

Implementation Guidelines for using broad award standards at NFQ levels 1-4

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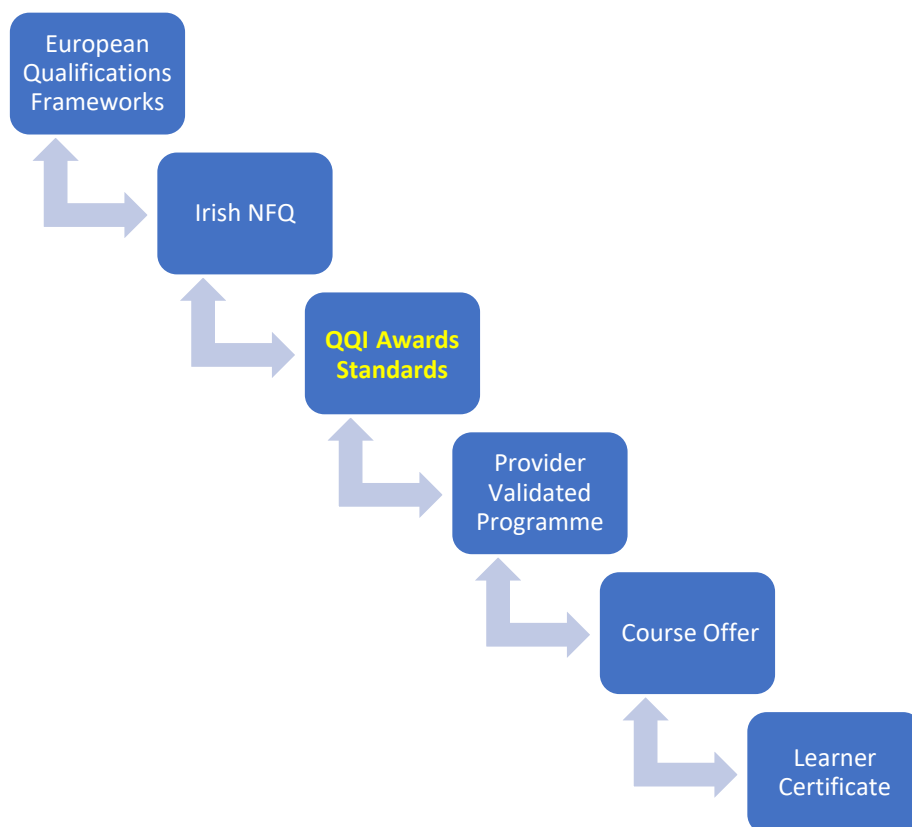
Introduction and Context

QQI is required to determine awards standards; this means we establish the standards of knowledge, skill, or competence to be acquired by learners before we make an award¹. The **National Framework of Qualifications** (NFQ) and its associated system of award type descriptors is the basis for the establishment and development of QQI awards standards.

QQI award standards help to **link the NFQ level and award type descriptors with programmes** (see figure 1). By contextualising the neutral language of the NFQ for specific disciplines or field of education, award standards make agreed expectations for qualifications clearer and more transparent. When implemented in programme design, delivery and assessment, award standards help to promote **consistency** across programmes and providers and help to maintain standards over time. Consistent and reliable qualifications **enhance further learning or employment opportunities**. QQI award standards support the **national and international recognition** of QQI awards, and the associated qualifications achieved by learners.

Figure 1. QQI Award standards – Connecting Qualifications Framework to Learner Certification

¹ Our approach to the determination of awards standards is set out in policy:
<https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/gp-12-policy-for-determining-awards-standards.pdf>



QQI's awards standards determinations vary in their specificity allowing scope for programme diversity, innovation and flexibility while still ensuring the necessary and appropriate degree of consistency across comparable qualifications. **Using QQI award standards as a primary reference point, providers design programmes that give learners the opportunity to acquire the relevant standards of knowledge, skill, and competence.**

Principles for the Development and Maintenance of QQI Award Standards.

QQI Awards standards are more likely to be fit for purpose when they:

1. are **owned and maintained by their users** including but not limited to providers, social partners, sectoral peak bodies, regulators and learners;
2. are created by **subject matter experts**;
3. are expressed in terms of expected standards of **knowledge skill and competence**
4. are systematically developed and approved according to an **internationally recognised process** (e.g., European norms for the development, design, and recognition of qualifications);
5. are suitable for the development and **validation** of education and training programmes and for the **recognition of prior learning**;

6. are available for **consultation** so that all interested parties impacted by the standard can contribute to the development of it;
7. are consistent with **NFQ level indicators and award type descriptors** from which they derive;
8. are **maintained and supported** over the lifetime of associated qualifications;
9. are **open** and **available** to all approved providers without undue restrictions;
10. are **accessible** so that the content supports the development of learning programmes that promote equal access to education and training for a diverse range of learners.

Broad Award Standards

The introduction of new broad award standards for QQI further education and training (FET) awards at NFQ Levels 1-4 is intended to bring a fresh and flexible approach to programme development for providers of further education and training in Ireland. **New broad award standards at NFQ levels 1-4 mark a departure from the Common Awards System (CAS) and offer a new approach for the timely development, delivery and certification of programmes.**

Guided by the broad standards as an alternative to the component structure of the CAS, providers can design prospective new QQI awards when developing a new programme or updating an existing one and propose these to QQI through the programme validation process. This allows providers to bring in new programmes more quickly because they do not have to wait for QQI to determine or update detailed CAS standards.

The suite of new award standards comprises ten **core competence award standards** specified at NFQ levels 1 to 4, and ten **vocational award standards** specified at NFQ levels 3 and 4. The award standards for core competences are aligned with the EU Key Competences for Lifelong Learning 2018 and subsequent EU competence frameworks².

Core competence award standards	Vocational award standards
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Sustainability Competence ➤ Digital Competence ➤ Mathematical and Numerical Competence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Agriculture ➤ Aquaculture ➤ Horticulture ➤ Construction and Engineering

² See 2018 EU [Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning](#) and subsequent European competence frameworks for [Personal, Social and Learning to Learn](#) in 2020 and [Sustainability Competence](#) in 2022

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Literacy Competence ➤ Science and Technology Competence ➤ Entrepreneurship Competence ➤ Citizenship Competence ➤ Personal, Social and Learning to Learn Competence ➤ Cultural Awareness and Expression Competence ➤ Foreign Language Competence (e.g., ESOL) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fine Arts and Crafts ➤ Hospitality and Personal Services ➤ Care and Community work ➤ Administration and Office work ➤ Retail ➤ ICT
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Phasing of Implementation

Subject to this consultation, the intention is that providers will be invited to use the broad standards on a pilot basis when undertaking new programme development or scheduled review of existing QQI validated programmes.

Detailed planning and guidelines to support the implementation of broad award standards at NFQ levels 1-4 will be developed in collaboration with the sector and in acknowledgement of:

- the need for continuity of provision for learners already studying;
- the need to ensure that providers have the time and capacity to adapt to using new broad award standards;
- the need for QQI to provide detailed guidance, advice and support for implementation;
- the large number of broad award standards that may become active within a relatively short timeframe;
- the need to ensure that learners can choose effectively from a range of high-quality programmes and opportunities for learners who depend on smaller sized qualifications;
- that the existing system for producing, delivering and certifying programmes and qualifications cannot be simply turned off, any changes must be introduced into a dynamic education, training and qualifications system.

QQI is committed to monitoring and learning from the implementation of broad award standards at NFQ levels 1-4.

Using Broad Award Standards

1. Programme Development and Review

The broad award standards at NFQ Levels 1-4 are an elaboration of the generic descriptors of the NFQ. They will guide programme developers in the development of ***minimum intended programme learning outcomes*** (MIPLOs) and ***minimum intended module learning outcomes*** (MIMLOs). QQI approves MIPLOs and MIMLOs when validating or revalidating programmes.

The broad award standards are not programme specifications—they only guide on learning outcomes and not how they are achieved. A diverse range of potential programmes and minimum intended programme learning outcomes are compatible with them.

The broad award standards will provide for flexibility and variety in the design of programmes and therefore encourage innovation within an agreed framework.

When specifying MIPLOs and MIMLOs a provider should first consider the educational purposes of the programme and the new award to which it will lead. A provider will need to have regard to the views of all users of the proposed new awards including learners, employers, and educational institutions. In some cases, rare at these levels, the provider may need to consider regulations governing occupations or activities that the new award is intended to prepare people for. These considerations will result in a first draft of the MIPLOs and, if applicable, MIMLOs.

The next step is to consider what classes of awards (major, minor, special purpose or supplemental) are required to deliver the MIPLOs and MIMLOs and at what NFQ levels. The class of award is guided by its volume of learning and purpose having regard to the NFQ award-type descriptors. The NFQ award-type descriptors also guide the NFQ level, but the broad standards will help providers interpret the generic descriptors in the different core and vocational domains. The first draft MIPLOs and MIMLOs may need to be adjusted to ensure a good fit to the NFQ guided by the broad standards.

More than one broad standard may be used at the same time. It is quite likely that several of the core competence award standards will be used together when fitting MIPLOs for major award programmes because they address general educational attainment that all aspire to achieve. In designing programmes, providers may experience situations where a core competence award standard overlaps with a vocational award standard, sustainability and agriculture for example. Using multiple vocational award standards is likely to be less common and restricted to multi-disciplinary programmes.

When reviewing and re-validating programmes, broad award standards can be used as the primary reference point for providers as an alternative to the award standards and awarding rules used in the CAS.

1. Are the guidelines on using broad award standards in programme development and review sufficiently clear?

Please submit your response [here](#)

2. Award Types and Award Classes

Broad award standards establish the standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners before a QQI award is made. Expressed in terms of learning outcomes, broad award standards are compatible with all existing award types (e.g., Level 2 Certificate) and award classes (major, minor, special purpose and supplemental). When using the broad award standards, providers can decide the most appropriate award types and award classes that best recognise the learning achievement of their target learners (for example a major award with embedded minor awards that recognise coherent clusters of learning outcomes). The proposed use of award types and classes of awards with broad award standards will be proposed by providers and agreed as part of the validation process.

2. Are the guidelines on using different award types and award classes with broad award standards, sufficiently clear?

Please submit your response [here](#)

3. Broad Award Standards as an alternative to CAS

Broad award standards offer an alternative to using the CAS. Broad award standards can guide the development by providers of **programmes that do not lead to CAS awards.**

Providers are encouraged to use the broad award standards to develop new programmes or review existing programmes without relying on the existing CAS. Broad award standards do not include detailed awards specifications and rules and they do not specify award standards for both compound awards and their constituent components (minor awards). Maintaining the centralised system of CAS standards is problematic for reasons discussed in QQI's [Green Paper on the Qualifications System](#) and the its accompanying [Technical Paper on the Qualification System](#).

QQI will **not publish certificate specifications** to accompany each broad award standard. This is because the broad award standards are not based on the CAS. The broad award standards are not designed to be used with CAS components. **QQI will not publish new component specifications** as part of the new broad award standards. Providers may design programmes using **modules** which can be combined to **offer programmes leading to named major, minor, special purpose or supplemental awards**.

3. Are the guidelines on using broad award standards as an alternative to CAS, sufficiently clear?

Please submit your response [here](#)

4. Broad Award Standards and Transversal Skills

The ten core competence award standards for lifelong learning are intended to support the development of learning opportunities that support personal fulfilment, a healthy and sustainable lifestyle, active citizenship and social inclusion³. Each of the ten core competence award standards are equally important and mutually supportive.

Skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, teamworking, communication, creativity and intercultural skills, often described as transversal skills, are explicitly embedded throughout the broad award standards for core competence and are also encouraged in vocational awards.

³ These aspirations are set out in the 2018 Council of the European Union Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning.

For programme designers, broad award standards for core competences may be used as stand-alone award standards or may be combined to develop integrated programmes designed to meet identified needs of learners. Using more than one broad award standard to develop a programme will be subject to guideline seven on the Making of Awards and Named Award Titles.

4. Are the guidelines on using broad award standards to support transversal skills, sufficiently clear?

Please submit your response [here](#)

5. Access Transfer and Progression (Including RPL, Credit and Provision of Information to Learners)

Programmes designed to meet broad award standards will be developed in accordance with agreed quality assured procedures for access, transfer and progression, including arrangement for the **recognition of prior learning (RPL)**. The granting of exemptions from certain modules will be managed by providers using their approved RPL procedures. With the adoption of broad award standards, QQI will not maintain a central list of non-QQI awards eligible for exemptions against named QQI awards. **QQI can advise on the NFQ level** of national and international non-QQI awards but not on the comparison of specific learning outcomes. When using broad award standards, provider decisions to grant programme exemptions for access, advanced entry or for an award, will be **managed in accordance with a provider's internal quality assurance procedures and specifically their procedures for access, transfer and progression**. At NFQ levels 1-4 it is particularly important to promote an ethos of lifelong learning in decisions about access to validated programmes. This responsibility is exercised within the overarching governing principle that a provider shall ensure that an **enrolled learner acquires the standard of knowledge, skill or competence** associated with the level of the award concerned within the NFQ before the award is made.

Broad award standards are compatible with the **existing credit system** for QQI further education and training awards where 1 credit represents 10 hours of learner effort. Learner effort is based on the time taken by typical learners at the level of the award on average, to achieve the learning outcomes for the award. It includes all learning time involved including guided learning hours, self-directed learning and assessment.

Credit volume for QQI awards at NFQ levels 1-4

Framework Level	Major Award Credit Values	Default Minor Award Credit Values	Other Permitted Minor Award Credit Values	Special Purpose and Supplemental Award Credit Value Range
1	20	5	10	
2	30	5	10	
3	60	10	5, 20	≥5 and ≤ 60
4	90	10	5, 15, 20	≥5 and ≤ 90

Providers using broad award standards are subject to existing requirements regarding **the provision of information to learners**. Providers must publish the award type, NFQ level and class of award associated with QQI validated programmes. Information about access, transfer and progression arrangements including arrangements for RPL must also be publicly available. The Irish Register of Qualifications will provide an official list of awards included within the NFQ and their associated programmes.

5. Are the guidelines on using broad award standards in Access, Transfer and Progression arrangements sufficiently clear?

Please submit your response [here](#)

6. Assessment and Grading

Relevant providers are required to establish procedures which are fair and consistent for the assessment of enrolled learners to ensure the standards of knowledge, skill and competence determined by QQI are acquired, and where appropriate, demonstrated, by enrolled learners.

The assessment, classification and grading of education and training awards are discussed in [QQI's published guidelines on assessment](#).

Grading classifications - QQI awards are graded and classified as follows.

Awards at levels 1-3 are classified as **Successful** where a learner has achieved all the outcomes for the award.

Awards at level 4 are classified as **Pass, Merit or Distinction** where a learner has achieved the standards for the award within the grading criteria.

- A **Pass** is a grade awarded to a learner who has attained the minimum standard. To be awarded a Pass grade a learner must have achieved a mark of between 50-64%.
- A **Merit** is a grade awarded to a learner who has exceeded the minimum requirements. To be awarded a Merit grade a learner must have achieved a mark of between 65-79%.
- A **Distinction** is a grade awarded to a learner who has substantially exceeded the minimum requirements. For a learner to be awarded a Distinction, a mark of 80% or over must be achieved.

Grading criteria describe what a learner must attain to achieve a particular grade for an award at a particular level. The following tables outline the grading criteria for QQI awards at levels 1 - 4.

Grading Criteria for Awards at level 1 - level 3

	Successful		
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
	The learner has achieved the learning outcomes for the award in a structured and supported learning setting. The outcomes	The learner has achieved the learning outcomes for the award in a structured and supported setting with clear direction	The learner has achieved the learning outcomes for the award with some supervision and direction. The



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Grading Criteria	have been achieved with significant support and direction from the assessor, but the learner has demonstrated sustentative achievement on their own.	from the assessor. The learner has demonstrated some autonomy of action and has taken limited responsibility for the activities and for generating evidence.	learner has demonstrated autonomy of action and has taken responsibility for generating appropriate evidence.
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Grading Criteria for Awards at Level 4

	Pass	Merit	Distinction
Grading Criteria	<p>A Pass indicates that the learner has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - achieved the learning outcomes as outlined in the relevant award - a Pass is the minimum acceptable standard - used the language of the vocational/specialised area competently - attempted to apply the theory and concepts appropriately - provided sufficient evidence which has relevance and clarity. 	<p>A Merit indicates that the learner has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - achieved the learning outcomes as outlined in the relevant award - a Merit implies a good standard has been achieved - used the language of the vocational/specialised area with a degree of fluency - expressed and developed ideas clearly - demonstrated initiative, evaluation and analytical skills 	<p>A Distinction indicates that the learner has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - achieved the learning outcomes as outlined in the relevant award - a Distinction implies that an excellent standard has been achieved - used the language of the vocational/specialised area fluently and confidently - demonstration-depth understanding of the subject matter

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none">- presented coherent and comprehensive evidence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- demonstrated a high level of initiative, evaluation skills- demonstrated analytical and reflective thinking- expressed and developed ideas clearly, systematically and comprehensively- presented coherent, detailed and focused evidence
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6. Are the guidelines on assessment and grading when using broad award standards sufficiently clear?

Please submit your response [here](#)

7. The Making of Awards and Named Award Titles

QQI, or a provider to whom QQI has delegated authority to make awards, may make an award to a learner if satisfied that the learner has acquired, and where appropriate demonstrated, the appropriate standard of knowledge, skill and competence as determined by QQI in the broad award standards at NFQ levels 1-4. Certification procedures will continue to function much as they have to date, where providers will submit learners for certification once they have ensured that learners have acquired the standard of knowledge, skill or competence associated with the award sought.

Only awards will be certified, programme modules will not be certified by QQI.

With the introduction of broad award standards, QQI will continue to make named awards in accord with any of the FET award-types established within the NFQ. Where providers use the broad award standards instead of the CAS to develop programmes, learners who successfully complete such

programmes will be certified accordingly and based on the award type/s approved during programme validation.

When using broad award standards at NFQ levels 1-4, there are two parts to the **award title**: ‘the stem title’ (indicating the award’s Framework Type and Class) and the ‘named award title’ (indicating the award’s subject). Subject to this guidance, named award titles will be agreed as part of the programme validation process.

The construction of named awards titles remains unchanged from existing titling conventions except that **a component certificate associated with CAS is not included here** and it is **proposed to change specific purpose to special purpose** so that it is consistent with the relevant award type.

	Named Award Stem Title	Named Award Subject
Major Awards	Level N Certificate	Taken from broad standard
Minor Awards	Level N Minor Certificate	Taken from broad standard
Special Purpose Awards	Level N Special Purpose Certificate	Taken from broad standard
Supplemental Awards	Level N Supplemental Certificate	Taken from broad standard

Criteria for named award titles:

- Should be uniform and consistently applied where feasible for the same subject at different Framework levels.
- Must not mislead learners
- Must be unique for awards at the same Framework level.
- Should reflect a domain of learning and not an occupation or job.
- Must not infringe any intellectual property rights.
- The named award title should reflect the award standards used

Providers to whom QQI has delegated authority to make an award may design their own certificates and parchments but must obtain QQI’s agreement for the design (including text) before issue. QQI will publish Europass Certificate Supplements to accompany each broad award standard, as determined.

Example 1

A provider uses the broad award standard for digital competence to design and successfully validate a programme leading to a major award at NFQ level 3. The approved programme title is 'Digital skills for lifelong learning.' The title of the named award issued on successful completion of the programme will be a 'Level 3 Certificate in Digital Competence.'

Example 2

A provider uses the broad award standard for agriculture together with elements from the broad award standard for sustainability competence to design and successfully validate a programme leading to a major award at NFQ level 4. The approved programme title is 'Agriculture for sustainable development.' The title of the named award issued on successful completion of the programme will be a 'Level 4 Certificate in Agriculture'. Note that the predominant broad award standard used to develop the programme is reflected in the named award title.

Example 3

A provider uses the broad award standard for foreign language competency to design and successfully validate a programme leading to a special purpose award at NFQ level 3. The approved programme title is 'Introduction to Spoken English.' The title of the named award issued on successful completion of the programme will be a 'Level 3 Special Purpose Certificate in English as a Foreign Language'. Note in this case that the target language associated with the broad award standard used is reflected in the named award title.

In these examples the flavour of the programme is reflected in the programme title which is proposed by the provider and must be clear and not mislead potential learners. Programme titles and named award titles are determined at validation. All named award titles are determined by QQI and must reference the award standard used as the primary reference point for programme development and design.

7. Are the guidelines on making of awards and named award titles when using broad award standards sufficiently clear?

Please submit your response [here](#)

Final Thoughts

Having read these initial guidelines on the implementation of broad award standards, please tell us if you think we have missed some issue where guidance is required.

Please submit your response [here](#)

Supplementary Material

Providers can access supplementary information to support the development of their programmes from the following sources:

- The [NFQ Determinations Levels 1 – 4](#) (level descriptors of the Framework) will support programme developers to align their programmes with the Levels determined by the NFQ. The Framework levels set out a range of standards of knowledge, skill and competence. Eight sub-strands of knowledge skill and competence have been defined by the Authority (please see above). Please see [here](#) for further information.
- Sector specific standards and regulations which can be found through engagement with the relevant sector / industry representative body.
- The Core Standards may be incorporated into many programmes to be developed in the future and further information on each of the 8 EU Key Competences for Lifelong Learning can be found at, [Key competences for lifelong learning](#).
- National Qualifications Framework [Grid of Level Indicators](#).
- Guidelines for completing the [programme descriptor template](#).