

## Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Note of the fifty-eighth Meeting of the Authority (The Board) which took place on Monday, 27 September 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
- Ms. Mary Danagher (Items 1-18)
- Mr. Blake Hodkinson (Items 1-18)
- Ms. Megan O'Connor
- Dr. Niamh O'Reilly
- Prof. Irene Sheridan (Items 1-16)
- Dr. Anne Walsh

**Apologies:** Mr. Thomas McDermott

**In attendance:**

- Ms. Caitriona Lawless (Recording Secretary)
- Mr. Liam Butler (Items 14 & 15)
- Mr. Eamonn Collins (Items 6 & 7)
- Ms. Laura Flynn (Item 10)
- Ms. Angela Lambkin (Item 1)
- Ms. Karena Maguire (Items 10 & 12)
- Ms. Gráinne Mooney (Item 12)
- Dr. Anna Murphy (Items 10 & 15)

### 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 Chairperson welcomed Megan O'Connor, Vice-President of Academic Affairs, USI to her first meeting as a QQI Board Member.

The Board agreed that the agenda for the meeting was acceptable, subject to changing the sequence of some items, and adopted same.

## **1. PRESENTATION ON EUROPASS**

Following a request by the Board, Angela Lambkin, Head of Information, QQI, joined the meeting to update the Board on recent developments relating to Europass, a set of free online career planning tools which help manage an individual's skills and qualifications. The platform is hosted/managed by the European Commission.

The Board noted that QQI hosts the national Europass centre. The latest version of Europass was launched in 2020. Currently, the use of Europass is strong in a number of EU countries and mandatory in some cases but its use is not prevalent in Ireland as yet. Work is underway to better promote the use of Europass in Ireland, particularly within the tertiary education sector but planned promotional activities and events had been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The Board noted that the Executive is also working with other agencies in Ireland such as Eurodesk, Leargas and EURSE.

The discussion was followed by a questions and answers session and Board Members were invited to forward any feedback on the service to the Executive. The Board looked forward to seeing how Europass progresses over the coming years.

### Qualifax

The Board also noted a brief update on Qualifax. The Board noted that work had been undertaken to conduct a content management assessment of the website, including consultation with key stakeholders and end users. The initial findings were received in August and will be presented to the Executive Management Team (EMT) shortly when recommendations and options will be considered.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, thanked Ms. Lambkin for her attendance at the meeting.

## 2. POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The Board noted that no conflicts of interest were declared.

## 3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETING

The **Minutes of the QQI Board Meeting** held on 21 June 2021 were **confirmed** and would be signed at a later date when circumstances allow.

## 4. NOTE OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETING

The Board **approved** the **Note of the Meeting of 21 June 2021** for publication on the QQI website.

## 5. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

The Board noted the **Action Tracker**.

### 5.1. Action Tracker

The Board noted the updated Action Tracker. The Board also noted that the QQI Policy Stocktake and Roadmap would be considered under a later agenda item.

## 6. COVID-19

The Board noted an update on matters affected 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 the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) Steering Group for the Tertiary Education System had met more frequently following the summer period. The Group was now meeting on a weekly basis to discuss and support the phased return to onsite activity in further and higher education. The Board noted that Covid-19 tests centres have been opened on a number of campuses and some providers are implementing large-scale antigen testing.

The Board noted that William Beausang, Assistant Secretary in DFHERIS was continuing to chair this group following a recent restructuring within the Department.

The Board noted all staff meetings are continuing to take place virtually, including a recent all staff Strategy Session held on 7 September. The Chief Executive attended an ACESA (Association for the Chief Executives of State Agencies) Action Learning Session on the Return to the Office. It was noted that the majority of state agencies are working on the basis of a phased return, in the main for those currently working in challenging working from home environments. The return to the workplace is also dependent on/influenced by centralised advice and guidelines due to be developed by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER).

The Board noted that the HR unit would develop a Return to Work policy with the assistance of the Executive and input from the recognised Trade Union but the policy's development will also be informed by the centralised guidance from DPER. There is a need to continue to be mindful of public health guidelines, but the Executive will plan towards a phased return based on the Government's advice on 22 October when the next easing of restrictions is expected.

The Board noted a tender on the reconfiguration of the office was being finalised. Work will be carried out on the layout of desks to maximise social distancing as well as ventilation in the building. It was noted that the Executive also wished to take the opportunity to move towards making QQI a more environmentally friendly and sustainable organisation.

