EUROPEAN
INVENTORY
OF NQFs 2022

IRELAND

European Inventory of National Qualifications Frameworks 2022 – Ireland

Contents

1.   Introduction

This report is part of the European inventory of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). Since 2009, Cedefop has carried out a systematic mapping and analysis of NQF developments in countries participating in the European qualifications framework (EQF) process. These reviews, done in close cooperation with the EQF Advisory Group, the European Commission and the European Training Foundation, have directly supported the development of operational and sustainable NQFs. The report offers a detailed description of the structure and scope of the Irish NQF, and its objectives, functions and institutional arrangements, as well as data on its implementation and impact.

The Irish national framework of qualifications (NFQ) is among the older qualifications frameworks in Europe and has reached an advanced operational stage. It is a comprehensive framework, covering all education and training subsystems and all learning. It is structured using 10 qualification levels, defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence; and five classes of awards. The NFQ was self-certified to the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) in 2006 and it was referenced to the EQF in 2009. Updated referencing and an updated self-certification report were adopted in 2020.

2.   National context

2.1.   Policy context

Strong central oversight of the Irish 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 qualifications provision (QQI, 2020a). Curricular reforms continue, with a focus on key competences, skills development and new assessment arrangements. There is continued government support for actions to improve adult literacy, reskilling, upskilling and green skills. Performance against most EU education and training benchmarks is high. The rate of early leavers from education and training declined to 3.3 % in 2021 (European Commission. DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022). Vocational education and training VET is usually offered in further education and training (FET) and encompasses a range of programmes (e.g. post-leaving certificate, traineeships, workplace training options, apprenticeships and community education). It is estimated that 21 % of school leavers enrol in FET (Cedefop and SOLAS, 2022). The percentage of tertiary education graduates is the second highest in the EU (61.7 % in 2021); an increasing number of students choose to study flexibly (part-time or remotely). The employment rate of recent

graduates was 90 % in 2021. Adult participation in lifelong learning was 13.6 % in 2021 (European Commission. DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022).

The NFQ is well embedded in strategic documents, legislation and regulatory instruments governing education and training ([1]). NFQ levels are used extensively as a reference point to set several targets ([2]). In the national strategy for higher education to 2030 the NFQ is seen as a platform improving the interface between further and higher education in terms of access, transfer, progression, quality assurance, upskilling and lifelong learning. The NFQ also features in the 2022 funding and reform framework for higher education ([3]), which expresses commitment to enable a tertiary system that seeks to integrate the further education, higher education and research sectors, and is characterised by clear and extensive pathways for learners, and an expansive qualifications framework aligned with current and future knowledge and skills needs (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

The NFQ fulfils its purpose through its integration with related policies and has become 'an explicit reference point in the regulations, policies and guidelines which govern the design, approval, review, delivery, assessment, certification and awarding of qualifications' (QQI, 2022, p. 6). Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) has facilitated the integration of the NFQ and policies on access, transfer and progression into quality assurance arrangements in the post-secondary education and training system (QQI, 220a).

2.2. NQF legal basis

The NFQ was first proposed in legislation in 1999 ([4]) and it was established in 2003 (NQAI, 2003). The operation of the framework is governed by a 2012 act and its 2019 amendment act ([5]). The latter introduced important changes strengthening the comprehensive nature of the framework and its role as central coordinating mechanism for qualifications, and clarified the legal route to the NFQ for all qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

([1]) For example, the 2020 *Programme for Government: Our shared future*, the action plan for apprenticeship, 2021 to 2025, the national access plan, 2022 to 2028, the Technological Universities Act 2018, the student grant scheme 2022 and the student support regulations 2022.

([2]) For example, in the national skills strategy for 2025 and 2020–2024 national FET strategy.

([3]) 2022 funding and reform framework for higher education.

([4]) The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999.

([5]) The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 and the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019.

