

## Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Note of the sixty first Meeting of the Authority (The Board) which took place on Friday, 8 April 2022 at 10:00 a.m. in the Rovos Meeting Room, The Alex Hotel, Fenian Street, Dublin 2.

**Present:**

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

**Apologies:** None

**In attendance:**

- Ms. Caitriona Lawless (Recording Secretary)
- Mr. Liam Butler (Item 11-13)
- Mr. Eamonn Collins (Item 5)
- Ms. Mary Grennan (Item 7)
- Ms. Karena Maguire (Item 10)
- Dr. Jim Murray (Item 7)

### INTRODUCTION

The Chairperson welcomed all Members to the meeting.

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

**1. POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The Board noted that no conflicts of interest were declared.

**2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETING**

The **Minutes of the QQI Board Meeting** held on 18 February 2022 were **confirmed** and would be signed at a later date.

**3. NOTE OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETING**

The Board **approved** the **Note of the Meeting of 18 February 2022** for publication on the QQI website.

**4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES**

The Board noted the **Action Tracker**.

4.1. Action Tracker

The Board noted the updated Action Tracker. The Board noted and briefly discussed a number of the actions listed.

The Board noted that as per the MoU with the HEA, the Chief Executive would be presenting to its Board in the coming weeks.

**5. COVID-19**

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

5.1. Covid-19 Update

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

The Board noted that the majority of staff are continuing to work remotely in advance of a phased return to the office following completion of the reconfiguration work within the next few weeks. The Board noted that the first phase of the reconfiguration fitout would commence on Monday, 11 April and would be carried out in three phases over 3-4 weeks.

The Board noted that as part of the reconfiguration plans two larger meeting rooms on the first and second floors would be created, and the Executive was working with the architect to see if the existing glass partitions/fixtures used in the current meeting rooms can be reused in the new ones. This would be beneficial both from a sustainability and cost-effective point of view. It was noted that the architect will also look at options for sound proofing improvements as well as some renovations to the kitchen areas.

The ICT Team have cleared the existing PC equipment and will begin work on clearing down the machines. The Board noted that the Executive is exploring options to reuse and recycle existing furniture where possible.

The Board noted that staff have been kept updated on the refit project. The Board noted that as part of the refit work, improvements to ventilation and soundproofing have been included. The Board noted that Guidelines for Ventilation in Workplaces will also be published shortly. It was also noted that Civil Service Guidelines for the return to work are expected to be available soon. Once work is completed and the office is back in use, staff will dock their laptops when on site and the Executive is introducing a clean desk policy. Desks will have to be booked in advance.

The Board noted and briefly discussed an outline update of the current lease situation provided by the Executive.

The Board discussed and **agreed** that a separate agenda item and paper for Covid-19 is no longer needed and the item would be incorporated into the CEO Report for future meetings.

## 6. CEO REPORT

The Board noted the **CEO Report**.

### 6.1. CEO Report

The Board noted the various updates contained in the CEO report covering the period since the February 2022 Board Meeting.

The Board noted that the Review of the Comparability of the Advanced Certificate and the Higher Certificate Qualifications had been socialised with relevant stakeholders and would be published shortly. There was a brief discussion on the topic of Level 6 awards.

## **7. PRESENTATION – UPDATE ON THE INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION MARK (IEM)**

The Board had received an update on the IEM at its February Meeting. As there had been a significant amount of engagement with stakeholders in this area in the interim and following a general request from a Board Member, an additional update on the International Education Mark was added to the agenda for this meeting.

The Chairperson welcomed Jim Murray, the Director of Development and Mary Grennan, the Head of International Education to the meeting. The Board noted that since 11 February, a number of meetings and briefings on the current status of the IEM function and the intended process were held with HECA, the IUA, THEA, and RCSI in the HE sector and a briefing webinar was held for English Language Education (ELE) providers on 30 March. The Board noted that the briefing for ELE providers had been attended by 173 attendees from 90+ providers and speakers had included QQI staff and DFHERIS representatives. Discussions with representative bodies and overseas agencies had also taken place.

