

Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Note of the seventy seventh Meeting of the Authority (The Board) which took place on Monday, 10 February 2025 at 10:30 a.m. in the Boardroom, QQI Offices, 26/27 Denzille Lane, Dublin 2.

Present:

- Prof. Irene Sheridan (Chair)
- Dr. Pádraig Walsh (Chief Executive)
- Ms. Cliona Curley (Secretary)
- Ms. Marianne Doyle
- Dr. Sean Duignan
- Dr. Sharon Feeney
- Mr. Blake Hodkinson
- Mr. Kevin McStravock
- Ms. Anne Naughton
- Mr. Bryan O'Mahony (attended via MS Teams)
- Ms. Maria Ward

Apologies: None

In attendance:

- Ms. Caitríona Lawless (Recording Secretary)
- Mr. Liam Butler (Item 9)
- Mr. Eamonn Collins (Item 15)
- Mr. Andrew Brownlee (Item 1, attended via MS Teams)

INTRODUCTION

The Chairperson welcomed Members to the meeting.

The Chairperson opened the meeting by acknowledging the passing of Dr. Fiona Maloney, Director of the National Tertiary Office (NTO), who had presented to the Board at its meeting on 14 June last. The Board expressed its condolences to Dr. Maloney's family, friends and colleagues.

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

1. PRESENTATION BY MR. ANDREW BROWNLEE, SOLAS

As one of the commitments contained in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between QQI and SOLAS, Mr. Andrew Brownlee, Chief Executive of SOLAS, delivered a presentation to the Board. The presentation was followed by a questions and answers session. Among the topics mentioned during the discussion were areas such as the development of the next Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2025-2029, the consultation process for which had opened the previous week, Apprenticeships and the FET sector's use of micro-credentials.

Mr. Brownlee paid tribute to Dr. Pdraig Walsh in advance of his retirement at the end of March, noting their close working relationship which had been built over the previous seven years. In that time, QQI and SOLAS had worked together to build an integrated FET system focused on quality.

The Chief Executive thanked Mr. Brownlee for the work which SOLAS and QQI have completed together. The Board noted the FET Strategy Implementation Steering Group which also included the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), had achieved a significant amount of work since its establishment in 2021. The focus for the sector is now on the next FET Strategy.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, thanked Mr. Brownlee for his attendance and contribution, noting that the Board was conscious of the relationship between the two organisations and what has been achieved over the last number of years.

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 2 December 2024 were **confirmed** and signed.

4. NOTE OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETING

The Board **approved** the **Note of the Meeting of 2 December 2024** 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.

5.2. Craft Apprenticeships

The Board noted a verbal update provided by the Chief Executive on a specific apprenticeship matter, a matter which the Board had been originally apprised of at its meeting on 2 December.

The Executive confirmed that the Board would be kept informed.

6. CEO REPORT

The Board noted the **CEO Report**.

6.1. CEO Report

In addition to the CEO Report circulated, the Chief Executive provided Members with a verbal update on a number of recent activities. The Board noted that the Cinnte Review process for the remaining Technological Universities was nearing completion as were the reviews of the four largest independent private HE providers. It was noted that the Executive was satisfied that progress with the reviews of this sector had been made, as it had been 12-13 years since this category of provider had been reviewed due to the amalgamation process, the reviews were then carried out by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), one of the legacy bodies. The Board noted that the Executive was keen to ensure that there would be a shorter review cycle in place in the future.

The Board noted that the assessment of the first application for validation of a Joint Programme under the European approach had taken place during the last week of January.

The Board noted that the Chief Executive had presented to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) conference in the United States which also took place in the final week of January and a link to the presentation would be circulated to Board Members once available. It

was noted that the participants in the conference were particularly interested in the area of micro-credentials in Ireland.

7. STRATEGIC PLANNING

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

7.1. Corporate Plan 2024

The Board noted the progress report covering Quarters 1-4 of the Corporate Plan 2024. The Board noted that while this was the last plan to feature under the previous Statement of Strategy which covered the period 2022-2024, any deliverables remaining open at year end, would be carried forward and included in the Corporate Plan for 2025.

