

Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Note of the fifty-ninth Meeting of the Authority (The Board) which took place on Friday, 26 November 2021 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. Pdraig Walsh (Chief Executive)
- Ms. Cliona Curley (Secretary)
- Dr. Barbara Brittingham
- Mr. Blake Hodkinson
- Mr. Thomas McDermott
- Prof. Irene Sheridan
- Dr. Anne Walsh

Apologies:

- Ms. Mary Danagher
- Ms. Megan O'Connor
- Dr. Niamh O'Reilly

In attendance:

- Ms. Caitriona Lawless (Recording Secretary)
- Mr. Andrew Brownlee, Chief Executive, SOLAS (Item 1)
- Ms. Angela Lambkin (Item 9)
- Dr. Anna Murphy (Item 10)

INTRODUCTION

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.

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

1. PRESENTATION BY SOLAS

Following a request by the Board, Mr. Andrew Brownlee, Chief Executive of SOLAS, delivered a presentation to the Board.

The presentation was followed by a questions and answers session. The discussion touched on topics such as the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy, apprenticeships and *The Evaluation of the Comparability of the Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate Qualifications (Level 6) Review*. The Board noted that SOLAS considers the inaugural review of Quality Assurance (QA) in Education and Training Boards (ETBs) currently being carried out by QQI, to be hugely significant for the sector. The SOLAS Executive considers it to be an informative and constructive review and QQI plays a significant role in provider development. The review also informs the FET Strategy outputs. The Board noted that several ETBs have acknowledged the positive impact of completing the self-evaluation element of the review on their institution.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, thanked Mr. Brownlee for presenting to the Board.

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 27 September 2021 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 27 September 2021** 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. The Board also noted that analytics for the current QQI website which were requested by Members at the September Board Meeting were included under Item 9, Communications.

6. COVID-19

The Board noted an update on matters affected by and resulting from **Covid-19**.

6.1. Covid-19 Update

The Board noted an update on the current impact of Covid-19. The Board noted that staff are continuing to work from home while adjustments are being made to the office layout to facilitate a more suitable working environment. Staff will also be surveyed again on their views of working remotely during the pandemic and a return to office-based working. The Executive has had discussions with Managers on identifying areas of work/business which are difficult to progress in a remote working environment. The Executive has also identified the requirement for more meeting room space in its premises. The Board noted that the HR and Organisation Committee had received an update on the plans for the eventual return to the office. The Chairperson confirmed the Board's satisfaction that the Executive is progressing as much of the 'return to the office' measures and procedures as possible under the current Covid-19 regulations.

The Board noted that the Chief Executive had attended an ACESA (Association of Chief Executives of State Agencies) Working Group comprised of a number of state agencies, many of which outlined differing experiences of working through the pandemic.

7. CEO REPORT

The Board noted the **CEO Report**.

7.1. CEO Report

The Board noted the various updates contained in the CEO report covering the period since the September 2021 Board Meeting. The Board noted that the Executive is working on the relaunch of the Green Paper on Qualifications and would be using the establishment of the Irish Quality and Qualifications Forum (IQQF) as a vehicle for the consultation process. The Paper will also be mentioned during the launch of the Statement of Strategy 2022-2024.

The Board noted that there had been strong certification figures for the October period, these figures were more in line with 2019 levels than had previously been seen in late 2020 and early 2021.

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

The Board noted an update on **Engagement with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)**.

8.1. Performance Delivery Agreement (PDA) 2021

The Board noted that a PDA Review meeting had taken place on 4 November and the Chairperson and Chief Executive provided a verbal update. The Board noted that some of the items discussed during the meeting included Workforce Planning, the Funding Model, the amended Legislation and the new Statement of Strategy. The establishment of the International Education Mark (IEM) was also discussed.

The Board noted that the Funding Model is still on the Department's agenda.

During the course of the discussion, Board Members raised a number of queries relating to Protection for Enrolled Learners (PEL). The Board noted that the PEL function is linked to Corporate Fitness, which needs to be in place in the first instance with the establishment of PEL being second in the sequence. It was noted that Corporate Fitness regulations are currently

being drafted with accompanying Guidelines which QQI is leading on as requested by the Department. A draft is expected for internal review by the end of the year.

