

## Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Note of the sixtieth Meeting of the Authority (The Board) which took place on Friday, 18 February 2022 at 10:00 a.m. in the Rovos Meeting Room, The Alex Hotel, Fenian Street, Dublin 2.

**Present:**

- Ms. Joanne Harmon (Chair)
- Dr. Pádraig Walsh (Chief Executive)
- Ms. Cliona Curley (Secretary)
- Dr. Barbara Brittingham
- Ms. Mary Danagher
- Mr. Blake Hodkinson
- Mr. Thomas McDermott (attended via video conferencing)
- Ms. Megan O'Connor
- Dr. Niamh O'Reilly
- Prof. Irene Sheridan
- Dr. Anne Walsh

**Apologies:** None

**In attendance:**

- Ms. Caitríona Lawless (Recording Secretary)
- Dr. Alan Wall, Chief Executive, Higher Education Authority (HEA) (Item 1, via video conferencing)
- Mr. Liam Butler (Item 12)

### INTRODUCTION

The Chairperson welcomed all Members to the meeting.

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

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

Following a request by the Board, Dr. Alan Wall, Chief Executive of the HEA, delivered a presentation to the Board.

The presentation was followed by a questions and answers session. The discussion touched on topics such as the draft HEA Bill (legislation) and the significant amount of data garnered by the HEA annually.

Dr. Wall acknowledged the good relationship between the Chief Executives of the two agencies and also confirmed that the two Executives work well together. The two organisations look forward to continuing to work together to benefit the sector.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, thanked Dr. Wall for presenting to the Board.

## **2. POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The Board noted that no conflicts of interest were declared.

## **3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETING**

The **Minutes of the QQI Board Meeting** held on 26 November 2021 were **confirmed** and would be signed at a later date.

## **4. NOTE OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETING**

The Board **approved** the **Note of the Meeting of 26 November 2021** for publication on the QQI website.

## **5. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES**

The Board noted the **Action Tracker**.

### **5.1. Action Tracker**

The Board noted the updated Action Tracker. The Board noted that an update on the Qualifax Website Project would appear under item 10 on the agenda.

## 6. COVID-19

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

### 6.1. Covid-19 Update

The Board noted an update on the current impact of Covid-19.

The Board noted that a Request for Tender (RFT) had been issued for the reconfiguration of meeting rooms/spaces in the QQI Offices on Denzille Lane and new furniture for the reconfigured open plan work areas had been ordered.

The Board discussed the upcoming Right to Request Remote Working legislation, details of which were recently announced by the Government. The Board noted that QQI's policy will need to be updated.

The Executive acknowledged that a balance has to be found in facilitating 42 staff members at one time in the office whilst accommodating those who may need to work in the office fulltime. The Executive is working to design a workspace which enables collaborative working. The Board noted that feedback from staff surveys and discussions with Managers have helped the Executive to consider what has been missing through full scale remote working, e.g. collaboration, engagement and interaction between colleagues.

## 7. CEO REPORT

The Board noted the **CEO Report**.

### 7.1. CEO Report

The Board noted the various updates contained in the CEO report covering the period since the November 2021 Board Meeting.

The Board discussed one of the items featured in the report, the Executive's plans for determining learner views on assessment. The Board noted that the Executive had received an update on the project at the Project Steering Group (PSG) meeting held on 17 February. The Executive is keen to see the project's outcomes. The Board noted that 21 focus groups covering FET and HE undergrad programmes by discipline had been established and these will

be in place by March/April. The focus groups will enable participating learners to share their perspectives on their learning and assessment. It is also expected that the project will build on the research QQI has already completed in 2020 on what was learned from online learning during the first six-month period of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Board noted that the Executive had also consulted with AONTAS to recruit marginalised learner voices to these focus groups, providing a comprehensive overview of the sector.

The Board noted that the Executive sees this project as an opportunity to also engage with postgraduate learners – which can be the forgotten cohort of Covid-19. It was suggested that a large amount of practice-based research was significantly affected by Covid-19 restrictions and limited access to on-campus facilities. The Board noted the Executive’s desire to engage with this group and canvas their opinions. The Board also suggested that consideration should be given to engaging with another category, those in full-time employment and part-time learning. The Board looked forward to receiving updates on this project.

