

Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Note of the fifty-seventh Meeting of the Authority (The Board) which took place on Monday, 21 June 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. Padraig Walsh (Chief Executive)
- Ms. Cliona Curley (Secretary)
- Dr. Barbara Brittingham
- Ms. Mary Danagher (Items 1-14)
- Mr. Blake Hodkinson
- Mr. Thomas McDermott
- Mr. Kevin McStravock
- Dr. Niamh O'Reilly
- Prof. Irene Sheridan
- Dr. Anne Walsh (Items 1-13)

Apologies: No apologies

In attendance:

- Ms. Caitríona Lawless (Recording Secretary)
- Mr. Simon Harris, T.D., Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Item 13)
- Ms. Tanya Kenny, Principal Officer, Higher Education – Quality and Governance Unit, DFHERIS (Item 13)
- Dr. Anna Murphy (Item 5)

INTRODUCTION

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

1. POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The Board noted that no conflicts of interest were declared.

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETING

The **Minutes of the QQI Board Meeting** held on 23 April 2021 were **confirmed** and would be signed at a later date when circumstances allow.

3. NOTE OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETING

The Board **approved** the **Note of the Meeting of 23 April 2021** for publication on the QQI website.

4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

The Board noted the **Action Tracker**.

4.1. Action Tracker

The Board noted the updated Action Tracker.

5. STRATEGIC PLANNING

The Board noted documents related to **Strategic Planning**.

5.1. Corporate Plan 2021

The Board noted the Quarter 2 Progress Report for the 2021 Corporate Plan. The Board noted that a number of items are delayed by approximately a Quarter e.g. events affected by ongoing Covid-19 restrictions but noted that none of the items currently delayed were a cause of concern for the Executive.

5.2. Draft Annual Report 2020

The Board noted the design proof for the Annual Report for 2020. The draft report had been revised following the Board's opportunity to provide feedback on the report presented at the April Board Meeting. The Board noted the Report was a record of a significant amount of work completed in an unusual year.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, expressed the Board's appreciation and thanks for all the work completed during such an extraordinary year. The Board **approved** the Annual Report for 2020 and requested that it be submitted to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science by 30 June as required by the 2012 Act.

5.3. Development of Strategy Statement 2022-2024

The Board noted the draft Statement of Strategy 2022-2024. The Board noted an update provided by the Executive on the steps which had occurred since the Board Meeting held on 23 April. The Executive had noted and reflected the Board's feedback from the previous meetings and strategy sessions in the revised Statement prior to the publication of Identified Priorities for public consultation. It was noted that further consultation with staff had taken place as well as the inclusion of a contextual narrative in the draft Statement.

The Board noted an analysis of the feedback received from the public consultation process and the incorporation of feedback from Board Members into the draft Strategy. The public consultation closed on 11 June with over 40 submissions received in addition to feedback and comments garnered through meetings with key external stakeholders (which took place earlier in the development process). The Chief Executive outlined a number of areas of focus for the coming strategic period e.g. remote teaching and learning, micro-credentials, new FET qualifications and a move towards an integrated tertiary education system.

The Board noted that QQI and TEQSA (the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency in Australia) had signed an Information Sharing Agreement on Academic Integrity on 21 June.

The new Strategy highlights how key the relationships and engagement with the FET sector, Education and Training Boards and Technological Universities will be in the next phase of QQI's development. The past year has proven how integral the organisation's engagement with different cohorts of providers has been to the tertiary education sector.

The response of Board Members to the draft Statement was very positive, with confirmation from Members that their suggestions and feedback on previous drafts had been reflected.

The Chairperson and the Board acknowledged the significant amount of work which had been completed and congratulated the Executive on the draft Strategy and requested that the acknowledgement of the Board be passed on to staff.

The Chief Executive thanked the Chairperson and the Board for all their contributions and the key role they played in the development of the new Strategy.

The Board **approved** the draft Statement of Strategy 2022-2024 for submission to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science for consideration. The Board noted that under the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies 2016, the Minister has a maximum of twelve weeks to consider the draft and respond with his observations. The Executive would then revisit the draft Statement depending on the feedback received from the Minister prior to final approval of the draft by the Board at its meeting scheduled for 27 September. The Executive will also begin work over the summer on an Implementation Plan and look at dissemination options. The Board noted that the Executive is likely to link the launch of the Strategy with an event (to be held later in the year). The matter would be discussed further at the next Board Meeting.

