

# Professional Award-type Descriptors at NFQ Level 5 and 6: Annotated for QQI Early Learning and Care (ELC) Awards

## Introduction

In the last decade there have been many significant developments in the early childhood sector at local, national and European levels.

Preschool Regulations were first introduced in Ireland in 1996. These regulations were revised in 2006 and were further revised in the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 and more recently in the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Amendment) Regulations 2016. In 2018, Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate developed the Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF), which sets out the core regulatory requirements for compliance with the Early Years Regulations 2016. The Quality and Regulatory Framework applies to all registered Early Years Services.

There have also been some significant changes in Irish and international laws in relation to children's rights. The Early Years Regulations 2016 and these other legal changes, as well as other important developments, have made a significant impact on what providers of early years care and education services are required to do and wish to do, to meet higher standards of quality in developing and providing safer, more efficient and more effective services for children and families, and to ensure that children's rights are protected.

The developments and changes have resulted in a range of supports to early years providers and educators to help meet these requirements and expectations. A list of supporting materials is provided at the end of this document.

In 2010 QQI undertook a systematic and full-scale review of Further Education and Training (FET) early years childcare awards and the output was a suite of awards at National Framework of Qualification Levels 4, 5 and 6. There have been nearly 25,000 major awards (including those at Levels 5 and 6) in the last 7 years (<https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/infographics.aspx>).

In parallel with the major reforms in the early years sector QQI commenced in 2018 a review of the Level 4, 5 and 6 awards with the aim of ensuring that that the awards and standards were fit for purpose. A Standards Review Group was established representing the Early Learning and Care community of practice to undertake the review and determine the new standards for early years awards.

The Standards Review Group comprised:

- Deirdre Hanamy (Chair), Retired Principal, Blackrock Further Education Institute, DDLETB
- Ann Fanning, Deputy Principal, Cork College of Commerce
- Ann McSorley, Learning and Development Manager, Scottish Social Service Council
- Antoinette Gibbs, Early Years Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills
- Bevin Doyle, Department of Children and Youth Affairs
- Kathryn O'Sullivan, Department of Children and Youth Affairs (replaced B. Doyle)

- Martina Carter, Early Years Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills (replaced A. Gibbs)
- Martina Coombes, Senior Lecturer, Technological University Dublin, Blanchardstown
- Phil Lynch, Early Childhood Specialist, Early Childhood Ireland
- Traycee McGarrity, Learner Representative (attended one meeting)

Following the first few meetings the membership of the group was increased to include:

- Clodagh Beare, Quality Assurance Officer, Dublin and Dun Laoghaire ETB
- Jenny Whelan, Support Officer, Further Education Support Service
- Mary Sheehy, Support Officer, Further Education Support Service
- Evelyn Reilly, Service Representative

The first task of the Group was to consult with education providers, ETBs, early years providers, policy makers and childcare networks on the appropriateness of the current awards and recommendations to improve the awards. An online consultation was set up and open for 5 weeks (26 November to 3 December 2018). 97 responses were received to the online consultation. This was supported by two stakeholder meetings (Tullamore 26 November and Dublin 27 November).

The results of the consultation were compiled and categorised under general comments about the major awards, feedback on the work experience module, feedback on individual award components and issues beyond the scope of this review. This information was provided to the Standards Review Group and work commenced on reviewing the titles, awards structure and awards components for the Level 5 and 6 awards.

This work was done in parallel with a substantial piece of work done under the leadership of the Department of Education and Skills on the development of *Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Education (Level 7 and 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care sector in Ireland*.

In January 2019, in consultation with the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, it was decided that the review of the ELC awards needs to take a higher-level approach to ensure that the awards are more clearly situated in the broader policy landscape and that a focus on setting standards for major professional awards would be more appropriate than using the Common Awards System. The move to using major professional award standards provided an opportunity for the first time to present further education awards standards in the same format as those for higher awards to help stakeholders compare and contrast the ELC expected learning outcomes at different NFQ levels and design programmes for optimal progression.

Following this, the Standards Review Group first developed role profiles for Level 5 and Level 6 graduates and went on to develop ELC major professional awards standards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6. The standards are expressed in the form of annotations to the NFQ Professional Award-type Descriptors (PATD). The annotations explain how to interpret the PATD indicators for programmes leading to ELC awards.

One of the major changes, then, is that the proposed new standards are based on the NFQ Professional Award-type Descriptors. This should have a significant positive impact for a sector which saw nearly 25,000 major awards (including those at Levels 5 and 6) in the last 7 years. For example, it should help facilitate the development of efficient progression pathways between different tertiary ELC qualifications in the NFQ.

This work on new standards can be regarded as Phase 2 of a three-phase project that will, all going well, result in updated programmes enrolling from the start of the 2021-2022 academic year.

- Phase 1 was the review by QQI of the existing CAS awards specifications for ELC.
- Phase 2 is the development of new-format professional award standards for ELC.
- Phase 3 will be the development by providers of new ELC programmes leading to awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6, and their validation by QQI.

## Consultation documentation

The following documents should be considered.

1. **Professional Award-type Descriptors at NFQ Levels 5 to 8: Annotated for QQI ELC Awards Consultation Draft.** This document presents the new standards and the special validation conditions.
2. **ELC awards to be deactivated and implications for validation.** This document lists the awards that will be deactivated and explains the deactivation schedule and the implications for programme design/updating and validation.
3. **Guideline for respondents.** This is a guideline on how to structure responses to the consultation.

## Closing date for consultation responses

Responses must be received by QQI by **30 September 2019**. Responses must be sent by email to [Consultation@qqi.ie](mailto:Consultation@qqi.ie) using the subject: **ELC**.