The Board noted that one of the features introduced to the planning process for the development of the Corporate Plan 2025 is a greater emphasis on multi-year planning. The Board noted that the items which are being carried forward are being progressed and, in many instances, the delays were due to external dependencies.

7.2. Corporate Plan 2025

The Board noted that, as outlined at its meeting on 2 December, the initial draft Corporate Plan 2025 had been reviewed by the Executive Management Team (EMT) in terms of finance and human resource requirements as well as cross sectional impacts on areas such as Communications, ICT, etc. The Executive was endeavouring to co-ordinate inhouse resources in a more strategic way. The Board noted the highlighted changes, additions and deletions to the revised plan. A Board Member raised the matter of the upcoming Irish Presidency of the European Union which will take place in Quarters 3 and 4, 2026. The Board noted that the matter had already been briefly discussed with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) at the PDA Review Meeting held on 5 February.

It was noted that the Corporate Plan reflects the new Statement of Strategy 2025-2027 and supports the outcomes the organisation wishes to achieve in that period.

The Board **approved** the revised Corporate Plan 2025.

8. ENGAGEMENT WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE (DFHERIS)

The Board noted documents relating to **Engagement with DFHERIS**.

8.1. Performance Delivery Agreement (PDA)

The Board noted that a Quarter 4, 2024/Quarter 1, 2025 PDA Review Meeting had taken place between QQI and DFHERIS on 5 February. The Assistant Secretary and members of the Higher Education Governance and Quality Unit from the Department and the Executive Management Team (EMT) from QQI attended the meeting. The Board noted that the Department has already commenced a programme of work to support elements of the Irish Presidency of the European Union which would take place during the latter half of 2026. It was noted that the Executive was interested in exploring some particular areas of work in support of the EU Presidency. The Executive confirmed that QQI would assist the Department in its EU Presidency activities.

The Board noted that the Executive had received feedback at the meeting from the Department on the draft PDA for 2025 and both parties were happy to move forward with the agreement.

8.2. Funding Model

The Board noted a verbal update on the Funding Model. The Board noted that, on foot of staff changes in the Higher Education Governance and Quality Unit in the Department, the Executive had been requested to brief them on the Funding Model with a view to determining further action. It was noted that there had been an increase in the State Grant allocation for 2025. The Board also noted that there had been no progress on the approval of the remaining fees and charges under consideration by the Department.

8.3. Amended Legislation Programme

Learner Protection Fund (LPF)

The Board noted a verbal update on the Learner Protection Fund which had also been discussed at the PDA review meeting. The Board noted that a DFHERIS-led engagement with stakeholders on the LPF had commenced.

The Board noted that the Department had recently appointed Grant Thornton to carry out the stakeholder engagement process. The Executive confirmed that a meeting had been scheduled between QQI and Grant Thornton for 11 February.

It was noted that the Executive is continuing to provide weekly seminars for applicants undergoing the TrustEd process.

The Board noted that the first annual report for the Learner Protection Fund (LPF) for 2024 must be completed and submitted to the Minister by 31 March 2025. This report must be submitted despite the Fund being empty. An incorporeal meeting would be arranged by the Executive to consider the report.

9. BUDGET AND FINANCE

The Board noted documents relating to **Budget and Finance**.

9.1. Management Accounts

The Board noted the Management Accounts for the twelve-months to 31 December 2024. The Board noted that the organisation had ended the financial year with a small surplus.

The Board noted the letter of 16 January 2025 from the Principal Officer of the Higher Education – Governance and Quality unit in DFHERIS, outlining the State Grant allocation for 2025. The Board noted that, with the additional funding, the Executive is now more confident in its ability to deliver on the Corporate Plan for 2025.

It was noted that the organisation will still be encountering reductions to part of its fee income over the coming years so the current increase will not be a permanent solution to the ongoing funding issues for the organisation.

