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Reengagement Panel Report

Assessment of Capacity and Approval of QA Procedures

Part 1 Details of provider

1.1 Applicant Provider

Registered Business/Trading Name:	Optimise Management Consultants Ltd. <i>trading as</i> Qualtec
Address:	7 The Arches, Maynooth Co. Kildare
Date of application:	31 March 2021
Date of resubmission of application:	
Date of site visit:	21 July 2021
Date of reconvene meeting (if applicable)	
Date of recommendation to the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee:	9 September 2021

1.2 Profile of provider

Optimise Management Consultants Limited (trading as “Qualtec”) is a Kildare-based provider of Health and Safety training and education. The company has been operating for over 23 years and has been a FETAC provider since 2008.

Qualtec offers a number of part-time programmes leading to Level 5 and Level 6 awards on the NFQ, as well as other non-accredited Instructor programmes for employees in the Health and Safety sector.

A significant learner base has been highlighted by Qualtec, which noted 17,436 learners across all of its programmes between 2018 and 2020, among which 1,596 were on programmes leading to QQI awards.

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Part 2 Panel Membership

Name	Role of panel member	Organisation
Annie Doona	Chair	Former President, Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology
Matthew Hurley	Report Writer	Bridge Mills Galway Language Centre & Education Consultant
Liz Doran	Panel Member	Barrow Consultancy and Training
Brendan Ryan	Panel Member	Limerick Clare ETB

Part 3 Findings of the Panel

3.1 Summary Findings

At the outset of this report, the panel would like to extend its gratitude to Qualtec and its staff for the open and transparent nature in which the virtual site visit was conducted. This allowed the panel a much deeper insight into the organisation than the documentation alone would have allowed. Qualtec's passion for education was evident, as was its dedication to its learners.

The panel conducted an initial desk review of Qualtec's draft QA procedures on 6 July, 2021. This meeting highlighted a number of areas in which the panel requested further information and clarification. These clarifications covered topics such as how the appropriate separation of commercial and academic decision-making is maintained, how externality is achieved in governance, and how requests for reasonable accommodation and appeals are managed in practice. These clarifications were provided to the panel in a timely manner.

The panel then met for the virtual site visit on 21 July, 2021, which began with a presentation by Qualtec representatives. Following this, extensive discussions were held throughout the day covering all aspects of Qualtec's QA Framework. These discussions highlighted significant concerns across areas such as governance, documented approach to quality, programmes of education and training, teaching and learning, supports for learners, and information and data management.

The panel spent considerable time deliberating these issues, and concluded by identifying thirteen mandatory changes which aim to assist Qualtec in addressing the panel's concerns. The panel has therefore decided to recommend to QQI to refuse approval of Qualtec's draft QA procedures pending mandatory changes. These are detailed in Section 7.1 and contextualised throughout this report.

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3.2 Recommendation of the panel to Programmes and Awards Executive Committee of QQI

	Tick <u>one</u> as appropriate
Approve Qualtec's draft QA procedures	
Refuse approval of Qualtec's draft QA procedures pending mandatory changes set out in Section 7.1 <small>(If this recommendation is accepted by QQI, the provider may make a revised application within six months of the decision)</small>	✓
Refuse to approve Qualtec's draft QA procedures	



Part 4 Evaluation of provider capacity

4.1 Legal and compliance requirements:

	Criteria	Yes/No/Partially	Comments
4.1.1(a)	Criterion: <i>Is the applicant an established Legal Entity who has Education and/or Training as a Principal Function?</i>	Yes	Qualtec has submitted a Certificate of Incorporation in relation to the name <i>Optimise Management Consultants Ltd.</i> and a Certificate of Registration in relation to the trading name <i>Qualtec</i> .
4.1.2(a)	Criterion: <i>Is the legal entity established in the European Union and does it have a substantial presence in Ireland?</i>	Yes	The documentation submitted by Qualtec evidences that it is established in Ireland, and therefore the European Union. Qualtec provided training to over 17,000 learners across Ireland between 2018 and 2020.
4.1.3(a)	Criterion: <i>Are any dependencies, collaborations, obligations, parent organisations, and subsidiaries clearly specified?</i>	Yes	Although Qualtec is engaged in a number of collaborative partnerships, this is not the case for the delivery of any of Qualtec's QQI programmes.
4.1.4(a)	Criterion: <i>Are any third-party relationships and partnerships compatible with the scope of access sought?</i>	Yes	Qualtec has not identified any collaborative arrangements in relation to the delivery of its QQI programmes.
4.1.5(a)	Criterion: <i>Are the applicable regulations and legislation complied with in all jurisdictions where it operates?</i>	Yes	The panel is satisfied that documentation provided gives evidence of Qualtec's compliance with all relevant regulations and legislation.
4.1.6(a)	Criterion: <i>Is the applicant in good standing in the qualifications systems and education and training systems in any countries where it operates (or where its parents or subsidiaries operate) or enrolls learners, or where it has</i>	Yes	Qualtec has had an ongoing relationship with QQI (and formerly FETAC) since 2008.