Recent implementing regulations include the 2022 joint-sectoral protocol between designated awarding bodies (DABs) and QQI (QQI, 2022), which regulates the formal inclusion of qualifications developed by universities, technological universities and institutes of technology within the NFQ. A code of practice for provision of programmes of higher education and training to international learners is currently under consultation; it outlines the expectations from providers enrolling international learners on programmes that lead to awards included within the NFQ, for the purpose of obtaining authorisation to use the International Education Mark (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

The 2022 Higher Education Authority Act includes a condition for the designation of an institution of higher education to provide a specified number of programmes and conduct examinations leading to awards that are included within the NFQ (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

3.   NQF objectives and functions

Originally, the NFQ was conceptualised as a driver of systemic change towards lifelong learning and rationalisation of FET qualifications. It is now viewed more as an enabler, rather than a driver, of wider reform, with implications for setting standards, quality assurance, developing awards, teaching, assessment and programme design. It functions both as a policy and as an instrument for policy. The NFQ was designed to facilitate (QQI, 2020a):

(a)   communication about qualifications (for example on their comparability);
(b)   the design and specification of specific qualifications and of programmes of education and training;
(c)   processes for the recognition of prior learning;
(d)   the design and specification of learning pathways.

While promoting communication and transparency of qualifications remain important functions of the NFQ, the quality assurance and regulatory functions have gained prominence. The NFQ is embedded in the statutory quality assurance arrangements for post-school education and training in Ireland (QQI, 2016). Since 2019, the concept of a qualification 'included within' the NFQ has replaced the term 'recognised within', implying an interest in the quality assurance arrangements for the delivery and certification of a qualification, not merely in the *ex post* recognition. The 2019 act also reinforced the legal relationship between long-standing constituent qualifications of the NFQ and acknowledged the legal obligation of QQI, as an awarding body, to develop, deliver and award qualifications that are

demonstrably included within the NFQ (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020; QQI, 2020a).

4. Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

4.1. NQF structure and level descriptors

The NFQ is defined in the 2019 act as 'a system of *levels* and *types* of awards based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired […] to entitle the learner to an award at a particular level, and of the type concerned, within the framework' (Article 14 (b), emphasis added). The main building blocks of the framework ([6]) are the 10 learning-outcomes-based levels, the level indicators, the five award types and their descriptors.

Each NFQ level has a specified level indicator or descriptor ([7]) 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 award type classes were determined originally: major (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]).

A professional class of awards was established in 2014 at NFQ levels 5–9 (EQF levels 4–7) ([10]) to strengthen the capacity of the NFQ to specify the levels of

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([6]) The structure of the NFQ can be seen in the fan diagram.

([7]) See grid of NFQ level indicators for more details.

([8]) See Addendum 4 of *Outline National Framework of Qualifications – Determinations made by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland* for more details.

([9]) See 'Descriptors for minor, special purpose, supplemental award-types' for more details. Awards under these types can be identified as microcredentials (with five or more European credit transfer and accumulation system credits at higher education levels). Their standards may be specified for fewer than the eight sub-strands of NFQ level indicators (QQI, 2020a).

([10]) See 'Professional award-type descriptors (award class: professional) for the alignment of professional awards at NFQ levels 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9'. They are the general standards

professional or occupation-oriented awards. The professional class implicitly introduced the concept that an award can have more than one class and type ([11]). They are typically used in conjunction with original NFQ award types.

4.2.   NQF scope and coverage

The 10 levels of the NFQ capture qualifications achieved in schools, FET and higher education. The NFQ also seeks to accommodate qualifications obtained through non-formal learning, offered by international, private and professional bodies. The 2019 act provides for a statutory scheme to facilitate voluntary access to the NFQ for a wider range of awarding bodies; development of policies and processes is under way (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Following an evaluation of the NFQ (Indecon, 2017), the review of the original levelling of certain qualifications was considered necessary, in light of emerging practice, experience and evidence. The comparability of the advanced certificate and the higher certificate, the two FET and higher education major awards at NFQ level 6, has been recently evaluated (Ecctis, 2021); the two qualifications were found to be appropriately aligned with NFQ level 6 (EQF level 5) in terms of achieved learning outcomes, while some differences existed between them in the distribution of NFQ substrands (thus warranting differentiated award-type descriptors) and progression pathways. Consideration of possible changes to award-type descriptors, and of possibilities for enhancing the comparability and transferability of learning, may follow. The placement of the 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 will be revisited in the context of ongoing senior cycle reform (QQI, 2020a).

