



**QQI**

Quality and Qualifications Ireland  
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

# Green Paper on the Qualifications System

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## Preface

In Ireland and internationally, qualifications are widely sought, used and recognised for a multitude of social, economic and cultural purposes.

They serve as educational goals, and communicate achievement of knowledge, skill or competence of varying magnitudes. They can attest to the successful completion of initial academic or professional formation, and also indicate continuing professional development. They can help a recruiter determine whether a person has the skills required to do a job. They can signal to an educational institution that an applicant is adequately prepared to enrol on a programme. They can affirm individuals' sense of self-worth and contribute to social inclusion. They are relevant to lifelong learning and can serve as stepping stones towards more advanced qualifications. They can take a variety of forms, with digital becoming increasingly popular. And they mediate trust between qualifications users.

Because they are ubiquitous, we can easily take qualifications for granted and overlook the human and material elements that support them and maintain their relevance and trustworthiness.

The achievements that entitle a person to a qualification can occur in a wide variety of learning environments; in educational institutions; in the workplace; in the home; in virtual learning environments and so on. Qualifications need to be underpinned by pedagogically sound educational programmes that accommodate the diversity of learners that exist in our society. They need to be based on trustworthy assessment of learning. These underpinnings, however, are not the principal subject of this paper except insofar as necessary to understand the qualifications.

The emphasis in this paper is on qualifications: on characterising qualifications; on agreeing and maintaining standards for qualifications; on relationships between qualifications; on the recognition of qualifications; on the signalling value of qualifications; and on qualifications' influence on learning pathways.

We believe this is a pivotal time to focus on how Ireland's tertiary qualifications system is performing. We would like to use this Green Paper to launch a conversation with qualifications users about tertiary qualifications, whether that's further education and training qualifications, higher education and training qualifications, or professional qualifications.

We aim to engage all types of qualifications users in this discussion including learners, employers, parents, practitioners, occupational associations and professions, providers including their staff, regulators, trade unions, the international community, and so on either directly or through representative bodies.

In this Green Paper we have set out what we think is important. Now, we want qualifications users to help us complete the picture. During this period, we will arrange bilateral meetings with key stakeholders as well as events (e.g. webinars, online workshops or other kinds of events as prevailing conditions allow) to facilitate discussion among diverse stakeholders. We encourage stakeholders to arrange their own events to facilitate discussion of the issues and collection of ideas.

Following the end of the consultation process we will publish the findings, a thematic analysis of the feedback and our response setting out the next steps. We will update the two papers and use them to inform our work in providing infrastructure for qualifications and for continuing dialogue with key stakeholders to help bring about enhancements to the qualifications system through our collected collaborative efforts.

## ① Introduction

This Green Paper (a discussion paper) outlines the Irish qualifications system and poses some broad questions on possible opportunities for its enhancement. The companion Technical Paper (Technical Paper on the Qualifications System) provides more depth.

QQI would like to use the Green Paper to launch a discussion about Ireland's qualifications system because we believe that this is a pivotal time to focus on how it is performing. We aim to engage all types of qualifications users in this discussion: learners, employers, parents, practitioners, occupational associations and professions, providers and their staff, regulators, trade unions, the international community, and others, either directly or through representative bodies.

QQI is in a particularly good position to facilitate discussion about the qualifications system because it is the state agency with responsibility for:

- the **external quality assurance** of **tertiary<sup>1</sup> education**;
- the maintenance of the **National Framework of Qualifications** (NFQ);
- the maintenance of national policy and criteria for **access, transfer and progression** in relation to learners; and
- certification of further education and training qualifications in the NFQ.

While this paper addresses all qualifications related to the NFQ, the main emphasis is on tertiary qualifications and directly related matters.

**Black bold text** indicates a term-of-art for the Green Paper that is defined in the Technical Paper's glossary (if frequently recurring) or in an endnote. The Technical Paper also contains a list of abbreviations (e.g. NFQ).

Among the motivations for publishing this Green Paper are:

- the need to understand better how our tertiary qualifications system works (as a complex adaptive system) and how it is evolving to match society's lifelong learning and qualification recognition needs where the pace of change, be it technological, scientific, economic, cultural, environmental, learner demographic or social, can sometimes appear alarmingly fast;
- the need to develop a new policy direction for QQI's Common Awards System (CAS) and associated standards underpinning the further education and training system;
- the need to explore the transparency of standards in higher education with stakeholders, in the context of the emergence of multiple new awarding bodies in the tertiary sector including the institutes of technology (now **designated awarding bodies** (DAB) at NFQ levels 1-9) and the technological universities;

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<sup>1</sup> Tertiary qualifications include further education and training qualifications; higher education and training qualifications; and professional qualifications.

- the need to be vigilant in safeguarding the national and international reputation of Irish qualifications;
- the need to reflect on the qualifications-related infrastructure required to support employment-oriented initial and continuing **vocational education and training**<sup>1</sup> that may include work-based learning;
- the need to better understand non-standard learning pathways and qualifications system permeability;
- the need to ensure that the NFQ continues to be adequately supported and invested with meaning by its communities of practice<sup>2</sup>.

The wide breadth of this Green Paper reflects the fact that broad changes in some of these elements must be considered given their impact on the wider qualifications system, and such elements cannot effectively be considered in isolation.

With this Green Paper and its associated Technical Paper, we aim to launch a discussion about:

- (i) **tertiary qualifications** and the **qualifications system**;
- (ii) the **standards** that underpin those qualifications,
- (iii) the **communities of practice** that underpin those standards and
- (iv) the **learning pathways** that lead to qualifications, occupations and lifelong learning.

**We invite people to join with us in looking at these matters from a whole system perspective and not only from their own experience of the system.**

The Green Paper and Technical Paper outline our thinking, some of it tentative. Several broad questions are posed in the Green Paper for respondents to consider. These papers provide one perspective only and we would like respondents to offer additional perspectives, especially on topics that are important to them. There is no need for each respondent to address all the issues/questions. We will facilitate discussion by arranging one or more events before the close of the consultation process.

**We have set out what we think is important and we want respondents to help us complete the picture.**

At the end of the consultation process we will publish the findings and our response to the findings, and we will update the two papers. Those papers will then inform our work in providing infrastructure for qualifications and maintaining dialogue with key stakeholders to help bring about enhancements to the qualifications system through our collected collaborative efforts.

## ② Why do we need to discuss the qualifications system now?

Here are some of the main reasons we need to discuss the qualifications system now:

- Ireland had bounced back relatively recently to virtually full employment after a period of high unemployment following the global financial crisis and now faces the challenge of dealing with the consequences of COVID-19.
- while the most recent (2018) national employer survey<sup>3</sup> found that overall satisfaction with higher and further education graduates was 86% and 84% respectively, there are opportunities for improvement (e.g. commercial awareness, entrepreneurship).
- people are already talking about the accelerating pace of change and the ‘fourth industrial revolution’.<sup>4</sup>
- in further education and training (FET)<sup>5</sup>, for example, we have seen:
  - o major structural changes in educational institutions (ETBs) and regulatory institutions (SOLAS and QQI) in recent years;
  - o a renewed interest in workplace learning and an increase in employment-oriented initial and continuing education;
  - o the publication of a new five-year Further Education and Training Strategy (FET) 2020-2024.
- in higher education, for example, we have seen:
  - o the institutes of technology gain intrinsic awarding powers to make awards at NFQ levels 1-9<sup>6</sup> on 1 January 2020 and become **designated awarding bodies** (DAB) as are Irish universities already;
  - o the emergence of technological universities (one at the time of writing);
  - o the beginning of the reform<sup>7</sup> of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Act 1971;
  - o the introduction of apprenticeships leading to higher education qualifications up to doctoral level.
- There is a renaissance of apprenticeships across the tertiary education system (at NFQ levels 5-10) and renewed interest more generally in workplace learning and increasing employment-oriented initial and continuing education.
- The learner population, especially in higher education, is playing a greater role in assisting with quality assurance of educational programmes (courses) and institutions.
- There is considerable interest in attracting international students and new legislation has been enacted for the International Education Mark (IEM), to be implemented by QQI.
- The advancing European qualifications and quality assurance agenda and infrastructure.
- Brexit and Covid-19 and their impact on Ireland’s qualifications system.

In particular it is timely to reflect on

- the continuing suitability of the established distribution of learning pathways to qualifications;

- how our system engages learners, employers, occupational associations, practitioners and other users of qualifications so that they can better understand and contribute to the design of learning pathways and qualifications;
- how our system facilitates the efficient and reliable recognition of non-formal and informal learning<sup>8</sup>;
- the NFQ, after 15 years of implementation, and its influence on the qualifications system and how to ensure that it continues to be adequately supported and invested with meaning by its communities of practice<sup>9</sup>.

