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# Quality Assurance Network for Adult Learning Organisations

## Handbook

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**1.****PURPOSE OF THE HANDBOOK.**

The QUALC quality scheme is open to all ALOs who can demonstrate that they meet the minimum defined standards (eligibility criteria to enter the process). It is a flexible approach to quality assurance which has been designed to reflect the interests and contribution to the learning process of a range of key stakeholders in Adult and Community Learning, including the learners and the community.

It is intended as a supportive continuous improvement tool to assist in the raising of standards and quality across the Adult Community Learning Sector. The quality matrix is unique and has incorporated elements for consideration that are specifically applicable to in-formal and non-formal learning provision.

The QUALC handbook is designed for Adult Learning Organisation (ALO) staff and learners but will also be of interest to stakeholders and other organisations active in the field of lifelong learning. The handbook outlines the results of the QUALC project, highlighting the innovative QUALC quality approach, which can be adopted to improve quality for the key stakeholders in adult learning; the learners, the learning organisation and the communities in which learning takes place. A separate Piloting Guide will accompany this Handbook during the evaluative phase of the project development. The QUALC scheme and process will be piloted to ensure that it is robust and fit for purpose.

The QUALC approach is also relevant for those engaged in in-formal and non-formal education which have less tangible 'softer' outcomes, but none the less require robust quality assurance<sup>1</sup>.

The handbook will clearly set out the QUALC approach to quality assurance and the processes involved. It is accompanied by a toolkit which contains adaptable documents or 'tools' which can be used to improve the standards of learning in ALO's across Europe.

The handbook and toolkit are underpinned through the QUALC Network of specialist partners, with support for organisations wishing to improve standards in the delivery of in-formal and non-formal learning.

QUALC welcomes contributions to these developments in quality assuring Adult Learning and the opportunity to exchange good practice with individuals and organisations. The QUALC Network of specialist partners can be accessed via the dedicated web site <http://zope.reu.pub.ro/qualc/>

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<sup>1</sup> Definition **Non-formal learning**: learning that is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is, however, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). **Non-formal learning** is intentional from the learner's perspective. **Informal learning**: learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (or "incidental"/ random) **The EC (2001) Communication on Lifelong Learning: formal, non-formal and informal learning.**

## 2.

## THE QUALC PROJECT BACKGROUND AND APPROACH:

**PREFACE:**

QUALC is an educational network drawing on expertise from eight European Countries through a Grundtvig Project for quality assurance of Adult and Community Learning.

QUALC has been uniquely developed to assure learning organisations, their learners and their communities that their learning activity has been designed and delivered to an agreed standard, and that it is part of a programme which is planned and approved by local partner organisations committed to the promotion of lifelong learning. The QUALC Network has engaged in rigorous and robust research and represents an **innovative** and **unique** quality scheme and process based on a matrix of criteria **specifically** designed for Adult Learning Organisations (ALOs).

Each ALO that successfully completes the QUALC scheme and process will receive a QUALC Quality Award as evidence of their commitment to improving standards in Adult & Community Learning and quality assurance in in-formal & non-formal learning provision. Support will be given to those ALOs that do not complete the process in sequential phases and provisions will be made to assist them in re-submitting at each of the four phases required to achieve the QUALC Award.

The QUALC approach has been developed to be formally structured yet transparent:

- The QUALC quality scheme (standards and guidelines) are piloted, analysed and finalised by agreement across the Network.
- The QUALC quality scheme is open to all ALOs that can demonstrate that they meet the minimum defined standards (i.e., eligibility criteria to enter the process).

## 2.1 ORIGINS OF QUALC

A strong European partnership has developed the first European quality assurance Award to enable ALOs to genuinely be responsive to learner and community needs and aspirations, thereby providing a first-class learning service to the key stakeholders.

The project partners are drawn from a range of organisations; from public and private sectors, local and national public authorities, higher education institutions, regional and national not-for-profit organisations, adult education centres and European research organisations - all of which have considerable expertise in innovative research methodologies, e-learning, quality assurance systems and collaborative learning.

The QUALC Network is committed to the belief that access to learning opportunities and recognition of learning achievements are essential for all citizens for their daily life, working life, and life within the community. In the revised Lisbon strategy, the European Commission calls for Europe to focus its attention to education for growth and employment. The development of multi-purpose ALOs are considered an important element in contributing to this strategy and making quality lifelong learning opportunities easily accessible for all.

