Annual Report
2021

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 2021 represents the main activities of the ninth year of QQI's business. It covers the final year of the agency's third statement of strategy: QQI – adding value to Qualifications 2019-21.

The Chief Executive commenced his term of office on 11 January taking over from Ms Cliona Curley who had served as Interim Chief Executive from October 2020.

The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the whole of 2021 with education and training institutions remaining largely in online teaching mode. QQI staff continued to work from home for the entirety of the calendar year.

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)'s Tertiary Education System (TES) COVID-19 Steering Group (consisting of Departmental officials, provider and student representatives as well as state agencies under the aegis of the Department, including QQI) met a total of twenty-one times during the year. The Group tasked QQI with liaising with the professional bodies in relation to student placements, particularly in the practice professions.

Continuing the practice begun in 2020, QQI conducted its programme validation and institutional review processes online. As part of the CINNTE higher education review cycle, the first review of one of the new technological universities, TU Dublin, took place with an online site visit in October.

As part of the QQI Insights series, the publication **Quality in the Irish Private and Independent Higher Education Institutions 2021** provides an insight into the dialogue meetings held between QQI and fifteen private higher education providers in July

– the first time such quality dialogue meetings were held with the private sector.

2021 was a milestone year for further education and training (FET) with the inaugural review of the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) commencing with an online visit to Limerick and Clare ETB in March. This was the first time that a review of the effectiveness of quality assurance was conducted in the FET sector. Further visits to ETBs took place over the remainder of 2021 and the reports of the first five reviews (Limerick and Clare ETB; Laois and Offaly ETB; Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim ETB; Donegal ETB and Cork ETB) were published in December.
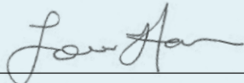
In 2021, almost 106,000 learners achieved QQI awards, a reduction of 1% from 2020. The increase in popularity of micro-credentials (small qualifications included in the National Framework of Qualifications) noticed in 2020 continued into 2021 with an increase in the number of QQI FET special purpose and supplemental awards. The evolution of QQI higher education micro-credentials is captured in the QQI Award Data Series document **QQI early exploration into micro-credentials in Higher Education, 2014-2020.**
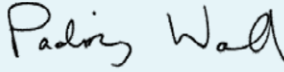
In October, following an extensive consultation process with higher education institutions (HEIs) and professional statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) during 2020 and 2021, QQI published a final version of the document **Principles for Professional Engagements with Education Providers, including Programme Validation, Professional Accreditation and Approval.**

A major task for the Board and Executive of QQI in 2021 was the development of the new Statement of Strategy to set out the organisation's strategic priorities and direction for the next three years. The Board approved the final Statement of Strategy 2022-24 at its September meeting.

There were five meetings of the QQI Board during the year, with all Board and Committee meetings taking place online.

Ms Joanne Harmon
Chairperson, QQI

Dr Padraig Walsh
Chief Executive, QQI

ABOUT QUALITY AND QUALIFICATIONS IRELAND

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012. It is a state agency whose non-executive members of the board are 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 to our work with 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 pursued 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 IN NUMBERS

2194
VERIFICATIONS OF QUALIFICATIONS

106,000
QQI AWARD CERTIFICATES ISSUED
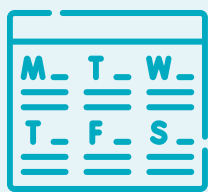
18 WEEKS
AVERAGE DURATION OF PROGRAMME VALIDATION APPROVAL

190
68 new HE and FET programmes successfully validated

5
Initial Access to Validation approved

45
44 HET and 1 FET programmes successfully revalidated

8
Re-engagement applications approved

21,861
NARIC country pages downloaded

1,501
NARIC comparability statements downloaded

QUALIFAX:

678k
USERS

14,689
COURSES LISTED

IRQ Includes:

11k
PROGRAMMES

8000
QUALIFICATIONS

374
PROVIDERS

22 unused or little used CAS awards deactivated

SOCIAL MEDIA:

5217
Twitter followers, a 30% increase

127
Facebook followers, a 135% increase

4127
LinkedIn followers, a 13% increase

5
Inaugural education and training board quality review reports published (Donegal; Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim; Laois and Offaly; Limerick Clare; Cork)

2
new apprenticeships validated by QQI

OUR WORK IN 2021

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.

NFQ
Draft joint-sectoral protocol between designated awarding bodies and Quality and Qualifications Ireland for the inclusion of qualifications within the National Framework of Qualifications

A draft joint-sectoral protocol between designated awarding bodies and Quality and Qualifications Ireland for the inclusion of qualifications within the National Framework of Qualifications was developed in 2021. The draft protocol is designed to fulfil the relevant requirements of Section 55B of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act (2012) as amended and is the result of a collaborative effort between Quality and Qualifications Ireland, the designated awarding bodies and their representative bodies. It is informed by the awarding practices of designated awarding bodies, existing internal and external quality assurance arrangements, sectoral advice on the implementation of the NFQ, and relevant international developments. Extensive consultation was undertaken with designated awarding bodies and their representative bodies throughout 2021, with a final version of the protocol agreed in December for adoption by the designated awarding bodies in 2022.

Listed Awarding Bodies
A dedicated resource was recruited to manage the implementation of the amended legislation related to the establishment of Listed Awarding Bodies and the inclusion of their awards in the Framework. A number of meetings were held with individual prospective Listed Awarding Bodies to explain the legislation and to commence dialogue between QQI and key stakeholders.

Updated NFQ diagram
The NFQ fan diagram was updated in December 2021 to reflect the changing education and training landscape in Ireland.

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.

Deactivation of unused awards
Every year QQI conducts analysis of the Common Award System (CAS) and publishes the list of CAS awards proposed for deactivation. This activity is required to ensure the integrity of the Common Award System and the NFQ.

Following the processing of retention requests, 22 CAS awards were set for deactivation in 2021.

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.

Approval of providers' quality assurance

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 2021, six new applications were received. Five were from providers seeking validation for FET programmes only, while one was from a provider seeking validation for HET programmes.

