

## Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Note of the fifty-third Meeting of the Authority (The Board) which took place on Friday, 4 December 2020 at 10:00 a.m. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, this meeting took place via Microsoft Teams (video conference facility).

**Present:**

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

**Apologies:** No apologies

**In attendance:**

- Ms. Caitríona Lawless (Recording Secretary)
- Mr. Andrew Bridgett (Item 14)
- Mr. Liam Butler (Items 12)
- Dr. Anna Murphy (Item 14)
- Dr. Alan Wall, Chief Executive, HEA (Item 1)

### INTRODUCTION

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

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

**1. PRESENTATION BY THE HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY (HEA)**

Following a request by the Board and in accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding between QQI and the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Dr. Alan Wall, Chief Executive of the HEA, joined the meeting to update the Board on the current areas of focus for the HEA.

The discussion was followed by a questions and answers session.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, thanked Dr. Wall for his participation.

**2. POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The Board noted that no conflicts of interest were declared.

**3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETINGS**

The Minutes of the following meetings were **confirmed** and would be signed at a later date when circumstances allow:

*Minutes of the QQI Board Meeting held on 25 September 2020* and  
*Minutes of the Incorporal QQI Board Meeting held on 23-27 October 2020.*

**4. NOTES OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETINGS**

The Board **approved** the following notes for publication on the QQI website:

*Note of the Meeting of 25 September 2020* and  
*Note of the Incorporal Meeting of 23-27 October 2020.*

**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 noted that many of the matters arising in the Action Tracker featured on the Agenda for this meeting.

## 6. DRAFT BOARD AGENDA

The Board noted the **Draft February 2021 Board Agenda**.

The Board noted and discussed the draft Agenda for the next Board Meeting. The Board noted that five Board Meeting dates had been proposed for 2021 but it was likely that a sixth meeting may be required due both to the impact of Covid-19 and to assist in the development of the next Statement of Strategy.

Board Members discussed changing the start time for Board Meetings while they continue virtually for the foreseeable future. The Chairperson and the Executive **agreed** to discuss the matter further offline.

Following the suggestion by a Board Member at the September 2020 Board Meeting of holding a Strategic Reflection Session, the Chairperson undertook to contact Board Members in advance of a session in January (date to be confirmed) to discuss further.

## 7. COVID-19

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

### 7.1. Covid-19 Update

The Board noted an update on the current impact of Covid-19. The Board noted that the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's (DFHERIS) Tertiary Education System Covid-19 Groups structure had been paused in the latter stages of September and October and was re-started in late November. The Department is redeveloping the Covid-19 Group structure for the next phase of the pandemic and there is some adjustment to the Steering Group Subgroups as a result. The Department's key focuses for the coming months are student wellbeing, enhancing teaching and learning and Data. The internal QQI Covid-19 Committee is continuing to meet every fortnight.

The Board noted a verbal update on the Accreditation and Co-ordination of English Languages Services (ACELS) and the English Language Education (ELE) sector. The Board noted that the Department was considering a proposal on the operation of ACELS in light of the prevailing pandemic.

The Board noted that the inaugural reviews of the effectiveness of Quality Assurance (QA) Procedures in Education and Training Boards (ETBs) have been rescheduled as a result of the impact of C-19 and the first five ETBs are now scheduled to be reviewed in Spring 2021. The Board noted that Dialogue Meetings with each of the 16 ETBs took place between 19 October and 3 December and discussed topics such as local impacts on delivery contexts and enrolment and governance and monitoring of contingency arrangements. The feedback to the Executive on QQI's role had been positive in relation to its support and engagement with the sector. The Board noted that the pandemic had been challenging for the sector. The Board also noted that there had been a lot of innovation by ETBs in their switch to online teaching and delivery necessitated by the pandemic. The Board noted that the Executive was also continuing to engage with the ETB sector on temporary modifications to CAS Awards relating to work experience placements/modules.

The Board noted that a lot of information on the measures put in place throughout the tertiary sector was contained in QQI's *Teaching, Learning and Assessment (TLA) Report* published in August. The CDET B report *Informing the Further – Review of CDET B's Covid 19 Responses and their impact on QA, Teaching, Learning and Assessment* was also referenced during the discussion.

## **8. INTERIM CEO REPORT**

The Board noted the **Interim CEO Report**.

### **8.1. Interim CEO Report**

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

The Board noted that the Executive had made a submission to the Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021-25 consultation process. The Board requested further updates on the implications of the developments of Apprenticeship structures. The Executive undertook to circulate the QQI submission in the first instance. It was suggested that the topic may feature as part of the strategy development process.

The Board noted the number of (virtual) events the Stakeholder Engagement Unit had organised in recent weeks– all of which had been well attended and well received. The Chairperson acknowledged the creative work by the Unit during the current restrictions.

The Board noted that the National Academic Integrity Network was now well established and was fostering growing interest in maintaining integrity in the system. The Executive was very conscious of its importance and the need for resources to support the Network’s work and has flagged the matter with DFHERIS as an important priority for 2021.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, expressed thanks and appreciation for the organisation of events and all work, academic knowledge and engagement carried out during 2020.

## **9. ITEMS FOR NOTING**

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

### **9.1. Focus on Approvals and Reviews Committee**

The Board noted the verbal overview of the work of the Approvals and Reviews Committee (ARC) provided by the Chairperson of that Committee. The Board noted an update on its work and developments over the last number of months. The Board noted that the training session for the Review Panel for IT Carlow had been held prior to the travel restrictions coming into force and the visit was then moved to a virtual process. The Committee approved the Review Report for publication at its meeting held on 12 October. The subsequent two Cinnte reviews (University of Limerick and Waterford Institute of Technology) were conducted completely online.

The Board noted that the mid-term Thematic Analysis of Cinnte Reviews is nearing completion and the ARC looks forward to receiving the document. The Thematic Analysis may point to enhancements to the Cinnte process. The Committee Chairperson acknowledged that the ARC is awaiting a number of its functions to come on stream once the remaining sections of the amendment Legislation are enacted.

9.2. Approvals and Reviews Committee (ARC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the ARC held on 27 August 2020.

9.3. Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC)

The Board noted the reports of the meetings of the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee held on 10 September and 15 October 2020.

The Board noted that a lot of business and activity had continued throughout the pandemic. The Board received a verbal update in relation to QA procedures which had been expected to be received earlier in the year by the PAEC but receipt of which was displaced due to C-19.

9.4. Policies and Standards Committee (PSC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Policies and Standards Committee held on 29 September 2020.

9.5. Rolling Board Agenda 2020 and 2021

The Board noted an update on the Rolling Board Agenda for 2020 together with a draft Rolling Agenda for 2021.

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

The Chair and members of the HR and Organisation Committee updated the Board on the current status of the CEO recruitment process.

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

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

11.1. Performance Delivery Agreement (PDA) 2020

The Chairperson provided a verbal update on the Q2 PDA Review Meeting which had been deferred until 28 September 2020. The meeting was the first to take place with the new Secretary General in the newly formed Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The Board noted that the Secretary General was updated on the need

for a sustainable funding model. The Board noted that the new Department is still bedding in, both in terms of staff and structure.

The Board noted the Q3 2020 PDA Progress Report which had been forwarded to the Department in advance of the Meeting. A number of actions had been displaced by Covid-19, some by approximately a Quarter and a number of projects which had not been planned for 2020 had been completed instead. The Executive proposed to present an update to the Board, at its next scheduled meeting in February 2021, outlining the additional and unexpected work completed during 2020.

A number of items relating to the revised Legislation were not completed in 2020 or not progressed as far as the Executive would have envisaged at the beginning of the year. This was due to a combination of the relevant sections of the amendment Act not yet being enacted and external factors outside of QQI's control.

#### 11.2. Performance Delivery Agreement (PDA) and Oversight Agreement

The Board noted the initial draft Performance Delivery Agreement 2021 and a draft Oversight Agreement 2021-2024.

The Board considered and discussed the initial draft Agreements. The Board suggested some areas for further consideration. The Executive undertook to discuss the draft documents further with the Executive Management Team (EMT).

#### 11.3. Funding Model and Workforce Planning

The Board noted that a new Principal Officer had commenced in the Higher Education, Governance and Quality Unit in DFHERIS and the restructuring of the new Department may have contributed to the delays to the outstanding requests for sanction to fill existing vacant posts in addition to delays on sanction for new resources. The Board noted that there had been no further developments in relation to the Funding Model.

#### 11.4. Revised Legislation

The Board noted that there had been no further developments in relation to the Revised Legislation.

## 12. BUDGET AND FINANCE

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

### 12.1. Management Accounts to 31 October 2020

The Board noted the Management accounts for the ten months to 31 October 2020. The Board was updated on the current financial situation and noted that the certification numbers had returned better than expected by the end of October, resulting in a more positive income situation than had been expected. Expenditure was also lower than budgeted for, particularly in the areas of Travel and Subsistence (due to the continuing travel restrictions). The Board noted that there was a possibility that the accounts may break even or have a small surplus at year end.

The Executive predicted, however, that the financial consequences of the pandemic may have more impact in subsequent years than in 2020 itself.

The Board also noted that the fact that this year's certification income may now exceed certification income for 2019 re-enforces the unpredictable nature of the organisation's current funding model. The Executive also suspects the impact of Covid-19 on learner numbers may be greater in the coming years.

### 12.2. Draft Budget 2021

The Board noted that the Executive had been conservative when drafting the Budget for 2021. The Board raised a number of questions which the Executive clarified.

The Executive had formulated the Budget as a hybrid model plotting income and expenditure in both the current restricted situation and allowed for a scenario where business would return to normal. The Board **approved** the draft Budget 2021.

### 12.3. Financial Statements 2019

At its meeting on 19 June 2020, the Board approved the Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2019 subject to audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) and there being no material changes. The Board noted that, following its audit, the C&AG had

requested that the Executive restate the Financial Statements without reference to IFRS16 'Right of Use Assets and Leasing' which it deemed unnecessary at this time. The QQI Financial Statements are prepared under FRS102 and as a result the use of IFRS16 was not required. The Executive confirmed that opinion with the external provider of some of its internal audit services, Mazars. The Board noted that the matter had also been discussed with the Director of Corporate Services and the Chairperson of the Audit and Risk Committee. The Board noted that the Executive may have to adopt the standard in a future accounting period. As the C&AG considered that its recommended changes constituted a material change, they requested that the Financial Statements be reapproved. The Board **reapproved** the Financial Statements for 2019 and noted that arrangements would be made for the signing of the Statements. It was noted that in light of the pandemic, the C&AG were accepting electronic signatures this year.

#### 12.4. ICT Support Services

The Board noted the current two-year contract (with an option for a one-year extension) for the provision of ICT Support Services ends at the end of Quarter 1, 2021. The Board noted that the proposed extension is within procurement rules and would align the contract with the current Strategy period and that of the associated ICT Strategy. The Board noted that the service provider is currently working on changes to QQI's systems relating to the amendment Act's functions and the continuity of service is helpful in this regard.

The Board **approved** the one-year extension to the current contract which will now finish at the end of Quarter 1, 2022.

#### 12.5. ICT Personnel Framework

The Executive flagged the need for an incorporeal Board Meeting in the coming weeks. The Board noted that following its earlier approval of the ICT Personnel Framework, the Executive progressed a mini tender competition for a number of contracted posts. The Executive subsequently are reviewing the documentation submitted for the ICT posts. Once shortlisted, the recommendations will be sent to the External Member (of the Tender Panel) for validation. The Executive expects to present the final recommendations to Board Members for approval in the coming week(s). The Board noted that contracts will be awarded for an initial six-month period and renewed by the Board for further six-month periods thereafter.

### 13. ORGANISATION AND HUMAN RESOURCES

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

#### 13.1. Update on Human Resources

The Board noted an update on Human Resources. The Board noted that the Health and Safety Authority had revised the Return to Work Safely Protocol at the end of November 2020. The Work Safely Protocol is the updated Protocol.

### 14. AUDIT AND RISK

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

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

The Board noted a verbal report of the Audit and Risk Committee Meeting held on 13 November 2020.

#### 14.2. Internal Audit Reports

The Board noted a number of Internal Audit Reports which had been considered at its meeting of 13 November and recommended to the Board by the Audit and Risk Committee.

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

- Qualifications (including NARIC),
- Official Languages Act and
- High Risks 6-10

#### 14.3. Risk Register

The Board noted the Risk Register updated as at Quarter 3, 2020. The Board noted that the current Top Five Risks were as expected and while there had been no significant changes that some reordering of the Risks had taken place. The Board noted that the Executive had articulated and included a risk on Covid-19 in the Register. The Board **approved** the Risk Register.

#### 14.4. Items for Noting

The Board noted the following documents:

- Update on the ICT Security Review,
- Formal Listing of Key Statutory Obligations 2019 and
- Status Update on Previous Internal Audit Recommendations.

#### 14.5. Procurement of Internal Audit Partner for 2021-2023

The Board noted that a Supplementary Request for Tender (SRFT) procurement exercise for an Internal Audit Partner for the period 2021-2023 had taken place and noted that an appointment had been made following the Office of Government Procurement (OGP) process. The Board noted that the appointment is subject to changes to contract which is currently under discussion and the contract takes effect from 1 January 2021 for a three-year period (with the potential of a 12-month extension).