The Board noted that stakeholder consultation will feature prominently in the development of the IEM process. The Board noted the timeline and plan for the next 12 months and the significant amount of work involved.

It was noted that following the recent meetings and briefings, the Executive is conscious of keeping up momentum. The Board noted the various areas and actions outlined by the presenters. Some initial areas of focus include determining the nature of provision of English language education in HEIs and working toward the establishment of the QA and Due Diligence of ELE providers. The Board noted that the Corporate Fitness process had changed title to Due Diligence. The Executive's current aim is to have the due diligence process open before year end. The Board noted that there is a lot of complex work ahead and it is likely that some applicants will move more quickly through the process than others, due to variations in capacity and capability and governance/ownership structure. As part of their application for IEM, all private provider applicants must complete the due diligence process. The Board noted that the Executive's intention is for HE and ELE providers to complete the process

simultaneously for competition reasons. There may also be a perception that prior award of ACELS membership may be of benefit to those accessing the IEM, which is not the case. All applicants will be starting from the same vantage point.

The Board noted that during the next phase of briefings, which will focus on QA for ELE providers, a number will be tailored to categories of providers and the Executive will offer as much support and guidance as possible as regulator and set expectations. The Board noted that the International Education Unit is working closely with the Partnerships Division (Stakeholder Engagement Unit) on its engagement plan.

The Board noted that all Regulations and fees associated with these processes require Ministerial approval.

The Board noted that a process mapping exercise is underway in-house.

The Board confirmed its own need to understand the complexity and diversity of the providers who will be involved in the process.

The Board spent a short time discussing the English Language Education needs for those Ukrainian refugees who require this support and the need to ensure appropriate provision of same.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, thanked Jim and Mary for their presentation and confirmed the Board's support and that it was looking forward to seeing the process progress.

## **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 Executive provided a verbal update on the Quarter 1 PDA Review Meeting for 2022 which was held on 10 March.

## 8.2. Funding Model

The Board noted that the Funding Model proposal is still under review by the Department and was briefly discussed at the recent PDA Review Meeting. The Board noted that the Executive received the Department's letter confirming the State Grant allocation for 2022. The letter also confirmed the Department's intention to further engage with QQI on the development of a Reserves Policy.

## 8.3. Amendment Legislation Programme (ALP)

The Board had noted the IEM timelines from the earlier presentation under item 7 above. As noted earlier, the Executive had recently renamed the Corporate Fitness process to Due Diligence and noted that an Expert Advisory Group had been established. This group had met twice to date, the most recent meeting taking place on 4 April and are providing feedback on the relevance and robustness of the draft regulations and associated criteria. Mapping of the Due Diligence process is underway, which has given rise to policy considerations and discussions. The Board noted that the Executive plans to engage with providers on the draft regulations in the coming weeks.

A Board Member raised the topic of the HEA Bill and the extensive references to QQI contained within the draft and queried if extra resources would be required to support the additional work. The Executive clarified that many of the references in the draft legislation were regularising actions and work which currently takes place and therefore, would not have an increased impact on the organisation's workload. The Board noted that the Executive believed that there may currently be a case for some additional temporary resources to support any increase in requests for recognition of qualifications arising from the war in Ukraine. The Board noted that the Executive had seen a similar increase in work during the Syrian crisis and noted that the Executive had used its experience from the latter to prepare and publish support material for those requiring information on recognition of their Ukrainian qualifications as it became apparent that there would be a demand for such supports.

The Board noted one member's view that QQI can be seriously limited by resources and a Board Member also suggested that the Executive could consider working/partnering with other agencies in some areas/projects.

The Board noted that at a recent briefing/discussion on the Future Funding of Higher Education for the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education, QQI's representative raised the subject of Academic Integrity. The Board noted that learners need to be constantly reminded of the implications and impact of cheating.

