

Annual Report 2020



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

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INTRODUCTION FROM THE CHAIRPERSON AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE



Ms Joanne Harmon
Chairperson, QQI



Dr Padraig Walsh
Chief Executive, QQI

This annual report for 2020 represents the main activities of the eighth year of QQI's business. It covers the second year of the agency's third statement of strategy: QQI – adding value to Qualifications 2019-21.

The year 2020 was one like no other in recent history. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in the early part of the year led to the announcement by An Taoiseach on 12 March that all education and training institutions were to close their campuses with immediate effect.

QQI immediately set about responding to the crisis. Due to prudent investment in ICT in recent years, all QQI staff were facilitated to work from home within days of the Taoiseach's announcement. By the end of March, QQI had

published detailed guidance on Measures to Mitigate the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Programmes leading to QQI Awards and Guiding Principles for Alternative Assessments. These facilitated education providers in moving from face-to-face to remote teaching and learning.

In early March, the Department of Education and Skills formed a Tertiary Education System (TES) Steering Group consisting of Departmental officials, provider and student representatives as well as state agencies under the aegis of the Department including QQI. The Group met weekly for most of the year.

A subgroup of the TES Steering Group on Quality, Integrity and Reputation was established with QQI in the Chair. The group worked with provider and student representatives and other stakeholders on evaluating the impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning. This culminated in

the publication in August of *The Impact of Covid-19 modification to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education – A QQI Evaluation*. The study found that, overall, the Irish tertiary education system had responded well to the pandemic, noting however the impact of the pandemic on marginalised learners.

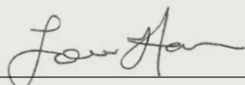
As part of the response to COVID-19, QQI moved its onsite programme validation and institutional review processes online. The significant investment over recent years in the QHub self-service portal facilitated providers in submitting applications for programme validation online. As part of the CINNTE higher education review cycle, reviews of Institute of Technology Carlow and the University of Limerick were conducted and completed in an online environment.

The formation of the new Government in June saw the establishment of a new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science with QQI taking a key role due to its wide remit covering all areas of further and higher education.


As part of the QQI Insights series, the publication *Quality in Higher Education 2020* provides an insight into the dialogue meetings held between QQI and providers in May and June where the responses of the individual institution to COVID-19 was discussed.

In 2020, just over 107,000 learners achieved QQI awards, a reduction of 18% from 2019. The reduction was greatest in the Further Education and Training area which saw a 21% reduction overall, with learners at Levels 1-4 in the National Framework of Qualifications being particularly impacted by the pandemic.

The Board of QQI met on eight occasions during the year, with all Board and Committee meetings taking place online from March onwards. The Chief Executive completed his term of office at the end of September with the Director of Corporate Service, Ms Cliona Curley taking up the role of Interim Chief Executive pending the appointment of a Chief Executive in early 2021.



Ms Joanne Harmon
Chairperson, QQI



Dr Pdraig Walsh
Chief Executive, QQI

ABOUT QQI



Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012. It is a state agency with the non-executive members of the board appointed by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

We are responsible for the external quality assurance of further and higher education and training in Ireland. We validate programmes, make awards and are responsible for the promotion, maintenance, development and review of the National Framework of

Qualifications (NFQ). We also inform the public about the quality of education and training programmes and qualifications and advise the Minister on national policy regarding quality assurance and enhancement in education and training.

Our stakeholders come from all sectors of education and training: learners; providers; employers; Government departments; state agencies and funding bodies; regulatory bodies; professional bodies; qualifications awarding bodies; the community and voluntary sector; representative bodies; and international bodies responsible for quality assurance and qualifications.

VISION, MISSION AND VALUES



OUR VISION

We are committed to working enthusiastically and purposefully towards a vision of Ireland that offers extensive and high-quality education and training opportunities, enabling learners to fulfil their potential through achieving qualifications that are widely valued nationally and internationally.



OUR MISSION

QQI sustains public confidence in the quality of education and training, promotes trust in the National Framework of Qualifications and drives a culture of continuous improvement by education and training providers.



OUR VALUES

Our approach to our own work and how we work with our partners is governed by clear values and associated behaviours.

We believe we have a **shared responsibility** with others to ensure confidence in and continuous improvement of the quality of education and training. We believe that the attainment of our goals and objectives is best pursued collaboratively and constructively with our diverse set of partners and providers. We value **collaborative effort** for mutual benefit.

We are committed to working with **objectivity and transparency**. This underpins our decision-making and our policies, procedures and activities. These are evidence-based, informed by national and international good practice, and conducted in a manner which is openly transparent and engenders trust.

We are committed to making a difference to our partners, providers and our people. We value **achievement and impact** – the successful pursuit of goals and objectives which culminate in impacting positively and substantively on our operating environment.

We are committed to **learning and innovation** in our organisation to continuously improve our services.

QQI AND COVID-19



Throughout 2020, the higher and further education and training sector took swift and responsive action to adapt to the unprecedented levels of disruption posed by COVID-19.

Providers implemented a range of modified teaching, learning and assessment alternatives at short notice in order to maintain satisfactory levels of provision for learners.

Initial emergency contingency measures gave way to a new longer-term planning phase which demanded a strategic approach to delivering education and training through blended learning.

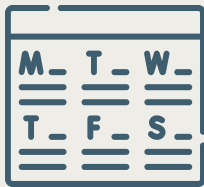
Recognising its key role as the sole agency working across the spectrum of higher and further education and training activities, QQI worked with partners across the education and training sector to support and provide leadership for FET and HE providers in their efforts to maintain the integrity, quality and standards of the Irish education and training system.

Key goals were to re-assure learners that the quality and integrity of the qualification received during 2020 would be maintained throughout the move to remote and blended learning models, and to provide guidance concerning alternative arrangements for teaching, learning and assessment for the coming year.

The outcomes of these measures were captured as part of a comprehensive evaluation by QQI of the response of higher education and further education and training institutions to the COVID-19 crisis - **The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education**. This authoritative account of the impact of modified teaching, learning and assessment arrangements outlined how confidence in the quality of the education and training received by learners was maintained without loss of integrity of the qualifications they achieved during 2020.

QQI IN NUMBERS

17
EVENTS
1219
ATTENDEES



15.4 WEEKS

AVERAGE DURATION OF PROGRAMME VALIDATION APPROVAL

68

68 new HE and FET programmes successfully validated

3

Initial Access to Validation approved

45

44 HE and 1 FET) programmes successfully revalidated

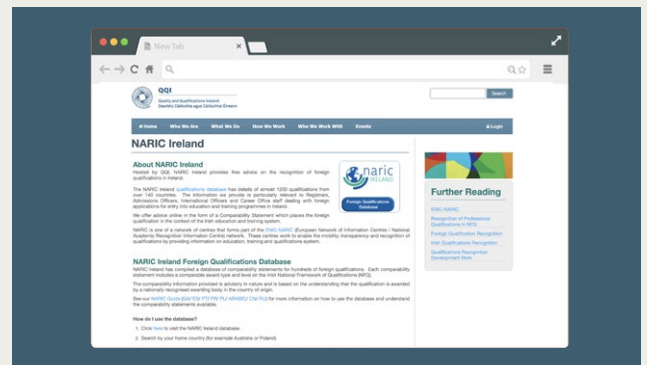
24

Reengagement applications approved



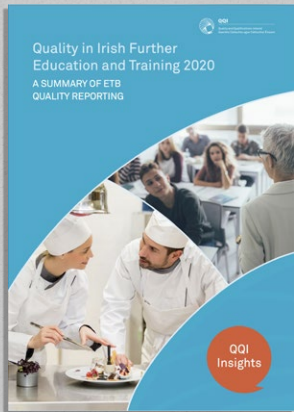
74,907

individual NARIC country page website visits

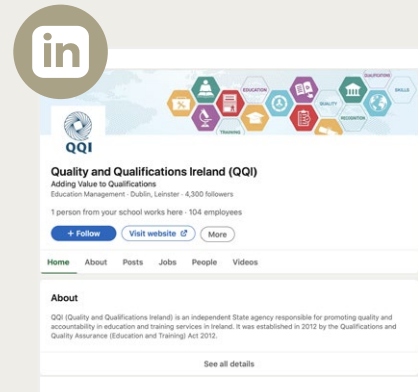


3 CINNTE HE
Reviews reports
published (IT
Carlow, UL and
UCD)

2 QQI
INSIGHTS
REPORTS



SOCIAL MEDIA:



Twitter followers up **50%**, Engagement rate **3.4%**

LinkedIn followers up **240%**

15 unused
or little used
CAS awards
deactivated



4
new apprenticeships
validated by QQI

OUR WORK IN 2020

OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

PRIORITY 1

To develop, promote and protect the integrity of the National Framework of Qualifications

A. We will regulate access to the National Framework of Qualifications for awarding bodies and qualifications, and maintain, develop and promote the Framework as the central feature of a flexible, responsive system for quality-assured qualifications in Ireland.

Referencing of the NFQ to the EQF

As the officially designated National Coordination Point for the European Qualifications Framework, QQI coordinated the preparation and publication of a national report confirming the alignment of the Irish NFQ with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). During 2020, the report was prepared and endorsed by national stakeholders and externally reviewed by international experts.

The final report provides a contemporary account of the publicly-regulated system of qualifications in Ireland. In successfully benchmarking the NFQ against the criteria and

procedures of both the EQF and the QF-EHEA, the report strengthens the transparency and trust in the NFQ and brings real benefits to users of qualifications.

[The final report](#) was well received by the relevant European authorities. Manuela Geleng, Director of the Skills Directorate, Directorate-General Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission, said that:

“The report contributes to EU cooperation on knowledge building and transparency of qualifications and reinforces understanding and trust in Irish qualifications. The report clearly shows the impact of the Irish framework which has brought tangible benefits to both individuals and stakeholders over the last 10 years. The report was warmly welcomed by the EQF Advisory Group and can serve as a benchmark for policy-learning.”

B. We will streamline our standards and awards to permit providers to deliver flexible, responsive and nationally-benchmarked programmes of education and training leading to our awards.

Green paper on the qualifications system

QQI published the Green Paper on the Qualifications System and the Technical Paper on the Qualifications System. These were published for two purposes:

- to air qualifications system issues as we currently see them for consideration by stakeholders and
- to provide a starting point for discussion of the issues with stakeholders

While written before the COVID-19 crisis, the papers are more relevant now than ever.

