**26 February 2014**

**QQI Presentation to the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection**

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) would like to thank the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection for the invitation to contribute to its consideration of the role and future potential of community and vocational education. As members will recall, QQI, along with the Department of Education and Skills and the ICTU Community Sector Committee, attended the Joint Committee on 19 February to discuss the application of fees to community and voluntary providers. I’d like to reiterate the apologies conveyed by my colleagues for my absence on that occasion due to a prior commitment overseas.

As Members will be aware from that presentation, QQI is an amalgamated entity which, in November 2012, replaced the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB).

In the context of my brief comments below, it is important to note that in addition to being an awarding body and a quality assurance body, QQI is responsible for maintaining the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and has statutory responsibility for ensuring that providers of education and training makes learners aware of how they may access education and training, how they may transfer from one part of the education system to another and how the qualifications they obtain allow them to progressively move through the different levels of the NFQ, if they so desire.

In respect of its relationship with community and vocational education providers, QQI is an awarding body and an external quality assurance body operating under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012. Working within this legislation and the emphasis it places on the capacity of providers to deliver programmes, QQI envisages an evolving quality assurance relationship with providers of community education and vocational education and training.

QQI will therefore be placing much more emphasis on the internal and external quality assurance of providers including how they design, deliver and assess programmes that lead to our awards, and in turn to their inclusion in the NFQ. In the context of the recent establishment of the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), the introduction of SOLAS, and the development of a Further Education and Training Strategy, we believe that this will be a very important parallel development. It is also, fundamentally, in the interests of learners.

Following on from our meeting with the Joint Committee last week, QQI is looking forward to meeting with AONTAS and with the ICTU Community Sector Committee to discuss the impact that these developments may have on the 150 providers that QQI currently engages with from the community and voluntary sector. While we have engaged with AONTAS in the past, it is now imperative that we work closely with the community representative organisations to explore how the sector can constructively and positively respond to evolving quality assurance standards. A potential reconfiguration of the sector with a reduction in the number of providers with a direct relationship to QQI and an increase in provider networks or consortia linked to lead providers, presents challenges for the sector and for QQI. However, it also provides the opportunity for a strengthened sector able to more proportionately allocate its collective resources between provision of education for learners and the maintenance of the quality assurance systems required to underpin this provision. We believe that this is an exciting development.

Vocational education and training with its inherent emphasis on access to employment is going through an equally interesting transition. In Ireland, vocational education and training is largely associated with the poorly-understood label of further education and training. In reality, vocational education and training is something that is happening at all ten levels of the NFQ. Specifically in this area we are engaging with ETBI and with individual ETBs to firstly seek to provide practical support in the management of quality assurance agreements which need to be updated in the light of the amalgamations and in the context of what were FÁS training centres becoming incorporated into ETBs. Our hope and intention is to then work with the ETBs as a whole as they will need to engage as a sector with new quality assurance standards developed by QQI.

As in the case of our work with the community and voluntary sector, and with higher education and training providers, our intention is to encourage the sector to collaborate and to share practice in all areas of their work; thus focussing on quality assurance but also quality improvement.

While I have particularly referenced public bodies and publicly-funded parties above, it is important to stress that private providers operate in the area of vocational education and training and indeed both public and private providers work with awarding bodies other than QQI. The 2012 Act values these relationships while stipulating that they must lead to the inclusion of awards in the NFQ. A significant number of the awards of certain UK awarding bodies were aligned with the NFQ under previous policy developed by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. QQI’s policy in this area is developing and we are engaging with City and Guilds and other awarding bodies on its plans in this regard.

Finally, I would like to emphasise the importance of collaboration between government departments and state agencies as we collectively try to support the present and future operations of the community education and vocational education and training sectors. We enjoy good working relationship with SOLAS, with our parent Department and with provider representative bodies. Our intention is to create opportunities to streamline this engagement as a national agency with responsibility for education and training at all 10 levels of the National Framework. In this spirit, we are currently establishing a 35-member Consultative Forum derived from representative bodies across the national education and training and qualifications system. We expect to have the first meeting of this forum in early April.

The very interesting developments proposed in the recently-published review of apprenticeship are another example of how the relevant actors which include SOLAS, the HEA, further and higher education and training providers, employers, unions and QQI can work in concert for the benefit of learners.

I look forward to discussing some of these matters further with colleagues during and subsequent to this meeting and to responding to any questions from Committee members.