

Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Note of the fifty-fifth Meeting of the Authority (The Board) which took place on Monday, 22 February 2021 at 10:00 a.m. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, this meeting took place via Microsoft Teams (video conference facility).

Present:

- Ms. Joanne Harmon (Chair)
- Dr. Pádraig Walsh (Chief Executive)
- Ms. Cliona Curley (Secretary)
- Dr. Barbara Brittingham
- Mr. Blake Hodkinson
- Mr. Thomas McDermott
- Mr. Kevin McStravock
- Ms. Niamh O'Reilly
- Prof. Irene Sheridan
- Dr. Anne Walsh

Apologies: Ms. Mary Danagher

In attendance: Ms. Caitríona Lawless (Recording Secretary)
Mr. Liam Butler (Item 12)

INTRODUCTION

The Board agreed that the agenda for the meeting was acceptable and adopted same.

The Chairperson welcomed all Members to the meeting. As there were ongoing restrictions in place in Ireland due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Board was continuing to meet virtually through Microsoft Teams.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, extended its condolences to Irene Sheridan on the recent death of her father, Michael Sheridan.

1. POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The Board noted that no conflicts of interest were declared.

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETINGS

The Minutes of the following meetings were **confirmed** and would be signed at a later date when circumstances allow:

Minutes of the Incorporal QQI Board Meeting held on 12-14 October 2020,

Minutes of the QQI Board Meeting held on 4 December 2020 and

Minutes of the Incorporal QQI Board Meeting held on 16-21 December 2020.

3. NOTES OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETINGS

The Board **approved** the following notes for publication on the QQI website:

Note of the Incorporal Meeting of 12-14 October 2020,

Note of the Meeting of 4 December 2020 and

Note of the Incorporal Meeting of 16-21 December 2020.

4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

The Board noted the **Action Tracker**.

4.1. Action Tracker

The Board noted the updated Action Tracker.

The Board discussed the opportunity to invite representatives of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to attend upcoming Board Meetings. The Chairperson and Executive suggested that the June meeting may be the most appropriate during the Strategy development process. The Board note that the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science had raised some key areas of focus for 2021, in a recent meeting with the Chairperson and Chief Executive, which have been taken on board during the Strategy development process. The Board noted that the Executive expects to have a clear sense of the strategic direction by the June Board Meeting. Being mindful that it is seen as an overseer of tertiary education, it was noted that the Executive expects to carry

out formal consultation on an outline Strategic Statement with external stakeholders following the April Board Meeting. The Board noted that there would be engagement with key external stakeholders (e.g. the Department, the HEA, SOLAS) throughout the development process.

The Board **agreed** with the approach to inviting DFHERIS representatives to upcoming Board Meetings.

5. DRAFT BOARD AGENDA

The Board noted the **Draft April 2021 Board Agenda**.

The Board noted and discussed the draft Agenda for the next Board Meeting.

The Board noted that a draft Agenda is provided at each meeting as an opportunity for Board Members to influence the agenda or raise queries. The Chairperson reiterated the importance of Board Members considering the draft Agenda. The Executive populates the agenda with governance, compliance and regular standard items but it is at Members' discretion to suggest additional items if they wish. The Executive undertook to change the sequence of the Agenda items to refresh the running order of the meetings.

The Board noted a further update on Strategy development will be provided at the April meeting. Members noted a verbal outline of the next stage of the process – the workshop with Board Members and the Executive Management Team (EMT) had been completed and a note of that session drafted by the facilitator was included in the papers for today's meeting. The EMT continue to meet twice a week to discuss and draft the Strategy and have drafted an outline of the initial high-level priorities. The Executive expects to present draft priorities and the actions arising at the April Meeting. The Board noted that a Strategy Development Workshop with Managers and Heads of Units was scheduled for 9 March. The next phase of the development process also includes engagement with key stakeholders.

6. COVID-19

The Board noted an update on matters effected by and resulting from **Covid-19**.

