

31st Meeting of the Policies and Standards Committee

15 November 2021 from 10:00 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
Alan Power – National Expert
Hannah McGee – National Expert
Niamh O'Reilly - Board Member
Achim Hopbach, International Expert
Peter Rigney – National Expert

In attendance: Peter Cullen – Head of Research and Innovation (QQI Key Executive for the PSC)
Ann Graves - QQI Secretary
Padraig Walsh, CE QQI (Item 6.2)
Laura Flynn, QQI (Item 7.1)
Sue Hackett, QQI (Item 11.2)

The Chair opened the meeting and welcomed Peter Rigney as a new member of the Committee.

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 30th Meeting, 20th September 2021, noted.

The Committee **APPROVED** the minutes which can be 'pp' signed in the Covid-19 context.

3 Matters arising from the minutes of previous meetings.

There were no matters arising.

4 Introduction – Peter Rigney

The Chair welcomed Peter Rigney as a new member of the Committee and invited him to introduce himself to the members of the PSC.

Dr. Peter Rigney is a graduate of TCD and a research associate in the Centre for Contemporary History. He was Industrial Officer of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions from 1980 to 2020. He held a number of portfolios including education, research, social policy and an ongoing shared brief on inter union disputes and industrial relations.

The members of the PSC welcomed Peter and look forward to working with him in the future.

5 Standards – review and development

Reactivation of Forestry Forwarder Award Standards. The PSC noted the document circulated

The Executive advised that QQI had received a request from Teagasc to reactivate six minor awards in the discipline of forestry:

These awards were originally included in the validation programmes held by Teagasc:
Advanced Certificate in Forestry and Certificate in Forestry

QQI annually deactivates awards that are unused or have low annual certification for the previous three years. QQI publishes the list of awards that meet these criteria and allow a period of not less than 90 days to facilitate retention requests from interested parties. QQI convenes a panel to consider these requests. The panel includes the Directors of Qualifications and representatives from the Validation, Certification and Standards units. Their decision results in a final list published on the QQI website. The deactivation action is taken annually in the month of December.

Teagasc made the case that *‘there are no viable alternatives to these awards for the Irish Context. NPTC City and Guild awards are the nearest but refer to UK legislation, not applicable in Ireland.*

In terms of the forestry related awards, forestry is a small but important sector, and is expected to gain importance as climate change becomes more acknowledged and the climate change debate gathers momentum. Government and EU policy will dictate that the forestry industry will play a much more important role in land use in coming years’

Teagasc who have had ongoing industry and stakeholder meetings which indicated that there is an interest and an urgent need to ensure that there are sufficient trained operators to sustain the forestry in Ireland. Teagasc are now in a position to offer the Forestry Forwarder Operations programme before the end of 2021, provided that the award can band requested that it and the other forestry related awards be reinstated.

Teagasc noted that *‘these modules are adapted for Ireland and the Irish forestry industry. The industry needs trained operators of this expensive equipment who understand;*

- *how to select trees for thinning for maximum profit*
- *how to clear fell safely, efficiently and to maximise timber volume*
- *how to operate forwarder machines to achieve maximum output safely’*

It has been the practice of QQI to facilitate providers with reactivation where unexpected demand has occurred. QQI undertook internal checks to ensure that this proposal was in keeping with our procedures. The agreement to reinstate the listed forestry awards was reached following internal discussions across relevant departments within QQI.

The note was presented to the PSC to outline the case made by Teagasc and the decision made by QQI.

The PSC NOTED the reactivation of the forestry awards.

6 Strategic Approach

6.1 Chair’s Report from the Board

The Chair presented a report from the meeting of the Board.

The Chair noted that there had been a presentation on Europass which had been set up in 2004 but had never really gained traction in Ireland but that a new approach includes considerable changes which aim to offer enhanced mobility across the EU. The Europass centre is hosted by QQI in Ireland and managed by the EU Commission.

The Chair noted that the Board had considered the QQI strategy and that this would be discussed in presentation by the CE of QQI later in the agenda.

The Chair noted that QQI continues to be involved in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science working arrangements in response to Covid19. QQI maintains ongoing working arrangement as part of the Government's 'Covid'19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 – the Path Ahead', the Minister participates in the meetings which are held regularly and are tasked to consider among other things a phased return to offices. Discussions around managing practice placements for students enrolled in professionally accredited programmes that prepare them for professional practice, mainly in health and social care areas continue to be discussed.

The Chair outlined the statistics for 2021 in relation to certification, validation and reengagement.

In relation to audit and risk, the Chair advised that consultants will be appointed to redevelop the Qualifax website, which needs to be robust, and the content; and that a full network and device scan of QQI networks took place on the advice of National Cyber Security Centre but no issues of concern had been identified; however, security is constantly being reviewed and a cyber awareness programme is being rolled out to all staff.

6.2 QQI Strategy

The QQI Chief Executive (CE) presented an update to the PSC on the QQI Strategy. He advised the Committee that the strategy had been approved by the Board in September and while it has to be signed off by the Minister that the feedback has been favourable. He outlined the four priorities of the plan:

- Information – better information and opportunities for learners
- Protection – implementing strengthened regulation to protect learners
- Development – driving and stimulating provider development and
- Insight – publishing authoritative analysis and insight

and indicated that the key enablers are partnership – strengthening strategic partnerships to effect system change and excellence – and building organisational excellence. The CE noted that recent recruitment, promotion and engagement and the manner in which QQI had responded to change due to COVID-19 contributed to organisational excellence. He further noted that a restructuring of the QQI executive would align with the new strategic objectives and contribute to what QQI can deliver and is part of the strategy development process. QQI will continue to contribute both nationally and internationally.