Nine applications, made before 2021, continued into 2021. Three are still in process. (See Appendix 1).

Re-engagement

Re-engagement describes the process by which education and training providers whose quality assurance (QA) was previously agreed with HETAC (the Higher Education and Training Awards Council) or FETAC (the Further Education and Training Awards Council) are now required to demonstrate that their governance and QA systems comply with QQI quality assurance guidelines.

During 2021, 44 applications for re-engagement were received. All were from providers of FET programmes only. See Appendix 2 for a summary of activity in 2021 as well as a status summary of the process to date.

Note that in the period since January 2019, a total of 121 providers have voluntarily ended their

relationship with QQI as relevant providers and so did not need to avail of the re-engagement process. In some cases, these providers continue to offer programmes but under the quality assurance of another provider.

Extensions to scope of provision

Providers seeking to apply for validation of programmes which have demands of capacity and/or quality assurance significantly beyond what they are current validated for, can apply to have their 'scope of provision' extended. This entails an evaluation of the provider's capacity to manage, and quality assure the new type of provision.

In 2021, there were nine applications for such extensions of scope. Eight requested approvals for blended learning programmes and one for approval to submit higher education programmes for validation. Of the nine applications, five were approved and four were still in progress at year end.

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.

For a summary of the numbers of new programme applications processed in 2021, 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 fresh approval. Forty-four HET programmes and one FET programme were revalidated in 2021.

QQI seeks to ensure that at least 90% of applications for validation are completed within 25 weeks (from date of receipt of a complete application deemed ready for evaluation, to a decision by QQI's Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC)).

During 2021, the average duration for an application for new validation was 18 weeks, with the longest being 42 weeks. Most (87%) took 25 weeks or less.

Where any application took longer than the target duration, there was always consultation and agreement with the provider involved.

All applications for revalidation were completed within the 25-week target.

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.

New QQI website

A new corporate website was developed during 2021. The rebuild allows QQI to provide authoritative information within a logical, accessible structure and search function, in turn improving the experience of our website visitors. The new website also provides a platform to promote better stakeholder engagement and improve overall customer satisfaction with QQI's services.

Digital media

Our approach to digital communications during COVID-19 continued throughout 2021 with follower growth and high engagement rates across all our social media platforms (see QQI in numbers).
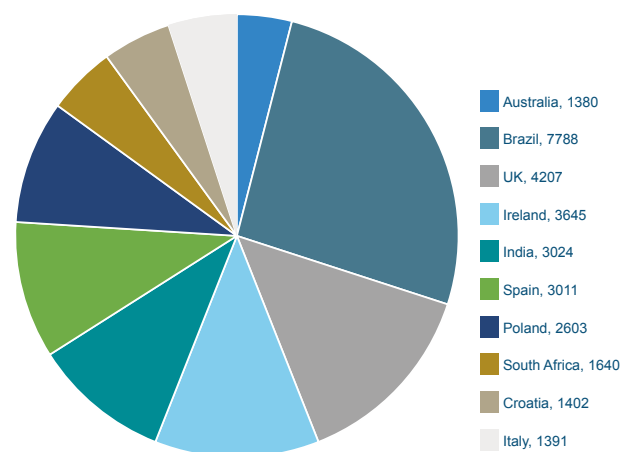
Irish Register of Qualifications

The Irish Register of Qualifications has been operational since 2020, listing over 11,000 programmes and 8,000 qualifications, from 374 providers, which are recognised within the National Framework of Qualifications. During 2021 the Register enabled QQI to respond to enquiries providing reliable and accurate information on qualifications for graduates and other stakeholders.

In December 2021, QQI, in association with the National Europass Centre, published the IRQ data for higher education programmes to the new Europass Qualification Dataset Register (QDR) at www.europass.ie, making this information visible at EU level. The cooperation of the designated awarding bodies continues to be critical to the comprehensive population of both these databases.

Recognition of foreign qualifications

QQI hosts NARIC Ireland, a free advisory service on the recognition of foreign academic qualifications which is part of a worldwide network of qualification recognition agencies known as the ENIC-NARIC network. QQI is represented on the ENIC-NARIC Bureau until 2023. The Bureau manages the work of the European network. The proposed network meeting to be hosted by the Bureau in Dublin was postponed due to COVID-19. However, planning continued over 2021 for this important event which will now take place in 2022.

Australia, 1380
Brazil, 7788
UK, 4207
Ireland, 3645
India, 3024
Spain, 3011
Poland, 2603
South Africa, 1640
Croatia, 1402
Italy, 1391

EU-based downloads from the NARIC Ireland site	Internationally-based downloads from the NARIC Ireland site
Ireland, 12%	Brazil, 26%
Spain, 10%	UK, 14%
Poland, 9%	India, 10%
Croatia, 5%	South Africa, 5%
Italy, 5%	Australia, 4%

At the end of 2021, 1,501 comparability statements for new award titles were listed in the NARIC Ireland database, an increase of 101 in 2020.

Traffic to the website amounted to 52,321 individual visits to country pages and 21,861 downloads of country pages along with more than 1,159 specific queries using the on-line form process. In addition, there were over 3,000 enquiries through the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system, by phone and email.

While the COVID-19 pandemic significantly reduced global mobility, overall specific but not relational demand reflects this impact; the same broad patterns of downloads from the same jurisdictions proportionate to each other remain consistent from year to year.

NARIC Ireland is a partner in a number of Erasmus+ projects. Activities for 2021 included a survey relating to awareness of students about fraud in assessment, the results of which will be published in 2022 (FraudScan Project).

The AddsUp project conducted an EU-wide survey gathering information about the extent of digitalisation of the Diploma Supplement and a peer learning event was held for higher education institutions to discuss the digitisation of the supplement. It is envisaged that the project work will conclude in 2022.

QQI/NARIC Ireland in association with the European Qualifications Framework national co-ordination points also presented at The Association for International Credential Evaluation Professionals (TAICEP) Annual Conference on the theme of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and Qualifications Recognition – Making Connections and Meeting New Challenges.

