

Green Paper on Intermediate Qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6

Consultation Report



CONTENTS

CONTENTS	2
1. Introduction	4
2. Proposal in the Green Paper	6
2.1. Single Major Award at NFQ Level 6	6
2.2. Impacts on Level 5 Certificate	6
2.3. Timeline	7
3. Overview of the Consultation	8
3.1. Meetings and Engagements	8
3.2. Responses to Online Survey	9
3.3. Written Submissions Received	9
4. Overall Response	11
4.1. Support for Single Major Award at NFQ Level 6	11
4.2. Title of New Award	11
4.3. Barriers to Progression	12
4.4. Award-Type Descriptor	12
4.5. Level 5 Certificate	13
4.6. Timelines	13
5. General Themes	15
5.1. Clarifying the Proposal	15
5.1.1. Glossary	15
5.1.2. Level 5 Certificate	17
5.2. Purpose of Qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6	18
5.2.1. Differences between NFQ Level 6 Qualifications in Further and Higher Education	19
5.2.2. Professional Awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6	20
5.2.3. Craft Apprenticeships	21
5.3. Classification as a Higher Education Award	21
5.4. Relationship between Level 5 Certificate and the Single Maor award at NFQ Level 6	23
5.4.1. ECTS at NFQ Level 5	23
5.4.2. Credit Distribution	25
5.4.3. Access, Transfer and Progression	27
5.4.4. Exit Awards	28

5.4.5.	Award of both the Level 5 Certificate and Level 6 Diploma	29
5.5.	Non-major awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6	29
5.6.	Implementation and Impacts	30
5.6.1.	Industrial Relations	30
5.6.2.	Erasmus+ Mobility	31
5.6.3.	Resources for issuing the Europass Diploma Supplement.....	31
5.6.4.	Re-validation of Programmes	31
5.6.5.	QQI Awards	32
6.	Conclusion.....	33
Appendix 1:	34
	Summary of Pre-Conference Workshop Proceedings, 20 November 2024.....	34
Appendix 2	44
	List of Responding Organisations to Consultation.....	44

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1. Introduction

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was established in 2003. The NFQ is a single framework, covering school, tertiary education and professional awards. Over the past two decades, the 10-level Framework has become part of the national lexicon and is frequently referenced by students, guidance counsellors, education and training providers, government and employers. Although the NFQ has been referenced against the two main European qualifications frameworks twice since its establishment, most recently in 2020¹, the placement of major awards has never been reviewed or revised.

Major awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6, and other further education and training (FET) awards have intrinsic value and labour-market relevance as they provide access to employment and labour markets and meet many occupational standards. These awards also play a significant role in social inclusion and lifelong learning. However, the current arrangement of two major awards at NFQ Level 6 has been identified as a barrier to progression to higher education. The proposal for a single major award at NFQ Level 6 seeks to remedy this, without devaluing FET qualifications in their own right.

Several reports and reviews conducted in the last decade have pointed to this issue at Level 6. The *Policy Impact Assessment of the NFQ*² published in 2017 found that the two major awards at Level 6 were confusing for stakeholders and it was suggested that these awards should be reviewed. The *Evaluation of the Comparability of the Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate Qualifications*³ undertaken by Ecctis and published in 2021 concluded that both awards relate to NFQ Level 6 in terms of achieved learning outcomes but that the difference in distribution of NFQ sub-strands was significant enough to warrant differentiated award-type descriptors. *A Review of the Landscape of Practice Supporting Access, Transfer and Progression in Irish Education and Training*⁴ published in 2023 recommended that QQI ensure parity of treatment of NFQ Level 6 for the purposes of progression while observing that the use of two credit systems continues to be a barrier for progression. Finally, a report marking the 20th anniversary of the NFQ published in early 2024 titled *20 years of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications – A Story of*

¹ [NFQ Referencing Report 12-2020.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

² [Policy Impact Assessment of NFQ_Indecon Report with Cover_FINAL.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

³ [evaluation-of-nfq-level-6-awards.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

⁴ [qqi-insights_from-counting-to-cultivating-successful-participation-a-review-of-the-landscape-of-practice-supporting-access-transfer-and-progression-in-irish-education-and-training-2023.pdf](#)

*Collaboration and Cooperation*⁵ outlined that stakeholders consider the contested space at Level 6 an ongoing issue as it resulted in unequal progression and pathways for learners. During a pre-conference workshop in November 2023, over 70% of senior leaders from further and higher education indicated support for replacing the two awards with a single major award at Level 6. In summary, the two awards at NFQ Level 6 constitute a barrier to progression for learners holding a further education qualification.

⁵ [20-years-of-the-irish-national-framework-of-qualifications-a-story-of-collaboration-and-co-operation-2003-2023.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

2. Proposal in the Green Paper

In December 2024, QQI published a Green Paper on Intermediate Qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 for consultation. Intermediate qualifications at these levels serve several purposes and meet many needs of learners. These qualifications are both primary and supplementary qualifications and are key to:

- Providing access to employment and labour markets
- Providing access to additional education at higher levels of the framework
- Social inclusion and lifelong learning

2.1. New Major Award at NFQ Level 6

The Green Paper proposed the introduction of a single major award at NFQ Level 6 that would replace the existing Advanced and Higher Certificates and be expressed in terms of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits and would be considered a short cycle qualification under the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) often referred to as Bologna. The new major award at NFQ Level 6 would be 120 ECTS credits, typically achieved with at least 2 years of full-time study. It was proposed that a new title would be needed for the award, and the title Tertiary Certificate was used as a placeholder name, and a few others suggested. Three options for a new award-type descriptor were provided for feedback. It was proposed that all awards at NFQ Level 6 including minor, special purpose and supplemental awards (to include micro-credentials and micro-qualifications) would also be expressed in terms of ECTS.

2.2. Impacts on Level 5 Certificate

As the Level 5 Certificate is often embedded into the existing Advanced Certificate, it was proposed that while the Level 5 Certificate would continue to be a standalone full qualification at NFQ Level 5, it would also be considered a partial⁶ qualification of the single major award at NFQ Level 6 and a partial qualification within the short cycle. The Green Paper proposed that while it might be sensible for the Level 5 Certificate to also be expressed in terms of ECTS credits, it could retain the existing Further Education and Training (FET) credit if preferred. The Level 5 Certificate would only be expressed in terms of one credit system, regardless of if the provider was traditionally considered a further or higher education provider. The Green Paper on QQI's Revised Access, Transfer and Progression (ATP) Policy⁷, which was a companion paper,

⁶ Please note that the language regarding partial qualifications has been updated and is only used here to accurately reflect the initial proposal in the Green Paper.

⁷ [qqi-green-paper-on-qqi-s-access-transfer-and-progression-policy.pdf](#)

details the national approach to credit in further and higher education, which would support the transfer and/or translation of FET credits to ECTS as needed. Whichever credit system (FET or ECTS) was preferred for the Level 5 Certificate would extend to all awards, other than general education qualifications delivered in the school system, at NFQ Level 5.

Although a new title for the award and a new award type descriptor was not proposed, stakeholders were invited to suggest if either or both were required. Changes were not proposed to qualifications at NFQ Levels 1-4, but it was acknowledged that learning achieved as part of a qualification at NFQ Level 4 and often used towards a qualification at NFQ Level 5 could continue after any changes to NFQ Levels 5 and 6.

2.3. Timeline

An ambitious timeline was set out in the paper. It was proposed that the new award type descriptor for the single major award at NFQ Level 6 would be available from September 2025 and all new programmes should be validated to this award-type. A 5-year transition period was suggested for the existing AC and HC's to be revalidated against the new award-type descriptor. The same timeline applies to associated changes proposed to non-major awards at NFQ Level 6, and any agreed amendments to NFQ Level 5.

3. Overview of the Consultation

Informal versions of the Green Paper were circulated widely to stakeholders in mid-November 2024, with the official versions formally published on the QQI website in December 2024. The consultation was open until the 7th of March 2025, with extensions provided as needed. Submissions were accepted until the end of March. Stakeholders were invited to submit written responses to the consultation and an online form was also provided to collect feedback.

3.1. Meetings and Engagements

To further support the consultation, QQI arranged and attended several meetings and events with stakeholders from across the sector to invite feedback and respond to queries and questions. A summary of these is provided below.

- On 20 November 2024, QQI hosted a pre-conference workshop exploring the role of qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6, and access, transfer and progression (ATP) policy in building a unified tertiary system. This workshop brought approximately 30 participants from across further and higher education, including representation from public and private, independent higher education institutions (HEIs), education and training boards (ETBs) and further education providers, the National Tertiary Office (NTO), the National Apprenticeship Office (NAO) and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFEHRIS) together to discuss NFQ Levels 5 and 6 and ATP. A summary of proceedings of the workshop are provided in Appendix 1.
- On 11 December 2024, QQI hosted a dedicated meeting of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Higher Education (HE) Network to discuss the two green papers. This meeting included approximately 20 representatives from across the public higher education institutions to discuss the proposals in the papers.
- On 19 December 2024, QQI met with representatives of the Irish Universities Association (IUA) Quality and Qualifications Group to discuss the proposals in the green papers.
- On 7 January 2025, QQI hosted a meeting with representatives from SOLAS, Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) to discuss the proposals regarding qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6.
- On 11 January 2025, QQI attended a meeting of the National Executive of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) to present an overview of the proposals in the green paper and to encourage feedback from members.
- On 20 January 2025, QQI attended a meeting of the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) Quality Network. The meeting had over 30 attendees representing ETBI and all education and training boards (ETBs).

- On 7 February 2025 QQI presented the proposal to 15 representatives of Dublin and Dun Laoghaire ETB (DDLETB).
- On 11 February 2025, QQI presented the proposal to 13 representatives of Cavan Monaghan ETB (CMETB).
- On 13 February 2025, QQI presented the proposal to the Irish Quality and Qualifications Forum (IQQF) which included more than 25 representatives from across further and higher education.
- On 24 February 2025, QQI presented the proposal to 20 representatives of Kilkenny Carlow ETB (KCETB).
- On 27 February 2025, QQI presented the proposal to 10 representatives of the ETBI FET Directors Forum.
- On 3 March 2025 QQI presented the proposal to 50 representatives of private and independent higher education institutions.
- On 12 March 2025, QQI hosted the EU Reference Group which is a meeting of agencies under the aegis of DFHERIS funded to complete EU projects. The afternoon was dedicated to feedback on the green papers and was attended by 40 representatives from across the education and training sector.

3.2. Responses to Online Survey

14 responses were received to the online survey. 10 responses were received representing education and training boards, designated awarding bodies and private and independent providers. The remainder were submitted by individuals, most of whom were engaged in the higher education sector.

3.3. Written Submissions Received

48 responses were received in total. A breakdown of these is provided in the table below.

Category	Number Online Submissions	Number Written Submission
Designated awarding body	3	10
Education and Training Board	5	5
Private and independent higher education institution	2	4
Professional Body	0	1
Representative Organisation	0	6

Individuals	5	3
Other	0	4
Total	15	33
Overall Total	48	

Please note that some organisations submitted both a written and online submission. A full list of stakeholder organisations that made a submission is set out in Appendix 2.

4. Overall Response

4.1. Support for Single Major Award at NFQ Level 6

The overwhelming majority of responses supported the introduction of a single major award at NFQ Level 6 to replace the existing Advanced and Higher Certificates, recognising the value it will deliver for learners and other end users of qualifications, and for providers and awarding bodies. Although there was some concern about the classification of the award as a higher education award, which is discussed further below, most stakeholders recognised the value of expressing the new major award in terms of ECTS credits. It was acknowledged that ECTS credits are the most sensible way to calculate and communicate the learning associated with qualifications for the purposes of progression to additional education. It was generally agreed that the qualification should be 120 ECTS, achieved in at least 2 years of traditional full-time study, recognising that some apprenticeships are longer in duration. The distribution of credit across NFQ Levels 5 and 6 within the 'Tertiary Certificate' caused some disagreement and this is discussed in more detail later in the report.

It was also agreed that non-major awards at NFQ Level 6 should be expressed in terms of ECTS.

- ✓ **Action: Present the Proposal for a Single Major Award at NFQ Level 6 in the White Paper. Programmes leading to this award can be offered by FET and HE institutions. The award may be made by QQI, by designated awarding bodies or by listed awarding bodies. The award will have a credit volume of at least 120 ECTS. It will be included within the QF-EHEA as a short cycle qualification. It will be emphasised that the award will be achieved in *at least 2 years of traditional full-time study*.**

4.2. Title of New Award

The placeholder title 'Tertiary Certificate' was not popular amongst stakeholders. There was a recognition that a new title was required, and acknowledgment that the terms advanced and higher were the strongest available and it was challenging to improve on these. There were mixed views about the appropriateness of using the term "degree" in the title, though many pointed to comparable practice internationally.

The most acceptable titles seemed to be the Level 6 Certificate or the Level 6 Diploma. Level 6 Certificate continues the naming conventions of the qualifications used at NFQ Levels 1-5, all of which are 1 year in duration or less. Level 6 Diploma more accurately reflects the size and complexity of the award.

It is worth noting that the most popular proposed name for the award was an Associate Degree. This was supported by a wide range of stakeholders including some from both the higher and further education sectors. However, there were many people opposed to this title.

The title Associate Degree is gaining some traction as it is mentioned in the Baltic Benelux Treaty, and there was a general sense that it was more inspiring than the title Level 6 Diploma. As such, the Level 6 Diploma is the most acceptable title at this time, but not most the popular. There is a possibility to revisit the title of the award in the coming years.

- ✓ **Action: Use the title *Level 6 Diploma* for the new major award at NFQ Level 6.**

4.3. Barriers to Progression

Many stakeholders emphasised that the introduction of a single major award at NFQ Level 6 would not necessarily result in increased progression opportunities for learners into higher education and may not result in advanced entry into Year 2 or 3 of degree programmes.

- **Response:** As outlined in the 2023 Review of the Landscape of Practice Supporting ATP in Irish Education and Training⁸, many of the barriers to progression for learners are systematic and relate to areas outside of QQI's remit. The Green Paper on a Revised QQI ATP Policy, which was a companion paper to the Green Paper on Intermediate Qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6, outlines high level principles that are designed to improve the co-operation and collaboration across the sectors to increase the quantity, transparency and visibility of pathways for learners from further to higher education.
- Advanced entry into degree programmes will continue to rely on articulation agreements, and the ATP Green Paper encourages institutions to develop and implement as many articulation agreements as possible. However, the sectoral status of the qualification should no longer be a barrier. Advanced entry should be limited only by the coherency of learning outcomes and not concerns about the level of the qualification or the associated credit volumes.

- ✓ **Action: The White Paper will confirm the roles and responsibilities of institutions in recognising qualifications in line with NFQ policies.**

4.4. Award-Type Descriptor

In general, very little feedback was received regarding the preferred award-type descriptor for the new award. However, from those that did express an opinion there was a clear preference for

⁸ [2023 review of ATP landscape in Ireland | Quality and Qualifications Ireland](#)

Proposal I which simply used the indicators associated with NFQ Level 6 from the grid of level indicators.

- ✓ **Action: The White Paper will confirm the preferred award-type descriptor for the Level 6 Diploma.**

4.5. Level 5 Certificate

There was a mixed response to the proposal to express the Level 5 Certificate and non-major awards at NFQ Level 5 in terms of ECTS credit. However, there was an overall sense that persisting with two credit systems at any level associated with these qualifications would simply replicate the existing issues with NFQ Level 6 at NFQ Level 5. Private and independent higher education providers were particularly concerned about the potential requirement to operate two different credit systems within the same programmes and awards. The confusion regarding the proposal at Level 5, which is discussed in more detail below, may have contributed to the resistance to using ECTS credits.

However, we also received a high volume of feedback suggesting that one credit system should be used at NFQ Level 1-10 to further simplify the NFQ.

- **Response:** The credit system at NFQ Levels 1-4 will be reviewed as part of the planned review of the NFQ⁹ which commenced in January 2025.

4.6. Timelines

Much of the feedback received was in relation to the ambitious timelines set out in the Green Paper. It was proposed that the new award-type descriptor for the single major award at NFQ Level 6 will be available for use from September 2025. However, it is worth noting that this will likely be for programmes being offered from September 2026. It is also worth noting that a transition period of 5 years is being offered for existing awards, with these only grandparenting out of the system in September 2030.

- **Response:** It is proposed to focus on the end date of 2030, rather than the introduction date of 2025. Even with the proposed timelines, we will only move to a single major award at NFQ Level 6 from September 2030.
- ✓ **Action: The new award-type descriptor will likely be available from March 2026, at the earliest, depending on the completion of the White Paper and internal governance approval by QQI. Any new programmes developed can be validated against the new award-type descriptor following its publication, but from**

⁹ [programme-for-review-of-national-framework-of-qualifications-nfq-policies-future-proofing-the-nfq.pdf](#)

September 2027, all new programmes must be validated to the new award-type descriptor.

- ✓ New non-major awards developed at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 can adopt ECTS credits from March 2026 (dependent on internal governance approval) but must do so from September 2027.
- ✓ September 2030 will continue to be the phase out deadline for the AC and HC. It is proposed that where students are enrolled in the existing AC or HC in September 2030, they will be transitioned to the new single major award at NFQ Level 6, and this should be made clear in information provided to learners.

5. General Themes

Despite the overall positive response to the proposal and a clear indication to proceed, there were some general themes that arose. These themes are quite technical in nature and relate more to the detail of the proposal, rather than the general approach.

5.1. Clarifying the Proposal

There was some confusion regarding the proposal and QQI accepts that some aspects of the proposal could have been communicated more clearly.

Firstly, some of the language used to describe the proposal has been amended. The White Paper will now have the title 'White Paper on Qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6' removing the use of the word intermediate in this context. The word intermediate will, instead, be used to replace the term 'partial' in relation to partial qualifications. This is in keeping with the existing approach to intermediate qualifications whereby the short cycle qualification is an intermediate qualification in the Bologna first cycle, and the postgraduate diploma at NFQ Level 9 is an intermediate qualification in the Bologna second cycle.

Secondly, the following definitions are offered to clarify aspects of the proposal

5.1.1. Glossary

Term	Definition
Credit	A means of measuring, recognising and communicating the volume of learning associated with a qualification or programme. Usually associated with hours of notional learner effort.
European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)	<p>The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a tool developed by the European Commission and used in the European Higher Education Area for making studies and courses more transparent. It helps students to move between countries and to have their academic qualifications and study periods abroad recognised.</p> <p>ECTS allows credits taken at one education institution to be counted towards a qualification studied for at another. ECTS credits represent learning based on defined learning outcomes and their associated workload.</p>

Higher Education Award	<p>A qualification associated with the short cycle, first, second and third cycles of the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA).</p> <p>Non-major awards at the NFQ levels associated with the QF-EHEA.</p> <p>The primary basis for differentiating between higher education and other awards is rooted in national policy, systems, law and convention, which is in turn referenced to the QF-EHEA. National differences in approach inevitably give rise to different outcomes in different countries. Moreover, these usages can and do change over time. The original requirement in Irish law under the 1999 Act for the qualifications authority to formally distinguish between FET and HET awards no longer applies as the law has been repealed.</p> <p>The funding of a programme of education and training by SOLAS under the Further Education and Training Act 2013 does not preclude the programme from leading to a HE award.</p>
Higher Education Institution	<p>As defined in the HEA Act 2022, an institution which provides at least one programme of education and training leading to the award of a degree or other qualification which is at least at bachelor degree level and is included within the NFQ. Statutory higher education institutions are regulated by the HEA. Subject to secondary legislation, other HEIs may be designated by the HEA.</p> <p>This equates to major awards at NFQ Level 7 and above. Not all providers offering programmes leading to HE awards are HE providers.</p>
Higher Education Programme	<p>A higher education programme is one which is offered by a higher education institution and leads to a higher education award.</p>
Intermediate Qualification	<p>An intermediate qualification is a qualification in its own right but also contributes to a larger qualification at either a higher level of the NFQ or the same level.</p> <p>For example:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Postgraduate Diploma at NFQ Level 9 is an intermediate qualification towards the Master's Degree/ Bologna second cycle qualification. • Short Cycle qualification is an intermediate qualification of a Bachelors Degree/ Bologna First Cycle qualification. • The Level 5 Certificate is an intermediate qualification of the Level 6 Diploma/ short cycle qualification.
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5.1.2. Level 5 Certificate

The Green Paper does not propose to remove or significantly change the Level 5 Certificate. The Level 5 Certificate will continue to be a major award, and a full qualification at NFQ Level 5.

There is no proposed change to the existing award-type descriptor or any existing Level 5 award standards. Learners will still be able to enrol directly into the Level 5 Certificate and complete the Level 5 Certificate, with appropriate certification to evidence the achievement of the qualification.

The Level 5 Certificate continues to be an important marker of personal learning achievement, both for those progressing directly from school and for adult learners.

The Level 5 Certificate continues to be suitable for entry to the labour market and employment and will continue to be suitable for meeting relevant occupational standards for some occupations.

The Level 5 Certificate will continue to benefit from existing progression opportunities to additional study, including advanced entry into the Level 6 Diploma and direct progression to programmes leading to qualifications at NFQ Levels 7 and 8. Advanced entry into Year 2 of programmes leading to qualifications at NFQ Levels 7 and 8 would only be available where articulation arrangements were in place.

In addition, the Level 5 Certificate will be considered an intermediate qualification of NFQ Level 6 and the short cycle of QF-EHEA. This is a technical standing of the qualification within the NFQ and is not necessarily a concept that will be relevant to learners and other end users of qualifications. This is in keeping with existing approaches used in jurisdictions of the UK and outlined in the Qualifications Can Cross Boundaries Guide¹⁰ where the Higher National Certificate and Certificates of Higher Education are considered intermediate qualifications within the short cycle. These qualifications are equivalent to NFQ Level 5 and EQF Level 4.

¹⁰ [Qualifications can Cross Boundaries](#)

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

Figure 1. Extract from *Qualifications Can Cross Boundaries* Guide outlining typical HE qualifications in UK and Ireland

- ✓ **Action: Affirm the continued title, value, relevance and standing of the Level 5 Certificate in the White Paper.**

5.2. Purpose of Qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6

A strong theme that emerged from the meetings and engagements was the Green Paper was overly focused on the purpose of these qualifications to facilitate progression to higher education. There were some concerns that these qualifications would no longer be suitable for access to employment and the labour market, and that the proposal would limit the existing occupational and vocational qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6. Stakeholders were also keen to emphasise the important role that NFQ Levels 5 and 6 play in lifelong learning and that smaller awards at these levels were also important for learners.

- **Response:** Major awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6, and other FET awards have intrinsic value and labour-market relevance as they provide access to employment and labour markets and meet many occupational standards. These awards also play a significant role in social inclusion and lifelong learning. However, the current arrangement of two

major awards at NFQ Level 6 has been identified as a barrier to progression to higher education. The proposal for a single major award at NFQ Level 6 seeks to remedy this, without devaluing FET qualifications in their own right.

The proposals outlined have no negative impact on access to labour markets and occupations. However, the Green Paper should have outlined, in more detail, the continued role that the new single major award at NFQ Level 6 and Level 5 plays in lifelong learning and access to labour markets.

The paper focuses mostly on major awards as it is proposing significant changes to the major awards at NFQ Level 6 and some minor amendments to the Level 5 Certificate.

The only proposed change to non-major awards at NFQ Level 6 is that they will be expressed in terms of ECTS credits which will be of benefit to those engaging in lifelong learning. Non-major awards at NFQ Level 5 will be expressed in the same credit system as the Level 5 Certificate, which continues to benefit lifelong learners. The companion Green Paper on QQI's Revised Access, Transfer and Progression (ATP) Policy specifically deals with credit accumulation and credit transfer and how that might work for learners who are engaging in small volumes of learning with the ambition of 'stacking' these towards a larger qualification, in time.

- ✓ **Action: The new award-type descriptor for the single major award at NFQ Level 6 will be clearer about the multi-purposes of the single major award at NFQ Level 6. This award-type can be used for both primary and supplementary qualifications and plays an important role in access to employment and labour markets, progression to additional education and lifelong learning. The Level 5 Certificate award-type descriptor will also be updated to use similar wording. The Professional Award-Type Descriptors which are available at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 continue to be suitable for the development of occupational awards.**

5.2.1. Differences between NFQ Level 6 Qualifications in Further and Higher Education

A minority of responses suggested that the existing Advanced Certificate is more oriented towards employment while the Higher Certificate is more oriented towards academic achievement.

- **Response:** As outlined in the Summary of Proceedings of the Pre-conference workshop in Appendix 1, those involved in the design and implementation of programmes leading to NFQ Level 6 awards report that this is no longer the case. The delineation between the two awards has decreased over time with some Advanced Certificates being used for

more academic achievement, and some Higher Certificates being used for employment. Furthermore, since the introduction of the Advanced and Higher Certificates in 2003, the Professional Award Type Descriptors were expanded to NFQ Levels 5 and 6 in 2015, noting that there is already a single professional award-type descriptor for use at NFQ Level 6. These descriptors can be used to develop professional and occupational oriented awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 and will be used in conjunction with the award-type descriptors for major awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6.

- The European Higher Education Area in 2024 Bologna Process Implementation Report¹¹ summarises the developments in relation to QF-EHEA since 1998 and summarises the Paris Communiqué¹² which emphasises the important role that short-cycle qualifications play in preparing learners for employment and additional study while also improving social cohesion. The purpose of the short-cycle qualification aligns with the purposes of major qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 making it a suitable qualification type for NFQ Level 6 awards regardless of whether they were achieved in further or higher education settings.
 - Recent reports from Cedefop¹³ and a recent virtual event exploring the future of vocational education and training¹⁴ outlines the growing importance of VET at higher levels, both inside and outside traditional higher education institutions. The developments in this space are informed by national contexts and policy objectives.
- ✓ **Action: Confirm the role of professional award type descriptors in the development of qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 in the White Paper.**

5.2.2. Professional Awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6

It was emphasised that many awards at both NFQ Levels 5 and 6 provide access to employment and labour markets and meet occupational standards. It was suggested that giving greater visibility of the professional and occupational standing of these qualifications would be beneficial to end users of qualifications.

- **Response:** The ongoing re-development of the Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ) is seeking to improve the functionality of the register. One element under consideration is making professional awards more transparent and communicating the relationship between qualifications and professions and occupations.

¹¹ [The European higher education area in 2024 - Publications Office of the EU](#)

¹² [Microsoft Word - Communiqué_final.docx](#)

¹³ [The future of vocational education and training in Europe - Publications Office of the EU](#); [The changing nature and role of vocational education and training in Europe. Volume 6 | CEDEFOP](#)

¹⁴ [background paper - future of vet v5.pdf](#)

- ✓ **Action: To consider as part of the redevelopment of the IRQ.**

5.2.3. Craft Apprenticeships

There was some concern about the suitability of the single major award at NFQ Level 6 for use in craft apprenticeships. Most points related to the credit volume and length of time associated with the craft apprenticeships.

- **Response:** The professional award-type descriptors which are more relevant to craft apprenticeships are not being updated. As previously mentioned, there is just one professional-award type descriptor for professional awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6. The new major award at NFQ Level 6 will specify that is *at least* 120 ECTS credits achieved across *at least* two years of full-time study.
- However, QQI is committed to ensuring that the NFQ continues to meet the needs of awarding bodies, providers and end users of qualifications. The review of the NFQ will encompass all aspects of the Framework, including the professional award-type descriptors and the awards available at each level. Should it become clear during this review, or during the integration of craft apprenticeships, that the NFQ needs to be updated, this is possible.

- ✓ **Action: The new single major award at NFQ Level 6 will specify that is at least 120 ECTS credits achieved across at least two years of full-time study.**

5.3. Classification as a Higher Education Award

There was some disappointment and concern about the placement of the single major award at NFQ Level 6 as a higher education award, and a request for a more detailed rationale for this.

- **Response:** Firstly, it is worth confirming that the delineation between further and higher education and the need to confirm the associated NFQ levels was repealed with the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 and is not found in the successor Quality and Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 2012. The delineation in the 1999 Act was associated with the two separate awards councils: Further Education and Training Council (FETAC) and Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) which were dissolved as part of the establishment of QQI. The 2012 Act is silent on the difference between further and higher education awards. Secondly, although it is relatively small numbers and small-scale activity, we are observing increased permeability of the NFQ beyond the traditional sectors. Small numbers of ETBs are already offering the Higher Certificate and some ordinary degrees with UK providers, and some HEIs are offering programmes at NFQ Levels 3, 4 and 5 via the Path 4 Funding.

QQI has legislative responsibility to promote, implement, maintain and further develop the NFQ, and part of our role is to ensure that it remains responsive to the education and training landscape and fit-for-purpose into the future. It is our view that learners are better served by an NFQ that articulates, describes and enables what is happening in practice, rather than describing the traditional education and training landscape. The initial ambitions of the NFQ were to recognise all learning and a more flexible NFQ that is more focused on achievement of learning outcomes rather than the setting in which the programme was delivered is a benefit to learners.

- Furthermore, NFQ Level 6 has always been a shared space between further and higher education providers, and this is becoming more common with the increasing number of apprenticeships and the introduction of tertiary degrees. As mentioned in the glossary above, a higher education institution is legally defined (under the HEA Act 2022) as being a provider delivering at least one programme leading to a major award included in the NFQ at NFQ Level 7 and above.
- QQI accepts that FET providers are considerably more active than HE providers in the awarding and certification of learners with NFQ Level 6 awards. In 2023, there were 16733 Level 5 Certificates issued by QQI and 7993 Advanced Certificates. In the same year, there were 163 Higher Certificates issued by QQI and 4080 issued by Designated Awarding Bodies. However, QQI in its capacity as the European Qualifications Framework National Coordination Point (EQF-NCP) has responsibility for ensuring continued referencing of the Irish NFQ with both the EQF and the QF-EHEA to ensure continued comparability and recognition of Irish qualifications in Europe and beyond, and the continued mobility of Irish learners and workers. Ireland was the first country to self-certify its national framework as compatible with the QF-EHEA in 2006 and has a long history of engagement in the Bologna framework. The Higher Certificate at NFQ Level 6 has already been self-certified as being compatible with the short cycle of the QF-EHEA. There would be a significant negative impact on the Irish education and training landscape and the international recognition of its qualifications, and on learners directly if the single major award at NFQ Level 6 was considered incompatible with the QF-EHEA short cycle.
- However, within the Irish context it is fair to say that a single major award at NFQ Level 6 is neither a further education award nor a higher education award. It is a qualification offered in both further and higher education settings. In the European context, the single major award at NFQ Level 6 is a short cycle qualification under the QF-EHEA and NFQ Level 5 is equivalent to EQF Level 4 while NFQ Level 6 is equivalent to EQF Level 5. In the wider international context, it can be considered comparable to the associate degree offered in community college settings in the US. This is important in the context of the

Baltic Benelux Treaty¹⁵ which Ireland is considering ratifying. The Treaty is focused on higher education systems and qualifications and allows for the listing of relevant qualifications that provide access to higher education. The Level 6 Diploma will be listed, should we ratify the Treaty, as will the Higher Certificate.

- This sector neutral approach to NFQ Level 6 is reflective of the overall direction QQI is taking with the NFQ. As mentioned in the Green Paper, the NFQ is becoming more permeable and as such, the NFQ will become agnostic on the association of NFQ Levels with specific sectors and this will be emphasised in the review of the NFQ.
- ✓ **Action: As outlined, the delineation between further and higher education awards is no longer required under the 2012 Act. As such, the new single major award at NFQ Level 6 can be expressed as a major qualification in the Irish NFQ, a short cycle qualification of QF-EHEA and referenced to EQF Level 5.**

5.4. Relationship between Level 5 Certificate and the Single Major award at NFQ Level 6

There were some concerns raised about the Level 5 Certificate and its relationship to a single major award at NFQ Level 6, and by association with NFQ Levels 7 and 8, in terms of credit, embedded and exit awards offered by HEIs.

5.4.1. ECTS at NFQ Level 5

The response in relation to using ECTS at NFQ Level 5 was mixed with a moderate preference for adopting ECTS at NFQ Level 5.

- **Response:** ECTS credit is simply a European approach to allocating credit to qualifications. It is key tool of the EHEA and is adopted as the national credit system in many countries and can interact successfully with local credit systems.¹⁶ The Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience¹⁷ recommends that ECTS credit be used for vocational qualifications at post-secondary level and tertiary level. The Level 5 Certificate falls into this description. The recommendation is currently on the agenda of an advisory group chaired by the European Commission that is revising the ECTS Users' Guide.

¹⁵ [IZMSs_230518_BaltATz: Par Igaunijas Republikas, Latvijas Republikas un Lietuvas Republikas valdības līgumu par kvalifikāciju, kas saistītas ar augstāko izglītību, automātisku atzīšanu](#)

¹⁶ [ECTS users' guide 2015 - Publications Office of the EU](#)

¹⁷ [eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020H1202\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020H1202(01))

- Learners holding a Level 5 Certificate who may wish to use this qualification for access to higher education in other jurisdictions are better served by having a qualification that is recognised, transparent and comparable using a centralised European approach to credit. Following the repeal of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) in 2020,¹⁸ there is no similar European approach to credit for use in further and vocational education.
- QQI is simply adopting a European credit system for local use at NFQ Levels 5-10 where this system is equivalent to ECTS where 1 credit is equal to 20-30 hours of learning. For now, QQI retains a national credit system for NFQ Levels 1-4 where 1 credit is equal to 10 hours of learning. During the review of the NFQ it will be considered if the Euro credit system should be adopted for all levels of the NFQ.

5.4.1.1. *Learning Hours*

There was some feedback about the learning hours associated with the new major award at NFQ Level 6 and the Level 5 Certificate, if expressed in ECTS credits. There was a concern that learning hours would need to change in further educational settings.

- **Response:** As defined in the ECTS User Guide 2015¹⁹ workload is an estimation of the time the individual typically needs to complete all learning activities such as lectures, seminars, projects, practical work, work placements and individual study required to achieve the defined learning outcomes in formal learning environments. The correspondence of the full-time workload of an academic year to 60 credits is often formalised by national legal provisions. In most cases, workload ranges from 1,500 to 1,800 hours for an academic year, which means that one credit corresponds to 25 to 30 hours of work. However, in Ireland we have adopted a range of 1200-1500 notional hours of work for 60 ECTS which corresponds to 20 to 30 hours of learning²⁰. As one FET credit is equal to 10 hours of learning and there are 120 FET credits in one year, it is consistent with existing approaches that one ECTS credit, even when offered in a FET setting, would correspond to 20 hours of learning, reflecting the wide variety of activities that correspond to workload. It should be recognised that this represents the typical workload and that for individual students the actual time to achieve the learning outcomes will vary.
- Providers will continue to have autonomy in the design of programmes and the allocation of learning hours to the wide suite of learning activities outlined above.

¹⁸ [The European credit system for vocational education and training - Publications Office of the EU](#)

¹⁹ [ECTS users' guide 2015 - Publications Office of the EU](#)

²⁰ [FIN COMPLETE.8:Layout 1 \(nfqnetwork.ie\)](#)

5.4.1.2. *Non-Major Awards including Micro-credentials and Special Purpose Awards*

There was some feedback seeking clarity on the role of special purpose awards and other non-major awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6.

- **Response:** Special purpose awards and other small awards, including micro-credentials and micro-qualifications, will continue to be available for use at NFQ Levels 5 and 6. These award-types will be available in the same manner as previously. The only change will relate to the use of ECTS credits for all non-major awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6. This will likely require a change to QQI awards policies as the smallest permissible award across both FET and HE is 5 credits. This equates to 2.5 ECTS in FET.
 - *Minor awards* are a multi-purpose award-type that recognises attainment of part of a major award, and which has relevance in its own right.
 - *Special purpose awards* meet specific, relatively narrow focused legislative, regulatory, economic, social or personal learning requirements,
 - *Supplemental awards* are for learners who have already obtained a major or special purpose award. May be for refreshing/updating and continuous education and training with respect to an occupation/profession²¹
 - Minor, special purpose and supplemental award types are suitable for use in the development of micro-credentials as there is no award-type for these yet. This will be considered as part of the review of the NFQ.

5.4.2. Credit Distribution

There was some feedback that suggested NFQ Level 5 was not suitable for embedding within the short cycle award, or for use in the first year of degree programmes.

- **Response:** As with all major awards traditionally considered as HE awards, only 60 ECTS needs to be at the overall level of the award. In addition, multi-year programmes leading to qualifications at NFQ Levels 7-9 have long been accepted as being made up of credit at a wide range of levels on the NFQ. For example, an honours bachelors degree at NFQ Level 8 can be made up of credits at NFQ Levels 6, 7 and 8 and in a range of distributions, as outlined in the figure below. Arguably, one of the reasons that the existing Higher Certificate is reported as having 120 ECTS at NFQ Level 6 is because NFQ Level 5 was considered a further education award under the 1999 Act and during the initial development of the NFQ and was not available for use by Institutes of Technology.

²¹ [descriptors-minor-spa-supplemental-awards.pdf](#)

The Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of a National Approach to Credit in Irish Higher Education and Training,²² which outlines these possible credit distributions, has been proposed for repeal in the companion Green Paper on QQI ATP Policy. This creates the opportunity to update the diagram below to include NFQ Level 5 as a possible Year 1 for programmes leading the major awards at NFQ Levels 6

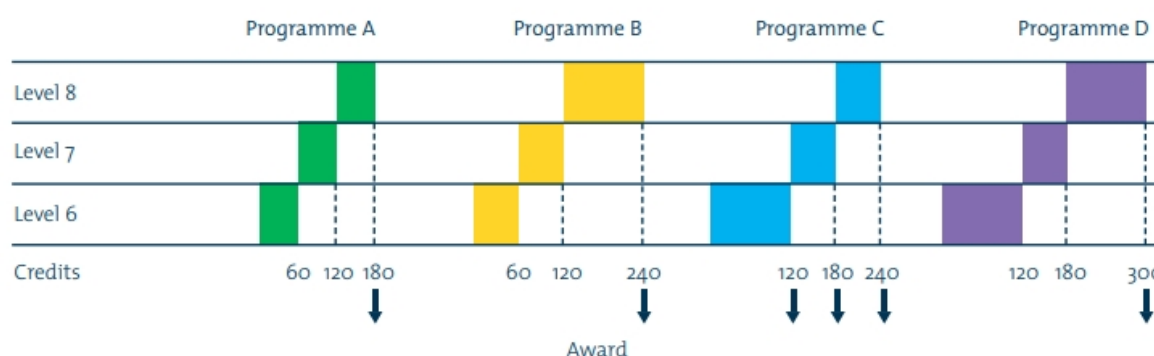


Figure 2: Outline of credit distributions possible at part of NFQ Level 8 degree programmes. Extract from Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of a National Approach to Credit in Irish Higher Education and Training

- The Evaluation of the Comparability of the Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate Qualifications²³ conducted by Ecctis and published in 2021 confirmed that both the Advanced Certificate and the Higher Certificate are appropriately referenced to NFQ Level 6 and deliver on the outcomes expected of major awards at NFQ Level 6. The existing Advanced Certificate is already comprised of approximately 60 ECTS at NFQ Level 5 and 60 ECTS at NFQ Level 6, which confirms that it is possible for the new single major award to also use this distribution.
- The Bachelor of Social Work (Hons)²⁴ developed as part of the tertiary degree programmes by UCC and Cork ETB includes an NFQ Level 5 Certificate in Year 1 which is the first year of a 4-year traditional degree programme culminating in an NFQ Level 8 qualification in Year 4.
- However, it does raise the issue regarding the number or volume of credits required to be at the NFQ Level of the award for single year programmes at NFQ Levels 5-9. There is also a need to consider the approach to levelling and credit volumes for non-major awards at NFQ Levels 5-9.

²² [principlesandoperguidelinesgreen.pdf](#)

²³ [evaluation-of-nfq-level-6-awards.pdf](#)

²⁴ [Bachelor of Social Work \(Hons\) | Courses | National Tertiary Office](#)

- ✓ **Action: Address in the White Paper the number/volume of credits required to be at NFQ Level 5 for the Level 5 Certificate.**
- ✓ **Action: Address as part of the NFQ Review the number/volume of credits required to be at the NFQ level of the award for single year qualifications at NFQ Levels 7-9 and approaches to ensure consistent levelling of non-major awards.**

5.4.3. Access, Transfer and Progression

There was some concern about the impact of this proposal on access routes and pathways for learners with the most common concern being that should the Level 6 Diploma include learning at NFQ Level 5 in the first year, that this would not be attractive to those holding a Leaving Certificate qualification. This concern also extended to use of NFQ Level 5 in the first year of degree programmes.

- **Response:** Access routes onto programmes associated with NFQ Levels are not always linear and do not always require a learner to achieve every NFQ Level along the way. The existing Determinations for the NFQ, first approved in 2003, provide for progression from the Leaving Certificate to programmes leading to awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6, or higher levels. The outlined proposal is not seeking to change these available progression routes.
- Similarly, learners holding a Level 4 Certificate will be able to progress to both a Level 5 Certificate and a Level 6 Diploma, as is the case already.
- Learners holding a Level 5 Certificate can progress to the second year of the Level 6 Diploma, where there is an articulation agreement or sufficient coherency of learning. These learners can also progress directly to qualifications at NFQ Levels 7 and 8. Again, as is already the case.
- As the Leaving Certificate (the most common route into higher education) is a qualification at NFQ Level 4/5, it is appropriate that the first year of qualifications (in some cases) would be considered as NFQ Level 5 learning outcomes. This is particularly true where introductory modules are delivered to learners on subjects and topics that might not have been undertaken as part of the Leaving Certificate.
- Finally, holders of the Level 6 Diploma will be able to progress to qualifications at NFQ Levels 7 and 8. Where articulation agreements are in place or sufficient coherency of learning, they may be able to avail of advanced entry into qualifications at NFQ Levels 7 and 8. Advanced entry is possible into Year 3 of these qualifications, even in the case of a Level 6 Diploma that is comprised of some credits at Level 5 and 60 ECTS at Level 6, as these qualifications meet the requirements of the single major award at NFQ Level 6. This is also already the case in some tertiary degrees and local articulation arrangements. However, many HEIs are autonomous awarding bodies and can make

their own decisions regarding access and advanced entry but must be cognisant of QQIs policies in relation to access, transfer and progression and of the principles that underpin the NFQ. All qualifications at NFQ Level 6 share the same status and decisions regarding entry should relate to a specific mapping exercise of learning outcomes rather than an overarching rule about credit achieved at NFQ Level 5. It is worth noting that certification of learners will simply confirm the achievement of the Level 6 Diploma and its overall standing as a major award at NFQ Level 6 comprising 120 ECTS credits.

- ✓ **Action: Confirm the credit distributions possible for the Level 6 Diploma and by association, the availability of NFQ Level 5 in the design of qualifications at NFQ Levels 7 and 8.**
- ✓ **Action: Review and update, as needed, the access, transfer and progression information in the award-type descriptors for all awards outlined here – Leaving Certificate, Level 4 Certificate, Level 5 Certificate, Level 6 Diploma.**
- ✓ **Action: QQI may explore the comparability of learning outcomes in specific subject areas between the Leaving Certificate, Level 5 Certificate and year 1 of Level 7 and 8 qualifications.**

5.4.4. Exit Awards

There was some concern about the requirement to use the Level 5 Certificate as an exit award from the Level 6 Diploma

- **Response:** The Level 5 Certificate is available as an exit award from the Level 6 Diploma but is not mandatory to use. It is the responsibility of awarding bodies and providers to map their qualifications against the requirements of the NFQ and decide if an exit award is suitable, and if so, at what NFQ Level, credit volume and award type. All exit awards still need to be included as qualifications in the NFQ and meet the requirements of the policies and criteria underpinning the Framework.
- Where a qualification is designed with 60 ECTS at NFQ Level 5, the Level 5 Certificate is the appropriate award to make at exit. If the 60 ECTS is at NFQ Level 6, then only a non-major award is available to make.
- Arguably, learners are better served by being awarded a major award at NFQ Level 5 than a non-major award at NFQ Level 6, but it is up to awarding bodies and providers to determine the appropriate level and award-type of any exit awards from any award including the Level 6 Diploma.

- ✓ **Action:** Confirm the credit distributions possible for the Level 6 Diploma and by association, the availability of NFQ Level 5 in the design of qualifications at NFQ Levels 7 and 8.

5.4.5. Award of both the Level 5 Certificate and Level 6 Diploma

Some feedback suggested that it would not be necessary to award both the Level 5 Certificate and the Level 6 Diploma to learners

- **Response:** Many learners will enrol directly onto a one-year programme in further education settings to achieve a Level 5 Certificate for personal or occupational purposes. Not all learners will progress to a second year to receive the Level 6 Diploma. Not all providers will offer a cognate, follow-on Level 6 programme.

5.5. Non-major awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6

Many respondents were interested to learn more about the flexibility available for the design of non-major awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6, and opportunities for credit accumulation. This is particularly pertinent in the FET space with the transition from Common Awards System (CAS) to programme derived awards standards (PDAS). There was an interest in outlining consistent award titles for non-major awards and their relationship to major awards.

- **Response:** Non-major awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 are qualifications in their own right and available for certification. Non-major awards can link to a major award and accumulate to the achievement of a larger, or major award. The approach is not limited to that which is used in CAS where eight minors combine to a major award. Instead, a non-major award can be of any credit volume and any number of them can accumulate to the major award.
- For example, it might be four non-major awards of equal value. In the case of the Level 6 Diploma this would be four non-major awards of 30 ECTS credits each. Or else it might be a combination of two 30 ECTS credit awards, and four 15 ECTS credit awards. There is no limitation on the combination. However, in keeping with the proposal in the Green Paper on a Revised Access, Transfer and Progression (ATP) Policy, pathways for credit accumulation to any award, but especially major awards, should be prospectively planned and communicated to learners.
- Any of the award-types; minor, special purpose and supplemental, can be used. It should be noted that minor awards must be related to the achievement of a major award, but learners are not obliged to achieve the major award. Furthermore, there are very few supplemental awards included in the NFQ and published in the IRQ, and the usefulness of this award-type will be considered as part of the review of the NFQ.

- A titling convention for non-major awards at NFQ Levels 6-9 has been recommended by QQI to Designated Awarding Bodies and is outlined in the table below. The same convention will apply to FET bodies delivering programmes leading to non-major awards at NFQ Level 6.

NFQ Level	ECTS credit range	Stem for minor, special purpose and supplemental award classes	Abbreviation
6	All	Certificate	Cert.
7-8	< 60	Certificate	Cert.
	≥ 60	Diploma	Dip.
9	< 60	Certificate	Cert.
	≥60 ²⁵	Diploma	Dip.

The available titles for non-major awards at NFQ Level 5 will be detailed in updated QQI validation policies.

5.6. Implementation and Impacts

There was a wide range of implementation and impacts raised as part of the consultation, many of which related to QQI in its capacity as an awarding body. Others related to topics such as industrial relations issues, impact on Erasmus+ mobility and potential for greater competition at NFQ Level 5. Some of these will require ongoing discussion with funding agencies, HEA and SOLAS and DFHERIS to ensure coherent planning and implementation.

5.6.1. Industrial Relations

There were some concerns about IR issues for education and training boards with a change to the single major award at NFQ Level 6.

- **Response:** As outlined in the Green Paper, the tertiary degrees and higher certificates offered by ETBs have already introduced this change. The same solutions should be applicable to the single major award at NFQ Level 6. This report also confirms that the single major award at NFQ Level 6 is a major award in the Irish system offered by both further and higher education providers. As outlined earlier, QQI is no longer legislatively

²⁵ There are some in the IRQ. Note the Postgraduate Diploma at NFQ level 9 is a major award type and this step cannot be used for minor, special purpose or supplemental awards.

required to delineate between further and higher education awards in the NFQ, and such delineation should be interpreted through legislation underpinning both further and higher education systems. Under the revised proposal, ETBs continue to be considered further education providers of the awards offered that are included in the NFQ.

QQI will continue to work with other agencies to implement the proposal.

5.6.2. Erasmus+ Mobility

It was suggested that the proposal might impact staff and students in the FET sector from accessing the existing systems for Erasmus+ mobility funded via Léargas.

- **Response:** As this report confirms that the single major award at NFQ Level 6 is a major award in the Irish system offered by both further and higher education providers, it does not impact the main target groups for Erasmus+ mobility. ETBs continue to be considered vocational education and training settings, while universities, technological universities and institutes of technological universities continue to be considered higher education settings.

5.6.3. Resources for issuing the Europass Diploma Supplement

There were some concerns about the need for providers, including ETBs to issue the Europass Diploma Supplement to learners.

- **Response:** There will be some resource implication for providers. However, the move from the Europass Certificate Supplement (CS) to the Europass Diploma Supplement (DS) will be an additional benefit to learners. The DS is an individualised document which is issued to learners and offers helpful information about a qualification including grades and achievements. The CS is issued at qualification level and is not individualised to learners. The DS is a useful tool to help explain a qualification at home and abroad.
- The European Commission has established a joint working group of the European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group (EQF AG) and the Europass Advisory Group to review the CS. The group is considering the proposal that the CS should be individualised in the same manner as the DS as this would be beneficial to learners. QQI in its capacity as the EQF National Coordination Point (NCP) and National Europass Centre (NEC) will be advocating for this approach.

5.6.4. Re-validation of Programmes

5.6.4.1. *Update to Learning Outcomes*

A minority of feedback focused on the need to change the learning outcomes of programmes to meet the requirements of being a higher education award.

- **Response:** The introduction of a new award-type descriptor for the major award at NFQ Level 6 means that all existing Advanced and Higher Certificate programmes will need to undergo revalidation to ensure that the learning outcomes are in keeping with the award-type descriptor. This will require some programmes across both FE and HE to minorly update the learning outcomes and may require changes to articulation arrangements.
- Learning outcomes are associated with the award-type descriptor which is appropriate to NFQ Level 6 and there is no additional burden in terms of it being a higher education award.

5.6.4.2. *Necessary Extensions to Validation Periods for QQI awards*

The Green Paper and associated policies have introduced a level of uncertainty for validated providers of QQI awards, particularly those that are due to undergo re-validation in 2025/2026. There is a risk that providers would revalidate to the existing award-type descriptor and then be required to undergo another revalidation to the new award-type descriptor in a short space of time which would be cost and resource intensive.

- **Response:** All programmes associated with the Advanced or Higher Certificate that are due to be revalidated by QQI in 2025 and 2026 are granted a one-year extension to facilitate a smooth transition to the new award-type descriptor

5.6.5. QQI Awards

There were a number of observations regarding the incoherence between existing QQI awards policies and the proposed changes in the Green Paper. This includes but is not limited to:

- the approach to embedded and exit awards,
 - the need to make an award of 2.5 ECTS for the smallest existing FET awards,
 - existing one-year Advanced Certificates
 - the need to extend scope of provision to FET or HE dependent on existing approvals.
- **Response:** QQI, in its capacity as an awarding body, will need to respond to the changes in the same manner as other awarding bodies. QQI awards is currently updating its suite of validation policies, and these will take cognisance of the proposed changes to NFQ Levels 5 and 6.
 - ✓ **Action: Confirm that existing approved scope of provision at NFQ Level 6 will encompass any changes associated with the introduction of the single major award at NFQ Level 6. However, an application to extend scope to NFQ Level 5 will be required if not already in approved scope.**

6. Conclusion

Overall, there is strong support for the introduction of a new major award at NFQ Level 6 to replace the Advanced and Higher Certificates, the proposed title for which is a Level 6 Diploma. The implementation of the Level 6 Diploma is technical in nature and there are necessary minor changes to the overall structure of the NFQ, with specific reference to NFQ Level 5. The majority of respondents to the consultation accepted that these technical changes would improve the situation for learners in the long-term and were worth pursuing despite the impact on the system.

The proposal does have broader impacts on the system. However, the NFQ has remained stable for over 20 years. It is time to refresh, update and review the infrastructure of the NFQ to account for the developments in tertiary education in that time, and to benefit learners. The impacts will need to be addressed and planned for as part of the implementation but are not a sufficient reason to maintain the status quo.

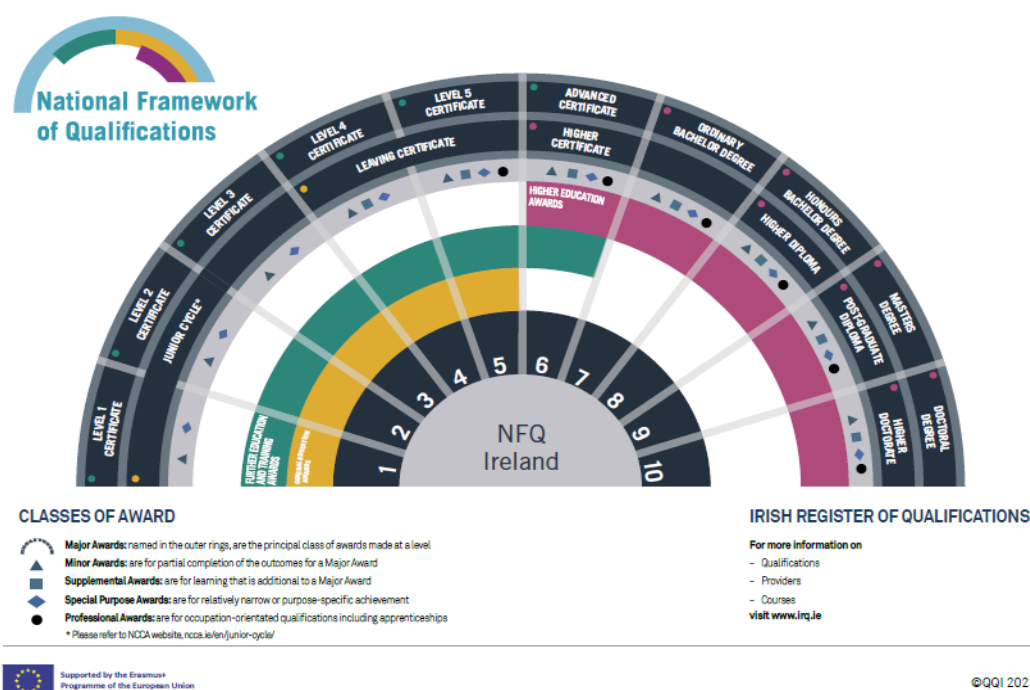
The White Paper on Qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 will outline the detailed policy position regarding these qualifications and will be published for a final round of consultation in September 2025.

Appendix 1:

Summary of Pre-Conference Workshop Proceedings, 20 November 2024

Introduction

On 20 November 2024, QQI hosted a pre-conference workshop exploring the role of intermediate qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6, and access, transfer and progression (ATP) policy in building a unified tertiary system. QQI will shortly issue two green papers: one proposing changes to intermediate qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 and the second proposing an updated QQI ATP policy. This workshop brought approximately 30 participants from across further and higher education, including representation from public and private, independent higher education institutions (HEIs), education and training boards (ETBs) and further education providers, the National Tertiary Office (NTO), the National Apprenticeship Office (NAO) and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFEHRIS) together to discuss NFQ Levels 5 and 6 and ATP.



Context

Dr Padraig Walsh, Chief Executive Officer of QQI, opened the workshop by sharing the progress since the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) 20th anniversary conference in November 2023. Participants were reminded that a pre-conference workshop had also been arranged at that time, bringing senior leaders from further and higher education together to discuss the

issues of the two major awards at NFQ Level 6. QQI also met with most of the previously established universities during the summer as part of quality dialogue meetings. From these discussions over the last year, it is clear that there is a real appetite to move to a single major award type at level 6 and that the status quo is no longer acceptable as it is causing confusion resulting in barriers to learners.

Participants were reminded of the history of the two awards at NFQ Level 6. When the NFQ was established, there were separate national awards councils for further and higher education, and the need to acknowledge the boundaries of the work of the Councils led to the differentiation between further and higher education awards at NFQ Level 6. The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 specified the boundaries of awarding in further and higher education but the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 removed the legal differentiation between further and higher education awards in terms of NFQ levels. Although the NFQ has been referenced against the two main European qualifications frameworks twice since its establishment, most recently in 2020²⁶, the placement of major awards in the framework has never been reviewed or revised. The *Evaluation of the Comparability of the Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate Qualifications*²⁷ undertaken by Ecctis and published in 2021 concluded that both awards relate to NFQ Level 6 in terms of achieved learning outcomes but that the difference in distribution of NFQ sub-strands was significant enough to warrant differentiated award-type descriptors but that overall, the awards were quite similar.

Padraig advised participants that QQI's new strategy for 2025-2027²⁸ would be launched at the conference the following day and that QQI envisages a flexible, responsive, and high-quality tertiary education system where learners have confidence that their learning experience is of a high quality and that their learning and qualifications are valued nationally and internationally. Future proofing the NFQ is a key strategic priority and will be achieved by reviewing and modifying the current award types in the NFQ to better serve learners in a more integrated tertiary education system and by undertaking statutory reviews of individual provider adherence to ATP policy and the appropriate recognition of prior learning (RPL). The two green papers will start essential conversations to deliver on these objectives. He confirmed that QQI have an ambitious timeline for introducing changes to the awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 and are committed to delivering on this in consultation and collaboration with key stakeholders.

²⁶ [NFQ Referencing Report 12-2020.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

²⁷ [evaluation-of-nfq-level-6-awards.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

²⁸ [qqi-statement-of-strategy-2025-27.pdf](#)

Exploration of NFQ Level 6

Learner Personas

Dr Bryan Maguire delivered a short presentation outlining sample personas of learners using intermediate qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6. These are presented in Figure 1 and though not based on actual learners, the profiles are realistic. Participants acknowledged that the personas were reflective of learners they encounter in their own contexts and institutions.



Figure 1: Sample Learner Personas of Learners at NFQ Level 6²⁹

Participants were invited to engage with Slido and identify three important characteristics of a Level 6 qualification. There were many answers, and a word cloud is presented below showing the responses. However, the characteristics could all be broadly grouped under three purposes of qualifications at NFQ Level 6.

1. Progression to higher education
2. Access to employment and labour markets
3. Social Inclusion

²⁹ Images generated by ChatGPT

As a result, it was emphasised that qualifications at NFQ Level 6 must continue to meet the needs of both vocational and academic qualifications, however it was agreed that there was no longer a clear delineation between the advanced certificate and higher certificate in terms of one being reserved for vocational qualifications and the other for academic. It was suggested that industry partners, employers and other stakeholders do not understand the difference between the two award types, and it is not easy to explain. Those working in ETBs confirmed that there is little to no difference between validation programmes as an advanced certificate versus a higher certificate.

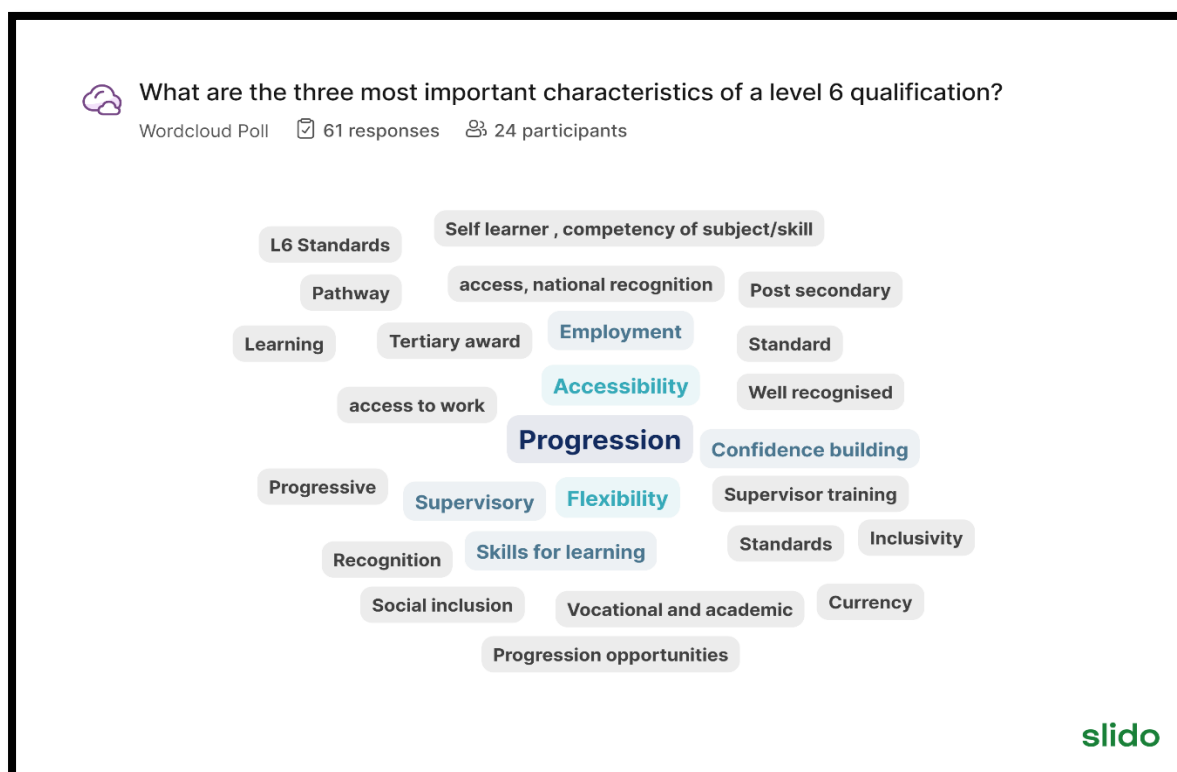


Figure 2. Slido word cloud

Overall, participants agreed and were positively disposed to the introduction of a single major award at NFQ Level 6 as it would simplify the system and bring clarity for learners, employers and other stakeholders.

The need for a single award to be expressed in terms of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits was discussed at length. It was emphasised that ECTS is tool of the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area and the Bologna Process and QQI does not have authority to move away from this system for higher education awards. Many benefits of using ECTS credits were noted:

- strengthening the relationship and transition between further and higher education.

- A transparent credit system that supports mobility that is recognised in the European Higher Education area
- Greater recognition of learning and credits achieved.

It was suggested that the Level 5 Certificate could also be expressed in terms of ECTS for further coherence, consistency and clarity. Although many participants were in favour of this, there was some hesitancy. At the very least, it was agreed that the Level 5 Certificate would need to be ECTS compatible for smooth transitions. FET credit is already compatible with ECTS as it can be calculated on a basis of 2:1 FET to ECTS. The Green Paper will invite feedback on the best approach to credit at NFQ Level 5.

The discussion was robust and considered and the following points were confirmed:

- A single major award-type and a new award-type descriptor will not prescribe elements of programme design. Programme design will continue to be the responsibility of the provider and should be mindful of the needs of learners – both academically and vocationally.
- It would still be possible for holders of NFQ Level 4 qualifications to enter the Level 5 Certificate.
- All learners receiving the new Level 6 qualifications would have to complete two years of learning in the intermediate space between secondary school and higher education, except for in the case of appropriate recognition of prior learning
- There is a practice that some Level 5 Certificates include modules/content from the Level 4 Certificate. It was confirmed that this can continue so long as the overall content meets the requirements of a qualification at NFQ Level 5. Participants were reminded that all qualifications include learning at lower levels, and this is normal practice in the design of programmes and awards.

Case Studies

Four invited case studies showcasing innovative, progressive and inspiring approaches to access, transfer and progression were then presented.

Georgina Roberts, Student Enrolment/Admissions Manager, Dublin City University (DCU)

Georgina presented the experience of DCU increasing further education entry paths and strengthening connections between DCU and FET. The Registrar at the time Prof Billy Kelly encouraged the prompt 'Why don't have you have an FET route?' In 2022, DCU conducted a full review of FET pathways to DCU programmes with three objectives:

- Simplify existing entry requirements where possible
- Increase the number of FET entry routes to DCU
- Increase the intake of QQI FET students

In 2024, 87% of DCU programmes have an FET pathway, with three further programmes introducing a pathway in 2025. 63% of eligible undergraduate programmes in DCU have more

than 5% of students coming from an FET route and the institution is continuing to work towards a stated ambition of 70% of eligible undergraduate programmes.

DCU has made institutional changes to strengthen connections including establishing a DCU FET to HE Working Group and a dedicated student recruitment team member with a focus on FET.

Deirdre Fitzpatrick, Project Manager, College Connect

College Connect is a partnership between Dublin City University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Maynooth University and Technological University of the Shannon Athlone Campus and aims to support people in the geographical area who are socially and economically disadvantaged. College Connect undertook community needs analyses of three groups; prisoners and former prisoners, refugees and people seeking asylum and further education students and found that there are 12 common recommendations to benefit all cohorts of students. The recommendation to extend SUSI grant funding to part time and flexible learners has already been achieved!

She provided examples of the implementation of some recommendations including promotional stands at events, the KickStart scholarship and a display of a traditional wagon used by the Travelling community to signify a 'culture of welcome'. Deirdre shared stories and quotes from learners to demonstrate the transformative effect of the work on individual people and their lives.

Deirdre focused on the specific recommendations for further education students which had relevance for this group:

- HEIs should expand strategic partnerships with FE colleges.
- Revision of CAO points allocation for FET.
- Learning-partnership activity between HEIs and FE colleges to build parity of esteem.



Figure 3. 12 Common Recommendations for disadvantaged groups³⁰

Dr Ita Kennelly, NCI Centre for Education and Lifelong Learning, National College of Ireland

Dr Ita Kennelly presented a case study on P-Tech, a curriculum design approach to supporting learning and progression pathways. The Certificate in P-Tech is an NFQ Level 6 Special Purpose Award of 10 ECTS and is delivered in secondary schools. The learning pathway is from transition year to 6th year and focuses on the development of digital skills such as robotics and coding, learning skills including reflections and work placements. Students can progress to a new tertiary degree programme. This programme comprises 2 years in FET City of Dublin ETB and 2 years in NCI to complete an NFQ Level 8 degree. Both programmes were developed from a set of programme values that shaped curriculum development. The degree programme evolves and extends the Certificate in P-TECH Values

³⁰ Reproduced from presentation by Deirdre Fitzpatrick, College Connect

CERTIFICATE IN P-TECH

LEARNING PATHWAYS TY-6TH YEAR

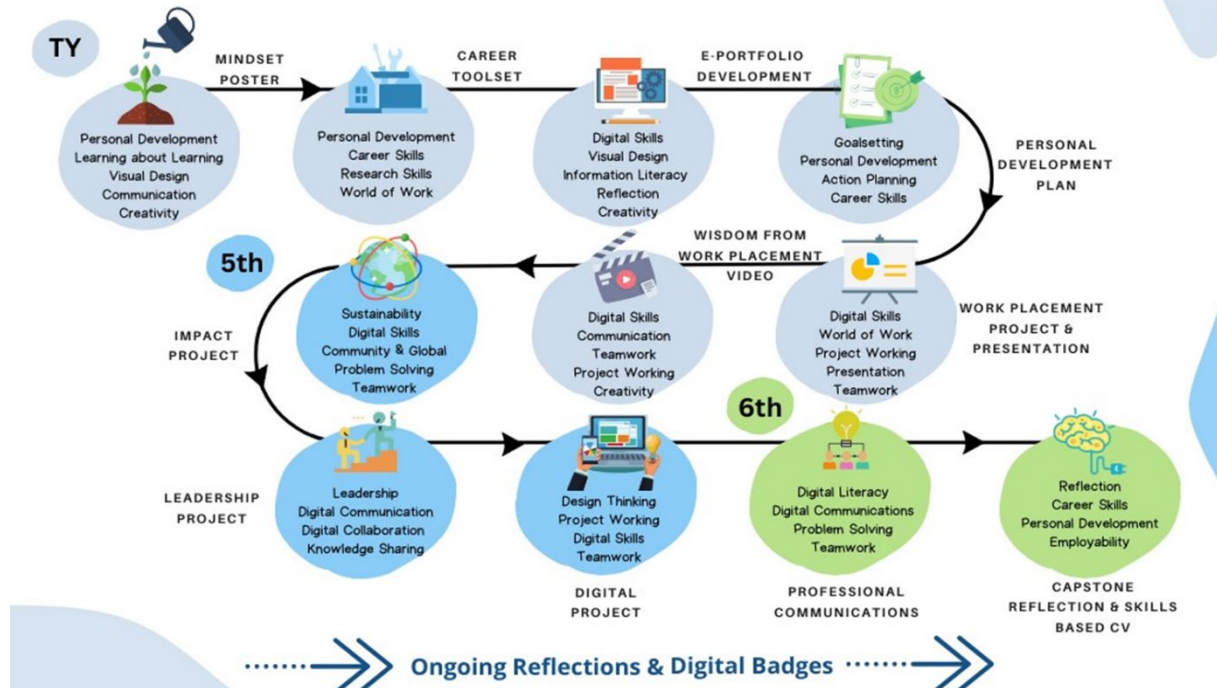


Figure 4. Certificate in P-Tech Learning Pathway³¹

Louise Fitzpatrick, City of Dublin ETB

Louise Fitzpatrick presented the work happening across City of Dublin ETB to contribute to the unified tertiary system. Firstly, CDETb considered challenges in the sector which included:

- Brexit uncertainty with potential to affect awarding relationships with UK institutions
- Decrease in applications for year 1 PLC Level 6 courses and,
- Increasing diversity of learners in FET

They then looked at how to address these challenges including:

- Promoting a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach across all provision
- Seeking alternative accreditation bodies to reduce our reliance on British awards
- Validating new level 6 programmes as 2-year Higher Certificates programmes (e.g. Dental Nursing, DABS tertiary degree)
- Increasing our offering of apprenticeship programmes at level 6
- Developing new apprenticeships
- Developing Tertiary degrees

³¹ Reproduced from presentation by Dr Ita Kennelly, NCI

CDETБ offered 10 post-2016 apprenticeships to learners in 2024-2026 and is developing five new NFQ Level 6 apprenticeships. They are offering two Tertiary Degrees in 2024/2025 and developing a further 15 NFQ Level 8 Tertiary Degrees for delivery in the next two years. These include a range of models including 2+2, 3+1 and 1+3 showcasing the flexibility and diversity of tertiary degrees.

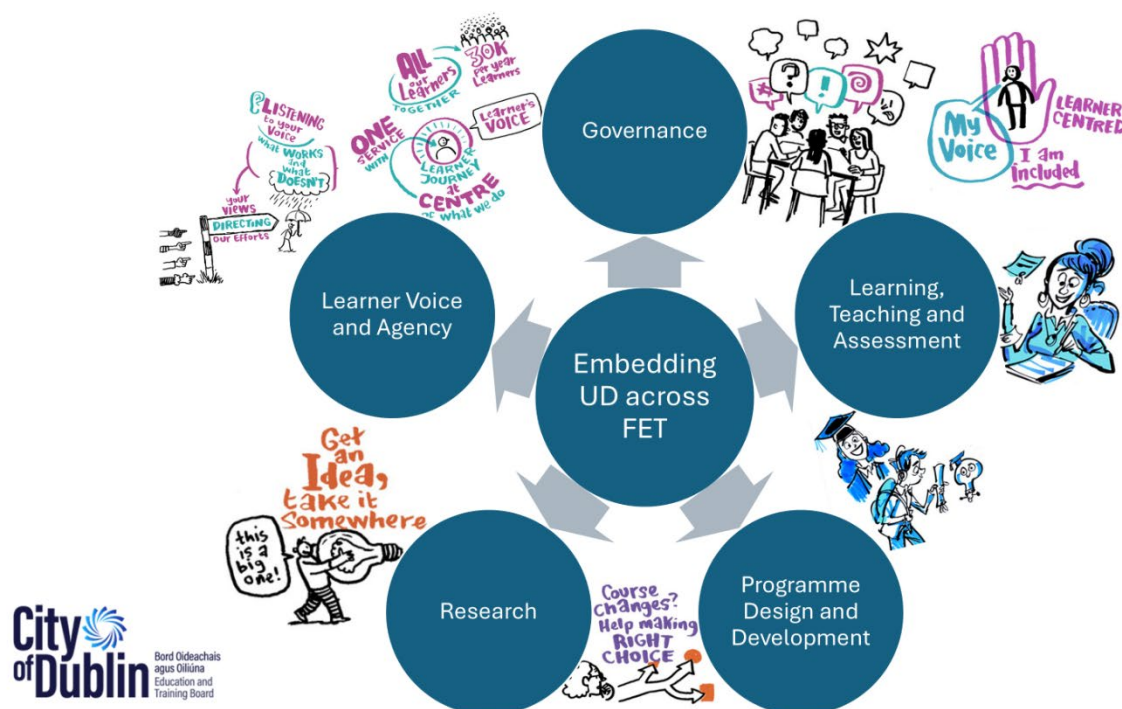


Figure 5. Summary of CDETБ approach to embedding UDL into their work³²

In summary, participants learned from the case studies about:

- 📊 increasing and diversifying learner pathways from FET to higher education
- 🧑 the need for clear information and dedicated supports to help learners navigate the system
- 🚧 common challenges and barriers experienced by marginalised learners
- 👥 the importance of welcoming & inclusive environments
- 📖 delivery of NFQ Level 6 special purpose awards in secondary schools to build digital literacy, skills for learning, confidence & provide progression opportunities
- ♻️ the integral role of NFQ Levels 5 & 6 in tertiary education but particularly apprenticeships & tertiary degrees

³² Reproduced from presentation by Louise Fitzpatrick, CDETБ

The insights from these discussions will be incorporated into the two Green Papers which will be published for consultation before the end of 2024. The summary will be included in the consultation report.

QQI Pre-Conference Workshop

Building Momentum to a Unified Tertiary System through an Exploration of NFQ Level 6 and Access, Transfer and Progression Policy

20 November 2024

AGENDA	
13:30-14:00	Welcome and introduction <i>Summary of progress since NFQ 20th Anniversary Conference in 2023</i> Dr Padraig Walsh , CEO, QQI
14:00-15:00	Learner Scenarios and Profiles <i>A presentation and discussion about common learner profiles and scenarios observed in intermediate qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6</i> <i>Participants will be invited to engage with Slido questions and share experiences and insight</i> Dr Bryan Maguire , Director of Integration, QQI
15:00-15:30	Case Studies: Innovative and Progressive ATP practice <u>Speakers:</u> Georgina Roberts , Student Enrolment/Admissions Manager, DCU Deirdre Fitzpatrick , Project Manager, College Connect Dr Ita Kennelly , NCI Centre for Education and Lifelong Learning, NCI Louise Fitzpatrick , Quality Assurance Manager, CDETB
15:30-15:45	Questions, answers and observations Dr Padraig Walsh , CEO, QQI
15:45-16:00	Close Dr Padraig Walsh , CEO, QQI

Appendix 2

List of Responding Organisations to Consultation

Atlantic Technological University (ATU)	Kilkenny Carlow Education and Training Board (KCETB)
Cavan Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB)	Léargas
CCT College Dublin	Louth Meath Education and Training Board (LMETB)
Children's Therapy Centre	Maynooth University (MU)
City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETb)	Munster Technological University (MTU)
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principles – Further Education and Training Colleges Ireland (NAPD-FETCI)
Donegal Education and Training Board (DETB)	National College of Ireland (NCI)
Dublin Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board (DDLETB)	National University of Ireland (NUI)
Dublin City University (DCU)	Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI)
Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)	SOLAS
Education and Training Board RPL Network	South East Technological University (SETU)
Elevation Training	Teagasc
Engineers Ireland	Technological Higher Education Association (THEA)
Fast Track into Information Technology	Technological University of Dublin (TUD)
Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA)	Technological University of the Shannon (TUS)
Innopharma Education	Trinity College Dublin (TCD)
Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC)	University College Dublin (UCD)
Irish Universities Association (IUA)	University of Limerick (UL)
Kerry Education and Training Board (KETB)	