ALOs have a unique contribution to make in enabling individuals to achieve their personal development goals by identifying and taking advantage of all

available learning opportunities including formal, in-formal and non-formal provision. Since the vast majority of what we know and can do is acquired non-formally and in-formally, and such learning is known to facilitate further progression opportunities, the primary focus of the QUALC project is on supporting ALOs that are committed to non-formal and in-formal adult learning provision.

The QUALC quality approach is inspired by the research and analysis conducted by the QUALC Network which examined current quality frameworks which exist in the eight European partner's countries <sup>2</sup>. It does however, also benefit from the body of knowledge derived from the partner's experiences and success generated by a number of outstanding initiatives, which were developed during other European lifelong learning projects <sup>3</sup>.

## 2.2 WHY USE THE QUALC QUALITY APPROACH?

- The QUALC quality award builds on broad stakeholder involvement as well as notable good practice, derived from numerous previous successful projects and initiatives.
- The QUALC quality award assures stakeholders that the **learner's voice** is at the centre of the quality assurance approach and supports the learner in developing and contributing to a quality culture, enabling learners to articulate what it is that they consider to be 'good quality learning experiences'.
- Compared to other quality initiatives in the area of adult learning, QUALC has an approach which extends out to the community and workplace.

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<sup>2</sup> For access to the full reports please go to: <http://zope.reu.pub.ro/qualc/>

<sup>3</sup> For more detail on these projects please see appendix XX Or Please can partners add any web details??

- The QUALC quality scheme has built into its approach a philosophy that respects diversity.
- QUALC has been designed to be a dynamic, qualitative tool as opposed to a rigid, quantitative one that forces organisations to fit into a common mould. Europe is diverse and this diversity is reflected in the QUALC quality criteria, the QUALC management, and the QUALC phased processes.

**Please see the following table which illustrates this unique approach.**

## 2.3 QUALC QUALITY CRITERIA MATRIX

The unique aspect of the QUALC approach which integrates the perspectives of the learner, organisation and the community are illustrated in the QUALC Quality Criteria Matrix. This is summarised below and the full matrix tool is to be found in the Toolkit documents for Phase 2.

	LEARNING CONTEXT	LEARNING RESOURCES	LEARNING PROCESSES
LEARNERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Openness and Responsiveness to the Needs of the Learner</li> <li>• Progression of Individual Learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Valuing the Learner as a Resource</li> <li>• Flexibility of Learning Pathways</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality of the Learning Provision</li> </ul>
ORGANISATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commitment to Innovation</li> <li>• Strategy &amp; Vision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective Tools for the Access &amp; Usage of Resources</li> <li>• Competent Tutors/Centre Staff</li> <li>• Supportive Learning Environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documented Processes</li> <li>• Transparent Methods</li> <li>• Documented Results</li> <li>• Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) Management</li> </ul>
COMMUNITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Openness and Responsiveness to Community Demands</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different Stakeholders in the Community act as a Resource for Learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact on local, regional and national Community</li> </ul>

## 3.

## THE QUALC APPROACH OUTLINED

**3.1 AIMS**

The aims of the QUALC quality approach are to:

- support ALOs in assessing how successful they are in providing learning experiences for adults in the community,
- to support ALOs in assessing how successful they are in engaging stakeholders in the process of continuous quality improvement
- to support ALOs in quality assuring-learning provision through informal and non-formal learning delivery.

The Quality approach defined by the QUALC consortium is based on a number of key principles.

**3.2 PRINCIPLES**

The QUALC approach is based upon sound principles which are:

- ALOs are considered to be more than just “places where people learn” but also “learning entities” in themselves, facilitating learning from **reflective practice**.
- In the QUALC quality award is based on two concepts: “**quality of learning**” as well as “**quality as learning**”, the process of improvement planning itself provides learning opportunities.
- QUALC quality award can encourage quality improvement and **innovation through continuous improvement planning**.

- The QUALC quality award contributes to continuous quality improvement since it is a **diagnostic** tool for self-assessment of the ALOs.
- The QUALC process is flexible, supportive and fosters pedagogic innovation and **creativity**.
- The QUALC quality award recognises different forms of learning and is based on the concept of **valuing in-formal and non-formal learning**.
- The QUALC quality scheme respects **diversity and is flexible and able to be adapted by ALOs**.

QUALC is built upon sound principles which have been designed and tested through a consensual and participative process which has set clear objectives.