The Board noted that the Executive had begun scheduling staff to access the office building to clear their desks and remove personal belongings. A Working Group is to be established (which will include Union representation and members of the Staff Engagement Forum). The Executive intends to ensure that all changes are properly communicated to staff.

The Board acknowledged and congratulated the Executive on the organisation's performance from the sudden move into lockdown and working from home in early 2020 and how it had maintained its services since.

## 7. ORGANISATION AND HUMAN RESOURCES

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

### 7.1. Update on Human Resources

The Board noted an update on Human Resources. The Board noted the significant progress in recruitment for new posts and vacancies which had taken place over the summer period.

The Board noted that induction sessions for new staff had been taking place online and, in some cases, managers had arranged some outdoor meetings. The Board noted that the Chief Executive had met with each of the new staff members in virtual one to one meetings.

The Board noted that the TEAMS Social Lounge is very active and is another route for new staff to engage with colleagues.

The Board noted that the Executive will be engaging with the Union on the upcoming organisational restructuring (on foot of development of new Strategy Statement and the return of a Director who had been on secondment for a number of years). A meeting is scheduled for 6 October.

The Board noted that a meeting of the HR & Organisation Committee would be scheduled in the coming weeks.

### 7.2. Keepwell Mark

The Board noted that, following the assessment process in May, QQI had retained the Ibec Keepwell Mark for a further two-year period and had also been nominated as a shortlisted finalist in the following categories at the Keepwell Awards 2021:

Best in class:	Leadership
Company of the Year:	Medium
Best in Class:	Physical Activity.

The Board offered its congratulations on the successful outcome of the review.

## 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 June 2021 Board Meeting.

The Board noted the latest Certification statistics. It was confirmed that the figures for summer 2020 were down approximately 20% on those for the previous year. 2021 summer figures are down approximately 13%. August 2020 and 2021 appear to be lower than the same period in 2019, however, it is suspected that the fluctuation is not entirely related to Covid-19.

The Board noted that two apprenticeships applications are in progress.

The Board noted that this year, a series of dialogue meetings had been held for the first time with 15 of the private HE providers that offer QQI awards. The Executive is continuing to ensure that similar processes are rolled out at all levels across the tertiary education sector.

The Board noted that QQI's latest analysis, 'Early Exploration into Micro-credentials in Higher Education 2014-2020' had been published and was circulated to Board Members.

The Board noted the update on the inaugural review of Quality Assurance in the ETBs. It was noted that phase one of the review has concluded and the five reports are currently being finalised and a full update will be provided at the next Board Meeting. The first five reviews will be published simultaneously once finalised. The Approvals and Reviews Committee will be presented with the final review reports at its November meeting. The Board noted that a number of themes are emerging from the first phase of reviews. The Board acknowledged its satisfaction at the commencement of external reviews of this sector and to see the significant involvement of international and business sectors on the review panels.

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

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

### 9.1. Performance Delivery Agreement (PDA) 2021

The Board noted that following several iterations, final versions of the PDA 2021 and the Oversight Agreement 2021-2023 had been received from DFHERIS. The latest versions of the agreements had been reviewed by the Executive Management Team (EMT) on 20 September where final amendments were accepted. The Executive would now proceed with the signing of the two documents.

The Board noted the mid-year review meeting between the Secretary General of the Department and the Chairperson and Chief Executive of QQI had been postponed and work was underway to reschedule it. It was noted that an update on the upcoming Review Meeting is likely to feature at the November Board Meeting.

The Board noted a verbal update on the restructuring of the Department. The new structure recommended four Divisions rather than the existing three. These are now the Higher Education and Policy Division, the Skills Policy and FET Division, the Research and Innovation Division and the Corporate Services and Capital Division.

QQI remains under the remit of the Quality and HE Governance Unit within the Higher Education and Policy Division which is now headed by Keith Moynes, Assistant Secretary and Tanya Kenny remains the Principal Officer and point of contact with that Unit.

The Board noted that the Chief Executive met with Mr. Moynes on 16 September to brief him on some key items that are currently on QQI's agenda (e.g. the funding model, the International Education Mark (IEM) and micro-credentials). It was noted that Mr. Moynes had previously held the International Education brief in the then Department of Education and Skills and is familiar with some of QQI's remit including the ELE sector.

## 9.2. Funding Model and Workforce Plan

The Board noted that the Executive had submitted the requested updated options paper on the funding model proposal to DFHERIS in July and had met with the Unit to present and discuss the options further. The Board noted that the Department will revert to the Executive in due course. The Executive reiterated that implementation of a new funding model would occur on a phased basis.

