

Submission from Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in relation to the preparation of a new Statement of Strategy for 2015-2017 for the Department of Education and Skills

QQI thanks the Department for the invitation to make a submission in relation to its new Strategy.

In reflecting on the existing Statement of Strategy 2011-2014, it is striking how challenging the environment was for the period in question. With national and international indicators all pointing to a positive recovery in Ireland for the next number of years, it is refreshing to be able to make a submission that hopefully will contribute to the positive impact that improvements in education and training can make to Ireland's economic recovery.

Agencies and the Department

QQI believes that the recommendations on agencies in the recent *Report of the Independent Panel on Strengthening Civil Service Accountability and Performance* (commissioned by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform) will assist the Department of Education and Skills, in the creation of its new Strategy and in the further development of its relationships with agencies under its aegis.

The Panel recommends that agencies be categorised according to their statutory basis and funding arrangements. This would reflect the diversity of organisation from quasi-judicial independent agencies to those dealing with the delegation of tasks analogous to outsourcing. QQI believes that the Department can play a role in the implementation of such a recommendation that would assist the public in a greater understanding of the different and essential roles that agencies play in regulation and service delivery.

Implementation of the recommendations in the above report would also give greater clarity in the accountability arrangements in place between the Department and its agencies consistent with their statutory autonomy.

QQI is in the process of finalising a Management Framework Agreement (replacing the commitments to develop Service Level Agreements referred to in the current Statement of Strategy) with the Department. The publication of such agreements will represent an outward-facing statement to stakeholders of the separate responsibilities of the Department and the agencies under its aegis.

QQI welcomes the significant progress made in the commitment in the existing Statement of Strategy in relation to the regular structured engagement between senior management in the Department and its agencies and looks forward to a continuation and deepening of this relationship over the timeline of the new Strategy.

QQI and its role in delivering on the Departmental Mission

QQI looks forward, in particular, to playing an important role in the delivery of two of the four high level goals identified in the current strategy in relation to the provision of:

- Opportunities for upskilling and reskilling that meet the needs of individuals and the labour market
- High quality learning, research and innovation opportunities in the higher education sector

Reforms of Departmental Agencies and the Structures of Further and Higher Education and Training

QQI welcomes the significant progress that has been made in the areas identified in the current Strategy of modernising and reform of the structures within which education has been delivered, as recommended in the 2012 report of the organisational review of the Department under the Organisational Review Programme.

During the lifetime of the strategy; FAS has been dissolved and SOLAS has been established; the 33 VECs and the former FAS training centres have been transformed in 16 ETBs; the Further Education and Training Strategy has been published; the Heads of a Bill to permit the establishment of Technological Universities have been published and the integration of teacher training colleges into the universities has commenced.

QQI was established in 2012 bringing together the functions of former agencies with responsibility for the National Framework of Qualifications and quality assurance and awarding in further and higher education. The goal in the current strategy of enhancing the internationalisation of Irish education services will be facilitated by the development by QQI of the code of practice for the provision of education and training to international students resulting in QQI authorising the use of the International Education Mark (IEM) to providers who are deemed compliant with the Code of Practice and policies associated with access to the IEM.

During the lifetime of the Strategy, QQI will authorise use of the IEM to higher education and English Language providers, the priority areas identified in *Ireland's International Education Strategy*.

The structural reforms described above for education and training providers and state agencies have implications for the interface between agencies and the different parts of the Department. QQI, in particular, has statutory functions to deliver related to Departmental units with responsibility for:

- Skills Development
- Further Education
- Higher Education Equity of Access and Qualifications
- Higher Education Policy and Skills
- International Education
- Curriculum and Assessment

QQI believes it is vital that the Department, in ensuring that it delivers on its goal in the current Strategy of being responsive, capable and efficient has effective structures and systems both in the Department and the wider education system to capitalise on the structural reforms that it has overseen in this period - in the provision of further and higher education and training and the agencies responsible for funding and quality assuring the outputs of further education and training.

QQI looks forward to continuing to play its role, as an agency under the aegis of the Department, in working toward the vision of enabling learners to achieve their full potential and contributing to Ireland's economic, social and cultural development.

Enhancing Higher Education

During the lifetime of the current Strategy, QQI participated in the Transitions Steering Group overseeing reform of the process of the transition from second to third-level education; and also accepted the invitation to join the Implementation Oversight Group established to progress the recommendations contained in the *National Strategy for Higher Education*

The development, publication and implementation of the Management Framework Agreement between the Department and QQI and the Memorandum of Understanding between the HEA and QQI will, over the lifetime of the new Strategy, assist the Department in delivering the goal in the current Strategy of providing effective policy support, oversight and leadership for the higher education sector in meeting the needs of the learner.

Enhancing Further Education and Training

Through its membership of the FET Strategic Implementation Advisory Committee, QQI will play its part in the implementation of the recently-published Further Education and Training Strategy.

QQI envisages, during the lifetime of the new Departmental Strategy, playing a key role in the implementation of the recommendations of the recent review of Apprenticeship and the development of new apprenticeships through working with SOLAS, HEA, the Education and Training Boards and further and higher education institutions and also in our role on the new Apprenticeship Council, when it is established.

QQI, in partnership with SOLAS, looks forward to assisting the Education and Training Boards in supporting the development of increased capacity in the further education and training sector to assure a high quality experience for participants. Over the lifetime of the new Strategy, this will assist the Department in its stated goal of ensuring the provision of high quality, learner centred, relevant and flexible education and training opportunities to allow people to upskill and reskill.

Data collection

In the spirit of public sector reform, QQI looks forward to playing its part in fulfilling the goal of the current Strategy of improving the quality of information, analysis and evaluation capacity and expertise to inform the development of policy and service delivery options. The Department has a key role to play in working towards a 'joined up' administrative data infrastructure (an aspiration

expressed in 2011 by the National Statistics Board). QQI sees the Department as a key actor in enabling systematic data sharing and matching across the education system.

It is essential, over the lifetime of the new Strategy, that organisations with statutory responsibility for data collection maximise the value of relevant data and reduce the response burden, wherever possible, with a particular desire to avoid duplicating requests for data from providers. The Department's oversight of data policy must ensure that QQI, SOLAS, HEA (and the Department itself); adopt the above principles in the areas of further and higher education data, while taking into account the national data infrastructure in a wider economic and societal context.

Cross-cutting issues

QQI is fully supportive of the Department's involvement in cross-cutting issues. In particular, QQI welcomes the positive role played by the Departments of Education and Skills and Justice and Equality in the recent regulatory reforms for international education. The continued close working of these Departments will greatly assist QQI in the authorisation and maintenance of the International Education Mark (IEM) over the lifetime of the new Strategy. Robust oversight of the regulatory reforms will help to ensure that international students choosing to study in Ireland have confidence in the quality of the courses on offer by accredited providers.

QQI believes that a commitment to similar cross-Departmental working, in the context of the new Strategy, with the Departments of Social Protection; Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation; Environment, Community and Local Government, Children and Youth Affairs; Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Health will greatly assist QQI in delivering on its functions in relation to the:

- appropriate accreditation of further education and training in areas such as childcare and healthcare
- appropriate quality assurance of community education
- balance between accredited training and the licence to practice in certain occupations
- Promotion of the National Framework of Qualifications as a tool for improving social inclusion and labour market mobility domestically and internationally