March 2024

20 YEARS OF THE IRISH NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS – A STORY OF COLLABORATION AND CO-OPERATION

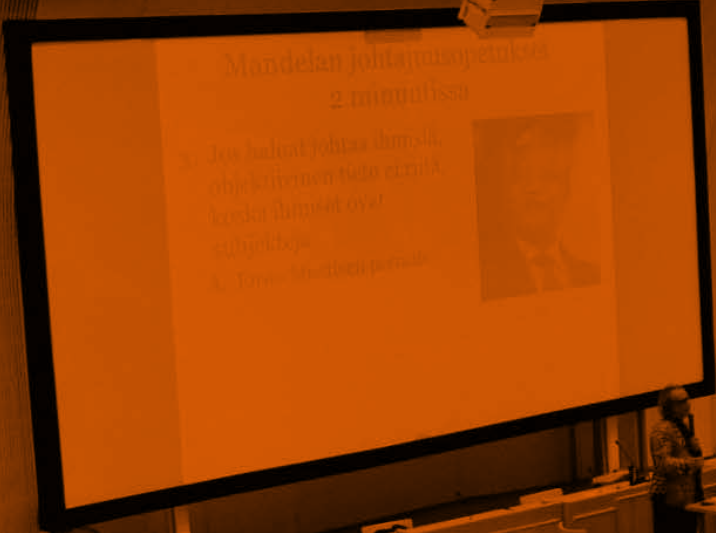2003-2023

Dearbhú Cáilíochta
agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann
Quality and
Qualifications Ireland

CONTENTS

TABLE OF FIGURES

QQI is the single state agency responsible for the external quality assurance of higher education (HE) and further education and training (FET) providers in Ireland. It is also the national awarding body for FET and for some private/ independent HE providers

QQI is a statutory agency whose functions, which span both qualifications and quality assurance in the tertiary education system, are defined in law.

QQI employs 84 staff across four directorates

QQI is commited to a vision of Ireland that offers diverse high quality further and higher education opportunities, enabling learners to reach their full potentential through achieving qualifications that are valued nationally and internationally

QQI works wtih a diverse set of partners and providers in a consultative, collaborative and inclusive manner. We value partnership for mututal benefit.

Part 1.

Introduction

1   INTRODUCTION

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was introduced in 2003 and is defined as 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 awards. While the framework may have begun its life primarily as an information source, it has since been transformed into a filter tool for a range of functions including government funding, student grant aid and employee recruitment. It has worked its way into the national lexicon, in a way that many of its counterparts elsewhere have not. This is evidenced by Cedefop characterising stakeholder penetration of the Irish NFQ as near total[1]. The Irish NFQ can be described as both a mature qualifications framework and a first-generation framework, sharing this position with relatively few countries including Scotland, South Africa, New Zealand, and Malta. The NFQ was described by Dr Grant Klinkum in his keynote address at the 20th anniversary celebration conference on 17th November 2023 as the most ambitious qualifications framework in terms of accessibility and inclusivity.
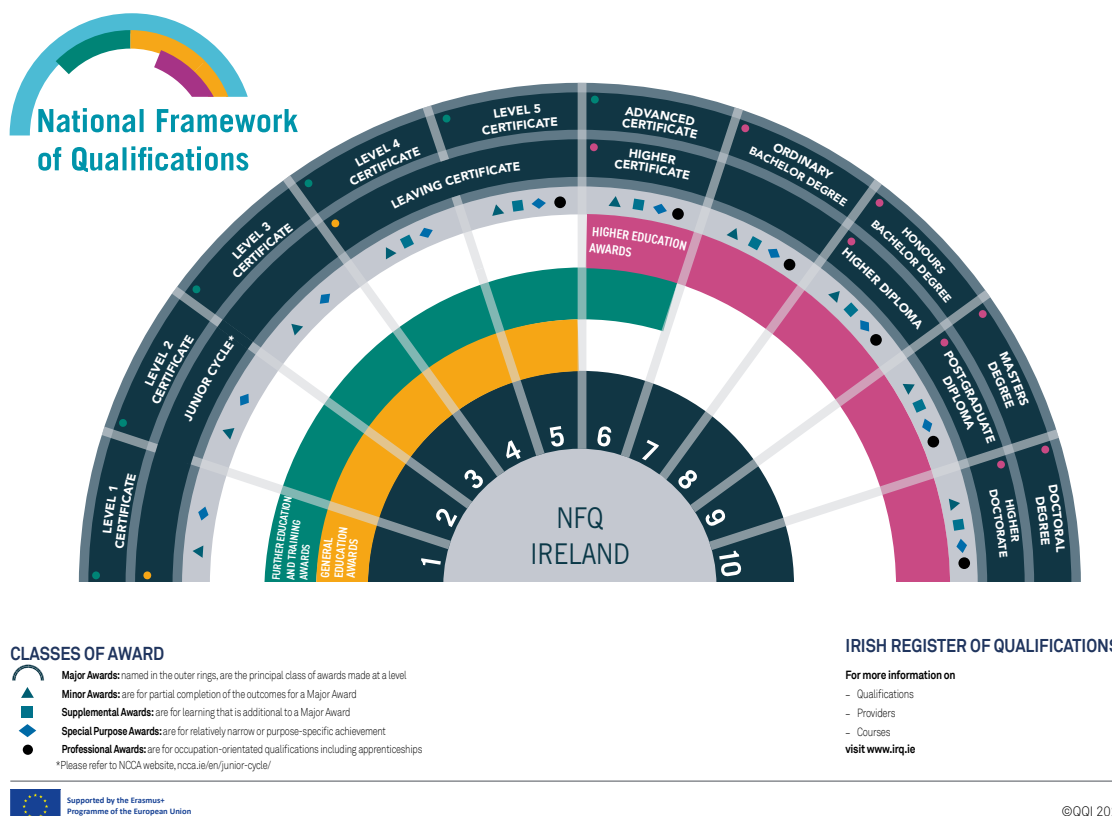
Figure 1. NFQ Fan Diagram in 2023

The NFQ has remained relatively stable throughout the last 20 years, providing a backdrop to and enabling much of the development of the education and training sector, specifically the recent trend towards tertiary education, the introduction of tertiary qualifications which begin in further

---

1   UNESCO, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), European Training Foundation (EFT), and European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) (2023) Global inventory of national and regional qualifications frameworks 2022, volume I: thematic chapters. France: UNESCO.

education institutions and are completed in higher education institutions, and the development of micro-credentials. This reflects an important finding of the 2009 Impact Study which highlighted that the NFQ is an enabler, rather than a driver, of change which the literature presents as part of its overall 'success'.[2] The success of the NFQ can further be attributed to the fact that it has retained its flexibility and learner-centredness but has also benefited from strong collaboration and cooperation across the sector in terms of development and implementation.

2023 marks the 20th anniversary of the introduction of the NFQ and this brief report charts its development from pre-establishment to a mature qualifications framework respected internationally. The report is informed by submissions from individuals and organisations, desktop research and interviews undertaken by Bell-Wylie Consulting and the proceedings of a conference held on 17th November 2023 to mark the 20th anniversary of the NFQ and associated pre-conference workshops[3].

---

2 Pilcher, N., Fernie, S., and Smith, K. (2017) 'The impact of National Qualifications Frameworks: by which yardstick do we measure dreams?', Journal of Education and Work, 30(1), pp.1-12.

3 Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2023a) 20 Years of the NFQ.

Part 2.

Pre-Establishment

2 PRE-ESTABLISHMENT

Initially proposed in legislation in 1999 and formally established in 2003, the story of the NFQ can be traced back to the 1990s (and arguably the 1980s) as Ireland became an early mover at the forefront in the development of qualification frameworks in Europe. It was adopted as government policy in the 1995 white paper on education[4]. Teastas, an advisory body established in 1995, was tasked with advising the government on the establishment and development of a national qualifications framework. Teastas engaged in public consultation in 1997 but even at this time, no consensus emerged[5]. However, the overarching policy approach underpinning the NFQ built on the initial advice of Teastas. It is worth noting that it is proposed in the literature that although the strength and autonomy of the universities and the Department was emphasised in the development of the qualifications system, it was the further education and training sector that was the catalyst for the development of a national framework of qualifications.[6]

Prior to the introduction of the 1999 Act, various bodies were responsible for recognising educational achievements in Ireland. The education and training strands of learning had separate organisational identities and were co-ordinated through two Ministries (the Department of Education and Science, and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment). Several agencies were responsible for the provision of training for particular employment sectors – such as hotel and catering, farming and agriculture, fisheries and for particular target populations such as persons with disabilities. There was also a generalised training and employment agency, FÁS, the national authority for training and employment, which delivered and co-ordinated a wide range of training provision, including apprenticeships. By 2001, each of these organisations had developed separate systems for the recognition of learning[7].

The overall result was a fragmented system which made it difficult to compare qualifications. Additionally, this system focused predominantly, if not exclusively, on the needs of school leavers[8] and hindered lifelong learning[9]. However, it is important to note that despite a lack of a qualifications framework, programmes were generally subject to external scrutiny through external validation and quality assurance.

In 1999, when discussing the proposed Bill, then Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Micheál Martin, emphasised the importance of the framework to promote international recognition of awards and international mobility. Amendments were made to the Bill before being adopted formally as legislation, affirming the role of partnership in the work of the proposed qualifications authority and the implementation of the Framework. This spirit of partnership was a feature of subsequent years and continues to be a strength of the Irish qualifications system.

---

4   Government of Ireland (1995) Charting Our Education Future White Paper on Education. Department of Education and Science.

5   Ó Foghlú, S. (2003) 'Agricultural Education and Training in the Context of the National Qualifications Framework', National Conference on Agricultural Education.

6   Granville, G. (2003) ''Stop Making Sense': Chaos and coherence in the formulation of the Irish qualifications framework', Journal of Education and Work, 16(3), pp.259-270.

7   OECD and National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) (2003) The Role of National Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning - Background Report for Ireland.

8   Peck, C. and Stritch, D. (2023) From Counting to Cultivating Successful Participation - A Review of the Landscape of Practice Supporting Access Transfer and Progression in Irish Education and Training. Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

9   OECD and National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2003) The Role of National Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning - Background Report for Ireland.

Pre-2001 Awarding Arrangements	
Awarding Bodies	Award Information
Department of Education and Science	Secondary school awards
Universities and Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT)	Higher education awards of their own
National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA)	Institutes of technology, national institutions and certain other colleges and institutions availed of these awards
National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA)	Most common awards system in use in further education was developed by NCVA.
FÁS	The national authority for training and employment delivering and coordinating a wide range of training including apprenticeships
Teagasc	Agricultural training and awards
National Tourism Certification Board (involving jointly CERT and the Department of Education and Science	Tourism training and awards
Bord Iascaigh Mhara	Marine and fisheries training and awards

Figure 2. Overview of Pre-2001 Awarding Bodies and Awards

2.1   AMBITIONS OF A NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS

As recalled by the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the main goal in Ireland was to create a common national framework for qualifications, formalising and accelerating the shift from a relatively unstructured collection of awards with few national or international reference points. At that point in time, the importance of the approach to and the subsequent development of the Irish framework was unknown and unrecognised. The NFQ was, eventually, to become a leading and recognisable qualifications framework; much admired around the world and often emulated in terms of approach and ethos.

The development of the NFQ began with recording the shift from awards primarily based on input factors, such as teaching hours and content, to factors where success and quality are better expressed through a coherent set of learning outcomes. This system was underpinned by the national objective of forming a lifelong learning society which would enable learners to take up learning at different stages of life, proceed at varying rates of progress and undertake varying

volumes of learning, including smaller units of learning. The concept of small units of learning pre-dates the formal concept of 'micro-credentials' quite significantly.

Lifelong learning recognises that learning takes place in formal, non-formal and informal settings that include the workplace, involvement in social and community activities, and learning through life experience generally. A major objective of the Framework was to enable the recognition of these learning achievements, to support the development of alternative pathways to qualifications (or awards), and to promote the recognition of prior learning. The framework set about shifting the perspective from young people pursuing learning in linear progression to lifelong learning pursued by all people at different times of their lives.

Those involved in the development of the Framework at this time remember a sense of excitement when given the challenge to design and implement a framework to serve the needs of all learners across the diverse education and training sector.

2.2 ADULT LITERACY

An important aspect of the proposed NFQ was that it would include all learning including general literacy and numeracy. The origins and importance of this decision were reflected in the general priorities of the Department as this time.

As remembered by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), the Department of Education and Science Learning for Life white paper on adult education[10] in 2000 cited adult literacy as a major priority. Taken together with emerging data from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) from 1994-1998[11], NALA's access to and participation in adult literacy schemes research[12] as well as data emerging from the Department of Education on provision levels in Ireland, it became clear that:

1. only a fraction of learners who had unmet literacy needs were accessing local provision opportunities, and

2. more flexible approaches to delivery were needed to help overcome barriers to access to provision including caring responsibilities, work commitments, travel and transport barriers as well as stigma around returning to literacy education in a public setting.

2.3 THE EUROPEAN DIMENSION

The Bologna Declaration in 1999[13] spoke to the willingness of the initial 29 countries involved to commit to enhance the competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It also committed to the adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees based on two main cycles and employing a recognised system of credits consciously calculated to support learner mobility. The philosophical shift that this represented was reflected in the increased importance afforded the social dimension and the focus on the individual student.

---

10 Government of Ireland (2000) Learning for Life White Paper on Adult Education. Dublin: Government Publications.

11 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) Report 1995. Note: The Adult Literacy and Lifeskills (ALL) Study (2002-2006) and Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) (2012-present) subsequently replaced the original IALS.

12 National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) (1998) Access and participation in adult literacy schemes.

13 European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and Bologna Process. Ministerial Conference Bologna 1999.

The Berlin Communiqué of September 2003[14] encouraged the member states to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which was intended to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences, and profile.

It was generally acknowledged that the Bologna process brought about an irreversible revolution in the higher education systems in Europe and its associated protocols were considered both radical and innovative as well as enabling.[15]

14   Realising the European Higher Education Area (2003) In Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin on September 19 2003.

15   Nic Giolla Mhichíl, M. (2013) 'The Changing Landscape of Higher Education: An Analysis of Bologna Policy and Ireland's Engagement with the Process', Irish Studies in International Affairs, 24, pp.331-345.; Crosier, D. and Parveva, T. (2013) The Bologna process: its impact in Europe and beyond. Paris: UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning.; Discussed in the foreword of - The University Sector Framework Implementation Network (FIN) (2009) University awards and the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ): Issues around the Design of Programmes and the Use and Assessment of Learning Outcomes.

Part 3.

Development of the NFQ in Ireland (2003-2023)

3 DEVELOPMENT OF THE NFQ IN IRELAND (2003-2023)

The development of the NFQ in Ireland marked a significant milestone in the country's education system. It is a comprehensive framework that outlines different qualifications, providing a unified and transparent structure for learners, employers, and educational institutions. Over the years, although the NFQ has remained stable as a structure, changes to the education and training environment with specific reference to new school qualifications and changes to awarding bodies have been reflected in the recognisable NFQ fan diagram.

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 set in train a process of change across the entire system of qualifications in Ireland. A new National Qualifications Authority of Ireland was established. Two new Awards Councils were also established under the Act:

- The **Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC)** made awards for learning in the Institutes of Technology, National Institutions and certain other colleges and institutions. Essentially this represented a development of the role of the former National Council for Educational Awards.

- The **Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)** made awards across a broad span of education and training areas. It incorporated the awards of the former National Council for Vocational Awards, and the awards previously made by various statutory training agencies, FÁS (the national authority for training and employment), Teagasc (agriculture) and CERT (hotel, catering and tourism). These agencies retained their function as programme providers, but their awarding functions were transferred to the Awards Council.

Despite the independence of NQAI and the two awards councils, it was clear that each had separate but interdependent roles. The objects of the Act could not be attained other than by co-operation between the three bodies and, indeed, with full involvement from a range of other stakeholders.[16] Social partners, such as employers and trade unions, were important stakeholders from the outset and were closely involved in the development of the Framework. A specific social partners' consultation forum was key to driving an understanding of employment perspectives and for ongoing development work.[17] It was recognised that the mix of statutory powers and participative development was a crucial factor in the development of the Framework achieving the necessary broad support of stakeholders and ensuring effective implementation across the education and training sector.[18]

> It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the NFQ in the developments witnessed throughout Irish education over that period. As that change has disproportionately impacted the technological higher education sector, it can reasonably be recorded that the benefits of the NFQ are keenly felt in our institutions
>
> ***Technological Higher Education Association, 2023***

16   NQAI (2001) *Towards a National Framework of Qualifications: A discussion document.*

17   OECD and National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) (2003) The Role of National Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning - Background Report for Ireland.