#### 14.6. Minutes of the Meeting held on 15 May 2020

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

#### 14.7. Chairperson of the Audit and Risk Committee

The Board noted that the meeting of 13 November had been the final meeting of the current Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee. The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, thanked Mr. McDermott for the huge amount of work completed by the Committee in the last five years and were very grateful for all that the Committee had accomplished to date.

### 15. **STRATEGIC PLANNING**

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

#### 15.1. Corporate Plan 2020

The Board noted the Quarter 3 and interim Q4 Progress Report for the 2020 Corporate Plan. The Board noted the obvious delays in relation to a number of the planned items, delays which were as a result of Covid19 and where progress can now be made. The Executive expected many of the delayed actions to be completed in Quarter 1, 2021.

### 15.2. Draft Corporate Plan 2021

The Board noted a number of actions were, similar to 2020, again planned for completion 'subject to resourcing'. The Board suggested, as has been discussed in some of the interviews conducted as part of the External Review of Board and Committee Effectiveness, that the Executive link papers, publications etc. back to Strategy, when reports/documents are being presented to the Board.

The Board noted that other priorities for 2021 should include ICT Security and preparation for return to the office when appropriate.

The Board **approved** the Corporate Plan 2021.

### 15.3. Strategy Development

The Board noted the changes to the Agenda for the February 2021 Meeting to devote additional time for reflection on the current Strategy and landscape. This will be in conjunction with a dedicated strategy session to be arranged for January.

The Board noted the need to finalise the Strategy Statement by June 2021 ahead of submission to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Innovation, Research and Science. The Executive had commenced work on sourcing a facilitator and in doing so, was conscious that the session will have to take place in an on-line/virtual setting. The Executive is preparing material including horizon scanning, PESTLE, a stocktake of the current strategy and benchmarking to assist the Board in its deliberations. Materials would be provided in advance to assist Board Members in their preparatory work and it was noted that the Board needs to consider what it wants to achieve from the session. Board Members **agreed** with the suggested approach.

The Board noted that the Chairperson would be in contact with Members to discuss the process further.

The Board noted that the PSC was also planning to do a similar evaluation exercise on its work.

## 16. GOVERNANCE

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

### 16.1 External Review of Board and Committee Effectiveness

The Board noted that the second External Review of Board and Committee Effectiveness, a requirement of the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies, was underway. Surveys had been circulated to Board and Committee Members as part of the review. The Board noted that the individual interview process had just been completed and Members described the process as positive to date.

### 16.2. Governance Developments

The Board noted that the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) had recently published an Annex to the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies 2016. The Annex outlines DPER's stipulations in regard to progress in addressing gender equality and diversity issues on State Boards. The Board noted the key requirements and reporting requirements contained in the document.

The Board also noted Sections 29 and 31 of the Civil Law and Criminal Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020 – 'Remote Meetings of State Body' and 'Remote Hearings by Designated Body' which provide for the holding of remote meetings and remote hearings. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science notified the Executive of recent amendments to this Act to accommodate remote meetings of State Bodies etc. during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Board noted that where a State Body's governing Legislation (such as the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012) already facilitates the Body holding remote meetings, no further action is required.

### 16.3. New Committee Members/appointments

The Chairperson proposed Blake Hodkinson as Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee and the Board **approved** the appointment. It was noted that two new external members will also be sought to join the committee.

## 17. REVIEWS

The Board noted the documents related to **Reviews**.

The Board noted the Cinnte Review Report for Institute of Technology, Carlow. The Board noted that the Institute had counted the virtual review as a positive experience. Feedback on the virtual Cinnte process had been gathered and while it does highlight some learning for the Executive, it was largely very positive.

The Board noted that a virtual visit of Waterford Institute of Technology, the latest Cinnte Review, took place in November.

## 18. COMMUNICATIONS

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

### 18.1. Media Mentions

The Board noted the media mentions published since the September 2020 Board Meeting together with Social Media Statistics covering October and November 2020.

## 19. NEXT MEETING

The Board **approved** the following dates for Board Meetings in 2021:

Monday, 22 February  
Friday, 23 April  
Friday, 18 June  
Monday, 27 September  
Friday, 26 November

The Board noted that a Strategy Reflections Session, as detailed above, will be arranged for January and an additional Board Meeting may be required during the year as a result of the impact of Covid-19 and to advance strategy development.

The Board noted that the next meeting is scheduled to take place on **Monday, 22 February 2021** beginning at **10:00 a.m.**

## **20. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

### 20.1. Tabled Documentation

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

- QQI TLA Report
- QQI Submission to the Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021-25 Consultation.

The Chairperson closed the meeting by thanking everyone for their participation and contributions over the year and wished everyone the best for the Christmas period.

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