

Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Note of the seventy third Meeting of the Authority (The Board) which took place on Friday, 14 June 2024 at 10:30 a.m. in the Boardroom, QQI Offices, 26/27 Denzille Lane, Dublin 2.

Present:

- Prof. Irene Sheridan (Chair)
- Dr. Pádraig Walsh (Chief Executive)
- Ms. Cliona Curley (Secretary)
- Ms. Marianne Doyle
- Dr. Sean Duignan
- Dr. Sharon Feeney
- Mr. Kevin McStravock
- Ms. Anne Naughton
- Ms. Maria Ward

Apologies:

- Mr. Blake Hodkinson
- Mr. Bryan O'Mahony

In attendance:

- Ms. Caitríona Lawless (Recording Secretary)
- Dr. Fiona Maloney (Item 1)
- Dr. Anna Murphy (Items 7 and 11)

INTRODUCTION

The Chairperson welcomed Members to the meeting.

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

1. PRESENTATION BY DR. FIONA MALONEY, NATIONAL TERTIARY OFFICE (NTO)

Following an invitation from the Board, Dr. Fiona Maloney, Director of the National Tertiary Office, delivered a presentation to the Board. The Board noted that the NTO had worked closely with QQI since its establishment on 6 December 2022 following a Government of Ireland announcement.

The presentation was followed by a questions and answers session. Among the topics touched on during the discussion was the expansion of NTO's suite of programmes to be delivered during its second year of operation, the design process for the programmes delivered to date and the transition of learners into the higher education (HE) environment as well as the inclusion and participation of professional bodies in the process.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Board, thanked Dr. Maloney for her attendance and contribution to the meeting.

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 22 April 2024 were **confirmed** and signed.

The Board noted that there was a possibility that an additional Board Meeting may need to be scheduled over the summer period and the matter would be discussed further later in the agenda.

4. NOTE OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETING

The Board **approved** the **Note of the Meeting of 22 April 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 also noted a verbal update on a number of actions provided by the Chief Executive. It was noted that the Chief Executive had met with Dr. Alan Wall, the Chief Executive of the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Dr. Wall had accepted an invitation to present to the QQI Board at its meeting scheduled for 27 September, as required under the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the two agencies. The Board noted that the Executive teams of the two agencies are planning to meet and review the next draft MoU prior to September. A date is currently being sought.

The Chief Executive also provided an update on a matter which had been previously discussed at the April Board Meeting.

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 the analysis of variation in honours Bachelor's degree classifications 2012-2022 was progressing. The Executive was working with the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and was able to access a broader range of data as a result. While acknowledging that the process had taken a significant amount of time to date, the Executive confirmed that it expects progress to have been made by Autumn.

The Board noted that the re-engagement process was drawing to a close with one final provider awaiting consideration. The Board took the opportunity to compliment staff on the significant amount of work completed in closing out this process.

The Board noted that the current phase of QDMs is running until the end of June. Cinnte review visits to two Technological Universities (TUs) had been completed, Munster Technological University in March and Technological University of the Shannon in April. The final reports for these reviews are expected shortly. The Board also noted that the Cinnte review of the first private HE provider was commencing in June with the three remaining visits of institutions participating in round one taking place later in the year.

The Board noted that QQI had co-hosted the 5th Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) Biennale in Kilkenny in early May. It was the first time the event had been held in Ireland and it saw over 300 delegates from 31 countries participate.

The Board noted that visits to QQI from delegates from overseas peer agencies and Departments and Ministries were continuing with interest most recently expressed by agencies in Estonia and the Czech Republic. The Board also noted that the Chief Executive had been one

of the Irish representatives at the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) Ministerial Meeting held in Tirana at the end of May.

7. STRATEGIC PLANNING

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

7.1. Corporate Plan 2024

The Board noted the progress report covering Quarters 1-2 of the Corporate Plan for 2024. The Board noted that there are already some signs of delays in the timelines for actions related to the Amended Legislation Programme (ALP) process. There are also a number of items whose timelines are being revisited in the context of the implications of a new Statement of Strategy and any impacts which may arise from that. The Board noted that work is progressing well otherwise outside of those dependencies.

