

Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Note of the seventieth Meeting of the Authority (The Board) which took place on Monday, 4 December 2023 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
- Ms. Maria Ward

Apologies: None

In attendance:

- Ms. Caitriona Lawless (Recording Secretary)
- Mr. Andrew Brownlee (Item 1)
- Ms. Órla Barry (Item 7)
- Mr. Liam Butler (Item 11)
- Dr. Anna Murphy (Items 8 and 12)

INTRODUCTION

The Chairperson welcomed Members to the meeting.

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

1. PRESENTATION BY 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. The discussion touched on topics such as apprenticeships, the recent cycle of reviews of the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and priorities for the Further Education and Training (FET) sector over the coming year(s). The Board noted that the microcredential/microqualification development process for FET had been streamlined following work and collaboration between the two organisations.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, thanked Mr. Brownlee for his attendance and contribution to the meeting.

A short discussion followed between Board Members on the potential impact of devolved responsibility to the sector.

The Board discussed some areas and likely impacts which the Executive should be cognisant of when developing the next Statement of Strategy. It was suggested identification of the priorities which the organisation wishes to achieve through the Strategy and the annual Performance Delivery Agreement (PDA) with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) will be a key part of the development process for the next Statement of Strategy.

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 22 September 2023 were **confirmed** and signed.

4. NOTE OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETING

The Board **approved** the **Note of the Meeting of 22 September 2023** 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. It was also noted that a number of actions had featured on the Tracker for a considerable length of time and are in the main, related to the Funding Model.

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 some general updates on developments which had occurred since the documents for the meeting were circulated. These updates included the October Certification figures and confirmation that the first award to be validated under the Broad Standards had recently been considered by the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC). A discussion paper on microcredentials had been prepared for consultation and the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) 20th Anniversary Conference had taken place on 17 November with positive feedback received from participants. The Irish Quality and Qualifications Forum (IQQF) had also met recently, with the Descriptors in the NFQ Grid of Level Indicators, amongst the items considered.

The Board noted that by year end, Quality Dialogue Meetings (QDMs) with 15 out of the 16 ETBs will have taken place. The Executive is also nearing the final phase of the current Cinnte Review cycle and panel visits with four Technological Universities (TUs) have now been scheduled in 2024.

One of the key priorities and developments for the tertiary education sector over the next 1-2 years, will be the establishment of Regulations for Delegation of Authority (DA) to private Higher Education (HE) providers. The Board noted that the development of draft Regulations can be a lengthy process. The upcoming reviews under the Cinnte Review of private HE providers will form part of the considerations for the designation process for DA.

The Board noted that the Executive had delivered several presentations at the European Quality Assurance Forum in November and the Executive undertook to forward the presentations to Members for their information. It was also noted that QQI had hosted the ENQA General Assembly 2023 in Dublin in October.

7. COMPREHENSIVE POLICY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

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

The Board noted a verbal update on the Amended Legislation Programme.

7.1. Due Diligence

The Board noted that the Guidelines for the Assessment of the Capacity and Capability of Specified Providers under the *Quality and Qualifications Ireland (Capacity and Capability Criteria) Regulations 2024*, which support the Due Diligence process, were considered by the Policies and Standards Committee (PSC) on 27 November. The Board noted a verbal update by the Chair of the Policies and Standards Committee confirming that the committee had a good discussion on these Guidelines. The Board noted that the Executive plans to draw down external expertise in the financial and governance areas from the Office of Government Procurement (OGP) Framework to support the Due Diligence assessment process.

During the course of their discussion on the item, Board Members raised the issue of resources to support the new functions coming on stream under the ALP. The Executive confirmed that these resource requirements continue to be difficult to gauge in the absence of knowing how many will apply across the sector for the IEM. It was noted that expressions of interest had been sought and received earlier in the development process but that exact numbers will only be known when the application process opens.

