

## Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Note of the fiftieth Meeting of the Authority (The Board) which took place on Friday, 25 September 2020 at 10:00 a.m. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, this meeting took place via Microsoft Teams (video conference facility).

**Present:**

- Ms. Joanne Harmon (Chair)
- Dr. Padraig Walsh (Chief Executive)
- Ms. Cliona Curley (Secretary)
- Dr. Barbara Brittingham
- Ms. Mary Danagher
- Mr. Blake Hodkinson
- Mr. Thomas McDermott
- Mr. Kevin McStravock
- Ms. Niamh O'Reilly
- Prof. Irene Sheridan (Items 1-17)
- Dr. Anne Walsh

**Apologies:** No apologies

**In attendance:**

- Ms. Caitriona Lawless (Recording Secretary)
- Mr. Liam Butler (Items 11-12)
- Mr. Oisín Hassan, NStEP (Item 1)
- Ms. Karena Maguire (Item 17)

### INTRODUCTION

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

The Chairperson welcomed all Members to the meeting. As there were ongoing restrictions in place in Ireland due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Board was continuing to meet virtually through Microsoft Teams.

## **1. PRESENTATION BY THE NATIONAL STUDENT ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMME (NStEP)**

Following a request by the Board, Mr. Oisín Hassan, Programme Manager with the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP), delivered a presentation to the Board.

The presentation was followed by a questions and answers session.

The Board noted that NStEP had been established in 2016 as a joint initiative of QQI, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI). The Board noted that approximately 2,750 learners had been trained to date and the aim for NStEP was to increase those numbers again this year, now through virtual training. The Board noted that NStEP had moved to online delivery of training during the Covid-19 pandemic which may be beneficial as it increases the number of learners it can now train.

The Board noted that NStEP is also focusing on two new projects in 2020, Postgraduate Student Engagement and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Engagement.

The Board noted that NStEP has an ongoing partnership with QQI and USI in the provision of a pool of Student Quality Assurance Reviewers who participate in Programme Validation panels, Re-engagement panels etc. which has been very successful to date. The Board noted that there is also an analysis project under way in QQI on the student engagement element of the Cinnte Review process.

The Board noted that the Chief Executive of QQI had originally observed the work of Sparqs (student partnerships in quality Scotland) in Scotland while a member of a QAA Committee (Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education) and that helped in bringing the idea to Ireland. The Chief Executive acknowledged how the process has grown in the intervening years.

The Board, in its discussions, mooted that a similar programme for the Further Education and Training (FET) sector may be beneficial.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, thanked Oisín Hassan for his presentation and overview of the extremely valuable programme operated by NStEP and wished Mr. Hassan the best of luck with the role for the future.

## 2. POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The Board noted that no conflicts of interest were declared.

## 3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETING

The *Minutes of the QQI Board Meeting* held on 19 June 2020 were **confirmed** and would be signed at a later date when circumstances allow.

## 4. NOTE OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETING

The Board **approved** the *Note of the Meeting of 19 June 2020* for publication on the QQI website.

## 5. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

The Board noted the **Action Tracker**.

### 5.1. Action Tracker

The Board noted the updated Action Tracker.

## 6. DRAFT BOARD AGENDA

The Board noted the **Draft December 2020 Board Agenda**.

The Board noted the draft Agenda for the next Board Meeting. The Board noted that a presenter had been contacted and the Executive was awaiting confirmation of availability to attend the meeting. In light of the upcoming Strategy development project, a Board Member suggested it would be an opportune time to reflect on the current strategy and where the organisation is at perhaps during a separate dedicated meeting. The Board suggested amending the strategy development process document, listed for consideration under a later item at this meeting, to include the additional strategy focused facilitated session. The Board noted that Chairperson would discuss the matter separately with the Board member to explore the session requirements further. The Board agreed that it was important to reflect on the current three-year strategy as the final year approaches. The Executive undertook to make the necessary arrangements in consultation with the Chairperson.

## 7. COVID-19

The Board noted the update on matters effected by and resulting from **Covid-19**.

### 7.1. Covid-19 Update

The Board noted the update on Covid-19. The Board noted the recent publication of the report on *The Impacts of Covid-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education* (referred to hereafter as the TLA Report) which had been circulated to the Board on 24 August. The Board recognised the importance of the document and congratulated the Executive on the compilation of same, noting that it came at a critical time in the public consciousness. The Board noted that the report had been referred to by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on a number of occasions such as the Tertiary Education System (TES) Steering Group meeting on 4 September and the Seanad Eireann debate on Safe Reopening of Tertiary Sector and Key Priorities for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on 24 September in addition to a number of newspaper articles.