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

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

### **8.1. Performance Delivery Agreement (PDA) 2022**

The Board noted a verbal update on the PDA for 2022. The Board noted that the Executive was awaiting confirmation of a date for the PDA Review Meeting in Quarter 1, 2022.

### **8.2. Funding Model**

The Board noted that the Executive had raised the topic of its Funding Model submission with the Department again and noted that a meeting with the Executive/Finance Manager is scheduled for the week of 21 February. The Board noted that the Executive is considering further discussing its proposed options with DFHERIS and exploring any challenges or barriers for the Department to authorise QQI’s preferred option. The Board noted the Executive wishes to rebalance the validation fees (which are legacy based) and will work on same. The Board noted that the Funding Model will continue to remain a standing item on the Board and the Executive’s agenda.

### 8.3. Amendment Legislation Programme (ALP)

The Board noted an update on a specific element of the ALP – the International Education Mark (IEM). The Board noted that there is a resurgence of interest in the IEM, perhaps due to the easing of Covid-19 restrictions. The IEM is also a prominent item on the agenda of the Department and the Minister. The Board noted the various steps in the establishment of the IEM as outlined in the paper provided.

The Board noted that the establishment of the IEM is predicated on the Regulations for Corporate Fitness and Protection for Enrolled Learners (PEL) being in place in the first instance. The draft Regulations for Corporate Fitness were submitted to the Department at the end of December and the associated consultation with the Department is continuing. It was noted that the Executive is establishing an Expert Group, comprising the relevant backgrounds and experience, to review the regulations and assist in their finalisation. This group is expected to meet for the first time in March. As part of this process, the Executive also intends to seek feedback from a number of providers on the draft Corporate Fitness regulations.

The Board noted that the Executive hopes to receive sign off on the Corporate Fitness Regulations from DFHERIS by the end of Quarter 2, 2022.

The Board noted that the Executive is surveying all relevant providers to confirm information on their programmes, student numbers, fees etc which will help inform the new statutory PEL fund and the associated transitional period. It was noted that QQI does not have existing data for English Language Education (ELE) providers as many are not current providers of QQI awards, so a customised survey is required for this sector. The PEL project owner and the IEM Manager are working closely on these projects and the Board noted that work on the IEM is continuing in parallel in the HE and ELE projects/sectors.

The Board noted that the Executive is working to ensure that these measures are in place as quickly as possible. The Executive is also working to risk assess and mitigate against challenges to these functions. The Board noted that public consultation on the IEM will take place once the Corporate Fitness and PEL Regulations are in place.

The Board noted that all HEIs have re-engaged with QQI but it is not yet known how many ELE providers will apply for the IEM. The Board noted that the Executive is planning to hold an IEM webinar for ELE providers in March. This will be one of the mandatory briefings for those that wish to apply for the Mark. Participating providers will also be issued with a survey post-webinar to ascertain their interest in applying for the IEM. The Board noted that the Executive had been engaging with the sector on an ongoing basis throughout the development of the amended Legislation and the ALP process.

#### 8.4 Correspondence with DFHERIS

The Board noted correspondence of 27 January from Ms. Fiona O’Byrne, Principal Officer, Higher Education and Reform, DFHERIS to Dr. Walsh, and of 1 February from Dr. Walsh to Mr. Simon Harris T.D., Minister for Higher and Further Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The correspondence related to the application for Technological University (TU) designation by the TUSEI consortium of Institute of Technology, Carlow and Waterford Institute of Technology. The QQI response also highlighted the next phase of engagement between QQI and the new TU once established.

The Board noted that the good standing in relation to quality assurance of the partner institutes with QQI is a prerequisite for a TU consortium application.

### 9. **STRATEGIC PLANNING**

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

#### 9.1. Corporate Plan 2021

The Board noted the Quarter 4 Progress Report for the 2021 Corporate Plan and noted there were a number of outstanding actions, largely those dependent on external parties. The Board reiterated its view that the Executive should not over commit.