7.2. Annual Report 2023

The Board noted the revised draft Annual Report for 2023, which had been amended following feedback received from Members at and after the April Board Meeting.

The Board **approved** the Annual Report 2023 for submission to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science by 30 June 2024 as required by the 2012 Act.

7.3. Statement of Strategy 2025-2027

The Board noted a draft Statement of Strategy revised on foot of the feedback received from the Board at its April meeting. The Executive acknowledged that the previous discussion had been very positive and helpful in progressing the Statement to this point. The Executive provided an update on the measures taken since the April Meeting. On foot of the Board's feedback, the Executive undertook to review one key performance indicator (KPI) prior to finalising the draft. The Board noted the Executive's explanation that fewer KPIs had been listed in this Statement compared to previous versions following a recommendation arising from an Internal Audit review of Strategy Implementation carried out in 2023. It was noted that income and finances will, of course, impact on the potential to delivery any Strategy.

The Chairperson and the Board expressed their appreciation of the significant amount of work and the engagement of staff and their willingness to listen to and incorporate the Board's feedback into the Strategy.

The Board **approved** the draft Statement of Strategy for submission to the Department for consideration and observations of the Minister(s) subject to review of one KPI. It was noted that the Department was likely to present the Statement to the Minister of State in DFHERIS and the Minister for Education for their observations in addition to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The Ministers have a 12-week period within which to provide their observations. The Board noted that the final draft Statement following the consideration by the Minister(s) and incorporation of any observations will be presented to the Board for its consideration at its September meeting.

The Chief Executive expressed his thanks to the Strategy Team and all staff for their participation in the development process. The process and its timing had also provided new staff with an opportunity to learn more about the organisation. The Board confirmed its gratitude for all the work completed to date.

8. BUDGET AND FINANCE

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

8.1. Management Accounts

The Board noted the Management Accounts for the four-months to 30 April 2024. The Board noted that there was no cause for concern currently. The Executive provided an update on pensions.

The Executive responded to a Member's query relating to Ministerial approval of HEI Relationship Fees.

8.2. ICT Contract Resources

The Board noted the proposals outlined and **approved**:

- the procurement of contracts for ICT contract resources for six months (July-December 2024), as outlined in the proposal submitted, in accordance with the QQI Purchasing and Procurement Policy and subject to contract,
- the purchase of hosting services for one year in MS Azure for the period July 2024-June 2025 in accordance with the QQI Purchasing and Procurement Policy, subject to contract and as outlined in the proposal submitted and
- the extension of the current ICT Support contract for 2025 by 12 months until March 2026, as per contract terms.

8.3. Taxation of Panel Members

The Board noted an update provided following a recent meeting between the Executive and the Revenue Commissioners. The Executive provided background to the matter and updated the Board on the details of the discussion with Revenue and the possible impacts on the organisation in terms of finances and the future recruitment of panel members. The Board also noted that this determination was not isolated to just QQI.

The Board noted that the Executive was preparing an explanatory memorandum for staff to provide to Panel Members to inform them of the new arrangements. It was noted that the matter had been flagged with the Department. The Board briefly discussed the wider implications of the decision.

8.4. Budget 2025

The Board noted an outline draft Budget for the year ended 31 December 2025. The Board noted that the Executive had prepared financial budget projections for 2024-2027. The forecast has been communicated to the Department. The Board noted that following preparation of the multi-year paper, the Director of Corporate Services and the Senior Manager, Finance and Procurement met with Department officials including the Principal Officer of the Higher Education Governance and Quality Unit. It was noted that as part of its submission, the Executive was requesting an increase to its grant allocation. The meeting with the Department provided the officials with an opportunity to scrutinise and clarify the figures presented.

The Executive was cognisant of the fact that it may not receive an answer to the funding question by the start of 2025.

The Board noted that the Executive had completed and returned an estimates template in advance of the meeting and provided further information to the Department as requested. The Board noted that should there be an increase in the Vote allocation, it does not mean that all monies would be drawn down, if not required.