The Executive acknowledged that it had received very wide input from across the sector when drafting the Report. The Report was also made possible due to the fact that QQI is the only State body outside of the Department which spans the tertiary education sector. The Board noted that the tertiary sector in the main, continued to function and complete its academic year and assessment period through the pandemic when compared with other educational sectors.

The Board noted as per Government guidelines, QQI staff were continuing to work from home. The Board noted that a number of all staff meetings had been held over the summer period with the most recent taking place on 3 September.

The Board noted that a second virtual Cinnte Review (University of Limerick) had taken place in addition to the completion of a number of virtual Initial Access Applications, Programme Validations and Re-engagement assessments.

The Board noted that the in-house Covid-19 Group is continuing to meet on a fortnightly basis. The Board noted all 19 rescheduled Quality Dialogue meetings with Universities and Institutes

of Technology had also taken place which assisted in gathering some additional information from providers on how they had operated their amended arrangements for and their experience of teaching, learning and assessment during the pandemic.

## **8. CEO REPORT**

The Board noted the **CEO Report**.

### **8.1. CEO Report**

The Board noted the various updates contained in the CEO report covering the period since the June 2020 Board Meeting.

The Board noted that the Executive had provided the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science with statistics (disaggregated by Levels) for FET Certification for the periods January-June 2015-2020, a copy of which was provided to Members at the meeting. The Board noted the initial indications suggest that the FET sector was heavily impacted once the country entered lockdown restrictions. The majority of the focus in that sector was on ensuring the completion of Major Awards at Levels 5 and 6 to facilitate learners applying to the CAO applications process.

## **9. ITEMS FOR NOTING**

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

### **9.1. Focus on Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee**

The Board noted the verbal overview of the work of the Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee (PAOC) provided by the Chairperson of the Committee. The Board noted the Chair's acknowledgement of the support provided by the Executive to the Committee. The Board noted that the attendance of PAOC members as observers at meetings of the PAEC had been a very useful exercise. The Board noted the latest innovation implemented by the PAOC was that the review of each negative decision of the PAEC was assigned to two members for presentation to the Committee, which has worked well to date. The Chief Executive acknowledged that the PAOC and the Committee structure in general had worked very well to date.

9.2. Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee (PAOC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the PAOC held on 26 September 2019 and PAOC Annual Report 2019.

9.3. Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC)

The Board noted the reports of the meetings of the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee held on 11 June and 16 July 2020.

9.4. Policies and Standards Committee (PSC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Policies and Standards Committee held on 4 June 2020.

9.5. Rolling Board Agenda 2020

The Board noted an update on the Rolling Board Agenda for 2020.

**10. BOARD MET WITHOUT THE EXECUTIVE PRESENT**

The Chair and members of the HR and Organisation Committee updated the Board on the recruitment process for the Chief Executive post.

**11. RELATIONS WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE**

The Board noted the documents relating to **Relations with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science**.

11.1. Performance Delivery Agreement (PDA) 2020

The Board noted that following the recent Government formation, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) was restructured to form the Department of Education and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) which QQI is under the aegis of. The Board noted that the officials which QQI had previously dealt with in DES had moved to the new Department. As a result of these developments, the Department requested that the Q2 PDA Review Meeting be rescheduled from 30 June (which was the date of the appointment of the new Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science). The Board noted that while several attempts had been

made to reschedule the meeting for July and early September, a date had just been confirmed for Monday, 28 September. The Board noted the final agreed PDA had been signed by both parties (delayed due to the C-19 pandemic). The Board noted that the Department had not yet requested budget estimates for 2021 as work on the July stimulus package (arising from Covid-19) had taken precedence.

The Board noted the update from the Chairperson on a meeting between the QQI Chairperson and the Chief Executive and the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The meeting had been a constructive overview of the current focus and priorities for QQI in its oversight of the tertiary education sector.

#### 11.2. Funding Model and Workforce Planning

The Board noted that a funding options submission 'Draft Budget Narrative 2021-2025' had been submitted to the Department in July. The Department is considering the options. The Board noted that the Department also recognises that QQI has legacy financial issues which would ideally need to be included in future Grant allocations. The Executive suggested that Option 7 – 'Mixed Increase All Fees' would be the most suitable for QQI.

The Board noted, that to date, the Department had not requested any clarifications on the material submitted.

The Board noted the matter will be revisited at the next Board Meeting.

#### 11.3. Revised Legislation

The Board noted that, as per the PDA, the drafting of Ministerial regulations for the implementation of the statutory scheme for Corporate Fitness lies with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science while an ICT resource has been dedicated in QQI towards the Corporate Fitness project.