A Board Member raised a concern that spending reviews may be likely following the economic impact of Covid-19 and it would be essential that the funding model is finalised before the end of the term of the current Board or the current Government. The Board noted the Quarter 3 Progress Report and the draft PDA for 2022.

8.2. Draft PDA 2022

The Board noted an initial draft Performance Delivery Agreement for 2022 which would be forwarded to the Department in the coming weeks.

8.3. Amendment Legislation Programme (ALP)

The Board noted a verbal update on progress under the ALP since the September Board Meeting. It was noted that following the recent round of staff recruitment, the ALP project plan has been reviewed and all project owners were now in place. The Project Management team are working with the project owners to now remove and update the business processes, mapping and review following the recent organisational restructuring. The Board noted that a new ICT Strategy is also being developed following completion of the QQI Statement of Strategy. The Board noted that the Executive will provide an updated timeline for the ALP to DFHERIS.

The Board noted that two new Projects were being developed to support the successful implementation of the ALP programme: 1) process mapping and 2) fees, for each of the functions under the existing ALP projects.

Corporate Fitness

The Board noted that the Executive is planning to have draft Corporate Fitness regulations by year end.

9. COMMUNICATIONS

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

9.1. Qualifax

The Board noted a presentation on the Strategic Review of Qualifax by the consultants tasked with conducting a review of the Qualifax website content management framework together with Angela Lambkin, Head of Qualifications Information and Learning Opportunities, QQI. The site is no longer fit for purpose in its current form. The consultants recommended that the Executive update/recreate a new (modern) site which focuses on the programme database and the calendar of events. The Chairperson thanked the presenters.

The Board discussed the item.

The Board requested that the Executive compile costings and a timeline for the Qualifax project to be presented at the February 2022 Board Meeting.

9.2. QQI Website Analytics

The Board noted analytics for the QQI website which were requested by the Board at its September Meeting. The Board discussed a number of the analytic categories. The Board noted that the Executive uses its social medial channels as well as the website to disseminate information to its different audiences. The Executive has, to date, focused on growing its Twitter and LinkedIn followers. It was noted that following the launch of the new website scheduled for early December, the Executive wishes to grow its Facebook audience which would be more learner focused.

9.3. Media Mentions/Social Media Statistics

The Board noted the media mentions and social media statistics for the period since the September 2021 Board Meeting.

10. STRATEGIC PLANNING

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

10.1. Corporate Plan 2021

The Board noted the interim Quarter 4 Progress Report for the 2021 Corporate Plan. The Board noted that while progress on a number of items is delayed, several are reliant on external dependencies. The Board noted that a launch for The Projects Hub, a new centralised portal for project development and project management, had been held for staff on 25 November. The Board stated that it was conscious that the organisation is still working through a pandemic and requested that the Executive should be conscious when carrying unfinished projects/actions through to 2022, that timelines and deadlines are staggered appropriately.

10.2. Strategy Statement 2022-2024 and Corporate Plan 2022

The Board noted the draft implementation plan for the Statement of Strategy 2022-2024 together with an initial draft Corporate Plan for 2022. It was noted that amongst the initial key actions for the start of the three-year period (2022-2024) are:

- Qualifax – development of new/updated website,
- Corporate Fitness (finalisation of regulations),
- PEL (development of regulations),
- Open the IEM for applications 12 months following the publication of Corporate Fitness regulations,
- Continue to work closely with SOLAS and the ETBs,
- Cinnte Reviews of Technological Universities (TUs),
- The 10-year anniversary of QQI's establishment and
- A reimagined workplace to facilitate working through and after Covid-19.

The Board **approved** the Implementation Plan for the Statement of Strategy 2022-2024 and the draft Corporate Plan 2022. The Board noted that a virtual launch of the new Statement of Strategy will take place on 30 November.

10.3. Restructuring of QQI

The Board noted that in order to support the implementation of the new Strategy, the Chief Executive had been considering options for restructuring the organisation. It was noted that a Director had also recently returned from secondment. The Board noted a verbal update from the Executive on the restructuring. The organisational structure which was effective from 22 November, now comprised of four Directorates and one Division:

Awards –Barbara Kelly, Director,
Integration –Bryan Maguire, Director,
Development –Jim Murray, Director,
Corporate Services –Cliona Curley, Director and
Partnerships Division – Karena Maguire, Head of Partnerships.