Table 1.   **Irish national framework of qualifications (NFQ)**

NFQ level	Qualification types	EQF level
10	Doctoral degree	8
	Higher doctorate	
9	Master's degree	7
	Postgraduate diploma	
	Level 9 professional award (*)	

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or Irish apprenticeship awards at NFQ levels 5–9. Their extension to doctoral level (NFQ level 10) is being considered (QQI, 2020a).

([11]) For example, a specific honours bachelor's degree award could be classed as both major and professional, and would need to be consistent with both the bachelor's award-type and the professional award-type descriptors (QQI, 2020a).

8	Honours bachelor's degree	6
	Higher diploma	
	Level 8 professional award (*)	
7	Ordinary bachelor's degree	
	Level 7 professional award (*)	
6	Advanced certificate, e.g. level 6 advanced certificate in horticulture	5
	Higher certificate	
	Level 6 professional award (*)	
5	Level 5 certificate, e.g. level 5 certificate in hospitality operations	4
	Leaving certificate	
	Level 5 professional award (*)	
4	Level 4 certificate, e.g. level 4 certificate in engineering skills	3
	Leaving certificate	
3	Level 3 certificate, e.g. level 3 certificate in information and communication technology	2
	Junior cycle (**)	
2	Level 2 certificate e.g. level 2 certificate in general learning	1
	Junior cycle (**)	
1	Level 1 certificate, e.g. level 1 certificate in communications	N/A

NB: Only qualification types from the major and professional award classes are listed here. Minor and special purpose awards can be included at NFQ levels 1–10, and supplemental awards at NFQ levels 4–10.

(*) The level of professional awards is clearly communicated on certificates, diplomas and in the qualifications register, but the qualification might not be clearly identified as a professional award.

(**) A junior cycle profile of achievement is issued to each student following the third year of junior cycle. It includes learning achievements broadly aligned with NFQ level 3. In a few cases the profile of achievement would be associated with level 2 learning programmes (included following reform of the junior cycle, for students with special educational needs), which are broadly aligned with NFQ level 2 (see the Department of Education web page on the junior cycle profile of achievement for more information).

Sources: Adapted from QQI (2020a) and European Commission and Cedefop (2022).

4.3. Use of learning outcomes

The learning outcomes approach has been central to the NFQ, associated legislation and system reforms. Irish experts consider both views of learning outcomes valuable: as results oriented, measurable and objective, and as process oriented, open to negotiation and only partly measurable (Cedefop, 2018). 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. It has provided common ground for different stakeholders (general education, higher education, VET, policymakers, students, employers and trade unions) and has become the basis for shared dialogue on the purpose of education. Increased progression between FET and higher education is an important achievement in the steps taken so far.

Award-type descriptors represent the most general expression of standards for NFQ qualifications; they are expressed in learning outcomes, while also referring to NFQ level, volume and (sometimes) progression characteristics. More detailed award standards are maintained by awarding bodies (QQI, 2020a).

In FET and higher education, award standards are elaborated in the form of statements of minimum intended programme learning outcomes. For QQI awards, the criteria for validation of provider programmes leading to NFQ awards [12] require providers to develop minimum intended learning outcomes for the overall programme and for each module.

In general school education, learning outcomes are seen in the context of professional development. In the junior cycle, programme design is guided by 24 statements of learning [13]. The senior cycle curriculum is based on a key skills framework [14], which includes associated learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are prominent in the way school subjects and examinations are specified, and are aligned with the appropriate NFQ levels (QQI, 2020a). Guidelines for teachers on the use of learning outcomes and a companion text [15] were developed following a 2019 review [16] of international practice in the use of learning outcomes in curriculum reform.

