The Irish National Framework of Qualifications:

Referencing to the European Qualifications Framework and Self-Certification of Compatibility with the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area

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National Report

European Qualifications Framework

National Framework of Qualifications

EUROPEAN Higher Education Area

Contents

Tables and Figures **2**

Interpretations **4**

Selected List of Networks and Institutions Referenced in Report **11**

List of Acronyms **13**

Foreword **14**

Executive Summary **15**

Chapter One: Introduction **17**

Section 1.1 Background **17**

QQI Green Paper on Qualifications **19**

Section 1.2 2006 QF-EHEA Self-certification and 2009 EQF Referencing Reports 19

Section 1.3 Significant National Developments 25

Section 1.4 Significant European Developments 27

Section 1.5 UK Withdrawal from the EU 28

Section 1.6 Rationale and Method for 2020 European Referencing Report 29

Chapter Two: The Education and Training System in Ireland **32**

Section 2.1 Education and Skills Profile of the Population 32

Section 2.2 Lifelong Learning in Ireland 34

Section 2.3 Labour Market Profile 35

Section 2.4: Education and Training Sub-Sectors and Associated Qualifications 35

Section 2.5 General Education 37

Section 2.6 Further Education and Training 41

Section 2.7 Apprenticeships 44

Section 2.8 Higher Education 45

Chapter Three: The Irish NFQ – Design, Implementation, Use and Impact **49**

Section 3.1 Introduction to the NFQ 49

Section 3.2 Structure and Design of the NFQ 50

Section 3.3 Implementation of the NFQ 53

Section 3.4 Use and Impact of the NFQ 59

Chapter Four: Response to Referencing Criteria and Procedures **66**

Section 4.1 Criterion 1 EQF and Criteria 1 and 7 QF-EHEA (Competent Authorities) 66

Section 4.2 Criterion 2 EQF and Criterion 2 QF-EHEA (Descriptor Alignments) 69

Section 4.3 Criterion 3 EQF and Criterion 3 QF-EHEA (Learning Outcomes, RPL and Credit) 76

Section 4.4 Criterion 4 EQF and Criterion 4 QF-EHEA (Levelling of Qualifications) 86

Section 4.5 Criterion 5 EQF and Criterion 5 QF-EHEA (Quality Assurance) 92
Section 4.6 Criterion 6 EQF and Procedure 2 QF-EHEA (Agreement by QA bodies) 107
Section 4.7 Criterion 7 EQF and Procedure 3 QF-EHEA (International Experts) 107
Section 4.8 Criterion 8 EQF and Procedure 1 QF-EHEA (Certification of report) 108
Section 4.9 Criterion 9 EQF and Procedure 4 QF-EHEA (Publication of report) 108
Section 4.10 Criterion 10 EQF; Criterion 6 of QF-EHEA; Procedure 6 QF-EHEA (Level visibility) 109
Section 4.11 Procedure 5 QF-EHEA (Update ENIC/NARIC Country Page) 110

Chapter Five: Current and Future Developments 111

Appendix 1: QF-EHEA Cycle Descriptors (updated 2018) 114

Appendix 2: Level Descriptors – European Qualifications Framework (2017) 116

Appendix 3: Criteria and Procedures for Referencing National Qualifications Frameworks or Systems to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) 119

Appendix 4: Criteria and Procedures for the Verification that National Frameworks are Compatible with the EHEA Framework: 120

Appendix 5: Irish NFQ – Level Descriptors 121

Appendix 6: Analysis and Outcomes of Technical Mapping 122

Appendix 7: Letters of Endorsement from Statutory Bodies Participating in Steering Group 175

Appendix 8: Opinion of International Experts 182

Appendix 9: Terms of Reference of Steering Group 192

Appendix 10: Steering Group Members 194

Appendix 11: Designated Awarding Body Focus Group Members 195

Tables and Figures

Table 1 NFQ European Referencing 2020 16
Table 2 Correspondence between NFQ and QF-EHEA (2006) 23
Table 3 Correspondence between NFQ and EQF (2009) 23
Table 4 Correspondence between EQF and QF-EHEA 24
Table 5 NFQ – Previously Established European Alignments 24
Table 6 Selected European Developments post-2009 27
Table 7 Broad Alignment of Qualification in UK and Ireland with EQF 28
Table 8 Employment/Unemployment by Level of Educational Attainment Q2 2019 (CSO) 35
Table 9 CAS Awards by Class and NFQ Level 52
Table 10 NFQ-EQF Level to Level Correspondence 2020 70
Table 11 NFQ (including PATD) -EQF Level to Level Correspondence 2020 72

Table 12 NFQ Qualification Types and QF-EHEA Cycle Descriptor Correspondence 2020..... 74

Table 13 Credit Profiles for Higher Education Qualifications..... 75

Table 14 NFQ Qualification Types (including PATD) and QF-EHEA Cycle Descriptor Correspondence 2020 76

Table 15 Schema for the NFQ Level Indicators..... 78

Table 16 Credit Profile Higher Education Qualifications..... 84

Table 17 Credit Profile Further Education and Training Qualifications..... 85

Table 18 Common Awards System Credit Accumulation Scheme..... 85

Table 19 Legislative Framework – Awarding Bodies and the NFQ..... 91

Table 20 Quality Assurance Scheme for Post-School Provider Types..... 95

Table 21 Post-Secondary School Quality Assurance and EQF Principles for Quality Assurance.. 96

Table 22 Quality Assurance in General (School) Education and EQF Principles for Quality Assurance 104

Figure 1 Ireland – Qualifications at a Glance 18

Figure 2 Correspondence between NFQ, EQF and the QF-EHEA..... 24

Figure 3 NFQ Key Milestones 2003-2020 25

Figure 4 Highest Level of Education Attained by Persons (aged 15-64) Q2 2009 – Q2 2019 32

Figure 5 Highest level of Education Attained (aged 15-64) Classified by Age Group, Q2 2019..... 33

Figure 6 Participation Rate in Education and Training 34

Figure 7 Lifelong Learning participation rates (2019) by learning type, gender, age, NFQ level (Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO data) 35

Figure 8 Education and Training System Ireland (Source: Cedefop and ReferNet Ireland) 36

Figure 9 The NFQ – Levels, Award-Types and Classes of Awards..... 49

Figure 10 Awarding Bodies and the NFQ 55

Figure 11 Practical Application and Use of NFQ..... 60

Figure 12 NFQ Impact – Transparency and Lifelong Learning 63

Figure 13 NFQ Impact – Quality 63

Figure 14 NFQ Impact – Lifelong Learning 63

Figure 15 NFQ Impact – Teaching Learning and Assessment..... 64

Figure 16 NFQ Impact – Employability and Skills Matching..... 64

Figure 17 NFQ Impact – International Recognition of Qualifications..... 64

Figure 18 NFQ Impact – Implications for Future Development..... 65

Figure 19 Awarding Bodies and the NFQ 90

Figure 20 QQI Model of QA Guidelines 93

Interpretations

Assessment

Learner assessment (specifically assessment of learning) means inference (e.g. judgement or estimation or evaluation) of a learner's knowledge, skill or competence by comparison with a standard based on appropriate evidence. Self-assessment is included in this. Assessment has many purposes (including summative and formative).

Award

A decision to give a candidate a result for a qualification or for part of a qualification.

Award standard

The knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired, and where appropriate, demonstrated, by a learner before the specified award may be made.

Awarding body

"A body issuing [certified] qualifications (certificates, diplomas or titles) formally recognising the learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, competences) of an individual, following an assessment and validation procedure"[1]

Certificate

*"An official document, issued by an awarding body, which records the achievement of an individual following an assessment and validation against a predefined standard. (**Certification of learning outcomes** ... The process of issuing a certificate, diploma or title formally attesting that a set of learning outcomes (knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences) acquired by an individual have been assessed and validated by a competent body against a predefined standard.)"*[2]

A certificate is documented evidence, which may be in exclusively digital form, that a specific individual holds a specific qualification. Certification involves the issue of a certificate. Bodies that issue such certificates are known as awarding bodies. When we speak of a qualification being certified we mean the certification of its learning outcomes: the process of issuing a certificate, diploma or title formally attesting that a set of learning outcomes (knowledge, knowhow, skills and/or competences) acquired by an individual have been assessed and validated by a competent body against a predefined standard[3]. A qualification is typically but not necessarily certified. Degrees, diplomas and certificates from a competent educational awarding body are examples of certified qualifications. The formal outcome of an assessment that a student has passed the first year of their undergraduate degree programme is a qualification to enter the second year but is normally uncertified if the student is progressing within the programme but may be certified should the student wish to transfer to another programme. The latter kind of certification may, for example, involve the issuing of a transcript that would include a statement of the stage reached by the individual along with their assessment results in the subjects studied and the subject credit weightings.

Competent Body

In this report a **competent body** is an entity, often referred to as an awarding body, that can credibly and legitimately make the determination referred to in the definition of a qualification. Qualifications are determined by many and diverse kinds of entities (e.g. employers, educational awarding bodies, providers, professional awarding bodies, regulatory awarding bodies, and vendor awarding bodies). Where a qualification is issued by a competent body, that body may rely on other entities (e.g. professional, regulatory or employer representative bodies) to support its determination and those other entities may also be competent bodies. More specifically, there are cases where a competent body will rely on a different entity to evaluate whether a specific individual "has achieved learning outcomes to given standards". For example, QQI is a competent body to determine educational and training qualifications but relies on providers to assess candidates for its awards.

1 https://www.eqf-support.eu/9.0.html (accessed 24/1/2019)
2 https://www.eqf-support.eu/9.0.html (accessed 24/1/2019)
3 From EQAVET https://www.eqavet.eu/eu-quality-assurance/glossary/certification-of-learning-outcomes

Credential

The use of the term credential is increasing in popularity (especially in the context of micro-credentials and in the digitalisation of certificates) but there is not a standard definition[4]. A credential is probably best thought of as being synonymous with a certificate. It is not clear that there is any significant distinction. We will occasionally refer to credentials, but we will frequently use the term certificate as it is more general and widely understood.

Credit

"*confirmation that a part of a qualification, consisting of a coherent set of learning outcomes has been assessed and validated by a competent authority, according to an agreed standard; credit is awarded by competent authorities when the individual has achieved the defined learning outcomes, evidenced by appropriate assessments and can be expressed in a quantitative value (e.g. credits or credit points) demonstrating the estimated workload an individual typically needs for achieving related learning outcomes;* " (Council of the EU Recommendation 2017/C 189/03).

Credit (in the context of a programme of education and training)

"credit" means an acknowledgement of an enrolled learner's completion of a programme or part of a programme of education and training to a particular standard;

"credit transfer" means transferring credits awarded for studies undertaken as part of one programme of education and training to another programme. (Section 56 of the 2012 Act).

Designated awarding body

This is a term defined in the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012*. It means a previously established university, the National University of Ireland, an educational institution established as a university under section 9 of the Act of 1997, a technological university, an institute of technology and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

Digital badges

Digital badges – logos (validated indicators of accomplishment) that are awarded to learners by various organisations to attest their claim to some specific skill or competence.

Dublin Descriptors

The Dublin Descriptors are the cycle descriptors (or "level descriptors") presented in 2003 and adopted in 2005 as the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). They offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with awards that represent the end of each of a (Bologna) cycle or level. The descriptors are phrased in terms of competence levels, not learning outcomes, and they enable us to distinguish in a general manner between the different cycles. A level descriptor includes the following five components:

- Knowledge and understanding
- Applying knowledge and understanding
- Making judgements
- Communication
- Lifelong learning skills

European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)

ECTS credits represent learning based on defined learning outcomes and their associated workload. ECTS is designed to make it easier for students to move between countries and to have their academic qualifications and study periods abroad recognised. ECTS allows credits taken at one higher education institution to be counted towards a qualification studied for at another.

[4] See Chakroun, B. and Keevey, J. (2018) Digital Credentialing: Implications for the Recognition of Learning across borders.

External quality assurance (of education and training)

It is an externally owned process used for the purpose of quality assurance. Programme validation and accreditation by bodies that are external to the programme provider are examples.

External examiner

An external examiner is an independent expert who is a member of the broader community of practice within the programme's field of learning and whose accomplishments attest to his/her likelihood of having the authority necessary to fulfil the responsibilities of the role. The External Authenticator in FET fulfils a similar role. In research degree programmes, the term 'external examiner' is used to refer to an 'external assessor'. The functions of the research degree external examiner are different from those of the external examiner for other types of programmes.

International Education Mark (IEM)

QQI is required to establish a code of practice for the provision of programmes of education and training to international learners, and to authorise the use of the international education mark (IEM) by a provider that complies with the code of practice. The objective of the IEM is that it will contribute, as part of a quality framework, to the promotion of Ireland as a destination for international students. For more information visit QQI website https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/International-Education-Mark-(IEM).aspx

ISCED field of learning

The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is a statistical framework for organising information on education maintained by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

Learner

A person who is undertaking, planning to undertake or likely to undertake a programme of learning. The programme of learning may be designed to prepare learners for a qualification. Once a learner has entered, or been entered for a qualification, he or she is often referred to as a candidate.

Learning

a.) *"**formal learning** means learning which takes place in an organised and structured environment, specifically dedicated to learning, and typically leads to the award of a qualification, usually in the form of a certificate or a diploma; it includes systems of general education, initial vocational training and higher education;*

b.) ***non-formal learning*** *means learning which takes place through planned activities (in terms of learning objectives, learning time) where some form of learning support is present (e.g. student-teacher relationships); it may cover programmes to impart work skills, adult literacy and basic education for early school leavers; very common cases of non-formal learning include in-company training, through which companies update and improve the skills of their workers such as ICT skills, structured on-line learning (e.g. by making use of open educational resources), and courses organised by civil society organisations for their members, their target group or the general public;*

c.) ***informal learning*** *means learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure and is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support; it may be unintentional from the learner's perspective; examples of learning outcomes acquired through informal learning are skills acquired through life and work experiences, project management skills or ICT skills acquired at work, languages learned and intercultural skills acquired during a stay in another country, ICT skills acquired outside work, skills acquired through volunteering, cultural activities, sports, youth work and through activities at home (e.g. taking care of a child);"* (Source: Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning OJ C 398, 22.12.2012, pp. 1-5).

Learning pathway

A learning pathway is a representation of the process followed by a learner to achieve knowledge, skill or competence.

Learning outcomes (expected, intended or actual)

Our understanding of learning outcomes is most definitely not linked with the simplistic notion that only objectively observable behaviours can usefully be discussed. Cognitive processes can and should be included in any discussion of learning at any level.

Learning is principally the result of effort by an individual learner. Programmes of education and training are designed to help motivate, stimulate and guide learners. When we speak of intended *programme* learning outcomes, we are thinking of the result of the transformation of a learner who actively engages with the programme of education and training.

When considering the meanings that can be extracted from learning outcomes statements, we cannot rely only upon the statement text alone, we must also consider the person who is interpreting the statement and especially the consensus that is likely to be reached by relevant communities of practice. Such communities help provide definitive support for standards. They also help support trust in and recognition of qualifications.

To members of a community of practice, a compact statement can encode substantial information that would not be fully evident to non-members from the statement alone. Within communities of practice words or phrases can be considered to encode or connect to information that would not be immediately evident to those outside the community of practice. A member of (or a group from) a community of practice can be expected to extrapolate knowledge, skill and competence from a learning outcome statement.

A learning outcome statement once established may take on new meaning as it is used over time within a community of practice. Learning outcome statements are partly symbolic (symbolising the meaning attached to them by the community of practice e.g. we know what we mean…) and rely on abstractions from the community of practitioners' repertoire.

Without communities of practice to decode the outcomes reliably and consistently, higher order learning outcome statements are challenged to encode or represent what has been learned in a way that can be understood by people outside the community of practice without being impractically detailed. The idea therefore that learning outcomes make everything transparent to everyone is naïve. However, they can be presented in such a way as to provide for layers of interpretation requiring increasing expertise.

In its most idealised form, a **learning outcome** is a stable transformation of an individual. By stable we mean enduring in time though subject to eventual decay. Though we cannot exactly measure or infer this kind of idealised learning outcome, it is nevertheless a useful concept when we are considering representations of learning outcomes and methods for the assessment (always against a standard) of learning. A learning outcome statement is a representation of a learning outcome. Learning outcome statements are often expressed in terms of statements of knowledge, skill or competence.

It is useful to distinguish between statements of:

- expected learning outcomes (e.g. the learning outcome statements in occupational standards)
- intended learning outcomes (e.g. the learning outcomes that the designers of a programme of education and training intend that learners should achieve)
- achieved learning outcomes (e.g. the learning outcomes achieved by a specific learner).

In summary, learning outcomes statements are more or less specific statements that can be interpreted reliably by relevant communities of practice to describe educational achievements, intentions or expectations for a well-defined purpose while leaving a suitable amount of latitude for interpretation and innovation.

Lifelong learning

Encompasses all purposeful learning activity, whether formal, non-formal or informal, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skill and competence.

Listed awarding body

Essentially, it means an awarding body whose name, for the time being, appears in the list of supernumerary awarding bodies that make awards that are included within the NFQ. For more information see section 55 of the 2019 Amendment Act.

Minimum intended programme learning outcome

The minimum achievement (in terms of knowledge, skill and competence) that the learner is certified to have attained if he/she successfully completes a particular programme (i.e. passes all the required assessments). The minimum intended programme learning outcomes define the minimum learning outcomes for a particular programme at the programme level.

NFQ award-type descriptor

The NFQ is a system of 10 levels (currently). Multiple award-types may be defined at each NFQ level. Award-types are characterised by award-type descriptors. For more information please see: Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications, NQAI, 2003

NFQ Award Class

There are currently five classes of awards in the NFQ (major, minor, special purpose, supplemental and professional) but professional awards may have a secondary class (major, etc.).

NFQ Level

The NFQ currently has 10 levels. Levels are defined using 'Level Indicators'. These take the form of statements about the breadth and kind of knowledge, the range and selectivity of skills, the role and context competence, learning competence and insight. For more information please see the Grid of Level Indicators

Occupation

A "job" is defined as a set of tasks and duties executed, or meant to be executed, by one person; a set of jobs whose main tasks and duties are characterised by a high degree of similarity constitutes an occupation. Persons are classified by occupation through their relationship to a past, present or future job.[5]

Programme of education and training (programme)

A programme of education and training is a process by which a learner acquires knowledge, skill or competence and includes a course of study, a course of instruction and an apprenticeship. Often, a person will gain a qualification after having earned it through successful completion of a pre-planned **programme** or course of education and training Some people gain qualifications not by following a pre-planned programme but through a process for the recognition of prior learning (RPL). In this context RPL can be thought of as being linked with a situation/individual specific and retrospectively revealed programme of education and training.

A qualification is not a programme. However, it is not unusual to see qualifications used as proxies for programmes. It is useful to differentiate qualifications from the associated programmes or RPL processes.

Provider of a programme of education and training (provider)

Provider means provider of a programme of education and training. Some providers certify their own learners, but others rely on external awarding bodies for certification.

[5] https://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=1876

A provider of a programme is responsible for enrolling qualified learners, managing and implementing the programme; and guiding, caring for and assessing learners.

If the provider is also the awarding body for the programme, then they are responsible for summative assessment to determine whether a learner has met the standard for an award.

If the provider is not the awarding body, they may or may not be responsible for summative assessment to determine whether a learner has met the standard for an award.

Qualification

"*... the formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards".*

This definition implies that a specific qualification is:

- determined by a specific competent body
- made with regard to a specific individual
- made with reference to a specific standard.

Qualification system

"National Qualifications System means all aspects of a state's activity related to the recognition of learning and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society. This includes the development and implementation of institutional arrangements and processes relating to quality assurance, assessment and the award of qualifications. A National Qualifications System may be composed of several subsystems and may include a National Qualifications Framework."

The concept of a qualifications system is important because many different groups are involved in supporting qualifications.

Recognition

Formal recognition: process of granting official status to learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences) either through:

- validation of non-formal and informal learning
- grant of equivalence, credit units or waivers
- award of qualifications (certificates, diploma or titles)

and/or social recognition: acknowledgement of the value of knowledge, skills and/or competences by economic and social stakeholders. (Cedefop, 2014).

Recognition of prior learning

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a term of art defined in the EU Council Recommendation of 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. It means "the validation of learning outcomes, namely knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning"

Standard

A series of elements whose content is defined by concerned actors. This can be:

- ***competence standards****: knowledge, skills, competences linked to the practice of a job*
- ***education standards****: statements of learning objectives, content of curricula, entry requirements and resources required to meet the learning objectives*
- ***occupational standards****: statements of the activities and tasks related to a specific job and its practice*
- ***assessment standard****: statements of the learning outcomes to be assessed and the methodology used*

- ***validation standards****: statements of the level of achievement to be reached by the person assessed, and the methodology used*
- ***certification standards****: statements of the rules applicable for obtaining a certificate or diploma as well as the rights conferred.*

The *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012* defines an **award standard** as the:

> *determination of the knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired, and where appropriate, demonstrated, by a learner before the specified award may be made*

The term **'standard'**, which featured in the qualification definition, can be defined as "norms and specifications regulating the award of qualifications"[6]. This is quite general and emphasises the social support rather than the subject of the standard or its content. More specifically, standards for qualifications express the knowledge, skill or competence required to gain a qualification (sometimes referred to as expected learning outcomes) and may include expectations concerning the programmes (formation) that lead to a qualification.

Statement of comparability

The statement of comparability compares the overall level of a foreign qualification to a national qualifications framework level and/or qualification type. While not legally binding, NARIC IRELAND advisory comparability statements are used by stakeholders such as employers, professional bodies and HEI's.

Validation of a programme of education and training designed to lead to a QQI award

Validation is a regulatory process that (in essence) determines whether (or not) a particular QQI award can be offered in respect of a provider's programme of education and training.

The term validate has other meanings in other contexts e.g. validation of prior learning.

Validation and Assessment of learning outcomes means "Confirmation by a competent body that learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, competences) acquired by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting have been assessed against predefined criteria and are compliant with the requirements of a validation standard[7]. Validation[8] typically leads to certification."

Vocational education and training

"Vocational education and training, abbreviated as VET, sometimes simply called vocational training, is the training in skills and teaching of knowledge related to a specific trade, occupation or vocation in which the student or employee wishes to participate. Vocational education may be undertaken at an educational institution, as part of secondary or tertiary education, or may be part of initial training during employment, for example as an apprentice, or as a combination of formal education and workplace learning"[9]

[6] Cedefop (2009) The Dynamics of Qualifications. Defining and renewing occupational and educational standards.
[7] EQF Interpretation https://www.eqf-support.eu/9.0.html
[8] Note: In Ireland processes for the 'validation of a programme of education and training' is a completely different use of the term 'validation' to the EQF definition of validation
[9] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Category:Education_and_training_glossary

Selected List of Networks and Institutions Referenced in Report

Aontas – National Adult Learning Organisation

CAO – Central Applications Office

CEDEFOP – European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

CoE – Council of Europe

CSO – Central Statistics Office

DEASP – Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection

DE – Department of Education

DES – Department of Education and Skills[10]

DFHERIS – Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Engineers Ireland

ENQA – European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies

EQAVET – European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training

EQF-AG – EQF Advisory Group

EQF-NCP Ireland – EQF National Coordination Point for Ireland

ERC – Educational Research Centre

ETBI – Education and Training Boards Ireland

ETBs – Education and Training Boards

ETF – European Training Foundation

EU – European Union

FÁS – An Foras Áiseanna Saothair

FETAC – Further Education and Training Awards Council

HEA – Higher Education Authority

HECA – Higher Education Colleges Association

HETAC – Higher Education and Training Awards Council

IBEC – Irish Business and Employers Confederation

IADT – Institute of Art, Design and Technology

ICTU – Irish Congress of Trade Unions

IoT – Institutes of Technology

IUA – Irish Universities Association

IUQB – Irish Universities Quality Board

NALA – National Adult Literacy Agency

NARIC – National Academic Recognition Information Centre

NCSE – National Council for Special Education

NCCA – National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NCGE – National Centre for Guidance in Education

[10] In July 2020 Government approved the establishment of a new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The Department of Education and Skills was renamed the Department of Education.

NCSE – National Council for Special Education

NQAI – National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

NRF – National Recruitment Federation

NUI – National University of Ireland

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

QQI – Quality and Qualifications Ireland

RCSI – Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland

RPL-PNI – RPL Practitioner Network Ireland

SEC – State Examinations Commission

SOLAS – An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna

SLMRU – Skills and Labour Market Research Unit

THEA – Technological Higher Education Association

TUI – Teachers' Union of Ireland

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

USI – Union of Students in Ireland

List of Acronyms

AIQRs – Annual Institutional Quality Reports

CAS – Common Awards System

CVET – Continuing Vocational Education and Training

DA – Delegated authority

DABs – Designated Awarding Bodies

ECS – Europass Certificate Supplement

ECTS – European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

EDS – Europass Diploma Supplement

ELOs – Expected Learning Outcomes

EQF – European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning

FET – Further Education and Training

HE – Higher Education

HET – Higher Education and Training

HEI – Higher Education Institution

IEM – International Education Mark

IRQ – Irish Register of Qualifications

IVET – Initial Vocational Education and Training

LAB – Listed Awarding Body

LCVP – Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

LFS – Labour Force Survey

LRC – Lisbon Recognition Convention

MISS – Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply

NFQ – National Framework of Qualifications

PATD – Professional Award-Type Descriptor

PLC/CTB – Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile

PLC – Post-Leaving Certificate

QA – Quality Assurance

QF-EHEA –Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area

QNHS – Quarterly National Household Survey

STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

TLE – Typical Learner Effort

TY – Transition Year

VECs – Vocational Education Committees

VET – Vocational Education and Training

Foreword

Qualifications matter. The attainment of knowledge, skills and competencies benefits individuals, enterprises, and society as a whole; the acknowledgment of these attainments, and their level, through well managed qualification processes and an overarching framework enables individuals to manage their learning journeys and be recognised as doing so.

This recognition is guided and managed, in Ireland, through the operation of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and is enhanced through its (the NFQ's) compatibility and comparability with the European Qualification Framework (EQF) and the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA).

The guardian and steward of the NFQ in Ireland is Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) acting on behalf of the Department of Education and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science[11]. QQI is responsible for the development and implementation of the NFQ, it is the designated EQF-National Coordination Point (EQF-NCP) for Ireland; the National Europass Centre for Ireland; and the Irish National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC).

This 2020 Report references the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and certifies the compatibility of the Irish NFQ with the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA).

Qualifications play an important role in fulfilling personal, social, and economic ambitions. The implementation of the Irish NFQ has brought greater transparency to our national system of qualifications. This report shows that the NFQ is well implemented and well regarded, delivering real benefits to users of qualifications including learners, providers, employers, researchers, regulators, credential evaluators and policymakers.

At European level, the EQF and the QF-EHEA make it easier to understand and recognise qualifications gained across borders, facilitating better prospects for lifelong learning, study and work mobility and social cohesion. Maintaining a strong relationship between the NFQ and both European frameworks reflects a longstanding European orientation of our education and training system. This report strengthens the European dimension of Ireland's national qualifications system. As countries and continents rebuild and renew their societies and economies in the midst of a global pandemic, access to inclusive and high quality education and training and the opportunity to acquire skills and qualifications to participate fully in society and manage labour market transitions will be more important than ever.

Sincere thanks go to the national stakeholders and international experts who, during very challenging times, gave generous support, advice, and expertise during the referencing process. The production of the 2020 Report was assisted by EU support under the Erasmus+ programme, for which we are also grateful.

At a personal level I would like to thank my fellow members of the Steering Group for their participation in this project and their very valuable contributions. I commend QQI for their engaged, professional and inclusive approach to this referencing project; particular thanks go to Dr. John O'Connor and Dr. Beata Sokolowska who were the executive leads on behalf of QQI. It was a real pleasure to observe their dedication and professionalism in action on behalf of the NFQ.

Paul O'Toole

Chair

EU Referencing Report – Steering Group

December 2020

[11] In July 2020 Government approved the establishment of a new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The Department of Education and Skills was renamed the Department of Education.

Executive Summary

The purpose of this 2020 Report is to present a contemporary account of Ireland's education, training, and qualifications system and to demonstrate the relationship between the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and the broader European system of qualifications. This report documents how the design and implementation of the NFQ is consistent with European expectations and standards for transparency and trust in national qualification systems. Renewing the alignment between the NFQ and relevant European benchmarks brings important benefits to learners and other users of qualifications, making it easier to understand, compare and recognise Irish qualifications across Europe. It is anticipated that this report will be an important r eference point for those interested in promoting the international recognition of Irish qualifications and those interested in significant European level qualifications developments. Longstanding national support for European ambitions for quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning, provides a strong political mandate to prepare and publish this 2020 Report.

The NFQ is defined in law as 'a system of levels and types of awards based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by a learner to entitle the learner to an award at a particular level, and of the type concerned, within the Framework. [It is intended] for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State'.

As an instrument for policy the NFQ is the single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training qualifications.

The NFQ was certified as compatible with the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) in 2006. The NFQ was separately referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) in 2009.

The 2020 NFQ European Referencing National Report (the 2020 Report) is a comprehensive single report confirming and strengthening the European dimension of the NFQ.

This report has been prepared by the competent national authorities with the advice and assistance of national stakeholders and subject to independent peer review by international experts and scrutiny by the European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group.

Chapters One–Three describes key features of Ireland's education and training system and significant changes over the past decade; details the approach and method taken to update the EQF and QF-EHEA status of the NFQ and provides a summary of the main features of the NFQ and its current state of implementation. **Chapter Four** addresses the relevant criteria and procedures required to maintain a robust alignment between the NFQ and both the EQF and the QF-EHEA, vis.:

- the legal, institutional and governance arrangements for the NFQ
- key aspects of the NFQ including the implementation of a learning outcomes approach to qualifications and national arrangements for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credit accumulation and transfer
- a detailed technical mapping of NFQ levels and qualification types to EQF level descriptors and the QF-EHEA cycle descriptors
- procedures for including qualifications within the NFQ
- national arrangements for the quality assurance of NFQ qualifications in Ireland and the compatibility of such arrangements with European norms
- the involvement of national stakeholders and competent authorities in the preparation and approval of the 2020 Report
- the role of international experts in peer-reviewing the 2020 Report
- the national visibility of European alignments in qualifications certificates, qualifications registers and qualification supplements
- arrangements for the publication and dissemination of the 2020 Report including updating of the ENIC-NARIC community.

Chapter Five outlines current NFQ developments and sets out a strategic approach for the future development, implementation, and evaluation of the NFQ.

Overall findings

Based on this report there is a clear and demonstrable relationship between the NFQ, the EQF and the QF-EHEA as follows:

Table 1 NFQ European Referencing 2020

EQF Level	QF-EHEA (Bologna)	NFQ Level	NFQ Award-Type
EQF Level 1		NFQ Level 1	Level 1 Certificate
		NFQ Level 2	Level 2 Certificate
EQF Level 2		NFQ Level 3	Level 3 Certificate
			Junior Cycle/Certificate[12]
EQF Level 3		NFQ Level 4	Level 4 Certificate
			Leaving Certificate
EQF Level 4		NFQ Level 5	Level 5 Certificate
			Level 5 Professional Award
			Advanced Certificate
EQF Level 5		NFQ Level 6	Higher Certificate
	Short Cycle Higher Education		Level 6 Professional Award
EQF Level 6		NFQ Level 7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree
			Level 7 Professional Award
	First Cycle Higher Education	NFQ Level 8	Honours Bachelor Degree
			Higher Diploma
			Level 8 Professional Award
EQF Level 7	Second Cycle Higher Education	NFQ Level 9	Post-Graduate Diploma*
			Masters Degree
			Level 9 Professional Award
EQF Level 8	Third Cycle Higher Education	NFQ Level 10	Doctoral Degree
			Higher Doctorate

*The Irish Post-Graduate Diploma is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna Second Cycle

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[12] The final Junior Certificate examination will be held in 2021 and thereafter all examinations will be called the Junior Cycle. The use of the term Junior Cycle/Certificate in this report reflects this transition period.

Chapter One: Introduction

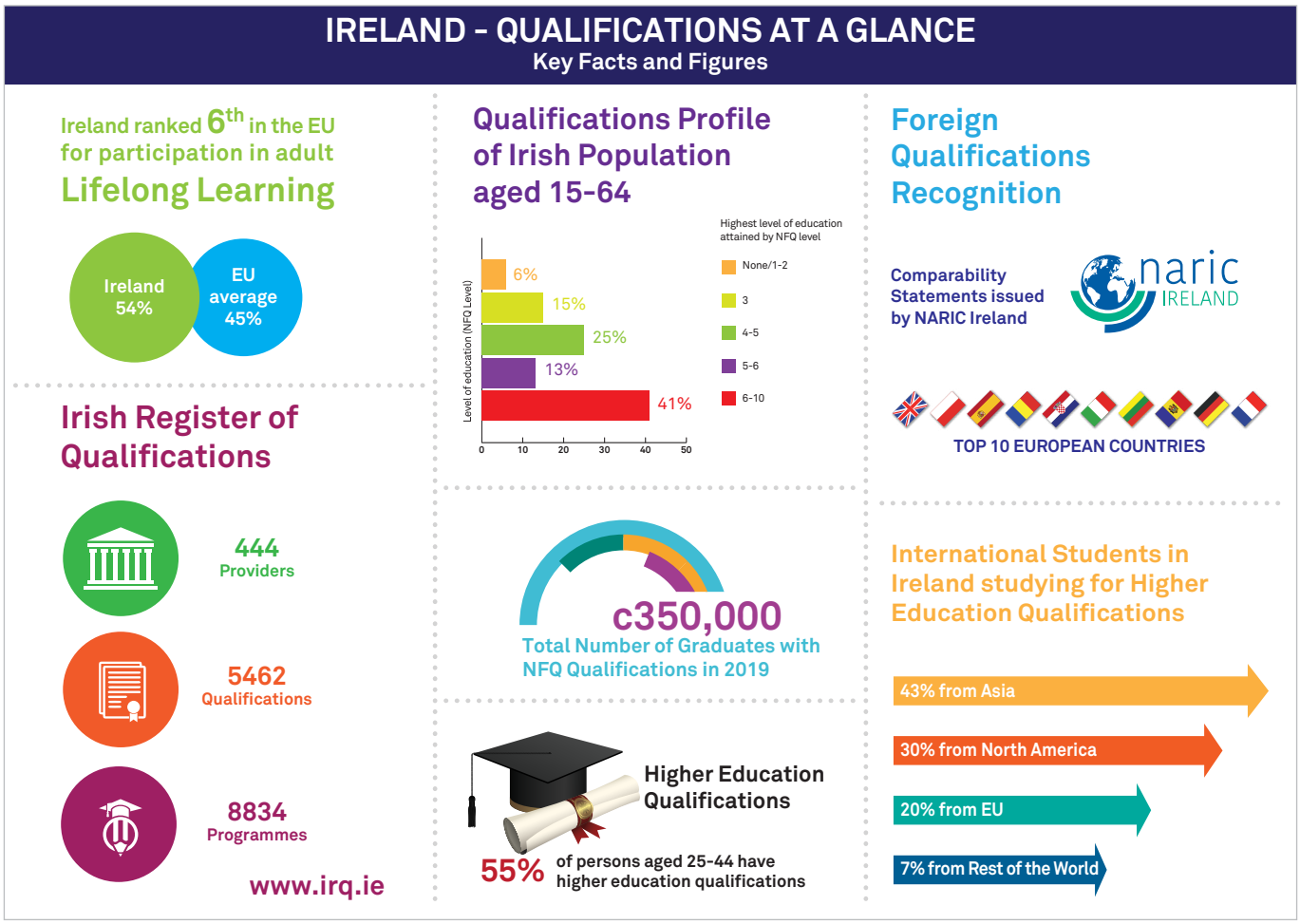
Section 1.1 Background

Qualifications, in the form of certificates, recognise the learning attainments of individuals. As a credential, a qualification confirms what individuals know, understand and can do, as a result of a learning process. Qualifications matter for individuals, influencing their prospects to gain employment, carry out an occupation or profession, access further learning opportunities and work or study in another country. Qualifications also serve important social and personal functions for learners, valuing and validating their learning achievements. Qualifications serve other important functions. For employers and enterprises, they signal the potential to perform work tasks and can be used to regulate access to certain occupations; for education and training providers, reputable qualifications carry national and international recognition, confirming the relevance and quality of courses offered to potential and enrolled learners; for policy-makers, they provide a focal point for education and training policies; for analysts and researchers, they offer measurable entities for classifying and analysing the supply of knowledge and skills in our societies. For learners and other users, the value, attractiveness, and utility of qualifications seems secure.

A qualification is the formal outcome of an assessment and validation process by a competent authority. Qualifications determine that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards. For the purpose of this report, the term qualification is used interchangeably with awards. A qualification can exist as a generalised type, with common characteristics and features, such as an Honours Bachelor Degree or a Honours Bachelor Degree in Engineering where the disciplinary orientation is reflected. A qualification can also take the form of a specific instance of these more generalised qualification types confirming an individual's unique learning achievement. A specific instance of a qualification achieved by a learner, is represented by a personalised certificate or diploma. Awarding bodies offer these more generalised forms of qualification and these are what are included within the NFQ and ultimately listed on the Irish Register of Qualifications. These subtle differences in meaning are important to set out so that readers will recognise the different forms that qualifications can take and the nuanced differences in the meaning and use of the term qualification in this report.

The Irish NFQ is a system of levels for defining, classifying and structuring qualifications in Ireland. Since its inception the widespread implementation and use of NFQ has increased the transparency of qualifications in Ireland and brought coherence to the qualifications offered in the formal education and training system. Educational standards for qualifications carrying an NFQ level are expressed in terms of learning outcomes derived from the NFQ and associated quality assurance arrangements explicitly support the integrity of the NFQ. The NFQ provides a trustworthy structure for establishing the level of qualifications and for comparing qualifications based on the range and complexity of the learning that they involve. Qualification pathways have become more apparent, enhancing prospects for lifelong learning, and supporting transitions into, within and from education and training. The NFQ is well-regarded internationally, facilitating the international recognition of qualifications gained in Ireland and providing a means to interpret and advise on the academic recognition of foreign qualifications presented in Ireland. Promoting a learning outcomes approach, the NFQ has brought a more systematic approach to the design, development, delivery, awarding and recognition of qualifications in Ireland. The Irish system of education and training qualifications is more transparent and easier to understand because of the NFQ. Arguably, by promoting more explicit qualification standards, expressed in terms of knowledge, skill and competence, the NFQ has created conditions for improved relevance and quality of qualifications. These claims about the value of the NFQ have been independently confirmed. However, they cannot be taken for granted; hard won gains can easily be lost, the integrity and reputation of the NFQ requires sustained attention and oversight by stakeholders. Data in Figure 1 provides a context for readers as a prelude to subsequent commentary.

Figure 1 Ireland – Qualifications at a Glance



Sources: Eurostat, 2019; IRQ, 2020; Labour Force Survey 2018, CSO; NARIC Ireland, Stats 2018. Education Indicators for Ireland, HEA, Key Facts and Figures Higher Education 2017/18; DES 2019.

The European currency of an Irish qualification, in EQF or QF-EHEA terms, rests on the accepted relationship between the NFQ and the respective European frameworks. The NFQ has always had a strong European and international orientation. International recognition and mobility opportunities for Irish graduates are important. European policy in the area of skills and qualifications has strengthened the NFQ, amplifying its relevance beyond national borders. The 2020 Report together with the 2006 and 2009 reports that established the original alignment between the NFQ and the QF-EHEA and with the EQF, are important milestones in strengthening and re-affirming the European status of the NFQ. Accepted international alignments of qualifications frameworks are based on credible evidence for compliance with referencing criteria and procedures. The preparation of the 2020 Report involved reflection on national practice, external peer review by selected international experts and consultation with stakeholders including the wider European qualifications community. The periodic review and publication of updated referencing reports provide an opportunity to strengthen and promote the European dimension of the NFQ.

Alignment of the NFQ with both the EQF and the QF-EHEA is important for learners in Ireland. Irish graduates are internationally mobile, and so it is important that their qualifications continue to be well-regarded and recognised for further study or employment abroad. Qualifications from other countries participating in the EQF or QF-EHEA enjoy efficient recognition in Ireland. Academic recognition processes in Ireland are consistent with the recommendation on use of qualifications frameworks contained in the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC).

The 2020 Report builds on the 2006 and 2009 national reports. The respective criteria and procedures of both processes are fully addressed in a single report providing a contemporary account of:

- the education, training and qualifications system in Ireland
- the development of the Irish NFQ
- the relationship between level descriptors of the NFQ and respective level descriptors of the EQF and cycle descriptors of the QF-EHEA
- the extent to which national arrangements for quality assuring qualifications in the NFQ are consistent with relevant European principles and practice
- the transparency of procedures for the inclusion of qualifications within the NFQ
- the implementation of the learning outcomes approach to qualifications in Ireland
- the role of the NFQ in supporting national arrangements for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning
- the institutional and legislative arrangements that underpin the NFQ
- the nature and extent of stakeholder engagement and support for the NFQ
- the visibility and application of qualifications frameworks as tools for lifelong learning, qualifications recognition and mobility
- the future development of the NFQ and the further implementation of the EQF and the QF-EHEA in Ireland

QQI Green Paper on Qualifications

In June 2020, QQI published a Green Paper on Qualifications. It is an important and timely companion text to the 2020 Report. The Green Paper uses the idea of a qualifications system as a way of thinking about, explaining and understanding qualifications. This conceptual framework, with its stated assumptions and interpretations, offers a sound basis for exploring qualifications in terms of their technical and social properties; opportunities for reform; and system dynamics for effecting innovation and change.

The Green Paper on Qualifications is intended to prompt a national conversation about qualifications in Ireland. Aspects of the Green paper may be contested, and new ideas may be put forward that challenge or even disrupt prevailing assumptions. Such engagement is to be welcomed. It is important that the NFQ remains dynamic, alert to wider policy developments and innovations and connected to real world problems in education and training. The consultation process on the Green Paper will extend beyond the publication of the 2020 Report but that dialogue is important to interested readers of the 2020 Report.

Section 1.2 2006 QF-EHEA Self-certification and 2009 EQF Referencing Reports

A significant development over the past two decades has been the emergence of regional or meta-qualification frameworks. These supra-national processes have encouraged and strengthened the level to level articulation among participating national qualification systems or national frameworks. Europe has led the way with two advanced and influential regional qualifications frameworks.

The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA)[13] has its origins in the 1999 Bologna Declaration with the 'Dublin (level) Descriptors' for bachelor, masters and doctorate level studies adopted in 2005 (See QF-EHEA cycle descriptors in *Appendix I*). The development of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF)[14] commenced in 2005 and was formally adopted by EU member states in 2008 (See EQF Level Descriptors in *Appendix 2* as revised in 2017 Recommendation).

[13] http://www.ehea.info/page-qualification-frameworks

[14] For useful background material and official texts and reports on EQF see https://europa.eu/europass/en/european-qualifications-framework-eqf

These two European qualification frameworks emerged from separate political processes, but they are similar in important respects. Both are meta-frameworks, relating national systems to each other using common reference points; both cover a broad scope of learning and are designed to improve transparency of qualifications and qualifications systems in Europe. Both European frameworks promote the centrality of learning outcomes and quality assurance arrangements that underpin public confidence in qualifications. Both European frameworks share the ultimate aim of supporting lifelong learning and skills mobility by improving the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications.

The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning

The EQF was established in 2008 as a common reference framework of qualifications, expressed as learning outcomes at increasing levels of proficiency. The EQF serves as a translation device between different qualifications systems and their levels. It is intended to benefit learners, workers, jobseekers, social partners, education and training providers, qualification recognition bodies, government authorities and international organisations.

Referencing a national qualifications framework or qualifications systems to the EQF requires the preparation of a detailed referencing report addressing each of the EQF referencing criteria (See *Appendix 3* for EQF Referencing Criteria and Procedures). Referencing reports are considered by the EQF Advisory Group (EQF-AG), and final reports are published. The EQF-AG is the governing structure for the EQF. Hosted by the EU Commission, its membership includes EU member states, candidate and third countries, European level social partners, learner representative groups, NGOs, and other public entities such as the Council of Europe, Cedefop and the European Public Employment Service[15]. Final referencing reports prepared by participating countries are presented to the EQF-AG for discussion and approval. The EQF referencing process helps to promote greater comparability, coherence, and transparency among participating national qualifications systems. Referencing promotes trust in a national qualifications system and in the EQF.

Selected extracts from the 2017 Recommendation help to provide useful context for the 2020 Report.

'The purpose of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) is to improve the transparency, comparability and portability of people's qualifications.'

'*A wide range of stakeholders should be involved in implementing the EQF at Union and national levels in order to ensure its broad support. Key stakeholders include all learners, education and training providers, qualifications authorities, quality assurance bodies, employers, trade unions, chambers of industry, commerce and skilled crafts, bodies involved in the recognition of academic and professional qualifications, employment services and services in charge of migrant integration.'*

'the Commission concluded that the EQF Advisory Group has provided effective guidance for national referencing processes and has built trust and understanding among participating countries. It further concluded that the effectiveness of the EQF National Coordination Points largely depends on how closely they are linked to the national governance of the referencing process.'

'National qualifications frameworks and systems change over time, therefore referencing to the EQF should be reviewed and updated, whenever relevant.'

'this recommendation conforms to the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality by supporting and supplementing Member States' activities through facilitating further cooperation between them to increase the transparency, comparability and portability of people's qualifications'

'This recommendation consolidates the EQF as a common reference framework of eight levels expressed as

[15] For a full list of EQF-AG membership https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/index.cfm?do=groupDetail.groupDetail&groupID=2107

learning outcomes, serving as a translation device between different qualifications frameworks or systems and their levels.'

'Coherence, complementarity and synergies at national and Union levels should exist between the implementation of the EQF, national qualifications frameworks or systems and tools on transparency and recognition of skills, competences and qualifications, including those for quality assurance, credit accumulation and transfer and tools developed in the context of the European Higher Education Area on transparency and recognition of skills, competences and qualifications.'

The 2017 EQF Recommendation invites member states in accordance with national circumstances[16] to:

1. *'Use the EQF to reference national qualifications frameworks or systems and to compare all types and levels of qualifications in the Union that are part of national qualifications frameworks or systems, in particular by referencing their qualification levels to levels of the EQF set out in Annex II and by using the criteria set out in Annex III.*

2. *Review and update, when relevant, the referencing of the levels of the national qualifications frameworks or systems to the levels of the EQF set out in Annex II and using the criteria set out in Annex III, with due regard to the national context.*

3. *Ensure that qualifications with an EQF level are in accordance with the common principles for quality assurance set out in Annex IV, without prejudice to national quality assurance principles that apply to national qualifications.*

4. *Where appropriate, promote links between credit systems and national qualifications frameworks or systems taking into account the common principles on credit systems set out in Annex V, without prejudice to national decisions to (i) make use of credit systems; and (ii) relate them to national qualifications frameworks or systems. Those common principles will not lead to an automatic recognition of qualifications.*

5. *Where appropriate, take measures, so that all newly issued qualification documents by the competent authorities (e.g. certificates, diplomas, certificate supplements, diploma supplements), and/or registers of qualifications contain a clear reference to the appropriate EQF level.*

6. *Make the results of the referencing process publicly available at national and Union levels and, where possible, ensure that information on qualifications and their learning outcomes is accessible and published, using the data fields in accordance with Annex VI.*

7. *Encourage the use of EQF by social partners, public employment services, education providers, quality assurance bodies and public authorities to support the comparison of qualifications and transparency of the learning outcomes.*

8. *Ensure the continuation and coordination of tasks implemented by EQF National Coordination Points (EQF-NCP). The main tasks of the EQF-NCP are to support national authorities in referencing national qualifications frameworks or systems to the EQF and to bring the EQF closer to individuals and organisations.'*

The Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA).

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is an international collaboration on higher education involving 48 countries. The central structural reform is the QF-EHEA with its respective cycle descriptors; short; first (Bachelor); second (Masters); and third (PhD) cycle. Each cycle is set out in terms of learning outcomes or descriptors of what a learner is expected to know, to understand and to be able to do at the end of the respective qualification cycle. In concert with the policy aspirations of the EQF, the aspiration of the EHEA

[16] Please note that references to annexes in 1-8 above refer to annexes in the 2017 EQF Recommendation, not to this report.

is to facilitate student mobility, improve the comparability and transparency of national higher education systems and to increase the quality and attractiveness of higher education in Europe. Countries participating in the EHEA are invited to certify the compatibility of their higher education qualifications system with the cycle descriptors of the QF-EHEA (See *Appendix 4* for Criteria and Procedures for QF-EHEA Self-certification).

As a signatory to the Lisbon Recognition Convention, Ireland has committed national competent authorities to the use of qualifications frameworks, national and regional, in the academic recognition of qualifications[17]. QQI is the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC) and a member of the European Network of Information Centres in the European Region[18]. In this capacity, QQI makes use of national and regional qualifications frameworks to inform recognition advice on foreign qualifications. Bilateral work between QQI and qualifications authorities in other jurisdictions has made use of respective alignments with the EQF to establish level to level qualification comparisons that support qualification recognition advice[19].

Original Irish referencing reports 2006 and 2009

In 2006, Ireland self-certified the compatibility of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) with the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). In 2009 Ireland referenced the Irish NFQ with the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF). On both occasions Ireland was among the first countries to relate its national system of qualifications with both European regional qualifications frameworks. The Irish reports were viewed as examples of good practice at the time of their publication and established clear and convincing alignments between qualification types and levels in Ireland and their respective European comparators.

The 2006 QF-EHEA Self-certification Report concluded that:

- the Irish Higher Certificate is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna First Cycle20
- the Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degree is compatible with the Bologna First Cycle descriptor
- However, holders of Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degrees and their equivalent former awards do not generally immediately access programmes leading to second cycle awards.
- the Irish Honours Bachelor Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna First Cycle
- the Irish Higher Diploma is a qualification at the same level as completion of the first cycle
- and is a qualification typically attained in a different field of learning than an initial first cycle award
- the Irish Masters Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna Second Cycle
- the Irish Post-Graduate Diploma is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna Second Cycle
- the Irish Doctoral Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna Third Cycle.

[17] See the 2013 LRC subsidiary text on the recommended use qualifications frameworks in the recognition of foreign qualifications.

[18] The European Commission, Council of Europe and UNESCO cooperate in the area of qualifications recognition. Further information on NARIC and ENIC-NARIC see https://www.enic-naric.net/

[19] QQI recently published separate comparisons of qualifications systems in Ireland and Hong Kong and Ireland and New Zealand. This work was based on respective alignments of national systems with the EQF.