18   ibid

3.0.1   The Importance of NFQ versus NQF

It is worthwhile situating the NFQ among its counterparts in Europe and elsewhere. In Europe, the general term used is a 'national qualifications framework,' that is, a framework of national qualifications, in that it generally includes nationally developed and awarded qualifications only. In many cases and in higher education in particular, older qualifications had to be discarded and were replaced by newer qualifications that fitted the aims of the Bologna Declaration. After that declaration was signed in 1999, a seismic change for many European countries was the move away from a so-called, long, first-cycle higher education award, and the development of new qualifications in the space of bachelor's and master's degrees. National governments required that these new qualifications be accredited and evaluated at programme level and industry, business and the professions had to be exhorted to recognise the 'first cycle' or bachelor's degree as being relevant to the labour market, including the public service. Bologna signatory countries like Ireland and the UK that already had in place the three-cycle bachelor's, master's and doctoral structure were freer to move faster with the development of qualifications frameworks.

Ireland took the decision to develop a framework of the qualifications that were already available nationally and to assemble them into what became a National Framework of Qualifications ('an NFQ'). This meant that the number of levels in the Irish Framework had to be such that it could accommodate the multiple qualification types at higher education such as the higher certificate, higher diploma, general bachelor's degree, honours bachelor's degree, post-graduate diploma and master's degree across only two cycles of the Bologna framework of qualifications. This led to the inclusion of six major awards at four levels across two higher education cycles.

3.1   ROLE OF NQAI

In 2001, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) was established following enabling legislation, marking the initial steps towards the development of the NFQ. The NQAI was principally responsible for coordinating and standardising qualifications across various sectors, ensuring their quality and comparability. In undertaking the development of a national framework, its main objective was to create a framework that would enhance lifelong learning, mobility, and recognition of qualifications.

Importantly, the Irish qualifications framework set out to be a new development, not simply the restatement of existing awards systems.[19]

3.1.1   The National Framework of Qualifications

In 2002, the NQAI adopted a vision for the NFQ which included a commitment that the framework would continue to be relevant to learners throughout their lives and contribute to the development of a lifelong learning society. It was acknowledged that the progress towards an NFQ was an exciting development and addressed a long-standing problem of a lack of coherence in education and training in Ireland.

---

19   Granville, G. (2003) "Stop Making Sense': Chaos and coherence in the formulation of the Irish qualifications framework', Journal of Education and Work, 16(3), pp.259-270.

The work of the NQAI was characterised by a systematic process of consultation, involving the publication of Discussion Documents, ongoing dialogue with a wide range of education partners and interests, presentations and consultative meetings. From this process, a set of values and principles and an approach to the framework incorporating levels, award types and named awards, has emerged'

Gary Granville, 2003

In 2003, the NQAI introduced the first version of the NFQ as a system of ten levels, based on standards of knowledge, skill, and competence (learning outcomes), which incorporates awards made for all kinds of learning wherever gained. As well as this 10-level structure, the NFQ includes award types of different classes. An award-type is a class of named awards (i.e., advanced certificate, honours bachelor's degree) sharing common features and level. They reflect a mix of standards of knowledge, skill and competence which is independent of any specific field of learning.
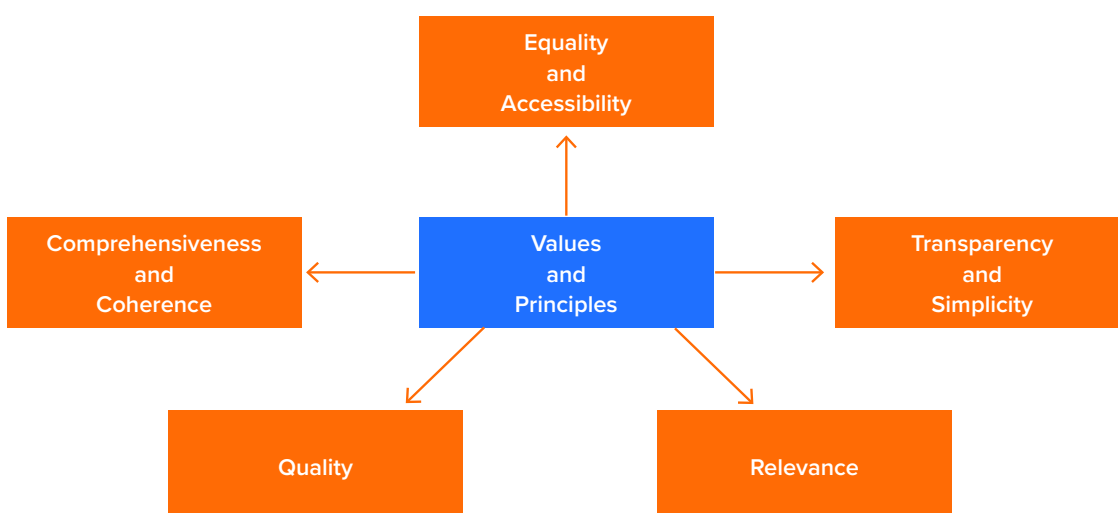
Figure 3. Values and Principles underpinning the NFQ in 2003

Amongst these are the large or 'major' awards. Major awards are the principal class of awards made at each level and capture a typical range of learning achievements at the level. Sixteen major award-types were initially established for the Irish Framework.

Qualifications are also awarded for smaller learning achievements. These are known in the Framework as minor, special purpose and supplemental awards and are used as follows:

- **Minor Awards**: for partial completion of the outcomes for a major award

- **Supplemental Awards**: for learning that is additional to a major award

- **Special Purpose Awards**: for relatively narrow or purpose-specific achievement.

Therefore, minor awards and supplemental awards always have a relationship with at least one major award, whilst a special purpose award may share some outcomes with a major award but can also be a stand-alone award.

School, further education and training and higher education and training awards – ranging from basic literacy awards to doctoral degrees – are included in the NFQ. Qualifications in the NFQ are quality assured and so a learner knows that the programme they are undertaking, and the provider offering the qualification, are reviewed internally and externally. The NFQ also enables learners to compare awards and plan their progression through the Framework.

The Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) reported that the introduction of the NFQ and the formal levelling of further education post-leaving certificate (PLC) courses in the Irish system had a tremendous impact on the education and training system.

> Improving pathways and second chances at third-level courses for students who did not achieve their points in the first place. It also pushed the older universities to think more outside the box.
>
> **_Guidance Counsellor 2023_**

3.1.2   Access, Transfer & Progression

The Act also established the legal basis for the introduction of national policies for access, transfer and progression (ATP). The two awards Councils, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), were responsible for implementing procedures for ATP established by NQAI.

As described in detail in the review of ATP commissioned in 2023, the NQAI published _Policies, actions and procedures for the promotion of access, transfer and progression_ in 2003. In this policy, the NQAI set out its vision, operational principles, and objectives for ATP in addition to actions and procedures for itself, HETAC, FETAC and providers. The 2003 policy articulates a vision for learner mobility:

"... the learner should be able to enter and successfully participate in a programme, or series of programmes, leading to an award, or series of awards, in pursuit of their learning objectives; the National Framework of Qualifications and associated programme provision should be structured to facilitate learner entry and to promote transfer and progression; thus, learners can be encouraged to participate in the learning process to enable them to realise their ambitions to the full extent of their abilities (NQAI, 2003)."

The NQAI devised its ATP policy around four key areas: credit; entry routes; transfer and progression opportunities; and information provision.
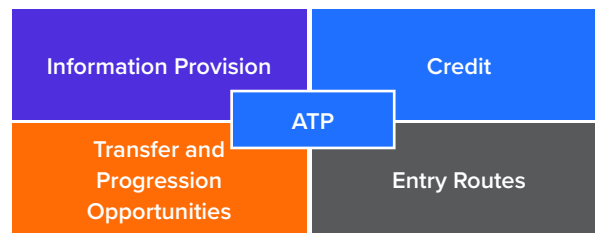
Figure 4. NQAI Approach to ATP

The IUA reports that the NFQ provided an invaluable opportunity to better articulate and align access, transfer and progression routes resulting in significantly improved transparency regarding the ways in which higher education works in Ireland, allowing all stakeholders to better navigate systems and procedures. This has been critical as higher education has expanded in scale, becoming more accessible and equitable for the under-represented and socio-economically disadvantaged, in particular.

Separate Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training[20], an additional tool in the ATP toolkit, were published separately by NQAI in 2005. FETAC and HETAC also developed relevant, but different, policies and procedures based on the NQAI principles and guidelines to enable learners gain recognition for attaining standards of knowledge, skills and competence, regardless of how this learning was acquired[21].

Case Study: Awards at initial levels of Framework offered by NALA

NALA's first online learning website, WriteOn.ie, was set up in 2008 to:

- provide free, flexible online learning in Ireland for those adult literacy learners who could not access or were not ready to access existing provision in Adult Literacy Services; and

- facilitate literacy development and certification for adult learners, initially at level 2 and later at level 3 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

Between 2008 and 2019, when WriteOn.ie was decommissioned, 11,593 adult literacy learners achieved 42,190 national Quality and Qualification Ireland (QQI) minor awards in literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy through the website[22].

---

20 NQAI (2005) Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training.

21 QQI (2013) Section 4.7 – Green Paper on the Recognition of Prior Learning.

22 NALA (2022) Leading the way in online learning.

3.1.3. Awarding Bodies

At this time in 2001, the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology had independent awarding powers. Other providers, including the remaining institutes of technology, had their programmes validated by either of the two Councils.

The previously established universities have, since 2003, shared responsibility for the implementation of the NFQ with autonomous awarding powers established under the Universities Act 1997. As presented by the IUA, working in partnership to navigate the challenges of initial implementation of the NFQ generated a wealth of experience and good practice that continues to this day, 20 years later.

The Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) reports that the launch of the framework accelerated the maturing of the technological sector and considers that the 1999 Act put the then institutes of technology on the right path for further improving and maintaining the quality of education and training which was necessary for achieving delegated authority.

Initially, quality assured qualifications offered by professional bodies and international awarding bodies operating in Ireland could also be recognised through the NFQ.

2003 Awarding Arrangements		
Awarding Bodies	**Award Information**	**Additional Information**
Department of Education and Science	Secondary school awards	
Universities (7) and Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT)	Higher education awards of their own	
Higher Education and Training Council (HETAC)	Institutes of technology (13), national Institutions and certain other colleges and institutions availed of these awards (25)	HETAC delegated power to IOTs to make awards at various levels from the early 2000s onwards
Further Education and Training Council (FETAC)	Broad span of education and training areas outside of higher education	

Figure 5. Overview of awarding bodies in 2003

3.1.4 Summary of the Framework

To summarise, the essential elements of the Framework as set out in 2003 were as follows:

- The Framework has ten levels, which incorporate schools, further and higher education and training qualifications. These are represented through a fan diagram, which is kept up to date.

- There are overarching level indicators at each level of the Framework with associated sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence appropriate to the achievement of an award at each of these levels. These indicators are expressed in terms of learning outcomes.

- There are two overall types of awards in the Framework: major awards and non-major awards.

- There is a larger volume and breadth associated with major award-types than with non-major awards. There are currently 16 major award-types included across the ten levels of the Framework.

- There are four classes of non-major award: minor, special purpose, supplemental and professional[23]. Award-type descriptors for these classes of award are available. The descriptors are broad in nature in order to be able to incorporate a wide range and variety of programme provision. These awards capture smaller or more prescriptive pieces of learning.

- Awards included in the Framework are expected to indicate the access, transfer and progression arrangements (ATP) associated with them.

- Awards included in the Framework are subject to quality assurance processes.

3.2   EMBEDDING THE NFQ

Between 2004 and 2010, NQAI, in collaboration with the education and training councils (FETAC and HETAC) and the wider sector, worked on refining and embedding the NFQ. During this period, more qualifications were included in the framework, including vocational and further education awards. The institutes of technology converted all programmes to meet the requirements of the Framework, using a learning outcomes-based paradigm and demonstrating disciplinary-appropriate distribution of the eight knowledge, skills, and competence sub-strands. [24] The University Sector Framework Implementation Network (FIN) was jointly established in 2007 by the NQAI and the Irish University Association (IUA) to deepen the implementation of the NFQ generally, and to ensure the inclusion of existing university awards in the Framework, specifically. This network also discussed and addressed the significant challenges experienced by the sector[25]. It was acknowledged that although there was strength in a responsive, flexible university system that designed programmes in response to both national and local needs, this breadth and diversity of programme choice could lead to confusion for learners attempting to navigate the qualifications systems.[26]

---

23 Professional award-type descriptors were introduced later.

24 Reflections of Dr Jean Hughes.

25 FIN (2009) University awards and the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ): Issues around the Design of Programmes and the Use and Assessment of Learning Outcomes.

26 ibid

NFQ Level	NFQ Major Award-Types	Credit volume
1	Junior Cycle Level 1 Certificate	n/a 20 FET credits
2	Junior Cycle Level 2 Certificate	n/a 30 FET credits
3	Junior Cycle Level 3 Certificate	n/a 60 FET credits
4	Leaving Certificate Level 4 Certificate	n/a 90 FET credits
5	Leaving Certificate Level 5 Certificate	n/a 120 FET credits
6	Advanced Certificate Higher Certificate	120 FET credits 120 ECTS
7	Ordinary Bachelor's Degree	180 ECTS
8	Higher Diploma Honours Bachelor's Degree	60 ECTS 180-240 ECTS
9	Post-graduate Diploma Master's Degree	60 ECTS 60-120 ECTS
10	Doctoral Degree Higher Doctorate	n/a n/a

Figure 6. NFQ Levels and Major Award-Types in 2003

3.2.1 Referencing to Overarching Frameworks

A crucial development was the early verification (in 2006) of the compatibility of Irish NFQ qualification types against the European Higher Education Area (Bologna Process)[27] three-cycle (bachelor's, master's, doctorate) system for higher education.

In 2009, a significant development took place with the referencing of the NFQ to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (which had been launched in 2008), the first national qualifications framework to complete this exercise. The EQF provided a common reference framework to compare qualifications across Europe, facilitating mobility and recognition of qualifications. The NFQ was referenced to the EQF, ensuring compatibility and comparability with European standards. During stakeholder interviews, it was commented that "without the NFQ, there would be no EQF" which indicates, perhaps, the wide-reaching impact of the NFQ.

---

27 NQAI (2006) Verification of Compatibility of Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area – Final Report, November 2006.

3.2.2 Europass Diploma Supplement

A Europass Diploma Supplement[28] is issued to graduates of higher education institutions. It provides additional information on a graduate's award, including the level of the award on the NFQ. The Diploma Supplement also contains information on the referencing of the Irish NFQ to the Bologna and EQF Frameworks. Increasing use of the Diploma Supplement has also aided recognition and progression internationally.

ECTS [associated with Bologna] was again a very innovative concept, beneficial to everybody especially for students. ECTS exposed workload imbalances and promoted equivalence in the demands of courses.

Academic HEI Representative, 2023

In 2002, the Department of Education and Science established a National Steering Group on the Bologna Process, and this group developed the first National Template for the Diploma Supplement in December 2003. In late 2007, the National Steering Group was re-established by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland to support implementation of the Diploma Supplement and to manage changes to the National Guidelines and/or National Template used for completing the Diploma Supplement. A survey was conducted with 68 institutions in 2008 to gain a better understanding of the implementation of the Diploma Supplement. At this stage, a high number of institutions were not yet issuing the Diploma Supplement, citing issues with technology, while some had no awareness of the requirement. New guidelines and a new template were developed and issued in 2009 and again in 2014.

In the NFQ Referencing Report 2020, the following information was provided:

'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. References 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.'

3.2.3 Europass Certificate Supplement

The Europass Certificate Supplement is issued by vocational education and training (VET) institutions and offers helpful information on your vocational qualifications (such as grades, achievements and institutions) in a standard format. The Europass Certificate Supplement (ECS), managed by QQI as the awarding body for further education, provides a clear reference to the EQF level in the supplementary information for awards at NFQ Levels 4, 5 and 6. QQI, in its role as

---

28   QQI (2020a). Europass Diploma Supplement.

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 original Certificate Supplement Template and associated guidelines were developed by FETAC in 2002 arising from a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council in July 2001 regarding mobility within the Community for learners, volunteers, teachers, and trainers. Following the establishment of Europass in 2004, FETAC undertook a project to redevelop the Certificate Supplement in line with new requirements and these updated certificates were issued from approximately 2008.

3.2.4 Impact of NFQ after 5 years (2009)

The first study on the impact and implementation of the NFQ was commissioned in 2009[29]. This study commended the success of the Framework in achieving a high level of prominence in Ireland which was recognised as an achievement requiring the involvement and collaboration of a wide range of stakeholders. The Framework was beginning to influence learners in terms of the language used to underpin choices, teaching and learning and new opportunities for progression.

> The award levels on the NFQ are referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and RPL activity may therefore be mapped to relevant EQF levels as per the 2012 Council Recommendation principle that validation arrangements are linked to national qualifications frameworks and are in line with the EQF
>
> **RPL Project Leads MU & UCD, 2023**

However, even in 2009, it was recognised that the communication of the Framework remained critical to its visibility and success and that there was a challenge in addressing the need for deeper engagement at a technical level. The study emphasised the need for pragmatism, compromise and continuous engagement with stakeholders and the requirement for sustained leadership and oversight of implementation.