4.4. Quality assurance arrangements

Qualifications included in the NFQ are subject to internal and external quality assurance for qualification development, design, review, delivery, assessment and certification. All programmes leading to NFQ qualifications must include explicit intended learning outcomes and be developed in line with NFQ requirements and associated policies on access, transfer and progression.

QQI is responsible for external quality assurance in FET and higher education. The learning outcomes approach features prominently in its activities, and

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[12] More information on validating provider programmes is available at 'Validating QQI award programmes'.

[13] See 'Statements of learning' for more details.

[14] See 'Senior cycle – Key skills framework' for more details.

[15] *Learning Intentions and Success Criteria*.

[16] *Learning Outcomes: An international perspective.*

implementation of the NFQ is embedded in national statutory quality assurance guidelines ([17]), which apply to all post-school providers (QQI, 2020a).

Quality assurance in general education is ensured through the School Inspectorate of the Department of Education. Developers of new general education awards must also comply with procedures and criteria to be developed by QQI for the inclusion of such qualifications within the NFQ (QQI, 2020a).

With a view to opening up the NFQ to qualifications awarded outside the formal system, the 2019 act introduced a new category of awarding body, listed awarding bodies (LABs), to 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, 2020a); policy development is under way (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

5. Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The authority responsible for the NFQ is QQI, on behalf of the Department of Education and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. QQI was created in 2012, as an independent state agency at the centre of the qualification system, enabling a systematic focus on qualifications, with stronger coordination with quality assurance policies. QQI also conducts reviews of access, transfer and progression policies, approves programmes offered by a variety of education providers and regulates the quality of programmes. It is also the main awarding body for FET qualifications and a niche awarding body for private independent higher education qualifications.

QQI is the designated EQF national coordination point (NCP) and national Europass centre, acts as the national correspondent for QF-EHEA and hosts the Irish national academic recognition information centre (NARIC).

NFQ governance is primarily ensured within the structures of QQI. The agency has a dedicated NFQ unit ([18]), but all its 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).

([17]) See 'Quality assurance guidelines' for more details.

([18]) Five members of staff support work on the NFQ on a permanent basis: the head of qualifications information and learning pathways, one senior manager, one manager, and two administrators supporting work on qualifications information, including the maintenance of the qualifications database (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Collaboration and partnership have been hallmarks of the NFQ process since the beginning. Providers and awarding bodies are partners in the implementation of the NFQ, while other users of qualifications are stakeholders. National awarding bodies offering qualifications included in the NFQ are QQI, the State Examinations Commission, universities, technological universities and the institutes of technology. The joint-sectoral protocol between DABs and QQI (QQI, 2022) aims to balance the autonomy of DABs with QQI's independent responsibilities relating to the implementation of the NFQ, and clarifies their respective roles, responsibilities and expectations as joint custodians of the NFQ. Policy developments are in progress to regulate access to the NFQ for LABs (including professional, private and international awarding bodies).

Other key actors in the qualifications system include professional recognition bodies, disciplinary or occupational communities of practice, employers and recruiters, learners, state funding agencies, government departments, and national and regional labour market actors.

A consultation process was initiated in 2020 through the Green Paper on the qualifications system (QQI, 2020b), to stimulate dialogue among a wide range of stakeholders and explore trends, issues, uncertainties and opportunities in the qualifications system.

The Irish Quality and Qualifications Forum (IQQF) was established in 2022, in response to challenges that require collaborative approaches. The standing group's work will relate to quality assurance and institutional/system research tools and models that help maintain the integrity of the qualifications system; supporting and understanding the varied standards, policies and processes [19] underpinning qualifications and the associated courses; the learning pathways leading to qualifications, occupations and lifelong learning; and understanding the roles of the diverse communities of practice [20] that support the establishment, issue, validation and recognition of qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

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[19] For example, awards standards for DABs, LABs and QQI; occupational standards; professional regulations; professional and regulatory bodies' accreditation criteria; programmes/curricula.

