

## Joint-sectoral protocol between Designated Awarding Bodies and Quality and Qualifications Ireland for the inclusion of qualifications within the National Framework of Qualifications – July 2022

### Preamble

This Joint-Sectoral Protocol ('protocol') endorsed by designated awarding bodies<sup>1</sup> and by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI):

- provides for the formal inclusion of awards made by designated awarding bodies within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The operation of this protocol is designed to fulfil the relevant requirements of Section 55B of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act (2012) as amended,
- is the result of collaboration between Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the designated awarding bodies and their representative bodies. It is informed by the awarding practices of designated awarding bodies<sup>2</sup>; existing internal and external quality assurance arrangements<sup>3</sup>; sectoral advice on the implementation of the NFQ<sup>4</sup>; and relevant international developments<sup>5</sup>,
- aims to balance the autonomy of designated awarding bodies with QQI's independent responsibilities relating to the implementation of the NFQ,
- makes use of existing internal and external quality assurance arrangements that promote transparency in the procedures for the development, delivery and awarding of assured

---

<sup>1</sup> Defined in law, this term means a previously established university, the National University of Ireland, an educational institution established as a university under section 9 of the Act of 1997, a technological university, an institute of technology and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> Annual Institutional Quality Review reports provide structured self-reports on e.g., awarding practices.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., [Sectoral Quality Assurance Guidelines](#) for Designated Awarding Bodies set out expectations for how qualifications are developed, designed, delivered, assessed, certified and awarded.

<sup>4</sup> See for example the advice on the implementation of the NFQ in universities published by the university-led [Framework Implementation Network](#); sectoral inputs into periodic European qualifications framework referencing exercises, most recently in 2021, and independent reviews of the implementation and impact of the NFQ in 2008 and 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Transparent procedures for the inclusion of qualifications within qualification frameworks is a central criterion for the alignment of the NFQ with both the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in European Higher Education require procedures for the correct levelling of qualifications within national qualifications frameworks. The "[Recommendation on the use of qualifications frameworks in the recognition of foreign qualifications](#)" - a 2013 subsidiary text to the Lisbon Recognition Convention – highlights the importance of clear qualifications framework levels, learning outcomes, quality assurance and credits to facilitate recognition.

qualifications and the independent assessment of the effectiveness of such procedures. This protocol builds on these arrangements, clarifying respective roles, responsibilities, and expectations,

- aims to minimise the administrative burden, costs, and reporting requirements on designated awarding bodies and on QQI.

## Introduction and Background

Higher education institutions in Ireland have a reputation for excellence and quality. Irish higher education qualifications are highly valued and recognised for academic, vocational, and professional purposes. This level of public confidence in higher education qualifications depends on a good understanding of the learning achievements represented by qualifications and the transparency of procedures that protect and ensure awards standards<sup>6</sup>.

In law, the Irish NFQ is a system

- (i) of levels and types of awards based on standards of knowledge, skill, or competence to be acquired by a learner to entitle the learner to an award at a particular level, and of the type concerned, within the Framework, and
- (ii) for the development, recognition, and award of qualifications in the State.

Established in 2003, the NFQ is now at an advanced operational stage, a permanent and visible feature of the national education, training, and qualifications system, improving the transparency and comparability of qualifications<sup>7</sup>. Universities, technological universities, and institutes of technology are joint custodians with QQI of the NFQ. As independent and autonomous awarding bodies, they have been central to the development, use and success of the NFQ. The role of the designated awarding bodies in the implementation of the NFQ has been widely recognised, nationally and internationally. They have enhanced the standing of the NFQ and its capacity to benefit learners, higher education institutions and other users of qualifications<sup>8</sup>.

The NFQ is important as a classification and communications tool. It is also used as an instrument for policy, for example in setting targets for skill and qualification achievements and for reporting on

---

<sup>6</sup> Awards Standards refers to the knowledge, skill, or competence to be acquired, and where appropriate, demonstrated, by a learner before a specified qualification may be awarded.

