



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

Policy for Determining Awards Standards



QQI, an integrated agency for quality and qualifications in Ireland

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Policy for Determining Awards Standards

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1 **SUMMARY**

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established in November 2012 by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 (the 2012 Act). The 2012 Act sets out the functions of QQI which includes the making of awards.

This document sets out QQI's approach to the determination of awards standards for the education and training awards that it makes itself and that are made by providers of education and training programmes to whom it has delegated authority to make an award.

The policy covers both further education and training (FET) awards standards and higher education and training (HET) awards standards.

This policy outlines the range of approaches used by QQI in the development and determination of awards standards.

It describes the Common Awards System (the CAS) of FET awards standards and provides for its evolutionary development.

QQI policy is developed through a consultative process involving all stakeholders. Details of the policy development process are available on www.QQI.ie. QQI policy is adopted by the Board and implemented by the executive accordingly.

2 **INTRODUCTION**

QQI awards standards are determined within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) which is maintained by QQI and comprises a grid of indicators, award-type descriptors and other policies, criteria, standards and guidelines that may be issued to support it.

2.1 **Policy Context**

The NFQ is used to recognise the awards made by a range of awarding bodies. The main kinds of awarding bodies are identified, and their relationships with the NFQ are outlined, in the following sub-sections.

2.1.a **QQI as an Awarding Body**

QQI determines awards standards for the education and training awards that it makes itself and that are made by providers to whom it has delegated authority to make an award. Such standards are determined to be consistent with the NFQ's award-types.

2.1.b **Providers to which authority to make an award has been delegated**

These providers make awards in respect of programmes of education and training that they validate against QQI awards standards.

2.1.c **Designated awarding bodies set standards for their own awards**

These awarding bodies are authorised by law to make awards. QQI does not determine

awards standards for their awards. They are required by section 43(3) of the 2012 Act to ensure, in so far as is reasonably practicable, that each award that they make is recognised within the NFQ. In this context recognition within the framework of a designated awarding body's (DAB) award means that the award standard is determined by the DAB to be consistent with the relevant NFQ award-type.

2.1.d Other organisations whose awards are recognised within the NFQ

This is a heterogeneous group of organisations and it includes those who elect to seek recognition of their awards within the NFQ. QQI Policy and criteria for recognition of awards within the NFQ is described elsewhere.

2.2 LEGAL BASIS

QQI's general functions are set out in section 9 (1) of the 2012 Act. Sub-sections a, e, f, g and j are relevant here as is section 9(2) which concerns actions to be undertaken in by QQI in the performance of its functions. QQI's authority to determine awards standards is established in section 49. Section 50 and 51 of the 2012 Act concern the making of awards by QQI and a provider with DA.

2.3 Purpose of the Policy

The purpose of the policy is to outline QQI's approach to the development (directly or indirectly) and determination of awards standards.

3 POLICY

3.1 Approach to Standards Determination

QQI's approach to the determination of awards standards will be to prescribe learning outcomes sufficiently specifically to meet the needs of Ireland's qualifications and education and training systems for the benefit of Irish society but never to prescribe more specifically than that. This means that QQI's awards standards determinations will vary in their specificity.

The least specific award standards are the (repurposed) NFQ award-type descriptors. These are the default awards standards for all QQI's education and training awards—they apply unless a more specific award standard has been determined by QQI.

QQI's higher education and training (HET) awards standards tend to be less specific than its further education and training (FET) awards standards. More specific HET awards standards might, for example, be determined where there is a need to capture specific education and training requirements for entry to a particular occupation or profession.

QQI's FET awards standards tend to be more specific than its HET awards standards and specific standards have been determined for all of QQI's named FET awards.

3.1.a Validation and Awards Standards

The de facto award standard for a particular named award as issued is the statement of minimum intended programme learning outcomes that is approved at validation of the corresponding programme of education and training. These de facto awards standards are maintained by providers.