The Executive answered a query raised by a Board Member in relation to Protected Disclosures which may arise due to or following a Due Diligence assessment. The Executive also confirmed that mechanisms will be in place for ongoing monitoring once the initial Due Diligence assessment process has been satisfied. The successful applicants from the ELE sector will have a built-in evaluation every three years and must notify QQI of material changes in a range of

areas such as ownership as well as provision of the provider's annual accounts, etc. The successful applicants from the HE sector will be evaluated through the Cinnte (or its successor) Review cycle.

The Board noted that the language used in the Due Diligence process will probably be unfamiliar to many providers when compared with other policies and guidelines contained within QQI's policy library.

As much information on the process as possible has been included in the Guidelines and Handbooks. The Board noted, prompted by a Board Member's query, the Executive's confirmation that the process and supporting documentation will evolve over time as the IEM rolls out and embeds in the tertiary education sector.

The Board **approved** the Guidelines for the Assessment of the Capacity and Capability of Specified Providers under the *Quality and Qualifications Ireland (Capacity and Capability Criteria) Regulations 2024*.

7.2. Listed Awarding Bodies (LABs)

The Board noted that on foot of a consultation process (both a targeted session in March 2023 and a public consultation period held over the summer), the following documents had been produced in support of the new LABs function:

- Statutory Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines developed by QQI for Listed Awarding Bodies engaging with QQI on a voluntary basis,
- Core Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of Listed Awarding Bodies (LABs), and
- Core Policies and Criteria for the Inclusion of Awards within the Framework.

The Board noted the Report on QQI's Consultation on White Papers related to the development and implementation of the Listed Awarding Bodies (LABs) Scheme and the Statutory QA Guidelines which had been approved by the PSC at its meeting on 27 November.

The Board noted the above documents were developed in support of the inclusion of a new type of awarding body on the National Framework of Qualifications, Listed Awarding Bodies. It

was noted that these documents and the process in general has a narrow scope and a narrow audience.

The Board noted that the documents specified above were discussed at length by the PSC on two occasions, mostly recently at its meeting held on 27 November. The Board noted that there had been broad support for the material through the consultation process as well as some specific feedback received.

The Board noted that the PSC had approved the Statutory QA Guidelines and endorsed the two Core Policy and Criteria documents while noting there was a certain amount of necessary duplication between the two policies.

The discussion touched on geographical limitations put on the scheme and transnational education and the implications of a LAB offering awards outside the State – the Executive confirmed that it was not allowed for under the offering.

It was noted that a workshop on ‘Exploring the Value of Inclusion of Awards 20 Years Later, with Prospective Listed Awarding Bodies (LABs)’ was held during the NFQ Anniversary Conference in November.

In addition to noting the Consultation Report and the Statutory QA Guidelines, the Board **approved**:

- Core Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of Listed Awarding Bodies (LABs) and
- Core Policies and Criteria for the Inclusion of Awards within the Framework.

7.3. Deactivation of Policies

The Board **approved** the deactivation of the following policies:

- Research Degree Programmes – Policy and Criteria (2014),
- Reengagement with QQI Policy and Criteria for Renewed Access to QQI Validation for Voluntary Providers of Further Education and Training (2014),
- Reengagement with QQI – Policy and Criteria for Renewed Access to QQI Validation for Voluntary Providers of Higher Education and Training (2014) and

- Policy and Criteria for the Delegation of Authority to the Institutes of Technology to make Higher Education and Training Awards (including Joint Awards) (2014).

8. STRATEGIC PLANNING

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

8.1. Corporate Plan 2023

The Board noted the interim progress report covering Quarters 1-4 of the Corporate Plan. The Board noted that a number of ALP deliverables would now continue into 2024 due to the impacts of external dependencies.

8.2. Corporate Plan 2024

The Board noted the Corporate Plan for 2024 would be the final plan developed under the current Statement of Strategy. The Board noted the initial draft plan presented and noted that the plan would be reviewed by the Executive in early 2024 following close out of actions in 2023 and receipt of confirmation of the State Grant allocation for 2024 from DFHERIS.