9.2. Financial Statements 2024

The Board noted the draft unaudited Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2024. The Board noted that there had been a slight increase in expenditure of approximately €20,000 since the draft presented was finalised on 17 January. The Board also noted that the

Executive had, on 10 February, received a letter from the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) notifying the Executive of the commencement of the audit for the financial year 2024.

The Board **approved** the draft Financial Statements for 2024, subject to audit by the C&AG and there being no material changes. It was noted that the Financial Statements would be re-presented to the Board for approval following completion of the audit.

9.3. Protection of Enrolled Learners Bank Accounts

The Board noted that establishment of the Learner Protection Fund would require the Executive to open new bank accounts specifically for the fund. The Board **approved** the request and completed the relevant paperwork.

9.4. Budget 2025

The Board recalled that an initial draft Budget for 2025 had been presented to the Board at its meeting on 2 December 2024 at which point the Board had noted the document. Now following the confirmation of an increase to the State Grant allocation for 2025, the Executive had revisited the initial draft Budget (which had been predicting a significant deficit for the year) and revised it based on the new allocation. The Board noted that planned retirements during 2025 would have an impact on the payroll budget. The Board confirmed that it was satisfied with the document presented and **approved** the revised Budget for 2025.

10. BOARD MEETS WITHOUT THE EXECUTIVE PRESENT

Among other matters the Board considered the retirement of the Chief Executive and the current funding situation.

11. COMPREHENSIVE POLICY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

The Board noted documents relating to the **Comprehensive Policy Development Programme**.

11.1. Titling Convention

The Board noted the Report on QQI's consultation with Designated Awarding Bodies (DABs) on the Titling of Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental classes of awards with a recommendation to awarding bodies. It was noted that the Executive had been unable to

reach a general consensus among the DABs on the titling convention. The Executive, therefore, was issuing a recommendation instead. The Board noted that the matter had also been considered and discussed by the Policies and Standards Committee (PSC). The Board noted the report and **approved** the recommendation that all designated awarding bodies abide by the modified version of the proposed convention on higher education minor, special purpose and supplemental awards stems which were outlined in the report.

12. GOVERNANCE

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

12.1. Committee Members/Appointments

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

- Dr. Elaine Boyd to the Approvals and Reviews Committee (ARC) and
- Sandra Campbell to the Policies and Standards Committee.

The Board also **approved** extensions of one year to the memberships of the following ARC members:

- Ronan O’Loughlin,
- Gerry O’Sullivan and
- Prof. Fiona Farr.

The Board noted the appointment of Roisín Morris-Drennan to the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC).

12.2. Protected Disclosures

The Board noted and **approved** the

- Annual Report of Protected Disclosures Statistics, 2024 – Internal Reports made under Section 6 of the Act and
- Annual Report of Protected Disclosures Statistics, 2024 – External Reports made or transmitted under Sections 7, 7A, 10C and 10D of the Act

for submission to the Minister for Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform by 1 March.

12.3. External Review of Board and Committee Performance

The Board noted a verbal update from the Executive on the External Review of Board and Committee Performance. The Board noted that this review was currently running behind schedule.

13. **AUDIT AND RISK**

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

The Board noted a verbal overview of the work of the Audit and Risk Committee provided by the Chairperson of the Committee together with a verbal update on the meeting of the Audit and Risk Committee which took place on 27 January 2025. It was noted that the Committee had deferred discussion on the Internal Audit cycle for the next three years pending receipt of the schedule of audits by our external partner. Once received it will be combined with the proposed work of the QQI Internal Auditor and presented to the Committee for consideration and subsequently presented to the Board for approval. The Board can adjust the cycle at any point to change or add to the sequence of audits proposed in light of emerging needs or changes. It is anticipated that the 3-year Internal Audit cycle will be brought to the April meeting.

13.1 System of Internal Controls (SIC)

The Board noted that as the Review of the System of Internal Controls for 2024 had not been completed by the date of the Audit and Risk Committee Meeting, it had since been considered incorporeally by the Committee. It was noted that there had been no issues of concern raised in the course of the review, with three minor recommendations arising.

The Board **approved** the Review of the System of Internal Controls for the year ended 31 December 2024 together with the Management Assurance Statements covering 2024.

13.2 Risk Management

The Board considered and **approved** the four principal risks for the year ended 31 December 2024 for inclusion in the Annual Report for 2024.

13.3 Disaster Recovery/Business Continuity

The Board noted a redacted copy of the Disaster Recovery Business Continuity Plan. The Board acknowledged the sense of comfort which the plan provides and noted all the areas covered

within the document which was reviewed on a regular basis. The Executive confirmed that it had received some helpful feedback on the plan from the Audit and Risk Committee which would be incorporated in future updates.

13.4 Internal Audit Report

The Board considered and **approved** the following Internal Audit Report:

- Value for Money (Insurance).

13.5 Minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee

The Board noted the Minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee Meeting held on 15 November 2024.

14. ITEMS FOR NOTING

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

14.1. Focus on the Audit and Risk Committee

This was discussed under Item 13 above.

14.2 Policies and Standards Committee

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Policies and Standards Committee held on 24 June 2024.

14.3. Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee held on 23 August 2024.

14.4. Approvals and Reviews Committee

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Approvals and Reviews Committee held on 19 September 2024.

14.5 Programmes and Awards Executive Committee

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee held on 27 November 2024.

14.6 Rolling Board Agenda

The Board noted an update on the Rolling Board Agenda for 2025.

15. ORGANISATION AND HUMAN RESOURCES

The Board noted documents relating to **Organisation and Human Resources**.

15.1 Human Resources

The Board noted a verbal update on Human Resources. The Board noted that the Senior Manager, Human and Physical Resources would be retiring with effect from 31 March 2025. As it was his final attendance at a Board Meeting, the Chairperson recognised his contribution to this and previous Boards.

The Board noted a consequential vacancy following a recent secondment – an internal competition was underway to fill the post for the period concerned.

15.2 Organisational Resources

The Board noted an update on the lease extension for 26/27 Denzille Lane.

15.3 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

The Board recalled that the organisation's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policy had been noted by the Board at the end of 2023. It was noted that the related Action Plan was now in place and it contained six pillars and 18 actions. The EDI action plan had been developed with input and consultation from staff and internal focus groups and contained actions such as appropriate training and supports for staff.

The Board noted that the Policies and Standards Committee will play a supporting role in this area as work to embed EDI in QQI's policies and standards is progressed.

The Board noted and welcomed the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion plan.

The Chief Executive took the opportunity to thank the Senior Manager, Human and Physical Resources on behalf of the Board and the organisation for his significant contribution to QQI.

The Chief Executive also paid tribute to the Manager of the Chief Executive's Office, who was retiring in April and had served as Acting Board Secretary in 2017. The Board noted the appreciations expressed.

16. REVIEWS

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

The Board noted the following Cinnte Review Report:

- Dublin Business School (DBS).

17. COMMUNICATIONS

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

17.1. Media Mentions

The Board noted media mentions covering the period 17 October 2024 to 19 January 2025.

The Board also noted a report on QQI's Social Media statistics covering the period 7 November 2024 to 19 January 2025 and requested that the Executive revisit the format of the report to make it more user friendly.

18. DRAFT BOARD AGENDA

The Board noted the **Draft April 2025 Board Agenda**.

The Board noted that the April meeting had been moved from its original date to 28 April. The Board also suggested two additional topics for future presentations.

19. NEXT MEETING

The Board noted the next scheduled meeting would take place on Monday, 28 April 2025.

20. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Chairperson paid tribute to Padraig Walsh on the occasion of his last meeting as Chief Executive and QQI Board Member and expressed appreciation for his commitment and dedication to QQI over the last 12 years.

The Chief Executive thanked the Chairperson and the Board for its support and that of his management team. He stated that it had been a real privilege to work in the public sector, in education and training and with the staff he had worked with. He acknowledged the support of his colleagues he had worked with over the last 12 years and the work that has been achieved since the amalgamation.

The Chairperson thanked everyone for their participation and contributions.

THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS OF THE MEETING.