Qualifax
QQI hosts Ireland's national learner database, Qualifax, which provides comprehensive, impartial information on options for further and higher education and training across Ireland.

In 2021 there were 678K users of the Qualifax website with numbers impacted overall largely due to COVID-19 school closures. The pattern of traffic has also shown variations due to alterations to Leaving Certificate examinations, results and CAO offers. During the year, updates were made to approximately 14,689 further and higher education and training courses included on the site and our extensive listing of career related events for users was updated frequently for schools and institutions, following adjustments to their events.

In 2021, QQI undertook a Content Management Framework Review of the Qualifax website to review and gather information about the current website, its users and their experiences. The findings were presented to the QQI Executive and Board, planning the way ahead for redevelopment of the website in 2022.

Verification of Qualifications
There continued to be a high demand for this service in 2021. These requests are made for different reasons e.g. proof of qualifications for employers, education evaluation services, college applications and residency requirements in other countries. In 2021, QQI dealt with 2,194 requests from holders of awards made by QQI and its legacy awarding bodies. The volume of requests decreased by 5% on 2020 figures.

Certificate Replacement Service
179 applications for replacement certificates were processed in 2021, a 10% increase on 2020. The service was introduced in 2019 and the volume of requests has continued to grow since then.

Additional certification round
In 2021, QQI facilitated an additional certification run in July due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

First minor award certificates in FET
In 2021, QQI issued certificates for the first FET minor awards. These are minor awards embedded within two Special Purpose Awards. Seventy-four learners were submitted for certification in October 2021 and 8 learners in December 2021.

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 monitoring and review

The CINNTE Review schedule for 2021 was impacted by both the public health restrictions resulting from COVID-19 and the applications for establishment of new technological universities (TU) by some of the institutes of technology. A revised timeline was agreed with those institutions that sought an extension due to COVID-19 impacts, and CINNTE reviews were suspended for those institutes of technology that had applied to become a TU.

The first review of a new technological university, Technological University Dublin, was conducted in 2021. Details of the reviews, including the composition of the expert review teams, key dates and the published review reports, can be found on the QQI website in QQI's Reviews Library.

An independent thematic analysis of the first seven CINNTE review reports was published and launched at a webinar in January 2021. The Chair of QQI's Approvals and Reviews Committee, and member of QQI's board, Irene Sheridan, chaired the webinar and Dublin City University and Dundalk Institute of Technology also shared their experience of the CINNTE review process.

In 2021, QQI received an annual quality report from each of the 21 publicly regulated HEIs, and following a pilot process in 2020, for the first time, 17 independent and private higher education institutions submitted an annual quality report (AQR). All annual quality reports for public and private higher education institutions are published on QQI's website.

Insights on Quality in Higher Education

A synthesis report of the AQRs is compiled annually as part of QQI's Insights Series. The synthesis of quality in higher education identifies key themes arising across the AQRs in quality development and enhancement activities reported by the institutions. The synthesis reports highlight and disseminate good practice and identify key areas of focus for the higher education sector during the reporting period. The synthesis reports for the 2021 AQRs submitted were published in 2022, including for the first time a report on quality in the private and higher education sector. The reports are available at QQI Insights 2021.

Quality Dialogue Meetings

As part of its monitoring function, QQI conducts quality dialogue meetings with higher education institutions. The first suite of quality dialogue meetings took place between July and September 2021 with the 17 independent and private higher education institutions that submitted an annual quality report.

The quality dialogue meetings provided an opportunity for QQI and the institutions to discuss the impact and effectiveness of quality assurance developments and enhancements within the institutions' internal quality system during the report period. Topics arising for discussion at the meetings included the impact of re-engagement on the strategic development of the internal quality assurance system and the experiences and impact of COVID-19 on teaching, learning, assessment and internal quality processes.

Two synthesis reports, one on Quality in Irish Public Higher Education Institutions and a second on Quality in Irish Private and Independent Higher Education Institutions, were compiled from the annual quality reports. The synthesis reports are published on the website.

Inaugural review of the education and training boards

The first phase of the inaugural review of education and training boards (ETBs) commenced in March 2021 with the completion of a virtual review visit by an external expert team to Limerick and Clare ETB. The remaining virtual review visits for Phase 1 of the inaugural review of ETBs were completed in June 2021, with virtual review visits to Laois and Offaly ETB, Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim ETB, Donegal ETB and Cork ETB.

The briefing and training for the four Phase 2 review teams and subsequent planning visits continued into 2021 with virtual review visits in November and December to Cavan and Monaghan ETB, Waterford and Wexford ETB, Kerry ETB and Kilkenny and Carlow ETB.

Planning and preparation also commenced in 2021 for Phase 3 of the inaugural review of ETBs, with a briefing to the review team for Tipperary ETB in November followed by a virtual planning visit to the ETB in December.

The five review reports from Phase 1 were launched on 13 December 2021 giving the "first snapshot" of the effectiveness of quality assurance in the sector. The review reports are published on the QQI website in the review's library.

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

Blended learning seminar series

The QQI Blended Learning Seminar Series continued in 2021, having begun in 2020 as part of QQI's COVID-19 response to support quality assurance practitioners and those involved in academic management in further and higher education. A series of national and international colleagues from FE and HE presented their expertise and experience. The seminars focused on 'Aligning Assessment, Learning and Teaching for Quality Assurance in Further and Higher Education Contexts' and on 'Successful and Meaningful Student Engagement- Planning for 2021-2022'. The series will continue in 2022.

Academic Integrity enhancement

In 2021, the following enhancement initiatives took place with external audiences:

- **The National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN) webinar series:** Four webinars were delivered by international experts in the field:
  - Cath Ellis (University of New South Wales)
  - Phillip Dawson (Deakin University, Australia)
  - Thomas Lancaster (Imperial College London)
  - Sarah Elaine Eaton (University of Calgary).

  Recordings of all sessions are available on the QQI YouTube channel.