The Board suggested that all references to Corporate Fitness be changed to Due Diligence in documents such as the PDA, the Corporate Plan etc.

## 9. STRATEGIC PLANNING

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

### 9.1. Corporate Plan 2022

The Board noted the Quarter 1 Progress Report for the 2022 Corporate Plan.

### 9.2. Draft Annual Report 2021

The Board noted the draft Annual Report 2021 and **approved** the document for progression to the next stage of production. Board Members provided some initial feedback on the draft and agreed to submit any further comments to the Executive by 25 April. The Board noted that the final design proof would be presented to the Board for noting at its June Meeting.

## 10. COMMUNICATIONS

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

### 10.1. Partnerships Strategy

The Board noted the draft Partnerships Strategy, which is an internal strategy document designed to be one of the elements supporting the delivery of the Statement of Strategy 2022-2024. The Board noted that this strategy combines the plans for the Communications and Stakeholder Engagement Units. The Board discussed a number of the areas of work which the Partnerships Division has focused on over the last two years.

The Board noted that the past two years had provided many opportunities to engage with and support stakeholders and the Covid-19 pandemic had demonstrated the strength of and reliance on QQI's national and international relationships. The Executive had worked closely

with Professional Bodies throughout the pandemic. The organisation had been able to maximise its use of Microsoft Teams to create a virtual hub to facilitate the interaction of existing and new staff members.

The Board noted that, following the restructuring of DFHERIS, the Executive now engages with four Assistant Secretaries across its remit.

The Board noted that the Executive is seeking to create a platform for the IEM (for those who will be applying for the IEM, etc) and has been working to get a sense of the engagement needs and support that will be required during this process. The Partnerships Division is working closely with the International Education Unit on the rollout of the IEM process.

The Board acknowledged all the work undertaken by the Partnerships Division and its positive effect on capacity building for learner engagement. The Board **approved** the Partnership Strategy.

#### 10.2. Consultation Framework

The Board noted the revised version of the Consultation Framework, the original draft of which had been presented to the Board at its meeting on 27 September 2021. The Board noted the update on the work carried out in the interim. A Board Member queried if there were opportunities for stakeholders to initiate topics for consultation which the Executive undertook to take on board.

#### 10.3. Academic Integrity

The Board noted a verbal update on Academic Integrity. It was noted that Academic Integrity had been an extremely busy function over the past year and had produced a significant number of outputs and a large amount of research was being carried out.

The National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN) had been established and produced (soft) regulations for providers. QQI had strengthened its relationships with similar agencies and peer organisations working in this area in Australia and New Zealand where academic integrity is also governed by primary legislation. It was noted that this area is also beginning to garner importance/prominence in the US and Canada.



The Board noted that the reputation of education systems in some regions have been hugely affected by the levels of contract cheating which has occurred within their systems. The Board noted that it is considered likely that the pandemic has had a huge impact on levels of contract cheating and social media has added greatly to accessibility of these services. The Board also noted that contract cheating has become more sophisticated and more heavily financed during the pandemic. It has already been considered in the global context, that the next phase of contract cheating will be even more problematic, as it is apparent that artificial intelligence will play a significant role. The Executive and the Network are acutely aware that the awareness of learners about academic integrity must be raised and increased support will be required for provider staff and faculties in how they approach assessment to discourage cheating. The Executive acknowledged the work and support of USI throughout this project, including the hosting of student support sessions.

The Board noted that an Academic Integrity masterclass for HE providers is scheduled during May. It is envisaged that some sessions will also be dedicated to senior education policy leaders. A briefing session was also recently held for University Registrars. The Executive is also considering providing a briefing session of the use of artificial intelligence in contract cheating as the research on this area grows.

As part of its next phase of work, the Executive and the Network are now engaging with senior policy leaders in Irish HE.

The Board noted that as a result of QQI's activity in the Academic Integrity area, the Executive has received a number of requests for articles for journals and peer reviews based on its work and findings to date.

The Board noted that the Executive is working on a significant initiative with similar organisations in other regions which it hopes to promote at or around its 10-year anniversary event later this year. The Board noted that some regions may be able to use any success of the Irish statutory function on Academic Integrity to push for a case in their regions for service providers to remove contract cheating services from their platforms.

The Board noted that no dedicated academic integrity posts had been established in providers in the HE sector as yet.

The Board noted that there is further work to be carried out in engaging with teaching unions and professional bodies.

The Executive thanked the Board for the opportunity to provide its update.

#### 10.4. Qualifax

The Board noted a verbal update on the Qualifax Website project. It noted a RFT for the redevelopment work had closed and following an assessment of the submissions by the Tender Assessment Group, a company had been selected. The appointment is currently in the 2-week standstill period but is expected to be finalised by mid-April. The Board noted an estimation of the cost of the project.

#### 10.5. Media Mentions/Social Media Statistics

The Board noted the media mentions and social media statistics for the period since the February 2022 Board Meeting.

### **11. AUDIT AND RISK**

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

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

The Board noted a verbal report on the Audit and Risk Committee Meeting held on 1 April 2022.

The Board noted an update on QQI ICT services.

The Board noted that audit of the draft Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2021 was underway.

The Board noted that the Internal Audit Report on ICT General Controls would be presented to the Committee in May and to the Board subsequently. The next IA review scheduled is a review of Data Protection and Freedom of Information Compliance.

#### 11.2 Annual Report of the Audit and Risk Committee 2021

The Board **approved** the Annual Report of the Audit and Risk Committee for 2021 subject to two minor amendments (one arising from the consideration of the Audit and Risk Committee on 1 April and the second following the Board's consideration). The Board noted that no matters arose during 2021 which gave cause for concern.

#### 11.3 Financial Statements 2021

The Board noted and discussed the draft unaudited Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2021 which had been considered by the Audit and Risk Committee at its meeting of 1 April and were referred to the Board for its approval. The Board noted that there was a surplus at year end.

The Board noted that the Executive is working towards developing a Reserves Policy and noted that as has been the case with QQI's unpredictable certification income, a late surplus can occur in the latter half of the year. Works and initiatives impacted by reduced funding levels are now being examined for progression.

The Board also discussed debtors and a recent change in the internal debt collection process. It was noted that the Finance Unit will now follow up on outstanding provider accounts rather than the Certification Unit and there will also be a change to the issuing of statements from April 2022. It was noted that Covid-19 had disrupted some providers' internal processes for the payment of invoices.

The Board **approved** the Financial Statements for 2021 subject to the completion of a small number of gaps in the document, audit by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) and there being no material changes.

#### 11.4 Guidelines on Reporting Data Breaches

The Board noted revised Guidelines on Reporting Data Breaches. Data Protection training would also be delivered in the coming weeks, both for new staff and a refresher programme for existing staff members.

The Board **approved** the revised Guidelines on Reporting Data Breaches.

#### 11.5 External Review of Risk Management

The Board noted that an external review of Risk Management is required under the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies 2016. The Board noted that the Executive had found this review to be a very positive experience. The Board noted the report recommended enhancements of some areas, but the outcome was very positive overall.

It was noted that the Executive was now beginning work to establish a Corporate Register of 10-12 risks and Divisional Registers in addition to reviewing its reporting templates.

The Board noted that two Risk Management workshops arising from the review had been held for the Executive Management Team (EMT) which the group had found to be a very positive and engaging experience. EMT Members would now work with their own Units and Directorates on the next phase of the revisions. The Board noted that risk management had also been briefly discussed at the meeting of the Board and Committee Chairpersons on 7 April. It was agreed that the review and its findings is reflective of where the Board sees risk within the organisation.