An update on the development in relation to workforce planning was provided under Item 7 above.

## 9.3. Amendment Legislation Programme (ALP)

The Board noted a verbal update on progress under the ALP since the June Board Meeting. It was noted that the bi-weekly ALP meetings had resumed from September (internal meeting one week, followed by a joint Department/ALP group meeting the subsequent week). In addition, the Department are meeting frequently with some of the project owners, currently those relating specifically to Corporate Fitness. The Stakeholder Engagement Unit is also meeting regularly with relevant DFHERIS sections.

### Protection for Enrolled Learners (PEL)

The Board noted that a draft paper on PEL Regulations had been submitted to the Department on 4 June and was presented to the QQI Policies and Standards Committee (PSC) in September. Agreement to the initial proposal contained in the paper has been received from the Department and drafting of the Regulations will commence shortly. The Board was updated on timelines for expected establishment of the scheme.

### Corporate Fitness

The Board noted that a second draft of the Corporate Fitness Regulations is under development. It was also noted that guidance/guidelines are also being developed to accompany same.

### Designated Awarding Bodies (DABs)

The Board noted that the development of a joint sectoral protocol between QQI and individual DABs has been proposed as a process to include DABs' awards in the National Framework of



Qualifications. Discussions are underway with the various providers and it is intended that the protocol process will be concluded in the coming months.

#### Listed Awarding Bodies (LABs)

The Board noted that a new staff member had been assigned to this project and legal advice had been sought on particular phrasing in the legislation related to the area.

The Board acknowledged the sense of progress and momentum of the new functions. A Board Member suggested that Keith Moynes should be invited to attend an upcoming Board Meeting.

### **10. STRATEGIC PLANNING**

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

#### 10.1. Corporate Plan 2021

The Board noted the Quarter 3 Progress Report for the 2021 Corporate Plan.

#### 10.2. Development of Strategy Statement 2022-2024

The Board noted the draft Statement of Strategy 2022-2024.

The Board noted that an all-staff Strategy Session had been held on 7 September. The Board noted that the outcomes and discussions from that session had fed into the Values Statement within the Statement of Strategy. The Board expressed its satisfaction at the ownership of staff of the Strategy and its associated values.

The Board also noted that the Executive had, on 13 September, received the observations of the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Minister for Education as well as the Ministers of State within those Departments. Work on incorporating those observations into the draft Statement had since been completed.

The Board **approved** the Statement of Strategy. Both the Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, and the Chief Executive thanked Board Members and staff for their input and assistance in developing the new Strategy.

The Board noted that the next phase is work on the design and publication of the Statement. To assist in the organisation's sustainability efforts, the main Statement will be published electronically only and the colour branding scheme will mirror the new QQI website.

The Board noted that the Chief Executive is now reviewing the organisational structure to see how best to deliver on the Strategy.

### 10.3. Consultation Framework and Terms of Reference (IQQF)

#### Consultation Framework

The Board noted that as the original Consultative Forum was established in 2013, the Executive considered that it was an appropriate time for a review of its consultation process. It was also considered appropriate to look at the development of the next phase in how QQI consults, to assist in delivering both the next Strategy and the next round of policy development arising from the new legislative functions. It was noted that the project proposed to build on the current framework.

The Board noted that the proposed new Framework would be underpinned by eight key principles and questions which should be considered prior to a consultation process. This enables colleagues across the organisation to apply a consistent and coordinated approach to consultations.

#### Terms of Reference

The Board noted the draft Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Irish Quality and Qualifications Forum (IQQF), a new QQI consultation initiative. The Executive considers the establishment of the IQQF to be an important platform for national discussions on quality and qualifications issues. It is envisaged that it will explore a range of topics and establish innovative strategic thinking groups. The Board noted that the Forum is a way of QQI adapting and evolving to meet its needs for collaboration and cooperation. The Executive expects to form working groups and subgroups from its membership which would explore some of the prioritised themes from the new Strategy and bring the areas of quality assurance and qualification closer together. The Board noted that the expected outcomes may be similar to that of the involvement of the current Working Group on the Future of FET Qualifications and its input into

*The Evaluation of the Comparability of the Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate Qualifications (Level 6) Report.*

The Board noted that the Executive sees and is seeking new opportunities to link with the new Departmental units on events and initiatives and also wishes to explore more ways of working with professional bodies.

