Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

Statement of Strategy 2022-24

Foreword

This Statement of Strategy from Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) builds on the progress achieved by the organisation, since its establishment in 2012, in providing confidence among learners and employers in the quality of further and higher education and training in Ireland.

The period 2022-2024, encompassed in this strategy statement, will be a challenging one for the organisation in several respects. As Ireland and the rest of the world continues to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, QQI will implement the expanded role and remit afforded to the organisation by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Amendment) Act 2019 in a number of areas - offering greater choice for learners through regulating access for listed awarding bodies to the National Framework of Qualifications, and providing greater protection to learners through our monitoring of academic integrity and the establishment of the statutory learner protection fund. International students will have greater confidence as QQI awards the International Education Mark to qualifying English language and higher education providers.

Over the course of the three-year period covered by the strategy, we will seek to add more value to the further and higher education and training sectors, by informing policy formulation, by analysing the outputs of our quality and qualification processes and by refining and enhancing our service offering to providers in a sustainable way. We will provide better information to learners on the opportunities and pathways available to them to access recognised and quality assured qualifications in a more connected and integrated tertiary education system.

This statement has been prepared following consultation with our extensive set of stakeholders. We would like to express our sincere appreciation to them and to our staff for their contributions to its development and we look forward to working cohesively with our many partners towards the successful execution of this strategy.

Ms. Joanne Harmon
Chairperson

Dr. Padraig Walsh
Chief Executive

Our Vision

We are committed to a vision of Ireland that offers diverse high-quality further and higher education opportunities, enabling learners to reach their full potential through achieving qualifications that are widely valued nationally and internationally.

Our Mission

We sustain public confidence in the quality, integrity and reputation of Ireland's further and higher education providers and provide authoritative information on the diverse range of qualifications included in the National Framework of Qualifications.

Our Values

Our approach to our own work and how we work with our partners is governed by clear values.

We believe we have a shared responsibility with others to ensure confidence in and continuous improvement of the quality of education and training. We believe that the attainment of our priorities and objectives is best pursued in a **consultative, collaborative** and **inclusive** manner with our diverse set of partners and providers. We value and respect **partnership** for mutual benefit.

We are committed to working with **objectivity, transparency** and **sustainability.** This underpins our decision-making and our policies, procedures and activities. These are evidence-based, informed by national and international good practice, **authoritative** and conducted with **integrity** in a manner which is openly transparent and engenders **trust.**

We are committed to making a difference to our partners, providers and our people. We value information, insight and impact – the successful pursuit of goals and objectives which culminate in impacting positively, confidently and substantively on our operating environment.

We are a **learning** organisation. We are committed to **innovation** and **excellence.**

Who we are and what we do

The Qualifications System

- We maintain the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) as a system relating different qualification levels to each other
- We maintain the Irish Register of Qualifications as a comprehensive database of all qualifications included in the NFQ
- We recognise awarding bodies and include their qualifications in the NFQ
- We monitor providers to ensure they offer learners access, transfer and progression opportunities
- We advise on the recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland and of Irish qualifications abroad

QQI Awards

- We set standards for QQI awards (qualifications)
- We assess the fitness of providers to offer QQI awards
- We validate programmes of education and training leading to QQI awards
- We award qualifications and issue certificates
- We maintain the statutory learner protection fund for learners enrolled in private education and training providers

Quality Assurance of Education and Training

- We issue quality assurance guidelines
- We approve providers' quality assurance procedures
- We monitor and review providers
- We promote awareness and maintenance of academic integrity
- We award the International Education Mark to higher education and English language education providers

Engagement, Insights and Knowledge Sharing

- We consult, inform and collaborate with national and international stakeholders
- We conduct research and report on quality and qualifications in the tertiary education system
- We consult with learners and learner groups and involve them in carrying out our core functions
- We develop enhancement initiatives and host events to learn from and share best practice with stakeholders

Introduction and Context

QQI operates in a complex environment, relied upon and influenced by a wide range of institutions and stakeholders. As a statutory body, our core functions and competencies are defined in law, yet our priorities and deployment of resources are subject to periodic re-evaluation in light of conditions in the environment. This is QQI's fourth statement of strategy. It articulates our priorities for the period 2022-2024. This section highlights the environmental factors that have been particularly influential in its development.