Finally, this impact study found commonality with other frameworks in a similar position such as Scotland and New Zealand and highlighted that time and partnership were key to successful implementation.

Qualifications Frameworks - Going Global
Enhancing the transparency, quality and mobility
of qualifications, nationally and internationally.

- **NFQ**   Irish National Framework of Qualifications
- **EQF**   European Qualifications Framework
- **QF-EHEA**   Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area

For further information consult: www.QQI.ie

©QQI 2024

Supported by the Erasmus+
Programme of the European Union
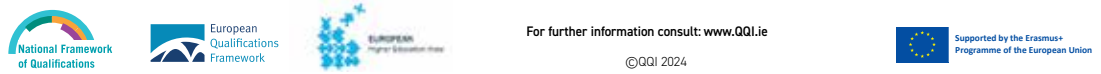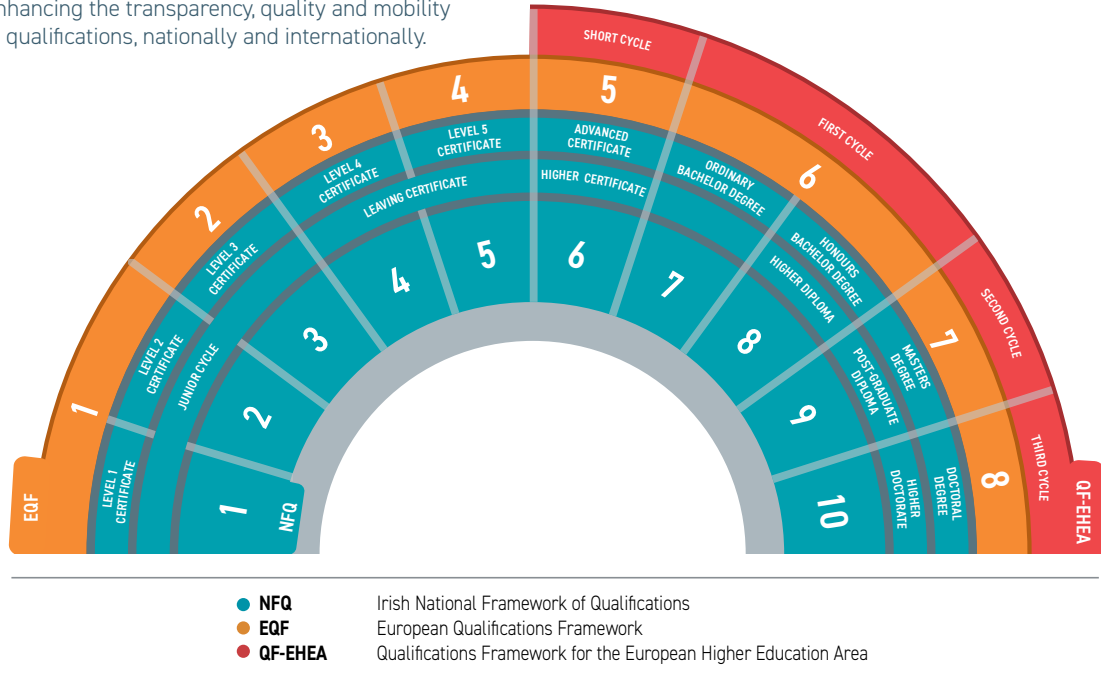
Figure 7. NFQ Levels Referenced to EQF & QF EHEA 2023

3.3   ESTABLISHMENT OF QQI

In 2012, the Irish government established Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI)[30], amalgamating several existing agencies, including the NQAI which then ceased to exist. This consolidation aimed to streamline the qualifications process and ensure a coherent approach to quality assurance. QQI subsequently took over the responsibility of maintaining and further developing the NFQ.

> The NFQ was highly regarded in Europe for its comprehensiveness, its rigour, clarity and logic. Irish qualifications would be perfectly understood.
>
> *HEI academic representative, 2023*

Shortly after the establishment of QQI, in 2013, 16 regional education and training boards (ETBs) were established following the dissolution of the 33 regional vocational education committees and FÁS, the national training authority.

---

30 QQI Website (www.qqi.ie).

3.3.1   Professional Awards

In 2014, descriptors for the professional class of award-types at levels 5-9 were published[31]. The professional award-type and its descriptors were developed to strengthen the capacity of the NFQ to resolve differences between levels of professional/occupation-oriented awards. However, it is worth noting that the 2012 legislation removed the previous capacity of the NQAI to recognise awards of professional and international awarding bodies in the NFQ through a process known as alignment.

The IGC also reported the impact of validating apprenticeships at NFQ Levels 5-10 for parity of esteem with other qualifications. It was felt this visibility was especially important to parents.

Award Type	Description	Levels
Major	The main class of award made at each level. It represents a significant number of learning outcomes.	1-10
Minor	All minor awards are linked to a major award which allows learners the opportunity to build on their minor awards and work towards gaining a major award. It is important to note that minor awards are achievements in their own right.	1-9
Special Purpose	Specific areas of learning that have a narrow scope.	3-9
Supplemental	Learning which is additional to a previous award. They could, for example, relate to updating and refreshing knowledge or skills, or to continuing professional development.	3-9
Professional	These 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's degree award could be classed as both major and professional and would need to be consistent with the bachelor's award-type as well as the professional award-type.	5-10[32]

Figure 8. Summary of award types post 2014 and the available levels for each

---

31   QQI (2014) Professional Award-type Descriptors (Award Class: Professional) For the Alignment of Professional Awards at NFQ Levels 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9.

32   Professional award-type descriptors are only available for levels 5-9, though apprenticeships have been designed at level 10.

The introduction of the professional award-type descriptors provided a more formal mechanism for the emergent use of the NFQ by professions and regulators as well as traditional education and training providers. For example, the Central Bank of Ireland issued minimum competency requirements in 2007, which were expanded in 2017, requiring new entrants to the insurance industry to hold a relevant recognised qualification at NFQ Level 7. It was this shift to NFQ-recognised qualifications that motivated the Insurance Institute of Ireland to start the process of transitioning all designations to the NFQ. This created an academic pathway for insurance professionals which is underpinned by internationally recognised academic rigour, mobility across geographies and sectors, and provides progression routes to further education and lifelong learning in the sector.

In a pre-conference workshop, prospective listed awarding bodies emphasised the importance of the professional award-type descriptor and the key role it will play in the inclusion of their awards in the Framework. Many of these prospective listed awarding bodies deliver professional education at all levels of the Framework.

Case Study: NFQ and streamlining professional qualifications in Early Learning and Care from levels 5 to 8, a FET perspective

Author: Fiona Fay, Early Learning and Care programme manager, Quality Officer, Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board

Introduction
The NFQ enabled the development of professional qualifications in early learning and care at levels 5 through 8.

Early Years – a regulated sector for employment
Since 2011, the *Level 5 Certificate in Early Childhood Care and Education 5M2009* and the *Advanced Certificate in Early Childhood Care and Education 6M2007* have been situated in the Common Awards System (CAS). CAS is unique to the further education and training sector (FET), as well as being the predominant QQI award standards framework in this part of the tertiary sector. The Early Years sector is regulated for employment by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Both major awards are recognised qualifications for working in Early Years. They are also recognised for progression to higher education through CAO.

Review of awards and development of new Professional Award-type Descriptors at NFQ Levels 5-8
When the *Early Childhood Care and Education* awards came up for review in 2018-2019, it was decided to consider new qualifications at levels 5 and 6 within the broader policy landscape of Early Years, this landscape itself undergoing significant reform. As a result, the FET qualifications were no longer to be based in CAS but in professional award-type descriptors (PATD), with a focus on professional major awards at these levels.
Arising out of work led by QQI and a Standards Review Group, and work done in parallel led by DES and DCYA on the *Professional Awards and Criteria Guidelines* for degree programmes at levels 7 and 8, the *Professional Award-type Descriptors at NFQ Levels 5 to 8: Annotated for QQI Early Learning and Care Awards* were published in November 2019.

Using the new award standards, the 16 ETBs collaborated on the development of two new programmes led by Dublin and Dún Laoghaire ETB. The *Level 5 Certificate in Early Learning and Care* and the *Advanced Certificate in Early Learning and Care* were validated by QQI in July 2021, leading to new professional awards 5M21473 and 6M21471 respectively. By June 2022, 318 FET learners from across the ETBs had achieved the new Level 5 Certificate in ELC 5M21473. As the existing awards are phased out by December 2023, the number of FET graduates with professional ELC awards at levels 5 and 6 is set to grow significantly.

The NFQ – an enabling framework for professional recognition and streamlined progression in education
The publication of the PATD for Early Learning and Care marked the first time that FET qualifications were placed on the same professional framework as higher education qualifications for the sector. Since many FET graduates find employment in Early Years, the framework confers professional recognition on FET graduates, as befits their roles as Early Years educators. This is hugely significant for professional identity and a sense of belonging to a professional community.

Reform is ongoing in the Early Years sector. The workforce development plan, *Nurturing Skills*, sets goals on establishing a career framework and raising qualifications by 2028. The drive towards a graduate-led workforce and the focus on upskilling existing staff are two key elements in achieving these goals. Situating the ELC awards in professional award-type descriptors defined by NFQ level sets the stage for streamlined progression in education from FET to HE. Two points of note arise in this context.

Firstly, the award standards are cumulative. As a major award at each level in the PATD assumes the achievement of the standards at the level below, the relevance of the distinction that exists between Advanced and Higher Certificates at level 6 comes into question. This distinction is surely a moot point.

Secondly, in the context of a unified tertiary sector, the PATD for ELC is a blueprint for a two plus two model of progression from further education and training to higher education.

With the standards for levels 5 and 6 alongside the standards for levels 7 and 8, and explicitly interpreted through annotations to boot, the staggered junction that learners encounter crossing from FET to HE is effectively straightened out

3.3.2   Access, Transfer & Progression under QQI

In 2015, following consultation a restatement of the 2003 Access, Transfer and Progression[33] in relation to learners for providers of further and higher education and training was confirmed.

The Irish further education and training (FET) sector has been heavily reliant on small-volume credentials for many years. QQI oversees a national system of small-volume qualifications in FET that was first developed by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and is called the Common Awards System (CAS). That system's "micro-credentials" are called "components". Components are included in the NFQ and classed as minor awards with each having expected learning outcomes, FET credit, and an NFQ level inter alia. Components are absolutely and automatically transferrable between providers. Various mixtures of components can be aggregated to earn 'compound' awards that are also included in the NFQ and may be classed as major, special purpose, or supplemental.

> The professional award-type descriptors (PATDs) were crucial when developing the Insurance Apprenticeship (and indeed all subsequent awards post 2016) as they allowed the Consortium and the Institute to incorporate the professional and ethical requirements that are so important to the sector into the Occupational Profile and the programme learning outcomes. The NFQ and PATDs have insured the apprenticeship qualification is academically robust and vocationally relevant. Graduate apprentices now have a globally recognised qualification that can be mapped to the EQF and beyond and many are progressing to Level 9 awards that are not just industry-specific.
>
> *Irish Insurance Institute, 2023*

The scale is considerable: QQI issued circa 2.5 million awards between 2012 and 2021 of which 84% were non-major awards and most have been for FET with credit volumes as low as 50 hours of learner effort. However, CAS is more of a supply-led than a demand-led system, and this underlines the importance of considering micro-credentials in the context of their wider role in the qualifications system.

The Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) congratulated the NFQ on the role it plays in providing a roadmap for progression. It also commended the establishment of the new National Tertiary Office which will allow students to commence their third-level experience in further education and complete their studies in higher education, enabling a whole new generation of learners to benefit from the progression opportunities provided by the NFQ.

3.3.2.1 QQI Insight – Review of Landscape of Practice Supporting ATP

QQI commissioned a high-level review of ATP practice[34] in Ireland in 2023. The findings of this review indicate that the principles of equity and social inclusion that underpin ATP, as articulated in the original vision for ATP in 2003, are translated into practice in numerous initiatives by dedicated

---

33   QQI (2015) QQI Policy Restatement - Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression in Relation to Learners for Providers of Further and Higher Education and Training.

34   Peck, C. and Stritch, D. (2023) From Counting to Cultivating Successful Participation - A Review of the Landscape of Practice Supporting Access Transfer and Progression in Irish Education and Training. Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

professionals. However, at times, the impact of such initiatives are undermined by systems that do not integrate. Examples include the ongoing existence of two credit systems in the tertiary sector; the different treatment of FET Level 5 awards for progression to HET; different funding streams in FET, priorities that do not adequately align (for example, widening and increasing access generally, whilst meeting skills needs in very particular areas) and the unintended consequences of well-intentioned interventions (for example, scholarships which waive fees for refugees, but fail to address the basic financial requirements for food on campus or travel expenses etc.).

The review identified a number of key findings in relation to current ATP practice, the implementation of ATP procedures by providers and the national policy and funding infrastructure which enables and incentivises providers in this task.

- Significantly, all providers offering programmes leading to awards in the NFQ have policies and procedures for ATP in place and utilise the building blocks of the NFQ. These include stated learning outcomes, FET or ECTS credits and provision of specified information to learners to support ATP implementation.

- There are a wide range of initiatives, projects and supports in place to enable successful access, transfer and progression by particular groups of learners.

- QQI validation processes have due regard for ensuring that providers have adequately specified the ATP arrangements in place for new programmes.

- At a national level, there is an increased focus on, and incentivisation of, providers to expand ATP pathways (e.g. the SOLAS FET Strategy; through HEA funding arrangements; the new National Tertiary Office to name a few examples discussed throughout this report).

Figure 9. Example of an award at Level 2 delivered by NALA

However, despite the enormous strides made towards realising national ambitions for ATP, there remain gaps and vulnerabilities which prevent a fuller realisation at this juncture. These include:

- The need for a fuller articulation of a national vision and objectives for ATP which adequately encompass the reality of successful participation.

- The sheer number of pathways and discrete sources of information (and gaps in same) on these pathways for learners which add to the complexity and opacity of the qualifications system rather than aiding its navigation by learners.

- The absence of a formal national policy and approach to RPL, which may contribute to inconsistent practice and undermine confidence in the RPL process.

- The emphasis across a range of policy and funding areas on *enabling entry* to programmes in the absence of concomitant efforts and supports to ensure *successful participation* across all aspects of the learner journey and the *achievement of awards.*

- The focus on particular categories of learners in national approaches to access whilst laudable and necessary in some areas, may, if undertaken in isolation, be somewhat reductive and obscure wider efforts to universally enable ATP for all learners.

- The gaps in data, both quantitative and qualitative, which undermine efforts to comprehensively evaluate the impact of ATP and related measures.
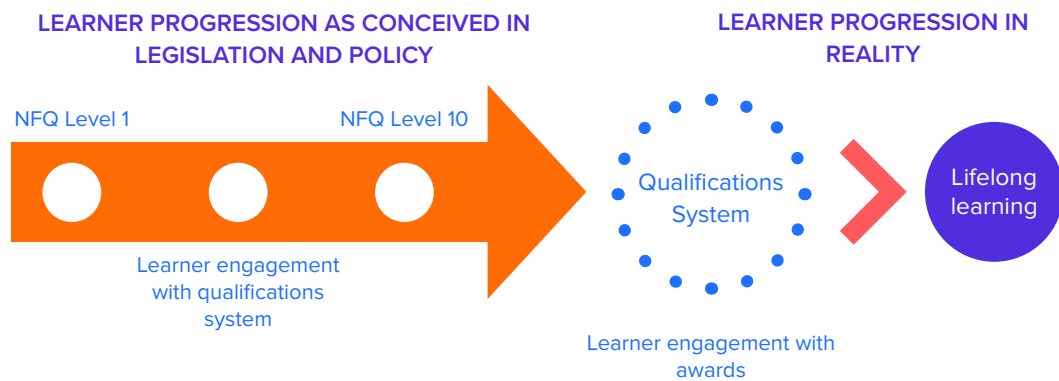
Figure 10. Summary of theoretical learner progression versus the reality of learner progression

3.3.2.2 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

In 2020, RPL was included in the '*Programme for Government, Our Shared Future*'[35] which makes a commitment to "develop and implement a standardised system of accreditation of prior learning taking account of previous education, skills, work experience and engagement in society". This is a significant development for Ireland and together with the allocation of dedicated funding for RPL projects in the FET and HE sectors enabling providers to develop their practices and provision further, has facilitated important progress since 2018.

---

35   Government of Ireland (2020) Programme for Government: Our Shared Future. Department of the Taoiseach.

In May 2023, the OECD Skills Strategy Ireland Assessment and Recommendations Report[36] was published. For Ireland, the following was recommended: 'Strengthening the capacity of Education and Training Providers to offer recognition of prior learning including by establishing national guidelines outlining the procedures and processes of RPL' in order to foster greater participation in lifelong learning.