- **National Academic Integrity Week 2021:** the second annual NAI week took place, organised by QQI. This was in synchronisation with the Global Day of Ethics and the ICAI International Day against Contract Cheating. The week included sessions from a range of NAIN members, a NAIN series webinar given by Dr Thomas Lancaster as well as four European Network for Academic Integrity (ENAI) workshops – in total, a programme of 17 webinars and workshops over the week. The week culminated in the National Student Panel, chaired by the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), discussing points raised during the week.

- **Launch of NAIN-developed resources for HEIs:** The NAIN working groups produced two key academic integrity resources which were launched in September by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research,

Innovation and Science, Simon Harris – Academic Integrity Guidelines and Academic Integrity: National Principles including a Lexicon of Terms.

- **E-proctoring research and report:** QQI commissioned an independent researcher to carry out research into e-proctoring. In collaboration with the Stakeholder Engagement Unit (SEU) and the NAIN manager, a series of interviews, with both national and international colleagues, took place. A final report – E-proctoring in theory and practice: a review – was published online as part of the QQI Insight series. This report was also presented by the researcher via a webinar in November.

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 the third issue of the QQI Data Series, titled 'QQI early exploration into Micro-credentials in Higher Education, 2014–2020'. The analysis explores the provision, demand and trends of qualifications with volume ≤ 30 ECTS in Ireland, based on QQI certification and validation data, IRQ portal data and data provided by HEA. The collaboration with HEA to complete this work represents a milestone in our efforts towards increasing cooperation and data sharing with other relevant national agencies.

Since 2018, QQI publishes, early in the year, an annual analysis of QQI certification data. It provides an analysis of QQI awards made each year by NFQ level, class, field of learning, provider type and learner profile for further education and training (FET) providers and certain higher education (HE) providers. The analysis of QQI certification data for 2020, published in 2021, includes a brief analysis of how the overall

number of awards made by QQI in 2020 was affected by COVID-19 restrictions.

Statistical analyses

QQI developed a first-of-its-kind longitudinal analysis of data on childcare-related qualifications which was published in 2021 – The Path to Early Childhood Education and Care – QQI Early Childhood Education and Care Graduates at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 (2014-2019)

An initial statistical analysis was conducted by QQI to gain a better understanding of how the NFQ Level 5 major awards in the healthcare and welfare field of learning (only those 'purely' part of the healthcare system, i.e., awards: Community Care (5M2786), Community Health Services (5M4468), Health Service Skills (5M3782), Health Support (5M4339), Nursing Studies (5M4349)) are being used by learners. The analysis will help to inform and influence education and training policy on this area.

Research

Ecctis delivered its report commissioned by QQI and entitled "Evaluation of the comparability of the Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate qualifications". This report has been circulated to key stakeholders and will be published fully in 2022.

Three reports were published on the analysis of the contents of programme approval and review reports that were published between 2015 and 2018 respectively by universities, institutes of technology and professional bodies.

A project entitled **Rethinking Assessment: stakeholder perspectives** commenced in 2021. The first part of this project involved the gathering of provider and key educator views on assessment, through a series of bilateral interviews. The second part of this project is to commence in 2022, focusing on the learner perspective.

CASE STUDY - FIRST SUITE OF QUALITY DIALOGUE MEETINGS WITH PRIVATE AND INDEPENDENT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

As part of its monitoring process, QQI conducts quality dialogue meetings with higher education institutions (HEIs). These are conducted on a biennial basis for each publicly regulated HEI.

Between June and September 2021, Quality Dialogue Meetings were held for the first time with the 17 private and independent higher education institutions, who submitted an annual quality report to QQI.

The Quality Dialogue Meetings provide an opportunity for both QQI and the institutions to discuss and consider a range of issues relating to the institutions' internal quality assurance system, including quality assurance developments, enhancements and impacts as set out in the annual quality report.

As these were the first quality dialogue meetings following the re-engagement process with QQI, the meetings provided an opportunity to discuss the enhancements to institutions' quality assurance systems resulting from the external panel advice received through re-engagement.

The meetings occurred at the end of the academic year providing a timely opportunity to discuss the impact on and responses of the institutions to COVID-19, in particular in relation to teaching, learning and assessment and internal quality assurance systems.
Quality dialogue meetings are an important element of QQI's quality engagement framework with higher education institutions, and these first quality dialogue meetings in 2021 are a key milestone in quality development and enhancement in the private and independent higher education sector.

PRIORITY 3
Collaboration and Engagement

A. We will strive to inform and influence policy through our relationships with government, public funders and other stakeholders

Strategy and Irish Quality and Qualifications Forum (IQQF) launch

In November 2021, QQI launched its Statement of Strategy 2022-2024. The Irish Quality and Qualifications Forum was also launched as a strategic forum that will support the development of the Qualifications and QA system. The launch event featured learners' and stakeholders' voices from across the FE and HE landscape.

The newly established IQQF will offer a platform for discussion on quality and qualifications challenges which require collaborative and innovative approaches. Membership is under review with updates to follow in 2022.

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.

Engagement with Professional Statutory & Regulatory Bodies

QQI continued its Finding Common Ground programme of engagement with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) in 2021, hosting four events to facilitate the exchange of information between PSRBs and HEIs during the year. 2021 also saw QQI consulting on, finalising and launching Principles for Accreditation and other Professional Engagements.pdf (qqi.ie). The

document sets out high-level principles that aim to clarify the roles of PSRBs, HEIs and QQI in respect of accreditation and other professional engagements, and – ultimately – to ensure that academic and professional processes align more effectively with each other, reducing the administrative burden on all parties. To date, the principles have been endorsed by 15 PSRBs and 21 HEIs. QQI continues to welcome endorsements by HEIs and PSRBs.

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 college course. QQI supports this scheme by providing scored results data to the Central Application Office (CAO) to enable third level colleges to make offers to QQI award holders. On average each year, 12,000 CAO applicants use their QQI award when making a college application. Each year, 5,000 QQI award holders receive offers for a wide variety of third level courses based solely on their QQI award.

The National Framework for Doctoral Education (NFDE) Advisory Forum

2021 saw the continuation of work in implementing the National Framework for Doctoral Education (NFDE) supported by the National Advisory Forum (community of research practice), which is co-chaired by QQI and the Higher Education Authority (HEA).