6.1. Covid-19 Update

The Board noted an update on the current impact of Covid-19. The Board noted that, in January, the Department had restructured the Tertiary Education System Steering Group which is made up of sectoral stakeholders and Government officials. Many of its initial Working Groups established in response to the pandemic in early 2020 had now ceased or were suspended as they had completed their agendas. The Board noted, that under the revised structure, there are now four Working Groups. QQI is a member of two, those dealing with Student and Learner Wellbeing and Engagement and Data. The Executive has also been requested by the Steering Group to contribute on two of the Group's priority areas, Challenges with Student Placements that lead to professional practice, largely in health and social care areas and Assessment Integrity and Load. The Board noted that the Executive is in discussions with IoTs and CORU in regard to Social Care placements in particular. The Board noted that while QQI has no statutory role in this area, it spans the Sector and can co-ordinate the discussions.

The Board noted further updates from two Board Members who are also involved in the various Working Groups through their respective organisations. It was noted that Student wellbeing and retention are a major focus. It was suggested that Student wellbeing and retention, however, are being considered mainly in relation to the HE sector. The Board noted that FET is most affected in the drop in QQI certification figures. Retention is a significant factor in the FET sector as a result of the pandemic. The Working Group on Student and Learner Wellbeing and Engagement was working on initiatives such as a strategy for retention, re-engagement, completion and progression. The Board suggested that the current retention issues underlined the need for the learner lens to be considered prominently in the context of QQI's Strategy development. There is a need to resume face-to-face provision within the FET sector as soon as possible.

The Board noted the continuation of regular virtual meetings with EMT, management and with staff.

The Board noted that the review of the effectiveness of the Quality Assurance procedures of the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) had commenced (the planned 2020 start having been impacted by Covid-19) and a briefing for the first virtual review team had taken place in early February. Briefings for a further four virtual review teams are scheduled to take place between February and April.

The Executive provided some clarification in relation to the re-engagement of providers and those that chose not to pursue that process. Those that do not re-engage are usually dormant providers no longer running programmes or have not certified learners in over two years. It was also noted that some community and voluntary providers have linked with ETBs which also reduces the numbers involved. Currently, 75 providers are not re-engaging with QQI.

7. CEO REPORT

The Board noted the **CEO Report**.

7.1. CEO Report

The Board noted the various updates contained in the CEO report covering the period since the December 2020 Board Meeting.

The Board noted the drop in certification figures and the number of provider re-engagements (mentioned under Item 6 above). There is a general upward trend in HE certification but a consistent decline in FET certification numbers since 2014 – the past year is likely to have accelerated that decline. The Board expressed some concern in relation to the reduction in certification numbers on lower levels on the Framework.

The Executive provided brief verbal updates on the provision of insurance for the Protection of Enrolled Learners and the publication of the Apprenticeship Action Plan and the governance of Apprenticeships.

The Board noted the Green Paper on the Qualifications System was recently published for consultation with external stakeholders and the Chief Executive undertook to discuss the Board's feedback on the consultation process with the Executive.

8. ITEMS FOR NOTING

The Board noted the **Items for Noting**.

8.1. Focus on Programmes and Awards Executive Committee

The Board noted the verbal overview of the work of the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC) provided by the Chairperson of that Committee. The Board noted that seven meetings had taken place in 2020 (five meetings per year are scheduled and additional are held if necessary) and re-engagement with private HE providers and larger FET providers had been completed. Three new apprenticeships had been validated and a number of micro-credentials programmes, the first such programmes, had been approved in December. The Chairperson also acknowledged the benefit of having a Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee Member in attendance as an observer at PAEC meetings.

In response to a query from a Board Member regarding a list of apprenticeship applications in the system, the Executive undertook to discuss the matter with SOLAS as the categories of statistics featured on the Apprenticeships.ie website appear to have changed. The Chairperson thanked the PAEC for all its work to date.

8.2. Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee (PAOC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Programme and Awards Oversight Committee held on 26 June 2020.