[20] For example, academic disciplines, industry and occupational associations, professional recognition bodies, regulators.

6. Recognition and validation of prior learning

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

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is part of policies for recognition of prior learning (RPL). RPL is a powerful tool for widening participation in education and training, and for access to and progression in workplaces [21]. It can provide access to formal education, and mechanisms for the awarding of credit and exemptions within programmes, and is increasingly giving direct access to complete awards, particularly in FET. The national skills strategy for 2025 and strategic documents in FET and higher education promote systematic RPL, including a national RPL framework spanning sectors.

QQI provides an overarching enabling architecture for RPL and supports implementation in partnership with stakeholders. QQI has policy responsibility for access, transfer and progression (ATP) of learners. In 2015, QQI issued a restatement of the policy and criteria for ATP for providers of further and higher education and training, and principles and operational guidelines for RPL [22]. Providers must comply with QQI policies on credit accumulation, credit transfer, and the identification and assessment of previously acquired knowledge, skills and competences, and must establish at local level their own policies and procedures on ATP; with the 2019 act, they are given a more central role in RPL processes (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). QQI has committed to scoping a national approach to RPL, involving a review of existing policies and practices, which will also provide for revised guidelines in 2023 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Significant national initiatives in all sectors have enabled progress in the increased implementation and awareness of RPL. Four stages of validation consistent with those in the 2012 Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning [23] (identification, documentation, assessment and certification) are used, but the use and combination of these stages differs in practice depending on the purpose of RPL.

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[21] This section draws on input from Murphy (2019).

[22] See *QQI Policy Restatement: Policy and criteria for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners for providers of further and higher education and training* and 'Principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning in further and higher education and training'.

[23] Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The legislative framework underpinning the NFQ facilitates RPL opportunities at all NFQ levels. There are no separate qualifications awarded through RPL as such, but rather NFQ qualifications can be acquired in part and/or (increasingly) in full through RPL. The definition of levels of learning and the articulation of learning outcomes in the NFQ have been found useful for RPL purposes (QQI, 2020a).

Challenges remain in intra-sectoral unevenness and lack of coherence, but infrastructure is strengthening (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). Collaboration and sharing of practice are facilitated through the voluntary RPL practitioner network ([24]).

6.2. Credit systems

The national approach to credit is part of policies on ATP, established with the introduction of the NFQ. It is organised in two tracks: one for higher education and one for FET.

The European credit transfer and accumulation system is widely used in higher education, in line with guidelines in its users' guide and national guidelines ([25]). Typical credit volume or credit ranges have been established for each major award type at NFQ levels 6–9 (QQI, 2020a).

The credit, accumulation and transfer system for FET was developed in the context of the common awards system, applicable to NFQ levels 1–6; this was further refined. Credit value is assigned to major, minor, special purpose and supplemental awards, clarifying the size of and relationship between various awards. One credit corresponds to 10 hours of typical learner effort (QQI, 2020a).

In general education, only the leaving certificate applied, a distinct track in the senior cycle preparing students for adult and working life, is modularised and graded using credit accumulation (QQI, 2020a).

6.3. Recognition of foreign qualifications

The NFQ and the EQF facilitate recognition of foreign qualifications, providing a means to interpret and advise on the level of academic achievements (QQI, 2020a). The NFQ is an outward-looking framework with a strong external dimension through engagement with non-European countries as well: Australia, Bahrain, Hong Kong ([26]), Jordan, Malaysia and New Zealand ([27]). The Russian war in Ukraine has made it necessary to use the NFQ/EQF as devices to understand

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([24]) More information at RPL Practitioner Network Ireland.

([25]) See *ECTS Users' Guide 2015* and *Principles and operational guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training*.

([26]) Comparing qualifications in Ireland and Hong Kong.

([27]) Comparing qualifications in Ireland and New Zealand: A guide.

and explain the Ukrainian qualifications system and the relationship of qualifications to levels ([28]) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

NARIC Ireland is governed by QQI's *Policy and criteria for facilitating the academic recognition of foreign qualifications* ([29]), scheduled for review in 2023. NARIC oversees and facilitates national implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention ([30]) and promotes fair recognition of academic qualifications in line with the European area of recognition manual ([31]). The NARIC database ([32]) lists over 1 550 qualifications from over 150 countries, supporting competent authorities and stakeholders in authenticating qualifications or determining eligibility for access to work or continuing education.

Qualifications authorities in Ireland and the United Kingdom have agreed the correspondence between the qualifications frameworks in operation across the five jurisdictions. The joint publication 'Qualifications can cross boundaries' ([33]) offers a short guide to the comparability of UK and Irish qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

QQI was mandated to develop an International Education Mark to ensure a safe, high-quality and consistent learning experience for international students. The draft code of practice for higher education providers (under consultation) includes specific requirements for admissions and recognition of qualifications, strongly supporting the LRC, the Council recommendation on promoting automatic recognition ([34]) and the guidelines in the European area of recognition manual (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

([28]) Guides to recognition services in a variety of languages and supplementary 'rough guides' to support the integration of refugees and displaced people are available at Recognition of foreign qualifications: NARIC Ireland offers advice on the recognition of foreign academic qualifications in Ireland.

([29]) *Policy and criteria for facilitating the academic recognition of foreign qualifications*.

([30]) See Subsidiary text to the Convention: 'Recommendation on the use of qualifications frameworks in the recognition of foreign qualifications'.

([31]) Available on the ENIC-NARIC website.

([32]) NARIC database.

([33]) Qualifications can cross boundaries.

([34]) Council recommendation of 26 November 2018 on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad.

7.   NQF implementation and impact

7.1.   Stage of implementation

The NFQ is operational and a permanent and visible feature of the education and training system, improving the transparency and comparability of all nationally recognised qualifications; work is under way to regulate access to the framework for a wider range of awarding bodies. The NFQ also supports reform and renewal in the qualifications system.

7.2.   Indicating EQF/NQF levels

NQF and EQF levels are indicated in the QQI database for FET qualifications, in the comprehensive Irish register of qualifications (IRQ), on all FET qualifications issued by QQI (since 2015) and on Europass diploma supplements in higher education and certificate supplements in FET (since 2012 and 2013 respectively). Their inclusion 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. NQF/EQF levels are not included on general education and higher education qualification documents, which are issued by autonomous bodies (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018, 2022).

7.3.   NQF dissemination

An NFQ communications campaign was conducted throughout 2022 to promote the NFQ, the IRQ and the EQF as key reference points for end users and stakeholders. It had a wide target audience including learners, employers, providers, policymakers, the guidance community, admissions offices and international stakeholders. The campaign involved regular promotion through social media platforms, direct mailing, an e-zine, a quarterly newsletter, webinars and the NFQ web page. It was also an opportunity to highlight the ongoing relevance and responsiveness of the NFQ, in particular the inclusion of awards through the LABs scheme, the introduction of the joint-sectoral protocol with DABs and the potential for inclusion of microcredentials (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022). Dissemination materials include the NFQ fan diagram ([35]), updated in 2021 to reflect the tertiary education sector of the 21st century, changes to the junior cycle at NFQ levels 2–3 (EQF levels 1–2) and the introduction of the professional award type. The diagram is designed to be responsive to expected future changes, including the introduction of LABs (European Commission and

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([35]) National Framework of Qualifications.

Cedefop, 2022). A global fan diagram was created, showing relationships between the NFQ, EQF and QF-EHEA, as well as an updated NFQ video.

An updated communications campaign has been designed to mark the 20th anniversary of the NFQ in 2023; it includes several projects led by QQI and will culminate with an anniversary event planned for November 2023 [36].