The Board confirmed that it was assured by the information provided by the Executive, that the Department have been fully briefed on the current issues and that the Executive continues to update the Department on the evolving situation. The Board also confirmed its appreciation of the clarity of the information provided.

9. GOVERNANCE

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

9.1. Committee Members/Appointments

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

- Paula Hodson to the Programmes and Awards Oversight Committee (PAOC).

The Board noted an extension to the membership term of the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee of Órla Barry by two years to 13 July 2026.

9.2. Self-assessment evaluation of Board performance

The Board noted that the Executive had received nine responses to the Board performance survey. The Chairperson acknowledged that it was a largely positive evaluation and welcomed the fact that members were engaged and had provided good commentary. There were some areas highlighted for further discussion.

Following its discussion, the Board noted that the Board Secretary undertook to provide additional information which had been requested.

The Board acknowledged the role that the Chairperson has played during the Board's term to date.

9.3. Communications to the Board

Following its discussion, the Board requested that, in relation to topics or matters which may generate potential media interest, Board Members should be given advance notice where the matter may have a substantive reputational risk or where there is a possibility that Members may be contacted about said issue. It was agreed that there is a need to have a process of informing Board Members and this and the timing of same should be at the discretion of the Executive in consultation with the Senior Communications Manager. The Executive clarified the process that Members should take if approached directly by the public regarding QQI matters and on the spokesperson for the organisation.

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

The Board considered the recent self-assessment evaluation of Board performance. Other matters discussed included the PMDS review of the Chief Executive, the development of the Statement of Strategy and the overall financial position of the organisation.

11. **AUDIT AND RISK**

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

The Board noted a verbal report of the Audit and Risk Committee meeting held on 24 May 2024 and an overview of the business which the Committee considered. The Board noted that the audit of the Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2023 was underway. It was also noted that work is continuing on the revised Anti-Fraud and Corruption Policy, following further consideration and feedback from the Audit and Risk Committee Members. It is expected that the final version of the revised policy will be presented to the Board for consideration at its September Meeting.

11.1 Risk Management

The Board noted the Corporate Risk Register for Quarter 1, 2024. The Executive raised and discussed with the Board a suggestion proposed by the Audit and Risk Committee during its consideration of the Risk Register.

The Board noted the removal of a risk following its closure on the Register. It was also noted that ALP fees and charges had been prioritised in the engagement on the Funding Model by the Department.

The Board **approved** the Risk Register as at Quarter 1, 2024 and noted that the Chief Risk Officer intends to review the Register against the new Statement of Strategy once approved and in place.

Following its consideration of the Register, the Board discussed the Audit and Risk Committee's suggestion referred to above and agreed with the Chairperson's decision to pause any further action on the suggestion for the moment while acknowledging recent and upcoming events and developments. The Board took the recommendation under advisement and will revisit it in due course.

11.2 Internal Audits 2024

The Board noted that, as approved at its April meeting, an outsourced Internal Audit partner has been appointed for the organisation for an initial three-year period. The Board noted that the account managers had met with the Audit and Risk Committee and examined the schedule of internal audits which had been completed recently and had produced an initial schedule of internal audits for the remainder of this year. The Board noted that the schedule will be reviewed again once the auditors have been in situ for a period of time and familiarised themselves with the workings of the organisation. The Board noted that currently the outsourced IA partner was going to prioritise audits in the areas of the 2019 Qualifications (Amendment) Act, health, safety and environment at work and Corporate Governance which would include the external review of the Board and Committee performance. The Board **approved** the proposed Internal Audit schedule for 2024.

11.3 Internal Audit Report

The Board noted the internal audit report on the Review of Internal Controls for the Top Four Ranked Risks. The Board noted that the necessary mitigations and controls are in place. It was noted that there was now a mature Risk Register in place after several years of work focused on its revision.

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

- Review of Internal Controls for Top Four Ranked Risks.

The Board also noted status updates on recommendations arising from previous Internal Audit Reports. The Executive was working to document key processes across all areas. The Board also noted that the organisation was currently undergoing a digital clean-up month.

11.4 Minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee

The Board noted the Minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee Meeting held on 11 March 2024.

