, respect, empowerment and social justice are central. QA Practitioners frequently articulate a strong sense of responsibility for upholding these values through their work.

However, this passion can also create tensions. Practitioners sometimes feel that bureaucratic demands, administrative pressures or resource constraints limit their ability to focus on what they consider most important. These tensions highlight the need for organisational structures and knowledge that support, rather than constrain, the professional agency of QA Practitioners. Members perceive the QA Network as a significant consistent touchstone for their learning and practice, which is of great relevance to their role. When members share their experience informally, they reflect on discrepancies across the ETBs in the allocation of tasks associated with quality, in resourcing, in approaches and in structures from a perspective of their own knowledge about policies linked to quality and qualifications.

1.11.6 Emerging Structures

As the sector continues to evolve, new structures for QA are emerging and being tested, based on the sectoral QA guidelines, that shape the work and identity of QA Practitioners. The development of integrated FET colleges, the expansion of tertiary programmes, the introduction of new award types and the increasing emphasis on digital and green skills all require new approaches to, and greater visibility of QA.

Within ETBs, QA units for academic governance are becoming more formalised separating administrative processes from academic functions and decision-making, with clearer roles, responsibilities and more inclusion of the voices of learners, staff and external stakeholders. Different ETBs are choosing to structure and staff QA teams and governance units in different

ways. Siúin described a QA team and the potential for expansion of associated specialist roles in her own ETB, although this vision is not necessarily consistent across the sector at this point:

> *So, I think we have four Quality Officers and or Training Standards Officers and clerical staff. Then we have our data analyst, and then the AEO and we would hope to have a curriculum and development person as well, if not two (Interview Data).*

Collaborative initiatives across ETBs, such as shared programme development, sectoral QA projects and joint training, are also becoming more common. These developments reflect a growing recognition of the importance of QA as a professional field within FET.

At the same time, the role of QA Practitioners is becoming more strategic. Practitioners are increasingly involved in organisational planning, data analysis, enhancement initiatives and the development of new models of provision. This shift positions QA Practitioners not only as custodians of quality but as key contributors to the future direction of the FET sector. The combined experiences of the QA Network members amount to a body of curated knowledge of the field and of QA in FET built over twenty years of learning and development.

In March, 2026, the report of an independent expert panel on FET staffing structures was published. The recommendations of this panel advocates recognising the history of FET and the development of a FET system that has a distinct and strong identity, and a clearer, more valued position and role alongside schools and higher education (2026, p.7). This panel's report is significant for the role of QA Practitioners, and for the relationship between a strengthened 'FET Directorate' which includes those responsible for QA, strategic planning, co-ordination of assessment and learner support; a proposed national centre for teaching and learning; professional development; collaboration and sharing of good practice (2026, p.8).

1.13 Constellations and Landscapes of Practice

The work of QA Practitioners in the FET sector can be understood through the lens of *constellations of practice* and *landscapes of practice*, concepts developed by Wenger (1998; 2010) to describe how professional learning and identity formation occur through practice across interconnected communities. They inform insights into how accepted norms evolve and become accepted. These concepts are particularly relevant in a sector as diverse, nested and multi-layered as FET, where practitioners navigate multiple organisational, pedagogical and policy contexts.

A *landscape of practice* refers to the broader terrain of interconnected communities in which professionals participate. In the case of FET, this landscape includes ETBs, SOLAS, QQI, ETBI, community organisations, training centres, education centres, PLC colleges, apprenticeship

consortia and higher education partners. QA Practitioners move across this landscape, engaging with different communities, interpreting their expectations and contributing to shared understandings of quality.

Within this landscape, constellations of practice emerge as clusters of related communities, like clusters of stars, that share common concerns, tools, language and ways of working. The ETBI QA Network is one such constellation, bringing together QA Practitioners from across the 16 ETBs. Other constellations include programme development groups, assessment and results approval structures, apprenticeship quality forums and communities of pedagogical practice within centres and colleges. The link with the Further Education Support Service (FESS), represents a key part of the constellation. The RPL Practitioner Network, the ETBI RPL Network and that National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN) are other related communities where QA Network members are actively engaged. Emerging QA Units charged with academic governance and QA teams within the ETBs represent new elements within the constellation of practice.

QA Practitioners operate at the boundaries of these constellations, acting as brokers who translate ideas, mediate expectations and connect practices across organisational and professional domains. This boundary-spanning role is central to their identity and practice, and to the functioning of the FET system. Practitioners become skilled at navigating complexity, negotiating meaning and building relationships that support coherence across diverse provision.

Understanding QA Practitioners as participants in communities, constellations and landscapes of practice highlights the relational, interpretive and collaborative nature of their work. It also underscores the importance of professional communities—formal and informal—in sustaining quality, supporting learning and shaping the evolving identity of the FET sector. Such communities bring knowledge into existence through shared experiences, social situations, histories, and new vocabularies and language, and that knowledge is a continual and dynamic force in continuing to shape social experience (Slater, 2017).

1.14 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has traced the historical, structural and policy contexts that shape the contemporary Further Education and Training (FET) sector in Ireland. It has outlined the evolution of adult and vocational education, the development of multiple strands of provision, and the significant reforms introduced since 2012 through the establishment of SOLAS, the ETBs and QQI. These reforms have created a more coherent, accountable and strategically

aligned system, while also introducing new complexities and expectations for providers and pedagogues and practitioners, who combine leadership, pedagogy, administrative and communication skills in their day-to-day work.

The chapter has highlighted the central role of quality assurance and qualifications policy in shaping the governance and identity of the sector. The shift to a provider-owned model of QA, the consolidation of awarding bodies and the development of the National Framework of Qualifications have transformed how programmes are designed, assessed and reviewed. These developments have also contributed to the emergence of new professional roles, particularly that of the QA Practitioner.

The chapter has shown that QA Practitioners operate within a dynamic and evolving landscape of practice, characterised by multiple communities and constellations, diverse organisational cultures and ongoing policy change. Their work is relational, interpretive and boundary-spanning, requiring them to navigate tensions between compliance and enhancement, pedagogy and governance, and local autonomy and national consistency. The ETBI QA Network has emerged as a key constellation of practice that supports collaboration, shared learning and professional identity formation across the sector.

By situating QA Practitioners within this broader context, the chapter provides the foundation for the empirical analysis that follows. The next chapter explores the theoretical frameworks that inform this study, while subsequent chapters examine the lived experiences, practices and identities of QA Practitioners within the ETB sector. Together, these chapters contribute to a deeper understanding of the human, organisational and systemic dimensions of quality assurance in FET.

Chapter Two: Considering Quality Management and Communities of Practice

2.1 Chapter Introduction

In Chapter 1, I described the FET system over recent decades, highlighting the increasing importance of quality and qualifications legislation and the growing role of provider-owned QA. A significant element of this development has been the emergence of the ETBI Quality Assurance Network, a national group of QA practitioners who implement QA in ETBs. This network has played and continues to play a vital role in shaping QA practice in the FET sector.

Since 1999, legislation has required providers to take responsibility for the quality of programmes, curricula and all associated processes. Working groups, networks and forums, many of which display the characteristics of communities of practice, have been central to the development of these processes. This chapter, provides an overview of the literature on the concept of quality, followed by an exploration of communities of practice as a framework for understanding collaborative work on quality in FET.

2.2 Applying Theories and Concepts of Quality to FET

2.2.1 What do we Mean by 'Quality' and 'Quality Management'?

Commencing with a search for publications providing definitions and explanations of quality as it applies to education and training, a range of terms were used to locate articles relevant to QA in FET or VET, including *quality assurance, quality assurance in VET, quality assurance in FET, total quality management, quality management systems, quality improvement, quality literacy and EQAVET quality indicators.*

Quality is defined in Latin as a 'characteristic or 'composition'. In education and training fields, 'quality' is frequently interpreted and conceptualised as a bureaucratic mechanism rather than a strategic or values-based concern. Fitzsimons points out that pursuit of excellence and quality has been a 'cornerstone of practice' in adult education, rooted as it is in critical theory and the practice of self-reflection (2017, p.16). The theme of the Adult Learner Journal in 2017, however, was linked to fears about increased bureaucracy, associated with the 'quality industry' (Golding and Harvey, 2019, p.56). A constant tension exists between administrative aspects of quality, and quality as it relates to learner experience directly, at a philosophical level, for example in the areas of pedagogy, learning and assessment. Providers must strike a

balance between the different perspectives when their goal is to deliver high-quality education and training. The environment for system implementation is a meeting point between administrative and bureaucratic processes and day-to-day practice, which can exist on a continuum from fluidity to rigidity. This is why it is necessary to create environments that support openness and trust. The systemic conditions created can either support or hinder positive quality cultures. The discourse surrounding quality contains many arguments, objections and convictions, and according to Ehlers, it tends to be poorly defined as a result (2007, p.96) of these multiple perspectives. Returning to the analogy of the alchemy of metalwork and hallmarking, it is through rigorous assay by an independent party such as the Irish Assay Office, which has existed since 16.37, respected by the metalsmiths that the true composition of the metal is proven or not, but this can be a challenge in environments that are focused on less scientific approaches, being involved directly with humans.

In 2014, Jarvis recorded 'different logics' that affect QA development including reticence towards policy evaluation, cost-benefit analysis or critical assessment (p.164). In his research, belief in enhancement was often a conviction rather than being evidence-based (p.164). He argues for a debate about the relationship between quality, values, policy and ideology. Harvey and Newton (2007), note that phrases like 'fitness for purpose', 'value for money', and 'achieving excellence' '*fail to evoke the core concept of quality'*, rendering the quality debate a 'debate about values, politics and ideology' (in Jarvis, 2014, p.164). Tensions come to the fore too where evaluation and review, and concepts of accountability and transparency perceived as an essential part of QA, are added to the mix. Questions arise about whether elements of pedagogy-oriented practice around review are more important than business-oriented elements of review, or whether the two can exist alongside one another?

In modern usage, quality typically refers to objects or services being higher in value or calibre than others. The concept of quality being measured however dates as far back as the Middle Ages. Silver and goldsmiths use hallmarking to distinguish precious and valuable metals such as sterling silver and gold from other, less valuable alloys. Sterling silver is a mix of copper and silver, and the hallmarking process proves that the metal contains the correct amount of silver (92.5% of silver, and the remainder is copper) for it to be deemed sterling silver (Irish Assay Office). Similarly, gold is hallmarked as 18, 14 or 9 carats, in a very well-understood system. The quality is further attested to by the inclusion in the hall mark of a maker's mark, and a special stamp for the year of making. Related to the quality of education and training programmes the programme developed and the materials produced by assessment candidates could be considered similar to artefacts bearing a maker's mark which is unique to the maker, but

identified as being to a certain recognised standard. The components of the object which are also highly valued can include the processes and procedures that lead to the development of programmes, assessment, staff recruitment and mechanisms for enrolling and supporting learners.

Competitiveness is linked to quality, and De Jager & Nieuwhuis describe quality as customers' continuous experience, achieved systematically (2005, p. 252, in Krooi et al, 2024, p.3). Saad and Aroudj argue that educational institutions pursue quality by producing and measuring learner performance (2024, p.177). Developing this apparently indefinable concept and implementing systems for quality in education institutions can represent significant challenges (Ehlers, 2007).

Ehlers notes limited research into whether pedagogical approaches affect educational quality. Beerkens identifies a political dimension to the term, used to portray education in a certain way to reflect strategic themes such as equity or economic benefit, or to satisfy the need to prove accountability demands (2015, p. 233), and the goal of 'high-quality FET' has been identified as a target in Irish national strategy (SOLAS, 2014 and 2020) is related to the national economy. While accreditation levels may indicate quality, they are not sufficient on their own (Beerkens, 2015, p.234), but need to be a part of a wider jigsaw of both pedagogic and administrative practices. Quoting Harvey, Beerkens identifies QA as representing a dichotomy between quality enhancement and accountability (1999, in 2015, p.235).

QA efforts often focus on certification and qualifications outcomes to justify education's contribution to economies, shaping decision-makers' priorities, but sometimes neglecting the quality of learner experience and practice. Beerkens highlights the tension in QA of education between the need to document accreditation and the pursuit of excellence, and this can arise in the form of challenges for learning practitioners who work closest to learners. Harvey and Green's five interpretations - quality as exception, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformative - illustrate the complexity of the concept (1993, in Beerkens, 2015, p.234). ETBs grapple with the dual pressures of external accountability, and the need for internal transparency, rendered more formal by quality and qualifications legislation and new experiences of cyclical review which publicises the standards to which we operate.

Ehlers refers to Berkel's three-dimensional scheme for service quality, adapted for educational processes, placing quality on continuums of objectivity and subjectivity; inherence and instrumentalism and lasting, innate qualities versus those revealed through stakeholder participation (1998, in 2007, p.98). The former could be considered as embedded in culture,

while the latter may force compliance, for example, as a result of demands based on assessment outcomes. Learning materials used instrumentally can be defined as endogenous objects with inherent quality characteristics, while objects such as organisational processes and structures can be defined as exogenous (Ehlers, 2007, p.98). Berkel concludes that educational quality is 'subjective, instrumental and endogenous' (1998, in Ehlers, 2007). Subjectivity refers to the fact that parameters may be defined by individuals or committees; instrumentalism refers to quality revealed through participation; and endogenous objects include programme descriptors; assessment instruments and learner artefacts.

Fish found that academic staff tend to define quality in terms of resources, and administrators define it as problems of coordination linked to instrumental goals (2003, in Akareem and Hossain, 2016, p.54). Fields et al lists Garvin's five classifications for quality (1988): transcendent quality based on academic reputation and expertise; manufacturing-based quality referring to compliance with specifications; product-based quality linked to curriculum and staff impact on learning; value-based quality, referring to value for money (VFM); and user-based quality reflecting student needs and preferences (in 2014, p.406). Thus, quality can be perceived as tangible and product-based or intangible and linked to institutional culture and a desire for excellence.

Akareem and Hossain note that most studies focus on staff and administrators rather than students (2016, p.54). Students' backgrounds, income, culture and teacher qualifications influence perceptions of quality, and employment opportunities and satisfaction ratings are more influential than media coverage and publicity (Sarpkaya, 2010, in Akareem and Hossain, 2016, p.55).

Systems and procedures within education and training organisations influence processes and quality evaluation, shaped by the interaction of learners and organisational structures. When learners, teachers and managers operate together as active "co-producers" whom LePreau refers to as "quality experts" (2005, in Ehlers, 2007, p.98) - quality becomes a reality. Ehlers therefore argues for the development of quality literacy across all levels of the enterprise, including learners, in relation to how they value their own work.

2.2.2 From 'Quality 1.0' to 'Quality 5.0'

Reviewing the history of the concept of quality, (Deleryd and Fundin, 2025), propose extending the four established generations of quality by adding a fifth generation informed by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They describe *Quality 1.0*as rooted in agricultural systems where responsibility for products rested entirely with local producers and

consumers who knew one another very well, as a community. *Quality 2.0* represents the craft era, associated with guild systems, where skilled individuals produced high-quality work, and marketed their expertise as craftspeople (Deleryd and Fundin, 2025, p.296).

In *Quality 3.0,* high-tolerance production methods emerged, requiring precision skills such as "filing and fitting" to meet customer requirements in engineering and firearms industries. These developments inspired flexible manufacturing and process control. *Quality 4.0* combined these approaches with scientific methods for measuring effectiveness, and meeting mass production specifications based on standardisation, ultimately informing 20th century management theories (Fundin and Deleryd, 2025, p.297).

Total quality management (TQM) which emerged from this fourth generation, is based on serving customers and achieving superior financial performance through efficiency (2025, p.298). Main theorists of TQM include Kano, Deming, Juran and Garvin. Speaking in 1984, Deming explained that experience teaches nothing without theory, and in his view, it is very important for management to learn what they cannot learn on the job through learning 'from the outside' explaining perhaps the growth of the consultant industry, but also illustrating that there is an argument to be made for leaders to take time to understand theory in order to improve the performance of their organisations (Deming, 1984). Within the education and training system, this can happen through learning from representatives of other organisations and agencies, for example through engagement in European projects to learn from other jurisdictions. Deming identifies barriers to quality as emphases on quantity not quality, use of cheap defective materials, tools and equipment, staff fears about losing their jobs, short-term contracts, and performance ratings as undermining the kind of dedication to organisations that supports constancy of purpose, authenticity and genuineness (Deming, 1984). Deming was an advocate for 'walking the floor' and talking to employees, promoting team work that contributes to happy, teams, which have a modifying effect, which promotes the ability to cope with ambiguity. He advised against Statistical Quality Control (SQC), Statistical Process Control (SPAC) and daily production and progress reports, and advocated for embracing a longer-term focus that places a value on learning, eradication of fear and theoretical and philosophical approaches, and promotion of pride in what he called 'workmanship' (1984).

Systems such as ISO9001, and the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) were informed by this fourth generation focus on excellence. The CEDEFOP Guidelines on Quality in VET are informed by the work of Deming and Juran, featuring Deming's famous Plan, Do, Check and Act (PDCA) cycle (2015), which was developed from the Japanese 'Kaizen' principles,

popularised in a book by Masaaki Imai published in 1986, (in Suarez-Barraza et al., 2022) and described as an 'ancestral concept' dating back to the 13th and 14th centuries, and based on the principles of Zen Buddhism (Suarez-Barraza et al. 2022). Kaizen is 'a philosophy of life' which features a structured, iterative, participatory approach to solving problems (Suarez-Barraza et al., 2022, p.158). The PDCA cycle locates change and improvement close to the locus of activity in organisations, where practitioners are active, and according to von Thiele et al. using kaizen as an approach can facilitate increased job satisfaction, comfort and better integration of organisational and employee objectives (2017, p.969). Within the kaizen principles, there is a strong practice orientation which emphasises human engagement, collaborative effort and continuous improvement (Lizarelli et al., 2025 p.149). Lizarelli et al. discovered that kaizen can contribute to achieving the environmental and governance commitments of organisations (2025, p.169), although they were unable to draw strong conclusions about the social aspects.

Recent emphases on business excellence, occupational health and safety and environmental management systems, have prompted calls for new approaches to quality. Fundin and Deleryd's *Quality 5.0* combines societal satisfaction with sustainable environmental, economic and social practices. In this model, 'future generations' are perceived as 'today's customers' (2025, p.298), reflecting Gro Harlem Brundtland's 1987 *Report to the World Commission on Environment and Development*. This represents a paradigm shift for quality management (p.296) extending beyond production processes to present and future societal benefits (2025, p.294), and, optimistically, indicating greater responsibilities towards the 'common good'.

According to Fundin and Deleryd, the prevailing fourth generation definition of quality focuses on the ability of goods and services to fulfil customer needs (2025, p.293) A shift towards a fifth generation would close the gap between traditional quality management and broader corporate social responsibility. Fundin and Deleryd's work suggests that this is an opportune moment to explore quality in ETBs and to consider the influence of the ETBI QA Network on quality in FET (2025, p.304). Similarly, it raises questions about how public service organisations can develop freedom of decision-making and create opportunities to assess situations accurately and take action promptly to solve problems in the interest of high-quality service. Quality 5.0 aligns with long-term planning for future good practice and prosperity, adopting system-thinking principles and offering an opportunity for the QA Network to consider the long-term impact of decisions on learners, potential learners and society, through engagement in heart-centred critical thinking, contestation, deliberation and dialogue.

2.2.3 Developing Quality in Education and Training

According to Ehlers, stakeholder competency is critical for developing quality in education (2007). Glykas et al. define QA as process planning and documentation, such as quality plans, while quality control refers to processes that ensure 'job management, competence and performance' during product or service delivery. (2015, p.153). The notion of stakeholder competency identified by Ehlers is important, as the use of the concept of quality within education and training cannot be strictly interpreted in the same way as the concept of quality control systems in business contexts.

As QA evolved, transparency became a central feature (2015, p238), linked to marketing and consumer satisfaction. Internal QA is described as an "umbrella concept", that takes many forms, depending on local conceptions, needs or traditions (Krooi et al, 2024, p.7) and it tracks improvement through transparency and accountability (Krooi et al, 2024, p.5). Transparency enables open communication about improvement, while publicly available QA procedures and reports reassure stakeholders about organisational integrity and standards. Krooi et al. describe accountability as a continuum ranging from transparency to strict compliance (2024, p.5), which in turn influences perceptions of assessment reliability and validity for example, supporting respect for accreditation or quality of education and training experience in turn, for example.

What constitutes effective internal quality assurance (IQA) has been contested for decades (Krooi et al. 2024, p.1), and tensions expressed anecdotally within different parts of FET bear this out. Their review identified an absence of comprehensive studies focussed on IQA for teaching and learning in higher education (2024, p.2). They excluded literature on total quality management (TQM) and service quality, focusing instead on teaching and learning (2024, p.3). Similarly, empirical evidence for QA effectiveness in VET and FET in Ireland is limited.

Krooi et al. argue that IQA is a complex research object, with educational quality definitions *'in the eye of the beholder'* (quoting Centoni & Maruotti, 2021; Harvey & Newton, 2007, in Krooi et al. 2024). In the EU context, cyclical reviews of VET institutions are still in their introductory phase, meaning that critical literature and evidence are scarce. Despite the need to demonstrate legitimacy through QA, Irish QA systems in FET are still immature (QQI, 2023). This affects evidence-based decision-making for QA system and programme design, as well as teaching, learning and assessment models, but it also offers opportunities for innovation and creativity. Krooi et al. question whether QA implementation processes in higher education represent value for money. This may be an explanation for apparent reticence around

resourcing of QA that appears to exist in the FET sector in Ireland (2024), and for persistent change, such as the shift to tertiary education may be a barrier to their coherent introduction too.

The terms 'quality assurance' and 'quality management' are used interchangeably in the literature (2024, p.2). Glykas et al. argue that organisations need to use these terms - and the associated term, 'total quality management' (TQM) - accurately (2015, p.152). Through identifying a quality model, organisations can develop greater knowledge and understanding of systems and quality. TQM is described as a philosophy, and *'a management approach to long-term success through customer satisfaction'* in which *'all members of an organisation participate in improving processes, products, services, and the culture in which they work*' (Glykas et al. 2015, p.153, quoting ASQ, 2013). Krooi et al. conclude that internal QA in higher education is concerned with three overarching themes: purpose, people and process (2024, p.3), and this conclusion appears to be a useful frame for thinking about quality in FET.

Jarvis argues that QA is used as a managerial tool to promote change and determine resource allocation, extending beyond measurement and the pursuit of excellence (2014). He suggests that government influence is increased through QA, contributing to marketisation and economic priorities. This raises questions about whether such influence affects the independence of FET, and whether QA should instead be used solely as an enabler to safeguard autonomy and independent thought, used to protect the value of authentic learning rather than corrupting it? Through adopting quality principles and culture, however, it may be possible to challenge and address inequity and to develop greater consistency, transparency and fairness across society. Clear processes for equitable provision of learner supports, and fairly distributed resources, for example, delivered as a result of a highly developed cultural focus on quality, demonstrate how systems can be enabling without curtailing freedom of thought. TQM offers opportunities to fairly distribute resources through transparent systems while maintaining standards, but it is important to remember that power, access and fear play a significant role in creating barriers to these possibilities. As Peter Jarvis points out, 'care for other' is a universal, central tenet of learning and education, and that advanced capitalism, in a shift to greater individualism, has undermined this centrality of learning (1997, p.174, in Holford, 2017, p.8).

Qualifications Frameworks provide a vehicle for this transparency and equitable accreditation, but Jarvis argues they reflect a neo-liberal agenda for standardisation, embodied in learning outcomes, academic metrics and accreditation, promoting global mobility and migration.

Qualifications frameworks operate as a 'meta-policy architecture' for regulating higher education and QA, according to Jarvis (2014, p.160). Nylander et al. reviewing forty years of publications in the International Journal of Lifelong Education, identified a trend for more emphasis on evidence-based and effective education, and proposed that this is linked to increases in public spending with 'strings attached'. They propose that as such concerns gain more legitimacy, traditional themes, such as exploring and advocating for democracy, social rights and justice fade (quoting Fejes and Salling Olesen, 2010, Rubensom and Elfert, 2019, in Nylander et al. 2024, p.40).

The QQI quality review into quality recommended that ETBs (the 'Boards') ensure QA processes lead to improvements in quality, a view that contrasts with the understanding within ETBs that QA is an executive, rather than a Board responsibility. The report advocates a stronger focus on establishing a proactive quality culture and on internal ownership of quality. ETBs should become more autonomous, less dependent on and more independent in allocating QA budgets (2023, p.17).

The goal is to develop culture inclusively, building knowledge and understanding across FET organisations, with management leading comprehensively. The concept of 'kaizen', which is a cooperative, collective, inclusive approach to continuous improvement, aligns with this goal. It depends on constructive management and open leadership and values all voices equally. Emerging quality governance units, established in ETBs from 2019 onwards, reflect this approach by including practitioner and learner representatives alongside management. Their involvement in interpreting theories of quality could support ETBs in clarifying their purpose in relation to quality, with support from the QA Network and ETBI.

Cultures of quality are constructed through systematic approaches based on specific theories or models. Leadership by senior management is critical for enhancing quality, eliminating fear associated with targets and creating open communication environments (Glykas et al, 2015, p.154). Deming argued that *'management should cease dependence on mass inspection'* because it is time-consuming and costly, and that higher-quality products are higher quality result when processes are developed, and embedded from the planning stages onward (Glykas et al. 2015, p.154), reducing stress in the process. The inclusive Deming model, featuring the 'plan, do act and check' cycle, aligns with democratic egalitarian principles but requires openness, transparency and equal consideration of all perspectives. It challenges hierarchical assumptions that privilege management or teaching staff over learners, or that assign different values to programmes at different NFQ levels. Connecting interpretations and definitions of

'quality' to FET, challenges us to consider how the goal to develop quality cultures can support improved access, learner experience and standards for learners.

Ehlers advocates for inclusion and learner participation in informing, designing and constructing the learning environment, and states that QA based on '*predefined, static frameworks'* can exclude co-production and active negotiation, particularly in heterogeneous learning environments. To engage in inclusive practices, staff need to be quality literate (2007, p. 99). For Ehlers, *Quality Literacy* extends to learners' ability to discern and make decisions about the quality of their own work too, and part of the task of practitioners is to support the development of this ability. Fixed and prescriptive quality standards may not be useful where learner needs and contexts vary widely, challenging practitioners to develop skills in participatory negotiation and co-production. This awareness can then extend into developing and improving learners' roles as stakeholders in the domain of quality, and in decision-making processes at policy levels.

QQI's Core Statutory Guidelines describe the broad quality areas and responsibilities of providers; Policies and Criteria for the Validation of Programmes (2017) detail the requirements for education and training programmes, and the development process, while policies for quality review and the ETB review handbook describe the approach to external reviews. Providers develop systems to meet these requirements and standards. In the FET sector, ETBs are the largest quality assured providers nationally. The extent to which a quality culture existed in the sector, and whether QA activities contributed to this, was considered by the review panel in their sectoral report (QQI, 2023, p.4). The panel emphasised that all professional staff should collaborate on QA at regional and national levels to improve knowledge and understanding through mutual learning.

2.2.4 What Does Quality Mean for Practice?

Professional development (PD) for teachers in QA is recognised as valuable and can be delivered through learning activities linked to review cycles and self-evaluation processes, for example through adopting Schon's concepts of 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action' (1983). However, PD for QA has not been delivered systematically across FET services. It is often accessed through self- selection or nomination such as participation in the Level 9 Award in Programme Development and Validation, or through short PD sessions provided by FESS. Another source of PD and learning is the local consideration of External Authenticator (EA) reports and the resulting improvement planning. Internal QA and self-evaluation can enable teachers to reflect on, and learn about their practice, and this reflection can take place at

centre, institutional or national level. Although a funding stream exists for self-selected, approved participation in CPD, within each ETB, but this may not always align with organisational strategy or universal QA.

Gosling & D'Andrea suggest that including pedagogical knowledge in the 'quality loop' can help support PD for teaching staff (in Krooi et al. 2024, p.4). This highlights the value of including pedagogical staff in procedure development, curriculum development and in governance structures in order to promote learning through involvement and action. In their review Krooi et al. found that teachers were positioned as change agents within internal QA systems, responsible for the development of modules or study programmes. This implies that teachers are primarily responsible for educational quality because they are most closely associated with the primary processes of teaching and learning (2024, p.5). Peer review and feedback can '*strengthen the notion of a learning community'* (2024, p.5). However, as Leney et al. observed, a focus on administration of new QA policies in FE may detract from pedagogy and learning (2007, p.83). The QQI Sectoral Report on Quality in ETBs similarly identified a lack of attention to teaching and learning, and limited opportunities for teachers to become involved in QA-related processes (QQI, 2023, pp. 13-14).

Developing shared language and understanding of key concepts and definitions in internal QA is important to ensure that experiences are positive and that unwanted side effects such as stress, window-dressing and bureaucratisation do not occur (Krooi et al. 2024, p.7). Krooi et al. propose an inclusive definition for internal QA:

> *Internal quality assurance for teaching and learning mobilises relevant actors for the purpose of improvement, professional development and accountability by means of systematic processes (Krooi et al. 2024, p.7).*

Purpose, people and processes (3 Ps) are dimensions that provide a potential framework for researching internal QA systems in institutions. This model can be aligned with different contexts and situations and has the potential to explain the '*working or non-working of internal QA'* (2024, p.7). Highlighting the value of robust dialogue, Krooi et al. propose a stimulating exchange that promotes formal learning opportunities, and learning through involvement in QA processes, supporting teacher improvement and commitment to quality (2024, p.8). Ehlers emphasises the *'importance of professionalism for quality development'* and quality literacy (2007 in Krooi et al., 2024, p.8), referring to the advanced knowledge, skills and reflective capacities required to engage meaningfully in QA activities, and linking them to a competence called '*quality literacy'*. "Quality literacy" is a concept emphasising the value of professionalism alongside '*structural quality management models'* (Ehlers, 2007, p. 96, in Krooi

et al. 2024), and it draws on Baacke's four elements of media literacy (1996, in Ehlers, 2007, p.100). Quality literacy is connected to TQM, continuous improvement processes and quality cultures (2007, p.99) and provides opportunities for inclusive intentional design for system development. According to Ehlers participatory quality development is important to support connection to 'higher purpose', and promote positive culture, participation and quality literacy (Ehlers, 2007, in Krooi et al., 2024, p.9). Both Ehler's and Krooi's work suggest a value in stepping back and being more intentional about how internal QA is developed, organised and structured.

Fundin et al acknowledge that we may have a cognitive bias towards rapid change and as a result, avoid the need to create stability. They argue for creating stability in changing environments affected by external sources (2025, p.274). Quality Management (QM) can contribute to '*organisational ambidexterity and adaptability'* through developing robust, easily adaptable processes, creating a new paradigm for achieving 'emergent quality improvement' (2025, p.274). This aligns with Snyder's view on the importance of safety in complex environments and systems (2013) and strengthens arguments for developing practitioner knowledge and skills through support, CPD and collegiate activities when designing curriculums, and considering approaches to improve quality for example (Ikram and Kenayathulla, 2023, p.170).

2.3. QA in the FET and ETB Context

2.3.1 QA Requirements and National Frameworks

Irish quality and qualifications legislation, the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ); QQI Core and Statutory QA Guidelines (2017), together with Sector-Specific and Topic Specific Statutory QA Guidelines outline the responsibilities of providers in relation to quality and quality assurance in education and training. Within these parameters, ETBs must determine how they will deliver high-quality programmes and high-quality learner experiences through localised development of frameworks for quality that take account of the levels of complexity within their organisations. Organisations applying for engagement or re-engagement with QQI must demonstrate how they meet the requirements set out in these guidelines.

The Policies and Criteria for the Validation by QQI of Programmes of Education and Training (2017) specify the requirements for programme development, validation and revalidation, while policies for quality review and the QQI Handbook for Inaugural Review of Quality in ETBs (2020) describe the purpose and approach to reviews. Providers must design systems that

meet these requirements and standards. As the largest quality-assured providers in the FET sector, ETBs play a central role in implementing these systems nationally.

The *QQI Sectoral Report on Quality Assurance in FET in the ETB Sector* examined the extent to which a quality culture existed in the sector and whether QA activities contributed to this (2023). The review panel emphasised that all professional staff are responsible for quality and highlighted the need for ETBs to collaborate regionally and nationally to improve knowledge and understanding through mutual learning. Ehlers four dimensions of quality literacy: Quality knowledge; quality experience; quality innovation and quality analysis (2007, p.100) could provide a framework for further development of this knowledge in the sector. Quality knowledge and quality experience build the competence to enable quality innovation and quality analysis.

2.3.2 ETB Quality Culture and System Development

The QQI panel expressed confidence that "the ETB sector has the capacity and enthusiasm for taking more responsibility for the development of a quality culture", but noted that this would require developing expertise in QA, clarifying responsibilities and funding central services and administrative support (QQI, 2023, p.15). The SOLAS 2022 Service Plan allocated its largest QA-related funding to ETBI (2022, p.73) to support the identification, development and promotion of QA supports and collaborative practice across ETBs. This funding covered QA system development; programme design; assessment and authentication; quality improvement planning; self-evaluation; and statutory review. Individual ETB QA funding was not separately recorded as allocations to ETBs, making it difficult to assess the level of assessment in the quality of FET nationally.

The QQI report recommended that ETBs ensure QA processes lead to improvements in quality, a view that contrasts with the understanding within ETBs that QA is an executive function rather than a Board responsibility (2023, p.14 & p.22). The report advocates a stronger focus on establishing a proactive quality culture and on internal ownership of quality. ETBs should become more autonomous, less dependent on external requirements, and more independent in allocating QA budgets (2023, p.17).

The report also recommends that ETBs be more explicit about the quality model they have chosen, echoing Glykas's argument that learning through model development supports quality culture (2015). ETBs should act autonomously and draw on guidance from their representative organisation, ETBI (2023, p.20). This suggests a need for immediate decisions about QA approaches and systems to influence long-term success, and for drawing on theory and

knowledge about quality models, and developing internal quality assurance rather than simply responding to external policy requirements as they arise. The QA Network of ETBI offers a mechanism for mobilising existing expertise to support this work collaboratively nationally and regionally.

2.3.3 Challenges and Opportunities for Practice

Learners experience education and training 'products' in varied ways, influenced by individuals backgrounds, experiences, attitudes and by prior knowledge. Within the range of programmes available in FET, content can range from the highly tangible, to the more intangible. For example, for example, when training people in manufacturing processes, pedagogic approaches may be influenced by behaviourist principles, while in personal development programmes, pedagogic approaches may be influenced by humanist principles. In FET, programmes and approaches draw on the full gamut of pedagogical theory, depending on purpose, target group and context. Challenges arise in drafting and reviewing MIPLOs and MIMLOs, highlighting the need for pedagogical and subject matter expertise among developers and evaluators. The learning outcomes approach pushes developers toward clearly defined, measurable outcomes aligned with specific standards, and supports are required for these professional to ensure the quality of their output, which will influence learner experience and satisfaction.

'Control' can be a challenging concept in parts of FET with strong roots in radical adult education traditions that value independent thinking, freedom and critical thought. The Irish Community Education Framework includes a commitment to quality learning experiences supported by 'co-ordinated QA supports' (2024, pp35 and 53). The Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) strategy emphasises evidence-informed, transparent, high-quality and efficient services under the theme of "accountability" (2021, p.34), prioritising high-quality teaching and expertise (p.37). The inclusive Deming model aligns with democratic egalitarian principles espoused by these sectors that seem to be predominantly concerned with the more marginalised sectors of society. The model requires openness, transparency and equal consideration of all perspective, challenging hierarchical assumptions that privilege management or teaching staff over learners, or that assign different value to programmes at different NFQ levels, indicating a need, if such a model were adopted, for much closer inclusive collaboration across the sector. Promoting isomorphism through cross-organisational and constructive social interaction with one another and promoting institutional entrepreneurship shows promise for understanding how best to implement requirements to meet standards locally (Seyfried et al. 2019, p.127).

2.3.4 Conclusions about Theories and Models of Quality

Ikram and Kenayathulla's systematic literature review (2023) on educational quality, spanning literature from early years education to higher education revealed that demographics and background characteristics can affect perception of quality in higher education (in Akareem and Hossain, 2016). Literature reviews on educational quality in VET and FET are less prevalent, and, of course, FET in Ireland is structured differently to VET in other jurisdictions, including as it does, adult education and community education, as well as VET. QA policy implementation in HE is motivated by political, ideological and bargaining interests, and influenced by practitioners' interests (Jarvis, 2014). The QQI Sectoral Report identified discrepancies in support for teachers and learners across different ETBs sections, for example in QA documentation and policy implementation (2023, p.13). There is a dichotomy between the pressure to fulfil national reporting requirements, while developing internal QA (IQA) that is focused on achieving equity, and transparency to ensure that learner experiences are high-quality, and currently, QA practitioners in FET work on both aspects within their day-to-day existence.

TQM is conceived predominantly as an administrative and management approach to quality, and could be interpreted to be applicable only to the administrative mechanisms for managing education and training processes for supporting the delivery of excellence. It is valuable for administratively supporting the delivery at the interface, and could be utilised to relieve pressure from learning practitioners (Saad and Aroudj, 2024, p.175), but this requires overlapping competences between administrators and pedagogical experts. A quality management system (QMS)based on TQM has some potential for adoption across FET services, as they are fundamentally focused on human development and enrichment. Deming placed 'the concept of quality within a human framework', (in Saad and Aroudj, 2024, p.181) which aligns with the humanistic goals of education and training, and illustrating the value of cyclical approaches which make the processes more manageable and accessible.

The existing QA network potentially provides an excellent platform for development of quality literacy, and proven quality management systems and models. In theory, universal understanding, based on a specific theory of quality, together with a collective national approach to embedding quality in the administration of FET, and a policy for quality in FET and a localised approach to innovation, development and pedagogy scaffolded and supported by the approach to administration may be constructive in the long term. This intersection between systems, policy, practice and theory may find a location in communities of practice,

where a social construction of the system is possible, and it is now worth considering their principles and possibilities, particularly in public service organisations (PSOs).

2.4 Communities of Practice (CoPs) as a Framework.

2.4.1 Understanding Communities of Practice (CoPs)

The concept of communities of practice (CoPs), developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and expanded by Wenger (1998, 2004), provides a useful framework for understanding how groups learn, share knowledge, develop practice collectively, and function as social structures (Etienne Wenger, interviewed by Omidvar and Kislov, 2014, p.269). CoPs are defined by three core dimensions: domain, community and practice. The *domain* refers to the shared area of interest or expertise the *community* refers to the relationships and interactions among members; and *practice* refers to the shared repertoire of resources, tools, language, stories and ways of working that develop over time. Developed initially through analysis of situated learning by Lave and Wenger (1991, Wenger, 1998), the concept is widely used in knowledge management and organisational learning (Crow and Mah, 2012, p.12), and appears as a familiar term in many fields where people of similar interests come together, including education and healthcare. In CoPs, communities of engaged practitioners come together united by common interests in learning about and sharing practice (Adler et al. 2024).

CoPs are characterised by mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoires. They support identity formation, knowledge exchange and the development of collective meaning. Wenger argues that learning is a social process (Buckley et al, 2019), that occurs through participation in shared activities, and that CoPs are central to this process. They can be formal or informal, intentional or emergent, and can exist within or across organisational boundaries.

Collective social learning environments that include practitioners across levels and boundaries can potentially provide stability, build knowledge and support adaptation during turbulence. Aligning TQM and CoP theory may provide servant leaders, transformational leaders, policy makers and senior managers with tools to enable trusted professional autonomy and intellectual freedom for FET QA practitioners charged with policy implementation. Addressing fissures and gaps through ‘knowledgeable libation’ may fertilise new development and rich growth at the boundaries (Bayo Akomolafe, 2017) in FET. Through determining whether the QA Network acts as a community of practice or not possibilities may emerge to nurture it’s future potential in FET. Boundaries act as fertile ground for learning when members move back and forth between different communities, enabling broad knowledge construction about the

domain of practice and subverting silos (Hodson, 2019, p.505), and this will be illustrated through reference to landscapes of practice later in this section.

In public sector organisations (PSOs). CoPs have been recognised as valuable mechanisms for knowledge sharing, knowledge co-creation, innovation and professional learning. Pacheco and Paul quote Sergeev and Duryan (2021) who found that individuals do not consider adding explicit knowledge to a repository, for example continuous sharing of documents and data online, as Knowledge Management (KM) but place more importance on knowledge sharing between individuals, and this sharing and co-construction of knowledge is one of the key benefits cited about communities of practice (2023). According to Pacheco and Paul, digitisation can lead to increased speed of decision-making, and consequently increased competition, due to increased accountability. This can occur at a cost to the rich, human, social interaction that is linked to cognition, and shared learning. One key agent in this research, Robert commented that the increased 'agendaisation' of the work of the network curtails open discussion and dialogue, and the business of the network is more timebound, or perhaps managed, as a result (*Interview Data)*. CoPs can help overcome hierarchical structures by enabling distributed expertise, boundary spanning and collaborative problem-solving. However, CoPs in PSOs also face challenges, including issues of legitimacy, uneven participation, organisational constraints and the risk of being co-opted into managerial agendas.

The literature review revealed that the concept of CoPs has developed over three significant 'generations' from being an analytical tool within organisations; to an instrumental knowledge management tool cultivated intentionally, across co-located groups in constellations of practice, to a concept that embraces 'knowledgeability', boundary spanning and multi-membership in landscapes of practice (Omidvar and Kislov, 2014, p.267). CoPs offer a 'third space for social learning' (Adelle et al, 2020), and for practice evolution, and this study explores QA practitioners' collective learning and its impact on policy implementation in the FET sector.

Tummons however, critiques CoP theory as 'frustratingly brief' (2023, p.69), and that the theory contains specific theoretical absences, in the form of political economy; gender; conflicts between the concepts of individual learning and collective learning; issues with literacy and language, for example in understanding and application of artefacts; and power relationships, for example in the form of hierarchical structures. According to Tummons, it is important to be aware of these issues, and apply other theories too when considering the use

of CoPs, indicating that there is scope for more detailed interrogation of CoP theory in conjunction with other theories or 'theoretical plug-ins' when considering how they can be most effectively applied (2023, p.76). This suggests that there are possibilities too for integrating theories about quality with CoP theories to enable the development of quality systems.

2.4.2 CoPs in QA and FET

The relevance of CoPs to QA in FET is evident in the emphasis on collaboration, shared understanding and collective responsibility for quality. However, Tummons stresses the importance of creating CoPs with a firm grasp of the associated theories, including establishing a learning architecture (2023, p. 70). Ehlers' argument for participatory negotiation and co-production or co-creation aligns closely with CoP principles (2007). In heterogeneous learning environments, where fixed and prescriptive quality standards may not be effective, CoPs offer a way for practitioners to negotiate meaning, interpret guidelines and develop shared approaches to quality, working within and across the boundaries, real or imagined, of their variable environments.

CoPs can support the development of quality literacy, enabling staff to understand and engage with quality concepts, processes and expectations associated with national policy and legislation. They also provide a space for reflective practice, peer learning and development of shared language, all of which are identified as essential for positive internal QA experiences (Krooi et al. 2024). Through regular interaction, CoPs can help practitioners make sense of complex QA requirements, reduce stress and bureaucratisation and strengthen commitment to quality.

In the FET context, CoPs can also help bridge the gap between administrative QA processes and pedagogical practice. As Leney et al. (2007) observed, an overemphasis on administrative compliance can detract from pedagogy and learning. CoPs offer mechanisms for reconnecting QA with teaching and learning by involving teachers, managers and QA practitioners in shared inquiry and collaborative problem-solving.

2.4.3 The ETBI QA Network as a Community of Practice

The ETBI QA Network displays many characteristics of a community of practice. It brings together QA practitioners from across ETBs who share interest and experience in a common domain, which is quality assurance in FET. Through regular meetings, working groups, shared projects and collaborative problem-solving, the network has developed a strong sense of community and a shared repertoire of tools, templates, specialist language and practices.

The network supports knowledge exchange and co-construction, mutual learning and the development of consistent approaches to QA across ETBs. It provides a space for practitioners to interpret policy, share challenges, develop solutions and build collective understanding. In doing so, it contributes to the development of a quality culture across the sector.

The ETBI QA Network also plays a boundary-spanning role, connecting ETBs with national bodies such as QQI and SOLAS, and enabling the flow of information, expectations and interpretations across organisational levels. This positions the network as a key mechanism for supporting ETB autonomy, strengthening internal QA systems and contributing to long-term quality development.

Viewed through the lens of Quality 5.0 (Deleryd and Fundin, 2025), the network has the potential to support long-term, sustainable, system-wide quality development by fostering collaboration, shared responsibility and systems thinking (Senge, 1993). Its role in mobilising expertise, supporting reflective practice and building shared understanding positions it as a central driver of quality culture in the FET sector, across organisational and network boundaries.

2.5 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has explored the complex and often contested concept of quality in education and training, tracing its evolution from early notions of inherent excellence to contemporary understandings shaped by accountability, transparency and stakeholder participation. Definitions of quality vary widely, influenced by political, economic and pedagogical perspectives, and the literature highlights persistent tensions between bureaucratic requirements and values-based, learner-centred approaches. The emergence of Quality 5.0, with its emphasis on sustainability, systems thinking and societal benefits, offers opportunities for considering long-term quality development in the FET sector. It also offers opportunities for drawing together a strong foundation for person-centred quality and humanistic approaches favoured in adult education, potentially offering opportunities for more extensive innovation across FET in response to the complex problems of the 21st century.

Quality assurance in education and training has been shown to encompass both enhancement and accountability, with internal QA systems shaped by purpose, people and processes (Krooi et al. 2024). The QQI Sectoral Report on Quality in ETBs (2023) emphasised the need for ETBs to develop clearer quality models, strengthen internal ownership of quality, and build proactive cultures supported by appropriate structures, expertise and resources. These

findings highlight both the challenges and opportunities facing ETBs as they continue to develop their QA systems within a rapidly evolving policy environment.

The chapter examined the practical implications of quality for teaching and learning. Professional development, reflective practice, shared language and collaborative engagement were identified as essential components of effective internal QA. Teachers play a central role as change agents, yet their involvement in QA processes has not always been prioritised. Ensuring that QA supports rather than constrains pedagogy remains a critical concern.

Finally, the chapter introduced the concept of communities of practice (CoPs) as a valuable framework for enabling collaborative quality development. CoPs emphasise shared learning, mutual engagement and the co-construction of meaning in social environments. These principles align closely with the needs of a dynamic and diverse ETB FET sector. The ETBI QA Network demonstrated many characteristics of a CoP, providing a space for practitioners to share knowledge, interpret policy, develop consistent approaches and build collective capacity. Its boundary-spanning role positions it as a key mechanism for supporting ETB autonomy, strengthening internal QA systems and contributing to long-term quality development.

Taken together, the literature suggests that developing a sustainable quality culture in FET requires both robust systems and collaborative participatory practices. Chapter three features the research methodology employed to study the QA Network, and following that, the findings of the research will demonstrate how the QA Network operates as a community of practice.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter will describe the methodological approach used to address the research aims and objectives. The ETBI QA Network represents a social environment where QA practitioners participate as a group in activities associated with implementing policies for quality and qualifications in the further education and training (FET) sector, and a pragmatic, qualitative approach was indicated. The chapter begins by exploring research in social science. I will describe my choices and attempt to justify them, referring to the different approaches, organisation and research stages. Next, I will describe the ethical approach, the research design, and data collection, concluding with the data analysis process.

3.2 Philosophy, Paradigms and Worldviews

3.2.1 Research in Social Science

Ontology is to do with the nature or essence of what is being investigated, and epistemology, concerns the basis of knowledge and how it can be acquired. Human nature and humans' relationship to their environment have implications about and influence on researchers' methodological concerns and choices (Cresswell, 2007, p.17, quoted in Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2010;). The QA Network central to this research is, in its essence, a social construct, characterised by human interaction, supporting QA policy implementation in FET. Development and growth through human interaction is key to FET, populated as it is by learners, teachers, instructors, trainers, guidance professionals, QA practitioners and managers.

The research aim is to explore the concepts of quality and communities of practice (CoPs), and the role and impact of the ETBI QA Network, as a CoP, on quality in FET. Learning from network members' and key agents' lived experiences, I will attempt to describe the network and to relate my findings to the five research questions. My research choices will determine how this knowledge will be acquired, and may add to the body of knowledge about CoPs in PSOs.

Cohen, Mannion and Morrison clarify two perspectives when studying social reality: a positivist perspective and an anti-positivist perspective. Subscribing to natural science methods that value the objective and tangible, is to be positivist, rooted in materialist concepts of research. An anti-positivist stance implies involvement with research subjects and rejection of

the natural scientist's stance which is based on experimentation. The experimental approach features research in which results are observed, and sometimes based on control groups against which findings about other groups are compared scientifically. This research conforms with the anti-positivist stance, which focuses on the personal, subjective and unique.

In the nineteenth century, positivist researchers, taking objective perspectives, applied the natural science techniques to social science to explain human behaviour, validating theory using experimental or quasi-experimental methods, in a desire to create change in society. In this version, quantitative, scientific and experimental methods were favoured as verifiable, generalisable and repeatable and perceived as a reliable, trusted method for research.

Advocating shifts to more pragmatic approaches, anti-positivists criticised positivist perspectives, perceived to be in favour of measuring the easily quantified and excluding choice, individuality and freedom, favouring humanist perspectives instead, (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2010, p.17). Anti-positivists favoured and advocated for more pragmatic approaches to researching the experiences of humans, adopting qualitative methods and pragmatic approaches.

Pragmatism is referred to by Gorard and Taylor as a label for how we behave in normal life (2004). Saldaña (2021, pp.4-5) advocates choosing 'the right tool for the right job' and counsels researchers to adopt 'pragmatic eclecticism', remaining open to emerging issues with research methods during initial data collection phases (2021, p.90). This research is underpinned by pragmatism allowing flexible approaches, while maintaining a focus on quality and ethical values.

Systematic approaches to research originally applied in scientific, quantitative methods, are important, according to Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2010). Systematic approaches are equally applicable to qualitative methods, as an organising feature to ensure rigour and integrity. Thus, researchers who take pragmatic perspectives utilise multiple modes and methods that include the qualitative and quantitative, mixing methods to meet researcher and task needs while the research is being conducted (2010).

Applying the interpretive paradigm, using predominantly qualitative methods, researchers view the world through the experiences and perceptions of participants, gathering and interpreting the data to construct understanding of the situation (Thanh, 2015). The interpretivist paradigm takes account of the numerous, unique perspectives and experiences likely to arise in interactions with research participants. Slater describes how an interpretive framework was adopted by advocates of social constructionism, contending that *'knowledge is*

not a thing that emerges from established phenomena rather knowledge arises from a socially constructed communal process' (2017). Social constructionism is intended to answer three main questions about the basis of knowledge; the nature of reality and about how humans make sense of their experiences (Slater, 2017). The term 'social constructivism' is also used, and was rooted in the early 20th century 'extramural exiles' of Vienna University, who rejected the post-World War 1 growth of totalitarianism, anti-democracy and anti-Semitism within its walls. The key proponents of the theory, which was linked to the emergence of the innovative possibilities of the social sciences were Schutz, Berger and Luckmann. Schutz produced a book called 'The Phenomenology of the Social World' (1932), which itself was influenced by the work of Max Weber, and the Austrian School of Economics (Pfadenhauer, in Knoblauch and Pfadenhauer, 2018, pp 1-16). Luckmann and Berger, in turn, produced the book ''The Social Construction of Reality' in 1966. Luckmann then became involved in 'the interpretive turn' and 'qualitative methods' (Pfadenhauer, 2018, p.5). Reality, knowledge and learning are constructed through human activity, social processes and individuals create meaning through interactions with others, and with the environment in which they live (Kim, 2001). Co-operation and co-construction are features of social constructivism/constructionism (Pfadenhauer, 2018, p.9). Constructionism and constructivism are connected to social sciences and to how knowledge and learning are constructed and to research associated with social activities.

Recognising that the participants in this research possess particular experiences, knowledge and perspectives, and my own connection as an involved insider, I take a pragmatic, qualitative stance, engaging in co-construction of the findings through social interactions with participants who are deeply engaged in the domain of QA in FET. It must be noted that the research participants are members of a community in which they strive to make sense of new policies, legislation and guidelines through their own interactions in a social situation, co-constructing knowledge, and leading to the adoption of certain norms of practice for QA in FET. Their activity within the QA Network and beyond reflects the theory of social constructionism, but more research is warranted to determine how this affects and influences the implementation of the legislation, policies and guidelines.

In this research, I have chosen to use predominantly qualitative methods, pragmatically contextualising the situation, for example, when describing the document analysis process and demographics (Castellan, 2010). The insights and results of this research are based on my interpretation, having combined and analysed data gathered in a spirit of inquiry, using qualitative methods in a predominantly qualitative process.

Braun and Clarke describe how knowledge generation is subjective and situated in nature (2006, 2012), and the qualitative researcher is consequently immersed in new knowledge production. They make the case for reflexivity in research, as a professional responsibility in research practice, recognising that researchers have a generative role in developing high quality codes, interpreting findings and developing high quality themes in a creative process. (2021, p9). Reflexive researchers can expect to work inductively, and responsively, and to exert intentional or unintentional influence on their findings (Jootun et al. 2009, p.42, in Palanganas et al. 2017, p.427). Personally, I have been deeply involved in all aspects of implementing policies for quality and qualifications in Irish FET, from working in unaccredited programmes in the early 1990s, becoming an early adopter of the potential of the NFQ for marginalised young people and adults, to managing processes for quality assurance of assessment; programme development; cyclical review and evaluation of validation and reengagement applications, as well as being a fully engaged participant in a number of communities of practice nationally. Inevitably, as a result, complete detachment is not an option for me, justifying my choice to take an interpretive, pragmatic, qualitative approach to the research, recognising the role of social constructionism, both in interactions with participants, and reflecting how their knowledge developed, and allowing me to make pragmatic adjustments if necessary during the research process.

3.2.2 Researching a Social Situation

The research aim is to explore the concepts of quality and communities of practice (CoPs), and the role of the ETBI QA Network and its impact on quality in FET, interpreting findings based on participants' insights (Habermas (RIP, March 14th, 2026), 1984, pp109-110), in Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2010 p.26). My aim is to search for sets of meaning, meaningful relationships and meaning-making activities which have consequences for action in 'invented' and 'nested' social realities (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2010, p.10), within the QA Network and its landscapes of practice.

The research participants are linked and connected in a social situation through their interaction in the network, across networks and across their organisations, representing a collective effort to understand and render policies that affect the FET sector meaningful. The FET QA community is infused with actors' 'assumptions, aspirations, biases and political preferences' (Molla, 2021, p.4). Reflexivity, which refers to the researcher's own consciousness and awareness while involved in research (Palaganas et al. 2017, p.426) and dialogical inquiry can lay bare and reveal biases, making beliefs and values central to the work rather than suspending them (Molla, 2021, p.5) and critical research that accesses tacit meaning

embedded in discourses through interpretation, can clarify social reality (2021 p.6), but, unlike positivist approaches the researcher role is perceived as embedded and involved in the research process.

Through focusing on QA in FET as a joint enterprise, with QA Network members and key agents, the emerging narrative and critical issues may create opportunities for innovation and new thinking about the function of CoPs within FET in Ireland (Molla, 2021, p.17), in an environment where volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) have become a norm. It is possible that, through conducting this research, the actual situation will be illuminated, providing a roadmap for future progress, building on the Network's reputation and modelling the approach (Molla, 2021, p.17).

Exploring and explaining how policy discourses function as a hegemonic ideology, linked to power or dominance of leadership or access to resources to constitute particular subjects including world views (ontology) and accepted knowledge forms (epistemology) is perceived by Regmi as the responsibility of researchers with an interest in policy (2019). It will be interesting to find out whether transfer of knowledge through the QA Network and policy implementation has influenced how language and processes are used, created and embedded and now accepted as norms for the sector, through the QA Network's social setting (2019, p. 71). Zilber and Meyer characterise qualitative studies as being 'spiral endeavours' which require researchers to go back and forth between the literature, data and emerging themes, including, for example, reframing research questions (2022, p.387). This mirrors my own experience when deciding to use Wenger's CoP characteristics as a lens to study the QA Network, to use complexity theory as a lens to help me understand the FET environment, and of choosing to approach elites as 'key agents'. The spiral decision-making included gathering as much demographic information about the network as possible as essential pieces of the jigsaw that would contribute to the research. Returning to the data from literature reviews and from research participants in a cyclical fashion was essential to constructing insights and drawing conclusions.

3.3 Researching Complex Situations

Turner and Baker advocate that social science should move towards 'the field of complexity' because it can provide new ways of looking at complex situations. Social network analysis can provide a method or tool for optimising systems, and studying leadership, diversity, teams and workplace engagement in this complex scenario. (2019, p.17). Giving an overview of FET and the role of the ETB and the QA Network within Irish education and training demonstrates the

complex nature of the environment in which the Network is located. Zilber and Meyer's ecosystem mapping (2022) is used to illustrate the QA Network's symbiotic connections as a potential CoP within a landscape of practice (Appendix H).

Cohen, Mannion and Morrison stress that educational research is important because it can catch the 'deliberate, intentional, agentic actions of participants' (2010, p.34), and thus interactionist and constructivist perspectives are relevant for educational research, reflecting the social context. Complexity theory recognises that there are multiple perspectives which can change, depending on what system component is placed at the centre, and this suggests that it is helpful to use multiple methods, and to seek out diverse voices. Uhl-Bien and Arena describe complex adaptive systems as being dynamic and self-organising without centralised control which continually evolve according to environmental conditions (2018), and this description is sometimes reflected in large organisations, institutions and systems.

Complexity theory influenced a decision to map the landscape of practice associated with the QA Network, enabling me to understand the eco-system within which it is embedded, and to use this 'warm data' to prompt discussion. Turner and Baker (2019) argue that complexity theory facilitates a move away from traditional units of analysis (individuals, communities, institutions and systems), interpreting them as a web or eco-system with interchangeable central nodes. According to Pacheco and Paul (2023), complexity theory focuses on understanding the non-linear dynamic change processes in complex systems with self-organisation attributes and their emergent properties. Complexity theory recognises that individuals move in non-linear directions. This theory emerging from climate science, enhances our understanding of the symbiotic existence of communities and societies. 'Warm data', defined as 'information about the interrelationships that integrate a complex system' (Bateson, 2017, p.2) can leverage change in institutions, societies and communities. Cohen et al say that this may be a challenging prospect for educational research (2010).

Complexity theory provides a lens with which to look at interacting system parts and patterns, and can illustrate a reality that may be difficult to describe in other ways. Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) is a framework to enable leaders to *'recognise the features of their own organisation, making it more understandable and more significant'* (quoting Rosenhead et al. in Bond, 2023), allowing them to step back and view events as they relate to a 'much larger and much more complex web of interactions' (2023, p.24).

3.3.1 Placing Myself Within these Perspectives

This study into the ETBI QA Network as a potential CoP concerned with QA uniquely considers network members' and key agents' experiences and insights in the FET context. Network members who are QA practitioners are employed in 16 ETBs to manage, administer and facilitate work linked to national policy implementation based on quality and qualifications legislation. The QA Network has sustained itself in various iterations despite personnel, legislative and policy changes. This topic choice is timely, as the network approaches its tenth anniversary in its current format. A unique opportunity is presented to explore the network's nature through three characteristics identified by Wenger-Trayner and Lave: Domain, Community and Practice (1991,1999, 2020).

The literature review revealed that the concept of CoPs has developed over three significant 'generations' from being an analytical tool within organisations; to an instrumental knowledge management tool cultivated intentionally, across co-located groups in constellations of practice, to a concept that embraces 'knowledgeability', boundary spanning and multi-membership in landscapes of practice (Omidvar and Kislov, 2014, p.267). CoPs offer a 'third space for social learning' (Adelle et al., 2021), and for practice evolution, and this study explores QA practitioners' collective learning and its impact on policy implementation in the FET sector. Focused on the rich environment of the QA Network, I will seek participants' insights to provide evidence of their lived experience (Van Manen (1990, p.183; Braun and Clarke, 2021, p. 8).

My long-term engagement with QA policy and practice, combined with my personal and professional history, provides a unique vantage point from which to explore the experiences of QA Network members. My long-standing professional relationships should facilitate open dialogue with participants. This positionality, which included understanding of organisational cultures and histories enables a deeply contextualised, critically reflective, and practice-informed analysis that aligns with the aims of this study.

The main topic of interest in my research is the efficacy of the QA Network in FET quality assurance within ETBs. In the initial research proposal, the research questions were:

> Does the QA Network function as a Community of Practice as conceptualised in the literature?
>
> How does the QA Network contribute to policy learning?

What impact does the QA Network have on implementation and development of procedures?

Has learning in the QA Network resulted in the transformation of practice?

During the process, I presented the project to the QA Network, and reflecting on that meeting, I realised that the initial intention was somewhat abstract. I decided that there was a need to align the research questions more closely with members' immediate concerns if I was to be successful in gathering good data and achieving realistic outcomes. This was a first foray into pragmatism. On reflection however, and given the data quantities gathered subsequently, I could have reduced the number of research questions considerably.

Reframing the questions to include reference to standards, I sought to answer them through interrogating the QA Network eco-system, applying qualitative methods within the interpretivist paradigm, and drawing on the principles of complexity theory, which advocates an interactionist and constructivist approach. The reframed questions were:

1. Does the QA Network function as a CoP as envisaged by Wenger et al?
2. How does the QA Network contribute to educational standards in FET?
3. Does the QA Network contribute to policy learning? If so, how?
4. Does the QA Network have an impact on policy implementation and if so, how?
5. Is the QA Network part of a constellation or landscape of practice?

While there is considerable literature pertaining to CoPs, in fact, there are significant gaps in research which applies the concept accurately (Adelle et al., 2021) and McGrath et al (2020). There is a need for clarity and alignment with theory when establishing and nurturing CoPs, and, located in the public service, this research represents an opportunity to explore perceptions of, and opportunities for, this inter-organisational CoP (McGrath et al, 2020).

The research project was designed to be pragmatic and multi-modal, within the social constructionist tradition (Slater, 2017). Taking a pragmatic approach, and through systematic document analysis, qualitative surveys, semi-structured interviews and participatory focus groups, the research questions were addressed with the research participants. The research is underpinned by academic rigour and ethics, and by adopting multiple methods, seeks to hear participants' voices and perspectives, to support triangulation and achieve clarity.

Inspired by eclectic, pragmatic approaches (Castellan, 2010; Zilber and Meyer, 2022), and the 'warm data' concept (Bateson, 2017), I decided to map the landscape of practice, or landscape of practice within which the CoP is located. Warm data is defined as 'living data', that can promote the emergence of new insights, making the invisible visible (Nørlem et al., 2022, p10).

The resulting map would act as a prompt for discussion at a focus group session with Network members. Bateson defines warm data as '*information that is alive within the transcontextual relating of a living system' (2022, p.10),* and I felt that, having explored the literature, documentary evidence and chronologies, a map would offer routes for participants to clarify and expand on the situation from their own perspectives.

3.3.2 Research Design

In order to achieve the research objectives, openness to emerging design was key. Constant reflection and reflexivity on the context and the research were required to remain alert to my own perceptions and assumptions. In turn, openness to a need to change of research questions was necessary based on reflection on processes.

The research design was based on the pragmatic four-stage approach (Figure 3) proposed by Trafford and Leshem (2008), and the process developed through a sequence of research cycles (Appendix I):

1. Contextualising the setting through reference to, and analysis of documentary sources, held in ETBI and ETB archives, and relevant to the QA Network (meeting notes, agendas, strategic documents and reports), or available in the public domain (national policy documents and reports) primarily for setting the scene and for fact-checking of events and timelines.

2. Contextualising and illustrating the QA practitioners' work and experience through gathering demographic data and qualitative data using a qualitative survey

3. Gathering 'leading opinions' through semi-structured interviews, which may serve, with the document analysis as a means of triangulation.

4. Reflection on critical incidents through reflexive thematic analysis and 'warm data' mapping through focus groups.

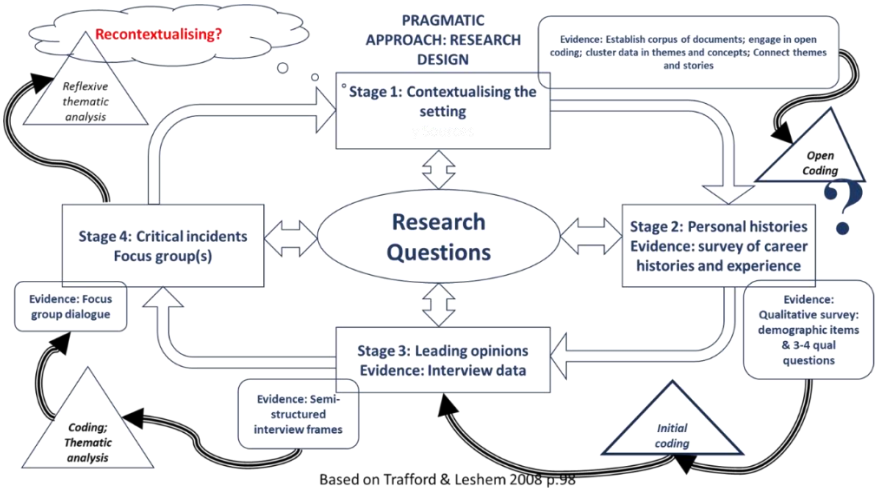


Figure 3: The Pragmatic Research Design Model

The research timeline emerged when the project was fully approved by ETBI and the Research Ethics Committee, and it enabled flexibility where necessary, for example, during the data

collection phase, when arranging the semi-structured interviews (Figure 4).

Approvals and presentations		
	Project presented to ETBI	Autumn 2022
	Project Approval by ETBI	January 2023
	REC Approval	April 2023
	QA Network presentations and updates	February 2023; November, 2023 and November, 2024.
Research Phases	**Process**	
1	Document Collation	November-2022
	Document Review	March-2023
2	Qualitative Survey Testing	November-2023
	Qualitative Survey Distribution: Gathering career histories and experiences	December-2023
	Qualitative Survey reminders issued	December-2023
	Qualitative Data Analysis (Nvivo)	April-2024
3	Semi-structured Interviews with Key Agents: Gathering leading opinions	May-2024
	Analysis	June-2024
	Framework Matrix (Nvivo)	July-2024
4	Focus Groups: Exploring critical incidents and experiences	November-2024
	Analysis cycle	November 2024 - July 2025
5	Writing and drafting	January 2024 – September 2025

Figure 4: Research Timeline

Figure 4 Research Timeline

3.3.3 Research Ethics

ETBI gave approval to the project proposal in January, 2023, (Appendix A) and the approval from the DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC) was confirmed in April, 2023. The project was introduced to the QA Network in February 2023, and updates presented in November, 2023, prior to the data collection phase, and November, 2024, at online meetings. In the research planning, care was required in constructing an appropriate analytical, theoretical or conceptual framework, that will allow analysis to reflect QA Network characteristics (Koliba and Gajda, 2009 p.97).

Through my status as an informed insider, I knew many of the research participants as peers, and have had professional working relationships with them through the course of our careers.

This study was connected to my interest in developing QA systems in FET. As a colleague, and also a researcher, it was be necessary for me to spend time with the participants, whom I know well, and I needed to keep this role separation in mind during the research, but to also be mindful of my own depth of knowledge as part of the exercise of co-construction of knowledge – one advantage of the qualitative paradigm.

The research findings were co-constructed, especially during the focus group interaction, based on shared experiences, and considering what more we can learn. In this context, trust, acknowledgement and awareness were instrumental in assuring the quality of the research and data, and respect for the knowledge and experiences of participants was key to its success. Taking this approach, quality data provided robust evidence to inform knowledge construction, high quality analysis, narrative and insights.

Given that the population being surveyed was employed in quasi-academic roles, literacy issues were not anticipated. Taking account of the possibility of invisibility however, inclusion was achieved through reassuring participants that spelling and grammar were not being critiqued or measured in any way (Braun et al. 2021, p.644), and I included a note to this effect when distributing surveys.

The qualitative survey and consent form were built in the Google Forms function within the suite made available to DCU students. The DCU Zoom platform was used for recording interviews and focus groups and generating interview transcripts. The Otter app was used as a back-up recording device to ensure that data would remain available and to mitigate against unexpected data loss. All participants were notified in advance about arrangements for recording, backing up and analysing data and notified that all digital records would be destroyed at the project's conclusion. Transcripts were reviewed and errors corrected where necessary. Recordings were listened to at least twice to ensure accuracy.

All participants have been anonymised, and allocated pseudonyms (Figure 6) to protect their identity, although it must be noted that the population engaged in QA management in FET is small, and there is a slight risk that individuals quoted in the report may be identified. All participants were informed that if extracts from their interviews were used, these would be circulated to them for checking and approval before publication.

Ntienjom et al. highlight that researchers must keep in mind their own situatedness and its effect on the research subjects, and take responsibility for this (2022, p.2). As an 'insider-outsider' I can claim 'multi-positionality' due to my own extensive sector experience. I did notice during data collection that my own reactions reflected my experience. I realised too that

some participants, particularly key agents, did not realise or know that I had extensive personal experience and knowledge of the sector, having worked in many situations similar to their own. This was not something I had considered as a likely issue until it occurred during the interviews, and I ensured that interviewees' voices were not interrupted by my own desire to argue a point, justify, explain, defend, agree or disagree, although tempted to do so at times. My role was to create a positive space for interaction, reflection, confidentiality, transparency and reliability (Ntienjom et al. 2022, p.3).

3.4 The Research Process

3.4.1 Reviewing the Literature on Communities of Practice and on Quality

I reviewed 95 research articles and publications, with eight excluded immediately as not covering the topic sufficiently, leaving 87 articles for consideration. The article 'Thinking together: what makes communities of practice work?' by Pyrko et al. published in 2017, acted as an inspiration for the research, as it compared two communities of practice in the Scottish healthcare environment, in organisations similar to ETB environments. When I initially read the article, the CoPs described reminded me of the ETBI QA Network. I was already familiar with Wenger's book 'Communities of Practice' (1999) having been drawn to the concept through my work previously with groups in the education and training sectors. These documents served as starting points for the research, together with a third document, focused on CoPs in public services, 'Cultivating sustainable communities of practice within hierarchical bureaucracies' by Duryan and Smyth (2019). I decided that, to understand the concept well, I should engage fully with Wenger's 1999 publication, Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, Identity, and took time to read it thoroughly, identifying the main CoP characteristics and principles and these inspired initial codes when I decided to use NVivo to assist the literature review process.

All eighty-seven articles were uploaded to NVivo, an online qualitative data analysis (QDA) tool. During this process, I became familiar with the articles, and in the final analysis, thirty-nine articles were most influential for identifying CoP characteristics and possibilities, and developing data collection instruments.

When searching for articles on CoPs, my primary searches included 'Community of Practice'; Communities of Practice'; 'Communities of Practice in VET'; 'Communities of Practice in FET'; 'communities of practice in FE' and 'CoPs in Training'; and 'Communities of Practice in Education', for example. As my knowledge of CoPs developed, through references in articles found, and accidental discoveries in searches, I broadened the search to include public service organisations. The process has provided a suite of additional resources for further work on

CoPs not necessarily referenced in this study, but which may be useful in further studies. Similarly, I used a range of terms to locate articles relevant to QA in FET or VET, including *quality assurance, quality assurance in VET, quality assurance in FET, total quality management, quality management systems, quality improvement, quality literacy and EQAVET quality indicators.* Following initial searches, literature on both areas was searched through the iterations of the research, guided by my own curiosity and the input of peers, advisors and examiners, and by initial literature reviews.

3.4.2 Data Collection

Stage 1: Contextualising the Setting

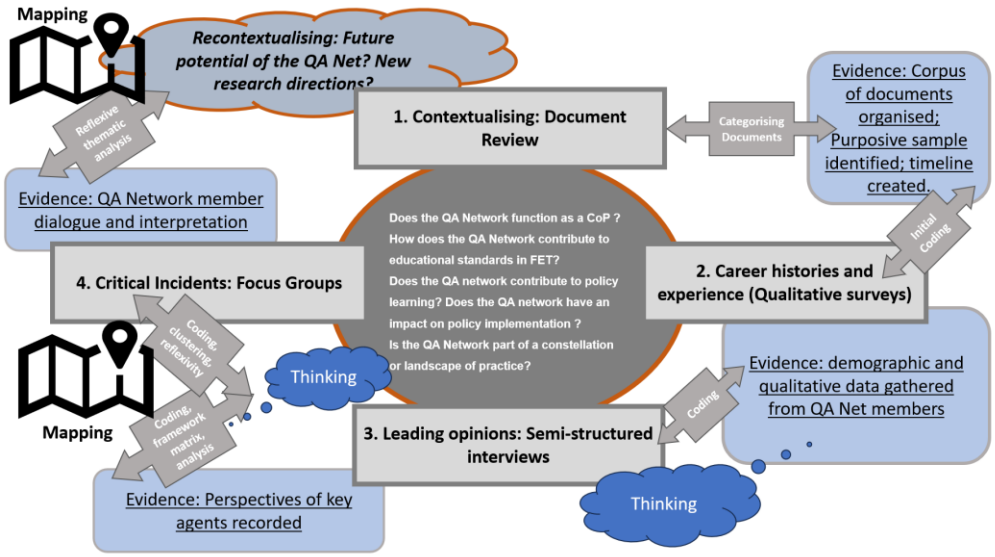


Figure 5: The Research Process

A document corpus was established, for review and analysis and for the purpose of understanding the context of the QA Network and identifying potential research participants. A total of 245 documents was included for consideration, and categorised by date range and type from 2006 to 2022 (Appendix E). These documents were useful for identifying potential research participants, and for tracking the different stages of the Network's existence. Documents were drawn from the KWETB QA filing system and the ETBI repository of QA Network documents. The document review supported timeline construction (Appendix F), which also helped to contextualise the setting. The documents illustrated the language used in the QA undertaking within the sector, although deep language analysis is beyond the scope of this research, and they helped in mapping the landscape of practice (Figure 10).

The documents were clustered as meeting notes, agendas, reports, communications, workplans and 2023 - 2024 DFET Forum updates; planning documents and consultation responses (Appendix D). Interesting items were 'starred' in the electronic filing system for additional review if relevant and uploaded to NVivo for further coding, clustering or analysis if necessary (Wood et al, 2020). The documentary sources were used to identify a purposive sample for the qualitative survey, and key agents for the semi-structured interviews.

Stage 2: Personal Histories – Qualitative Survey Design

Qualitative surveys presented an opportunity to glean participants' personal histories and experiences, and for participants to reflect on their network experiences in response to carefully phrased qualitative questions. According to Braun, et al. 2021, p.642) qualitative surveys offer a 'wide angle lens' and opportunities to capture diverse experiences and voices and are useful where the population sampled is likely to offer diverse perspectives. While QA Practitioners work in a common field, their practices, expertise, specialisms, qualifications and experiences are different. QA Network members are all involved in policy implementation, but their experiences, workplaces and backgrounds are different, and they are geographically dispersed.

Qualitative Survey Participants

Comprehensive document review yielded a total of 128 individuals directly involved in supporting QA implementation and present at national forums and groups across the ETB sector since 2007. Fifty-eight were eliminated as possibilities, based on limited references in the meeting minutes, inconsistent attendance or evidence that they had retired or left the system, especially during the pre-ETB, VEC phase.

The remaining seventy were deemed to be active in the ETB systems, and a qualitative survey was distributed to them by e-mail through ETBI's contact list to reduce GDPR risks, together with a consent form for completion. A reminder was sent about the survey three times, with a significant final drive supported by the development team at ETBI.

Braun and Clarke recommend using standard, closed questions which yield cleaner summaries of demographic data (Braun et al. 2021, p.647). I included closed questions about time in role, as a network member, and so on, and open-ended questions to enable respondents to provide rich descriptions of their roles and their route into the QA Network. These were supplemented with open qualitative questions to glean insights into their experiences.

An initial 108 possible questions based on the research questions, CoP literature, and informed by the grey literature on QA, were drafted, and reduced to 16 final survey questions: five demographic or 'trajectory' questions, and eleven main qualitative topic-based questions, divided into context and background; network experience; knowledge transfer; policy learning and implementation (Appendix J). Three more logistics questions were included asking permission to contact respondents regarding a focus group and a final open question asked participants to record any areas or issues not covered

Thinking about question design for quality and depth, without provoking responses influenced by my own thought process in framing the questions, took time, and helped to eliminate questions from the initial survey drafts. A draft questionnaire was piloted by six colleagues, or just over 6% of the purposive sample. All the testers were involved in QA in FET, and were familiar with the context. Feedback highlighted spelling and numbering issues, which were corrected, and the main adjustment was to make an analogue survey available if required, but no further lines of inquiry emerged based on the feedback.

	Participants by Pseudonym	**Role**	**Research instrument**
	6 testers (Survey pilot and testing)	AEOs; QA Officers	Survey
1	Andrew	Network Member	Survey
2	Anastasia	Key Agent: Consultant	Semi-structured Interview
3	Artemisia	Key Agent: National Agency	Semi-structured Interview
4	Audrey	Network member	Survey/Focus Group
5	Bernie	Network Member	Survey/ Focus Group
6	Clare	Network Member	Survey/ Focus Group
7	Dana	Network member	Survey/ Focus Group
8	Eva	Network member	Survey/ Focus Group
9	Frank	Network member	Survey
10	Glenn	Network member	Survey
11	Hannah	Network member	Survey
12	Ita	Network member	Survey
13	Joan	Network Member	Survey
14	Kim	Network Member	Survey
15	Leona	Key Agent: National Agency	Semi-structured Interview
16	Linda	Network Member	Survey
17	Marie	Network Member	Survey
18	Maurice	Key Agent: ETB	Semi-structured Interview
19	Niamh	Network Member	Survey
20	Odette	Key Agent: Consultant	Semi-structured Interview
21	Orla	Network Member	Survey
22	Robert	Key Agent: ETB	Semi-structured Interview
23	Quentin	Key Agent: National Agency	Semi-structured Interview
24	Siuin	Key Agent: ETB	Semi-structured Interview

Figure 6: Research Participants and Instruments

Stage 3: Gathering Leading Opinions with Key Agents

Semi-structured Interview Participants

I reviewed literature on elite participants, considering some options and making decisions based on that review. Elite or expert interviews are useful for exploring the realities in political organisations, decision-making and processes, and can be characterised by 'power asymmetries' due to role and perceived status (Ntienjom et al., 2022, P1). Assuming ‘eliteness’ can be a source of bias for researchers, in an ‘elite delusion’ affecting their ability to contact interviewees or communicate with them effectively, for example, being too deferential, or failing to be clear about the research proposed (Mason-Bish, 2019, p.267). Van Audenhove and Donders refer to 'expert' interviews, typically more present in European research traditions than Anglo-Saxon (English and American) traditions (2019, p.183), representing a different possibility.

Bakkalbasioglu states that when elites are identified using specific criteria as a purposive sample, they can be identified as ‘key agents’ (2020, p.689), but highlights the fact that a lack of response from them may undermine the research. This learning broadened my expectations, which had originally focused only on Directors of FET as participants. Instead, I sought a purposive sample that was representative of a number of key agents involved in the QA undertaking. To minimise risk of low response, I decided to contact thirty-one potential interviewees by e-mail inviting them to participate. A research description was attached to each e-mail. The group targeted included Directors of FET; Management and Directorate staff from QQI; FESS staff and consultants working in the QA environment who had considerable experience of policy implementation, development of policy and ETB FET programme provision. There were eleven positive responses to my e-mail and an additional two from whom I received replies were unavailable due to leave periods. In the event, the ninth person had to take leave unexpectedly, leaving eight interviewees in total. The key agents in this research were self-employed consultants, and employees of a number of ETBs and national agencies, giving fair representation of different perspectives (Figure 6).

Each interviewee was an expert in their own right. Li described ‘elites’ as ‘possessing superior power, resources or skills’ (2022, p.848), and these interviewees fitted this description, for example, FET Directors. Interviewees had held multiple roles and were informed by their own experiences in FET, which would help me to construct insights about the topic (Ntiemjon and Tomkinson, 2022, p.3) et al. Van Audenhove and Donders quote Welch, Marsschan-Piekkari,

Pentinnen and Tahvanainen as stating that an elite interviewee is a person in a senior or middle management position who ‘enjoys high status’ in a field (2019, p. 180).

Within the ETB FET sector new power dynamics and dualities have emerged since 2013, for example, in the reporting and accounting systems for both delivery and quality. SOLAS and QQI play central roles, while formalised responsibilities for both delivery and documentation rest with providers (ETBs). Ntienjom et al. (2022) caution researchers and remind them to remain aware of the relationship and dynamics between interviewer and interviewees, reflecting another kind of duality. Underlying the vocational education and training history in Ireland are histories, class discourses and hierarchies which, it can be assumed, continue to ripple through society today as power struggles and trust issues (Croke, 2017). Li claims that elites tend to hold disproportionate power and control over or access to resources (2022, p.848), and they can be public figures or people who hold power in social, economic, political or cultural contexts (Government of Canada, 2018, 135, cited in Ntienjom et al., 2022, p.1). Unexpectedly for me, this sense of disproportionate power, control and competition became visible, particularly in terms of perceptions linked to the scale of individual organisations within the sector.

I used semi-structured interviews with the key agents, providing them with an interview outline in advance (Ribbins, 1997, p.13), and recognising and anticipating possible needs to mitigate against some challenges that might arise with this group. I got the sense that some had prepared for the interviews in advance, especially when I reviewed the transcripts and in retrospect, given the amount of data collected, in future, I would use a much smaller number of initial questions, and more time for probing questions. There were certain topics that arose in these interviews that I was unprepared for, and I felt those topics could have been the subject of deeper critical exploration to relate them to other findings and insights from other participants in a more iterative process.

Ntienjom et al. advocate using reflexivity to question assumptions about power relationships between the interviewer and interviewee to enhance research reliability (2022). As an insider-outsider, I can claim 'multi-positionality' and according to Ntienjom et al., this ‘implies a social relationship that extends beyond the research encounter' indicating a responsibility to create a positive space for interaction, to ensure confidentiality, reliability and transparency during and after the interaction, and to represent the voice of interviewees accurately (2022, p.3). The ‘key agents’ (Doringer, 2020, p.269) invited to participate, represented an umbrella group, a regulatory authority, DFETs and a number of consultants who had been previously employed in

the sector (Figure 6). As a researcher, I chose to do all I could to maintain neutrality within this social system featuring a relatively small, connected population, in which I was an insider. Having selected the interview participants, my task now was to refine the interview protocol, producing an interview schedule and outline (Castillo Montoya, 2016).

Reviewing the research literature, I decided to adopt a semi-structured approach, formulating open questions related directly to the research questions, informed by initially coding data from qualitative survey. The semi-structured interview is a well-accepted and tested method in the qualitative research world (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). Ruslin et al comment that in depth data can be gathered from individuals through the powerful, flexible use of semi-structured interviews while providing a sense of direction, giving opportunities to adjust the questions, or add new questions, and can yield some unexpected results (2022, p.24).

Those who agreed to participate received an interview outline (Appendix K) framing the topics to be covered (Ribbins, 1997, p.13); a link to a zoom meeting, and a link to the consent form for participants. The interview schedule was updated with final arrangements and changed as required to suit participants' availability. Throughout the process, logistics were managed using a spreadsheet.

Devising the Semi-structured Interview 'Frame'

Informed by initial qualitative survey data coding, I formulated open questions for the semi-structured interviews (Appendix K). Throughout the interviews, I supported the interaction with interviewees by using probing questions and prompts to glean specific in-depth information.

The Interview outline or 'frame' was designed to gather insights into the key agents' experiences of implementing QA policy (Roberts, 2020, p.3187). The interview outline was to help me retain neutrality and awareness of subjectivity (Langley and Meziani, 2020, p.375). Interview outlines were circulated to all participants in advance.

The intention for the interviews was to give the participants time to reflect on, and interpret their experiences in a discursive situation, allowing opportunities for sense-making and co-construction of ideas (Langley and Meziani, 2020, p.372). I expected not to have full control of the direction of the dialogue during the interviews. Instead, I sought to maintain neutrality and a discursive style, although on reflection, when listening to recordings, and reviewing

transcripts, it is clear that this is not always easy, especially when interviewer and interviewee fall into dialogue, representing an area of future professional development for this researcher.

In the data gathered, there were cases that can be classified as 'unique responses' informed by the position, perspectives and experiences of the interviewees, and which may carry some weight with regard to the overall research outcomes (Solarino and Aquinas, 2021, p.654). Analysing the data was a catalyst which brought me towards some answers to my research questions, and I was struck by the critical analysis and honesty that interviewees brought to the process, although disappointed at times by my own failure to push for more in-depth responses. Surprisingly for me, it was during this process that latent tensions within the sector came to light, and seemed more significant than I had assumed.

Stage 4: Critical Incidents: The Focus Group and Mapping the Eco-system

Focus Group Participants

Focus group participants were invited based on their response to a question in the online survey, offering an opportunity to participate in a later focus group. Given the relatively small population involved directly as practitioners in quality assurance of FET in the ETBs, this was a pragmatic decision. It provided an opportunity to engage with research participants who participated in the questionnaire, and for others who did not participate to engage with preliminary findings and to explore some of the emerging themes in more depth, adding to the richness of data. The choice of this qualitative method provided a rich opportunity to unravel and consider themes arising together, and yielded significant insights and clarifications too. An invitation was issued to members who had not completed the questionnaire via the ETBI Development Team and a QA Network meeting in an effort to access a broader group of members. Five members participated in focus group 1. While three indicated they would attend focus group 2 initially, apologies were received from two.

The focus groups were held online to account for geographical distance and allowing participants representative of ETBs on the western seaboard, from the midlands and the east, and from urban and rural regions to participate. A disadvantage was that online it was difficult to promote an interactive focus group where participants entered into rich dialogue. I found that I had to work hard to facilitate this interaction, and to use a 'round robin' approach from time to time with the group to ensure that everyone had a voice. There was also some interruption from external sources and callers because participants were in their offices. For the most part however, the interaction was very rich, and the hour allotted for both extended with participants' permission. Participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to take time

to reflect on the Network and QA, and commented that they had never really had much time together to discuss these things before, especially since the network meetings went online during the COVID19 pandemic, illustrating the value of 'third spaces'.

I structured the focus group meetings to allow time beforehand for people to enter the online 'room', for greetings and to check that all technology was working. Briefly presenting the themes emerging I asked the groups three broad questions to prompt open responses:

- What should the network start doing?
- What should the network stop doing?
- What should the network continue doing?

Finally using a 'warm data' approach (Bateson, 2017), I presented the landscape of practice map and we discussed the nature of that landscape, and what else should be included in the map (Figure 10), which was developed further with input from the participants.

3.4.2 Data Analysis

Distinguishing between experiential and constructionist analysis orientations, Braun and Clarke (2021) claim that 'reflexive thematic analysis' based on an interpretivist, constructionist approach is a creative way to determine meaning beyond concerns with experiential data. They equate reflexive thematic analysis with greater researcher engagement, recognising that researchers themselves make assumptions, and being qualitatively immersed, cannot completely neutralise their own assumptions and perspectives. According to Braun and Clarke, in qualitative research, deductive orientations in reflexive thematic analysis are concerned with using *'preexisting theory as a lens through which to interpret the data'* and not about testing a preexisting theoretical framework or hypothesis. Saldaña states that qualitative researchers move through inductive and deductive reasoning in cycles, and reflexivity contributes to induction and deduction (2021, p.41). I entered the coding process with an open mind, and a spontaneous approach (Saldaña, 2021, p. 41).

Recognising the QA Network's nature, its longevity in the FET environment, and acknowledging my own uncertainty about how it functions in the context of the literature on CoPs, I took a pragmatic and inductive approach with an open mind, interpreting the data and prepared to be deductive if necessary. Through determining sets of meaning, seeking meaningful relationships and investigating their consequences for action, my goal was to reach greater understanding about the QA Network and landscape.

Coding and *Analysis*

Kvale and Brinkmann describe codes as immediate and short definitions of the experiences or actions described by the interviewee (2009, p.202). Coding takes the form of an iterative process of discerning patterns. Through analysis of data gathered in online surveys, semi-structured interviews and focus groups, codes were identified in a cyclical process, with analysis taking place between the four different instances of data collection, informing interpretations, findings and selection of data for presentation (Flick, 2002, p.62). Some significant recurring themes or natural 'meaning units' of the text (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p.207) were identified through open spontaneous coding (Saldaña, 2021, p.41). This was my introduction to reflexive process, and a discovery that when working with data from rich sources, the options and codes that reveal themselves are multitudinous.

The survey software allowed me to generate a spreadsheet featuring all responses. This spreadsheet was manipulated to provide a sheet for each question, which gave easy access to the data where I needed to compare responses. The qualitative survey data was uploaded to the Nvivo Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) tool for analysis and initial coding which, resulting in 77 codes, seemed like a lot at the time, but did help to identify significant areas which informed my thinking about participants for the semi-structured interviews. The interview 'frame' and some 'anchor codes' (Adu, 2021) began to emerge during this process. Initial coding of the qualitative semi-structured interviews yielded 84 codes, and a cross-referencing process began.

While I included the code 'communities of practice' at first, I refined this to include fourteen indicators of CoPs, as identified by Wenger (1999, pp.125 -127; Appendix P), to determine whether the QA Network reflected a CoP or not. Other codes for policies, roles and QA practitioners' work were created as the data was reviewed. These codes were inevitably linked to the questions featured in the qualitative survey, so in a sense, while the survey data coding was inductive, it was informed by the questions formulated and the broad research questions (Appendix L). Saldaña points out that a coding system started as inductive coding inevitably turns into a deductive process for the analyses that follow (2021, p.41), and ultimately, this is what happened.

There were times when I was lost in data, and the decision to use mixed methods resulted in a lot of data for a small-scale project, and occasionally, I thought that the amount of data was utterly unmanageable. Sometimes the electronic QDA tool used appeared unhelpful, and occasionally I was frustrated by the time taken to learn how to use it, although the ability to

generate code books, visualisations and a matrix framework were certainly useful in sense-making, thematic analysis, and reflexive thematic analysis, feeding the deductive process. Realistically, the process was a combination of electronic data management, paper-and-pencil exercises and thinking, reflection and notetaking.

Using the code book, and visualisations, I identified dominant codes (Adu, 2021), enabling me to reduce data quantities, cluster the data and identify patterns, similarities and key themes emerging when reading the interview transcripts (Figure 7: Reducing data and identifying dominant codes). This reflexive thematic analysis (Appendix M), as identified by Saldaña (2021) was useful for reaching clarity. Even though policy learning appeared at first to be more dominant, aggregated sub-codes suggested that policy implementation is really the more dominant element, and was selected as such when prioritising the clusters.

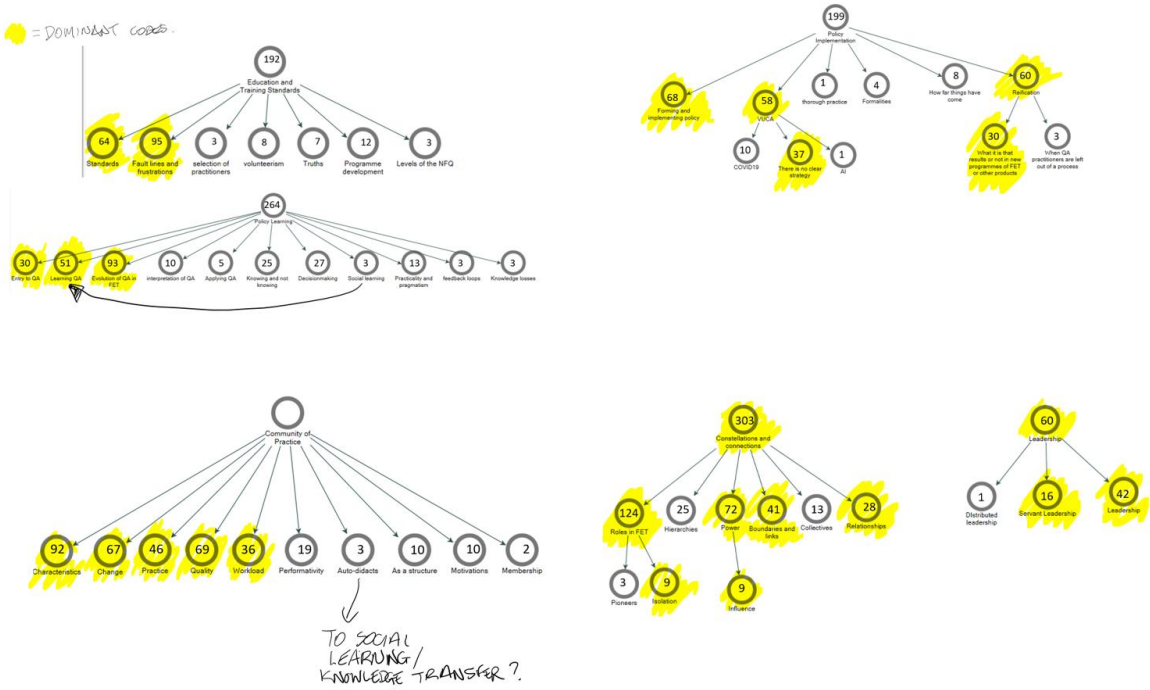


Figure 7: Data Reduction and Identification of Dominant Codes

A framework matrix created using NVivo supported management of emerging data as the semi-structured interviews were completed, relating them to codes from the qualitative surveys. This was the easy step; the analysis still had to happen through reading and rereading the data and listening to the interview recordings. There was no other option. The framework

matrix marshalled the data into the main themes emerging, and allowed me to build familiarity with it. During this process, at first, it appeared to me that the main categories arising were:

- Community of practice
- Constellations and collectives
- Policy implementation
- Education and training standards

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Attempting to reduce the data to more manageable formats, I entered a brief phase of reflexive thematic analysis again, reviewing the frequency of codes. I had been unhappy with my initial approach, which only focused on finding the most dominant codes, and working from them, but which did not provide for a deep dive into constructing a real sense of the QA Network as a valuable entity within the landscape.

I revisited the data visualisations created earlier again, taking a different perspective, and looked at the sub-codes within those dominant codes, mapping these against the data and constructing a more relevant data interpretation, resulting in themes based on the data coding, but not rigidly aligned to dominant code quantification. The themes which seemed to be most strongly related to the research questions and the qualitative data gathered were:

- Theme 1: Community of practice characteristics
- Theme 2: Roles in FET and Evolution of QA in FET
- Theme 3: Policy in practice
- Theme 4: Fault lines and frustrations
- Theme 5: Standards.

This process reflected Trafford and Leshem's final phase in research design (2008), which is about recontextualising the situation (Figure 8: Recontextualization), and some initial ideas emerged from that process. Saldaña's perspective that researchers progress through inductive cycles and deductive processes (2021, p.41) was beginning to make sense, and appears to yield a more accurate construction of the situation and possibilities, providing a roadmap for presenting data, discussing it, and drawing conclusions. Wenger's indicators for CoPs (1999, p.125) and McKellar's development of the concept in a list of value-types (2019) also provided mechanisms for marshalling the data. In the following chapter, I will present the data gathered, relating it to the research questions and to the themes arrived at through analysis.

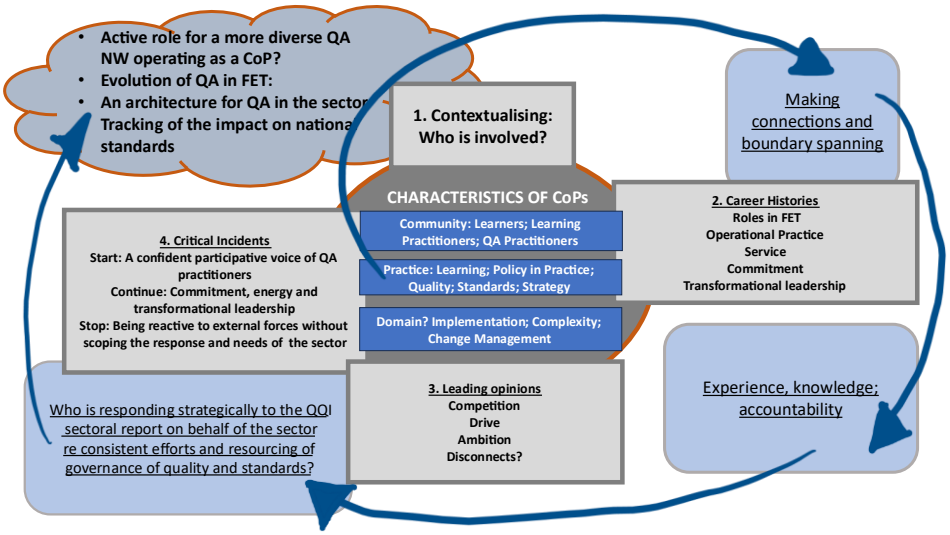


Figure 8: Recontextualising the Domain

3.5 Chapter Conclusion

The ETBI QA Network is a social environment where QA practitioners in the ETB FET sector meet regularly, participating in and informing decisions and consultations about quality and qualifications policy implementation in FET. Reflecting the Network's social context, a decision to undertake pragmatic research reflecting the social situation was taken. This enabled the exploration of the QA Network members' experiences and key agents' perspectives in policy implementation using mixed methods.

The four-phase research involved contextualising the situation; looking at career histories and demographics of Network members; seeking leading opinions from key agents and considering critical incidents through focus groups with Network members and recontextualising the situation.

A predominantly qualitative approach was taken, and qualitative surveys were developed based on the review of documents associated with the Network; a grey literature review and the review of literature on quality and CoPs which provided lenses for the work. Using a qualitative questionnaire gave participants opportunities to respond in detail, providing rich insights into their work as QA practitioners in ETBs. Coding and thematic analysis informed the protocols for semi-structured interviews with key agents who have been involved in supporting and championing the QA Network.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight key agents, and provided rich, thick descriptions of their experiences and insights into quality and qualifications policy implementation in the FET sector. Interview transcripts were listened to repeatedly, coded and

thematically analysed using a framework matrix and data visualisation. Data from the document review, the qualitative surveys and the semi-structured interviews informed mapping of the complex landscape within which quality and qualifications policies are being applied in the ETB FET sector.

A focus group and additional interview were conducted with Network members, who responded to initial findings, considering what to start, stop and continue, and they commented on and added information to the landscape map. The data collection and analysis processes have contributed to the results presented in the following chapter, which will give insights into some lived experiences of QA in FET.

Chapter Four: Results

4.1 Chapter Introduction

In this study, I set out to explore whether the ETBI QA Network reflects the characteristics of a CoP as envisaged by Etienne Wenger (1991, 1999, 2004). I developed four research questions, later becoming five, related to the Network's role in implementation of quality and qualifications policy in the ETB sector. In this chapter, I will present the research findings arising from initial online surveys, semi-structured interviews with key agents, and a focus group with QA Network members.

The five research questions were:

1. Does the QA Network function as a COP as envisaged by Wenger et al (1991, 1999, 2004)?
2. How does the QA Network contribute to educational standards in FET?
3. Does the QA Network contribute to policy learning? If so, how?
4. Does the QA Network have an impact on policy implementation and if so, how?
5. Is the QA Network part of a constellation or landscape of practice?

In this chapter, data gathered during the four research stages identified by Trafford and Leshem (2008) is presented. The four stages were designed to contextualise the setting; gather Network members' career histories to reflect on QA roles in FET; engage with key agents who may have had 'leading opinions' through semi-structured interviews and to explore critical incidents in a focus group with Network members, ultimately supporting recontextualization of the situation. The experiences and interpretations of participants were gathered and analysed. Through exploring leading opinions and critical incidents with key agents and Network members results and recommendations emerged. As described in Chapter 3, I took a pragmatic approach to data collection and analysis. In this chapter, the findings are presented according to the five themes that emerged during reflexive thematic analysis:

- Theme 1: Community of practice characteristics
- Theme 2: Roles in FET and the evolution of QA in FET
- Theme 3: Policy in practice
- Theme 4: Fault lines and frustrations
- Theme 5: Standards

4.2 Theme 1: Community of Practice Characteristics

Despite initial efforts to find them, no formal specific description of the purpose or terms of reference for the network was discovered. Then, in 2024 ETBI published an internal guide to CoPs and a description of the QA Network in its resource library (Figure 2). Formal agendas and meeting notes for Network meetings provided insights into specific events and provided data specific to the timelines in question, including historical data.

Members described the QA Network's purpose in their responses to qualitative questions (Appendix J) designed to elicit data about the domain, community and practice of the network, describing it as:

> *… a network of peers, sharing learning and experience, navigating an evolving landscape together, and in doing so, forging new, shared meanings and practices (Bernie: Survey Data).*
>
> *To support and guide quality with the 16 ETBs. Develop policy, procedures and practice. Sharing of knowledge. (Andrew: Survey Data).*
>
> *… a formal community of practice and informs the Quality Strategy Group (Frank: Survey Data).*
>
> …for s*haring of information, setting a QA agenda for FET, policy formation, procedure writing. (Glenn: Survey Data); An opportunity to share information and collaborate with colleagues (Hannah: Survey Data).*

This section is focused on the CoP characteristics identified by Wenger et al. (1999, pp.70-85): domain, community and practice, with reference to the first-generation dimensions of joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Domain refers to the shared interest, competence and commitment that underpin a common undertaking, and was developed from the first-generation concept of joint enterprise.

Community refers to collaborative activities; problem-solving; and collective learning and was developed from the first-generation concept of mutual engagement.

Practice refers to how the community uses shared language and terminology and develops artefacts together, linked to a technical or specialist field and was developed from the first-generation concept of shared repertoire. Practice *'highlights the social and negotiated character of both the explicit and tacit in our lives'* (Wenger, 1999, p.47). Ideally, 'practice contestation' can be a defining feature of communities of practice, and leads to the

development of common knowledge of that practice through social interactions, and this collective learning and meaning negotiation has 'productive power' (Sondarjee, 2024, p.1).

4.2.1 Domain

QA in FET represents a shared interest for network members, linked to high-quality delivery which is a key national strategic goal for FET (Transforming Learning 2020, p.17). Participants described the QA Network as a place that provides their 'QA fix' (Clare: Focus Group Data). The Network has featured shared interest and collaboration since it began, demonstrating a sense of inquiry, willingness, energy and committed responses to new legislation and policies concerned with the quality of FET:

> *Do you remember the first meeting? I remember being at that first meeting, and wasn't it,* (Chair at the time) *was chairing it, and we were like, what is this about? What? Who are we? What are we doing? …. (Leona: Interview Data).*

> *Now I would have collaborated from the beginning myself. It was a personal relationship, if you like, myself and (*named individual) *here….and we collaborated extensively…but I suppose we learned on the hoof (Anastasia, Interview Data).*

Quality and FET are linked in a single domain for network members and key agents:

> *So, I think that our community was quite strong…I think a lot of it was landed on this unknown entity, which was quality* (the Network) *… and it was shovelled over…. with very little resources, and that creates a lot of energy in itself and the fear as well (Leona: Interview Data).*

> *I believe that the QA Network, and its collaboration has had a highly influential impact on the development of a common QA approach within Irish FET in ETBs.* (Bernie: Survey Data).

> *Having the FET strategy published put QA clearly on the map, and made it a priority. (Robert: Interview Data).*

It must be noted however, that the issue of quality assurance and implementation of associated policies were central to the concerns of Practitioners and Quality Assurance Practitioners long before the FET Strategy was published, for example, in the form of quality frameworks for ABE, CE and Youthreach. From the inception of the National Framework for Qualifications, the FETAC Assessment Guidelines of 2007, and the programme development project in response to the CAS reform, and FETAC Guidelines for Programme Development (2010). The various strategic policy cycles of the evolution of a defined sector called 'FET' in Ireland, may have had a negative effect, prolonging the development of useful systems, procedures and well understood and supported quality cultures within the sector.

The linkage between quality and FET is driven by the interest of members and motivated by the publication of national policies, guidelines and strategies, in an era of significant change:

> *…if we didn't have to adhere to, you know their* (QQI) *guidelines…follow particular strategies…What would drive us to enhance our quality performance? (Leona: Interview Data).*

> *…we're a diligent sector, you know, and so we read - so I read all those policies (Audrey: Survey Data).*

It is apparent that there is a cohort of practitioners within the sector who recognise the usefulness of the legislation and policies, and who, as public servants, are willingly committed to implementing them to provide a high-quality service to participants in FET, who are typically adult learners, and by default, to communities, employers and society. The QA Network influences FET by *'supporting collaboration and being instrumental in key changes such as the CAS modifications' (Frank: Survey Data).* Network members' participation on behalf of ETBs is key to linking the Network's activity to ETBs, but support for implementation depends on the relationship between the QA Practitioner and their organisation and the strength of that organisation's commitment:

> *So basically, that relationship is as good or as weak as that member or member is and their ability and willingness to feed back into their organisation. (Anastasia, Interview Data).*

In a rapidly changing environment in which the domain itself is evolving, the Network acts as a source of information about national developments, and for comparison of activity between ETBs.

> *… So going to the QA Network keeps me informed of what is going on and often eases the workload by learning something I am doing has been done before (Marie: Survey Data)*

The community that has developed through the network retains a focus on the domain of quality in FET across the FET ecosystem, with network members operating at an intersection between FET and QA, constructively linking the interests of learners and practitioners engaged in FET programmes with policy agendas, and it is interesting to consider how this community is depicted by members.

4.2.2 Community

Participants described the social aspects of the network, reflecting on the power of commitment and support, illustrating the notion of productive power identified by Sondarjee (2024, p.1), and the extent to which relationships have developed:

> *It was powerful in that it kept us all in a loop… it was a very powerful network… (Anastasia, Interview Data).*
>
> *The Network definitely brings together key QA roles, you know, and brings together minds in QA … from all the ETBs (Odette, Interview Data).*
>
> *It is investing in quality, and it is - it is stimulating a debate about quality (Artemisia: Interview Data).*
>
> *It was like sacrosanct in the diary… not to miss any of those meetings…the fact everybody involved during all my time was committed. … and the amazing thing was personnel changed…. but the ethos or the culture didn't… (Anastasia, Interview Data).*

The value of a collective spirit, mutual engagement and clear community ownership of the domain was evident in focus group and interview responses, with an emphasis on strong relationships and positive behaviours:

> *You've built a relationship within that group with every member that's in there, and it's very much a place of trust, and I think that really is important (Dana:* Focus Group Data*).*
>
> *If somebody asks you like, okay, what is it about the QA net that makes it vibrant? What makes it a dynamic network... they come with…. huge passion* (Robert, *Key Agent Interview Data*).
>
> *It was our group, it was our community, it was. And we were learning from each other. (Leona: Interview Data).*

The collective spirit, engagement and passion illustrate the power of human resources, and the way in which the QA project has been implemented across the sector, relying predominantly on existing resources and expertise. This commitment flourished during the period of austerity after 2008, for example. Robert also referred to it as 'my highest functioning network' (Interview data). Staff were reallocated or assigned new tasks based on the quality and qualifications legislation and policies, as the need arose, in an organic way, based on localised interpretations, across the further education and training organisations before 2013. Those arrangements, interpretations and expectations were transferred into the FET departments of ETBs as they emerged following the 2012 legislation reconfiguring FET. This would have included the perceptions, interpretations and norms associated with quality, and the QA Network was instrumental in maintaining work that had been done beforehand, and in

supporting the merger of further education previously delivered by VECs and training previously delivered by FÁS. The trusting, welcoming environment within the Network, which itself was somewhat reconfigured, contributed to this integration. Reciprocity built on mutual engagement, trust, and support are clear community values:

> *…I feel like I am an equal stakeholder there. (Audrey: Focus Group Data).*
>
> *There is that collegiality… that openness to learning, that bit of building systems together (Audrey: Focus Group Data).*

The network allows practitioners to step away from their day-to-day practice, and to link with others who have mutual understanding of the domain, as in Clare's experience of new membership:

> *. …it was everything that I needed to keep me going for that, for that following month…and that buddy system – we have an unofficial buddy system going…I have mentors in the team that took me under their wing… (Clare: Interview Data).*

The community supports the practitioners involved. Through problem solving, routines, known solutions and rituals reduce the time taken to make decisions or act. The community is characterised by dynamism and passionate engagement, and personal relationships, friendships and reciprocity have developed as a result of the opportunities offered to practitioners through its existence beyond local geographies to national ones. Members also share practice and experiences, contribute to shared repertoires, language and practice.

4.2.3 Practice

In the survey, participants were asked to rate the Network's impact on their practice, on a scale from 1-7, with one being 'not at all' and 7 being 'a lot'. Six participants said that network membership informs their practice a lot, rating the extent at 7, reflecting the Network's importance to them. Eight rated the extent at six. Aggregated, this means that fourteen participants considered that network membership strongly informed their practice as a FET QA professional.

Wenger tells us that one element that defines a CoP is a common shared vocabulary, often related to a technical or specialist field. An extended list of forty-one terms provided by participants, together with those from a review of all survey and focus group data was analysed for frequency (Appendix O) and is featured in the word cloud, generated form research data in Figure 9, with the terms 'programme', 'network' and 'review' appearing as the most frequently used terms, and thus showing up in the image as the largest fonts. (Figure 9)

also shows the breadth of specialist language associated with quality that is used by members of the Network, reflecting the breadth of activities that their practice covers. It is interesting to note that, at this stage, the terms 'governance' and 'system' are in smaller fonts, meaning they are less frequently used in members' responses. The terms 'management of quality', 'theories or models of quality' and 'systems' do not feature. In this data, drawn directly from participants' words, suggesting a disconnect between practical day-to-day practice and strategic practices. It may reflect the close connections between the QA Practitioners and other practitioners at local levels within the system, their commitment to their practical work and to serving learners and advocating for learners and other practitioners. Responsibility for strategic activity seems to rest with those at higher levels of the hierarchy, and there is an apparent gap between the focus on practice associated with delivery of FET, and high-level strategy, indicating a gap in interaction across boundaries.



Figure 9: Terminology most frequently used by QA Practitioners

Shared understanding and language enable Network members to commence problem-solving quickly, without a need for explanation or preamble, aligning with the CoP literature (Wenger, 1999):

> *…when I'm talking about an external authenticator, I know everyone in the room will know. They won't think I'm talking about an external examiner (Audrey: Focus Group Data).*

However, if terms like 'quality management', 'theories of quality' or 'quality models' do not arise as commonly used language, then assumptions about their absence could be made. For example, if they are not commonly used, is there any location where they are being used? Are they part of strategic discourse? Do they feature in conversations about resources? Checking the responses of key agents, the terms do not occur there either, suggesting that practical rather than philosophical or strategic concerns are more powerful.

Reification refers to CoP artefacts and products and can manifest in language, documents, events and how community members behave in practice (Wenger, 1999). The community is constantly involved in developing procedures in response to specific concerns, and dissemination of those documents is a tangible element of the role of QA practitioners, cascading and implementing them in ETBs:

> *… academic writing and referencing and plagiarism handbooks…. And we debated and argued…and…the feedback generally was taken on board,* (for) *the validation policy and criteria (Odette, Interview Data).*
>
> An *Academic Integrity, Referencing Handbook* (was) *developed. The EA directory was created and there was a working group established which supported the development of the EA Role locally… (Bernie: Survey Data).*

The network, its working groups and its members' practice are driven by energy derived from activity and projects:

> *…. I was directly involved in that huge energy in that great team work, great community and just driving the thing* (COVID CAS modifications and programme adaptations)*, meeting every week, getting the job done… (Leona: Interview Data).*
>
> *There were several working groups each with a particular task. The group I was in looked at the development of documents to support the validation process and in line with information required for Q hub* (Dana: Survey Data).

The language and products devised by QA Network members are significant in disseminating messages about QA across the sector in activities which Wenger (1991, 2020) refers to as 'boundary spanning'. There is evidence that providing more time and space for practice contestation (Sondarjee, 2024) across levels can improve the development of common knowledge and practice in the field of quality.

4.2.4 Boundary Spanning

Boundary spanning describes activities in which CoP members, and reifications of a CoP move across boundaries to other groups or communities, co-creating and sharing knowledge, understanding, and perspectives. Wenger-Trayner et al refer to documents and other

reifications as ‘boundary objects’ (2019). The Wenger-Trayners refer to the value of ‘boundary objects’ for enabling negotiation of meaning across ‘boundaries of practice’ (2019, p.323), negotiation of meaning, clarity and consistency of language are essential. This was illustrated when Audrey described how the access officer from her organisation interacted with her across boundaries (Focus Group Data) to clarify the approach to access in their ETB’s QA manual.

Another instance was where Robert met with QQI on the sector’s behalf and realised that there were ‘unspoken misunderstandings’ in relation to programme validation. Dialogue with other organisations was important for clarity and illustrates why boundary spanning is necessary, whether between groups or individuals.

Two-way feedback loops are boundary spanning activities that members engage in, bringing their learning and co-construction meaning about the domain and building of experience of the national context through the network to their own organisations, and they describe the expansion of their perspectives:

> *Increased understanding of how national structures worked, increased understanding of QA governance for QQI programmes, programme development, networking, navigating QQI processes and procedures (Glenn: Survey Data).*
>
> *It has broadened my view of QA into a more holistic view of QA in FET from a purely "teacher" view of QA to the whole cycle (Hannah: Survey Data).*

There is a hierarchical structure for oversight of the network supported by ETBI, including a FET Directors (DFET) Forum; a Quality Strategy Group and a Task and Finish Group, all with interests in quality. Surprisingly, there was uncertainty from some key agents and Network members about the relationship between the Quality Sub-group (also known as the DFET Forum Quality Strategy Group) and the QA Network:

> *I'm joint chair of the quality subgroup in ETBI… of the directors, but I'd have no relationship, as far as I can see, to the quality network (Maurice: Interview Data).*
>
> *So, I'm not directly involved in the network. But I am involved in the strategy group that I think then works in tandem with that network group…. But that’s a bit more operational, really…So, but it's not overly strategic in my view. … (Siúin: Interview Data).*

The Network facilitates communications throughout FET services, acting as a unified single point of reference for the sector, and effectively spanning the gap between national decisions regarding quality and learning practitioners and management in the ETBs.

> *It makes sense to avail of that multiplier effect rather than have 16 different conversations. (Quentin: Interview Data).*

Both Quentin and Artemisia raise questions, however, about restructuring and how it restricted this direct contact, raising questions about too much homogeneity in such a critical network:

> *Yeah, so sometimes it's unclear… what the structures are, what their authority is, if you like (Quentin: Interview Data).*

> *One of the challenges for QQI is their relationship with ETBI. And I don't know do we have anybody on the QA Network? (Artemisia: Interview Data)*

QA Network members have acted as champions in the amalgamation of former VEC and FÁS services by courageously integrating and unifying multiple existing QA policies and procedures in the form of the TQAS, supporting change and connecting people who had not previously worked together:

> *And we were learning from each other* (in the network) *…trying to set up communication structures between two counties that had never previously spoken to each other… We had four different QA Agreements for QQI (Leona: Interview Data).*

> *I think, like from a national perspective the courage of the FET sector and their willingness to do this should be lauded, and their contribution to transparency, to quality of learning outcomes (Artemisia: Interview Data).*

Boundary spanning is a potentially powerful aspect of CoPs that can contribute to wider coherence, articulation and understanding, but where there are separations based on protocol, seniority, hierarchy and power a challenging problem emerges, specifically associated with the 'quality agenda', and the emergence of cohesive models for quality. Ideally, the concept of quality, the governance of quality, quality literacy and implementation of policies linked to quality, should be somewhat insulated against the formal structures and boundaries of our organisations, recognising the centrality of learners to our purpose, and more impervious to fluctuations. This story shows how structural and regime changes can interrupt the potential positive impacts of useful policies. Separations on the basis of power and hierarchy can lead to gaps in knowledge, and problems with the consistent application of policies, and with the development of strategies to build high quality systems that serve society well.

4.3 Theme 2: Roles and Evolution of QA in FET

QA Network members valued the leadership and support of their peers in the network, and talked about how their relationship turned into friendships as they navigated their roles in the context of a national situation. They learned that this was broader than their assumptions when they worked in pedagogical roles before being appointed to QA Practitioner roles. Newcomers and peripheral members also play a role in raising questions that may challenge accepted norms because they bring new perspectives to the Network too. This newcomer talked about leadership and influence within the Network:

> *I think there are definitely some people who are viewed as being very experienced and provide real leadership (Audrey: Focus Group Data).*

Learning about the similarities and differences between the ETBs and about the FET eco-system is a side effect of Network membership. It reflects the nature of boundary work, where members bring their own experiences into the Network, influencing their awareness of issues and practices:

> *But I always find it really interesting in the meetings, that people will have different views on what maybe we're being requested to do, because within certain ETBs, we might have certain emphases on… apprenticeships, for example, (Audrey: Focus Group Data).*

> *…how QA is seen within a particular ETB. It does raise that issue - kind of there being a difference between the ETBs… So, I didn't have any idea about any of this until I came onto the QA Network (Eva: Focus Group Data).*

> *…but you know, there is* (are) *inequities for QA staff and structures between the ETBs... No, I think that does affect the membership of the QA Network as well, and how QA is seen within a particular ETB… because of the differences in the numbers, but also in the staff instructions that are there (Eva: Focus Group Data).*

Experienced core members of the QA Network have an influence on the ongoing development of the domain, knowledge co-creation, and on the perpetuation of network and practitioner practices, development of norms, and embedding of beliefs and assumptions about the domain of quality in FET.

4.3.1 Motivations for Membership

Responding to question 7, which asked Network members to rate 8 statements from most important to least important, reflecting on motivations for network involvement 'improving standards' and 'improving learner experience' were rated as most important for the majority of participants, with thirteen out of sixteen participants favouring these statements. The least

popular statement was ‘to improve the practice of others’ perhaps reflecting the perception or norm which places responsibility in education and training firmly in the hands of individual practitioners culturally, rather than being part of a collective undertaking. This perception would require further research, but may provide a strong argument in favour of promoting the quality literacy concept (Ehlers, 2007, and in the consideration of ‘quality 5.0’ and our commitments across human rights and environmental issues, which are core concerns across all education and training sectors, and are linked to concepts of quality (Deleryd and Fundin 2024).

Sharing information and knowledge is an important aspect for cascading QA requirements, but there may not yet be a cultural connection between quality and pedagogical practice. As we saw in the potential for approaches to quality, including the TQM and ‘3P’s models, the role of human development and professional development were central to the successful development of cultures of quality through engaging all practitioners in constructing knowledge and understanding of approaches to quality and promoting ownership of the concept.

4.3. Co-constructing Learning, Knowledge, Skill and Competences

Participants described the network as a source of collective learning and understanding, about QA and FET, reflecting the potential for professional development reported on by both key agents and network members:

> *So, I think it's brilliant, for say, Mairead, from our place, and the other quality managers to meet, discuss, and to tease things out. (Maurice: Interview Data).*
>
> *And I've checked in with my own staff who are there? And they said, oh, yeah, we … always learn something (Robert: Interview Data).*
>
> *You see, that's where the community comes into play, and the sharing the knowledge and sharing the learning. (Leona: Interview Data).*
>
> *But I go to the quality network because I always learn something (Audrey: Focus Group Data)*
>
> *My knowledge of QA increased substantially when I moved into the QA Officer role in my ETB in early 2021 during the second COVID lockdown* (Eva: *Survey Data*).
>
> *It was when I became an active participant in the network, I really saw the depth of sectoral knowledge and experience that there is on the network. (Frank: Survey Data).*

Through mutual engagement, the community supports sense-making and meaning-making. Sharing information was a common repeating theme in responses from all research participants, and the Network's online platform supports that sharing:

> *The QA Network provides an environment in which peers share experience and learning generously, and work collaboratively to create shared meanings and knowledge (Bernie: Survey Data).*

QA Practitioners in the ETBs must engage with and get to know policies published by QQI and SOLAS to inform their practice, which includes developing procedures. Network participation is instrumental in knowledge sharing and co-construction from national policies to local level implementation, with practitioners drawing on numerous sources to learn about approaches to quality, including QA Network interactions, published policies, guidelines and other frameworks:

> *You know what was in place by FETAC (QA Guidelines) I also drew on…I remember there was a Youthreach one (QA Framework) (Anastasia, Interview Data).*

Joan highlights how she got to know new policies:

> *When the validation process changed, the QA Network and FESS were there to offer CPD and develop our skills in programme development (Survey Data).*

Frank gave an insight into the QA Network describing how the network supports competence for members:

> *The QA Network has supported a shared understanding of quality concepts and quality provision on the ground in the sector (Survey Data).*

Research participants described how their knowledge evolved through practice, sharing, collaboration, and mutual engagement:

> *…the growth and evolution of the QA Network has been inextricably intertwined with my own growth and evolution as a practitioner… (Bernie: Survey Data).*
>
> Policy knowledge*…evolved through practice, through collaboration, I suppose, with other like-minded people (Leona: Interview Data).*
>
> *…the beginnings of my knowledge were created through practice in my former role. I fell into it… learning with the team and being informed by the QA Team (Siúin: Interview Data).*

Carrying out the self-evaluation, the inaugural review of quality, engagement with the review panel, and familiarity with the review reports contributed to learning and motivated a move towards a model for Robert:

> *But you do need that internal knowledge base, capacity, skill set, expertise developed as well. So that was a large driver for us,* (related) *as well to why we needed to develop a model (for QA) (Robert: Interview Data).*

Maurice identified a gap in the Irish system and some perils associated with knowledge transfer, suggesting a need for more reading and sense-making:

> *…there is no formal qualification in Ireland in quality assurance and education. And I do think that is a gap...It means it's… handed down or learned through reading very torturous publications…. and we found out how tricky that is, because it turns out a lot of the truths that we knew were not true at all during Covid. (Maurice: Interview Data)*.

This statement highlights the nature of the problem and how knowledge of quality and qualifications is developed If knowledge of quality and qualifications as comprehended in legislation and policy is rendered through hearsay as an inaccessible concept, then it is impossible to articulate and communicate its purpose and value accurately to motivate comprehensive engagement with the concept. In order to engage with theories of quality, to be informed about models of quality, and to make decisions about adoption or co-creation of a specific model, it would be necessary to recognise and trust the value of the practice engaged in by QA Practitioners and expand the reach of professional learning. Creating time for professional learning and discourse to take place, can reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation and increase accurate articulation of concepts and motivations to adopt them.

The role of QA Practitioners as boundary spanners who cascade information throughout the sector was illustrated by Audrey, who commented on a need to refer to primary sources:

> *And everyone has the different message…and you can definitely come out of those meetings, and I think particularly in my newer days, that I was thinking, oh my God, that's the gospel, according to QQI. But I've learned that actually, if I want to know what QQI say, I go to QQI (Audrey: Focus Group Data).*

The Network is a source of information, but there is a need to explore how this information becomes knowledge and practice. Network members can inform decisions based on their expertise, and it was through QA Network meetings that a two-day mini-conference leading to a plan for programme development, validation, review and revalidation occurred and gave opportunities to learn from the experience of those present:

> *The fact that it* (the conference and plan for programme review and revalidation) *came through QA Network, where there's a lot of experience around the table*, and *…when we were able to present the challenges, as we had heard them from the QA Network, and also the recommendations around how we could go forward* (Robert, Interview data).

A plan was proposed, but Robert spoke about 'an unspoken misunderstanding' when he met with QQI to discuss programme review and revalidation, indicating that assumptions can arise as a result of gaps in regular connection, and the Network's combined experience, communicated at the mini-conference contributed to articulation of issues to address the misunderstandings.

The members of the network consistently refer to how their own knowledge has developed, although it is unclear whether 'knowledge' and 'information' have become interchangeable in perceptions of this learning. Newly appointed practitioners apply their existing knowledge; learn from other practitioners, and develop knowledge through engaging in practices associated with policies and procedural requirements. Knowledge of quality and qualifications tends to be acquired when there is a crisis, when there is an urgent need to resolve a problem, or through the process of engaging in a specific activity, rather than through conscious and strategic learning, and this aspect may affect behaviours and competences, causing repetitive, cyclical responses that may not always be in the best interest of the sector.

Within the domain of quality in FET, however, there is a unique combination featuring and requiring knowledge of quality, theories of quality, models of quality; models of evaluation and review; knowledge of pedagogy; knowledge of the complex system for education and training that exists from levels 1-6 in the ETB sector, awareness of resourcing issues and their relationship to quality, together with knowledge of the learners who avail of the services and of how to meet their needs in relation, for example, to access, transfer, progression and reasonable accommodations. The QA practitioner must be able to combine these aspects and to work effectively in partnership with other practitioners within FET to co-create and determine the best structures and systems to ensure a high-quality experience and success for learners, and to ensure that qualifications achieved are valuable and celebrated. Competence in communication and structuring support for initiatives, across boundaries, and designed to enhance the knowledge of other practitioners are critical to successful development and implementation.

Duguid quotes Ryle (1941), who argues that there is a difference between knowing *how* and knowing *that* but that the two are complementary (in 2005, p.111). Knowing *how* helps to make knowing *that* actionable. We know *that* by acquiring explicit, codified information, but we cannot action it if we have not learned *how* through practice (italics: Ryle and Duguid). Knowing *that* does not produce knowing *how*, which implies that information sharing alone is not sufficient to provide for the development of skilled practitioners who may need to respond

to problems arising by drawing on a broad range of knowledge and experience developed through practice. Relying on canonical knowledge alone in a field dedicated to the development of humans, such as education and training is not recommended, and the transfer of codified knowledge alone to newcomers (Oakeshott, 1949, cited by Duguid, 2005, p.112), while often welcomed and valued by those newcomers, may not be sufficient to produce the practice required to fulfil the needs of the system's beneficiaries.

Duguid goes on to explain that in a CoP, 'the knowing how of a community, not merely an individual is on display', and while this knowing *how* is clearly important within the QA Network, especially enabling the interactions of members, research participants such as Quentin and Robert recognised the need for this knowledge to be utilised more effectively. The risk for the Network is that it undermines this by focusing too much on knowing *that* as a consequence of growing bureaucratisation and codification. Writing about the field of further education in the United Kingdom, Tully quotes Bourdieu, who describes how codification reduces ambiguity and vagueness, and requirements for data recording can become a new moral code, which equates professionalism with productivity (Bourdieu, 1990, p.80, in Tully, 2023, p.44). Professional practice is drawn from the broad experiences and knowledge of practitioners, or their tacit knowledge, which contributes to quality of experience for learners. Straining to meet targets promotes performativity, with practitioners becoming stressed in regimes that force them to pass students at any cost (in Tully (2023, p.44), quoting Mather et al. 2012, in order to meet the managerial goals framed within strategy and performance agreements.

While QA Practitioners and Network members hold a lot of specialist knowledge, there is a argument to be made for considering how their knowledge and practice can be embedded in a more comprehensive way, and whether the Network can be more instrumental in this. Providing time for QA practitioners to consider, design and test the theoretical aspects of quality with a view to more comprehensively supporting quality literacy and culture throughout FET can give opportunities for more confidence in the quality system for FET to guard against performativity and focus in a concerted fashion on the values associated with FET at all levels. QA Practitioners willingly share their knowledge based on common experiences, practices and learning, but it appears that ability to share this knowledge beyond the Network in the same way, may be restricted through unnecessary boundaries resulting in lack of knowledge at other levels of the sector and organisations. A big question emerging poses a conundrum – do QA Practitioners, and the Network, through its practice, aim to

support the achievement of administrative objectives or do they serve learners' best interests, and is this conundrum a result of inappropriate boundaries?

As Eva pointed out, the synergy between senior management and practitioners is instrumental in filtering and supporting messaging and in defining the purpose and reason for the policies:

> *The recognition given by FET senior management for all things QA related and how this view is filtered down through FET - is QA seen as an enabling and positive support to FET provision or as an administrative burden? (Eva, Survey Data).*

4.4 Theme 3: Policy in Practice

Members of the Network have been involved in policy implementation since the 2006 QA agreements were signed with FETAC, acting as a 'knowledge-base' (Robert, Interview Data), and constructing the lore and language of quality within the sector since then. Current *'big ticket'* (Eva: Focus Group Data) concerns relate to programme development, review and revalidation and quality reviews. QQI consultations for access, transfer and progression, on-line or blended delivery, programme review, and standards review are ongoing, representing opportunities for policy learning for network members, and participation in QQI and FESS events contributes to that learning, as we have seen.

4.4.1 Connecting with FET Strategy

Participants reported on the Network's alignment with FET strategy through the *'development, sharing and implementation of best practice' (Andrew: Survey Data).* A collaborative collective environment developed which acted as a model for other networks as described by Bernie:

> *I think that the QA Network, as it evolved from earlier iterations* (e.g. The Process Coordinator's Network; the Ginger Group) *was very influential in FET, as the 16 ETBs sought to develop a common, network-based approach, rather than simply acting as a number of discrete, competing organisations (Survey Data).*

According to participants, QA Network members are powerful as leaders and agents of change, with a distinct focus on the impact of their work on learners:

> *There's very strong leadership, as well. It's not, it's not always formal…very much transformational, because it's operating in an unknown space and trying to carve out you know, the best possible route forward for our learners, (Eva: Focus Group Data).*

Engagement with new policies for QA through the QA Network, prompted process development, such as the EA panel for the sector, and the associated co-creation of knowledge and practice through the Network had an effect on quality frameworks and quality

governance systems within the ETBs. There is a sense that the Network and its members to carry the weight of policy implementation:

> *…you know all these policies were hitting us, and they were hitting the quality end of the house. The quality network was the one that kind of it had to mop up a lot of stuff from my recollection of it…. (Leona: Interview Data).*

> *I think. you know, I think it (the network) has definitely influenced our implementation of policy locally. (Robert: Interview Data).*

QA practitioners articulate and promote policies and their relevance. Within their own organisations, the ability to cascade knowledge, and support the use of that knowledge in the creation of new, refined or improved practice, in a respectful environment is critical:

> *It's important that the QA Manager role is respected…and when policy and procedures are brought to the practitioners that it's respected… People are more willing to buy into whatever has to be done if they understand the why (Anastasia: Interview Data).*

Siúin describes an environment, where the FET practitioners, QA team and stakeholders in one ETB are included through cascades and mutual engagement, illustrating the need for powerful cross-organisational communication mechanisms:

> *So, then our FET Practitioners… our coordinators, ALOs would have to contribute into that. So, I think any policy that's not created with the voice of those we're creating it for, then we've missed something. So, things like our learner council would also feed into that. (Interview Data).*

Audrey sums up the potential for QA Practitioners, pointing to a greater emphasis on the potential of cyclical processes to support developments, and indicating a need for a more organised approach and a shift towards greater inclusion in strategy development:

> *So, our agenda, I think is set…. So, there's those shared things that are policies. How are we responding to those, the programmes…So, but I think there is potential for us to move beyond that. I think it might be when… It becomes cyclical to us (Audrey: Focus Group Data).*

4.4.2 Strategic Direction and Strategic Gaps

Questions about geography and potential difference in implementation within and beyond each ETB emerged, signalling a need for more intentional consideration of a model for quality:

> *My biggest issue with QA at the moment is that in terms of consistency across the 16 ETBs, I'm not sure what the baseline is for quality assured provision… in terms of resourcing structures.* (*Robert, Interview Data).*

> *So, I can see significant differences in the implementation. I have seen it even within a provider you know, particularly ourselves, the ETB (Anastasia, Interview Data).*

Resourcing is largely a matter for individual providers, and is based on the prioritisation of QA within the service plans of those providers. As we saw earlier, there is no tracking of the cost of resourcing QA, apart from the cost of external authentication and locally devised assessment, and the allocation to ETBI (SOLAS Report, 2022). Both financial and human resources required have yet to be quantified, and related to the more long-term benefits arising from cultural and societal effects such as good practice, learning and fair and consistent treatment of learners, other beneficiaries, stakeholders and employees. The commitment to sharing learning and consulting across boundaries is clear. However, there is uncertainty and absence of frames of reference such as a defined theory of quality; concrete procedures and a known, agreed system (Sectoral Report on Quality 2023, p.14). In Quentin's statement, there is an indication of a need for the sector's representatives to become more articulate and clearer about its own processes and structures linked to quality and qualifications:

> *I don't know what the process is, if you like, around policy, development and procedure development within an ETB. (Quentin: Interview Data).*

The synergy created in the network through knowing one another, and having common starting points and shared expert knowledge, jargon and lore, all indicators of a CoP (Appendix P), are important, indicating the breadth of development to date, and hope for the future. Currently, however, confidence in the sector's capacity to make decisions is lacking and there is almost an illusion of being embattled:

> *And we're not seeing what's in the middle… what we need is an agreed understanding of how the policy should be interpreted, and the only way to get there is to have this dialogue with them (QQI) …it has taken that conversation to get to that point where you actually can see each other's perspective (Robert, Interview Data).*

> *You know, at times this is told to us, you must have more confidence - you can do it, and then as fast as we do it, that's pulled out from underneath us again sometimes, … How do we strategically make sure that our voice is heard more? (Bernie, Focus Group Data).*

> *I think our agenda is very much set. QQI are a huge stakeholder for us…we respond to requests from QQI - we seem very concerned with the way QQI might phrase something. …they're not our only awarding body…. when we get to the stage that we know…and we have this relationship with QQI that we feel confident then to kind of go, okay, how else do we define quality in our sector? (Audrey, Focus Group Data).*

This dependence and over-reliance on QQI are potentially limiting the development of practice and approaches lead by the sector as the main provider of FET. It is not clear where the barrier to progress lies, and there is no place for blame, but it seems that the source emerges from a misinterpretation of QQI's role; a need to constantly refer back to QQI as the assumed

authority, or the reticence of decision-makers within the sector to claim a space in relation to quality and qualifications as an element of the internal expertise of the sector and its institutions. The strength of the Network is recognised however, and if this is the case, then a different approach to sectoral learning, competence and strategy development for quality and qualifications is indicated:

> *It's a very strong group of people who know their field really, really well. So, I feel you have to be on your toes in that network and to be able to engage with it… it's probably my highest functioning network that I've been involved in because of the expertise that's around the table (Robert, Interview Data).*

There is a sense here of a paradoxical situation, where, on the one hand, the Network members are seen as powerful, expert and knowledgeable, yet they appear not to have freedom to act, are somewhat disempowered, and restricted by needing to refer back to QQI or to SOLAS. There is scope for building on the existing expertise across the hierarchies in a unified approach to the system for quality and qualifications, including identification of a theory and model of quality management; a systematic approach to governance, and ultimately an agreed, systematic cyclical approach so that all ETBs can avail of both devolved responsibility for programme validation and delegated authority for making awards. This suggests that creating spaces for consideration, and safe contestation about practice and roles, as well as quantification of resource needs, would be constructive and contribute to knowledge and to the identification of areas where more knowledge is required. These issues represent barriers which result in frustration.

4.5 Theme 4: Faultlines and Frustrations

The QA Practitioner role evolved in response to local issues and needs and as a result there are variations nationally, and, as we have seen, lack of a cohesive, well understood approach to quality and qualifications:

> *My experience of it has been- I'll use the word organic… when you go around the country, and you're talking to people about it* and ask*…., what does your unit* (QA Unit) *look like? They'll describe something very different to what we've done in* (our ETB) *(Robert, Interview Data).*

QA practitioners reported that the interpretation of roles in QA is changing, perceived as a shift away from a role that requires core practice or pedagogical experience as educators or trainers towards more administrative roles:

> *I see… the people who are employed in QA. It's becoming an administrative role and people who have not (and granted, it is not their fault)- like they were never educators. (Anastasia, Interview Data).*
>
> *Well, that's what I find worrying is the lack of you know in depth, understanding, and the lack of you know, you have technicians, basically, then doing the job instead of somebody who intrinsically is a Further Education and Training practitioner (Leona, Interview Data).*

While there are arguments to be made in favour of including those with pedagogical and administrative expertise in the development of systems for quality management and for qualifications, concern for the loss of expertise in pedagogy, and in the skills associated with adult education and training are legitimate. There is a need to remain aware of which voices are being silenced as changes in management occur and as new policies and strategies are introduced. The constant change has resulted in 'busyness' and constant reactivity, which are ongoing issues in the sector, almost becoming the essence of practice:

> *…we're reactive…… you come away from the* (network) *meeting really informed…but with a big to do list (Eva, Focus Group Data).*
>
> *And maybe that's the way it functions. And maybe that's what gives it energy is the crisis moments… you think you have a handle on it, and the next thing something else is thrown at you that you have to deal with (Leona, Interview Data).*

This constant reactivity can become a barrier, preventing more thoughtful reflective approaches to problem solving and problem anticipation. There is a tendency for everyone to join every working group, probably out of a need to continue learning, and seeking to understand, although there is also recognition of the role the network plays in replenishing the energy of members too, and supporting one another. Clare described this aspect which is at the centre of what draws members back, and builds and sustains long-term relationships:

> *…it needs to be an ongoing replenishment, even if it's just a rest. And that rest doesn't mean a new person, but just a rest from being the ones that are in every single working group going and trying to positively honk (as in the analogy of geese flying in V formation and changing place at the front to relieve one another) forward for everybody (Clare: Focus Group Data).*

Legacy FET structures are embedded in the landscape, and could be described as fault lines that have yet to fracture and reveal new rich seams of possibility and fertility where interesting solutions and richness emerge (Wenger-Trayner et al, 2019). Evidence of perceptions, misunderstandings, conflicts, status issues, and competition emerged in the research, illustrated here by Maurice:

> *I think there's huge issues, because all the directors as well are so different. So, some of them think, sure all you need are eight courses, and that's it. Or if you … came into being a director from… say, Youthreach how developed is your understanding of it all (QA), including appeals, repeats and all of that. Do you know what I mean? (Interview Data).*

While there are lots of meetings of the Network, sub-groups, working groups and oversight groups, it appears that time and space to resolve misunderstandings is limited, and there is a sense of frustration in participants' contributions. Bernie highlighted a problem with competition:

> *However, I do feel that this has been challenged by competing demands at higher levels in the organisations, and the need to find consensus across 16 different organisations (Survey Data).*

Groups associated with the QA Network and within ETBI were structured along hierarchical lines after 2013, which may have contributed to these issues of fractured and fragmented understanding, and to problems in agreeing a focus in relation to the domain of quality in FET. Fragmentation to the extent that there are insurmountable boundaries mean that the kind of working relationships that support true understanding cannot be developed because interpretation is based on the perspectives of a single group at a single level within the hierarchy:

> *They made, they kind of said, right. So, forums* (the Network was previously a forum) *are second grade (staff), and above… chief executives have a forum, directors have a forum and after that it's networks (Bernie: Focus Group Data).*

While this may work in relation to some decisions and policies that need to be devised; the role of quality in the lives of learners who access FET programmes, and as an element of culture suggests that there is a need for more interaction, shared learning and co-construction of knowledge to promote and influence the best impacts, and through this interaction, to reduce the nature of assumptions made about other actors within the sector, rendering the unfamiliar more familiar. There is a perspective that the directors rely on information from the QA Network, to inform decisions, but there is also a risk of loss of status and consequential loss of power for Network members:

> *I think there would be a sense that you know, directors maybe don't know the detail well enough to maybe be the core decision makers. We might be the ultimate decision makers. (Robert, Interview data)*
>
> *…. But actually, as directors of FET in order to approve anything, I think we have to be informed by the network… (Siúin: Interview Data)*

> *…as a sector we value hierarchy. I personally don't value hierarchy, but I can see the sector does, and I would hate us to lose status, if that makes sense. And status isn't important… but actually quality is…. So, I'd hate us to lose status as a network, because we've the wrong people there. (Audrey: Focus Group Data).*

There is an apparent hierarchy of scale, perceived capacity, proximity, funding and outcomes, and a sense of competition between the ETBs, and yet a contradiction is that sense of humility, for example, where key agents talk about referring to the Network for their expertise. Yet Network members feel at risk of loss of status and divergence from pedagogic perspectives. While there are energy and enthusiasm for the task in hand, there are barriers to learning together across the hierarchies within the sector. Reducing these boundaries may help the construction of more cohesive systems for quality in FET, and as a result secure the role of ETBs as awarding bodies. Perceptions stemming from competition also exist about leadership and organisation of programme development:

> *But at the moment you have odd things happening like, say, (named) ETB writing a curriculum in (a named vocational field). Yeah, but you're kind of scratching your head because you're kind of going (names a FET centre) do courses in that… and have quite a bit of state investment in it. And then I'm not sure why you put somebody with no experience in that space as the lead…to me (it's) a touch of the Wild West and the whacky races… which is total random chaos… And then whose role is it to direct? If they're all separate entities…. (Maurice: Interview Data).*

The legislation is designed to allow individual providers to engage in programme development. These concerns about who does what are legitimate, but may be the product of lack of constructive knowledge development as a result of the corralled, boundaried nature of the Network, and the other groups. Describing connections between QQI and the QA Network, and illustrating communication variations, communications breakdowns due to the entrenchment of hierarchies, and some dissonance around power and status, Quentin commented:

> *When QQI was established, or when ETBI was established first I would have met fairly regularly with the QA Network around the ETBs establishing QA systems and structures…Of late I have had much less interaction with the QA Network directly….I've been… dealing with the FET Directors (Interview Data).*

These changes also illustrate how interruption to co-construction of knowledge may be affected. Although perceived as a good information source, for feedback to the authority, QQI, there is confusion about the network's authority and its linked working groups, committees and forums according to Quentin:

- Where are we supposed to interact on what topic -? … is that to director's level? Is it to the QA Network? …. The QA Network is a lot closer on the ground I would imagine… implementation than the people we're having the conversation with (Interview Data).

And Artemisia identified a similar issue:

…and then things were restructured and we never even got a map of what the new structures were (Artemisia: Interview Data).

One key agent in ETBI, charged with supporting communications described the challenge of multiple groups:

And that's really what the role is keeping the connections going …agreeing how to do it… going through all the steering groups getting agreement from strategy groups, task and finish (group), *DFET Forum, CEs, (Leona: Interview Data).*

Maurice suggested that there are too many committees and these should be reduced or replaced with more representation across levels through delegation:

Well, I keep bringing it up, saying we need to shut down lots of these committees, because I don't have the time. Neither should the other directors and we need to elevate up our managers… (Maurice: Interview Data).

There are concerns too, about logistics and resources, as well as structural discrepancies, despite positivity at national level:

And ETBs will take responsibility to redevelop a minimum of one program each. But if I have 3 curriculum development officers and you don't, that's not like, with like. And so, then you have increases in workload, and just an unequal distribution of work across an unequally distributed workforce. (Siúin: Interview Data).

Eva argued for greater parity in distributing resources and staffing to enable

The standardisation of QA processes across all ETBs - allowing for local differences but overall, the same collective approach… (Focus Group Data).

Frustration with delays to policy implementation are evident in Jane and Kim's responses:

Programme Development and Validation process - what's generally agreed and recommended by QA Network is not progressing with a variety of factors and stakeholders involved, i.e., Strategy Group, DFET Forum, CE Forum, QQI, ETBI - the time taken to move this forward is very challenging. In the interim, each ETB is approaching it differently depending on their size, resourcing, priorities…. (Kim: Survey Data).

*A*ccording to Joan, the challenge that

has been ongoing since I joined in 2017 is programme development… this is still ongoing and without a clear structure in place yet. There was an overarching steering group established in June 2022, a two-day event (the mini-conference) *with all the QA*

> *Network in September 2022 and yet despite everyone's active roles, we are no further in the process (Survey Data).*

But there are *'hundreds of major awards, to be reviewed and revalidated (Bernie: Survey Data)*, and questions arise about the Skills to Advance (STA) micro-qualifications development process, perceived as potentially taking the focus away from other programme development projects, and perhaps highlighting conflicts between former FE and training interests:

> *It's* (the micro-qualification project) *targeted at employees, you know, it's the skills to advance piece, and then is it taking energy and enthusiasm away from other programme development that we should be doing? (Eva: Focus Group Data).*

Project continuity within the Network is a challenge according to Maurice: suggesting that there is a gap in a national and sectoral strategic vision for QA, although Maurice's perception is different to Frank's:

> *So, if you look at an act of gross self-harm that occurred…over a period of nearly 2 years - the inaugural reviews, and the directors who agreed to be part of the subcommittee to look at all reviews were all the ETBs who were first selected to be assessed. Then they said they were going to give the information out to everyone else* (but) *that didn't really happen. They were meant to go through the quality network (*to) *keep* (it) *going. But it didn't actually feature as an agenda item for months on end at the DFET (Forum)… (Maurice: Interview Data).*

> *(Our) ETB was in the second tranche of ETBs. I remember that the relevant members of the QA Network that were in the initial tranche provided accounts of their experience of all the elements of the review process; the self-evaluation process, the report-writing, the review panel meetings etc.* and *it was also done informally through chats and e-mails etc (Frank: Survey Data).*

Maurice was critical too, despite efforts by the ETBI team to thematically categorise the inaugural review reports and develop a work plan:

> *In a way the IRQ was a lost opportunity. Yeah, because it might have been one way of… looking at the culture of quality* (and)*, what kind of structures do the ETBs have at this moment in time? (Maurice: Interview Data).*

There was a disconnect in the coordination of sharing across the different boundaries and groups, so the potential for consistent learning and opportunities to develop a sectoral approach to building competence for further self-evaluation and review was lost due to this apparent lack of co-ordination. A conclusion might be that the QA Network itself is more useful for personal support and enhancement of individual practice than for concerted development and realisation of more universal, sectoral strategic goals in its current format.

4.6 Theme 5: Standards

Standards can be interpreted as standards for awards or standards of practice within FET intended to ensure high-quality delivery and experience for learners.

To one Network member, the QA Network is *'the rigorous standard bearer behind FET initiatives' (Eva: Focus Group Data)* and Glenn records that the QA Network influences FET *positively - it generates a reasonably standard experience across FET for learners' (Survey Data)* and, suggesting that the picture is not all bleak, and that the collaboration of all sixteen ETBs in the Network is useful for building consistency, according to Ita, the Network influences

> *improved consistency of awards and learner experience across ETBs, through sharing of innovative practices,* and *development and sharing of awards to respond to skills gaps in the economy (Glenn, Survey Data).*

In their responses, QA Network members showed their concern with the standards of education and training and a commitment to QA to support quality and qualifications policy implementation. The purpose of the response to the COVID 19 pandemic was to ensure that learners' achievement of certification would not be adversely impacted, through the adaptation of programme requirements. Audrey described the commitment to standards:

> *There is a commitment to standards - if there is a standard identified then we are setting it - we have high expectations of what we do for learners, because our learners deserve to have these very clear standards (Audrey: Focus Group Data).*

The Network ensured the maintenance of '*award standards and rigorous assessment processes for programmes with a high vocational competence element during the COVID pandemic' (Eva: Focus Group Data*). The motivation behind this was to cater for learners who would not achieve full awards because the Work Experience component was mandatory at the time and work experience was not available as a result of lockdowns. The QA Network '*developed and agreed a sector response to temporary mitigating arrangements for programme assessment'* (Ita: Survey Data), adapting assessment requirements and modifying programmes by adding more appropriate modules:

> *Many of these necessary adaptations were organised by the network with QQI becoming a somewhat more at-hand and agreeable ally (Frank: Survey Data).*

Network members recorded their priorities at that time as being: '*to facilitate learners to complete their award during lockdowns without completing a compulsory work placement'* (Ita: Survey Data). Others referred to being '*part of a governance group that negotiated*

modifications with QQI' (Hannah: Survey Data) and to the fact that *'the network provided a space for developing and negotiating a shared approach to managing work placements during lockdowns that did not impact on the value of the awards' (Ita: Survey Data).* Recognising the impact, Eva identified the response to the COVID19 pandemic as an opportunity to inform future practice:

> *The approach taken by the QA Network and in particular the working subgroup for this topic (*CAS Modification) *was incremental, evidence-based and sensible, providing a model going forward as to how other collective QA-related matters might be approached in the future (Survey Data).*

This response during the COVID 19 pandemic resulted in the development of practices linked to the governance of programme changes and adaptation, which has been adopted through programme governance units in the ETBs, and is reflected in the project to review and revalidate existing programmes of FET. The 'shared approach' mentioned by Ita in her survey response describes a consistent agreed approach to the process, but whether it provided any impetus for independent programme development and adaptation at local levels should be explored further, as, intense focus on procedures, together with inequitable resource use may actually contribute to less innovative activity at local level. The problem is that this approach grew out of an emergency response, which was a short-term action instead of a longer-term planned strategic approach that allowed time for the consideration of theory, research and other practices and needs in advance of decision-making.

QA Network members are committed to doing the right thing:

> *You see, if you think back, QA is rooted in standards, and it is rooted in doing the right thing and doing it in a way that is informed by quality practices (Leona: Interview Data).*

Related to being informed by quality practices, there is a need to provide time and space to consider and think about what we mean by 'quality practices', to ensure that the practices engaged in are beneficial for both learners and practitioners. The issue of fear arises from time to time, for example, it could be hypothesized that the 2012 project to develop programme descriptors was a response to the fear of awards not being made due to lack of validated programmes. Similarly, the COVID19 pandemic was characterised by fear that assessment candidates would not complete the mandatory Work Experience module, and would not achieve full awards. While fear is not the best basis for decision-making, there is a tendency for decisions made to resolve such wicked problems to influence practice. There is a need to become more strategic about developing practice intentionally instead of continuously

working in a reactive way, as highlighted by participants who described the heroic nature of QA practitioners' work.

These responses can show up as performativity, also a product of the passion perhaps, as illustrated in the research, and showing up as QA practitioners 'working savage hours' (Maurice); 'working more hours in the week' and becoming overworked (Siúin: Interview Data); taking on module development 'on top of her day job' (Siúin: Interview Data). In the focus group, members highlighted the need to nurture others to play their part and support progress like geese moving forward and dropping back to maintain the momentum of the flock, an apt analogy used by Clare in the Focus Group, and according to Robert sometimes

> *…the norm for us is you have to produce… because we want to be sometimes the best in class. So, we would produce 500 pages of evidence when only one page is required sometimes (Robert: Interview Data).*

The community functions through connections and participants gave an insight into the sources of their commitment to quality, and to FET, demonstrating a sense of passion and competitiveness once more:

> *But there was an obligation, you know, sort of a moral imperative on us…in a sense, it was unspoken. We really did not want to make things worse (Artemisia: Interview Data).*

> *I mean this in a good way but the network creates its own pressures on the members that nobody's going to let their sides down. (Anastasia: Interview Data).*

This passion can be a negative too, and can result in the creation of unrealistic expectations, burnout, and a tendency to flex too much to external pressures instead of working to develop true mastery and systems that are sustainable. As Stulberg and Magness point out, passion rooted in fear is rarely sustainable, and comes at a cost (2019, p.67).

4.6.1 Updating and Maintaining Standards

The project described by participants to review and revalidate legacy programmes meets a need to align existing validated programmes with validation and revalidation cycles. The process is designed to ensure that academic standards are maintained and there are ongoing award relevance and currency, as identified in the sectoral report (2023, p.p. 13-14) and required by QQI:

> *…so, my aim would be to have a more active programme development* (process)… *so that's the implementation of that work plan (for review and revalidation) is how I*

would see the QA Network contributing to educational standards… (Quentin: Interview Data).

Delays in programme review and revalidation, and in new programme development were raised as an urgent matter in the QQI sectoral report (2023) on quality in ETBs. The QA Network, as a collective, prompted action on the issue and dialogue with QQI ensued. Delays in progress are a problem and there have been proposals that it might be solved through invoking the existing provision for the ETBs to have greater responsibility for creating awards:

I think, what's missing for FET is delegated authority, and having the right, the role and responsibility to create our own awards on behalf of QQI. And to have that delegated responsibility to do it. I know there's talk about devolved responsibility, but I don't think that's in my mind what I think FET need. I think it's delegated authority (Siúin: Interview Data).

Interpretation issues appear however:

I've had a meeting with all the directors and two of the CEOs. But I was the only person there who knew the difference between devolved responsibility and devolved authority…I'd quizzed Quentin on it, three weeks beforehand. But like they were talking about devolved authority (Maurice: Interview Data).

Contested and different understandings have occurred, suggesting that there is a need for an enhanced focus on interrogating national policies, providing spaces for meaning-making and interpretation, eliminating conflicting interpretations if possible, and for considering their application to the FET sector. This should include actors with different experience and expertise, but ultimately focus on the benefits of application, recognising the autonomy of each ETB, as well as the importance of developing a coherent system that works seamlessly in the interests of learners and society. Provider autonomy is clearly encouraged in QQI policy, and when provider autonomy is introduced to practitioners participating in programme review or development, it is welcomed:

… 99.9% of teachers or instructors, trainers, whatever you want, they want to do the best for the learners… And yet they're cognizant of the standard. (Anastasia: Interview Data).

But there are fears present too, suggesting a need for more professional development:

…. they are afraid of having to develop anything of their own, and they're particularly afraid of developing assessments because (it's) their subject area…, and they really struggle if they have to go and develop their own assessments (Anastasia: Interview Data).

Gaps across the country in the level, intensity, experience and knowledge of programme and curriculum development and standards, are described by one interviewee:

> *But where there was an issue was, we weren't involved in actually the programme development side… had a limited involvement in programme revalidation and programme updates (Robert: Interview Data).*

The standards adhered to go beyond programmes and educational standards, and are influenced by legislation other than QA legislation, such as equality legislation, and by other ETB QA commitments:

> *That we have universal design…That people know what we mean when we talk about you know, diversity…. I think quality has – the quality, environment and quality awareness has shifted … and within FET so many really strong, strong voices have contributed so much to changing the understanding of this discourse. (Artemisia: Interview Data).*

For Anastasia, the primary focus must be the impact on learners, and the standard of what we do, with QA as an important enabler:

> *… I feel it (QA) should not get in the way of what we're about. And we're about quality teaching, learning and assessment for our learners. (Interview Data).*

4.7 Landscapes of Practice

Wenger and other authors identify that CoPs do not exist in isolation, but have overlapping memberships and interests in other domains, and connections to other communities and practices within 'constellations of practice', and 'landscapes of practice' connected by individuals called 'boundary spanners' (1991, 1999, 2004, 2019). This QA Network sits within a complex landscape of practice that is characterised by interconnected communities, committees and working groups extending from the local to the global. Their connection to pedagogical practices applied by teachers and trainers and the impact of those practices on learners are critical, and cannot be underestimated. While the main direction of their work is towards the development of a system for QA, the QA practitioners must remain knowledgeable about pedagogies in order to support the practice of educators and trainers who are in direct contact with learners, and to understand their situation with empathy.

4.7.1 Local Connections

Connections across boundaries and integrated activities contribute strongly to consistency and domain knowledge. These feed the ambition to serve learners well, creating complex interwoven social landscapes informed by practice (Wenger, 1999, p.118) *…but the real power, and I mean the word power is with the boards. (Education and Training Boards) (Anastasia).* The ETB Boards are not currently active in development of quality cultures however, because

quality lies within the executive function of Chief Executives, not within the reserved function of the Boards. The QQI review panel recommended considering how the ET Boards can take oversight of the QA of FET provision, aligning it with their other governance responsibilities (2023, p.3), recommending focusing on its centrality as a 'theme of good governance' influencing culture, rather than risking it being perceived as a relatively small part of the organisation's overall operation (2023, p.14; p.22).

There is a challenge in the change being wrought, and crossing local boundaries is important. The ability to frame quality as a concern for all of the organisation is critical to success, but illustrates the importance of spending time negotiating meanings:

> *…our QA Team have been…central to it in terms of how we move forward. And there were challenges then for the senior executive team particularly if people have been very traditional, and how we've always done things. And if the PLC Principal is still connected to the post primary school…You've got director of schools and directors of FET, and they don't always see the world in the same way (Siúin: Interview Data).*

The distinction between the authority (QQI) and providers is important, as is 'owning' QA as an enabler rather than a punitive concept:

> *I do think that in fairness to QQI it's up to us at provider level …to create a model of implementation of the policies which is not, you know, about production…. I'm working with an ETB and they are very excited to have the freedom … (Anastasia: Interview Data).*

> *But teachers and instructors being almost afraid to change or take advantage of the freedoms that they have…And the QA people in each ETB need…to take advantage of policies and communicate those policies (Quentin: Interview Data).*

As experts, members of the QA Network can share information and co-create knowledge with FET learning practitioners, supporting policy implementation locally and leading the process. Their role, in positions that bridge the gap between national policies, management and pedagogic practice, can offset fear, but depends on high levels of support and promotion by other actors throughout the sector.

4.7.2 National Connections

Bridging this gap between the national and the local, the QA Network is ideally positioned, in ETBI, to be a locus for the development of quality literacy, strategy, knowledge and competence, and for the transmission of strategic initiatives throughout the sector. Essential to this is the recognition of members as informed experts, and the understanding that this

knowledge should traverse hierarchical boundaries because it is so close to the overall goal of developing a well-respected high-quality FET system.

Wenger argues that through multi-membership across other groups, there is broader perspective alignment, redefinition and co-creation of new knowledge, as well as critical learning and greater understanding (1999, p.217):

> *Every meeting I learn something new, I understand more how QA functions in other ETBs. I bring this knowledge back to my local ETB (Jane: Survey Data).*

Network members are identified as an information source on which the DFET Forum, CE Forum, Learning Practitioners and Senior Management rely because they are connected operationally 'on the ground', but this is not necessarily consistent across ETBs. The risks associated with how quality is perceived in relation to the priorities of the ETBs was identified in the 2025 thematic analysis of the QQI Reports on Quality in ETBs, suggesting that a challenge for the sector may lie in perceptions and possibilities associated with the QA Practitioner role. Research participants gave an insight to the impact of learning through the network, suggesting that, if the links were made between their knowledge and strategy, then the expertise of members might be used more influentially and constructively in developing coherent systems:

> *So, we have to depend on networks like the quality network, where there are people who are very connected, either on the ground or to their teams (Siúin: Interview Data).*

> *…you know the range of these national working groups or steering groups -all of that really would have given me my pot of knowledge and understanding (Odette: Interview Data).*

The FET Directors' Quality Strategy Group, is an influence on Network agendas, and there appears to be a two-way looping interaction when deciding what action is taken, although, it is not entirely clear how agendas are set internally, and how these are connected to decisions. The external influence of QQI is cited however:

> *I mean, let's face it, the strategy group – the FET Director's Strategy Group would also have an impact on that… there's an offer that comes from us,* (the QA Network) *… and the strategy group decides it's a strategic imperative (Bernie: FG Data).*

> *So, who, I think, our directors, our CEOs, they really influence our agenda. I think QQI really influences our agenda… - that could be QQI in terms of… standards…definitely, I think, our two directors…that are the chairs* (of the network)*. (Audrey: FG Data).*

Located within ETBI, the QA Network, acting like a hub, is perceived as central to the landscape of practice in QA in FET. Practicing within that landscape was described as an essential for Clare's access to information, described in her response to the mapping exercise:

> *Because I know looking at that, I'm involved in maybe 80% of what you've got there* (Figure 10)*. Yeah, I do that by choice a lot of the time, because that's how I keep informed and keep abridged. (Clare: Focus Group Data).*

Through ETBI, the landscape of practice is developing. For example, a reasonable accommodations working group was established in ETBI following a scoping report (AHEAD, 2024) and Audrey described boundary spanning in the context of that group and policy area, although this is not necessarily consistent with interactions in other ETBs:

> *Our admissions officer here sits on that* (the Reasonable Accommodations WG) *and she links with me afterwards. So… she will come to me and say… 'how do we express it in the quality handbook'? (Audrey: Focus Group Data).*

QQI's thematic analysis of ETB interim quality reports gives an insight into the development of different elements of quality governance, and while each ETB is putting in place governance units, the report indicates that, for the most part, there is a focus on developing areas of quality (Appendix V) linked to the strategic plans of each ETB, which is a positive development (2025, p. 9), for example, in Kerry ETB, WWETB and LMETB. There is no reference to specific focus on models or theories of quality however. A challenge is to connect elements perceived as separate concerns, under the umbrella of quality and qualifications, and to ensure that different parts of ETBs are not duplicating work unnecessarily due to fragmentation.

The QA Network's work, and practice development through shared learning occurred through participation in working groups, within the landscape of practice, which, in the absence of available documentation for the period studied, are often set up responsively and organically. Some working groups were initiated by QQI, and some by ETBI:

> *Your working group… the QA Network voices at those things (e.g. programme evaluation WG) were very important… because they were speaking with an experience and an authority (Odette: Interview Data).*

Odette described the Network's influence on policy development and responses to QQI policy drafts, such as the Statutory and Sector- specific QA Guidelines:

> *I do remember the QA Network at all of those times, deciding it was important that as a network we respond to these drafts (Odette: Interview Data).*

And for Clare, the Network is useful for

> *Shared information on national issues and responses; a sounding board to check responses to ETB specific issues in the knowledge that it has already been addressed in another ETB (Interview Data).*

Quentin described the importance of Network links with other groups too, contributing to two-way exchanges and knowledge transfer:

> *And they're a conduit …for the people that they work with on the ground who will ultimately have to work with that policy…QQI has benefited a lot from the participation of ETB practitioners… on panels, the practical knows how and experience but also the provider perspective (Quentin: Interview Data).*

Audrey illustrated the valuable role of ETBI staff involved:

> *I think the chair is really, really important. I think ETBI staff really helped as well, because they're really committed to us rolling out the agenda (Audrey: FG Data).*

FESS could be considered a boundary spanning element within the landscape of practice, as a mobile third party, moving between different groups. Crossing boundaries and existing on peripheries can be a mechanism for broader contextualised understanding and knowledge. Maurice was involved in the FESS steering group and he described how they act as an objective third party:

> *…it was like having a third-party agency. Because then they could say things that you may not accept from ETBI, or you may not accept from your own staff (Maurice).*

FESS originally participated in the Network as a secretariat, but became more and more involved in the network's practice:

> *I think FESS would have felt maybe were we just brought in as a secretariat to it. … ... We had a wide range of knowledge as well. So, I think our role changed …in terms of us getting involved in projects and working groups (Odette: Interview Data).*

Audrey had a perspective on the network's relationship to QQI, illustrating the kind of tensions that can occur, and highlights a problem with perceptions of quality, and perhaps illuminating a problem with how the community itself presents quality, potentially affecting its representation within the ETBs as entities:

> *So, the way I see it, we're almost like a community that is anti-wind turbines at the moment, you know what I mean? …we have a kind of a common cause, in a sense, a very clear community of interest. But actually… we should be broader than that… So, we define quality quite narrowly in our community… in response to what QQI wants of us as a sector (Audrey: FG Data)*

4.7.3 Awarding Bodies

Network members' participation in consultations and events led by QQI, can contribute to two-way learning and feedback loops:

> *Okay, so some of the positive things have been, say, some of the QQI conferences where they have talked about, you know, like academic integrity and stuff … (Maurice). Another way that the network can contribute to policy learning is to* participate *in feedback and try and point that out where it is an issue that it's fine in theory, but how would it work in practice (Quentin: Interview Data).*

The relationship with QQI is one that needs to be reframed, and there is space for considering how the sector can be supported to grow its role as providers responsible for quality culture in their own right, separated from the awarding body, while maintaining the positive working relationship which has been constructive. Separation of responsibilities of providers from the regulator, and development of greater strategic integration of quality models and theories may be achieved through a process that reviews the role of umbrella bodies such as ETBI in leading this on behalf of the sector. In addition, the way in which quality and qualifications are perceived as strategic concerns within the ETBs needs to be considered in more depth, with a focus on determining how expertise developed through the QA Network can contribute to quality literacy and quality cultures.

4.8 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the findings of a pragmatic exploratory research process. Drawing on the insights of QA Network members and key agents, the roles of QA Practitioners and the QA Network came to light. Analysing the data, faultlines and frustrations were also brought to the surface.

Key emerging points of interest included a deep insight into the unique situation of the QA Network, which features considerable commitment to the domain, which is quality in FET. There are strong relationships in the Network, and the participants emphasised the generosity of spirit and support they experienced through the Network. Professional learning for QA practitioners occurs through their membership, practice, deliberation, collaboration and consultation within the Network.

The results showed that the environment for QA in FET is a complex one, because the sector, roles within the sector, practices and procedures have evolved organically, often in response to crises, rather than strategically. Knowledge about quality is gleaned through experience, and participation in working groups and panels. Clarification and expertise develop in response to

events as they occur, and through sense-making as a result of responding to policies as they are published. QA Practitioners glean knowledge about policy through engaging with publications, developing and implementing procedures and through sharing with peers. The QA Network forms an important locus of learning for new members, fulfilling the role of a source of 'legitimate peripheral participation' for them, during what can be considered an apprenticeship phase (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Longer-term members act as mentors and supports to newcomers, and this was acknowledged by participants. Core members' experience of previous cycles of policy implementation, and of responding to new policies, informs the co-construction of new knowledge and understanding with new members, who are typically newly appointed to roles for the management of quality in their ETBs.

There is a tendency to respond with a sense of urgency or novelty, as issues arise, and this may be a result of conditioning aligned with the recent history of FET which is a history of constant change. An interesting outcome of policy implementation in relation to quality and qualifications legislation was that QA Practitioners, through the TQAS, acted as catalysts for change, on the frontline of uniting previously unconnected organisations, during the restructuring of ETBs, due to the necessity to maintain and continue processes associated with quality assuring assessment.

Frustrations emerged in relation to delays in the review and revalidation of programmes developed and validated in 2012. Standards are connected to the NFQ, and through the maintenance and development of relevant, modern and high-quality programmes of FET, they are a cornerstone of success and progression for learners. Maintenance of standards is also associated with the quality assurance of assessment. Good quality management, together with well understood processes, delivered by committed practitioners, ensure that processes are coherent and comprehensive, and enable practice that is constructive for those who avail of ETB FET services, resulting in positive outcomes, including decisions about access to programmes and supports available. Over a twelve-year period, there have been successful initiatives and practice has developed, but delays in the emergence of quality cultures and knowledge about how to develop quality systems, applying theories of quality, are becoming more evident. Standards apply across all of these areas, but the sectoral response to the development of culture and models of quality has been less effective than the implementation of those areas of QA perceived to directly affect learners, for example, assessment processes (QQI, 2023).

With unequal distribution of resources, including human resources, complex decision-making pathways; no clear processes for programme development or general agreement on a shared understanding of what the legislation provides for; implementation of national policy will remain a challenge, prompting the continued emergence of differential provision without common basic standards of operation, resourcing and capacity.

Powerful voices, interpretations and priorities risk prioritisation of the wrong development and embedding of practices that won't meet the needs of all learners and potential learners fairly. For example, the constant tension between programme development leading to major and minor and special purpose awards, resulting in over-commitment to programmes for minor and special purpose awards at the expense of capacity in development of integrated programmes leading to major awards is a challenge. A sectoral opportunity is being missed to maximise capacity for developing integrated programmes leading to major awards, which can be delivered through a variety of different modes. The risk is that the sector's expertise in delivering to vulnerable groups will be undermined, and there will be loss of pedagogic expertise in that area, and reduction in the quality of service. The STA programmes leading to minor and special purpose awards only serve those already in employment for example, for the purpose of upskilling. Those not yet in employment may be consistently exposed to progressively more outdated programmes due to delays in enhancement of programme development capacity, systems and resources.

One area where this could be addressed is through becoming familiar with the landscape of practice for FET, illustrated in the landscape mapping process. Currently, the QA Network is part of hierarchically stratified system, and this has an impact on knowledge and information sharing and process development, as well as strategic approaches to the development of culture. The current system, based on approvals, permissions and status within organisations mitigates against the building of shared understanding. Reducing the boundaries between separate groups and levels of status to focus on specific areas could help to create a more cohesive system of FET. Given the complexity of the system, the landscape mapping exercise was indicated, and this supported the process of analysis, illustrating problems with strategic thought and cohesion. There are opportunities however, to leverage the landscape map, looking for those points of connection and rich intersections where fertile ideas and solutions can flourish, and an approach that favours collegiate learning, knowledge construction, research and development over and above procedural concerns can be positively enabled.

Reflexive thematic analysis yielded five overarching themes:

- Community of practice characteristics
- Roles in FET and the evolution of QA in FET
- Policy in practice
- Fault lines and frustrations
- Standards

and the findings illustrate these themes, contributing to my own interpretations. This exploratory process has revealed opportunities for further research.

In chapter five, I will present further analysis and discussion based on the five themes, drawing them together with reference to the literature, in an effort to make sense of the patterns and insights, and teasing out their relevance to the final conclusions.

Chapter Five: Discussion

5.1 Chapter Introduction

Drawing on the evidence reported in Chapter 4 above, I explore whether the ETBI Quality Assurance (QA) Network aligns with the concept of a community of practice (CoP) as defined by Wenger and Lave (1991, 1999, 2004). I also examine the Network's influence on policy learning, implementation, and standards, and its role within the broader landscape of practice. Adopting a pragmatic methodology, five themes were identified:

- Community of Practice Characteristics
- Roles in FET QA and evolution of QA in FET
- Policy in practice
- Fault lines and frustrations
- Standards.

Chapter four presented the research results, arrived at through document review, a survey, key agent interviews, a focus group, and a mapping exercise. This chapter discusses these results within the context of CoP characteristics and the five themes, beginning with insights into the QA Network and its values, referencing Wenger's CoP indicators (1999) and the McKellar et al. 'value-types' (2020) (Appendix Q). The chapter concludes by linking these themes to potential future directions for the QA Network. National FET strategies (SOLAS, 2014, 2020) emphasise high-quality education and training that comparable to other systems (QQI, 2024a). The QA Network, championed by Chief Executives and Directors of FET (DFETs) and supported by ETBI, and its predecessors, has consistently facilitated QA policy implementation through significant legislative, economic, and systemic changes.

5.2 Insights about the QA Network

Research findings indicate the Network provides induction, support, and knowledge development for new practitioners. It is perceived as being supportive, as a lobby group, a platform for sharing practice and expertise, and a means to inform sectoral agreements with QQI. It constructively informs shared practice and co-creates "boundary objects" which provide common reference points, for example, validated programme descriptors, quality frameworks and known themes and principles across FET (Wenger-Trayner et al, 2019, p.323).

Focus group members expressed a preference for more frequent face-to-face meetings, finding online meetings, a COVID-19 adaptation, less conducive to community-building.

5.2.1 Network Values

This section examines the Network's characteristics in relation to CoP characteristics (Lave and Wenger, 1991, 1999), specifically referencing Wenger's CoP indicators (1999, pp.125-126) and McKellar et al. CoP value-types (2020). The discussion focuses on the Network's characteristics as described by research participants, aligning them with the CoP characteristics of 'domain, community and practice'.

5.2.2 Motivation and Participation

Survey participants rated 'improving learner experience' and 'improving standards' highly as key motivators. Policy and strategy documents provide the imperative for their work and the Network's collaborative role. Dana saw the Network as a *'quality fix'* and a source of early career mentoring (Focus Group Data). Participants reported never missing meetings and noted a *'generosity of spirit'*, with one attending a meeting on her way to a holiday flight because it was always in her diary and so important to her. They link quality to learner benefits and are committed to 'doing right by learners.' New projects generate energy, as described by Leona (Interview Data). Key agents (Siúin, Robert, Maurice) observed members going 'over and above,' engaging in 'passion projects' and working '70 hour weeks,' mirroring how FET teaching practitioners demonstrate commitment (O'Leary and Rami, 2017). This aligns with Lipsky's (2010) concept of 'street-level bureaucrats' compensating for perceived underfunding for example, to avoid negative outcomes for beneficiaries (in Eriksson and Johansson, 2021, p.706). However, sustained high energy leads to overwhelm and tiredness. Trust among colleagues means members step up when others are immersed in projects. The perception that 'quality' has been 'shovelled' onto the Network, or a sense of novelty may contribute to this urgency and energy, and the sense of becoming burnt out expressed by some research participants.

5.2.3 Relational Aspects

The Network functions as a relational 'third space' (Adelle et al., 2021) fostering collaborative projects and strong connections. Members feel comfortable contacting colleagues outside meetings for support, and attendance promotes long-lasting collegiate relationships. It provides a safe, empathetic space for QA Practitioners. However, this sense of safety risks the normalisation of canonical behaviours (Brown and Duguid, 1991), replicating established practices and hindering experimentation. While interaction is easy, much remains operational, as noted by Siúin regarding the 'task and finish group,' though focus group participants desired

more strategic engagement. Relational aspects extend to strong connections and reputation with QQI. Within ETBI, hierarchical structures can impede knowledge transfer. Artemisia and Quentin noted losing direct contact with the Network after restructuring, partially alleviated during COVID-19 due to urgent programme adaptation (Frank: Survey Data). Artemisia described the restructuring period as lacking a 'map showing relationships', with QQI seemingly 'uninvited', highlighting issues with formal structural interconnections. Quentin detailed the confusion:

> *…after amalgamation, the Directors' QA Strategy Group was formed, which was when that relationship changed as well… between the direct contact of QQI with the network itself. So sometimes it's unclear what the structures are, what the authority is, if you like Where are we supposed to interact on what topic? (Interview Data)*

5.2.4 Knowledge

Members integrate their tacit knowledge, (a term defined by Michael Polanyi (1962a, in Pyrko et al. 2017, p.390), and explored by Duguid (2005),which recognises that adults possess stores of knowledge gleaned as a result of their maturation and experiential growth, which they draw on, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, in response to situations that occur in their daily life as educators and managers with new explicit knowledge from quality guidelines and policies, developing artifacts and managing assessment processes. Knowledge develops through the Network's social situation (Smith et al., 2019, p.64) and mutual engagement, and through processes of social construction, developing new knowledge while making sense of the information available, engaging in dialogue with their community and co-creating new knowledge which becomes received wisdom within the wider community.

A mini-conference on programme development, review, and validation exemplified shared meaning-making. Robert noted how expert knowledge and discussion at the event clarified issues, aiding QQI negotiations. Frank stated the Network *'supported a shared understanding of quality concepts and quality provision on the ground',* impacting ETB knowledge transfer and collective credibility (Survey Data). However, more research is needed to confirm whether the effect is strong 'on the ground' across all ETBs. While the Network's social situation fosters transformation and identity, there was limited reference to the use of reflection to identify successes or improvements. Participants' readiness to respond, without time for reflection, risks repetitive, crisis-driven practice, and echoes Fleming's thoughts on lack of time for reflection-on-action (2004).

5.2.5 Learning

Practice and tacit knowledge evolve through "indwelling" (Polanyi, 1962a, in Pyrko et al., 2017, p.390). Unlearning existing practices is sometimes necessary for changed situations, especially with conservatism (Stenvall et al., 2018, p.204). Wenger (1999) suggests starting with practice, valuing practitioners' insights over policy regurgitation for culture and learning. A question arises about how Network learning promotes quality messages in FET, given multiple ETBI channels. Maurice cited 'naivety' in programme development, prompting questions about policy learning and practice evolution through the Network. Frank and Maurice differed on external review debriefs (Survey and Interview Data). Frank recalled Network sharing, while Maurice claimed there was no Quality Strategy Group discussion, creating a concern about unified approaches and understanding across boundaries and hierarchical levels. Agenda formats may actually prevent time for reflection and learning, as they tend to be very business-like and itemised by project reports (*Document Review data*). Robert described 'unspoken misunderstandings' about policy interpretation, and Anastasia and Quentin noted practitioner fear and lack of flexibility regarding policy implementation. The Network must adapt its practice and define methods for proactive policy engagement and deep learning to inform decisions on quality models. Learning occurs through information sharing and policy implementation, and practice develops and becomes a norm as a result of crisis interventions and responses. Reflection could form a fourth leg for this, informing better learning and decision-making.

5.2.6 Intangible Assets

The Network is known for energetic problem-solving, dynamism, generosity, support, and collegiality. These can all be classified as intangible Network assets. Members altruistically support each other, sharing information as a result of their positive relationships. They are recognized experts, bridging policy and practice. Dana's analogy during the focus group of geese flying in formation illustrates collective competence and trust, but there are references to being exhausted and time poor, which is another reason why being able to work in formation supporting one another is useful. The Network is productive, sometimes excessively so, as Robert noted, aiming for 'best in class' output (Interview Data). Despite its strong reputation, participants felt disempowered and excluded from strategic decision-making and policy consultations. Slow approvals and internal ETBI structural issues undermine energy, leading to disengagement. A hierarchical, vertical decision-making axis prevents cross-level interaction. Snyder (2013, p.10) recommends iterative processes between decision-makers and 'implementers' to support experimentation and improvement in governance.

5.2.7 Tangible Assets

The Network's tangible assets are extensive, including meeting notes, position papers, programme descriptors, templates, an assessment manual, a learner handbook, and the EA Panel Directory. QA Practitioners have developed academic governance units and quality frameworks in their ETBs, leveraging Network knowledge. These boundary objects (McKellar et al., 2020, Wenger-Trayner, 2019) and reifications (Wenger, 1999) are used synergistically across ETBs. The RPL toolkit project, piloted and disseminated through the Network, in conjunction with the RPL Practitioner Network is an example of boundary spanning in the development of the project, and of a boundary object in its adoption and use in a number of ETBs. The validated ELC programme shows how the Network fosters partnerships and spreads interest in quality. Through resource development and interaction, members develop shared specialist vocabulary and internal lore. While QQI external review panels noted positive practice influencing ETB quality attitudes, there is no evidence of an underpinning known theory or model of quality management. Such a granular focus without foundation can lead to incoherence. The CEDEFOP Quality Manual (2015) recommends Deming's TQM and PDCA, but these were neither referenced by participants nor systematically applied in the ETB sector (QQI, 2023).

5.2.8 Applied Value

McKellar's value-type 'applied' represents changes in practice that come from the application of the first six indicators (McKellar, 2019). Procedures are developed through Network projects, local initiatives, SOLAS-funded innovations, and collaborative activities, with results shared across the network. Tangible assets contribute to practice formation, and their development contributes to the Network's practice, and members' expertise. The evidence shows reactivity and sectoral dependency on external agencies, as noted by the QQI report on quality in ETBs (2023, p.17). External demands drive practice towards energetic, crisis-oriented behaviour, hindering artifact development in less stressful times. Iverson and McPhee (2008) highlight that boundary object development and boundary spanning improve crisis performance due to established relationships, knowledge and ease of communication.

5.2.9 Realised Value

'Realised' value refers to the results of a CoP and, in particular of applied value or behaviour change (McKellar, 2019). The Network's energy and dynamism have led to significant achievements, including tangible assets created by the Network and QA Practitioners, driven by strong commitment. The programme review and revalidation process will update existing tangible assets. While the external review provided an opportunity to establish a baseline for

quality assurance practice, Robert noted that such a baseline does not yet exist. Cyclical practices are used for assessment management, SOLAS funding requests, and reporting but are not systematically applied across all eleven QA areas (QQI, 2016). Quality policy affects ETB departments beyond FET programme delivery (e.g. HR, IT, premises), which develop their own procedures, often in isolation from quality and qualifications policies. This is understandable because they are concerned with managing primary, post-primary, youth office and Music Generation services too, and must be responsive to Department of Education and Youth (DEY) policies and circulars too. CoPs have the potential to address these linkages within ETBs to improve quality cultures.

5.2.10 Reframing and Transformative

Wenger (1999) suggests practice emerges from collective learning, and this research confirms that learning together contributes to shared repertoire and Network reification. Practice becomes the Network's property (Wenger, 1999, p.45), replicated for recurring projects, and influenced by crisis responses. Participants reported increased programme and academic governance knowledge (Clare: Survey Data), personal growth (Bernie: Survey Data), and proficiency in programme development and change management (Frank: Survey Data). Members develop personally and professionally, applying learning in practice. When it is replicated in practice this learning must be relevant and accurate. Crisis-driven practice, like responding to deactivated awards or COVID-19, is problematic, conditioning practitioners to reactivity. Fundin et al (2018) warn that cognitive biases favouring rapid change can lead to avoiding stability (2025, p.274) and short-term thinking. Network members rely on managers for policy dissemination, and it is important that knowledge and practice is authentically based on accurate interpretation of policy.

Fragmented systems, diverse programme strands, funding streams, and legacy arrangements pose a challenge. That challenge is to find a unified quality management system based on theory, that allows local innovation, with leaders consistently and strategically disseminating quality principles and fostering quality cultures across the distributed system. Landscape mapping confirms the fragmented, distributed system, in which developing good governance is challenging. QA Practitioners act as changemakers and transformational leaders, with strong Network values, and leadership and senior management draw on their expertise. CoPs can support professional development, modelling leadership behaviours (Smith et al. 2019). Quality Management (QM) and consistent advocacy for FET quality are potential Network focuses. This could be achieved through reframing the QA Network's role to investigate models, enhance quality literacy, and quality management, and to include diverse voices.

Document review showed limited reflection on Network activities for learning or reframing, and there is potential for more reflection, and proactive strategic planning. Focus group participants appreciated the time to reflect, indicating that more time for reflection and transformative activities within the Network's business and broader quality deliberations is needed.

5.2.11 Do the Indicators Tally?

The Network shows significant CoP characteristics, which will be covered in the next section. The Network and ecosystem exhibit hierarchical public service organization (PSO) features, creating rigidities (Duryan and Smith, 2019, p.402). Priorities differ across hierarchical groups. Delegated authority is a strong DFET concern, as seen in Further Education and Training Colleges, Ireland (FETCI's) submission to the National Access Plan (No date). The operational elements of QA are the QA Network's and Practitioners' current focus, with practice influenced by crisis responses and urgency. Quentin noted, *'it would be useful, I think to have a clearer remit for what goes to what layer?'* Leona described her support role as *'keeping the connections going'* and securing approvals, illustrating boundary mediation practices. Hierarchies, defined as *'an order of some complexity in which the elements are distributed along the gradient of importance'* (Kuntz, 1968, in Duryan and Smyth), can limit knowledge transfer and creation (2019, p.204). Individual learning can be seen as a threat, promoting knowledge-hoarding and hindering collective learning (2019). Duryan and Smith state that within organisations, knowledge can be undervalued due to differentiation between senior and operational levels, making mixed-level teams seem risky. The QA Network's mobility is constrained by status-defined boundaries. Constructive, enabling leadership is vital for CoPs to be effective, balancing strategic approaches with autonomy. While the Network is strong and supportive, collective learning and its integration into accepted wisdom warrant further research.

Learning in reactive, canonical environments can be limited, lacking the discomfort that builds knowledge. Building knowledge through discomfort and unfamiliar situations can be promoted and achieved by creating environments where ambiguity is accepted (Snyder, 2013; Jackson, 2023). This raises questions about knowledge internalization as tacit knowledge, suggesting a need to move beyond prescriptive approaches to adult discussion. Expert individuals can grow by sharing knowledge and engaging in transversal processes. Smith et al. reported how a 'programme CoP' improved leadership through modelled practice (2019). McKellar et al. (2020) studied a CoP for an ecosystem approach in healthcare that supported experts across grades and regions. Iverson and McPhee (2008) explained how cross-boundary knowledge

sharing aids crisis problem-solving if learning occurs during calm periods. Network members currently learn through sharing, demonstrating generosity and altruism, fostering quality cultures with hope and vision (Ari Weinzweig, 2021). However, the Network's potential is limited by rigid vertical, hierarchical ETBI structures. Leveraging its strong values could strengthen the focus on the FET system and its quality excellence.

5.3 Theme 1: Community of Practice Characteristics

5.3.1 Domain

The QA Network demonstrates many features associated with communities of practice. Domain represents the shared commitment to quality in FET, informed by practitioners' experience and tacit knowledge (Adelle et al. 2021 p.146). Members engage deeply with existing and emerging policies and inform the development of quality frameworks and procedures. They collaborate actively when resolving operational challenges and contribute to collective projects, particularly in the area of programme development, though strategic engagement at national levels remains limited.

While focus group participants indicated that they would welcome more opportunities to participate in strategic planning, this mirrors observations by O'Leary and Rami that FET in Ireland represents *'an ad hoc structure lacking strategic vision'* (2017, p.15). There is a constant tension between the novel and a need for stability, and 'organisational ambidexterity' could help to channel the significant energy of the QA Network into the design of 'robust, easily adaptable processes; (Fundin et al. 2025), providing a more sustainable basis for the development of quality cultures across the sector.

5.3.2 Community

The community is characterised by strong collegial relationships, featuring high levels of trust and sustained mutual support. These relationships and characteristics extend beyond formal meetings. Members prioritize retaining a '*culture and value of generosity, of sharing and supporting one another altruistically'* (Focus Group Data). The palpable energy within the community, while driving motivation, can also lead to intense focus and exhaustion. The Network functions as a 'tightly knit group' or 'family' (Leona: Interview Data), united by their collective ethos and mutual engagement in response to adversity. Mutual support and trust have developed through problem-solving and crisis interventions, but high levels of cohesion, which foster confidence and collaboration, may also reinforce established practices and reduce opportunities for critical reflection. This in turn limits opportunities for innovation and

more systematic development of sustainable approaches which can be replicated easily by newcomers, maintained during crises, and developed through cyclical review and reflection.

Mutual engagement helps members understand context, tasks, and challenges, prompting comparisons across organizations (Audrey: Focus Group Data). While discovering commonalities is beneficial, competition and conflicting individual perspectives and capacities can lead to inconsistencies, suggesting a need to reframe the Network's purpose and strategy for the implementation of policies for quality and qualifications. There is some normalisation of reactivity to crises, which could be ameliorated by shifting culture towards one of acceptance of ambiguity and 'not knowing' and enabling practitioners to become 'adaptive experts' (Jackson, 2023).

5.3.3 Practice

Practice is expressed through shared language, artefact development, reification and problem-solving. In the QA Network, practice encompasses daily activities, members' practice within their roles, and the Network's collective actions, making it complex to evaluate or review. The review panel recommended a greater focus on monitoring and encouraging the quality of teaching and instruction (QQI, 2023), indicating a need for a stronger emphasis on strategic thought that is focused on pedagogy. A focus on meeting the needs of external regulators first, and beneficiaries second, potentially reduces the effectiveness of the domain of quality for learners. Inconsistent interpretations of such key concepts as 'devolved responsibility' and 'delegated authority' highlight the need for improved quality literacy (Ehlers, 2007) and shared mental models, developed through shared engagement in theory and model identification across boundaries.

5.3.4 Boundary Spanning

Boundary spanning involves knowledge and practice exchange between communities through movement across boundaries or shared artifacts and boundary objects (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2019). QA Practitioners connect teams across ETBs and nationally, and their practice evolves through experience. There is a need for more intentional Network practice focused on strategic outcomes, leveraging boundary spanning and including diverse voices to increase quality literacy for example. Network participation exposes members to practices in other ETBs (Audrey: Focus Group Data), allowing comparisons of structures, priorities, and conditions and revealing gaps in perspectives about the task, and this aspect could be strategically leveraged for more formal peer learning. While autonomy leads to differences in a 'provider-owned' scenario, inconsistencies in funding and resource allocation can impact

service quality and create conflict and competition for Network members in terms of decisions about priorities.

Internally, QA Practitioners successfully linked services across former VECs and FÁS via introduction of a temporary QA system (TQAS). Key agents noted Network members' participation in QQI reengagement and validation panels and working groups, in a two-way beneficial process, expanding their knowledge and contributing to policy. Boundary objects created by QA Practitioners are used across ETBs, though without a unified quality management model (QQI Report, 2023). These activities identify Network members as 'boundary spanners' as defined by Wenger (1999). Key agents acknowledge the benefit of mutual engagement across boundaries, as the Network represents all 16 ETBs, contributing to policy learning and dissemination. Within ETBI, however, the hierarchical structure (DFET Forum, Quality Strategy Group, Task and Finish Group) appears to restrict, rather than enable, boundary-spanning and coherent domain knowledge sharing, impacting dialogue and negotiation.

Key agents expressed uncertainty about group purposes and interaction gaps between the DFET Strategy Group and the QA Network. The Quality Strategy Group, described as 'operational' by Siúin, supports the DFET Forum and provides QA expertise (ETBI, 2024). Networks inform strategic areas for directors' forums. Despite this, a Strategy Group chairperson claimed they did not have a relationship with the QA Network, while another claimed they worked 'in tandem', highlighting a gap between strategic decision-making and Network practice. DFET forum newsletters show limited QA references, raising questions about connectedness in practice. For consistency in QA, Network members' agency as domain experts is crucial, requiring support from the Quality Strategy Group and Task and Finish Group, and there is an argument to be made for improving understanding of shared purpose while drawing on the different levels and types of expertise and knowledge available. Practice transformation is hindered by delayed decisions and over-reliance on external expertise (Grin, 2020).

Landscape mapping revealed an extensive, complex network of agencies, showing a potential source of QA Practitioners' frustrations with policy implementation delays and project execution. Illustrating silos, it is easy to see why Leona suggested that 'quality' is 'shovelled' onto the Network (Interview Data), rather than integrated. The mapping exercise illustrated in Figure 10 was a useful tool for considering the landscape of FET through the range of organisations and networks involved. In Figure 14, the complex landscape is mapped, showing

the many networks and groups associated with ETBI, denoted by a rainbow-coloured outline; the ETBs and their internal groups, in green outlines; extended broader networks and groups associated with awards and QQI in purple and the superstructure of other institutions and funding organisations in red. I initially drafted the map, and focus group members refined it, adding to the considerable breadth and range of connections and boundaries. The mapping exercise provided a focal point at the focus group, and it can serve as a tool for further exploration of the landscape, for example, when reflecting on how this landscape affects the practice and integration of quality in FET, for example, Maurice's perspective on programme development processes suggests a lack of consideration for the 'one destination, many routes' principle.



Figure 10: Mapping the Landscape of Practice

Constructive boundary spanning through knowledge development and positive social relationships (Iverson and McPhee, 2008) can improve well-being and reduce stress experienced when reacting to crises. Encouraging adaptive expertise, including diversity, taking account of uncertainties and ambiguity and leveraging them is also beneficial (Jackson, 2023). Social learning in communities fosters situational knowledge across complex systems, as seen in the Community of Practice in Eco-Systems Approaches to Health (COPEH) (McKellar, 2019). The QA Network demonstrates positive boundary spanning, easing member connections when help is needed, for example, when sharing programme descriptors and evaluations (Dana: Focus Group Data).

Snyder (2013) notes how large-scale governance projects support effective development in complex, changing situations through shared learning, informing wider system knowledge through mutual engagement. CoP principles suggest that self-organization is a useful way to frame and reframe purpose, working across boundaries could help address issues of interpretation and knowledge co-creation, especially when considering models and theories in the development of a systems of quality management, and approaches to professional development and quality literacy.

It is important to note that 'Boundary practices' can negatively affect groups by fostering insularity and rigidity (Wenger, 1999, p.115), potentially limiting innovative projects requiring diverse inputs. The 2023 QQI report noted ETB dependency on external authorities, possibly due to perceived deficits and lack of confidence, and there is a need to change the nature of the relationship, focusing instead on how quality and qualifications policies affect the sector. Boundary spanning must continue, and rich interaction between the different groups be sustained, but there is an argument to be made in favour of developing sectoral practices based on the sector's need rather than taking oppositional or defensive stances towards the authorities.

The STA SOLAS micro-qualifications project shows innovation is possible. The sectoral report suggests ETBs take more responsibility for internal quality, but also highlights resource needs for programme review and revalidation. There is a risk however, in attaching importance to this, neglecting other quality areas and overall governance, and such singular focus can result in the favouring of one area, - for example, as in the level of commitment to QA for assessment - over another, and the belief that quality is now 'done' (Glykas et al, 2015). Internal boundary spanning could foster greater proactivity in quality (2023 external review) and support the strategic goal of integration (SOLAS, 2020).

While the authorities aren't excluded, a robust quality management system depends on space for policy learning, system development and procedure development that avoids fear-driven, deadline-imposed behaviours in favour of scaffolding innovation, confidence and comfort with experimentation (Krooi et al. 2024). A process approach, leadership informed by domain knowledge, and Network members' strategic engagement are needed, along with input from organisation Boards and CEs. ETBI plays a role in fostering a consistent national quality architecture and QA Network members can connect policy to practice through mutual engagement. In turn, this can support the ongoing enhancement and increased value of FET services. The QA Network and QA practitioner roles have evolved organically, in response to

seismic incidents, becoming landmarks for quality in the sector. The longevity of the QA Network indicates that there is a value in their practices, reflecting possibilities for extending the concept of CoPs to include other categories, within the FET sector, building on existing knowledge and reframing as necessary.

5.4 Theme 2: Roles and Evolution of QA in FET: Career Histories

This section explores the QA practitioner role and its evolution, revealing how learning occurs within the Network's social situation. Each ETB now has a QA Team, represented in the Network, operating autonomously without a specific national guide, framework or blueprint, although the QA Network provides a locus centralised responses to urgent events.

Dependency on passionate individuals' willingness to step into tasks, learning as they went along, disseminating learning, leading change and promoting policy implementation has been key to the continuity of the joint enterprise of quality in FET. Their knowledge developed through indwelling as educators, trainers, managers and QA Practitioners. This is positive, and could be perceived as embodying the 'learning organisations' concept. There are costs, though, not least in emerging complex chaotic systems that lack the cohesion and stability needed to underpin cyclical reflection, improvement, change, comparison and innovation, which are indicators of system maturity.

A shift towards standard public service grading risks reducing pedagogical knowledge and increasing administrative functions, as Anastasia observed (Interview Data). There is a need for diverse expertise within a QA CoP, encompassing pedagogic, management, decision-making, and administrative skills to facilitate boundary spanning. Clear QA frameworks and architectures are essential to inform job descriptions, preventing 'strict alignment' (Wenger, 1999, p.205) and compliance that limits flexibility and fosters fear (Stenvall et al. 2018, p.204). I am arguing here for a courageous stance which flips quality management in FET away from quality control perspectives towards greater acceptance of ambiguity and improvisation (Fundin et al. 2025). Recent QQI policy drafts and updates provide for more flexibility and innovation, but absolutely embed the concept of provider responsibility for accountability (QQI presentation, 2025).

QA Practitioners in the Network have successfully navigated crises like award deactivation and COVID-19, and supported the transition from VECs and FÁS to ETBs. This capacity demonstrates strong, often informal, transformational leadership (Eva: Focus Group Data) that

should be leveraged to influence QA architecture and system development. Empowering practitioners to drive change within their ETBs (Bond, 2023, p.158) contributes powerfully to culture and system development. Embracing quality literacy (Ehlers, 2007, p.96) can enhance knowledge across ETBs and support beneficial system evolution. Focus group participants emphasized the importance of increased confidence for Network experts. Iverson and McPhee (2008, p.190) noted that expert CoP members often 'do the right thing' even if it means overriding management opinions. Improving Network confidence and counteracting over-compliance and fearful behaviour (Leona: Interview Data) is crucial (Wenger, 1999). Artemisia noted practitioners' 'unspoken moral imperative to make things better' fostering co-creation and independence, and this indicates opportunities for positive development where they are included (Interview Data).

5.4.1 Co-construction of Knowledge, Skill and Competence

Network participation by QA Practitioners facilitates knowledge transfer between national and local levels. The data gathered suggests that information sharing, particularly about regulatory requirements, is more prominent than deep knowledge development, which would foster constructive improvisation based on learner and societal needs. Key agent Maurice noted his dependence on a small number of people for knowledge. Network members co-construct meaning by interpreting policy and developing artifacts, a process embedded in their practice that enhances knowledge and informs innovation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). QA practitioners learned about quality by responding to policies (Anastasia, Leona, Odette: Interview Data). For some key agents, learning policies and procedures often occurs during crisis events. Leona described her learning as evolving through collaborative practice, becoming 'more streamlined'.as her knowledge grew (Interview Data). Wenger highlights how collective reflection and social learning offer professional development opportunities (2011, pp.8-11), and this is a strong aspect and argument in favour of CoPs, taking into account the insights of the QA Network members on their own learning.

Long-term Network members act as experienced leaders, mentoring new practitioners through 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This influences practitioners' behaviour, supporting their identity development as transformational leaders and mentors (Audrey, Dana: Focus Group Data). QA practitioners demonstrate broad skills, including co-creating tangible assets, acting as secretariats support for academic governance groups, policy communication, change management, self-evaluation, and advocating for QA benefits to various stakeholders. Their work on the TQAS exemplifies pioneering traits and a

broad vision. They engage with the academic relevance of quality assurance, including academic integrity, blended learning, curriculum development, assessment design, and AI implications. Their role spans administrative and academic practice, situated at the intersection of national policies and local implementation through procedures, demanding clear information transfer and broad domain competence (Audrey: Focus Group Data).

Accurate information and policy knowledge are vital for developing informed practitioners and ensuring sectoral consistency. This learning must occur across all levels, as leadership and cohesive implementation rely on it. Robert noted directors might not know the policy details well enough to be core decision-makers. I was quite surprised, and somewhat shocked by key agents' humble admissions that they felt they didn't know the details, and by uncertainties about structures within ETBI. It is not necessary for senior leaders to know the vocational fields in detail, as if they were to teach them, but quality underpins all vocational fields, and community education fields, and should be a concern for knowledgeable senior management, who have engaged with and understand it's implications. In recent periods of change and restructuring, it appears that other important operational matters, for example, the introduction of the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS), the data recording system, driven by SOLAS and DFHERIS have taken precedence resulting in limited strategic planning for quality beyond brief and aspirational references to quality and excellence in some strategic literature.

A collaborative effort is needed to develop a quality system that transcends boundaries. The Network's positive reputation and standing with QQI position it as a powerful fulcrum for future change within ETBI. TQM theory suggests that cross-departmental learning benefits quality commitment (Glykas et al, 2015, p.153), implying that increased Network diversity and strategic linkages could build competence and model positive approaches for the development of the integrated FET colleges for example.

Network members have developed problem-solving shortcuts through experience and evolving practice, but reactivity can limit capacity development. Assumptions about ETB capacity and capability, influenced by scale, location, budget, and proximity to control centres (Maurice: Interview Data; Li et al, 2022), reflect power imbalances. A diverse CoP focused on shared knowledge construction and practice development, rather than status, could challenge these assumptions.

5.5 Theme 3: Policy in Practice

This research primarily focused on academic quality governance, specifically concerning the external review and the application of the QQI Programme Development and Validation policy (2017), which is currently being updated. While other quality areas exist, Network members' current main concerns are academic governance and programme development. These areas align with research questions on standards, policy learning, and implementation. The absence of a unified quality model, underpinned by theory, may compromise knowledge and development, and, by default the benefits to learners and society at large, in the form of relevant FET programmes and reputable assessment outcomes.

What the Network chooses to attend to is significant, influencing focus on areas for implementation, and practice, and, as we have seen, this can promote reactivity to external events and organisations, prompting responses that become norms for practice. The Network was considered by one respondent, Frank to have become more influential through the large-scale programme adaptations project to address the effects of COVID19 (Survey Data). As noted in the external panel report, there is a tendency to be too dependent on, and responsive to, large external organisations, and to ignore local capacity development (2023, p.17). In an alternative perspective, Dr. John O'Connor of QQI, refers to the fact that providers and QQI are 'co-dependent' in the interest of high-quality standards (QQI Webinar, 2024), fitting with the concept of an interdependent eco-system. A strategic focus on shared learning providing conference opportunities for example, would be useful to address how such an eco-system could evolve, and to allow shared learning and knowledge construction.

5.5.1 Review and Academic Governance

The QQI review of quality in ETBs provided an opportunity for development, prompting ETBs to establish QA Teams and action plans based on the provider-owned principle. While the review required providers to examine their quality governance, participants made limited reference to the review, with one key agent calling it 'an act of gross self-harm' for the sector due to perceived lack of strategic focus and reflection. Before the review, no agreed sectoral self-evaluation approach based on a specific theory existed or was applied. ETBs met review requirements, receiving acknowledgement for what was presented, but a standardized data collection process could have yielded more consistent and comparable data nationally. A sector-wide conference to plan and develop a theoretical approach could have been beneficial. Conflicting accounts exist regarding reflection on the process. Frank described how the Network shared the experience (Survey Data), while a key agent expressed disappointment over lack of Quality Strategy Group discussion, possibly due to preoccupation

with other priorities at the time, highlighting the issues with lack of a defined system based on known theories.

Network participation fostered shared language, experience, and norms, leading to common reifications like the EA panel directory and the ELC programme. QA Practitioners' relationships with ETB DFETs and senior managers are crucial for the transmission of national policy and its conversion to procedures. Anastasia emphasized the need for respect and support for QA message credibility (Interview Data), while Audrey used her authority to ensure accurate messaging in her ETB (Focus Group Data). Domain knowledge is vital for policy implementation, and for credibility, especially in transitioning policy to procedure, suggesting a need for more sectoral introspection and reflection. The research highlights tension between the missed national opportunity of the IRQ to inform strategy and its contribution to greater awareness and development of local QA Teams, academic governance units, and quality frameworks, which are now more visible on ETB websites. Key agents noted that the IRQ exposed service discrepancies, for example across legacy geographical boundaries, prompting local internal improvements. Informed by the Core Statutory QA Guidelines (2017), ETBs have established academic governance units, including Quality Councils, Programme and QA Governance sub-groups, and QA Teams and Network members have been instrumental in this. The sectoral review panel highlighted inconsistent ETB approaches, limited personnel support, and delays in addressing the need for a quality system (2023), echoing concerns about inconsistent support and resourcing (Audrey, Eva, Robert, Siúin: Interview and Focus Group Data).

5.5.2 Programme Development, Review and Validation

The 2017 Policy for the Validation by QQI of Programmes of Education and Training states programme development is a provider responsibility, as stated too in QQI Core Statutory QA Guidelines, and this is expanded on in recent consultation documents (QQI, 2017a, QQI Webinar, 2025). In the ETB sector, programme development is largely a collective undertaking, influenced by resource constraints, external agencies and pressures. Programme development manifests as large-scale projects (e.g., the ELC programme); individual ‘passion projects’, or externally driven initiatives (e.g., STA micro-qualifications developed with SOLAS). Network members have been involved in various programme development projects, including responses to CAS and award deactivations, and apprenticeship programme development. The standards environment is fluid, with broad standards (Levels 1-4) and professional award type descriptors (PATD) for higher levels guiding programme developers. QQI also encourages the use of ‘Programme Derived Award Standards’ (PDAS) for new fields of education and training.

While administrative approval processes exist locally, defined programme development practice within ETBs is still emerging, with an emphasis on shared 'ETB-to-ETB' and collaborative projects.

The review panel recognized the sector's limited capacity for programme development due to the immediate need to review and revalidate legacy programmes (2023). Failure to review and revalidate 2010-2012 programmes during two cycles created a backlog, leading to calls for a national curriculum development unit (Odette: Interview Data), which appear not to have been heard or recognised. There are multiple potential reasons for this, connected for example, to lack of funding in the early years of ETB formation, lack of preparedness and awareness of the need for a national support, or indeed competition and conflict within the sector. In the event, funding was allocated to ETBI for a number of distinct shorter-term projects instead – a project to correct language in the AISs for example, and for the ELC programme development project. The QA Network supports projects like this, but their voice as an influence on the need for consistent processes and capacity development has not been strong enough to be heard or understood.

Lack of expertise or experience in scoping projects and a tendency not to reflect on project outcomes has an impact on the evolution of programme development capacity and by default on standards experienced by learners. A pessimistic discourse, reinforced by local lore, suggests programme development (evidenced in Anastasia's experience of practitioner fear – Interview Data) is perceived as time-consuming and challenging, hindering innovation despite QQI reassurances. The review and revalidation project focuses on module descriptors without analysing required capacity and resources, making programme development a consistent challenge expressed by research participants (Siúin, Robert: Interview Data).

Learners on newly validated STA programmes developed using an outsourcing model, traineeships and apprenticeships, can access relevant awards. Learners in the former FE sector however, predominantly in PLCs, are still exposed to programmes developed in response to the CAS, maintaining the sector in a self-imposed stranglehold. Adherence to bureaucratic approaches and commitment to compliance limits the potential for experimentation and innovation in curriculum development. Siúin and Robert point out that the review and revalidation project focusses on multiple module descriptors, without analysing the capacity and resources required, and the work will be carried out within existing provision (Interview Data). It is no surprise that programme development challenges were cited most consistently by research participants as a challenge. Another challenge for them however, is that they

themselves are inextricably embedded in the operational aspects of this project, running the consultations and collating the data to inform changes to existing programme modules. While deeply engaged in a highly administrative process, driven by the urgency of a much-delayed project, it is difficult to advocate for alternative approaches. Practically, this illustrates why participants reported feeling exhausted by the work earlier. Inevitably, based on evidence of reactivity, there is some new pressure lurking, and potential learning, review, and evaluation may be lost, rather than informing constructive growth or abandonment of a particular approach because it is no longer useful.

5.5.3 Contributing to Policy Learning

Network membership provides practitioners with policy learning opportunities from peers and QQI conferences (Quentin: Interview Data), although, as illustrated above, this can be a luxury in the face of operational concerns and pressures, such as difficulty releasing staff. Members participate in the National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN), the RPL Practitioner Network and QQI panels, enhancing their experience and knowledge. Member experience influences ETB policy implementation through knowledge sharing and co-construction across boundaries between and within ETBs. However, the external review report indicated a need for ETBs to be more proactive in developing a quality culture (2023), and this would require a focus on internal organisational learning. Maurice identified a ‘strategic gap’ in Network development planning, and focus group participants noted the lack of reflection time within the Network. Uncertainty exists regarding who is responsible for Network strategy, though it can inform DFET forum strategy, suggesting a need to revisit the Network's purpose and its influence the quality agenda within ETBI.

Dependent, Co-dependent or Independent?

Compliance often leads to reactive, fear-driven responses in QA. Dependency on external agencies, as noted in the external review (2023), extends policy implementation timelines and potentially constrains constructive projects due to the need to seek clarification at national levels. Delayed reactions result in a lack of proactive quality behaviours, implementation of cyclical processes, and delays in development of competence across multiple layers and grades. There is effectively no coherent plan or theoretical approach to the development of a system. There are however, new quality action plans that focus on academic governance and QA procedures, addressing gaps identified through external review. The external review highlighted the need to link FET's strategic vision to QA systems, frameworks, and resources (QQI Sectoral Report, 2023). Quentin noted improved substance in dialogue meetings post-review (Interview Data). Audrey reflected on the paradoxical issues of dependency and

resistance to QQI, comparing the Network to a community action group with a common cause and preoccupied with QQI's demands, forgetting that provider-owned quality covers other stakeholders and awarding bodies too (Focus Group Data). Collective policy study could lead to the development of a theory-based quality management system, and this study could be led by the Network, although they may have to change some accepted routine behaviours and practices to achieve this. The sectoral report recommended integrating quality as a 'central theme of good governance' in ETBs, with board support, robust monitoring, and emphasis on organizational quality cultures (QQI, 2023). Omidvar and Kislov (2014) noted knowledge deficits can disempower people, and the QA Network potentially support greater empowerment through leading the development of quality literacy and identification of a defined theory-based quality management model, which would promote and inform growing knowledge and sectoral independence. This would build on domain knowledge and enhance the QA Practitioners' roles as transformational leaders, but may challenge senior leadership to nurture learning opportunities to support capacity building.

5.6 Theme 4: Faultlines and Frustrations

Frustrations surrounding programme development and validation are widespread. QQI reports indicate gaps in policy and standards knowledge, including 'confusion between broad standards and programmes' and misunderstanding of NFQ terminology (QQI, 2023b). Sector feedback, while positive about new broad standards, highlighted difficulties in their practical application within ETBs. This suggests a self-limiting, overly pragmatic discourse which may be hindering progress. Delays in review, revalidation, and programme development, ongoing since 2017 (Joan: Survey Data), were expressed as a recurring frustration and are a cause of stagnation. Kim's survey data further noted that QA Network recommendations often fail to progress due to involvement from various stakeholders like the Strategy Group, DFET Forum, CE Forum, QQI, and ETBI, which should all function well together, given the similarity of their goals. These delays impact expectations, practice, and reputation, especially when timeframes. A paradox exists: an initial burst of energy often subsides into prolonged negotiation, increasing pressure and limiting time for reflection, thereby affecting capacity, knowledge, and confidence, and disenfranchising practitioners.

While 'knowledge deployment' (information transmission) is a regular QA Network function and activity, deeper knowledge development achieved in less stressful situations (Pyrko, et al. 2017), is less common. Problem-solving often occurs through informal one-to-one interactions, though large-scale projects, like programme review and revalidation, can

energize members (Leona: Interview Data). Competition among ETBs emerged as an unexpected undercurrent, with reluctance to 'let their side down' (Anastasia: Interview Data), questioning the capacity of certain ETBs to lead projects based on scale or perceived lack of experience (Maurice: Interview Data).

The operational focus and vertical hierarchical structure within ETBI forums and networks appear to distract from genuine progress and knowledge co-construction and sharing. Significant delays, such as the two-year gap between the proposal and start of the programme review and revalidation plan, highlight this vertical fault line reveals the negative impact of misapprehensions and misunderstandings, and the risk of absence of safe environments for sense-making and contestation (Sondarjee et al. 2024). Paradoxically, reactive behaviours and dependency on external organizations hinder the adoption of more reasoned needs-based approaches that allow for reflection, evaluation, and strategizing. This indicates a need to allow QA Practitioners and other stakeholders to use the time at the Network, or CoP to consider strategic options, research and develop the systems, and make recommendations. Snyder (2013, p.10) advocates for strong iterative processes between decision-makers and implementers to foster experimentation and improvement, practices the QA Network could develop based on its domain knowledge. Sondarjee describes the importance of 'practice contestation' for enhancing common knowledge and defines it as either 'pushing for' or 'pushing against' change (2024). This approach requires open dialogue across levels, perspectives and boundaries, leading to sense-making. It suggests that it is the task of leadership within a CoP and by the brokers of the CoP to create environments where this contestation can occur, and where, through contestation, common knowledge and practice traversing boundaries defined by hierarchy can emerge. Engagement in 'practice contestation' should be perceived as a healthy part of dialogue between parties interested in promoting quality in ETBs.

5.7 Theme 5: Contributing to Standards in FET

Network members actively demonstrate commitment to education and training standards through their daily work, including quality assurance of assessment, procedure development, and contributing to development of artefacts for the Network's projects. Their focus on standards is evident in reifications like programme descriptors and self-evaluation templates, though this effort is linked to a necessity for programme governance and review rather than to innovative curriculum development. Network members have led large-scale programme and

policy projects, with their outcomes adopted across the sector (Focus Group Data). Network activity has influenced members' programme development practices too (Survey data). Robert noted how Network members' expertise informed his discussions with QQI on programme development and validation. While programme and quality standards also relate to other awarding bodies, and to unaccredited programmes, much of the discourse around quality in the sector is associated with practices linked to the CAS, illustrating further problems emerging from interpretation and ownership. Even though new broad standards for levels 1-4 of the NFQ and Programme Award-Type Descriptors have been introduced by QQI, the response to the CAS review and reform still tends to inform practice.

The research highlights the impact of large-scale projects on practice, such as the intense reactions to the CAS and the 'wake-up call' for programme development after re-engagement (Anastasia: Interview Data). A competitive rush to develop modules among PLCs, when the CAS was launched while contributing to learning, was described as a 'clunky' process by Maurice (Interview Data). Critically, programmes validated around 2012 were not reviewed in the required five-year cycle, hindering the development and trial of processes and procedures and demonstrating a weakness in national policy and local implementation. It has resulted in years of lost capacity-building for programme review and new programme development, which has effectively been ruled out until the need for programme updates has been addressed. The failure to reflect on programme development projects has had an impact on organisational and sectoral knowledge, on teacher morale and potentially on the standards of programme experienced by learners. A pessimistic local discourse suggests that programme development is a lengthy and challenging process, fostering resistance to innovation despite QQI encouragement to engage in programme development and validation.

Despite legislative clarity and clearly stated responsibilities in the policies and guidelines, internal programme development in ETBs since 2013 has been low compared to the private sector (Figure 1). Tension exists between individual ETB responsibility and a collective sectoral approach, with capacity, time, and resources being constant issues, yet there appears to be no effort to determine how much effort is actually required, and to address the issue from a perspective of seeking to identify the most beneficial approach, although some might argue that the current approach to large-scale development is the most effective. Alternatives to experimental approaches by local development teams include procuring externally developed programmes, as seen with STA micro-qualifications and City and Guilds programmes, which are now on the National Register of Qualifications. This approach, while perceived as efficient,

could affect the indigenous sovereignty of Irish education. Discouraging local activity in programme development risks neglecting practitioners' professional development, skills, and confidence, and relieves them of any responsibility for how programmes are developed and delivered. Increased involvement in programme innovation could address practitioners' reluctance to adapt content, and the members of the QA Network could influence identification and agreement of a constructive approach to be used across organisation. This area could be the subject of a single piece of research.

Programme development responsibility rests with ETB academic governance units, not solely with the DFET Forum. A key challenge lies in clarifying responsibility levels and engaging in strategic thinking for quality to inform programme and standards development. Collective policy knowledge can foster consistent approaches, but a decision is needed on whether innovative or administrative practices are to be prioritised, a decision which appears to have been made already, although where and how the decision was arrived at is not completely clear. A discussion of how standards relate to the overall quality management system would support greater understanding. Shifting the work of the QA Network, in the social situation of a CoP, to a strategic task, focused on a quality system and leadership approaches to quality could support sectoral, organisational, and individual learning, and leadership, together with a properly resourced system for assuring standards.

5.8 Chapter Conclusion

The inter-organizational QA Network is a stable and active entity within FET, serving as a vital conduit for information and a driver of quality initiatives. It actively supports QA Practitioners across all 16 ETBs, providing induction, support, and mentoring, with members highly valuing their peers' expertise.

Analysis using Wenger's indicators confirms the Network functions as a CoP, within the domain of quality in FET. Members share practices through mutual engagement, possess a common technical vocabulary, develop artifacts and boundary objects, and offer strong collegial support (1999). While they empathize deeply with colleagues, they expressed reservations about broadening membership to other roles, indicating clear views on belonging. Cross-referencing with McKellar's value-types (2019), the Network exhibits positive relationships, interactions, and tangible/intangible assets that positively impact the sector's quality.

However, the McKellar et al. value-types (2019) also highlight areas for improvement. There is insufficient evidence to assert that ‘learning’ and ‘identity’ are fully represented, and ‘reframing and transformation’ are not currently prominent in the Network’s practice (Appendix R). Despite evidence of operational practice linked to quality assurance, a lack of reflection on priorities and project evolution suggests a need for more strategic engagement in defining the Network's purpose.

Duryan and Smyth emphasize the value of creating safe environments for CoP members to share tacit knowledge and engage in expansive thinking (2019, p.404). The Network provides this space, and its members are recognized as experts in FET quality, benefiting from professional development and support within their community. However, a notable gap exists in strategic thinking regarding both quality and the Network's evolution, as reported by focus group participants. The Network offers a social platform for dialogue and cohesion, offering an opportunity to contribute to the development of a more systematic model for quality management in ETBs that can enable more innovative practice at provider levels. Preserving the Network's positive core elements, as advised by Fundin et al, is crucial for embracing transformation (2025, p.277).

While members engage in significant boundary spanning and deliver valuable boundary objects, this is somewhat constrained by its homogeneity and ETBI's increasingly vertical, hierarchical structure. A truly genuine CoP would exhibit greater autonomy and self-organization, enabling engagement with challenging content. However, intentional CoPs can also foster conformity to organizational expectations. Brokers of CoPs are challenged to allow autonomy, recognize indigenous knowledge, and nurture existing positive elements to provide stability for transformation (Fundin et al, 2025).

The research confirms a substantial body of domain knowledge and experience within the QA Network. Embracing quality literacy (Ehlers, 2007, p.101) through its four dimensions - quality knowledge, quality experience, quality innovation, and quality analysis - offers a strategic opportunity for developing a purposeful quality culture at all levels via an extended, more diverse QA Network, with a renewed, reframed purpose. Strengthening QA Practitioners' voices and expanding this third space for constructive policy-to-practice discussions (Adelle et al. 2021) could address the fragmented nature of the FET sector somewhat, as integration becomes a reality. This implies reframing ETBI QA Network structures to include diverse internal stakeholders, fostering some introspection, breaking boundaries, and increasing

permeability to promote system knowledge and counter the reactivity and rigidity that hinder long-term strategy.

Fundin et al. argue that stability enhances adaptability and flexibility, advocating for leadership styles that support self-organization and extend quality managers' roles to strategic levels, including senior management responsibility for quality (2025), as suggested by Maurice in his interview. A concerted strategic discourse featuring diverse stakeholders could lead to a more effective national FET quality management system, addressing external dependency and fostering internal capacity building. The landscape mapping exercise (Figure 10) could serve as a basis for further discussions on the Network's identity, QA practitioners' roles, and cultural perspectives on FET quality, if such an opportunity were to arise.

The sector needs to establish a shared quality model and develop quality literacy, recognizing that education quality differs from mechanistic production. The complementarity between Total Quality Management (TQM), CoPs, and systems thinking suggests CoPs are a positive mechanism for achieving this. CoPs can foster change-making behaviours, and combined with quality literacy, offer a strategic approach to developing a quality culture at all levels through a dynamic QA Network. The next chapter will assess whether the research questions were answered, discuss contributions and limitations, and offer recommendations for future research.

Chapter Six: Answering the Research Questions, Recommendations, Limitations and Contributions

6.1 Chapter Introduction

In this research I set out to examine the role of the ETBI QA Network within the FET landscape. Five research questions guided the study, focusing on the Network's characteristics, its influence on standards, it's contribution to policy learning and implementation, and its position within the wider constellation and landscapes of practice.

Using a pragmatic, exploratory methodology, and acknowledging the social constructionist paradigm, data were gathered through a document review, survey, semi-structured interviews, a focus group and a landscape-mapping exercise. Reflexive qualitative thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2021) generated the five themes that shaped the discussion in Chapter Five:

- Community of practice characteristics
- Roles in FET and Evolution of QA in FET
- Policy in practice
- Fault lines and frustrations
- Standards.

This chapter now draws those findings together, answers the research questions directly, identifies limitations and contributions, and proposes recommendations for future developments and research.

6.1.2 Limitations

This study captures a snapshot of a dynamic, rapidly evolving sector. Personnel turnover, shifting structures and ongoing policy reform mean some contextual details may have changed since data collection. A purposive sample yielded rich insights, but a broader response rate, from longer-serving practitioners would have strengthened demographic balance.

The conceptual lens of communities of practice (CoPs) proved useful but imperfect for analysing the ETBs as public service organisations shaped by hierarchy, statutory obligations and policy cycles. While CoP theory illuminated how learning, identity and collaboration occur,

additional engagement with complexity leadership theory and later CoP scholarship could have provided deeper insights.

The landscape mapping process, influenced by Bateson's concept of 'warm data' (2017) was revealed as a powerful tool for visualising and understanding the distributed system of FET with participants and could be developed as a useful tool for future work. It acts as a powerful tool for understanding distributed systems and could be developed further. It opens up useful lines of discussion and discourse in the interest of constructing clearer understanding and articulation of the Irish FET system and context, and would be useful where social constructionist methods are favoured.

Finally, there is a need to recognise that boundaries can be a positive element, and to respect how the group of QA Practitioners values the QA Network as a safe place where they meet colleagues who understand the nature of the role, empathise with their experience and support problem solving. This raises a tension: how can the sector open up boundaries so that quality literacy, system coherence and system articulation can be strengthened, while still maintaining the sense of psychological, collegiate safety and comradeship represented by the QA Network.

6.2 Research Question 1: Does the QA Network Function as a Community of Practice?

The evidence shows that the QA Network exhibits many characteristics associated with CoPs: strong collegial relationships and support, shared language, mutual engagement and a clear domain of practice centred on quality in FET. Members draw on tacit knowledge from their wide professional backgrounds and develop shared repertoires through collaborative projects, artefact creation and reification.

The QA Network's potential as a CoP is constrained however by structural factors. Its membership is relatively homogenous, and its position within ETBI's hierarchical architecture, and indeed, within the architectures of individual ETBs, limits its strategic influence. Much of its activity is operational, shaped by external demands and reactive cycles and dependency on national external agencies. While the Network is intentional and highly functional, it does not necessarily operate as a fully empowered cross-boundary CoP capable of shaping system-level quality discourse at senior levels. Strengthening its CoP characteristics would require a clearer remit, more diverse participation and deliberate cultivation of reflective, strategic learning

spaces, enabled by recognising that quality in FET, as a concept, crosses hierarchical boundaries.

Complexity can have an impact on practitioners' professional development and on their ability to engage in self-improvement while delivering high quality services. Complexity can create barriers, tensions and imbalances between immediacy and longer-term thinking. Practitioners' participation in dialogue and decision-making to inform and influence QA practice is important and in a complex system, ensuring that all voices are fairly included is a challenge.

Snyder proposes that the role of governance in education is complex, rather than complicated. To reframe problems and find solutions through integrative approaches, policy makers, implementers and practitioners must be engaged in incorporating existing knowledge and structures (2013, p.9). Safe spaces to enable meaningful collaboration, support problem solving and providing time for meaning-making is critical. Croke identifies a 'complex eco-system of interrelationships' in FET, which is related to the broad range of initiatives and influenced by responses to new policies and power structures (2017, p.371), and the QA Network is one space where this collaboration can occur.

6.3 Research Question 2: How Does the QA Network Contribute to Educational Standards in FET?

The Network plays a significant role in maintaining and interpreting standards. Members contribute to programme development, validation processes, and the design of templates and procedures that support consistency across ETBs. Their stewardship of the External Authenticator panel is a notable achievement too, supporting ETBI and FESS staff and reinforcing the credibility of assessment standards nationally. The production of assessment referencing manuals, procedures for assessment and contributions to policy consultations and dissemination of that learning has also supported commitment to standards across the ETB FET sector.

Despite these efforts, however, the sector's programme development activity remains uneven with limited numbers of new programmes leading to major awards, and a reliance on the development of shared programmes. New programme development has been curtailed as a result of the need to update and revalidate existing programmes. Delays in review and revalidation processes highlight systemic challenges rather than shortcomings of the Network or its members, but there are opportunities for considering new approaches and system developments too. The expertise of Network members is well-recognised, but this expertise is

not yet fully leveraged to build wider capacity across the sector to promote the 'provider-owned' principle embedded in QQI policy.

A more strategic role for the Network could support a coherent prospectus across the NFQ levels from 1-6, and strengthen curriculum innovation, supporting both national standards development and more local innovative programme development.

6.4 Research Question 3: Does the QA Network Contribute to Policy Learning?

The QA Network is a key site of policy learning for QA Practitioners. New members receive informal induction, and practitioners collectively interpret national guidelines, share updates and translate policy into operational practice. This social learning environment, underpinned by common experience helps members to understand the significance of their role, the implications of policy decisions, and provides a safe space for problem-solving where shared communal understanding is key to interactions.

Policy learning, however, is uneven across the wider system, Leaders often rely on a small group of experts, which can result in policy being understood primarily through operational lenses rather than through theoretical knowledge or strategic intent. Policy engagement tends to intensify during crises, limiting opportunities for deeper learning through reflective practice or anticipatory planning, although, following the QQI review of quality in ETBs, action planning for quality has been introduced in each ETB.

The QA Network has the potential to become a more intentional policy-learning hub, but this would require time for reflection, structured dialogue across hierarchical levels and a clearer mandate, changing the practice of the Network to focus on quality literacy, and increasing its visibility and the visibility of the members as experts.

6.5 Research Question 4: Does the QA Network have an Impact on Policy Implementation?

The QA Network plays a central role in implementing quality and qualifications policy. Members translate guidelines into procedures, develop boundary objects and artefacts that support consistency, and disseminate information across ETBs. Their work during periods of rapid change – such as COVID 19 adaptations and qualification deactivations – demonstrates their capacity for coordinated action. Creating a significant legacy throughout FET, through practices that have evolved through its lifespan, it is possible that tensions and practices

remaining from the 2012-2013 legislation may be undermining opportunities to leverage that legacy in favour of quality in the FET sector.

Implementation is often reactive, shaped by external pressures and tight timelines. Hierarchical structures limit the Network's ability to influence policy interpretation at strategic levels, and inconsistent understandings and contestation of key concepts such as delegated authority, for example, can lead to fragmented implementation and different levels of resourcing across ETBs.

A more integrated structure, with improved linking of the Network, the Quality Strategy Group, the Task and Finish Group and the DFET Forum, in a broader Network, focused on quality and qualifications, may support more coherent policy implementation and quality literacy.

6.6 Research Question 5: Is the QA Network Part of a Constellation or Landscape of Practice?

The QA Network operates within a complex landscape that includes ETBI structures, QQI, SOLAS, ETB leadership, and multiple practitioner groups, as well as the DFHERIs, The Apprenticeship Council, and the Department of Education. Members span boundaries through participation in validation panels, working groups and cross-provider initiatives. However, internal ETBI structures create vertical channels, echoing management structures, that limit horizontal knowledge flow relevant to quality and qualifications.

The landscape mapping exercise revealed a fragmented system with multiple legacy arrangements and uneven connectivity, sometimes arising as much from interest as from professionally required membership. The Network acts as a central node, but its influence is mediated by structures that prioritise reporting over dialogue. Strengthening transversal connections would enhance the sector's capacity to develop a coherent quality culture.

6.7 Contribution of the Research

The study contributes:

- A detailed account of how QA Practitioners experience their roles and the Network
- Insight into the interplay between CoP characteristics and hierarchical public service structures, and insights into theories that could inform the further development of systems for QA within the sector
- A landscape-mapping approach that can support further research and system analysis

- Evidence of the need for improved quality literacy and shared mental models across the sector, and the possible role of QA Practitioners within the development of that quality literacy and systems.
- This research provides a foundation for rethinking the Network's remit as a strategic, cross-boundary learning community, and a clarion call for a shift to recognition of the transformative power of FET and lifelong learning across the levels of the NFQ. It highlights how adopting the concept of 'quality literacy' (Ehlers, 2007) could support the development of improved systems for quality assurance in the FET sector.
- Through improved systems and sectoral knowledge, there are opportunities to develop programmes that provide realistic alternatives to meet the needs of diverse adult learners who wish to access accredited and non-accredited. Developing these opportunities can enhance the recognition of FET as an alternative to more institutionalised aspects of learning, while also providing opportunities for access to high standards of vocational education and training.
- This research, and the findings of the research, can contribute to the development of a centre for teaching and learning for FET, the professional development of FET staff, and the redefinition of the role of QA Practitioners, should the report of the independent expert panel on staffing in FET be adopted (2026), because it lays the ground work for the development of quality literacy, and for structured, supported and boundary-crossing communities of practice.

6.8 Recommendations

Drawing on the three concepts of purpose, people and process (Krooi et al. 2024), I have refined the findings and results into thirteen recommendations in the hope of providing a road map for consideration by ETBI:

6.8.1 Purpose

1. Reshape the brief and work of the QA Network to support and improve the development of the domain of QA in FET. Clarify the Network's remit to include strategic and operational functions.
2. Develop a sector-wide participatory quality literacy initiative to build shared understanding and mental models for key concepts. 'Participatory' implies inclusion,

respect for all voices, openness to the ambiguous and the unexpected, and readiness to learn from others with different experiences and perspectives.

3. Develop a logical quality management system and architecture, relevant to the needs of ETBs, drawn, for example, on the CEDEFOP guidelines, TQM theories, and Deming's PDCA model. This architecture is needed in order to scaffold (Croke, 2017, p. 301) the development of well understood systems, informed by the voices of practitioners, and other stakeholders, and constructed with the interests of learners at the centre, and based on good practice in pedagogy, quality management, knowledge of curriculum development, standards, assessment and governance (QQI, 2023b, p.33).

6.8.2 People

1. Introduce opportunities to develop leadership skills and talent that favour integrative transformative strategies (Larsen et al, 2025).
2. Strengthen and leverage the existing collaborative environment and ethos of the QA Network.
3. Strengthen cross-level dialogue between the Network, Quality Strategy Group, Task and Finish Group and DFET Forum.
4. Broaden participation to include diverse roles and perspectives across ETBs.
5. Empower QA Practitioners and Senior Managers to further develop their own quality literacy and to lead the development of quality literacy (Ehlers, 2007) and quality cultures, creating a safe 'third space' for collaboration and participatory quality development (Ehlers, 2007, p.98).

6.8.3 Process

1.Develop a cyclical systematic approach to address the quality areas identified in national policy and use the process to support the development of quality literacy.

2. Establish practice, based on collaborative approaches that supports, promotes and enhances quality literacy in all directions, across boundaries in ETB FET services.

3. Intentionally create structured reflective spaces and situations for mutual engagement and sharing in professional discourse and learning.

4. Promote curriculum innovation by developing supporting processes and units to enable ETBs to develop update and review existing programmes and develop new programmes aligned with NFQ levels 1-6.

5. Use landscape mapping as a tool for ongoing system sense-making and planning.

6.9 Opportunities for Further Research

Further research into how the support of the ETBI team could be pivoted to focus on leadership and management skill development for QA Practitioners, Directors and other stakeholders is required. Exploring Quality Literacy (Ehlers, 2007) could lead to improved mentoring, support and ongoing training for learning practitioners and other staff and stakeholders, in the development of a QMS for all ETB FET services.

The empirical evidence on QA effectiveness in Vocational Education and Training (VET) and FET in Ireland is limited, and there is scope for further research in this area, perhaps through building it into the idea of a consistent approach to self-evaluation across ETBs, documenting the incremental effect of policy implementation within the domain of quality in FET. Here are some further lines of enquiry that could be taken:

- Research into practitioners' perceptions and interpretation of awards, standards and certification in FET and their relationship to 'mainstream' awards, to improve our knowledge of values as they relate to quality and standards across the mainstream and FET sectors.
- Perceptions, attitudes and beliefs about the concept of provider ownership of quality and what that entails for providers.
- There is a need for more in-depth quantitative data about the nature of the QA Practitioner role and the financial implications of the QA undertaking for FET. This was beyond the scope of this research, but emerged as an area worthy of further research to inform future development.
- More research is indicated into the role and conditions of QA Practitioners, and QA Teams, in the following areas:
    - Role definitions, interpretations and resourcing of quality assurance across the ETBs.
    - Geographical differences – the impact of differences in resources and approaches potentially on the experiences and outcomes for learners.
    - Perceptions of standards, and the role of practitioners in developing standards.
    - The role of practitioners in upholding standards.
    - Factors preventing curriculum innovation
- Methods and good practice for developing quality literacy across large complex organisations

- There is considerable scope for more in-depth study of communities of practice and networks, including, for example, the narratives that can develop and spread as a result of experience within such communities.
- Develop an Erasmus research and innovation project reviewing good practice in quality management systems in other countries and applying learning and external expertise to support the development of tools for a FET quality management system. Include a survey of academic governance within ETBs in this project.

I did not quite expect to finish with critical questions about leadership, even though this was the area of professional focus for this work, but it emerged nonetheless as a result of my decision to triangulate between the Network members, a number of key agents, the focus group and the landscape mapping exercise in the research process. Questions about leadership of quality within education and training really come to the fore now, so I am finishing with unanswered questions which could benefit with further crystallisation, by researchers and authors:

- Is there resistance to deep connection between strategy and quality within ETB FET services, especially at national level, or is it an accidental omission?
- What promotes fear of professional tasks such as making curricular changes within FET services?
- Who is responsible for leadership of quality in FET nationally and how does it permeate through levels of the system – what are perceptions and attitudes to this in the sector?
- The notion of quality models is a contested concept, and there is a need to explore what the concept of quality means to us as practitioners in the ETB FET sector in order to determine a develop, perhaps, a more sophisticated cultural stance, or multiple stances towards the theme, co-constructing more knowledge about quality and what it means in relation to our primary motivations of taking a learner-centred approach to developing a high quality system of FET. How can this understanding be achieved?
- How can we develop leaders who will lead quality? It occurs to me that a crash course is required to enable internalisation of knowledge and confidence about quality for senior management – with some notable exceptions, they have conveniently ignored and neglected it for many years, leaving responsibility with relatively powerless individuals. The role of the Network in mentoring and legitimate peripheral

participation could be leveraged to ensure there is a continuum of knowledge about quality that the concept of quality literacy is introduced.

6.10 Thesis Conclusion

The QA Network is a vital part of the FET quality and qualifications eco-system. It embodies the many strengths of a community of practice, including collegiality, shared purpose, and collective problem-solving. Its potential however, is constrained by structural and cultural factors. By reframing its remit, strengthening boundary-spanning practices, and cultivating reflective, strategic learning, the Network could play a transformative role in shaping a coherent, high-quality FET system.

My decision to explore the role of the QA Network was inspired by the fact that it has been a consistent feature of the domain of Quality in FET for nearly 20 years, in different variations, and is perceived as an energetic, passionate, committed group that goes 'above and beyond'. The inaugural review of quality was completed, but I had decided not to focus on it as a research topic, because the experience was still very recent. Returning to the report of the review panels (QQI, 2023) however, indicates that this research is timely. The literature review provided an opportunity for me to consider some practical, if longer term solutions to issues identified in the review, as well as the lived experience of QA Practitioners. My findings were validated when I discovered recent work by Fundin et al. (2025) illustrating some challenges that exist in quality management, acknowledging why it is a domain that requires flexibility and creativity across diverse layers to succeed.

When I applied and registered for the EdD programme, I titled my application 'getting to the heart of quality in ETBs'. In the initial process of defining a research project, I thought of the title 'realising quality in FET', in recognition of the work that QA Practitioners do within their organisations, institutions and nationally to improve the quality of FET. In conclusion, my research has affirmed this work, showing how quality is achieved, and I have upgraded the title to 'Achieving Quality in FET' reflecting the real social significance of the Network. A strong focus on learners is maintained at the heart of practitioners' work, and understanding the nature of quality enhances this whole hearted contribution and commitment. Linking research into quality literacy, strategies for quality management and the role of CoPs in disseminating this, this study potentially 'kickstarts' opportunities to develop toolkits to support the development of the domain of quality in FET, entering another cycle of more mature development.

Implementing legislation and policy for quality and qualifications along existing contractual, operational and structural lines within the ETB FET sector is doing a disservice to learners, practitioners and society because the NFQ is constructed as a continuum, requiring interaction across levels, and comprehensive knowledge of how to construct learning pathways based on theories of learning. This interaction across boundaries can occur through the strategic efforts of leaders, that promotes trusted professional interaction and dialogue between groups, collectives and communities of practices. Engagement in collaborative practices and co-construction of knowledge through equitable mechanisms will ensure universal adoption of good practice throughout the sector, that is relevant to the diverse target groups within the sector. As meanings are negotiated, and there are more shared experiences of innovation, competence, confidence and cohesion will grow across the sector, enhancing its reputation even further, and high-quality FET will flourish, delivered by flourishing practitioners.

Like the alchemy of metal smithing, where well-prepared alloys, and clean well-designed solder connections made with the correct equipment contribute to the integrity of the product and the certainty of a hallmark of quality and value, the repertoires associated with quality in the FET sector can contribute to the quality of products derived from collective effort and innovation developed with the correct tools, knowledge, competence and resources.

Having lived with this piece of work for four years, I am coming to the conclusion that no further progress should be made locally until a national system is defined, based on known theories and providing a sound theoretical foundation for quality, and defines structures for each ETB. After that, each ETB could proceed, with a foundation for creating unique responses to local needs. One could claim that this is a simplistic and idealistic outcome, but if it was desired, or easily achieved, it would exist already – indicating a need for a roadmap and some leadership to ensure that the map acts as a useful guide in order to reach a destination. The establishment of a unified COP charged with identifying a theoretical model for quality reflecting good practice in fields of education and training will be essential to the continued development and improvement of a high-quality sector that can stand on its own merits, standards and recognised quality.

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Appendix A: Research Proposal

WORKING TITLE: Realising Quality in FET through a Community of Practice

Introduction

The Education and Training Boards, Ireland (ETBI) Quality Assurance (QA) Network was established to support the implementation of new QQI policy in the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The QA Network could be considered a Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998, 1991).

I propose to study the impact of this network as an inter-organisational community of practice (DeGroot, Leenderste and Arts, 2022) and to explore its impact on collective learning of QA practitioners and on the implementation of QQI policy across the sector.

Wenger's work highlights the usefulness of social learning as a frame for how members of a community of practice are instrumental in the negotiation of meaning (1998, p 52) and in the creation and implementation of procedures and artefacts through the dual aspects of participation and reification (1998,p65), through members' engagement, shared repertoires and mutual engagement (1998, p73).

Duryan and Smyth (2019) identify the role of CoPs within bureaucratic hierarchies (2019). This community of practice, the QA Network, is embedded in a complex environment of hierarchical organisations.

The current community of practice grew out of a previous iteration of networks formed as a response to QA agreements signed by former VECs in 2006, and to the publication by FETAC of Quality Assuring Assessment Guidelines. These events preceded a decade of intense development and a shift to corporate responsibility for the QA of programmes of further education and training.

The decade was characterised by intense change in the form of the establishment of 16 Education and Training Boards, the establishment of QQI, the dissolution of FÁS and the establishment of SOLAS. Further development included new funding mechanisms, and the implementation of more rigorous policies for QA across FET and HE in Ireland. Theses by Fiona Moloney (2021) and Rory O'Sullivan (2016), and grey literature in the form of the SOLAS Future FET Strategy, Transforming Learning (2020a), illustrate and illuminate the 21st century further education and training (FET) context.

I am an insider in this research, because I have been a member of this CoP and its associated working groups since its inception, and I have worked in the sector for 32 years, delivering programmes and leading and managing the development of quality culture and QA in FET.

While I am very familiar with the environment and context, it is important to note the significance of the link between this privilege and the challenge of being an objective researcher. I have professional and personal relationships with many of the members of the network; some members can be considered potential 'elite respondents' and it will be important to consider and wisely manage biases based on perceptions and existing knowledge of one another, if these arise. I plan to mitigate the risks associated with this through

employing reflexivity to monitor my own reactions (Hamilton, 2017; Mercer, Hanson, 2013; Cameron, 2021).

In the following section, I will detail the potential value for the sector and the 'ask'. If this proposal is successful, I will present a detailed research plan and schedule.

Research proposal

Value for the sector

Through this research, I anticipate that the findings will result in the following insights and learning:

1. Gain deep insight into the impact of a community of practice
2. Learning and reflection on the work of the QA Network
3. Document the CoP from the perspective of members and other participants
4. Provide an insight into the role of the members of the CoP as professionals within the QA environment as it is developing
5. Inform improved utilisation of communities of practice
6. Enhance knowledge about the implications of collective learning for ETBs
7. Document the 'intersectionality' of communities of practice and their usefulness or not for professional learning in the sector, especially in response to change.

Methodology

My proposed methods for data collection include

- document review
- an online survey of the QA Network members; the support team and the FET Directors' Strategy Group for QA.
- qualitative semi-structured interviews with a selection of respondents to the survey.

What will be required?

In order to achieve this, I will require support for the project in the form of requests to participate, and promotion of the project.

I will require permission to access the 'papers' of the network to carry out a document review in order to inform the context-setting element of the thesis and to inform the analysis of data gathered through surveys and interviews.

I will require access to the members of the network; the support staff; members of the FET Directors' QA Strategy Group and former members of the network for the data collection phase. In total, this group numbers approximately 46, so this is a small-scale piece of research.

I would also respectfully request an individual contact person to act as a critical friend and to enable 'troubleshooting'.

Research Ethics

A detailed research Ethics Form must be completed, approved by my supervisor, Professor Gerry McNamara and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of DCU. Within the parameters for this ethics approval, I will be required to identify how I will implement GDPR to protect the personal data of participants, and to commit to the legislation on GDPR in terms of the use of participants' personal data. I am also prepared to apply ETBI's policies on GDPR.

Proposed indicative timeline

- February 2023: Document review
- March 2023: Development and administration of survey instrument
- May/June 2023: Semi-structured interviews
- July – September 2023: Data Analysis
- September- October 2023: Factual accuracy checking/iterative process if necessary
- November 2023 – February 2024: Further analysis, writing up and recommendations.

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December, 2022

Appendix B: List of ETBS, ETB Website Links, and QA Team Numbers

Education and Training Boards	QA Websites	Number of staff in QA Teams (referenced in sites - where available)
Cavan Monaghan ETB (CMETB)	Quality Assurance and Enhancement Service	
City of Dublin ETB (CDETB)	Quality Assurance	
Cork ETB (CETB)	Quality Assurance in FET	
Donegal ETB (DETB)	Quality Assurance in FET	
Dublin Dunlaoghaire ETB (DDLETB)	Quality Assurance in DDLETB	5
Galway Roscommon ETB (GRETB)	Quality Assurance	
Kerry ETB (KETB)	Quality Assurance and Curriculum Unit	
Kildare and Wicklow ETB (KWETB)	Quality Assurance	4
Kilkenny Carlow ETB (KCETB)	Quality Assurance	
Laois Offaly ETB (LOETB)	Quality Assurance	1
Limerick Clare ETB (LCETB)	Quality Assurance Support Service	9
Longford Westmeath ETB (LWETB)	Quality Assurance Development	3
Louth Meath ETB (LMETB)	Quality Assurance	
Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim ETB (MSLETB)	Quality Assurance	
Tipperary ETB (TETB)	Quality Assurance	6
Waterford Wexford ETB (WWETB)	Quality	

Appendix C: Resources and Scale of QA in FET

ETB funding allocations for external authenticators, locally devised assessment (LDA) and salaries can be tracked through finance systems and funding allocation requests if necessary, and an annual report, including a financial report is published by SOLAS. It recorded LDA 2022 costs for PLCs as €53,000. The SOLAS 2023 financial report recorded Quality Assuring Assessment and programme development as costing €4m each. There is no reference to the cost of implementing QA policy across ETBs, including, for example, the IRQ, validation, access, transfer and progression and recognition of prior learning. This may indicate the immature nature of the QA system. Some further research might reveal a need to change priorities to to eliminate perceptions that QA is not properly resourced. A logical assessment of costs would be useful too for the purpose of future planning.

New reporting systems such as quality improvement plans and performance agreements take their toll, and may have an impact on the ability to give time to imagination, thinking, innovation and reflection, as indicated by Eva:

> *the ETB environment is really, you know, under that way of, you know, the goodwill that was there and everything is with the, I suppose, the performance pressures that are coming in now, and since the strategic performance agreements and the kind of formalizing and all of that, and the contracts and the new contracts and the different types of contracts (FG Data).*

There is no defined structure across the ETBs for costing and funding QA. SOLAS financial reports do not name it specifically as a cost centre. Only quality assuring assessment, and programme development (referring to the development of 'micro-qualifications') are named. Robert suggested the need for 'some sort of coordination function' to provide national consistency, but it may be better to bring the powerful minds together first to determine what kind of system should be adopted – without a powerful system that provides a strong foundation for quality there is nothing to co-ordinate. Putting in place coordinators to manage processes not feasible if there is no system to which the procedures relate. Programme development, review, evaluation and validation processes are not organised or structured logically to allow for funding allocations, because they are responses to changes in the wider external certification environment such as award deactivation, policy changes, requirements for revalidation, or changes in standards required by professional regulatory bodies, based on dependency rather than autonomy, There is an assumption that everything that arises will be drawn from existing resources, and this could be a reason why key agents expressed concern

about the additional work that QA Practitioners. Practitioners commented on workloads, saying the Network should start nurturing new participants and providing ways of resting:

> *… You can't be at the top all of the time because you don't have the energy, the resources, the skills to do it…. , if you're not nurturing, the next generation, you know, to play their part. As Bernie said, yeah, the ones that are doing it a long time could get tired and could get depleted…*

As this research shows, there is an *'unequally distributed workforce which is a significant challenge'* and introducing new projects puts a strain on that workforce (Siúin: Interview Data), and for example, ETBs will be *'trying to revalidate programmes without any more knowledgeable other person to do that'*. This indicates that not only is lack of tangible resources a problem, but that lack of focus on sustaining and developing practice and developing knowledge represent a significant risk too. Siúin identified that the team at her organisation could benefit from having two curriculum developers, suggesting some sense of vision, but Robert reflected on differences across the sector. This indicates that there is some potential for working together to create a coherent, unified approach to workforce planning for QA. Taking these issues to the national FET macrocosm, this reveals a geographic weakness Potentially affecting learner experience. The SOLAS funding model was named as a barrier by Siúin, Anastasia and Maurice establishing competition between ETBs to meet targets and it may have a negative effect on quality (Interview Data).

Appendix D. List of Tertiary Programmes

Website: Courses | National Tertiary Office

- Bachelor of Business (L8, L7)
- Bachelor of Arts in Business Studies (L8)
- Bachelor of Arts in Business Studies (L8): Digital and Business Skills
- Bachelor of Arts in Business Studies (L8) with Beauty and Spa Management
- Bachelor of Business in Business Studies (L8) in Business and Psychology
- Bachelor of Business in Business Studies (L8) in Tourism and Hospitality Services
- Bachelor of Science in Business Studies (L8) in Applied Sports Science
- Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Software Development (L8)
- Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Software Development (L8)
- Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Mobile and Web Computing (L8)
- Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Digital Arts (L8)
- Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Animation, Visual Effects and Motion Design (L8)
- Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Immersive Media Productions (L8)
- Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Popular Music (L8)
- Bachelor of Engineering (Hons) in Sustainable Engineering Technologies (L8)

- Bachelor of Science in Industrial Laboratory Science (L7)
- Bachelor of Science (Hons) in General Nursing (L8)
- Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Information Technology Management (L8)
- Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Mental Health Nursing
- Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Public Health and Health Promotion
- Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Applied Health Care
- Bachelor of Social Work

Appendix E: Documents Reviewed

Year	Document	Type of document	Date of document
2005	A Common Awards System: A Proposal	FETAC Policy Proposal	2005
2006	QQI Policy for determining standards	QQI Policy Document	
2007	Meeting with Joe English	Notes	5/2/2007
2007	Assessment Ginger Group Notes	Note of meeting	7/6/2007
	Assessment Ginger Group Note	Note of meeting	17/9/2007
	Assessment Task Group Meeting Minutes	Minutes of meeting	7/11/2007
	Assessment Task Group Meeting Agenda	Agenda	7/11/2007
	Quality Assuring Assessment	Implementation Guidelines for Providers(working Draft)	not available
	Internal Verification	Process document - Assessment	5/11/2007
	Assessment Guidelines feedback	Feedback from IVEA to FETAC assessment guidelines	29/6/2005

	National Conference on Self-evaluation	6 Presentations	4/10/2007
	County Wicklow VEC Assessment QA WG	Agenda	14/3/2007
	County Wicklow VEC Assessment QA WG	Agenda	6/12/2007
	FETAC Quality Assuring Assessment Guidelines	Guidelines and Code of Practice for Providers	29/6/2007
	Draft letter to providers re Quality Assuring Assessment	Letter	29/6/2005
	Draft timeline for development and implementation of FETAC Guidelines and support pack	Document	29/1/2007
	Implementing QA Policies and Procedures in Further Education	Survey TUI	Mar-07
	FETAC QA Implementation Timeframe	Document	2/4/2007
	Implementation Plan	Planning Document	9/2/2007
	Towards a European Credit System for VET	Feedback from FETAC to FETAC assessment guidelines	29/6/1905
	IVEA Cascade feedback on QAA Guidelines	Feedback gathered at feedback conferences/briefings	16/4/2007
	Letter to 2nd Level TUI reps	Letter	17/9/2007

	FETAC QA Templates Pilot	Meeting Minutes CWVEC	27/3/2007
	CWVEC QA Policies and Procedures	Policy Doc	
	FETAC Policy for Determining Standards	Policy Doc	
2008	Provider guidelines for Validation of L 1 & 2 Programmes	Guidelines and Code of Practice for Providers	01/09/2008
	Provider Assessment processes	Internal CWVEC Doc	
	Quality Assuring Assessment Policy		March 2006
	Shared Programmes development	Presentation	01/06/2008
	Thoughts on assessment	Personal note	2008
	Note of assessment TG Meeting	Meeting minutes	30/01/2008
	Assessment TG Agenda	Agenda	20/06/2008
	QAA Guidelines for Providers		
	IVEA/FETAC TG: resources required to meet FETAC requirements for Adult education and Community Education	Discussion document	14/-4/2008
	Tools and Guidelines for developing awards and standards	Guidelines	April 2008

	Guide to awards at Levels 1 & 2 and associated processes		July 2008
	Report to CEEOA of a meeting of FE TG;FETAC, and TUI	Meeting report	9/05/2008 19/05/2008
	Context for shared programme development	Document	June 2008
2009	Note of meeting on Migration and harmonisation	Meeting note	June 2009
	Programme Approval Agreement	Agreement Document	November 2009
	PAA Structures	Role description	December 2009
	Programme Validation Guidelines	Guidelines	April 2009
	Policy and Guidelines on Quality Assurance	Policy	2009
	Consultation paper on migration to the CAS	Consultation paper	Dec 2009
	ideas and issues re PAAS	Discussion document	March 2009
	Generic PAA Agreement - what we have to do		
	FAQs on PAAs	Notes	2009
2010	Wicklow, Carlow and Meath PAA	Internal	2010
	Programme Approval Presentation	Internal CWVEC	2010
	FETAC Update	Internal	2010

2011	Wicklow Carlow Meath, Wexford Kildare and Kilkenny PAA	Internal	March 2011
	Presentation to PAA cluster re Evaluation Training	Internal	2011
	Managing the Transition to CAS	Information Note for Providers	July 2011
	CE Letter to Jacinta Stewart re sharing of progs at L3	Letter	May 2011
	CWVEC submission re Business case for FESS	DE Submission	2011
	Sharing application	Application form	2011
2012	Joint application for validation	Form	April 2012
2013	Nothing showing up as yet!		
2014	Common Awards System Restatement of policy	Policy	March 2014
2015	Report on feasibility study for QA in ETBs	presentation	March 2015
	Report on feasibility study re QA for ETBs	Report	March 2015
	Resourcing analysis	report	2015
	Collaborative Forum Agenda	Agenda	March 2015
2016	Self-evaluation Task Group Update to forum	Meeting notes	May 2016
	Self-evaluation Project Plan	Project management doc	2016
	Progression task Group	Meeting notes	April 2016

	Invitation to task group on QA Guidelines	e-mail	1/04/2016 and 13/04/2016
	QA Collaborative Forum 08 March 2016	Meeting notes	08/03/2016
	Draft roles and responsibilities for EQAVET QA Project		2016
	PLSS and ETB enhancement fund	e-mail	Aug 2016
	General Programme validation manual for apprenticeship	Manual	2016
	Briefing on Programme Validation	Document	2016
	Meeting agenda National Reference Point Seminar on QA	Agenda	June 2016
	Self-evaluation risk assessment	Table	2016
	ETBI FET Forum	Agenda	12 June 2016
	ETBI FET Forum	Agenda	13/01/2016
	ETBI FET Forum	Meeting notes	June 2016
	ETBI FET Forum	Agenda	Apr 2016
NB	2016 - considerable requests re programme sharing circulating for the first time as a practice of the group....		

	FESS CPD calendar - indicating changing role of FESS too		
	e-mail re transfer of SOLAS programmes	e-mail	12/09/16
	ETBI FET Forum	Meeting notes	15/09/16
	ETBI FET Forum	Agenda	13/10/16
	Programme Improvement Information	Information note	October 2016
	ETBI Response to QQI on delegation of authority	Consultation response	2016
	Agenda IQAVET Seminar	Agenda	November 2916
	Presentation re EA	Presentation	Dec 2016
	ETBI FET Forum	Agenda	Dec 2016
	ETBI comm re governance and implementation planning	email	Dec 2016
2017	Communication re Draft sector specific QA Guidelines	e-mail	Jan 2017
	White Paper Draft Sector Specific Guidelines for ETBs	Policy Document	Jan 2017
	Dates for QA Forum Meetings 2017	email	Jan 2017
	QQI Consultation re focused reviews	email	20/01/2017
	AIS Update /TQAS documentation	email	31/01/2017

	Documents for QA Forum Meeting 14th Feb 2017	email	10/02/2017
	QQI FET Forum Meeting	Agenda	14/02/2017
	QQI FET Forum meeting	Notes	
	QQI Award Standards Review	email	17/02/2017
	QA Forum Meeting	Meeting Notes	14/02/2017
	QQI/ETBI Joint Implementation Plan	Document	Jan 2017
	Joint ETBI QQI Implementation Plan addendum	Notes	Jan 2017
	Note of meeting of Director Reps, CEs and QQI Senior management	Notes	December 2016
	FET QA Forum	Agenda	07/03/2017
	FET QA Forum	email	06/03/2017
	FET QA Forum	Notes	07/03/2017
	FET Submission on Sector Specific QA Guidelines	email	23/03/2017
	ETBI Submission to QQI consultation re sectoral QA Guidelines	document	23/03/2017
	AIS Feedback	excel doc	13/04/2017
	Meeting re PHECC FAR	Note of meetings	27/03/2017
	Agenda ETBI QA Forum	Agenda	05/05/2017

	ETBI FET Forum Meeting	Notes	11/04/2017
	ETBI Feedback templates: Assessment Malpractice; Assessment Deadlines; Reasonable Accommodations in Assessment;	Artefacts	15/05/2017
	Assessment Procedures/Assessment WG	Artefacts	15/05/2017
	Draft ETB Sectoral Assessment Procedures for Consultation	email	16/05/2017
	ETBI Forum Meeting 11/05/2017	Notes	17/05/2017
	FAQs Transition to PHECC FAR	Artefacts	17/05/2017
	QQI outdoor signage and branding	Artefacts	18/05/2017
	Sector Specific QA guidelines	Artefacts	18/05/2017
	QA governance and management of quality questionnaire	Artefacts	20/02/2017
	Consultation re National Assessment Handbook	email	25/05/2017
	Consultation re new sectoral EA model	email	23/05/2017
	HSA Statement re acceptable OFA awards/PHECC	email	02/06/2017
	Statement of HSA in relation to transition to PHECC (5th)	Artefacts	01/06/2017
	Communication with QQI re Programme Validation issues (Digital Media Production L6)	Letter	08/06/2017

	Presentation re programme validation	Artefacts	09/06/2017
	QQI Validation of Commis Chef Apprenticeship Programme	Agenda	01/06/2017
	National Commis Chef Apprenticeship Programme QA procedures	Artefacts	01/06/2017
	Submission of applications for Differential validation	email	09/06/2017
	ETBI QQI FET Forum	Agenda	13/06/2017
	Draft documents produced by the validation implementation working group	email	13/06/2017
	Programme Validation Templates X 3	Artefacts	13/06/2017
	Meeting with Walter Balfe re former SOLAS programmes	Meeting Notes	12/05/2017
	Feedback on draft documents produced by the validation implementation working group	email	20/06/2017
	Review of validation pilot project.	Report	26/06/2017
	ETBI Forums response to QQI re pilot validation of Digital Media Production	emails	11/07/2017
	OFA PHECC outsourcing	emails	11/07/2017
	Validation Panel Report and Response	email	10/07/2017
	Validation Panel Report: Digital Media Production	Report/Artefact	10/07/2017

	ETBI Brief number 10/2017 Re sectoral QA projects	Brief	14/07/2017
	Revised work experience modules	email	24/07/2017
	Revised work experience review documents and templates (10 not downloaded)	artefacts	24/07/2017
	ETBIQQI FET Forum Agenda	Agenda	31/07/2017
	ETBI QQI FET Forum Meeting	Meeting Notes	13/07/2017
	FET Directors Strategy Planning meeting agenda	Agenda	30/08/2017
	Final work experience drafts	email	01/09/2017
	Work Experience documents (not downloaded)	Artefacts	01/09/2017
	ETBI Brief 13/2017	email	05/09/2017
	ETBI Brief 13/2017 Review of Work Experiencer Modules and supporting documentation	Artefact	04/09/2017
	Sectoral consultation on Topic Specific Blended Learning Guidelines	email	13/09/2017
	HSA Recognition of QQI OFA 6th Statement	email/artefact	14/09/2017
	Certification of QQI Awards and the update of QBS	email	15/09/2017
	Executive Self Evaluation Template	emails	19/09/2017
	Executive Self Evaluation Report Template	Artefact	19/09/2017
	Executive Self-evaluation Terms of Reference	Artefact	19/09/2017

	Payment of programme writers	email	22/09/2017
	ETBIQQIFET Forum Meeting	Notes	31/08/2017
	ETBIQA Forum Meeting	Agenda	28/09/2017
	AIS Edits QA Forum Update email 1	email	28/09/2017
	ETBI QA Forum	KWETB Internal Meeting Note	28/09/2017
	ETBI QA Forum	Notes	28/09/2017
	ESE	email	29/09/2017
	Executive Self Evaluation Mapping Tool	Artefact	29/09/2017
	Programme Development: Trail Cycle Leader Module	email	10/10/2017
	Trail Cycle Leader Instructional Skills Module Descriptor	Artefact	10/10/2017
	QQI training event HE and Apprenticeship programme evaluations	email	11/10/2017
	Report on RPL in the Irish FET Sector	Artefact	20/10/2017
	Initial Quality Dialogue meeting	Agenda	26/10/2017
	ETBI Focus Group submission Blended Learning	Artefact	12/10/2017
	ETBI Focus Group submission Blended Learning	email	03/11/2017
	FET Directors' QA Strategy Group Meeting	email	03/11/2017

	DFET QA Strategy Group	Agenda	1/11/2017
	Project to establish a sectoral handbook for the governance of quality	Artefact	1/11/2017
	Project to establish a sectoral model for external authentication	Artefact	1/11/2017
	AIS Redevelopment update	Artefact	1/11/2017
	ETBI QA Forum	Agenda	13/11/2017
	ETBI QA Forum	Meeting Notes	28/09/2017
	Letter from QQI re validation of the Digital Media Production Programme	Artefact	08/11/2017
	Letter from Fionnuala Anderson to QQI re DMP	Artefact	23/11/2017
2018	Assessment Consultation	email	15/01/2018
	QA Forum Meeting Notes	Note	16/11/2017
	QA Forum	Agenda	15/01/2018
2019	Agendas, Meeting Notes - ETBI QA Network Teams Site		
2020	Agendas, Meeting Notes - ETBI QA Network Teams Site		
2021	Agendas, Meeting Notes - ETBI QA Network Teams Site		
2022	Agendas, Meeting Notes - ETBI QA Network Teams Site		

2023-2024	FET Directorate	Updates 14 documents	Feb 2023 – June 2024
2023-2024	ETBI QA Network	Meeting Notes 11 documents	Feb 2023 – May 2024

Appendix F: Historical Timeline

1930-1990

	Acts	Policies/strategies/Guidelines	Programmes & interventions	Publications	Organisations	CoPs and Networks	Events	International
1930	Vocational Education Act							
1957								EEC formed
1958	Whittaker Programme for economic expansion							
1961								OECD
1967			Free' education					
1966		Inter cert and curriculum reform	Apprenticeships - plumbing, electrical…					
1972	NCEA established							
1973								Ireland enters EEC
1978 - 1979			First AEOs appointed					
1980			Vocational Preparation and Training Programmes					

1985			PLCs					
1986			VTOS established					
1987								
1988			Youthreach + Community Training Centres established					
1989								
1990								

1991-2006

	Acts	Policies/strategies/Guidelines	Programmes & interventions	Publications	Organisations	CoPs and Networks	Events	International
1991					NCVA			
1992								
1993								
1994								
1995								

1996								
1997	Public Service Management Act							
1998	Education Act							
1999	Qualifications (E &T) Act				FETAC & HETAC			
2000				White Paper on Adult Education				Lisbon Strategy
2001					NQAI FETAC and HETAC established			
2002								Copenhagen Declaration
2003		NFQ		McIver report				
2004		FETAC Policy for QA						
2005		FETAC QA agreements					CAS established	Bologna Process
2006				Towards 2016				
2007								

2008							Economic turmoil/financial 'crash'	
2009				McCarthy Report				
2010								
2011								
2012	Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act				QQI			
2013	Education and Training Boards Act Further Education and Training Act							
2014		ELC Professional Award-type Descriptor consultation (QQI)		Momentum Final Report(2014a) FET Strategy 2014-2020				

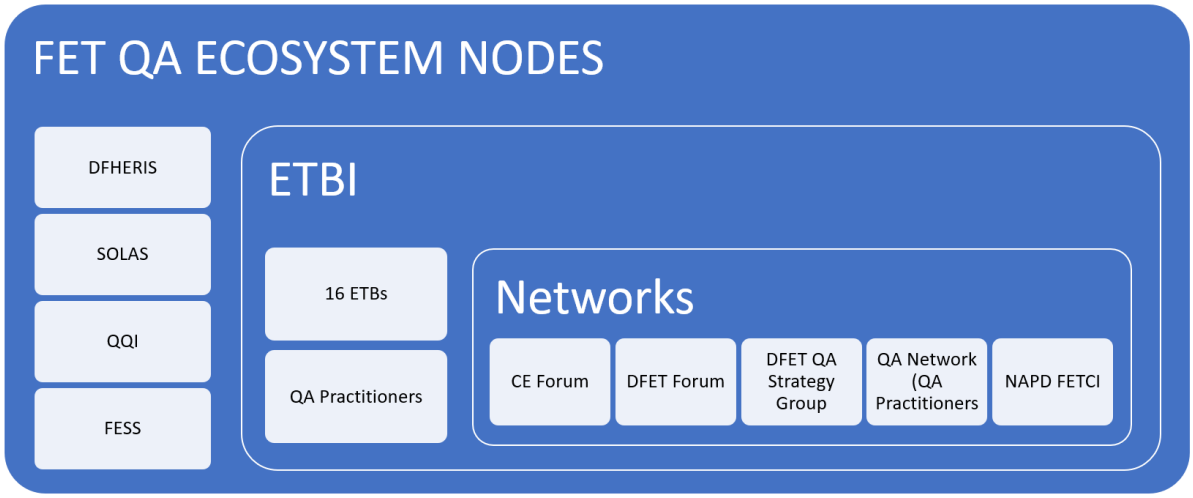
2015	FEMPI					New apprenticeships		
2016		Core Statutory QA Guidelines Sector-Specific QA Guidelines						
2017		Policies and Criteria For Validation of Programmes of Education and Training						
2018							ETB Executive self-evaluations and QQI dialogue meetings introduced	
2019		QQI PATD for ELC published		Annotated ELC Standards				
2020		ETB Consultation on ELC process – phase 1 consultation Consultation proceeds, led by DDLETB		FET Strategy: Transforming Learning, 2020 – 2025				
2021								
2022								

2023						Consultation re L1-4 Broad Standards		
2024						Launch of L1-4 Broad Standards		
2025				FET Strategy consultation commences				

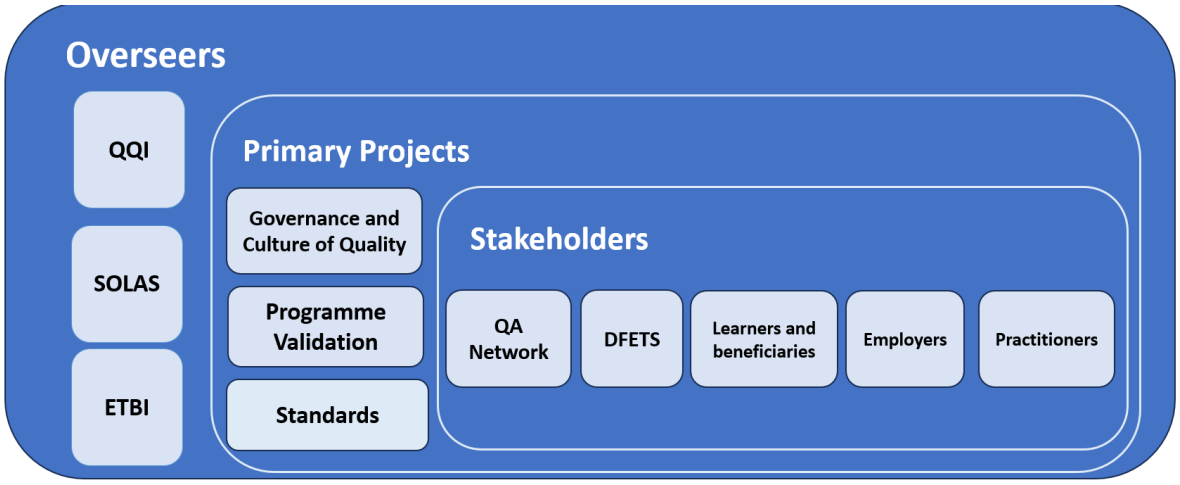
Appendix G: Relevant QQI Policy Documents and Guidelines

- Guide to Completing QQI Programme Validation Descriptor FET (CAS) (2024)
- QQI Consultation on Draft Broad Award Standards at Levels 1-4 (2023)
- Statutory QA Guidelines for Providers of Blended and Fully Online Programmes (2023)
- Review Cycle Schedule (2022)
- Assessment and Standards 2022
- Inaugural Review of Quality Terms of Reference (2021)
- Review Handbook (2021)
- Review Policy (2019)
- Policies and Criteria for the validation by QQI of programmes of education and training (2017)
- Policy and Criteria for Making Awards (2017)
- Policy on Quality Assurance Guidelines (2016)
- Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines (2016)
- QQI Sector Specific QA Guidelines for ETBs (2016)
- Restatement of policy on access transfer and progression (2015)
- Policy for Determining Award Standards (2014)
- Policy and criteria for initial provider access to initial validation (2013)
- FETAC Guidelines for Preparing Programme Descriptors (2010)
- Policies and criteria for the establishment of the NFQ (No date)

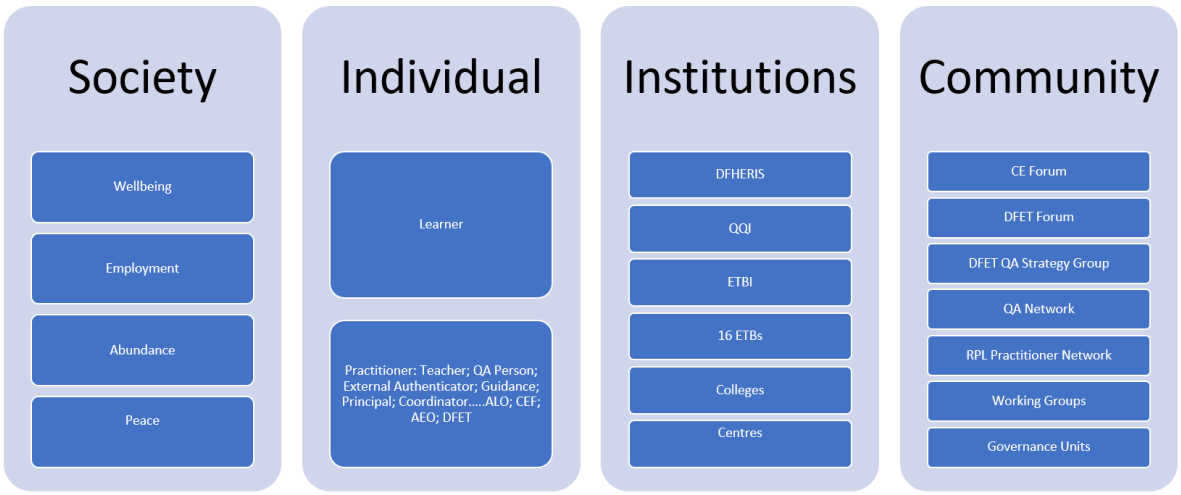
Appendix H: FET QA Ecosystem Nexuses and Nodes



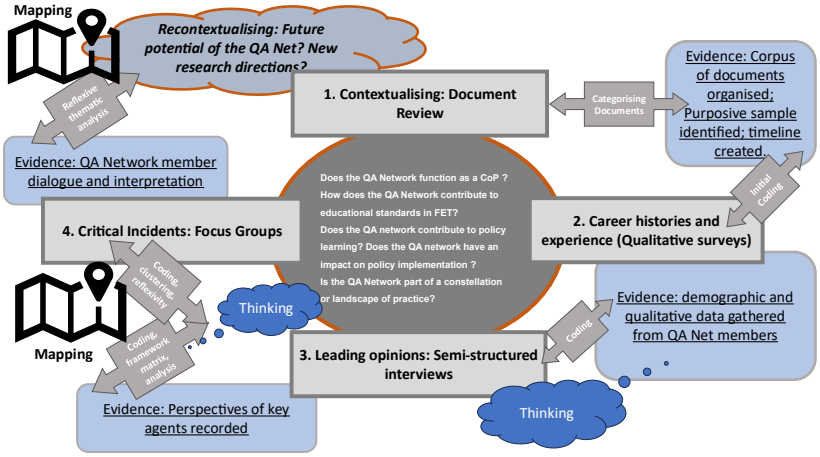
Overseers; primary projects; stakeholders

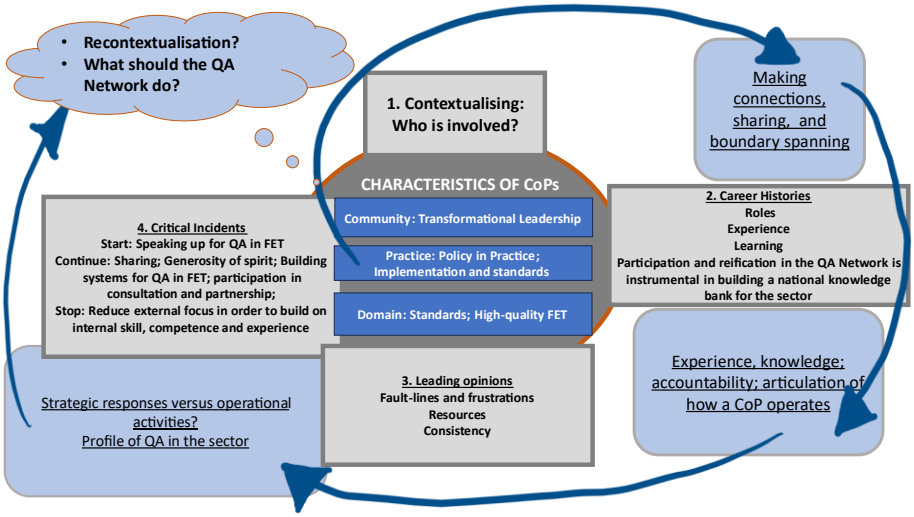


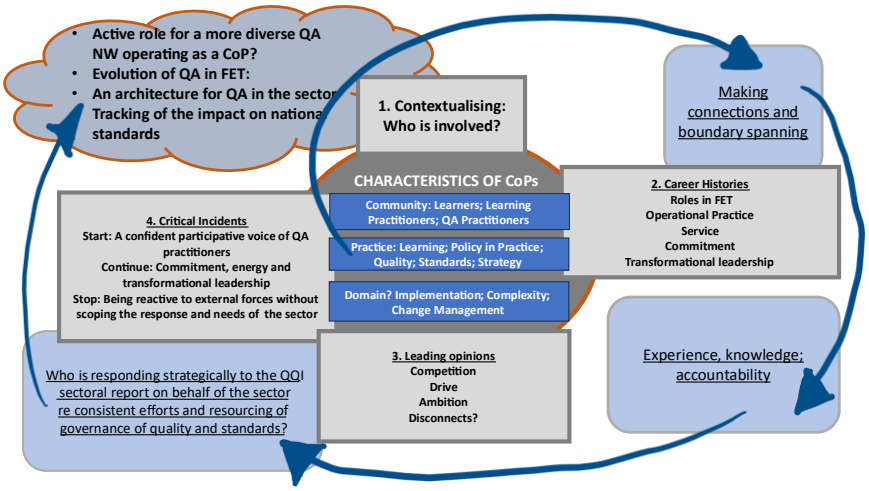
A QA Eco-system?


Society
Wellbeing
Employment
Abundance
Peace
Individual
Learner
Practitioner: Teacher; QA Person; External Authenticator; Guidance; Principal; Coordinator.....ALO; CEF; AEO; DFET
Institutions
DFHERIS
QQI
ETBI
16 ETBs
Colleges
Centres
Community
CE Forum
DFET Forum
DFET QA Strategy Group
QA Network
RPL Practitioner Network
Working Groups
Governance Units

Appendix I: Research Cycles







Appendix J: Survey Questions

Section1: Introduction to the Survey

Section2: Career Histories

1. 1. Professional role/title (this refers to your role within the organisation you are employed by). Please use the role stated in your contract of employment. (Short answer Text)
2. How long have you been in your current role? >1 year; 1-5 years; 6-10 years; 11-15 years; 15-20 years; <20 years.
3. Briefly describe your current role, including, for example, the purpose of the role; the type of work you do on a day-to-day basis, and the associated responsibilities. (Long answer)
4. Membership of the QA Network. I am a (please tick one): Current member; past member; neither.
5. If you are a past member, when did you leave? (Short answer)
6. How long in total have you spent as a member of the current QA network and/or previous iteration(s) of the community? >1 year; 1-5 years; 6-10 years; 11-15 years; 15-20 years; <20 years.
7. Place yourself on the following continuum in terms of your relationship to the current network. Recognising that members have different interests, and take different roles at different times, please indicate where you see yourself at this moment - if you are 'peripheral', then you may attend to remain informed about national activities or make contact with other practitioners; If you are an insider, then you may be deeply involved in a number of national projects. Where would you locate yourself? (Rating: Peripheral to Core)
8. As a member of the network, how do/did you identify yourself? (Multi-choice: As a volunteer; as an employee; as a representative of an organisation
9. Thinking back to your experience as a newcomer to the broad QA Network, how did you learn about or become aware of the QA enterprise? (Long answer)
10. How did you become involved in the QA Network or a previous iteration? (Long answer)
11. If you were nominated to attend, who nominated you sponsored, or supported your membership (name their role) ? (Short answer question)

Section 3: Perspectives on experiences of the QA Network members

In this section, you will be asked to answer 11 questions to illustrate the nature of your involvement in the QA Network.

1. Rate the extent to which your involvement in the network informs or informed your practice as a professional in FET (Rating 1-7 from 'Not at all' to 'A lot')
2. What would you say is the purpose of the QA Network? (Long answer)
3. Does the QA Network contribute to your practice in FET? (Multiple choice – Y/N)
4. Describe how your involvement in the network contributes to your knowledge.(Long answer)

5. Describe the skills and competence in the area of QA of FET that you have developed since becoming involved in the broad network. (Long answer)
6. Tell me how your understanding of QA in FET has evolved since becoming part of the QA Network. (Long answer)
7. Rate the following in terms of your involvement in the QA Network with '1 ' being the least important to you and 8 being most important:
    a. To learn
    b. To source information
    c. To improve your practice
    d. To improve the practice of others
    e. To improve services
    f. To improve learner experience
    g. To improve standards
    h. To make sense of policies

Section 4: Broad Qualitative Questions

These questions are designed to prompt a broader dialogue about the QA Network and are related to the research questions. There are five questions here. This is the last question section. The questions provide space for detailed qualitative answers and reflection on the themes, and you can edit your responses over time if you wish to do this. Your reflection on these themes is appreciated.

1. Describe one significant challenge in relation to QA in FET that you recall during your time in the broad network. (Long answer)
2. Describe the role and activities of the network in relation to this event or challenge as you recall it. (Long answer)
3. In what ways does the QA Network influence Irish FET in your opinion? (Long answer)
4. Provide some examples of shared language and terminology used by the members of the network that distinguishes them from other professionals or practitioners in FET services? (Long answer)
5. What factors influence the implementation of QA policy in Irish FET in your opinion? (Long answer)

Section 5.

Thank you for participating in this phase of my data collection. Finally, please complete this section, including indicating whether you would like to participate in further phases.

1. Please add any other issues, ideas or comments you would like to see explored here: (Long answer)
2. Would you be prepared to participate in the following phases of the research (Semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups)? (Multi-choice: Y/N)
3. I would be happy for you to use my e-mail address for the purpose of contacting me in relation to further phases of data collection (Multi-choice: Y/N)
4. I understand that my personal details will be deleted permanently from all records following the completion of the candidate's viva interview and announcement of the outcome of her studies. (Multi-choice: Y/N)

Appendix K: Semi-structured Interview Outline

Interview Schedule and Guide
Duration: 1 hour
Experience in the Quality Assurance of FET

- What is your current role?
- Tell me briefly about how you became involved in Quality Assurance for FET
- Where does your knowledge and understanding of QA in FET come from ?
- How would you describe your knowledge of QA in FET?
- What is your relationship/role vis a vis the QA Network – member/peripheral/non-member/broker/enabler? Describe how you fill this role.

The QA Network

- In your opinion, how does the QA Network contribute to educational standards in FET, especially in an era of significant FET reform and change?
- Does the QA network contribute to policy learning? If so, how?
- Does the QA network have an impact on policy implementation? How/Describe how it has an impact on policy implementation? Give examples.
- How does the QA Network function as a CoP?
- If you were to look at the network as a constellation, what other groups are part of that constellation?

Influences, enablers and challenges

- What are the significant challenges facing network members as practitioners in the field of QA?
- What are the significant challenges facing FET in the field of QA?
- What are your thoughts on maintenance of standards and development of standards in the sector?
- What in your view is the main influence on decision-making regarding QA in the sector?
- What key things contribute to success in QA?
- Do you have any thoughts on the future of QA within the FET sector?

Is there anything you would like to add? Any other thoughts?

Appendix L: Initial Codebook

Highlighted codes indicate those with most frequent references: reviewed 26/04/24

Autonomy		1
Community of Practice	Covering use of the term in responses by research participants	82
A certain style which displays membership		3
Absence of preambles	This refers to a situation which occurs in a community of practice because the members know one another, and can assume a common baseline of knowledge - as a result, there is no need to introduce the topic for discussion in great depth - they can take up conversations where they left off with ease.	1
Information sharing		7
Inside jokes, shared jargon, local lore		0
Mutual engagement		11
Mutually defined identities	There is consistency of identity and perception of identities as linked to the undertaking in question	4
Negotiation	This covers all aspects of negotiation - how we negotiate the tasks and role of the network and how we negotiate with other organisations	7
Overlapping descriptions of who belongs	There is clear understanding of who is a member and why	2
Quick problem set up		2
Shared discourse	Covers evidence that there is a shared perspective on the world, and this is represented in the jargon and interactions of members.	7
Shared mutual language		13

Shared practice within the CoP		4
Shared repertoire	Shared methods of working and shared resources which have developed over time	4
Specific tools, representations and other artefacts		4
Working Groups	Sometimes small working groups are set up tasked with specific timebound projects	6
Constellations	This describes the range of CoPs that interlink and connect	17
Process Coordinators' Network	This network was established around 2011 to lead the process of the development of new Programme Descriptors for the then VEC sector. There was another process in FÁS - which took the form of the recruitment of a number of curriculum experts and formation of a unit which devised Assessment Instrument Specifications and led the development of the FÁS QAA system centrally	1
Delays to projects and plans	This is to do with delays in implementation of plans and projects	1
Governance of Quality	2012 legislation requires that providers of education and training programmes put in place systems for the governance of quality	17
Group thought	This code comes from respondent F, who commented that they had developed increased understanding of 'group-thought and group validation of opinions/perspectives where defining or discerning quality is concerned'	1
Inconsistency	This refers to inconsistency in interpretation and understanding across ETBs, and inconsistency in roles associated with QA	5
	Individuals may have been nominated to the QA Network in the hope that they will learn enough to be able to manage or develop the QA system in their organisation. Does the level of success depend on the level of support? Has it become a case that the role of	1

Influence	Covering references to the influence of the QA Network	17
Agenda setting		5
Impact	How the QA Network and its forerunners influenced QA in FET	12
Knowledge Transfer	Relates to the sharing of information and knowledge between members	5
Leadership	Described as part of the role by respondent A in response to the question: 'Briefly describe your current role....	3
Learners		5
Management	First referred to by respondent B in response to the question 'briefly describe your current role...'	4
Managing Quality	References to the actual task of managing quality. I am wondering what members conceive as 'managing quality'? What does that mean to them?	4
Meaning	Linked to how we begin to understand through engagement in communities of practice	3
Newcomers	Descriptions of what it was like to be new in the Network/experience of being new - interestingly this often overlaps with appointment to the role	1
Policy	All things to do with policies for QA and reference to these	51
Influence on implementation of policy		20
Competing elements	There is some evidence that there are multiple sources of competition which impair the progress of the QA undertaking	5
Enablers	I am creating this under policy formation, though I am not entirely sure yet whether it is believed that the QA Network should be formulating policy or whether the QA network	5

	should be formulating procedures; or should they be supporting practice and implementation at local levels?	
Policy formation	This implies the development of new policy - QQI set the policy or do they?	6
Practice	Here I will list any references to practice or reference to tasks and operations that may be comprehended as professional practice	11
Procedures	This relates to the procedures for implementing the requirements under QA policies	4
VUCA	Volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous - a term describing contexts like FET and current political and global contexts.	6
Positionality	This covers the roles which members of the network occupy - for example, newcomers, peripheral or moving on...	1
Professional Development	This refers to ways in which the QA Practitioners and leaders of QA have developed knowledge, skill and competence in the field. The main heading is professional development, with sub-headings of knowledge, skills and understanding.	50
Awareness of the QA Enterprise	Linked to the concept of communities of practice and their 'undertakings' or 'enterprise' this code refers to the awareness members of the broad network have about QA and how this awareness occurred. It can be assumed that levels of awareness may influence how members participate. This also has relevance to positionality within the community - whether a person is a newcomer, or peripheral for example.	11
Knowledge	This refers to participants' knowledge of the QA system and their own knowledge development in QA	13
Learning		8
Policy learning		6

Skills	This refers to the skills that QA Practitioners perceive themselves to use in the conduct of their work.	11
Understanding	This refers to how members of the QA Network understand the roles and work of the network	4
Programme Development and Validation	This relates to the form of curriculum development and refers to the QQI policies on the validation of programmes of education and training.	20
Common Awards System		4
Purpose of the QA Network		9
QA System		3
Integrated Systems	Mainly to do with integrated systems of QA but also concerned with the integrated FET system	6
Legacy Agreements	These were the original agreements that individual centres within then VECs signed with FETAC based on a first iteration of QA policies and procedures	2
Quality Assurance Cycle	This is anything to do with Deming's cycle and cyclical approaches	2
Quality Assurance Framework	This describes the frame for the management of quality - basically the manual for QA in ETBs. It underpins the system of QA in FET.	3
Resourcing	This is to do with how the QA systems and staffing are supported and funded throughout the ETB FET system	6
Review, Cyclical Review, IRQ	Review is a legislative requirement, and ETBs are obliged to self-evaluate the quality assurance of education and training in the institution/organisation.	9
Quality	A broad term - include use of the term without a specific context	2
Quality Assurance Cycle	This describes what is commonly understood to be good practice in QA, and refers to the	1

	CEDEFOP guidelines on QA in VET and to Deming's cycle,	
Quality Assurance Support	Shows the intention to support the activities of practitioners and is one key role for QA Officers.	2
Quality Assuring Assessment	Describes the system for approving results - ideally it also describes the approach to carrying out assessment; devising assessment, assessing, and attesting to the integrity of assessment.	5
Roles	Roles of research participants	4
Adult Education Officer	Middle management role, originally coined in the 1980s as provision of adult vocational education grew within the then VEC sector	6
Crossover roles	This is where a person has roles other than QA, loosely linked to QA most of the time, but the role is more likely to be aligned with organisational requirements. Is there a tendency to see QA as something which can be done very easily - i.e. that it is appropriate to allocate other roles too? Is this fair? Is this the case across the ETBs?	4
Director of Quality Assurance		1
QQI role	This code refers to the QQI role in the context of the QA Network	9
Quality Assurance Manager	Role described by survey respondent	3
Quality Assurance Officer	Role described by a survey respondent	4
Quality Teams	These are teams established within ETBs to support the implementation of policy	1
Within the QA Network	This code covers participants' perceptions of the roles they take within the QA Network - who they represent/ what they represent...	10
Participation		6

Self-perception	How the members of the network see themselves. Makes me wonder whether I can work out what defines a QA person through this research?	2
Standards	Standardised processes and standards of education and training	11
Teaching and Learning	Teaching, learning and assessment are at the heart of FET QA Systems	3

Appendix M: Reflexive Thematic Analysis-Themes Arising

Themes	Relationship to qualitative data
Policy in practice	Communication and dissemination by practitioners
	Knowledge transfer and double loops – upwards and downwards; incoming form authorities
	Creating procedures and reification Crisis responses: Autonomy versus collective activities
	Space for reflection
Roles in FET	Consistency of perceptions of the role of QA practitioners
	Dual roles and responsibilities – spanning operations
	General lack of coherence in the location and position of QA
	A broad range of knowledge, skill and competence among the QA practitioners
	Scale and resources
Fault lines and frustrations	Lack of progress
	Availability or not, of high quality programmes of FET
	Trust: Perceptions of capability and capacity
	Committee structures
	Knowing how to 'do' QA
	Embattled and bombarded
Evolution of QA in FET	Influenced by past experiences
	'There is no strategy'
	Disconnect form other strategic action in FET
	Crisis responses inform reification
	Energy
Characteristics	Domain
	Community
	Practice
	Boundary Spanning
Standards	Of education and training
	Of operational activities … consistency and expectations (what level of quality is desired?)
	Proactivity and vision…
Leadership	

Ref: Trafford and Leshem (2008)

Appendix N: QA Practitioners Describe their Roles

3. Briefly describe your current role, including, for example, the purpose of the role; the type of work you do on a day-to-day basis, and the associated responsibilities.

Survey respondents gave a deep insight into the variations in their roles when answering this question, illustrating the development of the QA Practitioner role across the sector:

- Leadership in Quality
- Programme Development
- Data Analytics
- PLSS
- Quality Assurance Manager, responsible for oversight of the quality of all FET provision within our ETB
- development of a Quality Assurance Framework
- oversight of programme development
- oversight of FET Professional Development.
- Quality Assurance and Enhancement including compliance, data reporting, programme development, RPL, PL&D, Governance, self evaluation and quality assurance management.
- Operational and strategic oversight of the QA cycle.
- Responsible for the development of an integrated quality assurance system including the development, implementation and monitoring of policies and procedures across the FET provision.
- Management of the QA of the evening provision.
- Secretary for the Governance & Management groups ensuring communication between each of them.
- Overall responsibility for all matters relating to quality assurance and enhancement for FET provision in my ETB. The aim is ensure a quality teaching and learning experience for learners, for the teaching staff and for all other grades of staff associated with FET provision.
- The day to day role involves leading the Quality Assurance Support Service in providing ETB-wide QA support to FET Centres and Colleges, as part of the development of an overarching ETB Quality Assurance system.
- Assisting and supporting FET Provision on all local and national QA matters and other awarding body requirements– for example QA procedure implementation and review, learner qualifications, registration assessment, and certification, self-evaluation, monitoring of the QA system, internal and external stakeholder engagement and continuous improvement initiatives.
- Managing QA enhancement and improvement processes in areas such as Internal Verification, External Authentication, Results Approval, External Appeals, Self-Evaluation processes, programme development & validation, qualifications approval, internal monitoring, curriculum/documentation control, standardisation of assessment techniques, standards, and the sourcing/development of teacher and learning support materials and resources.
- Initiate and monitor ongoing reviews of the effectiveness, appropriateness and completeness of the processes, procedures and systems that have been developed and implemented for the governance and management of quality assurance in LMETB FET
- Compilation of the annual Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) for submission to QQI, identifying desired outcomes and improvement activities for quality initiatives across FET provision. The development of the QIP will be premised on ongoing monitoring of existing QA processes across FET and ensuring that planned activities are implemented and reported on.
- Quality Assurance

- Ensuring a systematic and consistent approach to teaching, learning and assessment in the context of the 11 defined areas as established by QQI.
- Quality Assurance Officer
- Responsibility for all areas QA for Further Education and Training.
- Creation of policies
- Management of governance system, oversight of data, programme development, programme review, oversight of authentication processes and all associated areas.
- Manage the academic QA the ETB including overseeing the four QA agreements for 51 certification centres and 60+ delivery centres with QQI.
- Managing Programme development and validation (new apprenticeships and QQI awards)
- Managing QA governance groups
- Managing the buildings, staffing, finance, etc associated
- Managing the FET development team (QA)
- Managing Professional Learning and Development in FET
- Managing the Digital Learning Team for FET
- Managing the Outdoor education team (FET and second level)
- Developing, implementing and reviewing a Quality Assurance system for FET in the ETB.
- Programme development/review of QQI programmes.
- Support and manage a team of QA support staff and Programme Development Staff and their work. Lead in various governance groups including Programme Approval group, Quality Steering Group, RPL, Assessment Working group.
- Participate on other ETB groups including FET Strategy group, AEO.
- Participate on other national groups through ETBI - Quality Network, EA working group, programme development group.
- Programme Development, Data (PLSS), Active Inclusion, Learner Supports and Learner Wellbeing.

Appendix O: Frequently Used Terminology

Theme	Associated terminology
Assessment and certification	Results Approval Panel; External Authentication/Authenticator; Internal Verification; RCCRS; QBS
Awards and Standards	Common Awards System; Grid of level indicators; NFQ;RPL; VNFIL.
Programme Development and Validation	Programme Descriptor; Programme Development; Validation; QBS; Validation Panel; MIPLOs; MIMLOs; Self-evaluation; template; Delegated responsibility
Governance, policies and procedures	Inaugural Review of Quality; Review Panel; QA framework;
Roles and titles	QA Officer; AEO; CEF; TSO; ATSO; Subject Matter Experts;

Appendix P: Indicators of a CoP

Indicator	Primary data indicators	Secondary data indicators
Sustained mutual relationships – harmonious or conflictual		y
Shared ways of engaging in doing things together	11	
The rapid flow of information and propagation of innovations		y
Absence of introductory preambles as if conversations an interactions were the continuation of an ongoing process	13	y
Very quick setup of problems to be discussed	13	y
Substantial overlap in participants' descriptions of who belongs		
Knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to an enterprise		y
Mutually defining identities		
The ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and products		y
Specific tools, representations, and other artifacts		y
Local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter		
Jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the ease of producing new ones	y	y
Certain styles recognised as displaying membership	3	y
A shared discourse representing a certain perspective on the world		

Appendix Q: McKellar et al Value-types (2019): Descriptions

Motivation and Participation: This refers to emotional responses as a consequence of engaging with the CoP. These can be goals and aspirations, or positive feelings from participation, as well as sources of motivation to participate.

Relational: This includes structural (e.g. connections, meeting a person) and relational aspects (e.g. Quality of relationships, trust).

Knowledge: This includes knowledge and skill regarding the domain and practice. It can be both tacit and explicit knowledge. This is related to shared meaning and understanding that individuals or groups have with one another.

Learning and Identity: The learning aspect of this value is process-oriented (including reflective processes) and relates to learning how to learn and work collaboratively. It also includes changes in identity that result through negotiated meaning with the CoP.

Intangible: This refers to intangible assets that are not elsewhere captures, Examples include status of an individual, the reputation of the CoP, its collective voice or the salience of the domain.

Tangible: Tangible assets are similar to the shared repertoire of the CoP. These can include documents, tools, procedures and methods.

Applied: This represents changes in practice that come from the application of the above-listed types of values.

Realised: These are the results of the CoP and, in particular of applied value or behaviour change. This represents value that is more traditionally considered outcomes in evaluation.

Reframing and transformative: The reconsideration of learning imperatives a result of the learning itself, a redefinition of success or a fundamental change.

Source: Mc Kellar, K.A., Whitney, B., Cockerill, R., Cole, D., Saint-Charles, J. (2020) *Application of an Evaluation Framework for Extra-organisational Communities of Practice: Assessment and Refinement* in Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation / La Revue canadienne d'évaluation de programme 35.2 (Fall / Automne), 149–169 doi: 10.3138/cjpe. 69796

Appendix R: Evidence of Indicators and Value-types for CoPs

Indicator	Evidence	McKellar's Value-types
Sustained mutual relationships – harmonious or conflictual	'It was everything that I needed to keep me going for that, for that following month' (Clare: Focus Group Data) There is enjoyment and depth of relationship in the QA Network, which provides time and space 'outside the office' (Jane: Survey Data) Peers share learning and experience generously, navigating an evolving landscape (Bernie: Survey Data) The network brings together minds in QA from all the ETBs…(Odette)	Motivation and Participation Relational Learning and identity
Shared ways of engaging in doing things together	Members forge new, shared meanings and practices (Bernie) The Network brings together those people who are fully occupied in the QA Space, from across ETBs (Odette) The culture and ethos did not change, despite personnel change- the topic draws them together (Anastasia)	Relational Motivation and Participation Intangible
The rapid flow of information and propagation of innovations	Work is focused on specific projects and products such as templates; module and programme descriptors; and reference documents, which are shared readily. QA Practitioners are privy to large amounts of information (Document review; evidence of sharing). Coming together in the Network prompts and maintains awareness, and reminds people of possibilities and different approaches/things they may not yet have covered (Audrey The ability to clarify language and terminology is highly valued (Robert)..It stimulates a debate about quality. (Artemisia: Interview Data) *The language of the group is particularly relevant to and reflective of, QQI policy and guidelines, which tend to be used consistently by members of the network, together with a wide range of acronyms associated with their work, which may serve to exclude non-members. This shared mutual language is easily understood by members, and enables easy problem set-up, shared discourse and ease of negotiation.*	Tangible Assets
Absence of introductory preambles as if conversations and interactions were the continuation of an ongoing process	Informal discussion of projects and outcomes (Coffee chats and discussion over lunches – (Bernie: Survey Data) Engagement in problem solving and receiving advice (Jane: Survey Data)	Tangible (Assets) Realised
Very quick setup of problems to be discussed	The Network is vibrant and dynamic, due to the members, who have come to the work through different routes (Robert). Time and space for making sense of the meaning of policy requirements is valued – 'does it mean this? Or this?...The Network is good for learning how others do their work. (Audrey). *While there may be very quick initial response to new problems, the frustrations expressed about the timeframes for the programme review and revalidation project, indicate that resolution of problems and negotiation of solutions takes a long time. Transmission of problem identification, proposed solutions and resolution are hindered by lengthy approval and discussion processes.*	Intangible assets Learning and identity Relational Tangible assets
Substantial overlap in participants' descriptions of who belongs	Members are all operationally involved in QA in their ETBs. The perception that relationships between different role levels are not a problem *(Clare: Focus Group Data)*	Identity

	A commonality between members is placing learners' needs at the centre of focus…the Network is 'like-minded' and supportive. (Clare: Focus Gorup Data)	
Knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to an enterprise	'Micro conversations over a sandwich' are where relationships are nurtured and safety is established.. 'Minor but important chats' that nurture trust. (Bernie: Survey Data) There is respect for each ETB having taken the lead in different projects, such as the ELC; RPL; Apprenticeships….sustainable construction…online learning (Audrey) Readiness to take leadership roles and then share learning. Perception that this distribution enabled achievement of more than would have been achieved otherwise. (Clare: Focus Group Data) Sharing information is mutual and reciprocal (Eva: Focus Group Data). Through knowing one another, members know where expertise lies or what colleagues are working on, and can access it quickly. (Clare, Focus Group Data). Knowing who can be contacted quickly with questions is a major asset of the group There is that collegiality… that openness to learning, that bit of building systems together, and building approaches together and learning from each other (Audrey)	Relational Intangible assets Realised Reframing and transformative Learning and identity Applied
Mutually defining identities	An unofficial 'buddy system' that links newcomers and core members. (Clare: Focus Group Data). A spirit of generosity, and spirit of caring and support (we lose it at our peril – Bernie: Survey and Focus Group Data) Supportive relationships, and trust are key to the environment. …Building relationship contributes to trust. Dana: Focus Group Data) There's strong transformational leadership, in a space that is sometimes unknown, but with people utterly committed to learners. (Eva: Focus Group Data)	Relational
The ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and products	Tasks are distributed to ensure that all are covered – members swap in and out of leadership (Bernie: Focus Group Data) Knowledge transfer is seen as valuable, and willingness to share contributes to this. (Interview and survey participants). Commitment to doing the right thing and contributing to the benefit of learners is high (Bernie, Artemisa and Eva: Survey and Focus Group Data). QA Practitioners make decisions to benefit learners. Safety and trust in one another enables the sharing and questioning that occurs. (Eva)	Relational Intangible Reframing, transformative
Specific tools, representations, and other artifacts	Self-evaluation reports; IRQ panel reports; policies; annual quality reviews; programme descriptors, although there is a view that there could be more ownership of these (Audrey) Position papers (Maurice) Templates and descriptors; the EA Panel; Reference documents – academic writing and assessment manuals; surveys; consultations; programme review processes.	Tangible
Local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter	Memories of specific meetings in Piper's Hill and other places; events; different working groups and conferences; memories of new project starts. Strong relationships also inform memories of the people involved and promote boundary spanning. about tentative steps to embrace the concept of QA…shared experiences pf programme validation and IRQ.	Learning and Identity
Jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the ease of producing new ones	….QA…IRQ….ITEC…NGBs….NFQ…CIBTEC… (Eva: Survey Data). Quality; Levels; Programmes…Micro-qualifications…teaching, learning and assessment; Validation; engagement; evaluation.	Applied

Certain styles recognised as displaying membership	Within the members' participation, feelings for colleagues are very human, and caring….going beyond professional shells, and there is a sense of warmth among the QA practitioners… Network is made up of 'like-minded people' (Clare: Focus Group Data). The experiences of 'growing practice' together was transformational. Transformational leadership; there is strength in diversity and in courageously approaching adversity. (Eva: Focus Group Data)	Applied Relational Motivation and Participation Intangible assets
A shared discourse representing a certain perspective on the world	Buddy' system, mentors. (Clare: Focus Group Data); And if it was not for them, I would have run for the hills – it's the only way to cope with what you have to get your head around' (Clare: Focus Group Data). Focus on integrity, quality and learner-centredness. Work perceived as challenging and perceptions that people are 'always on', and working seventy-hour weeks (Maurice). Commitment to standards; commitment to learners (Audrey) Openness and collegiality in co-constructing systems and approaches. High expectations in the interests of learners. Rigorous application of standards. Visibility of quality is important. Pride and recognition of FET as a legitimate sector/sensitivity to not being recognised?	Learning and Identity

Appendix S: Functions of ETBs

Their functions include establishing and maintaining recognised schools and education and training facilities; resourcing schools and education and training facilities in its area; planning, providing, coordinating and reviewing the delivery of education and training, including the provision of education and training for the purpose of employment; providing support services; adopting a strategy statement, annual service plan and annual report; cooperating with internal audit organisations; implement government policy; and consult with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders if appropriate (Education and Training Boards Act,2013, Section 10).

The Education and Training Boards Act, 2013 distinguishes between reserved and executive function of the board. Reserved functions include the appointment of a Chief Executive (CE); overall governance; establishment of scholarships; adoption of the strategy statement and annual reports; acceptance of gifts; constitution as a trustee; establishment of committees and determination of their terms of reference and procedures; power to borrow money, keeping of accounts and acquisition and disposal of land. Executive function includes every function that is not a reserved function of the board, and these are performed by the CE or delegated staff. The CE must act in accordance with the policies of the ETB.

Appendix T: Functions of SOLAS

SOLAS functions include:

- Publishing a strategy for the provision of FET
- Funding allocations and promotion of FET
- Performance agreements with FET providers
- Advancing funding to ETBs and other providers of FET services
- Arranging for delivery of training and retraining for employment by persons other than the agency
- Performance management and review of providers receiving funding
- Promoting cooperation between ETBs and other bodies involved in FET

- Promoting equality of opportunity in FET
- Developing and facilitating new and existing programmes and establishment of systems designed to monitor the quality of education and training to ensure that programmes serve their intended purpose
- Conducting research.

Further Education and Training Act, 2013.

Appendix U: Functions of QQI

The functions of QQI are to

- Promote, maintain and further develop the NFQ
- Advise the Minister in relation to national policy on quality assurance and enhancement in education and training
- Review and monitor the effectiveness of providers' QA procedures
- Validate programmes of education and training and to monitor validated programmes
- Promote the use of statements of levels of learning
- Establish the standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners before an award can be made
- Make awards
- Delegate authority to make awards, and review and monitor operations of authorities so delegated
- Determine policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression and to monitor implementation of providers' procedures for access, transfer and progression
- Establish a code of practice for the provision of education and training to international learners, and to authorise the use of an International Education Mark by providers complying with the code of practice
- Establish a register of awards recognised within the NFQ
- Cooperate with international bodies on qualifications and QA and to make arrangements for the protection of enrolled learners (PEL).

The authority informs itself of education , training, skills and qualifications requirements for the labour market; promotes practices in education and training to meet these requirements; must have regard to government policy; collaborates internationally and engages in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders.

List of provider responsibilities and procedures required by the Quality and Qualifications (QA) Act, 2013

- Evaluation from time to time as the provider deems appropriate, by the provider, enrolled and former learners
- Provider review of the application of their quality assurance procedures
- Preparation of a report identifying the results of a review and improvement measures
- Submission of the report of the review to QQI
- Evaluation every seven years
- Quality Assurance of programmes of education and training
- Access, transfer and progression (Section 56(2), including procedures for credit accumulation, credit transfer and formal assessment of previously acquired knowledge, skill or competence.
- Protection of enrolled learners

Appendix V: Areas for Governance and Management of Quality

QQI

- Governance and Management of Quality
- Documented Approach to QA
- Programmes of Education and Training
- Staff recruitment
- Management and Development
- Teaching and Learning
- Assessment of Learners
- Supports for Learners
- Information and Data Management
- Public Information and Communications
- Other Parties involved in FET
- Self-evaluation, Monitoring and Review

(QQI Statutory Guidelines for QA 2016, pp i-ii).

FETAC

- Communications
- Equality
- Staff Recruitment and Development
- Access, Transfer and Progression
- Programme Development, Delivery and Review
- Fair and Consistent Assessment of Learners
- Protection for Learners
- Sub-contracting and Procuring Programme Delivery
- Self-evaluation of Programmes and Services