

## Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Note of the forty-eighth Meeting of the Authority (The Board) which took place on Monday, 27 April 2020 at 10:00 a.m. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, this meeting took place via Microsoft Teams (video conference facility).

**Present:**

- Ms. Joanne Harmon (Chair)
- Dr. Pádraig Walsh (Chief Executive)
- Ms. Cliona Curley (Secretary)
- Dr. Barbara Brittingham
- Mr. Blake Hodkinson
- Mr. Thomas McDermott
- Mr. Kevin McStravock
- Ms. Niamh O'Reilly
- Prof. Irene Sheridan
- Dr. Anne Walsh

**Apologies:** Ms. Mary Danagher

**In attendance:**

- Ms. Caitriona Lawless (Recording Secretary)
- Mr. Liam Butler (Item 9)
- Ms. Louise Kelly (ICT Manager)
- Dr. Anna Murphy (Item 11)

### INTRODUCTION

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

The Chairperson welcomed all Members to the meeting. The Board noted that due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions in place in Ireland, the Board was for the first time, meeting virtually through Microsoft Teams and that etiquette for the meeting had been agreed in advance. The Chairperson thanked all members for their co-operation and participation.

It was noted that the Board would meet without the Executive present under item 17, Any Other Business.

**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 28 February 2020 were **confirmed** and would be signed at a later date when circumstances allow.

**3. NOTE OF PREVIOUS BOARD MEETING**

The Board **approved** the *Note of the Meeting of 28 February 2020* for publication on the QQI website.

**4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES**

The Board noted the **Action Tracker**.

4.1. Matters Arising/Updates

Draft Board Agenda

On foot of a discussion at its February Meeting, the Board had requested a list of the external presentations conducted to date. The list was circulated to the Board in advance of the April meeting and several suggestions for future presentations were received from Members.

The Board also noted that as the meeting had switched to a videoconference as a result of Covid-19 restrictions, the agenda had been streamlined on this occasion to best accommodate the meeting and a number of items such as the presentation by Andrew Brownlee, Chief Executive of SOLAS, the project plan on the implementation of revised Legislation and the discussion on the Board Self-assessment Evaluation for 2019 were deferred to a future meeting. It was considered that the latter in particular, would be more appropriate to a face to face discussion.

The Board noted that the meeting in June is likely to run longer than normal as a result of the deferred items.

#### CEO Report

The Board noted that following its request, the Report on Five Year Certification Data (*Draft Paper on Certification of QQI Major Awards 2014-2018*) featured on the agenda for this meeting.

#### 4.2. Action Tracker

The Board noted the updated Action Tracker.

#### 4.3. External Presentations to the Board

The Board noted that the planned presentation for this meeting by Andrew Brownlee, Chief Executive, SOLAS had been deferred. There was a brief discussion on the merits of proceeding with external presentations at future Board Meetings if meetings are to continue via video conferencing for the foreseeable future.

The Board noted the suggestions received to date from Members and these would be added to the options the Executive had already been considering for upcoming meetings.

As at the time of the meeting, it was unknown if the restrictions in place would continue or if the meeting scheduled for 19 June would take place via Teams, the Board **agreed** that the Executive should proceed with rescheduling the presentation by SOLAS if Mr. Brownlee was available.

### 5. **DRAFT BOARD AGENDA**

The Board noted the **Draft June 2020 Board Agenda**.

The Board noted the draft Agenda for the next Board Meeting. The Board noted that the Executive would invite the Chief Executive of SOLAS to present to it as discussed in the previous item and that the majority of items on the Agenda are standing items.

The Board noted that the HR and Organisation Committee would feature as the Committee the Board would focus on under 'Items for Noting'.

The Board noted that the Board would meet without the Executive present as required under the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies.

The Board noted there would be a discussion on the Consultative Forum and the next phase of its development.

A Board Member suggested that while an Update on Covid-19 features on the agenda for this meeting, that it should be considered as a standalone item at the next meeting.

## **6. CEO REPORT**

The Board noted the **CEO Report**.

### **6.1. COVID-19 update and Potential Risks**

The Board noted a report on the steps taken by QQI in reaction to the Covid-19 situation which arose in the period since the February 2020 Board Meeting.