The Board noted that the Executive had engaged with the recognised Trade Union on the restructuring with any issues being worked through and the new structure fully communicated to staff. The Chief Executive had also discussed the restructuring with the Chairperson and the HR & Organisation Committee had been updated on the matter at its meeting on 5 November.

10.4. QQI's 10-Year Anniversary

The Board noted that QQI will celebrate its 10-year anniversary in November 2022 and the Executive is proposing a year-long programme of events to mark the occasion. It is planned that this would include a two-day face to face conference in October. Board Members were invited to send suggestions and feedback to the Secretariat.

11. ORGANISATION AND HUMAN RESOURCES

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

11.1. Update on Human Resources

The Board noted an update on Human Resources.

The Board noted that the HR & Organisation Committee had met on 5 November where the Committee finalised amendments to its Terms of Reference.

The Board considered and **approved** the amendments to the Terms of Reference for the HR & Organisation Committee.

12. ITEMS FOR NOTING

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

12.1. Focus on HR & Organisation Committee

This item was discussed in conjunction with the previous item. The Board noted the minutes of the HR & Organisation Committee meeting held on 19 November 2020 which had been circulated separately. The Board noted that the Committee had spent a significant amount of time during 2020 overseeing the recruitment of a Chief Executive. The Board noted that the final Committee meeting of this year will be to finalise the Chief Executive's PMDS.

12.2. Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee (PAOC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee held on 10 November 2020. A Board Member requested further information on a refusal of programme validation listed within the report.

12.3. Approvals and Reviews Committee (ARC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Approvals and Reviews Committee held on 19 August 2021. The Board also noted a verbal update provided by the Chair of the ARC. The Committee had, at its last two meetings, considered the review reports arising from phase 1 of the Inaugural Review of Quality Assurance of ETBs. The Board noted that the Executive was already analysing themes emerging from the first set of reviews and registering a number of similarities. It was noted that the Executive will produce a thematic analysis at the end stage of the review cycle. The Board noted that the review was constructive and there was a general sense that the reviews and their findings are enabling the sector. The ARC Chair acknowledged the significant work by QQI on the composition of review panels, sourcing international experts etc.

12.4. Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC)

The Board noted the reports of the meetings of the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee held on 9 September and 19 October 2021.

12.5. Rolling Board Agenda 2021 and 2022

The Board noted an update on the Rolling Board Agenda for 2021 together with a draft Rolling Agenda for 2022. The Board noted that its membership term will finish in November 2022 and the reappointment/appointment of new Board Members had been discussed with the Department at the PDA Review Meeting held on 4 November. The Board noted that a number of members will have completed two terms of membership (10 years in total) and will be ineligible for reappointment as a result.

13. **REVIEWS**

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

13.1. ENQA Review 2019

The Board noted an update on the two-year Progress Report submitted to ENQA in June in response to its review of QQI's compliance against the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). This item was deferred from the September 2021 Board Meeting. The Board noted that there had been significant progress on the two recommendations arising from the review i.e. submission of a Funding Model and Workforce Plan and ongoing engagement with DFHERIS on same and completion of reengagement with all HE private providers and initial planning for a delegated authority (DA) process for the HE private provider sector. The Board noted that the ENQA Board commended QQI for committing considerable resources to perform analytic work to further develop related external QA activities.

13.2. Inaugural Review of Quality Assurance (QA) in the Education and Training Boards (ETBs)

The Board noted the review reports from Phase 1 of the Review of Quality Assurance in the Education and Training Boards. The reports for the following five ETBs are being prepared for publication:

- Limerick and Clare ETB,
- Laois and Offaly ETB,
- Mayo, Leitrim and Sligo ETB,
- Donegal ETB and
- Cork ETB.

The Board briefly discussed the initial phase of the review cycle and together with the Executive, acknowledged the amount of work undertaken by the ETBs in their self-evaluation process. During the discussion, both the Board and Executive were conscious of the impact of Covid-19, not only on the review process from QQI's perspective but also its impact on the self-evaluation preparation for many of the providers under review. The Executive also noted the Board's suggestion that it was important to review its own process as the cycle continues and improve upon it for the next review cycle.

The Board noted that it is likely that 6-7 common themes will emerge from the review cycle and a thematic analysis will be carried out. The common themes will also be discussed with the ETBs (ETB sector), SOLAS and the Department.

14. BUDGET AND FINANCE

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

14.1. Management Accounts to 30 September 2021

The Board noted the Management Accounts for the nine months to 30 September 2021. The Board noted that no issues had arisen to date. The Executive was in the process of drawing down the final tranche of State funding for 2021 from the Department.

14.2. Additional QQI Credit Cards

The Board noted that due to remote working and changes to the security requirements associated with the company credit card, the Executive was requesting authorisation to apply for two additional credit cards to be held by staff in the Finance Unit. The additional credit cards negate the need for the current card holder to be available at all times should a transaction need authorisation (which is now verified through an app on the cardholder's phone). The Board noted that the existing controls and sign offs remain in place. The Board **approved** the request for two additional credit cards.

14.3. ICT Contract Resources

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

- the procurement of contracts for ICT contract resources for six months (January-June 2022) as outlined in the proposal submitted and in accordance with the QQI Purchasing and Procurement Policy and subject to contract.

The Board noted that ICT spend and spend against budget is reviewed monthly by the Project Steering Group. The Board noted that the spend to date in 2021 and the budget for the year to date are currently very comparable.

15. **AUDIT AND RISK**

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

15.1. Verbal Report of Audit and Risk Committee Meeting

The Board noted a verbal report of the Audit and Risk Committee Meeting held on 15 October 2021. All items discussed at the meeting featured on the Board Meeting agenda bar a discussion the Committee had relating to cybersecurity.

15.2. Management Letter 2020

The Board noted the Management Letter for the Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2020. The Board also noted that the contracted auditor attended part of the Committee Meeting on 15 October.

The Board noted that the letter contained no high risks, three medium and one low.

15.3. Internal Audit Reports

The Board noted two Internal Audit Reports which had been considered by the Audit and Risk Committee and recommended to the Board for its consideration.

Business Continuity and Operational Resilience

The Board noted that the Business Continuity Policy had been approved in June 2019 and following the continued operation of QQI throughout the last 21 months of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Internal Audit was a timely review of the processes in place. It was also noted that in advance of the review, ICT has been working on an updated Business Continuity Plan.

Following the review, the Homeworking Policy is being updated and the Covid-19 related Return to Work Policy was also being developed. The Board noted that a new Data Breach Policy has been reviewed and updated and the Executive recently tendered for a new GDPR support agency. The Board noted that the Executive had found it to be a helpful and positive review.

The Board **approved** the following Internal Audit Reports:

- Business Continuity and Operational Resilience, and
- Audit of Medium Risks Ranked 1-5.

15.4. Internal Audits 2022

The Board noted and **approved** the schedule of four Internal Audits in the proposed Outsourced Internal Audits for 2022 and noted that the schedule can be adjusted if required.

15.5. Risk Management Update

The Board noted an update on Risk Management and that the Executive had amended the Risk Management Policy to include new measures for the removal of risks from the Risk Register (removed risks will be maintained in an associated file for record). The Board **approved** the amendments to the Risk Management Policy, which had also been endorsed by the Audit and Risk Committee. It was noted that the amendments now ensure that the Policy is better aligned with QQI's Risk Appetite.

The Board noted that, following a tender process, a suitable company has been engaged to conduct an external review of QQI's Risk Management Framework. This review is a requirement of the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies.

15.6. High Level Review of Top Five Risks

The Board noted that one recommendation arising from the External Review of the Board and its Committee, which was carried out in late 2020, was that the Board should dedicate some time to consideration of the top five Strategic Risks facing QQI, taking each in turn in a high-level discussion, over successive meetings.

The Executive was now presenting the second in the series of risks to the Board for consideration, Risk QQI-R6:

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

The Board discussed the risk and noted that the relationship with its new Department is working well. The significant increase in staffing this year was noted. However, both the Board and the Executive were conscious that in light of the continuing pandemic, its impact on the economy and public finances, there may yet be an impact on recruitment in the public service. The Board noted that this risk is considered regularly by EMT in the context of the next Strategy, staff retention and the succession policy. The Executive does not have full control over recruitment and always will require sanction from DFHERIS and in some cases, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. As such, this is likely to always remain a high risk.

Following its consideration, the Board **agreed** to retain Risk QQI-R6 on the Risk Register both in terms of its ranking and rating.