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	<i>arrangements with awarding bodies, quality assurance agencies, qualifications authorities, ministries of education and training, professional bodies and regulators.</i>		
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Findings

The panel is satisfied that Qualtec's draft QA procedures adequately address QQI's legal and compliance requirements.

**4.2 Resource, governance and structural requirements:**

	Criteria	Yes/No/Partially	Comments
4.2.1(a)	Criterion: <i>Does the applicant have a sufficient resource base and is it stable and in good financial standing?</i>	Yes	Qualtec has provided Financial Statements for the years 2018 – 2020, as well as an Accountant's Declaration and Tax Clearance Certificate. Additionally, Qualtec has delivered training to over 17,000 between 2018 and 2020. This information provided to the panel indicates that Qualtec has a sufficient resource base and is in good financial standing.
4.2.2(a)	Criterion: <i>Does the applicant have a reasonable business case for sustainable provision?</i>	Yes	As outlined above, Qualtec has a significant client base, having provided training to over 17,000 learners between 2018 and 2020.
4.2.3(a)	Criterion: <i>Are fit-for-purpose governance, management and decision making structures in place?</i>	No	The panel held significant concerns over Qualtec's understanding of genuine academic and corporate separation, noting the presence of the Managing Director at almost every level of the organisation. The panel emphasised the importance of decreasing this overreliance and introducing more external expertise. Qualtec must revise its governance structure to ensure an appropriate separation of academic and commercial decision-making.
4.2.4(a)	Criterion: <i>Are there arrangements in place for providing required information to QQI?</i>	Yes	The Managing Director is the primary point of contact for communications with QQI.

**Findings**

The panel was not satisfied that Qualtec's draft QA procedures adequately addressed QQI's resource, governance and structural requirements.

The panel's primary concern lay in the area of governance and separation of commercial and academic decision-making, and the organisation's clear dependence on the Managing Director. A number of mandatory changes were subsequently identified in an effort to help Qualtec remedy this.

4.3 Programme development and provision requirements:

	Criteria	Yes/No/Partially	Comments
4.3.1(a)	Criterion: <i>Does the applicant have experience and a track record in providing education and training programmes?</i>	Yes	Qualtec has been FETAC-approved since 2008 and offers a wide selection of accredited and non-accredited programmes.
4.3.2(a)	Criterion: <i>Does the applicant have a fit-for-purpose and stable complement of education and training staff?</i>	Yes	Qualtec has a cohort of full-time staff members, as well as reserve trainers for each programme to provide backup as necessary. Qualtec also subcontracts trainers as required.
4.3.3(a)	Criterion: <i>Does the applicant have the capacity to comply with the standard conditions for validation specified in Section 45(3) of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act (2012) (the Act)?</i>	Yes	The panel is satisfied that evidence presented by Qualtec demonstrates its capacity to comply with the standard conditions for validation specified in Section 45(3) of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act (2012).
4.3.4(a)	Criterion: <i>Does the applicant have the fit-for-purpose premises, facilities and resources to meet the requirements of the provision proposed in place?</i>	Yes	Qualtec does not have owned premises, but rather uses rented space as required, or delivers programmes on the customer's site. In light of this, Qualtec has a Premises Selection and Learning Environment Policy and Procedure which outlines the necessary criteria.



4.3.5(a)	Criterion: <i>Are there access, transfer and progression arrangements that meet QQI's criteria for approval in place?</i>	Partially	The panel is of the view that the English language eligibility criteria, which forms part of Qualtec's admission process, needs to be clearly and fully documented. A mandatory change has been identified in respect of this. (7.1.8)
4.3.6(a)	Criterion: <i>Are structures and resources to underpin fair and consistent assessment of learners in place?</i>	Partially	The panel is cognisant that a number of the mandatory changes which were identified at the conclusion of the site visit may impact or overlap with assessment processes, specifically in relation to the development of programme (and assessment) materials, recording of learners during assessment, and Learner Appeals.
4.3.7(a)	Criterion: <i>Are arrangements for the protection of enrolled learners to meet the statutory obligations in place (where applicable)?</i>	N/A	Qualtec does not currently offer programmes longer than three month's duration.