Deactivation of unused awards

QQI completed its second annual analysis of certification for each Common Awards System (CAS) award. Following a consultation process and analysis of certification, 15 unused or little used CAS awards were deactivated. This activity is required to ensure the integrity of the Common Award System and the NFQ.

C. We will regulate access to QQI awards to private education and training providers and provide security to their learners through the introduction of a statutory learner protection fund.

Initial Access to Programme Validation

Providers who have not previously had a programme validated by QQI must apply to have their organisational capacity and quality assurance procedures evaluated against our guidelines and validation policy.

In 2020, nine new applications were received from a mix of Higher Education (HE), Further Education and Training (FET) and English Language Education (ELE) providers. Of these, one was approved, two were subsequently withdrawn and six are still in process. Of the five providers who had applied before 2020 and whose applications were carried forward into 2020, three applications were approved in 2020 while another two were refused with recommendations. The latter two are still in process. (See Appendix 1).

Reengagement

Reengagement describes the process by which education and training providers whose quality assurance (QA) was previously agreed with HETAC or FETAC prior to 2012 are now required to demonstrate how their governance and QA systems meet with QQI quality assurance guidelines. In 2020, the focus for reengagement was on ensuring that all remaining HET providers submitted applications and extending the process out to medium and smaller sized FET providers.

During the year, 24 applications were approved, most of which had been in process since 2019. Thirty new applications were received; 6 have been approved, 20 are currently in process and 4 have been withdrawn, the providers deciding to cease offering QQI awards. Of the 25 HET providers eligible for reengagement, 23 have now completed the process and have had their quality assurance procedures approved and published. The remaining two providers are at an advanced stage of the process and will have completed reengagement by mid-2021.

Of the 2,237 major awards achieved by learners in 2020 in independent/private FET providers eligible for reengagement, 79% were made by the 27 providers who have either already completed the process or who are currently in the process.

180 smaller FET providers have still to apply. (See Appendix 2).

Programme Validation

Validation is a regulatory process that determines if a provider's programme of education or training meets the criteria required for a QQI Award.

In 2020, 72 applications for new validation were received by QQI – 54 HET and 18 FET; 66 programmes were validated, 1 was refused and five are still in process. Four apprenticeship programmes were validated, three FET and 1 HET. (See Appendix 3).

Revalidation refers to a renewal process for programmes that had been previously validated by QQI but which have now evolved or changed and require a fresh approval, or for programmes which have come to the end of their current validation term (usually 5 years). 44 HET programmes and one FET programme were revalidated in 2020 (See Appendix 4).

QQI seeks to ensure that at least 90% of applications for validation are completed within 25 weeks (from date of receipt of application to decision by the QQI Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC)).

During 2020, the average duration for an application for new validation was 15.4 weeks, with the longest being 43 weeks. 89% took 25 weeks or less. Where any application took longer than the target duration, there was always consultation and agreement with the provider involved. 100% of the applications for revalidation were completed within the 25-week target.

Impact of COVID-19 on the Validation Process

Due to the national restrictions on movement and face to face contact, all panel meetings, both preparatory and with providers, moved online from March 2020. This happened remarkably successfully and QQI very much appreciates the flexibility and cooperation of panel members and providers.

A survey of providers and panel members provided reassuring feedback that the substantive process was not diminished and that, in some aspects, the interaction was enhanced. Feedback indicated that there are elements of the process involving human to human interaction that virtual meetings do not fully replace.

Validation of Research Degree Programmes

QQI continues to validate research degree programmes at NFQ Level 10 for some institutes of technology. One research degree programme was validated by QQI's Programmes and Awards Executive Committee in July 2020.

Academic Integrity Regulatory Actions

QQI agreed arrangements with a number of advertising service providers in early 2020 to remove all advertisements for cheating services which QQI brings to its attention. QQI also commenced development of a formal process for sharing information on persons placing such advertisements with those advertising service providers.

ANNUAL QUALITY REPORT REVIEW AND ENHANCEMENTS



In summer 2019, QQI established a working group to revise and improve the current annual quality report template for higher education institutions. QQI set up a working group made up of members from universities, the institutes of technology and private independent providers of higher education. Over a series of meetings, the working group discussed and gave feedback on QQI's proposed revisions to the template. Further, three members of the working group trialled an early version of the template as part of their 2020 submission. Following consultation with the sector in July and August 2020, the final report template was circulated to the sector in November 2020.

This will allow for annual quality reports to be submitted by all 20 publicly regulated HEIs and, for the first time, by 15 private independent providers of higher education that have had their quality assurance policies and procedures approved by QQI as part of the reengagement process. All submissions will be made using a new AQR submission platform, which is part of QHub, QQI's provider portal.

D. We will provide comprehensive information and be recognised as an authoritative voice on high-quality education and training provision and qualifications available in Ireland.

Communications

QQI's external communications activities focus on highlighting the impact of the work of QQI and improving understanding and perceptions of QQI amongst its key stakeholders.

- QQI Insights

The QQI Insights series aims to analyse and demonstrate the impact of measures taken by QQI to improve and enhance the quality of education and training for the benefit of learners. This series of publications demonstrates how the work of QQI delivers impact through the promotion of quality improvement among education and training providers, and how this, in turn, enhances the experience and outcomes for learners. They also contain an analysis of our qualifications systems to better inform education and labour market decision-makers. Editions published in 2020 have focused on:

- Quality in Irish higher education
- Quality in Irish further education and training

- Strengthening digital media activities

A digital approach to communications became even more essential with the advent of COVID-19 and a widespread move to remote working. This involved increasing the QQI brand presence in those online spaces where our audiences spend time, creating engaging content and delivering segmented communications that resonate with our diverse audiences. 2020 has seen strong follower growth and engagement across both Twitter and LinkedIn due to increased use of video content. We have also expanded our digital footprint to include

a new Facebook channel and initiated a programme of work to redevelop the QQI website which will be completed in 2021.

- #MyOwnWork

As part of the activities of the National Academic Integrity Network, QQI has supported the creation of a communications campaign to highlight to higher education students the risks of engaging in contract cheating and how to access the relevant support services within their institution. The [campaign](#) was launched in October 2020 and will be repeated throughout the 2020-21 academic year, targeting students at all private and public higher education institutions.

Quality in Higher Education

Following review and analysis of the reports received from the public HEIs, QQI published a summary of the main themes arising as part of its Insights series: Quality in Irish Higher Education 2020 was accompanied by a collection of case studies, Quality in Action in Irish Higher Education 2020. In 2020, in collaboration with the sector, QQI revised its annual quality report for providers of higher education. Further details of the revision and consultation process are provided in the case study above.

During 2020, QQI also met with each of the higher education institutions as part of its cycle of quality dialogue meetings. The meetings provided a timely opportunity for the HEIs and QQI to discuss the sectoral response to COVID-19 – a summary of the main themes discussed is included in Quality in Irish Higher Education 2020.

Irish Register of Qualifications

The Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ) was formally launched in July 2020. It contains the courses and qualifications offered by all awarding bodies that have their qualifications included on the National Framework of Qualifications. The cooperation of the designated awarding bodies has been critical

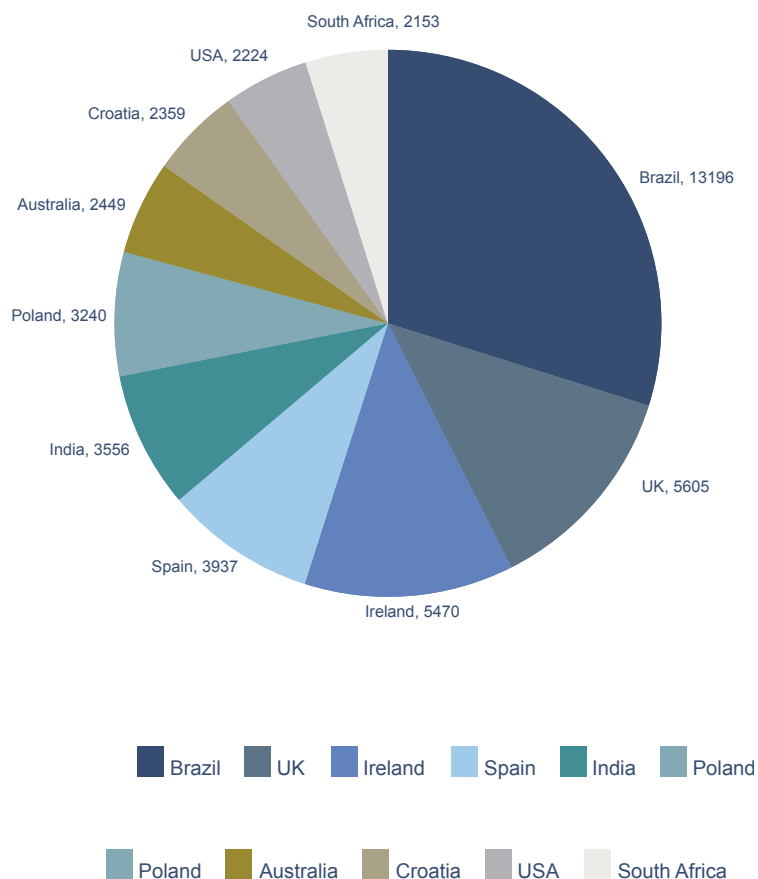
to the comprehensive population of this database. The IRQ will, in many ways, always be a work in progress as the data inputs are improved.

Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

QQI hosts NARIC Ireland, a free advice service on the recognition of foreign academic qualifications and part of a worldwide network of qualification recognition agencies known as the ENIC-NARIC network.

At the end of 2020, 1,400 comparability statements were listed in the NARIC Ireland database, an increase of 111 since 2019. Traffic to the website amounted to 74,907 individual visits to country pages and 24,623 downloads of country pages along with more than 2,500 queries on-line and by email. While there was an initial reduction in calls during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, overall demand remained constant.

New projects under the Erasmus+ NARIC call were approved by the European Commission in 2020. NARIC Ireland was included as a partner in a number of projects associated with fraud, credits, digitisation and recognition of on-line certificates. NARIC Ireland was also successful in its bid to host the annual ENIC-NARIC network conference in Dublin in 2021, now deferred to 2022 due to COVID-19 restrictions.