The Board noted the update on the Steering Group established by the Department of Education and Skills to respond to the challenges faced by the Tertiary (Higher Education and Further Education and Training) Sector and chaired by William Beausang, Assistant Secretary at the Department. Membership of the Group is on an ad hoc basis and included leaders of provider representatives (IUA, THEA, HECA, ETBI), learner representatives (USI, AONTAS), agencies (HEA, SOLAS, QQI) and other bodies (HEAnet, EduCampus) and Government officials. The Steering Group met daily in the initial phase of restrictions before moving to twice weekly and now meets on a weekly basis. The Group looked at immediate operations and contingency planning.

The Board noted that QQI was in a particularly unique position; apart from the Department itself, it is the only body to span the tertiary education sector and had contacts within the full range of providers and the resources to advise where needed. The Board noted the work which had been carried out to date within the Tertiary Education system in response to the pandemic.

The Board noted one of the first actions carried out by QQI as the situation began to unfold was to request all private HE and all public and private FET providers to submit their contingency plans for the move to online learning.

The Board noted that QQI had published revised information on changes to QQI's QA systems to accommodate the rapid move to full (where possible) online delivery, assessment and examinations, necessitated by the restrictions and closure of Irish tertiary education providers and to ensure the integrity of the system. This information included:

- *Building Confidence: supports and arrangements for the tertiary education system,*
- *Guiding Principles for alternative assessments (devised in response to the Covid-19 emergency restrictions),*
- *Measures to mitigate impact of Covid-19 pandemic on programmes leading to QQI Awards,*
- *Implementing Contingency Arrangements for Alternative Assessment and Authentication Processes: Guidance for Further Education and Training Providers.*

The Board noted that the Executive had received very positive feedback to date on its responsiveness to the emergency situation.

The Board noted that the Executive was also reviewing the experiences of peer agencies overseas.

The Board noted that QQI itself as an organisation had had a relatively positive experience in the initial stages of the unfolding situation in Ireland. Staff had adapted well and the workforce had been enabled to work from home during the early phase of restrictions so that by the time of the Government announcement of full restrictions virtually all staff were enabled to work from home with no perceivable gap in service.

The Board noted that the only service which QQI had been unable to provide was the physical printing of Award Certificates. The provision of a Final Statement of Results as normal, was still carried out and will enable any learner involved to continue to apply for further study or employment in the interim. The Certificates will be printed once relevant restrictions are lifted

and staff can safely access QQI offices and work within the necessary health and safety parameters.

The Board noted excellent support had been received from the ICT team, the majority of systems were already stored in the Cloud and the team were in a position to move sooner on a planned rollout of Microsoft Teams – video conferencing system, which was planned for later in the year. ICT desktop support was already working remotely so there was no gap in this service. The Board noted that the majority of staff were provided with laptops or similar devices.

The Board noted that many meetings and contacts have continued as normal through Teams – the Executive Management Team (EMT) moved to weekly meetings and a QQI Covid-19 Planning Group was established prior to the outbreak commencing in Ireland and meets weekly. The Group consists of the EMT and senior staff from key services such as Certification, QQI Awards, Communications, ICT and Legal and Provider Risk.

Staff were kept informed of developments through the staff newsletter 'Sway' which moved from weekly circulation to daily circulation in the first weeks of the restriction period. Two staff meetings have taken place to date with 74 staff members attending the second meeting on 8 April, a third is planned for 30 April. The Board noted that the HR team are in contact with staff and reminders relating to the provision of the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) are circulated on a regular basis.

The Board noted that with regard to QQI's regular business, many research projects are continuing uninterrupted, through desk-based work and electronic meetings. The Board noted the areas where some initial delays have occurred. The Executive had contacted the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) notifying them of an extension to the deadline for the submission of the Self-Evaluation Reports for the Cinnte Reviews of that sector. This allows the providers to reprioritise their workload. The submission deadline has been extended to June and will delay the review process by approximately one Quarter.

The Board noted the Executive had carried out one dialogue meeting (with UCD) prior to the restrictions being put in place and the rest of the scheduled meetings have been paused for the moment. The Board noted that the Executive was exploring options in relation to validation

site-visits (a possible move to electronic meetings, etc.) and will have to look at how it carries out certain work processes going forward. The Executive wants to learn from the experience, improve its processes as a result and build on it.

The Board noted that one Board Member was also currently working with remote site visits and offered to share advice.