In the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030[37], the NFQ was acknowledged as a platform tasked with improving the interface between further and higher education in terms of access, transfer, progression, quality assurance, upskilling and lifelong learning. The outcomes-based approach which the NFQ adopts readily lends itself to RPL practice by facilitating learners and education providers to map a diversity of learning, pathways and programmes to a single reference point. A review by Goggin et al. (2015)[38] found that whilst there were eighteen RPL policies in existence across Irish higher education institutions highlighting common themes and areas of good practice, the report identified a lack of coherence and consistency within and between institutions regarding policy and practice. It is no surprise therefore, that one of the recommendations arising from that funded research was the development and implementation of a national policy and strategy across higher education. This recommendation was noted again in an inventory of RPL activity in Ireland by Murphy (2019)[39] on behalf of Cedefop.

However, a significant strength of the Irish NFQ is the concept of RPL for award. In 2022, the first graduates of the Level 6 hairdressing apprenticeship, offered by Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board, received their awards solely through the formal recognition of their prior learning. This followed on from the previous experiences of RPL for award such as that of the TOBAR project between ETBs and the Defence Forces that resulted in awards solely by RPL being made at levels 3-6.

36 OECD (2023) OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations. Paris: OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing.

37 Government of Ireland (2011) National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. Report of the Strategy Group. Dublin: Government Publications.

38 Goggin, D., Sheridan, I., O'Leary, P., and Cassidy, S. (2015). A Current Overview of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Irish Higher Education, Focused Research Report No. 2. Dublin: National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

39 Murphy, I. (2019). European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Ireland.

Case Study: TOBAR Project [40]– RPL for Award

Introduction: TOBAR ran over a period from 2018 to 2019, enabling members of the Defence Forces to gain various awards on the basis of their prior learning. The ten participating ETBs worked collectively and in partnership with the Defence Forces, through the auspices of ETBI, with input from other stakeholders such as QQI. Its significance as a pilot project in RPL derived from the fact that it extended to all forms of learning, i.e., not just formal learning but also non-formal and informal, and provided for the achievement of full awards, not just for programme entry or exemption.

Results: A total of 91 learners achieved awards which included 21 major and 386 minor awards. There were 121 minor awards made at level 3, a further 67 at level 4, 133 at level 5 and 65 at level 6. Of the minor awards made at level 4 and above, a total of 190 achieved a distinction (72%), 61 achieved a merit (23%), with 14 awards at pass level (5%). Communications, Word Processing, and Teamworking were among the more common awards chosen.

Impact: Learners expressed a very high level of satisfaction with what they had achieved, reflecting with enthusiasm and gratitude on their RPL journey. Among the quantitative results collected, the vast majority (46 learners or 94%) indicated that it was an enjoyable experience. Participation was conducive to developing various dispositions and competences that have been recognised elsewhere as essential for today's workplace, for example, learning to learn competence, personal initiative and effectiveness. Learners had a greater awareness of the significance of their existing knowledge and its transferability to other contexts. They also developed project management and writing skills that were useful for continued participation in education and training.

---

40 de Paor, C. (2021) Evaluation of Tobar - a pilot project in the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI).

RPL for Award for Individuals in Changing Professional Environments[41]

A significant volume of work has been undertaken within Donegal ETB to facilitate learners working in sectors with changing requirements, utilising a process for the Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning that enables candidates to have their experiential learning validated and achieve a full award. A direct contribution to this review outlined that this has been particularly important for workers in the healthcare sector who may have substantial experience and require a specific number of awards to maintain their employment, meet contractual requirements or to progress. It has also been used to recognise the learning of individuals who have been made redundant from the banking industry following decades of service, who had not previously achieved learning recognised on the NFQ. Subsequent to undertaking the RPL process and achievement of the award, many were able to progress to higher education and obtain advanced entry to programmes. This work is also documented in an article by Magee (2023).

RPL for award has also been undertaken in FET in the context of the Advanced Certificate in Hairdressing Apprenticeship programme, where the first eight graduates were conferred following a process facilitated by the Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board. A pilot group of eight experienced hairdressers completed the RPL process in nine months, as distinct from the three years required for the apprenticeship programme. The process followed and benefits obtained are set out in detail in an article by Hogan et al (2023).

The need for a national RPL framework was emphasised in both the QQI Review of Landscape of Practice Supporting ATP and the AONTAS Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland report.

> It wasn't just that the degree wasn't recognized, your work experience was not even recognized, so it's as if you're starting from rock bottom like all over and then you kind of don't have the chance to even try because you feel like there is no opportunity to say that you can use your business skills or knowledge
>
> ***Migrant Adult Learner, 2022***

3.3.3 Policy Impact Assessment of NFQ (2016)

In 2016, QQI commissioned an independent Policy Impact Assessment of the NFQ[42]. An extensive survey of stakeholder views collected data on the impact of the NFQ. Stakeholders were also asked about the effectiveness of QQI in leading the development of the NFQ, and about the future policy direction for the NFQ. The full report was published in 2017, while a companion paper focusing on Reflections and Trajectories was published in 2016.

---

41   Peck, C. and Stritch, D. (2023) From Counting to Cultivating Successful Participation - A Review of the Landscape of Practice Supporting Access Transfer and Progression in Irish Education and Training. Quality and Qualifications in Ireland.

42   Indecon International Research Economists (2017) Policy Impact Assessment of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications.

The report found that the language of the NFQ was established as common currency, but that a depth of understanding among both student and employers was lacking. It was found that the introduction of the NFQ had improved the quality of teaching and learning and that by this time, learning outcomes-referenced qualifications were an integral part of the education and training system. It was raised that some aspects of the NFQ infrastructure continue to be confusing given the two major awards at Level 6 and the Leaving Certificate being spread across two levels being cited as examples. The findings of the report found strong agreement that the NFQ facilitated improved access to education and improved progression between qualifications. It also found that the NFQ made it easier to value and recognise learning and qualifications achieved outside of formal education and training. However, with specific reference to the further education sector it found that progression practice lacked transparency and that local arrangements continued to dominate. A more general issue raised was the excessive perceived importance of university education in Irish society.

The report made several recommendations including reviewing the two awards at Level 6, ensuring clarity and simplicity of communication, including a broader range of qualifications, and establishing a national forum for qualifications. Data about access, transfer and progression was also identified as important.

3.3.4 Focused Review of NFQ (2019)

In 2019, QQI embarked on a focused review of the NFQ, tasked with ensuring its relevance and responsiveness to the changing needs of learners and the labour market. This review aimed to align the framework with emerging trends in education and employment, as well as to enhance its international recognition and comparability. This report re-iterated the need for effective communication and engagement with the industry regarding the NFQ, EQF and related services.

3.3.5 Amended Legislation (2019)

The 2019 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act introduced important changes, strengthened the comprehensive nature of the framework and its role as central coordinating mechanism for qualifications, and clarified the legal route to the NFQ for all qualifications.

3.3.6 Green Paper on Qualifications (2020)

The Green Paper[43], a discussion paper, outlines the Irish qualifications system and poses broad questions on possible opportunities for its enhancement. It was supported by a Technical Paper which provided more depth[44].The Green Paper was intended to launch a discussion about Ireland's qualifications system and will be used to inform future discussions and developments.

---

43   QQI (2020b) Green Paper on the Qualifications System.

44   QQI (2020c) Technical Paper on the Qualifications System.

3.3.7   Comparing NFQ Level 6 Awards (2022)

In 2020, QQI commissioned Ecctis[45], the operators of the UK National Information Centre for the recognition and evaluation of international qualifications and skills, to determine whether there is a significant difference between the learning associated with the Advanced Certificate programme cycle and the Higher Certificate programme as implemented at level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications.

Key findings of the report suggest that:

- both the advanced certificate and higher certificate qualifications are appropriately aligned to NFQ Level 6 in terms of achieved learner outcomes;

- there is a difference in the distribution of NFQ sub-strands between the AC and HC programmes sampled. Whilst the number of sub-strands at level 5 was comparable for the AC and HC samples respectively, the number of sub-strands at level 7 was significantly higher for the HC programmes overall (18 for the sample of HCs vs 6 for the sample of ACs).

- entry requirements did not identify a significant difference in the educational level of entrants to either set of programmes sampled.

- the durations of the AC and HC cycles are broadly comparable in that they are at least two academic years full-time but there are different credit systems and therefore different notional hours of learner effort required – 2400 hours for the AC cycle and at least 3000 hours for the HC (based on 120 ECTS)

Report	Year
Verification of Comparability of Irish NFQ with QF EHEA	2006
Referencing Report to EQF & QF EHEA	2009
Framework Implementation and Impact Study	2009
Policy Impact Assessment of NFQ	2016
Making Sense of Qualifications	2019
Green Paper on Qualifications	2020
Re-referencing to EQF & QF EHEA	2020
Comparing NFQ Level 6 Awards in Higher and Further Education	2022
Review of ATP landscape	2023

Figure 11. Overview of reports relevant to the NFQ 2003-2023

---

45   Ecctis (2021) Evaluation of the Comparability of the Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate Qualifications.

3.3.8 Review of QQI Award Standards

In 2023, QQI commenced a project to review and update the common award system (CAS) award standards. The CAS supports over 1700 award standards in further education and training (FET). It covers major and non-major award types in all fields of learning across NFQ Levels 1-6. CAS award standards set out the expected learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skill and competence to be achieved before a relevant QQI award can be made to a learner. The CAS also specifies the various combinations of smaller awards that can be accumulated towards larger awards. In October 2023, QQI published a summary of a public consultation[46] on draft broad award standards at NFQ Levels 1-4 with a commitment to publishing updated award standards by the end of the year.

3.3.9 Micro-credentials

The word micro-credential is a relatively new term that is gaining currency for describing qualifications signalling the achievement of small volumes of learning. Micro-credentials are designed to have a stand-alone utility but may also be part of larger qualifications. They may be offered by educational institutions but are not exclusive to academia. They are topical in education circles, especially in higher education but also in vocational education and training, and also beyond the formal education and training system.

3.3.9.1 Definitions

The Council of the European Union adopted a "*recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability*" on 16 June 2022, including 10 principles for "the design and issuance of micro-credentials' and it includes the following understanding:

"'Micro-credential' means the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes will have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined criteria. Learning experiences leading to micro-credentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs. Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared and are portable. They may be stand-alone or combined into larger credentials. They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity.

This is a broad definition designed to cater to a diverse set of member states. It comprehends credentials that follow from formal, non-formal[47] or informal learning. As defined above, micro-credentials meet the criteria to be classed as *qualifications* as defined in the context of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)[48] which states that a qualification is:

46 QQI (2023b) QQI Consultation on Draft Broad Standards at NFQ Levels 1-4.

47 "'Non-formal learning' means learning which takes place outside formal education and training through planned activities in terms of learning objectives and learning time and where some form of learning support is present" (Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing Erasmus+: the Union Programme for education and training, youth and sport and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 (Text with EEA relevance) (OJ L 189, 28.05.2021, p. 1 -33)).

48 Assuming that being "underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity" implies that its determination is formal and by a competent body.

"… 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."[49]

3.3.9.2 Purpose of micro-credentials

Iraklis Pliakis from Cedefop, presenting at the NFQ 20th anniversary conference, discussed *'Microcredentials for labour market education and training: the added value for end users'* [50] and suggested that micro-credentials can increase the flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness of frameworks to address labour market needs and these types of small qualifications can play an important role in RPL.

Micro-credentials present several benefits to end users which includes learners, employees, employers and the wider society.

Employers view micro-credentials positively and consider it a mechanism to tailor their training and contribute to career development and staff retention. Employers also value micro-credentials as a tool for job enrichment and career opportunities. Over half of employers in Ireland consider it important that micro-credentials are included in the NFQ.[51]

Learners and employers view micro-credentials as a means of accessing continuing and further learning in a flexible way that helps them to stand out in a competitive recruitment environment.

---

49 Council recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (OJ C, C/189, 15.06.2017, p. 15).

50 Cedefop (2023) Microcredentials for labour market education and training: the added value for end users. Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop research paper.

51 Nic Giolla Mhichíl, M., Brown, M., Beirne, E. and Mac Lochlainn, C. (2020) A Micro-Credential Roadmap: Currency, Cohesion and Consistency. Dublin City University.

Case Study: From MicroCreds to Masters: A Curated Learning Pathway
Authors: Prof Ann Ledwith, Dr Sinead Burke, Prof Martin Hayes, UL@Work, University of Limerick

The growing popularity of Micro-credentials has led to increased calls for progression routes and stackability towards major and minor awards. This demand for more flexible learning pathways reflects the current workplace where professionals seek a range of both technical and transversal skills to succeed. However, the requirement by industry for more personalised, on demand, and flexible learning is at odds with the requirements of Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) for structure and quality assurance. HEI awards are carefully developed to ensure that students acquire the knowledge, know-how, skills, and competence necessary for their level of learning. This is achieved through accreditation and quality assurance processes that ensure that students are supported and that their learning is scaffolded as they meet the required learning outcomes. Additionally, HEIs are bound to achieve economies of scale in their programme delivery, small class sizes are not always viable. These competing requirements mean that building an award by stacking micro-credentials is not a simple task.

Since 2006, the University of Limerick has been delivering Specialist Diplomas, later renamed as Professional Diplomas. These are one year, part-time programmes designed for work-based learners. Over the years we have extended our offering of Professional Diplomas, and even developed limited stacking options so that, for example, students could combine Professional Diplomas in Lean and Six Sigma with a dissertation to achieve an MSc in Strategic Quality Management. A similar progression pathway was developed for an MSc in Technology Management. However, students continued to request more flexibility, many wanting to combine technical topics, e.g. Airworthiness, with Business, e.g. Strategic Leadership. In response to this demand, we developed the Masters of Professional Practice, a learning pathway that allows students to combine any three Professional Diplomas to achieve a level 9/master's award. A critical part of the Masters of Professional Practice is the inclusion of a Reflective Learning Portfolio that requires students to reflect on their learning and its impact on their professional and personal practice within the context of the National Framework of Qualifications.

The final part of the Curated Learning Pathway was facilitated by the Human Capital Initiative (HCI) funding that enabled the development of a much larger portfolio of Professional Diplomas, through the UL@Work project, as well as a range of micro-credentials, through the MicroCreds project. Each new Professional Diploma was designed to contain at least one micro-credential, allowing students to begin their learning journey with a micro-credential and continue through professional diplomas to a Masters of Professional Practice.

The advantages of this Curated Learning Pathway approach are that it allows learners to sample one module before embarking on a year-long programme. This allows them to build the skills that they need to develop both personally and professionally and, in this way, delivers on the demand for flexibility in education within carefully designed learning pathways. The challenges of the pathway approach include managing student expectations as completion of a micro-credential does not guarantee entry to a professional diploma. In addition, many students underestimate the academic demands of learning at level 9. The systems and processes needed to support this flexibility in progression are also a challenge, but one that must be addressed by HEIs if we are to continue to meet the demands of work-based learners.

3.3.9.3 Inclusion in the NFQ

In Ireland the educational qualifications and quality assurance systems have long enabled and supported micro-credentials as the term is a catch-all for diverse kinds of records of small volumes of learning, some of which have long existed in FET and HE and associated short courses. While there is nothing new about small qualifications, micro-credentialing is associated with some new use cases and drivers especially in the HE context. In 2023, QQI published data on the micro-credentials already available across higher education.[52]

Although MICROBOL, the Common Framework for Micro-credentials in the EHEA[53] and the EU Recommendation make it clear that inclusion of micro-credentials in the NFQ is optional, MICROBOL explicitly encourages it by stating the following:

"Micro-credentials should be included in the NQF, whenever possible. The decision on including micro-credentials within national frameworks is to be made at national level. If the national decision is to include micro-credentials in the NQF, the criteria for inclusion should be decided. These criteria might include for example the size, naming, value/relevance and quality assurance of the micro-credentials".

Furthermore, the EU recommendation suggests that inclusion of micro-credentials in the NFQ further supports the transparency of, and trust in, micro-credentials. The European Qualifications Framework is open to all types and levels of qualifications and represents the common standard reference for transparency, portability, and comparability. The EQF is open to micro-credentials if and where they are first included in national qualifications frameworks.

Dr Grant Klinkum suggested that most of the not insignificant problems with micro-credentials – proliferation and associated end-user confusion, lack of clarity about transparency of content and quality, and concern about recognition – are removed by having micro-credentials fully embedded in the NQF and therefore subject to quality assurance.

Iraklis Pliakis from Cedefop, presenting at the NFQ 20th anniversary conference, outlined the ways in which micro-credentials can be a part of qualifications systems. There is a wide variety of approaches available, with some micro-credentials operating solely in the labour market. He stated that there is strong indication that micro-credentials will not diminish the labour market value of traditional qualifications in the near future.

---

52 QQI (2023c) Data on HE micro-credentials in Ireland 2014-2023.

53 MICROBOL (2022) European Project MICROBOL Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments – Common Framework for Micro-credentials in the EHEA.

