

## Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Note of the seventy second Meeting of the Authority (The Board) which took place on Monday, 22 April 2024 at 10:30 a.m. in the Boardroom, QQI Offices, 26/27 Denzille Lane, Dublin 2.

**Present:**

- Prof. Irene Sheridan (Chair)
- Dr. Pdraig Walsh (Chief Executive)
- Ms. Cliona Curley (Secretary)
- Ms. Marianne Doyle (Items 1-14)
- Dr. Sean Duignan
- Dr. Sharon Feeney
- Mr. Blake Hodkinson
- Mr. Kevin McStravock
- Ms. Anne Naughton
- Mr. Bryan O'Mahony

**Apologies:** Ms. Maria Ward

**In attendance:**

- Ms. Caitriona Lawless (Recording Secretary)
- Mr. Liam Butler (Item 12)
- Mr. Eamonn Collins (Item 15)
- Dr. Bryan Maguire (Item 1)
- Dr. Anna Murphy (Item 9)

### INTRODUCTION

The Chairperson welcomed Members to the meeting.

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

## 1. BRIEFING ON INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

The Board noted the document circulated, **Briefing on QQI and International Engagement**. The Board also noted a brief verbal overview presented by the Director of Integration following a request by the Board for further information on QQI's international engagements during their induction sessions last year. The Executive provided a synopsis of QQI's international engagement and work. It was noted that there is a statutory basis for a large part of the engagement and an explicit function for QQI in the operation of the Irish NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centre).

The Board noted that QQI's international engagements keep the organisation informed of international developments and help to develop and maintain its relationships with peer agencies across Europe and further afield. QQI and one of its antecedent bodies, the NQAI, had a central role in the development of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The Executive views its involvement in European interactions as one way to ensure that QQI's work and initiatives in Ireland align with developments at a European level.

The Board noted that Ireland and QQI have continued to maintain and grow its relationships with the UK and its peer agencies there and in Northern Ireland through the Five Countries Qualifications Framework Group and the establishment of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the UK. The Five Countries Qualifications Framework Group also maintain the rough guide for comparing qualifications systems within the Common Travel Area (CTA) – 'Qualifications Can Cross Boundaries'. Significant efforts are made to ensure that the relationship with the UK is maintained following Brexit. The Board noted that the Association of Chief Executives of State Agencies (ACESA) group were due to meet with their Northern Irish counterparts on 24 April in Belfast. The Board noted that the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's (DFHERIS) International Strategy contains a section on the North/South relationship. Relationships are key as some recognition issues remain since Brexit and work is continuing to resolve this, e.g. areas such as professional recognition remain complicated, EU Directives are in place and have an impact on recognition of same. It was noted that QQI was invited to provide a member to QAA's Method Advisory Group for developing a new External Higher Education Quality Review method in Northern Ireland.

The Board noted that the Executive also established and maintains Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with several countries with significant mobility with (to/from) Ireland, e.g. Australia, New Zealand, China and Malaysia.

Following a query from a Board Member, the Executive outlined the arrangements in place in relation to the quality assurance of transnational education programmes, whereby the overseas provider or centre is incorporated into the institutional review process for the Irish based provider and the QA processes and procedures for Irish based programmes apply to those in transnational settings. The Board also noted that the introduction of the International Education Mark (IEM) will add another dimension to this as the Mark will include Irish programmes taught by Irish providers overseas.

The Board acknowledged that it was useful to get an understanding of where international engagement fits within QQI's remit and its work and the benefits which it provides to the organisation. The Board noted that in the period following the Covid-19 pandemic, a significant number of international meetings, particularly one-day meetings, have moved to online provision so the amount of time away from the office for attending staff members is reduced compared to the past. The Board noted that a number of staff members have taken part in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) annual Leadership Development programme.

## **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 20 February 2024 were **confirmed** and signed.

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

The Board **approved** the **Note of the Meeting of 20 February 2024** 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 the Funding Model submission was still under consideration by DFHERIS.