Qualifax

QQI hosts Ireland's national learner database, Qualifax, which provides information on higher and further education and training. In 2020 there were 389,251 visitors to the website with numbers impacted by around 11% overall largely due to COVID-19. School closures from Friday 13 March (due to COVID-19 restrictions) impacted significantly on traffic with 11,059 users from 13- 31 March 2020 compared to 25,915 in the same period 2019. The pattern of traffic has also shown variations due to school and examinations alterations of Leaving Certificate calculated grades results released on 7th September 2020 (normally August) which would be a peak time for Qualifax in normal times.

Verification of Qualifications

Demand for QQI's qualification verification system for employers continued to grow. In 2020, QQI dealt with 2,325 requests from holders of awards made by QQI and its legacy awarding bodies. The requests are for a variety of reasons - requests for proof of qualifications for employers, education evaluation services, higher education applications and to meet residency requirements in other countries. A further 190 requests were answered from employers looking for award verification for their employees. The volume of request grew by 5% on the 2019 figures.

	NO. OF USERS 2019	NO. OF USERS 2020	VARIANCE ON LAST YEAR	% INC. / (DEC.)
Quarter 1	148,957	128,634	(20,323)	(13.6)
Quarter 2	77,005	63,694	(13,311)	(17.3)
Quarter 3	93,664	77,823	(15,841)	(16.9)
Quarter 4	118,121	119,100	979	(.8)
Total	437,747	389,251	(48,496)	(11.1)

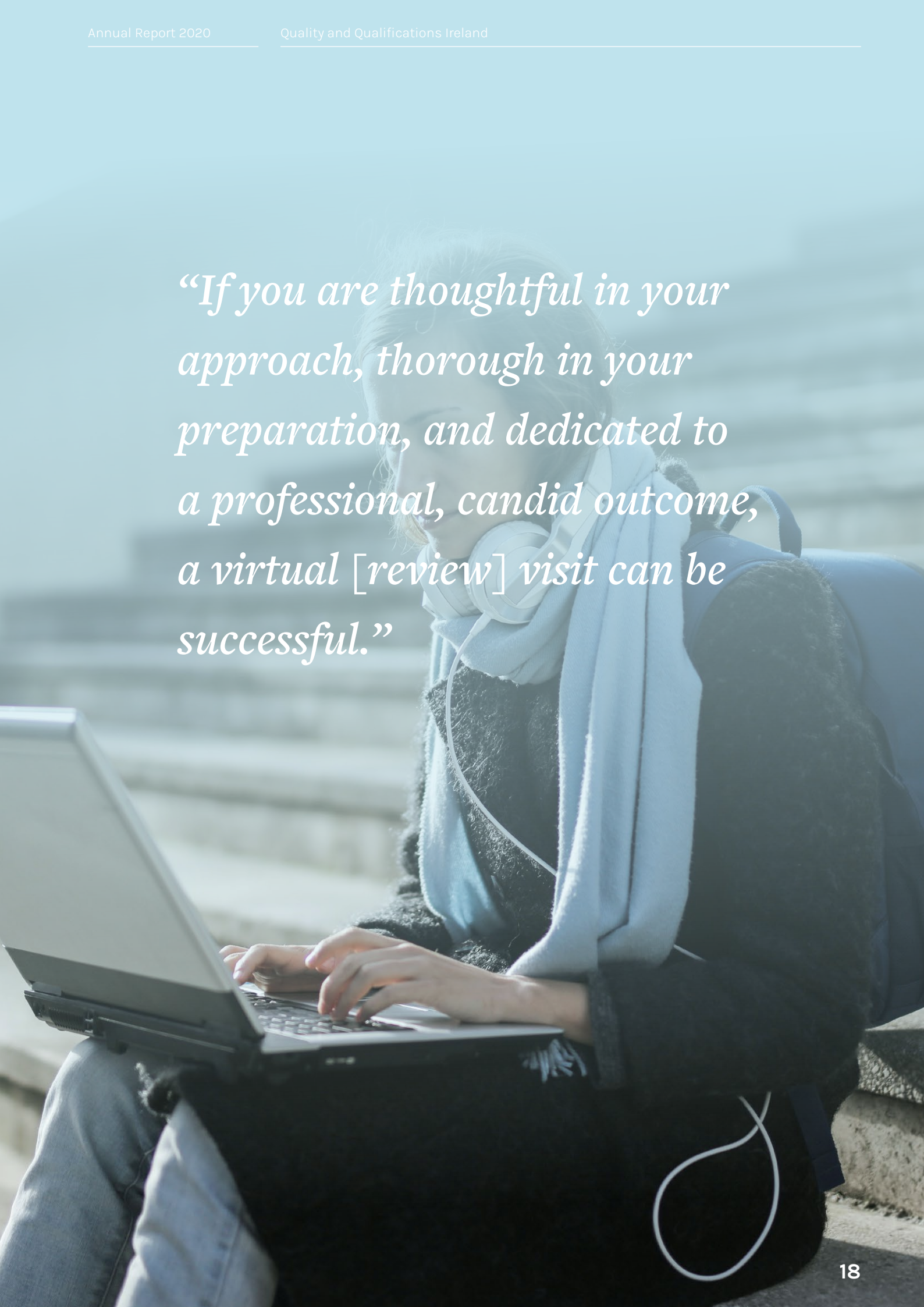
International Activities

European Quality Assurance Forum 2020

In October 2020, QQI presented two papers to the annual European Quality Assurance Forum which took place virtually for the first time. The first was based on QQI's pilot virtual review visit with IT Carlow. It presented an evaluation of the efficacy of that process based on the review report and a follow-up survey of review team members, IT Carlow students, staff, management and external stakeholders. The second presentation considered adaptations made by Irish higher education institutions to their internal QA in response to the COVID-19 pandemic – it drew on the outputs of QQI's quality dialogue meetings and QQI's report, **The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education** and a survey of HEI websites conducted by QQI.

Lifelong Learning

QQI also contributed as a panelist in a Peer Learning Activity (PLA) on Validation policies and Volunteering, in a discussion on what policy makers can do with the Lifelong Learning Platform. Our consistent approach has been to engage policy development with practice, connecting RPL leadership nationally with emerging policy directions, continued to enable recommendations in this forum which were adopted by the project team.



“If you are thoughtful in your approach, thorough in your preparation, and dedicated to a professional, candid outcome, a virtual [review] visit can be successful.”

QUALITY REVIEW CASE STUDY - CINNTE VIRTUAL INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW VISIT



QQI's CINNTE institutional review cycle was significantly impacted by COVID-19 public health restrictions, with the initial immediate postponement of scheduled institutional review visits in spring 2020. Subsequently, a pilot virtual institutional review of Institute of Technology Carlow was undertaken in June 2020. This case study summarises the key stages in this pilot virtual review process.

Planning and Preparation

- Operational guidelines and meeting protocols for all participants in the review process were developed.
- There was detailed planning and engagement between QQI, IT Carlow, and the external review team in advance of commencing the virtual visit.
- The review visit timetable was adapted for a virtual environment; this included incorporating additional review team meetings, themed sessions and parallel meetings.
- A student-led briefing for student participants was conducted virtually by the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP). Feedback from participants confirms that the briefing was very positively received.

The Virtual Review Visit

- All online meeting links were set up by QQI and included in the main review visit timetable. The institutional coordinator was responsible for sharing the meeting links with internal and external stakeholders.

- A QQI staff member was allocated to each meeting session to provide technical support.

Evaluation

- A follow-up survey and focus group were undertaken with students to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the virtual review process.
- The survey results and outcome of the evaluation confirmed a high level of confidence from all participants in the effectiveness of the virtual review process.
- It was felt that the pilot process was very helpful in developing and testing a framework for virtual reviews.

Following the pilot in June, a CINNTE virtual review was successfully completed for University of Limerick and Waterford Institute of Technology, applying the methodology and framework developed, and lessons gleaned from the pilot. In the words of the IT Carlow review team chair, Professor Elsa Núñez,

“If you are thoughtful in your approach, thorough in your preparation, and dedicated to a professional, candid outcome, a virtual [review] visit can be successful.”

PRIORITY 2

Analysis and Impact

A. Our independent evaluations of providers and provider-led evaluations and our research and analysis of provider-led evaluations will be used to provide high-level advice to policymakers and funders on quality in the education and training system.

Higher Education Quality Reviews

The CINNTE cycle of institutional reviews of publicly regulated higher education institutions (HEIs) continued in 2020. Reviews were completed for IT Carlow, University of Limerick (UL) and Waterford IT (WIT). Public health restrictions as a result of COVID-19 impacted on the CINNTE reviews schedule, resulting in the rescheduling of some reviews. Following a pilot virtual review with IT Carlow in June, the main review visits to UL and WIT were also held virtually. Details of the reviews, including the composition of the expert review teams, key dates and the final review reports, as well as quality profiles for the institutions, can be found in QQI's [Reviews Library](#).

In 2020, QQI commissioned Dr Achim Hopbach, an independent higher education consultant, to complete a [mid-cycle analysis of the first seven reports arising from the CINNTE review cycle](#). The purpose of the analysis was to identify and analyse the key themes and topics arising within the CINNTE institutional review reports. The report was completed in December 2020.

In 2020, QQI received an annual quality report from each of the 21 publicly regulated HEIs. Three private independent providers of higher education also submitted an annual quality report as part of a pilot process. All of the reports are published [on QQI's website](#).

Further Education and Training Quality Reviews

The inaugural quality review for the Education and Training Boards (ETB) sector was scheduled to commence in the second half of 2020 but implementation was delayed in recognition of the challenges for, and demands on, ETBs in 2020 arising from COVID-19. A revised review schedule was subsequently agreed with the sector. The self-evaluation report for the first review (of Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board) was submitted in December 2020 and the first phase of the inaugural review were scheduled for Quarter 1 and Quarter 2, 2021.

As key stakeholders in FET provision, the learner perspective is critical to the inaugural review process; consequently a learner representative is included on each review team. In 2020, QQI engaged with the ETBs and AONTAS to recruit a pool of 23 FET learners from which learner representatives for inaugural review teams will be drawn. QQI collaborated with AONTAS to develop a training event on the inaugural review process and the role of the learner reviewer. Online training was delivered to the learner reviewer pool over two days in November.