Findings

The panel was not fully satisfied that Qualtec's draft QA procedures adequately addressed QQI's programme development and provision requirements.

As outlined in Sections 4.3.5(a) and 4.3.6(a), the panel identified a number of concerns relating to the areas of Admission and Assessment which must be addressed in order to satisfy the above criteria.

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4.4 Overall findings in respect of provider capacity to provide sustainable education and training

The panel would like to acknowledge Qualtec's good standing in its areas of operation, and commend the clear commitment demonstrated to its learners. The panel is cognisant that Qualtec is a small, family-run provider and recognises the hard work that is put in by staff across the organisation.

Notwithstanding this, the panel identified areas of significant concern within the draft QA procedures, emphasising that these must be comprehensively addressed before the panel can have confidence in Qualtec's capacity to provide sustainable education and training.

These are detailed in Section 7 and contextualised throughout the report.

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Part 5 Evaluation of draft QA Procedures submitted by Qualtec

The following is the panel's findings following evaluation of Qualtec's quality assurance procedures against QQI's Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines (April 2016). Sections 1-11 of the report follows the structure and referencing of the Core QA Guidelines.

1 GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF QUALITY

Panel Findings:

At the outset of the virtual site visit, the panel explored Qualtec's approach to reengagement and queried whether any consultation or research was conducted in the preparation of its application and/or supporting documentation. Representatives noted that feedback and insight were primarily sought from Qualtec's client base of independent trainers. This feedback was regarded as generally positive, while also highlighting some minor areas for improvement.

However, representatives admitted that little had been done in relation to reviewing other providers' QA Manuals or QQI approval reports. The panel opined that this could have proven incredibly beneficial to the development of Qualtec's draft QA procedures, as it would have allowed for deeper consideration of QQI's guidelines, quality standards, and common issues.

Development of Qualtec's draft QA procedures was thus considered by the panel to be a largely insular affair, due to the lack of more extensive peer engagement/consultation, or external, independent expertise to ensure the integrity of academic standards and processes was maintained.

Following extensive discussions with Qualtec representatives during the virtual site visit, the panel identified a number of mandatory changes which are detailed and contextualised throughout this report, and which begin with a comprehensive review of Qualtec's entire quality framework. The aim of this review is to develop a robust, fit-for-purpose, and fully-documented system which considers relevant stakeholder consultation, feedback and peer review, and is appropriately aligned with QQI Guidelines. **(7.1.1)**

Overreliance on the Managing Director

The panel is cognisant of the fact that Qualtec is a small, family-run provider of education and training programmes, and that it is not uncommon in such organisations for staff members to assume multiple roles and responsibilities. Notwithstanding this, the panel held significant concerns around the overreliance and dependence on the Managing Director, who is an ex officio member of the Board of Directors, but also holds a number of other key positions in the organisation including Head of Training & Quality, Course Director, and IT Manager. The Managing Director/Head of Training & Quality is also listed as an active member of almost every board and committee (e.g. Academic Board, QA Committee, Results Approval Panel, and Programme Design Panel). The panel noted that this multiplicity of roles across both corporate and academic facets of the organisation would directly conflict with QQI's guidelines under this criterion, which require providers to establish a system of governance in which "Overall corporate decision-makers within the provider, whether trustees, owners, shareholders or



others, do not exercise exclusive authority or undue influence over academic decision-making.” (CSQAG, 2016, p. 6)

Although Qualtec did acknowledge the need to make the organisation more independent of the Directors in the opening presentation, it appeared as though little had been done to actively address the matter. Moreover, Qualtec representatives noted that they did not observe any conflict of interest within the current setup. This raised further concerns over the understanding of genuine academic and commercial separation, and the importance of this as it pertains to the integrity and maintenance of academic standards and processes. And while acknowledging certain limitations currently faced by Qualtec in relation to scale and staffing, the panel emphasised the importance of separating out the roles currently held by the Managing Director with the ultimate aim of establishing a system of governance in which academic decision-making is appropriately independent of commercial considerations.

The panel has therefore identified two mandatory changes in respect of the concerns outlined above. These are further detailed in Section 7.1. **(7.1.2, 7.1.3)**

Academic Board

Qualtec has established an Academic Board with responsibility for academic oversight. At the time of the virtual site visit, membership of this board stood at only two people: The Head of Training & Quality (who is also Managing Director) and an Independent Education & Training Expert. Additionally, the Head of Training & Quality/Managing Director was identified as Chair of the Academic Board.