The Board noted that the paper on the Consultation Framework had been considered by the PSC at its September meeting and good feedback had been received from Committee Members. There had been discussion on how best to explore ways to engage learners in QQI's consultation process and to think about learners in broader terms, not just Leaving Certificate students. It was also suggested that it was key to engage the correct officer within providers when publicising consultation processes. These opportunities to input often get lost in internal provider systems. The Board noted that the initiatives were welcomed by the PSC.

A Board Member suggested greater consideration should be given to community education when working on learner engagement. The Board noted that a lot of work had been done in building learner representation capacity in ETBs and on review panels but this area also needed to be strengthened in QQI's consultation processes.

The Executive noted the point. The Board noted that the paper is still an internal draft document and the Executive is working on feedback and wishes to get the balance right. It was noted that once the final version is agreed internally, work will commence on putting the new Framework in place.

#### **11. BOARD MEETS WITHOUT THE EXECUTIVE PRESENT**

The Board discussed the Strategy Statement 2022-2024 and how best to support the Executive in ensuring that its priorities were implemented through the annual Corporate Plans. The Chair also updated the Board on the plans for CEO PMDS.

## 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. The Board noted that the project had commenced in 2020 with a tender process and the successful tender applicant was appointed. Since then, the company has undertaken background work, brand research and held discussions with key internal and external stakeholders. A review of the feedback contained in the Stakeholder Engagement Survey carried out in 2020 was also incorporated. It was noted that a content audit was completed as well as identifying any information gaps carrying over from the current website. For its part, the Executive had established a steering group and a working group consisting of representatives of all internal business units and this group was focusing on developing user focused content in plain English.

The Board noted that the new site design was agreed in May and development work had been continuing in the intervening period with the upload of new content taking place over the last 4-6 weeks. The next stage in the process is sharing the test site with the internal working group, translation of the sections of the site (those that are more static) into Irish and a review by an external copy writer as well as user scenario testing. The Executive hopes to be able to share the test site shortly and confirmed that the project is on track for the website to go live by the end of November 2021. The Board raised a number of questions in relation to some of the features and functionality such as the search engine facility which the Executive clarified.

A Board Member requested an overview of website analytics for the current website and to schedule a comparison to be presented to the Board in a year's time.

### 12.2. Media Mentions

The Board noted the media mentions published since the June 2021 Board Meeting.

### 13. ITEMS FOR NOTING

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

#### 13.1. Approvals and Reviews Committee (ARC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Approvals and Reviews Committee held on 20 May 2021.

#### 13.2. Policies and Standards Committee (PSC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Policies and Standards Committee held on 14 June 2021.

#### 13.3. QQI Policy Stocktake and Roadmap, June 2021

The Board noted the Policy Stocktake and Roadmap (June 2021) which had been considered by the PSC at their June meeting.

#### 13.4. Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC)

The Board noted the reports of the meetings of the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee held on 24 June and 15 July 2021.

#### 13.5. Rolling Board Agenda 2021

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

### 14. BUDGET AND FINANCE

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

#### 14.1. Management Accounts to 31 July 2021

The Board noted the Management Accounts for the seven months to 31 July 2021. The Board noted that there were no issues in the accounts that currently give rise for concern. It was noted that a clearer picture of the Certification income for 2021 and its comparison to previous years would be available following the October period. The Executive indicated that it is currently not expecting a deficit at year end.

#### 14.2. Annual Financial Statements 2020

The Board noted the final audited Annual Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2020. It was noted that the audit had been completed earlier in the calendar year than normal. As there were no material changes, the Board **approved**, subject to a minor amendment, the Annual Financial Statements 2020 for signing by the Chairperson and the Chief Executive.

#### 14.3. Initial Outline Budget 2022

The Board noted an initial outline Budget for 2022 which was drafted based on current assumptions and which took a conservative stance on the financial year ahead. The initial opinion of the Executive is that 2022 is likely to generate a small deficit. The Board again discussed the large pension liability which QQI carries and which was raised again with the Department during the recent briefing meeting with the new Assistant Secretary.

### 15. **AUDIT AND RISK**

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

#### 15.1. Report of Audit and Risk Committee Meeting

The Board noted a draft report of the Audit and Risk Committee Meeting held on 2 June 2021. The Board noted that the Committee had, under its Risk Management update, discussed academic integrity and any possible impact of same on the perception of QQI as a regulatory body and its potential as a reputational risk.

#### 15.2. Financial Policies

The Board **approved** the draft Financial Policies and noted that associated procedures/standard operating procedures for the Unit were under revision.