#### 9.2. Corporate Plan 2022

The Board **approved** the revised Corporate Plan for 2022, amended on foot of confirmation of the State Grant allocation and the restructuring of the organisation including the realignment of Directorates.

The Board briefly discussed one specific action contained within the Plan:

‘We will engage with key FET and HE stakeholders on current developments in RPL thinking, practice and implementation, including the HCI project for a national framework for RPL in higher education.’ The Board and Executive want to ensure Recognition of Prior Learning remains on the HEI agenda and that its position is strengthened, and the Board acknowledged the role QQI is playing in this area.

The Board noted that there is a significant THEA project on RPL underway. Members suggested an option of working with another state agency to capture RPL data on an ongoing basis. This may assist in ensuring that the topic remains on the agenda of the HEIs. It was suggested that data on workplace learning also needs to be compiled.

The Board **approved** the revised Corporate Plan 2022.

### 9.3. QQI’s 10-Year Anniversary

The Board noted an update on the initial programme for the 10-year anniversary of QQI’s establishment. The Board noted the various events planned to date, proposals and branding for the anniversary programme together with the Executive’s intention to badge a number of previously planned actions as anniversary related events/publications. It was agreed that this year provides an opportunity to highlight QQI’s key role as an integrator across the tertiary sector.

The Board noted that the Annual Analysis of Awards made by QQI, 2021 had just been published. Following the organisation restructuring in late 2021, the organisation now had a dedicated Research and Innovation Unit.

The Board discussed a number of suggestions it put forward for consideration for inclusion on the programme of events and publications. The Board expressed its view that it would be worthwhile reinforcing the complexity of QQI’s remit and the breadth and reach of its role. The Board also noted that the Chief Executive had written an article on microcredentials in the recently published *Ireland’s Education Yearbook 2021*. Other areas the Board suggested as opportunities to highlight included compiling what QQI has learned over the last decade and research on areas such as Work-based Learning, RPL, Doctoral Learning and Apprenticeships.

The Board noted that the Executive also intends to work with external stakeholders and partners in promoting QQI throughout 2022 and is likely to compile a number of stakeholder videos, similar to those used in the launch of the Statement of Strategy 2022-2024 in November 2021.

## 10. COMMUNICATIONS

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

### 10.1. Qualifax

The Board noted an update on the Qualifax Website project. It noted a RFT for the redevelopment work had been published on 14 February and a clearer indication of the timeline and costs involved would be available following assessment of submissions.

### 10.2. Media Mentions/Social Media Statistics

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

## 11. ITEMS FOR NOTING

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

### 11.1 Focus on Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee

The Board noted the verbal overview of the work of the Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee (PAOC) provided by the Chairperson of the Committee. The Board also noted that there had been turnover of both membership and the Key Executive for the PAOC during 2021.

The Board noted the report of the PAOC Meeting held on 7 October 2021 and the Annual Report of the Committee for 2020.

Following a query from a Board Member, the Committee Chairperson confirmed that the Committee which reviews negative decisions of the PAEC, has also examined successful programme validations as examples of positive decisions.



### 11.2 Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee held on 7 December 2021.

The Board noted a verbal summary provided by the PAEC Chairperson on recent reengagement activity with community and voluntary providers. It was noted that three providers had successfully reengaged with QQI, albeit with conditions and the reengagement applications of another three providers are due for consideration at the next PAEC meeting. The Board noted that this sector is continuing in its efforts to build capacity and through community of practice, the lessons learnt from the reengagement process will benefit the sector.

The Board noted that the Executive is in the process of scheduling the Annual Meeting of Board and Committee Chairperson alongside the April Board Meeting.

### 11.3 Rolling Board Agenda 2022

The Board noted the Rolling Board Agenda for 2022.

## 12. BUDGET AND FINANCE

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

### 12.1 Management Accounts to 31 December 2021

The Board noted the Management Accounts for the 12 months to 31 December 2021. The Board noted the additional finance provided through the Covid-19 Grant by DFHERIS, which has to be spent by the end of Quarter 2, 2022, has been committed to the reconfiguration of the Denzille Lane building as part of the preparation for a return to the office.

The Board noted that Certification fees for 2021 exceeded expectations, again underlining the unpredictability of QQI's income streams.

There was a short discussion on the fact that two of the Top Five Risks are financial, this followed a query raised by a Board Member. It was noted that the top risks have to reflect the risks as they materialise throughout a given year and in the case of a risk relating to its

finances, the Executive can only determine if the organisation will break even or if there will be a surplus in the final month(s) of the year, therefore, those risks remain appropriate.

The Board noted and discussed the continued awareness of the pension liability of QQI. It was noted that there had been three retirements in 2021. It was noted that a provision has been made in the draft Budget for 2022.

#### 12.2 Draft Budget 2022

The Board noted the draft Budget for 2022.

The Board noted, as per the discussion of the previous item, a number of pension lump sums had been provided for in the Budget for 2022.

The Board noted that the Executive had developed the budget on the basis of breaking even at year end. It was also noted that the Executive had drafted a balanced budget with the expectation of a full draw down of its State Grant allocation. The Board noted that it is expected that panel visits in 2022 are likely to be a mix of on-site and virtual visits.

The Board considered and **approved** the revised Budget for 2022.

#### 12.3 ICT Contract Resources

The Board noted and discussed the proposal outlined.

The Board **approved**:

- the award of a 3-year contract of ICT Support Service Contract as outlined in the proposal submitted and in accordance with the QQI Purchasing and Procurement Policy, subject to contract and subject to satisfactory conclusion to clarifications sought by the Executive.

The Board noted that the Executive will provide updates, associated with delivery of the contract, as appropriate.

### 13. AUDIT AND RISK

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

#### 13.1. Verbal Report of Audit and Risk Committee Meeting

The Board noted a verbal report on the Audit and Risk Committee Meeting held on 31 January 2022.

The Board noted that the Committee had been informed that the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) confirmed the arrangements for the audit of QQI's draft Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2021. It was noted that the audit for 2021 was expected to commence on 28 February which would be the earliest start date assigned to QQI to date.

The Board noted that the Audit and Risk Committee had considered a large number of Internal Audit Reports at its January meeting, only some of which appear on the agenda for this meeting. This was due to the volume of material on the Board's agenda. It was noted that the Committee had considered:

- Internal Audit Report – Revenue and Debtors Cycle
- Internal Audit Report – Financial Reporting Cycle and
- Internal Audit Report – Value for Money Review.

The Board noted that a number of these reviews have no recommendations arising. The reports will be presented to the Board for consideration at its April 2022 Board Meeting.

#### 13.2 Review of System of Internal Controls (SIC)

The Board noted the SIC which on this occasion was accompanied by Management Assurance Statements for 2021.

The Board noted and discussed a recommendation arising from the SIC related to Purchase Orders (POs) and the need to adjust the relevant Finance Policy as a result.

The Board **approved** the Review of the System of Internal Controls for the year ended 31 December 2021.

### 13.3 Internal Audit (IA) Report – Review of Procurement

The Board noted the IA Report and further noted a recommendation linked to Office of Government Procurement (OGP) Frameworks and the timing and expiration of same.

The Board noted that the Executive is working on a central repository to manage its procurement data and documentation.

The Board **approved** the IA Report – Review of Procurement.

### 13.4 Previous IA Recommendations

The Board noted an update on the status of recommendations arising from previous Internal Audits. It was noted that there are several recommendations which the Executive is unable to close due to the involvement of external parties or external factors.

### 13.5 Risk Register and Top Five Risks

The Board noted an update on the Risk Register and the Top Five Risks for 2021.

In light of the recent publication of the RFT, a Board Member raised a query in relation to a risk on the Register which related to the Qualifax website and noted its score reduction. The Executive clarified that the risk specifically related to data protection and the user accounts which were hosted on the website several years ago. As the accounts had been disabled and removed from the site a number of years ago, the security issue was mitigated against.

The Board **approved**:

- the Risk Register at Quarter 4, 2021 and
- the Top Five Risks as at 31 December 2021.