<sup>7</sup> International agencies such as Cedefop, the European Training Foundation and UNESCO, report on the stages of NQF development within countries. The Irish NFQ is consistently cited as an example of an advanced, fully operational NQF.

<sup>8</sup> See for example the Independent Policy Impact Assessment of the NFQ (2018) and the European Referencing of the NFQ (2020).

educational attainment and learner outcomes. It has come to be used in regulatory ways too, for example, in setting qualification requirements for access to employment or eligibility requirements for student supports and other forms of public funding. The designated awarding bodies and QQI are committed to maintaining the collaborative and consensual approach that has characterised the development of the NFQ as a reliable and trusted instrument for policymakers.

The integrity and reputation of the NFQ depends on the support of trustworthy awarding bodies offering highly valued qualifications that are appropriately included within the NFQ and underpinned by effective quality assurance arrangements. These conditions enable the NFQ to be used and accepted as a tool to promote transparency and trust in higher education qualifications in Ireland. The implementation of the NFQ by designated awarding bodies strengthens its capacity to act as a signal for excellence and for promoting public confidence in Irish qualifications. The sectoral norms for the implementation of the NFQ, developed by designated awarding bodies, play a leading role in setting expectations for current and prospective awarding bodies participating in the NFQ.

As joint custodians of the NFQ, the designated awarding bodies expect the NFQ to be robust and dynamic, consistently applied, and responsive to innovations that advance the interests of learners. The NFQ is well implemented by designated awarding bodies who, in turn, benefit from a robust and relevant NFQ. This symbiotic and reciprocal relationship is sustained and strengthened by mutual understanding, collaboration, and partnership between the designated awarding bodies and QQI.

### Legislative context

Universities have their own statutory degree awarding powers<sup>9</sup>. Universities, technological universities, and the institutes of technology are classed as designated awarding bodies for the purpose of implementing the NFQ in accordance with the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act 2012. This designation respects the autonomy of these institutions, their self-accrediting status, and the principle of academic freedom.

Amendments introduced in the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (amendment) Act 2019 clarify and strengthen the relationship between designated awarding bodies and the NFQ. (See Appendix 1 for selected extracts of amended legislation). Amendments to Section 43 confirm that designated awarding bodies are expected to include their qualifications within the NFQ and to ensure that their awards standards are consistent with relevant NFQ descriptors. Sections 55B and 55D provide legal

---

<sup>9</sup> The Universities Act 1997; the Technological Universities Act 2018; RCSI Charters Amendment Act 2010.

mechanisms for determining how the awards of designated awarding bodies may be included within the NFQ. This joint-sectoral protocol is designed to implement section 55B consistent with the practice and values of NFQ implementation in higher education to date.

QQI has been assigned statutory functions that concern how the relationship between qualifications and the NFQ is established and maintained. These include the requirement to:

- promote, maintain, further develop, and implement the NFQ,
- promote and facilitate the use by providers and awarding bodies of statements of what an enrolled learner is expected to know, understand, and where appropriate, demonstrate, on completion of a programme of education and training,
- make decisions that it is appropriate that particular awards be regarded as awards that are included within the NFQ,
- determine policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression and review their implementation,
- facilitate the recognition outside the State of awards made in the State,
- establish, maintain, and develop a database providing information on awards that are awards included within the NFQ,
- establish quality assurance procedures and monitor and review the effectiveness of such procedures as they apply to the provision of programmes leading to qualifications included within the NFQ.

### Awards Standards

Awards Standards refer to the knowledge, skill, or competence to be acquired, and where appropriate, demonstrated, by a learner before a specified qualification may be awarded. The NFQ award-type descriptors constitute generalised standards for all qualifications included within the NFQ. They are benchmark statements about the learning achievements required to attain particular NFQ award types e.g., an Honours bachelor's degree. Each designated awarding body determines an award standard for each of its NFQ qualifications. Such awards standards are consistent with the NFQ. The award standard for a particular named award is elaborated in the statement of minimum intended programme learning outcomes agreed by a designated awarding body as part of the programme approval process.

Some designated awarding bodies articulate discipline or subject based award standards as an intermediary or bridging mechanism between NFQ award-type descriptors and related programmes.