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

The Board noted updates on **Engagement with Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)**.

6.1. Funding Model

The Board noted that the Executive had been working with the Department of Education and Skills on a new Funding Model for QQI since 2019. Following a change in the structure of the Department (with the establishment of DFHERIS) in 2020, the Board noted that the Executive had been asked to prepare and resubmit its preferred option for a funding model. Work is nearing completion on the submission, the proposals therein will be presented to the Department in the first instance.

The Board noted that the Executive intends to submit the final proposal to the Department in Quarter 3 and the Executive hopes the funding model will be agreed by year end.

The Board suggested that the communication of any fee changes with the relevant sectors should be clear and timely. The Executive clarified that the roll out of any agreed changes will be gradual and there will be a period of transition. The Board also noted that the Executive's submission will take account of changes to the sector such as possible delegation of authority for private HE providers and wished to ensure equity for providers in the fees charged.

The Board noted that engagement with the Department on the matter has been very positive. Early discussions with funding organisations (e.g. SOLAS, HEA) had taken place and the Executive had flagged the possible changes in advance.

6.2. Workforce Plan

The Board noted sanction for a number of posts had been received from DFHERIS in April and the recruitment processes and shortlisting for same were underway.

6.3. Amendment Legislation Programme (ALP)

The Board noted that there had been a significant amount of activity in the Amendment Legislation Programme in 2021.

The Board noted that the internal ALP Steering Group and the QQI/DFHERIS ALP Liaison Group meet on alternative weeks. It was noted that the programme currently consists of seven projects that are managed individually by dedicated project managers. The Board noted that of these seven projects, three were scheduled for completion by the end of 2021, three for completion by Quarter 3, 2022 and one was due to be completed by Quarter 1, 2023. Two further projects 'QQI Policies and Procedures' and 'Academic Integrity' have been completed and closed.

The Board noted that draft Corporate Fitness Regulations are currently under consideration by the Department. A position paper on the Protection for Enrolled Learners (PEL) is also being reviewed by the Department. The development of a Protocol for the Inclusion of the Awards of Designated Awarding Bodies (DABs) in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is expected to be completed in Quarter 3, 2021. It was also noted that the Executive hopes to have a Head of International Education in place by Quarter 4, 2021.

The Board noted an update on a matter raised by the Department in relation to the introduction of a National Single Scheme for Learner Protection.

The Board noted that DFHERIS is commencing regular meetings between the Departmental Management Board (Secretary General and Assistant Secretaries) and the Heads of State Agencies under its aegis. A similar series of meetings had previously been in place under the Department of Education and Skills. The first meeting is scheduled for 5 July and participants would include the Chief Executives of the Grangegorman Development Agency, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the Irish Research Council, Léargas, QQI, Science Foundation Ireland, Skillsnet Ireland and SOLAS.

7. COVID-19

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

7.1. Covid-19 Update

The Board noted an update on the current impact of Covid-19. The Board noted that the DFHERIS Steering Group for the Tertiary Education System had recently finalised its plan for 'A Safe Return to on-site Further and Higher Education and Research' that was signed off by Government/the Cabinet and published by the Department on 15 June. A copy was circulated to Board Members in advance of its meeting. The Board noted that the Steering Group is now likely to move to monthly meetings over the summer period.

The Board noted that a limited tender for the reconfiguration of the QQI office building had been issued. As part of the planning for an eventual return to the office (dependent on public health advice), the Board noted that the Executive would again survey staff which would help inform the strategy for a phased return to the office.

The Board noted the Chief Executive had, on 12 June, attended a virtual action learning event on 'Returning to the Workplace' organised by the Association of Chief Executives of State Agencies (ACESA).

8. CEO REPORT

The Board noted the **CEO Report**.

8.1. CEO Report

The Board noted the various updates contained in the CEO report covering the period since the April 2021 Board Meeting.