## ③ What do we hope will be achieved by the discussion?

We hope that the consultation process for this Green Paper will be an opportunity to bring diverse participants (individuals and organisations) together to identify the existing strengths of our tertiary qualifications system and to help find opportunities for improving it. It is important to engage users of qualifications not only from inside the education and training system but also from outside it in the discussions.

The consultation on the Green Paper will be an opportunity to determine current perspectives but the discussion of issues will need to continue indefinitely as the system evolves.

We offer ourselves as facilitators and enablers of this discussion. We can effect or influence some change ourselves but ultimately we are but one of many actors within the qualifications system.

**Changing the qualifications system or even preserving strengths within it involves concerted efforts by a multitude of entities. We can easily forget that even the simplest qualifications require continual efforts by many diverse actors to maintain the necessary underpinnings for standards and relevance.**

The outcomes of this discussion might contribute to:

- a greater general understanding of the qualifications system, its key infrastructure and terminology;
- refreshed approaches to the NFQ and its implementation;
- new methods for using external quality assurance to help maintain the strengths of the qualifications system and enhance it;
- a greater understanding of learning pathways, how they impact on the permeability of the qualifications system and the factors that influence the sustenance and evolution of networks of learning pathways;
- the identification of opportunities for new infrastructure or initiatives at qualifications system level;
- the streamlining of QQI's standards for FET qualifications;
- a greater understanding of the potential of, and support for subject guidelines for higher education;

- the development of arrangements that can make more granular information from the labour market (e.g. occupational standards and more granular information on skills/ labour shortages from the national skills infrastructure) available to inform the design of educational qualifications and the implementation of programmes;
- enhanced data collection and analysis methodology that can help us better understand how qualifications are being used and how the qualifications system is functioning;
- the emergence or growth of communities of practice to help enhance quality through the dissemination of ideas and experiences;
- new ideas about how to facilitate the validation of non-formal and informal learning (RPL);
- greater connectivity between suppliers of qualifications and other users of qualifications, especially employers.

## ④ Explaining some key concepts and definitions used in this Green Paper

We need to begin by setting out some key concepts and definitions. Please bear with us as these will provide the basis for a coherent exchange of views between diverse users of qualifications.

Please note that there are some inconsistencies in the definitions that people use. We will point out some of these. The aim here is sufficient clarity for productive discussion and not mathematical precision.

### **What is tertiary education?**

For the purposes of this paper tertiary education refers to all of further education and training (FET), higher education (HE) and professional education and training that may lead to qualifications from level 1 to level 10 in the NFQ. This is a relatively new usage in Ireland.<sup>10</sup>

### **What is a qualification?**

A qualification is granted to an individual when a **competent body** formally certifies that the individual has achieved knowledge, skill or competence to a specified **standard**. It is typically achieved following successful completion of a **programme<sup>11</sup> of education or training** (often abbreviated to programme) or a process for the **recognition of prior learning<sup>12</sup>** or a combination of the two.

Examples include certificates, diplomas or degrees. We consider the terms '**award**' and '**qualification**' to be synonymous.

Qualifications mediate trust and are widely sought after, used and recognised in our society for multiple purposes.

### **Why is trustworthiness important?**

Naturally we want our qualifications to be trustworthy. By this we mean that users can safely trust that the qualified individual has been validly and reliably assessed to have met the relevant standard and that the standard itself reflects current expectations among relevant stakeholders (especially the users of qualifications e.g. employers, professional or scientific communities, educational institutions using the qualification and such like).



Trustworthiness is important for our qualifications to be widely recognised nationally and internationally. It relates to the value of qualifications to their users. The credibility of tertiary qualifications is important for the reputation of our qualifications system (including its institutions), and our country more generally.

## How is trust established?

**Qualifications are so commonplace in our society that we can take for granted the various trust relationships on which they depend.**

Trust in qualifications requires a basis. It also requires infrastructural supports and sanctions against those who would abuse it. Qualifications users need simple and effective ways of discerning trustworthy qualifications and avoiding untrustworthy ones.

The reliability and validity of the **assessment** of candidates for qualifications is a critical success factor in building and maintaining trust in qualifications. It has already been addressed in detail in a separate QQI [Green Paper on the Assessment of Learners and Learning \(2018\)](#).

The **standards** underpinning qualifications are key to assessment and the recognition of qualifications by users. In this context a standard is a statement of knowledge, skill and competence that a group of concerned actors has agreed and in addition it may include a statement of expectations concerning the formational processes that lead to those outcomes. Qualifications typically depend on a cascade of standards. For example, a master's degree in engineering will meet the following standards:

- the NFQ's general academic standard for the award-type;
- Engineers Ireland's programme accreditation criteria;
- applicable occupational standards;
- awarding body requirements in terms of knowledge, skill and competence to be achieved for the specific qualification.

The transparency and suitability of these standards, the level of engagement of concerned actors in their development, and the procedures for their implementation are all important for establishing trust. The various kinds of standards are discussed in more detail in the Technical Paper.

Much of the work of QQI is concerned with providing the terminology and tools (such as the National Framework of Qualifications) that help people to think and talk about standards of knowledge, skill and competence; to express and compare one standard with one another; and to use them to support qualifications and the programmes of education and training that lead to them.

## What is a country's qualifications system?

In general, a country's **qualifications system** embodies the diverse activities that underpin trust in qualifications. According to the OECD<sup>13</sup>, a qualifications system includes

*“all aspects of a country's activity that result in the recognition of learning. These systems include the means of developing and operationalising national or regional policy on qualifications, institutional arrangements, quality assurance processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society...”<sup>14</sup>*

The three key functions<sup>15</sup> of a qualifications system are, according to (Allen, 2006)<sup>16</sup>:

- “social reproduction – supporting demarcations in knowledge and skills, promoting particular explicit/implicit values
- structuring pathways to employment and further learning, formalising progression routes and thus providing patterns of incentives for participation in education and training
- shaping learning through affecting the nature, structure and content of learning programs.”