Case Study: An approach to developing microcredentials in MTU
Author: Dr Deirdre Goggin.

Micro-credentials in Munster Technological University (MTU) are generally accredited awards of fewer than 60 credits of learning on the National Framework of Qualifications. For the most part the identification of the need and the development of these shorter, flexible awards is linked to evolving labour market needs and they are mainly developed in close collaboration with external partners.

In developing micro-credentials, attention is paid to the extent to which the intended participants can avail of recognition of prior learning and to the possibility of work-integrated learning in achieving the desired competence or learning outcomes. The MTU approach is described in the following stages, but it is important to point out that they are not strictly linear.

1. Identifying the need for the micro-credential is the initial step in the process. Often this arises from our ongoing interactions with enterprise or from a 'Learning Clinic' event for example. External factors such as changing work practices, changing regulations, or indeed availability of funding can contribute to the identification of the need or opportunity.

    Sustainability of demand is one of the key considerations. An early step in the process seeks to determine the potential learner population and the viability of the award. This stage involves consulting with external partners and representative groups who have expressed an interest or may be able to identify and quantify the need for the proposed micro-credential.

2. Considering the content or composition of the micro-credential involves bringing together subject matter experts from the relevant industry sector, the university and representatives of the intended participant cohort. Working together they devise a shared understanding of the overall programme outcomes of the award. These roundtable discussions include consideration of the level on the framework and the overall credit volume of the resulting micro-credential. This process also includes exploration of the prior learning that participants might have which may in turn influence the entry requirements, content, level, credit value and duration of the programme. If participants have prior learning which could enable entry and exemptions for elements of the award, support is available to them through the RPL mentor.

3. Having drafted the content and overall programme outcomes, the course developers work through the existing book of modules to identify if there are approved modules which can be incorporated or if new modules must be developed through the university quality assurance processes. Opportunities for different modes of delivery, including work-integrated learning, are also explored. This may take the form of learning that is acquired on the job or through inhouse training and is developed through a close collaboration with the relevant employer(s) where appropriate.

4. There is a focus throughout the process on ensuring that the resulting award is a coherent response to the specific need identified and that progression opportunities are clear. Micro-credentials in MTU are generally developed with a view to enabling subsequent progression to a relevant major award. In addition, the university RPL policy enables the consideration of micro-credentials regardless of where they are obtained for credit or exemption as part of a learning portfolio.

3.3.9.4 Barriers

Despite the potential impact and benefit of micro-credentials, there continue to be barriers. These are outlined in the Cedefop report[54] as follows:

- Lack of adequate and transparent quality assurance standards
- Lack of proper documentation of assessment of learning outcomes
- Lack of formal recognition by national authorities
- Incompatibility with national qualifications systems
- Limited opportunities for the accumulation, combination and stackability of micro-credentials.

Furthermore, in determining a national approach to micro-credentials, a fine balance must be struck between trust and flexibility. In some cases, the flexibility, responsiveness, and agility required for micro-credentials is incompatible with rigorous and robust national systems for quality assurance and inclusion of qualifications in a framework.

---

54 Cedefop (2023) Microcredentials for labour market education and training: the added value for end users. Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop research paper.

Case Study: Experience of Developing Micro-credential Programmes Innopharma Education

Author: Pauline Flusk

Context

In line with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's (DFHERIS) national objective to develop new pathways for learners from further education to higher education, Innopharma Education offers a range of micro-credential programmes designed to meet current and future skill needs. With a focus on the pharma, medtech, food science and digital transformation industries, these short bite-sized programmes ranging from 6 weeks to 5 months in duration will allow learners to develop the skills for entry to employment in high tech manufacturing sectors and/or to continue their lifelong learning journey into higher education.

Development Stage

Innopharma Education has a tight relationship with industry, lectures are delivered by industry lecturers and that input along with accreditation at a national level by QQI drove the appropriate structure and design of modules. The aim has been to offer more than learning a new technical process – it's about enabling learners to keep up as technology increasingly changes the workplace. Being aligned to the NFQ pathways and designed as short, stackable programmes makes it easy for learners to start at a level suitable to their academic needs and progress from one NFQ level to the next. Level 6 programmes are delivered in conjunction with the AMTCE (Advanced Manufacturing Training Centre of Excellence) within the Louth Meath Education Training Board (LMETB). There is a Level 7 micro-credential programme delivered by Innopharma Education and it's envisaged that several additional pathways will be developed for roll out on a national basis.

- Level 6 Certificate in Operational Excellence (25 ECTS)
- Level 6 Certificate in Supply Chain (20 ECTS)
- Level 6 Certificate in Transversal Skills (5 ECTS)
- Level 7 Certificate in Operational Excellence and Sustainability in Supply Chain (30 ECTS).

Challenges Overcome

Removing the barriers and recognising that learners may start from different points and have different needs engages people in the idea of lifelong learning. People mid-career who may not have done LC or need to upskill now have endless possibilities!

- Flexibility – deliver learning in discrete small units, at a time and pace that supports work life balance
- Accessibility – weekly classes are delivered online (live recorded) with monthly face to-face classes
- Partnerships – find a way to make study affordable using government funding
- Create building blocks – start small, grow in confidence, continue learning

Impacts Achieved

Since the first micro-credential was launched in March 2023, they have proven to be a huge success, with classes oversubscribed. Specific sector needs are being met with learners from many of Ireland's leading industry names signing up and from a wide range of roles. Learning shapes access to quality jobs and employment outcomes and some students have moved to new roles, gained promotions or more responsibility as a result. Many have chosen to progress onto another micro-credential or the next level of study. It's a win-win for everyone!

"it gave me the confidence to go for an operator role – I found it really beneficial career-wise"

3.4   SECONDARY SCHOOL QUALIFICATIONS

There has been significant progress in the reform and review of school qualifications, with the junior cycle reform completed and a plan outlined for senior cycle reform. Both emphasise the role of the NFQ in school qualifications.

3.4.1 Junior Cycle

The Framework for Junior Cycle[55] published in 2015 makes explicit reference to the NFQ, which was made possible by the pre-existence of the NFQ. Several subjects or a combination of subjects and short courses are broadly aligned with level 3 of the NFQ. As part of the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle, NFQ Level 2 Learning Programmes (L2LPs) and NFQ Level 1 Learning Programmes (L1LPs) were introduced at junior cycle in 2015 and 2018 respectively.

A review of the NFQ Level 1 and 2 programmes conducted by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2022[56] indicated that the introduction of the L1LPs and the L2LPs in junior cycle was viewed as a very positive step towards greater inclusion. Teachers, principals, parents, and stakeholders overwhelmingly welcomed the introduction of the programmes as it enabled students with specific special educational needs to have equitable access to an inclusive and appropriate curriculum and to have that learning recognised in the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA), thereby ensuring parity for all students.

The JCPA also includes non-academic achievements, which recognises non-formal and informal learning undertaken by students and may have the benefit of RPL in the future.

3.4.2 Senior Cycle

This finding was echoed by a similar review of the Leaving Certificate[57] which stated that the introduction of NFQ Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes in junior cycle was viewed as a very positive step towards greater inclusivity and was enthusiastically welcomed by schools, students, and parents. However, students currently following NFQ Level 1 or Level 2 Learning Programmes in junior cycle do not have access to appropriate learning at senior cycle, namely, learning that is age-appropriate and peer appropriate and that contributes holistically to students' social, personal, and intellectual growth and development. This report identified the need for opportunities to progress, consolidate and transfer learning for students of NFQ Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes in a redeveloped senior cycle. The level of the NFQ to which the curriculum components involved would be aligned may vary as appropriate. The components themselves, such as modules of learning, would be age-, peer- and learning needs-appropriate and contribute to students' intellectual, social, and personal growth and maturity.

The wider redevelopment of the senior cycle commits to ensuring broad alignment of the curriculum and inclusion of the qualification arising from it within the NFQ, emphasising the role of the NFQ in school qualifications.

---

55 Government of Ireland (2015). Framework for Junior Cycle 2015. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

56 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) Report on the review of the Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes. NCCA: Dublin.

57 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2022) Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report. NCCA: Dublin.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and QQI are committed to working collaboratively to determine the appropriate inclusion of the various elements of senior cycle reform in the NFQ.

3.4.3 Opportunities for Transition Year

The promotion by government and the heightening of awareness of FET and its potential, in particular, to secondary school children could be creatively facilitated by the space provided by transition or fourth year. Exposing secondary school learners to FET in senior cycle might be too late for individuals to meaningfully consider it as their next step. Transition Year has historically been characterised by non-formal structures and assessment and there could, therefore, be a fertile space to be exploited for FET including the potential of FET for award, in this area. This would assist in overcoming the traditionally low level of vocational education and training in second level education. This could include an introduction to the concept of apprenticeship and training, as well as education.

3.5 INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION & REFERENCING

In his keynote address at the 20th anniversary conference in 2023, Dr Grant Klinkum outlined that borderless digital tertiary education provision, increasing rates of migration, transnational education, and significant post-Covid offshore study movements provide a backdrop for the increasing importance of international qualification comparability, transparency, and recognition. He further emphasised that there is potential for the use of the development of relationships between NQFs and Regional Qualification Frameworks to support the qualifications recognition work of competent authorities and credentialling agencies, especially given current regional efforts are being extended by the adoption of the UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education to support global recognition activity. For both domestic and international recognition, the quality assurance arrangements that underpin NQFs are critical. This was supported by Helene Peterbauer of the European Universities Association who emphasises that the broad scale success of NQFs in Ireland and Europe is related to the strong connections to quality assurance and connections to recognition via the Lisbon Convention.

Recognition of qualifications is evidence of a trust in quality. Quality assurance arrangements – to give stakeholders confidence in qualifications – are on show in NQFs. The ability and capacity of a qualifications 'receiving' country to recognise and understand qualifications and learning outcomes from other countries – and the quality assurance that supports them – reflects the country's ability to understand the quality and quality assurance processes of its own qualifications. The process of referencing bilaterally with another country or against an RQF offers periods of powerful learning for NQF stewards and wider stakeholders.

Ireland has done much to show the relationship between its qualifications systems and the four UK qualifications systems[58] and has undertaken referencing projects with New Zealand, Hong Kong and other non-European jurisdictions, in addition to verification through self-referencing against the Bologna Framework and referencing against the EQF. Ireland also contributes via the European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group, to the pilot project to reference the EQF

---

58   QAA (2023) Qualifications can Cross Boundaries: A guide to comparing qualification in the UK and Ireland (8th ed.). QAA.

against other third country frameworks such as Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Ukraine and Cabo Verde and regional frameworks such as the Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF).

In 2018, a Guide to Comparing Qualifications in Ireland and Hong Kong[59] was published, while a similar guide related to New Zealand[60] was published in 2019.

3.5.1 Re-referencing to EQF and QF EHEA (2020)

QQI presented an updated re-referencing report to the EQF and QF EHEA in 2020, with a focus on the 2017 recommendation[61]. In keeping with Ireland's reputation as a leader in qualifications frameworks, it was one of the first countries to conduct such a re-referencing report and as of 2023, is one of just six countries to have completed this exercise.

The purpose of this 2020 Report was 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. Longstanding national support for European ambitions for quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning constitutes a strong political mandate to prepare and publish this 2020 Report.

European Qualifications Framework (EQF)	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and OfS sector-recognised standards for England (SRS)	Regulated Qualifications Framework England/Northern Ireland (RQF)	Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)	The National Framework of Qualifications for Ireland (NFQ IE)	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)
8	8	8	8	10	12
7	7	7	7	9	11
6	6	6	6	8/7	10/9
5	5/4	5/4	5/4	6	8/7
4		3	3	5	6
3		2	2	4	5
2		1	1	3	4
1		E3	E3	2/1	3
		E2	E2		2
		E1	E1		1

Typical higher education qualifications within each level	FHEQ and SRS level	FQHEIS/ SCQF level	NFQ IE level	Corresponding FQ-EHEA cycle
Doctoral degrees	8	12	10	Third cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Master's degrees (including Integrated Master's)	7	11	9	Second cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Postgraduate diplomas				Intermediate qualifications within the second cycle
Postgraduate certificates				
Bachelor's degrees with honours /Honours Bachelor Degrees	6	10	8	First cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Irish Higher Diplomas				
Bachelor's degrees/ Ordinary Bachelor Degree		9	7	
Graduate diplomas				Intermediate qualifications within the first cycle
Graduate certificates				
Foundation Degrees (for example FdA, FdSc)	5	8	6	Short cycle qualifications
Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)				
Higher National Diplomas (HND)				
Irish Higher Certificates				
Higher National Certificates (HNC)	4	7		Intermediate qualifications within the short cycle
Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE)				

Figure 12. Extract from Qualifications Can Cross Boundaries Leaflet, comparing UK and Ireland frameworks

59 QQI and The Education Bureau (EDB) of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (2018) Comparing Qualifications in Ireland and Hong Kong.

60 QQI and New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) (2019) Comparing Qualifications in Ireland and New Zealand: A Guide.

61 QQI (2020d) Referencing of the Irish NFQ to the EQF and QF-EHEA - National Report 2020.

3.5.2 Qualifications Can Cross Boundaries

Although the UK is no longer a member of the EU, collaboration between the UK and Ireland is supported in line with the Common Travel Area Memorandum of Understanding. The qualifications authorities in the UK and Ireland meet annually, and have agreed the correspondence between qualifications frameworks in operation across the five jurisdictions.

A joint publication, Qualifications Can Cross Boundaries[62], which was updated in 2023, offers a short guide to the broad comparable levels of UK and Irish Qualifications.

3.5.3 Cedefop NQF Inventory

Cedefop has published several NQF Inventories for Ireland[63] (2012, 2016, 2018, 2020 & 2022), the most recent of which acknowledged that the Irish NFQ is at an advanced operational stage. It reported that the framework increased transparency and coherence in the qualifications system, and promoted a more systematic approach to the design, development, delivery, award, and recognition of qualifications; supporting lifelong learning and transitions into, within and from education and training.

In its Global Inventory of National and Regional Qualifications Frameworks 2022: Volume 1[64], Cedefop states that Ireland offers an example of how a framework may alter in purpose and scope over time. It acknowledges that the NFQ was initially conceived as a driver towards lifelong learning and is now an enabler of a change and has also assumed a more regulatory identity in terms of quality assurance guidelines and strengthened primary legislation.

> The NFQ has provided a solid underpinning for the evolution of Ireland's education system throughout the past 20 years. That evolution continued throughout the economic crash of the late 2000s, in the aftermath of which QQI found that our universities had retained and even enhanced the quality of education on offer, despite huge cuts to funding. A key part of the system's strength came from the alignment of awards to learning outcomes that promoted the development of human capital as the essential component of a knowledge-based economy, where graduates could more easily demonstrate and communicate their skills and competencies, at home and abroad, within a system in which awards were comparable and valued. Similarly, as Ireland responded to the Covid-19 crisis, the system again was able to maintain high awards standards, due in no small part to the comparability and consistency the NFQ-based system continues to provide.
>
> ***Irish Universities Association, 2023***

62 QAA (2023) Qualifications can Cross Boundaries: A guide to comparing qualification in the UK and Ireland (8th ed.). QAA.

63 Cedefop (2024a) European inventory of NQFs.

64 UNESCO, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), European Training Foundation (EFT), and European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) (2023) Global inventory of national and regional qualifications frameworks 2022, volume I: thematic chapters. France: UNESCO.

3.5.5 Cedefop Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning

Cedefop has published several inventories on the validation of non-formal and informal learning for Ireland (2014, 2016, 2018 & 2023)[65], which particularly monitor Ireland's progress towards achieving the 2012 Council Recommendation on Validation. In 2018, it was reported that progress had been made towards each of the principles in the Recommendation. It is acknowledged that whilst RPL in Ireland continues to be implemented in line with national priorities and interpreted at the level of each individual learning provider, local practices are becoming more consistent thanks to the introduction of frameworks, guidance, information, and training in both the FET and HE sectors. This infrastructure which is developing at sectoral level is helping to support greater awareness and capability amongst providers and practitioners. In time, as these become more embedded, RPL will be made available to greater numbers of individuals and will be implemented in a more standardised manner.

3.6   TRANSITION FROM SOFT INFORMATION TOOL TO HARD FILTER

Upon its introduction in 2003, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland defined the NFQ as 'the single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way'. While the framework may have begun its life primarily as an information source, it quickly transformed into a filter for government funding, for student grant aid and for employee recruitment.

The 'previous education and progression' criterion used by Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) states that an applicant for higher education grant funding must "be *progressing* in (their) education by attending an approved course that leads to a *higher* level of qualification than any that (they) may already hold and that is at a *higher* level than any course (they) may have previously attended."

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth's rules for eligibility for the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) funding programme for 2023/24 requires that all staff working directly with children in a pre-school service must hold at least a level 5 major award in childcare on the NFQ, and furthermore that each room must have a 'lead educator' holding a minimum of a level 6 qualification.