[20] The Paris Conference of Ministers of Higher Education (2018) adopted the revised overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA, including short-cycle qualifications as a stand-alone qualification within the overarching QF-EHEA. Each country can decide whether and how to integrate short cycle qualifications within its own national framework

Table 2 Correspondence between NFQ and QF-EHEA (2006)

Irish NFQ levels	QF-EHEA Cycles
10	Third cycle
9	Second cycle
8 / 7	First cycle
6	Short cycle

It was noted that there is an 'apparent inconsistency' in the treatment of both the Ordinary Bachelor Degree and the Honours Bachelor Degree as first cycle qualifications compatible with the Bologna First Cycle descriptor. The compatibility of both with the Bologna First Cycle descriptor has been demonstrated in terms of the comparisons of the learning outcomes. Notwithstanding this, these awards are included at two different levels in the Irish framework, with different descriptors, and the Ordinary Bachelor Degree does not typically give access to Masters Degree (second cycle) programmes at present in Ireland.

The 2006 report anticipated the need for periodic review and updating of referencing reports concluding that 'the Irish authorities should review this verification in the light of the implementation of the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area by other countries, particularly in the context of new progression arrangements being put in place.'

The 2009 EQF Referencing Report for Ireland established a clear and demonstrable link between the levels of the Irish NFQ and the level descriptors of the EQF in the following manner:

Table 3 Correspondence between NFQ and EQF (2009)

Irish NFQ	EQF
10	8
9	7
8	6
7	6
6	5
5	4
4	3
3	2
2	1
1	1

The EQF is officially aligned with the QF-EHEA and its cycle descriptors. The short cycle (that can be linked to or within the first cycle), the first, second and third cycles of the QF-EHEA correspond to EQF Levels 5–8 respectively (see Table 4).

Table 4 Correspondence between EQF and QF-QF-EHEA

EQF Levels	QF-EHEA Cycles
5	Short Cycle higher education
6	First Cycle
7	Second Cycle
8	Third Cycle

Figure 2 Correspondence between NFQ, EQF and the QF-EHEA

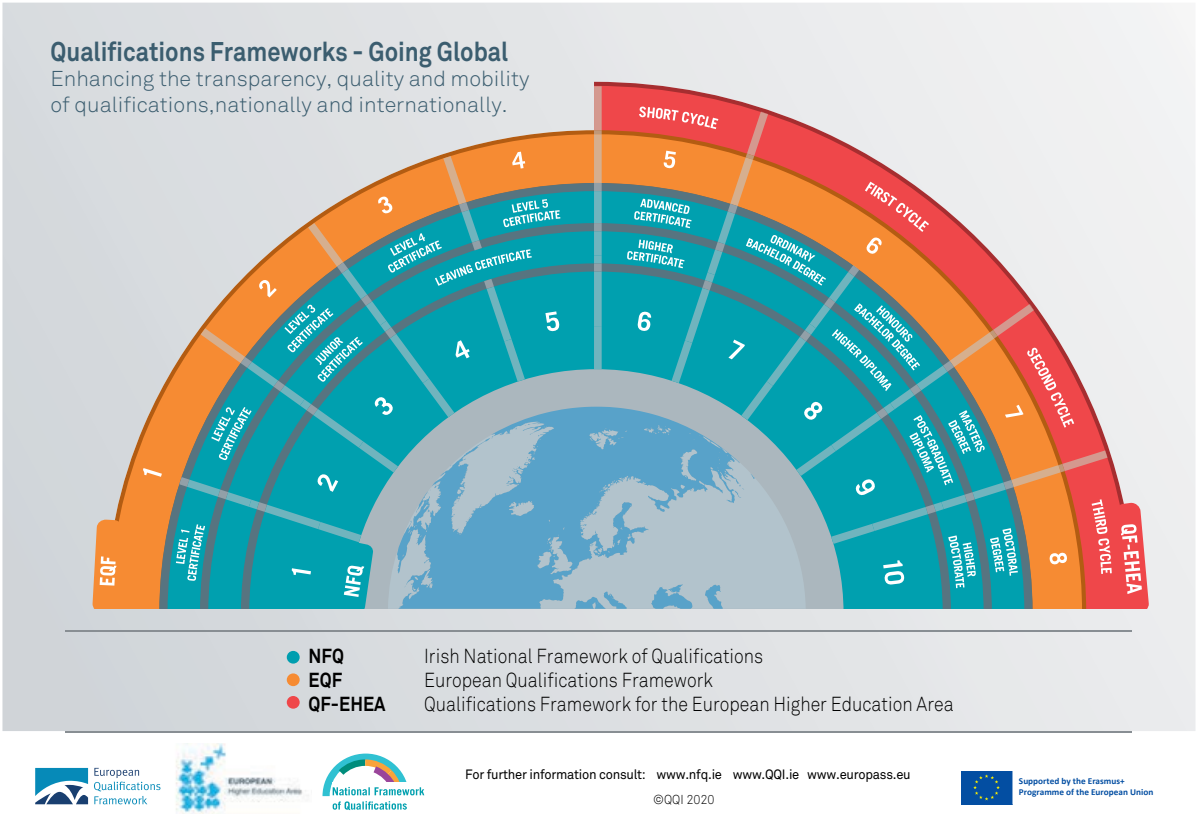


Table 5 shows the current alignments between the NFQ and both the QF-EHEA and the EQF. The 2020 Report confirms these pre-existing alignments.

Table 5 NFQ – Previously Established European Alignments

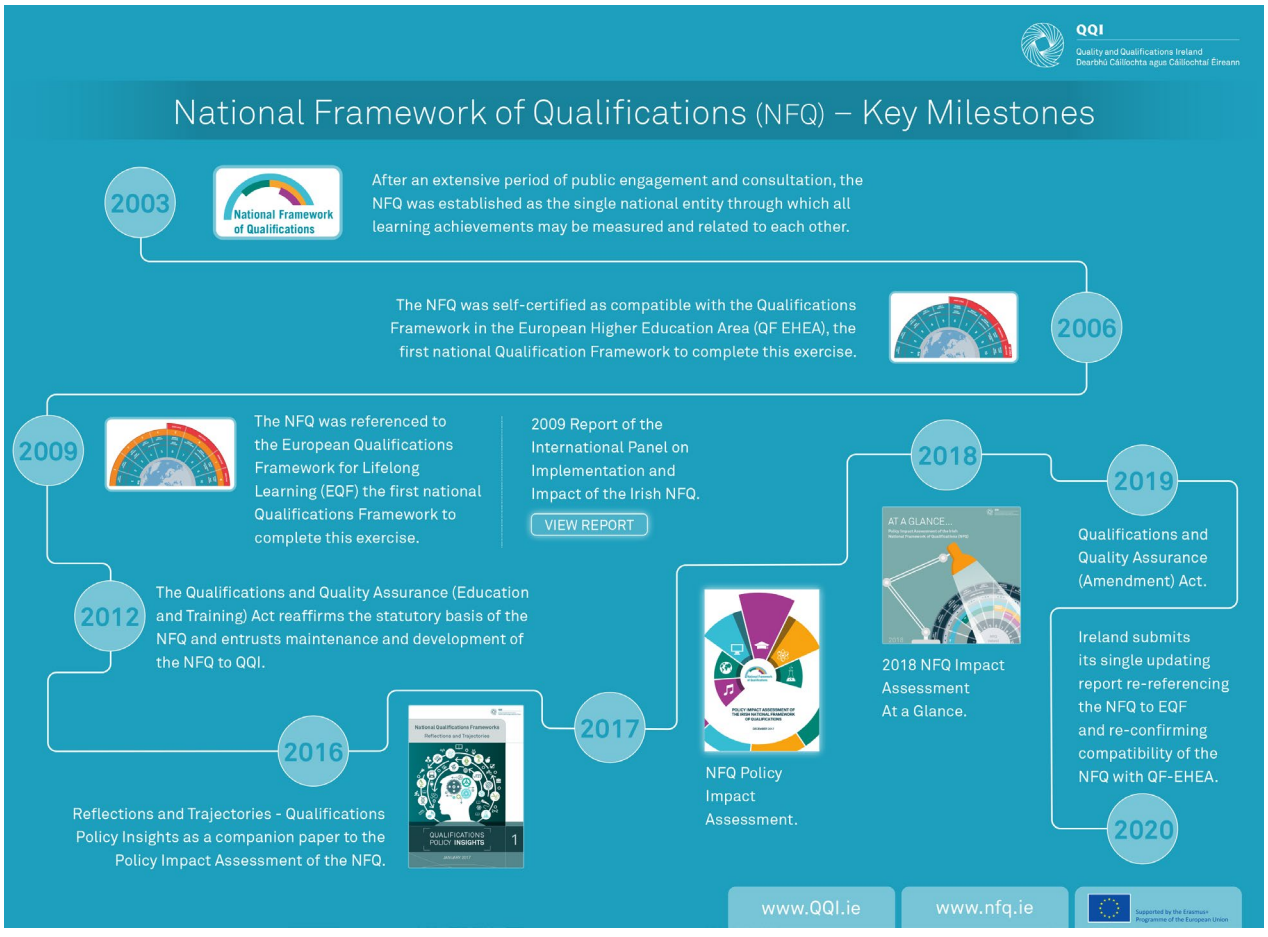
EQF Level	QF-EHEA (Bologna)	NFQ level	NFQ Award-Type
EQF Level 1		NFQ Level 1	Level 1 Certificate
		NFQ Level 2	Level 2 Certificate
EQF Level 2		NFQ Level 3	Level 3 Certificate; Junior Certificate

EQF Level 3		NFQ Level 4	Level 4 Certificate; Leaving Certificate
EQF Level 4		NFQ Level 5	Level 5 Certificate; Leaving Certificate
EQF Level 5		NFQ Level 6	Advanced Certificate
	Short Cycle Higher Education		Higher Certificate
EQF Level 6	First Cycle Higher Education	NFQ Level 7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree
		NFQ Level 8	Honours Bachelor Degree; Higher Diploma
EQF Level 7	Second Cycle Higher Education	NFQ Level 9	Masters Degree; Post-Graduate Diploma
EQF Level 8	Third Cycle Higher Education	NFQ Level 10	Doctoral Degree; Higher Doctorate

Section 1.3 Significant National Developments

Over the past decade the Irish NFQ has remained stable in terms of its principal technical features. One technical innovation was the development of the Professional Award-Type Descriptor (PATD) at NFQ Levels 5-9 (EQF 4-7). The PATD will be described in detail later in this report. Since its establishment in 2003, the NFQ has been developed, implemented, widely used and independently evaluated (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3 NFQ Key Milestones 2003-2020



Since the original European referencing reports, there have been important **legislative and institutional** developments in Ireland. These include:

- Quality and Qualifications Ireland was established in 2012, consolidating the integration of institutional and regulatory for qualifications and for quality assurance in the post-secondary education and training system
- the Irish NFQ was established in law under the *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999*. It was re-authorised under *the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012*. The *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019* further strengthened the centrality of the NFQ as a co-ordinating mechanism for qualifications in Ireland, provided for a wider range of awarding organisations to access the NFQ and clarified the legal route to the NFQ for all qualifications.
- In 2010 the Department of Education and Science became the Department of Education and Skills reflecting the transfer of responsibility for skills training from the then Department of Enterprise Trade and Jobs (DETJ) and the transfer of research policy to DETJ.
    - Since July 2020 there are two Government Departments with lead responsibility for setting education and training priorities and supporting delivery. The Department of Education continues to be responsible for primary and secondary general education while a newly established Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is responsible for policy, funding and governance of the higher and further education and research sectors and for the oversight of the work of the State agencies and public institutions operating in those areas. A single updated EQF referencing and QF-EHEA self-certification report in 2020 is timely, given government commitment to closer integration between further and higher education and training in Ireland.

Further education and training

- Following the financial crisis, the Government in 2013 streamlined the former 33 Vocational Education Committees into 16 new Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and decided to transfer the training function of FÁS to the ETBs with the aim of bringing local and regional coherence to FET. The Government also decided to create a new authority, SOLAS, The Further Education and Training Authority, under the aegis of the then Department of Education and Skills, with responsibility for the strategic co-ordination and funding of the further education and training sector.

Higher education

- The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 was announced in 2011. This strategy sets out a new vision for higher education in Ireland. The Strategy led to the enactment of the Technological University legislation in March 2018 (*Technological Universities Act, 2018*) which sets out a process whereby consortia may submit an application for technological university designation. Technological universities will address the social and economic needs of their region and will engage in industry-focused research. They will focus on science and technology programmes that are vocationally and professionally oriented.

As of 2020, there is currently one designated technological university, one consortium pending designation and three consortia engaged in the process to become designated as technological universities.

General education

- A major reform of Junior Cycle was introduced in 2015 which gives schools greater flexibility to design programmes that are suited to the needs of their Junior Cycle students and to the particular context of the school.
- The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) conducted a review of Senior Cycle between 2016-2019. Informed by national and international research and by feedback from extensive

consultations nationwide, the review identified many strengths in the existing Senior Cycle and highlighted areas where there is scope to further develop Senior Cycle education.

Ireland's **skills policy and architecture** has evolved. A new strategy, central coordinating mechanisms and regional orientation aim to ensure better anticipation of skills needs and better alignment between skills demand and supply.

Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 aims to support the development, activation and utilisation of the labour market relevant skills. A National Skills Council brings together high-level officials from relevant public and private bodies and aims to improve coordination and cohesion within the skills system and act as an advisory and a reporting body. It mediates the provision of labour market intelligence. The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs advise Government on current and future skills requirements and makes recommendations on how the education and training system, including the enterprise sector, can respond to identified skill mismatches. The Skills and Labour Market Research Unit at SOLAS provides a data gathering, analytical and research resource to identify skills needs and support the work of the National Skills Council. Nine Regional Skills Fora were established under the National Skills Strategy, these provide an opportunity for employers and the education and training system to work together to meet the emerging skills needs of their regions.

The Human Capital Initiative (2019) aims to address key challenges for the Irish economy, including demographic change, Brexit and shifting skills requirements. From 2020-24, annual investments of EUR 60 million have been planned through the National Training Fund to increase tertiary provision in high demand skills, provide graduates with industry-relevant skills for emerging technologies, embed transversal skills development across the sector and drive agility and innovation in higher education. Distribution of the fund is planned according to priorities identified through the framework developed by the National Skills Council.

Future Jobs Ireland (2019) is a whole of Government initiative setting out an economic pathway based on embracing innovation and technological change, improving productivity, increasing labour force participation, enhancing skills and developing talent and transitioning to a low carbon economy.

Renewed Government effort to expand **apprenticeship** and traineeships in Ireland since 2015 has supported a significant expansion in the range of occupations making use of dual-VET programmes and has encouraged the offer of apprenticeships at higher levels of the NFQ where appropriate.

The Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ) is provided for by Section 79 of the *Quality and Qualifications Act 2012*. It was launched in 2019 by QQI and it will be a central repository for information about qualifications that are included in the NFQ and their associated programmes. When fully implemented it will provide much-needed infrastructure to facilitate the recognition and understanding of qualifications in the NFQ.

Section 1.4 Significant European Developments

The past decade has seen many European-level policy developments that have created an important context for domestic education, training and qualifications policy and practice. Qualifications and qualifications frameworks are routinely referenced in European policy texts that aim to make Europe the best region in the world in which to live, work and study. Table 6 shows a selection of developments that set a European context to qualifications and quality assurance policy and practice in Ireland.

Table 6 Selected European Developments post-2009

2020 New EU Skills Agenda 2020 Communication on European Education Area	2015 European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA
2018 EU Council Decision on Europass	2015 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System User Guide
2018 EU Council Recommendation on Promoting Automatic Mutual Recognition of Qualifications	2015 Riga Conclusions

2018 Paris Communique on QF-EHEA	2013 Council of Europe/UNESCO Recommendation on the use of Qualifications Frameworks in the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications
2018 Key Competences Framework for Lifelong Learning revised	2013 EU Directive on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications
2017 EU Council Recommendation on EQF	2012 EU Council Recommendation on the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning
2017 EU Pillar of Social Rights	2010 Bruges Communiqué 2010 Launch of the European Higher Education Area
2017 Vision for European Education Area	2009 EU Council Recommendation on Quality Assurance in VET
2016 EU Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways	2009 EU Council Recommendation on European Credit System for VET (ECVET)

Section 1.5 UK Withdrawal from the EU

Notwithstanding the decision of the UK to withdraw from the EU in 2016, high levels of mobility for work and study opportunities between Ireland and the UK are likely to continue. It is important to maintain agreed level to level correspondences among the various qualifications frameworks in the UK and Ireland. The broad alignment of qualifications frameworks across Ireland and the four UK nations, as shown in Table 7, is informed and strengthened by each country's respective referencing to EQF and self-certified compatibility with the QF-EHEA.

Table 7 Broad Alignment of Qualification in UK and Ireland with EQF

<table>
<tr><th>National Framework of Qualifications for Ireland (NFQ)</th><th>Regulated Qualifications Framework for England and NI (RQF)</th><th>Framework for Higher Education Qualifications for England and NI (FHEQ)</th><th>European Qualifications Framework (EQF)</th><th>Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)</th><th>Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)</th></tr>
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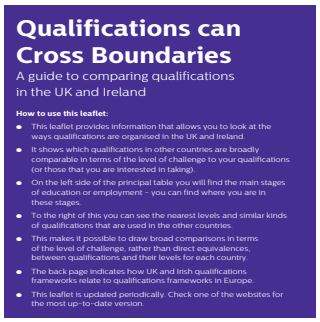


The Irish and UK qualifications and quality assurance authorities collaborate to maintain comparability between the respective qualifications systems across the five countries. Qualifications can Cross Boundaries (updated 2019) describes the alignment of qualification levels and qualification types. The updated EQF referencing reports for Scotland (2018), Wales (2019), England and Northern Ireland (2019) are reflected in the current edition as are the respective qualification levels associated with apprenticeship training. This publication, updated annually, supports academic recognition practices of NARIC Ireland and NARIC UK.

Section 1.6 Rationale and Method for 2020 European Referencing Report

Establishing and maintaining alignment between the NFQ and both the EQF and the QF-EHEA requires a transparent technical mapping the correspondence between respective qualifications and level descriptors. However, referencing is more than a technical exercise. European criteria and procedures invite a description of the education, training and qualifications system in which the NQF is located. Referencing reports typically describe the governance, institutional, regulatory and quality assurance arrangements that pertain to qualifications. There have been important changes across the education and training system in Ireland since the original referencing reports were completed over a decade ago. The initial Irish referencing reports for EQF and for QF-EHEA were well received internationally and seen as exemplary. However, it is time to update these reports. Updating referencing reports is important so that they contain a contemporary and reliable description of the Irish NFQ in European terms. The reputation of qualifications gained in Ireland is strengthened when accompanied by an account of developments shaping their design, development, delivery, assessment, certification, quality assurance and recognition.

The updating of QF-EHEA self-certification reports is seen as an important commitment in strengthening the three-cycle system compatible with the overarching QF-EHEA[21]. Updating reports is seen as necessary to reinforce quality and cooperation within the EHEA and consequently to support the recognition of higher education qualifications.

The EQF Recommendation was revised in 2017. The core objectives agreed over a decade ago to create transparency and mutual trust in the landscape of qualifications in Europe are preserved. The 2017 Recommendation 'invites Member States to review and update their referencing to the EQF when relevant, which helps to ensure that the information underpinning the referencing is accurate, transparent and reflects any relevant changes at national level'.

In April 2018, the EQF-AG agreed guidance on updating EQF referencing reports consistent with the 2017 EU Council Recommendation on EQF[22]. This guidance sets out expectations for: the frequency and rationale for updating; the approach and methods for updating reports; guidance on peer-review; and the procedure for EQF-AG discussion and endorsement. The EQF-AG advise that 'referencing updates do not put into question the EQF-AGs endorsement of the ini tial referencing'. The 2020 Report has been produced in line with EQF-AG guidance on updating referencing reports.

Approach to preparing the 2020 Report

The Department of Education and Skills (DES)[23] together with QQI initiated the preparation of the 2020 Report in late 2019. QQI has a statutory role in connection with the development of the NFQ and is required to promote the international recognition of qualifications. QQI is the designated EQF National Coordination Point for Ireland

[21] See the work of EHEA Thematic Peer Group A – Qualifications Frameworks http://www.ehea.info/page-peer-group-A-QF and also the ongoing work of the EHEA Network of National Correspondents for Qualifications Frameworks https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/qualificationsframeworks

[22] Note AG 43-4-REV Brussels, April 2018. Circulation limited to EQF-AG

[23] In July 2020 Government approved the establishment of a new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The Department of Education and Skills was renamed the Department of Education.

(EQF-NCP Ireland) and acts as the National Correspondent for Qualifications Frameworks (QF-EHEA). QQI is the Irish NARIC and the National Europass Centre.

After an initial assessment of the original reports to identify text that was no longer accurate and where there were important omissions, it became apparent that a brief update would not constitute a satisfactory response. The 2020 Report is presented as a re-referencing of the NFQ with the EQF and a re-certification of the compatibility of the NFQ with the QF-EHEA. On this basis a project plan was approved for the preparation of a national report presenting the 2020 position. It was important that the national report be technically robust and complete, providing clear and credible responses to the various criteria and procedures. It was also important that stakeholders had the opportunity to provide input into and advice on the preparation of the 2020 Report. The production of this report involved desk research, technical drafting, and structured stakeholder engagement. A stakeholder steering group was established to oversee and advise on the preparation of the 2020 Report (See *Appendix 9* for terms of reference of Steering Group and *Appendix 10* for membership of Steering Group). Letters of Endorsement from various statutory bodies participating in the Steering Group are included in *Appendix 7.*

The Steering Group included three international experts from Finland, Estonia, and the UK (Wales) who participated in Steering Group meetings and provided a critical and independent peer review of the 2020 Report. A focus group of higher education institutions with degree awarding powers was also established to gather expert opinion on elements of the report. (See *Appendix 11* for membership of the Designated Awarding Body Focus Group).

A state of play update on the preparation of the 2020 Report was provided to the EQF-AG on 16 June 2020. This afforded an opportunity to set out Ireland's approach to preparing the 2020 Report to a European community of qualifications experts and policymakers.

The 2020 Report provides a contemporary account of Ireland's qualifications system. It is necessarily selective given the imperative to address specific criteria and procedures agreed at European level, the information needs of the target audience and the need to produce a timely report. Qualifications systems are dynamic and complex, beyond the scope of a referencing report to fully comprehend and explain. As noted earlier, the Green Paper on Qualifications aims to stimulate reflection and ongoing dialogue on qualifications in Ireland, their role, effectiveness, opportunities and challenges. It should be consulted as a useful companion to the 2020 Report, inviting interested readers to engage critically and deeply with topical issues, including the role of the NFQ in our national qualifications system.

COVID-19

The preparation of this report commenced in late 2019. In March 2020 COVID-19 presented an immediate public health crisis. The pandemic also disrupted the delivery of education and altered both the ways that people work and work priorities. A significant body of work to prepare this report was undertaken while the Irish education system was rapidly adapting and reorganising in response to COVID-19.

The pandemic has raised important questions about qualification standards and about the regulation and recognition of qualifications during 2020. Teaching, learning and assessment was disrupted and the effects of COVID-19 on learning are only just beginning to be understood. Ultimately, only time will tell the full effect and impact of COVID-19 on education systems and on learners. During the summer of 2020, QQI as the quality regulator for further and higher education and training in Ireland undertook a comprehensive evaluation of the initial response of higher education and further education and training institutions in Ireland to the COVID-19 crisis.

The Impact of COVID-19 modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education – A QQI Evaluation details the measures taken by universities, institutes of technology, Education and Training Boards, private higher education institutions during the global pandemic which resulted in lockdown of physical campuses.

The report finds that the further and higher education and training system held up well, demonstrating levels of resilience and a capacity for coordinated action. Like other country systems, marginalised and vulnerable groups of learners were reported to have been disproportionately impacted by the negative impacts of COVID-19. While there are important lessons to be learned from the initial response, the QQI report concludes that the overall

quality of the education, training and assessment experience in further and higher education and training was preserved during very difficult circumstances. The report also provides strong grounds to have confidence in the integrity of NFQ qualifications gained in 2020.

One finding of particular significance to the 2020 Report was the value of the learning outcomes approach in providing a focus and maintaining educational standards during a period of significant upheaval. The QQI report (p. 171) concluded that:

> 'The principle of the conservation of essential learning outcomes helped focus minds on what needed to be done rather than what could no longer be done. The time invested by the institutions in the elaboration of intended programme and module learning outcomes over the past 20 years stood them in good stead during this emergency. Learning outcomes concepts were central in the development of the QQI principles to guide alternative assessment arrangements that were developed and agreed with the representative bodies IUA, THEA, ETBI, and HECA and directly with RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences and TU Dublin. The usefulness of learning outcomes was no surprise to us. We have long promoted their use, for example through the National Framework of Qualifications, and we recently published a Green Paper on the Qualifications System that explores a wide and intricate range of issues related to the support of qualifications standards.'

Chapter Two: The Education and Training System in Ireland

This chapter provides an overview of the Irish education and training system. In the first instance, selected national statistics provide insights into the education and qualification profile of the population. Secondly, this chapter describes the education and training sub-sectors; general or school education; further education and training; higher education and training; and the qualifications associated with each sub-sector.

Section 2.1 Education and Skills Profile of the Population

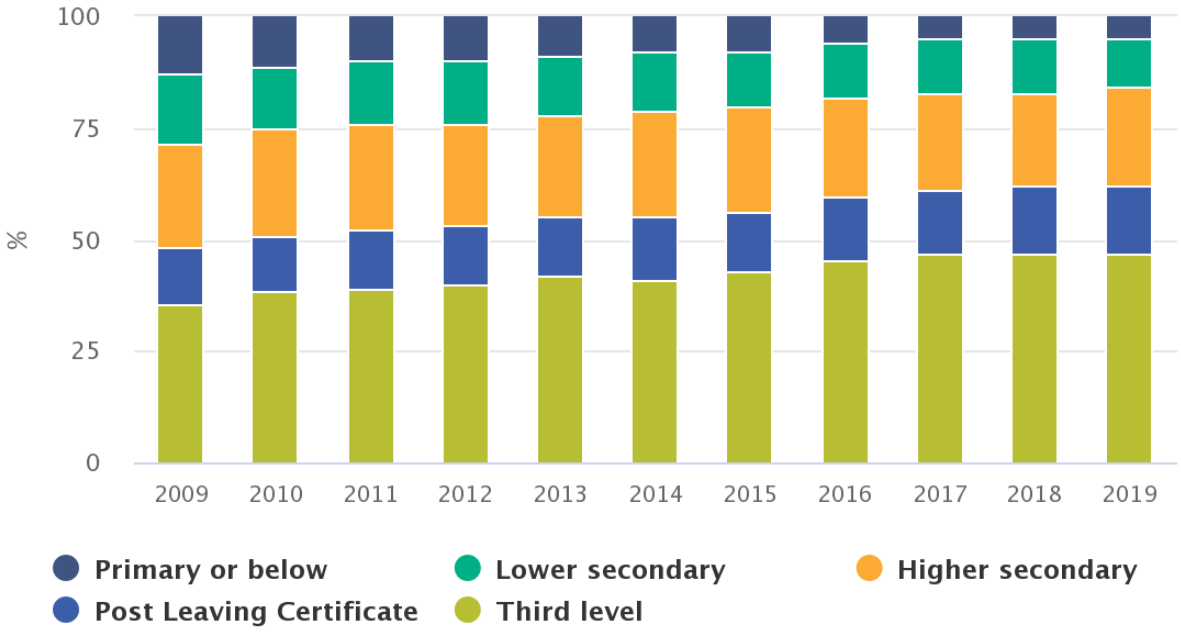
Full-time enrolments at all levels of education have risen strongly in recent years driven by a combination of demographic pressures and increased participation. Enrolments are projected to peak in 2019 at primary level, in 2024 at post-primary and in 2031 at third level. 'Early school leaving has continued to decline, and participation in early childhood education and care is to be supported by new national schemes. Ireland implements initiatives aimed at upskilling and increasing adult participation in learning and training but the numbers of low-skilled adults in the population remain sizeable.'[24]

Levels of educational attainment

Over the last ten years, there has been an increase in the proportion of those aged between 25–64 participating in third level education, from 37% in Q2 2009 to 47% in Q2 2019.

This has been accompanied by a steady decrease in the proportion with primary education only/no formal education from 13% in Q2 2009 to 5% in Q2 2019. The percentage of males with primary education only/no formal education decreased in the last ten years from 14% in Q2 2009 to 8% in Q2 2019. The corresponding proportion of females dropped from 11% to 6%.

Figure 4 Highest Level of Education Attained by Persons (aged 15-64) Q2 2009 – Q2 2019



Source: CSO Ireland

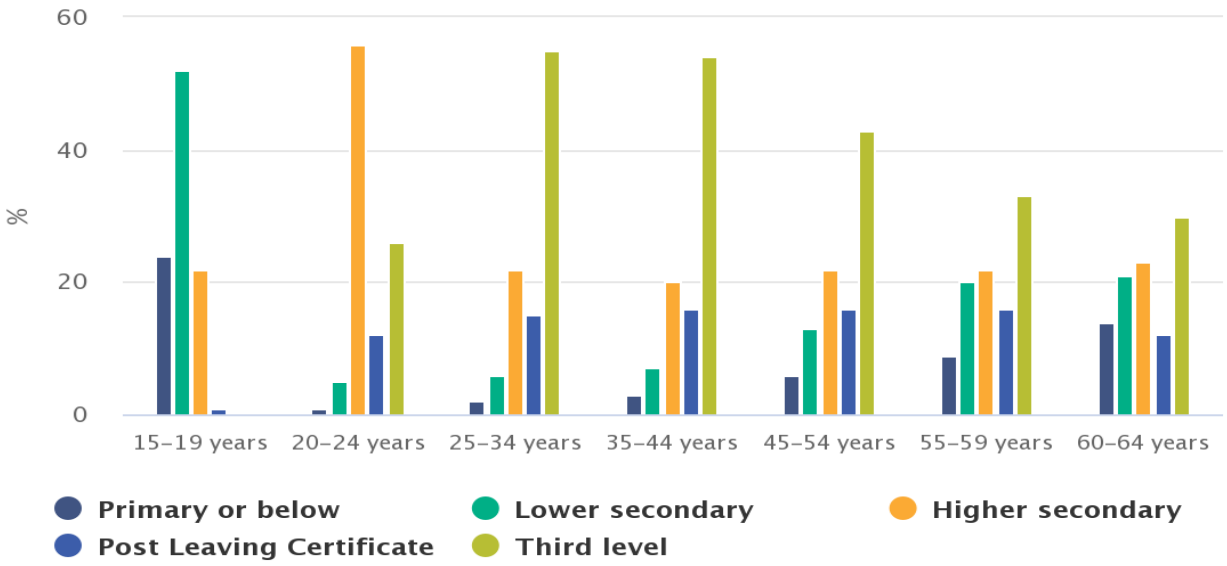
Younger age groups reported the highest levels of third level attainment, with over half of the 25-34 and 35-44 year olds in this category (55% and 54% respectively) compared to just three in ten (30%) of 60-64 year olds. This reflects increased levels of participation in third level education over time.

[24] EU Education and Training Monitor Report for Ireland (2019)

The gap between males and females is more evident in younger age groups. Females aged between 20-24 and 25-34 were more likely to have a third level qualification in Q2 2019 with rates of 30% and 58% respectively. The equivalent rates for males were 23% for the 20-24 age group and 51% for the 25-34 age group. This gender gap continues in older age groups but to a lesser extent. There was a six-percentage point difference between the genders in the 45-54 age group and a seven-percentage point difference between the 60-64 age group.

One in seven persons (14%) aged between 60-64 years old had primary education as their highest level of educational attainment or no formal education. Again, there is a difference by gender, where 16% of males aged 60-64 years had primary education/no formal education only, compared to 13% of females.

Figure 5 Highest level of Education Attained (aged 15-64) Classified by Age Group, Q2 2019



Source: CSO Ireland

The European Semester Country Report 2020 provides several key observations for education and training in Ireland.

- Participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) from age four reached 100% in 2017, and the participation of children below three years of age in formal ECEC (34.4% in 2018) was at around the EU average.
- Students' performance in basic skills as measured by PISA 2018 was above the EU average in mathematics, reading and science. For all three domains, the shares of low achievers remained among the lowest in the EU.
- The rate of early leavers from education and training, standing at 5.1% in 2019, was one of the lowest in the EU.
- The tertiary education attainment rate for the 30-34 age group was 55.4%, above the EU average of 41.6% in 2019.

Education Policy Outlook (OECD, 2020)

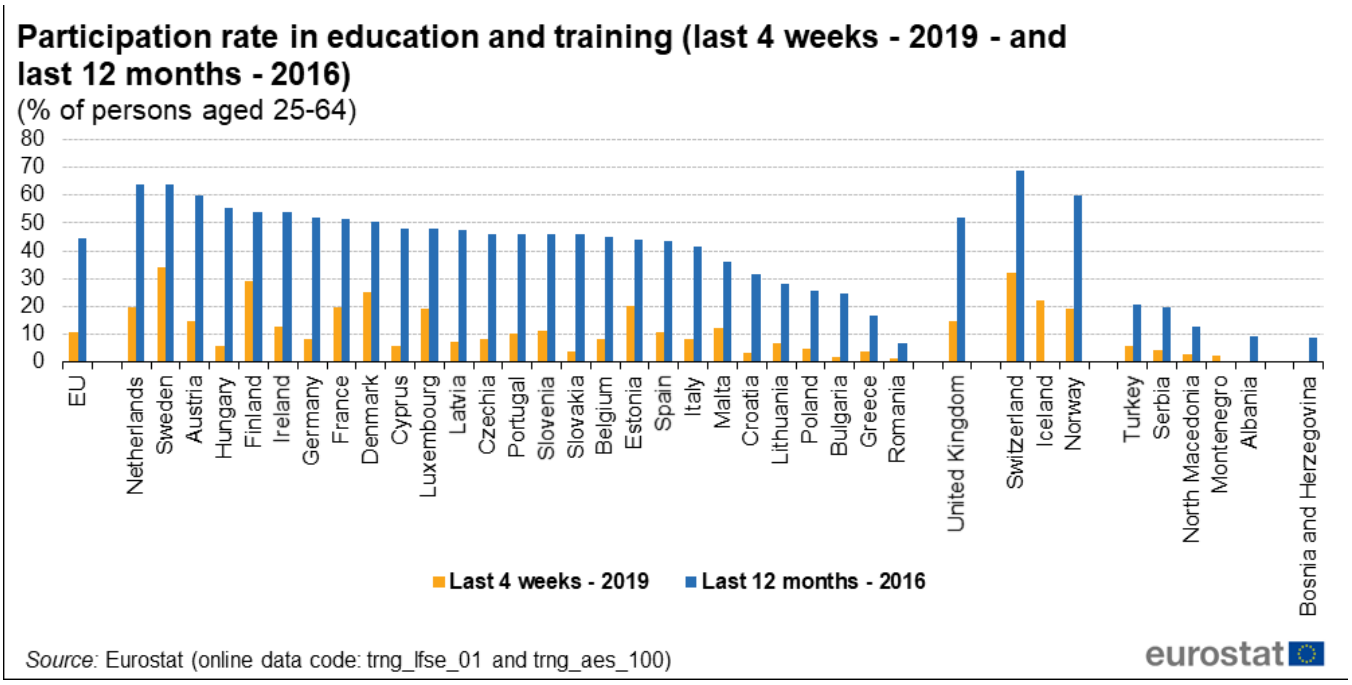
In Ireland, the share of 25-34 year olds with vocational upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary attainment was below the OECD average in 2017, at 15%, compared to 24%.

Irish adults have relatively high levels of qualifications, with a smaller than average share of 25-64 year olds with lower secondary education as their highest level of attainment (11.7% in 2018, compared to the OECD average of 14.4%).

Section 2.2 Lifelong Learning in Ireland

Ireland performs relatively well in terms of the proportion of adults aged 25-64 participating in formal and non-formal education. Measures using data from the Labour Force Survey (previous four weeks) and the Adult Education Survey (previous 12 months) both show lifelong learning rates in Ireland are above the EU average.

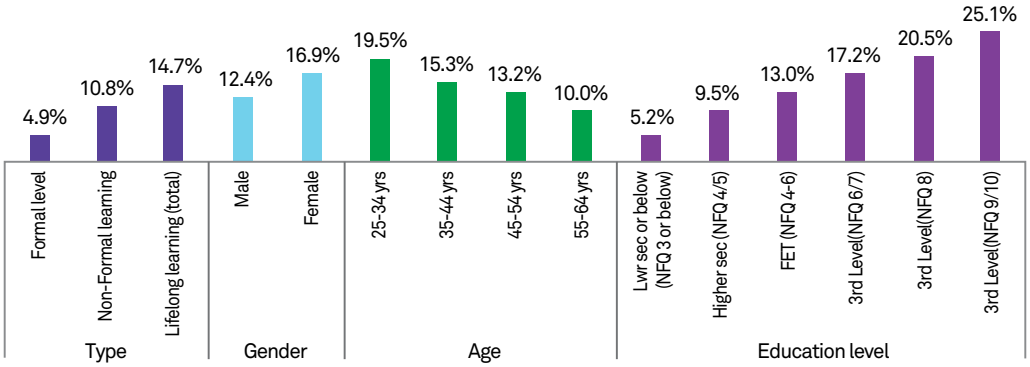
Figure 6 Participation Rate in Education and Training



Based on the Adult Education Survey (2016), over half of adults (53.9%) reported participating in lifelong learning (formal and/or non-formal education). Just over one in twelve adults (8.6%) participated in formal education in the last 12 months. Those who were unemployed were over three times more likely to participate in formal education than those in employment (28.2% versus 7.6%). Almost half of adults aged 25-64 (49.7%) received non-formal education. Employed persons were more likely to have participated in non-formal education than those who were unemployed (59.3% versus 38.3%). Younger persons are more likely to participate in lifelong learning than older persons. Over six in ten adults (63.4%) aged 25-34 participated in lifelong learning compared with only four in ten (40.5%) aged 55-64. As the highest level of education attained increased so did the participation rates in lifelong learning; only a quarter (24.7%) of those who had attained primary level or below were participating in lifelong learning while the corresponding figure for those who had attained third level honours degree or above was 71.7%. A higher proportion of persons in employment participated in lifelong learning than those who were unemployed (62.6% versus 52.9%). For more detail on adult participation in lifelong learning in Ireland see Adult Education Survey (CSO 2018).

The Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) in SOLAS monitors Ireland's participation in lifelong learning on behalf of the National Skills Council. SOLAS analysis of Labour Force Survey data (participation in education or training in past four weeks) shows adult participation in learning, at 14.7%, above the EU average of 11.3% in for Q4 2019.

Figure 7 Lifelong Learning participation rates (2019) by learning type, gender, age, NFQ level (Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO data)



Section 2.3 Labour Market Profile

The employment rate for those aged 15-64 is 69.8% (CSO Labour Force Survey Q1 2020). Having increased considerably in the aftermath of the financial crisis, the pre-pandemic unemployment rate was low at 4.8% (CSO February 2020). The long-term unemployment rate was 1.3% for Q1 2020 while youth unemployment stood at 10.5%. COVID-19 has had significant effects on the Irish labour market. While the standard measure of monthly unemployment was 5.0% in July 2020, a new COVID-19 Adjusted Measure of Unemployment could indicate a rate as high as 16.7%. At the time of writing, COVID-19-adjusted levels of youth unemployment stand at 37%. Education attainment levels are linked to labour market outcomes. Table 8 shows that, in general, higher levels of education in Ireland are associated with positive labour market returns on investment.

Table 8 Employment/Unemployment by Level of Educational Attainment Q2 2019 (CSO)

Summary table Educational Attainment Q2 2019 (CSO)

%

	Persons aged 25-64		
Highest level of education attained	**Percentage of total**	**Employment rate**	**Unemployment rate**
Primary or below	5	40	6
Lower secondary	11	58	7
Higher secondary	22	73	5
Post leaving certificate	15	77	5
Third level	47	86	3
Total persons aged 25 to 64	**100**	**76**	**4**

Section 2.4: Education and Training Sub-Sectors and Associated Qualifications

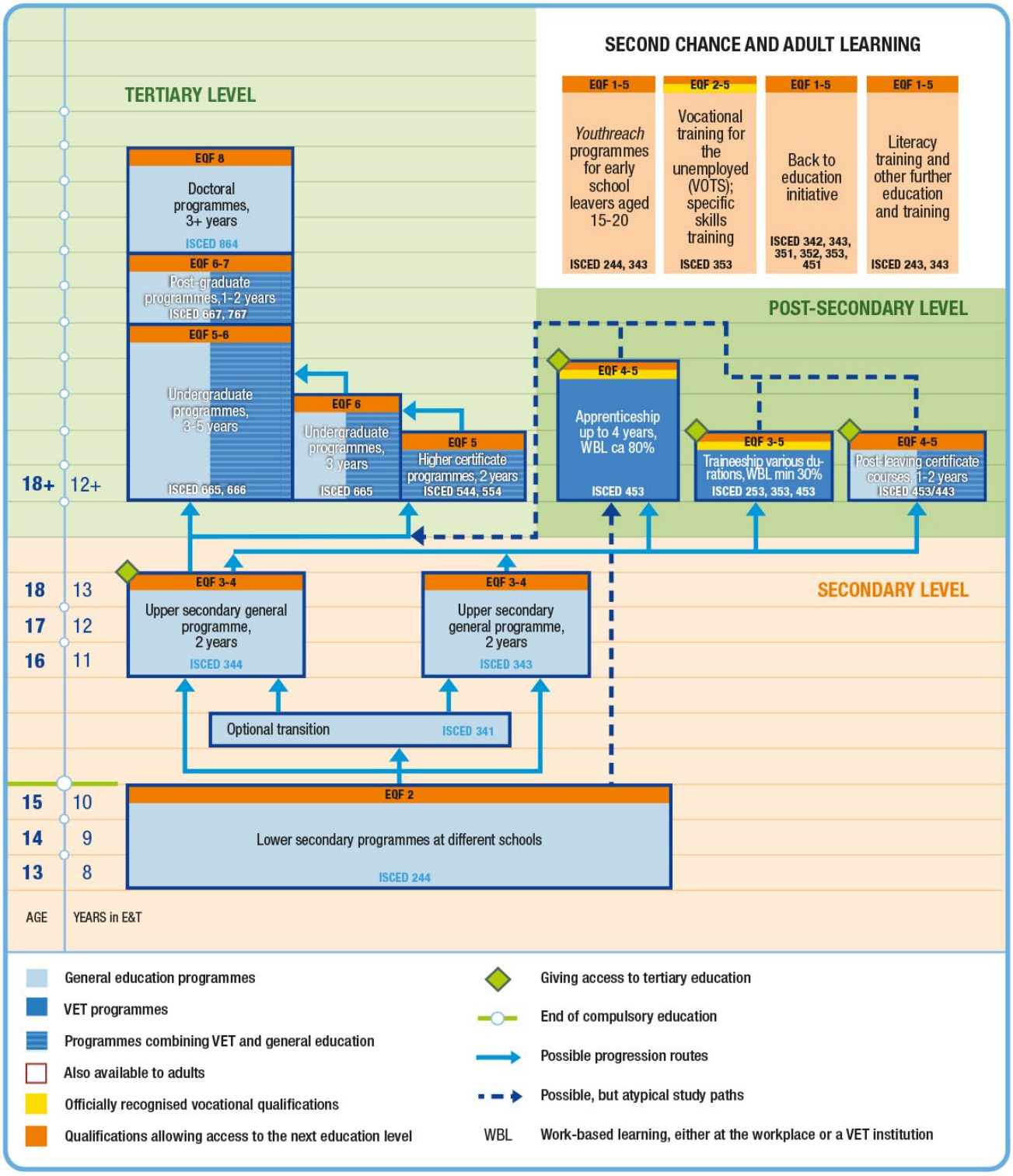
Education and training policy and reform in Ireland is characterised by a system-wide approach designed to deliver better outcomes for all learners. Public policy and its implementation aims to provide all learners with the knowledge and skills they need to participate fully in society and the economy, to facilitate clear and simple pathways for learners within and across the system that support lifelong learning, to improve the quality of the education experience and accountability for educational outcomes, to support diversity and inclusion, and to develop an infrastructure that supports a modern, flexible education and training system[25].

Ireland's education system balances strong central oversight with a high level of autonomy for schools and higher education institutions. Previously absent, more recently there has been a growing layer of regional governance

[25] The Department of Education and Skills – Statement of Strategy 2019-2021 https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Strategy-Statement/statement-of-strategy-2019-2021.pdf

approaches including informal school clustering for innovation and formal clustering among higher education institutions, as well as regional mechanisms for further education and training (FET). Private organisations play a significant role in the provision of education. The vast majority of state-funded primary schools and just under half of post-primary schools are owned and managed privately. Early childhood education and care is offered by public and private providers with both receiving government subsidies. While further and higher education is generally offered within the public system, private providers make an important contribution to the availability of post-school NFQ qualifications. Figure 8 outlines the main stages of education and training in Ireland by ISCED level, including qualification pathways and institutional arrangements for the delivery of qualifications.

Figure 8 Education and Training System Ireland (Source: Cedefop and ReferNet Ireland)



NB: ISCED-P 2011.
Source: Cedefop and ReferNet Ireland, 2019.

Section 2.5 General Education

Primary education

Although children are not obliged to attend school until the age of six, in 2018-19, 23.2% of four year olds and 75.4% of five year olds were enrolled in infant classes in primary schools in Ireland. Ten years earlier, before the introduction of the universal free early childhood care and education (ECCE) programme which provides children from the age of 2 years 8 months with 15 hours per week of pre-school education, 41.2% of four year olds and 57.2% of five year olds were enrolled in junior infants. As 96% of all eligible children now participate in the universal pre-school programme, pupils commencing primary education in Ireland are now older that was previously the case. Primary schools operate an eight-year programme, consisting of two initial years (Junior and Senior Infants), followed by classes 1-6.

The primary education system emphasises a child-centred approach and is founded on the belief that high quality education enables children to realise their potential as individuals and to live their lives to the fullest capacity appropriate to their particular stages of development. The primary curriculum (which is currently under revision) provides for an extensive learning experience and promotes a rich variety of approaches to teaching and learning. It builds on the learning experiences of children in early years education settings which is informed by Aistear, the curriculum framework for children from birth to six years.

The primary curriculum is divided into the following key areas:

- Languages
- Mathematics
- Social, environmental and scientific education
- Arts education (including visual arts, music and drama)
- Physical education
- Social, personal and health education

The aims of the current (1999) curriculum are to ensure that all children are provided with learning opportunities that recognise and celebrate their uniqueness, develop their full potential and prepare them to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The focus is on the child as learner, and the use of a variety of teaching methodologies is an essential feature of the curriculum.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is reviewing and redeveloping the primary school curriculum. In doing so, the NCCA is working with teachers and early childhood practitioners, school leaders, parents and children, management bodies, researchers and other stakeholders to develop a high-quality curriculum that will meet the needs of learners for the next 10 – 15 years.

The NCCA is hosting a public consultation on a draft Primary Curriculum Framework which runs from February 2020 to the end of December 2020. The consultation is framed around six key messages which, taken together, represent the main features and significant changes proposed for the redeveloped primary curriculum. The draft framework:

- builds on the successes and strengths of the Primary School Curriculum (1999) while responding to challenges, changing needs and priorities
- gives increased agency and flexibility to schools in their role as 'curriculum-makers'
- promotes stronger connections between children's experiences in primary and their prior experiences in preschool, and with their later experiences in post-primary school
- presents an updated set of priorities for children's learning and development
- proposes changes to how the curriculum is structured and presented
- supports a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to teaching and learning.

It is expected that new Primary Curriculum Framework will be completed by the end of Q1 2021 with individual curriculum specifications completed by the end of June 2024.

Meanwhile, a new Primary Language Curriculum 2019, which supports teaching and learning in English and Irish from junior infants to sixth class, is already being implemented. This curriculum is for children of all abilities in all school contexts. It sets out children's language learning for English and Irish in clear learning outcomes for each stage and describes the types of experiences that help children to learn in both languages. It is an integrated curriculum that makes connections across and within languages and that seeks to support the transfer of skills between languages. Integration between the two languages supports teachers to plan for and progress children's learning in Language 1 and Language 2 of the school, whether English or Irish. Is supported by an updated and expanded online Primary Language Toolkit which includes examples of children's language learning, progression continua and support materials for teachers. In addition, support for implementation over a three-year period is being provided by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) for all primary schools.

Post-primary education

The post-primary education sector comprises secondary, community and comprehensive, and Education and Training Board (ETB) schools. Secondary schools are privately owned and managed, while community and comprehensive schools are managed by Boards of Management of differing compositions. ETB schools are state-established and administered by Education and Training Boards which were statutorily established under the *Education and Training Boards Act 2013* to promote the development of education, training and youthwork in Ireland.

All schools offer the full range of post-primary programmes leading to the certificate awards prescribed by the Department of Education and are subject to inspection by the Department of Education. In addition, ETB and community schools are also providers of adult education and community education courses.
Post-primary education consists of a three-year Junior Cycle followed by a two- or three-year Senior Cycle. A State examination is taken after the three-year Junior Cycle.

Junior Cycle

The first stage of post-primary schooling that learners encounter, usually commencing at age 12, is Junior Cycle, a three-year programme within the compulsory period of education that builds on the young person's educational experience at primary school by offering a broad, balanced and coherent programme of study across a wide range of curriculum subjects and areas. It is in Junior Cycle that the knowledge, understanding and skills of learners—including the personal, social, moral and spiritual aspects—are extended and deepened with the aim of generating a love of learning in young people. In the process, Junior Cycle prepares learners for transition to Senior Cycle, for other further education opportunities, in some cases for employment and, in general, for the challenges involved in growing towards adulthood.

At Junior Cycle, students undertake a number of subjects, which include Irish, English, Mathematics, History and up to 6 others from a list which includes Geography, Science, Business Studies, Modern Foreign Languages (Spanish, German, French and Italian), Music, Art and Technology subjects. The exact number of subjects studied is dependent on whether the student is also taking short courses, with a maximum of 10 subjects to be taken for certification. Since 2017, schools report on wellbeing (Social Personal & Health Education, Civic, Social and Political Education, Physical Education). Junior Cycle takes a dual approach to assessment, reducing the focus on one externally assessed examination and increasing the prominence given to classroom-based and formative assessment. Following the completion of the Junior Cycle, each student receives a composite Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) from his/her school. The JCPA reports student achievement across a range of areas of learning in Junior Cycle and not just on achievement in state examinations. This also includes reporting on classroom-based assessments, well-being, and other areas of learning.

As part of the new Junior Cycle, schools can now include programmes called (NFQ) Level 2 Learning Programmes and Level 1 Learning Programmes. They are designed for a small number of students with particular special educational needs. L2 Learning Programmes are suited to students with general learning disabilities in the higher functioning moderate and low functioning mild categories, and L1 Learning programmes are designed for students in the low moderate, and severe and profound range of general learning disabilities.