A PROMISE OF GREATER COHERENCE

The Government formed in June 2020 included for the first time a Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. QQI falls under the aegis of this new department. The Department's Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 forms the key public policy context for our own strategy. QQI shares in the mission of the Department, as outlined in its strategy, to:

develop Ireland's further and higher education and research systems to support people in reaching their full potential and to create value, prosperity, resilience and a cohesive, sustainable and vibrant society.

Here, we set out how we will contribute to the agenda of shaping Ireland as an island of innovation, talent, international leadership, inclusion and engagement.

The overarching message and ambition from the Government's action in establishing the Department is its scope. Spanning further and higher education, and including research, its remit maps directly onto that of QQI. Over the past decade, QQI has developed an integrated approach to quality and qualifications in the tertiary system in all its diversity – further and higher, education and training, teaching and research, public and private. A similar integration of different parts of the tertiary system is now identified as a key challenge at national policy level. The national objective is to promote greater coherence and mobility between tertiary sub-systems that have developed along different institutional lines, while maintaining the diversity of pathways along which learners can progress and develop their individual talents. In different ways, this challenge is addressed through the National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-24, the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021 – 2025, and the new law proposed for the Higher Education Authority (HEA), each of which also brings new tasks and emphases for QQI.

Central to QQI's contribution to the integration of the tertiary system is our stewardship of the qualifications system. In 2020, we refreshed the NFQ, updated its referencing to the European qualifications frameworks, and published a consultative green paper on the qualifications system. These steps lay the groundwork for further initiatives to modernise and integrate the system. International trends and domestic stakeholders are calling for the digitalisation of qualifications, more micro-credentials, and the recognition of both previously credentialed learning and non-formal and informal learning.

A key goal in the Department's strategy is to nurture the talent of everyone, facilitating their unique journey through lifelong learning. The Government's Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy 10-Year Strategy for Ireland outlines supports for some key steps on this journey, as will the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2022-26 which is under consultation in 2021. Throughout the development of our strategy, we have reflected on the importance of incorporating the goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development into our work and processes, in particular the goal of quality education which aims to ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning. We support this goal through our work on infrastructural elements such as the NFQ, qualifications pathways and the quality assurance of adult education providers and programmes. We offer QQI Awards that are relevant to learner needs and support providers in developing programmes and courses that learners and employers desire, including apprenticeships, skills and work-based learning. We are opening the NFQ to a wider range of qualifications. We also support individual learners and their families through providing information to them directly, for example, through the national learners' database, Qualifax, and the NARIC recognition database.

Our further and higher education sectors are changing, adopting new, dynamic, and complementary roles nationally and regionally. Through our quality assurance, enhancement and review activities with providers, QQI plays an important role in providing transparency, building confidence and supporting the pursuit of excellence within education and training providers. The inaugural reviews of education and training boards and of technological universities, demonstrating how quality is embedded across complex entities, are examples of how we can bring fresh perspectives from home and abroad to assure the quality of education and training delivered by providers.

The stated national ambition to join up policy for educational and research missions is echoed in QQI's role in the external quality assurance of universities as research institutions as well as locations of teaching and learning. This is accomplished through, for example, monitoring the embedding of the *National Framework for Doctoral Education* and the statutory *Quality Assurance Guidelines for Research Degree Programmes* as part of our institutional review process. We also continue to work with the Department, the HEA, other agencies and the higher education institutions to articulate national expectations for quality in responsible research and innovation.

A TURBULENT PERIOD WITH CONSEQUENCES
The COVID-19 pandemic has massively disrupted our lives and our education system since 2020. QQI's close contact with tertiary system providers has already led to our direct involvement in work to assess the impact on teaching and learning for current learners and their providers. The longer-term effects of the pandemic will reverberate in the coming years. In Ireland, as around the world, experts and policy makers are urgently trying to observe and predict what these effects will be. We will continue to actively follow these developments.

Our review of the early effects of the pandemic, *An Evaluation of the Impact of the COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment,* concluded that by and large we can have confidence that most of the 2020 tertiary learner cohort had achieved their intended learning outcomes. There were significant exceptions. The pandemic heightened pre-existing divisions in society, and this was reflected in corresponding learner groups. Detailed work done by the Department's COVID-19 working group on mitigating educational disadvantage highlighted these divisions. For example, learners at Levels 1-4 of the NFQ were much less likely than those at higher levels to complete their programmes and gain qualifications in 2020 because of the pandemic.