To support the work of the Advisory Forum, QQI joined with the HEA, the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) to commission the EUA Solutions report entitled 'The National Framework for Doctoral Education in Ireland: Report on its Implementation by Irish Higher Education Institutions'. The report was published in 2021 and cited a number of recommendations. The NFDE Advisory Forum established working groups to respond to the recommendations highlighted.

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.

Academic Integrity

National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN)

The NAIN continued to grow in size to 92 members across 32 HEIs, representative HE agencies and bodies, USI Student Union (SU) officers and QQI. Members continued to meet in plenary to discuss ongoing work. There were five plenary meetings during the year.

The three NAIN Working Groups continued their work, developing initiatives based on their objectives. Working Groups 1 and 2 produced two resources Academic integrity Guidelines and Academic Integrity: National Principle and a Lexicon of Common Terms, published on the QQI website.

Working Group 3 ran two campaigns to raise awareness among higher education students and produced a series of online crosswords as well as a poster developed with USI, highlighting the dangers of cheating to students, to be displayed on campuses and online.

QQI hosted information sessions for USI and SU officers on academic integrity.

NStEP: a project between the Stakeholder Engagement Unit (SEU) and NStEP was agreed in 2021. This is to commence in 2022 with the development of a new online module on academic integrity, as part of the class reps training package.

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

QQI continued in 2021 to identify opportunities to work with learners. As members, we contributed to various national groups such as the Aontas-led National FET Learner Forum Advisory Group and the StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group and the Analysis and Impact Group in addition to supporting and steering the work of the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) with our partners, the HEA and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI).

QQI also sponsored and participated in the judging panels for the Aontas STAR Awards 2021 (Learner Voice category) and the USI Student Achievement Awards 2021 (Academic Representative of the Year).

National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP)

In 2021, the National Student Engagement Programme continued its successful partnership with QQI, the HEA and USI. During the year, NStEP rolled out an expanded student training programme, engaging with over 1,200 student representatives in spring and autumn. NStEP has continued working with QQI and USI to recruit and train students to participate in quality assurance review panels for the evaluation of practices in higher education institutions. As the pandemic continued to affect how programmes were delivered, the student quality reviewers pool has been supportive to higher education institutions.

May 2021 marked a major milestone for NStEP as it launched a new framework to support authentic student engagement in decision-making. 'Steps to Partnership' represents both a new national approach to student engagement, as well as an opportunity to create new resources and initiatives for students and staff across higher education.

The two NStEP associate interns led on important areas of student engagement culminating in the publication of the 'Postgraduate Student Engagement in Decision-Making: Fostering Connected Learning Communities' report and the development of the student-led pilot training module 'Representing Diversity'.

NStEP also launched the Steps to Partnership professional development open course with the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (NFETL) with participants from institutions across Ireland. The programme also teamed up with AISHE-J (the All Ireland Society for Higher Education Journal) of teaching and learning, to produce a new special issue on student engagement and partnership, due to be published in early 2022.

Twenty-eight higher education institutions are now collaborating with NStEP to explore, and further embed, staff/ student partnerships and increase student engagement opportunities across the Irish higher education sector. NStEP remains open to supporting and collaborating with staff and students to enhance student engagement. They continue to welcome interest from other higher education institutions in joining the programme.

QQI delivered two joint webinars focusing on work-based assessment in April and November, in collaboration with the NFETL.

Assessment: in collaboration with the Head of the Research and Innovation Unit, a project entitled **Rethinking Assessment: stakeholder perspectives,** commenced. The first part of this project involved the gathering of provider and key educator views on assessment, through a series of bilateral interviews. The second part of this project is to commence in 2022, focusing on the learner perspective.

Insights
QQI published two insights as part of the NFETL Vital Project referred to as Next Steps. This was a national collaboration with all stakeholders. The QQI insights focused on "Assessment" and "Higher Education Quality and Qualifications" and are published on the QQI website. QQI hosted one of the national Next Steps sessions as part of the Launch, which was attended by Mr. Simon Harris T.D., Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

#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 #MyOwnWork campaign has continued through 2021, targeting students at all private and public higher education institutions and was informed by a series of student focus groups in April 2021.

StudentSurvey.ie
The Stakeholder Engagement Unit continued to liaise with StudentSurvey.ie as a member of the Analysis and Impact Group. The group collaborated on the production of, and provided editorial support, for two 2021 reports – the Irish Survey of Student Engagement National Report and the Irish Survey of Student Engagement for Postgraduate Research Student National Report. Both reports can be found here.

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.

EQF-NCP and Europass Joint Action Project 2021-2023
Europass and EQF-NCP Ireland prepared and submitted a Joint Action Plan Project three-year proposal as part of the ERASMUS+ Programme in May 2021. This joint project supports the ongoing promotion and communication of the new upgraded Europass platform and the EQF to our key stakeholders across higher and further education, and the general public. Key EQF priorities of the project include developing a scheme for Listed Awarding Bodies and inclusion of awards in the Framework; ongoing promotion of the National Framework of Qualifications; and the integration of the Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ) into the Qualifications Dataset Register (QDR) platform and preparing

for digital credentials. The previous project for the 2018–2020 period concluded with submission of the final report in mid-2021 and receipt of final payment from the European Commission. Network and Advisory Group meetings for both strands were attended virtually in 2021.

Five Country Qualification Frameworks Group

The annual meeting of five country qualifications frameworks was hosted virtually by Qualifications Wales in January. This two-day meeting brought together qualifications authorities, quality assurance agencies and government officials. The meeting was an opportunity for policy dialogue and exchange across the UK and Ireland. The group promotes alignment between national qualifications systems, providing information on our mutual qualifications systems within the Common Travel Area.

Memoranda of Understanding

QQI and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, United Kingdom (QAA) renewed their Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for three years from 2021.

The MoU between QQI and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) was also re-established with effect from 2021. It may be reviewed prior to its completion in 2023 pending potential legislative changes for the HEA.

QQI continues to enjoy close collaboration with national and international organisations facilitating communications and cooperation under the terms agreed in the MoUs. Agreements are published on the QQI website.