### 3.3 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of QUALC are:

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- To promote the value of adult learning, irrespective of format (i.e., formal, in-formal and non-formal);
- To support ALOs (as providers of in-formal and non-formal learning) in the adoption of quality procedures and criteria into their services and provision;
- To establish a quality award (Institutional Accreditation) for ALOs who demonstrate a commitment to and progress in adopting and implementing quality criteria and processes that facilitate the smooth transition between formal, in-formal and non-formal learning opportunities for adult learners;

- To integrate the needs of the organisation, the learner and the community into quality improvement planning;
- To establish and consolidate a sustainable network of ALOs committed to adopting a set of agreed tools, operational principles and quality criteria and processes.

The main objectives of the QUALC project are to respond to the demand of the European Commission for strategies which contribute substantially to the current European debate on the quality of learning.

QUALC's objectives are also to enhance the quality and recognition of informal and non-formal learning. These principles and objectives are embedded in the methodological approach.

### **3.4 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH.**

The approach adopted by the QUALC Network is inspired by the SEEQUEL Conceptual Framework <sup>4</sup>, which highlights and values the “subjective dimension” in the learning experience, together with a more objective set of criteria related to the quality of the learning provision. This recognition of the subjective nature of learning and the role of in-formal/ non-formal learning has influenced the methodology of the QUALC process and is reflected in the quality criteria.

The QUALC phased process is designed to be cyclical and supported, therefore, the QUALC accreditation is not perpetual and re-accreditation is required on an annual basis.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.education-observatories.net/seequel/index](http://www.education-observatories.net/seequel/index)

The next section of the Handbook sets out the unique set of QUALC quality criteria used to benchmark standards through the QUALC approach to informal and non-formal learning in ALOs.

4.  
**THE QUALC QUALITY PHASED PROCESS**

**QUALC QUALITY PHASED PROCESS**

The following process represents the QUALC Quality Approach – a step by step approach in supporting ALOs that are committed to improving the quality of adult and community learning.

The following demonstrates the multi phased process:

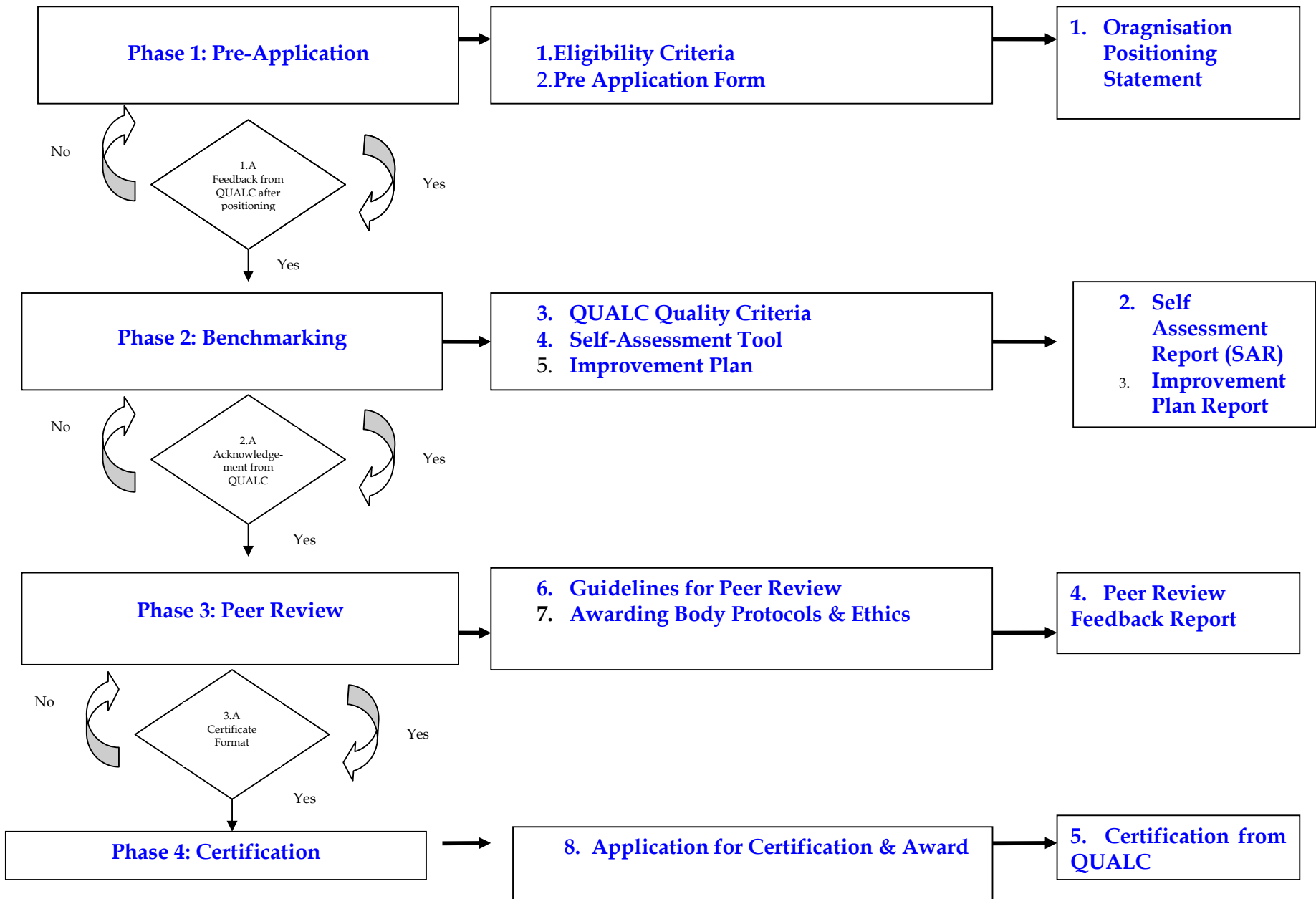
- Phase 1      Pre-Application Form**
  - Eligibility and positioning check
  - Organisation positioning questionnaire
- Phase 2      Benchmarking Learning Organisations**
  - Self Assessment Report
  - Improvement Plan
- Phase 3      Peer Review**
  - Peer Review Report
  - Awarding body decision
- Phase 4      QUALC Certification**