As the public health restrictions have persisted into 2021 and continue to disrupt learners' personal and educational lives, there will be an increased focus on mitigating the worst effects of the pandemic on the whole student population. School-leavers and others progressing into and through further and higher education may not have achieved the usual level of preparedness for their subsequent studies. Those progressing into the workplace may find either that they have not had the opportunity to master some of the traditional skills expected or that the skillsets required have changed as the workplace itself has been transformed by the pandemic. Responsibility for the measures needed to identify and address these gaps is broadly shared across government, agencies, providers and other actors in the system. QQI will play its part in this process as we continue to track key issues through our certification, data collection and analysis, and quality assurance engagements with education providers.

International students were adversely affected by the restrictions on international travel. The impact has been particularly stark for English language education providers. The Department's forthcoming international education strategy seeks to chart a path to a robust, sustainable and quality-led recovery for Ireland's international education sector, one in which QQI will play an enhanced role.

The tertiary education system is set to expand. Demand that was already growing through the rising number of school leavers, is added to by pandemic-induced backlogs in areas like apprenticeship and anticipated changes in patterns of employment post-pandemic. There are also reskilling needs arising both from sudden pandemic-related changes within sectors of industry and services sectors and from long-term trends related to the quest for sustainable growth.

One of the most dramatic and visible impacts of the pandemic in education and training has been the wholesale adoption of online technology to support teaching, learning and assessment. While the easing of public health restrictions should see the resumption of in-person teaching, many have been impressed by the effectiveness of the alternatives. Students and teachers alike, having been forcibly immersed in online learning and assessment, are now evaluating which elements to retain and which traditional practices will not return. Some skills, however, can only be acquired or practised in physical settings like laboratories, field trips or workplaces. In turn, programmes and facilities will have to adapt to new expectations. QQI has roles in guiding these changing practices and in evaluating and sharing how providers implement them.

AN EXPANDING MANDATE

Before the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science was established and before the onset of the pandemic, the Oireachtas had already assigned a suite of new functions to QQI in the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Amendment) Act, 2019. These functions are to be rolled out over the period 2022-2024. They include regulations for private tertiary education providers, a new fund to protect learners where private providers cease operating, the inclusion of additional qualifications and awarding bodies in the NFQ, measures to counter contract cheating, and an international education mark to underpin standards for international students in the higher education and English language education sectors. This legislation is both a sign of confidence in QQI and a challenge to the organisation to implement these functions efficiently and effectively. It signals the first expansion of QQI powers and staffing since 2012.

CONCLUSION

The emerging operating environment for QQI is a particularly challenging one. In addition to taking on added statutory responsibilities in the areas of learner protection and the further development of both the NFQ and English language education, the knock-on consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic pose serious issues across the tertiary education sector. The prospect of 'learning loss', and the need for greater and more accessible transfer and progression pathways across further as well as higher education are key issues to be addressed. The effective use of online learning and ensuring integrity in online assessment represent further challenges. To this can be added the ongoing challenges of building capacity and commitment to quality in the education and training sectors. Finally, there is the challenge of supporting the Government's stated ambition of achieving greater coherence and integration across the tertiary system, a challenge in which QQI, given its remit straddling the entire tertiary system, will be expected to play a significant facilitating role.

Our Ambition

Over the course of this strategy, QQI will engage all key stakeholders in taking the next steps required to create a more dynamic qualifications system. By the end of 2024, learners will have a greater choice of qualifications through the inclusion of the awards of listed awarding bodies and an expanded range of micro-credentials in the NFQ.

Better information will be available to learners through a new QQI website, an improved Qualifax service and an Irish Register of Qualifications which contains detailed information on how to access all the further and higher education qualifications included in the NFQ.

Learners will be better protected through the implementation of legislation in areas such as academic integrity, protection from financial loss and programme cessation and International Education Marks.

By the end of 2024, all public further and higher education providers will have undergone an institutional quality review. QQI will use the outcomes of these evaluations to shape an innovative future for institutional quality beyond this strategic timeframe. We anticipate that several mature private higher education providers will have received greater autonomy through receiving delegated authority to make their own awards.

Finally, as the only agency with a remit covering all parts of the further and higher education sectors, QQI will fully leverage both its unique position within leading international peer networks and its own independent analysis to establish strong and credible thought leadership credentials in quality and qualifications matters. In so doing, we will support the national vision of an Ireland with a further and higher education and research system that supports people in reaching their full potential and creates value, prosperity, resilience and a cohesive, sustainable and vibrant society.