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.

Learning Hub events

The Communications and HR units continued to host their series of presentations on **The Learning Hub** for QQI colleagues. This series is an opportunity for us to learn about internal and external initiatives. In 2021, we were delighted to be joined by colleagues from SOLAS presenting on the background collaborative development of the 10-Year Adult Literacy Numeracy and Digital Literacy strategy; and from the HEA on Promoting Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Irish Higher Education. Three webinars were provided by the NAIN manager with colleagues as part of this series. These focused on academic integrity and impact evaluation.

C. 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 2021, development work continued on QQI's IT portal for providers, QHub. The portal is designed to facilitate secure online applications to QQI services across a number of business processes, whilst also increasing provider access to their own data.

A module for Annual Quality Reporting (AQR) was completed enabling providers to upload reports showing case studies of quality initiatives they have undertaken in the past year.

In parallel, a Panel Management module was developed enabling experts to collaborate towards a final report as part of the programme validation process. This module will also be used for other processes such as re-engagement and due diligence in time.

The Travel and Subsistence module was extended beyond staff use to enable experts to claim their daily fees.

Data Collection – work commenced on a data collection module. It was developed, initially, to capture programme and learner data to support the protection for enrolled learners process.

Security Improvements

Considerable work was carried out in 2021 to continue to protect QQI's IT services and systems. These included the rollout of a Security Awareness Training tool to all staff, ongoing security assessments, review and modernisation of our password and authentication policies and procedures. Further security measures were applied to secure our endpoints as staff continued to work from home including upgrade of our End point patching tool and procurement of an application whitelister, giving further control and protection against malicious, unwanted software and scripting on devices. Continued implementation of Data loss prevention policies and sensitivity labels took place to prevent leakage of sensitive or personal data.

COVID-19-related ICT activities

QQI's ICT Team continued to support staff remotely during 2021, upgrading dated laptops, supporting webinars and engaging with staff through monthly IT calls for information sharing, updates, and training. Preparation for office return commenced with an upgrade of network switches and access points and the procurement of audio-

visual equipment to support the new hybrid working model.

D. 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.

QQI Strategy Statement 2022—2024

During 2021, we developed our fourth statement of strategy covering the period 2022-2024. We expect that this will be a challenging period as the tertiary education system learns from and adapts to a post-pandemic world. We aim to contribute to the Government's ambition to create a more integrated tertiary education system and to support all learners to reach their full potential. We will incorporate the United Nations Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goal of Quality Education into our work and embed sustainability in our work processes.

We will deliver on our new functions to protect learners where private providers cease operating, to include more qualifications and more awarding bodies in the National Framework of Qualifications, to protect academic integrity by addressing contract cheating (essay mills) and roll out the International Education Mark (IEM) for higher education and English language education.

The strategy is built around four priorities, which are:
• providing better information and opportunities for learners,
• implementing strengthened regulation to protect learners,
• developing education and training providers and institutions, and
• publishing authoritative analysis and insight.

We will deliver the strategy through continued and strengthened partnership with stakeholders and by building organisational excellence through developing our people, systems and processes.

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 2019 Annual Report. Therefore, as of 31 December 2021, 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 as to avoid unnecessary expenditure.

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

QQI reports on outcomes to its line department, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science 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. An associated three-year Oversight Agreement (covering the period 2021-2023) was also developed and agreed with the Department in 2021. QQI meets several times a year with Department officials to review progress under the Agreements.

Internal audit function

QQI has a three-year rolling internal audit plan 2021 – 2023, that is reviewed annually. Internal audits are carried out on all the key corporate and business functions of QQI on a cyclical basis.

As a result of the ongoing public health restrictions in place, all audits in 2021 were performed remotely.

External audit function

In 2021, 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, whereby it recommends that the Authority and the Audit Committee engage in discussion with the external auditors at least once a year, without executive members of the Authority or employees of the State body present, to ensure that there are no unresolved issues of concern. A representative for the C&AG attended meetings of the Audit and Risk Committee on 16 February 2021 and 15 October 2021.

The system of governance, risk management and internal control in QQI is designed to manage risk to a reasonable level rather than to eliminate all risk of failure to achieve aims and objectives. Senior QQI management is responsible for the development and maintenance of the internal control framework. The Audit and Risk Committee's monitoring and review of the effectiveness of the system of internal control is informed by the work of the internal and external auditors.

A review of the effectiveness of the internal controls for 2020 was completed in 2021, as required by the Code, and was forwarded to the Authority for consideration at its meeting in April 2021.

CASE STUDY - VALIDATION CASE STUDY: MICROCREDENTIALS

In 2020, a new(ish) word entered the lexicon of education and training in Ireland. The word is microcredential and 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 the 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 microcredential programmes submitted for validation.

In 2020, QQI piloted the validation of HET programmes as small as 5 ECTS with a proportionately streamlined process. Following a positive evaluation of the pilot, the model for agile development and validation is now part of the menu of options available to HET providers. Nineteen such programmes were validated in 2021.

In FET, small awards have been available for a long time, reflecting the wide range of focused training opportunities available to learners which can be certified using QQI's Common Awards System (CAS). However, as new training and upskilling needs emerge in new niche areas, it has become clear that new awards are needed also.

In 2021, QQI cooperated with Education and Training Boards and Solas' Skills to Advance Unit to develop a model for development and validation of small programmes targeted at specific industries such as fish farming, robotics etc. These programmes are designed to be small, specifically targeted packages of learning capable of being certified by minor awards. In most cases they can also be combined or 'stacked' to deliver larger volume (though still focused) special purpose awards.

This model builds on what has been learned from the HET microcredential pilot and will facilitate more rapid development and validation of programmes to meet emerging industry-specific training needs.

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:

- Preparation and adoption of the strategy statement,

- Strategic direction and planning, corporate planning and approval of annual reports,

- Approval of financial accounts,

- Approval of all policy and approaches to policy,

- 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 and include Board Members among their membership.