Senior Cycle

In the Senior Cycle[26] there is an optional one-year Transition Year after which learners can take one of three Leaving Certificate programmes of two years' duration: the Leaving Certificate Established, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme or the Leaving Certificate Applied. Over 70% of upper secondary learners choose the Leaving Certificate Established programme.

Senior Cycle has a particular role to play in the preparation of learners for adult life in a changing economic and social context. A broad curriculum at Senior Cycle that allows for a degree of specialisation for learners continues to be viewed as the best means of achieving continuity and progression from Junior Cycle and assisting learners to prepare for the future. Senior Cycle education seeks to provide learners with a high-quality learning experience to prepare them for the world of work, for further and higher education and for successful personal lives.

Learners in Senior Cycle can currently follow a two-year programme of study (without Transition Year) or a three-year programme of study (if taking Transition Year). In some schools, the Transition Year programme is compulsory for all students, in other schools Transition Year is optional.

Transition Year

The Transition Year (TY) is a one-year programme that forms the first year of a three-year Senior Cycle in many schools. It is designed to act as a bridge between the Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle. Transition Year offers learners an opportunity to mature and develop without the pressure of a formal examination. Its flexible structure allows for a broad range of learning experiences to be included, such as experiences related to personal and social awareness and development. It also provides an opportunity for learners to reflect on, and develop an appreciation of, the value of education and training in preparing them for the demands of the world of work and pays particular attention to fostering a spirit of enterprise.

Each school designs its own programme, within guidelines, to suit the needs and interests of its learners. Transition units are new units of study that can be selected or developed by teachers as part of the programme. In establishing its own distinctive programme content, the school takes into account its own resources and the possibilities offered by local community interests.

Leaving Certificate Established

The Leaving Certificate is studied over two years and aims to provide learners with a broad, balanced education while also offering some potential for specialisation towards a particular career option. The Leaving Certificate is taken in almost all schools and students are required to study at least five subjects, one of which must be Irish. The majority of students in school will sit Leaving Certificate examinations in seven subjects. However, candidates – including many learners in second chance education settings or repeat students – can also sit one or more individual subjects. All subjects are offered at two levels, Ordinary and Higher. Irish and Mathematics are also available at Foundation level. Thirty-eight Leaving Certificate subjects are available to schools.

Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is designed to enhance the vocational dimension of the Leaving Certificate. This two-year programme combines the academic strengths of the Leaving Certificate with a dynamic focus on self-directed learning, enterprise, work and the community. The defining features of the LCVP are that learners select some of their Leaving Certificate subjects from a specified set of vocational subjects, they study a recognised course in a modern European language, and take two additional courses, known as Link Modules, in the areas of preparation for the world of work and enterprise education.

[26] In late 2016, the NCCA commenced an extensive review of Senior Cycle programmes and vocational pathways, to include Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Established. The review will be informed in part by lessons emerging from implementation of the new Framework for Junior Cycle. The review is focusing on the purpose of Senior Cycle education and pathways, programmes and flexibility. The NCCA is finalising an advisory report which will look at priority areas, longer-term goals and a proposed timeline and advice on the pace and scale of developments in Senior Cycle. The report is due to be submitted to the Minister for Education in Q4 of 2020.

Leaving Certificate Applied

The Leaving Certificate Applied is a discrete programme designed for those learners whose aptitudes, learning interests and ways of learning are not fully catered for by the other two Leaving Certificate programmes and for those learners who are at risk of early school leaving. Participants in the Leaving Certificate Applied engage in work and study of an active, practical and task-centred nature and participants are prepared for the transition from the world of the school/centre to that of adult and working life. The Leaving Certificate Applied is a two-year programme made up of a range of courses that are structured round three elements:

- vocational preparation
- vocational education
- general education.

Changes to the Leaving Certificate Grading Scale in 2017

In 2017, the then Department of Education and Skills changed the Leaving Certificate grading scale to an 8-grade band scale from the previous 14-grade band scale.

The new grading scheme was introduced with a view to reducing the pressure on students to achieve marginal gains in examination-performance and to minimising the use of random selection in the allocation of places in Irish higher education while at the same time fairly rewarding scholastic attainment.
The reduction in the number of grading bands will more closely align the Irish system with the grading systems of other countries, none of which utilises the high number of bands under which the Leaving Certificate had hitherto been assessed.

The new Irish grading scheme for Leaving Certificate has been fully communicated to the other EU countries and to the UK.

The new grading scale has 8 grade bands, as follows:

New Grades	% Marks
H1 / O1	90 – 100
H2 / O2	80 < 90
H3 / O3	70 < 80
H4 / O4	60 < 70
H5 / O5	50 < 60
H6 / O6	40 < 50
H7 / O7	30 < 40
H8 / O8	0 < 30

Post-primary qualifications

Junior Cycle/Certificate (NFQ Level 3)

Leaving Certificate (NFQ Levels 4 and 5)

Placement of the Leaving Certificate at Levels 4 and 5 of the NFQ

From the perspective of the school sector, the issues related to placing the Leaving Certificate and its various programmes at Levels 4 and 5 were complex. This complexity was only in part related to the task of matching learning aims, objectives and outcomes associated with the Leaving Certificate options with the level indicators of the Framework.

At the time, the view from the school sector was that the Leaving Certificate involved certain additional factors. The Leaving Certificate is a high profile, and, in the context of its selection function for higher education and training, a high stakes qualification. It is taken in almost all schools: in 2020 there were 61,000 candidates for Leaving Certificate examinations. It enjoys public confidence in its standards, status, and currency. It is the terminal qualification for the vast majority of school leavers and a reference point for agencies and individuals involved in employment and training. As a consequence, it was felt that the placing of the Leaving Certificate would be subject to greater scrutiny than that associated with most other awards on the Framework.

For this reason, the NCCA advised:

- that the Leaving Certificate should be treated as a single award incorporating the Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
- that it should be defined on the basis of the published general aims, objectives and outcomes associated with its various options
- that these were consistent with the level indicators at Levels 4 and 5 of the Framework so that the award should be viewed as including learning outcomes and standards spanning these levels.

At the time, the NCCA recognised that while the Leaving Certificate would be considered to extend across NFQ Level 4 and Level 5, the ultimate achievements of each individual learner would do so in varying proportions. The achievements of some learners would be reflective of indicators largely associated with Level 4 in the Framework while learners who take 'higher level' courses in their Leaving Certificate programme and achieve well are likely to acquire learning outcomes more akin to the indicators associated with Level 5. However, on balance it was felt that, regardless of the option taken, all learners would be engaged in attaining learning outcomes consistent with Framework indicators spanning in some measure Levels 4 and 5 rather than being exclusive to either one of these levels.

The main criticisms of this placing then and now are that it is not definitive enough and does not address the question of the volume of learning associated with the award. The original placement of the Leaving Certificate on the NFQ is to be revisited in the context of ongoing reform of Senior Cycle. The NCCA review of Senior Cycle advocates for broader reporting of student achievement. Addressing the issue of recognition, reporting and certification, the report includes an action for the NCCA itself to 'collaborate with QQI and other relevant stakeholders to determine the inclusion of Senior Cycle qualifications within the National Framework of Qualifications'

Section 2.6 Further Education and Training

Further Education and Training provides education and training and related supports to assist individuals of all ages to gain a range of employment, career, personal and social skills and qualifications at Levels 1-6 on the NFQ or equivalent, and is aimed at jobseekers, school leavers, labour market returners, employees, those interested in a new career direction, those wishing to access 'second chance' education, those wishing to re-engage in learning, and to prepare school-leavers and others for higher education. FET also plays an important role in helping people to lead fulfilling lives, supporting hard-to-reach individuals and groups to achieve their potential and reducing the costs to society of exclusion. It offers the opportunity to engage in learning in virtually every

community in Ireland regardless of previous levels of education and offers a pathway to progress as far as any individual wants to go. It is currently providing education and training to around 200,000 learners each year.

FET provides a diverse range of programmes and supports designed to meet the needs of individuals in different stages of their learning pathways. This includes courses which are focused on foundation or transversal skills development, including literacy and numeracy (e.g. Adult Literacy, English for non-native speakers, Adult Basic Education) in order to build the core capabilities which will allow participants to move on to more advanced learning opportunities. A range of programmes (e.g. Youthreach, Back to Education Initiative, Skills for Work) are focused more formally on facilitating pathways to other education and training opportunities and often bridge the gap between foundational learning and accessing vocational education and training. Within this latter vocational group, post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) provision focuses both on facilitating progression to higher education and on direct generation of employment outcomes. Other programmes (e.g. traineeships, apprenticeships, specific skills training) are based on the principle of work-based learning and seek to lead directly to sustainable jobs for participants (or involve employment from the outset in the case of apprenticeships).

SOLAS is the planning and funding authority for FET. Public funding is channelled through sixteen Education and Training Boards (ETBs) who deliver FET provision either directly or via a network of contracted training or community education and training providers in response to the needs of their respective regions. Outside of this FET coordinated by ETBs, there are approximately 25 independent community and voluntary secondary schools funded to deliver Post-Leaving Certificate courses, while a range of support organisations are also funded to deliver specific services across the FET system. These include the National Adult Literacy Agency and AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation.

With certain exceptions including statutory apprenticeships, the typical duration of a FET course is one year fulltime, although some provision carries a two-year option with a distinct award at the end of each year. This means learner engagement with providers tends to be shorter term than, for instance, in typical higher education programmes.

The reform programme in the further education and training sector was part of Government's wider reform of the public service in 2012. Reform relating to FET involved reform at structural level as well as planning, prioritising, funding and providing a diverse range of FET programmes and services. The further education and training sector developed from and was shaped by a combination of education policies and by the prevailing workforce development strategies.

In 2009, when the NFQ was originally referenced to the EQF, vocational education committees (VECs) offered programmes to address local gaps in education provision building organically on the post-primary sector. Even with the introduction of a range of national programmes, there was still a lack of a central strategic direction. FÁS (the National training Agency) was responsible for delivering training and employment programmes and employment services aimed at a very diverse range of individuals and groups. These included jobseekers; persons in work; unemployed persons including youth and the long-term unemployed; persons with a disability; persons in community-based training; company-based training; and in community employment.

The economic downturn during 2008 and 2009 presented a challenge for VET in Ireland in the light of diminishing resources to respond effectively with programmes and services to meet the needs of the increasing number of individuals who had lost their jobs. The response of Government was to streamline the former 33 existing Vocational Education Committees into 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and to transfer the training function of FÁS to the ETBs with the aim of bringing local and regional coherence to FET. The former FÁS employment services function transferred to the Department of Social Protection on January 1st, 2012.

The Government also decided to create a new authority, SOLAS, The Further Education and Training Authority, under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills, with responsibility for the strategic co-ordination and funding of the further education and training sector. The VECs and FÁS were statutory bodies. Substantive legislative change was required to meet the reform aims outlined above. Consequently, two pieces of legislation were enacted in 2013 to provide the statutory basis for the dissolution of the VECs and FÁS, and the establishment of SOLAS and 16 ETBs.

With regard to the ETBs, the *Education and Training Boards Act* was signed into law in May 2013, replacing nine existing Vocational Training Acts with one piece of legislation. The new Act provided for the dissolution of the VECs and, through a process involving a merger of some of the existing 33 VECs, for the establishment of 16 ETBs. The key aim of this legislation was to modernise governance provisions and to better reflect the new mission of the ETBs. The functions of the Education and Training Boards were published in the *Education and Training Board Act 2013*.

As stated above, SOLAS is the authority responsible for planning, funding and co-ordinating further education and training (FET) in Ireland. Its vision is for FET programmes to be recognised for their demonstrable benefits for learners, enterprise and communities, where FET is valued for its effectiveness and quality, playing an integral role in helping Ireland achieve its ambition of the best education and training service in Europe. SOLAS is charged with a range of responsibilities including:

- supporting the development and implementation of a further education and training strategy
- funding the FET system to maximise the impact of state investment
- overseeing the development and implementation of the Strategic Performance Agreements between SOLAS and each education and training board (ETB) which set out 3-year plans to further embed a strategic and integrated FET system
- statutory responsibility for the apprenticeship system
- analysing the labour market and identifying and anticipating key skills needs, and
- promoting the standing of further education and training.

In terms of FET infrastructure, there are 64 FET centres focused primarily on what was traditionally seen as training or further education at NFQ Level 5 or Level 6. There is also a wider network of 293 community-based facilities providing critical access to education and training opportunities, primarily at NFQ Levels 1 to 4.

The National Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024 sets out how FET will be organised and delivered based around three strategic pillars: building skills; fostering inclusion; and facilitating pathways. FET delivery will be underpinned by a strong focus on four enabling themes: digital transformation; learner and performance focus; staffing and structures; and capital development. The strategy aims to create more simplified structures and learning pathways, to facilitate easier access, and to ensure a more consistent learner experience. The strategy supports lifelong learning, highlighting the need to foster more permeable access to FET, transfer within FET and transition from FET to work or further study.

The current mix of post-secondary IVET and CVET programmes in FET, with apprenticeships, traineeships, specific skills training and post-Leaving Certificate programmes, is to be replaced by a more coherent NFQ Level 5 and Level 6 proposition. This will have a core brand, focused on the discipline/career and NFQ level, and be linked to regional skills needs and clear employment or progression outcomes.

Community Education in Ireland describes adult learning which takes place in local community settings. It is offered within and outside the FET system, often in non-formal and informal settings. Fostering empowerment and contributing to civic society, community education plays an important role in reducing educational and social disadvantage. Many courses are short and offered on a part-time basis encouraging a return to education for many adult learners. AONTAS host the Community Education Network comprising local, independent community education organisations.

The SOLAS Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) provide a data gathering, analytical and research resource to identify skills needs and support the work of the National Skills Council.

SOLAS is also the lead partner for ReferNet Ireland, part of a European network of VET organisations established by CEDEFOP, that collaborate on documentation, information collection and exchange on developments in VET policy and research. The 2018 report on Vocational Education and Training in Ireland provides a contemporary account of the provision of VET in Ireland and the associated institutional, legislative and governance arrangements.

Further education and training qualifications in Ireland

Levels 1 and 2 Certificates (NFQ Level 1, NFQ Level 2) and non-major awards at the same levels
Awarded by QQI. See examples of qualifications at this level on www.IRQ.ie

Level 1 and 2 Certificates are designed to meet the needs of learners, both young and old, including those with intellectual and other disabilities, adults returning to training, and learners with few or no previous qualifications, including those within the workforce. These awards provide certification for learners who may progress to higher levels and also for those whose principal achievements rest at these levels. Each certificate comprises a number of components, most often in basic literacy and numeracy, which the learner can achieve at their own pace and accumulate over time towards one of the named certificates above.

Level 3 Certificate (NFQ Level 3) and non-major awards at the same level
Awarded by QQI. See examples of qualifications at this level on www.IRQ.ie

The Level 3 Certificate enables learners to gain recognition for specific personal skills, practical skills and knowledge, basic transferable skills, the enhancement of individual talents and qualities and achievements and learning relevant to a variety of progression options.

Level 4 Certificate (NFQ Level 4) and non-major awards at the same level
Awarded by QQI. See examples of qualifications at this level on www.IRQ.ie

The Level 4 Certificate enables learners to gain recognition for the achievement of vocational and personal skills, knowledge and understanding to specified standards, the enhancement of individual talents and qualities and the achievement of learning relevant to a variety of progression options, including employment at an introductory vocational level, and programmes leading to a Level 5 Certificate.

Level 5 Certificate (NFQ Level 5) professional and non-major awards at the same level
Awarded by QQI. See examples of qualifications at this level on www.IRQ.ie

The Level 5 Certificate enables learners to develop a broad range of skills which are vocationally specific and require a general theoretical understanding. Qualification holders are enabled to work independently while subject to general direction. The majority of certificate/module holders at Level 5 take up positions of employment. They are also deemed to meet the minimum entry requirements for a range of higher education institutions/programmes.

Advanced Certificate (NFQ Level 6) professional and non-major awards at the same level
Awarded by QQI. See examples of qualifications at this level on www.IRQ.ie

An Advanced Certificate award enables learners to develop a comprehensive range of skills which may be vocationally specific and/or of a general supervisory nature and require detailed theoretical understanding. Modules include advanced vocational/occupational skills, enabling certificate holders to work independently or progress to higher education and training. The majority of holders of Level 6 qualifications take up positions of employment, some of whom may be self-employed.

Section 2.7 Apprenticeships

An independent Review of Apprenticeship Training in Ireland was published in 2014. The review contained a range of recommendations to expand participation in apprenticeship, including the establishment of an Apprenticeship Council. The Apprenticeship Council issued its first call for new enterprise-led apprenticeships in 2015. A National Action Plan to expand apprenticeship and traineeships in Ireland 2016-2020 has supported a significant expansion in the range of occupations making use of dual-VET programmes and has encouraged the offer of apprenticeships at higher levels of the NFQ where appropriate.

Key features of post-2016 national apprenticeships:

- Industry-led by consortia of industry and education partners

- Lead to an award at Levels 5 to 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)
- Between 2-4 years in duration
- Minimum 50% on-the-job learning
- Flexible delivery – online, blended, off-the-job learning in increments/blocks
- Apprentices are employed under a formal contract of apprenticeship
- The employer pays the apprentice for the duration of the apprenticeship.

A new central public information resource, Generation Apprenticeship, provides comprehensive information on apprenticeship policy and opportunities and a range of other practical resources for employers and potential apprentices.

Ireland experienced strong growth in apprenticeship registrations from 3,153 to 5,648 between 2015 and 2018, with the overall apprenticeship population more than doubling from 8,317 at the end of 2015 to 17,758 in August 2020. There are now 58 apprenticeship programmes in place, with many of the newer programmes very different in structure, duration, and level from those in place pre-2016.

Section 2.8 Higher Education

Higher education in Ireland is offered primarily within the publicly funded system comprising nine universities and eleven institutes of technology[27]. Almost all higher education students enrol in public institutions. There are a small number of other higher education institutions in receipt of public funding offering NFQ qualifications in music, theology, humanities, and rural development. Finally, independent providers of higher education and training play an important role in meeting the qualifications requirements of learners in Ireland. There are currently 28 independent providers, accredited to offer QQI qualifications in fields of learning including business, law, ICT, and education.

The past decade has seen the commencement of major transformation in the Irish higher education landscape. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 recommended consolidation within the institute of technology sector and a pathway towards the establishment of multi-campus technological universities. The enactment of the *Technological Universities Act, 2018* sets out a process for technological university designation. As of August 2020, there is currently one established technological university, one consortium designated as a technological university and three consortia engaged with the process to become designated as technological universities.

In December 2019, the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, which was founded by Charter in 1784 and recognised as a college of the National University of Ireland since 1977, received authorisation from the Irish Parliament to describe itself as a university in the State. This was made possible through amended legislation.

The *Universities Act 1997* sets out the objectives and functions of a university, the structure and role of governing authorities, staffing arrangements, composition and role of academic councils and sections relating to property, finance and reporting. The Higher Education Authority has an overseeing role on such plans and procedures. The legislative framework preserves the academic freedom of the universities and respects the diverse traditions and institutional autonomy of each university.

The *Institutes of Technology Act 2006* provides for a similar relationship between the institutes of technology and the Higher Education Authority as that between the Authority and universities as well as greater institutional autonomy, improved governance and a statutory guarantee of academic freedom for the institutes.

Students in bachelor's programmes are typically enrolled between the ages of 19 and 21 with enrolment rates reaching 53% among 19-20 year olds and 39% among 21-22 year olds, some of the highest rates across OECD and partner countries. High completion rates ensure a smooth transition through bachelor's programmes in Ireland: 63% of new entrants at this level (and 67% of women) complete their degree within its theoretical duration, the second highest completion rate among OECD countries with available data (OECD 2019).

[27] Universities, technological universities, institutes of technology and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

Most applications for entry to higher education are processed by the Central Applications Office (CAO). The aim of the system is to process applications centrally in a fair and efficient manner with participating institutions retaining the function of making decisions on admissions. Nevertheless, there are alternative entry routes for underrepresented groups – including those from the Leaving Certificate Applied – and for those progressing from FET. For example, the Higher Education Links Scheme is designed to connect selected FET courses to the first year of cognate higher education courses, and universities offer places from a reserved quota to FET qualification holders.

About two thirds of 18-year olds in Ireland enter higher education. Ireland now ranks highly internationally in terms of attainment in higher education, with nearly half of all 25-64 year olds (47%) having attained higher education qualifications, one of the largest shares across the OECD. The higher education attainment rate is even higher among women (51%, compared with 43% among men) and for the younger generation, reaching 60% among 25-34-year-old women and 52% among young men in the same age group (OECD 2019).

Statutory quality assurance arrangements in higher education support the effective implementation of the NFQ in the sector. These arrangements are discussed in detail in Chapter Four. There are a number of other initiatives in higher education and training in Ireland that contribute to the quality of the student experience.

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning was established in 2012 and is a key system-level infrastructure for the enhancement of teaching and learning in Irish higher education. The National Forum is engaged in a range of activities aimed at providing students with the highest quality teaching and learning experience. Its focus is on 'adding value' by providing a structure through which institutional and network initiatives can be synergised and leveraged to support a vibrant community of 'grass-roots' activity.

The Irish Survey of Student Engagement invites responses from first-year undergraduate, final-year undergraduate, and taught post-graduate students in 26 higher education institutions in Ireland. With a response rate of 31% (2020), this survey provides representative trend data on the student experience of higher education in Ireland. Introduced in 2013, the survey findings reveal student views on the nature of their teaching and learning experience, learning environment, and the quality of the interactions they have with their higher education institutions.

A Transitions Reform Steering Group, oversees a process to improve the transitions from school to higher education. A package of reforms was announced in April 2016, including a new grading scheme for the Leaving Certificate, reducing the number of grade bands from 14 to 8, which was first applied to students who sat their Leaving Certificate in 2017. As these reforms have embedded themselves in the system, the focus of this group has shifted to the transition from further education to higher education.

The National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (NAP) was published in December 2015. Equity of access to higher education is a national priority for the Government. The current Action Plan for Education prioritises equity of access across all levels of education. It has at its core the drive to break the cycles of disadvantage that can prevent some from fulfilling their full potential. Following the publication of the progress review report on the NAP in December 2018, many achievements were highlighted, from increased participation across a number of target groups, development of Access Data Plan to support for an evidence-based approach to policymaking in this area and the incorporation of the concept of 'student success' into the Higher Education System Performance Framework. Notwithstanding these important achievements, key challenges remain including difficulties in increasing student numbers from among mature students and Irish Travellers. With the NAP extended to 2021, the HEA continues to work with the new Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and other stakeholders including QQI to address these challenges, improve pathways to higher education and enhance partnerships amongst educational stakeholders. In 2021, work will commence on the consultation for and development of a new National Access Plan.

Higher Education Authority Publications provide statistical and thematic reports on the state of higher education in Ireland. Time-specific series and topic-specific reports provide valuable insights into institutional and system performance.

Higher education and training qualifications in Ireland are recognised at NFQ Levels 6-10. There is no prohibition on higher education institutions offering qualifications at lower levels of the NFQ and there are examples of further education and training providers offering short cycle higher education qualifications. The overlap between FET and HE at EQF Level 5 (NFQ 6) has attracted much international interest and research. In Ireland,

QQI in collaboration with SOLAS have commissioned a study comparing the two qualification types, Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate, at NFQ 6. The results of the comparison will inform any future policy decisions about the qualification offer at this level.

Higher education qualifications in Ireland

Higher Certificate (NFQ Level 6) professional and non-major awards at the same level
Awarded by institutes of technology, some universities and QQI
See examples of qualifications at this level on www.IRQ.ie

The Higher Certificate is normally awarded after completion of an accredited programme of two years' duration (120 ECTS credits) in a recognised higher education institution/provider. Entry to these programmes is generally for school leavers and those with equivalent qualifications. The Higher Certificate is a short cycle higher education qualification within the QF-EHEA.

Ordinary Bachelor Degree (NFQ Level 7) professional and non-major awards at the same level
Awarded by institutes of technology, some universities and QQI
See examples of qualifications at this level on www.IRQ.ie

The Ordinary Bachelor Degree is normally awarded after completion of an accredited programme of three years' duration (180 ECTS credits) in a recognised higher education institution/provider. Entry to a programme leading to an ab-initio Ordinary Bachelor Degree is typically for school leavers and those with equivalent qualifications. In addition, there are one-year add-on Ordinary Bachelor degree programmes (60 ECTS credits) for holders of the Higher Certificate. The Ordinary Bachelor Degree is compatible with the Bologna First Cycle descriptor, although holders of this award do not generally gain immediate access to programmes leading to Second Cycle awards in Ireland.

Honours Bachelor Degree (NFQ Level 8) professional and non-major awards at the same level
Awarded by institutes of technology, universities and QQI
See examples of qualifications at this level on www.IRQ.ie

The Honours Bachelor Degree is normally awarded following completion of a programme of three or four years' duration (180-240 ECTS credits) in a recognised higher education institution/provider, although there are examples of longer programmes in areas such as architecture, dentistry and medicine. Entry to a programme leading to an ab-initio Honours Bachelor degree is typically for school leavers and those with equivalent qualifications. In addition, there are typically programmes of one year's duration (60 ECTS credits) leading to Honours Bachelor Degrees available to holders of the Ordinary Bachelor Degree. The Honours Bachelor Degree is a Bologna First Cycle qualification.

Higher Diploma (NFQ Level 8)
Awarded by institutes of technology, universities and QQI
See examples of qualifications at this level on www.IRQ.ie

The Higher Diploma is normally awarded following completion of an accredited programme of one year's duration (60 ECTS credits) in a recognised higher education institution/provider. Entry to a programme leading to a Higher Diploma is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees but can also be for holders of Ordinary Bachelor Degrees. It is of note that the Higher Diploma is typically in a different field of learning than the initial award. The Higher Diploma is a qualification at the same level as completion of the Bologna First Cycle.

Masters Degree (NFQ Level 9) professional and non-major awards at the same level
Awarded by institutes of technology, universities and QQI
See examples of qualifications at this level on www.IRQ.ie

There are two types of Masters Degree in Ireland: taught Masters Degrees and research Masters Degrees. The taught Masters Degree is awarded following the completion of an accredited programme of one to two years'

duration (60-120 ECTS credits). Entry to a programme leading to a taught Masters Degree is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees. Also, in some cases, entry to such programmes can be permitted for those with Ordinary Bachelor Degrees or equivalent who have some relevant work experience. Furthermore, in some cases, entry to such programmes is permitted for people with extensive experience in a relevant area.

Research Masters Degree programmes are typically of two years' duration, although they are not credit rated. Entry to a programme leading to a research Masters Degree is typically for holders of an Honours Bachelor Degree, with a high classification, i.e. first or second class honours.

The Irish Masters Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna Second Cycle.

Post-Graduate Diploma (NFQ Level 9)
Awarded by institutes of technology, universities and QQI
See examples of qualifications at this level on www.IRQ.ie

The Post-graduate Diploma is normally awarded following completion of a programme of one year's duration (60 ECTS credits) in a recognised higher education institution. The award is usually made in a field of learning different from that in which a learner is already qualified. Entry to a programme leading to a Post-graduate Diploma is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees but can also be for holders of Ordinary Bachelor Degrees. The Post-graduate Diploma is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna Second Cycle.

Doctoral Degree (NFQ Level 10)
Awarded by institutes of technology, universities and QQI
See examples of qualifications at this level on www.IRQ.ie

Entry to a programme leading to a Doctoral Degree is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees. The general model is that a holder of an Honours Bachelor Degree with a high classification enters initially a Masters research programme, and transfers to a Doctoral programme after one year on the Masters research programme. In total, the number of years in the programme would generally be at least three. There is also direct access to Doctoral Degrees for holders of Masters Degrees, whether taught Masters or research Masters. Various models for Doctoral Degree programmes now exist, ranging from the traditional research doctorate to professional and practitioner doctoral programmes, which have substantial taught components. Most doctoral programmes are now structured to include some taught components.

This chapter described the Irish education and training system with its sub-systems and associated qualifications. It also presented data on the level of education and training attainment in Ireland, lifelong learning participation rates and selected labour market indicators. The next chapter provides a detailed account of the design, implementation, use and impact of the NFQ.

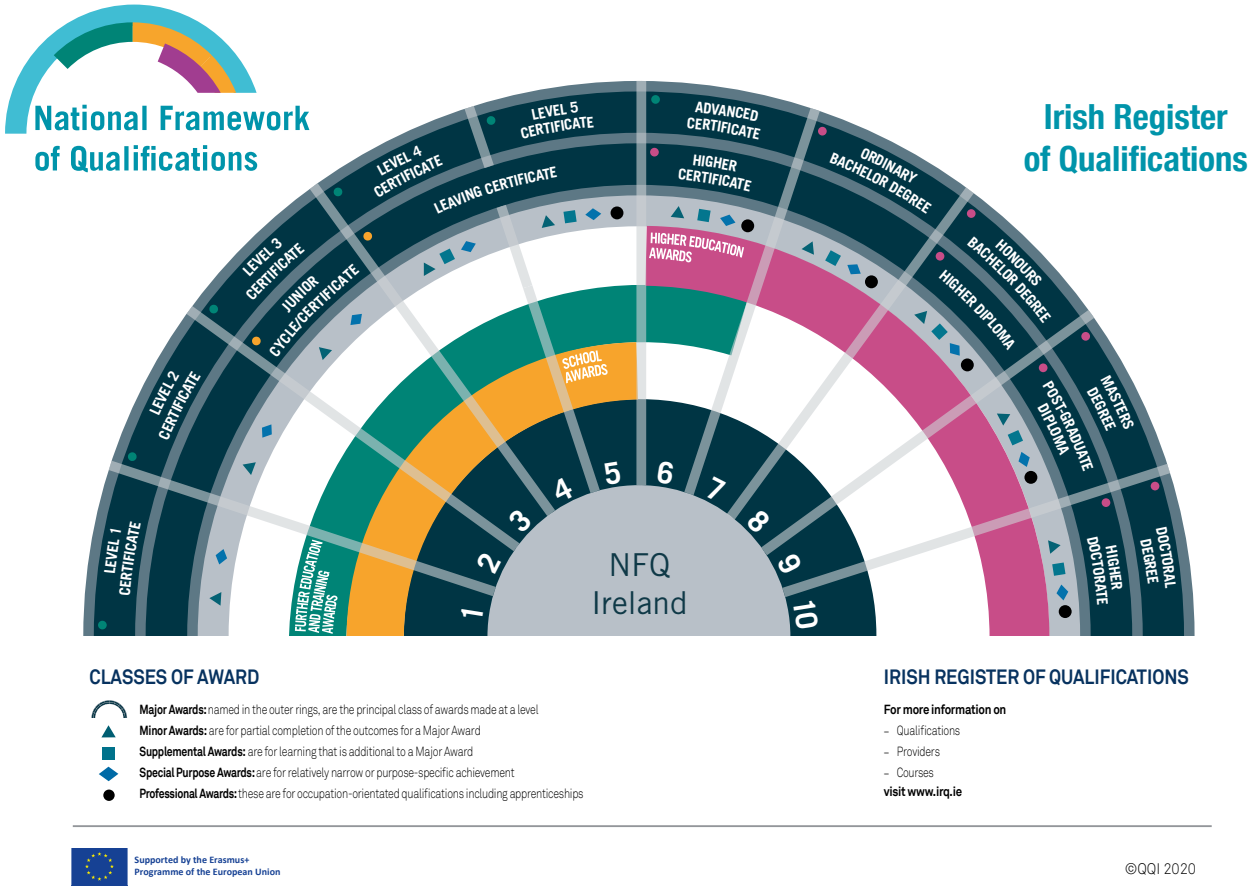
Chapter Three: The Irish NFQ – Design, Implementation, Use and Impact

This chapter provides a description of the architecture and principle features of the NFQ. Given the advanced stage of development of the NFQ, commentary and analysis are also provided on the implementation, use and impact of the NFQ.

Section 3.1 Introduction to the NFQ

The NFQ is a system of levels for qualifications. It assumes that the learning required for any educational qualification can be described in terms of knowledge, skill or competence and that these can be represented by statements in writing. The NFQ is the most widely recognised macro-level infrastructure for qualifications in Ireland.

Figure 9 The NFQ – Levels, Award-Types and Classes of Awards



QQI's policies and criteria on access, transfer and progression are part of the NFQ's supporting infrastructure. They are concerned with lifelong learning and the permeability and transparency of the qualifications system and they guide providers and qualifications awarding bodies.

The NFQ has been designed to facilitate:

- communication about qualifications (e.g. on their comparability)
- the design and specification of specific qualifications
- the design of programmes of education and training leading to qualifications
- processes for the recognition of prior learning
- the design and specification of learning pathways.

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was established under the *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999*. The operation of the NFQ is governed by *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012* (the "2012 Act") as amended by the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019*.

Section 3.2 Structure and Design of the NFQ

The NFQ operates on the assumption that the learning required for any educational qualification can be described in terms of **knowledge, skill or competence** and that these can be represented by statements of **expected learning outcomes**.

Ten NFQ levels are defined by the NFQ Grid of Level Indicators for each of three **strands** (knowledge, skill and competence) and eight **sub-strands**.

The NFQ also includes a range of **award-types**. There are five classes of NFQ awards: four original ones: major, minor, special purpose, and supplemental and the more recently established professional class of awards.

Each award-type has an **award-type descriptor**. Descriptors have been determined for:

- major awards
- professional awards
- minor, special purpose and supplemental awards

The original major award-type descriptors for FET and HE were largely built using elements from the Grid of Level Indicators. Some combine indicators from different columns (e.g. a Level 6 award-type might include a Level 7 indicator for knowledge kind).

Award-type descriptors and level indicators involve the use of statements of **expected learning outcomes (ELO).**

All the NFQ's original award-type descriptors were designed to be as general as possible. They are non-discipline-specific and they do not distinguish between occupation-oriented and other kinds of qualifications.

The most recent NFQ development was the determination of a new 'professional' class of awards along with a set of professional award-type descriptors (PATDs). The professional award-type and its descriptors were developed to strengthen the capacity of the NFQ to resolve differences between levels of professional or occupation-oriented awards. The professional class implicitly introduced the concept that an award can have more than one class and type—e.g. a specific Honours Bachelor Degree award could be classed as both major and professional and would need to be consistent with the bachelor award-type as well as the professional award-type. The expected learning outcomes (ELOs) of the PATDs were designed to be consistent with the ELOs used in the corresponding column of the Grid of Level Indicators.

PATDs are the generalised standards for apprenticeship awards at NFQ Levels 5-9. The prospect of extending them to doctoral level (NFQ Level 10) is being considered.

The award-type descriptors are the most general expression of standards for qualifications that are included in the NFQ.

NFQ award-type descriptors have the following features (NQAI, 2003):

- award-type descriptors describe general standards and mixes of knowledge, skill and competence associated with award-types
- award-type descriptors include level and volume – there may be more than one award-type at any given level in the Framework – the level of an award-type is not determined solely by the level of the highest learning contained therein
- award-type descriptors operate independently of specific fields of learning, but facilitate more detailed specification for named awards
- award-type descriptors may include articulation or progression characteristics
- award-type descriptors may include reference to assessment methods.

Educational standards and qualifications

The NFQ award-type descriptors constitute generalised standards for all qualifications recognised within the NFQ. They are benchmark statements about the learning achievements required to attain particular NFQ award-types e.g. an Honours Bachelor Degree or an Advanced Certificate.

Awarding bodies are expected to maintain more detailed standards for their own qualifications. We refer to these as **awards standards** or simply standards where the meaning is clear from the context.
Standards for research degrees are supported by the National Framework for Doctoral Education.

Designated awarding body (DAB) awards standards[28]

Essentially, each DAB needs to determine an **award standard** for each of its NFQ qualifications. Such awards standards must be consistent with the NFQ.

QQI awards standards

QQI awards standards apply to awards made by QQI and to those made by providers under delegated authority. QQI is currently the main awarding body for further education and training qualifications and a niche awarding body for private independent higher education qualifications. All FET awards in the NFQ are made by QQI. QQI maintains and publishes about 1800 FET awards standards. In higher education QQI awards are only a small fraction of the total (e.g. in 2017 QQI awarded approximately 7% of the Honours Bachelor Degrees).

QQI's Policy for Determining Awards Standards outlines its approach. QQI awards standards vary widely in their specificity. They are not, however, the last word on standards for QQI awards. This is because QQI awards are normally achieved following successful completion of a validated programme of education and training. The outcomes of such programmes provide the most specific information on what must be achieved to qualify for the award to which the programme leads. Minimum intended programme/module learning outcomes are approved by QQI as part of a programme validation process[29].

QQI higher education awards standards

Currently there are several different kinds of QQI awards standards operating in higher education:

- the original NFQ award-type descriptors (e.g. the honours bachelor degree descriptor)
- the NFQ professional award-type descriptors (these are designed to be used in conjunction with other award-type descriptors and may be annotated to guide their interpretation in specific applications)
- wide or medium breadth standards (these apply to field of learning award stems e.g. QQI higher education awards standards for business, science or engineering)
- occupation-specific standards (e.g. Awards Standards—Architecture)
- generic standards linked with implicit external standards (e.g. Honours Bachelor of Laws)
- generic standards that explicitly reference meeting external requirements (e.g. those of the Teaching Council).

Many non-generic QQI higher education awards standards are expressed using a combination of both field-specific statements of expected learning outcomes and the NFQ level indicators. Different approaches have been taken to the style and depth of presentation of the field-specific statements of learning outcomes within HE awards standards. Different disciplines tend to prefer different ways of expressing standards.

[28] Designated Awarding Bodies are the Irish universities, technological universities, institutes of technology and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

[29] The following extract from our *Policy for Determining Awards Standards explains: The de facto award standard for a particular named award as issued is the statement of minimum intended programme learning outcomes that is approved at validation of the corresponding programme of education and training.*

The higher education awards standards tend to be closer to the NFQ in their generality and overall presentation than a set of minimum intended programme/module learning outcomes (MIPLOs and MIMLOs) that might be produced for a specific programme of higher education leading to a named award. And they tend to be far more detailed than the NFQ level indicators and can best be thought of as interpretations of the NFQ within a specified scope or discipline. Generally, they cover NFQ Levels 6-9.

Broad HE awards standards are intended to complement each other where appropriate, e.g. a B.Sc. in business would be expected to refer to the science and business standards and satisfy both (i.e. treat business subjects as the scientific core).

QQI further education and training awards standards

There are several different kinds of QQI awards standards operating in further education and training:

- the original NFQ award-type descriptors (e.g. the Advanced Certificate descriptor)
- the NFQ professional award-type descriptors (these are designed to be used in conjunction with other award-type descriptors and may be annotated to guide their interpretation in specific applications, e.g. the recently published awards standards for Early Learning and Care at NFQ Levels 5-8)
- wide or medium breadth standards (e.g. the broad standards under development at NFQ Levels 1-4)
- occupation-specific standards (e.g. Awards Standards—Early Learning and Care and some Common Awards System standards)
- tightly focussed standards (e.g. many of the Common Awards System standards fall into this category)
- awards standards that explicitly adopt external standards (e.g. those specified in legislation or by regulatory bodies).

The **Common Awards System (CAS)** comprises **compound** award specifications (for major, special purpose and supplemental awards) and **component** award specifications (for minor awards). The definitive policy statement of the CAS system is set out in the QQI *Policy for Determining Awards Standards*. The following table lays out the number of CAS award specifications by NFQ level and award class. The bulk is at NFQ Levels 5 and 6. CAS award specifications are relatively detailed. This explains why there are so many of them (around 1800 at present reduced from about 2000 at the start of 2019).

Table 9 CAS Awards by Class and NFQ Level

Level	Major	Component	Special purpose	Supplemental
1	2	25	0	0
2	1	26	0	0
3	4	117	1	0
4	15	117	6	0
5	84	667	63	0
6	111	504	41	1
Total	**217**	**1456**	**111**	**1**

Standards for qualifications leading to apprenticeships

QQI and DABs may award NFQ qualifications to individuals who successfully complete national apprenticeship programmes.

The general standards for major awards that mark successful completion of an apprenticeship are the NFQ Professional Award-type Descriptors, interpreted in conjunction with QQI's Topic-Specific Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for providers of Statutory Apprenticeship Programmes. Formal qualifications may

be gained following successful completion of a programme of education and training or following a process that validates non-formal or informal learning achievements so that they can be certified. The latter process is included in the meaning of RPL (recognition of prior learning).

Higher education qualifications recognised within the NFQ are currently available to those who complete programmes and/or RPL processes with:

- Designated Awarding Bodies including specified:
    - universities
    - technological universities
    - institutes of technology
- QQI accredited independent/private HE providers.

Further education qualifications included in the NFQ are currently available to those who complete QQI validated programmes or RPL processes with:

Education and Training Boards

- Teagasc
- Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM)
- SOLAS
- QQI accredited independent/private FET providers.

Programmes of education can be fulltime or part-time; they can involve face-to-face tuition in an educational institution, work-based learning, online tuition, or blends of any of these.

Section 3.3 Implementation of the NFQ

The NFQ is a comprehensive national qualifications framework, including general, further and higher education qualifications. By international standards the NFQ has reached an advanced operational stage. It is well established, highly regarded, widely used and sustainable.

Originally conceived of as a driver for systemic and strategic reform, advancing prospects for lifelong learning and consolidation of FET qualifications in particular, today the NFQ operates more as an enabler of wider reform, with implications for setting standards, quality assurance, developing awards, teaching, assessment, and programme design.

The original policy intent of the NFQ was to:

- promote development of a more flexible and integrated system of qualifications and of alternative learning pathways
- establish learning outcomes as a common reference point for qualifications and for recognition of non-formal and informal learning
- respond to the qualification needs of individuals, society and the economy through increasing the range of available qualifications and the recognition of diverse forms of learning.

The *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act*, *1999* established institutional arrangements for:

- the development of the NFQ for the national and international recognition of qualifications
- the operation of national arrangements for access, transfer and progression
- the promotion and maintenance of academic standards in further and higher education in Ireland.

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) were established under the 1999 Act. The Irish Universities Quality Board was established soon after in 2002 under the *Universities Act 1997*. NQAI, FETAC, HETAC and the universities were assigned statutory roles for the establishment of the NFQ and for the development of the original policies underpinning the NFQ.

The *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012* re-authorised the role of the NFQ as:

- a system for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State
- a system of levels of awards based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by a learner, to entitle the learner to an award at a particular level within the Framework.

The establishment of QQI in 2012 has facilitated the integration of the NFQ and associated policies on access, transfer and progression into internal and external quality assurance arrangements in the Irish post-secondary, education and training system.

The *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019* strengthens the basis on which all qualifications are to be included within the NFQ. The implications of the 2019 Amendment Act are discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

Qualifications included within the NFQ

Designated awarding body qualifications

The universities, technological universities and the institutes of technology are all Designated Awarding Bodies (DABs). The institutes of technology have been DABs since 1 January 2020 in respect of awards up to and including NFQ Level 9. DABs are providers that make their own awards; they are responsible for the assessment and certification of candidates for their awards.

QQI qualifications

QQI also makes awards across the 10 levels of the NFQ. QQI has no direct involvement in programme provision and no direct role in the assessment of candidates for its qualifications. QQI requires the involvement of **providers** of programmes of education and training to arrange for the assessment of candidates for the QQI awards to which their programmes lead. QQI are indirectly involved in provision through the external quality assurance of programmes leading to QQI awards and their providers (as institutions).

QQI determines and publishes standards for its awards in collaboration with stakeholders (standards advisory groups). The NFQ award-type descriptors provide the most general (least specific) QQI award standards. Other QQI award standards are more specific. The specificities of standards can vary.

Qualifications awarded under delegated authority

QQI can also **delegate authority** (**DA**) to certain providers to make their own awards. Currently this authority only extends to doctoral qualifications of certain institutes of technology in specified fields. The **Education and Training Boards** are among the other kinds of providers that are eligible to request delegated authority (DA). Awarding bodies that rely on DA are required to use QQI awards standards.

Listed awarding bodies

In the future, it will be possible to include qualifications of other kinds of bodies in the NFQ through a process of listing. The 2012 Act (as amended) has introduced the innovation of a **Listed Awarding Body** (**LAB**) that can have its awards included within the NFQ. A LAB may be a provider but not necessarily.

Qualifications that are not currently included in the NFQ

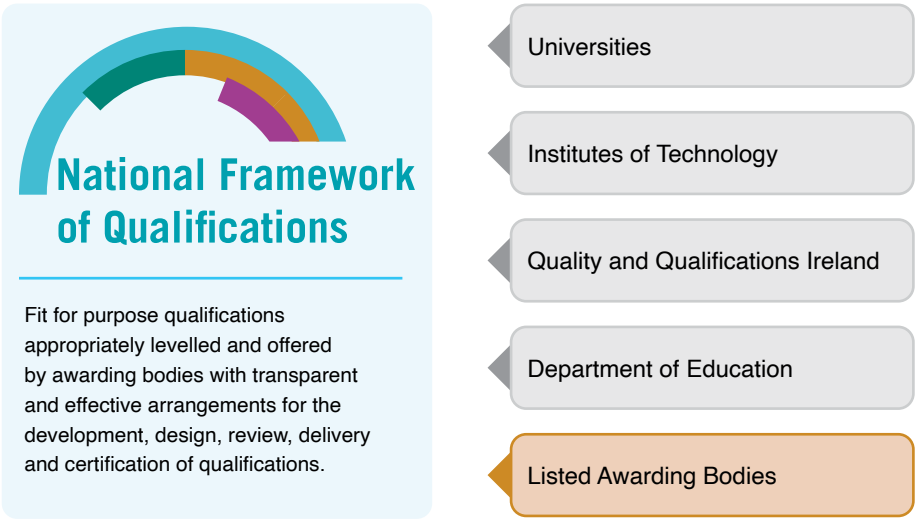
Many important qualifications are not currently included in the NFQ. Some of these may not require inclusion in the NFQ to function effectively within the qualifications system. Others might be rendered more useful by being included in the NFQ and, as a consequence, having their associated programmes quality assured in line with national norms. In some cases, national policy or law or European directives and such like may stimulate the demand for qualifications to be included in the NFQ.

For administrative convenience it can be useful to classify the qualifications that are not included in the NFQ as follows:

- non-NFQ qualifications certified by bodies with education as their principal focus
- vendor-specific, vendor-certified qualifications (e.g. ICT qualifications)
- professional body qualifications
- emerging qualifications types e.g. Digital Badges
- some English language qualifications.

Listing awarding bodies will enable some of these qualifications to be included within the NFQ. We anticipate, for example, demand for listing from the awarding bodies already making awards in respect of ETB programmes and from some professional bodies who may wish to have their professional awards included within the NFQ.

Figure 10 Awarding Bodies and the NFQ



Implementation of the NFQ

In Ireland, it is common to associate qualifications with a level on the NFQ. Qualification level is widely used, generally accepted and seen to offer practical, economic, social and personal benefits[30].

Since its establishment, the NFQ has:

- established a system of ten levels with level descriptors based on learning outcomes to classify qualifications
- promoted the use of learning outcomes to represent and recognise learning achievements
- defined the accepted relationship between qualifications and supported pathways within further

[30] See for example INDECON (2017) Policy Impact Assessment of the Irish NFQ https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/Reviewing-the-NFQ.aspx See also CEDEFOP Country Profile on Ireland https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/ireland-european-inventory-nqf-2018

education and employment opportunities

- promoted public confidence in the quality of qualifications offered and gained in Ireland
- facilitated national and international recognition of qualifications achieved in Ireland.

The NFQ is implemented primarily by participating awarding bodies and education and training providers. The utility and impact of the NFQ depends on the quality and effectiveness of its implementation. The following sectoral inputs illustrate how the NFQ is implemented in the awarding and quality assurance practice of public higher education institutions in Ireland.

University Perspective (Statement by the Irish Universities Association)

'The Irish universities offer a diverse range of programmes at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels, together with basic and applied research. There are seven universities recognised under the Universities Act, 1997 and represented by the Irish Universities Association: Dublin City University, Maynooth University, National University of Ireland Galway, Trinity College Dublin, University College Cork, University College Dublin, the University of Limerick. All are recognised in law as autonomous Designated Awarding Bodies (DABs), with the authority to make awards, including in institutions recognised by them. The National University of Ireland (NUI) is also recognised under the Universities Act, 1997 and as a DAB, with the authority to make awards in its recognised colleges.

The universities have primary responsibility for the standards of awards made in their name. In order to uphold this, the universities have developed comprehensive and firmly embedded quality frameworks. Processes to assure and enhance the academic standards of awards, and ensure that the quality of teaching and learning and the student experience is adequate and appropriate, enable students to achieve these standards. Standards are aligned to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

The effectiveness of these long-standing and extensive range of processes – including external examiner and peer review, and regular monitoring and systematic internal reviews of faculties, departments, schools, programmes, etc. – is confirmed through external quality assurance. This includes cyclical external institutional reviews and the Annual Institutional Quality Reports (AIQRs) which each HEI provides to QQI.

All of the Universities have well-established policies and procedures for access, transfer and progression. University awards are included within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The NFQ is discernible and explicitly mentioned across university regulations, policies and guidelines which set out parameters relating to programme design, approval, review, delivery, assessment and certification. All of the universities have extensive experience in this, and the degree award programmes offered are aligned to the relevant Framework level and award-type descriptors across the sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence through clearly specified and articulated learning outcomes. Programme and module learning outcomes are communicated to students and prospective students through relevant materials such as prospectuses and course handbooks. The NFQ is used as a reference in the course of quality reviews, to ensure programmes are appropriately positioned on the NFQ.

Robust design and approval processes, and curriculum review procedures, are in place for all university programmes. In the design of new programmes, university policy stipulates that one of the key considerations for a panel evaluating a proposal is the appropriateness of the learning outcomes to the NFQ, in terms of what level of knowledge, skill and competence a graduate should have attained on successful completion of the programme. Learning outcomes of the modules therein are designed to collectively deliver the overall programme outcomes, and credit is assigned based on these learning outcomes and student workload required. Typically, in the re-design of existing programmes, the approach is more bottom-up. Related modules are brought together to construct a programme in such a way to ensure compatibility of programme learning outcomes with the associated award included within the Framework. The NFQ is increasingly used as a reference in course quality reviews, to ensure programmes are appropriately positioned on the Framework.

This provides the basis upon which effective and appropriate teaching and learning activities are designed. Academic staff are supported in the delivery of modules/ programmes by university centres for teaching and learning, many of which have developed resources related to the NFQ and learning outcomes. University assessment policy is grounded in the interrogation and supported achievement of the stated module/ programme learning outcomes. A wide range of assessment methods are designed to ensure that a student can demonstrate the typical standard

of knowledge, skill and competencies associated with the relevant NFQ level. Among other processes, this is reviewed by professional accreditation bodies and by external examiners appointed by universities to assure that the academic standards are consistent with the specified learning outcomes. The Covid-19 crisis has provided further stimulus to the diversification of teaching, learning and assessment methods while maintaining focus on ensuring that learning outcomes are achieved.