While QQI awards standards and corresponding awards specifications are more or less specific, the intended programme learning outcomes to be acquired, and where appropriate demonstrated, before a named award associated with a validated programme may be made, must always be specific and sufficiently detailed to communicate the award-holder's knowledge, skill and competence to a prospective employer or an educational institution for the purpose of helping the award-holder gain access to, transfer to or progress to, a particular programme of education and training.

3.1.b Occupational Standards and Fitness to Practise

Here 'occupational standard' means a standard of knowledge, skill and competence that must be achieved to qualify or license a person to practise in a specific occupation.

As expressions of expected learning outcomes, occupational standards are comparable to education and training standards but their purpose and origin are typically different and this warrants making a clear distinction between them.

If an occupation is regulated, an occupational standard might be maintained by the regulator. The origination of occupational standards will normally involve the regulator, employers, occupational associations, and education and training providers. The international communities involved in the occupation and its knowledge-bases would also be involved directly or indirectly.

Practitioners of a regulated occupation can be expected to demonstrate periodically that they comply with the applicable occupational standard. Continuing practice may be sufficient to keep practitioners' skills up-to-date but some education and training may also be necessary for this purpose.

An education and training programme and award may be designed to prepare a person for entry into an occupation. Education and training programmes and awards may also be designed for practitioner development purposes. Such programmes and awards (and awards standards) benefit from the existence of detailed and up-to-date occupational standards.

An education and training award is permanent and cannot function as periodically renewable licence to practise nor as an indicator of continuing fitness to practise a particular occupation. It is not a proxy for a licence to practise.

3.1.c An Award Standard is a Threshold

Awards standards as constructed by the 2012 Act are thresholds. They describe standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired, and where appropriate, demonstrated, by a learner before an award may be made.

3.2 Awards Standards for Higher Education and Training Awards made by QQI and Providers with DA

Specific awards standards will not routinely be determined for higher education and training awards because the HET validation processes when properly implemented provide a sufficient check on the suitability of minimum intended programme learning outcomes.

3.3 Award Standards for Further Education and Training Awards Made by QQI and Providers with DA

3.3.a The Common Awards System

The CAS was originally developed by the Further Education and Training Awards Council and most current FET awards standards are within the CAS. The CAS and implications of the changes to CAS (introduced by this policy) are detailed in Appendix 1. It will continue to be used for new development but not exclusively.

3.3.b Other Approaches to the Determination of FET Awards Standards

As indicated above the NFQ's award-type descriptors are QQI's default awards standards. There are situations where these will be sufficient for FET. Where more specific FET awards standards are required they will be determined.

3.4 Apprenticeship Awards Standards

Where required QQI will determine awards standards for FET and HET apprenticeship awards where necessary. The approach will be consistent with the principles outlined in this policy and the implementation plan.

3.5 Articulation and Progression

Awards standards must have regard to the articulation and progression relationships of the corresponding programmes. It is important to avoid dead-end qualifications. Ideally all programmes leading to Framework qualifications should be on learning pathways; i.e. they should enable a learner to access, transfer to, or progress to, other programmes.

3.6 Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a system of levels based on knowledge, skill and competence. It is specialised to language learning. CEFR may be used within QQI awards standards determinations.

4 QQI STANDARDS DEVELOPMENT AND DETERMINATION PROCESS

The detailed process for standards development will vary considerably from one situation to another. All processes share certain broad features and these are indicated here.

4.1 Proposals for Review or Development of Awards Standards

As indicated above, the NFQ's award-type descriptors provide a default system of standards. Additional specificity may be provided by QQI awards standards determinations where required. QQI maintains and publishes guidelines and criteria on proposals for the review and development of awards standards.

4.2 Development

The expertise required in the development of awards standards includes an understanding of:

- The field of learning
- Education and training needs (for employment and/or educational development)
- The occupation concerned (where applicable); employer and practitioner perspectives on the occupation and the occupation's education and training needs
- Occupational regulation (where applicable)
- The practice of education and training.