Our Priorities, Enablers, Objectives and Indicators

Our analysis of the emerging education and training landscape points to the need for a greater focus on measures to directly enhance the opportunities for learners while at the same time continuing in our efforts to build a culture of quality within our diverse set of education and training providers. In some instances, our remit is such that we can bring about a direct impact through our own efforts. However, increasingly, our role is that of a key interlocutor within the wider education and training ecosystem. In this respect, we facilitate change and improvement in two key areas: providing relevant, timely, credible and independent insights to promote greater understanding of emerging issues and to support the formulation and implementation of mechanisms to address the issues. Implicit in this regard is a commitment to working collaboratively with our diverse set of stakeholders to bring about change. Without the commitment and dedication of our teams, prudent investment of limited financial resources and our efficient technological infrastructure, our efforts would come to little. Accordingly, we have identified the following set of key priorities and enablers to guide our work and focus our resources over the lifetime of this strategy.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

#information
Better information and opportunities for learners

#protection
Implementing strengthened regulation to protect learners

#development
Driving and stimulating provider development

#insight
Publishing authoritative analysis and insight

KEY ENABLERS

#partnership
Strengthening strategic partnerships to effect system change

#excellence
Building organisational excellence

Strategic Priority

Objectives

- We will provide high quality information to school-leavers and to all those seeking learning opportunities on progression pathways across and between different providers in further and higher education by upgrading QQI's qualifications information platforms and services.

- We will play our part in ensuring that learners can achieve their potential within the further and higher education system by evaluating provider adherence to a national approach to access, transfer and progression and the appropriate recognition of prior learning.

- We will improve learner choice and opportunity by including an increased range of flexible qualifications including micro-credentials in the National Framework of Qualifications.

- We will play our part in ensuring that all learners are enabled to access accredited qualifications in learning environments suitable to their needs including in the workplace.

- We will exercise a key role in ensuring learners have access to a wide range of new high-quality apprenticeship programmes spanning further and higher education.

Key Performance Indicators

- There is increased usage of and satisfaction with QQI qualifications information platforms.

- The national forum for quality and qualifications facilitates and enables discussion and development of the quality and qualifications system.

- Institutional self-evaluations and reviews demonstrate adoption of revisions to the national approach to access, transfer and progression enabling greater opportunities for learners.

- There is evidence of positive learner engagement with the increased range of qualifications in the NFQ including QQI's micro-qualifications.

- The programme validation process enables more access to accredited QQI qualifications which include workplace learning components.

- There is an increase in the number of new apprenticeship programmes validated by QQI.

Strategic Priority

Objectives

- We will protect learners by promoting and maintaining awareness of academic integrity and the monitoring of those seeking to undermine it.

- We will robustly assess and monitor private providers for their fitness to offer QQI awards and provide security to their learners through our stewardship of the statutory learner protection fund.

- We will contribute to ensuring a high-quality learning experience for international students though issuing the International Education Mark for higher education and English language education providers.

Key Performance Indicators

- There is evidence of heightened awareness of academic integrity and the risks of academic misconduct.

- Private providers have signed up to the national Protection for Enrolled Learners scheme and have passed a robust fitness to practise monitoring process.

- Providers who meet the criteria are successful in their applications for the International Education Mark.

Strategic Priority

#DEVELOPMENT
Driving and stimulating provider development

Objectives

- We will engage with community education providers to ensure access for their learners to education and training qualifications in the National Framework of Qualifications including by working in partnership with the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) where appropriate.

- We will support capacity for flexible and innovative programme development and robust quality assurance in the ETBs.

- We will assess the effectiveness and embedding of quality assurance within the new and evolving technological universities through our institutional quality reviews.

- We will facilitate increased autonomy and flexibility for mature providers by enabling them to pursue delegated authority to make their own awards.

- We will stimulate autonomous universities to demonstrate how effectively they monitor and improve the quality of the learner experience in research and community engagement.

Key Performance Indicators

- Community education providers are supported to enable continued access for their learners to qualifi cations in the NFQ.

- Flexible and innovative programme development in the Education and Training Boards is demon-strated through their engagement with QQI.

- Effective quality assurance within technological universities is clearly demonstrated in the fi ndings of institutional quality review processes.

- Mature providers apply for and are successful in receiving delegated authority to make their own awards.

- Improvements in the learner experience, research and community engagement are demonstrated in QQI institutional monitoring and review reports.

Strategic Priority

Objectives

- We will analyse the further and higher education system to inform closer alignment and integration, to provide evidence of how it can provide a wider choice at transition points and enable progression pathways across and between different providers.

- We will analyse and provide insights on QQI Awards data and trends to inform providers, policy makers, funding agencies and government strategies.

- We will evaluate the experience of remote and blended learning and provide guidance on authentic assessment for an improved learner experience and outcome.

- We will draw on our significant international networks of peer agencies to continue to contribute to and influence national policy.

- We will publish system-level analyses and host enhancement events including an annual summit event with stakeholders on a key strategic theme embracing quality and qualifications.

- We will conduct system-level analyses of the outcomes of further and higher education quality reviews to inform new and innovative approaches to institutional quality assurance.

Key Performance Indicators

- Key influencers in education and training use and reference sectoral and analytical reports produced by QQI.

- Evidence of institutional changes of practices in learner assessment, and positive feedback from providers and learners on changes made.

- International peer experts engaged in our initiatives enable us to encourage best practice in providers and to contribute to national policy.

- A wide range of stakeholders are positively engaged in QQI enhancement initiatives.

- Ireland is viewed as a leading country in the development of innovative methodologies for institutional quality assurance.

Key Enabler

#PARTNERSHIP
Strengthening strategic partnerships
to effect system change

Objectives

- We will inform and influence education and training policy through our relationships with government, public funders, providers and other stakeholders.

- We will assist in the development of mechanisms for effective learner engagement in the quality of their education and training through our work with learner representative and advocacy bodies.

- We will drive capacity-building in the Education and Training Boards in strategic partnership with funding authorities, provider representative bodies and other stakeholders.

- We will contribute to reduce overlap in programme evaluation practices by working with professional and statutory regulatory bodies and higher education institutions.

- We will continue to influence and contribute to good practice in quality assurance and qualifications by deepening our strategic relationships with partner agencies in Europe and worldwide.

Key Performance Indicators

- QQI influence on key policies and processes is evidenced by stakeholders who reference/acknowledge QQI publications, opinions and data.

- The student voice and student partnership are visibly influencing system level policies, procedures and governance processes.

- Enhanced capacity in education and training boards is evidenced by funding initiatives focused on improved staff capacity for programme development and quality assurance.

- Improved alignment of professional and statutory regulatory body, QQI and provider activities is evidenced through the adoption and implementation of key principles for professional engagements with providers.

- Our memoranda of understanding and international agreements with strategic partners continue to be valued and endorsed in recognition of common purposes including the sharing of best practice.

Key Enabler

Objectives

- We will develop and provide opportunities for our people by continuing to build an agile, engaged, responsive and motivated workforce.

- We will reimagine the QQI workplace through utilising ICT for remote and blended working and embedding sustainability in our work processes.

- We will work with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to ensure that QQI has stable, predictable and sustainable income streams.

- We will improve our services to providers through better self-service technology and enhanced transparency of our fees and charges.

- We will enhance our service to learners by transforming our certification systems to digital form.

- We will optimise our value to our stakeholders through the strategic use of purposeful and impactful communications.

- We will demonstrate best practice in line with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies and adherence to relevant legislative and regulatory obligations.

Key Performance Indicators

- Surveys indicate that QQI is a workplace that supports staff development and offers a fit-for purpose blended working experience.

- Sustainability is evidenced through a reduction in QQI's environmental/carbon footprint.

- QQI has secured the appropriate skills and expertise and the financial resourcing required to deliver on our organisational strategy.

- Quantitative data shows increased website traffic and use of all our online services.

- Stakeholders express positive levels of satisfaction with the implementation of digital certification systems.

- There is increased stakeholder engagement and satisfaction with our communications through our website, social media channels, publications and events.

- QQI complies with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies.

Strategic Priorities

#information – better information and opportunities for learners

#protection – implementing strengthened regulation to protect learners

#development – driving and stimulating provider development

#insight – publishing authoritative analysis and insight

Key Enablers

#partnership – strengthening strategic partnerships to effect system change

#excellence – building organisational excellence

Our Vision

- To provide diverse high-quality further and higher education opportunities

- To provide qualifications that are valued nationally and internationally

Our Mission

- To sustain public confidence in the quality, integrity and reputation of Ireland's further and higher education providers

- To provide authoritative information on the range of qualifications included in the National Framework of Qualifications

Our Values

- Collaboration
- Inclusivity
- Partnership
- Transparency
- Sustainability
- Authority
- Integrity
- Trust
- Learning
- Innovation
- Excellence

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Statement of Strategy
2022-24

QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann