NQF state of play

Ireland 2020

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Overview

Stage of development: Operational stage

NQF linked to EQF: ✓

Scope of the framework:
Comprehensive NFQ including all types and levels of qualification from formal education and training.

Number of levels:
10, with five classes of award type: major, minor, special-purpose, professional and supplemental

Legal basis/stage of development:
Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999) (in English) Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 (in English) Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019. (in English)

NQF/EQF website:
Website

Qualifications register/database:
The NFQ register of qualifications

Introduction and context

Ireland is very well situated according to several performance indicators for education and training, ahead of EU average figures and most EU targets. Strong central oversight of the education system is balanced with high autonomy for schools and higher education institutions, with an increasing layer of regional governance. Private organisations have a significant role in education and qualifications provision (QQI, 2020). According to the Programme for international student assessment (PISA) 2018 results ([1]), Ireland has the second lowest percentage in the EU of 15-year-olds underachieving in reading (11.8%) and relatively low shares of underachievers in mathematics and science. A low percentage of pupils leave education and training early (5.1% in 2019, compared with the EU average of 10.2%). A wider range of post-school options and the Action plan to expand apprenticeship and traineeship in Ireland 2016-20 ([2]) are among the measures aiming to support early leavers and increase participation in vocational education and training (VET). 20 new apprenticeship programmes became operational, and a further 36 are being developed. The employment rate of VET graduates increased from 71.9% in 2017 to 76.9% in 2018. The country has one of the highest rates of tertiary education attainment in Europe (55.4% in 2019). Efforts at modernising higher education focus on increasing participation and the gender balance in STEM subjects; the first technological university was established following the 2018 Technological universities Act ([3]). Adult participation in lifelong learning increased to 12.6% in 2019. Several initiatives were introduced to support upskilling, including the Skills to advance policy, targeting vulnerable employees with skills below NFQ level 5/EQF level 4. The greatest identified skill shortage is in transversal and digital skills among older and low-skilled workers (European Commission, 2019; European Commission, 2020).

The Irish national framework of qualifications (NFQ) is among the early developed qualifications frameworks in Europe, the concept having been first proposed in legislation in 1999. Its development was undertaken by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and it was officially established in 2003 following extensive public consultation. The operation of the framework is governed by the 2012 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act and the 2019 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (amendment) Act. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established in 2012 as the single national qualifications and external quality assurance body for post-school education and training in Ireland, and the custodian of the NFQ.

The NFQ is a comprehensive and learning-outcomes-based framework, covering all education and training subsystems. It has 10 qualification levels, defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence, capturing all learning, from initial stages to the most advanced. All qualifications awarded by the national awarding bodies in Ireland are now included in the NFQ.

The NFQ has reached an advanced operational stage. Implementation has been carried out by agreement within the education and training subsectors, with strong support from national stakeholders. Studies on NFQ implementation and impact have been carried out. The framework has increased transparency and coherence in the qualifications system, and has promoted a more systematic approach to the design, development, delivery, award and recognition of qualifications, supporting lifelong learning and transitions into, within and from education and training (QQI, 2020).

In 2006 the NFQ was self-certified to the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) and in 2009 it was referenced to the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning (EQF). An updated referencing and self-certification report was submitted to the EQF Advisory Group in November 2020, reinforcing links between the NFQ and the two European frameworks.

Policy objectives

Originally, the NFQ was conceptualised as a driver of systemic change towards the objective of lifelong learning and rationalisation of further education and training (FET) qualifications. Currently, it is viewed more as an enabler, rather than driver, of wider reform, with implications for setting standards, quality assurance, developing awards, teaching, assessment, and programme design. By 2020, the framework has come to be seen as both an end in itself and a means for achieving socially useful objectives. It functions both as policy and as an instrument for policy (QQI, 2020).

Its original aims included (NQAI, 2009a):

  a. to promote development of a more flexible and integrated system of qualifications and of alternative learning pathways;
  b. to establish learning outcomes as a common reference point for qualifications and for recognition of non-formal and informal learning;
  c. to respond to the qualification needs of individuals, society and the economy through increasing the range of available qualifications and the recognition of diverse forms of learning.

The NFQ was designed to support in several areas: communication about qualifications (e.g. for comparability); the design and specification of specific qualifications and of programmes of education and training; processes for the recognition of prior learning; and the design and specification of learning pathways (QQI, 2020).

The potential of the Irish NFQ to fulfil its purpose is strongly linked to its integration with related policies and initiatives. This has been aided by the establishment of QQI in 2012, whose work has facilitated the integration of the NFQ and related policies on access, transfer and progression into quality assurance arrangements in the post-secondary education and training system (QQI, 2020). The need to embed the NFQ further in quality assurance policy and practice was seen by 76% of respondents to the 2017 NFQ policy impact assessment study (Indecon, 2017) as a high priority for the future. At the same time, stakeholders had more diverse views on other NFQ future policy priorities: communication (67% of respondents viewed this as a high priority); progression and recognition functions (60%); curriculum design function (45%); and regulatory function (41%).

While classification and transparency of qualifications remain important objectives, many users of qualifications that exercise regulatory or quasi-

regulatory functions in relation to access to study or to employment have used the NFQ as a regulatory tool. In addition, the implementation of the framework has assumed more of a regulatory character over time. Statutory quality assurance guidelines for education and training providers ([4]) make repeated reference to the NFQ and related policies, embedding it in the statutory quality assurance arrangements for post-school education and training in Ireland (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

The 2019 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (amendment) Act introduced important changes strengthening the comprehensive nature of the framework and its regulatory role. The concept of a qualification 'included within' the NFQ was introduced into a legal text for the first time, replacing the term 'recognised within' the NFQ, used in the 2012 Act. This implies an interest in the quality assurance arrangements for the delivery and certification of a qualification, not merely in the ex-post recognition of a qualification (QQI, 2020). The 2019 Act reinforced the legal relationship between qualifications that have been long-standing constituent qualifications of the NFQ. It also acknowledged that, as an awarding body, QQI is legally compelled to develop, deliver and award qualifications that are demonstrably included within the NFQ, and provided for a statutory scheme to facilitate voluntary access to the NFQ by a wider range of awarding bodies offering qualifications (European Commission; Cedefop, 2020).

The potential opportunities and benefits brought about by the NFQ are relevant to many of the strategic objectives set out in Ireland's *National skills strategy 2025* ([5]): active collaboration between employers and education and training providers; strengthening the role of employers in skills development; and improving career information and guidance services (Indecon, 2017).

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

The NFQ was defined as a 'single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards' (NQAI, 2003) and 'a system 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' ([6]). The main building blocks of the framework are the 10 learning-outcomes-based levels, level indicators and five award-types and their descriptors. The 10 levels of the NFQ capture all learning ([7]), from initial stages to the most advanced: qualifications achieved in schools, further education and training, and higher education and training. They are all quality assured. Over time, the NFQ also seeks to accommodate qualifications offered by international, private and professional bodies. The 2019 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (amendment) Act provides for a statutory scheme to facilitate voluntary access to the NFQ of a wider range of awarding bodies offering qualifications obtained through non-formal learning. A new category of awarding body is to be established for this purpose: listed awarding bodies will accommodate competent and trustworthy applicants that can demonstrate that they offer learning-outcomes-based qualifications that are relevant and can be mapped to the NFQ (QQI, 2020).

Each NFQ level has a specified level indicator or descriptor and one or more award types. Levels describe nationally agreed standards of learning in terms of three strands and eight sub-strands of expected learning outcomes: knowledge (breadth and kind), know-how and skills (range and selectivity) and competence (context, role, learning to learn, and insight). Knowledge, skills and competences are defined following a constructivist approach.

NFQ award types describe the purpose, volume and progression opportunities associated with a particular award. Each award type includes a wide range of qualifications. Four classes of award type were determined originally: major (the principal class of awards at each level, capturing a typical range of learning achievements) ([8]); minor (for partial completion of the outcomes for a major award); supplemental (for learning that is additional to a major award); and special purpose (for relatively narrow or purpose-specific achievements) ([9]) ([10]). A professional class of awards was established in 2014 ([11]) at NFQ levels 5-9 (EQF 4-7) ([12]) to

strengthen the capacity of the NFQ to level professional or occupation-oriented awards. The professional class implicitly introduced the concept that an award can have more than one class and type ([13]). They are typically used in conjunction with original NFQ award types. Award-type descriptors are also expressed in learning outcomes; they represent the most general expression of standards for NFQ qualifications (QQI, 2020).

More detailed award standards are maintained by awarding bodies. For QQI awards, in addition to awards standards, a new policy and criteria for validation of provider programmes leading to awards was issued by QQI in 2016 ([14]). This requires providers to develop minimum intended programme learning outcomes (MIPLOs) for the overall programme and minimum intended module learning outcomes (MIMLOS) for each module.

As all types of qualification involve their own unique combination of technical, social and political dimensions, the principle of 'best fit' was used for allocating qualifications to NFQ levels in Ireland. The need to revisit the original levelling of certain qualifications in the light of emerging practice, experience and evidence was highlighted (Indecon, 2017). For apprenticeship qualifications leading to advanced certificate at NFQ level 6/EQF level 5, the initial 'block levelling' of traditional craft apprenticeships has been revisited and largely confirmed (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018). A study was commissioned by QQI in collaboration with SOLAS to compare the two FET and higher education qualifications that sit at NFQ level 6/EQF level 5 (advanced certificate and higher certificate); the results will inform future policy decisions. The placement of upper secondary leaving certificate (senior cycle) spanning both NFQ levels 4 and 5 (EQF levels 3 and 4) was discussed in the context of EQF referencing in 2009 and revised referencing in 2020. The original placement of the leaving certificate on the NFQ is to be revisited in the context of ongoing senior cycle reform (QQI, 2020).

The learning outcomes approach was central to establishment of the NFQ, associated legislation and system reforms. The role of communities of practice in understanding and applying learning outcomes is emphasised. Learning outcome statements are seen as partly symbolic, encoding meanings attached to them by the community of practice (QQI, 2020). It is recognised that both views of learning outcomes are valuable: as result-oriented, measurable and objective, and as process-oriented, open to negotiation and only partly measurable. The focus on learner profile and on programme context is part of the answer to this issue.

Extensive work has been undertaken across all subsystems of education and training to implement the learning outcomes approach of the NFQ. There is strong agreement across all stakeholder groups on the view that

the NFQ has had a positive impact on course design, teaching, assessment and the monitoring of standards (Indecon, 2017). The approach has started to provide common ground for different stakeholders (general education, higher education, VET, policy-makers, students, employers and trade unions) and has become the basis for shared dialogue on the purpose of education. Increased progression between VET and higher education is considered an important achievement in the steps taken so far.

QQI is responsible for external quality assurance in FET and higher education. The NFQ and the learning outcomes approach feature prominently in its activities and in statutory quality assurance guidelines ([15]). In general school education, learning outcomes are seen in the context of professional development, and are prominent in the way school subjects and examinations are specified (QQI, 2020). A review of international practice in the use of learning outcomes in curriculum reform was published in 2019 ([16]) by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, informing development of guidelines on the use of learning outcomes for teachers ([17]) and a companion text, *Learning intentions and success criteria* ([18]). A key area to be addressed is implementation of an integrated and effective quality assurance process for learning-outcomes-referenced qualifications, operating across institutions, sectors and levels of education and training.

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The Irish NFQ was established in law under the 1999 Qualifications (Education and Training) Act ([19]) and re-authorised under the 2012 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act ([20]). In 2019, the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (amendment) Act ([21]), further strengthened the centrality of the NFQ as a coordinating mechanism for qualifications in Ireland (QQI, 2020). Its initial development and first decade of implementation was coordinated by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), supported by the two main awarding bodies, the Higher Education and Training Award Council (HETAC) and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC).

A new agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), was established in 2012, as an independent State agency of the Department of Education and Skills, created by an amalgamation of four bodies that had both awarding and quality assurance responsibilities: FETAC, HETAC, NQAI and the Irish Universities Quality Board. QQI has assumed all functions of the four legacy bodies while also having new statutory responsibilities. This important step enabled a systematic focus on qualifications, with stronger coordination of qualifications and quality assurance policies. The agency is responsible for promotion, maintenance, implementation, further development and review of the NFQ, on behalf of the Department of Education and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. It is at the centre of the qualification system and cooperates with ministries, higher education institutions, employers and the voluntary sector. Other functions of QQI include: conducting reviews of access, transfer and progression policies in education and training; approving programmes offered by a variety of education providers; and promoting and regulating the quality of programmes ([22]). It is also the main awarding body for further education and training qualifications and a niche awarding body for private independent higher education qualifications.

NFQ governance is currently ensured within the broader structures of QQI, which follow two strands: corporate and operational/academic ([23]). Human and financial resources are in place. QQI has a dedicated framework development and integrity unit but, as an integrated qualifications and quality assurance agency, all functions have a mandate to support the operation of the NFQ, including staff in awards development, validation, quality assurance, corporate services and communication (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

QQI promotes the international academic recognition of qualifications. It is the designated EQF national coordination point and national Europass centre, it acts as the national correspondent for QF-EHEA and hosts the Irish National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC).

National awarding bodies offering qualifications included in the NFQ are currently: QQI, the State Examinations Commission, the institutes of technology, and the universities. The 2019 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (amendment) Act strengthens the regulatory role of QQI, giving it statutory power to include qualifications issued by a broader range of awarding bodies in the NFQ (professional, private, and international awarding bodies).

Collaboration and partnership have been hallmarks of the NFQ process since the beginning. Early cooperation and collaboration has arguably led to the position where the NFQ reflects a strong consensus about the kind and complexity of knowledge, skill and competence associated with qualifications at each of its 10 levels. Providers and awarding bodies are partners in the implementation of the NFQ, while other users of qualifications are stakeholders. As the NFQ has become more settled, engagement has become more an issue of specific interests of different stakeholder groups. In 2019, a stakeholder steering group was established to oversee and advise on the preparation of the 2020 European re-referencing report, and a focus group of higher education institutions with degree awarding powers advised on specific elements. It is anticipated that this would provide necessary impetus for the establishment of a national NFQ/qualifications forum strengthening NFQ governance and national oversight arrangements (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

[24]

The Department of Education and Skills ([25]) announced in the *Action plan for education 2016-19 (*[26]*)* its commitment to establish a national policy for the recognition of prior learning (RPL). The *National skills strategy 2025 – Ireland's future* ([27]), published in 2016, included among its objectives the development of a system for RPL and better recognition of workplace learning, supporting lifelong learning. Both the further education and training (FET) strategy and the higher education strategy called for systematic implementation of RPL in the two sectors and a national RPL framework spanning sectors.

RPL includes prior formal, non-formal and informal learning and is a powerful tool for widening participation in education and training and work. It can provide access to formal education, award of credit, exemptions within a programme and support access to the labour market. Four stages of validation consistent with those in the 2012 Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning ([28]) (identification, documentation, assessment and certification) are used, but the use and combination of these stages differs in practice depending on the purpose of RPL.

RPL-related initiatives over recent years grew organically and with commitment to excellent practice. QQI provides an overarching governing structure for the coordination of RPL and supports implementation in partnership with stakeholders. Under the 2012 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, the agency has policy responsibility for access, transfer and progression (ATP) of learners. In 2015, QQI issued a restatement of the *Policy and criteria for access, transfer and progression for providers of further and higher education and training* ([29]) – first published in 2003 – and the *Principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning in further and higher education and training* ([30]), first published in 2005 by NQAI. Providers must comply with QQI policies on credit accumulation, credit transfer, and identification and assessment of previously acquired knowledge, skill and competence, and must establish at local level their own policies and procedures on ATP. With the 2019 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (amendment) Act, providers are given a more central role in application processes for RPL.

Qualifications acquired through validation of non-formal or informal learning

use the same standards as formal qualifications. The definition of levels of learning and the articulation of learning outcomes in the NFQ have been found useful for RPL purposes. Arrangements for RPL are linked to the NFQ through a vision for learner progression, articulated in QQI's policy restatement (QQI, 2020). They are in place in all education and training sub-sectors except general education, and lead to full or partial qualifications and/or give access to education and training programmes. RPL arrangements for the low-skilled, low-qualified and other groups of learners have been put in place. The legislative framework underpinning the NFQ facilitates RPL opportunities for individuals who have been assessed as having achieved the necessary learning outcomes associated with the relevant qualification or arrangements for exemptions or credits at all levels of the NFQ. Responsibility for assessment rests with quality assured providers of education and training, which facilitates transparency and accountability in the process (QQI, 2020).

The national forum for the enhancement of teaching and learning (NFETL) commissioned a research project on RPL in higher education ([31]) which showed that most institutions considered claims for RPL in relation to advanced entry to a course and module exemptions; a limited number considered claims for full awards. QQI funded a parallel research project on RPL approaches and practices in FET ([32]), which suggested that RPL is seen as more appropriate at the lower levels of the NFQ (levels 1-3); at higher levels (4-6) it seems to be approached with more caution, due to more direct links at these levels to entry to the labour market.

Another strength of the Irish approach to VNFIL is collaboration and sharing of practice through the voluntary RPL practitioner network ([33]) created in 2015 and supported by major stakeholders. It aims to contribute to policy development. These developments demonstrate a targeted and strategic approach towards RPL implementation. Among the challenges that Ireland is facing are the need for common definition and understanding, for greater data integration across sectors and regions, for the integration of guidance into RPL processes, and perceived lack of resources for capacity building.

NQF implementation and impact

The Irish NFQ is an inclusive framework that has reached an advanced operational stage. Initial implementation prioritised qualifications in general education, VET and higher education awarded by national public bodies, which have now all been included in the framework. The NFQ is also open to fit-for-purpose qualifications offered by professional bodies and private and international awarding bodies operating in Ireland (NQAI, 2003). The 2019 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) amendment Act strengthened the role of the NFQ as central coordinating mechanism for qualifications and clarified the legal route to the NFQ for all qualifications. Section 55A-55I of the 2019 Act provides for a statutory scheme to facilitate voluntary access to the NFQ by a wider range of awarding bodies offering qualifications (European Commission; Cedefop, 2020).

The NFQ is referred to in strategic documents, legislation and regulatory instruments governing education and training ([34]). It is used in the National skills strategy 2025 ([35]) as a reference point to set up a number of targets in the National further education and training (FET) strategy 2020-24 ([36]) providing a continuum of learning opportunities from NFQ level 1 to 6 in the FET sector, and in the National strategy for higher education to 2030 ([37]) as a platform that has provided opportunities for improving the interface between further and higher education in terms of access, transfer, progression, quality assurance, upskilling and lifelong learning. It is also used by the National Skills Council and the Central Statistics Office in data collection on the education and training system and educational attainment, and by the Central Applications Office (CAO) in the application process for higher education (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

The NFQ is known and used extensively by education and training institutions and providers; NFQ levels associated with programmes and awards are mentioned explicitly in communications to prospective learners and the public. The framework is widely known and used by guidance and counselling practitioners; over 2000 posters depicting the NFQ and the EQF are distributed every year to the guidance community. It is also widely used and known by quality assurance bodies and also used regularly by NARIC Ireland to provide academic recognition advice on foreign qualifications ([38]).

Based on the nationally representative Omnibus survey responses, 38% of learners claim to have heard of NFQ and 28% of the EQF. According to the Union of Students in Ireland, the NFQ '[…] brings numerous benefits for

students, notably facilitating progression along the NFQ and promoting international mobility, due to its alignment with other international frameworks of qualifications' (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020). Among labour market stakeholders, in 2018/2019, 96% and, respectively, 69% of employers/recruiters were aware of the NFQ and EQF, and 54% and, respectively, 17% referred to the NFQ and EQF during recruitment ([39]). SOLAS uses the NFQ while reporting on education and training outputs and for setting out targets ([40]), and Intreo [Jobs Ireland] used the NFQ in job advertisements (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

QQI maintains a national database of the further education and training qualifications that it offers ([41]). The Irish register of qualifications (IRQ) ([42]) was launched in 2019 by QQI as a central repository for information about qualifications included in the NFQ and their associated programmes. It will confirm the relationship between qualifications and the NFQ, and supply details about associated courses, providers, and awarding bodies. It is also anticipated to include qualifications from other awarding bodies when they become eligible, including professional and other international awarding bodies. In time, it is intended to be fully interconnected with relevant European level qualifications portals. Currently, the IRQ includes quality-assured, recognised qualifications from universities and institutes of technology, private higher education colleges, education and training boards, and private further education providers. General education qualifications are not included (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

NQF and EQF levels are indicated in the QQI database for FET qualifications and in the comprehensive IRQ. Levels have been included on all further education and training qualifications issued by QQI (since June 2015) and on Europass diploma supplements in higher education and Europass certificate supplements in VET (since 2012 and 2013, respectively). However, they are not included on general education and higher education qualification documents, which are issued by autonomous bodies; this decision was the result of cost-benefit analysis. Inclusion of NQF and EQF levels on Europass supplements was facilitated by coordination at central level and is believed to have made NQF/EQF level references on qualification documents less important (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Materials, guidelines and tools aimed to support the use of the framework by different stakeholders include: the interactive NFQ fan diagram ([43]), and interactive tool qualifications frameworks – a European view ([44]); a 2019 e-booklet *European qualifications framework – adding value to qualifications* ([45]); the 2019 Guide to comparing qualifications in Ireland and New Zealand ([46]); and the 2018 Guide to comparing qualifications in Ireland and Hong Kong ([47]). The Universities Framework Implementation Network ([48]) includes guidance on the use of the NFQ in programme

design (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

Two NFQ evaluation studies have been carried out so far: a 2009 study on the impact and implementation of the NFQ ([49]) and a 2017 policy impact assessment of the Irish NFQ (Indecon, 2017) ([50]).

The 2017 policy impact assessment of the Irish NFQ (Indecon, 2017) found that it had a positive impact on transparency and comparability of qualifications, skills and competences; most stakeholders agreed that the NFQ has made it easier to see how qualifications relate to each other (84%), to explain and understand qualifications pathways (89%) and to evaluate qualifications for work or study (80%). The NFQ is perceived to have had an impact on the design of qualifications standards and curricula (74% strongly agreed/agreed that the learning outcomes approach of the NFQ has improved the practice of course and curriculum design), and on progression between qualifications achieved in school, in further and in higher education and training (81%). 61% of responders strongly agreed/agreed that the NFQ has made it easier for qualifications achieved in other countries to be understood, compared and recognised in Ireland, and 63% strongly agreed/agreed that the NFQ has improved the dialogue between the world of qualifications and the world of work.

The study also showed that there was continued support for the NFQ as an important element of the national skills and qualifications architecture, continued interest in a qualifications agenda and support for a national forum for knowledge exchange on all qualifications developments, including NFQ and EQF. At the same time, the risks of the NFQ becoming taken for granted and of the weakening of vigilance in maintaining its integrity were acknowledged, including the need to revisit the original levelling of certain qualifications in the light of emerging practice, experience and evidence ([51]) (Indecon, 2017).

The NFQ is an outward-looking framework with a strong external dimension through engagement with non-European countries: Australia, Bahrain, Hong Kong, Jordan, Malaysia and New Zealand. The importance of maintaining the international connectedness of the NFQ was also highlighted in the 2017 review (Indecon, 2017), while the EQF was seen as a valuable asset for promoting the international recognition of Irish qualifications abroad and of foreign qualifications in Ireland.

Referencing to the EQF

The Irish NFQ was the first national qualification framework to complete its referencing to the European qualifications framework (EQF), in 2009 (NQAI, 2009). The country built on experiences and conclusions of self-certification of compatibility of the Irish NFQ with the qualifications framework for the European higher education area (QF-EHEA), completed in 2006.

Since then, significant changes in the institutional and legislative landscape have taken place, along with some technical changes. Revised referencing of the NFQ to the EQF was undertaken in 2019, involving desk research, technical drafting, and structured stakeholder engagement. A single updated report for referencing of the NFQ to the EQF and self-certification against QF-EHEA was submitted to, and approved by, the EQF Advisory Group in November 2020 (QQI, 2020).

The report confirms existing alignments to the European frameworks and details NFQ-related developments; it also covers wider reforms of the education and training system and innovations in skills policy and governance. These include the establishment of QQI in 2012; the adoption of the Technological Universities Act 2018 and the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (amendment) Act 2019; the establishment of 16 new education and training boards with the aim of bringing local and regional coherence to further education and training; the establishment of SOLAS with responsibility for strategic coordination and funding of the further education and training sector; the determination of a new professional class of awards along with a set of professional award-type descriptors at NFQ Levels 5-9; the recent introduction of the Irish register of qualifications (IRQ) as a key information tool supporting the NFQ; and the introduction of the category of listed awarding bodies that can have their awards included within the NFQ (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

Important lessons and future plans

Following an incremental approach to implementation, the NFQ has reached an advanced operational stage. By international standards, it is well established, highly regarded, widely used and sustainable, delivering real benefits to learners, providers, employers, researchers, regulators, credential evaluators and policymakers (QQI, 2020). It has increased transparency in the qualifications system and it aids international recognition of qualifications gained in Ireland and academic recognition of foreign qualifications presented in Ireland (European Commission; Cedefop, 2020). A combination of factors contributed to its success: a mix of statutory and collaborative approaches with strong institutional arrangements; political support; and implementation and use of the framework in conjunction with other policy initiatives. 'Government and other stakeholders share the expectation that all learners in Ireland have access to qualifications that are fit for purpose, effectively regulated, and appropriately recognised nationally and internationally' (QQI, 2020,).

Three interrelated sets of activities have been outlined to guide future NQF-related developments in Ireland: design and implementation; awareness and use of the NFQ; and evaluation and impact (QQI, 2020). QQI sustains public confidence in the quality of education and training, promotes trust in the NFQ, and drives a culture of continuous improvement among education and training providers. QQI's Statement of strategy 2019-21 ([52]) outlined a new vision, mission and strategic priorities which place the NFQ at the centre of its work. The first of the four strategic priorities is to develop, promote and protect the integrity of the NQF, and there is awareness of the need for protection of standards to achieve this. In addition, QQI prioritises analysis and impact of measures taken to improve the quality of education and training for the benefit of learners; collaboration and engagement through mutually beneficial strategic partnerships; and increased internal organisational capacity to sustain, improve and communicate its performance (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

The main challenges include the continued development and implementation of the NFQ as a responsive and adaptable mechanism for qualifications and skills policy; the need to strengthen monitoring and review of levelling of qualifications and to include a broader range of qualifications within the NFQ; and the establishment of a national forum for qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

Among several initiatives under way, QQI has published a *Green paper on qualifications* and a companion *Technical paper on the qualifications system*

([53]), to stimulate dialogue among a wide range of stakeholders (learners, employers, parents, practitioners, occupational associations and professions, providers and their staff, regulators, trade unions, and the international community) and deepen understanding of trends, issues, uncertainties and opportunities in the qualifications system. A study has been commissioned on the comparability of qualification types at NFQ level 6 (EQF level 5), a review of qualifications at NFQ levels 1-4 (EQF levels 1-3) has been initiated, and the placement of the leaving certificate at NQF levels 4 and 5 is also under review. The National Academic Integrity Network was established in 2019 to promote the integrity of qualifications achieved in Ireland. QQI has also initiated engagement with professional regulatory bodies and higher education institutions aimed at developing synergies in professional and academic accreditation ([54]) (QQI, 2020).

Implementation of the newly introduced provisions of the 2019 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (amendment) Act 2019 is to be taken forward, to enable access to the framework of additional awarding bodies, mainly from the non-formal sector, and to ensure transparency and robustness of procedures. In 2021, QQI plans to establish a national forum for qualifications as a mechanism for collaboration and engagement among practitioners, policymakers and other interested parties; this proposal has already been endorsed by the national qualifications authorities, quality assurance bodies, and by the steering group for the updated referencing report. The Irish register of qualifications (IRQ) was launched in 2019 and, when fully implemented, will provide a comprehensive infrastructure to support the recognition and understanding of qualifications in the NFQ (QQI, 2020).

Main sources of information

- Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) hosts the EQF NCP: http://www.qqi.ie/
- NFQ/EQF website: https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-(NFQ).aspx
- The Irish register of qualifications: https://irq.ie/
- The QQI qualifications database: https://qsearch.qqi.ie/WebPart/Search?searchtype=awards
- National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2009). *Referencing of the Irish national framework of qualifications to the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning.* http://www.qqi.ie/Documents/Referencing%20Irish%20NFQ%20to%20the%20European%20QF%20for%20Lifelong%20Learning.pdf
- National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2006). *Verification of Compatibility of Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area – Final report, November 2006.* https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Verification%20of%20Compatibility%20of%20NFQ%20with%20QF%20EHEA%2020220609.pdf
- QQI (2020). Referencing of the Irish NFQ to the EQF and QF-EHEA – National Report 2020 [unpublished].

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
10	**Doctoral degree** **Higher Doctorate**	8
9	**Master degree** **Postgraduate diploma** **Level 9 Professional award**	7
8	**Honours bachelor degree** **Higher diploma** **Level 8 Professional award**	6
7	**Ordinary bachelor degree** **Level 7 Professional award**	
6	**Advanced certificate** e.g. level 6 advanced certificate in horticulture **Higher certificate** **Level 6 Professional award**	5
5	**Level 5 certificate** e.g. level 5 certificate in hospitality operations **Leaving certificate** **Level 5 Professional award**	4
4	**Level 4 certificate** e.g. level 4 certificate in engineering skills **Leaving certificate**	3
3	**Level 3 certificate** e.g. level 3 certificate in information and communication technology **Junior certificate / Cycle** The final Junior certificate examination will be held in 2021 and then all examinations will be called the Junior Cycle (QQI, 2020).	2
2	**Level 2 certificate** e.g. level 2 certificate in general learning	1

1   **Level 1 certificate**
      e.g. level 1 certificate in communications

Acronyms

ATP	access, transfer and progression
EQF	European qualifications framework
FET	further education and training
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Award Council
MIMLOs	minimum intended module learning outcomes
MIPLOs	minimum intended programme learning outcomes
NFETL	national forum for the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education
NFQ	national framework of qualifications
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
NQF	national qualifications framework
PATD	professional award type descriptors
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RPL	recognition of prior learning
STEM	science, technology, engineering and mathematics
VNFIL	validation of non-formal and informal learning

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QQI (2020). *Referencing of the Irish NFQ to the EQF and QF-EHEA – National Report 2020* [unpublished].

Notes

[1] https://ec.europa.eu/education/news/pisa-2018_en

[2] The Action plan has supported expansion in the range of occupations making use of dual-VET programmes and has promoted the offer of apprenticeships at higher levels of the NFQ. Post-2016 apprenticeships lead to an award at levels 5 to 10 of the NFQ (QQI, 2020).

[3] The 2018 Technological Universities Act sets out a process whereby consortia can apply for Technological University designation. Technological universities focus on vocationally and professionally oriented science and technology programmes (QQI, 2020).

[4] Quality and Qualifications Ireland (2016). Core statutory quality assurance guidelines. https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Core%20Statutory%20Quality%20Assurance%20Guidelines.pdf

[5] The National skills strategy 2025 â Ireland's future is available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf

[6] Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (amendment) Act, 32/2019. http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2019/act/32/enacted/en/html

[7] The structure of the Irish NFQ can be seen in the interactive diagram available at: https://nfq.qqi.ie/

[8] https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Determinations%20for%20the%20outline%20National%20Framework%20of%20Qualifications.pdf

[9] https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Descriptors%20-%20minor,%20special%20purpose,%20supplemental.pdf

[10] Minor, special purpose or supplemental awards can be identified as micro credentials (with a volume of 5 or more ECTS credits at higher education levels) (QQI, 2020).

[11] https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Professional_Award-types_PS3_2014.pdf

[12] Their extension to doctoral level (NFQ level 10) is being considered (QQI, 2020).

[13] E.g. a specific honours bachelor degree award could be classed as both major and professional and would need to be consistent with the bachelor award-type as well as the professional award-type descriptors (QQI, 2020).

[14] More information on validation of provider programmes is available at: https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/Programme-Validation07.aspx

[15] QQI (2016). Core statutory guidelines for providers of education and training. https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/Core-QA-Guidelines.aspx

QQI statutory quality assurance guidelines currently consist of: core guidelines, relevant to all providers, sector-specific guidelines for groups of providers, and topic-specific guidelines for themes or forms of provision (e.g. apprenticeship programmes, blended learning, research degree programmes). All providers offering programmes leading to awards on the NFQ must have regard to QQI guidelines in development of their quality assurance procedures (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

[16] https://ncca.ie/media/3958/learning-outcomes-an-international-perspective.pdf

[17] https://ncca.ie/media/4107/learning-outcomes-booklet_en.pdf

[18] https://ncca.ie/media/1927/assessment-workshop-1_en.pdf

[19] Qualifications (education and training) Act 26/1999. http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1999/act/26/enacted/en/pdf

[20] Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012. http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/bills28/acts/2012/a2812.pdf

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[22] QQI (2017). Who we are and what we do. https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Who%20We%20Are-Booklet-August%2017.pdf

[23] More information can be found at: https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/QQI-Governance-.aspx

[24] This section draws mainly on input from the 2018 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning (Murphy, 2019).

[25] The Department of Education and Skills was renamed the Department of Education in July 2020, when a new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science was established.

[26] Department of Education and Skills. Action plan for education 2016-19: strategy statement. https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Strategy-Statement/Department-of-Education-and-Skills-Strategy-Statement-2016-2019.pdf

[27] The National skills strategy 2025 â Ireland's future is available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf

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[29] The 2015 restatement of the 2003 version is available at: https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/ATP%20Policy%20Restatement%20FINAL%202018.pdf

[30] The first version, published in June 2005 by NQAI, is available at:

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[31] National forum for the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education (2015). A current overview of recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Irish higher education. Focused research report; No 2.

[32] Goggin et.al, (2017). Recognition of prior learning in Irish further education and training. A study commissioned by QQI and ETBI, available at: https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Prior%20Learning%20Report.pdf

[33] More information about the RPL practitioner network is available at: https://rpl-ireland.ie/

[34] Technological Universities Act 2018. https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/bills/bill/2015/121/ https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/act/2018/3/eng/enacted/a318.pdf Tax and Duty Manual â Education and Vocational Training, Revenue 2017. https://www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/value-added-tax/part03-taxable-transactions-goods-ica-services/Services/services-education-vocational-training-post-2015-20170630083852.pdf Ministerial Regulation â Visa Conditions for Studying a Degree Programme in Ireland. http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/Student%20Pathway  Statutory Instruments â Student Grant Scheme 2020. http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2020/si/76/made/en/pdf Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI). https://susi.ie/eligibility/undergraduate-student/approved-institutionscourses-for-undergraduate-students/ https://susi.ie/eligibility/postgraduate-student/approved-institutionscourses-for-postgraduate-students/

[35] https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf

[36] https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf

[37] https://hea.ie/resources/publications/national-strategy-for-higher-education-2030/

[38] E.g. https://www.qqi.ie/QualRec%20Comparability%20Statements/France_ID_44.pdf

[39] https://www.qqi.ie/News/Pages/Making-Sense-of-Qualifications----How-Recruitment-Professionals-in-Ireland-view-Qualifications.aspx

[40] https://www.regionalskills.ie/national-skills-updates/solas-monitoring-ireland-s-skills-supply.html https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/da278b4ad3/national-skills-bulletin-2018.pdf

[41] The QQI database for further education and training qualifications is available at: https://qsearch.qqi.ie/WebPart/Search?searchtype=awards

[42] www.IRQ.ie

[43] https://nfq.qqi.ie/

[44] https://nfq.qqi.ie/qualifications-frameworks.html

[45] https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/The%20%20European%20Qualifications%20Framework%20EQF%2010%20Years.pdf

[46] https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/NZQA%20New%20Zealand%20Webx.pdf

[47] https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Comparing%20Qualifications%20Ireland%20and%20Hong%20Kong.pdf

[48] http://www.nfqnetwork.ie/

[49] See NQAI (2009).

[50] See Indecon (2017). The 2017 Policy impact assessment of the Irish NFQ was commissioned by QQI and conducted by Indecon International Economic Consultants. It used a mixed method approach: an online survey of national stakeholders and bilateral interviews with key representative bodies.

[51] Specific recommendations included: to continue to develop and implement the NFQ as a responsive and adaptable mechanism for qualifications and skills policy; to consider initiatives to improve awareness of the NFQ among stakeholders; to revisit the operation of the NFQ for upper secondary school qualifications in Ireland and for qualifications at EQF level 5; to examine QQI's awarding function and NFQ levelling processes more generally; to ensure clarity and simplicity of communication; to include a broader range of qualifications within the NFQ; to ensure strong international engagement; to establish data to investigate transfer and progression pathways through the national qualifications system; to establish a national forum for qualifications (Indecon, 2017).
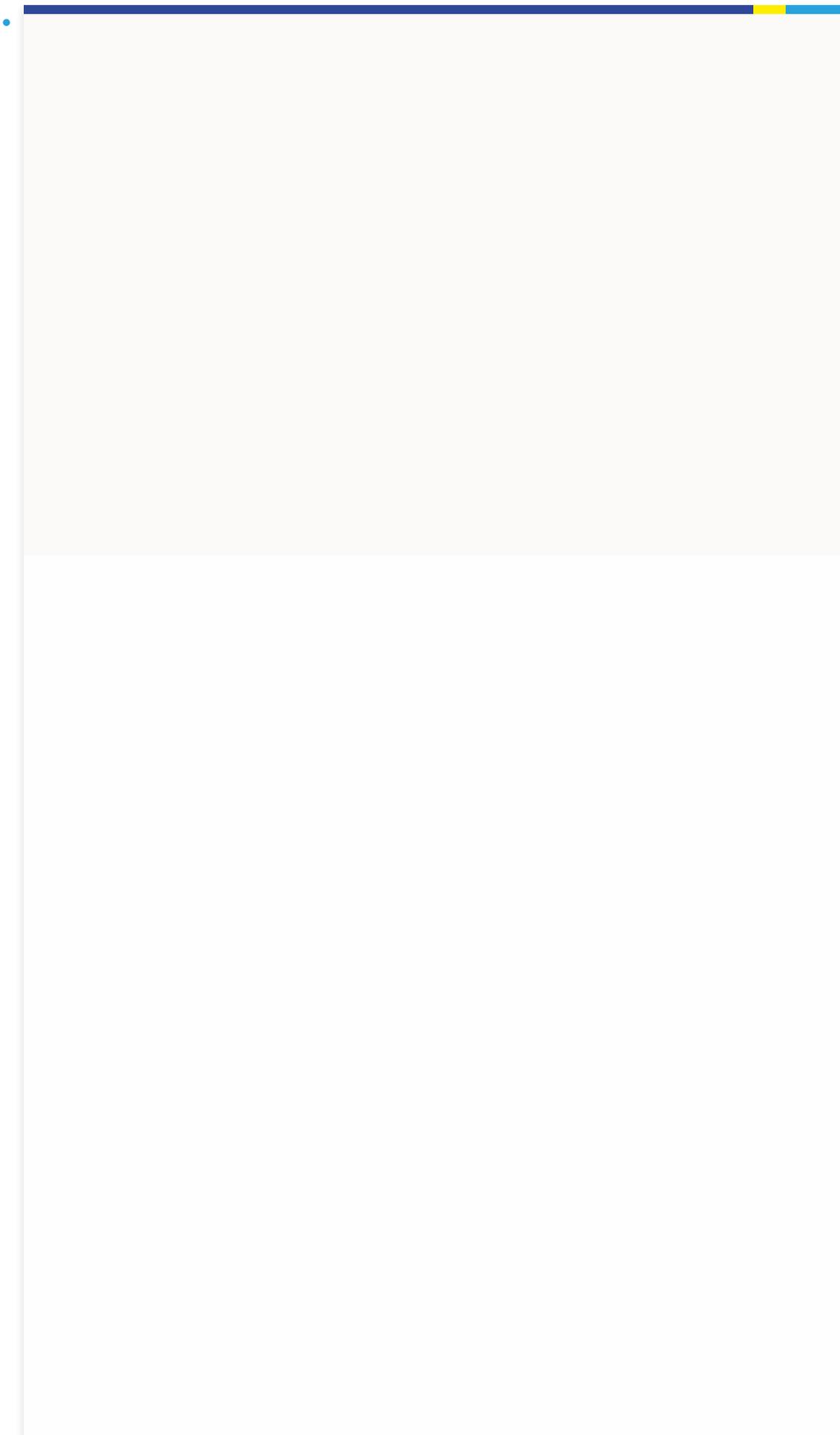
[52] https://www.qqi.ie/News/PublishingImages/Pages/QQIs-Statement-of-Strategy-2019-2021%20Adding-Value-to-Qualifications/Statement%20of%20Strategy%202019-2021%20-%20Adding%20Value%20to%20Qualifications.pdf

[53] https://www.qqi.ie/News/Pages/New-Green-Paper-on-Qualifications.aspx

[54] See for example https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Accreditation%20Approval%20of%20Higher%20Education%20Programmes%20by%20Professional%20Bodies.pdf

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