On the next page, the process is clearly illustrated in the diagram and then outlined in more detail.

**PROCESS**

**TOOLS**

**OUTCOMES**



## 4.1 PHASE 1: PRE-APPLICATION FORM (ELIGIBILITY AND POSITIONING CHECK)

The first phase involves the initial contact between interested ALOs and the QUALC Office<sup>5</sup>.

The Eligibility check allows the ALO to briefly make an assessment of whether they conform to the minimum of three out of the following four Eligibility Criteria below:

### Eligibility Criteria

Your organisation:

- Has as one of its main activities, the provision of learning for adults.
- Values in-formal and non-formal learning in its strategy and daily practises.
- Actively promotes the use of ICT in the in-formal and non-formal learning process.
- Systematically collects feedback on the learning it provides from all or some of the following; learners, staff, the community.

After being declared eligible, the application will be formally accepted and the ALOs are then able to continue to go through the quality phased process.

<sup>5</sup> The QUALC office is the administrative centre of the QUALC project. Please contact *Ms. Mariarosa Di Nubila* at [mdinubila@scienter.org](mailto:mdinubila@scienter.org) for more information.

The QUALC office will at his point, offer advice during an 'eligibility briefing' on how to progress to next phase and how to undertake the benchmarking exercise through a Self- Assessment and Improvement Plan.

## 4.2 PHASE 2: BENCHMARKING LEARNING ORGANISATIONS

### Self Assessment Report<sup>6</sup>

All eligible ALOs have the opportunity to become a member of QUALC Network. This virtual network allows the different organisations to share and exchange information, experiences and practises or highlight common difficulties that can be solved by reciprocal support.

During the eligibility briefing, the institution will have been advised on how to initiate the **Self-Assessment** process. The aim of this advice is to ensure that the ALO's management understands what is expected and how best to proceed.

The objective of the Self-Assessment and the accompanying report (**Self Assessment Report SAR**) is to assist and inform the work of the Peer Review Team who will guide Phase 3.

The SAR is intended to be a self reflective exercise and the self-assessment process has a two-fold purpose:

1. To help the ALO to identify, reflect and plan for strategies and actions that will help to improve their performance in promoting, supporting, developing, implementing, monitoring and assessing the quality of their learning provisions .

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<sup>6</sup> Please find in Toolkit 1

2. To offer the opportunity to apply for recognition and award of the QUALC certificate.

This self-evaluation process is designed to assist ALOs management to gain a clearer understanding of its:

- strategic position by assessing its strengths and weaknesses;
- its principal constraints and opportunities;
- a realistic assessment of its ambitions;
- a clear picture of the resources available and those needed.

The process is also designed to assist the organisation in judging the overall effectiveness of its own processes and to plan for future change.