## What are learning pathways and why are they important?

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

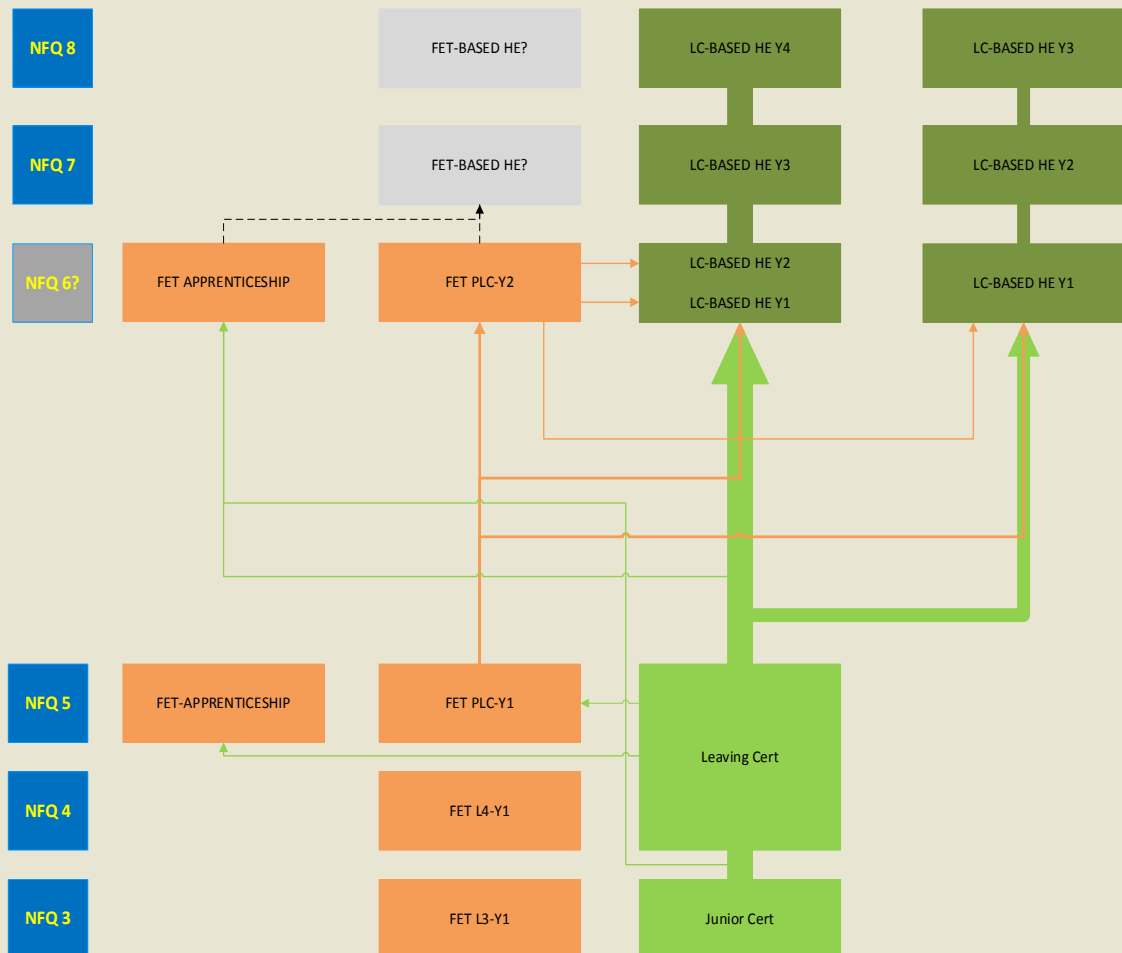


Figure 1 Illustration of some of the main potential articulations on potential learning pathways. An actual pathway will require relevant qualifications and programmes to exist. FET-BASED HE means a HE programme that is designed to add on to (i.e. build upon) a FET programme. LC-based HE includes award programmes where the assumed entry standard is the LC. The width of the arrows is not proportional to the traffic. We have focussed on Levels 5-7 because this is where pathways tend to be most complicated. Please note that this figure is a simplification, some, may contest the representation of years 1 and 2 in 4-year Honours Bachelor degrees as being at L6, arguing that some elements of year-2 will be at L7 and some at L6, and some elements of year-3 will be at L8 and some at L7.

Formal learning pathways include (i) programmes (of formal education and training) or (ii) sequences of programmes that lead to qualifications. The qualifications system includes a network of such pathways that link qualifications.

### Qualifications can shape learning pathways.

Non-formal or informal learning pathways are also possible. These do not lead directly to qualifications, but the resulting achievements can be validated through a process for the **recognition of prior learning (RPL)**, see below) which can lead to qualifications.

For some, the learning pathway to their desired qualifications is clearly mapped out though they may have to compete with others for access where there is a scarcity of places on programmes. For others on a less travelled pathway progression to their desired qualification may be blocked in the direction of travel requiring them to double back to progress along a different pathway.

It is important that our tertiary qualifications system and the underpinning tertiary education system are **permeable**<sup>17</sup> and can enable people to efficiently gain the qualifications that our society needs, in the numbers that it requires. The stock of qualifications, the network of formal learning pathways connecting them and the availability of RPL all impact on permeability.

### The learning pathway concept can help us visualise issues relating to the permeability of our qualifications system.

#### What do we mean by Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)?

The following pair of definitions is taken from the European Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01).

**“Recognition of prior learning means** the validation of learning outcomes, whether from formal education or non-formal or informal learning, acquired before requesting validation.”

**“Validation of learning outcomes** means a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard and consists of the following four distinct phases:

1. *identification* through dialogue of particular experiences of an individual;
2. *documentation* to make visible the individual’s experiences;
3. a formal *assessment* of these experiences; and
4. *certification* of the results of the assessment which may lead to a partial or full qualification.”

The Annex to that recommendation also includes definitions of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Essentially ‘non-formal’ learning refers to intentional learning achievements outside the formal systems and ‘informal’ learning refers to non-planned learning achievements arising from activities.

RPL as defined here requires certification *of the results of the assessment* that may *or may not* lead to a qualification. This is inconsistent with the definitions we have adopted for certification and qualification which imply that certification leads to qualification.

The **recognition of non-formal and informal learning** is a special case within RPL. It describes a process used to evaluate skills and knowledge gained through life outside of formal education and training. Often it is what people have in mind when they refer to RPL.

There are two classes of recognition:

*“Formal recognition: [is a] process of granting official status to learning outcomes of knowledge, skills and competences either through:*

- validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- grant of equivalence, credit units or waivers<sup>18</sup>;
- award of qualifications (certificates, diploma or titles)

and/or **Social recognition**: [is the] acknowledgement of [the] value of knowledge, skills and/or competences by economic and social stakeholders.” (Cedefop, 2014)

The number of different scenarios in which RPL might arise is virtually infinite but if we ignore the situational detail we can identify the following scenario-types as examples:

- A. Acquire a specific qualification (including exemptions and such like) that is led to by one or more specific programmes;
- B. Acquire a qualification for which there is an NFQ award-type but no programme and no specific ‘named award’.

## How are qualifications linked with wider society?

**The qualifications system is more of a social system than a deterministic one based on rules alone. Each user of a qualification has a role in the qualifications system.** Users and influencers of Irish qualifications are not confined to Ireland and so our qualifications system is internationally connected.

The qualifications system is a **complex adaptive system** that emerges from the collected activities of all users of qualifications including individuals, institutions, associations, and communities of practice. Consequently, it can be challenging to understand and to anticipate the impact of policy change. It can be tempting to leave well enough alone in such circumstances and in doing so miss opportunities for better alternatives.

To understand qualifications and how they are used, we need to understand, for example:

- the mechanisms (processes and actors) by which qualifications are established and maintained to meet a country’s social and economic needs;
- how meanings are ascribed to specific qualifications and to related objects such as standards and qualifications frameworks<sup>19</sup> by specific groups<sup>20</sup>;
- the mechanisms by which specific groups can have confidence or trust in the value of specific qualifications for specific purposes;
- the mechanisms for changing qualifications.

## What do we mean by communities of practice?

It has been claimed that “qualifications are social<sup>21</sup> constructs more than they are technical constructs...” (Raffe, 2013). So, we need a way of discussing the sociological aspects of qualifications and related matters.

**Communities of practice** “are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”<sup>22</sup> For Wenger a community of practice<sup>23</sup> must involve (Wenger, 1998, p. 65):

- “mutual engagement”,
- “joint enterprise” and
- “a shared repertoire”.<sup>24</sup>

These play important roles in the support of qualifications.

Professions<sup>25</sup> are particular examples of communities of practice. An example of a more heterogeneous community of practice might be the coalition of employers, **providers**<sup>26</sup>, professional bodies, practitioner representatives, and regulators that may be involved in supporting a specific occupation-oriented qualification.

**Any attempt to change a qualifications system would need to acknowledge, involve, and influence communities of practice and, where they are missing or fragmented, to create environments that favour their emergence and cohesion.**

## What are occupational standards and why do they matter?

Occupational standards are important for vocational education and training at all levels because they can help exchange information about skills needs between the world of work and the education system.

**Occupational standards** consist of “*statements of the activities and tasks related to a specific job and to its practice*”. An occupational standard stresses what a practitioner is expected to be *able to do*.

Some draw a distinction between an occupational standard and an **occupational profile**. An occupational profile can be defined as “*a description of the knowledge, skills, competences that a professional or worker must have to perform a task competently at the workplace.*”<sup>27</sup> It stresses what a prospective practitioner *must learn*. As defined, an occupational standard and the corresponding profile must be consistent with each other. An occupational standard can be written to include an occupational profile. Where we refer to occupational standards in the Green Paper, we assume that they are drafted to include an occupational profile.

We will use the same term ‘occupation’ to signify a fulltime occupation (e.g. an electrician or a nurse) or an activity that may only be part of an individual’s job (e.g. handling F-gases). The standards of knowledge, skill or competence required of practitioners of such regulated activities fulfil the same role for activities as occupational standards do for fulltime occupations.

An occupational standard is generally linked to a community of practice centred on the occupation. In some occupations the standard is fully or partly prescribed by regulation. However, regulation is not a prerequisite for the establishment of an occupational standard.

When occupational standards are maintained by the relevant community of practice they can, among other things, help education and training providers develop and maintain programmes of education and training for members and prospective members of that community of practice.

The qualifications standards of educational awarding bodies can occasionally serve as occupational standards especially in emerging professions (e.g. our standards for Early Learning and Care qualifications at NFQ levels 5 and 6). However, there are advantages in separating standards for specific educational qualifications from occupational standards.

In regulated occupations (e.g. electrician or primary school teacher), clarity about occupational standards is important so that, for example, professional recognition bodies can transparently recognise qualifications from other EU member states. Ideally, the occupational standards would be expressed in terms of knowledge, skill and competence. In practice, some regulators simply require that an individual has a specific educational qualification or a specific class/type of qualification. In other cases, they may endorse a specific educational qualification as indicative of the standard that must be met by practitioners. Often professional recognition bodies not only prescribe criteria for qualifications but also for the formational processes that lead to them.

### **How do educational qualifications relate to occupations?**

We define an occupational qualification to be one that signals that an individual has achieved the standard required to practise the occupation as either a full or probationary member of the occupational community of practice. Other kinds of occupational qualifications may reflect further professional development or specialisation. Occupational qualifications can be formal educational qualifications.