QQI has a coordinating role in standards development. It must ensure that:

- The necessary development expertise is assembled and applied
- A valid, reliable and open development process is implemented
- Awards standards are comprehensible and implementable
- Awards standards meet significant education and training needs (for employment or educational development) and are normally designed to be valid for five years or more
- Awards standards are consistent with the NFQ
- Awards will be recognised nationally and internationally
- Awards standards will regulate assessable intended programme learning outcomes.

QQI may manage the development of an award standard itself or enter into an arrangement with another.

QQI may adopt external standards, criteria, norms or benchmarks in determining its own award standards.

4.3 Consultation on Draft Awards Standards

Once a draft standard has been developed it will normally be published for public consultation. The draft may be modified following consideration of the consultation feedback.

4.4 Formal Determination

If the QQI executive is satisfied that a draft award standard is suitable for determination by QQI it will present it to the QQI Policies and Standards Committee for adoption.

4.5 Publication

QQI will publish awards standards on its website.

4.6 Review

Awards standards will be reviewed from time to time as necessary. Minor changes may be made by the QQI executive outside the review cycle where necessary.

Changes to standards will be published on QQI's website. Providers with delegated authority to make awards and providers of QQI validated programmes are responsible for monitoring relevant standards and making necessary responses to changes.

5 REVIEW OF THIS POLICY

This policy and QQI's principles and approach to the determination of Award Standards will be reviewed two years after the option of this policy, or earlier if necessary.

ANNEX: THE COMMON AWARDS SYSTEM

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Common Awards System (CAS) is a system of further education and training awards and awards standards based on learning outcomes. It was originally developed by the Further Education and Training Awards Council and is being maintained and further developed by QQI. At the time of writing there are in the region of 1600 CAS awards specifications (including minor awards).

The policy for the Common Awards System is presented in this annex.

2 CONTEXT

2.1 Terminology

The CAS makes use of the Framework's four main award classes¹:

- Major
- Minor
- Special purpose
- Supplemental.

The NFQ, its award classes and its award-types are explained elsewhere. Two additional terms are used frequently by the CAS to characterise its awards:

- Component
- Compound.

The term component or 'component award' is synonymous with the NFQ term 'minor award'. A component award is described by a 'component specification'. A component certificate may certify that an individual holds one or more named component awards.

A compound award is an award with prescribed component awards. It may be a major, supplemental or special purpose award. A compound award is described by a 'certificate specification' and this includes 'certificate requirements' that detail all the associated component awards and the combinations of component awards that must be made/held before the compound award may be made/held. The overarching expected learning outcomes for a compound award are also included in its certificate specification. Compound awards are issued as 'certificates' (the detailed naming conventions are described in section 4).

2.2 POLICY AND CRITERIA FOR MAKING QQI CAS AWARDS

QQI's Policy and Criteria for Making Awards establish the policy and criteria for making CAS awards.

¹ The CAS sometimes uses the term 'award type' to mean 'award class'. Often the terms are interchangeable but not always and therefore the more precise usage is advised.

3 THE COMMON AWARDS SYSTEM

The common awards system comprises:

- Certificate specifications for compound awards (i.e. Major, Supplemental or Special Purpose awards).
- Component specifications (for Minor awards).
- Regulations concerning the applications of the awards specifications.

Certificate and component specifications include awards standards expressed as minimum expected learning outcomes. They also include additional information as described in section 4 of this annex.

3.1 Changes to CAS Introduced by this Policy

3.1.a Assessment

Before a learner may receive any CAS award he or she must have acquired and where appropriate demonstrated all of the expected learning outcomes specified for the award. For the avoidance of doubt, it is not sufficient that all the outcomes have been assessed.

3.1.b Capstone Component Award Specifications

A compound award's certificate requirements may include a mandatory capstone component award. A capstone component award is uniquely associated with a particular compound award. Its purpose is to facilitate the demonstration by the learner of the compound award's (overarching) expected learning outcomes—where this cannot be assured through achievement of other kinds of component awards. Credit associated with a capstone component award is intended to facilitate the integration of learning achieved in the other components.

3.1.c Provider Developed Awards Specifications

Subject to QQI's agreement, a provider of an education and training programme may develop their own award specifications within the CAS framework. Awards specifications developed by a provider under such an agreement:

- May be for any class of award (major, special purpose, supplemental or minor)
- Must be consistent with the Framework's award-type descriptors
- May include CAS component award specifications
- Belong to the provider concerned and may not be used by other providers without agreement of that provider and QQI
- Must always include a capstone component as described in the previous sub section
- Must be approved (and periodically reviewed) in the context of a programme validation (and revalidation) process involving by an expert panel who can make national and international comparisons

- Must comply with the FET credit requirements.

3.1.d Major, Special Purpose or Supplemental Award Specifications without Prescribed Minor Awards

A CAS certificate specification (major, special purpose or supplemental) may be determined without prescribing any component awards.

3.1.e Major, Special Purpose or Supplemental Award Specifications with Residual Credit

Each CAS certificate has a minimum FET credit associated with it. Table 1 illustrates the minimum requirements for the CAS's major award certificates.

Not all of a certificate's credit needs to be allocated to component awards (prescribed or non-prescribed).

The certificate's award specification will indicate how residual credit may be made up. Some (if not all) of the residual credit may be required to cover the integrated learning involved in meeting the certificate's expected learning outcomes (as distinct from its components' expected learning outcomes).

The programme design must specify how residual credit is used and this must be approved at validation. A provider may use its own 'provider-developed' awards specifications to make up the residual credit subject to section 3.1.3 (including validation).

Residual credit is not a 'wild card' to enable the use of arbitrary minor awards to make up a certificate's credit requirements.

Framework levels 1-3 afford relatively greater flexibility however in aggregating component awards to earn major awards.

Table 1

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
Certificate Credit Requirement (w.r.t. achievement of the preceding Framework level)	20	30	60	90	120	120
Maximum Allocated to Component Awards	20	30	60	90	120	120
Minimum allocated to components	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 2 (in section 4) which illustrates the previous credit distribution and therefore applies to most of the stock of certificate specifications at the time of writing. The new distribution allows more focus on vocational education and training and affords much greater flexibility to programme designers.

3.1.f Alternatives to Transferrable Skills Pools for New Compound award Specifications

Originally, certificate requirements within CAS compound awards specifications generally included pools prescribing component awards for transferrable skills (e.g. teamwork and work experience).

The inclusion of these pools is no longer a requirement for newly developed or reviewed award specifications. The expected learning outcomes for a compound award must include transferrable skills. Programme designers should be enabled to integrate the development of these skills into the programme.

4 SYNTAX FOR THE CAS CERTIFICATE AND COMPONENT SPECIFICATIONS

This section outlines the broad features of CAS certificate specification syntax. The detailed syntax is determined through the implementation of the CAS and not prescribed here. The syntax may change with Framework level.

4.1 The CAS's Certificate/Component Specification Syntax

Certificate and component specifications normally address the following headings. Some are explained in the sections that follow.

- i. Award Title
- ii. Framework Level
- iii. Purpose Statement
- iv. Credit Value
- v. Field of learning
- vi. Expected Learning Outcomes
- vii. Certificate requirements
- viii. Assessment requirements
- ix. Grading
- x. Special Validation Requirements
- xi. Supporting Documentation
- xii. Access Statement

The grade (where an award is classified) is calculated from the weighted average of the grades of components which are listed in the certificate requirements.

Awards making up residual credit do not necessarily contribute to the grade and components gained by exemption may be excluded from the calculation of grade.

New award specifications may require that all component grades contribute to the grading calculation along with other contributions.

4.2 Title

There are two parts to the award title: ‘the stem title’ (indicating the award’s Framework Type and Class) and the ‘named award title’ (indicating the award’s subject).

The award title has the form

[Level String] [Stem String] Certificate [Subject String]

Where, for N = 1, ..., 6, Level String = empty for Stem String = “component” otherwise = “Level [N]”; Stem String = empty (for Major Award-type and N= either 1 or 2 ...or 5) or “Advanced”(for Major and N=6) or “Special Purpose” ...or “Supplemental” ...or “component” ...and Subject String is created in line with sections 5.1.1 and 5.5 and only in the case of components leads with Level [N].