The panel raised immediate concerns over this membership, referring back to the issue of appropriate separation and how it would be virtually impossible for the Head of Training & Quality/Managing Director to remain impartial as a member of both the Academic Board and the Board of Directors.

Although the panel is considerate of the size and scale of the organisation, all providers seeking QA approval (regardless of size) must still satisfy QQI guidelines. To this end, Qualtec must review the membership and Chairing of all committees and boards to increase the level of external expertise and learner representation. In particular, the Academic Board would benefit significantly from the appointment of an External Chair and Learner Representative. The membership of the Academic Board must also reassure the panel that no undue influence can be exercised by the Board of Directors on the decisions of the Academic Board. These safeguarding measures are crucial to ensuring the integrity of academic processes. A mandatory change has been identified in respect of the above concern. **(7.1.3)**

Risk Management

Although Qualtec has established a risk management system and included a risk register within the draft QA documentation, the panel was of the view that this register did not adequately consider the different categories of risk relevant to the organisation, particularly academic risk. This was discussed with representatives during the virtual site visit, who assured the panel that the oversight could be easily addressed. Given the importance of such considerations, the panel has identified a mandatory change. This is further detailed in Section 7.1. **(7.1.4)**



2 DOCUMENTED APPROACH TO QUALITY ASSURANCE

Panel Findings:

At the conclusion of the virtual site visit, the panel was not fully satisfied that QQI's guidelines under this criterion had been adequately addressed.

Quality assurance can be considered a flexible system comprised of moving parts which change and grow with the provider. For this reason, it is need of ongoing maintenance and development to ensure it is fit-for-purpose. In order to comply with QQI guidelines, providers must ensure that their quality system is fully documented, and that "there are robust, documented policies and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of provision." (CSQAG, 2016, p. 9)

The panel emphasises to Qualtec the importance of fully documenting all policies and procedures, including those which may be in operation but not formalised in writing, and ensuring these are consistent, visible and accessible across the supporting documentation. This is closely tied to mandatory changes **7.1.1**, **7.1.6** and **7.1.13**, which are further detailed in Sections 5.1, 5.2 and 5.9 respectively.

Document Control and Ownership

Ongoing QA development can be significantly enhanced with the use of a comprehensive document control system. However, the panel observed an absence of any kind of document control system within the draft QA procedures, and queried whether one was in fact in operation. Representatives stated that a system had been in place previously, but was not currently in use. However, as documents are updated, older versions are kept as a record of changes.

The panel was of the view that development and utilisation of a comprehensive document control system, with assigned ownership to appropriate members of staff, would prove instrumental to the consistency and effectiveness of Qualtec's QA procedures. To this end, the panel has identified a mandatory change. **(7.1.5)**

Consistency of Terminology

Upon review of the draft QA procedures, the panel noted that a lot of terms were used interchangeably, particularly in relation to Course Design and Delivery. Qualtec representatives highlighted that this was at least in part due to the variation of some terminology used by QQI and PHECC, which are the two primary regulatory bodies under whose guidelines Qualtec operates.

While understanding this justification, the panel expressed concern that it may also lead to confusion and inconsistency. To remedy this, the panel has identified a mandatory change, whereby Qualtec must review its documentation to ensure consistency of terminology across the QA Manual, Learner and Tutor Handbooks, and all supporting documentation. **(7.1.6)**

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3 PROGRAMMES OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Panel Findings:

At the conclusion of the virtual site visit, the panel was not satisfied that QQI's guidelines under this criterion had been adequately addressed.

Programme development should be a systematic process, as per QQI's guidelines, with sufficient time given "for the necessary internal and external consultations with stakeholders..." The process includes "an evaluation of new programmes by the appropriate internal decision-making structures, allowing for consideration of new programmes by both management and governance." (CSQAG, 2016, p. 10)

Qualtec's process for course design and development is detailed in the draft QA procedures submitted for reengagement. In reviewing these, the panel observed a clear issue with regard to the role and input of the Head of Training & Quality (Managing Director), who is involved at almost every stage of the development process, including the proposal of new programmes, initial approval by the Academic Board (of which the Head of Training & Quality is a member), being part of the Programme Development Team, and then being involved in the final approval of programme materials as a member of the Academic Board.

The panel explored the programme development process at length during the virtual site visit, querying the rationale as to why the Head of Training & Quality was so involved at every stage. Qualtec representatives noted that although the Head of Training & Quality is heavily involved, an Independent Education & Training Expert would also be involved in the process, as would other trainers and subject matter experts as necessary.