## 6. CEO REPORT

The Board noted the **CEO Report**.

### 6.1. CEO Report

In addition to the CEO Report circulated, the Chief Executive provided Members with a verbal update on a number of recent activities. The Board noted that there is currently one Apprenticeship programme progressing through the validation process.

The Board noted that the final batch of approx. 20 providers are proceeding through the last stages of the re-engagement process. There had been two new initial access applications approved, one new HE and one new FE provider. The Executive undertook to circulate links for a number of recent publications.

The Board noted that the Executive had held its first Quality Dialogue Meeting (QDM) with Teagasc. The cycle of QDMs with the 16 ETBs had been completed in Quarter 2 and the Executive was now commencing the latest round of biennial QDMs with the previously established Universities and some other HE providers.

The Cinnte Review of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), which is the final review of the previously established providers, has been completed. It was noted that reviews of the remaining Technological Universities (TUs) were now underway.

The Board noted that this is the first year that in person QDMs with the University sector will take place since 2019. The round of meetings held in 2021 took place online due to Covid-19.

The QDMs take place every two years with Annual Quality Reports (AQRs) submitted each year. The Executive confirmed that the AQRs and the notes of the QDMs form a repository from which the Executive can monitor a situation. The Board noted the Executive's assertion that issues can arise, it's ensuring that the issues are flagged and properly notified as soon as possible, and the correct action(s) taken to resolve the issue, that is key to the appropriate resolution. The Executive can work with a provider once it is aware that there is a situation.

The Executive clarified in relation to a query on the number of providers who did not opt to undergo the re-engagement process with QQI, that many that did not partake were not running programmes at the time or opted to form consortiums with other smaller providers or joined with an Education and Training Board (ETB). The Board recognised that capacity is needed in order to operate as a successful provider.

## **7. ENGAGEMENT WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE (DFHERIS)**

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

### **7.1. Performance Delivery Agreement 2024**

The Board noted an update on the Quarter 1 PDA Review Meeting which took place on 20 March and was attended by the Assistant Secretary and members of the Higher Education – Governance and Quality Section and the Executive Management Team (EMT) from QQI. The Board noted that the Section's new Principal Officer attended the meeting. The Board noted that the Executive had taken the opportunity to again stress with the Department, the importance of agreeing a Funding Model and outlined the options available to the organisation should QQI continue to not have sufficient funding. These solutions were to complete or progress less work and/or fewer initiatives, an increase to the State Grant allocation or an increase in fees. The Executive confirmed that it had highlighted the difficulties in the areas of increased ICT and pensions costs.

The Board noted that the Department's focus remains on the ALP-related fees and charges and the associated Ministerial Regulations rather than the funding model. It was noted that the Executive reminded the Department that the current State Grant allocation is less than that of

the 2014 allocation. It was noted that during a recent meeting with Department staff (spanning many of the Department's sections), held as part of the QQI Strategy Development process, the added-value work on system-wide analysis and insights carried out by the organisation was confirmed as being particularly beneficial to the Department. This work is dependent on adequate funding being in place. The Board noted that the PDA Review meeting had been a useful opportunity to reiterate the organisation's key concerns in this area.

It was also noted that the Executive has completed all the work that it can up to this point and significant delays may impact on completed procurement processes, contracts and associated pricing.

The Board noted that DFHERIS and the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform (DPENDER) met on 17 April to consider the ALP fees and charges proposal. The Board noted that the remainder of the draft Ministerial Regulations (with the exception of those relating to the Listed Awarding Bodies (LABs)) were submitted to the Department's legal advisor on 19 April. The Executive was hopeful that the process was nearing the point where the drafts would be presented to the Minister for consideration without incurring any delays or any further issues arising.

The Executive confirmed that it had seen considerable progress on the ALP development process in recent weeks and was hopeful that the end of the process was near.

The Board noted, following a query from a Board Member, that work on the next Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) was ongoing.

## **8. GOVERNANCE**

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

### **8.1. Annual Review of Reserved Functions**

The Board noted the Reserved Functions of the Board. The Board noted that, as the various ALP processes had not yet come onstream, the expected amendments to the document had

not yet materialised. It was noted that the Executive expects to present an amended version of the Reserved Functions to the Board for consideration at a meeting later this year.

## 8.2. Committee Members/Appointments

The Board **approved** the following appointments to Committees:

- Prof. Eithne Guilfoyle and Caty Duykaerts to the Policies and Standards Committee (PSC) and
- Karen Jones to the Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee (PAOC).

The Board also **approved** a one meeting extension to the membership of PSC member, Prof. Hannah McGee.

The Board **approved** the following reappointments to the Audit and Risk Committee:

- Walter Johnson and
- Pearl Cunningham.

These appointments were for a further three-year term.

The Board noted the appointment of Marie Mattimoe, Senior Manager, QQI Partnerships Division to the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC) with effect from 12 June 2024.

## 9. **STRATEGIC PLANNING**

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

### 9.1. Corporate Plan 2024

The Board noted the progress report covering Quarter 1 of the Corporate Plan for 2024. The Board noted that of the seven actions listed for completion in the first quarter, three had been completed, one had been put on hold while awaiting the resolution of an external dependency and three had been slightly delayed. The latter are expected to be completed within the coming weeks.

### 9.2. Annual Report 2023

The Board noted the initial draft Annual Report for 2023. Following a brief discussion and due to its late presentation to Members, the Board noted the draft document as the starting point for further work prior to the presentation of the final draft report to the Board for approval at its next meeting scheduled for 14 June. The Board noted that the final report is due for submission to the Minister by 30 June.

### 9.3. Statement of Strategy 2025-2027

The Board noted an update on the development of the next QQI Statement of Strategy.

The Board noted that a workshop for the Management Group had taken place on 13 March and the draft Statement had been developed and reviewed by the EMT. A copy of the initial draft Statement of Strategy 2025-2027 had been circulated to Members in early April and was recirculated with the documents for this meeting.

The Board noted that a number of consultation meetings with key stakeholders had taken place in the period since the February Board Meeting including one with DFHERIS. Seven Principal Officers and an Assistant Secretary from Sections across the Department had been in attendance.

The Board discussed the draft Statement of Strategy at length and confirmed that it was satisfied with the substance and themes of the text in the main but considered that further work was required around the structure beneath the priorities, the presentation and refining some of the language used.

The Executive responded to queries raised by the Board and provided clarification where needed. The Board noted that it will be necessary to carry some elements of the current strategy through to the 2025-2027 version. This is due to the Executive being unable to complete its work in a small number of areas, largely as a result of external dependencies which were outside the Executive's control.



The Board suggested that the Executive should be more ambitious in the language used. The Board confirmed that they were happy with the strategic direction of the statement and provided some helpful feedback to finesse the Strategy.

The Board noted that, similar to all public bodies, QQI's functions are largely laid down in statute and are guided by legislation. That, therefore, naturally limits the scope of the statement of strategy. The Board, together with the Executive, undertook to arrive at a strategy which is forward-looking and appropriately ambitious while also recognising the constraints and statutory responsibilities of the organisation.

Board Members undertook to forward any further feedback on the draft Statement of Strategy to the Executive by close of business on 29 April.

The Board **approved** the current draft Statement on the basis that further work will be carried out ahead of presentation of a final draft to the Board for consideration at its meeting scheduled for 14 June.

## **10. BOARD MEETS WITHOUT THE EXECUTIVE PRESENT**

Following the discussion, the Chairperson provided the Executive with a verbal update on a number of the matters raised during the closed session:

- It was proposed that a short discussion without the Executive present would be included in the agenda of each Board Meeting.
- It was requested that Board papers be provided a clear seven days in advance of the meeting in one mailing to facilitate members allocating time to preparation for meetings.