University Programmes Boards review, approve and monitor the design, delivery, assessment of programmes within their remit on an ongoing basis to assure compliance with Academic Regulations, and to ensure the effectiveness and quality of programmes. These Boards report to Academic/ University Council, a statutory body, the responsibility of which is to oversee the university's academic activity and assure the quality and standards of academic matters. Committees under the Academic/ University Councils include those specifically relating to quality assurance and enhancement. Each of these groups tend to have staff and student representatives. All of the universities have a dedicated Quality Director in place, reporting to the Registrar/ Vice-President for Academic Affairs.

University awards are granted on the basis of a student's performance in assessments or other tests of the attainment of programme learning outcomes, sufficient credit to meet requirements, and compliance by subject and level for the relevant award. University awards are typically named to reflect the relevant NFQ award-type or in accordance with credit allocated. In the case of major awards, programmes titles typically reference the Framework award-type they lead to. The universities strive to provide current and prospective students, along with other education and training institutions, employers and the wider public, with clear and instructive information on awards regarding their inclusion within the NFQ, including the level, award-type, and associated credit and progression opportunities.

The recent introduction of the Irish Register of Qualifications, and the inclusion by the universities of their awards on this Register, allows for a welcome refocusing of attention on the NFQ and its associated architecture and principles after a significant time lapse. It also highlights the need for further policy development to ensure the NFQ remains fit for purpose for the coming decade as the Irish university system responds to changing student, employer and public policy demands.'

Institute of Technology Perspective (Statement by the Technological Higher Education Association)

'The technological higher education sector plays a distinct part in the national higher education landscape, offering awards at each level of the NFQ from 6 to 10. Historically, there were 14 institutes of technology designated under various acts of legislation including the Dublin Institute of Technology Act 1992, the Regional Technical Colleges Acts 1992-1999, and the Institutes of Technology Act 2006. The most recent legislation is the Technological Universities Act 2018. The Technological Universities Act provides for a significant reconfiguring of the technological sector whereby institutes of technology can choose to merge and undergo a rigorous evaluation in order to be designated as technological universities. Dublin Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Blanchardstown and Institute of Technology Tallaght were formally designated as Technological University Dublin in January 2019. The majority of the current 11 institutes of technology are actively engaged in consortia to explore and advance designation of further technological universities. At the time of this report, the institutes of technology are comprised by Athlone IT, Cork IT, IT Carlow, Dundalk IT, Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Letterkenny IT, Galway-Mayo IT, Limerick IT, IT Sligo, IT Tralee and Waterford IT.

Until 2019, institutes of technology operated under delegated authority from QQI (and the preceding body, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC)) to make awards at levels 6 to 9 of the NFQ. This means that institutes followed clearly established guidance and procedures to determine design, approval and validation of programmes and awards.

The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019 formally established institutes of technology as autonomous Designated Awarding Bodies from 1 January 2020 enabling them "to make awards, with the exception of Doctoral degrees, to students where the college has satisfied itself that the students have acquired the appropriate standard of knowledge, skill or competence for awards that are included within the National Framework of Qualifications." QQI continues to delegate authority to certain institutes to make (Doctoral) awards at level 10 of the NFQ. Automatic autonomy to make awards at level 10 of the NFQ is available only to institutes that achieve designation as technological universities.

Institutes of technology have primary responsibility for quality and are committed to the principle of continuous quality improvement. Standards are aligned to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Institutes have extensive experience of designing, approving and delivering modules and programmes which explicitly reference learning outcomes from relevant levels of the NFQ, leading to clearly defined standards of knowledge, skill and competence for awards to be made to individual learners. This experience is gained from operating with the oversight of QQI (and preceding bodies) since the establishment of the framework in 2003 and enhanced by understanding of the relationships and interplay between undergraduate programmes and awards at levels 6, 7 and 8, in particular, as well as post-graduate awards. The progression "ladder of qualifications" is a central tenet of provision in the technological sector. Increasing legislative autonomy recognises this proven ability to effectively operate concepts and constructs which enable learners and other stakeholders to navigate the qualification system using the framework as a key instrument. With increased autonomy, institutes of technology will adopt proven existing award standards and processes in the short to medium term, whilst acknowledging the right of each institute to design and operate its own award standards and processes in due course. Such standards and processes continue to be subject to external quality assurance.

Institutes of technology place great value on their increasing autonomy and the responsibilities associated with making awards in their own name. Comprehensive quality frameworks are supported by explicit policies and procedures, including those to validate and authorise new programmes and new awards. These have been in place for some time and are firmly embedded in practice. Typically, proposals for new programmes and related awards are made by the relevant centre / campus / unit of an institute, although proposals may originate from many sources, internal or external. The term validation is used for the process used to address the academic quality of a proposal. Authorisation refers to a decision by the institution to make the programme available. Proposals are validated internally and externally prior to programmes being authorised. In each case, validation is undertaken by a panel to consider a number of key considerations. External validation panels aim to include academics with experience in the disciplinary areas and a practitioner with relevant experience from the labour market/enterprise. Key considerations for validation panels include the rationale, need and relevance of the proposed programme, the potential demand for entry places and the expected demand for graduates. The NFQ is central to the process with consideration, by the validation panels, of the award title, award type, NFQ level, proposed entry requirements and arrangements for access, transfer and progression. The intended learning outcomes are reviewed, having regard to the level of the award sought. Teaching, learning and assessment methodologies are also considered among a number of other issues relevant to running the programme. Validation panels may approve proposals, reject proposals, or make recommendations to be addressed prior to approval. Thereafter, maintaining and improving quality is achieved by a range of measures.

Programme boards monitor quality on an ongoing basis. These boards are internal constructs and include representatives of academic staff and students. They meet several times each year and report to Academic Councils. The Academic Council of an institute of technology is a statutory body appointed by an institute's Governing Body with key functions to protect, maintain and develop academic standards. Academic Councils also maintain a number of standing committees relating to quality assurance and enhancement. Typically, these include specific committees focussed on teaching and learning, programme validation and quality enhancement. Each committee tends to have representatives of staff and students. It is common for a specific quality office or manager to be in place, reporting to the Vice-President for Academic Affairs and Registrar.

In addition to ongoing monitoring, periodic programmatic review examines programmes on a scheduled basis which occurs every five years, or more frequently. Programmatic Review is the name given to the quality review process through which institutes undertake a critical evaluation of programmes, reviewing and assessing them under a defined set of criteria and allowing their further development in order to improve educational quality. Programmatic Review takes into account all aspects of programmes including educational objectives, programme concept and implementation, learning outcomes, access and transfer issues, curriculum and module descriptors, staffing and physical resourcing, and evaluates each area under specified criteria. Included in the review are: an evaluation of the aims and general learning outcomes of the programme in the context of the relevant award standard which is informed by the level descriptors of the NFQ; and an evaluation of the learning experience to be

provided in terms of learning outcomes, curriculum content and teaching methods. The quality-related processes of validation and review are designed to be transparent with reports published on institutes' websites.

In communicating to employers, the public and prospective learners, institutes of technology explicitly refer to the NFQ level associated with the programme and awards on offer. This helps to develop and maintain a good understanding of "levelness" for all parties who engage with the education and training system, including the general public.'

Section 3.4 Use and Impact of the NFQ

NFQ use and impact

The NFQ has come to be understood as an *end* in itself and also a *means* for achieving socially useful objectives. The NFQ functions both *as policy* and as an *instrument for* policy. The NFQ is a key text articulating national policy on education and training qualifications, guiding the classification and design of qualifications and setting national access, transfer and progression arrangements that apply. As the NFQ has become established and implemented *as policy*, policymakers have sought to use the NFQ as an *instrument for* other policy initiatives and as a regulatory tool. In the context of updating referencing reports, this evolution is important. The NFQ is not a static entity, neither is it complete. The purpose and use of the NFQ have evolved over time as it progressed through various stages of development[31]. This report is a timely reminder of the need for the NFQ to remain relevant, alert to wider policy concerns and open to innovation that protects and advances learner interests.

Qualifications systems involve a complex interplay of laws, regulations, policies, institutions, interests, values and traditions. Single policy initiatives rarely cause predictable and significant change in complex qualifications systems. Therefore, the NFQ has come to be viewed less as a driver and more of an enabler or facilitator of reform, mediating how learning opportunities and achievements are represented, recognised and regulated. As a reference point for qualifications in Ireland the NFQ has come to be used as a tool for mediating and brokering various qualifications interests.

The implementation of the NFQ by education and training providers and by awarding bodies is subject to internal and external quality assurance. Users of qualifications report confidence in the NFQ, relying on it to make important decisions.

Learners are the most important users and beneficiaries of qualifications. The NFQ can make it easier for learners to make sense of qualifications offered in Ireland, to assist in planning their qualification pathways and to gain international recognition for their learning achievements.

> *'The National Framework of Qualifications provides an overview of the range of qualifications available within the education system in Ireland, enabling learners to easily measure and compare their learning achievements. This brings numerous benefits for students, notably facilitating progression along the NFQ and promoting international mobility, due to its alignment with other international frameworks of qualifications.'* (Union of Students in Ireland 2020)

Other users of qualifications include employers, education and training providers, professional regulatory bodies, credential evaluators, researchers, the media, the policy-making community and public funders of education and training qualifications (See Figure 11). The utility of the NFQ rests upon its acceptance and support by its constituency of users.

[31] Cedefop and ETF (2020) have proposed a six-stage trajectory of NQF development – Explorative; Design; Adoption; Activation; Operational; Review.

Figure 11 Practical Application and Use of NFQ

The implementation of the NFQ by awarding bodies, education and training providers and other stakeholders has stimulated policy and practical applications of the NFQ including:

- as a policy instrument in the planning and delivery of national education and training services
- as an approval mechanism for education and training schemes supported by public funds
- as a regulatory instrument facilitating student access to education and training opportunities e.g. study permissions for non-EU students; student grant funding
- as a reference point for specifying qualification requirements in public and private employment recruitment campaigns
- as an official statistical classification for reporting education and training data
- as a clearing mechanism, sorting central applications to higher education and training
- as a resource for the provision of guidance services to learners
- as a national reference point for the recognition of foreign qualifications presented in Ireland.

The NFQ is used in labour market transactions, by credential evaluators, by the media, by the guidance community, by researchers, by individual learners and by Government as an instrument for policy.

Public awareness of the NFQ and the EQF in Ireland

A public awareness survey of the NFQ and of the EQF in Ireland, commissioned by QQI, was carried out from 2013-2017. Based on a nationally representative sample of adults aged 15+, the most recent data shows that more than one in three claim to be aware of the NFQ. Public awareness of the EQF increased sharply over these years, peaking at 28% in 2017. While 50% of respondents reported school and college as their source of information about qualifications frameworks, the workplace was reported by a quarter of respondents as their primary source of information. The headline figures for public awareness of the NFQ and the EQF in Ireland are impressive and reinforce the important contribution of education and training settings and the guidance community in particular in promoting qualifications frameworks in Ireland.

In 2019 the EQF-NCP for Ireland, in association with the public and private recruitment agencies and lead employer groups, undertook a study into the use of qualifications and qualifications frameworks in recruitment practice. The findings reported in 'Making Sense of Qualifications – Views of Recruitment Professionals in Ireland' show that recruiters are well aware of the NFQ and often use the NFQ to set our qualification requirements. The EQF is also used by Irish recruiters as a reference point in European recruitment campaigns. Specific findings include:

- the relative importance of qualifications in recruitment varies by occupational level
- 74% of recruiters have difficulty assessing foreign qualifications
- 63% of recruiters say qualifications gained outside the formal education and training system are important
- 96% of recruiters are aware of the NFQ with 54% referring to the NFQ in recruitment campaigns
- 69% of recruiters are aware of the EQF with 17% referring to the EQF in recruitment campaigns
- over 50% of recruiters reported interest in learning more about micro-credentials and digital badges, the EQF and the academic recognition of foreign qualifications service offered by NARIC Ireland.

Independent impact evaluations of the NFQ

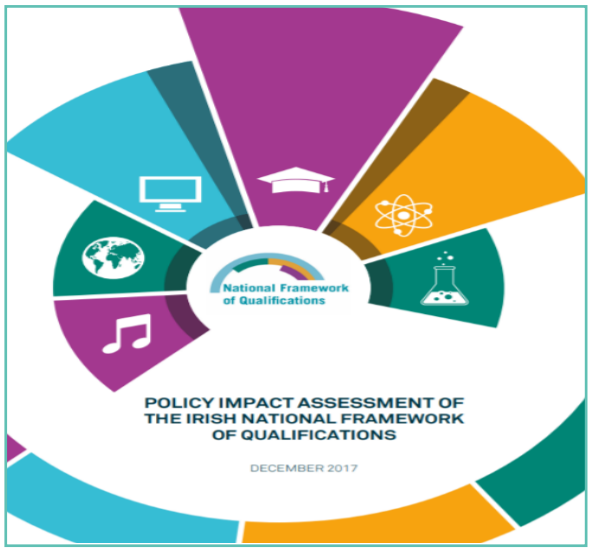
Understanding the effects of the NFQ is not straightforward. Impacts may be instrumental (e.g. increased transparency), enlightening (e.g. learning outcomes' paradigm) or strategic (e.g. system reform oriented). Furthermore, many effects of the NFQ are likely to be non-linear. Notwithstanding such complexities, there has been increased interest in the evaluation and impact of the NFQ. The Irish NFQ has been the subject of two published independent evaluations.

The first was the Framework Implementation and Impact Study in 2009, six years after the establishment of the NFQ. The study generated useful guidance for further implementation of the NFQ at that time and offered important insights into the role of the NFQ as an agent for change. The conclusions of the study are worth reproducing at some length:

> *'The Framework is an ambitious and major undertaking, aiming as it does to encapsulate the full spectrum of education and training, both life-long and life-wide. It has established itself in a relatively short period of time with a high level of prominence on the landscape of Irish education and training. This is a significant achievement involving the agreement of multiple players and stakeholders. The Framework is beginning to have an impact on learners in terms of a language*

to underpin their choices, new approaches to teaching and learning, and new opportunities for progression. These developments are at an early stage and there is still a long road to travel. The conclusions draw attention to the centrally driven nature of the Framework; its role in creating a new currency; issues of trust and stability, and the cultural lag in insinuating the Framework in teaching and assessment. It notes the tension between an outcomes-based approach to qualifications and education and training system largely predicated on inputs. The communication of the Framework remains critical to its visibility and success. This poses a challenge to simplicity and clarity whilst also addressing a need for deeper engagement at a technical level. The Study underlines the nature of the Framework as a long-term, dynamic process. This reveals tensions that are similar those experienced in other countries where such qualifications frameworks have been introduced. They concern the need for pragmatism and compromise and for sustained engagement of stakeholders in implementation. This may have implications for consistency and interpretation across sectors, many of which can be resolved as implementation unfolds. This brings into focus a need for sustained leadership and oversight of implementation. There is also a need to maintain a balance between stability and flexibility or dynamism in the operation of the Framework.

In reflecting on the themes which emerged in Ireland's case, the Study Team found that there were common features in its experience and that of countries such as Scotland and New Zealand. These are: time, stakeholder involvement and partnership, an iterative process of development, a sufficiently 'loose' Framework to accommodate differences, balance between implementation within sectors and system-wide arrangements, and the recognition that a qualifications framework may be an enabler of change more than a driver of change'.



In 2017 a second independent evaluation of the NFQ was conducted. The focus of the Policy Impact Assessment of the NFQ was on gathering evidence on the practical benefits of the NFQ and on identifying areas for further development. The review provided an initial policy impact assessment of the NFQ and was designed to inform future NFQ policy development, implementation and evaluation.

The results of the 2017 impact assessment suggest that the NFQ is well regarded and useful. It also reported implications for future work on the NFQ. Based on the findings of a comprehensive independent survey of national and international stakeholders, the NFQ has made a positive contribution to important educational priorities in Ireland. Figures 12-17 below illustrate the range of NFQ impacts while Figure 18 outlines implications for future developments arising from the 2017 impact assessment of the NFQ.

Figure 12 NFQ Impact – Transparency and Lifelong Learning

NFQ Impact - Transparency of Qualifications

89% - NFQ has made qualification pathways easier to explain and understand

80% - NFQ has made the skills and competence of qualifications more visible

84% - NFQ has made it easier to see how qualifications relate to each other

80% - NFQ has made it easier to evaluate qualifications for work or study

Figure 13 NFQ Impact – Quality

NFQ Impact - Quality of Qualifications

86% - Qualifications included in the NFQ are relevant for users (learners, employers etc.)

68% - Qualifications included in the NFQ are highly trusted, nationally and internationally

57% - Qualifications included in the NFQ meet consistent quality standards wherever they are provided

78% - Overall, the NFQ has enhanced the quality of qualifications in Ireland

Figure 14 NFQ Impact – Lifelong Learning

NFQ Impact - Lifelong Learning, Progression and Mobility of Qualifications

81% - NFQ has improved progression between qualifications achieved in school, in further and in higher education and training

68% - NFQ has facilitated improved access to education and training courses

63% - NFQ has made it easier to value and recognise learning and qualifications achieved outside of the formal/public education and training system

Figure 15 NFQ Impact – Teaching Learning and Assessment

NFQ Impact - Teaching, Learning and Assessment Practice

74% - The learning outcomes approach of the NFQ has improved the practice of course and curricula design

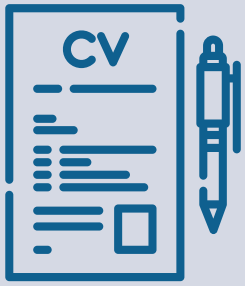
69% - The learning outcomes approach of the NFQ has improved assessment practice

64% - The learning outcomes approach of the NFQ has improved teaching and learning practice

63% - The learning outcomes approach of the NFQ has improved how standards of courses and curricula are monitored and maintained

70% - NFQ has made a positive contribution to the enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment

Figure 16 NFQ Impact – Employability and Skills Matching



NFQ Impact - Employment and Skills Matching

63% - NFQ has improved the dialogue between the world of qualifications and the world of work

72% - Vocational qualifications included in the NFQ signal relevant skills and competencies required for particular occupations

51% - NFQ has facilitated better matching between skills and job vacancies

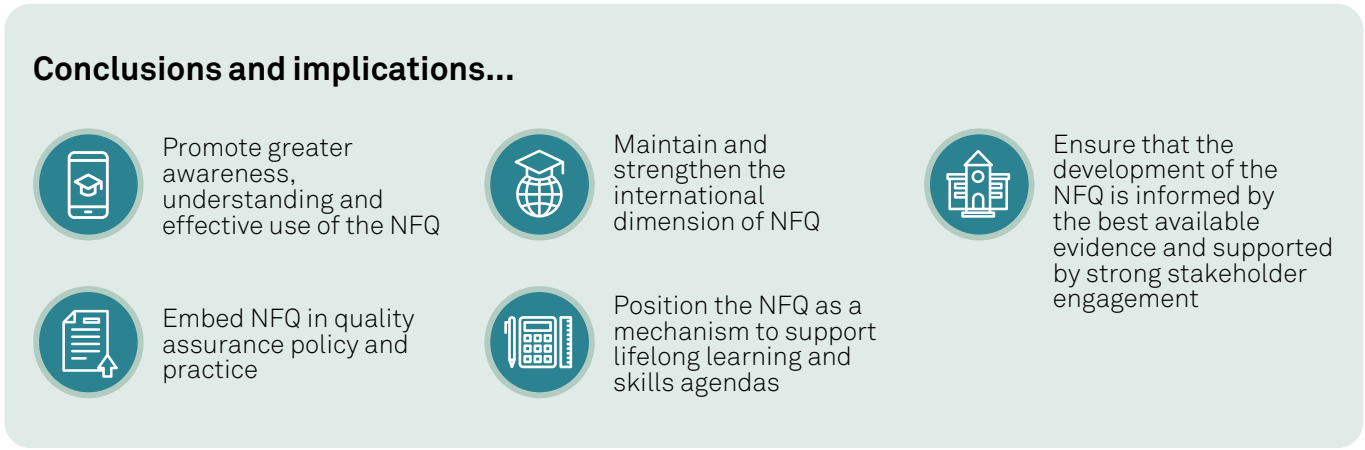
Figure 17 NFQ Impact – International Recognition of Qualifications

NFQ Impact - Recognition of Foreign Qualifications in Ireland and Irish Qualifications Abroad

61% - NFQ has made it easier for qualifications achieved in other countries to be understood, compared and recognised in Ireland

69% - NFQ has made it easier for Irish qualifications to be understood, compared and valued in other countries

Figure 18 NFQ Impact – Implications for Future Development



The 2018 Policy Impact Assessment of the NFQ concluded that:

> *'The NFQ has been very positively received among learners, employers and other stakeholders. In terms of different aspects of the impact of the NFQ, the assessment found that the NFQ was viewed as having had a very positive impact on the transparency and quality of the qualifications system in Ireland; on promoting progression between education levels but also of mobility of qualifications internationally; as well as improving the match between skills and employment opportunities. However, while acknowledging the achievements of the NFQ to date, the stakeholder engagement interviews also indicated a diverse range of views of how the NFQ should evolve in the future, and what the priorities of QQI should be in this regard. As such, this report should be viewed as the start rather than the end of a process of consultation, review and, where necessary, reform, to ensure that the NFQ is well positioned to meet the future needs of Irish society and economy.'*

The study of qualifications frameworks has advanced significantly over the past two decades. Two important longitudinal knowledge sources are the European Inventory of National Qualifications Frameworks produced by Cedefop and the Global Inventory of Qualifications Frameworks, a collaborative initiative by UNESCO, the European Training Foundation, and Cedefop. Both sources offer a systematic review of international developments and trends in the field of qualifications frameworks. They also bring together an emerging body of knowledge about the impact of qualifications frameworks. In 2017 the EU Commission, Cedefop and QQI jointly organised a conference in Thessaloniki addressing the question Do National Qualifications Frameworks make a Difference? Interest in the impact of qualifications frameworks looks set to remain on national and international agendas. The preparation of the 2020 Report required an exercise in self-evaluation and external peer review. In this way, establishing and maintaining an alignment between the NFQ and both the EQF and the QF-EHEA fulfils a periodic evaluative function.

This chapter has outlined the main design features of the NFQ and shown that implementation of the NFQ is well advanced, establishing a credible basis for use-inspired application.

Chapter Four: Response to Referencing Criteria and Procedures

This chapter addresses the respective criteria and procedures for EQF referencing and QF-EHEA self-certification. The evidence presented against each of the criteria is endorsed by relevant national authorities, providing links to further sources of information as required. Certain criterion and procedures invite a necessarily extensive response, others require far less detail and are confirmatory in nature.

Section 4.1 Criterion 1 EQF and Criteria 1 and 7 QF-EHEA (Competent Authorities)

EQF Criterion 1
The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process, including the National Co-ordination Point, are clearly determined and published by the competent authorities.

QF-EHEA Criterion 1
The national framework for higher education qualifications and the body or bodies responsible for its development are designated by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education.

QF-EHEA Criterion 7
The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published.

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications was established under the *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999*. It was re-authorised under the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance) Act 2012* and strengthened under the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019*.

This body of legislation has put in place the governance arrangements for the development and implementation of the NFQ. National bodies with designated responsibilities for the development and implementation of the NFQ include:

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is an independent state agency operating under the aegis of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The principle statutory functions of QQI include:

- promoting, maintaining, further developing and implementing the NFQ
- functioning as a national awarding body (determining standards, validating programmes, making awards and delegating authority to make awards) mainly, but not only, for further education and training
- providing external quality assurance for post school education and English language schools
- establishing policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression
- authorizing the International Education Mark
- maintaining the Irish Register of Qualifications
- providing a qualifications recognition service.

As the statutory quality assurance body for higher education and further education and training in Ireland, QQI conducts reviews of institutions and makes recommendations for their further development. In doing so, it engages peer reviewers with national and international experience who ultimately seek to establish the effectiveness of the institution's quality assurance procedures, in the interests of learners. The findings of this

process are published and utilised by a variety of parties both nationally and internationally. Institutions follow up on recommendations arising from reviews and engage with QQI on an annual and periodic basis. At a system level QQI synthesises the findings of external reviews; conducts themed reviews across several institutions where considered beneficial; and facilitates the exchange of good practice across higher education and further education and training.

QQI is the designated EQF-National Coordination Point (EQF-NCP) for Ireland; it is the National Europass Centre for Ireland; and the Irish NARIC.

The Department of Education and Skills[32] is a department of the Irish state with responsibility for education and training. The stated mission of the Department is to facilitate individuals, through learning, to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development. The Department has a responsibility to ensure that appropriate and proportionate arrangements are in place so that the resources in our care are directed and utilised where most needed in order to support our mission to "facilitate individuals through learning, to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development".

In recent years, a significant programme of reform has been underway across the education and training sector. The reform programme centres on the four key goals of promoting Learning for Life, Improving Quality and Accountability, Supporting Inclusion and Diversity and Building the Right Systems & Infrastructure. The Department takes a "whole-of-system" approach to strategic planning and implementation across the education and training sector. This "joined-up" approach enables the Department to plan and implement an extensive programme of reform and to balance this with the demands of supporting and sustaining the operation of our education and training system.

The recently established Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is responsible for policy, funding and governance of the higher and further education and research sectors and for the oversight of the work of the State agencies and public institutions operating in those areas.

The new department's role is to ensure that these sectors underpin and stimulate Ireland's social and economic development and that the opportunities provided by public investment and policy in the sectors are made more widely available to everyone including the most vulnerable in society.

The new department will have a lead role in setting the broad policy, governance, and institutional settings in which the NFQ is located. The Department of Education will continue to influence the NFQ due to its policy remit for school qualifications and interest in post-school transitions.

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is the statutory funding authority for the universities, institutes of technology and several other institutions. It leads the strategic development of the Irish higher education and higher education research system and is the advisory body to the Minister for Education and Skills in relation to the higher education sector. The HEA also has responsibility for the effective governance and regulation of higher education institutions and the higher education system.

It is the responsibility of the HEA to ensure the alignment of institutional strategies with national strategic objectives, and to ensure the delivery of agreed objectives through effective performance management at institutional and system levels. These objectives span the enhancement of teaching and learning, the advancement of equity of access to higher education, the enhancement of institutions' responsiveness to the needs of wider society, research capacity-building, and the internationalisation of Irish higher education. Central to the HEA's strategic development of a coherent and effective higher education system is the structural reform, and the reform of the funding and governance of higher education institutions, with which the organisation is charged in the National Strategy.

SOLAS is the statutory authority responsible for planning, funding and co-ordinating further education and training (FET) in Ireland. SOLAS is charged with a range of responsibilities including:

- supporting the development and implementation of further education and training strategy
- funding of the FET system to maximise the impact of state investment

[32] In July 2020 Government approved the establishment of a new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The Department of Education and Skills was renamed the Department of Education.

- overseeing the development and implementation of the Strategic Performance Agreements between SOLAS and each Education and Training Board (ETB) which set out 3-year plans to further embed a strategic and integrated FET system
- statutory responsibility for the apprenticeship system
- analysing the labour market and identifying and anticipating key skills needs, and
- promoting the standing of further education and training.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is a statutory body of the Department of Education and Skills[33]. The NCCA advises the Minister for Education and Skills on:

- curriculum and assessment for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools
- assessment procedures used in schools and examinations on subjects which are part of the curriculum.

The State Examinations Commission is a non-departmental public body under the aegis of the Department of Education responsible for the development, assessment, accreditation and certification of the second-level examinations of the Irish state: the Junior Cycle/Certificate and the Leaving Certificate. The Commission is responsible for the operation of all aspects of the established Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, Leaving Certificate Applied and Junior Cycle/Certificate Examinations including written, oral, aural, and practical components and assessed course work in some subjects. The individual functions involved in the operation of the examinations include:

- preparing examination papers and other examination materials
- determining procedures for the conduct and supervision of examinations
- recruiting contract staff to draft and mark examination components and to superintend at the examinations
- arranging for marking of work presented for assessment and examinations
- issuing the results of examinations
- determining procedures to enable the review and appeal of results of examinations at the request of candidates
- charging and collecting fees for examinations
- designating places where examinations may be held.

The School Inspectorate of the Department of Education has a statutory quality assurance obligation in relation to educational provision, as set out in Section 13 of the Education Act, 1998. The Inspectorate evaluates the quality and effectiveness of the provision of education in the State, including comparison with relevant international practice and standards, and reports thereon to the Minister. The Inspectorate plays a central role in the evaluation of the education system, particularly at primary and second level. In recent years, the main vehicle for this has been a comprehensive Whole School Evaluation process which has been introduced by the Inspectorate and schools.

Universities and institutes of technology have their own statutory degree awarding powers and are Designated Awarding Bodies with regard to the NFQ. DABs are required to maintain academic standards consistent with the NFQ and to operate national policy on access, transfer and progression.

Professional Recognition Bodies (PRB) in Ireland are required by law to co-operate and consult with QQI in the performance of QQI functions that are relevant to the activities of a PRB.

[33] In July 2020 Government approved the establishment of a new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The Department of Education and Skills was renamed the Department of Education.

Section 4.2 Criterion 2 EQF and Criterion 2 QF-EHEA (Descriptor Alignments)

Criterion 2 EQF
There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications frameworks or systems and the level descriptors of the EQF.

In accordance with EQF Criterion 2, this response demonstrates level to level correspondence between the qualifications levels in the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and the level descriptors of the EQF. The evidence presented in this section supports a clear and demonstrable link between the levels of the NFQ and the levels of the EQF.

Approach to 2020 technical mapping of the NFQ to the EQF

The approach involved an initial analysis of the levels in both Frameworks and making a general comparison between the two Frameworks' descriptors on the basis of learning outcomes defined in terms of 'Knowledge', 'Skills' and 'Competence' in the NFQ, and 'Knowledge', 'Skills' and 'Responsibility and Autonomy' in the EQF. The analysis built on work already undertaken to establish correspondences between NFQ levels and EQF levels in 2009 and involved a direct comparison of the text in the NFQ level indicators and in the EQF level descriptors.

The 2020 Report includes the mapping of the NFQ professional award-type descriptors (NFQ Levels 5-9) to the EQF.

The professional award-type descriptors at NFQ Levels 5-9 were initially developed in 2011 to facilitate the recognition of professional and occupationally oriented qualifications within the NFQ. The full suite of PATDs was published in 2015 and has not been formally or directly related to either of the European Qualifications Frameworks. However, it is important to note that the PATDs are derived from the NFQ and were informed by the EQF level descriptors. PATDs are typically used in conjunction with original NFQ award-types. It is no surprise, therefore, that PATDs are relatively straightforward to link with their respective EQF descriptors. Further information on the rationale for and use of PATDs is provided in response to Criterion 3 below. The result of the current mapping exercise confirms the original correspondence between EQF and NFQ levels and presents a convincing alignment between the PATD (NFQ Levels 5-9) and the EQF. For detailed technical analysis, see *Appendix 6*.

Ireland first completed a technical mapping of the NFQ to the EQF in 2009, establishing level to level correspondence between both Frameworks. The approach adopted in 2009 consisted of the following elements:

- a general background comparison of the two Frameworks and the purposes for which they were designed, comprising a comparison
    - between the architecture of the two Frameworks
    - between the concepts of learning outcomes on which they are based, and
    - the way levels are defined
- a comparative analysis of the NFQ and EQF level descriptors.

The levels analysis conducted in 2009, built on the verification of compatibility of the Irish NFQ with the 'Bologna' Framework, conducted in 2006, continuing with a direct comparison of the text [colour coded for 'Knowledge', 'Skill' and 'Competence'] in the NFQ level indicators and in the EQF level descriptors.

2009 NFQ-EQF outcomes

The 2009 referencing of the NFQ to the EQF established clear level to level relationship between both Frameworks and yielded the following results:

- The Irish NFQ and EQF share core design criteria which demonstrate that a direct comparison of the levels in the two Frameworks is feasible

- There is a strong correspondence between the Irish NFQ and EQF in terms of the understanding and meaning of learning outcomes on which they are based. This demonstrates that a meaningful comparison of the levels in the two Frameworks based on 'Knowledge', 'Skill' and 'Competence' as the primary comparative factors.

Table 10 NFQ-EQF Level to Level Correspondence 2020

Irish NFQ	EQF
10	8
9	7
8	6
7	6
6	5
5	4
4	3
3	2
2	1
1	1

2020 technical mapping of the NFQ to the EQF

The 2017 EQF Recommendation renamed the 'Competence' level descriptor so that it is now described as 'Responsibility and Autonomy' referring to the ability of the learner to apply knowledge and skills autonomously and with responsibility. The technical architecture of the NFQ has remained very stable since 2009, a notable exception being a new qualification type – professional award-type, now active at NFQ Levels 5-9.

The methodology for the 2020 Report builds on the 2006 and 2009 reports and includes: a general background comparison of the two Frameworks; the purposes for which they were designed; a conceptual comparison of the architecture of the two Frameworks and a technical comparative analysis of the EQF level descriptors and the NFQ level indicators including professional award-type descriptors (NFQ Levels 5-9). It should also be noted that in both Frameworks keywords and phrases are introduced as distinguishing factors in the description of learning outcomes at each level.

The EQF level descriptors, the NFQ level indicators and the PATDs (NFQ Levels 5-9) are presented in tables, with sets of descriptive statements for 'Knowledge', 'Skills' and 'Competence' for NFQ and the PATDs; and in sets of descriptive statements for 'Knowledge', 'Skills' and 'Responsibility and Autonomy' in the case of the EQF. This enabled cross-referencing of the statements in the two Frameworks, level by level.

The technical mapping exercise results from analysing the levels in the EQF and the NFQ and drawing a 'best fit' comparison between both Frameworks' descriptors on the basis of learning outcomes defined in terms of 'Knowledge', 'Skills' and 'Competence' (NFQ), and 'Knowledge', 'Skills' and 'Responsibility and Autonomy' (EQF). The results of this technical mapping of these key learning constructs, colour coded accordingly, are presented in Appendix 6.

It is important to note, that employing this approach to undertaking the technical mapping exercise was possible because both the NFQ and EQF address the task of describing learning outcomes using a similar conceptual basis.

Knowledge

Both Frameworks' definitions of knowledge describe what is learned and what learning processes are involved.

Skill

This aspect of learning outcomes is referred to as 'Skills' in EQF, where it is defined as 'the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems'.

In the NFQ 'Skill' is defined as 'the goal-directed performance of a task in interaction with the environment' and this concept is elaborated by the further definition of know-how as 'the procedural knowledge required to carry out a task'.

Competence/Responsibility and Autonomy

Conceptually, both Frameworks refer to the application of knowledge, skill and other abilities. NFQ describes competence as 'the effective and creative demonstration and deployment of knowledge and skill in human situations', acknowledging also that competence 'draws on attitudes, emotions, values and sense of self-efficacy of the learner'. The EQF description highlights the 'ability of the learner to apply knowledge and skills autonomously and with responsibility'.

The analysis of the definitions of Knowledge, Skill and Competence/ Responsibility and Autonomy that underpin the construction of levels in the NFQ and the EQF, evidence a continuing and strong correspondence between the Frameworks in the understandings of the meaning of learning outcomes on which they are based. It is clear that a reliable comparison of the level descriptors in the two Frameworks can be based on the Knowledge, Skill and Competence dimensions in the NFQ and the Knowledge, Skill and Responsibility and Autonomy dimensions of the EQF, see technical comparisons in *Appendix 6*.

2020 Technical mapping outcome

The conceptual and technical analysis undertaken for the 2020 Report, confirms and strengthens the demonstrable link between the levels in the NFQ and the level descriptors of the EQF. The report also establishes the relationship between the PATD and the EQF via the NFQ.

Table 11 NFQ (including PATD) -EQF Level to Level Correspondence 2020

EQF Level	NFQ Level	NFQ Award-Type
EQF Level 1	NFQ Level 1	Level 1 Certificate
	NFQ Level 2	Level 2 Certificate
EQF Level 2	NFQ Level 3	Level 3 Certificate
		Junior Cycle/Certificate[34]
EQF Level 3	NFQ Level 4	Level 4 Certificate
		Leaving Certificate
EQF Level 4	NFQ Level 5	Level 5 Certificate
		Level 5 Professional Award
EQF Level 5	NFQ Level 6	Advanced Certificate
		Higher Certificate
		Level 6 Professional Award
EQF Level 6	NFQ Level 7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree
		Level 7 Professional Award
	NFQ Level 8	Honours Bachelor Degree
		Higher Diploma
		Level 8 Professional Award
EQF Level 7	NFQ Level 9	Post-Graduate Diploma
		Masters Degree
		Level 9 Professional Award
EQF Level 8	NFQ Level 10	Doctoral Degree
		Higher Doctorate

The NFQ-EQF alignment is supported by detailed technical analysis of the respective level descriptors in both Frameworks presented in detail in *Appendix 6*.

Criterion 2 QF-EHEA
There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework.

This section sets out the response in relation to the QF-EHEA Criterion 2 and confirms the compatibility of higher education qualification types on the Irish NFQ with the relevant QF-EHEA descriptors.

The Dublin Descriptors offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with awards that represent the end of each of a (Bologna) cycle or level. The Dublin Descriptors are intended to facilitate comparisons between qualifications awarded at the end of each Bologna cycle.

[34] The final Junior Certificate examination will be held in 2021 and then all examinations will be called the Junior Cycle. The use of the term Junior Cycle/Certificate in this report reflects this transition period.

The Irish award-type descriptors are part of the NFQ that has as its underpinning vision the recognition of all learning. The dimensions or strands of learning underpinning the NFQ are not identical to those underpinning QF-EHEA cycle descriptors. This is not problematic for the current purposes of presenting a clear and demonstrable link between the respective qualifications descriptors.

Strands of learning in both descriptor sets

The Dublin Descriptors are expressed in terms of competence levels and they help distinguish in a general manner between the different Bologna cycles. A level descriptor includes the following five components:

- knowledge and understanding
- applying knowledge and understanding
- making judgements
- communication
- lifelong learning skills

The Irish award-type descriptors comprise eight sub-strands:

- knowledge – breadth
- knowledge – kind
- know-how and skill – range
- know-how and skill – selectivity
- competence – context
- competence – role
- competence – learning to learn
- competence – insight

2006 self-certification outcomes

The 2006 verification of compatibility of the Irish Framework award-type descriptors with the 'Bologna' cycle descriptors was informed by the principle of substantial difference as enshrined in the Lisbon Recognition Convention; the original analysis yielded the following results:

- the Irish Higher Certificate is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna First Cycle
- the Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degree is compatible with the Bologna First Cycle descriptor.
- However, holders of Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degrees and their equivalent former awards do not generally immediately access programmes leading to Second Cycle awards
- the Irish Honours Bachelor Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna First Cycle
- the Irish Higher Diploma is a qualification at the same level as completion of the First Cycle, and is a qualification typically attained in a different field of learning than an initial First Cycle award
- the Irish Masters Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna Second Cycle
- the Irish Post-Graduate Diploma is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna Second Cycle
- the Irish Doctoral Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna Third Cycle.

Table 12 NFQ Qualification Types and QF-EHEA Cycle Descriptor Correspondence 2020

NFQ Levels	Typical qualifications within each NFQ Level	QF-EHEA Cycle
1	Level 1 Certificate	
2	Level 2 Certificate	
3	Level 3 Certificate Junior Certificate	
4	Level 4 Certificate Leaving Certificate	
5	Level 5 Certificate Leaving Certificate	
6	Advanced Certificate	
	Higher Certificate	Short Cycle Qualifications
7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree	First Cycle Qualifications
8	Honours Bachelor Degree Higher Diploma	
9	Masters Degree Post-Graduate Diploma	Second Cycle Qualifications
10	Doctoral Degree Higher Doctorate	Third Cycle

2020 self-certification approach

Technical analysis was undertaken to re-confirm a set of standard characteristics 'common' to the NFQ awards-types and the 'Bologna' Framework, and to compare for the first time the Professional Award-Type at Levels 6-9 with the 'Bologna' Framework.

A 2020 verification of compatibility was conducted cognisant of the outcomes of the 2006 self-certification of the compatibility of the NFQ with the QF-EHEA, while also taking account of the relationship between the EQF and the QF-EHEA articulated in the 2017 EQF Recommendation. It is worth noting that the 2009 Irish EQF-referencing report had built on the outcomes of the self-certification exercise that had been conducted in 2006 to verify the compatibility of the NFQ with the QF-EHEA.

2020 approach to verifying NFQ-QF-EHEA alignment

In terms of methodology, the same approach was used as was originally employed with some innovations. Apart from verifying comparability of the PATD with the QF-EHEA for the first time, the current presentation is characterised by a much higher level of granularity. The Dublin Descriptors and the associated award-type descriptors from the NFQ are aligned in tables in sets of statements and compared. The same methodological approach was employed for verifying compatibility of the NFQ professional award-type descriptors at Levels 6-9 with the Dublin Descriptors. This enabled cross-referencing of the statements in the various NFQ award-type descriptors (Levels 6-10) and the PATD (Levels 6-9) with the Bologna cycle descriptors (See *Appendix 6*).

The results of the 2020 analysis confirms and strengthens the 2006 QF-EHEA self-certification outcomes.

In addition to the extensive technical mapping of level and qualification descriptors, it is instructive to describe credit profiles attached to higher education qualifications in Ireland.

National guidelines for the use of credit in HE in Ireland recommend a typical credit volume or credit range for each major award-type at Levels 6-9 in the NFQ. These credit profiles are compatible with ECTS conventions and consistent with Bologna cycle credit ranges:

Table 13 Credit Profiles for Higher Education Qualifications

NFQ Level 7 Ordinary Bachelor Degree	180 credits
NFQ Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree	180-240 credits
NFQ Level 8 Higher Diploma	60 credits
NFQ Level 9 Masters Degree (Taught)	60-120 credits
NFQ Level 9 Post-graduate Diploma	60 credits

Irish Doctoral Degrees and Masters Degrees (by research) do not usually have credit values assigned.

In the context of credit arrangements of PATDs, it is important to note that PATDs are by and large used in conjunction with other NFQ major awards-types, but not only, therefore, depending on the variation and diversity in the profiles of different programmes (smaller or bigger) leading to various NFQ award-types, the credit packages of PATDs can vary accordingly from 30 credits to 240 credits.

It is apparent that the Irish NFQ and its qualifications are based on learning outcomes and that higher education qualifications in Ireland utilise an ECTS-compatible system. Since the original self-certification exercise, we have accumulated a significant body of data and knowledge about the recognition in other countries of qualifications gained in Ireland. The relatively seamless experience of graduates of the Irish higher education and training system who seek further learning or employment opportunities in Europe suggests that the Bologna status of Irish higher education qualifications is widely accepted.

2020 NFQ-QF-EHEA self-certification outcomes

The 2020 verification of compatibility of the Irish NFQ award-type descriptors including the PATD (NFQ Levels 6-9) with the 'Bologna' cycle descriptors yielded the following results:

- the Irish Higher Certificate is compatible with the Bologna Short Cycle descriptor
- the Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degree is compatible with the Bologna First Cycle descriptor. However, holders of Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degrees and their equivalent former awards do not generally immediately access programmes leading to Second Cycle awards.
- the Irish Honours Bachelor Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna First Cycle
- the Irish Higher Diploma is a qualification at the same level as completion of the First Cycle, and is a qualification typically attained in a different field of learning than an initial First Cycle award
- the Irish Masters Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna Second Cycle
- the Irish Post-Graduate Diploma is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna Second Cycle
- the Irish Doctoral Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna Third Cycle.

Overall, there is a clear and demonstrable link between the NFQ award-types including the PATD and the QF-EHEA cycles as shown in Table 14 below.

Table 14 NFQ Qualification Types (including PATD) and QF-EHEA Cycle Descriptor Correspondence 2020

QF-EHEA (Bologna)	NFQ Level	NFQ Award-Type
Short Cycle Higher Education	NFQ Level 6	Higher Certificate
		Level 6 Professional Award
First Cycle Higher Education	NFQ Level 7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree
		Level 7 Professional Award
	NFQ Level 8	Honours Bachelor Degree
		Higher Diploma
		Level 8 Professional Award
Second Cycle Higher Education	NFQ Level 9	Post-Graduate Diploma
		Masters Degree
		Level 9 Professional Award
Third Cycle Higher Education	NFQ Level 10	Doctoral Degree
		Higher Doctorate

Section 4.3 Criterion 3 EQF and Criterion 3 QF-EHEA (Learning Outcomes, RPL and Credit)

Criterion 3 EQF
The national qualifications frameworks or systems and their qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and related to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where appropriate, to credit systems.

Criterion 3 QF-EHEA
The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS credits.

The Irish NFQ and learning outcomes

The NFQ is defined in law as a 'system of levels and types of awards based on standards of knowledge skill or competence [...] for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State'.

The original Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications (2003) determined that award standards are the expected outcomes of learning, inclusive of all education and training. They concern the knowledge, skill and competence that are expected from the learner who is to receive an award.

They concern both general standards (for a level in the Framework or an award-type) and the specific standards for named awards in particular subjects or fields of learning.

As part of the development process, the Qualifications Authority determined that there would be three general strands of learning outcome underpinning the Framework: knowledge, know-how and skill, and competence. A full description of the original learning outcomes approach in the NFQ, and the underlying concepts, is available in the publication Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications (2003).

Since 2012, QQI has been designated to lead the development of the NFQ. Section 43 of the 2012 Act as amended[35] requires QQI to:

> *a. promote, maintain, further develop and implement the Framework as a system —*
>
> *ii. of levels and types of awards based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by a learner to entitle the learner to an award at a particular level, and of the type concerned, within the Framework, and*
> *iii. for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State..."*

and to

> *"...promote and facilitate the use by providers and awarding bodies of statements of what an enrolled learner is expected to know, understand, and where appropriate, demonstrate, on completion of a programme of education and training..."*

The Section 43 amendments included above have not commenced (been activated) at the time of writing and Section 43 of the 2012 Act is still in force, but this is very similar in this regard and also makes the link with knowledge, skill and competence clear.

One of the differences the amendment has made to Section 43 is that the NFQ is regarded as a system of levels *and types* rather than just a system of levels. This reflects how the NFQ has been structured but also affords the possibility of evolving structures, for example, having different levels for different types.

The Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications were published in 2003 and remain in force. They describe the NFQ's learning outcomes approach and the underlying concepts. For example:

> *"In the Framework, award standards are the expected outcomes of learning, inclusive of all education and training. They concern the knowledge, skill and competence that are expected from the learner who is to receive an award. They concern both general standards (for a level in the Framework or an award-type) and the specific standards for named awards in particular subjects or fields of learning."* (p. 20)

The NFQ assumes that the learning required for any educational qualification can be described in general terms by a set of **knowledge, skill or competence** level indicators and that these can be expressed as statements of **expected learning outcomes**.

Ten NFQ levels are defined by the NFQ Grid of Level Indicators for each of eight **sub-strands** of the set of knowledge, skill and competence **strands**. The schema for the Grid of Level Indicators is illustrated in Table 15.

[35] *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act* 2012 (the "2012 Act") as amended by the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act* 2019 (the "2019 Amendment Act").

Table 15 Schema for the NFQ Level Indicators

Strand title	Sub-strand title	Level 1 Indicators	Level 2 Indicators	…
Knowledge	Breadth			
	Kind			
Know-how and skill	Range			
	Selectivity			
Competence	Context			
	Role			
	Learning to learn			
	Insight			

There are five classes of qualifications that can be included in the NFQ. Four original ones: major, minor, special purpose, and supplemental and the more recently established professional class.

In addition to the Grid of Level Indicators, the NFQ includes a set of **award-types.** For example, an 'Honours Bachelor Degree' is an example of an award-type. Each award-type is defined by an **award-type descriptor**.

The Determinations for the Outline National Framework of Qualifications, published in 2003, include the original set of major award-type descriptors. Currently, descriptors have been determined for:

- major awards (e.g. Honours Bachelor Degree) (2003)
- professional awards (2011-2014)
- minor, special purpose and supplemental awards (2004)

The learning outcomes content of the original major award-type descriptors for FET and HE are largely built of elements from the Grid of Level Indicators. Some combine indicators from different levels/columns (e.g. a Level 6 award-type might include a Level 7 indicator for knowledge kind).

The most recent NFQ development was the determination of a new 'professional' class of awards along with a set of PATDs. The professional award-type and its descriptors were developed to strengthen the capacity of the NFQ to facilitate the levelling of professional (meaning occupation-oriented) qualifications.

The professional class implicitly introduced the concept that an award can have more than one class and type – e.g. a specific honours bachelor's degree could be classed as both major and professional and would need to be consistent with the Honours Bachelor Degree award-type as well as the Level 8 professional award-type.

The expected learning outcomes (ELOs) of the PATDs were designed to be consistent with the ELOs in the corresponding column of the Grid of Level Indicators. However, the PATD ELOs are organised under eleven bespoke sub-strands.

The PATDs are the general standards for Irish apprenticeship awards at NFQ Levels 5-9. The prospect of extending them to doctoral level may be considered by QQI.

The Descriptors for Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental Award Types are designed to be used in conjunction with the 2003 determinations. Minor awards are always linked to major awards. Supplemental awards always build upon a previous award. Special-purpose awards *may* comprise learning outcomes that also form part of major awards (i.e. they can function as minor awards while having a standalone value). Rather than list every conceivable descriptor, the 2004 document indicates that the expected learning outcomes for each strand are variable but implies that the expected learning outcomes will be taken from the relevant elements of the Grid or

Level Indicators or the major award-types as appropriate:

> *Minor, supplemental and special purpose awards may often specify standards for fewer than the eight sub-strands. In some cases, their focus may be narrow and only a small number of sub-strands may be defined. If only one sub-strand is defined for the award, then the level to which the award-type is allocated is decided on the basis of that strand. If more than one sub-strand is defined, a best-fit principle will apply. This will take into account the purpose and context for developing the award (and, where relevant, its link to other awards).*

It is noteworthy that the NFQ extended minor awards to higher education (HE). Not all countries provided for small HE qualifications at that time. In modern terms, minor, special purpose or supplemental award can be identified as micro credentials (with a volume of learning of five or more ECTS credits at HE levels). However, the volume of some micro-credentials not included within the NFQ can be smaller than this.

Award-type descriptors and level indicators involve the use of statements of **expected learning outcomes (ELO)**. However, ELO is not a term that was routinely used by the NFQ policy and criteria, mostly it simply refers to learning outcomes.

All the NFQ's original award-type descriptors were designed to be as general as possible (i.e. they are non-discipline-specific, and they do not distinguish between occupation-oriented and other kinds of qualifications).

The NFQ's award-type descriptors are the most general expression of standards for qualifications that are included in the NFQ. NFQ award-type descriptors (NQAI, 2003):

- describe general standards and mixes of knowledge, skill and competence associated with award-types
- include level and volume – there may be more than one award-type at any given level in the Framework – the level of an award-type is not determined solely by the level of the highest learning contained therein
- operate independently of specific fields of learning, but facilitate more detailed specification for named awards
- may include articulation or progression characteristics
- may include reference to assessment methods.