The Board noted that the Chief Executive was scheduled to attend an online meeting of the ENQA General Assembly on 29 April and will be able to share experiences and learnings from European colleagues and peers.

The Board noted that the structure of the Irish academic year meant that the majority of the year had been completed; whereas, the academic year in Australia for example, only begins in February/March and there may be some useful information from their experiences which may help when the next academic year starts here, probably somewhat delayed due to the rescheduling of the Leaving Certificate to late July/early August. The Executive would be interested to learn how best to transition new entrants to tertiary education in terms of what restrictions may be in place at that point.

The Executive noted the positive feedback from the Board on the work and flexibility of the organisation in response to the Covid-19 situation. The Board noted the Chairperson had been in constant contact with the Chief Executive and endorsed the positive feedback from external sources, noting that the shift from office to remote working had been virtually seamless with no perceivable gap in services provided. The Board thanked the Chief Executive and staff for all their efforts and work over the last six weeks. The Chief Executive acknowledged that the Board's well wishes had been passed to staff.

## 6.2. CEO Report

The Board noted the various updates contained in the CEO report covering the period since the February 2020 Board Meeting.

6.3. Draft Paper on Certification of QQI Major Awards 2014-2018

The Board noted the draft paper on the *Certification of QQI Major Awards 2014-2018* and noted that it was the first report in a new data series. The Board noted that the Chief Executive hopes to present the paper to the National Skills Council at some point. The Board noted that this would be a valuable report for external bodies, as to date, data produced has focused primarily on public HE statistics. This report includes data for private HE and the FET sector.

**7. ITEMS FOR NOTING**

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

7.1. Focus on Audit and Risk Committee

The focus on the Audit and Risk Committee was moved to Item 11.

7.2. Approvals and Reviews Committee (ARC)

The Board noted the reports of the meetings of the Approvals and Reviews Committee held on 5 December 2019 and 25 March 2020. The Board noted a brief verbal update on the meetings provided by the Chair of the Committee. The Board noted that the tender had been awarded for the thematic analysis of the Cinnte Reviews carried out to date.

7.3. Programmes and Awards Executive Committee (PAEC)

The Board noted the report of the meeting of the Programmes and Awards Executive Committee held on 6 February 2020.

7.4. Policies and Standards Committee (PSC)

The Board noted the report of the Policies and Standards Committee Meeting held on 26 March 2020. The Chair of the Committee provided a brief verbal update. The Board noted that the Committee had carried out an urgent meeting (through Teams) to consider modifications to a range of policy documents arising out of the Covid-19 situation to ensure confidence and transparency was maintained in assessments.

The Board noted that the PSC, in addition to a number of the documents (previously mentioned under item 6.1), also approved extensions to the period of enrolment for Validated Programmes and a temporary extension of Providers' Scope of Provision and related



amendments to Validated Programmes. The Board noted that the extension granted for the period of enrolment for Validated Programmes will run to 31 December 2020. The Board noted that all documents were approved by the PSC and disseminated to all relevant providers.

The Board noted that the Executive had also looked at options in relation to the completion of workplace assessments.

The Chief Executive thanked the PSC Chair and all Committee members for convening and considering these documents.

The Board noted that the Executive was also offering Providers an additional certification period in July (in addition to the six periods normally scheduled throughout the year), which may help in completing workplace assessments, should travel restrictions ease in the coming months. This would also help accommodate the phased change for Round 0 of the CAO offers arising from the proposed change to the Leaving Certificate examination process.

7.5. Rolling Board Agenda 2020

The Board noted an update on the Rolling Board Agenda for 2020.

**8. RELATIONS WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS**

The Board noted the documents relating to **Relations with the Department of Education and Skills**.

8.1. Draft Performance Delivery Agreement (PDA) 2020

The Board noted that feedback had been received from the Department in relation to the draft Performance Delivery Agreement (PDA).

The Board noted that the first Review meeting of 2020 was scheduled for 18 March and due to the developing Covid-19 situation at the time, the meeting was moved to a video conference call and focused on the role QQI could play in the scenario that was likely to unfold in the weeks ahead and resulted in a more operational discussion. The Board noted the positive feedback the Executive had received from DES on its work in the matter to date. The Board noted that another meeting with the QQI Executive and the Higher Education – Funding, Governance and Qualifications Unit in DES would take place in the coming weeks.