Membership:

- Ms Joanne Harmon (Chair)

- Dr Padraig Walsh (Chief Executive from 11 January 2021)

- Ms Cliona Curley (Interim Chief Executive between 1 October 2020 and 11 January 2021)

- Dr Barbara Brittingham (International expert)

- Ms Mary Danagher

- Mr Blake Hodkinson

- Mr Thomas McDermott

- Mr Kevin McStravock (USI nomination) (to 30 June 2021)

- Ms Megan O'Connor (USI nomination) (from 1 July 2021)

- Dr Niamh O'Reilly (learner representative)

- Professor Irene Sheridan

- Dr Anne Walsh

**Record of attendance by Board members at
2021 QQI Board meetings**

	22 FEB 2021**	23 APR**	21 JUN**	27 SEPT**	26 NOV**	MAX	ATTENDED
Joanne Harmon	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	5
Padraig Walsh	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	5
Barbara Brittingham	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	5
Mary Danagher			✓	✓		5	2
Blake Hodkinson	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	5
Thomas McDermott	✓	✓	✓		✓	5	4
Kevin McStravock*	✓	✓	✓	-	-	3	3
Megan O'Connor*	-	-	-	✓		2	1
Niamh O'Reilly	✓	✓	✓	✓		5	4
Irene Sheridan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	5
Anne Walsh	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	5

In addition to the five Board Meetings outlined above, two Board Workshops
on Strategy Development were held on 28 January and 7 April 2021.

* USI Representative, term of office runs from 1 July to 30 June each year.
** Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and in accordance with national public
health guidelines, QQI Board Meetings held during 2021 were conducted
through video conferencing.

Gender balance in QQI Board membership

As at 31 December 2021, the Board had seven (70%) female and three (30%) male members.

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. However, it should be noted that the nominee of the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) usually serves a membership term of 1-2 years and therefore, changes more frequently than the other members of the Board.

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

- The term of the current Board ceases on 5 November 2022. The gender balance on the Board shall be given due consideration during the appointments process and highlighted to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

Performance evaluation

An External Review of Board and Committee effectiveness was carried out in Quarter 4, 2020, with the resulting report presented to the Board in Quarter 1, 2021. Work on progressing the recommendations arising from the External Review continued throughout 2021.

Sub-Board governance

A number of sub-Board committees provide specific expertise to 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 2021.

Membership and attendance

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

Blake Hodkinson (Chair)	4/4
Kate Cullen (non-Board Member)	1/1
Pearl Cunningham (non-Board Member)	1/1
Walter Johnston (non-Board Member)	2/2
Tony Mealy (non-Board Member)	4/4

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 2021.

Membership and attendance

Padraig Walsh (Chair from 11 January 2021)	7/7
Cliona Curley (Interim Chair between 1 October 2020 and 11 January 2021)	0/0
Mary Grennan	1/1
Marie Gould	6/7
Barbara Kelly	5/7
Angela Lambkin	7/7
Bryan Maguire	5/6
Jim Murray	1/1
John O'Connor	5/7
Andrina Wafer	6/6

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 2021.

Membership and attendance

Anne Walsh (Chair)	4/4
Bryan Fields	4/4
Achim Hopbach	3/4
Barbara Kelly	4/4
Bryan Maguire	4/4
Hannah McGee	2/4
Niamh O'Reilly	3/4
Aileen Ponton	4/4
Alan Power	4/4
Peter Rigney	1/1
Aoife Sweeney	0/1

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 2021.

Membership and attendance

Barbara Brittingham (Chair)	2/2
Ken Carroll	0/0
Mary Danagher	0/2
Mark Kane	2/2
Paul Lyons	0/0
Mary Meaney	2/2
Gerard Morgan	1/2
Brendan O'Dea	2/2
Gina Quin	0/0
Seán Rowland	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 five times in 2021.

Membership and attendance

Irene Sheridan (Chair)	5/5
Ailsa Crum	3/3
Laura Flynn	1/1
Colette Harrison	4/4
William Kelly	3/5
Siobhan Kinsella	3/5
Geraldine Larkin	5/5
Kevin McStravock	2/3
Megan O'Connor	1/1
Ronan O'Loughlin	2/2
Gerry O'Sullivan	1/1
Mary Sheridan	5/5

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 twice during 2021.

Membership and attendance

Joanne Harmon (Chair)	2/2
Mary Danagher	1/2
Blake Hodkinson	2/2

CORPORATE MATTERS

Finance

In 2021, QQI received €11.403 million from State Grant, fee income, EU funding and other sources. For the same period, expenditure was €10.634 million. Pay and pensions expenditure in 2021 amounted to €6.653 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 2021. Expenses are paid for accommodation, travel, flights and subsistence in line with rates set by the Department of Finance. Total Board expenses in 2021 were €1,779*.

Remuneration and expenses of the Chief Executive

The Chief Executive received salary payments of €139,030* in 2021 (from 11 January 2021). 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 €104* in 2021.

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 2021.

RISK MANAGEMENT

QQI continued to manage risk in line with the Risk Management Policy of June 2020. An external review of QQI's risk management framework was commissioned in late 2021 and will be completed in 2022.

The corporate Risk Register was reviewed and updated on a quarterly basis by managers and risk owners, the CEO, Chief Risk Officer and the Executive Management Team. The Risk Register was considered by the Audit and Risk Committee and the QQI Board. Particular attention was paid to the potential risks to QQI arising from the impact of COVID-19 on the tertiary system (learning loss, learner attainment and progression, and assessment); cybersecurity and risks associated with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work of QQI. Information sessions on risk were held with senior management and with all staff. Steps were taken to integrate risk into projects, business planning and the development of QQI's strategy.

Principal risks

The Authority assessed the principal risks, and their mitigations, to QQI in 2021 at its meeting on 31 January 2022. It also commenced an in-depth review of each of these risks in 2021. These are set out in Table 1 below.

RISK RANKING	PRINCIPAL RISK
1	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 the Workforce Plan; recruitment of staff in 2021, 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.
2	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 and key staff on finance needs, project management, regular communication with DFHERIS on our financial situation, reserves and work to determine a sustainable funding model.