An extensive body of work has been undertaken to date by the awarding bodies across the further education and training sector, the higher education sector and the general education sector to implement the learning outcomes approach of the NFQ since its launch in 2003.

Learning outcomes and quality assurance

QQI is responsible for the external quality assurance of FET and HE providers. Its Core Quality Assurance Guidelines apply to all FET and HE providers of programmes that lead to qualifications that are included within the NFQ. Learning outcomes and the NFQ are central to QQI's external quality assurance activities. The following extracts illustrate:

> *"Policies and procedures for programme design and approval ensure that programmes:*

- are designed with overall programme objectives and programme strategies that are in line with the provider strategy and have explicit intended learning outcomes
- are developed in line with the requirements of the National Framework of Qualifications and associated policies and procedures on Access, Transfer and Progression..." (p.10)

> *"Policies and procedures related to the assessment of learners address:*
>
> *i) Learner responsibility for demonstrating learning achievement*
>
> *ii) How assessment supports standards based on learning outcomes*

iii) How assessment promotes and supports effective learning and teaching

iv) The credibility and security of assessment procedures ... viii) (p. 15)

Core Quality Assurance Guidelines apply to all FET and HET providers offering qualifications recognised within the NFQ. These national guidelines are consistent with the expectations for the use of learning outcomes as set out in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2015).

Quality Assurance Guidelines for Designated Awarding Bodies require that NFQ level indicators be used to establish academic standards and such standards maintained in the awarding function of degree awarding bodies so 'that learners enrolled on programmes leading to awards recognised within the NFQ acquire the standard of knowledge, skill or competence associated with the level of that award' (p. 7).

Periodic external quality assurance processes evaluate the effectiveness of institution-wide quality assurance procedures for the purposes of establishing, ascertaining, maintaining, and enhancing the quality of education, training, research, and related services the institution provides. The Handbook for the 2017-2023 Review Cycle of Designated Awarding Bodies guides higher education institutions, with degree awarding powers, in preparing for external review of the effectiveness of their internal quality assurance procedures. It makes clear that review procedures should be capable of demonstrating that certified standards of knowledge, skill or competence achieved by learners are consistent with the NFQ (p. 8).

Learning outcomes in general/school education

Learning outcomes are seen in the context of professional formation, development, and practice in general education. In 2019 the NCCA published a review of international practice in the use of learning outcomes in curriculum reform. The findings from the review contributed to the development of guidelines on the use of learning outcomes for teachers. These guidelines are intended to be used in a flexible way to empower teachers to explore a range of approaches which will enable them to develop a coherent approach to the use of learning outcomes defined as 'statements in curriculum specifications to describe the knowledge, understanding, skills and values students should be able to demonstrate after a period of learning'. A companion text developed by the NCCA, in collaboration with the teaching profession, Learning Intentions and Success Criteria, introduces the concept of 'learning intentions' or what the teacher wants the students to know, understand, and be able to do as a result of learning and teaching activities. Learning intention statements support the learning outcomes expressed in subject specifications. Success criteria are linked to learning intentions. They are developed by the teacher and/or the student and describe what success looks like. They help the teacher and student to make judgements about the quality of student learning. It is clear that learning outcomes and associated concepts that make expectations about learning activities more explicit, are influential in curricula development and the professional practice of teaching in Ireland. Learning outcomes also feature prominently in the way that school subjects and examinations are specified.

The **Senior Cycle** curriculum is based on a Key Skills Framework which includes associated learning outcomes. Each subject specification is expressed in terms of learning outcomes, defined as 'statements of the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes which it is expected learners will be able to demonstrate as a result of the learning associated with the topic'. Statements of learning outcomes in Senior Cycle subject specifications are aligned with the appropriate NFQ levels. Senior Cycle programmes prepare students to take the Leaving Certificate examination which has been placed at NFQ Levels 4 and 5. This placement is elaborated in Chapter Two and reflects the breadth of learning achievements that may be recognised by a Leaving Certificate. Recognition authorities in other countries will consider the particular leaving certificate programme followed, the subjects taken and the typical progression pathways from the various leaving certificate programmes, when determining the comparability of the Irish Leaving Certificate with upper secondary, school leaving qualifications in Europe. See for example how the universities and colleges admissions service in the UK use the EQF to compare the Irish Leaving Certificate for the purpose of accessing higher education courses in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Junior Cycle is described in 24 Statements of Learning that guide the design of programmes for all Junior Cycle learners. Each subject specification is expressed in terms of learning outcomes aligned with NFQ Level 3. To

support teaching, learning and assessment, NCCA prepared guidelines on the use of learning outcomes. Within the school system learning outcomes help to ensure that the objectives of the relevant curriculum component, the learning and teaching strategies adopted, and the assessment approaches employed, are consistent with each other. Learning outcomes feature strongly in the design and delivery of school qualifications. Junior Cycle programmes prepare students to take the Junior Cycle/Certificate examination which has been placed at NFQ Level 3.

The published learning outcomes in official subject specifications, established through an NCCA-led consultative process, determine the subject 'content-standards'. These inform the State Examinations Commission (SEC) when setting 'performance standards' for school examinations. Finally, 'attainment referencing' using statistical analysis and professional judgement is used by the SEC to maintain standards of school examinations over time. For further technical explanation see Setting and Maintaining Standards in State Examinations.

The Irish NFQ and arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning

From the outset, the NFQ was intended to form the basis of a new, more flexible and integrated system of qualifications, by putting the needs of the learner first and supporting the national objective of moving towards a 'lifelong learning society'. The aim is that in this society, individual learners will be able to take up education and training opportunities at any stage throughout their lives as appropriate to their ambitions, commitment and capacity and receive due recognition for what they achieve.

This commitment to lifelong learning is reflected in the Qualifications Act. Section 9(g) of the 2012 Act requires QQI to "*determine policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners, and monitor the implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners by providers*".

Access, transfer and progression were defined in the section 2 of the 1999 Act as follows:

- *Access: the process by which learners may commence a programme of education and training having received recognition for knowledge, skill and competence required*
- *Transfer: the process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme having received recognition for knowledge, skill and competence acquired*
- *Progression: the process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme, where each programme is of a higher level than the preceding programme.*

Building on the definitions in the Act, and side by side with the development of the NFQ, the NQAI developed and published *Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression* (2003). Following consultation, in 2015, a *Policy Restatement on the 2003 Access, Transfer and Progression in relation to Learners for Providers of Further and Higher Education and Training* was published. This provides the basis for providers to establish at local level their own policies and procedures for ATP. The policy states that providers are required to give clear information to learner which should help identify pathways to, from and within programmes, and about awards and qualifications that may be achieved.

Providers' implementation of access, transfer and progression is monitored mainly through programme validation and through review processes for providers' quality assurance arrangements.

The restatement articulates a vision for learner progression. It is in this context that the arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning – or the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), as it is commonly referred to in Ireland – and its linkage to the NFQ are established.

The NFQ is based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and is related to arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning and to credit systems.

The legislative framework underpinning the NFQ facilitates RPL opportunities for individuals who have been assessed as having achieved the necessary learning outcomes associated with the relevant qualification or arrangements for exemptions or credits at all levels of the NFQ. RPL is supported within a range of national policy frameworks to promote social inclusion and enhance competitiveness. Responsibility for assessment

rests with quality assured providers of education and training, which facilitates transparency and accountability in the process.

All providers offering programmes leading to NFQ qualifications are required to establish *policies and procedures* for access, transfer and progression. Provider procedures shall be inclusive of credit accumulation, credit transfer and accumulation and formal assessment of knowledge, skill or competence previously acquired by learners. Credit is used to recognise 'an enrolled learner's completion of a programme or part of a programme of education and training to a particular standard'. Credit achieved for completion in whole or in part of one programme may be transferred to another programme of education and training.

The 2019 Amendment Act gives providers an explicit role in achieving qualifications for learners based on prior learning achievements. As an awarding body, QQI shall, 'on the application of a relevant provider ... make an award to a learner where the learner has, in the opinion of the provider, acquired, and where appropriate, demonstrated, the appropriate standard of knowledge, skill or competence as determined by the Authority'.

RPL provision is further strengthened by the 2019 amendment to the *Regional Technical Colleges Act 1992* (36), which provides that institutes of technology may make awards on the basis of previously acquired learning in accordance with ATP procedures established by the college, where learners have attained an appropriate standard in examinations or other tests of knowledge or ability or have performed other exercises in a manner regarded by the academic council of the college as being satisfactory.

The ethos of the NFQ is clear: learners achieve qualifications which record or certify that they have acquired or achieved a particular standard of knowledge, skill or competence, including certificates, diplomas and degrees. Importantly, learners may acquire such knowledge, skill or competence without being an 'enrolled learner' in a formal programme of education and training.

The Irish NFQ and links to credit systems

The EU Council Recommendation on EQF (2017) encourages Member States to promote links between credit systems and national qualifications frameworks or systems. The Recommendation provides the following interpretations on credit.

- 'Credit' means confirmation that a part of a qualification, consisting of a coherent set of learning outcomes, has been assessed and validated by a competent authority, according to an agreed standard; credit is awarded by competent authorities when the individual has achieved the defined learning outcomes, evidenced by appropriate assessments, and can be expressed in a quantitative value (e.g. credits or credit points) demonstrating the estimated workload an individual typically needs for achieving related learning outcomes.
- 'Credit systems' means a transparency tool for facilitating the recognition of credit(s). These systems can comprise, inter alia, equivalences, exemptions, units/modules that can be accumulated and transferred, the autonomy of providers who can individualise pathways, and the validation of non-formal and informal learning.
- 'Credit transfer' means the process of allowing individuals who have accumulated credit in one context to have it valued and recognised in another context.

Annex V of the EQF Recommendation sets out principles for credit systems related to national qualifications frameworks or systems referenced to the EQF. Credit systems related to national qualifications frameworks or systems, where appropriate, should respect the following principles:

- credit systems should support flexible learning pathways, for the benefit of individual learners.
- when designing and developing qualifications, the learning outcomes approach should be systematically used to facilitate the transfer of (components of) qualifications and progression in learning.
- credit systems should facilitate transfer of learning outcomes and progression of learners across institutional and national borders.
- credit systems should be underpinned by explicit and transparent quality assurance.

- the credit acquired by an individual should be documented, expressing the acquired learning outcomes, the name of the competent credit awarding institution and, where relevant, the related credit value.
- systems for credit transfer and accumulation should seek synergies with arrangements for validation of prior learning, working together to facilitate and promote transfer and progression.
- credit systems should be developed and improved through cooperation between stakeholders at the appropriate national and Union levels.

Credit systems are well established in education and training in Ireland. Credit is used to represent the effort required to undergo a change in learning. Systems for credit accumulation, recognition and transfer are in place and function reasonably well. The system of credit linked to the NFQ is broadly consistent with European norms and principles.

In an educational context the term credit has multiple meanings. It can relate to any or all of the following:

- quantity of learning (for profiling qualifications included within the NFQ)
- average effort expended to achieve a specified learning achievement, expressed in numbers of hours (or of multiples of hours) of learner effort
- recognition of prior learning (gaining credit for a unit of a programme that has been completed successfully)
- calculation of a grade (e.g. where a grade is a function of credit weighted marks)

Credit is often involved in aggregating assessment results for elements of a programme to produce an overall grade, for example calculating an overall grade using a credit weighted average of marks for the units that comprise the programme. The QQI Green Paper on Assessment (2018) provides a more in-depth treatment of assessment.

Credit also plays a role when developing or agreeing articulation, transfer or progression arrangements between programmes of different providers, perhaps in different sectors or even jurisdictions.

Credit and credit transfer are defined in Irish law as follows:

> *"credit" means an acknowledgement of an enrolled learner's completion of a programme or part of a programme of education and training to a particular standard;*
>
> *"credit transfer" means transferring credits awarded for studies undertaken as part of one programme of education and training to another programme.*

Credit and the NFQ

Following the establishment of the NFQ in 2003, NQAI, in partnership with education and training stakeholders, proceeded towards developing a national approach to credit, within the context of the established general approach to access, transfer and progression. A twin-track approach was pursued (one for further education and training, the other for higher education and training) as the way forward on credit was more clearly signposted for higher education and training at that time within the context of the Bologna process and the general acceptance and use of ECTS.

Meanwhile, during the early years following the establishment of the NFQ, work proceeded on the development of a credit system for further education and training in the context of developing the Common Awards System (CAS) and the associated credit arrangements, applicable to FET awards at NFQ Levels 1 to 6. The following paragraphs outline developments regarding credit in higher education and training and further education and training.

Credit in higher education

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is widely used in higher education under guidance contained in the ECTS Users' Guide (updated 2015). ECTS guidance on credit range is widely observed by higher education institutions in Ireland.

The Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of a National Approach to Credit in Irish Higher Education (NQAI, 2006) requires that programmes leading to major higher education qualifications must require at least 60 credits (one academic year) at the same level as the major. It also promotes models of programme design where the credit for the first year or two of undergraduate studies may be associated with a lower NFQ level. These principles and operational guidelines have been adopted by QQI. Typical credit volume or credit ranges have been established for each major award-type from Levels 6-9 in the NFQ, these are consistent with existing ECTS conventions.

Table 16 Credit Profile Higher Education Qualifications

Level 6	Higher Certificate	120 credits
Level 7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree	180 credits
Level 8	Honours Bachelor Degree	180-240 credits
Level 8	Higher Diploma	60 credits
Level 9	Masters Degree (Taught)	60-120 credits
Level 9	Post-graduate Diploma	60 credits

Irish Doctoral Degrees and Masters Degrees (by research) do not usually have credit values assigned. Institutional practice on assigning credit to professional doctorates differs. National discussions on developing a possible credit range for doctorates, which could include professional doctorates, are at an early stage. All Irish higher education and training awarding bodies are operating these national arrangements.

Credit in further education and training

The current Credit, Accumulation and Transfer System in FET was initially devised in 2005 as part of the Common Awards System. At that time credit ranges were established for all further education award-types at NFQ Levels 1-6. Since 2005, and in conjunction with stakeholders, the credit ranges have been refined further. A refined credit framework was developed in 2008, as set out in Table 17 below.

The credit system has been designed to complement the NFQ and the use of NFQ award-types. The assignment of credit values to major, minor, special purpose and supplemental awards provides greater transparency to the size and shape of the various awards and helps learners, employers, and other users to relate awards to each other in a meaningful way. It meets the needs of learners in a lifelong learning context as it puts in place ways of measuring and comparing packages of learning outcomes. In addition, it is also designed with features that are compatible with ECVET, the system of credit accumulation and transfer designed for vocational education and training in Europe.

The key principles behind the Credit Accumulation and Transfer System are: simplicity (easy to understand); transferability (enables learners to move); parity (all major awards at a level have an agreed value); and coherence (well structured).

The numeric value is based on a notional concept of time, i.e. an estimation of the average time it takes a learner to achieve learning outcomes. Credit value is based on notional learner effort and not on time served. In FET one credit corresponds to 10 hours of Typical Learner Effort (TLE). TLE includes combinations of directed and non-directed learning including: class time/ tutorials/ practice/ lab-work/ work experience/ preparation/ study/ assessment/ reflection.

Table 17 Credit Profile Further Education and Training Qualifications

Aims	The Credit Values below aim to ensure parity of major awards per level	The Credit Values below aim to ensure maximum transferability of minors across a range of majors	The Credit Values below aim to provide some flexibility when designing awards	The Credit Values below aim to ensure that all learning can be recognised beyond a minor and below a major
Level	**Major Awards** **Credit Values**	**Default Minor Credit Values**	**Others permitted (allows minors of substantially different sizes not by small increments)** **Minor Credit Values**	**Special Purpose**
L1	**20**	**5**	**10**	**Not appropriate**
L2	**30**	**5**	**10**	**Not appropriate**
L3	**60**	**10**	**5, 20**	**→ 5 < 60**
L4	**90**	**15**	**5, 10, 20**	**→ 5 < 90**
L5	**120**	**15**	**5, 10, 30**	**→ 5 < 120**
L6	**120**	**15**	**5, 10, 30**	**→ 5 < 120**

The credit ranges and values for all QQI award-types are set at a national level. This ensures credit value stability when the minor awards are exchanged or are transferred across major awards. Credit, Accumulation and Transfer System ranges for major and non-major awards are set out in Table 18. The concept of the default (standard) sizes will ensure maximum parity and transferability across all FET awards. It will also enable learners to accumulate learning over time.

QQI's Common Awards System regulates credit for major awards as follows:

Table 18 Common Awards System Credit Accumulation Scheme

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
Certificate Credit Requirement	20	30	60	90	120	120
Maximum Allocated to Component Awards	20	30	60	90	120	120
Minimum Allocated to Components	0	0	0	0	0	0

All awards specifications within QQI's Common Awards System prescribe FET credits. Compound award specifications also include rules on how that credit must be accumulated through the achievement of component awards.

The Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS) gives learners the opportunity to use their QQI Level 5 or 6 major award to apply, through the Central Applications Office (CAO), for a place in the first year of a higher education programme. The CAO scheme is based on points. Points are allocated based on component/module grades, weighted by the component/module credit values.

Credit in general education

In general, curriculum design in general education has not employed credit systems. There is no mechanism for accumulating credit across programmes leading to school qualifications. There is one interesting exception to the general rule. The Leaving Certificate Applied is a distinct and self-contained two-year programme aimed at preparing students for adult and working life. Uniquely, in general education, the Leaving Certificate Applied is modularised by design and delivered over a semesterised structure. Students accumulate credits towards their result at the end of each semester. Leaving Certificate Applied is graded as follows: Pass (120-139 credits); Merit (140-169 credits); and Distinction (170-200 credits). The Leaving Certificate Applied programme is the only school leaving programme that uses a credit accumulation system. In 2019 just 5% of students taking the school leaving certificate elected to take Leaving Certificate Applied Programme.

Section 4.4 Criterion 4 EQF and Criterion 4 QF-EHEA (Levelling of Qualifications)

Criterion 4 EQF
The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system are transparent.

Criterion 4 QF-EHEA
The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent.

For the purpose of this report, a qualification means: 'the formal outcome of an assessment and validation process by a competent authority and typically take the form of documents such as certificates or diplomas. They determine that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards.'

Transparent procedures for the 'levelling' of qualifications within the NFQ is important for the effective functioning of the NFQ and for its national and international acceptance as an entity for recognising learning achievements.

The referencing criteria for both the EQF and QF-EHEA invite participating countries to describe how qualifications come to be assigned a level and are therefore deemed to be 'included' within a national qualifications framework. The response to Criterion 4 should be read in conjunction with responses to Criterion 3 and to Criterion 5 to gain a more holistic understanding of what is involved in including qualifications within the NFQ. The commentary in Chapter Three on the design and implementation of the NFQ provides further contextual information on the procedures and practice for including qualifications within the NFQ.

The term 'qualification level' has become ubiquitous in education and training in Ireland. The NFQ as a 'system of levels' operates as a social and technical construct, owing as much to underpinning ideas and values as to observable features, including descriptors and formal rules. NFQ Level 2 Certificates or NFQ Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degrees are offered and awarded based on published curricula and educational standards. Their development, design, delivery, assessment, and certification are consistent with published policies and procedures. Qualification level is generally well understood and accepted as a good approximation for the achievement of a defined range and complexity of learning. The public acceptance and social recognition of the NFQ as a system of levels for classifying qualifications is fundamental for its wider use and utility.

Chapter Three of this report provides examples of the use of the NFQ, which provide testament to its credibility as a system for levelling qualifications. The role of technical, social, and political influences in the assignment of qualifications to a level within a qualifications framework has been well documented internationally. These influences have been apparent too in the development of the NFQ. There have been tensions around the levelling of certain qualifications, for instance the original placement of apprenticeship qualifications at a single NFQ

level has been revisited. The levelling of the Higher Diploma in Education was deferred pending agreed solutions which led to the adoption of the Professional Master of Education in 2013 as the academic and professional requirement for Initial Teacher Education. For the most part, the levelling of qualifications within the NFQ has been uncontroversial and uncontested. Those interested in the history of how qualifications were initially assigned a level within the NFQ should consult the original referencing reports and the early policies for the establishment of the NFQ.

Inclusion – an interpretation

Inclusion concerns the approach and procedures by which a qualification comes to be assigned a level within the Irish NFQ. In Ireland, the terms 'levelling' and 'including' qualifications within the NFQ have been used interchangeably. There are some important nuanced understandings of what it means to include a qualification within the NFQ:

- qualification types are included within the NFQ. Qualification types usually comprise a qualification standard and common features including volume, titling conventions and generic access, transfer and progression arrangements. Qualification type is distinct from a specific instance of a qualification in the form of a certificate or degree parchment, that recognises the learning achievement of an individual.
- inclusion of a qualification within the NFQ assumes that learners acquire the standard of knowledge, skill or competence associated with the NFQ level of the qualification.
- any qualification included within the NFQ is offered and awarded subject to effective internal and external quality assurance arrangements. Inclusion is dependent on quality assured procedures for the development, design, review, delivery, assessment, and certification of qualifications.
- qualifications that are not offered in Ireland may not be included within the NFQ.
- the inclusion of a qualification within the NFQ may be interrupted or come to an end. Qualifications may cease to be offered; their NFQ level or award-type may be revisited and varied over time; some qualifications may be withdrawn from the NFQ.

Over time, terminology used to describe the relationship between a qualification and the NFQ has evolved. Qualifications have been described as 'placed on' 'recognised within' and 'included within' the NFQ. Notwithstanding terminological evolution over time, learning outcomes remain central to the assignment of qualifications to NFQ levels. The legislative framework provides a clear basis for including qualifications within the NFQ. The original referencing reports of 2006 and 2009 relied on 1999 legislation. There have been two subsequent legal Acts that have strengthened the basis on which all qualifications may be assigned an NFQ level and a qualification type.

The NFQ – legal basis for including qualifications

The legal basis of the NFQ, and provisions for assigning qualifications to NFQ levels and award-types, can be traced to three legal texts: The *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act* (the 1999 Act); The *Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act* (the 2012 Act); and the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act* (the 2019 Amendment Act).

The **1999 Act** sets the policy and institutional framework for:

- the development of the NFQ
- the national and international recognition of qualifications
- the operation of national arrangements for access, transfer and progression
- the promotion and maintenance of academic standards in further and higher education in Ireland.

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) were established under the 1999 Act. The Universities were not subject to HETAC regulation and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) was established in 2002 following the enactment of the *Universities Act 1997*. NQAI, FETAC, HETAC and the universities

were assigned central roles in the establishment of the NFQ and for the development of the original policies underpinning the NFQ. In 2003 the Qualifications Authority published Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications

The 1999 Act was the basis for compiling the original response to the inclusion criteria in the 2006 QF-EHEA Self-certification Report and the 2009 EQF Referencing Report. The 1999 Act provided for a 'framework for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State' [...] to be known as a framework of qualifications [...] based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence'. The foundational 2003 Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the NFQ set out how the national awarding infrastructure at the time would implement the NFQ and associated policies, including how qualifications were to be **'placed'** within the NFQ. The original, and still relevant, policies and criteria also addressed how 'legacy' qualifications, which were no longer offered but remained in general circulation, were to be accommodated within the NFQ. The term '**included within the NFQ'** was used in the original policies and criteria for the development and implementation of NFQ but the term was not used in the 1999 Act.

The original EQF and QF-EHEA referencing reports both describe how the NQAI, along with HETAC and FETAC, had developed policies procedures under the 1999 Act for the '**inclusion and alignment with the NFQ**' of qualifications outside of those made by national awarding bodies. From 2008-2013, this policy was availed of by up to thirty awarding bodies, mostly UK VET awarding bodies operating in Ireland. This scheme was intended to fulfil the ambition for the NFQ to be a comprehensive framework and was consistent with initiatives in other European countries to open up qualifications frameworks to what are sometimes referred to as 'non-formal' qualifications[36]. The scheme did not involve direct regulation or quality assurance of the delivery of qualifications in Ireland and the legal basis for the policy was not explicitly provided for under 2012 legislation and was discontinued.

The 2012 Act positioned the NFQ as a unifying feature within new institutional arrangements for a more integrated post-school quality assurance and qualifications system. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established as the single statutory external quality assurance body for post-school education and training in Ireland. Qualifications functions of QQI include acting as the national awarding body for further education and training in Ireland and for private higher education and training; reviewing providers' compliance with national policy on access, transfer and progression; advising on the academic recognition of foreign qualifications; and coordinating the implementation and development of the NFQ. The early positive effect of this new institutional arrangement is apparent in quality assurance policies and procedures published under the 2012 Act which see the implementation of the NFQ embedded within national quality assurance arrangements. These quality assurance arrangements also set expectations for fair, transparent and efficient provider level arrangements for access, transfer and progression.

The 2012 Act re-authorised the NFQ, requiring QQI to promote, maintain, further develop, and implement the NFQ as a system:

(a) for the development, recognition, and award of qualifications in the State; and

(b) of levels of awards based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by a learner, to entitle the learner to an award at a particular level within the NFQ.

QQI is also tasked with reviewing and amending the NFQ, as necessary. Significantly, in the context of this report, QQI is required to promote and facilitate the use of learning outcomes statements by awarding bodies and providers, as they set out what 'enrolled learners are expected to know, understand and where appropriate, demonstrate on the completion of a programme of education and training'.

The 2012 Act mandated the use of the NFQ in the awarding function of QQI and institutions offering qualifications under delegated authority from QQI. Other institutions authorised by law to make awards in Ireland, including the Irish universities, were required to ensure that their qualifications were appropriately **'recognised within'** the NFQ. Under the 2012 Act, an awarding body must 'ensure that a learner acquires the standard of knowledge, skill or competence associated with the level of that award within the Framework before an award is made'. This is a condition for an 'award [to be] recognised within the Framework' In effect, this condition requires awarding

[36] The EU supported project 'NQF-in' provides a comprehensive account of country practice for relating 'non-formal' qualifications within NQFs. http://www.nqf-in.eu/

bodies to ensure that qualification standards and graduate learning outcomes are consistent with relevant NFQ level and qualification type descriptors.

However, the 2012 Act did not include an express provision for a procedure to determine how a qualification may be so recognised within the NFQ. Following advice, a legislative amendment to the 2012 Act was proposed to address this legal lacuna and provide explicit procedures for the determination of the status of a qualification within the NFQ.

The **2019 Amendment Act** includes several important amendments governing the NFQ. The concept of a qualification **'included within'** the NFQ is introduced into a legal text for the first time, replacing the term 'recognised within' the NFQ used in the 2012 Act. This is helpful since the term 'recognition', has varied meanings and usages in education and training. For example, NARIC Ireland routinely provides *recognition* advice on qualifications, many of which have no relationship with the NFQ. Many professional qualifications are *recognised* under national and EU law but may not have been assigned a level within the NFQ. *Social recognition* of qualifications is a well-known phenomenon. In the field of qualifications, recognition is a congested space.

The term 'included within' the NFQ, as set out in the 2019 Amendment Act, implies an interest in the quality assurance arrangements that govern the delivery of a qualification and not merely with the ex-post recognition of a qualification. The statutory scheme for including qualifications within the NFQ under the 2019 Amendment Act is intended to make assurances about the delivery of qualifications, and the achieved learning outcomes of graduates, more transparent.

The 2019 Amendment Act reinforces the legal relationship between qualifications that have been long standing constituent qualifications of the NFQ. Qualifications made by universities, technological universities, the institutes of technology, the RCSI, the State Examinations Commission and QQI are to be included within the NFQ subject to policies, procedures, and arrangements. While the relevant sections of the 2019 Amendment Act have yet to be commenced, inclusion of qualifications within the NFQ will primarily rest on the transparent use of the NFQ in setting and maintaining academic standards.

Examples of the implementation of the NFQ by Designated Awarding Bodies is detailed in Chapter Three. Statutory arrangements for determining the inclusion of awards within the NFQ under the 2019 Amendment Act will build on the strong track record of NFQ implementation by participating awarding bodies to date.

The 2019 Amendment Act acknowledges that QQI, as an awarding body, is legally compelled to develop, deliver and award qualifications that are demonstrably included within the NFQ. By law, QQI policy and criteria for setting qualification standards; for the validation of programmes; and policy and criteria for making of awards are predicated on the explicit use of NFQ standards of knowledge, skill or competence. Similarly, where QQI delegates authority to make awards to certain providers, this is on condition that NFQ standards are clearly maintained in the development, review, delivery, assessment and certification of qualifications.

For any new school/general qualifications, the 2019 Amendment Act requires a body that makes such an award under the *Education Act 1998* to comply with procedures and criteria to be developed by QQI for the inclusion of such qualifications within the NFQ. New provisions under the 2019 Amendment Act cast no doubt on the prevailing NFQ status of qualifications recognised within the NFQ under earlier legislation and policy. It is intended that existing arrangements, procedures and practice be made more transparent and accountable.

A significant development in the 2019 Amendment Act is the provision for a statutory scheme to facilitate voluntary access to the NFQ by a wider range of awarding bodies offering qualifications in Ireland. The opening up the NFQ to what are described as 'non-formal' qualifications in European discussions, is consistent with European trends, the intent of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and has been a policy priority for the NFQ since its inception. Professional qualifications in fields such as accountancy and law, VET qualifications offered in Ireland by many UK-based awarding bodies, qualifications offered by international awarding bodies and other credentials recognising important learning achievements play an important role in meeting the economic and social needs of learners in Ireland.

To facilitate this opening up of the NFQ to a broader range of qualifications, the 2019 Amendment Act provides for the establishment of a new category of awarding body to be known as '**Listed Awarding Bodies'** (LABs). Bodies interested in becoming a LAB will need to demonstrate that they are a competent and trustworthy awarding body. Applicants must also demonstrate that they offer qualifications in Ireland that are useful and are specified

in terms of learning outcomes capable of mapping to the NFQ. The detail of the legislative scheme is set out in Section 55A-55I of the 2019 Amendment Act. At the time of writing the relevant sections of the 2019 Amendment Act have yet to be commenced.

The Irish Register of Qualifications is the single central repository of all qualifications included within the Irish NFQ. The design of the register has been informed by the data model for qualifications with an EQF level, as set out in Annex VI of the 2017 EQF Recommendation. Education and training providers in Ireland are required by law to inform prospective or enrolled learners of the NFQ status of the qualifications that they offer. The availability of public information on the NFQ attributes of qualifications in Ireland is an important feature of the national arrangements for including qualifications within the NFQ.

Confidence in procedures for including qualifications within the NFQ

QQI Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines apply to all post-school providers of qualifications included within the NFQ. All relevant providers are required to develop, design, review, deliver, assess, and certify qualifications, consistent with NFQ standards and with associated policies on access, transfer and progression. Statutory quality assurance guidelines set expectations for how the NFQ is to be implemented by relevant providers. Detail on the operation of national arrangements for quality assurance and their role in the inclusion of qualifications within the NFQ are set out in the next section of this report.

Conclusion

To date, only qualifications offered by national awarding bodies may be included within the NFQ (see Figure 19 below). The prospect of Listed Awarding Bodies, provided for under the 2019 Amendment Act, is likely to increase the range of awarding bodies offering qualifications to be included within the NFQ. The regulatory framework governing awarding bodies that currently and potentially may offer qualifications included within the NFQ, is set out in Table 19. The inclusion of qualifications within the NFQ has evolved over the past two decades. The legal basis for establishing a relationship between a qualification and the NFQ has evolved. Significantly, the implementation of the NFQ is now more explicitly embedded in post-school internal and external quality assurance arrangements. The inclusion of secondary school qualifications within the NFQ has been accommodated by the design of award-types that correspond to the standards of knowledge, skill or competence certified in the Junior Cycle/Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations. Under the 2019 Amendment Act procedures for including qualifications within the NFQ are set to become more transparent and accountable.

Figure 19 Awarding Bodies and the NFQ

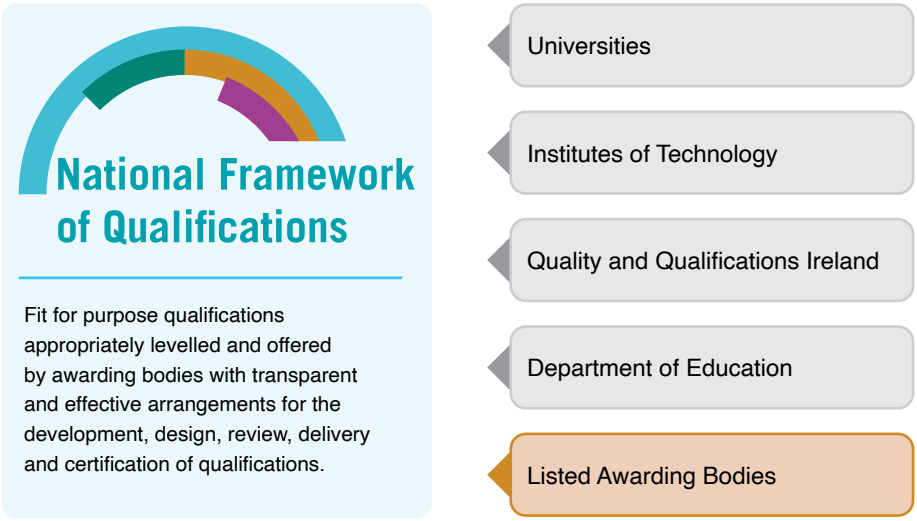


Table 19 Legislative Framework – Awarding Bodies and the NFQ

Awarding Bodies currently offering qualifications included within the NFQ				
Awarding Body	**Implement NFQ Award- Type and Level Indicators**	**Implement National Policy on Access Transfer and Progression (ATP)**	**Legal Basis for Awarding Qualifications (most recent)**	**Statutory External Quality Assurance (Body)**
Pre-2019 Universities	Yes	Yes	*Universities Act 1997*	Yes (QQI)
Technological Universities	Yes	Yes	*Technological Universities Act 2018*	Yes (QQI)
Institutes of Technology	Yes	Yes	*Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019*	Yes (QQI)
RCSI	Yes	Yes	*RCSI Charters Amendment Act 2010 and Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act 2012*	Yes (QQI)
QQI	Yes	Yes. Relevant providers of QQI validated programmes subject to ATP review	*Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act 2012*	Yes. Relevant providers of QQI validated programmes subject to external review arranged by QQI
Bodies with Delegated Authority from QQI	Yes	Yes	*Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act 2012*	Yes (QQI)
Department of Education	Yes	No	*Education Act 1998*	Yes (Schools Inspectorate)
Prospective Awarding Bodies offering qualifications included within the NFQ (relevant legal provisions enacted but not yet commenced)				
Listed Awarding Bodies	Yes	Yes	*Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019*	Yes (QQI)

Section 4.5 Criterion 5 EQF and Criterion 5 QF-EHEA (Quality Assurance)

Criterion 5 EQF
The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications frameworks or systems and are consistent with the principles on quality assurance as specified in Annex IV to this Recommendation.

Criterion 5 QF-EHEA
The national quality assurance system for higher education refer to the national framework for higher education qualifications and are consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent Ministerial Communiqués in the Bologna Process.

Quality assurance in post-school education and training

Quality assurance of post-school education and training has been strongly influenced by European norms and practice. Benchmarking national practice against European standards has been an important feature in the development of national quality assurance arrangements in Ireland.

The European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA) promotes European co-operation in the field of quality assurance in higher education and disseminates information and expertise among its members and to stakeholders in order to develop and share good practice and foster the European dimension of quality assurance.

The 2019 ENQA external review report is the most recent report on QQI compliance with the 2015 Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. The report is based on a review process that involved the production of a Self-assessment Report by QQI, the review of this report by an expert peer-review panel and a subsequent site visit by the panel to QQI in March 2019. This is the second review QQI has undergone since it was established in 2012.

The report concluded that QQI's progress to date and the quality of its external quality assurance activities were exemplary:

> "In the seven years since QQI's establishment and especially in the five years since QQI's first ENQA review, a significant amount of progress has been made in creating a unified organisation and a new framework of policies and processes to guide its external quality assurance activities. QQI is now moving from a phase of intensive development, including a notable amount of consultation, to a phase focused on its contribution to the assurance, enhancement and strategic development of higher education, as set out in its recently published Statement of Strategy 2019-2021."

In VET, the most recent EQAVET country report drafted by the EQAVET National Reference Point of Ireland describes the main quality assurance arrangements in vocational education and training. It concludes that 'EQAVET principles and indicators are strongly embedded in QA practice and that EQAVET principles have strongly informed national quality assurance policy developments'. The report notes that since its establishment in 2012, QQI has engaged in extensive consultation facilitating the development of a range of new policies, including for quality assurance within further education and training.

The response to Criterion Five provides an overview of the quality assurance arrangements underpinning the NFQ with a summary of the arrangements as they pertain to both higher and further education and training. It also addresses the criterion in terms of the national quality assurance arrangements that prevail in general education. For both school and post-school education and training, prevailing quality assurance arrangements are mapped to the principles on quality assurance specified in Annex IV of the EU Council Recommendation for the EQF.

Quality assurance arrangements in post-secondary school education and training

Within Ireland, qualifications that are part of national qualifications systems and included within the NFQ are underpinned by internal and external quality assurance arrangements. Findings resulting from relevant quality assurance events are published and appropriately disseminated. Quality assurance arrangements help to ensure

that relevant providers and awarding bodies implement the NFQ in the design, review, delivery, assessment, and certification of qualifications included within the NFQ.

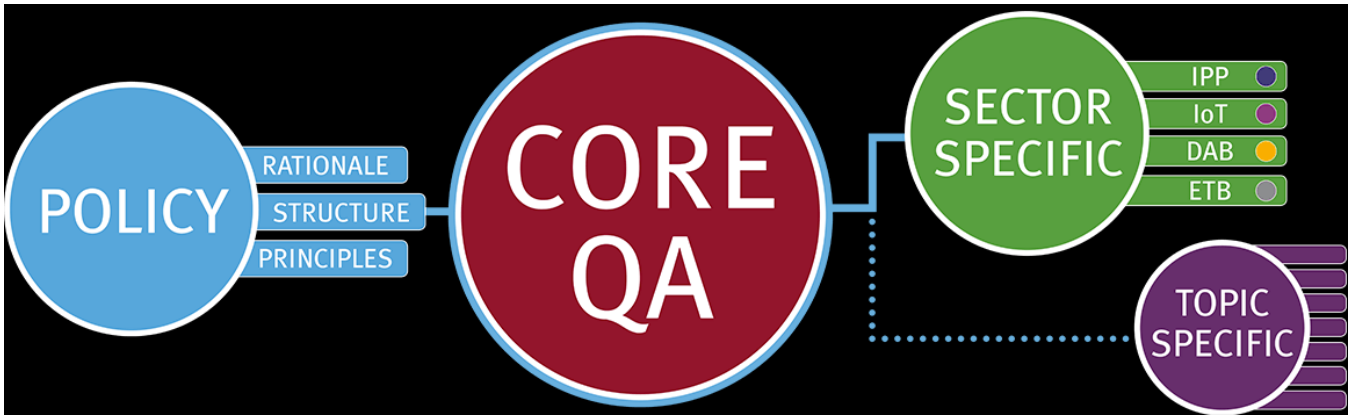
QQI is the single statutory body responsible for the external quality assurance of higher education and further education and training, leading to awards in the NFQ. Under legislation, QQI is required to publish quality assurance guidelines, and providers are required to establish their own quality assurance procedures, and in doing so, they must have regard to statutory QA guidelines issued by QQI.

A provider's quality assurance procedures are understood to be "procedures in writing for quality assurance for the purposes of establishing, ascertaining, maintaining and improving the quality of education, training, research and related services the provider provides" (Section 28(1) of the 2012 Act).

QQI statutory quality assurance guidelines currently consist of:

- core guidelines, relevant to all providers
- sector-specific guidelines for groups of providers
- topic-specific guidelines that deal with themes or forms of provision (e.g. apprenticeship programmes, blended learning, research degree programmes).

Figure 20 QQI Model of QA Guidelines



The purpose of the guidelines is to inform the development of providers' QA procedures. They are designed to provide guidance proportionate to the complexity and breadth of the educational activities of the provider. All the principles for quality assurance of qualifications entitled to carry an EQF level are reflected in QQI's suite of quality assurance guidelines and statutory review handbooks. QQI guidelines are compatible with the Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and with European Quality Assurance in VET (EQAVET).

Classes (or Categories) of providers

There are different classes of providers in higher education and in further education and training that offer quality assured programmes leading to qualifications included within the NFQ. QQI's responsibility is not uniformly distributed across all classes of providers. The following section outlines the different categories of providers.

Higher education

Publicly regulated higher education institutions include:

- nine universities and their linked institutions (referred to as linked providers)
- eleven institutes of technology and
- thirty independent private providers.

The universities have statutory degree-awarding powers on the NFQ and are 'Designated Awarding Bodies' for all levels on the NFQ. The institutes of technology (IOTs) are Designated Awarding Bodies up to master's degree,

Level 9 (EQF 7) on the NFQ. In cases where IoTs do not have the necessary delegated authority, they must secure QQI validation of their programme for doctoral degrees leading to Level 10 (EQF 8) qualifications on the NFQ.

Independent private higher education institutions (termed independent providers) provide programmes leading to awards made by QQI. QQI awards made in respect of independent providers' programmes account for a relatively small fraction of the total number of awards made. In 2019 approximately 6,500 degrees (NFQ Level 7 to Level 9) were awarded to learners in these providers.

An entity can become an independent provider by a two-stage process. It must first obtain access to QQI's validation service through the 'Initial Access to Programme Validation' process. This is an independent evaluation of the provider's capacity, resources, quality assurance and governance structures with reference to the NFQ level(s) and awards class(es) for which it intends to seek validation.

If successful, it must then apply for validation of one of more programmes of higher education. Independent providers must secure validation (meaning approval or accreditation) of their programmes through QQI or another national awarding body (e.g. Irish universities).

Further education and training

Further education and training (FET) in Ireland includes but is not limited to initial and continuing VET. It comprises a wide variety of programmes across many disciplines and awarded at Levels 1 to 6 of the NFQ. FET currently includes over 350 providers, both public and private, offering QQ-validated FET programmes.

Publicly regulated FET

Public institutions offering FET

Public FET is funded by SOLAS, the Further Education Authority. SOLAS is charged with ensuring that provision is appropriate to strategic needs.

The bulk of the funding is to 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs), state entities each of which has responsibility for FET in a specified geographic region. ETBs are obliged to seek QQI validation of their programmes.

The ETBs' provision includes:

- post-Leaving Cert programmes – these are for students who have completed secondary education and wish to gain qualifications for employment or progression to higher education.
- apprenticeships – these are traditionally for craft areas related to construction and related employment areas. Recently, the model has been extended to include areas such as accounting, hairdressing, retail, sales etc.
- adult and community education – large numbers of adults can avail of a huge variety of vocational preparation and employment-related programmes. These are offered in centres local to the population served and with programmes targeted at a variety of learner profiles.
- the ETBs also provide supports in the form of programme development capacity and, in some cases, tutors to non-ETB schools and to small providers operating in the community and voluntary sector.

Other public providers of FET include Teagasc, the national agriculture and food development authority and Bord Iascaigh Mhara, the Irish seafood development agency. Both bodies have responsibility for development skills capacity in their sectors and have dedicated training wings with programmes validated by QQI and offering QQI awards.

Independent institutions offering FET

Those independent, private providers who voluntarily seek QQI validation as a route to offering NFQ awards currently number about 300. This number has reduced quite considerably in recent years for a variety of reasons, including the costs associated with maintaining quality assurance arrangements.

Approximately half of the independent providers operate on a commercial basis, offering QQI qualifications

to those in employment or seeking employment and those in need of specific skills training. Many of these providers, in addition to offering their own programmes, can also be contracted by an ETB to deliver programmes on its behalf.

Non-commercial private providers, while not obliged to seek validation from QQI, choose to do so because it enhances the value of their training offering to their learners. These include:

- hospitals
- community-based adult education, funded in the main by the public purse
- training services for people with disabilities
- employers – the number here is quite small

Table 20 below summarises the different processes and classes of providers offering programmes leading to awards that are included within the NFQ.

Table 20 Quality Assurance Scheme for Post-School Provider Types

Different classes of providers offering programmes leading to awards that are included within the NFQ							
Category of Provider	**Who guides the establishment of QA procedures?**	**Are academic standards for qualifications derived from the NFQ?**	**Who approves provider's QA procedures?**	**Who sets overarching qualification standards?**	**Who sets the specific qualification standards?**	**Who validates the programme leading to NFQ award?**	**Who externally reviews the provider's QA procedures?**
Established Universities – Designated Awarding Bodies (DABs)	QQI	Yes	QQI for Technological Universities and RCSI. Previously established universities self-approve	Institution	Institution	Institution	QQI
Linked Providers	QQI	YES	Relevant DAB	Relevant DAB	Relevant DAB	Relevant DAB	Relevant DAB (or QQI on request by relevant DAB
Institutes of Technology	QQI	Yes	QQI	QQI	Institution for awards to NFQ Level 9	Institution to NFQ Level 9. QQI for programmes at NFQ Level 10	QQI
Independent and Private Higher Education Institutions	QQI	Yes (through QQI awards standards)	QQI	QQI	QQI	QQI	QQI
Public Further Education and Training Providers	QQI	Yes (through QQI awards standards)	QQI	QQI	QQI	QQI	QQI
Private Further Education and Training Providers	QQ	Yes (through QQI awards standards)	QQI	QQI	QQI	QQI	QQI

Table 21 summarises how each of the EQF principles on quality assurance, as specified in the 2017 EU Recommendation, are evident in national arrangement for post-secondary school quality assurance in Ireland.

Table 21 Post-Secondary School Quality Assurance and EQF Principles for Quality Assurance

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">All the EQF principles on quality assurance specified in Annex IV of the EU Recommendation are clearly reflected in national requirements and QQI QA Guidelines.</td></tr>
<tr><td>EQF Principle:

All qualifications with an EQF level should be quality assured to enhance trust in their quality and level.

In accordance with national circumstances and taking into account sectoral differences quality assurance of qualifications with an EQF level should:</td><td>Legislative/Statutory Requirements

Under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019 a qualification is included within the NFQ when an eligible awarding body or relevant provider ensures that a learner acquires the standard of knowledge, skill or competence associated with the level of that qualification within the NFQ.

QQI is the statutory body with express functions, including the validation or programmes of education and training. QQI has established Core Policies and Criteria for the validation by QQI of Programmes of Education and Training.

All providers offering programmes leading to awards on the NFQ must have regard to QQI guidelines in the development of their quality assurance procedures.

Public Higher Education
DABs are required to have regard to QQI Statutory Core QA Guidelines and Statutory QA Guidelines for DABs when establishing their internal QA procedures.

Other Providers
Further education and training (FET) and independent private higher education providers, offering programmes leading to QQI awards at all levels on the NFQ, are subject to QA approval and programme validation by QQI.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">i. address the design of qualifications as well as the application of the learning outcomes approach</td></tr>
</table>

QQI-issued QA guidelines for higher education providers are demonstrably aligned with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). DABs operate these national QA guidelines having regard to European standards and guidelines.

Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Designated Awarding Bodies and the CINNTE Cyclical Review Handbook for DABs require providers and awarding bodies to evidence how the NFQ is used in the design of qualifications and in setting and maintaining academic standards.

Private and independent higher education institutions

QQI is the national awarding body for private and independent higher education providers. Private and independent higher education providers that choose QQI as their awarding body, must have their programmes validated in line with QQI award standards.

Programme validation is a regulatory process that determines whether a particular award can be offered in respect of a provider's programme. The validation process requires an applicant provider to map the programme learning outcomes of its proposed programme against the NFQ level and award-type descriptor, as well as to the relevant QQI standards e.g. Computing or Business etc. An independent panel of experts will evaluate all aspects of the programme but with particular focus on the proposed learning outcomes and their adherence to NFQ standards.

QQI Validation Policy and Procedures for Higher Education include programme design templates and associated guidelines. These evidence how quality assurance arrangements concern the design of programmes and the centrality of the NFQ in setting qualifications standards based on learning outcomes.

Further education and training

New programmes in the FET sector leading to NFQ awards must also be validated by QQI. Where the target award for the programme is to be associated solely with the programme e.g. a new apprenticeship, the provider must carry out the same mapping exercise of programme learning outcomes to NFQ levels and award-type descriptor as applies to HET providers.

In addition, there are a set of QQI standards covering a wide range of vocational areas which can be used by a provider as intermediaries between the NFQ and the programme. This is called to Common Awards System (CAS). The CAS major and minor awards provide much more detailed expected learning outcomes, to which providers can map their programme learning outcomes.

QQI Validation Policy and Procedures for Further Education include programme design templates and associated guidelines. These evidence how quality assurance arrangements inform the design of programmes and the centrality of the NFQ in setting qualifications standards based on learning outcomes.

ii. ensure valid and reliable assessment according to agreed and transparent learning outcomes-based standards and address the process of certification	Providers are responsible for learner assessment and must establish procedures consistent with QQI QA Guidelines. QQI QA guidelines require providers to establish an assessment framework for the formal assessment of learners where it leads to a qualification/ certification, see section 6. Assessment of Learners This assessment framework requires policies and procedures related to how the assessment supports standards based on learning outcomes. Designated Awarding Bodies must have regard to QQI statutory core and sector-specific guidelines in establishing their assessment framework. Private or independent higher education institutions and further education and training providers must adopt quality assurance procedures to underpin valid and reliable assessment that complies with QQI protocols, conventions, and guidelines on assessment.
iii. consist of feedback mechanisms and procedures for continuous improvement	Providers are required to establish quality assurance procedures which form part of a coherent system, incorporating internal self-monitoring and improvement by the provider, and external monitoring and evaluation by QQI. Consistent with ESG (2015), Irish higher education institutions are required to periodically monitor and review their programmes and services. The institutions must submit an Annual Institutional Quality Report (AQIR) to QQI, reporting on quality improvements, developments and enhancements undertaken. Higher education institutions are subject to periodic external cyclical review through QQI's Cinnte Institutional Review Process. This cyclical review takes place on a periodic scheduled basis.
iv. involve all relevant stakeholders at all stages of the process	QQI Quality Assurance Guidelines are derived from European Standards and Guidelines 2015 (ESG) and Designated Awarding Bodies must have regard to the ESG 2015. In line with Section 10 Core QA Guidelines, Designated Awarding Bodies are required to engage with external stakeholders at all stages in the process from programme design to self-assessment and external review. Designated Awarding Bodies must establish procedures and explicit criteria for recruitment and engagement of external, independent and international experts.

v. be composed of consistent evaluation methods, associating self-assessment and external review	As outlined in (iii) above, Irish higher education institutions are subject to periodic external cyclical review through the Cinnte Institutional Review Process . Consistent with European norms and practice, this process involves a self-evaluation/ assessment by the institution concerned, with engagement of internal and external stakeholders. The CINNTE institutional review is based on an internationally recognised approach to and method for reviews and includes the following core elements VI. Terms of Reference VII. Institutional Self-Evaluation Report VIII. An external assessment and site visit by a team of reviewers IX. Publication of a review report with findings and recommendations X. Follow-up procedure, which includes a report on actions to be progressed. The Inaugural External Review process will commence in further education and training in Autumn 2020 for 16 Education and Training Boards. The framework for the external review of the ETBs within FET is based on core elements outlined above.
xi. be an integral part of the internal management, including sub-contracted activities, of bodies using qualifications with an EQF level	Section 1 of Core Quality Assurance Guidelines for all providers offering programmes leading to NFQ qualifications carrying an EQF level set out expectations for the governance and management of quality. All providers are required to manage their corporate and academic functions in accordance with the highest international standards. All awarding bodies are accountable for the quality of the delivery of qualifications on their behalf. For example, where a DAB makes an award in respect of a programme for an accredited provider (known as a linked provider), it must include in its own QA procedures, the procedures to approve, monitor and review the effectiveness of QA in its linked provider.

xii. be based on clear and measureable objectives, standards and guidelines	Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines set clear and measurable objectives, standards and guidelines in the following areas: 1) Governance and Management of Quality 2) Documented Approach to Quality Assurance 3) Programmes of Education and Training 4) Staff Recruitment, Management and Development 5) Teaching and Learning 6) Assessment of Learners 7) Supports for Learners 8) Information and Data Management 9) Public Information and Communication 10) Other Parties involved in Education and Training 11) Self-evaluation, Monitoring and Review These expectations are elaborated in topic- specific and sector-specific guidance.
xiii. be supported by appropriate resources	QQI Core QA Guidelines (see Section 2 (1.2) Core QA Guidelines) require that a provider's resource base be sufficient to ensure sustainability of the teaching, learning and research environment. The corporate infrastructure and financial stability underpinning the teaching and learning environment are evaluated by QQI. When determining whether to make awards in respect of programmes offered by prospective collaborative or linked providers, Designated Awarding Bodies are required to determine the resource, governance and structural capacity of that provider, see section 5.2 (1) Statutory QA Guidelines for Designated Awarding Bodies
xiv. include a regular review of existing external monitoring bodies or agencies carrying out quality assurance	QQI, as the external quality review agency, is a full member of European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA). ENQA's regulations require all full member agencies to undergo an external cyclical review, at least once every five years. Since its establishment in 2012, QQI has undergone an external review by an ENQA-appointed external panel, in 2014 and in 2019.

xv. include the electronic accessibility of evaluation results	As the external QA body, QQI monitor and review QA in all Irish public and private HEIs. The QA framework includes an Annual Institutional Quality Report that is provided by public HEIs to QQI. The AIQR structure and content are in line with QQI Core QA Guidelines and the ESG 2015. For each institution, the AIQR documents QA activities for the previous year, including, in the case of Designated Awarding Bodies, those activities that underpin their awarding procedures. All AIQRs are published on QQI's website. In addition, QQI publishes an annual synthesis report on quality in HE, see Quality in HE 2019 Synthesis Report. Private higher education institutions will be incorporated within the formal AIQR process in 2021 and will be incorporated within the formal external institutional review process from 2022. In advance of periodic institutional reviews of further education and training providers, QQI published Quality in Irish Further Education and Training. based on ETB self-evaluation and quality improvement reports. QQI external institutional review process results in an institutional review report with a suite of commendations and recommendations arising from the evaluation process. All institutional review reports are published on QQI's website in QQI's Reviews Library.

Quality assurance of general (school) education

Arrangements for quality assuring primary and secondary education in Ireland exhibit many features found in many national systems in Europe.

The two school awards, the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate, were included in the NFQ on an agreed basis in 2003 between the National Qualifications Authority and the then Department of Education and Science, the State Examinations Commission and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. A detailed account of the original placement and the rationale behind it are included in Ireland's 2009 EQF Referencing report. The underpinning quality assurance of the awards and the related programme provision is described below.

Several elements contribute to quality assurance in the school sector. The most obvious, and arguably the most significant, of these is the work of the School Inspectorate of the Department of Education which has a statutory quality assurance obligation in relation to educational provision, as set out in Section 13 of the Education Act, 1998. The Inspectorate evaluates the quality and effectiveness of the provision of school education in the State, including comparison with relevant international practice and standards, and reports thereon to the Minister. Inspections are carried out to improve the quality of learning and teaching that children and young people experience in Irish schools, centres for education and other settings, and to support the development of the Irish education system. The Inspectorate provide high quality evaluation, analysis, support, and advice in relation to education provision mainly at early years, primary and post-primary levels.

In recent years, the main vehicle for the evaluation of the quality of school education has been a comprehensive Whole School Evaluation process introduced by the Inspectorate and schools. The emphasis within this process is on teams of inspectors evaluating the work and performance of schools, but in ways which connect with school development planning, leadership development and professional development processes already taking place in parallel in schools. In other words, whole school evaluation places a dual emphasis on evaluation and enhancement. The results of the work of the Inspectorate are made available in the form of reports on the performance of individual schools, which are published online. The Inspectorate also publish reports on teaching and learning in individual subjects, on curriculum programmes and on more cross-curricular thematic areas. In addition, the Inspectorate reports annually on its work and more generally on the education system.

Some elements of quality assurance are even more deeply rooted than in evaluation of the work of schools. The school sector in Ireland is unique in the extent to which the partners in education are instrumentally involved in the development of curriculum, assessment and educational programme specifications before they are introduced in schools and in reviewing them after they have been introduced. The consensus, shared purpose and understanding achieved through this approach contribute significantly to quality assurance in teaching and learning and the work of schools. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, established on a representative basis, is the statutory body responsible for curriculum, assessment and programme development. It was established on a representative basis.

The process through which the NCCA develops curriculum and assessment specifications involves structures which, to varying degrees, comprise representatives of teachers, parents, school management (primary, secondary, community/comprehensive and vocational schools), subject associations and professional support organisations, further and higher education, business, the community/voluntary pillar, the Department of Education and the State Examinations Commission. Increasingly, the voice of learners is also strongly featured in that representation, as is direct work with groups and networks of schools in introducing curriculum and assessment reform on a phased basis. In short, all the partners in education are directly and instrumentally involved on a continuous basis in the development and review of curriculum, assessment and programme specifications in the school sector in Ireland and this contributes to how quality is assured in the schools sector.

The quality of pre-service and in-service teacher education is seen as fundamental to the quality of teaching and learning in schools. There has been considerable investment in the continuing professional development of teachers, school leaders and school managers in areas such as school development planning, leadership development, meeting special educational needs, and curriculum and assessment development. Initiatives in this area of continuing professional development have been supported through the establishment and building of a national network of teacher Education Centres as a locus for professional development and teacher professional communities. In addition, the establishment of the Teaching Council of Ireland has advanced the professionalism of teachers and teaching practice.

In 2006, following many decades of discussion and consultation, the Teaching Council (of Ireland) was set up as an autonomous, independent, statutory body, to promote teaching as a profession, to promote the professional development of teachers and to regulate standards in the profession. In 2011, the Teaching Council in a Continuum of Teacher Education set out a vision for initial teacher education (ITE), induction, early and continuing professional development and late career support. In the years since then, the Teaching Council has published revised criteria for the registration of teachers and has also developed an induction process (Droichead) and a framework for continuing professional development. In July 2011, the Minister for Education launched a national strategy for literacy and numeracy – *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People* – which included a number of qualitative and quantitative targets for improving literacy and numeracy standards for the period 2011 to 2020. Among the key areas addressed in the strategy was the need "to ensure the development of teachers' skills in literacy and numeracy teaching" and to improve the professional practice of teachers through changes in both pre-service and in-service education. This strategy led to the lengthening of the Honours Bachelor Degree in Education (NFQ Level 8) programme for primary teachers from three to four years (240 ECTS credits) and the Higher Diploma (NFQ Level 8) for primary teaching from eighteen months to two years (120 ECTS credits). The Higher Diploma in Education courses for post-primary teachers would be extended from one year to two years (120 ECTS credits). In 2012 the Higher Diploma in Education was re-developed and designated as a Professional Master of Education at NFQ Level 9 by the Irish higher education institutions.

In April 2012, following a request from the Minister for Education and Skills, an International Review Panel was established to advise on the structure of ITE provision in the State. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) was requested to manage the review process on behalf of the DES. The Report of this International Review Panel proposed a restructuring of ITE and recommended that the then nineteen separate ITE institutions be reconfigured to provide six new "centres for teacher education". The new structures recommended by the international panel aimed to ensure that a smaller number of centres for teacher education would exist, and that each centre would offer education across the continuum of teacher education – from early childhood to primary, post-primary, further education and adult education. These centres for teacher education would also possess a critical mass in terms of research capacity, not always possible in smaller institutions. The new configurations would mean that strong research bases would be embedded in each centre. In 2018, a review of progress in implementing reform of the structure of ITE in Ireland documented the current state of institutional consolidation and economies of scale for research-led ITE. The importance attached to the initial and continuing professional development of teachers in Ireland, recognises that the quality of teachers is as fundamental to the overall quality of the school education.

Similarly, a Centre for School Leadership (CSL) was established in 2016 on a partnership basis between the Department of Education and the Irish Primary Principals Network and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (post-primary). It is the shared objective that the Centre will develop a coherent continuum of professional support and mentoring for school leaders, commencing with pre-appointment training through to induction for newly appointed principals to continuous professional development throughout the leader's career.

The State Examinations Commission (SEC) is responsible for the development, assessment, accreditation and certification of Irish second-level State examinations. The school sector in Ireland is one of a few worldwide which operates two centralised national examinations, one on completion of lower secondary education, the other on completion of upper secondary education. The transparency associated with these examination processes and systems contributes to the quality assurance of school qualifications. That transparency is reflected in the publication of all materials related to the examinations – sample papers, all marking schemes, chief examiner reports on subjects and programmes, aggregated results. In addition, students have the facility to review their marked examination scripts after the examination. The SEC is an important pillar in the quality assurance framework for secondary school education, assuring the integrity of the school examination system.

Policy and decision making concerning the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in schools is increasingly informed by access to administrative data and research. As already noted, the Schools Inspectorate generate and publish a significant body of knowledge that informs understanding about the quality of school-based education and the prospects for the enhancement of quality in schools. There are other examples of the growing national capacity to produce and use data and research to inform quality assurance policy and practice.

In 2015 the long-established Educational Research Centre (ERC) became a statutory agency of the DES under Section 54 of the *Education Act 1998*. The ERC plays a key role in monitoring the outcomes of education and in generating standardised data about the quality of education in schools. National surveys of achievement at primary level have been carried out in association with the DES since 1972. International assessments of educational achievement have been conducted since the 1980s. Currently, the ERC oversees three international assessments covering primary and post-primary levels:

- Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS; every 5 years, Fourth class)
- Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS; every 4 years, Fourth class and Second year)
- The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, every 3 years; 15- and 16-year-olds)

The results of such international assessments are used to provide indications of relative performance in primary and secondary education in Ireland. In this way they add to the stock of accumulated knowledge available to policymakers.

In recent years, bodies such as the NCCA have allocated significant proportions of their budget to research activity designed to provide evidence on which to base policy and decisions in the areas of curriculum, assessment, and qualifications. The current review of upper secondary school education (Senior Cycle) led by the NCCA has been informed by an extensive body of research and data. The research series also commissioned

by NCCA provides robust evidence to inform curriculum policy formation, implementation and evaluation. Studies of this nature provide important insights into curriculum and assessment in schools. In 2019 the NCCA published a review of international practice in the use of learning outcomes in curriculum reform. The findings from the review contributed to the development of guidelines on the use of learning outcomes for teachers, a pertinent example of research-led learning outcomes practice. Research undertaken or commissioned by the Schools Inspectorate, the ERC and the NCCA, points to the increasingly prominent role of data and research in quality assuring teaching, learning and assessment practices in schools and the associated qualifications that recognise learning achievements. The Statistics section of the Department of Education has grown its capacity to collect and make available an extensive body of administrative data about schools, teachers and pupils in primary and secondary education in Ireland.

In summary, the key elements associated with quality assurance in the schools sector include: the work of the Inspectorate; the unique collaborative process of curriculum, assessment and programme development and review; the recognition and centrality of teacher professional development, both pre- and in-service; the rigour and objectivity associated with the State examinations system; and the increased investment across all these areas in research-informed professional practice and policy-making.

Mapping quality assurance arrangements for general (school) education to the quality assurance principles for qualifications that are part of an NQF referenced to the EQF.

The 2017 EU Recommendation of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning anticipates that national arrangements for quality assurance underpinning qualifications that are part of qualifications frameworks referenced to the EQF, are consistent with the quality assurance principles set out in Annex IV of the Recommendation. The Recommendation recognises that European principles, derived from EQAVET and the ESG, may not readily or easily correspond to quality assurance approaches that have evolved in general or school education. That said, Table 22 presents key quality assurance features of general education, in terms of these European principles.

Table 22 Quality Assurance in General (School) Education and EQF Principles for Quality Assurance

1. address the design of qualifications as well as application of the learning outcomes approach;	The **Senior Cycle** curriculum is based on a Key Skills Framework which includes associated learning outcomes. Each subject specification is expressed in terms of learning outcomes. Statements of learning outcomes in Senior Cycle are aligned with the appropriate NFQ level. **Junior Cycle** is described in 24 Statements of Learning that guide the design of programmes for all Junior Cycle learners. Each subject specification is expressed in terms of learning outcomes aligned with NFQ Level 3. The NCCA publish guidelines on the use of learning outcomes in teaching learning and assessment. In the school system learning outcomes help to ensure that the objectives of the relevant curriculum component, the learning and teaching strategies adopted, and the assessment approaches employed, are consistent with each other. Learning outcomes feature strongly in the design and delivery of school qualifications.

2. ensure valid and reliable assessment according to agreed and transparent learning standards based on outcomes and address the process of certification;	The published learning outcomes in official subject specifications, established through an NCCA led consultative process, determine the subject 'content standards'. These inform the SEC in setting 'performance standards' for school examinations. Finally, 'attainment referencing' using statistical analysis and professional judgement, is used by the SEC to maintain standards of school examinations over time. For further technical explanation see Setting and Maintaining Standards in State Examinations
3. consist of feedback mechanisms and procedures for continuous improvement;	The *Education Act 1998* makes legal provision for teachers, students and their parents, to influence education policy and practice. Agencies of the Department of Education, concerned with school education, have representative governance structures to facilitate feedback mechanisms for continuous improvement. The NCCA for example has representative Council, Boards and Development groups, to facilitate feedback, consensus and continuous improvement of school curriculum and assessment policy.
4. involve all relevant stakeholders at all stages of the process;	Governance arrangements for standards and for reform of school education are representative. Statutory arrangements for representative structures are provided for in the *Education Act 1998.* Schools and agencies that constitute their regulatory framework, including the NCCA, SEC and Teaching Council, have institutionalised stakeholder engagement in their decision-making processes.
5. be composed of consistent evaluation methods, associating self-assessment and external review;	School self-evaluation is a collaborative, reflective process of internal school review. It provides teachers with a means of systematically looking at how they teach and how pupils learn and helps schools and teachers to improve outcomes for learners. The Inspectorate carries out different types of inspections in schools and centres for education. The reports of external school inspections and thematic reviews are published.
6. be an integral part of the internal management, including sub-contracted activities, of bodies issuing qualifications with an EQF level;	Not an applicable feature of the general education system in Ireland.

7. be based on clear and measurable objectives, standards and guidelines;	Assessment standards and academic standards for school qualification are derived from NCCA curriculum objectives which are aligned with the NFQ. The Inspectorate publish procedural standards and guidelines for the quality assurance of teaching, learning and assessment in schools. The State Examinations Commission set standards for certification in school examinations. The Teaching Council specify qualification standards for use in the accreditation of initial teacher education. The Educational Research Centre advise on national performance in international standardised assessments of school students.
8. be supported by appropriate resources;	School education in Ireland takes place within a predominantly public system. Government supports recognised schools and teachers are state employees. The Department of Education provide a range of services, policy advice, guidance and capacity building measures, that enhance the quality of school education. The Department's Statement of Strategy 2019-21 provides an overview of the commitments, priorities and support arrangements that exist.
9. include a regular review of existing external monitoring bodies or agencies, carrying out quality assurance;	The Code of Practice for the Inspectorate sets our guiding principles that govern the evaluation and advisory work of the Inspectorate. Procedures for a review of an inspection include a role for an external reviewer and procedures for an external appeal.

10. include the electronic accessibility of evaluation results.	The Inspectorate evaluates the quality and effectiveness of the provision of education in the State. Whole School Evaluation reports are published for each recognised school or education centre. In addition, the Inspectorate publish a range of reports and other publications to advise and support schools, policy makers and the wider educational community. The Chief Inspectors Reports provide a periodic review on the quality and standards in the primary and post-primary schools and centres for education that were inspected by the Inspectorate.

Section 4.6 Criterion 6 EQF and Procedure 2 QF-EHEA (Agreement by QA bodies)

Criterion 6 EQF
The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies that the referencing report is consistent with the relevant national quality assurance arrangements, provisions and practice.

Procedure 2 QF-EHEA
The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies of the country in question recognised through the Bologna Process.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is the national agency for the external quality assurance of post-school education and training in Ireland. As a quality assurance agency, QQI has contributed to the preparation of this report and the Director of Quality Assurance at QQI was a member of the Steering Group. *QQI (Quality Assurance) can confirm that this report provides an accurate account of national quality assurance arrangements, provisions and practice that apply in post-secondary education and training in Ireland.*

The Department of Education, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the State Examinations Commission and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment contributed to the preparation of this report. Department officials and representatives of the national examinations and curriculum agencies participated in the Steering Group and can confirm that this report provides an accurate account of national quality assurance arrangements, provisions and practice that apply in primary and secondary education in Ireland.

Section 4.7 Criterion 7 EQF and Procedure 3 QF-EHEA (International Experts)

Criterion 7 EQF
The referencing process shall involve international experts and the referencing reports shall contain the written statement of at least two international experts from two different countries on the referencing process.

Procedure 3 QF-EHEA
The self-certification process shall involve international experts.

Independent peer review provided by international experts has added much to the quality and credibility of this report. The selected international experts are: Dr. Carita Blomqvist (Finnish National Agency for Education); Külli All (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research); and Adrian Sheehan (Colleges Wales). These experts were selected based on their expertise in qualifications systems and relevant European developments. Their unique country perspectives are of particular interest to qualifications authorities and the wider policy making community in Ireland.

The international experts are full members of the Steering Group for European Referencing and they participate in meetings of the Steering Group. The international experts were invited to provide a written opinion on the extent to which this report addresses the procedures and criteria for EQF referencing and for QF-EHEA self-certification. The written opinions prepared by each of the international experts are included in *Appendix 8*.

Section 4.8 Criterion 8 EQF and Procedure 1 QF-EHEA (Certification of report)

Criterion 8 EQF
The competent authority or authorities shall certify the referencing of the national qualifications frameworks or systems with the EQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing, and the evidence supporting it, shall be published by the competent authorities, including the EQF National Coordination Points, and shall address separately each of the criteria. The same report can be used for self-certification to the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area, in accordance with the self-certification criteria of the latter.

Procedure 1 QF-EHEA
The competent national body/bodies shall self-certify the compatibility of the national framework with the European framework.

The Department of Education, The Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (as EQF-NCP), certify that this report provides an accurate account of the education, skills and qualifications system in Ireland. The single report addresses each of the respective criteria and procedures for referencing the NFQ to the EQF and for self-certifying the compatibility of the NFQ with the QF-EHEA. The competent authorities shall publish this report on relevant national and European portals and promote and disseminate this report to relevant users of qualifications.

Section 4.9 Criterion 9 EQF and Procedure 4 QF-EHEA (Publication of report)

Criterion 9 EQF
Within 6 months from having referenced or updated the referencing report, Member States and other participating countries shall publish the referencing report and provide relevant information for comparison purposes on the relevant European portal.

Procedure 4 QF-EHEA
The self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall address separately each of the criteria established and shall be published

QQI as EQF-NCP will publish and disseminate a final certified report. A copy of this report will be published on the relevant European portals alongside the original EQF referencing report and QF-EHEA self-certification report for Ireland. The 2020 Report is a new, updated report, it will not replace earlier reports which remain available as a matter of record.

Section 4.10 Criterion 10 EQF; Criterion 6 of QF-EHEA; Procedure 6 QF-EHEA (Level visibility)

Criterion 10 EQF
Further to the referencing process, all newly issued documents related to qualifications that are part of the national qualifications frameworks or systems (e.g. certificates, diplomas, certificate supplements, diploma supplements) and/or qualification registers issued by the competent authorities should contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications frameworks or systems, to the appropriate EQF level.

Criterion 6 QF-EHEA
The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements.

Procedure 6 QF-EHEA
The completion of the self-certification process shall be noted on Diploma Supplements issued subsequently by showing the link between the national framework and the European framework.

The Europass Certificate Supplement (ECS), managed by QQI as the awarding body, provides a clear reference to the EQF level in the supplementary information for awards at NFQ Levels 4, 5 and 6. An example of an ECS issued in Ireland includes a reference to the relationship between the NFQ and the EQF. QQI, in its role as the National Europass Centre, promotes the ECS to all stakeholders on a regular basis, particularly at the point of issue of certification to providers and their learners (six occasions per annum).

The Europass Diploma Supplement is available directly from awarding bodies in higher education and adheres to the prescribed format for the EDS set out by the Commission. Reference to the EQF and to QF-EHEA are included. Updates are made to the format of the EDS as appropriate and QQI communicates with HEIs annually in relation to the EDS. National Guidelines for completing the EDS are well observed. Section 8 of the national guidelines sets out how the relationship between the NFQ and both EQF and QF-EHEA is to be communicated to graduates. Europass Ireland maintain a listing of higher education institutions in Ireland that issue the EDS. The EDS is widely promoted to enrolled students in Ireland.

All qualification certificates issued by QQI include a reference to the NFQ and to the EQF. To date other national awarding bodies in Ireland do not include European references on qualification certificates or parchments issued to graduates.

The Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ) is the central repository of information on programmes and associated qualifications recognised in the NFQ. Currently, the IRQ lists quality-assured, recognised qualifications offered by universities and institutes of technology, as well as private HE colleges, Education and Training Boards, and private FE providers delivering courses leading to a QQI Award.

The IRQ publicly confirms the formal, technical relationship between a qualification and the NFQ. It will also supply details about the associated course, provider, and awarding body. It is anticipated that the IRQ will also include qualifications from other awarding bodies when they are eligible to have qualifications included within the NFQ, for example, professional bodies, and UK and other international awarding bodies. The recently launched register includes NFQ and EQF level as mandated data fields. In time, it is intended that the IRQ will be fully interconnected with relevant European level qualifications portals.

As the National Academic Recognition Information Centre in Ireland, NARIC Ireland operates the advisory service offering Comparability Statements in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention. The searchable Recognition Database includes over 1300 foreign qualifications from over 130 countries and includes a clear reference to the EQF for qualifications where appropriate. In 2019, more than 80,000 persons visited the website, and 28,000 individual Comparability Statements were downloaded for qualifications. While not legally binding, the advisory comparability statements are widely accepted by stakeholders including employers, professional bodies and HEIs.

Section 4.11 Procedure 5 QF-EHEA (Update ENIC/NARIC Country Page)

Procedure 5 QF-EHEA
The ENIC/NARIC network shall maintain a public listing of States that have completed the self-certification process.

NARIC Ireland has been a member of the ENIC-NARIC network since 1994. The ENIC-NRIC country page for Ireland includes links to Ireland's QF-EHEA Self-certification Report (2006) and the EQF Referencing Report (2009). This country page is updated annually by NARIC Ireland who also operate as the national contact point for the network, providing advisory information to network colleagues and individuals requiring guidance.

Once finalised and certified, NARIC Ireland will publish a copy of the 2020 Report on the ENIC/NARIC network.

Chapter Five: Current and Future Developments

This report is intended to renew and strengthen the European dimension of the NFQ; to promote the portability and recognition of Irish qualifications in Europe; and to contribute to the broader European agenda for mobility and lifelong learning.

Since the establishment of the NFQ in 2003 and the original QF-EHEA Self-certification Report for Ireland (2006) and EQF Referencing Report for Ireland (2009), the Irish education, skills and qualifications system has evolved and changed. European level policy has also moved on and has shaped developments in Ireland. This report shows that the implementation and use of the NFQ has advanced and there is a better understanding of the contribution, effect, and impact of the NFQ.

Periodic European referencing provides an opportunity for the qualifications community in Ireland to view the NFQ through a European lens and to provide a contemporary and authoritative account of the extent to which NFQ design, implementation and governance are consistent with European norms and standards. The 2020 Report builds on the strong foundations established in the original NFQ European referencing reports, it confirms existing European alignments and describes important national developments. The process of completing this European referencing exercise has required national authorities and stakeholders to take stock of past and current developments and to consider prospects for the NFQ. The preparation of the 2020 Report has been informed bringing together hindsight, insight, and foresight.

This report shows that qualifications matter, and accordingly it is important that they are easily understood, highly valued and that they meet the needs of learners, wider society, and the economy. The qualifications system in Ireland is underpinned by significant public and private investment. Government and other stakeholders share the expectation all learners in Ireland to have access to qualifications that are fit for purpose, effectively regulated, and appropriately recognised nationally and internationally. The implementation and use of the NFQ strengthened by the European alignment of the NFQ, contribute to the realisation of this ambition.

In preparing this report, national stakeholders and international experts have recognised the resilience of the NFQ, but success should not be taken for granted. The NFQ requires maintenance, review and potentially adjustment to ensure it continues to be alert and responsive within a dynamic qualifications system.

Stakeholders have called for the need to have sustainable arrangements in place to support the implementation and use of the NFQ and to ensure that the NFQ is capable of supporting reform and innovation as appropriate.

Current developments

There are several ongoing initiatives, led by QQI, intended to improve the functioning of the qualifications system in Ireland, promote the visibility of the NFQ and support national collaborations that will enhance the quality of qualifications. These include; the publication of a Green Paper on Qualifications which is intended to stimulate dialogue about qualifications trends, issues, uncertainties and opportunities; the commissioning of a study on the comparability of qualification types at NFQ Level 6 (EQF Level 5) in Ireland; the release of the Irish Register of Qualifications; a review of qualifications at NFQ Levels 1-4 (EQF Levels 1-3) in Ireland; the establishment of the National Academic Integrity Network to promote the integrity of qualifications achieved in Ireland and structured engagement with professional regulatory bodies and higher education institutions in Ireland towards synergies in professional and academic accreditation.

QQI and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science will continue to prepare for the commencement of published legislation, opening up the NFQ to a wider range of awarding bodies than is currently the case and promoting transparency in the procedures by which all qualifications are included within the NFQ.

Future developments

The most recent policy impact assessment of the NFQ in 2017 identified a number of priorities for the future development of the NFQ. During the preparation of this report, the Steering Group members have reaffirmed these priorities and offered some further ideas.

The Steering Group recognised that there are many important issues, opportunities and challenges facing the NFQ and the qualifications system more generally. These are diverse, reflecting the values and priorities of those with an interest in the NFQ. The Steering Group advised that this concluding chapter should avoid setting out an extensive list of issues for possible future development and suggested that a more strategic and sustainable approach should be taken to ongoing NFQ planning, delivery, and review.

The preparation of this report has led to the identification of three interrelated sets of activities that offer a structure for planning the future development of the NFQ:

- **Design and implementation** (e.g. Maintain NFQ architecture, legislative framework and policies; promote learning outcomes approach; support inclusion of qualifications within the NFQ; embed NFQ implementation in QA arrangements; operate national credit arrangements; support RPL arrangements)
- **Awareness and Use** (e.g. Promote public awareness of NFQ and EQF; support use and users of NFQ; respond to emerging issues; maintain strong international engagement)
- **Evaluation and Impact** (e.g. Conduct timely reviews of NFQ design, implementation, use and impact; facilitate collaborative work towards building the knowledge base to inform system level understanding; amend NFQ and related policies as appropriate to support innovation that meets the needs of learners)

Demand for reform in our qualifications system can stem from local and specific issues, or it can result from mega trends such as increased digitalisation and internationalisation, changing labour markets, demands for greater social cohesion and stronger action on climate change. The NFQ is frequently used as an instrument for policy.

Evidence cited in this report has shown that the NFQ, as an instrument for policy, is productive when used in concert with other policy initiatives. Effective policy coherence and policy alignment help to realise the national ambition for the NFQ. Resources for supporting and maintaining the NFQ are finite and priorities need to be agreed for future development. Better awareness, leverage and use can be made of knowledge resources made available by the EU and the Council of Europe and by European networks and agencies such as Cedefop and the European Training Foundation. UNESCO, the ILO and the OECD also provide quality data and analysis relevant to qualifications.

A deep knowledge and understanding of qualifications, their nature, use, quality, and impact will help to keep the NFQ responsive to the needs of learners and workers. This requires dedicated partnerships and collaboration among those that develop and implement the NFQ and those that use the NFQ. Success is more likely when NFQ-related work plans, projects and initiatives are the result of stakeholder consensus and are subject to appropriate oversight and accountability. The preparation of this report has renewed interest in the NFQ and related European developments and has revealed a stakeholder appetite for informing and shaping the next phase of NFQ development.

Harnessing the potential for greater collaboration and engagement among those who implement, promote, use, and regulate the NFQ, requires a mechanism to bring practitioners, policymakers and other interested parties together. In 2021 QQI will establish and support a national forum to promote and strengthen engagement, better coordinate actions, and ultimately enhance the effectiveness of our national qualifications system. The nature, scope, and ways of working of such a forum will be worked out with stakeholders. It is apparent that there is a qualifications agenda that warrants sustainable arrangements for more systematic deliberation and coordinated action. The proposal for such a national forum has been positively received and endorsed by the national qualifications authorities and quality assurance bodies in Ireland and by the Steering Group for the preparation of this report.

A reflection on the referencing process

Addressing the criteria and procedures for EQF referencing and QF-EHEA self-certification in a single comprehensive report was an efficient and timely exercise. Closer integration between further and higher education in Ireland has been a longstanding national policy ambition. The most recent manifestation of this ambition is the establishment of a single government department charged with overseeing the development of post-school education and training in Ireland. This administrative change mirrors the relatively recent convergence of arrangements for the external quality assurance of further and higher education. Arguably, a comprehensive NFQ has facilitated these administrative and regulatory reforms. A single consolidated report aligning the NFQ with the respective European frameworks for higher education and for lifelong learning is well attuned to domestic policy aimed at seamless transitions across the education and training system and parity of esteem among academic and vocationally oriented qualifications.

The criteria and procedures for EQF referencing and for QF-EHEA self-certification, together with the advice on updating reports, will need to be monitored and reviewed as NQFs mature and knowledge of NQF development, implementation, evaluation, and impact improves. Recent work by Cedefop on the developmental phases of NQFs may be instructive for the nature of updated referencing reports in the future.

The preparation of the 2020 Report provided an opportunity to stimulate renewed interest in the NFQ and to put future governance arrangements for the NFQ on a more sustainable footing. The role of international experts cannot be underestimated. Acting on behalf of the EQF/QF-EHEA community, they have fulfilled an essential independent quality assurance function for the process and outcomes of the 2020 Report.

This final chapter outlines developments underway that will shape the NFQ in the short and medium term. It also recognises that the implementation of the NFQ is incomplete: policy and practice continue to unfold; new opportunities and challenges present themselves. There is an expectation that the NFQ will support qualification reform and innovation. This chapter also marks a shift in governance and oversight arrangements for the NFQ, re-kindling an appetite for broad based stakeholder involvement in shaping the future mandate for NFQ development.

In conclusion, this report captures the state of the NFQ at a point in time, offering a transparent and credible basis to support prevailing Europe-wide recognition of qualifications gained in Ireland. In time, this report will provide a point of departure for authors of future accounts of the NFQ and its European status.

END

Appendix 1: QF-EHEA Cycle Descriptors (updated 2018)

The Paris Conference of European Ministers responsible for higher education 24-25 May 2018 adopted the revised overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA, implementing the commitment in the Yerevan Communiqué. The revised overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA comprises the short cycle, the first cycle, the second cycle and the third cycle generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges in the short cycle, first and second cycles. Ministers committed themselves to elaborating national frameworks for qualifications compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA. While recognising that each country decides whether and how to incorporate short cycle qualifications within its own national framework, the Paris Communiqué underlined the role ECTS-based short cycle qualifications play in preparing students for employment and further studies as well as in improving social cohesion.

Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA)		
	Learning outcomes	ECTS credits
Short cycle qualifications	Qualifications that signify completion of the higher education **short cycle** are awarded to students who: - have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks; such knowledge provides an underpinning for a field of work or vocation, personal development, and further studies to complete the first cycle; - can apply their knowledge and understanding in occupational contexts; - have the ability to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems - can communicate their understanding, skills and activities, to peers, supervisors and clients - have the learning skills to undertake further studies with some autonomy.	Typically include 90-120 ECTS credits
First cycle qualifications	Qualifications that signify completion of **the first cycle** are awarded to students who: - have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study; - can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study;	Typically include 180- 240 ECTS credits

	- have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgments that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues; - can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences; - have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.	
Second cycle qualifications	Qualifications that signify completion of **the second cycle** are awarded to students who: - have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with the first cycle, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research context; - can apply their knowledge and understanding, and problem-solving abilities, in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study; - have the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgments with incomplete or limited information but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgments; - can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously; - have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.	Typically include 90-120 ECTS credits, with a minimum of 60 credits at the level of the 2nd cycle
Third cycle qualifications	Qualifications that signify completion of **the third cycle** are awarded to students who: - have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field; - have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity; - have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication; - are capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas; - can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise; - can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge-based society.	Not specified

Appendix 2: Level Descriptors – European Qualifications Framework (2017)

Each of the eight levels is defined by a set of descriptors indicating the learning outcomes relevant to qualifications at that level in any system of qualifications.

	Knowledge	**Skills**	**Responsibility and autonomy**
	In the context of EQF, knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual.	**In the context of EQF, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments).**	**In the context of the EQF responsibility and autonomy is described as the ability of the learner to apply knowledge and skills autonomously and with responsibility**
Level 1 The learning outcomes relevant to Level 1 are	Basic general knowledge	Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks	Work or study under direct supervision in a structured context
Level 2 The learning outcomes relevant to Level 2 are	Basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study	Basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools	Work or study under supervision with some autonomy
Level 3 The learning outcomes relevant to Level 3 are	Knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts, in a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information	Take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study; adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems

	Knowledge	**Skills**	**Responsibility and autonomy**
	In the context of EQF, knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual.	**In the context of EQF, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments).**	**In the context of the EQF responsibility and autonomy is described as the ability of the learner to apply knowledge and skills autonomously and with responsibility**
Level 4 The learning outcomes relevant to Level 4 are	Factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study	Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change; supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities
Level 5[1] The learning outcomes relevant to Level 5 are	Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change; review and develop performance of self and others
Level 6[2] The learning outcomes relevant to Level 6 are	Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles	Advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts; take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups
Level 7[3] The learning outcomes relevant to Level 7 are	Highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/or research Critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields	Specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields	Manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches; take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams

	Knowledge	Skills	Responsibility and autonomy
	In the context of EQF, knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual.	**In the context of EQF, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments).**	**In the context of the EQF responsibility and autonomy is described as the ability of the learner to apply knowledge and skills autonomously and with responsibility**
Level 8[4] The learning outcomes relevant to Level 8 are	Knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields	The most advanced and specialised skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in research and/ or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice	Demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research

Compatibility with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area

The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area provides descriptors for three cycles agreed by the ministers responsible for higher education at their meeting in Bergen in May 2005 in the framework of the Bologna process. Each cycle descriptor offers a generic statement of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with qualifications that represent the end of that cycle.

- The descriptor for the short cycle developed by the Joint Quality Initiative as part of the Bologna process (within or linked to the first cycle) corresponds to the learning outcomes for EQF Level 5.
- The descriptor for the first cycle corresponds to the learning outcomes for EQF Level 6.
- The descriptor for the second cycle corresponds to the learning outcomes for EQF Level 7.
- The descriptor for the third cycle corresponds to the learning outcomes for EQF Level 8.

Appendix 3: Criteria and Procedures for Referencing National Qualifications Frameworks or Systems to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

1. The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process are clearly determined and published by the competent authorities.
2. There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications frameworks or systems and the level descriptors of the EQF.
3. The national qualifications frameworks or systems and their qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and related to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where appropriate, to credit systems.
4. The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system are transparent.
5. The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications frameworks or systems and are consistent with the principles on quality assurance as specified in Annex IV to this recommendation.
6. The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies that the referencing report is consistent with the relevant national quality assurance arrangements, provisions and practice.
7. The referencing process shall involve international experts and the referencing reports shall contain the written statement of at least two international experts from two different countries on the referencing process.
8. The competent authority or authorities shall certify the referencing of the national qualifications frameworks or systems with the EQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing, and the evidence supporting it, shall be published by the competent authorities, including the EQF National Coordination Points, and shall address separately each of the criterion. The same report can be used for self-certification to the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area, in accordance with the self-certification criterion of the latter.
9. Within 6 months from having referenced or updated the referencing report, Member States and other participating countries shall publish the referencing report and provide relevant information for comparison purposes on the relevant European portal.
10. Further to the referencing process, all newly issued documents related to qualifications that are part of the national qualifications frameworks or systems (e.g. certificates, diplomas, certificate supplements, diploma supplements) and/or qualification registers issued by the competent authorities should contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications frameworks or systems, to the appropriate EQF level.

Appendix 4: Criteria and Procedures for the Verification that National Frameworks are Compatible with the EHEA Framework:

1. The national framework for higher education qualifications and the body or bodies responsible for its development are designated by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education.
2. There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework.
3. The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS credits.
4. The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent.
5. The national quality assurance systems for higher education refer to the national framework for higher education qualifications and are consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent Ministerial Communiqués in the Bologna Process.
6. The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements.
7. The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published.

It is proposed that each country should certify the compatibility of its own framework with the overarching framework according to the following procedures:

1. The competent national body/bodies shall self-certify the compatibility of the national framework with the European framework
2. The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies of the country in question recognised through the Bologna Process
3. The self-certification process shall involve international experts
4. The self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall address separately each of the criteria established and shall be published
5. The ENIC/NARIC network shall maintain a public listing of States that have completed the self-certification process
6. The completion of the self-certification process shall be noted on Diploma Supplements issued subsequently by showing the link between the national framework and the European framework

Appendix 5: Irish NFQ – Level Descriptors

	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4	LEVEL 5	LEVEL 6	LEVEL 7	LEVEL 8	LEVEL 9	LEVEL 10	
KNOWLEDGE BREADTH	Elementary knowledge	Knowledge that is narrow in range	Knowledge moderately broad in range	Broad range of knowledge	Broad range of knowledge	Specialised knowledge of a broad area	Specialised knowledge across a variety of areas	An understanding of the theory, concepts and methods pertaining to a field (or fields) of learning	A systematic understanding of knowledge, at, or informed by, the forefront of a field of learning	A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of a field of learning	**KNOWLEDGE** BREADTH
KNOWLEDGE KIND	Demonstrable by recognition or recall	Concrete in reference and basic in comprehension	Mainly concrete in reference and with some comprehension of relationship between knowledge elements	Mainly concrete in reference and with some elements of abstraction or theory	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant depth in some areas	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant underpinning theory	Recognition of limitations of current knowledge and familiarity with sources of new knowledge; integration of concepts across a variety of areas	Detailed knowledge and understanding in one or more specialised areas, some of it at the current boundaries of the field(s)	A critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, generally informed by the forefront of a field of learning	The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy review by peers	**KNOWLEDGE** KIND
KNOW-HOW & SKILL RANGE	Demonstrate basic practical skills and carry out directed activity using basic tools	Demonstrate limited range of basic practical skills, including the use of relevant tools	Demonstrate a limited range or practical and cognitive	Demonstrate a moderate range of practical and cognitive skills and tools	Demonstrate a broad range of specialised skills and tools	Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools	Demonstrate specialised technical, creative or conceptual skills and tools across an area of study	Demonstrate mastery of a complex and specialised area of skills and tools; use and modify advanced skills and tools to conduct closely guided research, professional or advanced technical activity	Demonstrate a range of standard and specialised research or equivalent tools and techniques of enquiry	Demonstrate a significant range of the principal skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials which are associated with a field of learning; develop new skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials	**KNOW-HOW & SKILL** RANGE
KNOW-HOW & SKILL SELECTIVITY	Perform processes that are repetitive and predictable	Perform a sequence of routine tasks given clear direction	Select from a limited range of varied procedures and apply known solutions to a limited range of predictable problems	Select from a range of procedures and apply known solutions to a variety of predictable problems	Evaluate and use information to plan and develop investigative strategies and to determine solutions to varied unfamiliar problems	Formulate responses to well-defined abstract problems	Exercise appropriate judgement in planning, design, technical and/or supervisory functions related to products, services, operations or processes	Exercise appropriate judgement in a number of complex planning, design, technical and/or management functions related to products, services, operations or processes, including resourcing	Select from complex and advanced skills across a field of learning; develop new skills to a high level, including novel and emerging techniques	Respond to abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge	**KNOW-HOW & SKILL** SELECTIVITY
COMPETENCE CONTEXT	Act in closely defined and highly structured contexts	Act in a limited range of predictable and and structured contexts	Act within a limited range of contexts	Act in familiar and unfamiliar contexts	Act in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs; identify and apply skill and knowledge to a wide variety of contexts	Act in a range of varied and specific contexts involving creative and non-routine activities; transfer and apply theoretical concepts and/or technical or creative skills to a range of contexts	Utilise diagnostic and creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts	Use advanced skills to conduct research, or advanced technical or professional activity, accepting accountability for all related decision making; transfer and apply diagnostic and creative skills in a range of contexts	Act in a wide and often unpredictable variety of professional levels and ill defined contexts	Exercise personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent contexts	**COMPETENCE** CONTEXT
COMPETENCE ROLE	Act in a limited range of roles	Act in a range of roles under direction	Act under direction with limited autonomy; function within familiar, homogeneous groups	Act with considerable amount of responsibility and autonomy	Exercise some initiative and independence in carrying out defined activities; join and function within multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups	Exercise substantial personal autonomy and often take responsiblity for the work of others and/or for the allocation of resources; form, and function within, multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups	Accept accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes; take significant or supervisory responsibility for the work of others in defined areas of work	Act effectively under guidance in a peer relationship with qualified practitioners; lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups	Take significant responsibility for the work of individuals and groups; lead and initiate activity	Communicate results of research and innovation to peers; engage in critical dialogue; lead and originate complex social processes	**COMPETENCE** ROLE
COMPETENCE LEARNING TO LEARN	Learn to sequence learning tasks; learn to access and use a range of learning resources	Learn to learn in a disciplined manner in a well-structured and supervised environment	Learn to learn within a managed environment	Learn to take responsibility for own learning within a supervised environment	Learn to take responsibility for own learning within a managed environment	Learn to evaluate own learning and identify needs within a structured learning environment; assist others in identifying learning needs	Take initiative to identify and address learning needs and interact effectively in a learning group	Learn to act in variable and unfamiliar learning contexts; learn to manage learning tasks independently, professionally and ethically	Learn to self-evaluate and take responsibility for continuing academic/professional development	Learn to critique the broader implications of applying knowledge to particular contexts	**COMPETENCE** LEARNING TO LEARN
COMPETENCE INSIGHT	Begin to demonstrate awarenesss of independent role for self	Demonstrate awareness of independent role for self	Assume limited responsibility for consistency of self-understanding and behaviour	Assume partial responsibility for consistency of self-understanding and behaviour	Assume full responsibility for consistency of self-understanding and behaviour	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others	Express an internalised, personal world view, manifesting solidarity with others	Express a comprehensive, internalised, personal world view manifesting solidarity with others	Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and act to change them	Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and lead action to change them	**COMPETENCE** INSIGHT

This 10-Level Grid of Level Indicators forms part of the determination of the national framework of qualifications under section 7(a) of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999. Note: The outcomes at each level include those of all the lower levels in the same sub-strand.

Appendix 6: Analysis and Outcomes of Technical Mapping

As outlined in the report, the two European regional frameworks (EQF and the QF-EHEA) are meta-frameworks that promote *inter alia* the centrality of learning outcomes, which are at the forefront of the analysis presented below.

In the first part of this appendix, a comparison activity was undertaken to re-reference our National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) to the EQF (re-confirm a set of standard characteristics 'common' to the NFQ and the EQF), and to relate NFQ professional award-type descriptors (PATD) at Levels 5-9 with the EQF. These characteristics were examined in the context of level descriptors characterising both Frameworks but referred to as level indicators for the Irish NFQ.

The second part of this appendix focuses on confirming (updating of the QF-EHEA self-certification report) compatibility of the qualifications in the Irish NFQ with the Bologna Framework based on direct comparability of the Dublin Descriptors with the NFQ award-type descriptors including PATDs at Levels 6-9. The updating of QF-EHEA self-certification reports is seen as an important commitment in strengthening the three-cycle system compatible with the Bologna Framework, reinforcing quality and cooperation within the EHEA.

NFQ, PATD and EQF-level correspondences: comparative analysis of text in descriptor and indicator statements

The approach adopted for the technical mapping exercise started by analysing the levels in both Frameworks and making a general comparison between the two Frameworks' descriptors on the basis of learning outcomes defined in terms of 'Knowledge', 'Skills' and 'Competence' in the NFQ, and 'Knowledge', 'Skills' and 'Responsibility and Autonomy' in the EQF, based on the concept of 'best fit' and colour coded accordingly:

NFQ	EQF
Knowledge	Knowledge
Skills	Skills
Competence	Responsibility and Autonomy

Thus, brown colour for 'Knowledge', red colour for 'Skills' and green colour for 'Competence'/ 'Responsibility and Autonomy', represent keywords/phrases that are similar in both Frameworks.

It is of note that 'Knowledge', 'Skills' and 'Competence' are not completely independent of each other. However, during comparative analysis an effort has been made to focus on commonalities, drawing attention to overlap between the level descriptors only when necessary.

EQF Level 1		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Responsibility and Autonomy descriptor**
Basic general knowledge.	Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks	Work or study under direct supervision in a structured context
NFQ Level 1		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Competence descriptor**
Elementary knowledge Demonstrable by recognition or recall	Demonstrate basic practical skills and carry out directed activity using basic tools Perform processes that are repetitive and predictable	Act in closely defined and highly structured contexts Act in a limited range of roles Learn to sequence learning tasks; learn to access and use a range of learning resources. Begin to demonstrate awareness of independent role for self

Analysis

The NFQ Level 1 descriptor requires the use of 'elementary knowledge' of a subject and this is a good match to the requirements of EQF Level 1.

The keyword 'basic' is used to describe the 'Skill' component in both Frameworks.

The two Frameworks also refer to 'competence' outcomes (termed 'Responsibility and Autonomy' in EQF) in similar terms while describing ability to work in 'structured contexts'.

Best fit outcome: NFQ Level 1 is a good match to EQF Level 1

EQF Level 1		
Knowledge descriptor	Skills descriptor	Responsibility and Autonomy descriptor
Basic general knowledge	Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks	Work or study under direct supervision in a structured context
NFQ Level 2		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Competence descriptor**
Knowledge that is narrow in range Concrete in reference and basic in comprehension	Demonstrate limited range of basic practical skills, including the use of relevant tools Perform a sequence of routine tasks given clear direction	Act in a limited range of predictable and structured contexts Act in a range of roles under direction Learn to learn in a disciplined manner in a well-structured and supervised environment Demonstrate awareness of independent role for self
Analysis The EQF descriptor's reference to 'basic general knowledge' at this level is matched in NFQ references to 'knowledge that is narrow in range'. The NFQ Level 2 descriptor requires 'basic practical skills' to perform 'routine tasks' and this is a good match to the requirements of EQF Level 1. Under 'Competence', termed 'Responsibility and Autonomy' in EQF; both Frameworks refer explicitly to operating in a 'structured context', under 'direct supervision' in EQF and in 'a range of roles under direction' in NFQ. There is a strong correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these levels in the two Frameworks.		
Best fit outcome: NFQ Level 2 is a good match to EQF Level 1		

EQF Level 2		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Responsibility and Autonomy descriptor**
Basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study	Basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools	Work or study under supervision with some autonomy
NFQ Level 3		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Competence descriptor**
Knowledge moderately broad in range Mainly concrete in reference and with some comprehension of relationship between knowledge elements	Demonstrate a limited range of practical and cognitive skills and tools Select from a limited range of varied procedures and apply known solutions to a limited range of predictable problems	Act within a limited range of contexts Act under direction with limited autonomy; function within familiar, homogeneous groups Learn to learn within a managed environment Assume limited responsibility for consistency of self- understanding and behaviour
Analysis The EQF descriptor for Level 2 refers to 'basic factual knowledge', which is reflected in the NFQ indicator as 'knowledge moderately broad in range and mainly concrete in reference'. The 'Skill' outcomes for this level in EQF are set as 'basic cognitive and practical skills' to 'carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools'. This is matched closely in the NFQ requirement to demonstrate 'a limited range of practical and cognitive skills and tools' and 'apply known solutions to a limited range of predictable problems'. Under 'Responsibility and Autonomy' termed as 'Competence' in NFQ, EQF refers to 'work or study under supervision with some autonomy'. This is matched closely in the NFQ requirement to 'act under direction with limited autonomy'. Overall, there is a strong correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these levels in the two Frameworks.		
Best fit outcome: NFQ Level 3 is a good match to EQF Level 2		

EQF Level 3		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Responsibility and Autonomy descriptor**
Knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts, in a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information	Take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study Adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems
NFQ Level 4		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Competence descriptor**
Broad range of knowledge Mainly concrete in reference and with some elements of abstraction or theory	Demonstrate a moderate range of practical and cognitive skills and tools Select from a range of procedures and apply known solutions to a variety of predictable problems	Act in familiar and unfamiliar contexts. Act with considerable amount of responsibility and autonomy Learn to take responsibility for own learning within a supervised environment Assume partial responsibility for consistency of self- understanding and behaviour

Analysis

The NFQ Level 4 descriptor requires the use of 'broad range of knowledge' with 'some elements of abstraction or theory'. The EQF descriptor for 'knowledge' at Level 3 refers to 'knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts'.

Under 'Skill', both Frameworks refer in almost identical terms to a 'range of cognitive and practical skills', which demonstrates clearly a close correspondence between 'Skill' indicators in both Frameworks.

The 'Responsibility and Autonomy' component of the EQF descriptor refers to the need to 'take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study'; the matching statement in the NFQ indicator is somewhat more demanding: 'act with considerable amount of responsibility and autonomy'. The EQF descriptor also mentions the need to 'adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems'; several statements in the NFQ indicator address aspects of this outcome, requiring the learner to 'learn to take responsibility for own learning' and to 'assume partial responsibility for consistency of self-understanding and behaviour'.

Overall, there is a strong correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these levels in the two Frameworks.