8.3. Approvals and Reviews Committee (ARC)

The Board noted the reports of the meetings of the Approvals and Reviews Committee held on 12 October and 18 December 2020.

8.4. Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee held on 3 December 2020.

8.5. Policies and Standards Committee (PSC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Policies and Standards Committee held on 14 December 2020.

8.6. Rolling Board Agenda 2021

The Board noted an update on the Rolling Board Agenda for 2021.

9. **STRATEGIC PLANNING**

The Board noted an update on **Strategic Planning**.

9.1. Corporate Plan 2020

The Board noted the Quarter 4 Progress Report for the 2020 Corporate Plan together with an addendum outlining some of the additional and unexpected work and projects completed in 2020, arising in the main from the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, thanked the Executive and staff for taking on a substantial amount of additional unexpected work in 2020.

9.2. Revised Corporate Plan 2021

The Board noted that the Executive had reviewed the Corporate Plan for 2021 (approved at its December 2020 meeting) in January once a clear picture of the actions completed in 2020 and the likely financial situation emerged. The plan was revised to include an additional action and a revision to another:

- Conduct review of consortium-led apprenticeships (*addition of new activity*),
- Assess current record and document management systems and practices in QQI to identify improvement opportunities (*revised activity*).

The Board **approved** the revised Corporate Plan 2021.

9.3. Development of Strategy Statement 2022-2024

The Board noted the note of the Board Strategy Workshop held on 28 January. The Workshop had proved to be a useful exercise and the Chairperson thanked all Members for their participation, contributions and the work completed by them in advance. Members agreed there is a need to build in the time to do such reflection and consideration exercises on a

regular basis and to assist it in taking the lead on the strategic aspect of the Organisation's work.

The Board noted that three particular areas of interest which had been raised by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science at his meeting with the Chairperson and the Chief Executive on 21 January:

- Advancement of micro-credentials (and digital badges),
- The NFQ as an important tool in an integrated tertiary system and
- Access, transfer and progression (including Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)).

The Executive was exploring ways of incorporating these areas into the forthcoming Strategy Statement together with key points and considerations from the Board's Workshop.

Board Members highlighted the importance of reflecting the views of the Board within the Strategy and the process is an opportunity for the Board to be more challenging of itself as a Board. It was also suggested that there is now an opportunity for the Organisation to extend its ambitions. The new Strategy can also be seen as an opportunity to address changes to the education system in the future, it is important that this Strategy can be relevant in a changing education environment.

The Board briefly discussed how likely it is that the tertiary education system will return to how things were once the Covid-19 pandemic is over and affirmed the importance of keeping the learner at the centre of the process. QQI has an important role in leading or driving initiatives within the tertiary education sector as the only agency spanning the entire sector.

The Board noted that the Strategy Statement will cover a three-year period but stated it must be a living flexible document due to the current environment which QQI is operating within.

The Board noted that there have been some informal discussions with the Department as there is a Strategy development process underway there also and that sharing of views and discussions will also take place with Departmental line equivalents.

The Chief Executive had to leave the meeting unexpectedly at this point to attend to a personal matter.

9.4. Strategy Development Process

The Board noted the Strategy Development Process document which had been revised on foot of feedback from the Board's discussion at its September 2020 meeting. The Board **approved** the document as a high-level process and requested more detail on the timeline and consultation process.

10. BOARD MET WITHOUT THE EXECUTIVE PRESENT

The Board discussed its responsibility to lead the strategic direction of the Organisation and discussed plans for further engagement with the Executive on the formation of the next Strategy Statement.

11. ENGAGEMENT WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE

The Board noted verbal updates on the following items:

11.1. Performance Delivery Agreement 2021 (PDA) and Oversight Agreement 2021-2023

The Board noted that the draft Oversight Agreement had been revised on foot of the discussions at the December Board Meeting and the draft, together with the draft PDA, was forwarded to the Department on 25 January. No feedback had been received to date. The Board noted that the Quarter 4 2020 PDA Review Meeting had been deferred to 2021 and a date was still under consideration for the rescheduled meeting.