RISK RANKING	PRINCIPAL RISK
3	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 or project-related expenditure; QQI's accounting and reporting capability assessed under the Financial Management Maturity Model (FMMM).
4	Risk that enrolled learners cannot complete their programmes due to a specific provider/ multiple providers ceasing to provide their programme 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 provider PEL arrangements; ongoing work with DFHERIS to implement legislation to establish and implement 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).
5	Risk that agreed Protection for Enrolled Learner (PEL) arrangements with third parties may be discontinued at short notice leaving providers, learners and programmes without required PEL, leading to a breach in conditions of validation and potential PEL event. Mitigated by the agreement and approval of a PEL insurance product; robust and open communication channels with relevant third parties; work with DFHERIS to establish and implement a national PEL scheme.

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.

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 2021.

No reports were received by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) under Section 7 of the Protected Disclosures Act, 2014 in the 12-month period to 31 December 2021.

Complaints of service

During 2021, QQI received one complaint of service which was responded to appropriately.

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 2021.

Fraud

No instances of fraud or suspected fraud were disclosed or discovered during 2021. Neither were any instances of fraud reported to HR, the Chief Executive, the Internal Auditor or the Audit and Risk Committee during the year.

Energy efficiency and environmental policy statements

QQI is committed to implementing environmentally sustainable policies and reducing our carbon footprint. Some recent initiatives to help us achieve this include:

- Using only energy-saving lightbulbs and fixtures where possible.
- Ensuring the use of eco-friendly toiletries, cleaning products and other office perishables.
- Efforts have been made to make QQI a paperless organisation wherever possible. The number of photocopies has been halved and photocopiers have been replaced with follow-me print-enabled copiers
- A continued commitment to recycling and elimination of wastage including moving to online publications.

As a public sector body, QQI also makes annual reports to the SEAI on our energy performance.

Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty

All public bodies in Ireland have a responsibility to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of their employees, customers, service users and everyone affected by their policies and plans. This legal obligation is called the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty. It originated in Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014, which imposes a statutory obligation on public bodies in performing their functions to have regard to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination;
- promote equality of opportunity and treatment for staff and persons to whom it provides services; and
- protect the human rights of staff and services.

QQI is committed to the full implementation of this Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014. In 2021, we published our statement of strategy for 2022-24 in which we recognise the diversity of our stakeholders and set out our values which include integrity, transparency and inclusivity. Our existing suite of policies underpin our dedication to equality and human rights and work will begin in 2022 to consolidate this work into a corporate equality, diversity and inclusion policy.

CASE STUDY - INAUGURAL REVIEW OF QUALITY IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING BOARDS

In 2021, QQI commenced the first-ever comprehensive quality review of the further education and training provided by Ireland's 16 education and training boards (ETBs). These quality reviews evaluate the effectiveness of the quality of further education and training (FET) in ETBs and aims to encourage a quality culture that prioritises learner experience and outcomes.

The reviews are conducted by an external review team consisting of 6 members selected by QQI, chosen to represent a variety of perspectives and expertise, including industry, social inclusion and national and international peers from FET QA. All review teams include a learner representative.

The review team meet the management team, a variety of staff, internal and external stakeholders, and learners throughout the week of the review. Due to ongoing public health restrictions, these meetings were conducted virtually.

The first phase of the reviews was conducted with virtual visits to five ETBs between March and June 2021, and the first review reports were published in December.

At the launch of the review reports, Dr Padraig Walsh, CEO of QQI, highlighted the importance of the ETB review process, noting:

"These initial statutory reviews are a critical milestone for the sector involving review teams of national and international experts as well as representatives of learners and the world of work. It is an opportunity for individual ETBs to establish plans for continuous improvement of their quality assurance infrastructure, policies, procedures and teaching, learning and support services."

The review teams noted and commended the enthusiasm, commitment and quality of staff in ETBs and the commitment to and focus on learners. Common themes also emerged in relation to recommendations for quality improvement and enhancement, including ETB-wide QA System, QA governance, learner engagement, programme development, validation and review, and consistency of learner experience. Identifying and working collaboratively on enhancement in these areas will inform QQI's future engagement with the sector.

The inaugural review of ETBs will conclude in 2022.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

INITIAL ACCESS TO VALIDATION – APPLICATIONS MADE IN 2021

SECTOR	APPLICATIONS	APPROVED	IN PROCESS	WITHDRAWN
Higher Education and Training	1	0	1	0
Further Education and Training	5	0	5	0
Total	**6**	**0**	**6**	**0**

INITIAL ACCESS TO VALIDATION – APPLICATIONS MADE PRIOR TO 2021 BUT FINALISED IN 2021

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

APPENDIX 2

RE-ENGAGEMENT – APPLICATIONS MADE IN 2021

SECTOR	APPLICATIONS	APPROVED	IN PROCESS	WITHDRAWN
Higher Education and Training	0	0	0	0
Further Education and Training	44	8	33	3
Total	**44**	**8**	**33**	**3**

RE-ENGAGEMENT – OVERALL POSITION TO DATE

SECTOR	APPLICATIONS	APPROVED	IN PROCESS	WITHDRAWN
Higher Education and Training	26	26	0	0
Further Education and Training	85	41	44	74
Total	**111**	**67**	**44**	**74**

APPENDIX 3

NEW VALIDATION – APPLICATIONS MADE IN 2021 (Apprenticeships in brackets)

SECTOR	APPLICATIONS	VALIDATED	REFUSED VALIDATION	IN PROCESS
Higher Education and Training	135 (2)	107 (1)	0	28 (1)
Further Education and Training	109 (1)	83 (1)	0	26
Total	**234**	**190**	**0**	**54**

DIFFERENTIAL VALIDATION/REVALIDATION/EXTENSION of VALIDATION – APPLICATIONS MADE IN 2021

SECTOR	APPLICATIONS	VALIDATED	REFUSED VALIDATION	IN PROCESS
Higher Education and Training	81	69	0	12
Further Education and Training	13	12	0	1
Total	**94**	**81**	**0**	**13**