Best fit outcome: NFQ Level 4 is a good match to EQF Level 3

EQF Level 4		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Responsibility and Autonomy descriptor**
Factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study	Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change Supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities
NFQ Level 5		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Competence descriptor**
Broad range of knowledge Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant depth in some areas	Demonstrate a broad range of specialised skills and tools Evaluate and use information to plan and develop investigative strategies and to determine solutions to varied unfamiliar problems	Act in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs; identify and apply skill and knowledge to a wide variety of contexts Exercise some initiative and independence in carrying out defined activities; join and function within multiple, complex, and heterogeneous groups Learn to take responsibility for own learning within a managed environment Assume full responsibility for consistency of self-understanding and behaviour

NFQ Level 5 Professional Award-type descriptor		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Competence descriptor**
Broad current general knowledge and an integrated body of specialised knowledge required to support a craft or occupational discipline and knowledge of its connections with related activities. Specialised knowledge here involves some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking with significant depth in some areas Practical understanding of facts, concepts, rules, regulations, methods, materials, tools, devices, techniques; their development and limitations; and how they are applied in current occupational activity. Knowledge of the context for professional activity (familiarity with the community of practice and with safety, employment, technological and regulatory perspectives) and awareness of disciplines likely to be encountered as a member of the community of practice	Select from a broad range of specialised skills and tools and apply them to problems arising in professional activity; problems here are usually predictable but are subject to change. Evaluate and use information to draw conclusions and determine solutions to predictable problems arising in professional activity that take due account of social, field-specific and ethical insights Communicate oral and written information effectively in familiar contexts; engage in the transfer of knowledge and skills within the professional community of practice; convey information and decisions, to specialists and non-specialists, including clients	Exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in varied and specific contexts including professional practice and learning Exercise initiative and independence in professional activity, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs and for decisions in work and learning contexts. Act effectively in team roles within multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups Assist in the supervision of routine work or learning activities Take responsibility for leading on some occupational activities Contribute to the review and development of the performance of others Maintain professional knowledge and skill taking responsibility for own learning within a managed environment Provide learning support, and guidance to others in the professional contexts Seek guidance as appropriate when working independently Assume full responsibility for consistency of self-understanding and behaviour at personal, occupational, societal, and environmental levels

NFQ Level 5 analysis

The EQF descriptor for 'Knowledge' at Level 4 refers to 'factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study', which is reflected in the NFQ indicator as 'broad range of knowledge' and 'some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant depth in some areas'.

Under 'Skill', EQF refers to 'a range of cognitive and practical skills'. In the NFQ using the skills for this level involves the ability to select from 'a broad range of specialised skills and tools'.

Strong similarities are also evident in the 'Competence/Responsibility -Autonomy' outcomes for these levels. The EQF 'Responsibility and Autonomy' descriptor refers to the need to 'exercise self-management within the guidelines', which is matched by the NFQ requirement to exercise 'some initiative and independence in carrying out defined activities'. EQF specifies the need to operate in contexts that are 'usually predictable, but are subject to change': NFQ refers to 'a range of varied and specific contexts'. A supervisory element is evident in both Frameworks.

There is a strong general correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these levels in the two Frameworks.

NFQ Level 5 professional award-type descriptor analysis

The EQF Level 4 'Knowledge' descriptor requires 'factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study', which is reflected in the NFQ Level 5 professional award-type descriptor as 'broad range of current general knowledge' and 'some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant depth in some areas', augmented by 'an integrated body of specialised knowledge required to support a craft or occupational discipline and knowledge of its connections with related activities'.

Under 'Skill', EQF refers to 'a range of cognitive and practical skills'. The NFQ Level 5 professional award-type descriptor is very closely aligned with the EQF 'Knowledge' descriptor, and involves the ability to select from 'a broad range of specialised skills and tools', and 'apply them to problems arising in professional activity'.

Under 'Responsibility and Autonomy' EQF descriptor refers to the need to 'exercise self-management within the guidelines', which is well-matched by the NFQ Level 5 professional award-type descriptor requirement to 'exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in varied and specific contexts including professional practice and learning'.

Overall, the NFQ Level 5 professional award-type descriptor for Level 5 links directly to the EQF Level 4 descriptor in terms of knowledge, and cognitive and practical skills in usually 'predictable' context. A supervisory element is strongly evident in both EQF and in the NFQ Level 5 professional award-type descriptor.

There is a strong general correspondence between Level 5 professional award-type descriptor and the EQF descriptor at these levels.

Best fit outcome: NFQ Level 5 is a good match to EQF Level 4

EQF Level 5		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Responsibility and Autonomy descriptor**
Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change Review and develop performance of self and others
NFQ Level 6		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Competence descriptor**
Specialised knowledge of a broad area Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant underpinning theory	Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools Formulate responses to well- defined abstract problems	Act in a range of varied and specific contexts involving creative and non-routine activities; transfer and apply theoretical concepts and/ or technical or creative skills to a range of contexts Exercise substantial personal autonomy and often take responsibility for the work of others and/or for the allocation of resources; form, and function within, multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups Learn to evaluate own learning and identify needs within a structured learning environment; assist others in identifying learning needs Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others

NFQ Level 6 professional award-type descriptor		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Competence descriptor**
Broad current general knowledge and an integrated body of specialised knowledge required to support a craft or an occupational discipline and knowledge of the connections with related disciplines Specialised knowledge here involves significant underpinning theory and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge Practical understanding of facts, concepts, rules, regulations, abstract models, methods, materials, tools, devices, technologies; their development and limitations; and how they are applied in current occupational activity Knowledge of the context for professional activity (familiarity with the community of practice and with safety, employment, technological and regulatory perspectives and with relevant economic, social and environmental issues) and awareness of other disciplines likely to be encountered as a member of the community of practice	Select from a comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools and apply them to the generation of creative solutions to problems arising in professional activity Plan and develop investigative strategies and evaluate information to determine creative, evidence-informed solutions to predictable and unpredictable problems and respond to unpredictable change arising in professional activity that take due account of social, field-specific and ethical insights Communicate complex oral and written information effectively in familiar and unfamiliar contexts; facilitate the transfer of knowledge and skills within the professional community of practice; justify decisions, to specialists and non-specialists, including clients	Exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts including professional practice and learning Exercise initiative and independence in professional activity, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs and for decisions in work and learning contexts Act effectively in team roles within multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups Exercise supervision in contexts of work or learning activities Lead a variety of occupational activities Contribute to the review and development of the performance of others Evaluate and maintain professional knowledge and skill taking responsibility for own learning within a structured learning environment Provide learning support and guidance to learners in the professional context; assist others in identifying learning needs Seek guidance as appropriate when working independently Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others at the personal, occupational, societal, and environmental levels

NFQ Level 6 analysis

The Level 5 'Knowledge' descriptor for the EQF and the NFQ descriptors require specialised, theoretical knowledge. The NFQ indicator elaborates the 'theoretical' aspect, referring to 'abstract thinking and significant underpinning theory'.

The 'Skill' outcomes set out in the EQF and the NFQ are remarkably similar. EQF refers to 'a comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills', closely matched by 'comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools' in the NFQ indicator. These skills are to be used to 'develop creative solutions to abstract problems' in EQF, and in NFQ to 'formulate responses to well-defined abstract problems'.

The 'Competence' indicators for NFQ Level 6 is more detailed than the EQF 'Responsibility and Autonomy' descriptor for Level 5, but every aspect of the EQF descriptor can be matched to elements of the outcomes required in the NFQ. The EQF specifies the ability to 'exercise management and supervision', whereas NFQ describes the need to be able to 'exercise substantial personal autonomy and often take responsibility for the work of others'. In EQF, these abilities are to be deployed in 'contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change', and in NFQ in 'a range of varied and specific contexts involving creative and non-routine activities'. The EQF requirement to be able to 'review and develop performance of self and others' is reflected in several statements within the NFQ indicator in the requirements to 'take responsibility for the work of others and to evaluate own learning and to assist others in identifying learning needs'.

Overall, the correspondence between the NFQ descriptor and the EQF at these Levels in the Frameworks is very strong.

NFQ Level 6 professional award-type descriptor analysis

'Knowledge' outcomes set out in the EQF Level 5 descriptor and the NFQ Level 6 professional award-type descriptor are remarkably similar referring to 'specialised knowledge'.

In terms of 'Skills' outcomes, EQF at Level 5 refers to 'a comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills', matched by 'comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools' in the NFQ Level 6 professional award-type descriptor. These skills are to be used to 'develop creative solutions to abstract problems' in EQF.

The NFQ Level 6 professional award-type descriptor is even more specific and requires ability to 'apply them to the generation of creative solutions to problems arising in professional activity' but also require 'evidence-informed solutions'.

The 'Competence' indicator for the NFQ Level 6 professional award-type descriptor is more detailed than the EQF 'Responsibility and Autonomy' descriptor for Level 5 because of more professional focus geared towards occupationally oriented qualifications.

EQF specifies the ability to 'exercise management and supervision', whereas the NFQ Level 6 professional award-type descriptor describes the need to be able to 'exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts including professional practice and learning' and to 'exercise initiative and independence in professional activity, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs and for decisions in work and learning contexts'.

In EQF, these abilities are to be deployed in 'contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change', and in the NFQ Level 6 professional award-type descriptor in 'in a variety of contexts including professional practice and learning' also subject to 'unpredictable change' as highlighted in 'Skill' descriptor.

The EQF requirement to be able to 'review and develop performance of self and others' is reflected in several statements within the NFQ Level 6 professional award-type descriptor: 'act effectively in team roles within multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups', and to 'exercise supervision in contexts of work or learning activities', and to 'lead a variety of occupational activities', and to 'contribute to the review and development of the performance of others' while 'evaluate and maintain professional knowledge and skill taking responsibility for own learning within a structured learning environment' and finally to 'provide learning support and guidance to learners in the professional context; assist others in identifying learning needs'.

Overall, the is a very strong correspondence between the NFQ Level 6 professional award-type descriptor and the EQF descriptor at these levels in the Frameworks.

Best fit outcome: NFQ Level 6 is a good match to EQF Level 5

EQF Level 6		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Responsibility and Autonomy descriptor**
Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles	Advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts Take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups
NFQ Level 7		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Competence descriptor**
Specialised knowledge across a variety of areas Recognition of limitations of current knowledge and familiarity with sources of new knowledge; integration of concepts across a variety of areas	Demonstrate specialised technical, creative or conceptual skills and tools across an area of study Exercise appropriate judgement in planning, design, technical and/or supervisory functions related to products, services, operations or processes	Utilise diagnostic and creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts Accept accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes; take significant or supervisory responsibility for the work of others in defined areas of work Take initiative to identify and address learning needs and interact effectively in a learning group Express an internalised, personal world view, manifesting solidarity with others

NFQ Level 7 professional award-type descriptor		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Competence descriptor**
Broad and up-to-date general knowledge and specialised knowledge of a variety of areas comprising a professional discipline and of the connections between these areas and with related disciplines Understanding of facts, concepts, rules, models, schools of thought, methods, technology; their development and limitations; and how they arise and are applied in current professional practice Knowledge of the context for professional practice (including regulatory, economic, scientific, technological, social and cultural aspects) and awareness of other disciplines likely to be encountered as a practitioner and member of the profession	Select and apply advanced skills to analyse and respond to unpredictable and complex problems arising in the profession and its reflective practice Prepare evidence-based conclusions that take due account of social, disciplinary and ethical insights Communicate information effectively, transfer one's knowledge and skills, and justify decisions, to specialists and non-specialists, including clients	Exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a wide variety of contexts including professional practice and study Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making and decisions in unpredictable work or study contexts Act effectively in team roles and take responsibility for managing individuals and groups Take initiative to identify and address learning needs; seek necessary guidance when working independently Express an internalised personal worldview (see Notes below) manifesting solidarity with others at all levels including the personal, professional, societal, and environmental

NFQ Level 7 analysis

The EQF requirement for 'advanced knowledge' is paralleled by the NFQ requirement at Level 7 for 'specialised knowledge'. EQF specifies a 'critical understanding of theories and principles', well matched by NFQ that refers to 'recognition of limitations of current knowledge and familiarity with sources of new knowledge' and to the 'integration of concepts'.

The 'Skill' outcomes for these Levels in the Frameworks are described as 'specialised'. These skills are required to 'solve complex and unpredictable problems' in EQF, and for 'planning, design, technical and/or supervisory functions' in the NFQ.

The 'Responsibility and Autonomy' component of the EQF descriptor refers to the need to take 'responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts'. In the NFQ this is reflected in the requirement to 'take significant or supervisory responsibility' and to deploy skills in 'a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts'.

There is a very clear correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these levels in the two Frameworks: this correspondence is not based on precise matching of the language used, but on the overall interpretation of the concepts reflected in the statements for 'Knowledge', 'Skill' and 'Competence'/ 'Responsibility and Autonomy' respectively.

NFQ Level 7 professional award-type descriptor analysis

In terms of 'Knowledge', the EQF at level 6 requires 'advanced knowledge' which is paralleled by 'broad and up-to-date general knowledge and specialised knowledge' in the NFQ Level 7 professional award-type descriptor.

The NFQ Level 7 professional award-type descriptor also introduces the notion of ' knowledge of the context for professional practice' (including regulatory, economic, scientific, technological, social and cultural aspects) and 'awareness of other disciplines likely to be encountered as a practitioner and member of the profession'. It is clear that NFQ PATD at Level 7 goes beyond the EQF requirement as it is more focused on occupationally oriented qualifications, which only strengthen a match between the level of knowledge described for EQF Level 6 and the NFQ Level 7 professional award-type descriptor.

Strong similarities are also evident in the 'Skill' outcomes for these levels, as both the EQF and the NFQ Level 7 professional award-type descriptor refer to ability to use 'advanced skills' to solve 'complex and unpredictable problems'.

The 'Responsibility and Autonomy' component of the EQF descriptor refers to the need to take 'responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts'.

In NFQ Level 7 professional award-type descriptor it is reflected in the ability to 'exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a wide variety of contexts including professional practice and study' and to 'manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making and decisions in unpredictable work or study contexts'.

There is a strong correspondence between the EQF descriptor and the NFQ Level 7 professional award-type descriptor at these levels.

Best fit outcome: NFQ Level 7 is a good match to EQF Level 6

EQF Level 6		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Responsibility and Autonomy descriptor**
Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles	Advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts Take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups
NFQ Level 8		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Competence descriptor**
An understanding of the theory, concepts and methods pertaining to a field (or fields) of learning. Detailed knowledge and understanding in one or more specialised areas, some of it at the current boundaries of the field(s)	Demonstrate mastery of a complex and specialised area of skills and tools; use and modify advanced skills and tools to conduct closely guided research, professional or advanced technical activity Exercise appropriate judgement in a number of complex planning, design, technical and/ or management functions related to products, services, operations or processes, including resourcing	Use advanced skills to conduct research, or advanced technical or professional activity, accepting accountability for all related decision making; transfer and apply diagnostic and creative skills in a range of contexts Act effectively under guidance in a peer relationship with qualified practitioners; lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups Learn to act in variable and unfamiliar learning contexts; learn to manage learning tasks independently, professionally and ethically Express a comprehensive, internalised, personal world view manifesting solidarity with others

NFQ Level 8 professional award-type descriptor		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Competence descriptor**
Broad and up-to-date general knowledge and specialised knowledge of a variety of areas comprising a professional discipline and of the connections between these areas and with related disciplines; to include knowledge about recent developments and trends in the professional discipline or its practice Critical understanding of facts, concepts, rules, models, schools of thought, methods, technology; their development and limitations; and how they arise and are applied in current professional practice Knowledge of the context for professional practice (including regulatory, economic, scientific, technological, social and cultural aspects) and of significant issues at the interfaces with related disciplines and professions	Select, modify and apply advanced skills to critically analyse, research (under close guidance) and formulate responses to unpredictable, complex and ill-defined problems arising in the profession and its reflective professional practice Prepare and analyse evidence-based conclusions that take due account of social, disciplinary and ethical insights Communicate advanced information, transfer one's knowledge and skills, and justify decisions, to specialists and non-specialists, including clients	Exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a wide variety of complex contexts including professional practice and study Manage complex and innovative technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making and decisions in unpredictable and unfamiliar work or study contexts, balancing responsibilities towards service-users and employer Act effectively in team roles and take responsibility for managing individuals and lead complex and heterogeneous groups Manage learning tasks independently, professionally and ethically; seek necessary guidance when working independently and provide guidance to peers Express a comprehensive internalised, personal and professional worldview, manifesting solidarity with others at all levels including the personal, professional, societal and environmental

NFQ Level 8 analysis

EQF descriptor for knowledge at Level 6 refers to 'advanced knowledge of a field' and 'a critical understanding of theories and principles'. Both of these concepts are reflected in the NFQ indicator for Level 8, which refer to 'detailed knowledge', some of it at the current boundaries of the field and to 'an understanding of the theory, concepts and methods pertaining to a field'.

The 'Skill' outcomes for these Levels in the Frameworks are described as 'advanced skills. Both Frameworks also highlight the need to 'demonstrate mastery'. The ability to deploy skills in challenging situations to solve 'complex and unpredictable problems' is required at these levels in EQF Level 6 descriptor and the NFQ Level 8 descriptor.

Under 'Competence', the role envisaged for the holder of a Level 8 NFQ award is characterised by 'advanced technical or professional activity'. This is closely paralleled by the EQF Level 6 'Responsibility and Autonomy' descriptor referring to 'managing complex technical or professional activities'. The leadership and managerial aspect of this role are specified in NFQ as 'accepting accountability for all related decision making' and in the requirement to 'lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups'. Similarly, EQF refers to 'taking responsibility for decision-making' and for 'managing the professional development of individuals and groups'.

The correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these levels is very strong.

NFQ Level 8 professional award-type descriptor analysis

The EQF 'Knowledge' descriptor at Level 6 requires 'advanced knowledge of a field' and 'a critical understanding of theories and principles'. Both of these concepts are reflected in the NFQ Level 8 professional award-type descriptor, which refer to 'broad and up-to-date general knowledge and specialised knowledge of a variety of areas comprising a professional discipline' and 'critical understanding of facts, concepts, rules, models, schools of thought, methods, technology; their development and limitations; and how they arise and are applied in current professional practice'. The NFQ Level 8 professional award-type 'Knowledge' indicator also specifically expects 'knowledge of the context for professional practice (including regulatory, economic, scientific, technological, social and cultural aspects) and of significant issues at the interfaces with related disciplines and professions autonomous approach from the learner', which exceeds the requirements of the EQF descriptor for this level.

In terms of 'Skills', the EQF at Level 6 requires 'advanced skills', and so is the NFQ Level 8 professional award-type descriptor. The ability to deploy skills in challenging situations to solve 'complex and unpredictable problems' is required at these levels in EQF descriptor and in the NFQ Level 8 professional award-type descriptor; augmented by ability to 'prepare and analyse evidence-based conclusions that take due account of social, disciplinary and ethical insights' in the NFQ Level 8 professional award-type descriptor.

Under 'Competence', the role envisaged for the holder of a level 8 NFQ award professional award at this level is characterised by 'managing complex and innovative technical or professional activities'. This is paralleled by the EQF Level 6 'Responsibility and Autonomy' outcome referring to 'managing complex technical or professional activities'. The leadership and managerial aspect of this role are specified in EQF as taking 'responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups'. Similarly, NFQ Level 8 professional award-type descriptor refers to taking 'responsibility for managing individuals and lead complex and heterogeneous groups'.

However, the NFQ PATD at Level 8 'Competence' indicator goes even further and requires ability to 'express a comprehensive internalised, personal and professional world-view, manifesting solidarity with others at all levels including the personal, professional, societal and environmental'.

The correspondence between the NFQ Level 8 professional award-type descriptor and the EQF descriptor at these levels is very strong, and in some aspects, it even goes beyond the demands in the EQF for this Level.

Best fit outcome: NFQ Level 8 is a good match to EQF Level 6

EQF Level 7		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Responsibility and Autonomy descriptor**
Highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking Critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields	Specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields	Manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches Take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams
NFQ Level 9		
A systematic understanding of knowledge, at, or informed by, the forefront of a field of learning A critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, generally informed by the forefront of a field of learning	Demonstrate a range of standard and specialised research or equivalent tools and techniques of enquiry Select from complex and advanced skills across a field of learning; develop new skills to a high level, including novel and emerging techniques	Act in a wide and often unpredictable variety of professional levels and ill-defined contexts Take significant responsibility for the work of individuals and groups; lead and initiate activity Learn to self-evaluate and take responsibility for continuing academic/professional development. Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and act to change them
NFQ Level 9 professional award-type descriptor		

Knowledge descriptor	Skills descriptor	Competence descriptor
Broad and up-to-date general knowledge and specialised knowledge of a variety of areas comprising a professional discipline and of the connections between these areas and related disciplines; to include knowledge about recent developments and trends in the professional discipline or its practice Comprehensive and critical evaluation of current developments and trends in the relevant professional or academic literature and as the basis for research or innovation and strategic change and leadership. Knowledge of the wider context for practice in the profession including critical awareness and anticipation of the fundamental issues for the profession and at the interfaces with other disciplines and professions	Select, modify and apply advanced skills, including research or innovation skills, to critically analyse, research independently and formulate responses to unpredictable, complex and ill-defined problems with many interacting factors, in order to develop new knowledge or procedures and integrate knowledge from other disciplines Prepare and evaluate evidence-based conclusions that take due account of social, disciplinary and ethical insights Communicate complex information effectively, transfer one's knowledge and skills, and justify recommendations and research findings, to specialists and non-specialists, including clients; influence and lead professional practice	Exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a wide variety of complex contexts, including professional practice and study, and transfer them to unfamiliar and emerging contexts. Manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches; take responsibility for decisions and contributing to professional knowledge and practice. Act effectively in team roles and take responsibility for managing individuals and lead complex and heterogeneous groups and for reviewing the strategic performance of teams. Evaluate learning needs of self and others and take responsibility for continuing academic/ professional development of same Scrutinise and reflect on social and professional norms and relationships and act to change them in the interests of professional standards, society or the wider environment.

NFQ Level 9 analysis

There are close parallels in the description of 'Knowledge' outcomes for NFQ Level 9 and EQF Level 7, both of which refer explicitly to knowledge 'at the forefront of a field of learning' and to the need for 'critical awareness' of issues.

Similar parallels are found in the outcomes described under 'Skill'. The NFQ descriptor refers to 'specialised research or equivalent tools and techniques of enquiry', which relates closely to the EQF requirement for 'specialised problem-solving skills required in research'. NFQ indicator for this level requires the holder of a Level 9 award to develop 'new skills', whereas the Level 7 EQF requires to develop 'new knowledge and procedures'.

Under 'Competence', both Frameworks highlight the ability to operate in 'unpredictable contexts'.

Further parallels are evident in the statements that refer to role. The holder of an NFQ Level 9 award should be able to 'take responsibility for the work of individuals and groups' and for 'continuing academic/professional development'; EQF refers to the need to 'take responsibility for reviewing the strategic performance of teams' and for 'contributing to professional knowledge and practice'.

There is clearly a significant correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these levels in the two Frameworks.

NFQ Level 9 professional award-type descriptor analysis

In terms of 'Knowledge' outcomes, the EQF Level 7 refers to knowledge 'at the forefront of knowledge in a field' and to the need for 'critical awareness' of issues, which is reflected in the NFQ Level 9 professional award-type descriptor which refers to 'broad and up-to-date general knowledge and specialised knowledge of a variety of areas comprising a professional discipline and of the connections between these areas and related disciplines; to include knowledge about recent developments and trends in the professional discipline or its practice, and also to the need for 'critical awareness' of issues.

In terms of 'Skills', the EQF at Level 7 requires 'specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation', augmented by ability to 'develop new knowledge'. This is paralleled by the NFQ Level 9 professional award-type descriptor which requires ability to 'develop new knowledge' and 'apply advanced skills, including research or innovation skills'.

Under 'Competence', the ability to operate in 'complex contexts' is referred to in both, the EQF Level 7 descriptor and the NFQ Level 9 professional award-type descriptor. The same applies for the ability to 'manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches'. Further parallels are evident in the statements that refer to role. The holder of the EQF Level 7 award should be able to 'take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams'. This is reflected in the NFQ Level 9 professional award-type descriptor which requires ability to 'take responsibility for managing individuals and lead complex and heterogeneous groups and for reviewing the strategic performance of teams'.

Overall, the correspondence between the EQF Level 7 descriptor and the NFQ Level 9 professional award-type descriptor at these levels is very strong.

Best fit outcome: NFQ Level 9 is a good match to EQF Level 7

EQF Level 8		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Responsibility and Autonomy descriptor**
Knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields	The most advanced and specialised skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in research and/or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice	Demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research
NFQ Level 10		
Knowledge descriptor	**Skills descriptor**	**Competence descriptor**
A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of a field of learning The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy review by peers	Demonstrate a significant range of the principal skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials which are associated with a field of learning; develop new skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials Respond to abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge	Exercise personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent contexts Communicate results of research and innovation to peers; engage in critical dialogue; lead and originate complex social processes Learn to critique the broader implications of applying knowledge to particular contexts Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and lead action to change them.

Analysis

The statements that describe the 'Knowledge' outcomes required at EQF Level 8 refer to 'knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study', matching the NFQ Level 10

description of 'knowledge which is at the forefront of a field of learning', augmented by the 'creation and interpretation of new knowledge'.

Under 'Skill', the NFQ refers to the 'principal skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials which are associated with a field of learning', whereas EQF refers to 'specialised skills and techniques'. In EQF these skills are required to service innovation: the NFQ requires the 'development of new skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials' and ability to 'respond to abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge'. The EQF descriptor expects a holder of a Level 8 EQF award to be able to 'solve critical problems in research and/or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice'.

The 'Competence' outcomes in both Frameworks refer to 'significant autonomy and personal responsibility or authority'. There are references in both Frameworks to the 'research context of work or study'. EQF requires the demonstration of 'innovation', paralleled in the NFQ requirement to 'lead and originate complex social processes' and to communicate 'results of research and innovation'

As with 'Skill' outcomes, the statements for 'Competence' in the NFQ descriptor and in the EQF descriptor use slightly different language to describe broadly comparable concepts.

There is a strong correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these levels in the two Frameworks.

Best fit outcome: NFQ Level 10 is a good match to EQF Level 8

Comparison of the Dublin Descriptors with the award-type descriptors including PATD in the Irish National

Framework of Qualifications

As outlined in the report, the Dublin Descriptors offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with awards that represent the end of each of a (Bologna) cycle or level, and are intended to facilitate comparisons between qualifications awarded at the end of each Bologna cycles.

The Irish award-descriptors are part of the NFQ that has as its underpinning vision the recognition of all learning. Therefore, the intended scope of the NFQ is broader than that of the QF-EHEA which is visible in direct comparison of NFQ award-descriptors with the Dublin Descriptors presented below.

Higher Certificate (NFQ Level 6) and the Dublin Descriptors – Higher Education Short Cycle

The Irish Higher Certificate is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment and access to additional education and training. The Higher Certificate at NFQ Level 6 (120 ECTS) is awarded following one or two years of study. Entry to this programme is generally for secondary school graduates and those with equivalent qualifications. Holders of the Higher Certificate may progress to a programme on the next level on the Irish NFQ.

Higher Certificate - NFQ Level 6	
Knowledge breath	Specialised knowledge of a broad area
Knowledge kind	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant underpinning theory
Know-How and Skill range	Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools
Know-How and Skill selectivity	Formulate responses to well-defined abstract problems
Comptence context	Act in a range of varied and specific contexts involving creative and non-routine activities; transfer and apply theoretical concepts and/ or technical or creative skills to a range of contexts

Dublin descriptors - Higher Education Short Cycle	
Knowledge and understanding	Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and that provides an underpinning for a field of vocational activity or broader activities and studies
Applying knowledge and understanding	Can apply their knowledge and understanding in an occupational context
Making judgements	Have the ability to formulate responses to well-defined abstract and concrete problems
Communication	Can communicate about their activities and understanding with colleagues
Learning skills	Have the learning skills to undertake further studies within structured learning environments while demonstrating some elements of autonomy

Comptence role	Exercise substantial personal autonomy and often take responsiblity for the work of others and/or for the allocation of resources; form, and function within, multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups
Comptence learning -to- learn	Learn to evaluate own learning and identify needs within a structured learning environment; assist others in identifying learning needs
Comptence insight	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others

The Dublin Descriptor for the HE Short Cycle requires ' demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general s econdary education, and that provides an underpinning for a field of vocational activity or broader activities and studies' The NFQ award- type descriptor for Higher Certificates requires 'specialised knowledge of a bread area' underpinned by 'some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking'. The application of knowledge and understanding in the Dublin Descriptor takes note of ability to 'apply knowledge and understanding in an occupational context'. The Irish award-type descriptor encompasses more and refers to ability to 'act in a range of varied and specific contexts involving creative and non-routine activities; transfer and apply theoretical concepts and/ or technical or creative skills to a range of contexts'.

The 'Making judgements' strand in the Dublin Descriptor is remarkably similar to the Irish Higher Certificates descriptor referring to the ability to 'formulate responses to well-defined abstract problems'. Both descriptors emphasise the importance of communications with others. In terms of learning skills, both descriptors refer to learning skills 'within structured learning environments' and the ability to demonstrate 'some elements of autonomy'. It is evident that the intended scope of the learning outcomes in the Irish descriptor for this level is broader than that of the Bologna Short Cycle descriptor, yet still very well matched, which supports the 2006 analysis outcome and reconfirms that the Irish Higher Certificate is indeed compatible with the Bologna Short Cycle.

Ordinary Bachelor Degree (NFQ Level 7) and the Dublin Descriptors – First Cycle

The Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degree is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment and access to additional education and training. The Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degree at NFQ Level 7 is normally awarded after completion of a programme of three years' duration (180 ECTS). Entry to this programme is typically for school leavers and those with equivalent qualifications. In addition, there are several programmes of one year's duration leading to the Ordinary Bachelor Degree for holders of the Higher Certificate.

The Ordinary Bachelor Degree does not typically provide access to post-graduate programmes but to a programme on the next level on the Irish NFQ.

Ordinary Bachelor Degree - NFQ Level 7	
Knowledge breath	Specialised knowledge across a variety of areas
Knowledge kind	Recognition of limitations of current knowledge and familiarity with sources of new knowledge; integration of concepts across a variety of areas
Know-How and Skill range	Demonstrate specialised technical, creative or conceptual skills and tools across an area of study
Know-How and Skill selectivity	Exercise appropriate judgement in planning, design, technical and/ or supervisory functions related to products, services, operations or processes
Competence context	Utilise diagnostic and creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts

Dublin descriptors - 1st Cycle	
Knowledge and understanding	Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study
Applying knowledge and understanding	Can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study
Making judgements	Have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues
Communication	Can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and nonspecialist audiences
Learning skills	Have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy

Competence role	Accept accountability for determining and achieving personal and/ or group outcomes; take significant or supervisory responsibility for the work of others in defined areas of work
Competence learning -to-learn	Take initiative to identify and address learning needs and interact effectively in a learning group
Competence insight	Express an internalised, personal world view, manifesting solidarity with others

The application of knowledge and understanding for the Bologna First Cycle requires having 'demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education' and 'includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study'. Whereas the Irish award-type descriptor for the Ordinary Bachelor Degree emphasis importance of having 'Specialised knowledge across a variety of areas' and the 'Recognition of limitations of current knowledge and familiarity with sources of new knowledge' including 'integration of concepts'.

The 'Making judgements' outcomes for the Bologna First cycle are described as having the ability 'to gather and interpret relevant data to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues'. The Irish descriptor requires to 'demonstrate specialised technical, creative or conceptual skills ', 'utilise diagnostic and creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts' and 'exercise appropriate judgement'. In terms of communications skills, holders of the Bologna First Cycle award are required to demonstrate ability to 'communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences'. The Irish descriptor does not specifically mention audiences. Instead it put more emphasis on taking 'significant or supervisory responsibility' in 'a wide variety of contexts'. The learning skills strand emphasises that autonomy of learning required by the Bologna First Cycle award holder with a view to further study, while the sub-strand in the Irish descriptor requires focussing on the initiative a learner must take to' identify and address learning needs' and also to 'interact effectively in a group learning'.

There is a clear correspondence between the Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degree descriptor and the Dublin Descriptor for this cycle. This correspondence is not based on precise matching of the language used, but on the overall interpretation of the concepts reflected in the statements in both the Dublin Descriptor for the Bologna First Cycle and the Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degree descriptor. The analysis indicates that the Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degree is compatible with the Bologna First Cycle descriptor even if the holders of Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degrees do not generally immediately access programmes leading to Second Cycle awards.

It is noteworthy that Ireland has two sub-levels within the First Cycle: the minimum attainment, represented by the Ordinary Bachelor Degree and a higher attainment with more advanced learning outcomes, represented by the Honours Bachelor Degree. The distinction between the Ordinary and Honours Bachelor Degree has a long history in Ireland and is intended to serve the interests and needs of learners.

Honours Bachelor Degree (NFQ Level 8) and the Dublin Descriptors – First Cycle

The Irish Honours Bachelor Degree at NFQ Level 8 a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment and access to additional education and training.

The Irish Honours Bachelor Degree (180-240 ECTS) is awarded after three to four years of study and offers progression to post-graduate study. Entry to a programme leading to an Honours Bachelor Degree is typically for high- achieving school leavers or holders of equivalent qualifications. In addition, there are typically programmes of one-year duration leading to Honours Bachelor Degrees for holders of Ordinary Bachelor Degrees.

Honours Bachelor Degree - NFQ Level 8	
Knowledge breath	An understanding of the theory, concepts and methods pertaining to a field (or fields) of learning
Knowledge kind	Detailed knowledge and understanding in one or more specialised areas, some of it at the current boundaries of the field(s)
Know-How and Skill range	Demonstrate mastery of a complex and specialised area of skills and tools; use and modify advanced skills and tools to conduct closely guided research, professional or advanced technical activity

Dublin descriptors - 1st Cycle	
Knowledge and understanding	Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study
Applying knowledge and understanding	Can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study
Making judgements	Have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues

Know-How and Skill selectivity	Exercise appropriate judgement in a number of complex planning, design, technical and/ or management functions related to products, services, operations or processes, including resourcing
Competence context	Use advanced skills to conduct research, or advanced technical or professional activity, accepting accountability for all related decision making; transfer and apply diagnostic and creative skills in a range of contexts
Competence role	Act effectively under guidance in a peer relationship with qualified practitioners; lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups
Competence learning -to-learn	Learn to act in variable and unfamiliar learning contexts; learn to manage learning tasks independently, professionally and ethically
Competence insight	Express a comprehensive, internalised, personal world view manifesting solidarity with others

Communication	Can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and nonspecialist audiences
Learning skills	Have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy

In terms of application of knowledge and understanding the Dublin Descriptor requires 'demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary Education' and can 'apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study', which is generally reflected in the Irish Honours Bachelor Degree descriptor, augmented by 'demonstrated mastery of a complex and specialised area of skills and tools'. Evidently, application

of knowledge in the Honours Bachelor Degree descriptor speaks of a range of contexts for the exercise of professional accountability. This appears to go somewhat beyond that specified for the Bologna First Cycle descriptor.

The 'Making judgements' outcomes for the Bologna First Cycle are described as having the ability 'to gather and interpret relevant data to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues'. The judgments required by the holders of the Honours Bachelor Degree awards speaks about exercising 'appropriate judgement in a number of complex planning, design, technical and/or management functions related to products, services, operations or processes, including resourcing' and explicitly mentions ability to 'express a comprehensive, internalised, personal world view'.

In terms of communications skills, holders of the Bologna First Cycle awards are required to demonstrate ability to 'communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences'. The Honours Bachelor Competence role calls on the learner to demonstrate ability 'to lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups', a function that calls for high levels of communications skills, with the leadership and managerial aspect of this role as specified in NFQ descriptor for this level – 'accepting accountability for all related decision making'.

The learning skills strand emphasises autonomy of learning required by the Bologna First Cycle award holder with a view to further study. Whereas the learning to learn sub-strand of the Honours Bachelor Degree descriptor calls on the learner to 'manage learning tasks independently professionally and ethically', clearly a step up from the high degree of autonomy specified in the First Cycle descriptor.

The comparison of outcomes in the First Cycle Dublin Descriptor and the Honours Bachelor Degree descriptor supports the 2006 conclusion and reconfirms that the Irish Honours Bachelor Degree is a first cycle qualification, although in some respects the learning outcomes go beyond those required for Bologna First Cycle qualification.

Higher Diploma (NFQ Level 8) and the Dublin Descriptors – First Cycle

The Irish Higher Diploma at NFQ Level 8 a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment and access to additional education and training.

The Irish Higher Diploma (60 ECTS) is normally awarded following one year of study. Entry to a programme leading to a Higher Diploma is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees but can also be for holders of Ordinary Bachelor Degrees. It is of note that the Higher Diploma is typically in a different field of learning than the initial award.

Higher Diploma - NFQ Level 8	
Knowledge breath	An understanding of the theory, concepts and methods pertaining to a field (or fields) of learning
Knowledge kind	Detailed knowledge and understanding in one or more specialised areas, some of it at the current boundaries of the field(s)
Know-How and Skill range	Demonstrate mastery of a complex and specialised area of skills and tools; use and modify advanced skills and tools to conduct closely guided research, professional or advanced technical activity
Know-How and Skill selectivity	Exercise appropriate judgement in a number of complex planning, design, technical and/or management functions related to products, services, operations or processes, including resourcing

Dublin descriptors - 1st Cycle	
Knowledge and understanding	Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study
Applying knowledge and understanding	Can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study
Making judgements	Have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues
Communication	Can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and nonspecialist audiences

Competence context	Use advanced skills to conduct research, or advanced technical or professional activity, accepting accountability for all related decision making; transfer and apply diagnostic and creative skills in a range of contexts
Competence role	Act effectively under guidance in a peer relationship with qualified practitioners; lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups
Competence learning -to- learn	Learn to act in variable and unfamiliar learning contexts; learn to manage learning tasks independently, professionally and ethically
Competence insight	Express a comprehensive, internalised, personal world view manifesting solidarity with others

Learning skills	Have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy

The Dublin Descriptor for the Bologna First Cycle requires 'demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education' and can 'apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study', which is largely reflected in the Irish Higher Diploma descriptor, augmented by 'demonstrated mastery of a complex and specialised area of skills and tools'.

The 'Making judgements' outcomes for the Bologna First Cycle are described as having the ability 'to gather and interpret relevant data to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues'. The judgments required by the holders of the Irish Higher Diploma awards speak of exercising 'appropriate judgement in a number of complex planning, design, technical and/or management functions related to products, services, operations or processes, including resourcing', while explicitly mentioning ability to 'express a comprehensive, internalised, personal world view'.

In terms of communications skills, holders of the Bologna First Cycle awards are required to demonstrate ability to 'communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences'. The Irish Higher Diploma role calls on the learner to demonstrate ability 'to lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups', a function that calls for high levels of communications skills, with the leadership and managerial aspect of this role as specified in NFQ descriptor for this level – 'accepting accountability for all related decision making'. The learning skills strand emphasises autonomy of learning required by the Bologna First Cycle award holder with a view to further study. Whereas the learning to learn sub-strand of the Irish Higher Diploma descriptor calls on the learner to 'manage learning tasks independently professionally and ethically' which is a step up from the high degree of autonomy specified in the First Cycle descriptor.

The comparison of outcomes in the First Cycle Dublin Descriptor and the Irish Higher Diploma descriptor supports the 2006 conclusion and reconfirms that the Irish Higher Diploma is a qualification at the same level as completion of the Bologna First Cycle, and is a qualification typically attained in a different field of learning than an initial first cycle award.

Masters Degree (NFQ Level 9) and the Dublin Descriptors – Second Cycle

The Irish Masters Degree at NFQ Level 9 is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment and access to additional education and training.

There are two types of Masters Degree in Ireland: taught Masters Degrees and research Masters Degrees. Entry to a programme leading to a taught Masters degree (60-120 ECTS) is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees. Also, in some cases, entry to such programmes can be permitted for those with Ordinary Bachelor Degrees or equivalent who have some relevant work experience. Research Masters Degree programmes are typically of two years' duration (120ECTS) though not all such programmes are credit rated. Entry to a programme leading to a research Masters Degree is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees, typically with a high classification attained first or second-class honours.

Masters Degree - NFQ Level 9	
Knowledge breath	A systematic understanding of knowledge, at, or informed by, the forefront of a field of learning
Knowledge kind	A critical awareness of current problems and/ or new insights, generally informed by the forefront of a field of learning
Know-How and Skill range	Demonstrate a range of standard and specialised research or equivalent tools and techniques of enquiry
Know-How and Skill selectivity	Select from complex and advanced skills across a field of learning; develop new skills to a high level, including novel and emerging techniques

Dublin descriptors - 2nd Cycle	
Knowledge and understanding	Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with first cycle, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research context
Applying knowledge and understanding	Can apply their knowledge and understanding, and problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study
Making judgements	Have the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements
Communication	Can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously

Competence context	Act in a wide and often unpredictable variety of professional levels and ill defined contexts
Competence role	Take significant responsibility for the work of individuals and groups; lead and initiate activity
Competence learning -to- learn	Learn to self-evaluate and take responsibility for continuing academic/ professional development
Competence insight	Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and act to change them

Learning skills	Have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous

The Dublin Descriptor for the Bologna Second Cycle requires 'demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with first cycle, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research context', matching the Irish descriptor that affirms the importance of the concept 'forefront of the field of learning in masters" knowledge and speaks of 'critical awareness' and of 'new insights'.

Further parallels are evident in the statements that refer to the application of knowledge and understanding. The Dublin Descriptor speaks of 'new or unfamiliar environments', whereas the Irish descriptor refers to 'a wide and often unpredictable variety of professional levels and ill-defined contexts'.

In terms of communications skills, holders of the Bologna Second Cycle awards are required to demonstrate ability to 'communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously' while the Irish Masters Degree descriptor in the competence role sub-strand requires taking 'significant responsibility for the work of individuals and groups; speaks of leading and initiating activity and requires to 'scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and act to change them', a function that calls for high levels of professional communications skills.

There are references in both Frameworks to the learning skills. The Dublin Descriptor requires having 'the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous', which is reflected in the Irish Masters Degree descriptor that speaks of ability to 'learn to self-evaluate and take responsibility for continuing academic/ professional development'.

The comparison of outcomes in the Second Cycle Dublin Descriptor and the Irish descriptor for this level supports the 2006 conclusion and reconfirms that the Irish Masters Degree is the Bologna Second Cycle qualification.

Post-Graduate Diploma (NFQ Level 9) and the Dublin Descriptors – Second Cycle

The Irish Post-Graduate Diploma at NFQ Level 9 is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment and access to additional education and training.

The Irish Post-Graduate Diploma is normally awarded following completion of a programme of one year's duration (60 ECTS). Entry to a programme leading to a Post-Graduate Diploma is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees but can also be for holders of Ordinary Bachelor Degrees.

The Dublin Descriptor outcomes for the Bologna Second Cycle requires 'demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with first cycle, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research context', matching the Irish Post-Graduate Diploma descriptor. Further parallels are evident in the statements that refer to the application of knowledge and understanding. The Dublin Descriptor speaks about 'new or unfamiliar environments', whereas the Irish descriptor refers to 'a wide and often unpredictable variety of professional levels and ill-defined contexts'.

Post-Graduate Diploma - NFQ Level 9	
Knowledge breath	A systematic understanding of knowledge, at, or informed by, the forefront of a field of learning
Knowledge kind	A critical awareness of current problems and/ or new insights, generally informed by the forefront of a field of learning
Know-How and Skill range	Demonstrate a range of standard and specialised research or equivalent tools and techniques of enquiry
Know-How and Skill selectivity	Select from complex and advanced skills across a field of learning; develop new skills to a high level, including novel and emerging techniques

Dublin descriptors - 2nd Cycle	
Knowledge and understanding	Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with first cycle, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research context
Applying knowledge and understanding	Can apply their knowledge and understanding, and problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study
Making judgements	Have the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements
Communication	Can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously

Competence context	Act in a wide and often unpredictable variety of professional levels and ill defined contexts
Competence role	Take significant responsibility for the work of individuals and groups; lead and initiate activity
Competence learning -to- learn	Learn to self-evaluate and take responsibility for continuing academic/ professional development
Competence insight	Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and act to change them

Learning skills	Have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.

In terms of communications skills, holders of the Bologna Second Cycle awards are required to demonstrate ability to 'communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously'. While, the Irish Post-Graduate Diploma descriptor speaks of taking 'significant responsibility for the work of individuals and groups and speaks of leading and initiating activity and also requires to 'scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and act to change them', a function that imply high levels of professional communications skills.

Both Frameworks make references to specific learning skills at this level. The Dublin Descriptor requires having 'the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous', while the Irish Post-Graduate Diploma descriptor requires ability to 'learn to self-evaluate and take responsibility for continuing academic/ professional Development'.

The comparison of outcomes in the Second Cycle Dublin Descriptor and the Irish descriptor for this level supports the 2006 conclusion and reconfirms that the Irish Post-Graduate Diploma is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna Second Cycle.

Doctoral Degree (NFQ Level 10) and the Dublin Descriptors – Third Cycle

The Irish Doctoral Degree at NFQ Level 10 is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment and access to additional education and training.

Irish Doctoral programmes are generally not credit rated. Entry to a programme leading to a Doctoral Degree is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees. The general model is that a holder of an Honours Bachelor Degree with a high classification enters initially onto a Masters research programme, and transfers on to a Doctoral programme after one year on the Masters research programme. In total, the number of years in the programme would generally be at least three. There is also access to research Doctoral Degrees for holders of Masters Degrees, whether taught Masters or research Masters.

Doctoral Degree - NFQ Level 10	
Knowledge breath	A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of a field of learning
Knowledge kind	The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy review by peers
Know-How and Skill range	Demonstrate a significant range of the principal skills, techniques, tools, practices and/ or materials which are associated with a field of learning; develop new skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials
Know-How and Skill selectivity	Respond to abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge
Competence context	Exercise personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent contexts

Dublin descriptors - 3rd Cycle	
Knowledge and understanding	Have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field
Applying knowledge and understanding	Have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity. Have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication
Making judgements	Are capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas
Communication	Can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise
Learning skills	Can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge based society

Competence role	Communicate results of research and innovation to peers; engage in critical dialogue; lead and originate complex social processes
Competence learning -to- learn	Learn to critique the broader implications of applying knowledge to particular contexts
Competence insight	Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and lead action to change them

The Dublin Descriptor for the Bologna Third Cycle refers to the 'systematic understanding' and 'mastery of a field'; similar language is also found in the knowledge – breadth sub-strand of the Irish descriptor. The Dublin Descriptor requirement for 'extending the frontiers of knowledge through original research' is paralleled by the NFQ descriptor requirement at Level 10 for 'the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research'. The Bologna Third Cycle descriptor also requires that the learner has demonstrated the ability to 'conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity'. The Irish Doctoral Degree descriptor has echoes of this in the skills strand that speaks of 'developing new skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials'. It appears that the Irish descriptor is aiming for a greater degree of generality whereas the Dublin Descriptor has a more traditional academic doctoral degree in mind.

The strand of judgment in the Bologna Third Cycle focusses on the 'critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new ideas'. The Irish descriptor is more precise as it requires responding to 'abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge', though entirely compatible with the doctoral competence requirements.

In terms of communication skills, the Irish Framework makes explicit, within the sub-strand of competence – role, the communicative outcomes of the qualification. Having said that, the content of the sub- strand does not match up precisely with that of the Dublin Descriptor. The Irish descriptor emphasises communication with peers, while the Dublin Descriptor also refers to the larger scholarly community and society in general. However, the capacity and responsibility to communicate with society in general is implicit in the requirement of competence – insight in the Irish descriptor to not only 'scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships', but also to 'lead action to change them'.

In terms of learning skills, the Dublin Descriptor for the Third Cycle expects the learner 'to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge-based society'. The Irish Doctoral descriptor requires 'learn to critique the broader implications of applying knowledge to particular contexts'. The Third Cycle Dublin Descriptor and the Irish Doctoral Degree descriptor are broadly similar in content, though the Irish descriptor appears somewhat broader in intention. Both focus on the creation of new knowledge and allude to the broader obligations such a function brings with it.

The comparison of outcomes in the Third Cycle Dublin Descriptor and the Irish descriptor for this level supports the 2006 conclusion and reconfirms that the Irish Doctoral Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna Third Cycle.

Professional award-type descriptor at NFQ Level 6 – and Dublin Descriptors – HE Short Cycle

Professional award-type descriptor at NFQ Level 6			Dublin descriptors - Higher Education Short Cycle	
Knowledge – Breadth and Kind	Knowledge scope and coherence	Broad current general knowledge and an integrated body of specialised knowledge required to support a craft or an occupational discipline and knowledge of the connections with related disciplines	Knowledge and understanding	Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and that provides an underpinning for a field of vocational activity or broader activities and studies
		Specialised knowledge here involves significant underpinning theory and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	Applying knowledge and understanding	Can apply their knowledge and understanding in an occupational context
	Knowledge structure	Practical understanding of facts, concepts, rules, regulations, abstract models, methods, materials, tools, devices, technologies; their development and limitations; and how they are applied in current occupational activity	Making judgements	Have the ability to formulate responses to well-defined abstract and concrete problems
	Knowledge of issues	Knowledge of Knowledge of the context for professional activity (familiarity with the community of practice and with safety, employment, technological and regulatory perspectives and with relevant economic, social and environmental issues) and awareness of other disciplines likely to be encountered as a member of the community of practice	Communication	Can communicate about their activities and understanding with colleagues

Skill and know- how – range and selectivity	Use cognitive and practical skills (analytical and synthetic) to solve problems	Select from a comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools and apply them to the generation of creative solutions to problems arising in professional activity
	Draw insightful conclusions	Plan and develop investigative strategies and evaluate information to determine creative, evidence-informed solutions to predictable and unpredictable problems and respond to unpredictable change arising in professional activity that take due account of social, field- specific and ethical insights
	Communicate and influence	Communicate complex oral and written information effectively in familiar and unfamiliar contexts; facilitate the transfer of knowledge and skills within the professional community of practice; justify decisions, to specialists and non-specialists, including clients

Learning skills	Have the learning skills to undertake further studies within structured learning environments while demonstrating some elements of autonomy

Competence – context, role, learning-to-learn and insight	Exercising autonomy and judgement	Exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts including professional practice and learning
	Exercising responsibility	Exercise initiative and independence in professional activity, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs and for decisions in work and learning contexts
	Working with others	Act effectively in team roles within multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups
		Exercise supervision in contexts of work or learning activities
		Lead a variety of occupational activities
		Contribute to the review and development of the performance of others
		Take some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or learning activities
	Learning and teaching	Evaluate and maintain professional knowledge and skill taking responsibility for own learning within a structured learning environment
		Provide learning support and guidance to learners in the professional context; assist others in identifying learning needs
		Seek guidance as appropriate when working independently
	Attitudes	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others at the personal, occupational, societal, and environmental levels

Analysis

'Knowledge and understanding' outcomes in the Dublin Descriptor for the HE Short Cycle requires 'demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and that provides an underpinning for a field of vocational activity or broader activities and studies'. The NFQ Level 6 professional award-type descriptor refers to 'broad current general knowledge' and to 'specialised knowledge', augmented by 'practical understanding of facts, concepts, rules, regulations, abstract models, methods, materials, tools, devices, technologies; their development and limitations; and how they are applied in current occupational activity', paralleled in the application of knowledge and understanding in the Dublin Descriptor that takes note of ability to 'apply knowledge and understanding in an occupational context'. However ,it is clear that the NFQ Level 6 professional award-type descriptor encompasses more and in the sub-strand of 'knowledge of issues', it highlights 'knowledge of knowledge of the context for professional activity which includes familiarity with the community of practice and with safety, employment, technological and regulatory perspectives and with relevant economic, social and environmental issues, and awareness of other disciplines likely to be encountered as a member of the community of practice'. In addition, the NFQ Level 6 professional award-type descriptor requires 'comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools' and ability to 'apply them to the generation of creative solutions to problems arising in professional activity' but also require 'evidence-informed solutions'.