The Department is working on the development of the regulations and the progression of the associated steps. The Executive hope to have a further update by the next meeting.

## 12. BUDGET AND FINANCE

The Board noted the update on **Budget and Finance**.

### 12.1. Management Accounts to 31 August 2020

The Board noted the Management accounts for the eight months to 31 August 2020. The Board noted the reduction in certification income resulting from the impact of Covid-19. The Board noted a similar reduction in panel expenditure (namely Travel and Subsistence) for the same reason. The Board noted that while income is down, staff have had to be innovative to maintain the same level of service during the pandemic. The Board noted expenditure arising as a result of the pandemic and the Government recommendation to work from home where possible, had already been incurred.

The Board noted that the Executive had been conservative in drafting its 2020 budget and had expected to run a deficit in that financial year. The Board noted that drawdown of the full State Grant allocation for 2020 had now taken place.

The Board noted that there was likely to be a request for additional funding for 2021. It is expected that the biggest funding issue in the next financial year, is likely to be a loss of income, particularly from certification fees.

### 12.2. Initial Draft Budget 2021

The Board noted the initial draft Budget for 2021.

### 12.3. Tenders

The Board noted a tender process for the ICT Personnel Framework was live and would be closing in the coming week. The Board noted that the Executive would arrange an incorporeal Board meeting to consider the outcome of the process.

The Board noted a tender process for Audit Services is underway with the Office of Government Procurement and a recommendation arising from that process is expected to be presented for consideration at the next meeting of the Audit and Risk Committee prior to being referred to the Board at its meeting scheduled for 4 December.

### **13. ORGANISATION AND HUMAN RESOURCES**

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

#### **13.1. Update on Human Resources**

The Board noted an update on Human Resources. The Board noted that the Executive was working on a follow up questionnaire to a Staff Survey conducted during the initial stages of the working from home period. The Board noted that supporting staff wellbeing was more important than ever at this time.

### **14. AUDIT AND RISK**

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

#### **14.1. Report of the Audit and Risk Committee**

The Board noted the draft report of the Audit and Risk Committee Meeting held on 15 May 2020.

#### **14.2. Chairperson of the Audit and Risk Committee**

The Board noted that the Chairperson of the Audit and Risk Committee had decided to step down from the Committee at the end of the year to facilitate staggering of membership and succession planning.

The Chairperson and Board Members thanked the Audit and Risk Chairperson for the significant time and work involved over the last five years.

### **15. STRATEGIC PLANNING**

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

#### **15.1. Corporate Plan 2020**

The Board noted the Quarter 2 and interim Q3 Progress Reports for the 2020 Corporate Plan.

The Board noted that, as a result of the effects of the Covid-19 restrictions and the reprioritising of work related to the pandemic, the delivery of a number of actions had been delayed. The Board noted that work was progressing on the delayed actions and it was

expected that the majority would be nearing completion in Quarter 4 or early in 2021. It was noted that most of the delayed actions had moved timelines by approximately one Quarter.

#### 15.2. Strategy Development

The Board noted that QQI would be entering the third year of its three-year strategy in 2021 and would shortly begin the drafting process for the next three-year Strategy Statement. The Board noted and discussed the draft Strategy Development Process presented. As the preparation and adoption of a strategic plan is a primary responsibility of the Board, Members considered that that role was not reflected sufficiently in the draft and requested an amendment to the document to strengthen the Board's role as drivers of the process as well as including the additional strategic reflection meeting suggested under Item 6 above. A Board member also raised the matter of strategy development in the current time period (i.e. what is now 'normal'), it was suggested that consideration should be given to building activities and methods for communicating with stakeholders in such times. The Board requested the Executive amend the draft Strategy Development Process and present to the Board at a subsequent meeting for further consideration.

### 16. GOVERNANCE

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

#### 16.1 Board Self-Assessment Evaluation 2019

The Board noted the Board Self-Assessment Evaluation for 2019. This item was originally presented to the Board for consideration at its February 2020 meeting but was deferred due to time constraints. The Board then deferred the matter from its April 2020 meeting as the meeting was held virtually, the consensus at the meeting was that Members wished to discuss the matter in a face to face setting. As that continues to be unlikely for the foreseeable future, the document was re-presented to the Board for consideration. The Board discussed the matter and may touch on the subject further during its strategic reflection meeting.

The Board expressed an overall high degree of satisfaction with the Board's performance and its governance. The Board noted that communication from the Executive of specific items completed throughout the year (and how they are first presented and packaged for approval/consideration) may assist to inform completion of future questionnaires. The Board

noted the size of the Board will always present as a challenge to populate the Committee structure with a low number of Board Members. The Board suggested that some consideration should be given to how the Board maintains its dialogue in the now 'virtual' world and it may now require an additional meeting in 2021 as a result. The Board expressed its appreciation to the Executive for its ongoing support.

The Board also suggested once the presentation scheduled for the December 2020 Board meeting is complete, that the timeslot could revert to normal meeting time which could be used in the first instance to reflect on strategy and related matters. It was noted that the timeslot would also continue to be used for the two annual presentations linked to the Memorandums of Understanding with the HEA and SOLAS.

The Board noted a Board Member's assertion that resolution of the funding of the organisation would allow more time to devote to other matters.

The Chief Executive acknowledged the Board's comments relating to the QQI Committee Structure noting that the structure had worked very well to date.

The Board noted that an external review of the Board's performance is due this year and was planned for an earlier Quarter but was impacted by the C-19 restrictions. The Executive was sourcing an external evaluator with a view to completing the review by year end.

#### 16.2. Self-assessment Evaluation of Committee Performance 2019

The Board noted the outcomes and recommendations arising from the annual self-assessment evaluation of the performance of the four Committees (PAEC, PAOC, ARC and PSC) for 2019.

### **17. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

The Board noted the documents circulated in advance of the meeting and relating to **Stakeholder Engagement**.

#### 17.1 QQI Stakeholder Survey

The Board noted the QQI Stakeholder Engagement Research Report compiled following a stakeholder survey and interviews with key stakeholders conducted earlier in 2020.

The Board noted the Executive's opinion that the research company, chosen following a tendering process, had really understood the premise, topic and QQI as an organisation and the sector which it works in, all of which added to the outcome of the project.

The Board noted and discussed the findings.

The Board noted that the positive feedback included a good sense of general stakeholder satisfaction with QQI and the Executive was happy with the expressions of the professionalism of its staff. The Board noted that there was some negative feedback in relation to QQI's ICT system and however, also noted that the Executive hopes that this may have since been resolved somewhat by the development of and recent rollout of new phases of the QHub system. The Board noted the acknowledgement by some stakeholders that a lack of resources can at times be a significant factor in what and how much QQI can accomplish and react to.

The Board noted that, in general, the majority of the feedback received was extremely positive and noted that a number of Units and Directorates in the organisation were already reviewing the feedback and working on the recommendations. The Executive was encouraged that a number of the areas for improvements had already been identified and prioritised inhouse as areas to work on.

The Board noted that a tender for the development of the QQI website would be concluded in the coming weeks and some of the feedback from the survey can be incorporated into that review.

The Board also noted that the 2020 Stakeholder Engagement Research Report can be used as a benchmark for a similar exercise in the future.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, congratulated the Executive on the project.

## 18. WITHDRAWAL OF VALIDATION

The Board noted the document entitled **Withdrawal of Validation**.

The Board noted and **approved** the withdrawal, under Section 47 of the 2012 Act, of validation of the programmes specified in the document provided to the Board. The Board noted that the providers of the programmes specified had confirmed that the programmes were no longer being offered. It was noted that following withdrawal of validation of these programmes, the specified providers would no longer have a relationship with QQI.

## 19. COMMUNICATIONS

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

### 19.1. Media Mentions

The Board noted the media mentions published since the June 2020 Board Meeting.

The Board noted that QQI had again sponsored and contributed to the Irish Independent's *'Going to College'* podcast.

## 20. NEXT MEETING

The Board noted that the next meeting is scheduled to take place on **Friday, 4 December 2020** beginning at **10:00 a.m.**

The Board noted that the meeting will be held via Microsoft Teams again and the Executive would be in contact with Members closer to the date to confirm the arrangements. The Board noted that there may also be a need for an additional meeting(s) during the coming weeks.

The Board noted that the Executive would circulate options for Board Meeting dates in 2021 to Members in the coming weeks with a view to confirming the most suitable options at the December 2020 Board Meeting.

## **21. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

### 21.1. Chief Executive

As the contract of employment of the Chief Executive was ending on 30 September 2020, the Chairperson and Board took the opportunity to thank Dr. Pdraig Walsh for all his contributions and work over the previous eight years.

The Chief Executive thanked the Chairperson and the Board with whom it had been a pleasure to work with and he paid tribute to the staff of QQI.

### 21.2. Tabled Documentation

The Executive undertook to circulate two documents to the Board which had been mentioned during the course of the Meeting:

- FET Certification Statistics: Certificates Issued, January-June 2015-2020
- TLA Media Mentions and Promotions.

**THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS OF THE MEETING.**