### **How do educational qualifications compare with licences to practise?**

Educational qualifications are significantly different from **licences to practise** even though there is overlap between the two. An occupation-oriented educational qualification:

- can help to prepare or enable a person to practise in that occupation;
- results from an assessment of an individual at a specified time and is permanent even if the person ceases to meet the learning outcomes certified by it;
- may be enough to attest to a person's fitness to practise at the time it was achieved but cannot attest to their continuing fitness to practise because the educational qualification holder or the occupational requirements may change;
- can only be withdrawn if improperly acquired e.g. through cheating, though it may lose its currency in the qualifications system if superseded.

Licences to practise, on the other hand, are normally for a finite period and indicate that a person has current competence, among other things. Such licenses may be withdrawn, suspended or varied if the person's competence diminishes (e.g. because it atrophies or because it is no longer current on account of not being refreshed).

## What scopes of activity are relevant?

The QQI *Green Paper on Assessment of Learners and Learning* 2018, has distinguished between **macro-**, **meso-** and **micro-** level scopes of activity and the same classification will be useful here. For example:

MACRO	MESO	MICRO
<p>Examples of actors operating at the macro level include QQI, which operates for the most part at this level, and the Departments of Education and Skills, Business Enterprise and Innovation, and Employment Affairs and Social Protection; other entities such as the Higher Education Authority and SOLAS, the National Skills Council, the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, IBEC, ICTU, ISME, and such like and initiatives such as Future Jobs Ireland.</p> <p>Infrastructure at this level includes: <i>Cumasú—Empowering Through Learning</i> (DES Statement of Strategy 2019-2021), NFQ, QQI Policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners; the National Skills Strategy.</p> <p>This list is not exhaustive!</p>	<p>Examples of actors operating at the meso level include qualifications awarding bodies (including QQI), professional recognition bodies, <b>occupational</b><sup>28</sup> regulators, employer sectoral representative groups, trade unions, occupational communities of practice, large employers, and large educational institutions</p>	<p>Examples or actors operating at the micro level include diverse qualifications users, small providers, small to medium employers, individual practitioners of all kinds</p>

## ⑤ A sketch of the infrastructure for tertiary qualifications

This section is provided for information. We hope that it will help readers, where required, to situate their activities in the wider context of qualifications. The material is descriptive and provided without commentary. We address

1. The NFQ
2. qualifications that can be included in the NFQ
3. the Irish Register of Qualifications
4. educational standards that apply to qualifications included in the NFQ
5. routes to tertiary educational qualifications
6. the infrastructure in place to predict skills needs
7. European infrastructure for qualifications
8. QQI's role

*Note that for simplicity we use the term 'include' in the NFQ, anticipating legislation that has not yet commenced at the time of writing.*

### 5.1 What is the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)?

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

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

The NFQ

- provides award-type descriptors that provide general (non-subject-specific) standards of knowledge, skill and competence for types of award (qualification) (e.g. the honours bachelor's degree)
- provides a basis for more specific standards (of knowledge, skill or competence) for qualifications (awards);
- facilitates communication about qualifications and comparison between different qualifications both of which facilitate the national and international recognition of qualifications.
- promotes the use of learning outcomes which are used in the design of programmes of education and training, and processes for the recognition of prior learning, leading to qualifications.



The operation of the NFQ is governed by the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012* (the “**2012 Act**”) as amended by the *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019* (the “**2019 Amendment Act**”). Collectively this legislation is referred to as the **2012 Act (as amended)**.

## 5.2 What qualifications can be included in the NFQ?

### Designated awarding body qualifications

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

### QQI qualifications

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

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

### Qualifications awarded under delegated authority

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

### Listed awarding bodies

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

### Qualifications that are not currently included in the NFQ

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

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

- non-NFQ qualifications certified by bodies where education is the primary focus;
- vendor-specific, vendor-certified qualifications (e.g. ICT qualifications);
- professional body qualifications;
- emerging qualifications types e.g. Digital Badges<sup>29,30</sup>;
- some English language qualifications<sup>31</sup>.

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

### 5.3 What is the Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ)?

The Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ) is provided for by Section 79 of the *Quality and Qualifications Act 2012*. It was launched in 2019 by QQI and will be a repository for synoptic information about qualifications that are included<sup>32</sup> in the NFQ and their associated programmes. When fully implemented it will provide much-needed infrastructure to facilitate mobility and the recognition and understanding of qualifications in the NFQ.

#### **What digital platforms exist for individuals' qualifications portfolios?**

It is sufficient to note here that this is an emerging area that is likely to become increasingly important. It is discussed in more detail in the Technical Paper.

### 5.4 What educational standards apply to qualifications included in the NFQ?

First of all, the NFQ award-type descriptors<sup>33</sup> constitute generalised standards for all qualifications included in the NFQ. They are benchmark statements about the learning achievements required to attain particular NFQ award-types e.g. an Honours Bachelor's Degree or an Advanced Certificate.

Awarding bodies are expected to maintain more detailed standards for their own qualifications. We refer to these as **awards standards** or simply standards where the meaning is clear from the context.

Standards for research degrees are supported by the National Framework for Doctoral Education<sup>34</sup>.

#### **Designated awarding body awards standards**

Essentially, each DAB needs to determine an **award standard** for each of its NFQ qualifications.<sup>35</sup> These are published by some DABs on their websites in the form of programme outcomes<sup>36</sup>. Such awards standards must be consistent with the NFQ.

#### **QQI awards standards**

QQI awards standards apply to the awards it makes and to awards made by providers under delegated authority.

QQI is currently the main awarding body for further education and training qualifications and a niche awarding body for private independent higher education qualifications. All FET awards in the NFQ are

made by QQI. We maintain and publish about 1800 FET awards standards. In higher education our awards are only a small fraction of the total (e.g. in 2017 we awarded approximately 7% of all honours bachelor's degrees).

QQI's [Policy for Determining Awards Standards](#) (especially section 3) outlines its approach succinctly. Here we highlight some features of the implementation of that policy.

QQI awards standards vary widely in their specificity. They are not, however, the last word on standards for QQI awards. This is because QQI awards are normally achieved following successful completion of a validated programme of education and training. The outcomes of such programmes provide the most specific information on what must be achieved in order to qualify for the award to which the programme leads. *Minimum intended programme/module learning outcomes* are approved by QQI as part of a **programme validation** process<sup>37</sup>.

### **QQI higher education awards standards**

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

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

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

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

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

## QQI further education and training awards standards

Again, there are several different kinds of QQI awards standards operating in further education and training:

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

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

*Table 1 Analysis of CAS awards by class and NFQ level.*

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

## Educational standards for qualifications leading to apprenticeships

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

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

## 5.5 How do people gain tertiary educational qualifications?

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

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

- universities;
- technological universities;
- institutes of technology;
- independent/private HE providers.

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

- education and training boards (ETBs);
- Teagasc;
- Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM);
- SOLAS;
- independent/private FET providers.

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

## 5.6 What occupational standards exist in Ireland?

Occupational standards are important here because they can bridge the world of work and the education and training system. Such standards can provide an accessible description of the occupational role and responsibilities and knowledge, skills and competences (sometimes abbreviated to skills) required to undertake them.

The implementation of occupational standards in Ireland is fragmented. Occupational standards in Ireland where they exist are established, maintained and communicated in diverse ways. For example, they may be

- established by regulators (e.g. CORU);
- maintained or adopted by professional bodies on a statutory (e.g. RIAI) or non-statutory basis;
- set out in Irish or EU legislation;
- established by an industry-led apprenticeship consortium;
- embedded in job-descriptions of major employers (e.g. the Health Service Executive).

There is no central repository for occupational standards.

## Example: occupational profiles for apprenticeship

An occupational profile for an apprenticeship is a type of occupational standard. It is defined as:

*...the knowledge, skills and competencies which will be developed by an apprentice on completion of her/his apprenticeship. It will propose the duration of the apprenticeship and qualification level on the National Framework of Qualifications (between Level 5 to Level 10)<sup>38</sup>. (Apprenticeship Handbook)*

An occupational profile (OP) is required for each national apprenticeship—there are currently more than forty. They normally specify an NFQ level and vary in the style and depth of communication of expected knowledge, skill and competence. They are developed by the relevant apprenticeship **consortium**. An apprenticeship consortium is an industry-led coalition of employers and training providers and other stakeholders. In areas where there are occupational associations and regulators one might expect them to be involved as well.

**The term consortium is the name given to the industry-led group which develops an apprenticeship programme and oversees its roll out and ongoing relevance to the needs of industry. The consortium includes education and training providers (Apprenticeship Handbook).**

OPs are formally approved by the Apprenticeship Council. The process for the approval (but not the development) of occupational profiles is described in *Developing a National Apprenticeship—Handbook* (Apprenticeship Handbook). The criteria for approval of an occupational profile are:

- *there is adequate industry support for the apprenticeship and*
- *there is no excessive overlap (in general, no more than 50%) with an existing apprenticeship. (Apprenticeship Handbook)*

## 5.7 What infrastructure is in place for predicting skills needs?

The [National Skills Council](#)<sup>39</sup> is an advisory, non-statutory body under the remit of the Department of Education and Skills. Its [terms of reference](#) detail its functions. It includes representatives from senior levels in the public and private sector and it:

- oversees research;
- advises on prioritisation of identified skills needs and on how to secure delivery of identified needs;
- plays a key role in promoting and reporting on the delivery of responses by education and training providers to those priorities.

A [National Skills Strategy to 2025](#) has been published and it includes detailed set of objectives, actions and indicators.

The [Expert Group on Future Skills Needs](#) (EGFSN) forecasts future skills needs and produces regular reports. It reports to the National Skills Council.

The National Skills Council also receives reports from the [Skills and Labour Market Research Unit](#) of SOLAS (SLMRU). The SLMRU provides reports for SOLAS and the EGFSN. It maintains a 'National Skills Database'.

A Network of [Regional Skills Fora](#) has been created as part of the Government's National Skills Strategy. They are intended to provide or enable:

- *“a single contact point in each region to help employers connect with the range of services and supports available across the education and training system*
- *more robust labour market information and analysis of employer needs to inform programme development*
- *greater collaboration and utilisation of resources across the education and training system and enhancement of progression routes for learners*
- *a structure for employers to become more involved in promoting employment roles and opportunities for career progression in their sectors”<sup>40</sup>*

Future Jobs Ireland is a relatively new initiative that

*“will drive our development as a resilient, innovative, and globally connected economy, capable of coping with technological and other transformational changes ahead.”*

[Skillnet Ireland](#) is a state agency under the umbrella of the Department of Education and Skills that is *“dedicated to the promotion and facilitation of workforce learning in Ireland”<sup>41</sup>*. Currently it funds over 50 ‘industry representative’ groups.

Data relevant to the functioning of the qualifications system is gathered, compiled or analysed by QQI, HEA, SOLAS/SLMRU, EGFSN, CSO, ESRI, DES, CEDEFOP, OECD, Revenue, EUROSTAT and others. In certain circumstances, the CSO can combine PPSN-tagged data from multiple sources to study patterns in qualifications histories, access to qualifications and progression to employment. Note that personal data is not exposed in the published reports of such analyses. This is an area where significant progress has been made in recent years, for example in analysing transitions between further education and higher education.

## 5.8 What European infrastructure for qualifications has been established?

In this section we look at a selection of the available European infrastructure that impacts on our qualifications system. The Technical Paper provides more detail. In summary these are:

- the European Qualifications Framework
- the Bologna Framework
- the Tuning Academy
- the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)
- the EU Key Competence Framework
- the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) classification system

### 5.8.1 European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

The EQF is a ‘meta-framework’ and qualifications normally obtain an EQF level through the relevant national framework. Among other things, it provides a basis for comparing qualifications in different

countries. The national qualifications frameworks of all EU member states are required to be referenced to the EQF, and QQI has been designated by the Department of Education and Skills as the body responsible for compiling the referencing report on the Irish NFQ to the EQF.

## 5.8.2 Bologna Framework

The Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA includes 49 countries) is often referred to informally as the Bologna Framework. It is a meta-framework for higher education. It is consistent with the relevant set of EQF levels.

*“The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area provides descriptors for the short cycle (that can be linked to or within the first cycle), the first, second and third cycles of higher education. Each cycle descriptor offers a statement on the achievements and abilities associated with the qualifications awarded at the end of that cycle. The EQF is compatible with the qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area and its cycle descriptors. The short cycle (that can be linked to or within the first cycle), the first, second and third cycles of the qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area correspond to EQF levels 5-8 respectively.”*, (EU, 2017)

## 5.8.3 Tuning academy

There are Tuning<sup>42</sup> [reference points for the design and delivery of degree programmes](#) for many different mainstream higher education subjects (e.g. Physics, Chemistry, Business and Music). The Tuning documents typically address outcomes for each of the Bologna cycles as well as curriculum and assessment matters.

## 5.8.4 Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

The Council of Europe’s (COE’s) Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)

*“was designed to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency. It is used in Europe but also in other continents.”*<sup>43</sup>

## 5.8.5 EU Key Competence Framework

“Key competences and basic skills are needed by all for personal fulfilment and development, employability, social inclusion and active citizenship.”<sup>44</sup> The most recent recommendation of the Council of the EU on key competences is available [online](#).

## 5.8.6 European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO), ISCO and SOC2010

“ESCO is the multilingual classification of European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations.”<sup>45</sup> It is outlined in the ESCO Handbook.<sup>46</sup> Online access to ESCO resources is available via an online portal<sup>47</sup>.

ESCO is an ambitious project but is still a work in progress. It may be a useful tool for making international comparisons. The ESCO qualifications pillar<sup>48</sup> resonates with the Irish Register of Qualifications. Note that there is a qualification section on the ESCO portal and at the time of writing 8161 qualifications are included.



ESCO is related to the International Labour Organisation's ISCO but (significantly) provides additional functionality e.g. on the classification of skills.

SOC2010<sup>49</sup> is a four-digit classification system, a modified version of which is used in Ireland by the CSO and SLMRU. It serves a similar function to ESCO.

The ISCED field of education and training classification is sometimes used in the analysis of the supply of skills. The ESCO (or SOC2010), being more granular and more attuned to occupations, would be better suited to that.

## Other resources

The UK education and training systems have much in common with ours. This means that institutions in Ireland can benefit from UK resources for example QAA subject benchmark statements and National Occupational Standards.

## 5.9 What is QQI's role?

As the national qualifications and quality assurance authority for further and higher education, QQI has several key roles within the tertiary qualifications system that provide it with a unique vantage point from which to observe, contribute to and influence the system.

QQI roles include:

- maintaining the National Framework of Qualifications and related infrastructure;
- developing and maintaining the Irish Register of Qualifications;
- recognising qualifications;
- listing<sup>50</sup> awarding bodies so that their qualifications can be included in the NFQ;
- awarding NFQ qualifications for the public sector FET institutions and many other FET providers;
- awarding HE qualifications for private sector higher education institutions;
- determining standards for its awards;
- validating programmes leading to its own awards;
- delegating authority to providers to make awards;
- externally quality assuring FET and HE institutions and listed awarding bodies;
- authorising providers to use the International Education Mark; and
- conducting and reporting on system-level analyses.

The National Framework of Qualifications is perhaps the most widely recognised qualifications-oriented infrastructure that QQI maintains at the national level. QQI also has a central role in guiding providers on establishing procedures for **access, transfer and progression (ATP)**. Policy and criteria for ATP are concerned with lifelong learning pathways among other things. QQI is responsible for the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (**NARIC Ireland**) which provides advice on the academic recognition of foreign qualifications.

## **What does QQI's external quality assurance involve?**

The last 5 points in the preceding list illustrate various aspects of external quality assurance. It is important for the reputation and continuing enhancement of our qualifications system. It helps maintain the necessary trust relationships. Our external quality assurance processes are designed to work in tandem with the elaborate internal quality assurance systems providers establish to support their activities.

## **How does QQI effect change?**

QQI can help effect change by exerting influence on the qualifications environment (e.g. through NFQ and related policies, awards standards, quality assurance guidelines and processes) and on the main qualifications system actors (e.g. policy makers, other awarding bodies; providers, employers, regulators, professional/occupational associations, learners).

QQI does not control the qualifications system but helps to support it and where necessary to effect change identified in collaboration with the stakeholders.

**All QQI activities (e.g. maintaining the NFQ, determining standards, quality assuring institutions and programmes) typically involve collaboration and consultation with stakeholders. Their perspectives influence ours at least as much as ours theirs.**

## ⑥ Questions for stakeholders

This Green Paper is a condensed version of a Technical Paper that sets out multiple issues for discussion. We appreciate that many will prefer to engage with us on broader issues rather than on the more detailed issues covered in the Technical Paper and Questions 1 to 7 (below) have been prepared with that in mind. Naturally, we would like some to respond to the detailed issues in the Technical Paper and Question 8 below makes this explicit.