Notwithstanding this, the panel stressed the importance of separation in regard to programme design, approval and review. This matter is heavily linked with the panel's concern of separation in governance, as detailed in Section 5.1. The panel has therefore identified a mandatory change in respect of this, whereby Qualtec must make it clear that those who are involved in the development of programmes and programme materials must not also be involved in the approval and/or review of those same programmes and materials. **(7.1.7)**

English Language Requirements for Access to Programmes

As per QQI guidelines, "access policies, admission processes and criteria" must be "established and implemented consistently and in a transparent manner and in accordance with national policies and procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression (ATP)."

Qualtec's draft QA procedures include a booking procedure and information pertaining to course admissions, as well as a Policy and Procedure for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The panel queried whether Qualtec had documented and published its eligibility criteria in relation to the standard of English required for admission onto programmes, as this was not apparent in the supporting documentation.

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Qualtec representatives noted that a reasonable level of written and verbal English is required for entry, but that this is not specifically tested by the organisation. Where an enrolled learner's level of English appears particularly low following commencement of a programme, Qualtec will aim to work with the learner to find appropriate supports or accommodation.

While recognising the clear commitment of Qualtec to its learners, the panel emphasised that developing clear guidelines in relation to the English language requirements for programmes, and ensuring learners are fully informed on these prior to enrolment, is crucial for the purposes of transparency and full disclosure.

The panel has therefore identified a mandatory change in respect of this. **(7.1.8)**

4 STAFF RECRUITMENT, MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

Panel Findings:

The panel is generally satisfied that QQI's guidelines under this branch of QA have been adequately addressed.

Qualtec has documented its recruitment and vetting procedures, which were explored more closely in Qualtec's presentation during the virtual site visit, and in subsequent discussions with the panel. All staff undertake specific training on Qualtec's own LMS, including Equality and Diversity training and GDPR awareness.

Professional development opportunities are also available for staff and discussed at annual appraisals. The panel had an opportunity to speak with a member of training staff who provided insight on his own experiences with professional development in the organisation, and the training he has received to expand his teaching skillset.

Monitoring of trainer performance is conducted systematically by the Head of Training & Quality, who performs routine observations and reviews course evaluation form and KPIs (e.g., completion rates and assessment results).

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5 TEACHING AND LEARNING

Panel Findings:

QQI guidelines require providers to establish a learning environment which “Flexibly uses a variety of pedagogical methods that are evaluated and monitored and adjusted accordingly.” Moreover, the pedagogic style should incorporate “national and international effective practice.” (CSQAG, 2016, pp. 13 & 14)

In reviewing Qualtec’s draft QA procedures, the panel noted that only vague reference was made to the use of pedagogical methods, and sought to understand more about the principles which underpin teaching and learning. Malcolm Knowles’ theory of andragogy was cited as a significant influence and representatives offered the panel some examples as to how this is applied in practice.

The panel also had an opportunity to explore teaching and learning with a member of teaching staff. From the discussions which took place, the panel is satisfied that training staff are indeed informed on the application of such principles in the context of programme delivery. However, considering the absence of such information from the draft QA procedures, the panel emphasised the importance of fully documenting these guiding principles and theories.

The panel has identified a mandatory change in respect of this, further detailed in Section 7.1. **(7.1.9)**

Complaints and Appeals

The panel was of the view that Qualtec’s existing procedures around Complaints and Appeals were in need of further development in order to be robust, practicable, and aligned with QQI guidelines.

Concerns were raised over the apparent lack of independence or impartiality in the Complaints process, given the involvement of the Head of Training & Quality (Managing Director) at almost every stage. The panel stressed that Qualtec must also consider how the process would be managed if, for example, a complaint was made against the Head of Training & Quality, and that arrangements for this must be clearly documented.

Furthermore, the panel noted that the final stages of both Qualtec’s Complaints and Appeals processes referred learners to QQI in the event of an unsatisfactory outcome of a complaint or appeal. Given QQI’s primary function as a State regulatory body, the panel advises Qualtec to consider alternative arrangements to this input, and to revise/update both processes accordingly.

A mandatory change has been identified in respect of the above concerns. **(7.1.10)**



6 ASSESSMENT OF LEARNERS

Panel Findings:

Qualtec's approach to assessment was the subject of extensive discussion during the virtual site visit, with the panel seeking to understand in greater detail how Qualtec operates processes such as Internal and External Verification, as only limited information was available on these. Representatives were able to provide the panel with valuable insight, offering information on Qualtec's sampling strategy and how feedback and data from verification is communicated to tutors.