Progress reports on ETB quality improvement plans were received from all sixteen ETBs. The QQI Insights report, *Quality in Irish Further Education and Training 2020*, summarises the developments and ongoing progress achieved in quality assurance and enhancement within the sector as evidenced from ETB quality reporting.

In recognition of the risks and challenges to the quality of teaching, learning and assessment arising from the COVID-19 restrictions, QQI conducted a series of focused bilateral dialogue meetings with each of the sixteen ETBs during Quarter 4, 2020. The meetings provided an opportunity to discuss 1) local impacts on delivery contexts and enrolment; 2) approaches to the governance and monitoring

of contingency arrangements; 3) arrangements to support professional development and 4) ongoing areas of concern arising from the COVID-19 context.

B. We will provide guidance to and evaluate providers to stimulate and promote quality enhancement in education and training provision.

Exploring Models of Success: Professional Development of Staff in Higher Education, Further Education and Training, and English Language Education

In February, QQI hosted the Exploring Models of Success conference which focused on the importance of professional development for those involved in improving the quality of teaching and learning, and education management among other areas.

The event featured national and international speakers, workshops and panel discussions and created an opportunity for cross-sectoral networking with peers in the tertiary education and training sector. Attendees included those involved in front-line education, and in academic management, as well as policy makers, support staff and those in quality assurance roles across higher education, further education and training and English Language Education.

Blended Learning Seminar Series

As part of its COVID-19 response to support Quality Assurance practitioners and those involved in academic management in further and higher education, QQI developed a 'Blended Learning Seminar Series' in collaboration with experienced national and international experts. The focus of the seminars was on the implementation of successful blended delivery from a quality assurance perspective. The series was well received with attendance figures of over 170 across the FET and HE sectors and events will continue into 2021.

Recognition of Prior Learning

In 2020, innovations continued to develop in RPL improving the quality of education and training for the benefit of learners. QQI is consulted routinely in the development of initiatives, and many are stimulated organically from other projects in the field. Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) commenced the evaluation of TOBAR, a pilot project with the Defence Forces. QQI participated in the reference group for the evaluation. SOLAS provide 'Innovation Funding'; Donegal ETB received Innovation Funding and commenced a specific initiative in partnership with Limerick Clare ETB using RPL to recognise and accredit the skills of health and social care workers. Donegal ETB also appointed an RPL Officer to provide county-wide support for RPL. The national programme in Hairdressing, co-ordinated by LCETB provides for RPL for access, exemptions and for the award. 'The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education' report indicated that RPL was used for the purposes of assisting learners complete award stage assessment in placements, typically in FET.

At European level, QQI reports on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills since 2012 on progress nationally in the implementation of the 2012 Recommendation on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning. In 2020 the Commission published the 'European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Ireland', an evaluation of progress on implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) according to the Recommendation to which QQI made strong contributions.

In 2020 QQI also participated in thematic groups as part of the EQF Advisory Group, particularly preparing the revision of the EU Guidelines for the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning and Validation festival Planning.

Work-based Assessment

QQI, in partnership with the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, hosted three events on work-based assessment in 2020. Two webinars were followed by a day-long National Symposium on Work-based Assessment.

Empowerment and Partnership in Student Engagement

In November, QQI, NStEP and StudentSurvey.ie co-hosted a joint online conference on 'Empowerment and Partnership in Student Engagement'. The conference supported by USI, included an opening address from the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris, TD and featured a panel of renowned international experts. Over 200 attendees represented public and private higher education, further education and training organisations, and representative organisations.

Academic Integrity Enhancement

As part of the enhancement initiative for the Academic Integrity project the following activities took place:

- An inaugural National Academic Integrity Week was held in October 2020. This week was hosted to coincide with the European Network for Academic Integrity (ENAI) and International Centre for Academic Integrity (ICAI) International Day of Action against Contract Cheating. The week comprised 14 sessions hosted or given by National Academic Integrity Network members, panel discussions hosted by ENAI and provision of a session by QQI for the ICAI.
- The introduction of a series of academic integrity webinars focusing on themes proposed by the Network members. Two webinars were delivered in 2020 given by international experts in the field.

- The sharing of resources through a collated Repository of Resources on the QQI website, articles, publications and links shared across the Network.

C. We will rigorously analyse and report on the outputs of our qualifications system to inform education and labour market decision-makers.

QQI Data Series

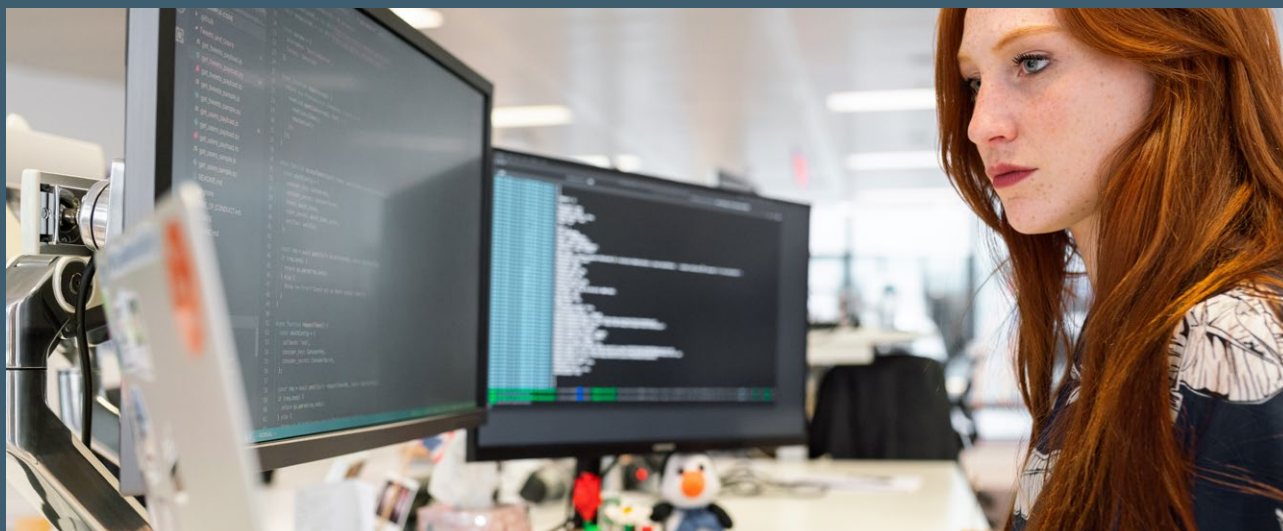
QQI published [Certification of QQI Major Awards 2014-2018](#), the first in a new series exploring QQI's data to contribute to a better understanding of quality and qualifications in post-secondary education and training.

The QQI Data Series will help inform and influence policy and contribute to the continuing development of the Irish education, training and qualifications systems.

QQI also expects the series to help demonstrate to learners, graduates, employers, professional recognition bodies, regulators and policy makers the impact of measures taken by QQI to review and enhance the quality of education and training in Ireland and the national qualifications infrastructure.

QQI also published an analysis of [QQI certification data for 2019](#) and developed a first-of-its-kind longitudinal analysis of data on childcare-related qualifications which will be published in 2021.

VALIDATION CASE STUDY: MICROCREDENTIALS



Microcredentials refers to a qualification (award) arising from a 'small' package of learning, where 'small' refers to the credit associated with the award. QQI has for many years made small awards i.e. minor, special purpose and supplemental awards in both FET and HET sectors, but the term microcredential has not been used to describe these awards before. Also, in HET, a lower limit of 10 ECTS had been applied to programmes submitted for validation.

In 2020 however, a government initiative, part of the July 2020 stimulus package, provided funding for the delivery of microcredentials in higher education. Public and private HEIs were approved for funding to offer short programmes to learners seeking upskilling or retraining. One criterion of the funding was that any such programme should be based on a module from a programme validated by QQI or another Irish awarding body. While there was no requirement that the modular programme itself should lead to an award, QQI and private HEIs agreed that QQI would facilitate applications for validation of such

modular programmes where a provider wanted to offer a qualification to learners who took the programme. QQI agreed to accept programmes as small as 5 ECTS and applied a streamlined evaluation process in recognition of the fact that the modules were already part of a validated programme.

In October 2020, 10 applications for validation of microcredentials were received. Six of them were validated in December 2020. The programme disciplines included Data Analytics, Software Development, Project Management, Marketing, Special Education, Regulation in the Pharma Industry and Creative Approaches to Problem Solving.

It is hoped that such programmes will enhance opportunities for learners impacted by the pandemic through upskilling and retraining.

PRIORITY 3

Collaboration and Engagement

B. We will engage with government departments, agencies, social partners and professional recognition bodies to contribute to co-ordinated policy in relation to skills requirements, regulations and associated occupational standards and qualifications.

Professional and Regulatory Bodies

QQI continued its **programme of engagement with the professional statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs)** during 2020. The purpose of this engagement is to clarify the roles of all parties operating as part of the national quality assurance framework (i.e. the HEIs, PSRBs and QQI); to share information; and to increase trust and confidence between those parties. To assist in the sharing of good practice and to facilitate communication in the challenging circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, QQI held **three webinars** with the PSRBs and HEIs during the year. It also consulted with the sector on a **set of high-level accreditation principles** aimed at reducing the administrative burden of the professional accreditation/approval and academic validation processes.

Based on meetings with PSRB representatives and feedback received as part of the consultation on the accreditation principles, QQI is increasingly seen as an **enabler of communication** between the PSRBs and HEIs and has been approached by both PSRBs and HEI representative bodies for advice and to facilitate communication between the two groups. QQI has been informed by two PSRBs that they have referred to the draft accreditation principles in the revision of

their own accreditation policies and criteria. The accreditation principles document will be published and endorsed by PSRBs, HEIs and QQI in early 2021.

Access to higher education using QQI awards

The Higher Education Links Scheme is a well-established route for holders of QQI awards to access a third-level education programme. QQI supports this scheme by providing scored results data to the Central Application Office (CAO) to enable third-level institutions to make offers to QQI award holders. In 2020, 12,499 CAO applicants mentioned using their QQI award when making a college application. 5,069 QQI award holders received offers for a wide variety of third-level courses solely based on their QQI award score. 3,872 learners accepted an offer. This is an increase of 7.9% on 2019.

C. We will work with providers and awarding bodies to promote shared responsibility for a high-quality education and training system that stimulates transparency and improvement.

COVID-19 Response Activities

QQI chaired the 'Quality, Integrity and Reputation' working group established by the then Department of Education and Skills (now the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)) from March- August 2020. This group met regularly and included representatives from learner representative bodies, institutional representative bodies, funding bodies, state agencies and the Department of Education and Skills. Its terms of reference included supporting the quality of teaching and learning, assessment and qualifications, capturing learning from providers' experience for future system enhancement, documenting best practice and establishing communications with key

stakeholders such as students, employers and professional bodies.

The group also functioned as the steering group for **The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education**, which was published in August 2020.

This reflective evaluation embodied significant collaboration across the sector with 56 submissions and 70 organisations consulted by QQI in the process making it one of the most collaborative projects undertaken across the tertiary education sector to date. The focus of the evaluation was to understand how providers delivering further education and training and higher education programmes modified their teaching, learning, assessment and student engagement activities as they adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

National Academic Integrity Network

As part of the Academic Integrity project, QQI continued to coordinate the National Academic Integrity Network during 2020. It worked on a variety of peer-driven initiatives, which included:

- Interim non-statutory Academic Integrity Guidelines to support HEIs (these were circulated for consultation and are expected to be published in 2021)
- Academic Integrity Principles, including a Lexicon of Common Terms (these were circulated for consultation and are expected to be published in 2021)
- A survey of HEI registrars which provided benchmark data on the number and types of academic misconduct cases across institutions
- A National Academic Integrity Week with 14 events hosted by member HEIs amongst others
- A series of Academic Integrity webinars
- Establishing and strengthening

international links and relationships through participation in committees and working groups and provision of talks and webinars.

- A dedicated communication strategy targeting learners.

The Network HEI membership expanded by approximately 25% in 2020 bringing the total to 80 members representing 32 HEIs, students, the HEI representative groups, Steering Committee members.

Stakeholder Survey

In 2020, QQI engaged a market research agency to undertake an independent research survey on behalf of QQI with QQI's key stakeholders. The survey report, delivered in August, identified examples of good practice in addition to areas to consider for review. QQI has reviewed the feedback and will continue to monitor all areas of its service delivery, engagement and enhancement activities to further improve the user experience and build on relationships in place with its stakeholders.

Awarding Powers for Institutes of Technology

In February 2020, QQI and THEA hosted a joint workshop for institutes of technology to outline the legislative changes which enabled their transition to the status of designated awarding bodies. The panel and audience included representatives from the institutes of technology and from the co-hosting organisations.

“Overall I found the process quite seamless. We were given excellent support by QQI in preparing for a virtual panel which was very useful in ensuring that the actual panel ran smoothly” – Provider



REENGAGEMENT CASE STUDY 2 - MOVING PROVIDER EVALUATIONS ONLINE IN RESPONSE TO COVID RESTRICTIONS



In May 2020, QQI moved its QA approval evaluations online in response to the public health restrictions imposed in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. This included the full-day 'site visit' between the panel and the provider. QQI uses Microsoft Teams to facilitate these meetings and has produced guidance for both panel members and providers to ensure the meetings proceed as efficiently and as effectively as possible.

In late October and early November 2020, the executive carried out a survey of all providers and panel members who had participated in an online site visit to identify any areas that could usefully be improved upon. The provider survey was sent to 27 providers with 25 responding (an 93% response rate). The panel member survey was sent to 61 panel members with 49 responding (an 80% response rate).

Levels of satisfaction expressed with the process were extremely high. For example, 96% of panel members and 92% of providers felt that the support and guidelines provided by QQI for online site visits was sufficient. 93% of panel members were satisfied that the set up on Microsoft Teams was as effective and efficient as a face-to-face meeting and 92% of providers felt that the online site visit was effective and robust. Notable, were the many comments praising the professionalism and courtesy of QQI staff and the efficiency of QQI processes. Some sample feedback is provided here:

“The advance preparation and the arrangements for the virtual visit were excellent.” – Provider

“Overall I found the process quite seamless. We were given excellent support by QQI in preparing for a virtual panel which was very useful in ensuring that the actual panel ran smoothly” – Provider

“The QA team were excellent and always helpful and took us by the hand through the complex process with skill and with aplomb.” - Panel Member

“I am not a great fan of Teams but I was amazed at how QQI operated it with such efficiency. My own University has not been able to convince me that it is better than zoom. However, give the QQI any virtual platform and I am sure they will get it working really well!!!;” – Panel Member

In response to feedback received, the executive now invites providers to submit a recorded tour of their premises in advance of the meeting (where desired and feasible) and encourages the panel to have a second private meeting in advance of the online meeting as this has been identified as an important means of building rapport amongst team members. Lastly, QQI reviewed the template agenda for the meetings to ensure that sessions are not too long and breaks between sessions are of an adequate length.

D. We will engage with learner representative bodies to encourage best practice in providers.

The National Student Engagement Programme

2020 was another successful year for the [National Student Engagement Programme \(NStEP\)](#) working in partnership with QQI, HEA and USI with the NStEP team being expanded to include the appointment of its Development Coordinator and two Associate Interns.

During the year, NStEP developed and rolled out a revised student training programme and trained over 1,300 student representatives. NStEP has continued to collaborate with QQI and USI on the student quality reviewers pool, which recruits and trains students to participate in quality assurance review panels for the evaluation of practices in higher education institutions. QQI is pleased that the student quality reviewers pool has been supportive to higher education institutions, particularly during the changed environment resulting from the pandemic.

NStEP also published a discussion paper on its new draft Framework for Student Engagement in Decision Making which will be open for consultation into 2021.

There are now 26 institutions which collaborate to explore and further embed staff student partnerships and increase student engagement opportunities across the Irish higher education sector and NStEP continues to welcome interest from higher education institutions to participate in the programme.

StudentSurvey.ie

QQI continued to be a member of the steering group for StudentSurvey.ie. In 2020, QQI joined the StudentSurvey.ie Analysis and Impact Group and collaborated with them to produce a discussion paper on impact and how this could be defined and considered for StudentSurvey.ie. An opportunity will be available for members

to consider the paper and respond with comments and feedback ahead of next year's Practitioners' Forum.

Learner Reviewer Training

In collaboration with the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), QQI coordinated two student quality assurance (QA) reviewer events in 2020. During the training sessions, participants were briefed by experienced student reviewers and review panel chairs. Following the training sessions, participants joined the NStEP pool of QA reviewers. QQI and HEIs may draw on this pool when seeking student representatives for QA review and evaluation panels.

National FET Learner Forum

During 2020, QQI contributed to the National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group as the Forum sought to find innovative ways to engage with, and reflect the voice of, FET learners as COVID-19 significantly impacted the delivery of further education and training. In place of the annual National FET Learner Forum event, the Forum hosted a webinar on 16 December to launch a booklet highlighting the experiences of ten FET learners who participated in the Forum over the past five years and how it has deepened their engagement in learner voice initiatives. The booklet includes a foreword from QQI on the value of learner voice in quality assurance. QQI was represented on a stakeholder panel at the event, responding to questions from FET learners.

E. We will work with our EU colleagues and other international partners to influence European quality and qualifications policy and to inform our work here in Ireland.

Europass

Following lengthy development, the new Europass platform was launched in July 2020 introducing a new personal profile tool which incorporates the previous tools of European

CV, Diploma and Certificate supplements. A promotional campaign led by the Commission promoting the new Europass continues. The 2018-2020 project was extended to the end of March 2021 when a final report was prepared and submitted. Face-to-face promotional activities ceased in March 2020 with key events such as Higher Options and Grad Ireland cancelled and moved online.

Five Country Qualification Frameworks Group

The annual five country qualifications frameworks meeting was hosted by our colleagues, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), in Belfast in January. This two-day meeting brought together qualifications authorities, quality assurance agencies and government officials. The meeting was an excellent opportunity for policy dialogue and exchange across the UK and Ireland. The work of this group promotes alignment between the various national qualifications systems, removing obstacles to study and work opportunities within the common travel area.

Engaging with the EU Qualifications Agenda

During 2020 the new EU Skills Agenda and the EU ambition for a European Education Area were advanced. Both agendas include flagship initiatives in quality assurance and the recognition of qualifications and skills. QQI contributed to the development, implementation and dissemination of these European initiatives. As the designated European Qualifications Framework National Coordination Point (EQF-NCP), QQI represents Ireland at EU level EQF Advisory Group meetings. Three meetings of the EQF-AG took place during 2020, where the agenda covered EU Skills policy, the Copenhagen Process (VET in Europe) and the Bologna process (Higher Education in Europe).

As Ireland's nominee to the Member States Working Group for European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations,

QQI attended two meetings where the main agenda items include testing how learning outcomes of qualifications can be mapped to ESCO skills with the use of Artificial Intelligence and a consultation on the release of ESCO Version 1.1.

UNESCO Education 2030 Agenda

The 10th United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Expert Group on qualifications systems took place in June 2020. QQI participates as an invited expert. The agenda included updates from regional qualifications systems around the world; implications of COVID-19 on qualifications; and the global Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education.

EU-Africa Partnership

QQI was invited to speak at two webinars organised under the EU-Africa partnership. The webinars were part of ongoing dialogue and policy exchange about qualifications and quality assurance systems. QQI was also invited to speak about the NFQ developments to Israeli stakeholders during a webinar organised jointly by CIMEA Italy and the Israeli Department of Education in November 2020.

Recognising Prior Learning Internationally

QQI continued to work closely connecting both national practice and policy at sectoral, regional and national level with European policy and developments, including through participation in collaborative Erasmus+ projects. Work with the VISKA consortia concluded, with the dissemination event hosted in Brussels in February 2020, and the publication of the project results and report on www.viskaproject.eu. The Irish contribution and approach to working with stakeholders in RPL has been referenced by the Centre Européen pour le Développement de la Formation Professionnelle (CEDEFOP) and the Commission at subsequent events, including during European Vocational Skills Week and at the International Labour Organisation.

Innovations and Strategies for Recognition of Prior Learning

QQI, at the initial invitation of the Department of Education and Skills, also continued as a national co-ordination partner in the Recognition-of-Prior-Learning In Practice Project, led by the Swedish Council for Higher Education, another Erasmus+ funded project, under Bologna Process initiatives. This project aims to support greater consistency in RPL practices leading to access and exemptions in RPL across higher education institutions. Cork Institute of Technology is a national co-ordinating partner; the Irish Universities Association and Mary Immaculate College are also partners. In 2020, two Peer Learning Webinars were hosted inviting policy makers and practitioners within higher education to consider ‘Why RPL?’ and ‘How RPL?’.

QQI continued to support the RPL Practitioner Network although the impact of COVID-19 was significant and no events were sponsored in 2020. The Network Steering Group prepared a workplan and advanced preparation for a series of webinars to take place in 2021.

QQI reports on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills on progress nationally in the implementation of the 2012 Recommendation on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning. In 2020 the Commission published the ‘European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Ireland’, an evaluation of progress on implementation of RPL according to the Recommendation to which QQI made strong contributions.

Memoranda of Understanding

2020 saw QQI continue to focus on national and international partnerships with the renewal of two significant agreements. Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) were re-established with SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority, and with the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA). QQI continues to work closely with organisations in Ireland and internationally to facilitate communication and cooperation under the agreed terms of the MoUs. Both agreements are published on the QQI website.

REENGAGEMENT CASE STUDY – SOLAS



SOLAS, the Further Education and Training Authority manages a range of further education and training programmes which include 27 craft apprenticeships, traineeships, Skills to Advance, eCollege and the European Globalisation Fund. As a provider SOLAS is required to have its quality assurance procedures for any of these programmes that lead to QQI awards, approved by QQI.

At a national level, change is pending in the apprenticeship area. On 2 August 2020, Minister Harris announced the launch of a consultation process on a new Action Plan for Apprenticeship. The new action plan is intended to provide an opportunity to build on the lessons learned from the introduction of consortia-led programmes and the experience of the past to deliver a new robust and dynamic governance and funding system for national apprenticeship programmes. This Action Plan for Apprenticeships will set out a five-year pathway to embed apprenticeship in enterprise and increase the diversity of learners who choose apprenticeship programmes.

This means that while current programmes are ongoing and need effective and transparent quality assurance by SOLAS, the governance configuration could change significantly in the medium term. If this happens, the overarching QA and governance may need to be restructured and will require further approval by QQI when developed.

It was recognised by all parties that SOLAS' quality assurance will need to evolve to adapt to this new scenario and that approval of current QA procedures would reflect this reality.

In December 2020, following a series of senior level interactions between the two organisations, QQI approved with conditions, SOLAS' current QA procedures for craft apprenticeships.

PRIORITY 4

ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY

To build internal capacity to sustain, improve and communicate our performance.

A. We will continue to support and develop our people to build and foster a flexible, engaged, adaptable and motivated executive.

The COVID-19 pandemic imposed unique demands on QQI in 2020, including the rapid transition to homeworking. QQI's focus was to actively manage and support homeworking whilst ensuring the safety, health and wellbeing of our employees and with the purpose of maintaining an engaged, flexible and motivated workforce. Some of the key HR initiatives included:

- Virtual ergonomic assessments were carried out for all staff other than e-workers who had previously been assessed. HR followed up on the assessment reports and authorised the provision for staff of ICT, other equipment and office furniture where recommended and reasonable.
- Regular virtual all staff meetings were convened where the CEO and management updated staff on aspects of the business, these were well attended and well received.
- QQI conducted two key staff surveys in June and November 2020 related to remote working. The surveys were excellent tools for supporting the staff engagement process and provided a platform for staff

to express their experiences of remote working and its operational challenges. The surveys were also used to gauge the personal impact of homeworking on mental health and other responsibilities, for example caring responsibilities. The objective was to chart any changes over time, particularly in regards to mental health'.

- The data from the surveys was also used to support management decision making and to deal with challenges that staff experienced throughout the transition to home working.
- Regular Staff Engagement Focus Group meetings were held to shape and implement the wellbeing agenda.
- The provision of relevant wellbeing and general awareness workshops were scheduled at regular intervals throughout the year.
- QQI continues to endorse and support a lifelong learning culture where, for example, some staff are currently participating in third-level programmes at Bachelor and Master's degree levels. Also, regular training and development initiatives continued for all staff to enhance their continuous professional development.
- Participation in Mental Health Awareness Days.
- A suite of regular virtual social initiatives for staff to engage in for example: online fitness classes, coffee mornings and book club meetings.

B. We will invest further in our ICT infrastructure and internal capability as a means of further improving organisational productivity and enhancing service levels to our clients.

QQI Provider Portal

During 2020, development work continued on QQI's new IT portal for providers, QHub. It is designed to facilitate secure online applications to QQI services while also increasing provider access to their own data. QQI Quality Assurance processes e.g. programme validation and reengagement, proceed through a series of steps. Each step has a status e.g. In Screening, Awaiting APEC Decision etc. By making these statuses visible to providers through QHub, the progress of their application will be visible i.e. more transparent.

A number of system modules were released and operationalised in 2020:

- Programme Validation - new validation, revalidation, extension and closure of programmes. Experts engaged to evaluate new programmes are able to get secure access to the material via QHub and collaborate in the evaluation therein.
- Reengagement - scheduling, uploading applications, expert evaluation, process tracking and publication.
- Annual Quality Reporting (AQR) - this allows for provider upload and publication of reports showing case studies of quality initiatives they have taken in the past year. It is hoped that such publications will disseminate good practice throughout the sector.
- Data Extracts - QQI and providers can download data in Excel format for further analysis.

Security Improvements

To protect QQI IT services and data, a number of security-related measures were put in place. These included conditional access policies to control which devices and users access services, lockdown of services to agreed geographic locations, continued work on the implementation of policies to prevent leakage of sensitive or personal data and the upgrade and extension of the firewalls to include all QQI services.

Certificate Replacement

This service has proved useful to QQI award holders. A total of 162 applications for replacement certificates were processed in 2020. This is a 40% increase on 2019 when the service was introduced.

COVID-19-related ICT activities

In late February 2020, the ICT team started to prepare any available devices for potential distribution to staff in the event of a COVID-19 related lockdown. In the week leading up to lockdown extensive work was actioned to upgrade our Remote Desktop Services and Virtual Private Network infrastructure to allow for a larger number of staff to work remotely, connecting to QQI Services in a secure yet consistent manner. Microsoft Teams was rolled out to support organisational communications both internally and externally, with training carried out throughout the year. The ICT team also supported home set up for remote workers advising and procuring monitors, keyboards etc and replacing old and dated laptops that were temporarily issued at the start of lockdown.

C. We will demonstrate best practice in relation to our functional and corporate governance in line with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies and adherence to relevant legislative and regulatory obligations.

Compliance with Code of Practice

QQI complies with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies (2016). QQI presented its checklist of compliance with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies, 2016 in October 2019. The only outstanding derogation, relating to the Public Spending Code, was addressed and reported on in the Annual Report, 2019. Therefore, as of 31 December 2020, there were no outstanding derogations.

Public Spending Code

QQI adheres to the Public Spending Code by:

- having a Purchasing and Procurement Policy that clearly sets out the requirements and authority levels of purchasers
- ensuring all non-routine items of expenditure support the delivery of QQI's strategic and corporate plan
- ensuring value for money for all expenditure
- undertaking audits of procurement and purchasing to ensure adherence with best practice
- encouraging staff to be aware of the cost of services so to avoid unnecessary expenditure.

Department of Education and Skills/ Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

The agency reports on outcomes to its line department, the Department of Education and Skills (until June 2020) and the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (since June 2020) through a Performance Delivery Agreement (PDA), a requirement under the Code of Practice. The PDA, which is developed and agreed annually, is linked to objectives contained in QQI's Corporate Plan which is derived from the QQI Strategy Statement 2019-2021. QQI meets several times a year with Department officials to review progress.

Internal Audit Function

QQI has a three-year rolling internal audit plan 2020-2022 that is reviewed annually. Internal audits are carried out on all the key corporate and business functions of QQI on a cyclical basis.

From March 2020, staff were directed to change to remote working due to Government restrictions and not to work from the office where possible. As a result, from mid-March 2020 audits have been performed remotely.

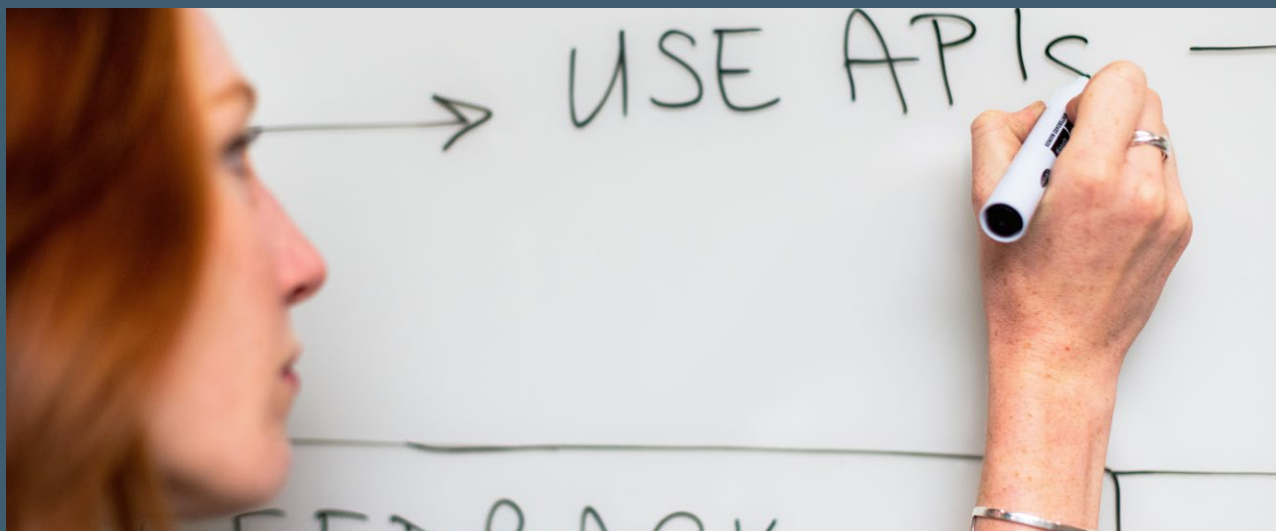
The following internal audits have been completed in 2020:

- Summary Status Update on previous In-house Internal Audit recommendations
- Reengagement Cycle
- Payroll and Personnel Cycle
- QQI Risk Register High Risks 1-5 (as at year end 2019)
- Review of the System of Internal Control (SIC) 2019
- Status Updates on Internal Audit Partner Recommendations, SIC 2018, Internal Auditor, and C&AG Management Letters
- Procurement Cycle
- Qualifications (including NARIC) Cycle
- Official Languages Act
- High Risks 6 - 10 (as at year end 2019)

External Audit Function

In 2020, an invitation was issued to the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) in line with the revised Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies, September 2016. It is recommended that the Board and the Audit and Risk Committee should have a discussion with the external auditors at least once a year, without executive members of the Board or employees of the State body present, to ensure that there are no unresolved issues of concern. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020, it was not possible for a representative from the Office of the C&AG to meet with members of the committee.

CASE STUDY - MODIFICATIONS TO AWARDS AND PROGRAMMES



As part of actions to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, QQI's Policies and Standards Committee approved measures providing for the temporary modification of QQI awards where learners were unable to secure work experience placements. The availability and safety of practice placements proved particularly challenging in the 2020-21 academic year and QQI engaged extensively with the ETB sector in respect of requests for modifications to QQI award structures. Temporary modifications were effected in respect of c. 80 awards at NFQ Levels 4-6.

These modifications were complemented by comprehensive consideration of programme-level amendments, including practice simulation, alternative assessment and discipline-specific case studies. In addition, QQI engaged with the sector on robust quality assurance and governance arrangements to support the implementation of these contingency measures and ensure the continued integrity of awards.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

QQI Board

QQI is governed by a Board of ten members including the Chief Executive. Non-executive members are appointed by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The Board is responsible for the approval of financial accounts, policy, strategy statements, corporate plans and annual reports. The Board makes decisions in relation to a number of functions including but not limited to:

- Approval of all policy and approaches to policy
- Strategic planning, corporate planning and approval of annual reports
- Approval of financial accounts
- Withdrawal of approval of quality assurance procedures
- Withdrawal of programme validation
- Delegation of authority to a provider to make awards
- Withdrawal or variation of delegated authority to make awards.

It also has functions in relation to programme validation, joint awards, and access, transfer and progression. A number of sub-Board committees assist with academic and other key areas of governance which are serviced by Board Members.

Membership:

- Ms Joanne Harmon (Chair)
- Dr Pdraig Walsh (Chief Executive to 30 September 2020)
- Ms Cliona Curley (Interim Chief Executive from 1 October 2020)
- Dr Barbara Brittingham (International expert)
- Ms Mary Danagher
- Mr Blake Hodgkinson
- Mr Thomas McDermott
- Mr Kevin McStravock (USI nomination)
- Dr Niamh O'Reilly (learner representative)
- Professor Irene Sheridan
- Dr Anne Walsh

Record of Attendance by Board Members at 2020 QQI Board Meetings

	28 FEB 2020	27 APR**	19 JUN**	25 SEPT**	12-14 OCT** (INCORPOREAL MEETING)	23-27 OCT (INCORPOREAL MEETING)	4 DEC**	16-21 DEC** (INCORPOREAL MEETING)	MAX	ATTENDANCE
Joanne Harmon	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	8	
Padraig Walsh	✓	✓	✓	✓				4	4	
Cliona Curley						✓		1	1	
Barbara Brittingham	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	8	
Mary Danagher	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	7	
Blake Hodgkinson	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	8	
Thomas McDermott	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	8	
Kevin McStravock	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	8	
Niamh O'Reilly	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	8	
Irene Sheridan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	
Anne Walsh	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	8	

** Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and in accordance with national public health guidelines, QQI Board Meetings held after 15 March 2020 were conducted through video conferencing.

Gender Balance in QQI Board Membership

As at 31 December 2020, the Board had seven (70%) female and three (30%) male members. With effect from 1 October 2020, an interim Chief Executive was appointed pending completion of a recruitment process for the Chief Executive (ex officio member) position.

The Board, therefore, did not at year end meet the Government target of a minimum of 40% representation of each gender in the membership of State Boards.

The following measures are planned to address and improve gender balance on this Board:

- Reassess the gender balance situation following the appointment of a Chief Executive (ex officio member).

Performance Evaluation

The Board conducted an internal assessment of Board effectiveness for 2019 in Quarter 1, 2020. An External Review of Board and Committee effectiveness was carried out in Quarter 4, 2020, with the resulting report expected in Quarter 1, 2021.

Sub-Board Governance

A number of sub-Board committees provide specific expertise with academic and other key areas of QQI operations:

Audit and Risk Committee

The purpose of the Audit and Risk Committee is to provide an independent assessment structure and support the Board in their responsibilities for issues of risk, control and aspects of governance, by reviewing the comprehensiveness of assurances in meeting the Board's and Accounting Officer's assurance needs and reviewing the reliability and integrity of these assurances. The Audit and Risk Committee met four times in 2020.

Membership/Attendance:

Due to the size of the Board, membership of the Committee is comprised of two Board Members and one external non-Board Member (as opposed to three Board Members as required by the Code of Practice). The composition is being reviewed.

Blake Hodgkinson (Chair from December 2020)	4/4
Thomas McDermott (Chair to November 2020)	4/4
Tony Mealy (non-Board Member)	3/4

Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC)

The Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC) makes decisions regarding the validation of programmes leading to QQI awards. The decisions and recommendations of the Committee are informed by external expertise and recommendations, normally provided in the form of external panel reports and the outcomes of monitoring and review activities carried out by QQI. The PAEC met seven times in 2020.

Membership/Attendance:

Padraig Walsh (Chair to 30 September 2020)	5/5
Cliona Curley (Interim Chair from 1 October 2020)	2/2
Marie Gould	6/7
Barbara Kelly	7/7
Angela Lambkin	7/7
Bryan Maguire	7/7
John O'Connor	7/7
Róisín Sweeney	2/3
Andrina Wafer	7/7

Policies and Standards Committee (PSC)

The Policies and Standards Committee (PSC) considers QQI draft policy and makes recommendations to the Board regarding

the approval of these policies in line with the organisation's strategy. It also considers and may act on recommendations from the executive to determine standards of knowledge, skill and competence for education and training awards or to endorse subject guidelines concerning knowledge, skill and competence which are expected for higher education awards. The PSC met four times in 2020.

Membership/Attendance:

Anne Walsh (Chair)	4/4
Bryan Fields	4/4
Achim Hopbach	2/2
Barbara Kelly	4/4
Daire Keogh	2/2
Bryan Maguire	4/4
Hannah McGee	3/3
Niamh O'Reilly	4/4
Aileen Ponton	4/4
Alan Power	3/3
Ann-Marie Ryan	1/1
Aoife Sweeney	2/4

Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee (PAOC)

The Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee (PAOC) reviews and analyses the activities of the PAEC, providing advice and making recommendations on its decisions. It will also confirm or refer back decisions of the PAEC, as appropriate. The PAOC met twice in 2020.

Membership/Attendance:

Barbara Brittingham (Chair)	2/2
Ken Carroll	2/2
Mary Danagher	0/2

Paul Lyons	2/2
Gerard Morgan	2/2
Gina Quin	2/2

Approvals and Reviews Committee (ARC)

The Approvals and Reviews Committee makes decisions and recommendations about the approval of quality assurance procedures; the International Education Mark; delegated authority; and approves for publication the findings of quality reviews conducted by QQI. The ARC met four times in 2020.

Membership/Attendance:

Irene Sheridan (Chair)	4/4
Ailsa Crum	3/4
Colette Harrison	4/4
Marie Kehoe O'Sullivan	1/3
William Kelly	2/4
Siobhan Kinsella	3/3
Geraldine Larkin	3/4
Kevin McStravock	4/4
Mary Sheridan	4/4

Human Resources and Organisation Committee

The Human Resources and Organisation Committee assists and advises the Board in order to reinforce its own governance and oversight in the areas of HR and the CEO performance. The Human Resources and Organisation Committee met three times during 2020.

Membership/Attendance:

Joanne Harmon (Chair)	3/3
Mary Danagher	3/3
Blake Hodgkinson	3/3

REVALIDATION CASE STUDY: ADVANCED CERTIFICATE IN ACCOUNTING (APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMME)



The two-year, Level 6, Advanced Certificate in Accounting programme (180 FET credits) was developed by Accounting Technicians Ireland (ATI) and a Consortium Steering Group (CSG) comprising professional accountancy bodies such as Chartered Accountants Ireland, qualified members of Accounting Technicians Ireland, employers, academics and other relevant stakeholder experts. The programme is aimed at school leavers, career changers and mature applicants wishing to pursue a career as an Accounting Technician. The programme is a practical pathway to a career in Accounting where apprentices are mentored through a two-year work-based learning education training programme.

An employer-led development approach was taken from the onset with strong professional accountancy representation. ATI engaged with employers on an individual and group basis to determine the Occupational Profile of the programme, programme content, module learning outcomes, assignments, and workplace tasks. Employer-led Consortium Steering Group (CSG) and a Programme Board (PB) were established early in the development process to ensure the programme addressed the needs of industry. This programme is an excellent illustration of industry and education collaborating in the design and development of an apprenticeship programme.

The programme was validated by QQI in 2017. It was the first programme validated with reference to QQI's topic guidelines for quality assurance of apprenticeship programmes and the 2016 Validation policy and criteria.

The apprenticeship programme currently has over 300 apprentices drawn from 18 counties across Ireland and 63% are women. Out of 59 apprenticeship programmes currently provided through SOLAS, the Accounting Technician Apprenticeship is the top choice for women, providing over 20% of all SOLAS female apprenticeship participants registered. The programme continues to be in demand by Industry with over 250 stakeholders participating from various sectors i.e. financial services, public sector, hospitality, manufacturing, property, engineering etc. participating on the programme.