The SUSI website grant eligibility information indicates that the Barrister-at-Law degree offered by the King's Inns and the Professional Practice Course (PPC) of the Law Society of Ireland is eligible for SUSI funding as they are approved courses for post-graduate study at Level 9 in the NFQ. But the courses and the 'qualifications' to which they lead are not at Level 9 and are not in the NFQ as neither the Honourable Society of King's Inns nor the Law Society of Ireland are currently providers of framework awards. The King's Inns or the Law Society could, however, should they so choose, become Listed Awarding Bodies when the relevant section of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Amendment) 2019 Act is commenced.

---

65 Cedefop (2024b) European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning. Please note the 2023 report is still under development and may not yet be published.

3.7   RECENT AND PLANNED DEVELOPMENTS

There are several recent and planned developments which respond to some of the recommendations arising from the various impact and review studies commissioned by QQI.

A significant development was the enactment of The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019 which further strengthened the centrality of the NFQ as a co-ordinating mechanism for qualifications in Ireland and clarifies the legal route to the NFQ for all qualifications.

The partnership approach adopted by QQI, and the wider education and training sector strengthens the coordinated and cooperative approach to quality and qualifications. Several of the developments summarised here, including the joint sectoral protocol, the Irish Register of Qualifications and publication to Europass are all key examples of successful collaboration in the NFQ ecosystem.

3.7.1   Listed Awarding Bodies

An important component of the Amendment Act 2019 is the provision for the establishment of a new type of awarding body, the Listed Awarding Body (LAB). A LAB is an awarding body that does not have statutory powers to award NFQ awards in the State and voluntarily seeks to have their awards included in the National Framework of Qualifications.

This new type of awarding body aims to resolve the gap created by the 2012 Act which inadvertently eliminated the opportunity for professional and international awarding bodies to have their awards recognised in the NFQ, which was previously provided for in the 1999 Act. It also builds on the recommendation of the 2016 study which recommended the inclusion of a broader range of awards in the NFQ.

However, where the NQAI previously offered 'alignment' of qualifications to the NFQ, this new scheme provides for full inclusion of these awards in the NFQ, utilising the existing architecture and infrastructure delivering parity of awards within the wider system. It is expected that the scheme will open for applications in 2024. This will increase the number of pathways to the NFQ for post-secondary qualifications – as a Designated Awarding Body, as a Delegated Authority Awarding Body, as a Linked provider of a Designated Awarding Body, as a Listed Awarding Body or as a provider of QQI awards. Although the pathways differ, the route to the framework must always be subject to a robust, periodic quality assurance process.

Dr Grant Klinkum, in his keynote address at the conference in November 2023, was emphatic in his support for this new scheme which opened up NQFs to actively support a wider variation of credentials, qualifications and competencies as a reasonable and significant response to the changing nature of work. He also showed support for QQI's commitment to quality assurance in this new approach which offers the necessary trust and confidence to learners and wider stakeholders in the value of these qualifications.

3.7.1.1 Value of Inclusion 20 Years Later

A wide range of prospective Listed Awarding Bodies participated in a workshop in November 2023 and identified the primary reasons for seeking inclusion of awards in the Framework as international

mobility of graduates; access to appropriate employment opportunities and access to further learning opportunities through both traditional applications and recognition of prior learning (RPL). A specific example was provided by the Chartered Accountants of Ireland, where graduates of its programmes are unable to evidence the achievement of a level 9 qualification to the Teaching Council of Ireland in order to become a teacher of accountancy at second level.

These organisations indicated that the formal inclusion of awards via Listing is an improvement on the previously offered alignment. They suggested that the robust assessment of quality assurance will ensure parity of esteem with other awarding bodies and that learners will benefit from being able to articulate their qualifications in the existing, accepted, well understood lexicon of the Framework.

The recognition of these types of professional awards was considered vital by participants in a panel discussion regarding the role of the NFQ in professions, employment and workforce planning as more people now have 'portfolio careers' which represents a more diverse career journey with twists, turns and new directions. The ability to give greater structure, visibility, transparency and legitimacy to alternative qualifications is essential as a plethora of education products emerge in response to rapidly changing need contexts.

Figure 13. Summary of existing and future awarding bodies of NFQ Awards

3.7.2 Joint Sectoral Protocol between QQI and Designated Awarding Bodies

A joint sectoral protocol between QQI and Designated Awarding Bodies (DABs)[66] was agreed in 2022 and provides for the formal inclusion in the NFQ of awards made by designated awarding bodies. The protocol is designed to fulfil the requirements of Section 55B of the amended legislation.

---

66 QQI (2022) Joint-sectoral protocol between Designated Awarding Bodies and Quality and Qualifications Ireland for the inclusion of qualifications within the National Framework of Qualifications.

3.7.3 Irish Register of Qualifications

The Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ)[67] was launched in 2020 as the authoritative, comprehensive list of qualifications included in the NFQ, the programmes leading to these awards and the associated awarding bodies and providers. The IRQ meets the statutory requirement under Section 79 of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 (as amended) for Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) to establish and maintain a database that provides information on awards included in the Framework, programmes leading to those awards and any other programmes as appropriate.

The IRQ serves several purposes, including but not limited to:

- Implementation of the '*Joint Sectoral Protocol between QQI and Designated Awarding Bodies*'[68] in compliance with Section 55B of the Act, as amended.
- Ensuring transparency and accessibility of award and programme information to support recognition of prior learning (RPL); and access, transfer, and progression (ATP).
- Provision of clear information regarding awarding bodies, awards, programmes, and providers for use by national and international organisations for verification purposes.
- Publication of award and programme information to relevant European platforms including Qualifications Dataset Register (QDR) ensuring visibility of Irish awards, awarding bodies and programmes.
- Ensuring compliance with the requirements of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and European Skills, Competence and Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) Recommendations.

The higher education awards listed on the IRQ are published to the Qualifications Dataset Register (QDR) in Europass[69], giving visibility to Irish awards in Europe.

As of September 2023, the IRQ provides information about more than 11,000 qualifications delivered by over 200 different providers. Interestingly, just 25 of these qualifications are supplemental awards with 19 of these offered by one awarding body. This may point to continued lack of technical understanding of the different award types underpinning the NFQ.

An internal review of the IRQ, which included stakeholder feedback, identified several gaps in the information included in the IRQ and the next phase of development of the database will commence in 2024. The next phase will ensure the IRQ meets the following requirements:

- Confirmation of institutions, including English language education providers, that have been awarded the International Education Mark
- Publication of award and programme information to relevant European platforms including Database of European Quality Assurance Reports (DEQAR) ensuring visibility of Irish awards, awarding bodies and programmes.

---

67 Irish Register of Qualification (irq.ie).

68 QQI (2022) Joint-sectoral protocol between Designated Awarding Bodies and Quality and Qualifications Ireland for the inclusion of qualifications within the National Framework of Qualifications.

69 European Commission. Europass: What is the Qualifications Dataset Register (QDR)?

3.7.4 Irish Quality and Qualifications Forum

Informed by the recommendation in the 2016 Impact study, QQI established the Irish Quality and Qualifications Forum (IQQF) in 2022. It was established in response to challenges that require collaborative approaches. The standing group's work will relate to quality assurance and institutional/system research tools and models that help maintain the integrity of the qualifications system; supporting and understanding the varied standards, policies and processes underpinning qualifications and the associated courses; the levels associated with qualifications in regulated clinical professions, the learning pathways leading to qualifications, occupations and lifelong learning; and understanding the roles of the diverse communities of practice that support the establishment, issue, validation and recognition of qualifications. As yet, only a subgroup of the IQQF, focused on statutory awarding bodies, has met but this will be widened out to the FE sector in the course of 2024.

2023 Awarding Arrangements		
Awarding Bodies	**Award Information**	**Additional Information**
Department of Education and Science/ State Examinations Commission	Secondary School Awards	
Universities (9)[70]; Technological Universities (5) and Institutes of Technology (2)	Higher Education Awards of their own	
QQI	Education and training providers; independent higher and further education providers; community and voluntary providers	QQI has the power to delegate authority but has not yet done so.
Potential Additional Awarding Bodies to be established after 2023		
Listed Awarding Bodies	A wide range of awards across all levels of the Framework.	Professional, technical, and international awarding bodies that may apply
Delegated Authority Awarding Bodies	Awards predominantly at levels 6-10	Validated providers of QQI that meet the requirements of delegated authority

Figure 14. Overview of awarding bodies in 2023 and beyond

---

70 Including the National University of Ireland and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

3.7.5 Updated NFQ Fan Diagram

The NFQ Fan Diagram is highly recognisable across Ireland and has been commended by a wide range of stakeholders including THEA, which reported that the simplicity and accessibility of the fan diagram has been integral to the adoption of the lexicon of the Framework.

In 2022, the NFQ Fan Diagram was revised to reflect changes to the Junior Cycle and the wider tertiary sector with the establishment of technological universities. This updated fan diagram reflects changes to awarding body responsibilities, rather than reflecting significant changes to the NFQ itself. It was particularly noted that the adaptability of the fan diagram in communicating the establishment of technological universities was important.

3.7.6 Tertiary System

In 2020, following a general election, a new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) was established. In subsequent years, 12 institutes of technology merged into five new technological universities. In 2022, DFEHRIS publishes a policy platform '*Progressing a Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge'*[71] which emphasises the need for agencies to work collaboratively to progress actions and demonstrate leadership. Key actions are identified in this policy platform regarding the establishment of the IQQF and the review of ATP to enable the enhancement and expansion of pathways across the system. The policy platform also emphasises the need for QQI to work on joined-up approaches across the tertiary system to enhance the national reputation of qualifications in the NFQ.

The National Apprenticeship Office (NAO) was established in 2022 and is a joint initiative of both SOLAS and the Higher Education Authority on behalf of the Government. The NAO has responsibility for all aspects of the management, oversight and development of the apprenticeship system and for implementing the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025. The NAO acts as a single point of contact for employers, apprentices and education and training providers in accessing information and guidance on apprenticeship. The NAO is leading the work to create a single, integrated model for national apprenticeships. There are currently 73 apprenticeship programmes in Ireland leading to a major award across two models – craft and consortia. Apprenticeships allow people to achieve awards that are suited to them, and employers greatly value apprenticeships with over 9000 active employers across the 73 programmes. A report[72] published in 2022 sets out the findings of a QQI-commissioned review of the quality assurance, governance arrangements and processes developed for the 39 consortium-led apprenticeships that were established by mid-2021. In doing so, the report offers a snapshot of the diversity of industries, occupations, delivery models and qualification levels that the consortium-led model of apprenticeship has been able to accommodate since the model was rolled out in 2016.

The National Tertiary Office (NTO) [73] was established in 2023 and is responsible for developing new pathways for further and higher education. Several new tertiary education programmes were developed and launched in the same year. These new programmes allow learners to commence degree study in further education and training and then progress with guaranteed

71   Government of Ireland (2022) Policy Platform: Progressing A Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge. Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

72   McManus, S., Peck, C. and Vickery, J. (2022) A Review of Consortia-led Apprenticeships in Ireland. Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

73   National Tertiary Office Website (nto.hea.ie)

access to continue degree studies in higher education. This represents a widening of access to degree level education by building on existing pathways and partnerships. 153 students were subsequently registered across the 14 joint tertiary programmes which began in September 2023. In September 2023, the NTO launched a call for proposals for a second round of programmes that will start in 2024. The tertiary offering for 2024 will be announced in Q1 of 2024, and more than twice as many programmes will be available in key skills areas such as Software Development, Construction Studies and Nursing.

It is worth noting that the 2012 Act removed specific references to further and higher education as previously specified in the 1999 Act, firmly establishing QQI as a tertiary agency.

3.7.7 National Project for the mainstreaming of RPL in Higher Education

As the emphasis on RPL practice becoming more coherent and consistent in higher education grew, attention was also being drawn to upskilling/reskilling in national policy and on RPL as a tool to support these aims (National Skills Strategy 2025, OECD Skills Strategy Report, 2022). In response to global megatrends like digitalisation and the climate crisis, it has become evident that employees will need to upskill and reskill at a pace and scale never seen before. Therefore, they will need multiple participations in higher education and, RPL as a process can help support that need.

In response to these needs, the National RPL in Higher Education Project successfully received funding under the Irish Government's Human Capital Initiative (HCI) Pillar 3 (Innovation and agility). This five-year project seeks to extend what has already been achieved within higher education institutions (HEIs) and with QQI, as well as in the Further Education and Training (FET) sector and through existing fora such as the RPL Practitioner Network.

As central leads, the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), working in conjunction with the Irish Universities Association (IUA), manages this cross-sectoral and multi-institutional project that has a central project management office to drive and co-ordinate the project at a national and sectoral level. Eighteen project leads manage the roll-out of the project across fourteen technological universities, universities, and institutes of technology.

Strategic guidance is provided by the project steering group working in close collaboration with key national stakeholders, including QQI, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (NFETL); and employer and enterprise representative bodies, including IBEC and ISME.

The project has been developed with agreement and input from the fourteen HEIs and is designed to engineer a significant shift in RPL policy, procedure and practice by embedding and streamlining RPL (in particular, the recognition of informal and non-formal learning) across Ireland's higher-education sector, and to work with employers to increase access and progression opportunities in areas of skills needs.

In 2022, the project, through an extensive, consultative stakeholder process, developed a pilot framework for RPL in higher education which was subsequently approved in principle by the Registrars/Vice-Presidents for Academic Affairs from each of the project's partner HEIs.

This new pilot framework outlines those principals, values and guidelines which will support HEIs in Ireland to develop a shared understanding of RPL and work towards coherence and consistency in institutional policy and practice. It leans upon QQI's quality assurance guidelines to propose two core values of learner-centeredness and quality assurance in developing RPL procedures. The framework outlines principles based on the value of quality assurance which include the need for HEIs to align their RPL policies to the NFQ and, where permissible, allow learners to apply for RPL on all modules, programmes and courses aligned to the NFQ.

The framework is ambitious, and progress will be incremental and different for each institution. As a pilot, it is anticipated that this framework will continue to evolve as institutional RPL practice develops, and HEI senior management support and engagement will play a pivotal role in this evolution. This pilot framework is due to be reviewed in the lifetime of the project.

Part
4.

Stakeholder Perspectives in 2023

4.   STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES IN 2023

Stakeholder interviews conducted by Bell-Wylie Consulting about the NFQ over the last 20 years and stakeholder interactions, presentations, and feedback from the NFQ 20th anniversary conference inform this commentary of stakeholder perspectives. These perspectives are not presented as a thematic analysis, instead the diversity of opinions and perspectives are presented through commentary. The scope, breadth, and complexity of the NFQ is reflected by the volume of different topics presented in this commentary. Some of the topics presented are small and discrete while others are broader and more conceptual, but all the information presented is important to those that use and benefit from the NFQ. This section is used to highlight the key issues that are front and centre in the minds of stakeholders and partners.

> Ireland proved to be a pathfinder in this regard and the early launch of the Irish Framework, notwithstanding some contemporaneous political commentary around the rate of progress, is of great credit to the many who worked on it and notably those in the then National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) which was statutorily mandated to establish and maintain a framework.
>
> *THEA, 2023*

4.1.   CORE INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE NFQ

In general, it is agreed that the NFQ has made a significant contribution to the Irish education system in its twenty years of existence and has played a crucial role in promoting lifelong learning, enhancing mobility, and providing transparency and recognition for learners in Ireland. At a pre-conference workshop of senior leaders from across FE and HE it was agreed that the NFQ has had a significant influence on qualifications practices in both FE and HE but only a slight impact on schools' qualifications and qualifications of professional bodies. The framework has remained stable but flexible and adaptable, responding to changes in the education and training sector and foreseeing the need for the recognition of small volumes of learning, now termed micro-credentials.

However, there is a sense that some of the original infrastructure require updating and review, and that capacity building is needed to increase knowledge of the NFQ across the education and training sector.   Questions have also been raised about the implementation of the NFQ by those with shared responsibility for the NFQ and the need to monitor adherence to the norms of the Framework. Just 45% of senior leaders from across FE and HE agreed that the NFQ level indicators and the associated award-type descriptors continue to be fit for purpose in 2023.

> The NFQ is too precious and too valuable to lose. The NFQ needs us; there is lots done but more to do. Let's make it work!
>
> *Dr Tomás Mac Eochogáin, 2023*

4.1.1 Infrastructure of the NFQ

The Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) emphasised the lack of clarity regarding awards at levels 5-7, while THEA outlined the continued contested space at level 6 and potential confusion at level 9. Generally, stakeholders reported confusion regarding the varying award titles and credit volumes of non-major awards, particularly at levels 6-9. It was also suggested that the inclusion of micro-credentials in the Framework should be made more explicit. Stakeholders report struggling to understand the opportunities that micro-credentials and other smaller awards can bring to the qualification landscape and how they fit into the framework.

At a pre-conference workshop, over 70% of senior leaders from FE and HE agreed that the advanced certificate and higher certificate should be replaced with a single major-award type at level 6, while almost 85% agreed that the two current credit systems need to be replaced with a unified credit system.

Figure 15. Word cloud describing the NFQ generated during a pre-conference workshop.

4.1.1.1 Levels

Many of the reports conducted about the NFQ over the last 20 years have highlighted issues regarding the Leaving Certificate spanning two levels, the two major awards at level 6 and the two credit systems. Particularly, the two awards at level 6 cause issues related to access, transfer, and progression. Furthermore, the re-referencing report to the EQF in 2020 confirmed that many of the anomalies of the Framework at levels 6-9 are historical and legacy. Stakeholders would welcome a review of the core infrastructure of the NFQ. It is acknowledged that stability of the Framework has enabled much change in the sector, but it is timely to consider if the NFQ continues to serve the needs of learners and wider society.

Interestingly, stakeholders participating in a focus group regarding the review of QQI award standards for business reported that the changing requirements for Master's degrees to include

those from non-cognate disciplines leads to a challenge to deliver the depth of knowledge required by the grid level indicators. This was also considered to be a problem for the higher diploma at level 8.

> No aspect of the Framework is too precious not to be looked at. Too much reverence for the initial work of the Framework is a risk.
>
> **_Seán Ó Foghlú, 2023_**

4.1.1.2 Workload

A key theme raised in the NFQ conference was workload in terms of credit. It was considered by Professor William Kelly that declared workload is a simple, observable way to know if the norms regarding the NFQ are being followed by institutions. The workload norm for a full-time programme in HE is 60 ECTS in an academic year, which equates to approximately 50 hours of learning per week. Though there is no agreed expectation for part-time students, arguably, it should be 30 ECTS per academic year, 40 at most. Springboard+[74] is a government initiative offering free and heavily subsidised courses at certificate, degree, and masters level leading to qualifications in areas where there are employment opportunities in the economy. These areas include ICT, engineering, green skills, manufacturing and construction, among many others. There are over 250 courses available for 2023-24, the majority of which are flexible and part-time. However, 108 of the 228 funded part-time programmes are 60 ECTS or more in one academic year. The integrity of the NFQ is dependent on greater adherence to the elements of the Framework and the existence of a means for monitoring and acting on such non-adherence.

4.1.1.3 Learning Outcomes

At the time of the widespread implementation of the Framework across the sector – from 2007 onwards – the concept of a learning outcome was not widely considered or understood. The advantage in 2023 is that 'learning outcomes' are part of the everyday lexicon within the higher education sector. However, over time, the meaning of a learning outcome as it relates to an NFQ level and associated workload, has diminished. Within institutions, it is generally acknowledged that Programme Learning Outcomes don't get the focus that they should and are often neglected or undervalued. Instead, the focus has drifted to module learning outcomes.

Programme Learning Outcomes, those statements of learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills, and competence, are of critical importance and even more so due to the explosion of artificial intelligence and the associated challenges.

In a pre-conference workshop in November 2023, participants suggested that the grid level indicators should be widened to include attitudes and values, as well as knowledge, skills and competences.

---

[74]   Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2024) Springboard+ (springboardcourses.ie).

4.1.1.4 RPL

Finally, the review of ATP in 2023 and a submission from the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) emphasised the importance of developing national policies and systems for recognition of prior learning (RPL) to ensure consistent validation for non-formal and informal learning. QQI has committed to scoping a national approach to RPL. It will also evaluate provider adherence to a national approach to access, transfer and progression and the appropriate recognition of prior learning, thus helping to ensure that learners can achieve their potential within the FET and HE systems. This will involve the development of a revised policy, criteria, and guidelines for RPL.

4.1.2. Capacity Building

As far back as the impact study undertaken in 2009, it was acknowledged that building deep technical knowledge of the Framework is challenging but necessary for successful implementation. Though many stakeholders exalt the simplicity of the fan diagram, there is an overall sense that the NFQ has been reduced to this diagram and that knowledge of the technical infrastructure underpinning the NFQ in its entirety has been lost. One stakeholder suggested that the fundamental philosophies of the framework appear to slip at times.

> What counts as expert NFQ knowledge in institutions now, was just a basic understanding 20 years ago.
>
> **HEI Professional Staff Representative, 2023**

Furthermore, the Framework Implementation Network was essential to the mainstreaming of knowledge about the NFQ in institutions back in 2007. However, much has changed in the sector since 2003 and many of those knowledgeable about and expert in the NFQ have since retired or moved roles. A new generation of staff, administrative and academic, are now at the forefront of the implementation of the Framework and it is suggested that capacity building is urgently needed. In addition, the introduction of both Listed Awarding Bodies and Delegated Authority Awarding Bodies increases the pool of individuals with responsibilities for implementing the NFQ and the necessary knowledge required by these types of awarding bodies needs to be considered as part of implementation.

Although 95% of senior leaders from FE and HE agree that the NFQ has supported the use of learning outcomes across tertiary education, many examples were provided to support the further embedding of the use of learning outcomes. This included:

- Online resources for the upskilling staff
- Require providers to produce evidence of alignment of learning outcomes with assessment
- Make learning outcomes more visible
- Support the writing of learning outcomes in accessible language
- Link learning outcomes with occupations

It was suggested that the challenge is not about the structure or principles of the Framework itself but how to recreate the excitement of the early days of the Framework and to build that sense of enthusiasm with new partners – individually and organisationally.

4.2.   EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

The continued referencing of the Irish NFQ to overarching European frameworks was frequently highlighted as essential to the recognition of Irish qualifications and mobility of graduates. However, it is fair to say that much of the work being undertaken by the EU Commission and Council of Europe in relation to the EQF and QF EHEA is aimed at national frameworks in the early phases of establishment and implementation.

The Irish NFQ was one of the first of its kind, and the first to reference to the EQF and one of just six countries to re-reference since 2017. The 2009 impact study suggested that Ireland should look to countries such as Scotland, South Africa and New Zealand who operate similarly mature qualifications frameworks to share learning and discuss developments. Ireland may need to be pioneers again in considering how best to harness the mature qualifications framework in an ever-evolving education and training system.

Panellists at the NFQ 20th anniversary conference emphasised the opportunity for Ireland to learn from other mature qualifications frameworks and it was suggested that a peer network of these countries might be key in leading the way forward.

4.3   NFQ GOVERNANCE & LEADERSHIP

Stakeholders identified QQI as an inclusive and cohesive agency with capability to monitor, review and evaluate trends and needs across the diversity of the tertiary sector. Its responsibility as a tertiary agency was seen as a particular strength in its role as overall custodian of the NFQ. Although stakeholders emphasised the need for partnership and collaboration in the shared responsibility for the implementation of the NFQ, there was a sense that QQI could more clearly communicate its role as a qualifications authority. It was suggested that this was particularly relevant with the imminent introduction of new types of awarding bodies and the opening of access to the NFQ. It needs emphasising that stakeholders were not advocating for a strong regulatory role in this space, as reported in the 2016 policy impact study, but a clear articulation of how QQI discharges its legislative responsibility to develop, promote and maintain the NFQ.

> When I was isolated, I saw NALA online and I went for it. It has gave me great confidence and I work on it through the iPad. I just felt it was something I was doing for myself as I fell through the cracks in school and probably at home as well. I really did enjoy it and got so much from it. I think it is a wonderful course. I did Level 2 computers.
>
> *Representative DCU Institute of Education, 2023*

The important role of QQI was emphasised by several senior leaders and stakeholders at the NFQ 20th anniversary conference. Dr Tomás Mac Eochagáin focused on the 'storm clouds that are gathering' as new jobs, new disciplines and new technologies emerge and the need for agile, responsive programme and qualification design can create a gap for an excuse not to use the NFQ. He considers this to be an existential threat to the existence of the Framework, and QQI and other agencies need to be proactive to ensure that the NFQ continues to be at the forefront of qualifications in Ireland.

4.4   LEARNERS

In 2021, Ireland had a higher rate of third level education than the EU-27 average across all age groupings. The highest rate was for 25–34-year-olds, with 62% holding a tertiary level qualification in comparison to the EU average of 41%. [75]

The impact at the initial levels of the Framework is also significant, with almost 14,500 learners earning over 48,000 qualifications at levels 2 and 3 through NALAs generally literacy and numeracy courses for adult learners.

> NFQ is a powerful tool for social cohesion and the recalibration of inequalities. It allows us to value everyone's lived experience and can enable entry to education and labour market.
>
> **Anne McHugh, CEO of Donegal ETB, 2023**

NALA state that the National Framework of Qualifications in Ireland has encouraged adults to improve their reading, writing, numeracy, and digital literacy skills. It provides:

- National and international standards to underpin provision.
- Information and language concerning access and progression opportunities for learners at all levels
- A reference point for learners who may be at different levels for different subject areas.
- A motivation for learners to progress through the NFQ levels to achieve their goals and take ownership of their lives.

> The NFQ has been a huge success and 20 years well spent in reviewing, extending… but it is millennial… of its time. Things have changed and evolved and the education system as a whole is having to consider the future. (The NFQ) needs to be forward-looking, dealing with AI, softer skills, creativity and flexible learning.
>
> **Adult Learner, 2023**

---

75   Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2022) Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2022. CSO statistical publication.

Learners univrsally commended the fan diagram as a simple, effective way of communicating the NFQ, but the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) noted the need for additional messaging and communications designed specifically for learners. This was echoed by those involved in providing guidance to students with the NFQ seen as extremely useful in discussing the lifelong learning journey both for those who had come through the Irish system and for those coming to the country to study or work. Those representing adult learners also commended the fan as a simple way to explain to those, perhaps further away from mainstream education, where their learning fitted within the overall lifelong learning landscape. It also provided a basis for discussions around pathways and next steps.

I am a secondary school guidance counsellor and frequently refer to the NFQ in my guidance work with students, parents and staff. I use the poster; I refer to the levels when looking at the various pathways and courses.

I always use the QQI website in my careers classes to explain the levels and progression pathways. The NFQ links to understanding information about SUSI also. I also always point it out in the search engines on Careers portal and Qualifax or on the individual college websites. We have the NFQ image in our school homework journal for students too. Staff are made aware annually at whole school guidance level.

Guidance Counsellors, 2023

A survey conducted by the European Students' Union (ESU) in 2020[76], and discussed by Andrej Pirjevec at the NFQ anniversary conference in November 2023, demonstrated that Irish students have a very positive attitude to the NFQ and trust the qualifications system.

4.4.1 Lifelong Learning

"It is widely acknowledged that lifelong learning participation fuels a host of positive benefits, both at individual and societal level. Acknowledging these benefits, the New European Agenda for Adult Learning outlines a commitment to ensuring that lifelong learning participation is an opportunity provided equally to all (The Council of the European Union, 2021). This is reflected in the development of the EU Education and Training 2020 Strategy, which describes a lifelong learning participation rate of 15% as a key objective (European Commission, 2021)."[77]

4.4.1.1 Barriers to Lifelong Learning

Although the NFQ was established with the ambition of enabling and recognising lifelong learning, it is accepted that this ambition has not yet been fully realised.

---

76   The European Students' Union (ESU) (2020) Bologna With Student Eyes 2020. Brussels: ESU).

77   Meyler, A., Lovejoy, L. and Swan, L. (2023) Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland: A focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups. AONTAS. p.4.

A report published by AONTAS[78] presents the findings from the Learning and Work Institute Adult Participation in Learning in Ireland Survey and shows 65% of adults aged 17-64 years in Ireland have participated in learning in the last 3 years. In this population, several factors were found to positively influence lifelong learning participation, including being employed, living in Dublin, higher educational attainment, higher age when exiting formal education, higher occupation class and younger age. The findings from this national survey support a growing body of evidence reaffirming a Matthew Effect in education, implying that individuals who experience greater participation and progression in formal education at earlier phases of life continue to observe greater educational participation in adulthood.

> I have thought many times about doing courses but you know what, like most of the free stuff or cheaper courses, they're usually evening courses. They are very, very bad timing. When you have to put your kid to bed and when you have to have dinner, it can be hard to find someone to mind him at that time. A lot of times that has stopped me doing something
>
> **_Adult Learner, 2022_**

The barriers are discussed in detail in the AONTAS report but can be summarised as follows:

- Absence of sufficient childcare supports
- Lack of flexibility in course schedule
- Financial barriers
- Hidden costs of learning such as books and course materials
- Need to embed learner voice principles across lifelong learning
- Prior negative experience with formal education

4.4.1.2 Lifelong Learning & Employment

A concept discussed at the NFQ conference was a 'portfolio career' with people no longer traversing a linear career trajectory and instead changing industries, developing multiple skills and responding to a changing work landscape. It was suggested that individuals benefitted hugely from the NFQ in such a portfolio career as it provides the common language which can overcome the language discrepancies that do not translate from one sector to another. However, it was also suggested that in a portfolio career, not all programmes and qualifications need to be on the NFQ. Although the common language is useful, industry-specific qualifications that are industry-accredited can be sufficient. A qualifications system needs to be mindful of this and find the right balance of accreditation, quality assurance and inclusion in the Framework. Interestingly, a presentation from Conor Thompson from AONTAS also supported the need for non-accredited learning for marginalised groups as some courses that are designed predominantly for professionals or young people can be exclusionary to those from marginalised communities.

---

78   Meyler, A., Lovejoy, L. and Swan, L. (2023) Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland: A focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups. AONTAS.

Upskilling and re-skilling are key themes for employees, with individuals needing to adapt to the changing skills profiles as a result of artificial intelligence, climate change and changing regulations. IBEC report that a skills-focused approach to workforce planning and development is becoming a growing concern for employers, especially small to medium enterprises. Often employers and employees think about learning in terms of skills, career development and economic reasons but learning for the sake of learning should also be encourage and celebrated.

4.4.2 Learner Agency

An important perspective shared by Professor Emeritus William Kelly, Chair of the National Academic Integrity Network, is that the Framework gave learners a greater degree of agency in their learning than was available prior to 2003. The focus moved from teaching to learning and from a teacher-centred approach, to a learner-centred one. The NFQ delivered greater levels of uniformity across the HE sector. However, learner agency continues to be limited by anomalies and inconsistencies across the sector. Professor Kelly described how universities attribute NFQ Level 8 to all modules in a bachelor's degree regardless of whether the module is undertaken in the first or final year. This approach limits transparency of qualifications and inhibits access, transfer and progression in HE, and especially from FE to HE.

> The values and principles of the Framework articulated in 2003 – comprehensiveness, equality and accessibility, transparency and simplicity, relevance, and quality – have, I believe, stood the test of time and are still relevant today; what is needed is a full-hearted re-commitment to these values and any necessary processes that protect those values.
>
> *Professor William Kelly, 2023*

Part 5.

Conclusion

5. CONCLUSION

The development of the National Framework for Qualifications in Ireland from 2003 to 2023 has been a dynamic process. The NFQ's continuous evolution reflects the commitment of Ireland to quality education and the adaptability required in a rapidly changing world.

The NFQ has been subject to several reviews and reports over the last 20 years with some common themes highlighted repeatedly. Many of these themes continue to be reflected by stakeholders and partners today. On its 20th anniversary it is appropriate to consider how the NFQ can adapt to the changing education and training landscape and continue to serve the needs of learners and wider stakeholders. This includes the need to communicate clearly and consistently with stakeholders about the NFQ, EQF and related services. There is also a need to ensure deeper engagement at a technical level by relevant individuals and organisations. Some of the infrastructure of the NFQ – namely the two major awards at level 6 – needs to be reviewed. However, there is much to celebrate about the implementation of the NFQ, including the success of the fan diagram as an important reference point and a common language, the shift from input to learning outcomes and the meaningful impact of the NFQ on learners. Additionally, it is not clear that all the opportunities implied in the Framework have been realised, including the full benefits of access, transfer, and progression, a national approach to RPL and seamless transition from FE to HE.

The scope and breadth of the stakeholder perspectives outlined in this report reflects the complexity of the NFQ and the variety and diversity of opinions that need to be considered by QQI as part of any future development of the NFQ. The volume of feedback and engagement by stakeholders with the NFQ 20th anniversary speaks of the embeddedness of the Framework in Irish education and training and wider society, and the commitment to its continued implementation and ongoing use. Although it is positive and heartening to receive such significant tributes to the NFQ and its success, it does point to the challenges associated with making any changes to the Framework.

QQI, its stakeholders and partners, have benefitted from the experience of working together to tackle challenges and find compromises which has ensured the NFQ has become embedded into the fabric of Irish society. The same commitment to collaboration, cooperation and compromise needs to be capitalised on to bring the NFQ forward and remain relevant for the next 20 years and beyond, with QQI demonstrating sustained leadership in the development, implementation, and monitoring of the NFQ.

Part
6.

