

Address by Dr. Pádraig Walsh, Chief Executive, at launch of QQI Consultation Event in the Croke Park Conference Centre, 20 May 2013

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You are all very welcome to the Croke Park Conference Centre for the launch of Quality and Qualifications Ireland's public consultation on our Comprehensive Policy Development Programme.

My name is Pádraig Walsh and I am the Chief Executive of QQI.

I am delighted that so many of you have signed up for today's event reflecting the great interest there is in Ireland in our education and training system and the qualifications that underpin it.

QQI was established last November as an amalgamation of four agencies representing different parts of the national system of education and training. Since their establishment over a decade ago, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, the Irish Universities Quality Board and the Further and Higher Education and Training Awards Councils achieved much.

In particular, the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is now 10 years old and its 10 level system of awards has entered the common lexicon of learners, educators and employers throughout the country. The framework is used throughout our secondary and vocational schools; the public and private further and vocational education and training system and in our universities, institutes of technology and independent higher education institutions. The Irish framework is also much admired and recognised internationally.

While the 2012 Act that established QQI maintains substantial continuity, it also introduces a variety of new features that were not present in the 1999 Act, which it replaces. These include an international education mark (IEM) that will be available to education providers and the English language training sector who can demonstrate compliance with a statutory Code of Practice. QQI will also be

responsible for a national database of programmes and awards. These and other changes affect all entities in QQI's provider base, to some extent.

Even where the previous legislation prescribed similar functions; the way in which these were implemented varied across the legacy bodies. For QQI to act in an integrated way, we, and our stakeholders, must examine how we should implement all of these functions. A fresh approach to implementation is also necessary if we are to achieve the efficiencies which are so important at this time of public service reform. The papers being launched today are the first part of QQI's public discussion of our approach to implementing the 2012 Act. We are hosting a similar event next week in Cork and next month, QQI expects to publish (also for public consultation) a draft Strategy Statement that will address the Mission, Vision, Values and Goals of QQI.

While the Qualifications Authority and the former Awards Councils have been subsumed into QQI, the Framework remains very much in place and 'recognition' in the national framework is the unifying feature of QQI's responsibilities as 'custodian' of the framework.

Public education and training providers (such as our universities, Institutes of Technology and Vocational Education Committees); bodies such as the State Examinations Commission (which awards the Junior and Leaving Certificates) and professional recognition bodies all have an obligation in the new legislation to engage with QQI in relation to their awards.

Likewise, independent providers can continue to engage with QQI to make their awards or can seek to have their awards recognised by QQI in the framework.

There is a clear link between awards being placed at an appropriate level in the framework and the process of ensuring that the intended learning outcomes of those awards are being achieved. The link between framework qualifications and the quality assurance behind these qualifications is paramount and requires QQI to deliver a coherent and holistic approach to qualifications and quality assurance as we seek to develop our suite of policies and associated procedures, in fulfilment of our functions.

The key QQI quality assurance processes must be linked to the life cycle of engagement with QQI by education and training providers and prospective providers must see a clear path from recognition to certification (where that is applicable and appropriate).

The cost and benefit of engagement with QQI must be clear in terms of the fees charged for services. The cost of continued engagement with QQI and the process for and consequences of disengagement with QQI based on incapacity or poor performance must also be clearly signalled to prospective and legacy providers.

Effective and efficient consultation with education and training providers such as those represented among the audience here is both a legal requirement and a good practice for QQI.

It is also an organisational imperative in the context of a public service operating with significantly reduced resources, both human and financial. For QQI, the maintenance and development of good professional relationships with individual providers and representative bodies is of great importance because of the changing landscape envisaged for higher education provision and the changes in the further education space during the transition from FAS and the VECs to SOLAS and the soon to be established Education and Training Boards (ETBs).

The path to and the bar for both initial and continued recognition in the framework must be similar for providers that are required to or choose to come to QQI for direct awards or for recognition of or placement of their awards in the framework.

The cost of services for the various routes to recognition must be comparable and appropriate for public and private bodies and the policies developed must be consistent with QQI's ability to charge for services within our legislative remit.

QQI has a diverse range of functions and relationships. There are important differences in how the specific functions apply to different groups of providers.

The four legacy bodies that have come together to form QQI all had different relationships with their individual provider bases, which ranged from small private providers choosing to seek access to framework awards for the first time, English Language Training Organisation seeking recognition for their academic and pastoral provision and universities which predate the establishment of the state. I am delighted therefore to see that we have such a wide range of people here from all parts of our public and private further and higher education systems and from our diverse training sector.

When the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Bill was first published in 2011, both former awards councils recognised that it would have major implications for the ways in which the functions they carried out would be implemented in the future and in particular how they interacted with providers.

Both Councils announced the suspension of access to registration, the term both Councils used to indicate the agreement of a provider's quality assurance procedures. Providers that were already registered by the Further Education and Training Awards Council and/or the Higher Education and Training Awards Council continue to have access to certification for their learners. However, given the time that has elapsed since the publication of the Bill, QQI considers it important to establish policies that will allow new providers the opportunity to apply to QQI for access to its quality assurance services and certification for their learners at the earliest opportunity. We at QQI very much welcome engagement with new providers who can demonstrate the ability to offer sustainable high quality education and training that meets the standards for awards in the National Framework of Qualifications.

The Comprehensive Policy Development Programme we are launching today must be developed in the context of QQI's vision for the qualifications system and the maintenance and further development of the framework. QQI's policy must ensure that the qualifications and awards in the framework are sufficiently robust and substantial so that they withstand periodic external re-examination. The framework must continue to recognise learning and permit access, transfer and progression through the qualifications system.

Today and during this and subsequent phases of consultation, we require your input into our policy development.

As part of our amalgamation programme, QQI had to develop an organisational structure that takes account of the spectrum of education and training provision that comes within our remit. Initially, we have structured ourselves around our two primary functions: Qualifications and Quality Assurance services. These two main business Sections are supported by a Provider Relations Section, that is the main vehicle through which we are channeling our information to and consultation with education and training providers and their representative bodies.

The Heads of these three Business Sections and the other members of QQI's management team are with me today. Many of you will be familiar with Bryan Maguire and Karena Maguire (no relation), who previously worked with the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and are the Heads of Qualifications and Quality Assurance Services respectively at QQI. Following this presentation, Bryan and Karena will outline the services that QQI will provide in these areas.

They will be followed by a presentation from Trish O'Brien, the Head of QQI's Provider Relations Section, whom many of you will know from her work in the former National Qualifications Authority. Trish will introduce QQI's Comprehensive Policy Development Programme and the important and necessary role that you, in our audience, need to play in its development.

Many other colleagues from QQI are also present who have assisted in the organisation of this event and in the development of the papers that you will be commenting on today. They will be performing important roles in the interactive parts of today's programme.

I look forward to continuing to work with those of you that I already know and to getting to know the many others in this audience that I have yet to meet. Together, we can ensure the continuous improvement of our high quality education and training system and the maintenance and further development of our National Framework of quality-assured qualifications.