**Each question is accompanied by a commentary. The commentaries are intended to aid interpretation of the questions by prompting the reader to reflect on a selection of relevant topics from the Technical Paper—the selection is not intended to limit the scope of responses. The commentaries may contain some supplementary questions to facilitate readers’ engagement with the main question. Again, these are not intended to limit the scope of the main question. The length of a commentary is not a measure of the importance of the question. We are interested in receiving macro-, meso-, or micro-level ideas in response to the questions.**

### 6.1 Summary of the questions

1. What might be done to enable stakeholders outside the tertiary education system to exert greater influence on the shaping of the tertiary qualifications system?
2. From a qualifications’ perspective, what might be done to help promote a more permeable qualifications system?
3. Can you think of ways in which the quality assurance system could be enhanced to better support the qualifications system?
4. What kind of additional data do we need to better understand the qualifications system?
5. What is your vision for educational standards for FET qualifications in Ireland and how might it be implemented?
6. What can be done to help increase the transparency, consistency and fitness for purpose of the standards for higher education qualifications that are included in the NFQ?
7. How can the qualifications system support, promote awareness of, and build confidence in RPL?
8. Do you have views on any other topics addressed in the Technical Paper? If so, please tell us about them.

### 6.2 Questions with commentary

- 1. What might be done to enable stakeholders outside the tertiary education system to exert greater influence on the shaping of the tertiary qualifications system?**

#### **Range of perspectives**

An alternative formulation of this question might be: How can we promote a deeper engagement on qualifications matters by a wider range of people to assist in the long-term maintenance of our qualifications system?

As described in the Technical Paper virtually everyone has a role to play in the qualification system. The role may be as an employer; as a practitioner member of an occupational association, academic discipline, or cultural community; as a teacher, trainer, instructor, assessor, mentor or lecturer; as a member of a trade union; as a regulator; as a policy maker; as a researcher; as a learner; as a discerning user of qualifications or in some other capacity.

It is important that the views of such stakeholders are sought and considered when setting standards for educational and training qualifications and developing and implementing the associated programmes of education and training. This helps ensure that qualifications that are included in the NFQ are recognised nationally and internationally and can help individuals advance in their chosen careers.

There are benefits to having a broader range of perspectives involved in the development and maintenance of qualifications; in thinking about the qualifications system; and in thinking about learning pathways. This is because ideally a qualification must be trusted by, and meet the needs of, all of its users. It is rarely if ever sufficient for qualifications to be developed from a single perspective. So how can we engage a wider range of people in structured meaningful discussions about qualifications and related matters?

### **Communicating about skills needs**

In this context, the terminology we use can be an enabler or a barrier to engaging people in discussions about qualifications. It can sometimes be challenging to entice people from outside the education and training system to discuss the development of qualifications standards or curricula and part of the reason for this can be differences in terminology used inside and outside the education system.

### **Occupational standards**

The reader may wish to consider whether occupational<sup>51</sup> standards can usefully play a greater role. In principle such standards can function as a bridge between the education and training system and people involved with occupations that require or benefit from educational qualifications. In Ireland some occupational standards are already in place, but is there scope for a greater number?

If the use of occupational standards were to become widespread how could they be organised and made accessible to stakeholders? Might it be useful to have a central repository of occupational standards set out in a consistent format? Could the NFQ and the Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ) help to achieve greater visibility of occupational standards?

### **Occupational, skills and competence classifications schemes**

Classifications schemes also facilitate communication between the education system and wider society. They are especially useful when gathering information from diverse sources.

The main occupational classifications scheme used in Ireland is SOC-2010<sup>52</sup>. It includes about 900 occupations. SOC-2010 specifies<sup>53</sup> a job description, the educational entry requirements for the job, the key tasks involved, and related jobs.

The European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO<sup>54</sup>) classifications scheme was launched in 2017 and is usable, although still a work in progress. It includes about 3000 occupations<sup>55</sup>. ESCO data include a description of the occupation and a list of essential knowledge, skill and competence (it includes over 13,000 skills and competences). An example of the use of ESCO

skills classification is the analysis of online vacancies in Ireland and other countries by Cedefop's Skills Panorama<sup>56</sup>.

Both SOC 2010 and ESCO are mapped to the International Labour Organisation's International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO).

To facilitate better information exchange between different actors (e.g. education, employers, policy makers, diverse state data collectors), might there be benefit in more widespread implementation of such classifications schemes for occupations and the ESCO knowledge, skills and competence classifications?

Could the use of such classification schemes (ESCO, SOC-2010) with qualifications (and programmes) usefully complement the ISCED Field of Education classification scheme to help us better understand the supply of skills?

Might such classifications schemes help in the codification of occupational standards and with their international benchmarking? From the analysis/research perspective, could they provide a basis for collecting more useful data on what occupations people move into after initial tertiary education and on the occupational pathways that people tend to follow?

Could better data on occupations and the associated skills (standards, trends, interrelations relations) help ensure that educational and training qualifications are relevant to the lifelong learning needs of people in Ireland?

## 2. From a qualifications perspective, what might be done to help promote a more permeable qualifications system?

### Permeability

Permeability is about how easy it is to get from a given state of learning to a desired qualification. In the Technical Paper we explain how qualifications strongly influence the availability and distribution of learning pathways and, to a lesser extent, RPL opportunities.

### Visualising permeability

A permeable system requires a well interconnected network of programmes and qualifications. Qualifications, programmes and RPL all have a role in shaping the permeability of the qualifications system. A certain level of permeability can be expected to emerge spontaneously but in times of rapid change, more concerted action may be required to monitor and stimulate permeability.

### A FET alternative to the Senior Cycle

It is recognised that there are already strong progression flows from FET into the technological higher education sector (about 25% of the annual intake is from FET) and this is contributing significantly to the permeability of the qualifications system. Do you think there might be additional opportunities to increase permeability? In this context is there room for more higher education programmes that are designed to build on FET programmes (i.e. to articulate with FET programmes) rather than on the senior cycle?

### Opportunities for new kinds of articulation arrangements between FET and HE

Our recent publication of standards for Early Learning and Care presents QQI standards at NFQ levels 5 and 6 in the same format as the corresponding Department of Education and Skills standards for ELC

awards at NFQ levels 7 and 8. The new standards are set out in the context of the NFQ's Professional Award-type Descriptors. It is a set of tertiary education standards, as it were. Does setting out standards in this format make it easier to design well-articulated learning pathways (programme or course sequences)?

Creating articulated programmes for qualifications in Early Learning and Care should be relatively straightforward because of the scale of the activity. It might not always be feasible to design a dedicated HE programme that articulates with a given FET programme or class of similar programmes (1+3 years, 2+2 years...) because there must be sufficient demand to warrant such development. How do you think the diversity of FET and HE qualifications impacts on permeability?

### **3. Can you think of ways in which the quality assurance system could be enhanced to better support the qualifications system?**

Trust is essential for the functioning of any qualifications system. Internal and external educational quality assurance help provide a basis for that trust. Quality assurance activities provide opportunities to report on the implementation of the

- NFQ;
- national qualifications standards;
- national policy relating to access, transfer and progression for learners.

### **4. What kind of additional data do we need to better understand the qualifications system?**

#### **Data gathering and analysis is already paying dividends.**

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs provides useful data that can help tertiary education providers identify opportunities when reviewing or developing programmes.

Substantial progress has been made in recent years (especially in FET) in building better datasets on qualifications and how they are achieved and used. This has involved the analysis of integrated data collected by multiple agencies to provide greater understanding of graduate learning pathways (including progression) and employment destinations.

#### **Further opportunities relating to occupations and skills needs**

Are there opportunities to further enhance the richness of the data available? Might it be useful to have additional sources of timely information about the specific jobs that individuals are doing (occupations) and more granular information about the skills needs of those jobs?

What kind of additional data, if any, do we need to conduct more penetrating longitudinal analysis to better understand learning journeys and learning pathways and the impact of programmes and qualifications on individuals?

### **5. What is your vision for educational standards for FET qualifications and how might it be implemented?**

**Strategically QQI has committed to streamlining its own system of FET awards standards and to opening the NFQ to include qualifications of awarding bodies whose qualifications are not currently included in the NFQ.**

QQI awards standards currently apply to all FET qualifications in the NFQ<sup>57</sup>. They shape programmes and learning pathways as well as FET qualifications.

The Technical Paper sets out initial thoughts on possible futures for FET standards and outlines innovations that have already been introduced. It envisages that a more diverse range of FET qualifications will be included within the NFQ with multiple awarding bodies offering NFQ qualifications.

The recent trend towards QQI standards for FET qualifications has been towards fewer but broader centrally determined standards (e.g. new apprenticeships; new Early Learning and Care awards standards) and devolution of responsibility for the more detailed (narrower) *de facto* standards to curriculum developers.

One of the reasons we are publishing the Green Paper is that we would like to begin a discussion with interested parties, including but not limited to providers, professional recognition bodies, practitioners, employers, regulators, learners, analysts and relevant state agencies, in order to develop a shared vision for a future system for maintaining responsive standards (and related infrastructure) for FET qualifications in the context of a **tertiary education** system. Also, we would like to find ways of working effectively with a wide range of collaborators to help realise that vision.

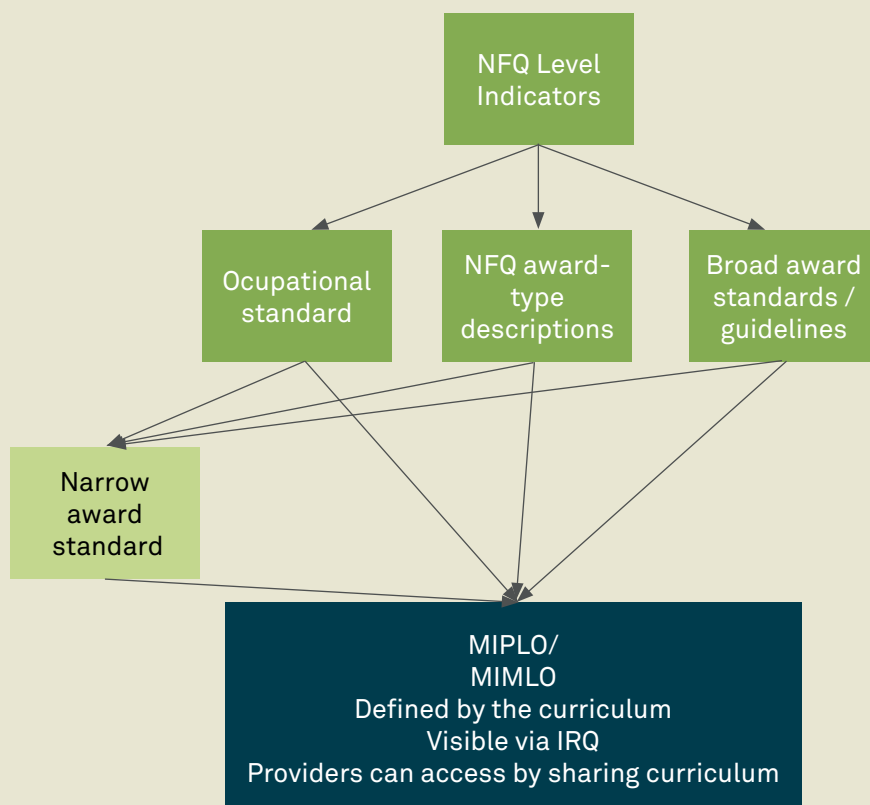


Figure 2 Kinds of standards. Note that MIPLOs and MIMLOs are not available in the current version of the IRQ.

## Why are qualifications standards important in FET?

Qualifications standards are important not least because of the impact they have on (i) the availability of people with the knowledge, skill and competence required by employers and wider society; and (ii) the permeability of the qualifications system. Specifically, they:

- represent educational and training goals agreed by the relevant communities of practice;
- shape programmes, courses, continuing professional development, traineeships and apprenticeships;
- provide a reference for the recognition of prior learning and of equivalent qualifications;
- help communicate and explain qualifications to users be they learners, employers, regulators, practitioners, providers of programmes of education and training or others; and
- help build confidence and trust in the qualifications system.

## **Balance between centralised and localised standards**

The **Common Awards System** is a centralised modularised system of standards maintained by QQI for FET qualifications. It originated about ten years ago and helped rationalise and systematise a proliferation of FET awards while aligning them with the NFQ. We are at a pivotal time now for the Common Awards System because it needs substantial work either to update, reform or replace it with something else. In the meantime, the FET sector and its wider context have changed substantially in the past ten years.

The Technical Paper presents *for discussion* a proposition that the FET sector would benefit from moving away from a heavy dependence on a centralised system of detailed (i.e. narrow) standards to a more open and distributed system for the determination and dissemination of standards and associated qualifications and programmes. It argues that this can be achieved without sacrificing all the system coherence benefits of the CAS because they can be realised in alternative ways, for example through **sharable national curricula**.

**Already, guided by QQI's generic standards (NFQ award-type descriptors), new FET awards can be proposed by providers when applying for validation of a new programme.** Operationally, for example, if a module in a curriculum is designed to lead to a new QQI minor award, then the **minimum intended module learning outcomes** (MIMLOs) are the *de facto* standards for that award. If the curriculum leads to a new QQI major award, then the **minimum intended programme learning outcomes** (MIPLOs) are the *de facto* standards for that award. In FET, MIMLOs and MIPLOs for such new QQI awards are approved at the point of validation. Recall that the Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ) provides information about all NFQ awards and programmes including these.

## **6. What can be done to help increase the transparency, consistency and fitness for purpose of the standards for higher education qualifications that are included in the NFQ?**

### **Recognition of Irish higher education qualifications**

Ireland has a well-regarded qualifications system. We were one of the early movers in establishing a National Framework of Qualifications for the national and international recognition of our qualifications. We were involved in the development of the FQ-EHEA. This early success needs to be followed through.

The NFQ is the main instrument for nationally benchmarking higher education standards. Now that the institutes of technology have become designated awarding bodies under the 2012 Act (as amended (since 1 January 2020)) the NFQ will, for more than 90% of that activity, be the sole national benchmark under the 2012 Act for the academic standards of knowledge, skill and competence for higher education



awards. For awards that are recognised by the professions or where education is regulated there are, of course, additional discipline-specific benchmarks (including e.g. occupational standards). Some of these are voluntary and others mandatory.

## Transparency

The publication of the Green Paper provides an opportunity for stakeholders in the higher education sector to reflect on the transparency of the relationship between higher education qualifications and the NFQ and on the transparency of academic standards (learning outcomes) for higher education qualifications.

The Technical Paper has presented some issues for discussion relating to the transparency of the implementation of the NFQ by the pre-2019 designated awarding bodies. It argues that designated awarding bodies could be more transparent about how they ensure that their awards warrant inclusion within the NFQ, and QQI is working with them and their representative bodies on this issue. Section 55B of the 2012 Act (as amended) in effect requires greater transparency together with QQI's written agreement before a DAB award may be regarded as being included in the NFQ.

## Higher education subject guidelines

**The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030—Report of the Strategy Group stated that *subject guidelines should be developed as a supporting academic infrastructure to the National Framework of Qualifications.***

To date nothing has been done on that front. However, the landscape has changed with the introduction of a greater number and range of designated awarding bodies. So there may be a greater need now for this kind of support. The Report of the Strategy Group stated:

*This work should be progressed by subject experts from the academic community and coordinated by the new Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland agency. Care must be taken to demonstrate that this project does not create an excessively bureaucratic or costly system. [...]*<sup>58</sup>

Would it be useful to explore, with stakeholders, the feasibility and benefits of working together to develop such infrastructure?

## Intended learning outcomes and the IRQ

The Irish Register of Qualifications is also relevant here; it lists awards that are included in the NFQ and the programmes that lead to them. One open policy question is whether **intended programme learning outcomes** should be accessible through the IRQ.

## 7. How can the qualifications system support, promote awareness of, and build confidence in RPL?

RPL can strengthen social inclusion, enable access to new learning opportunities, motivate individuals to learn more and form bridges between different learning pathways.

Existing macro-level initiatives and infrastructure include the NFQ and the *Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression in Relation to Learners for Providers of Further and Higher education*. At the meso level, for example, the RPL Practitioners' Network is an active community of practice that helps disseminate examples of effective RPL practice that can encourage and inspire others. What additional

initiatives and infrastructure at macro and meso levels do you think might help contribute to a better *environment* for RPL and *influence* effective practice?

One of the challenges relating to RPL is the identification and guidance of people who might benefit from it. Might there be benefit in extending online RPL portals like FETCH with functionality to enable people to search for relevant qualifications by occupation, make an initial self-assessment of RPL needs, and connect with a competent provider who can guide, advise or progress an RPL process?

Identifying individuals who can benefit from RPL requires good communication channels between providers who implement RPL, learners, employers, workers and other relevant stakeholders. Are there ways in which communications could usefully be improved?

Might there be benefit in developing more detailed topic specific guidelines on the quality assurance of RPL processes, especially processes for the validation of non-formal and informal learning? Note this does not mean guidelines on how to practice RPL.

## **8. Do you have views on any other topics addressed in the Technical Paper? If so, please tell us about them.**

The Technical Paper on Qualifications covers issues over an extensive landscape, and many readers will not be equally familiar with all parts of that landscape. Different parts of it will be more or less relevant to different stakeholders. We don't expect that all stakeholders will wish to respond to all of the issues in detail, but we would be grateful for any feedback people may wish to offer. We would like to know whether people:

- agree that the issues we have identified are relevant and well captured;
- agree with the ideas put forward for addressing those issues;
- have additional issues that might be added to our list;
- have additional ideas that might help address the issues;

Other issues raised in the Technical Paper include:

- stimulating the emergence of communities of practice.
- promoting linkages between educational and occupational/professional standards and associated accreditation processes.
- the implications of the institutes of technology becoming designated awarding bodies.
- the possibly questionable use of major-classed exit awards in higher education.
- the differences between FET and HE credit systems.
- the inclusion of assessment techniques in CAS standards.
- digital credentials: opportunities and challenges.

## **⑦ Next steps**

Following the end of the consultation process we will publish the findings, a thematic analysis of the feedback and our response, in which we will set out the next steps. We will update the two papers and use them to inform our work in providing infrastructure for qualifications and maintaining dialogue with key stakeholders to help bring about enhancements to the qualifications system through our collected collaborative efforts.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> This term is defined in the Glossary in the accompanying Technical Paper. Higher vocational education is a subset of vocational education and training and we take a broad interpretation of it, to include, for example, any professional degree programme (e.g. engineering, law, architecture, nursing, medicine).
- <sup>2</sup> We have commenced a process of re-referencing the NFQ to the **European Qualifications Framework**.
- <sup>3</sup> <https://hea.ie/2019/01/23/minister-launches-results-of-national-survey-2018/> (The National Employer Survey is a joint project undertaken by the Higher Education Authority, Quality and Qualifications Ireland and SOLAS)
- <sup>4</sup> The most requested skill in Irish job vacancy advertisements is “adapt to change”. <https://skillspanorama.cedefop.europa.eu/en/indicators/skills-online-vacancies>
- <sup>5</sup> We will sometimes drop the term training. However, the terms further/higher education should be understood to include both education and training.
- <sup>6</sup> The 2019 Amendment Act renders them designated awarding bodies but permits them only “to make awards, with the exception of doctoral degrees, to students where the college has satisfied itself that the students have acquired and demonstrated the appropriate standard of knowledge, skill or competence for awards that are included within the National Framework of Qualifications”.
- <sup>7</sup> <https://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Higher-Education/Legislative-Proposals-Reform-of-HEA-Act-1971.pdf>
- <sup>8</sup> This is part of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).
- <sup>9</sup> We have commenced a process of re-referencing the NFQ to the European Qualifications Framework.
- <sup>10</sup> This concept is discussed in more detail in section 1.1 of Part 1 of the accompanying Technical Paper.
- <sup>11</sup> We should mention here that some people use the terms programme and qualification interchangeably, which can lead to confusion. A qualification is the outcome of a process (such as a programme) rather than a process itself. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to fully understand or trust a qualification without considering the process by which it was achieved. If the qualification is ambiguous, the process may resolve the ambiguity.
- <sup>12</sup> **RPL** is a term of art that includes the **recognition and validation of non-formal or informal learning (R/VNFIL)**.
- <sup>13</sup> OECD. (2007). *Qualifications Systems: Bridges to Lifelong Learning*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- <sup>14</sup> The sociological mechanisms while not explicit in this definition are taken by us as implied.
- <sup>15</sup> In (CEDEFOP, 2010, p. 37) this was cited it as a “*good description of the way qualifications are expected to work*” and we agree.
- <sup>16</sup> Adapting ideas from Oates et al.
- <sup>17</sup> “The idea is for learners to be able to move easily between different types of education, (such as academic and vocational) and between different levels (such as upper secondary, or apprenticeship, up to higher education), as they decide.” (Cedefop, 2012)
- <sup>18</sup> Advanced entry and module exemptions are terms for these that many in the Irish system are likely more familiar with.
- <sup>19</sup> The notion of ‘shared meaning’ is important in the context of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs); although hard to establish it is undoubtedly linked to the trust and confidence essential to supporting qualifications or an NQF. While the notion of an NQF as a symbolic device, propped up by text, written laws and rules, and legitimate only so long as the construct is accepted, supported and invested with meaning by its community, might scare some, there is certainly some truth to the idea.
- <sup>20</sup> This begs the question of how divergent interpretations of shared standards (e.g. the NFQ) can be before they become problematic.
- <sup>21</sup> Note that sociology is central to this discussion. By sociology we mean the “*the systematic study of the development, structure, interaction, and collective [behaviour] of organized groups of human beings*” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sociology> (19/03/2019)
- <sup>22</sup> <https://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/> (04/03/2019)
- <sup>23</sup> The essence of the idea of a CoP seems compatible with Kuhn’s idea of a ‘scientific community’ in “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions” (Kuhn, 1962). That work clearly recognises the importance of considering the social dimension: “*As in political revolutions, so in paradigm choice – there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community.*”

- <sup>24</sup> If you are unfamiliar with communities of practice it might be worthwhile to reflect a little on the italicised text in the two paragraphs and to imagine how it might apply in your contexts.
- <sup>25</sup> There is an extensive literature on the sociology of professions (especially the prestige professions). We do not intend to delve into that literature at this point.
- <sup>26</sup> A **provider** of a programme of education and training. Public providers include universities, institutes of technology, and education and training boards. There are also many private sector providers.
- <sup>27</sup> <https://www.euvetsupport.eu/index.php?id=127> (03/07/2019)
- <sup>28</sup> We use the term occupation to mean a defined occupation or a defined activity that may be part of one or more occupations.
- <sup>29</sup> <https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/handle/10197/9691>
- <sup>30</sup> <https://about.unimelb.edu.au/teaching-and-learning/innovation-initiatives/pedagogy-and-curriculum-innovation/micro-credentialing> (20/03/2019)
- <sup>31</sup> Many of the qualifications used in this sector, with the exception of qualifications designed to prepare people for higher education, are not currently included in the NFQ.
- <sup>32</sup> More specifically it includes qualification titles as distinct from the actual qualifications held by individuals.
- <sup>33</sup> Award type descriptors are benchmark statements about the learning achievements required to attain particular NFQ **award-types** e.g. an Honours Bachelor's Degree or an Advanced Certificate. ... These **descriptors** apply to awarding bodies which make **awards** recognised in the NFQ.
- <sup>34</sup> [https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/04/national\\_framework\\_for\\_doctoral\\_education\\_0.pdf](https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/04/national_framework_for_doctoral_education_0.pdf)
- <sup>35</sup> The process for including qualifications in the NFQ changed under the 2019 Amendment Act.
- <sup>36</sup> For example, [https://sisweb.ucd.ie/usis/!W\\_HU\\_MENU.P\\_PUBLISH?p\\_tag=MAJR&MAJR=NES2](https://sisweb.ucd.ie/usis/!W_HU_MENU.P_PUBLISH?p_tag=MAJR&MAJR=NES2)
- <sup>37</sup> The following extract from our *Policy for Determining Awards Standards* explains:
- The de facto award standard for a particular named award as issued is the statement of minimum intended programme learning outcomes that is approved at validation of the corresponding programme of education and training.*
- <sup>38</sup> <https://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/>  
<https://registrar.mit.e>
- <sup>39</sup> <https://www.regionalskills.ie/national-skills-council/>
- <sup>40</sup> <https://www.regionalskills.ie/regions/>
- <sup>41</sup> <https://www.skillnetireland.ie/about/>
- <sup>42</sup> <http://tuningacademy.org/>
- <sup>43</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/home> (20/03/2019)
- <sup>44</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/school/key-competences-and-basic-skills\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/school/key-competences-and-basic-skills_en)
- <sup>45</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/esco/portal> (11/04/2019)
- <sup>46</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8083&furtherPubs=yes>
- <sup>47</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/esco/portal>
- <sup>48</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/esco/portal/qualification>
- <sup>49</sup> <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/occupational/soc2010>
- <sup>50</sup> Subject to commencement of the relevant section of the 2019 Amendment Act.
- <sup>51</sup> Occupation for these purposes refer to well defined roles such as plumber, accountant and so on as well as activities that may be only part of a person's job, e.g. handling F-gases.
- <sup>52</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/soc/2010/home.htm> (there is now a more recent version: SOC 2018).
- <sup>53</sup> E.g. <https://onsdigital.github.io/dp-classification-tools/standard-occupational-classification/data/SingleClass.html?soc=2124&from=212>
- <sup>54</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/esco/portal/skill>

<sup>55</sup> For a comparison of classifications schemes see: [https://publications.iadb.org/publications/english/document/Occupations\\_Labor\\_Market\\_Classifications\\_Taxonomies\\_and\\_Ontologies\\_in\\_the\\_21st\\_Century\\_en\\_en.pdf](https://publications.iadb.org/publications/english/document/Occupations_Labor_Market_Classifications_Taxonomies_and_Ontologies_in_the_21st_Century_en_en.pdf)

<sup>56</sup> <https://skillspanorama.cedefop.europa.eu/en/indicators/skills-online-vacancies>

<sup>57</sup> This contrasts with higher education where QQI awards standards (as distinct from the NFQ) now only apply to a small fraction of higher education awards.

<sup>58</sup> This review has not so far been undertaken.

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