The panel also sought to understand if and how assessment had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Representatives noted that, like many providers, it has been necessary to adapt to alternative approaches, but that these had now become routine and were being formalised into the draft QA procedures.

Recording of Assessments

Qualtec's draft QA procedures pertaining to Assessment state that "For QQI assessment, skills will be videoed/photographed for evidence. Learners will be informed of this fact. This recorded evidence is stored securely in a OneDrive folder." (QA Manual, p. 40)

However, the panel noted that little information was available on how these recordings are processed or stored, which would be important to give reassurance to learners that their data is both secure and managed in line with data protection regulations. This is explored further in Section 5.8, leading to a mandatory change requiring Qualtec to fully document its practices pertaining to the recording, storage and retention of learner data, including the recording of learners. **(7.1.12)**

Academic Integrity

The credibility and integrity of assessment processes are crucial to the maintenance of a fair and consistent assessment framework. QQI's guidelines require providers to have robust, fit-for-purpose policies and procedures in place to address this. (CSQAG, 2016, p. 15)

Qualtec's draft QA procedures include a process for dealing with academic misconduct, which is published in the QA Manual and readily accessible on the organisation's website. While acknowledging the importance of this process, it was also considered by the panel to be primarily *reactive* in nature (i.e., dealing with academic misconduct as/after it happens), and the panel was keen to explore this further during the virtual site visit.

Representatives noted that, in addition to the documented process around academic misconduct, cheating and plagiarism are indeed outlined with learners before and during programmes, but that the use of services such as *Turnitin* are not entirely befitting of the style of assessment and therefore not used.

While acknowledging the rationale behind the decision, the panel nonetheless recommends that Qualtec conduct regular reviews of its practices around plagiarism and academic integrity to ensure that

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they are robust, fit-for-purpose, and clearly articulated for learners. An item of specific advice has been identified in respect of this. **(7.2.2)**

7 SUPPORT FOR LEARNERS

Panel Findings:

The panel commends Qualtec on its clear commitment to learners, which was evident throughout discussions during the virtual site visit. Representatives consistently demonstrated an awareness of the diverse needs of learners and the importance of creating a culture of inclusivity and support.

Although Qualtec's draft QA procedures include policies around Equality and Diversity, and the provision of learner resources and supports, the panel noted an absence of a discrete Reasonable Accommodation Policy and Procedure in the submitted documentation, which is crucial to facilitate the full and equitable participation of learners who may require such accommodation or additional support. And while some information is available on the website and embedded within other processes such as Assessment, the panel stressed that a comprehensive Policy and Procedure for Requesting Reasonable Accommodation must be fully documented. This should be a learner-friendly, stepped procedure, which guides learners through the process. It should be fully available to learners in advance of their enrolment of a programme, and published publicly on the Qualtec website.

A mandatory change has been identified in respect of this. **(7.1.11)**



8 INFORMATION AND DATA MANAGEMENT

Panel Findings:

At the conclusion of the virtual site visit, the panel was not satisfied that QQI's guidelines under this criterion had been adequately addressed.

While Qualtec's draft QA procedures do contain some information on the organisation's records maintenance practices, which is necessary under QQI guidelines, the panel was of the view that these were insufficiently detailed to account for the array of methods by which Qualtec obtains/records, processes, stores and retains learner data, including the recording of learners (as happens during assessment).

The panel refers Qualtec back to QQI's guidelines, which require a provider's information system to be designed in such a way that it enables compliance with data protection legislation. Specifically, this includes "the establishment of data access controls, data backup systems and ensuring learner information material makes clear what personal data will be collected, for what purpose and with whom it will be shared." (CSQAG, 2016, p. 18)

The panel has identified a mandatory change in respect of this, whereby Qualtec must fully document its practices pertaining to the recording, storage and retention of learner data, including the recording of learners. **(7.1.12)**

External Audit of Data Protection Practices

Information on Qualtec's data protection practices was primarily available on the organisation's website, but largely absent from the draft QA procedures presented to the panel. The panel explored these practices further during the virtual site visit and emphasised the importance of fully-documenting data protection practices across all relevant documentation, in keeping with mandatory changes **7.1.1** and **7.1.13**.