### **Improvement Plan<sup>7</sup>**

The **Improvement Plan** is a further tool to support ALOs in reflecting on strategies and actions that will help to improve their performance and quality assurance of their learning provisions.

This plan will help make clear what learners, learning organisations and communities require to improve the quality of learning, teaching and management of Adult Community based learning.

#### **The Improvement Plan will:**

- 1) Identify an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses for the stakeholders: the learner, the organisation and the community in relation to the broad Quality criteria matrix.

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<sup>7</sup> Please find in Toolkit 2

- 2) Identify what actions are required to improve the quality of learning to meet with stakeholders expectations.
- 3) Identify and specify support and resources for improving action.
- 4) Identify proposed solution: timescales and actions.
- 5) Identify how progress will be monitored and feedback into organisations strategic planning.

### **4.3 TIMESCALES**

This stage of the accreditation process is expected to take between three to six months, but the duration will be determined by the ALO.

For those organisations who don't feel they are able to proceed, they are able at any point, to simply repeat the Phase that they are at, and then move on. For those who are successful in gaining the QUALC Certificate, this is re-newable on an annual basis.

The phased processes are summarised in the following table.

(NB. Phases 3 and 4 to be completed for second piloting stage)

#### 4.4 SUMMARY: QUALC PHASES & TOOLS

Phases 1-4	Activities	Tools
<b>1. Pre-application</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Positioning and Eligibility Check</li> <li>▪ Fill the document to profile the organisation template</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Eligibility Criteria</li> <li>▪ Application form, based on the eligibility criteria.</li> </ul>
<b>2. Benchmarking Learning Organisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Application Form based on the QUALC quality criteria for self-assessment process.</li> <li>▪ Profile the organisation with best practises.</li> <li>▪ Improvement plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ QUALC quality criteria.</li> <li>▪ QUALC quality criteria Self Assessment Tools.</li> <li>▪ Self Assessment Report.</li> <li>▪ Presentation of organisation profile on QUALC web site.</li> <li>▪ Improvement Plan pro forma.</li> </ul>
<b>3. Peer Review</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Selection Criteria for Peer Reviewers.</li> <li>▪ Selection criteria for Awarding body.</li> <li>▪ Certificate pro forma</li> <li>▪ Appeal's Procedures Guidelines.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Peer Review guidelines for organisation.</li> <li>▪ Peer review training for Reviewers.</li> <li>▪ Awarding Body Protocols and Ethics.</li> <li>▪ Certificate format.</li> </ul>
<b>4. QUALC Certificate</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Formal QUALC Quality Award (Validation).</li> <li>▪ Formal QUALC quality award.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ QUALC quality award format.</li> <li>▪ QUALC quality award formalised.</li> </ul>

## 5.

**CONCLUSION: QUALC QUALITY ASSURANCE: ADDED  
VALUE FOR YOUR ORGANISATION**

The QUALC Approach offers benefits to different stakeholders in Adult and Community Learning:

**5.1 BENEFITS TO ALOS;**

- Improve quality management
- Improve levels of quality of provision (e.g. organisational portfolio) and increased efficiency and operational effectively
- Increase ability to promote learning experience
- Evidence of quality provision for funding bodies
- Enhanced legitimacy and recognition through benchmarking and peer learning
  
- Maximise learner recruitment
- Offering a variety of learning experiences
- Understanding customer requirements
- Responding to learners needs
  
- Responsiveness to change
- Ability to learn from experience
- Learning based on reflective practice and continuous improvement

## 5.2 BENEFITS TO LEARNERS;

- Improved learning
- Access to more comprehensive information about good opportunities for learning
- Improved standards of individual learning
- Active involvement in the operation of their learning experience and its on-going improvement
- Ownership of the learning experience and enhancement of the learners' commitment and achievement
- Improved appreciation and enjoyment of learning experience
- Increased opportunity
- Improved employability/flexibility
- Equality of opportunity
- Improved understanding quality assurance and improvement

## 5.3 BENEFITS TO EMPLOYERS;

- Increased confidence in the reliability and quality of learning provision
- Improved availability of appropriate/customised learning provision
- Increased availability of a pool of individuals with the appropriate skills

## 5.4 BENEFITS FOR THE COMMUNITY;

- ALOs become more active contributors to community development

- ALOs is more responsive to community and individual needs The QUALC quality scheme (standards and guidelines) are pre-tested, re-examined, and finalized.