The 'Making judgements' strand in the Dublin Descriptor refers to ability to ' formulate responses to well-defined abstract and concrete problems'. The NFQ Level 6 professional award-type descriptor is far more specific requires to 'plan and develop investigative strategies and evaluate information to determine creative, evidence-informed solutions to predictable and unpredictable problems and respond to unpredictable change arising in professional activity' alongside exercising 'autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts including professional practice and learning'.

Both descriptors emphasise importance of communications with others. In terms of learning skills both descriptors refer to learning skills 'within structured learning environments' and ability to demonstrate some elements of autonomy. However, the NFQ Level 6 professional award-type descriptor is even more specific and requires ability to 'evaluate and maintain professional knowledge and skill taking responsibility for own learning'.

It is evident that the intended scope of the learning outcomes in the NFQ Level 6 professional award-type descriptor is broader than that of the Bologna Short Cycle descriptor, which supports the contention that the NFQ Level 6 professional award-type descriptor is compatible with the Bologna Short Cycle.

Professional award-type descriptor at NFQ Level 7 and Professional award-type descriptor at NFQ Level 7

Professional award-type descriptor at NFQ Level 7			Dublin descriptors - 1st Cycle	
Knowledge – Breadth and Kind	Knowledge scope and coherence	Broad and up-to-date general knowledge and specialised knowledge of a variety of areas comprising a professional discipline and of the connections between these areas and with related disciplines	Knowledge and understanding	Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study
	Knowledge structure	Understanding of facts, concepts, rules, models, schools of thought, method s, technology; their development and limitations; and how they arise and are applied in current professional practice	Applying knowledge and understanding	Can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study
	Knowledge of issues	Knowledge of the context for professional practice (including regulatory, economic, scientific, technological, social and cultural aspects) and awareness of other disciplines likely to be encountered as a practitioner and member of the profession	Making judgements	Have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues

Skill and know- how – range and selectivity	Use cognitive and practical skills (analytical and synthetic) to solve problems	Select and apply advanced skills to analyse and respond to unpredictable and complex problems arising in the profession and its reflective practice
	Draw insightful conclusions	Prepare evidence-based conclusions that take due account of social, disciplinary and ethical insights
	Communicate and influence	Communicate information effectively, transfer one's knowledge and skills, and justify decisions, to specialists and non-specialists, including clients
Competence – context, role, learning-to-learn and insight	Exercising autonomy and judgement	Exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a wide variety of contexts including professional practice and study
	Exercising responsibility	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making and decisions in unpredictable work or study contexts
	Working with others	Act effectively in team roles and take responsibility for managing individuals and groups
	Learning and teaching	Take initiative to identify and address learning needs; seek necessary guidance when working independently
	Attitudes	Express an internalised personal world-view, manifesting solidarity with others at all levels including the personal, professional, societal, and environmental

Communication	Can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and nonspecialist audiences
Learning skills	Have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy

Analysis

In terms of 'knowledge and understanding', the Dublin Descriptor requires 'demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary Education' and can 'apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study'. Here, the NFQ Level 7 professional award-type descriptor goes further and requires 'broad and up-to-date general knowledge and specialised knowledge of a variety of areas comprising a professional discipline and of the connections between these areas and with related disciplines' and 'knowledge of the context for professional practice' and 'understanding of facts, concepts, rules, models, schools of thought, methods, technology; their development and limitations; and how they arise and are applied in current professional practice'.

Application of knowledge and understanding the Dublin Descriptor speaks about ability to apply 'knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach' and 'have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study'. Whereas the NFQ Level 7 professional award-type descriptor requires ability to 'select and apply advanced skills to analyse and respond to unpredictable and complex problems arising in the profession and its reflective practice'.

The 'Making judgements' outcomes for the Bologna First Cycle are described as having the ability 'to gather and interpret relevant data to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues', which is paralleled by ability to 'exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a wide variety of contexts including professional practice and study' while expressing 'an internalised personal world-view, manifesting solidarity with others at all levels including the personal, professional, societal, and environmental' in the NFQ Level 7 professional award-type descriptor.

In terms of communications skills, holders of the Bologna First Cycle awards are required to demonstrate ability to 'communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences'. The NFQ Level 7 professional award-type descriptor echoed those requirements as it speaks about ability to ''communicate information effectively, transfer one's knowledge and skills, and justify decisions, to specialists and non-specialists'.

The learning skills strand emphasises autonomy of learning required by the Bologna First Cycle award holder with a view to further study. Whereas the learning to learn sub-strand of the NFQ Level 7 professional award-type descriptor requires ability to 'take initiative to identify and address learning needs; seek necessary guidance when working independently' which corresponds with the Dublin Descriptor requirements.

There is a strong correspondence between the Irish NFQ Level 7 professional award-type descriptor and the Dublin Descriptor for this cycle.

Professional award-type descriptor at NFQ Level 8 and Dublin Descriptors - 1st Cycle

Professional award-type descriptor at NFQ Level 8			Dublin descriptors - 1st Cycle	
Knowledge – Breadth and Kind	Knowledge scope and coherence	Broad and up-to-date general knowledge and specialised knowledge of a variety of areas comprising a professional discipline and of the connections between these areas and with related disciplines; to include knowledge about recent developments and trends in the professional discipline or its practice	Knowledge and understanding	Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study
	Knowledge structure	Critical understanding of facts, concepts, rules, models, schools of thought, methods, technology; their development and limitations; and how they arise and are applied in current professional practice	Applying knowledge and understanding	Can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study
	Knowledge of issues	Knowledge of the context for professional practice (including regulatory, economic, scientific, technological, social and cultural aspects) and of significant issues at the interfaces with related disciplines and professions	Making judgements	Have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues

Skill and know- how – range and selectivity	Use cognitive and practical skills (analytical and synthetic) to solve problems	Select, modify and apply advanced skills to critically analyse, research (under close guidance) and formulate responses to unpredictable, complex and ill-defined problems arising in the profession and its reflective professional practice
	Draw insightful conclusions	Prepare and analyse evidence-based conclusions that take due account of social, disciplinary and ethical insights
	Communicate and influence	Communicate advanced information, transfer one's knowledge and skills, and justify decisions, to specialists and non-specialists, including clients

Communication	Can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and nonspecialist audiences
Learning skills	Have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy

Competence – context, role, learning-to-learn and insight	Exercising autonomy and judgement	Exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a wide variety of complex contexts including professional practice and study
	Exercising responsibility	Manage complex and innovative technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making and decisions in unpredictable and unfamiliar work or study contexts, balancing responsibilities towards service-users and employer
	Working with others	Act effectively in team roles and take responsibility for managing individuals and lead complex and heterogeneous groups
	Learning and teaching	Manage learning tasks independently, professionally and ethically; seek necessary guidance when working independently and provide guidance to peers
	Attitudes	Express a comprehensive internalised, personal and professional world-view, manifesting solidarity with others at all levels including the personal, professional, societal and environmental

Analysis

The Dublin Descriptor for the Bologna First Cycle refers to having 'demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study'. The NFQ Level 8 professional award-type descriptor encompasses munch more as it refers to 'broad and up-to-date general knowledge and specialised knowledge of a variety of areas comprising a professional discipline and of the connections between these areas and with related disciplines; to include knowledge about recent developments and trends in the professional discipline or its practice', augmented by 'critical understanding of facts, concepts, rules, models, schools of thought, methods, technology; their development and limitations; and how they arise and are applied in current professional practice'.

In terms of application of knowledge and understanding the Dublin Descriptor requires 'a professional approach' and speaks about having 'competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study'. The NFQ Level 8 professional award-type descriptor goes much further and requires not only 'knowledge of the context for professional practice' but also ability to 'select, modify and apply advanced skills to critically analyse, research (under close guidance) and formulate responses to unpredictable, complex and ill-defined problems arising in the profession and its reflective professional practice'.

The 'Making judgements' outcomes for the Bologna First Cycle are described as having the ability 'to gather and interpret relevant data to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues'. The judgments required by the holders of the NFQ Level 8 professional award refers to ability to 'prepare and analyse evidence-based conclusions that take due account of social, disciplinary and ethical insights' alongside exercising 'autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a wide variety of complex contexts including professional practice and study'.

In terms of communications skills, holders of the Bologna First Cycle awards are required to demonstrate ability to 'communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences'. The NFQ Level 8 professional award-type descriptor requires ability to 'communicate advanced information, transfer one's knowledge and skills, and justify decisions, to specialists and non-specialists, including clients' and 'act effectively in team roles and take responsibility for managing individuals and lead complex and heterogeneous groups' – evidently a step up from the requirements specified in the First Cycle descriptor.

There is a strong correspondence between the Irish NFQ Level 8 professional award-type descriptor and the Bologna First Cycle, although in some respects the learning outcomes of the NFQ Level 8 professional award-type descriptor go beyond those required for Bologna First Cycle qualification.

Professional award-type descriptor at NFQ Level 9 – Dublin Descriptors – 2nd Cycle

Professional award-type descriptor at NFQ Level 9			Dublin descriptors - 2nd Cycle	
Knowledge – Breadth and Kind	Knowledge scope and coherence	Broad and up-to-date general knowledge and specialised knowledge of a variety of areas comprising a professional discipline and of the connections between these areas and related disciplines; to include knowledge about recent developments and trends in the professional discipline or its practice	Knowledge and understanding	Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with first cycle, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research context
	Knowledge structure	Comprehensive and critical evaluation of current developments and trends in the relevant professional or academic literature and as the basis for research or innovation and strategic change and leadership	Applying knowledge and understanding	Can apply their knowledge and understanding, and problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study
	Knowledge of issues	Knowledge of the wider context for practice in the profession including critical awareness and anticipation of the fundamental issues for the profession and at the interfaces with other disciplines and professions	Making judgements	Have the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements

Skill and know- how – range and selectivity	Use cognitive and practical skills (analytical and synthetic) to solve problems	Select, modify and apply advanced skills, including research or innovation skills, to critically analyse, research independently and formulate responses to unpredictable, complex and ill-defined problems with many interacting factors, in order to develop new knowledge or procedures and integrate knowledge from other disciplines
	Draw insightful conclusions	Prepare and evaluate evidence-based conclusions that take due account of social, disciplinary and ethical insights
	Communicate and influence	Communicate complex information effectively, transfer one's knowledge and skills, and justify recommendations and research findings, to specialists and non-specialists, including clients; influence and lead professional practice

Communication	Can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously
Learning skills	Have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous

Competence – context, role, learning-to-learn and insight	Exercising autonomy and judgement	Exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a wide variety of complex contexts, including professional practice and study, and transfer them to unfamiliar and emerging contexts
	Exercising responsibility	Manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches; take responsibility for decisions and contributing to professional knowledge and practice
	Working with others	Act effectively in team roles and take responsibility for managing individuals and lead complex and heterogeneous groups and for reviewing the strategic performance of teams
	Learning and teaching	Evaluate learning needs of self and others and take responsibility for continuing academic/ professional development of same
	Attitudes	Scrutinise and reflect on social and professional norms and relationships and act to change them in the interests of professional standards, society or the wider environment

Analysis

The Dublin Descriptor for the Bologna Second Cycle requires 'demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with first cycle, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research context'. The Irish NFQ Level 9 professional award-type descriptor requires 'Broad and up-to-date general knowledge and specialised knowledge' including 'knowledge about recent developments and trends in the professional discipline or its practice', augmented by 'critical awareness and knowledge of the wider context for practice in the profession' and 'comprehensive and critical evaluation of current developments and trends in the relevant professional or academic literature and as the basis for research or innovation and strategic change and leadership'. Both descriptors build upon knowledge associated with the Bologna First Cycle.

In terms of application of knowledge and understanding. The Dublin Descriptor speaks about 'new or unfamiliar environments'. This is paralleled in the Irish NFQ Level 9 professional award-type descriptor, augmented by ability to 'select, modify and apply advanced skills, including research or innovation skills, to critically analyse, research independently and formulate responses to unpredictable, complex and ill-defined problems with many interacting factors, in order to develop new knowledge or procedures and integrate knowledge from other disciplines'.

In terms of communications skills, holders of the Bologna Second Cycle awards are required to demonstrate ability to 'communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously' which is reflected in the Irish NFQ Level 9 professional award-type descriptor that requires to communicate 'complex information effectively, transfer one's knowledge and skills, and justify recommendations and research findings, to specialists and non-specialists, including clients; influence and lead professional practice'.

In the context of 'learning skills', the Dublin Descriptor requires having the learning skills to allow 'to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous'. The Irish NFQ Level 9 professional award-type descriptor is even more specific and requires ability to 'evaluate learning needs of self and others and take responsibility for continuing academic/ professional development' including ability to 'scrutinise and reflect on social and professional norms and relationships and act to change them in the interests of professional standards, society or the wider environment'.

There is a strong correspondence between the Irish NFQ Level 9 professional award-type descriptor and the Bologna Second Cycle, although in some respects the learning outcomes of the NFQ Level 9 professional award-type descriptor go beyond those required for Bologna Second Cycle qualification.

Appendix 7: Letters of Endorsement from Statutory Bodies Participating in Steering Group

QQI
Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

19 October 2020

To whom it may concern,

As well as being responsible for the promotion, maintenance and further development and implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications, QQI is the sole national agency responsible for the external quality assurance of further education and training (including vocational education and training and adult education) and higher education in Ireland. This means that the quality assurance of all education and training leading qualifications in the national framework, other than those associated with second level schooling, falls under QQI's remit. QQI exercises this responsibility through publishing statutory quality assurances guidelines to which providers must have regard when establishing their own QA procedures and then monitoring and reviewing provider's implementation of those procedures.

QQI's *Policy on Quality Assurance Guidelines* is explicitly designed to be compatible with the relevant Annex of the EQF recommendation. This policy covers all of QQI's Quality Assurance activities. The internal and external quality assurance procedures for Irish higher education programmes and institutions are designed to be compliant with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. This compliance was confirmed most recently by the ENQA review of QQI in 2019 and QQI's subsequent inclusion in the EQAR.

As director of quality assurance for QQI, I welcome this referencing report and endorse the conclusions contained herein.

Yours sincerely,

Bryan Maguire PhD

Director of Quality Assurance

26/27 Denzille Lane, Dublin 2, Ireland. t +383 (01) 1 905 8100 www QQI.ie

HEA | AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY

Dr Padraig Walsh,

Chief Executive,

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI),

26/27 Denzille Lane,

Dublin 2, D02 P266

24 September 2020

Re: National Report on European Referencing of the NFQ

Dear Padraig,

Thank you for providing the Higher Education Authority (HEA) the opportunity to participate in the 2020 Referencing of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) with the European Qualifications Framework and with the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area.

As you know, both Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) have stated our commitment to working closely together in the best interests of the Irish Higher Education system over recent years. Two successive Memoranda of Understanding have confirmed this intent. Our most recent Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) 2018-2020 has committed our two organisations to ongoing collaboration, with specific reference to four key areas:

- Coherence of approach;
- Alignment of activities;
- Ireland in an international context;
- Partnerships for enhancement.

These commitments have seen actions in relation to access, transfer and progression; a data strategy for higher education; a statutory database of programmes and awards; enhancement of the Ireland's educational reputation on the international stage; collaboration with other HE partners and stakeholders; enhancement of the quality of teaching, learning and student experience; and supporting the quality and integrity of Irish research.

This most recent exercise in referencing the Irish NFQ with the EQF and QF-HEA is an important aspect of Ireland's international positioning but also demonstrates our commitment to the European Higher Education Area and European Qualifications Framework.

As the statutory quality assurance body for higher education (HE), further education and training (FET) and English Language Education (ELE) in Ireland, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is respected

An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas | 3 Áras Síol mBrain | Ascaill Crampton | Bóthar Shíol Bhroin | Baile Átha Cliath 4
Teil: +353 1 231 7100 | Facs: +353 1 231 7172 | IosGhlo: 1890 200 637 | R-phoist: info@hea.ie | Gréasán: www.hea.ie
The Higher Education Authority | 3 Shelbourne Buildings | Crampton Avenue | Shelbourne Road | Dublin 4
Tel: +353 1 231 7100 | Fax: +353 1 231 7172 | LoCall: 1890 200 637 | E-mail: info@hea.ie | Web: www.hea.ie
@HEA_irl Higher Education Authority

and recognised for extensive and established processes in place for programme validation, revalidation and the awarding of NFQ levels to courses. Our higher education institutions are subject to both internal and external rigorous quality assurance (QA) reviews. QQI's Institutional reviews, programme validation and programme revalidation process ensure that learners are enabled to acquire and demonstrate the necessary knowledge, skill or competence to justify the award(s) being offered.

The HEA has welcomed the opportunity to work closely with QQI and the associated *European Referencing Steering Group* in the preparation of this national report. We are satisfied that it provides a fair description of the national higher education system and on behalf of the HEA, I am happy to endorse the report. We acknowledge the work of the steering group and the Chair, Mr Paul O'Toole, who led the group in the challenging circumstances of a global pandemic. Finally, we would also like to thank Dr John O'Connor and Dr Beata Sokołowska for their work in supporting the entire process.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Alan Wall

Chief Executive Officer, Higher Education Authority

An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas | 3 Áras Síol mBrain | Ascaill Crampton | Bóthar Shíol Bhroin | Baile Átha Cliath 4
Teil: +353 1 231 7100 | Facs: +353 1 231 7172 | IosGhlo: 1890 200 637 | R-phoist: info@hea.ie | Gréasán: www.hea.ie
The Higher Education Authority | 3 Shelbourne Buildings | Crampton Avenue | Shelbourne Road | Dublin 4
Tel: +353 1 231 7100 | Fax: +353 1 231 7172 | LoCall: 1890 200 637 | E-mail: info@hea.ie | Web: www.hea.ie
@HEA_irl Higher Education Authority

24th September 2020

Dr Padraig Walsh

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

26/27 Denzille Lane

Dublin 2

D02 P266.

Dear Padraig

I am writing to commend the work undertaken by QQI to review and update the referencing of the levels of the National Qualifications Framework (NFQ) to the levels of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

As you are aware, NCCA supported this work through our representative, Barry Slattery, on The European Referencing Steering Group. I would like to acknowledge the professionalism and dedication of your colleagues, John O'Connor and Beata Sokolowska, who progressed this work at such a challenging time for the system.

The updated national report, *2020 Referencing of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the European Qualifications Framework and with the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area* is a comprehensive report and it provides a very fair description of the national school/general education system and associated quality assurance arrangements. We're very satisfied with the process engaged with and the conclusions reached in the updated report.

Yours sincerely

John Hammond

Chief Executive Officer

NCCA

SOLAS
learning works

Dr Padraig Walsh
Chief Executive
QQI
26-27 Denzille Lane
Dublin 2
D02 P266

29th September 2020

National Report on European Referencing of the NFQ

Dear Padraig,

I am writing to you in relation to the national report on European referencing of the National Framework of Qualifications. As the statutory agency responsible for funding, planning and coordinating of further education and training, including apprenticeships, we were very pleased to be invited to participate on the steering group and to be involved in the preparation of this report.

I would like to confirm that the report represents an accurate and fair description of the further education and training system, including the provision of apprenticeships. On that basis, I am happy to endorse the report and I would like to thank you and colleagues in QQI for your work on this important project.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Brownlee

Andrew Brownlee
Chief Executive Officer

SOLAS
An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna
Further Education and Training Authority
Teach Chaisleán Foirbis, Bóthar Chaisleán Foirbis, Baile Átha Cliath 1.
Castleforbes House, Castleforbes Road, Dublin D01 A8N0
+ 353 (0) 1 533 2500 / www.solas.ie / info@solas.ie

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29th September 2020

2020 Referencing of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the European Qualifications Framework and with the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area

To whom it may concern,

As Manager of NARIC Ireland providing advice on foreign qualifications I write in strong support of the review and updating of the referencing of the levels of the National Qualifications Framework (NFQ) to the levels of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

Our work at NARIC Ireland draws heavily on both the NFQ and EQF for our research and evaluation of foreign qualifications, preparation of Comparability Statements for our database and publication of this material on our website at www.naric.ie

The re-referencing report which I have reviewed and provided feedback on is comprehensive and offers valid, informed updates on the referencing of the NFQ to the EQF. Overall, I am very pleased with the process engaged with and the conclusions reached in the updated national report.

Best wishes,

Angela Lambkin

NARIC Ireland

Coimisiún na Scrüduithe Stäit

State Examinations Commission

Corr na Madadh, Baile Åtha Luain, Co. na hlarmhi.
Cornamaddy, Athlone, Co. Westmeath.

Mr. John O'Connor
Head of Framework Integrity
QQI

joconnor@qqi.ie

16 October 2020

Dear John

The State Examinations Commission was established as a non-departmental public body under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills in March 2003. The Commission assumed responsibility for the operation of the State Certificate Examinations from the Department of Education and Skills from 2003 onwards. Within that remit the Commission has responsibility for the development, assessment, accreditation and certification of the second-level examinations of the Irish state at Junior Cycle and the Leaving Certificate.

The State Examinations Commission has had direct input in the deliberations, drafting and finalising of this national report. The State Examinations Commission is satisfied that the assigned remit of this European Referencing Steering Group as described in its Terms of Reference have been met and the descriptors and commentary in the Report on NFQ European Referencing 2020 for Ireland are appropriate.

Yours sincerely

Aidan Farrell
Chief Executive
State Examinations Commission

Appendix 8: Opinion of International Experts

Opinion on the 2020 Referencing of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the European Qualifications Framework and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area.

International Expert: Adrian Sheehan. Consultant with CollegesWales/ColegauCymru the National Coordination Point for the European Qualifications Framework for the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales

General Comments

This report references the current National Framework of Qualifications in Ireland to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The report is the outcome of a comprehensive referencing exercise. Ireland was one of the first countries to produce a referencing report to the EQF in 2009; higher education qualifications were referenced to the EHEA in 2006. Since then there have been significant legal and organisational changes which made it appropriate to produce a fresh, comprehensive referencing report rather than updating the original ones.

The report reflects a mature, functioning qualification framework that is an integral part of the education, training and qualifications systems in Ireland. The report explains how the Framework is an enabling mechanism which is understood by different parties and used in ways that meet their particular needs. The parties that use the Framework understand that the requirements of vocational education are not the same as adult education, general education or academic higher education. At the same time there is a common thread that enables articulation between different parts of the qualifications system with movement of learners between different providers and valid comparisons between different qualifications. The Framework is changing as the contexts and circumstances change with, for example the introduction of Professional Award-type descriptors for higher qualifications enhancing links with the labour market and the increasing focus on enabling the incorporation of non-formal learning into the framework and the use of recognition of prior learning which will become more relevant with the expected shake-out in the labour market as a result of the effects of the coronavirus.

Throughout the report there is evidence of extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. In addition to inputs from the different competent bodies the report reflects the views of students, teachers, employers and professional bodies. The importance of the part that all stakeholders have in the development and use of the framework is recognised.

The report is clear and has a logical structure. Good use is made of links to other documents and appendices to keep the chapters focussed while not omitting from the report important aspects of the qualifications system that readers may wish to explore in more detail. The report acknowledges that there are particular elements of the Irish framework that differ from other countries. To address this the report does not assume any prior knowledge. Explanations start from first principles which assists in putting the Framework in a clear context for people from different backgrounds and making it accessible to the non-specialist reader.

There is a detailed account of the context in which the qualification framework operates in Ireland and in the international setting, explaining how the system has changed over time. It shows the framework is part of a dynamic system that has evolved in response to the needs of the stakeholders in planning and providing education and training. There is a detailed analysis of national participation and achievement which gives a good insight into the dynamics of the system. The framework is comprehensive, covering all awards made in Ireland. It includes general and vocational education. Private and public provision is covered and organisations at all levels from primary education onward are included.

It is a critical account which identifies areas for development. In primary education the use of learning outcomes in the curriculum is being adopted and there is an interesting discussion of the rationale for this. With general education the school junior and senior cycle are clearly explained with a detailed discussion of how levels are being applied to the Leaving Certificate qualifications. There is a similar, robust account of further education and training with an inclusive account covering vocational provision, adult education provision for the unemployed and for people with particular educational needs. There is increasing coordination across vocational education and training with a growing emphasis on regional partnerships. It is a further indication of a mature system that there is open discussion of the issues involved.

The framework is an integral part of the design of the curriculum and assessment in higher education. The account is of a well-established and robust system with the Framework being an integral part of the processes for the validation of programmes and of quality assurance.

Reviews of the impact of the national framework confirm that it is a dynamic and self-improving system that is an enabler rather than a driver of change. There is a good discussion of how the framework has evolved and the nature of the impact has changed, one that resonates with similar developments of frameworks in other countries. The report describes a relatively high level of public awareness and engagement from all relevant stakeholders.

In conclusion I would like to put on record my appreciation of the invitation to contribute to this re-referencing process. It has been a pleasure to review this report which is an account of a mature framework that is an integral part of the curricula and qualifications offered in Ireland in schools, higher education, in vocational education and training and in adult and community education, in particular the non-formal and non-regulated provision which make an important contribution to developing an inclusive system.

The report shows a deep understanding and appreciation of how credit frameworks operate and how they can contribute to the operation of effective systems within a country as well as linking qualification systems across countries, helping to create opportunities for progression and mobility for learners and those looking for work.

The clear explanations in the report will be useful to those concerned with developing frameworks including those who work with relatively mature systems. There is transparent discussion of the different issues that arise and how these have been addressed. As someone involved with the Credit Framework in Wales, many of the things discussed in this report resonated with my experience with the welsh framework, in particular, the role of the framework as an enabling mechanism rather than a transformative one.

It is also good to note that Ireland intends to maintain close links with the UK frameworks. I am confident that this will be of benefit to learners and education practitioners in both countries.

Comment on the extent to which the draft report addresses the criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications frameworks or systems to the European Qualifications Framework

Criterion 1. The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process, including the National Co-ordination Point, are clearly determined and published by the competent public authorities.

This criterion has been met. The report refers to a comprehensive set of competent bodies. There is a clear account of the legal framework and how it has changed in recent years with responsibilities and accountability explained. The explanation of the legislative framework in the report is helpful in confirming the inclusive nature of the National Framework with reference to general qualifications and non-formal learning as well as vocational education.

Criterion 2. There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications frameworks or systems and the level descriptors of the EQF.

This criterion has been met. The report covers referencing of the National Framework of Qualifications to the European Qualifications framework and the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area. There is a clear explanation of the methodology and is based on recognised best practice. It is an involved process and it has been handled well. The analysis is clearly set out with effective use of a colour coding system which draws attention to the key parts in each comparison and aids the reader in following the analysis.

An effective case is made for equivalence at each level. In some cases this is straightforward. There is some divergence is in the use of language, some of the differences can be explained by the amount of detail in the NFQ and PADT descriptors and there are marginal overlaps in some areas. Where there are differences these are acknowledged, a case is made accounting for the difference and the reasons for the decisions arrived at. This makes for a strong case in each comparison.

The NQF/PADT descriptors look at the application of the descriptors at different levels in a range of contexts. This is an aid to understanding and also addresses a weakness apparent in some other referencing processes.

In the past many qualification descriptor processes focused on the academic context. The NFQ/PA descriptors make a point of looking at vocational contexts in addition to academic ones, looking at levels from a work-based perspective as well as a university/college/school one.

The equivalences made are fairly presented and will be useful to anyone who wants to understand what someone with a particular qualification is capable of doing. The comparisons are in step with developments across frameworks in the EU looking to integrate qualification descriptors used in academia with those used in the world of work.

As an aside, the process that had been developed and implemented here can also be used by those who are new to the application of levelling, particularly those in the non-formal sectors as well as people involved in work-based learning developments..

The work done with the Dublin Descriptors follows the same approach and is similarly effective. The use of skills in different contexts is looked at and a good case is made for similar levels of skill in each instance. There are clear justifications and judgements as to the levels of the qualifications.

Overall, there is a well-argued case that, for the different qualification types, there is comparability and equivalence with the relevant levels of the EQF and the EHEA; the strong links are evident. The level of detail provided makes this an effective document to promote international recognition with the EQF and Bologna processes included. The inclusive nature of the NFQ is evident in this work.

Criterion 3. The national qualifications frameworks or systems and their qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and related to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where appropriate, to credit systems.

This criterion has been met. Learning outcomes are used at all levels from primary through to higher education. It is evident in curriculum and qualification design in general, vocational and higher and is an explicit part of the quality assurance processes for further and higher education programmes. Learning outcomes are used in a number of contexts. One application not usually seen in the inclusion of learning outcomes in guidelines for teachers and linked to the quality assurance processes.

The recognition of prior learning and the inclusion of non-formal and informal learning is acknowledged and supported. This is an area that is being developed further. There will be a rise in demand for the inclusion and recognition of learning outside of the regulated system with the expected shake out in the labour market as a result of the knock-on effects of Covid on the economy.

Criteria 4. Procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system are transparent.

This criterion has been met. There is a clear account of how the procedures for the inclusion of qualifications offered in Ireland have been developed and implemented. This has been a complex and involved process and this paper strikes a balance, giving an overview of the development but not getting into too much technical detail to distract the reader from the main messages. There are helpful references to other, related criteria on qualification design and quality assurance arrangements.

The account makes it clear that the NFQ has become embedded in the qualification system in Ireland. The transition from a transformative to an enabling framework is a trajectory that is common to many national frameworks and this will be reassuring to those countries that are less advanced in the development process.

The history makes it clear that the NFQ is a live instrument that has developed over time and will continue to evolve. The terms used are explained as are the criteria for inclusion with effective use of explanation and the fan diagram.

The account covers the incorporation of the various stakeholders and the different sets of qualifications confirms the inclusive nature of the framework, in particular the detail of the 2019 legislation. It is notable that general and non-formal qualifications are properly included and that no particular qualification type dominates

the framework. The 2019 legislation is still being implemented, another illustration of a dynamic and evolving system

There are helpful supporting diagrams accompanying the text to explain the structure.

Criterion 5. The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications frameworks or systems and are consistent with the principles on quality assurance as specified in Annex IV to this Recommendation.

This criterion has been met. There are detailed comments on how the principles are addressed by the systems in place in Ireland. EQAVET and EHEA principles are embedded in the quality assurance systems that are in place and can be mapped to the EQF principles. Effective quality assurance is embedded in the relevant legal and statutory requirements. There are robust quality assurance arrangements for all sectors and levels.

Criterion 6

The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies that the referencing report is consistent with the relevant national quality assurance arrangements, provisions and practice.

Arrangements are in place to confirm that this criterion has been met.

Criterion 7

The referencing process shall involve international experts and the referencing reports shall contain the written statement of at least two international experts from two different countries on the referencing process.

As an international expert I have been involved in the production of this report. I have attended all meetings of the steering group, face-to-face and on-line. The on-line meetings, organised as a result of current travel and meeting restrictions, were well organised. The technology worked well, and all relevant information was available for the meetings. The steering group meetings had representatives from a wide range of organisations and the contributions reflected a good understanding from all participants of the workings of the framework and the requirements of the referencing process. As an international expert I was able to make an appropriate contribution to the referencing exercise.

Criterion 8

The competent authority or authorities shall certify the referencing of the national qualifications frameworks or systems with the EQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing, and the evidence supporting it, shall be published by the competent authorities, including the EQF National Coordination Points, and shall address separately each of the criteria. The same report can be used for self-certification of compatibility with the QF-EHEA, in accordance with the self-certification criteria of the latter.

This criterion has been met. The report is comprehensive including referencing to the framework for the European Higher Qualifications Area as well as the European Qualifications Framework. All of the criteria have been addressed fully and all competent bodies have been involved or consulted in the production of this report.

Criterion 9

Within 6 months from having referenced or updated the referencing report, Member States and other participating countries shall publish the referencing report and provide relevant information for comparison purposes on the relevant European portal.

Arrangements are in place to confirm that this criterion has been met.

Criterion 10

Further to the referencing process, all newly issued documents related to qualifications that are part of the national qualifications frameworks or systems (e.g. certificates, diplomas, certificate supplements, diploma supplements) and/or qualification registers issued by the competent authorities should contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications frameworks or systems, to the appropriate EQF level.

This criterion has been met. The framework in Ireland has already been referenced to the EQF and, as a result of this, relevant documentation already contains reference to the EQF. The report confirms that this will be continued. Europass documentation, all qualifications issued by QQI and the Irish Register of Qualifications include reference to comparable EQF levels as do comparability statements issued by NARIC Ireland.

Opinion on the 2020 Referencing of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the European Qualifications Framework and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area.

International Expert: Dr. Carita Blomqvist, Head of Unit. Recognition and Comparability of Qualifications, Finnish National Agency for Education

I would like to thank QQI for the possibility to provide an expert opinion on the Irish report on 2020 Referencing of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the European Qualifications Framework and with the Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. Reading the report was a pleasant and rewarding task. It was interesting also because this is one of the first updated reports. Next, I will present some observations.

The reasons for updating the referencing report are well and interestingly described and provide a comprehensive background from several important points of view. It is definitely justified, and, as it seems, also needed, to update the report. I am happy to notice that the new report takes into account the changes occurred both on national and European levels. Despite the complexity and many-sidedness of the Irish education system as well as the NFQ, the description of those is excellent and provides a solid basis for the evaluation of the responses to the referencing criteria.

The whole referencing process has been inclusive in terms of engaging national stakeholders and international experts, which has greatly strengthened the transparency of the updated report. Highlighting the importance of the input of all stakeholders can be regarded as one of the success factors of the referencing process. Furthermore, the launch of the QQI Green Paper on Qualifications offers a continuation for this inclusive process, provides a useful background and assures the NFQ remains up-to-date and modifiable also in the future.

The Irish NFQ is comprehensive and includes a vast array of qualifications. Although the Irish NFQ might somewhat differ – e.g. because of its inclusiveness – from many other European QFs, it is very clearly presented. I also found the different award classes interesting. Placing those in the NFQ is interesting for other countries, which are only taking first steps in including such learning modules in their frameworks.

The leaving certificate presented in the referencing table 1 seems to be on two levels. The reason was later explained and justified in a transparent way, however, setting an accurate level for the certificate would greatly benefit the understanding and use of the NFQ among general public. All in all, the referencing solutions are well-argued and seem to be the conclusion of extensive discussions with stakeholders.

Moreover, it was interesting to read about the quality assurance arrangements of the NFQ. Evaluating the impact of the NFQ is important and the work done so far is clearly presented in the report. In fact, the Irish example of the evaluation of the impact of the NFQ could be followed as an example elsewhere as well. In addition, teacher education is reported in detail, which can be regarded as one of the key elements for quality assurance.

Next, even if my conclusion is that all referencing and self-certification criteria are met, I will shortly comment each response.

Criterion 1 EQF and Criterion 1 and 7 QF-EHEA (Competent Authorities)

EQF Criterion 1: The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process, including the National Co-ordination Point, are clearly determined and published by the competent authorities.

QF-EHEA Criterion 1: The national framework for higher education qualifications and the body or bodies responsible for its development are designated by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education. QF-EHEA Criterion 7: The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published.

The response is comprehensive.

Criterion 2 EQF and Criterion 2 QF-EHEA (Descriptor Alignments)

Criterion 2 EQF: There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications frameworks or systems and the level descriptors of the EQF.

The response is very good. Criterion 2 EQF and Criterion 2 QF-EHEA are very important and have, indeed, been

thoroughly discussed in the response. Furthermore, they were illustrated in a separate document "Analysis and Outcomes of Technical Mapping".

Criterion 3 EQF and Criterion 3 QF-EHEA (Learning Outcomes, RPL and Credit)

Criterion 3 EQF: The national qualifications frameworks or systems and their qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and related to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where appropriate, to credit systems. Criterion 3 QF-EHEA: The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS credits.

The response is very good. The importance of the learning outcomes in including qualifications in the NFQ is highlighted not only here, but throughout the text.

One observation from the European point of view: Including the minor, special purpose and supplemental awards of HE in the NFQ is in line with the current European discussion on micro-credentials.

Criterion 4 EQF and Criterion 4 QF-EHEA (Levelling of Qualifications)

Criterion 4 EQF: The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system are transparent. Criterion 4 QF-EHEA The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent.

The response is very clear and explicit. The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the NFQ are described thoroughly. The introduction of the legal base of including qualifications in the NFQ reinforce the understanding of the statutory policies affecting the NFQ.

Criterion 5 EQF and Criterion 5 QF-EHEA (Quality Assurance)

Criterion 5 EQF: The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications frameworks or systems and are consistent with the principles on quality assurance as specified in Annex IV to this Recommendation.

Criterion 5 QF-EHEA: The national quality assurance system for higher education refer to the national framework for higher education qualifications and are consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent Ministerial Communiqués in the Bologna Process.

The response is very good.

Criterion 6 EQF and Procedure 2 QF-EHEA (Agreement by QA bodies)

Criterion 6 EQF: The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies that the referencing report is consistent with the relevant national quality assurance arrangements, provisions and practice.
Procedure 2 QF-EHEA: The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies of the country in question recognised through the Bologna Process.

The response is adequate.

Criterion 7 EQF and Procedure 3 QF-EHEA (International Experts)

Criterion 7 EQF: The referencing process shall involve international experts and the referencing reports shall contain the written statement of at least two international experts from two different countries on the referencing process. Procedure 3 QF-EHEA: The self-certification process shall involve international experts.

The response is adequate.

Criterion 8 EQF and Procedure 1 QF-EHEA (Certification of report)

Criterion 8 EQF: The competent authority or authorities shall certify the referencing of the national qualifications frameworks or systems with the EQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing, and the evidence supporting it, shall be published by the competent authorities, including the EQF National Coordination Points, and shall address separately each of the criteria. The same report can be used for self-certification of compatibility with the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area, in accordance with the self-certification criteria of the latter. Procedure 1 QF-EHEA: The competent national body/bodies shall self-certify the compatibility of the national framework with the European framework.

The response is adequate.

Criterion 9 EQF and Procedure 4 QF-EHEA (Publication of report)

Criterion 9 EQF: Within 6 months from having referenced or updated the referencing report, Member States and other participating countries shall publish the referencing report and provide relevant information for comparison purposes on the relevant European portal. Procedure 4 QF-EHEA: The self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall address separately each of the criteria established and shall be published.

The response is adequate.

Criterion 10 EQF; Criterion 6 of QF-EHEA; Procedure 6 of QF-EHEA (Level visibility)

Criterion 10 EQF: Further to the referencing process, all newly issued documents related to qualifications that are part of the national qualifications frameworks or systems (e.g. certificates, diplomas, certificate supplements, diploma supplements) and/or qualification registers issued by the competent authorities should contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications frameworks or systems, to the appropriate EQF level. Criterion 6 QF-EHEA: The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements. Procedure 6 QF-EHEA: The completion of the self-certification process shall be noted on Diploma Supplements issued subsequently by showing the link between the national framework and the European framework.

The response is clear.

Procedure 5 QF-EHEA (Update ENIC/NARIC Country Page)

Procedure 5 QF-EHEA: The ENIC/NARIC network shall maintain a public listing of States that have completed the self-certification process

The response is adequate.

Besides being pleasant to read and well structured, the report also makes use of infographics, tables and several appendices, which enhance the understanding of the content of the report. The language is clear, concise and understandable also for non-native speakers of English.

From my point of view, you have done excellent work in compiling the report. Despite being a complex topic, the report is high-quality and describes very clearly the NFQ itself as well as its correspondence with the EQF and the QF-EHEA.

Opinion on the 2020 Referencing of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the European Qualifications Framework and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area.

International Expert: Külli All, Deputy Head of Adult Education Department, Ministry of Education and Research, Estonia.

The Irish report gives very thorough and comprehensive overview of the Irish qualifications system. Even as the work of referencing has been mostly done during the strong impact of COVID 19 crisis, which did not allow the physical meetings of experts and stakeholders, approach taken was very effective and the referencing process itself remained very inclusive, comprehensive, managing to involve all parties and stakeholders and allowing the report to be monitored and to contribute everyone to it chapter by chapter.

Chapters 1-3 of the report give a thorough and very useful information about Irish education, training and qualifications system and thus make the qualifications and report more understandable.

In order to prove that a report of referencing Irish Qualification System to the European Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning demonstrates following the criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF, the report will be further compared with the criteria one by one.

The first criterion which states that the responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies should be involved in the referencing process, including the National Coordination Point, is fully met. Chapter 4 of the report gives an overview of the legislation and the descriptions of responsibilities of bodies involved - QQI and Department of Education and Skills, Higher Education Authority, SOLAS, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, State Examinations Commission, School Inspectorate, Universities and Institutes of Technology and Professional Recognition Bodies.

The second criterion states that a report should show a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the Irish qualifications framework and the level descriptors of the EQF. The requirements of the criterion are met.

Section 4.2 of Chapter 4 and Annex VI of the report address the criteria and procedures for EQF referencing and QF-EHEA self-certification. The approach involved an initial analysis of the levels in both frameworks and built on work already undertaken in 2009 and involved a direct comparison of the text in the NFQ level indicators and in the EQF level descriptors. The current referencing includes also the mapping of the NFQ professional award-type descriptors (NFQ Level 5-9) to the EQF which have not been related to the EQF in previous report.

The evidence presented is comprehensive and accurate and supports a clear and demonstrable link between the levels of the NFQ and the levels of the EQF. As the NFQ Levels 1 and 2 correspond to EQF Level 1 and NFQ Levels 7 and 8 both correspond to EQF 6, it's important that the technical alignment demonstrates the best fit of the descriptors to the respective levels of EQF. The descriptions of education system at section 2.5 gives and additional information and make the qualifications more understandable.

However, it would make the system even more understandable if there was and additional information about the correspondence of grading system and assessment of learning outcomes with the description of learning outcomes.

The third criterion states that the qualifications in national frameworks should base on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and relate to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where appropriate, to credit systems.

The learning outcomes approach is fundamental to the EQF. The qualifications included into NFQ follow learning outcomes approach. The underlying assumption of IQF is that the learning required for any educational qualification and professional awards can be represented by statements of expected learning outcomes.

In the report there is given also a description to positioning of the Leaving Certificate to the different levels of QF as the Leaving Certificate is viewed by the Irish public as a single award and that the aims, objectives and learning outcomes associated with the various options, in each case, are consistent with indicators at both Levels 4 and 5.

The requirements of the criterion 4 that the procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system are transparent, is fulfilled as the procedures are described in chapter 3 and section 4.4, giving the historical and current view together with the future prospect to the inclusion process.

Criterion 5 states that the national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications frameworks or systems and are consistent with the principles on quality assurance. The requirement is met in the report as described in section 4.5. of the report and proven by the 2019 ENQA external review report 2019 and the EQAVET country report. As QQI is the single statutory body responsible for the external quality assurance of higher education, and further education and training, its quality guidelines give a proof that the quality of qualifications included into the NFQ, is proven. School Inspectorate has the statutory quality assurance obligation in relation to educational provision in school sector and its role is described also in the report.

Criterion 6 states that the referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies that the referencing report is consistent with the relevant national quality assurance arrangements, provisions, and practice. Correspondence of the report to this criterion is described in the section 4.6 of Chapter 4 by statements of QQI and Education Department.

QQI also takes the responsibility to publish and disseminate the report.

With this statement, one has to conclude that Ireland has an operational qualification system and framework, where the qualifications are described in learning outcomes and are quality guaranteed. The framework is open to internal and international development. With this report the somewhat complex system of qualifications in Ireland is described and made more transparent and understandable for international audience.

Appendix 9: Terms of Reference of Steering Group

Terms of Reference

1. Context

The 2017 EU Council Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning[37] invites member states to Review and update, when relevant, the referencing of the levels of the national qualifications frameworks or systems to the levels of the EQF. Similarly, the currency of QF-EHEA self-certification reports has been recognised as important for the realisation of the European Higher Education Area.

The European Referencing Steering Group's (Steering Group) remit is to advise QQI in the preparation, publication and dissemination of a single comprehensive report that will update the referencing the NFQ to both the EQF and the QF-EHEA.

An updated referencing report will provide a contemporary account of:

- the education, training and qualifications system in Ireland
- the development of the Irish NFQ
- the relationship between level descriptors of the NFQ and respective level descriptors of the EQF and cycle descriptors of the QF-EHEA
- the extent to which national arrangements for quality assuring qualifications in the NFQ are consistent with relevant European principles and practice.
- the transparency of procedures for inclusion of qualifications within the NFQ
- the implementation of the learning outcomes approach to qualifications in Ireland.
- the role of the NFQ in supporting national arrangements for the recognition non-formal and informal learning.
- the institutional and legislative arrangements that underpin the NFQ
- the nature and extent of stakeholder engagement and support for the NFQ
- the visibility and application of qualifications frameworks as tools for lifelong learning, qualifications recognition and mobility
- the added value of the NFQ and the EQF in Ireland.

2. Terms of Reference

The remit of the Steering Group is to support the production of a referencing report in response to EQF and QF-EHEA referencing criteria and procedures. The aim is to ensure that the report provides a comprehensive, accurate, and accessible overview of Ireland's education, training and qualifications systems. Specifically, the remit of the Steering Group is to:

- ensure the report provides an accurate description of the education, training and qualifications systems and the associated quality assurance arrangements in Ireland
- as required, provide information or sources to refer to during the drafting of the report
- review the draft report and comment on the accuracy and clarity of the information presented, considering the comments of international experts and others
- endorse and provide comments on the final report before it is signed off by national authorities and then to the EQF Advisory Group (EQF-AG) in October 2020
- disseminate promote the final published report to relevant stakeholders.

[37] https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ceead970-518f-11e7-a5ca-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

3. Timeline

Activity	Date
Agreement on Referencing Approach	January 2020
Evidence gathering for each referencing criterion	January – March 2020
Technical mapping of level descriptors	January – March 2020
Draft updated referencing report	May 2020
Progress report to the EQF-AG	23-24 June 2020
Final report (endorsed by national authorities)	June – August 2020
Submit final report to the EQF-AG	October 2020
Formal presentation of final updated referencing report to the EQF-AG	24-25 November 2020
Publication of report on relevant national and European portals	Following endorsement by EQF-AG

4. Membership

The Steering Group will draw on experience and knowledge from across our education and training system, including provider representatives, voluntary and community sectors, learners, awarding bodies, social partners funding bodies, regulators, quality assurance bodies and other policymakers. International experts with experience of referencing will also be invited to join the Steering Group.

Appendix 10: Steering Group Members

Title	*Name*	*Organisation*
Mr.	*Paul O'Toole*	*Chair*
Dr.	*Leah Dowdall*	*National Adult Learning Organisation*
Mr.	*Joseph O'Grady*	*Central Applications Office*
Ms.	*Ailbhe Brioscu*	*Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection*
Ms.	*Louise Kavanagh*	*Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection*
Ms.	*Maev Nic Lochlainn*	*Department of Education and Skills*[38]
Mr.	*Joe Gleeson*	*Department of Education and Skills*
Mr.	*Damien Owens*	*Engineers Ireland*
Ms.	*Fiona Maloney*	*Education and Training Board Ireland*
Ms.	*Jenny Conroy*	*Education and Training Board Ireland*
Mr.	*James Eustace*	*Education and Training Board Ireland*
Mr.	*Tim Conlon*	*Higher Education Authority*
Dr.	*Richard Brophy*	*Higher Education Authority*
Ms.	*Cliona O'Beirne*	*Higher Education Colleges Association*
Ms.	*Claire McGee*	*Irish Business and Employers Confederation*
Ms.	*Joan Pearson*	*Irish Congress of Trade Unions*
Dr.	*Carita Blomqvist*	*International Expert – Finnish National Agency for Education*
Mr.	*Adrian Sheehan*	*International Expert – Colleges Wales*
Ms.	*Külli All*	*International Expert – Ministry of Education and Research of Estonia*
Ms.	*Nora Trench Bowles*	*Irish Universities Association*
Ms.	*Angela Lambkin*	*NARIC Ireland*
Mr.	*Barry Slattery*	*National Council for Curriculum and Assessment*
Ms.	*Jennifer McKenzie*	*National Centre for Guidance in Education*
Ms.	*Geraldine King*	*National Recruitment Federation*
Ms.	*Andrea Durnin*	*National University of Ireland*
Ms.	*Barbara Kelly*	*Quality and Qualifications Ireland*
Dr.	*Bryan Maguire*	*Quality and Qualifications Ireland*
Ms.	*Elaine Sheridan*	*State Examination Commission*
Dr.	*Tim Desmond*	*State Examination Commission*
Mr.	*Alan McGrath*	*An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (SOLAS)*
Dr.	*Jim Murray*	*Technological Higher Education Association*
Mr.	*Sean O'Reilly*	*Technological Higher Education Association*
Mr.	*Aidan Kenny*	*Teachers Union of Ireland*
Mr.	*Kevin McStravock*	*Union of Students in Ireland*

[38] In July 2020 Government approved the establishment of a new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The Department of Education and Skills was renamed the Department of Education.

Appendix 11: Designated Awarding Body Focus Group Members

Title	*Name*	*Organisation*
Dr.	*Michael Hannon*	*Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology*
Dr.	*Andrew Power*	*Institute of Art, Design and Technology*
Prof.	*David Croke*	*Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland*
Prof.	*Brian Bowe*	*Technological University Dublin*
Ms.	*Elizabeth Noonan*	*University College Cork*
Dr.	*Michael Kennedy*	*University College Dublin*

Notes

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QQI
Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

With the support of the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

An Roinn Breisoideachais agus Ardoideachais, Taighde, Nuálaíochta agus Eolaíochta
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science