#### 15.3. 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:

- Tertiary Education Monitoring and Review Cycle, and

- Deloitte’s proposed Outsourced Internal Audits for 2021.

The Board noted that the Internal Audits scheduled for early 2022 included a review of Data Protection and noted that the schedule can be adjusted if required.

#### 15.4. Management Assurances Framework

The Board noted that one of the recommendations of the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies 2016, was the establishment of a Management Assurances Framework. The Board noted that the Executive had been working on its Framework for some time, but its approval and rollout had been delayed by Covid-19. The Framework had recently been reviewed and approved by the EMT.

The Board **approved** the Management Assurances Framework and noted that the Executive will now brief Heads and Managers on the system prior to its rollout before year end.

The Board noted that the Framework would evolve over time following the transition period.

#### 15.5. High Level Review of Top Five Risks

The Board noted that one recommendation arising from the External Review of the Board and its Committee, which was carried out in late 2020, was that the Board should dedicate some time to consideration of the top five Strategic Risks facing QQI, taking each in turn in a high-level discussion, over successive meetings.

The Executive had deferred presenting this item to the Board for a number of meetings to allow sufficient time for consideration and development of the new Strategy. Following the finalisation of the drafting of the Strategy, the Executive was now presenting this item to the Board, commencing with Risk QQI-R14:

*Risk that QQI could run short of funds in the coming 15-month period due to the variable & fluctuating nature of QQI income and costs. This may result in an inability to pay suppliers/staff or require additional funding/facility at short notice.*

The Board discussed and **agreed** that the risk in question should remain in the Top Five Risks. It noted the strong controls system in place including an early warning system with the Department, that the EMT has regular financial updates and budgets are flagged at both EMT and Project Steering Group level.

The Board noted that nothing has changed since the risk was originally included/placed in the Top Five Risks and it is likely to remain there until there is agreement of and embedding of the new funding model.

## 16. GOVERNANCE

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

### 16.1. External Review of Board and its Committees

The Board noted that the Executive would be in contact with members in the coming weeks with regards to a Skills Audit.

### 16.2. Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies, 2016

Consideration of this item was deferred to the November 2021 Board Meeting.

*Megan O'Connor withdrew from the meeting during consideration of this item.*

### 16.3. Committee Members/Appointments

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

- Dr. Kate Cullen to the Audit and Risk Committee,
- Ms. Carol Hanney and Mr. Gerry O'Sullivan to the Approvals and Reviews Committee and
- Dr. Peter Rigney to the Policies and Standards Committee.

The Board also **approved** the appointment of Megan O'Connor, Vice-President of Academic Affairs, USI to the ARC. Ms. O'Connor replaces Kevin McStravock, the previous USI representative on the Board and the ARC. The Board **approved** the appointment of Laura Flynn, Manager, Stakeholder Engagement and Communications Division, QQI as a member of and Key Executive of the ARC. Ms. Flynn replaces the current Key Executive and member,



Colette Harrison, Manager of Awards and Certification, QQI, who retires in September. The Board expressed its best wishes to Ms. Harrison in her retirement.

The Board **extended** the PSC membership of Dr. Bryan Fields to 31 December 2021.

The Board noted that following the recent round of staff recruitment, the Executive would consider some changes to the membership of the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC). An update would be provided to the Board at a future meeting.

## **17. REVIEWS**

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

### **17.1. ENQA Review 2019**

Consideration of this item was deferred to the November Board Meeting.

## **18. DRAFT BOARD AGENDA**

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

The Board noted the draft Agenda for the next Board Meeting. The Board noted that the Chief Executive of SOLAS is available to attend the Board Meeting on 26 November for the annual attendance under the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding between the two bodies.

It was noted that the matter of Strategic Planning and the Board exploring how best to translate the new strategy into business programmes had been discussed during the non-Executive session earlier in the meeting. The Chairperson undertook to discuss the matter separately with the Executive and it was suggested that a separate Board session may be required.

## **19. NEXT MEETING**

The Board noted that the next meeting is scheduled to take place on Friday, 26 November 2021, beginning at 10:00 a.m. The Board noted that the meeting may be held in a face-to-face setting depending on the public health guidelines in place at the time.

**20. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

Annual Chairpersons' Meeting

The Board noted that the Annual Chairpersons' Meeting had not been held in the past year to allow the two new Committee Chairs time to adjust to their new roles. It was noted that arrangements would be made to schedule the next meeting for late 2021 or early 2022.

The Chairperson thanked everyone for their participation and contributions.

**THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS OF THE MEETING.**