## **11. COMPREHENSIVE POLICY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME**

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

### 11.1 Procedures for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes based on the European Approach

The Board noted the background to the development of the procedures which have been drafted based on the European Approval for Quality Assurance of Joint Programme guidelines approved by the Ministers of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2015. The Board noted that, under these guidelines, where a partnership or consortia of institutions in the EHEA

are co-operating on a joint programme and one of the institutions is not self-accrediting, the European Approach requires that an EQAR registered QA agency be assigned to conduct the external QA of the joint programme using the European Approach as a single QA procedure. As QQI had received a number of requests relating to joint programmes which fell under this category, it developed the said procedures to cover such applications.

The Board noted that the Panel Reports arising from the process will be considered by QQI's Approvals and Review Committee (ARC) prior to the follow up validation report relating to the Joint Programme being considered by the Academic Councils of the Providers or Institutions involved.

The Board **approved** the Procedures for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes based on the European Approach. It was also noted that the Executive expects that there will be a limited number of providers availing of this process.

## **12. BUDGET AND FINANCE**

The Board noted the documents relating to **Budget and Finance**.

### 12.1. Management Accounts

The Board noted the Management Accounts for the two-months to 29 February 2024. The Board noted the Senior Manager, Finance and Procurement's opinion that there was no cause for concern at the current time. It was noted that there was an increase in the Certification figures for February and the April Certification period had just closed and those figures were yet to be confirmed.

### 12.2. Financial Policies and Procedures

The Board noted the draft revised Financial Policies and Procedures which were updated on foot of recommendations from the Review of the System of Internal Controls (SIC) and various changes to practices within the Finance Unit over the last number of years. The Board noted that the revised version had been considered by the Audit and Risk Committee at its meeting on 11 March and the Committee's suggestions and feedback had been incorporated into the document.

The Board **approved** the revised Financial Policies and Procedures.

#### 12.3. Procurement Procedures

The Board noted the Procurement Procedures had been revised to reflect changes in the tendering limits prescribed. The Board **approved** the revised Procurement Procedures.

#### 12.4. Tender

The Board noted the information on the tender process for the Due Diligence examination of English Language Education (ELE) providers. The Board noted that a number of submissions were received on foot of the RFT published following consultation with the Office of Government Procurement (OGP) on its framework of companies who carry out due diligence and financial examinations of businesses. These applications were then screened by the evaluation panel. The Board noted that, following its discussions with the OGP, the Executive decided to allocate the work into two batches of 30 due diligence applications in the first instance and as a result, the panel recommended two companies to carry out the assessments. The Board **approved** the Executive to proceed to finalise the appointments with the OGP and appoint the two companies specified in the document provided, subject to clarifications and contract. The Board noted that there was the option to appoint a third assessor should the volume of business require it.

### 13. **AUDIT AND RISK**

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

The Board noted a verbal report of the Audit and Risk Committee meeting held on 11 March 2024 and of the business which the Committee considered. The Board noted that while the Committee had considered the revised Anti-Fraud and Corruption Policy, the draft was undergoing further work following the Members' feedback before it will be reconsidered at the next Committee meeting. It will likely be presented to the Board for its consideration at its next meeting scheduled for 14 June.

#### 13.1 Annual Report 2023

The Board **approved** the Annual Report of the Audit and Risk Committee for 2023.

### 13.2 Internal Audit Reports

The Board noted that two of the Internal Audit Reports listed had been held over from consideration at the February Board Meeting due to the volume of material on the agenda for that meeting.

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

- Tertiary Education and Monitoring,
- Value for Money (Mobile Phones) and
- Official Languages Act 2003-2021.

### 13.3 Tender

The Board noted an update on the tender process for the appointment of out-sourced internal auditors. The Board **approved** the appointment of the successful applicant for the provision of out-sourced internal audit services (for a three-year period with the option to renew for a further two 12-month periods), subject to contract.

### 13.4 ICT Security Update

The Board noted an update on ICT security. It was noted that the Executive continues to closely monitor the organisation's ICT security requirements. Testing and training are ongoing with mandatory training for all staff scheduled to take place again in Quarter 2, 2024.

### 13.5 Minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee

The Board noted the Minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee Meeting held on 30 January 2024.

## 14. ITEMS FOR NOTING

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

### 14.1 Focus on the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC)

The Board noted the verbal update provided by the Chairperson of the Committee. The Board noted that the Committee Members are members of the Executive who do not work in the Quality Assurance division of the QQI Awards Directorate and membership offers an opportunity for staff to learn about the organisation and its processes. The Board noted the

initiative whereby a member of the Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee (PAOC) attends a PAEC meeting as an observer. The Executive confirmed that this continues to be a very beneficial measure for both committees. The Board also noted input from the Chairperson of the PAOC, who had attended a recent PAEC meeting as an observer. The Chairperson confirmed that all items were discussed in detail and was of the opinion that the Board can take comfort from the operation of the Committee and the measures which are in place. Similar views were previously expressed by the PAOC Members who had attended on earlier occasions. The Board noted that of the six PAEC meetings held in 2023, three had refusals referred to the PAOC for consideration and three had none. The Board noted, to date, that there had been no appeals relating to validation decisions and one appeal of a re-engagement decision.

#### 14.2 Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee (PAOC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee held on 17 July 2023.

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

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Approvals and Reviews Committee held on 6 December 2023.

#### 14.4 Programmes and Awards Executive Committee

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee held on 7 February 2024.

#### 14.5 Rolling Board Agenda 2024

The Board noted an update on the Rolling Board Agenda for 2024.

### 15 **ORGANISATION AND HUMAN RESOURCES**

The Board noted a verbal update on **Organisation and Human Resources** provided by the Senior Manager, Human and Physical Resources.

#### 15.1 Human Resources

The Board noted an update on recent new appointments.

The Board noted that, following its renewal of the IBEC Keepwell Mark in late 2023, QQI had been nominated for a best in class award at the IBEC Keepwell Mark Awards with the ceremony taking place on 25 April. IBEC had also confirmed QQI's continued inclusion in the 'Top 100 Companies leading in Wellbeing' list.

#### 15.2 Organisational Resources

The Board noted that the refit of meeting rooms in the 26/27 Denzille Lane building was nearing completion with two large meeting rooms available in addition to two additional smaller meeting rooms/spaces also coming online.

The Board noted that refurbishment work would shortly be commencing in the 25 Denzille Lane building.

The Board also noted an update on the ongoing negotiations for the renewal of the lease of 26/27 Denzille Lane.

### 16 **ENQA REVIEW**

The Board noted a verbal update on the **ENQA Review**.

The Board noted that the Review Team's site visit had taken place from 21-23 February. A draft Review Report had been prepared and was submitted by the Panel to the ENQA Secretariat at the end of March.

The Executive confirmed that it had received the draft report on 2 April and had an opportunity to correct any factual inaccuracies up until 16 April.

The Board noted that the next stage of the Review process would then be the sign off of the final report by the Review Team and submission of same to the ENQA Secretariat in May. The report will be presented to the ENQA Board in June for its consideration. The ENQA Board's decision and the final report will also be available for QQI to submit to the EQAR Register Committee for evaluation of renewal of registration on the Register.

## **17 COMMUNICATIONS**

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

### **17.1. Media Mentions**

The Board noted media mentions covering the period 22 February to 11 April 2024. The Board also noted a report on QQI's Social Media statistics covering the period 24 January to 27 March 2024.

## **18 DRAFT BOARD AGENDA**

The Board noted the **Draft June 2024 Board Agenda**.

Following the earlier discussion, the Executive undertook to add the additional session of the Board meeting without the Executive present to the June agenda and the Board noted that revised versions of both the Statement of Strategy 2025-2027 and the Annual Report for 2023 will be presented to the Board for its consideration and approval at this meeting.

## **19 NEXT MEETING**

The Board noted the next meeting would take place on Friday, 14 June 2024.

## **20 ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

There was no other business.

The Chairperson thanked everyone for their participation and contributions.

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