The Board noted that the Funding Model Meetings with DES had been paused while work in response to the Covid-19 situation was prioritised.

The Board noted that it was unclear as yet what the full impact on the finances of the tertiary sector will be. The Board noted that the Executive had already begun assessing the impact and financial implications of the pandemic on QQI.

## 9. BUDGET AND FINANCE

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

### 9.1. Management Accounts to 29 February 2020

The Board noted the Management accounts to end of February 2020 and as the current circumstances only changed in the latter half of the month, no noticeable effects to the financial situation are reflected in what was presented to the Board at this point.

The Board noted the information provided with regards to QQI's finances over the coming months. It was noted that invoices for Relationship Fees had been issued.

The Board noted that expenditure has reduced significantly in the last number of weeks, the only additional expenditure so far had been in ICT including on increased broadband capacity. Savings may arise in travel and subsistence expenses which will likely fall due to the restrictions. This may continue beyond the current period as remote meetings may become the norm. The Certification fees may also be reduced.

The Board noted that it is likely to have to review panel member fees under the current working restrictions. The Executive is reviewing the validation and re-engagement processes as the current processes are likely to be impacted for some time as a result of the pandemic e.g. some processes require site visits and it would be the norm for panels to include an international member. The Board noted that the Executive has flagged the panel member fees issue with DES.

## 9.2. Funding Model Review 2020

The Board noted the verbal update on the Funding Model. The Board noted that the Executive had met twice with DES since the February Board Meeting and had interrogated the cost basis. However, the process was paused while the Covid-19 situation was prioritised. The Executive had been notified that the Department would resume the meetings within the coming fortnight. The Board noted that all information requested by the Department in relation to this matter had been provided.

In relation to the options contained in the Report of the Funding Model Review 2020 provided to DES, the Department were reviewing the information provided.

The Board noted that the Executive had, that morning, received an email from the C&AG addressed to all agencies. State agencies were now requested to include a note on the impact of Covid-19 within the draft Financial Statements for 2019.

## 10. ORGANISATION AND HUMAN RESOURCES

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

Item omitted from this note.

### 10.1. Update on Human Resources

The Board noted an update on Human Resources. The Board noted that the Chief Executive normally meets with new employees approximately 10 days after employment commences. This practice has continued in the current climate. In addition, new staff are being supported to help integration with colleagues and the nature of their assigned work can be completed from home.

The Board noted that the Executive had received good feedback from staff on the support provided by HR in general. The Staff Engagement Forum had met on 23 April and work was progressing on adapted activities for Staff Wellbeing week. The Board noted that staff already availing of e-working arrangements had been ergonomically assessed and HR will look at the situation in the medium term for remaining staff. The Board also noted staff had been briefed on data protection regulations in relation to working from home.

The Executive noted that the Board was supportive of all the efforts in place.

## 11. AUDIT AND RISK

The Board noted the documents entitled **Audit and Risk**.

### 11.1. Report of the Audit and Risk Committee

The Board noted the draft Report of the Audit and Risk Committee Meeting held on 1 April 2020.

### 11.2. Comptroller and Auditor General – Management Letter 2018

The Board noted the Management Letter for 2018 received from the Comptroller and Auditor General on 22 April 2020.

### 11.3. Annual Report of the Audit and Risk Committee 2019

The Board noted the draft Annual Report of the Audit and Risk Committee together with the Committee's priorities for 2020. The Board noted and appreciated the significant amount of work done to date.

The Board **approved** the Annual Report of the Audit and Risk Committee for 2019 subject to a minor edit.

### 11.4. Risk Management Policy and Risk Appetite Statement

The Board discussed the draft Risk Management Policy and Risk Appetite Statement. The Board noted that the Risk Appetite was revised to replace the existing risk categories with six new ones which reflect the stage of development of QQI, its operations, status as a state agency and public policy context in which it operates. The Board noted that the draft Policy and Appetite Statement had been reviewed by a member of the Audit and Risk Committee experienced in risk.

In its discussion, the Board noted that QQI doesn't always have to be completely risk adverse, dependent on the area under consideration and the document provides a good framework for the organisation. The Executive stated that the organisation has to be somewhat flexible in its

operations – the current pandemic situation has proven that. There is also a move away from ‘traditional’ providers within education. The Board noted that the Executive had found the revision of the Policy and the Risk Appetite Statement to be a very beneficial exercise and confirmed the addition of descriptors under the section on ‘Assess Risk’ in the Policy was particularly useful. The Board noted that there was good engagement with the Risk Register by Risk Owners.

