

Covid-19 presented unprecedented challenges to all aspects of FET provision in City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB). After careful consideration, a number of procedures had to undergo almost immediate alteration. In 2018/19, CDETB adopted new corporate Quality Assurance (QA) structures. This article outlines how the new structures and systems responded to the pandemic.

Introduction

On 12 March 2020, then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar TD announced that all face-to-face education would pause until 29 March. This presented challenges to all education providers no matter what their level or scale. Further Education and Training (FET) provision by City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB) is very diverse in terms of student/learner cohorts, programmes and courses delivered, and settings and locations. On the day of the lockdown, the 22,000 FET students/learners in CDETB varied in age from 16 to 91 years. They were studying in seventeen Colleges of Further Education, two training centres, ten Youthreach centres, ten Community Training Centres (CTCs), five adult education areas, and seven centres providing education to prisoners and ex-prisoners. Some others were involved in specialist training programmes and Department of Justice workshops in locations across the city.

We had begun to discuss the possibility of a lockdown and what its impacts might be, but few of us believed it was imminent. The complexity and challenges that we faced cannot be minimised. For example, in the three weeks after lockdown began, around 700 CDETB students/learners were due to undertake Erasmus+ work placements across Europe. This is normally an amazing vocational aspect of some of the courses we provide, involving intensive work-based learning in a partner country. This one small item, which would not have crossed many minds, required many hours to resolve and involved seeking refunds for airplane tickets and cancelling accommodation bookings. Though difficult, it was easier than some other challenges we faced during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Overview

At the outset of the lockdown, each of our forty-plus centres prepared a contingency plan to cover all aspects of delivery. Key aspects of the plans included:

An Education and Training Board's FET Quality Assurance response to Covid-19

Stress-testing a new ETB governance structure



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- sourcing ICT devices for staff, students, and learners
- further developing and refining emergency remote teaching and learning
- converting examinations to assessments
- ensuring that all learning outcomes were covered
- facilitating online submission of assignments
- undertaking internal verification and external authentication in a completely changed environment
- communicating with and supporting students/learners while working remotely
- ensuring the quality of the education and training processes while maintaining the integrity of certification and awards.

FET managers had to ensure that the education or training their college or centre was providing was not compromised by Covid-19. They had to achieve this while leading and supporting their staff through the unprecedented and very challenging period of lockdown. College of Further Education principals, centre managers, and staff were rapidly inducted into the world of Zoom, Teams, and GoToMeeting.

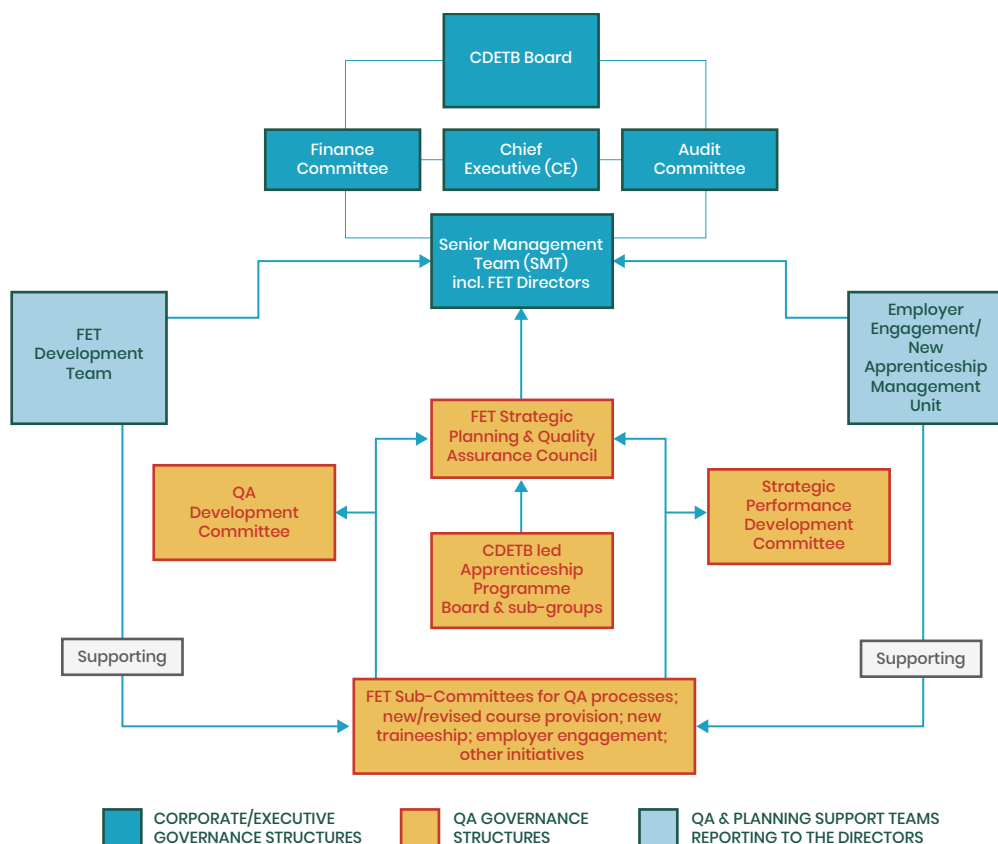
Plans, questions, and solutions were presented to the CDETБ Quality Assurance and Strategic Planning Council (QASPC), the main QA oversight group in CDETБ. Ideas were discussed, debated, questioned, and further developed or ceased. The following principles guided our response to Covid-19 and emerged from discussions across CDETБ:

- safety of learners and staff
- minimise impact on learners
- maintain the integrity of all awards
- maximise learning opportunities
- collaborate with other providers
- establish emergency plans
- recognise the disruption brought about by Covid-19 and put in place strategies to address not only the academic but the social and emotional impact of the virus on our staff and current and new learners
- ensure that IT, assessment, and other learning is not lost. (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020)

All of our QA actions had to conform to our guiding principles. Each ETБ nationally has a slightly different QA governance structure. CDETБ's is based on the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) template. The two biggest modifications in the CDETБ QA governance structure are that:

1. Strategic performance is included, allowing for planning and implementation of agreements with SOLAS to be overseen centrally.
2. Quality teams are established in all FET centres and report to the QA development committee. These teams have been a key component at a local college/centre level in our response to the pandemic.

Quality teams have been invaluable during the crisis, their role being 'to promote, enhance, develop, coordinate and support quality assurance in a college, centre or service sphere and to foster and embed a culture of quality improvement in the provision and delivery' (Farrelly, 2019). The teams of local staff at the coalface provided many solutions to the



CDETB QA corporate governance structure (CDETB, 2018)

different difficulties we had to overcome. The QASPC would ask specific teams to consider different scenarios and then return with potential solutions. Normally the question would be asked of two or three teams to generate different opinions and options. The QASPC would consider these and develop them. Ideas and solutions were discussed with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), who would offer insights on their suitability.

Simultaneously we engaged with our colleagues at different levels in the other fifteen ETBs, through ETBI structures, and this allowed ideas and thoughts to be shared. The sectoral collegiality and responses proved invaluable. CDETB had devised a blended learning policy some years ago, which fed into the ETBI blended policy and made it easier to move to emergency online tuition across the sector. Ideas were discussed with QQI at ETBI and ETB level, and they helped moderate the diverse solutions that were generated.

Responses

It is not possible to provide an exhaustive list of responses during the Covid-19 lockdown, due to the extensive number of interventions. I therefore encourage readers to read 'Informing the Future: Review of CDETB's COVID-19 responses and their impact on QA, Teaching, Learning

and Assessment', which gives detailed examples and insights into the responses from across the range and breadth of CDETB provision.

The human aspect of the pandemic is really brought home in the review, with staff supporting younger FET learners through bereavement while maintaining their engagement and focus on education and training. From the period of the lockdown, the following QA responses stand out in my mind:

- Extensive professional development was delivered to support the emergency overnight change to online delivery. A repository of online resources was established, along with a communal staff Moodle site managed by the Curriculum Development Unit. Community providers funded by CDETB and other secondary providers were invited and encouraged to avail of the free training.
- Guidance documents covering various scenarios were created to guide staff at college and centre level.
- All examinations were converted to assignments and internally verified to ensure they still met the requirements of the course.
- Alternative modules were delivered in cases where work experience was required. FET staff mapped learning outcomes against work experience and sought out the best fit. Permission was then sought from QQI to alter the components in an award. This required assessments to be designed and internally verified before they could be delivered remotely.
- Weekly online meetings for all FET managers were established, which morphed into a community of practice (COP) with agreed terms of reference. These meetings proved invaluable for everyone, as all issues and challenges could be aired and teased out. Without the COP, Covid-19 could have been a far more damaging experience for CDETB and a lonelier place for all staff in positions of management.
- The frequency of all QA meetings increased to weekly, which ensured that all centres were implementing agreed changes uniformly. CDETB staff engaged at sectoral meetings and Covid-19 meetings led by the Department of Education and Skills.
- Local quality teams generated most of the solutions to the challenges that the scheme faced.

Reflections

CDETB learned an enormous amount from the experience of the Covid-19 lockdown. As an organisation in the business of learning, this is very appropriate. Our new QA governance structures proved robust, yet it is the local quality teams that made the real difference. I encourage all providers to establish local QA teams and make them part of their formal structures if they have not already done so.

Overcoming the many challenges during lockdown required all parties in CDETB to see the issues and to work towards practical solutions. Of paramount concern was to ensure that students/learners received their qualification without compromising on quality or the health and well-being of staff, students, or learners. CDETB staff and managers, Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI), SIPTU, other ETBs, QQI, and ETBI all found themselves

facing a common enemy, Covid-19, and pulled together for the well-being and future of students and learners.

Rory O'Sullivan, principal of Killester College of Further Education, said to me, 'Never let a good crisis go to waste.' I have taken this sentiment to heart. As I've mentioned, we undertook a formal review, 'Informing the Future', in June. We captured our learning thus far from the pandemic and have used this to inform our actions for the summer and autumn of 2020.

Staff attendance at various training and upskilling events in ICT and QA has exceeded 5,000, while €880,000 has been spent on devices for FET learners to reduce digital disadvantage. Requirements for staff to move from emergency remote teaching to deliberate remote teaching has been priced, and funding has been sought from SOLAS. As a scheme, our QA is stronger now than ever before. Everyone has a far deeper understanding of all that is required and the role they have to play.

Finally, CDETB's positive management of the lockdown and the QA challenges that arose was underpinned and informed by our FET development team, the CDETB QA ninjas who helped us make sense of the chaos and put order on the madness.

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I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts."

— Abraham Lincoln,
16th president of the United States