Table 2 illustrating the construction of awards titles²

	Certificate	
Major awards	Level N Certificate	[Subject string]
Minor awards	Component Certificate	Level N [Minor Subject String 1] Level N [Minor Subject String 1] ...
Special purpose awards	Level N Special Purpose Certificate	
Supplemental awards	Level N Supplemental Certificate	

4.2.a Named Award Title (Subject String)

The named award title must be concise, indicate the subject and reflect the expected learning outcomes. The named award title may incorporate Field of Learning categories where feasible. For example: Level 5 Certificate in Forestry.

Named award titles:

- Should be uniform where feasible for the same subject at different Framework levels.
- Must be unique for awards at the same Framework level.
- The title of a compound award cannot be used for a component award
- Should reflect a domain of learning and not an occupation or job.
- Must be no longer than 43 characters selected from: the Roman alphabet; the space character; and the hyphen character.
- Must not infringe any property rights.

² A narrative version of the protocol with examples will be issued in due course.

4.3 Purpose

All the CAS awards must have a stated purpose. The CAS purpose statements aim to describe what the learning will enable the award-holder to do.

4.4 FET Credit

FET credit (a measure of learner effort) in the CAS is normally calculated on a one-step-up basis: i.e. the FET credit associated with a CAS award at a given Framework level assumes (unless otherwise stated) as a baseline that the learner has already achieved the requirements for the previous Framework level in the discipline-area concerned.

Every CAS certificate and component specification includes an FET credit value. FET credit is normally quantised to multiples of 5 FET Credits (50 hours of learner effort). Learner effort is based on the time taken by typical learners at the level of the award on average, to achieve the learning outcomes for the award. It includes all learning time involved including; guided learning hours, self-directed learning and assessment.

Normally, all the CAS's majors at the same Framework Level have the same credit value. Component awards have the default value for their Framework Level or one of several permitted alternatives (Table 3).

At the time of adoption of this policy a default credit value of 15 FET Credits had been used for the development (by migration³) of minor awards at Framework Levels 5 and 6. Therefore, unless a particular case was made during the development of a particular certificate specification, the credit level for all level 5 and 6 minor awards is 15 FET credits. This may have resulted in anomalies that will need to be identified and addressed.

Table 3 Credit rules

Framework Level	Major Awards Credit Values	Default Minor Award Credit Values	Other Permitted Minor Award Credit Values	Special Purpose and Supplemental Award Credit Value Ranges
1	20	5	10	
2	30	5	10	
3	60	10	5,20	→5 and ← 60
4	90	10	5,15,20	→5 and ← 90
5	120	15	5,10,30	→5 and ← 120
6	120	15	5,10,30	→5 and ← 120

4.5 Field of Learning

The Field of Learning Classifications System used by the CAS.

4.6 Expected Learning Outcomes

Every certificate specification must include a statement of the standard of knowledge,

³ Migration was a process used by the Further Education and Training Awards Council to generate CAS award specifications from previously existing materials. Migration completed in 2013/2014.

skill and competence to be achieved before the relevant certificate award may be made.

4.7 Certificate Requirements

A CAS certificate specification may include 'certificate requirements' that specify the CAS component awards (minor awards) that must be held by a learner before the compound award may be made and the certificate issued.

4.8 Assessment Requirements

Assessment requirements provide supplementary requirements above the standard requirement for any QQI award that the learner be assessed as having achieved the expected learning outcomes. This section may be left blank.

An award specification may apportion the determination of the overall grade to a combination of assessment techniques: e.g. Project 20% Examination-Theory 80%.

Alternatively the award specification may otherwise prescribe assessment requirements.

4.9 Specific Validation Requirements

Certificate and component specifications may include conditions that must be met before a programme leading to the award can be validated.

4.10 Access statement

QQI's policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners apply to all of its work. If any non-standard matters need to be addressed they are included in the access statement.





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