In response to a query on whether Qualtec has had an external audit done of its data protection practices, representatives noted that informal checks have indeed been carried out, but that no formal audits have been conducted to date. The panel strongly recommends that an external audit of Qualtec's data protection practices be conducted annually as a means of ensuring full, ongoing compliance with GDPR requirements. An item of specific advice has been identified in respect of this. **(7.2.3)**

Data Protection Officer

During the virtual site visit, the panel queried the role of the Data Protection Officer (DPO), who was subsequently identified as the Managing Director. Although the draft QA procedures state that "All staff and trainers complete a GDPR training course" (p. 45), the panel noted that the role of the DPO comes with specific associated training which would need to be undertaken by the post-holder. The Managing Director assured the panel that this would not be an issue and could be easily arranged, additionally identifying another member of staff who may be suited to the role of DPO who they would be happy to train up as necessary.

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9 PUBLIC INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

Panel Findings:

QQI's guidelines require providers to have policies and procedures in place to "ensure information published is clear, accurate, objective, up to date and easily accessible." Moreover, all relevant programme and award information should be made available to prospective and current learners, and be accurate, honest and transparent. (CSQAG, 2016, p. 19)

The draft QA procedures submitted by Qualtec include a policy and procedure for the dissemination and monitoring of public and learner information. However, the panel observed that much of this information was a restatement of QQI's own guidelines, and provided little insight as to how Qualtec follows these guidelines in practice.

Although Qualtec representatives assured the panel that learners are indeed informed of the necessary details of their programmes in advance of programme commencement, any documented evidence to support this was largely absent. It was therefore difficult for the panel to discern or confirm what information learners received, or when and how they received it. Additionally, the information available on the website was not as comprehensive or accessible as QQI guidelines would require.

The panel emphasised the importance of ensuring that all information relevant to the learner journey is provided to prospective learners in advance of their enrolment on a programme, and available on the website. A mandatory change was identified in respect of this. **(7.1.13)**

10 OTHER PARTIES INVOLVED IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING (incl. Apprenticeships)

Panel Findings:

The panel is generally satisfied that QQI's guidelines under this branch of QA have been adequately addressed.

Qualtec has not identified its involvement in any form of collaborative provision. However, Qualtec does work in partnership with other trainers and training organisations, who/which act either as subcontractors or deliver courses directly for Qualtec. Where these partnerships arise, a Memorandum of Agreement is signed by both providers.

Qualtec has engaged with an expert panellist and subject-matter expert who has been appointed to the Academic Board. The panel recognises the benefit that this will bring to the organisation, and recommends that Qualtec engage further with external expertise in the ongoing development of its QA framework. An item of specific advice has been identified in respect of this. **(7.2.1)**

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11 SELF-EVALUATION, MONITORING AND REVIEW

Panel Findings:

The purpose of self-evaluation, as per QQI guidelines, is to “review, evaluate and report on the education, training, research and related services provided by the provider and the quality assurance system and procedures which underpin these.” (CSQAG, 2016, p. 21)

The draft QA procedures submitted by Qualtec include processes for self-evaluation, trainer monitoring, and KPI monitoring. As outlined in Section 5.4, monitoring of trainer performance is conducted by the Head of Training & Quality. However, in querying which staff member is then responsible for monitoring the Head of Training & Quality, Qualtec representatives admitted that there is no such staff member.

While stressing the importance of accountability and transparency in the self-evaluation and monitoring process, the panel is of the view that this issue can likely be addressed with due consideration of the mandatory changes identified by the panel in Section 7.1.

Evaluation of draft QA Procedures - Overall panel findings

At the conclusion of the virtual site visit, the panel was of the view that significant further development of Qualtec’s draft QA procedures and associated documentation was necessary in order to meet the requirements set out in QQI’s Core Statutory QA Guidelines. The panel therefore recommends to QQI to refuse approval of Qualtec’s draft QA procedures pending mandatory changes.

Areas of particular concern for the panel include:

- genuine separation of academic and corporate governance (and Qualtec’s understanding of this);
- the overreliance and dependence on the Managing Director;
- the membership of boards and committees (particularly the Academic Board);
- separation in Qualtec’s programme design, approval and review process;
- teaching and learning pedagogy;
- reasonable accommodation;
- data management

The panel identified a number of mandatory changes and items of specific advice in respect of the concerns outlined above and detailed throughout this report. The panel is of the view that, given additional time to allow for further QA development, relevant research and consultation, and engagement with external expertise, Qualtec can address the mandatory changes in a satisfactory manner.