11.2. Meeting with the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

The Board noted that, as outlined under Item 9 above, the Chairperson and the Chief Executive had met with the Minister on 21 January to discuss priorities for 2021. A brief note of the meeting had been circulated to Members in advance of the Strategy Workshop held on 28 January.

The Board noted three areas of interest which had been raised by the Minister at the meeting (also outlined above under Item 9). The meeting with the Minister had provided an opportunity for the Chairperson and the Chief Executive to reiterate QQI's additional resource

requirements. The Board noted it had been a timely meeting ahead of the commencement of the strategy development process.

The Board noted the Executive had also had several separate meetings with the Department on matters such as Protection for Enrolled Learners (PEL) and the Amended Legislation Programme. These meetings had included a number of side discussions on funding and the funding model. The Board noted that the Executive has been waiting on feedback on the submission made in July which is expected shortly and will likely be required to resubmit an updated funding paper thereafter.

The Chief Executive returned to the meeting at this point.

11.3. Workforce Plan

The Board noted sanction had been received for the recruitment of a Senior Administrative Officer (Grade VII). The Executive had also been requested to resubmit its Workforce Plan to address resource requirements arising from the Amended Legislative Programme. As a result, a request for additional posts was submitted for sanction and is currently being reviewed by the Higher Education – Governance and Quality Unit. The Executive expects to be in a position to provide a more detailed update by the April Board Meeting.

The Executive provided a breakdown of the various posts sought in its submission.

The Executive confirmed that it had received correspondence from the Department on 15 February confirming the State Grant allocation for 2021.

12. BUDGET AND FINANCE

The Board noted an update on **Budget and Finance**.

12.1. Management Accounts to 31 December 2020

The Board noted the Management accounts for the twelve months to 31 December 2020. The Board noted that when developing its budget for the year, the Executive had initially projected a deficit for 2020. It was noted that the Department had notified the Executive in December of an additional Grant towards Covid-19 mitigation measures. The Board also noted that

Certification figures for 2020 had returned better than predicted and expenditure in some areas had not materialised or was lower than expected/budgeted for. As a result, the accounts ended the year with a small deficit.

12.2. Revised Budget 2021

The Board considered and **approved** the revised Budget for 2021.

12.3. State Grant Allocation 2021

The Board noted the receipt of a letter of 15 February 2021 from the Principal Officer in the Higher Education – Governance and Quality Unit in the Department confirming the State Grant allocation for 2021 of €4.579m with additional monies available to support agency capacity building and the implementation of the QQI Amendment legislation, if required.

13. **ORGANISATION AND HUMAN RESOURCES**

The Board noted an update on **Organisation and Human Resources**.

13.1. Update on Human Resources

The Board noted an update on Human Resources. The Board noted that sanction had been received for two posts, a Grade V (received in December 2020) and a Grade VII (received in January 2021).

The Board noted the report of a staff survey conducted in November 2020 (carried out as a follow up to the original conducted in July 2020). The Board suggested that the Executive should be cognisant of the Government's National Remote Working Strategy and QQI's business needs may look different on return to the office when compared with the current environment.

The Board noted the minutes of the HR and Organisation Committee meeting of 17 April 2020.

14. AUDIT AND RISK

The Board noted the documents relating to **Audit and Risk**.

14.1. Report of the Audit and Risk Committee

The Board noted a verbal update on the Audit and Risk Committee Meeting held on 16 February 2021. The Board also noted a report of the previous meeting held on 13 November 2020.

The Chairperson of the Audit and Risk Committee confirmed that he had met with the new Internal Auditors. The Board noted that the Executive is exploring options for a nomination for a third Audit and Risk Committee member.

14.2. Top Five Risks for 2020

The Board noted the Top Five Risks as at 31 December 2020. The Board discussed the item and suggested that the Executive reconsider the wording of Risks 2 and 3 and amend to better distinguish between them (one is a short-term risk, the second a long-term one, both relating to funding). The Board noted that the Audit and Risk Chairperson would discuss the matter with the Chief Risk Officer and the Finance Manager to better communicate the two risks.