15.7. Formal Listing of Key Statutory Obligations 2021

The Board noted the Listing of Key Statutory or Compliance Obligations 2021.

15.8. Minutes of Audit and Risk Committee Meeting

The Board noted the Minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee Meeting held on 2 June 2021.

16. GOVERNANCE

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

16.1. External Review of Board and its Committees

The Board noted an update on the implementation plan for the recommendations arising from the External Review of Effectiveness of the Board and its Committees. The Board noted that the majority of the recommendations had been progressed.

The Board noted that the Executive had tendered for a Board Skills Set Audit. It was noted that this audit will also feed into the recruitment process for new Board Members. The Board noted that the Chairperson will be in contact with Members eligible to reapply/for reappointment to discuss their intentions for the future.

16.2. Self-assessment Evaluation of Board Performance 2021

The Board noted that self-assessment survey for 2021 will issue to Board Members in January 2022.

16.3. Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies, 2016

This item had been deferred from the September 2021 Board Meeting. The Board noted the amendments to the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies, 2016 - Annex on Remuneration and Superannuation, July 2021. The Board noted that the amendments on Severance Schemes (Voluntary Redundancy and Voluntary Early Retirement Schemes) and Pension Schemes and relate to Commercial State Bodies.

16.4. Terms of Reference (PAEC and PSC)

The Board noted that following the restructuring of the organisation referred to earlier in the meeting and the resulting reprofiling of a number of Directorates and changes to staff assignments, the Executive had reviewed the Executive membership of its Committees to ensure its appropriateness. As a result of these proposed changes, amendments to the Terms of References of the Policies and Standards Committee and the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee were required.

The Board **approved** the amendments to the Terms of Reference for the two Committees.

16.5. Committee Members/Appointments

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

- Mr. Damien Owens to the Policies and Standards Committee.

Following the approval of the amendments to the Terms of Reference for the Policies and Standards Committee (above), the Board also **approved** the appointment of Jim Murray,

Director of Development who replaces Barbara Kelly, Director of Awards (previously Director of Qualifications), for a two-year term.

The Board noted that the Executive also reviewed the membership of the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee and had made the following changes:

- Jim Murray, Director of Development replaces Bryan Maguire, Director of Integration (previously Director of Quality Assurance) and
- Mary Grennan, Head of International Education replaces Andrina Wafer, Head of International Mobility and Prior Learning (previously Head of Access and Lifelong Learning) whose membership term has been completed.

17. COMPREHENSIVE POLICY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

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

The Board noted the recommendation of the Policies and Standards Committee at its meeting held on 14 June 2021. The Committee recommended the deactivation of the following policies:

- Policy and Criteria for Recognising Professional Awards within the NFQ (2014) and
- Code of Practice for the Provision of Programmes of Education and Training for International Learners (2015).

The Board **approved** the deactivation of the above listed policies.

18. DRAFT BOARD AGENDA

The Board noted the **Draft February 2022 Board Agenda**.

The Board noted that the Chief Executive of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) would be invited to present to the Board at the February 2022 Meeting. The Board expressed an interest in an update on the progress of the HEA Bill/draft Legislation.

As outlined earlier in the meeting, the Executive would add the Board's request to include a costing and timeline for the work on the Qualifax website to the draft Agenda for the next meeting. The Board also noted that the programme for the QQI 10-year anniversary would have been advanced by then and an update will be provided.

The Board noted the Executive's intention to hold a Committee Chairpersons' meeting in Quarter 1, 2022.

19. NEXT MEETING

The Board noted the **Draft Schedule of Board Meeting Dates, 2022**.

The Board **approved** the following dates for its meetings in 2022:

Friday, 18 February
Friday, 8 April
Friday, 10 June
Friday, 23 September.

The Board noted that a meeting may be scheduled for October 2022 depending on progression of the Board Member appointments process.

The Board noted that the next meeting is scheduled to take place on Friday, 18 February 2022, beginning at **10:00 a.m.** It was also noted that the current intention would be to hold the meeting in person on 18 February, but it will be dependent on the Covid-19 restrictions in place at the time. A final decision will be made nearer the date. Board Members were also reminded to allow sufficient time in their calendars for the meeting.

20. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business.

The Chairperson thanked everyone for their participation and contributions.

THIS CONCLUDED THE BUSINESS OF THE MEETING.