On foot of a Board Member's query on the number of actions planned for delivery in Quarter 4, the Executive confirmed that the Senior Manager, Programme Management Office had already flagged the numbers with the Executive Management Team (EMT) and this would be one of the areas reviewed early next year. The Board noted that similar to the 2023 plan, there are a significant number of actions which are impacted by external dependencies and both the Board and the Executive were conscious of delays caused by external party dependencies in the current year.

The Board **approved** the initial Corporate Plan for 2024.

8.3. Statement of Strategy 2025-2027

The Board noted that under its governing legislation, QQI is required to develop a three-year Strategy Statement every three years. The Board noted that the Executive proposed to commence work on the development of the new Statement with a view to presenting the Board with a draft Statement for consideration in June 2024 prior to its submission to the Department and to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and

Science for his observations over the summer period. The final Statement is expected to be available for the Board's consideration at its September 2024 meeting.

The Board noted the outline timetable for delivery of the next Statement of Strategy together with the proposed development process. This will be the fifth Statement of Strategy which QQI has produced and the Executive proposed using the process used to develop the current statement which can be adapted if needed over the coming months. On that note, the Executive also proposed considering moving the public engagement phase to an earlier stage in the development process.

Following consultation with Members during November, a Board Workshop on Strategy had been scheduled for 16 January 2024. This workshop will provide Members with the first of several opportunities to contribute to the Statement of Strategy. Among the items which will be considered on the day, the Executive will present the outcomes of a recent Stakeholder Engagement Survey. The Executive will also provide the Board with materials in advance, including an overview of what the organisation has achieved under the current Strategy as well as some areas and topics which are likely to feature prominently during the lifetime of the new Strategy. Priorities for the Department and QQI's stakeholders would also be provided. The Executive was looking forward to Board Members bringing their own expertise to the process and working with the Board to develop the next Strategy.

The Board requested strategically driven horizon scanning documents to support the Workshop referring to the priorities of the tertiary education sector and its direction of travel (e.g. AI, etc.).

The Board **approved** the development process for the Statement of Strategy 2025-2027.

9. ENQA REVIEW

The Board noted an update on the **ENQA Review**.

The Board noted the draft Self-Assessment Report (SAR) which had been submitted to the secretariat of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) on 15 November for screening. The Board noted that the Executive had since received a request for some additional

information on the organisation's selection of the thematic analysis theme which would be provided to the secretariat shortly.

Following the screening process, the SAR will be published and the Board would be provided with the final version. The Board noted that the review panel had been selected and the site-visit had been scheduled to take place on 21-23 February 2024. The Board noted that the Executive, with the co-operation of Board Members, had rescheduled its next meeting from Monday, 19 February to Tuesday, 20 February ahead of the Board's participation in the review on 21 February.

The Board noted that, as it is a targeted review, QQI will be assessed against the ESG standard for enhancement (3.4.) - thematic assessment, as well as changes since the last review held in 2019 and against the recommendations arising from that review, namely, the areas of resources and engagement with private HE providers/sector. It was noted that since the previous review, in 2019, there had been an increase in staffing and the HE re-engagement process had been completed together with the scheduling of Cinnte reviews for private providers.

The Board requested that the Executive should provide any briefing, supporting material or information it considers appropriate to the Board in advance of its session with the Panel to aid it in its preparation.

10. BOARD MEETS WITHOUT THE EXECUTIVE PRESENT

The Board considered some of the recent and forthcoming significant events as well as the development of the next statement of strategy. In particular, consideration was given to ensuring that the Board is well-prepared to fully contribute to the planned strategy session and to support the Executive in ensuring that the various timelines in drafting the Strategy Statement are met.

11. BUDGET AND FINANCE

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

11.1. Management Accounts

The Board noted the Management Accounts for the ten months to 31 October 2023. The Board noted the Executive's update that the forecast for the expected year-end close out position which, based on accruals-based accounts, will be an overall deficit.

The Board noted a verbal update on pensions.

It was noted that there had been a number of one-off costs incurred in 2023 – the redevelopment of the Qualifax website, ICT costs relating to the ALP, i.e. development of the International Education Mark (IEM) portal, including the Due Diligence portal.

The Board noted that the timing of receipt of income from EU projects can be unpredictable.

11.2. ICT

Contract Resources

The Board noted that the tender process outlined at its meeting on 22 September had progressed to the final stage, a mini competition from the successful applicants on the multi-supplier framework. The mini-competition submissions were reviewed and screened by a panel (inclusive of an independent third-party member) on 1 December and updated information was provided to the Board at this meeting. The Board noted the updated details and the outcome of the panel’s deliberations. The Board **approved** the proposal. It was noted that there had been increases in day rates across the board in the period since the tender process was last conducted in 2020. The Board **approved** the tender evaluation recommendation.

ICT Resources

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

- the procurement of contracts for ICT contract resources for six months (January - June 2024), as outlined in the proposals submitted and in accordance with the QQI Purchasing and Procurement Policy and subject to contract.

11.3. Funding Model

The Board noted a verbal update on the Funding Model. The setting of the IEM and Protection for Enrolled Learners (PEL) fees and charges continue to be the primary focus for the Department as part of the key information for the opening of the IEM application process. Once approved, the Executive will pursue the remaining elements of the funding model.

The Board noted the update.

11.4. Budget 2024

The Board noted the initial draft outline budget for 2024 and noted that the Department had not yet confirmed the State Grant allocation for next year. The Executive confirmed that it had requested additional funds in its Budget Estimates submission submitted earlier in the year. The Board noted the measures the Executive had taken into account when devising the budget. The Board having earlier noted the increases in ICT costs, noted that this is also likely to continue to be a factor next year. The Executive confirmed that, if required, savings can also be made in certain areas, such as in relation to conferences and events and some planned research projects can be deferred. The Board noted the Executive had included inflation costs as part of its budget request to the Department in May.

The Board **approved** the initial Budget for 2024. The Board noted that an updated version of the Budget will be presented to the Board for consideration/re-approval at its next meeting in February 2024. This will be on foot of the confirmation of the Department's State Grant allocation.

12. **AUDIT AND RISK**

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

The Board noted a verbal report on the meeting of the Audit and Risk Committee which took place on 10 November. The Board noted that a number of items from that meeting were deferred for consideration at the February 2024 Board Meeting due to the volume of material on this agenda.

12.1. Internal Audit Reports

The Board considered and **approved** the following IA reports:

- Quality Assurance and Validation Cycle
- Review of Disaster Recovery
- Review of Strategy Implementation and
- Revenue and Debtor Collection Cycle.

The Board noted the Committee Chair's confirmation that the Audit and Risk Committee had had robust discussions on all the reports.

12.2. Data Protection

The Board noted the second tranche of updated GDPR policies for consideration. The Board noted that one of the organisation's Units had worked through the revised Data Protection Impact procedure during the revision exercise, so the process had undergone a practical test application as well as a desk review. The Board **approved**:

- Data Protection Impact Assessment Policy and
- Privacy Statement – *Employees*
- Privacy Statement – *Learners* and
- Privacy Statement – *Panellists*.

In relation to the revised Privacy Statement for Learners, the Executive informed the Board that the Audit and Risk Committee had suggested that the Executive engage with the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) prior to the publication of the statement which it undertook to do. The suggestion was also welcomed by the Board.

12.3. Protected Disclosures

The Board noted that new policies for making External and Internal Protected Disclosures were required under new Legislation enacted in 2023.

The Board noted that since the papers issued for this meeting, the Executive had received guidance from the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform and DFHERIS including templates which the Executive considered useful and was now suggesting that it revisit the policies over the coming months and revise based on any appropriate advice contained in the templates. The Board **agreed** to the suggestion and **approved**:

- QQI Policy and Procedures for making an External Protected Disclosure to the QQI Prescribed Person and
- QQI Policy and Procedures for making an Internal Protected Disclosure to QQI,

subject to some minor amendments and until the next set of revised policies are presented to Members for consideration and are ready to be put in place.

12.4. Risk Register

The Board noted an update on risk, together with the latest Risk Register considered by the Audit and Risk Committee. The Board noted that Risk No. 3, the risk that the transition to blended working will lead to diminished organisational effectiveness due to logistical difficulties and inadequate facilities, is due to be reviewed by the EMT on 6 December on foot of the responses received from a recent staff survey. It was noted that the survey was conducted after a year of the pilot blended working scheme. In relation to Risk No. 4, the risk that ICT is compromised due to a cybersecurity event, a Disaster Recovery review is planned for Quarter 2, 2024.

The Board **approved** the QQI Corporate Risk Register, Quarter 3, 2023.

12.5. Minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee

The Board noted the Minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee Meeting held on 30 May 2023.

13. **ORGANISATION AND HUMAN RESOURCES**

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

13.1. Human Resources

The Board noted an update on Human Resources and recent recruitment activity.

The Board noted that a staff survey on blended working had recently been completed. It was noted that there had been a large response rate and positive feedback received.

The Board expressed its condolences to the family and colleagues of a member of QQI's staff, who passed away in October following a short illness.

13.2. Organisational Resources

The Board noted that the Executive was awaiting the appointment of the Landlord's agent to negotiate the new lease on the office building at 26/27 Denzille Lane. The Executive confirmed

that following review of the responses to the recent staff survey on blended working referred to above, some changes would be made to the office space to help facilitate internal in-person meetings.

13.3. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

The Board noted the EDI Policy and that it had been developed by an internal cross organisational group and drafted as both an outward facing policy as well as one with internal focus. The Executive confirmed that the policy would evolve over time.

14. GOVERNANCE

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

14.1. Committee Members - Appointments

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

- Jens Bjørnåvold to the Policies and Standards Committee (PSC) and
- Mary Kerr to the Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee (PAOC).

The Board noted the nominations process and the Executive undertook to engage with Committee Chairs on any upcoming vacancies.

15. ITEMS FOR NOTING

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

15.1. Approvals and Reviews Committee (ARC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Approvals and Reviews Committee held on 20 June 2023.

15.2. Policies and Standards Committee

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Policies and Standards Committee held on 26 June 2023.

15.3. Programmes and Awards Executive Committee

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee held on 21 September 2023.

15.4. Rolling Board Agenda 2023 and 2024

The Board noted an update on the Rolling Board Agenda for 2023 together with a draft Rolling Agenda for 2024.

16. **REVIEWS**

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

16.1. Cinnte Review

The Board noted the Cinnte Review Reports for:

- National University of Ireland (NUI) and
- University College, Cork (UCC).

The Board briefly discussed a matter relating to the reports and noted that a similar discussion had taken place at a recent meeting of the Approvals and Reviews Committee. The Executive suggested that the matter would form part of the feedback into the advice provided to panel members as part of their inductions. The Board noted that the report of the ARC meeting of 26 September which considered the report would likely form part of the documentation for the February Board Meeting.

17. **COMMUNICATIONS**

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

17.1. Media Mentions

The Board noted media mentions covering the period 15 September to 14 November 2023.

The Board also noted a report on QQI's Social Media statistics covering the period 8 September to 8 November 2023.

18. DRAFT BOARD AGENDA

The Board noted the **Draft February 2024 Board Agenda**.

The Board noted the draft Agenda for its next meeting scheduled for 20 February 2024. The Executive confirmed that following consultation with the Chairperson and Board Members, the Board Workshop on Strategy would take place on 16 January and further details would be confirmed in due course.

Following a brief discussion, the Executive undertook to reorder the agenda following feedback provided by Members. Board Members also suggested topics for future presentations – Transnational Education and the National Tertiary Office.

19. NEXT MEETING

The Board noted the next meeting would take place on Tuesday, 20 February 2024.

20. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business.

The Chairperson thanked everyone for their participation and contributions.

THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS OF THE MEETING.