The PSC welcomed the strategy and noted the opportunities to focus and concentrate efforts where the organisation needs to. The Committee also noted the value of Qualifax and the IRQ and how they are key resources particularly for the guidance community, the key value of Qualifax is that it is sector (public, private, FE, HE, Apprenticeship, Training) neutral and comprehensive.. The PSC noted the difficulties in dealing with essay mills and how assessment design is important particularly with the rise in cheating as a result of the shift to more remote learning, QQI has a role in promoting

academic integrity and combatting those who facilitate contract cheating; prevention is better than cure and assessment can help.

The PSC noted the reference to the Scottish review of tertiary education and how it led to increased learner expectations and that the idea of merging the VEC's in Ireland had travelled from Scotland. The committee further noted the increased expectations of learners—especially those who are disadvantaged and the importance of ensuring that learners have better quality information and how flexible learning pathways would be. The committee suggested that a strategic policy on information could be considered. QQI will analyse information produced by institutions.

The PSC acknowledged the development of the QQI Strategy, the extensive consultation and formulation of how QQI will lead into the Future and the large contribution QQI has to make on assessment. QQI envisages a closer link between QQI standards and validation.

7 PSC Reflection

7.1 Consultation Framework

The PSC noted the Consultation Framework document circulated by the executive which had been amended based on feedback from the September '21 meeting of the PSC. There had been increased engagement with stakeholders including with learners and Aontas in particular and a significant change to the principles to guiding criteria.

It was agreed that amendments included in the explanatory memorandum to the PSC would be addressed and circulated to the members of the committee. Following discussion an additional amendment was agreed in relation to 'Learners' in the report, including a definition. This will also be circulated to members of the PSC.

8 Policy and Guidelines – review and development

8.1 Towards Policy and Policy Development

The executive gave a verbal report on the need to develop policy for policy development, to guide and produce coherent proportionate policy, this once developed will be a companion to the Consultation Framework. There is a need for QQI to have a discussion at executive level and this will take place following the current restructuring within the organisation. The policy will look at a systematic approach, including criteria, for the PSC to consider policy presented to them. How policy is developed and why. The paper will also look at how policy and strategy work together and the connections between both.

The executive will progress with internal discussions and draft an internal paper as a companion to the Framework Consultation document by March.

8.2 Policy Review Schedule - No Business

8.3 Approval of minor modifications - No Business

8.4 Green Papers - No Business

8.5 White Papers - No Business

- 8.6 **Final Decision on Guidelines - No Business**
- 8.7 **Policy Advice - No Business**
- 9 **Procedures relevant to the PSC's functions - No Business**
- 10 **Notable new publications since the last PSC Meeting**

[QQI early exploration into Micro-credentials in Higher 2014-2020.pdf](#)

11 **Any Other Business**

11.1 **Bryan Fields Valediction**

Bryan Fields noted that he felt incredibly lucky to have been a member of the PSC, that time had gone so fast and he had plenty of opportunity, his voice had been listened to and he welcomed that. He noted the respect and professionalism he had been afforded and that the PSC should be proud of the way the members dealt with the matters before them and particularly measures that were put in place to look after learners.

He noted the key challenges and key opportunities in the past and those in the future. He acknowledged the work of the QQI staff and noted that he will be back as a learner himself. He thanked the members of the committee.

The Chair and members of the committee and QQI executive thanked Bryan for all the work he had done as a member of the committee and acknowledged the value of his input and wished him the best for the future.

11.2 **E-Proctoring Report**

The PSC noted the report, E-proctoring in theory and practice circulated by the executive, which is a limited circulation. The report, in draft form as circulated, is an outcome of a review commissioned by QQI and carried out by an independent researcher, Professor Paul Giller, supported by QQI staff, to investigate the area of remote e-proctoring, present findings and make some recommendations, for the higher education sector in Ireland. This initiative, although independent of the National Academic Integrity Network, emanated from their work.

Remote e-proctoring was an established practice in some specific contexts prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, with the onset of the pandemic and the ensuing need to find alternative assessment procedures, e-proctoring became a very topical issue and one which has been discussed, trialled and implemented in many contexts both nationally and internationally in an attempt to provide a possible solution to the issue of reliable and secure exam proctoring for online assessment. Professor Giller's report, reviewing the literature, identifying the various approaches taken and highlighting the advantages and constraints inherent to e-proctoring is intended to act as a welcome advisory resource for policy-makers, education developers and others in institutions in Ireland. Professor Giller also describes both some successful and less successful case studies and analyses some possible reasons for these outcomes. The report will be published on the QQI website before the year end.

11.3 **Report on the 'Evaluation of the comparability of the Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate qualifications'** (limited circulation report)

The PSC noted the report circulated by the executive. The report is being disseminated and socialised on a phased basis.

The executive noted that work had been carried out by Ecctis (formerly responsible for UK Naric pre Brexit) and overseen by a Stakeholder Steering Group (SSG) comprising key stakeholders. The SSG contributed to decisions on how the project was undertaken. The SSG is happy with the project and the way it was handled.

The outcomes of the report are subtle and while there is a difference in the profile of the AC and HC qualifications as implemented, they were both found to be at the NFQ Level as implemented (Level 6).

The executive noted that the first release of the report is to the SSG organisations and feedback will be collated.

Publication of this report marks the completion of the first phase of the Level 6 project, the second phase will gather feedback from stakeholders on its implications.

The report was co-funded by Solas and HEA and discussions will take place with both these organisations and the Department to agree next steps.

Next meeting – Schedule of meetings for 2022 to be circulated by the executive

Meeting ended