The Board noted that the Executive was reviewing the first draft of a report on the comparability of the Advanced Certificate (Level 6) and the Higher Certificate (Level 6) qualifications as implemented and a meeting of the Project Steering Group is scheduled for the end of June.

A Board Member raised a query in relation to re-engagement figures and the alternative arrangements in place. The Executive undertook to provide further information. In relation to a query on the lack of activity in Apprenticeship applications, the Executive clarified that it is due to the timing of applications.

The Board noted that a paper is being prepared on the data held by QQI on HE Micro-credentials (qualifications with volume ≤ 30 ECTS) for 2014-2020. The Board also noted that QQI is assisting in a national project on Micro-credentials co-ordinated by the Irish Universities Association (IUA).

The Board noted that Terms of Reference for a new Quality and Qualifications Forum had been drafted and had been provided to the Board Chairperson.

The Executive provided a verbal update on the June 2021 Certification figures. It was noted that the approximate learner/certification figures for the previous three years were:

2019 – 52,000,
2020 – 34,000 and
2021 – 35,000.

The Board noted that the Executive was accommodating an additional certification period in July for the second year running as part of its response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Board noted that the first phase of the Inaugural Review of Quality Assurance in the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), which consisted of the review of five ETBs, was now complete. The general feedback received on the process was all positive to date. The Executive briefly outlined the initial common areas arising from the reviews which are being highlighted as areas requiring general focus/improvement. The Board noted that reports of the first five reviews are at the drafting stage and a thematic analysis will be carried out following their receipt.

The Board noted that the dates for the next phase of ETB reviews have been scheduled.

9. ITEMS FOR NOTING

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

9.1. Policies and Standards Committee (PSC)

The Board noted the verbal overview of the work of the Policies and Standards Committee (PSC) provided by the Chairperson of the Committee. The Committee had last met on 14 June and a brief overview of the meeting was provided. The Board noted that among the items considered by the Committee were:

- approval of publication for consultation of the draft Protocol for the Inclusion of the Awards of Designated Awarding Bodies in the NFQ,
- Updates on Corporate Fitness/PEL and the Green Paper on Qualifications,
- A concept paper on Micro-credentials,
- Policy Stocktake and a Roadmap for the Review and Development of Policies and Standards.

The Board noted that the Committee also taken some time to reflect on its own effectiveness.

9.2. Approvals and Reviews Committee (ARC)

The Board noted the reports of the meetings of the Approvals and Reviews Committee held on 3 February and 12 April 2021.

9.3. Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee held on 8 April 2021.

9.4. Rolling Board Agenda 2021

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

10. BUDGET AND FINANCE

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

10.1. Management Accounts to 30 April 2021

The Board noted the Management Accounts for the four months to 30 April 2021. The Board noted that it would be later in the year before the Executive would have a clear indication of the level of Certification income.

10.2. ICT Contract Resources and Services

The Board noted the proposal outlined and **approved**:

- the procurement of contracts for ICT contract resources for six months (July-December 2021), as outlined in the proposal submitted and in accordance with the QQI Purchasing and Procurement Policy and subject to contract and
- the purchase of services in MS Azure for the period July 2021-June 2022, as outlined in the proposal submitted and in accordance with the QQI Purchasing and Procurement Policy, subject to contract.

11. ORGANISATION AND HUMAN RESOURCES

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

11.1. Update on Human Resources

The Board noted an update on Human Resources.

The Board noted that assessment of QQI's application to retain the Keepwell Mark had taken place on 19 May and the Executive was awaiting the formal outcome.

12. COMMUNICATIONS

The Board noted an update on **Communications**.

12.1. QQI Website

The Board noted an update on work undertaken to date on the redevelopment of the QQI website.

12.2. Media Mentions

The Board noted the media mentions published since the April 2021 Board Meeting together with Social Media Statistics covering April and May 2021.

13. ATTENDANCE BY THE MINISTER FOR FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE

The Board was joined by Mr. Simon Harris, T.D., Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science for part of the meeting.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, welcomed the Minister and thanked him for attending. The Minister began by thanking the Board and QQI for its leadership and work during the pandemic, noting that the organisation had been flexible and agile in ensuring standards had been upheld in a period of great uncertainty.