In summary, Gabriela Airini, Head of Apprenticeship, comments, "Accounting Technicians Ireland delivers a high-quality apprenticeship nationwide, providing graduates with on-the-job, practical training and a top industry QQI Level 6 qualification. As part of the programme revalidation in 2020, ATI has updated our syllabus to reflect the changing nature of the profession, increase digital literacy skills, and to deliver wellness and personal development training which supports apprentices' wellbeing throughout the programme, and will provide important resilience tools as they embark on their new career."

Following a comprehensive review and revision process, the update programme was revalidated by QQI in April 2020.

CORPORATE MATTERS

Finance

In 2020, QQI received €10.448 million from State Grant, fee income, EU funding and other sources. For the same period, expenditure was €10.554 million. Pay and pensions expenditure in 2020 amounted to €6.349 million (excluding FRS17 adjustments).

Board Member payments

Members of the Board of QQI act entirely in a voluntary capacity and therefore, no fees were paid to members of the Board in 2020. Expenses are paid for accommodation, travel, flights and subsistence in line with rates set by the Department of Finance. Total Board expenses in 2020 were €4,977*.

Remuneration and Expenses of the Chief Executive

The Chief Executive received salary payments of €118,264* in 2020 (to October 2020). No performance-related pay was received during this period. The Chief Executive's pension entitlements do not extend beyond the standard entitlement in the model public sector defined benefit superannuation scheme. The Chief Executive incurred vouched expenses of €78* in 2020.

QQI's audited Financial Statements are published on the QQI website - www.qqi.ie.

* These figures are extracted from the draft Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2020.

RISK MANAGEMENT

QQI's Risk Management Policy was reviewed and updated in 2020 to include a new risk appetite statement, additional processes to manage and report risk and to embed risk in our work. The corporate Risk Register was regularly reviewed and updated by managers and risk owners, the CEO, Chief Risk Officer, Executive Management Team, Audit and Risk Committee and the Board throughout 2020. Particular attention was given to risk associated with remote working and the Covid 19 pandemic. Steps were taken to raise awareness of risk and integrate risk into projects and planning.

Principal Risks

QQI identified the following risks as the principal ones that could materially and adversely affect the performance of QQI.

- **Risk that QQI cannot deliver the work it sets out to do, in its Corporate Plan and Strategy Statement, if it has not got the necessary skills and manpower. This may result in strategic activities being deferred or otherwise removed from the corporate plan.**

Mitigated by revision of requirements under the Workforce Plan; completion of annual training needs analysis; operation of PMDS; regular updating of Board on staffing matters; regular communication with Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) on resource requirements.

- **Risk of insufficient State funds to establish and carry out new statutory functions (not yet matched by income streams) and to continue to fund existing statutory obligations, strategy and corporate plans.**

Mitigated by completion of Workforce Plan; early submission of a detailed annual

budget and narrative to DFHERIS; liaison between Finance Manager with key staff re project budgeting and planning; inclusion of projects identified by Programme Board in budgeting process.

- **Risk that QQI could run short of funds in the coming 15-month period due to the variable and 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.**

Mitigated by financial management system that facilitates the recognition of expenditure at section, unit and project level, produces monthly management accounts; publication of monthly accounts and detailed cash flow; monitoring of variance in income and expenditure against previous years; review of financial controls and forecasting; control and tracking of project-related expenditure; QQI's accounting and reporting capability assessed under the Financial Management Maturity Model (FMMM).

- **Risk that QQI is not sufficiently prepared to implement the new functions allocated to QQI under the amended legislation, leading to reputational damage or regulatory failure.**

Mitigated by completion of workforce planning and related budget submission; joint DFHERIS/QQI working group on implementation schedule for new functions; approval by Programme Board of related project plans on the development of regulations to assess the capacity of providers, the IEM, Protection for Enrolled Learners (PEL), and listed awarding bodies.

- **Risk that enrolled learners cannot complete their programmes due to a specific provider/multiple providers ceasing to provide their programmes and/or ceasing to trade. This may lead to significant impact on State/QQI**

resources, and legal proceedings against QQI/State, and associated reputational damage.

Mitigated by policy and procedure for the timely and effective management of provider closures and discontinuity of programmes; ongoing monitoring of providers' PEL arrangements; ongoing discussions with DFEHRIS on the implementation of legislation on a national PEL scheme; withdrawal of validation, and quality assurance approval from providers that become non-compliant with legislative requirements concerning PEL (Section 65 of the 2012 Act).

QQI has business policies and organisational structures in place to limit some of these risks and the Board and Executive Management Team regularly review, reassess and proactively limit the associated risks insofar as possible.

Data Protection

QQI is committed to protecting the rights and privacy of individuals in line with the Data Protection Act 2018. The Acts provide for the collection and use of data in a responsible way and provide against unwanted or harmful uses of the data. QQI maintains oversight of its level of compliance to ensure that we have adequate arrangements in place to meet the requirements of the Data Protection Acts. Requests for access to personal data were responded to as appropriate, within the legislative timeframes during 2020.

Protected Disclosures

Section 21 of the Protected Disclosures Act 2014 requires that every public body establish and maintain procedures for the making of protected disclosures by workers who are, or were, employed by the public body and for dealing with such disclosures.

No reports were made by QQI workers under the QQI Protected Disclosures Policy in the 12-month period to 31 December 2020.

One report was received by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) under Section 7 of the Protected Disclosures Act, 2014 in the 12-month period to 31 December 2020. This disclosure was not from employees of QQI and related to a worker or workers employed in an entity that falls within the remit of QQI whereby such a disclosure can be made to a prescribed person in QQI under S.I. 339 of 2014. The disclosure was examined and concluded in 2020.

Complaints of Service

During 2020, QQI received no complaints of service.

Internal Controls

QQI has taken steps to ensure an appropriate control environment is in place in relation to identification and management of risks. There were no material breaches of internal controls in 2020.

REENGAGEMENT CASE STUDY 3 - LOCAL AUTHORITY SERVICES NATIONAL TRAINING GROUP (LASNTG)



The Local Authority Services National Training Group (LASNTG) draws its membership from four national training groups:

- The Road Services Training Group (RSTG)
- The Water Services Training Group (WSTG)
- The Environmental Services Training Group (ESTG)
- The Fire Service Training Group (FSTG)

Learners include staff from all local authority grades within the four sectors. The diverse learner profile includes general operatives, gangers, tradespeople, drivers, supervisors, caretakers, technicians, engineers, administration staff and fire fighters.

Although the primary focus of the LASNTG is the provision of training for local authority staff, LASNTG also provides training on a contract basis to other public sector bodies and private sector contractors and employees involved in works on public roads. These include, for example, Irish Water, the Environmental

Protection Agency, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

LASNTG currently offer a diverse range of accredited and non-accredited programmes and deliver these at five Regional Training Centres (RTC) in Counties Tipperary, Mayo, Donegal, Cork and Dublin. Training is delivered by training centre staff, local authority staff and contracted trainers. In 2019, LASNTG was responsible for over 33,000-person training days across the RTC network.

LASNTG achieved FETAC recognition in 2011, and the following programmes have been validated by QQI at NFQ Levels 5-6:

- Plant Operations for Water Treatment
- Plant Operations for Waste Water Treatment
- Site Suitability for Waste Water Treatment
- Firefighting Operations

LASNTG additionally works in partnership with IT Carlow and IT Sligo to support the range of education and training programmes available at NFQ Levels 6 – 9 in its areas of expertise.

LASNTG applied for reengagement on 29 April 2020. A virtual site visit between the provider and a panel of experts, chaired by Dr Annie Doona (President Emeritus IADT), took place in July 2020. The panel identified a number of areas of good practice in its evaluation of LASNTG's QA system, and commended the provider in relation to these. The panel also acknowledged the significant amount of work involved in preparing for and submitting an application for reengagement. The panel congratulated LASNTG on its constructive engagement with the reengagement process. However, at the conclusion of the virtual site visit the panel held concerns that some discrete issues needed to be addressed by LASNTG before the panel could recommend approval of the provider's QA procedures. These related to governance and in particular, the relationship with the RTCs and the provision of

information to learners on the provider website. The Panel thus availed of the option to defer its decision and allowed LASNTG six weeks in which to address the issues identified, before reconvening to review the provider's revised documentation.

Following that desk review of revised documentation in September 2020, the panel was of the view that LASNTG had worked effectively to address the panel's concerns in the interim period and was pleased to make a recommendation to QQI to approve LASNTG's draft QA procedures. The panel also offered the provider advice on areas in which it could further enhance its QA system. The PAEC approved LASNTG's QA procedures at its meeting on 15 October 2020.

The panel report and LASNTG's response is available here: [LASNTG QA approval report](#).

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Initial Access to Validation – Applications made in 2020

SECTOR	APPLICATIONS	APPROVED	IN PROCESS	WITHDRAWN
Higher Education and Training	5	0	3	2
Further Education and Training	4	1	3	0
Total	9	1	6	2

Initial Access to Validation – Applications made prior to 2020 but finalised in 2020

SECTOR	APPLICATIONS	APPROVED	IN PROCESS	WITHDRAWN
Higher Education and Training	4	3	1	0
Further Education and Training	0	0	0	0
Total	4	3	1	0

APPENDIX 2

Reengagement – Applications made in 2020

SECTOR	APPLICATIONS	APPROVED	IN PROCESS	WITHDRAWN
Higher Education and Training	6	3	2	1
Further Education and Training	23	3	17	3
Total	29	6	19	4

Reengagement – Applications made prior to 2020 but continued in 2020

SECTOR	APPLICATIONS	APPROVED	IN PROCESS	WITHDRAWN
Higher Education and Training	10	10	0	0
Further Education and Training	10	8	2	0
Total	20	18	2	4

APPENDIX 3

New Validation – Applications made in 2020

SECTOR	APPLICATIONS	VALIDATED	REFUSED VALIDATION	IN PROCESS
Higher Education and Training	54	49	1	4
Further Education and Training	18	17	0	1
Total	72	66	1	5

New Validation – Applications made prior to 2020 but finalised in 2020

SECTOR	APPLICATIONS	VALIDATED	REFUSED VALIDATION	IN PROCESS
Higher Education and Training	7	5	2	0
Further Education and Training	5	4	1	0
Total	12	9	3	0

APPENDIX 4

New Validation – Applications made in 2020

SECTOR	APPLICATIONS	VALIDATED	IN PROCESS
Higher Education and Training	44	44	0
Further Education and Training	1	1	0
Total	45	45	0