The Board did not approve the Top Five Risks and requested that the two in question (Risks 2 and 3) be restated to better distinguish between them.

15. GOVERNANCE

The Board noted the documents relating to **Governance**.

15.1 Annual Review/Noting of Reserved Functions of the Board

The Board noted the Reserved Functions of the Board. The Board noted amendments to the list of Reserved Functions may be required once further sections of the revised Legislation, the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019, are commenced.

15.2. External Review of Board and Committee Effectiveness

The Board noted the Report of the Review and Action Points arising from the External Review of Board and Committee Effectiveness carried out in Quarter 4, 2020.

The Board noted the opinion of the reviewers that QQI was strong on governance and the overall view that the Board is therefore, operating effectively. Following its discussion, Members stated that they were expecting a clearer understanding from the Review of where the Board needs to go next. The Board noted that the Chairperson and the Board Secretary both stated that the reviewers did find it difficult to find substantial governance issues in their review, the Board is operating effectively and instead looked for areas where value could be added, particularly in the context of the forthcoming Strategy.

The Board agreed that some action points were positive, such as the suggestion of splitting the induction for new Board Members into two sessions and working on the development needs of the Board/skills set audit. It was noted that in relation to the suggestion of authors of Board documents outlining where the Board can add value, a better option may be to highlight the potential impacts and implications for the sector from the item in question. The Board noted that a skills audit would be timely in terms of succession planning.

The Chairperson undertook to discuss the matter further with the Executive (particularly regarding process and development pieces).

15.3. Protected Disclosures 2020

The Board noted the report on the Protected Disclosures received during the year ending 31 December 2020.

15.4. New Committee Members/appointments

The Board noted that invitations to join the Audit and Risk Committee, the Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee and the Approvals and Reviews Committee had been issued and responses were awaited.

16. REVIEWS

The Board noted the documents relating to **Reviews**.

16.1. Cinnté Review – University of Limerick (UL)

The Board noted the Cinnté Review Report for the University of Limerick.

16.2. Mid-cycle Analysis of Cinnté Review Report

The Board noted the Mid-cycle Analysis of Cinnté Review Report compiled from the findings of the reports of the seven Cinnté Reviews completed to date. The Board noted the analysis was not a review of the current process which runs until 2023.

The Board noted comments on the Report from the Chairperson of the Approvals and Reviews Committee and noted that a webinar had been held for HEIs to mark the launch of the Report. The webinar had also included presentations from representatives of two HEIs who had already completed the process, Dublin City University and Dundalk Institute of Technology. The event had been a good learning opportunity for those providers yet to go through a Cinnté review.

The Board noted that a 'Review of Reviews' had been carried out at the end of the previous HEI review processes carried out by three of QQI's predecessors, HETAC, NQAI and IUQB. It was noted that carrying out a similar exercise at the end of the Cinnté Review Cycle would be an opportunity to learn from and prepare for the next cycle of reviews.

17. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS

The Board noted an update on **Stakeholder Engagement and Communications**.

17.1. Stakeholder Engagement and Communications – Plans for 2021

The Board noted an update on the Stakeholder Engagement and Communications – Plans for 2021.

Due to time constraints, the Board briefly discussed the document and requested that it be used as a reference document in the Strategy Development process. The Board expressed a

need to look at how best QQI balances student engagement across the entire tertiary education sector.

17.2. Media Mentions

The Board noted the media mentions published since the December 2020 Board Meeting together with Social Media Statistics covering December 2020 and January 2021.

18. NEXT MEETING

The Board noted that the next meeting is scheduled to take place on **Friday, 23 April 2021** beginning at **10:00 a.m.**

19. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Chairperson undertook to discuss a number of matters which had arisen during the item where the Board met without the Executive present, with the Chief Executive and the Board Secretary. These matters related to Strategy Development.

THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS OF THE MEETING.