While there may be diversity in institutional approaches, all designated awarding bodies determine awards standards that are consistent with the NFQ and have robust procedures in place for assigning the appropriate NFQ level and award type to their own awards.

Sectoral expectations for awards of designated awarding bodies to be included within the NFQ

The NFQ is an explicit reference point in the regulations, policies and guidelines which govern the design, approval, review, delivery, assessment, certification and awarding of qualifications. While designated awarding bodies are responsible for the design and implementation of their own awarding procedures, an integral part of this consists of ensuring that transparent procedures are in place to confirm that their awards are appropriately included within the NFQ.

Since the establishment of the NFQ the following sectoral norms and practices have been developed to ensure that the statutory inclusion of relevant higher education qualifications within the NFQ is carried out in a consistent, transparent manner, in line with relevant legislative provisions.

Designated awarding bodies observe the following norms and practices in determining that it is appropriate that an award be regarded as an award included within the NFQ.

#### **(i) Awards Standards**

Designated awarding bodies use the NFQ as the principal national reference point in determining awards standards. This established practice is reflected in national quality assurance guidelines<sup>10</sup> and in relevant European developments<sup>11</sup>.

Using the NFQ as a reference point for awards standards contributes to a consistent overall architecture for the design of higher education qualifications and enables their comparability in terms of award type, award class and NFQ level. Awards standards, expressed in terms of learning outcomes, enable the key attributes of qualifications to be signalled to students, graduates, employers, credential evaluators, regulators, and other stakeholders. Awards standards facilitate the provision of clear

---

<sup>10</sup> The NFQ Core Quality Assurance Guidelines and in Quality Assurance Guidelines for Designated Awarding Bodies. <https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/QA-Guidelines.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> The role of qualifications frameworks in setting and maintaining academic standard is explicit in various EU and European processes including the European Qualifications Framework; the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area; The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance; and the Lisbon Recognition Convention. The [Tuning Educational Structures in Europe](#) initiative is also relevant as it reflects university guidance on the implementation of the Bologna process degree structures in qualification design at subject or discipline level.

statements of what enrolled or prospective learners are expected to know, understand and be able to do after a specified programme of learning. Programme learning outcomes are clearly aligned with the relevant NFQ descriptors.

Awards standards expressed as learning outcomes, consistent with the NFQ, improve the capacity of the NFQ to promote the international comparability of Irish qualifications. Designated awarding bodies have participated in the formal alignment of the NFQ with both the EQF and the QF-EHEA (See Appendix 2). The international recognition of Irish qualifications creates mobility opportunities for graduates and enhances the attractiveness of higher education in Ireland<sup>12</sup>.

Awarding and recognition arrangements for qualifications resulting from joint and transnational collaborations<sup>13</sup>, are facilitated by the inclusion of qualifications within the NFQ and the referencing of the NFQ to the European qualifications system.

The respective roles of designated awarding bodies and linked providers<sup>14</sup> in the determination and maintenance of awards standards is made clear. Designated awarding bodies are responsible for their awards standards. Where designated awarding bodies make awards in respect of programmes offered by linked providers, they ensure that the relevant award standards are upheld.

## **(ii) Programme Design and Review or equivalent institutional procedures**

Designated awarding bodies, as self-accrediting institutions, continually assess their systems and their programmes in a variety of ways, to ensure that they are fit for purpose.

The NFQ level indicators are used as the generalised reference point for the development of awards standards at a given NFQ level. When designing new, or redesigning existing programmes, designated awarding bodies ensure that they specify all the features necessary for their inclusion within the NFQ, i.e., learning outcomes, NFQ level, applicable award type, award class, volume in terms of ECTS, and appropriate and coherent titling.

---

<sup>12</sup> The [2020 National Report on the European Referencing of the NFQ](#) benchmarks qualification standards in Ireland against key European systems and strengthens the international recognition of NFQ qualifications.

<sup>13</sup> The European Universities Initiative and the prospect of a European degree are pertinent.

<sup>14</sup> As defined in the 2012 Act.

Every new programme proposed within a designated awarding body undergoes a rigorous process of programme approval. One of the key considerations in evaluating a programme proposal is the appropriate alignment of the expected learning outcomes with the relevant NFQ descriptor.

Quality reviews help to ensure that programmes lead to qualifications that are appropriately included within the NFQ. Programme boards, or comparable governance structures, oversee the approval, review and monitoring of programme design, delivery, and assessment. Institutional governance structures, policies and procedures assure compliance with academic regulations and ensure award standards and the quality of associated programmes. Reviews of programmes, or equivalent institutional procedures, include an evaluation of intended and achieved programme learning outcomes as assessed against the relevant award standard.

The NFQ is an important tool for professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) in defining and using qualifications in the context of their professional recognition and accreditation processes<sup>15</sup>. Designated awarding bodies, QQI and PSRBs work in partnership to promote complementary approaches to programme accreditation/approval and to ensure that where academic and professional award standards both apply to a qualification, these are consistent with the learning outcomes approach and requirements of the NFQ.

### **(iii) Assessment and External Examining**

Designated awarding bodies have valid and reliable assessment policies and regulations in place to ensure that awards standards are maintained. Learning outcomes play a key role in defining points of reference for the establishment and assessment of standards. Assessment methods give students the opportunity to demonstrate the achievement of relevant programme or module learning outcomes. Designated awarding bodies assess learner performance against the relevant award standard to ensure that a qualification or credit is awarded based on achieved learning outcomes.

Internal and external moderation is used to ensure the reliability of assessment practice. Independent, external examiners, assigned to programmes or subjects, advise on awards standards so that they meet or exceed national and international comparators. External examiners review assessed work of learners against awards standards determined by the designated body and against comparable qualifications offered by other designated bodies. Where relevant, PSRBs also provide an external

---

<sup>15</sup> See QQI (2021) [Principles for Accreditation and other Professional Engagements](#)



validity check that helps to ensure that awards standards are consistent with occupation-specific learning outcomes.

#### **(iv) Access, Transfer, Progression and Credit**

Designated awarding bodies have their own institutional strategies for contributing to national and regional ambitions for lifelong learning, social mobility, and widening participation in higher education. They implement quality assured arrangements for access, transfer and progression that facilitate accessible and inclusive pathways to qualifications. Pre- and post-programme entry activities are consistent with QQI policies and criteria on access, transfer, and progression<sup>16</sup> and with quality assurance guidelines on learner admission, progression, and recognition.

Designated awarding bodies ensure that arrangements for accessing the programme (including arrangements for the recognition of prior learning where possible), transferring from it, exiting from it, and progressing to other programmes are documented at the outset in programme materials and clearly communicated to the learner. Programme design and redesign procedures include the review of proposed entry requirements and arrangements for access, transfer, and progression. Procedures for the recognition of qualifications already achieved or of learning acquired in non-formal or informal settings are consistent with the Lisbon Recognition Convention<sup>17</sup> and with relevant European policy<sup>18</sup>.

Designated awarding bodies promote and support the use of recognition of prior learning to facilitate the access, transfer, and progression opportunities for learners.

---

<sup>16</sup> National Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression [ATP Policy Restatement FINAL 2018.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](https://www.qqi.ie/ATP_Policy_Restatement_FINAL_2018.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> The Lisbon Recognition Convention is the main legal instrument on the academic recognition of qualifications in Europe <https://www.coe.int/en/web/higher-education-and-research/lisbon-recognition-convention>

<sup>18</sup> See EU Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning <https://www.coe.int/en/web/higher-education-and-research/lisbon-recognition-convention>

Designated awarding bodies operate systems for credit accumulation and credit transfer consistent with the Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of Credit in Irish Higher Education<sup>19</sup> and with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation Scheme (ECTS)<sup>20</sup>.

Typical credit volume or credit ranges have been established for each major award-type from Levels 6-9 in the NFQ (see table 1). Academic credit also applies to non-major awards offered in higher education, including for micro-credentials.