Acknowledgements

6.   ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

QQI would like to thank all the individuals and organisations that submitted perspectives, reflections, and case studies to inform this report including:

- Carol Lynch, Maynooth University, and Marian O'Connor, University College Dublin
- Fiona Fay, Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board
- Dr Jean Hughes, Dublin City University
- Prof Ann Ledwith, University of Limerick
- Dr Deirdre Goggin, Munster Technological University
- Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC)
- Irish Insurance Institute
- Irish Universities Association
- National Adult Literacy Agency
- Technological Higher Education Association
- Teachers Union of Ireland

QQI would also like to thank Bell-Wylie Consulting for the desktop research and interviews conducted which have informed this report. A significant number of individuals representing a wide range of organisations spanning the 20 years were interviewed. QQI would like to thank all those individuals for sharing their thoughts and reflections with the team from Bell-Wylie Consulting. The organisations represented by those individuals are listed below.

- An Cosán
- AONTAS
- Chartered Accountants Ireland
- Education and Training Boards Ireland
- Employment and Recruitment Federation
- Engineers Ireland
- Higher Education Authority
- Higher Education and Training Awards Council
- Higher Education Colleges Association
- Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications
- Ibec
- Irish Universities Association
- Institute of Guidance Counsellors
- National Adult Literacy Agency

- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
- National Council for Educational Awards
- National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
- Open Training College
- QQI Policy and Standards Committee
- SOLAS
- Technological Higher Education Association
- UCD Students' Union
- Union of Students in Ireland
- University Framework Implementation Network

QQI would like to thank all the organisations who attended the pre-conference workshops on the 16th November 2023. The following organisations were represented.

- Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), University of Medicine & Health Sciences
- City & Guilds
- Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education
- VTCT
- ThreeSixtyInsights
- National University of Ireland (NUI)
- National Coordination Point - Dutch Qualifications Framework (NCP-NLQF)
- Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA)
- Quality Education Development (QED)
- The Open University in Ireland
- Irish Tax Institute
- King's Inns
- St Patrick's Pontifical University
- Institute of Certified Public Accountants in Ireland (CPA Ireland)
- Chartered Accountants Ireland
- Insurance Institute
- FDQ
- Pearson Education Ltd.
- Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board (WWETB)
- Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT)
- Donegal Education and Training Board (Donegal ETB)

- Kerry Education and Training Board (Kerry ETB)
- National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN)
- University College Dublin (UCD)
- Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education & Training Board (DDLETB)
- Tipperary ETB
- South East Technological University (SETU)
- Dundalk Institute of Technology (DKIT)
- New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)
- Atlantic Technological University (ATU)
- University College Cork (UCC)
- Cork Education and Training Board (Cork ETB)
- Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board (KWETB)
- City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB)
- Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board (KCETB)
- Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board (LWETB)
- Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board (LCETB)
- Dublin City University (DCU)
- Technological University Dublin (TUD)
- University of Galway
- Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board (MSLETB)
- Trinity College Dublin (TCD), The University of Dublin
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)
- Dunboyne College of Further Education (DCFE)
- Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC)
- National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)
- AHEAD
- Education & Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)
- FET Research Centre, DCU
- Hibernia College
- Synergy Careers
- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)
- Citizens Information Board
- SOLAS
- Belvedere College
- Technological Higher Education Association (THEA)

- Further Education Support Service (FESS)

- ERF

- Manor House Secondary School

- Grad Ireland

- Department of Social Protection (DSP)

QQI would like to thank all those who presented and participated in the NFQ 20th anniversary conference in November 2023. The presenters, panellists and chairs are listed below.

- Prof Irene Sheridan, Chair QQI Board

- Dr Grant Klinkum, NZQA

- Andrej Pirjevec, ESU

- Helene Peterbauer, EUA

- Iraklis Pliakis, Cedefop

- Nadia Starr, SAQA

- Dr Sjur Bergan

- Pauline Radcliffe, SCQF Partnership

- Dr Catherine Peck, ThreeSixtyInsights

- Dr Deirdre Stitch, ThreeSixtyInsights

- Conor Thompson, AONTAS

- Deirdre Goggin, MTU

- Dr Graham Glanville, TCS

- Sarah Barron, KCETB

- Shirley Ryan, UL

- Prof Denis Ryan, ICHAS

- Alan O'Gorman, WWETB

- Ali O'Mahony, UCC SU

- Navin Vasudev, SAQA

- Elva Casey, Hibernia College

- Greg O'Brien, Griffith College

- Dr Billy Kelly, NAIN

- Tony Donohoe, IUA Microcreds Enterprise Advisory Group

- Prof Ann Ledwith, UL

- Pauline Flusk, Innopharma Labs

- Damien Owens, Engineers Ireland

- Aisling Reast, RCSI
- Dr Mary-Liz Trant, NAO
- Meadhbh Costello, IBEC
- Terry Fennell, FDQ
- Amanda Butler, KCETB
- Bridie Killoran, ATU
- Mary Beare Aust, SETU
- Robert Farrell, Innopharma Labs
- Dr Valerie Brett, SETU
- Dr Rory O'Sullivan, DCU
- Hannah Kelly, NStEP
- David Rigney
- Shelly Ann Buckingham
- Ben Holmes
- Seán Ó Foghlú, MU
- Dr Tomás Mac Eochagáin, Griffith College
- Anne McHugh, Donegal ETB

7. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cedefop (2023) *Microcredentials for labour market education and training: the added value for end users.* Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop research paper. Available at: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/7efe9ba9-9b09-11ee-b164-01aa75ed71a1/language-en (Accessed 8 February 2024).

Cedefop (2024a) *European inventory of NQFs*. Available at: https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/european-inventory-of-nqfs (Accessed 9 February 2024).

Cedefop (2024b) *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning*. Available at: https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/european-inventory-on-validation (Accessed 9 February 2024).

Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2022) *Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2022*. CSO statistical publication. Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-eda/educationalattainmentthematicreport2022/keyfindings/ (Accessed 9 February 2024).

Council recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (OJ C, C/189, 15.06.2017, p. 15). Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615(01) (Accessed 9 February 2024).

Crosier, D. and Parveva, T. (2013) *The Bologna process: its impact in Europe and beyond*. Paris: UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning. Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000220649 (Accessed 6 February 2024).

de Paor, C. (2021) *Evaluation of Tobar - a pilot project in the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)*. Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). Available at: https://library.etbi.ie/ld.php?content_id=33929972 (Accessed 7 February 2024).

Ecctis (2021) *Evaluation of the Comparability of the Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate Qualifications*. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2022-04/evaluation-of-nfq-level-6-awards.pdf (Accessed 8 February 2024).

European Commission. *Europass: What is the Qualifications Dataset Register (QDR)?* Available at: https://europa.eu/europass/en/what-qualifications-dataset-register-qdr (Accessed 9 February 2024).

European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and Bologna Process. *Ministerial Conference Bologna 1999*. Available at: https://www.ehea.info/page-ministerial-conference-bologna-1999 (Accessed 6 February 2024).

Goggin, D., Sheridan, I., O'Leary, P., and Cassidy, S. (2015). A Current Overview of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Irish Higher Education, *Focused Research Report No. 2*. Dublin: National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Available at: https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/NF-2015-A-Current-Overview-of-Recognition-of-Prior-Learning-RPL-in-Irish-Higher-Education.pdf (Accessed 7 February 2024).

Government of Ireland (1995) *Charting Our Education Future White Paper on Education*. Department of Education and Science. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/24448/0f3bff53633440d99c32541f7f45cfeb.pdf (Accessed 6 February 2024).

Government of Ireland (2000) *Learning for Life White Paper on Adult Education*. Dublin: Government Publications Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/24723/8eaa8222690f43279dd017f686427e9b.pdf (Accessed 6 February 2024).

Government of Ireland (2011) *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. Report of the Strategy Group*. Dublin: Government Publications. Available at: https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Strategy-for-Higher-Education-2030.pdf (Accessed 7 February 2024).

Government of Ireland (2015). *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. Available at: https://ncca.ie/media/3249/framework-for-junior-cycle-2015-en.pdf (Accessed 9 February 2024).

Government of Ireland (2020) *Programme for Government: Our Shared Future*. Department of the Taoiseach. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e05d-programme-for-government-our-shared-future/ (Accessed 7 February 2024).

Government of Ireland (2022) *Policy Platform: Progressing A Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge*. Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/225165/fff8a843-0df6-436a-ade1-ae060deadd45.pdf#page=null (Accessed 9 February 2024).

Granville, G. (2003) ''Stop Making Sense': Chaos and coherence in the formulation of the Irish qualifications framework', *Journal of Education and Work*, 16(3), pp.259-270. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1363908032000099430

Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2024) *Springboard+ (springboardcourses.ie)*. Available at: https://springboardcourses.ie/ (Accessed 9 February 2024).

Indecon International Research Economists (2017) *Policy Impact Assessment of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications*. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/Policy%20Impact%20Assessment%20of%20NFQ_Indecon%20Report%20with%20Cover_FINAL.pdf (Accessed 8 February 2024).

International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) Report 1995. Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/methods/programmefortheinternationalassessmentofadultcompetencies/ials_report.pdf (Accessed 7 February 2024).

Irish Register of Qualifications (irq.ie). Available at: https://irq.ie/ (Accessed 9 February 2024).

McManus, S., Peck, C. and Vickery, J. (2022) *A Review of Consortia-led Apprenticeships in Ireland*. Quality and Qualifications Ireland. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/news/new-report-review-of-consortia-led-apprenticeships-in-ireland (Accessed 9 February 2024).

Meyler, A., Lovejoy, L. and Swan, L. (2023) *Lifelong Learning Participation in Ireland: A focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups*. AONTAS. Available at: https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Lifelong%20Learning/AONTAS_LLL%20Research%20Report_Final%20Digital%20Launch.pdf (Accessed 7 February 2024).

MICROBOL (2022) *European Project MICROBOL Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments – Common Framework for Micro-credentials in the EHEA*. Available at: https://microcredentials.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2022/03/Micro-credentials_Framework_final-1.pdf (Accessed 9 February 2024).

Murphy, I. (2019). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Ireland*. Available at: http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_Ireland.pdf (Accessed 7 February 2024).

National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) (1998) *Access and participation in adult literacy schemes*. Available at: https://www.nala.ie/research/literacy-numeracy-access-participation/ (Accessed 6 February 2024).

National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) (2022) Leading the way in online learning. Available at: https://www.nala.ie/research/leading-the-way-in-online-learning/ (Accessed 7 February 2024).

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2022) *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report*. NCCA: Dublin. Available at: https://ncca.ie/media/5399/scr-advisory-report_en.pdf (Accessed 9 February 2024).

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Report on the review of the Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes*. NCCA: Dublin. Available at: https://ncca.ie/media/5961/review-l1l2-lp_0223_en.pdf (Accessed 9 February 2024).

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) (2001) *Towards a National Framework of Qualifications: A discussion document*.

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) (2005) *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training*. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-09/principles-and-operational-guidelines-for-rpl-2005.pdf (Accessed 7 February 2024).

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) (2006) *Verification of Compatibility of Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area – Final Report, November 2006*. Available at: https://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/Qualifications_frameworks/81/0/Verification_of_Compatibility_of_NFQ_with_QF_EHEA_220609_596810.pdf (Accessed 7 February 2024).

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) (2009). *Framework Implementation and Impact Study*. Available at: https://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/Qualifications_frameworks/03/7/FIISreportFINALsept2009_597037.pdf (Accessed 7 February 2024).

National Tertiary Office Website (nto.hea.ie). Available at: https://nto.hea.ie/ (Accessed 9 February 2024).

Nic Giolla Mhichíl, M. (2013)　The Changing Landscape of Higher Education: An Analysis of Bologna Policy and Ireland's Engagement with the Process 　, *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 24, pp.331-345. Available at:　http://www.jstor.org/stable/42912426 (Accessed 6 February 2024).

Nic Giolla Mhichíl, M., Brown, M., Beirne, E. and Mac Lochlainn, C. (2020) *A Micro-Credential Roadmap: Currency, Cohesion and Consistency*. Dublin City University. Available at: https://www.skillnetireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/A-Micro-Credential-Roadmap-Currency-Cohesion-and-Consistency.pdf (Accessed 8 February 2024).

OECD and National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) (2003) *The Role of National Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning - Background Report for Ireland*. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/33978011.pdf (Accessed 6 February 2024).

OECD (2023) *OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations*. Paris: OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/d7b8b40b-en

Ó Foghlú, S. (2003) 'Agricultural Education and Training in the Context of the National Qualifications Framework', *National Conference on Agricultural Education*. Available at: https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2003/agriculturaleducation.pdf (Accessed 6 February 2024).

Peck, C. and Stritch, D. (2023*) From Counting to Cultivating Successful Participation - A Review of the Landscape of Practice Supporting Access Transfer and Progression in Irish Education and Training*. Quality and Qualifications Ireland. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2023-11/qqi-insights_from-counting-to-cultivating-successful-participation-a-review-of-the-landscape-of-practice-supporting-access-transfer-and-progression-in-irish-education-and-training-2023.pdf (Accessed 6 February 2024).

Pilcher, N., Fernie, S., and Smith, K. (2017) 'The impact of National Qualifications Frameworks: by which yardstick do we measure dreams?', *Journal of Education and Work*, 30(1), pp.1-12. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2015.1122178

QAA (2023) *Qualifications can Cross Boundaries: A guide to comparing qualification in the UK and Ireland* (8th ed.). QAA. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2023-08/Qualifications%20Can%20Cross%20Boundaries-Aug-2023_0.pdf (Accessed 9 February 2024).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Website. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/ (Accessed 7 February 2024).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2013) *Section 4.7 – Green Paper on the Recognition of Prior Learning*. Available at: https://qsdocs.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Green%20Paper%20-%20Section%204.7.pdf (Accessed 7 February 2024).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2014) *Professional Award-type Descriptors (Award Class: Professional) For the Alignment of Professional Awards at NFQ Levels 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9*. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2022-09/Professional%20Award%20Type%20Descriptors.pdf (Accessed 7 February 2024).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2015) *QQI Policy Restatement - Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression in Relation to Learners for Providers of Further and Higher Education and Training*. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/ATP%20Policy%20Restatement%20FINAL%202018.pdf (Accessed 7 February 2024).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2020a). *Europass Diploma Supplement*. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/HEI%20Institution%20weblinks%202020.pdf (Accessed 7 February 2024).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2020b) *Green Paper on the Qualifications System*. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-10/green-paper-on-the-qualifications-system.pdf (Accessed 8 February 2024).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2020c) *Technical Paper on the Qualifications System.* Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-10/technical-paper-on-the-qualifications-system.pdf (Accessed 8 February 2024).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2020d) *Referencing of the Irish NFQ to the EQF and QF-EHEA - National Report 2020.* Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/NFQ%20 Referencing%20Report%2012-2020.pdf (Accessed 9 February 2024).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2022) *Joint-sectoral protocol between Designated Awarding Bodies and Quality and Qualifications Ireland for the inclusion of qualifications within the National Framework of Qualifications*. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2022-07/Joint-sectoral%20 protocol%20DABs.pdf (Accessed 9 February 2022).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2023a) *20 Years of the NFQ*. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/ events/20-years-of-the-nfq (Accessed 6 February 2024).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2023b) *QQI Consultation on Draft Broad Standards at NFQ Levels 1-4*. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/news/report-published-on-public-consultation-on-draft-broad-award-standards (Accessed 8 February 2024).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2023c) *Data on HE micro-credentials in Ireland 2014-2023*. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/engagement-insights-and-knowledge-sharing/our-data/data-on-he-microcreds (Accessed 8 February 2024).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and The Education Bureau (EDB) of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (2018) *Comparing Qualifications in Ireland and Hong Kong*. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/comparing-qualifications-in-ireland-and-hong-kong.pdf (Accessed 9 February 2024).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) (2019) *Comparing Qualifications in Ireland and New Zealand: A Guide*. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/ files/2021-11/comparing-qualifications-in-ireland-and-new-zealand.pdf (Accessed 9 February 2024).

Realising the European Higher Education Area (2003) In *Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin on September 19 2003*. Available at: https://www.ehea.info/ Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/2003_Berlin_Communique_English_577284.pdf (Accessed 6 February 2024).

Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing Erasmus+: the Union Programme for education and training, youth and sport and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 (Text with EEA relevance) (OJ L 189, 28.05.2021, p. 1 -33). Available at: http://data.europa.eu/ eli/reg/2021/817/oj (Accessed 9 February 2024).

UNESCO, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), European Training Foundation (EFT), and European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) (2023) *Global inventory of national and regional qualifications frameworks 2022, volume I: thematic chapters*. France: UNESCO. Available at: https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/2237_en.pdf. (Accessed: 6 February 2024).

The European Students' Union (ESU) (2020) *Bologna With Student Eyes 2020*. Brussels: ESU). Available at: https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/BWSE2020-Publication_WEB2.pdf (Accessed 9 February 2024).

The University Sector Framework Implementation Network (FIN) (2009) *University awards and the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ): Issues around the Design of Programmes and the Use and Assessment of Learning Outcomes*. Available at: https://www.nfqnetwork.ie/A_Guide_to_designing_UNiversity_Awards_for_Inclusion_in_the_National_Framework_of_Qualifications/Default.132.html (Accessed 6 February 2024).

NOTES: