

28th Meeting of the Policies and Standards Committee

16 March 2021 from 11:00 am to 1:00pm
MS Teams Meeting

Meeting Note

Present: Anne Walsh - Committee Chair
Barbara Kelly - QQI Executive Member
Bryan Maguire - QQI Executive Member
Aileen Ponton - International Expert
Bryan Fields - National Expert
Niamh O'Reilly - Board Member
Alan Power – National Expert
Achim Hopbach, International Expert

Apologies: Hannah McGee – National Expert
Aoife Sweeney – National Expert

In attendance: Peter Cullen – Head of Research and Innovation (QQI Key Executive for the PSC)
Ann Graves - QQI Secretary
Angela Lambkin, QQI (Item 4.4)
Anna Murphy, QQI (Item 5.2)
Sue Hackett, QQI (Item 5.3)
Karena Maguire, QQI and Oisín Hassan, USI (Item 5.4)

The Chair opened the meeting.

1 Declaration of Interest.

There were no declarations of interest expressed by any member.

2 Minutes of previous meetings.

The Minutes of the Meetings of the 27th Meeting, 14 December 2020, were **APPROVED** The minutes can be 'pp' signed in the Covid-19 context.

3 Matters arising from the minutes of previous meetings.

No matters arising

4 Standards – review and development

4.1 Measures to Mitigate Impact of Covid-19 on Programmes Leading to QQI Awards

The Policies and Standards Committee (PSC) noted the COVID-19 mitigation measures implemented by the QQI executive as described in the following documents:

Temporary Modifications to CAS Awards and Programmes (Master files and new award specification for level 4 component award in Career Preparation and Planning)

The PSC noted the situations where special arrangements had to be put in place:

- Early Childhood Education & Care Support
- Catering Support
- Professional Cookery
- Horticulture
- Healthcare Support
- Nursing Studies
- Early Childhood Care & Education (arrangements approved by the Department of Education, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth who have a regulatory role in childcare along with Tusla).

The executive proposed modifications and extensions to the COVID-19 mitigation measures

The executive noted that the temporary modification of rules for awarding the CAS are in place until August 2022, the temporary extension of provision and related amendments to validated programmes are in place until 31 December 2022.

The executive advised that there are no plans to make these arrangements permanent and any move to make them permanent would have to include a public consultation process.

Following discussion, the PSC noted that the integrity of the standards will be maintained although delivery of programmes may be made in a different way and that the executive will review the impact of modifications by assessment following consideration.

The PSC APPROVED the extensions as proposed.

4.2 Levels 1-4 update on review and development of broad standards

The PSC noted the update on development of broad standards for Levels 1-4 of the NFQ. QQI will be looking at commencing the consultation process at the end of March 2021.

The executive noted that COVID-19 restrictions have impacted on this project and its timeline, furthermore QQI is conscious that the sector will require time to consider these broad standards to maximise engagement and provide considered feedback. It is planned to present the broad standards suite to the PSC at its final meeting in 2021.

4.3 Level 6 Comparability Study

The executive outlined the scope of a project looking at the comparability of the two major award-types at NFQ Level 6, namely the advanced certificate (FE) and the Higher Certificate (HE), as implemented. The original AC and HC award-type descriptors contain different mixtures of elements from NFQ Levels 5, 6 and 7. Since the establishment of the NFQ in 2003 the FE and HE systems have evolved and one motivation for this study is to provide evidence to help consider the usefulness or otherwise of maintaining differentiated major award-types at NFQ Level 6. This work will be relevant to facilitating greater integration between FE and HE.

The executive noted that this work is the first phase of a two-phase project the second phase will address policy implications of the results of the first.

The PSC noted that a draft of the final report will be presented to it.

4.4 Europass briefing – in the context of digital credentials

The executive noted some the new approach to Europass as a key activity within the European Skills Agenda which was relaunched in 2020. The relaunch of Europass will be through a re-energised

platform and with more potential to include digital credentials and an e-portfolio where additional digital documents may be added.

The PSC discussed possibilities in relation to linking the FET strategy, which is already linked to employment, to promote the use of Europass. The need for encouraging new sectors post COVID-19 and leveraging existing skills and upskilling and linkages to the e-portfolio of Europass was discussed. The PSC noted that there are a number of areas where co-operation between partners on Europass and other potential projects could be useful.

5 Strategic Approach

5.1 Chair's Report from the Board

The Chair noted that we are at a crucial stage in development of strategy and in working with stakeholders to deal with mitigating measures required to deal with issues that arose as a result of COVID-19 and that the Board had discussed the measures put in place to ensure a clear pathway for learners. Although there have been challenges the Board acknowledged that work has continued.

The Chair further noted that the impact of changes to legislation, when implemented, will act as a driving force for the work of the QQI executive, the Board, and the PSC; and will impact on the work of the committee and approaches in the future.

The Chair also noted that, despite COVID-19, certification numbers in QQI were up at some levels (although down in FET) and that the work of the QQI staff is acknowledged in their efforts to ensure that mitigating factors safeguarded the integrity of awards and ensure they were not compromised.

The Chair noted that Cinnte reviews had continued virtually, demonstrating how work can continue and that issues in relation to PEL (Protection of Enrolled Learners) issues had been resolved.

Attendance at and participation at events and conferences continues, although these are now through virtual platforms.

The Chair also encouraged members of the PSC to support and promote QQI through social media platforms, by sharing tweets and publicising the work of the organisation.

5.2 QQI strategy and risk update

Strategy

The executive noted that QQI is working on its 3-year strategy, 2022-2024, the work having been formally started by the Board in January. The newly created Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science provides an opportunity to position QQI as the only agency spanning FET and HE.

The Board and executive are keen to strengthen QQI's partnerships with stakeholders, to build further on providing data-driven evidence, insight and advise and to build organisational excellence to deliver our strategy.

The draft statement will be sent to the Board for consideration at its meeting on 23 April, following which there will be a consultation process with stakeholders. The final draft will be presented to the Board in June and then forwarded to the Minister for his approval.

Risk

The executive noted that of the top five risks to QQI in 2019, those concerning preparation to implement the new functions assigned to QQI on the 2019 legislation and the protection of enrolled

learners are relevant to the work of the PSC. The commencement of the relevant pieces of legislation and resourcing issues are being addressed with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

5.3 National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN)

The PSC noted the two documents circulated in relation to the current work of the NAIN

- 1) Academic Integrity: National Principles and Lexicon of Common Terms for Academic Integrity
- 2) Interim Academic Integrity Guidelines V4.

The executive sought the PSC's advice and feedback on both documents and noted that these have been developed by the Network for higher education institutions and associated stakeholders.

The PSC members who had been assigned responsibility to comment were Aileen Ponton and Achim Hopbach. Both acknowledged the guidelines and principles as useful, topical and interesting. They noted that the foci in the Interim Guidelines were wider than in other comparable documents they were aware of, these having a primary focus on academic misconduct. This broader scope was felt to be a positive feature of the document and its underlying approach.

The executive noted that while QQI coordinate and facilitate this initiative, this is a peer-driven network set up for HE and the documents were developed by Working Group 1 of the NAIN. Both documents incorporate the feedback from the member institutions through their NAIN members, representing 32 HEIs, HE representative bodies and students. They also noted that NAIN Working Group 3 is a Communications group headed up by the Academic Affairs Officer in the USI and their key role is to raise awareness and understanding in relation to academic integrity including misconduct, across the enrolled student body in higher education institutions.

5.4 National Student Engagement Programme (NStep) – briefing on activities

NStep is a national programme of student engagement for higher education providers. It is supported and steered by a collaboration between QQI, Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI).

The executive noted that the programme is more successful than could have been envisioned when initially set up. It is now working on a par to the Scottish agency SPARGS.

Oisín Hassan presented an outline of the programme and noted that to date 4400 students have been trained, the numbers during the COVID-19 pandemic (current academic year) have increased with 1500 students trained. This training allows for student participation in panels, boards in areas such as QA, Governance, Management, Teaching/Learning and strengthens the value of engagement in areas of development. It allows for learners to be engaged and part of decision-making conversations and processes.

6 Policy and Guidelines – review and development

6.1 Policy Review Schedule – Review of validation policy and criteria

The executive advised that the QQI Policies and Criteria for the Validation of Programmes of Education and Training were approved in 2016 and due for review in 2021.

The paper (Extension of Review Date for QQI Validation Policy) requested that the Policy and Standards Committee approve this document as a high-level review of the QQI Policies and Criteria

for the Validation of Programmes of Education and Training which are, by statute, due for review this year.

The Committee APPROVED the summary review and NOTED the update as fulfilling the requirement to review the policy in 2021.

6.2 Approval of minor modifications

The PSC noted the document circulated in relation to the modification to standards policy and standards (Modification to standards policy and standards to pilot adding flexibility to the Common Awards System) to pilot adding flexibility to the Common Awards System.

The executive explained that the proposed approach would not undermine the integrity of the award standards and should have no negative effect on the currency of QQI awards. It was also explained that 'relaxation' refers to the policy and not the rigour of the standards.

Following discussion, the PSC APPROVED the proposed modifications.

7 Procedures relevant to the PSC's functions – no business

8 Notable new publications since the last PSC meeting

[NFQ Referencing Report 12-2020.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

[Education department's three-year strategy](#)

9 PSC Reflection

The PSC considered how it could measure the impact of the role of the PSC. They discussed how policies could align with the strategy and how the PSC could contextualise policy in terms of the developing QQI strategy. The PSC also considered that by ensuring the integrity of QQI awards beyond question, this insures a policy link.

The PSC also noted the need to build for change, taking into account previous challenges faced by the education sector, including financial and economic and more recently Covid emergencies, and ensuring that any policy decisions made by the PSC enables things to happen – ensure the scope is broad enough to facilitate change.

The PSC agreed to tease out understandings and to look at a framework of advice to enable new and future members of the PSC contextualise where policy is developed how it ties into the strategic direction. A framework for policy in the broad context will be considered.

10 Any other business

10.1 The role of the PSC in QQI research projects

This item was deferred owing to lack of time.

10.2 Framework for the evaluation of material presented to the PSC

The executive noted that further discussions would take place within the executive in advance of a proposal being ready for consideration by the PSC. The executive outlined some initial ideas in the form of the following questions:

Are the proposal's objective and approach aligned with QQI's statement of strategy?

Has the proposal been adequately contextualised (historical and current)?

Has the proposal explored alternative approaches and been informed by research?

Is there a sound legal basis for each of any regulatory elements in the proposal?

Are the proposal's expected short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes for QQI and stakeholders clear?

Have the resource implications for QQI and stakeholders been addressed?

What value does the proposal add for QQI and stakeholders?

Has the proposal explained how any new arrangements integrate with or replace any existing arrangements?

Is the approach fit for purpose?

Has the proposal identified all the main stakeholder groups that the proposal would impact and have their views been sought and considered?

The Chair thanked the members for their participation

Meeting ended