*Table 1 Credit Profile of Major Higher Education Qualifications*

Level 6	Higher Certificate	120 credits
Level 7	Ordinary Bachelor's Degree	180 credits
Level 8	Honours Bachelor's Degree	180-240 credits
Level 8	Higher Diploma	60 credits
Level 9	Master's Degree (Taught)	60-120 credits
Level 9	Post-graduate Diploma	60 credits

#### **(v) Awarding and Certifying Qualifications**

Designated awarding bodies have documented procedures in place for the awarding and certification of qualifications. Such procedures ensure that the achievement of the relevant programme learning outcomes is demonstrated by learners before a qualification is awarded.

Institutional academic regulations contain the assessment rules that govern progression and awarding arrangements, and these include guidelines on the granting of credit and the determination of award classification where relevant.

<sup>19</sup> Principles and operational guidelines for credit in higher education have been adopted by QQI. [principlesandoperguidelinesgreen.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](https://www.qqi.ie/principlesandoperguidelinesgreen.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> ECTS has been adopted by most of the countries in the European Higher Education Area and adopted as the national credit system [https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system-ects\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system-ects_en)

Established procedures for the certification of awards and the maintenance of learner and award records apply to all awards made by designated awarding bodies, including those made on behalf of linked providers. Students are provided with a detailed record of their studies when they leave their programme of study (on completion or earlier), which gives evidence of their achievement.

Certificates, in the form of transcripts, supplements or parchments, issued in respect of qualifications that are included within the NFQ, include reference to qualification title; qualification level, type and award class as identified within the NFQ; the corresponding level of the qualification within the European Qualifications Framework; the total credit value attached to the qualification awarded.

The European Diploma Supplement issued by designated awarding bodies, is consistent with standards agreed by the EU, the Council of Europe and UNESCO and with guidance published by QQI as the National Europass Centre for Ireland<sup>21</sup>.

Qualification titles promote public understanding of the expected demands and outcomes of higher education qualifications. The titling conventions for all major and non-major qualifications included within the NFQ are consistent and coherent within and across designated awarding bodies. Designated awarding bodies observe agreed sectoral conventions for the titling of all qualifications. Such conventions are periodically reviewed and updated to maintain consistency.

#### **(vi) Provision of Information to learners**

Public information about qualifications and programmes offered by designated awarding bodies is clear and comprehensive and consistent with the provisions of Section 67 of the 2012 Act.

QQI is responsible for the development and maintenance of the Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ) and for the interoperability of the IRQ with relevant European data infrastructures for qualifications and programmes. Designated awarding bodies and QQI cooperate to ensure that the IRQ is regarded as the authoritative source of information on qualifications included within the NFQ. Data published to the IRQ is consistent with the metadata model for qualifications and programmes.

---

<sup>21</sup> QQI hosts the National Europass Centre for Ireland <https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/Europass.aspx>



The systematic publication of information on programme learning outcomes on the IRQ will help to demonstrate the transparent implementation of the NFQ<sup>22</sup> and supports EU level registration of accredited higher education qualifications<sup>23</sup>. Designated awarding bodies and QQI will work to ensure that IRQ data is published to the Qualifications Dataset Register<sup>24</sup> on the Europass platform, and that the IRQ supports the implementation of the Europass Digital Credential Infrastructure<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Bologna and EQF alignment require that national qualifications frameworks and their qualifications are demonstrably based on the principle of learning outcomes.

<sup>23</sup> The metadata model for the interoperability between national qualifications registers and relevant European portals, requires information of learning outcomes of qualifications and learning opportunities.

<sup>24</sup> The Qualifications Dataset Register serves as the central EU portal for qualifications and learning opportunities. <https://europa.eu/europass/qdr/#/login>

<sup>25</sup> The Europass Digital Credentials Infrastructure will support authentication services for any digital documents or representations of information on skills and qualifications. <https://europa.eu/europass/en/what-are-digital-credentials>

## Endorsement, Operation, Reporting and Review of this Protocol

Any amendments to this protocol and/or to the arrangements for its endorsement, operation, reporting and review, shall be agreed between signatory designated awarding bodies and QQI.

### Endorsement and Operation

The signatories to this protocol endorse it as the basis for determining the inclusion within the NFQ of awards of designated awarding bodies, in accordance with Section 55B of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act (2012) as amended.

Signatory designated awarding bodies will publish their awards included within the NFQ to the IRQ. Where QQI requires any further information on a data upload to the IRQ, it will consult with the relevant designated awarding body.

The publication of an award on the IRQ confirms that a relevant designated awarding body and QQI have agreed that it is appropriate that such an award be included within the NFQ.

The operation of this protocol should have no adverse effects on the recognition of qualifications that have been issued by designated awarding bodies before the commencement of the protocol.

### Reporting

Part A of the Annual Quality Report (AQR) will include a reference to this protocol and record confirmation by a designated awarding body that it continues to apply. Part B of the AQR will be used to report any changes or developments that may have impacted on the operation and implementation of the protocol during the reporting period, for example, specific quality enhancement initiatives or updates to relevant policies and procedures.

Where a designated awarding body decides not to endorse this protocol or where this protocol no longer applies, in full or in part, section 55D of the 2012 Act (as amended) shall apply for the purpose of including relevant qualifications within the NFQ.

### Review

This protocol is intended to promote the inclusion of qualifications within the NFQ in a way that is transparent, accountable, consistent, and proportionate. The effectiveness of this protocol will be judged in terms of these principles. The operation of this protocol will be reviewed three years from the date of its endorsement by designated awarding bodies and by QQI.

## Interpretations

The **National Framework of Qualifications** (NFQ) is a system of levels and types of awards based on knowledge, skill, and competence. It was established for the development recognition and award of qualifications in the State. The NFQ has been designed to facilitate:

- communication about qualifications (for example on their comparability);
- the design and specification of specific qualifications;
- the design of programmes of education and training leading to qualifications;
- processes for the recognition of prior learning; and
- the design and specification of learning pathways.

A **qualification** is the formal outcome of an assessment and validation<sup>26</sup> process by a competent body<sup>27</sup> and typically take the form of documents such as certificates or diplomas. They determine that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards. For the purpose of this protocol, the terms qualification and award are synonymous. In most cases a programme delivered by a designated awarding body or approved for delivery in a linked provider, is also the qualification that the learner receives on its successful completion. E.g., a learner who undertakes a BSc (Hons) programme is also awarded a BSc (Hons) Computer Science by the designated awarding body, having successfully completed the programme.

## Access, Transfer and Progression

There are pre-defined and published regulations, which are consistently applied, covering all areas related to learner admission, progression, recognition, and certification of awards. Access policies, admission processes and criteria are established and implemented consistently, transparently and in accordance with national policies and procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression (ATP).

---

<sup>26</sup> The meaning of assessment will be clear, validation here means confirmation by a competent body that learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, competences) acquired by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting have been assessed against predefined criteria and are compliant with the requirements of a validation standard. Validation typically leads to certification.

<sup>27</sup> A competent body is an entity, often referred to as an awarding body, that can credibly and legitimately make the determination referred to in the definition of a qualification.

### Learning outcomes

Statements regarding what a learner knows, understands, and can do on completion of a learning process, are defined in terms of knowledge, skills, and competence. It is useful to distinguish between, intended learning outcomes (e.g., the learning outcomes that the designers of a programme of education and training intend that learners should achieve) and achieved learning outcomes (e.g., the learning outcomes achieved by a specific learner).

### Award Standard

The knowledge, skill, or competence to be acquired, and where appropriate, demonstrated, by a learner before the specified qualification may be awarded. Awards standards express the knowledge, skill or competence required to gain a qualification (sometimes referred to as expected learning outcomes). The NFQ's award-type descriptors in effect function as generalised awards standards for the corresponding awards of designated awarding bodies. Award standards set by designated awarding bodies may exceed threshold or minimum levels of knowledge, skill, or competence to be achieved by a learner to entitle that learner to an academic qualification e.g., an honours bachelor's degree.

### Programme

A programme of education and training is a process by which a learner acquires knowledge, skill or competence and includes a course of study, a course of instruction and an apprenticeship. Often, a person will gain a qualification earned through successful completion of a pre-planned programme or course of education and training. Some people gain qualifications not by following a pre-planned programme but through a process for the recognition of prior learning (RPL). In this context RPL can be thought of as being linked with a situation/individual-specific and retrospectively revealed programme of education and training.

### European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)

ECTS credits represent learning based on defined learning outcomes and their associated workload. ECTS is designed to make it easier for students to move between countries and to have their academic qualifications and study periods abroad recognised. ECTS allows credits taken at one higher education institution to be counted towards a qualification studied for at another.

### External Examiner

An external examiner is an independent expert who is a member of the broader community of practice within the programme's field of learning and whose accomplishments attest to his/her likelihood of having the authority necessary to fulfil the responsibilities of the role.

### Irish Register of Qualifications

The official source of information on qualifications included within the NFQ and their associated programmes and institutions. A listing on the register confirms that a qualification meets all the requirements of a qualification included within the NFQ at a particular time.

### NARIC Ireland

A service of QQI, acting to promote the international academic recognition of higher education qualifications gained in Ireland, consistent with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and associated provisions on national qualifications frameworks.

### European Diploma Supplement

Issued by designated awarding bodies, accompanying a higher education qualification, and providing a standardised description of the nature, level, content, and status of the studies completed by a graduate. Designed to support the academic recognition of qualifications and refers to the place of a qualification within the NFQ and corresponding alignment with the European qualifications frameworks.



## Appendix 1 - Selected extracts from amendments to Qualifications and Quality Assurance (2012) Act

[ ] indicates a deletion of text not pertinent to the protocol.

### Section 43

(3) Each designated awarding body and listed awarding body, shall, in respect of each award that the body makes that is an award included within the Framework:

(a) take such steps (whether by way of co-operation or consultation with the Authority or otherwise) as will facilitate the performance by the Authority of its functions in so far as those functions relate to awards included within the Framework (referred to in paragraph (b) as 'relevant functions');

(b) provide to the Authority such information as the Authority may from time to time require for the performance by it of relevant functions.

(4) Each designated awarding body shall ensure, in so far as is reasonably practicable, that each award that it makes is an award that is included within the Framework.

(5) Each [ ] designated awarding body,

shall cooperate with the Authority in the implementation of policies and criteria established under section 55E(1)(b).

(6) Each designated awarding body [ ] shall, in respect of each award the body makes that is an award included within the Framework, ensure that a learner acquires the standard of knowledge, skill or competence associated with the level of that award within the Framework before and when the award is made.

### Section 55B

(3) In respect of an award made by a designated awarding body, such an award shall, without the need for the making of a decision under section 55D, be regarded as an award that is included within the Framework if—

(a) arrangements of the kind referred to in subsection (4) have been put in place by the designated awarding body and the Authority, and

(b) on foot of those arrangements, the Authority—

(i) expresses its agreement with the view, concerning that award, of the designated awarding body referred to in paragraph (a) of subsection (4), and

(ii) notifies the body, in writing, to that effect,

and an award, the subject of such a notification, is referred to subsequently in this Act as a 'section 55B(3) award'.

(4) The arrangements referred to in subsection (3) are arrangements that consist of the following two procedures—

(a) a procedure under which, following its forming such a view in relation to an award it makes, a designated awarding body may, by notice in writing served on the Authority, state that the body is of the view that it is appropriate that the award be regarded as an award that is included within the Framework, and

(b) a procedure under which the Authority may—

(i) having had regard to the view of the body expressed in that notice, and

(ii) having consulted with the body,

express the agreement of the Authority with that view.

#### Section 55D

(1) On an application in that behalf by the awarding body that intends to make the particular award, whether—

(a) a listed awarding body,

(b) save where the award concerned of such a body is a section 55B (3) award, a designated awarding body, or

(c) a body or provider referred to in section 55B(2)(c) or (d),

the Authority shall make a decision as to whether it is appropriate that the award be regarded as one that is included within the Framework.