The Board considered the review report and was satisfied with the outcome.

#### 11.6 Internal Audit Reports

The Board noted a number of internal audit reports which had been considered by the Audit and Risk Committee at its meeting on 31 January, but which were held over from the February Board Meeting due to the volume of material on the agenda.

The Board noted that the Review of the System of Internal Controls had been endorsed within the timeframe of 28 February.

The Board **approved** the following IA reports:

- Financial Reporting Cycle,
- Revenue Cycle and Debtors Cycle,
- Value for Money Review.

#### 11.7 ICT Services

The Board noted an update on ICT services.

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

The Board noted the Minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee Meeting held on 31 January 2022.

### 12. ITEMS FOR NOTING

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

#### 12.1 Focus on Audit and Risk Committee

This was handled under item 11 above.

#### 12.2 Policies and Standards Committee (PSC)

The Board noted the reports of the meetings of the Policies and Standards Committee held on 20 September and 15 November 2021.

#### 12.3 Approvals and Reviews Committee (ARC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Approvals and Reviews Committee held on 1 November 2021.

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

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee held on 10 February 2022.

#### 12.5 Rolling Board Agenda 2022

The Board noted an update on the Rolling Board Agenda for 2022. It was noted that the Annual Meeting of Board and Committee Chairpersons had been held on 7 April 2022.

### 13. BUDGET AND FINANCE

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

#### 13.1 Management Accounts to 28 February 2022

The Board noted the Management Accounts for the 2 months to 28 February 2022. The Board noted the Executive's confirmation that the certification income for this time of year was above prior years. The Board noted an error in the out-turn which the Executive undertook to correct.

The Board again discussed retirements and the possible impacts on finances. It is expected that there will be a number of retirements in 2022.

### 14. GOVERNANCE

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

#### 14.1. Board Performance Evaluation 2021

The Board noted and discussed the feedback received through its self-assessment evaluation of the Board's performance during 2021. The Board noted that the majority of areas surveyed had received positive feedback and the Board discussed the small number of items where Members had expressed dissatisfaction. It was noted that Covid-19 and the move to virtual meetings had impacted on how the Board had worked, to some degree. A Board Member suggested that a Board reflections piece could be explored to support new Board Members due to be appointed later this year. The Board discussed where it considered that it had added value such as strategic direction, how matters are reported and engagement with learners and the areas which had proved frustrating or where progress had been limited.

The Board suggested that a larger Board membership would have been helpful in terms of populating Committees. It was noted that succession planning was important and this was also

discussed at a recent meeting of the Board and Committee Chairpersons. The Board acknowledged that continuity on the Board is important.

#### 14.2 External Board Evaluation 2020

The Board noted an update on the implementation of recommendations arising from the External Board Evaluation 2020.

#### 14.3 Committee Members/Appointments

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

- Anna Murphy to the Approvals and Reviews Committee.

The Board also noted the appointment of Andrea Durnin and Órla Barry to the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee, replacing Marie Gould and Angela Lambkin respectively.

### 15 **DRAFT BOARD AGENDA**

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

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

The Board noted that the new Assistant Secretary and Head of the Higher Education Policy Division in DFHERIS, Mr. Keith Moynes was unable to attend this meeting and arrangements would be made to schedule his attendance at an upcoming meeting instead. The Board noted that the Chairperson was continuing contact with the Department in relation to the Board appointments process.

### 16 **NEXT MEETING**

The Board noted that the next meeting is scheduled to take place on **Friday, 10 June 2022**, beginning at **10:00 a.m.**

### 17 **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

The Board noted that as Megan O'Connor's term as Deputy President/Vice-President for Academic Affairs at USI was coming to an end, the June Meeting would be her final one as a QQI Board Member. It was noted that her successor in USI would be elected during the week of 11 April and the

necessary arrangements for the appointment of the new USI representative to the Board would be made.

The Chairperson thanked everyone for their participation and contributions.

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