### 13.6 High Level Review of Top Five Risks

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

The Executive was now presenting the third in the series of risks to the Board for consideration, Risk QQI-R1:

*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.*

The Board discussed the risk.

Following its consideration, the Board **reaffirmed** Risk QQI-R1 as a top risk.

#### 13.7 Minutes of Audit and Risk Committee Meeting

The Board noted the Minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee Meeting held on 15 October 2021.

### 14. ORGANISATION AND HUMAN RESOURCES

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

#### 14.1. Update on Human Resources

The Board noted an update on Human Resources. The Board noted that a significant amount of this item had been discussed under Item 6, Covid-19. The Board noted that the Executive expects the furniture for the reconfigured office space to be installed in March/April, so it will be several months before a full move to hybrid working will be possible. The Executive is also exploring more flexible layouts for its meeting rooms. The unexpected removal of many of the remaining Covid-19 restrictions a number of weeks ago, meant that the move to hybrid working landscape changed quicker than had been expected. The Board noted that the Executive is also awaiting Government guidelines for the sector on the return to the workplace.

The Executive has consulted with Managers on the areas (of work) which have worked well or that have been heavily impacted during the last two years of remote working. The Executive also wishes to give new staff an opportunity to integrate with existing colleagues. It was important to acknowledge what has worked well in the remote working environment. The Board noted that a number of the new teams have now met in face-to-face settings.

The Board briefly discussed the current employment climate and trends and noted, that as an organisation, QQI had worked to position itself as an 'employer of choice' through its wellbeing initiatives.

Both the Board and the Executive agreed it had been difficult to develop the new Statement of Strategy through the remote working environment.

## 15. GOVERNANCE

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

### 15.1. Annual Review of Reserved Functions

The Board noted the Reserved Functions of the Board. The Board noted that it was likely that amendments to the Schedule of Functions would be required later this year as further Sections of the amended Legislation are enacted and as the ALP progresses.

### 15.2 Protected Disclosures 2021

The Board noted the Protected Disclosures Report for the year ended 31 December 2021.

### 15.3 Committee Members/Appointments

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

- Mr. Tony Pettit to the Approvals and Reviews Committee.

### 15.4 External Review of Board and its Committees

#### Board Skillset Audit

As previously noted, one of the recommendations arising from the External Review of the Effectiveness of the Board and its Committees (Quarter 4, 2020), was an audit of the Board's skills set. A survey of Members had been carried out in January 2022 by an external provider and the Chairperson, Chief Executive and Board Secretary met with the consultant to discuss the findings. The Board noted the resulting Report of the Skillset Audit. The report gives an indication of where the skills gaps are likely to arise once the current Board completes its membership term in November. The Chairperson thanked members for their input to the audit.

The Board noted that the Chairperson had recently received correspondence from DFHERIS in relation to the commencement of the Board appointments process. The Chairperson had contacted those members eligible for reappointment and discussed and confirmed their intentions. The Executive/Chairperson will advise the Department and ensure the appointment process progresses as swiftly as possible.

15.5 Self-assessment Evaluation of Board Performance 2021

The Board noted that as both the Statement of Interests returns and the Skillset audit were conducted in January, the Executive delayed this survey until later in the month. The Executive has received six responses to date and will recirculate the link to facilitate a full set of returns.

**16 DRAFT BOARD AGENDA**

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

The Board noted and discussed the draft Agenda for the April Meeting.

The Board noted that the new Assistant Secretary and Head of the Higher Education Policy Division in DFHERIS would be invited to attend part of the April Board Meeting.

**17 NEXT MEETING**

The Board noted that the next meeting is scheduled to take place on **Friday, 8 April 2022**, beginning at **10:00 a.m.** It was also noted that the Executive intends to schedule the Annual Meeting of Board and Committee Chairs on 7 April, members availability permitting.

**18 ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

A Board Member raised a query in relation to a QQI-validated programme. The Executive outlined the details as far as it was aware and undertook to revert to the Member on the matter.

The Chairperson thanked everyone for their participation and contributions.

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