12. ORGANISATION AND HUMAN RESOURCES

The Board noted a verbal update on **Organisation and Human Resources** provided by the Director of Corporate Services.

12.1 Human Resources

The Board noted that there had been no further developments in recruitment. The latest appointee had commenced employment and there were no further vacancies at the moment. The Board noted that some panels remain in place if required.

12.2 Organisational Resources

The Board noted that in relation to the lease of 26/27 Denzille Lane, the negotiation process is still ongoing.

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

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

13.1. Performance Delivery Agreement 2024 and Oversight Agreement 2024-2026

The Board noted the Performance Delivery Agreement (PDA) 2024 and the Oversight Agreement 2024-2026 which had been agreed and signed by QQI and DFHERIS. Copies of the agreements were provided for the Board's information.

The Board noted that the Quarter 2 PDA Review Meeting had been scheduled for 26 June between the Secretary General and the Assistant Secretary of the Higher Education Policy Division within the Department and the Chairperson and Chief Executive from QQI. The Board noted that the topics likely to be discussed during the meeting include QQI's new Statement of Strategy, the establishment of the IEM process and funding.

13.2 Funding Model

The Board noted a verbal update on the Funding Model. It was noted that an update had been provided earlier in the meeting on the engagement with the Department on the Estimates process for 2025.

13.3 Amended Legislation Programme

The Board noted a verbal update on ALP developments. The Board noted that an update on the status of the Ministerial Regulations for the IEM, Due Diligence and PEL and the associated fees and charges had been received from the Department the previous evening and the Executive outlined the details.

As the new ALP fees will require Board consideration and approval, a meeting during the summer period will need to be scheduled as these items will require approval in advance of the September launch. The Executive proposed to hold a virtual Board Meeting in the coming months once it is in receipt of the Ministerial Regulations and the various approvals. The Executive will endeavour to give Members as much notice as possible in advance of the meeting.

14. ITEMS FOR NOTING

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

14.1 Focus on the Policies and Standards Committee (PSC)

The Board noted the verbal update provided by the Chairperson of the Committee. The Board noted that the Committee had met twice since this Board had commenced its membership term. The next meeting of the PSC was scheduled for 24 June. The Board noted a brief update on some recent and upcoming activities including work on a Policy Development Framework.

14.2 Policies and Standards Committee (PSC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Policies and Standards Committee held on 27 November 2023.

14.3 Programmes and Awards Executive Committee

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee held on 25 April 2024.

14.4 Rolling Board Agenda 2024

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

15. **REVIEWS**

The Board noted documents relating to **Reviews**.

The Board noted the Cinnte Review Report for the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland University of Medicine and Health Science (RCSI).

16. **ENQA REVIEW**

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

The Board noted that the draft Panel Report had been presented to the ENQA Agency Review Committee on 31 May and the Executive was awaiting the publication of the final report at which point it would be circulated to Board Members. The Executive also reiterated that once the final report was available, it would be submitted to the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) for consideration for QQI's continued inclusion on the EQAR Register. The Executive expects that its submission would be considered at either the July or the October meeting of the EQAR Committee.

The Board noted that the recent European Higher Education Area (EHEA) Ministerial Meeting in Tirana had called for revised European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) by 2026. Previous versions of the ESG dated from 2005 and 2015. The Board noted that any revised Guidelines will inform any successor to the current Cinnte Review process.

17 COMMUNICATIONS

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

17.1. Media Mentions

The Board noted media mentions covering the period 25 April to 29 May 2024. The Board also noted a report on QQI's Social Media statistics covering the period 28 March to 23 May 2024.

18 DRAFT BOARD AGENDA

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

The Board noted that it was likely that a number of the items currently listed on the draft agenda may move for consideration at the proposed virtual meeting dealing with matters relating to the new ALP functions to be arranged over the summer period.

There was a brief discussion on Board training needs which will feature at a later meeting following consideration by the Executive.

19 NEXT MEETING

The Board noted the next scheduled meeting would take place on Friday, 27 September 2024.

Members would be advised as soon as possible in relation to a date for a virtual meeting over the summer period.

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.