#### Section 55E

(1) As soon as practicable after the operative date, the Authority shall establish policies and criteria to which regard shall be had by the Authority in making—

(a) a decision under section 55C (5), and

(b) a decision under section 55D. (*Note: This may apply to designated awarding bodies where an award is not a section 55B (3) award.*)

(2) The Authority shall publish the policies and criteria established under subsection (1) in such form and manner as it thinks appropriate (including on the internet).

(3) The reference in subsection (1) to policies and criteria, so far as that subsection relates to a decision under section 55C(5), shall be deemed to include a reference to minimum requirements, that is to say requirements that must first be fulfilled before the Authority may make a decision under section 55C(5) that the relevant awarding body is an appropriate body, with reference to a particular award, to make such an award.

(4) A requirement of the kind referred to in subsection (3) may include a requirement that the making of an application, under section 55C(4)(a), by an awarding body, has been endorsed by a public authority of such class as is specified by the Authority in the requirement, and, for the purposes of this subsection, ‘public authority’ includes the Minister, any other Minister of the Government, An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas, Solas, a professional recognition body and a designated awarding body.

(5) The Authority may establish different policies and criteria under subsection (1)(b) in respect of different awards.

(6) Subsection (7) applies so far as the number of awards that, for the time being, stand included within the Framework is attributable to the policies and criteria established under subsection (1)(b).

(7) The Authority shall, in establishing policies and criteria under subsection (1)(b), have regard to the need to ensure:

(a) that the number of awards included within the Framework provides a reasonable level of choice for learners; and

(b) that the number of awards included within the Framework that are awards with similar learning outcomes is not excessive.

(8) In addition to what is provided in subsection (7), the Authority shall, in establishing policies and criteria under subsection (1)(b), have regard to:

(a) the reasonable requirements of learners;

(b) the reasonable requirements of industry, agriculture, business, tourism and trade, the professions, and the public service;

(c) the extent to which present and past awards in the State serve or served their educational purpose and the needs of the economy;

(d) any consultation, concerning the education and training needs of learners, engaged in by it with—

(i) bodies with responsibility for managing the provision of education and training that is funded by the Exchequer, and

(ii) bodies that regulate one or more professions;

and

(e) such aspects of Government policy as the Minister may specify for the purposes of this paragraph.

(9) The Authority may consult with another public body, including a public body that is established outside the State, where it considers that it is appropriate to do so for the efficient and effective operation of policies and criteria established under subsection (1).

(10) The Authority shall, within 5 years after the establishment of policies and criteria under subsection (1) and at least once in every period of 5 years thereafter, review those policies and criteria.

## Appendix 2 - European Alignment of the NFQ

EQF Level	QF-EHEA (Bologna)	NFQ Level	NFQ Award Type
EQF Level 1		NFQ Level 1	Level 1 Certificate
		NFQ Level 2	Level 2 Certificate
EQF Level 2		NFQ Level 3	Level 3 Certificate
			Junior Certificate
EQF Level 3		NFQ Level 4	Level 4 Certificate
EQF Level 4		NFQ Level 5	Leaving Certificate
			Level 5 Certificate
			Level 5 Professional Award
EQF Level 5	Short Cycle Higher Education	NFQ Level 6	Advanced Certificate
			Higher Certificate
			Level 6 Professional Award
EQF Level 6	First Cycle Higher Education	NFQ Level 7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree
			Level 7 Professional Award
		NFQ Level 8	Honours Bachelor Degree
			Higher Diploma
			Level 8 Professional Award
EQF Level 7	Second Cycle Higher Education	NFQ Level 9	Post-Graduate Diploma
			Masters Degree
			Level 9 Professional Award
EQF Level 8	Third Cycle Higher Education	NFQ Level 10	Doctoral Degree
			Higher Doctorate

## Signatories to the Protocol

Atlantic Technological University

Dublin City University

Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology

Dundalk Institute of Technology

Maynooth University

Munster Technological University

National University of Ireland

National University of Ireland Galway

Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland

South East Technological University

Technological University Dublin

Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest

Trinity College Dublin

University College Cork

University College Dublin

University of Limerick

Quality and Qualifications Ireland