The Board noted that the Minister had last met with the Chairperson and Chief Executive in January 2021 at the height of the most recent lockdown restrictions. The Board noted that as part of the planning for further reopening, the Minister and his Department had published on 15 June, the plan for 'A Safe Return to on-site Further and Higher Education and Research'.

The Minister spoke to the Board about matters such as Micro-credentials, Apprenticeships, Technological Universities, the QQI Green Paper on Qualifications, and the International Education Mark (IEM).

A Questions and Answers session followed. There was a brief discussion covering a number of topics.

The Minister, noting that it was his last meeting as a QQI Board Member, thanked Mr. Kevin McStravock for serving on the Board and for his contributions during his time as Vice President for Academic Affairs at the Union of Students in Ireland (USI).

The Minister thanked Members for meeting with him. The Chairperson thanked the Minister for attending.

14. AUDIT AND RISK

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

The Board noted a verbal update on the Audit and Risk Committee meeting held on 2 June. The Board discussed a number of the items which had been considered by the Committee and referred to the Board for decision.

14.1. Risk Register

The Board **approved** the Risk Register as at Quarter 1, 2021 subject to a minor amendment to Risk No. 5. The Board discussed a number of the individual risks.

14.2. Internal Audit Reports

The Board noted a number of Internal Audit Reports which had been considered by the Audit and Risk Committee and recommended to the Board for its consideration.

The Board **approved** the following Internal Audit Reports:

- Value for Money
- Awards and Certification
- Programme Validation and Provider Initial Approval

14.3. Financial Policies

Following consideration of the draft QQI Financial Policies, the Board deferred approval of the QQI Financial Policies and requested the Executive to review the appendices.

14.4. Terms of Reference

The Board **approved** the revised Terms of Reference for the Audit and Risk Committee.

14.5. Cybersecurity

The Board noted an update on QQI's cybersecurity measures and noted that a planned staff security awareness programme had commenced the week of 14 June.

14.6. General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

The Board noted a verbal update on GDPR.

14.7. Minutes of Audit and Risk Committee Meetings

The Board noted the minutes of 16 February and 9 April 2021.

15. GOVERNANCE

The Board noted an update on **Governance**.

15.1. Committee Members/Appointments

The Board **approved** the following appointments to QQI Committees:

- Mr. Ronan O'Loughlin to the Approvals and Reviews Committee,
- Mr. Brendan O'Dea and Dr. Seán Rowland to the Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee and
- Ms. Pearl Cunningham to the Audit and Risk Committee.

The Board also noted that an external member of the Audit and Risk Committee, Mr. Tony Mealy, would be stepping down after the October 2021 meeting. The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, expressed its thanks for his contributions and input during his membership term. The Board noted that a nomination would be presented to the Board for its consideration at the September meeting.

16. REVIEWS

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

16.1. Cinnte Review – Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT)

The Board noted the Cinnte Review Report for Waterford Institute of Technology. As with all reviews held since March 2020, the review of WIT had been held virtually.

17. DRAFT BOARD AGENDA

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

The Board noted the draft Agenda for the next Board Meeting. The Board noted that, as requested, a briefing on Europass would feature at the September meeting. It was also noted that the Quarter 2 PDA Review Meeting with the Department had moved to 14 July. Board Members were reminded to contact the Executive that if they were aware of or wished to include any additional items.

18. NEXT MEETING

The Board noted that the next meeting is scheduled to take place on Monday, 27 September 2021, beginning at 10:00 a.m.

19. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, thanked Mr. Kevin McStravock for his contributions over the previous two years noting the work he and USI have done, particularly during the pandemic, stating that he had added much positive value to the Board. The Chief Executive also expressed his thanks for the role played by Mr. McStravock. Mr. McStravock thanked Board Members for their support and he looked forward to seeing what the Board and organisation achieve over the coming years. The Board noted that his successor in USI had been nominated to the Department for consideration to serve on the QQI Board and the nomination was awaiting Ministerial approval.

It was queried if the next meeting of the Board would be held on site in QQI Offices. The Board noted that the Executive was continuing to follow public health guidance and guidelines and would make a decision on the matter nearer the date and in accordance with the guidance at the time and the configuration of the office building.

The Chairperson thanked everyone for their participation and contributions.

THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS OF THE MEETING.