A Board Member suggested that consideration should be given when developing QQI policies and guidelines to incorporating an assessment of possible risks involved.

The Board **deferred** a decision on the Policy to its June Meeting pending clarification on a number of points. The Board noted that the revised draft would be presented to the Audit and Risk Committee at its next meeting to be scheduled for May.

#### 11.5. ICT Security Review

The Board noted the positive outcome to the ICT Security Review and noted that QQI had displayed a positive status in many areas. The Board noted that cybersecurity is now more important than ever. The Board noted that there were approximately 30 recommendations arising from the Review and noted that work had already commenced on the majority with even a small number already completed to date. The Board **approved** the ICT Security Review Report.

#### 11.6. Recommendations of Previous Audits

The Board noted the update on recommendations arising from previous audits and noted that a significant number were completed and closed. The Board noted that three recommendations remain open – two of which are scheduled to be implemented at year end. Four recommendations have been suspended as they are outside the organisation’s control. The Board **requested** a progress report on outstanding items at the December Meeting.

It was noted that the focus of the Audit and Risk Committee for 2020 will include the area of procurement.

#### 11.7. Minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee

The Board noted the Minutes of the Audit and Risk Committee Meeting held on 17 January 2020.

### 12. STRATEGIC PLANNING

The Board noted the update on **Strategic Planning**.

#### 12.1. Corporate Plan 2020

The Board noted the Quarter 1 Progress Report for the 2020 Corporate Plan.

The Board also noted an update on the Corporate Plan for the remainder of 2020. The EMT had reviewed the Plan in light of the developments arising from Covid-19 and adjusted deadlines where they considered delays are likely to occur. The Executive remains hopeful that the majority of actions should still be achievable in 2020.

#### 12.2. Draft Annual Report 2019

The Board noted the verbal update on the draft Report. The Board noted work had to be paused on the drafting of the report in order to prioritise work resulting from Covid-19. The Board noted that the Executive intends to circulate the draft Report to the Board in May with an opportunity to review and return feedback. The final version would be presented to the Board for approval at its June Meeting.

### 13. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

The Board noted the update on **Stakeholder Engagement**.

The Board noted a comprehensive report on the work carried out by the Stakeholder Engagement Unit in the past year as well as details of its current work in response to recent events. The Board noted that the Unit had made a considerable difference to how the organisation communicated with stakeholders during the current period. The Board thanked the Head of Stakeholder Engagement and Communications and all the staff for the significant amount of work completed to date.

The Board noted work had progressed on a Stakeholder Survey which was due to be circulated shortly.

The Board noted discussions on the next phase of the Consultative Forum would take place at the next Board Meeting.

#### **14. REVIEWS**

The Board noted the update on **Reviews**.

The Board noted the report of the Cinnte Review of University College Dublin (UCD).

The Board noted that the Report was considered by the ARC at its meeting on 25 March.

The Board noted that the ARC again discussed the variation between the different Cinnte Reports published to date – the reports vary from one to the other. Board Members indicated their interest in seeing the outcome of the mid-term Thematic Analysis of Cinnte Reviews. Seven reviews had been carried out to date and following the publication of a tender to complete a thematic analysis of these reviews, a contractor had been appointed to carry out the work.

The Board noted that the Executive had carried out a Dialogue Meeting with UCD prior to the restrictions taking place.

The Board note that the pastoral care response within HE in Ireland had been good.

#### **15. COMMUNICATIONS**

The Board noted the document entitled **Communications**.

##### **15.1. Media Mentions**

The Board noted the media mentions published since the February 2020 Board Meeting.

#### **16. NEXT MEETING**

The Board noted that the next meeting is scheduled to take place on **Friday, 19 June 2020** beginning at **10:00 a.m.**

The Board noted that the meeting may be held again via Microsoft Teams – this will be dependent on any updated advice included in the next round of Government announcements at the end of April/beginning of May. The Executive would prepare for a virtual meeting.

**17. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

There was no other business.

**18. BOARD MET WITHOUT THE EXECUTIVE PRESENT**

Item omitted from this note.

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