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Part 6 Conditions of QA Approval

6.1 Conditions of QA Approval

N/A

Part 7 Mandatory Changes to QA Procedures and Specific Advice

7.1 Mandatory Changes

At the conclusion of the virtual site visit, the panel identified thirteen mandatory changes to be addressed by Qualtec within a given six month period. They are:

- 7.1.1 Qualtec must conduct a comprehensive review of its entire quality framework with the aim of developing a robust, fit-for-purpose, and fully-documented system which considers relevant stakeholder consultation, feedback and peer review, and is appropriately aligned with QQI Guidelines.
- 7.1.2 Qualtec must revise its governance structure to ensure an *appropriate* separation of academic and commercial decision-making (i.e., academic decision-making must be independent of commercial considerations), and that no *undue* influence is exercised by the Board of Directors on the decisions of the Academic Board.
- 7.1.3 Qualtec must review the membership and Chairing of all committees and boards to increase the level of external expertise and learner representation, while at the same time decreasing the overreliance on the Managing Director / Head of Training and Quality.
- 7.1.4 Qualtec must ensure that the risk register pays due attention to academic risk, alongside other risks (i.e. operational, financial, strategic, reputational).
- 7.1.5 Qualtec must develop a comprehensive document control system with assigned document ownership.
- 7.1.6 Qualtec must review its documentation to ensure consistency of terminology across the QA Manual, Learner and Tutor Handbooks, and all supporting documentation.
- 7.1.7 Qualtec must ensure a separation in its programme design, approval and review process, making it clear that those who are involved in the development of programmes and programme



materials are not also involved in the approval and/or review of those same programmes and materials.

- 7.1.8 Qualtec must develop clear guidelines in relation to the English language requirements for its programmes, and to ensure learners are fully informed on these prior to enrolment.
- 7.1.9 Qualtec must document the pedagogical principles which underpin the organisation's approach to Teaching and Learning.
- 7.1.10 Qualtec must revise its Complaints and Appeals Policy and Procedure to ensure an appropriate level of independence is present within the processes, and that alternative arrangements to the input of regulatory bodies are implemented.
- 7.1.11 Qualtec must fully document its Policy and Procedure for Requesting Reasonable Accommodation. This should be a learner-friendly, stepped procedure, which comprehensively guides learners through the process.
- 7.1.12 Qualtec must fully document its practices pertaining to the recording, storage and retention of learner data, including the recording of learners.
- 7.1.13 Qualtec must ensure that all information relevant to the learner journey is provided to prospective learners in advance of their enrolment on a programme, and available on the website.

7.2 Specific Advice

At the conclusion of the virtual site visit, the panel also identified three items of specific advice:

- 7.2.1 The panel recommends that Qualtec engages with external expertise in the ongoing development of its QA framework.
- 7.2.2 Qualtec should conduct regular reviews of its practices around plagiarism and academic integrity to ensure that these are robust and clearly articulated for learners.
- 7.2.3 The panel recommends that an external audit of Qualtec's Data Protection practices be conducted annually.

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Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann**Part 8 Proposed Approved Scope of Provision for this provider**

NFQ Level(s) – min and max	Award Class(es)	Discipline areas
Minimum: NFQ Level 5 Maximum: NFQ Level 6	SPA, Minor	Healthy and Safety

Part 9 Approval by Chair of the Panel

This report of the panel is approved and submitted to QQI for its decision on the approval of the draft Quality Assurance Procedures of Qualtec.

Name: _____Dr Annie Doona_____

Date: 20th August 2021

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Annexe 1: Documentation provided to the Panel in the course of the Evaluation

Document	Related to
Statutory Declaration	Legal and Compliance Requirements (Section 4.1)
Certificate of Incorporation (“Optimise Management Consultants Limited”)	Legal and Compliance Requirements (Section 4.1)
Certificate of Registration (“Qualtec”)	Legal and Compliance Requirements (Section 4.1)
Safety Statement	Legal and Compliance Requirements (Section 4.1)
Accountant’s Letter	Resource, Governance and Structural Requirements (Section 4.2)
Financial Statements (2017-2019, inclusive)	Resource, Governance and Structural Requirements (Section 4.2)
Insurance Documentation	Resource, Governance and Structural Requirements (Section 4.2)
Tax Clearance Certificates	Resource, Governance and Structural Requirements (Section 4.2)
Additional Information and Clarifications	Various Sections
Learner Handbook	Various Sections
Tutor Handbook	Various Sections
Draft QA Manual	All sections
Reengagement Application Form and Gap Analysis	All sections

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Annexe 2: Provider staff met in the course of the Evaluation

Name	Role/Position
Sean Kelleher	Managing Director / Head of Training & Quality
Niamh Kelleher	Director / Office Manager
Conor Kelleher	Trainer
Grazyna Zyskowska	Assistant Trainer / Assessor / Internal Verifier