7.4. Qualifications databases and registers

The Irish register of qualifications (IRQ) [37] was launched in 2019 by QQI as a central repository of information on all qualifications included in the NFQ and their associated programmes. It is intended to benefit learners, guidance counsellors, funding agencies, employers, recruiters and admissions offices; it includes 11 376 qualifications (February 2023) from FET and higher education. General education qualifications are not included. Information on awards made by QQI is updated in the IRQ automatically in real time. DABs are invited to upload information twice a year, but updates can be made at any time as needed. The IRQ contains all required elements of Annex VI of the EQF recommendation [38], except the qualification description in learning outcomes; it also contains some of the optional elements (e.g. credit points). QQI publishes information on qualifications from its IRQ service to the Europass platform via the Qualifications Dataset Register at least once per year.

QQI also maintains a national database of the FET qualifications that it offers [39].

7.5. Awareness and use of the NQF

The NFQ is known and used extensively by education and training providers; NFQ levels of programmes and awards are explicitly mentioned in communications to prospective learners and the public. The framework is widely known and used by guidance and counselling practitioners, by quality assurance bodies, and by NARIC Ireland to provide academic recognition advice on foreign qualifications.

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' (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020). Among labour

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[36] See 'Celebrating 20 years of the national framework of qualifications'.

[37] Irish register of qualifications.

[38] Council recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning.

[39] Awards.

market stakeholders, in 2018, 96 % and 69 % of employers/recruiters were aware of the NFQ and EQF respectively, and 54 % and 17 % referred to the NFQ and EQF respectively during recruitment ([40]).

The Further Education and Training Authority (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (SOLAS)) uses the NFQ while reporting on education and training outputs and for setting out targets ([41]). The NFQ 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 ([42]), and by the Central Applications Office in the application process for higher education (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020, 2022).

7.6. Monitoring and evaluating the NQF

Two evaluation studies of the NFQ have been carried out: a 2009 study on the impact and implementation of the NFQ (NQAI, 2009a) and a 2017 policy impact assessment of the Irish NFQ (Indecon, 2017).

Indecon (2017) showed that there was continued support for the NFQ as an important element of the national skills and qualifications architecture ([43]). Findings and recommendations have informed subsequent developments, such as work towards the inclusion of a wider range of qualifications in the NFQ, continued international engagement, the evaluation of the two major awards at NFQ level 6 (Ecctis, 2021) and the setting up of the IQQF in 2022.

The evaluation of the two major awards placed at NFQ level 6 / EQF level 5 put forward NFQ-related recommendations beyond the specificities of the two qualification types. It raised the question of whether the NFQ and award type descriptors should be used primarily as tools of regulation, communication or both, and pointed to the need for closer connection with qualification delivery and design. Recommendations include (Ecctis, 2021):

(a) consider reviewing NFQ level descriptors, to enable levels to be clearly differentiated in terms of skill level and cognitive demand, while ensuring

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[40] See 'Making sense of qualifications – How recruitment professionals in Ireland view qualifications'.

[41] See Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply 2022.

[42] The 2022 census by the Central Statistics Office included a question on the highest level of education/training achieved, and this was articulated in terms of NFQ levels. A survey of apprentices used to ascertain baseline data included questions regarding educational attainment expressed in terms of NFQ levels.

[43] According to Indecon (2017), the NFQ's quality assurance function was considered a high priority (76 % of respondents), followed by its role in communication (67 %), progression and recognition (60 %), curriculum design (4 5%) and regulatory function (41 %).

clearly defined progression and relevance to the substrands, and to be applied more generally at modular as well as qualification level;

(b) consider the number of substrands and scope for some to be merged;

(c) consider whether the scope of NFQ substrands of the award-type descriptors accurately reflects qualification provision at NFQ levels 5 and 6;

(d) reconsider the feasibility of demonstrating supervisory skills as being a typical outcome of learning at NFQ level 6 in relation to competence and role.

As a follow-up to the Education Counseling and Credit Transfer Information Service (Ecctis, 2021) study, QQI is to initiate preliminary explorations for phase 2, in consultation with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the Higher Education Authority and SOLAS.

A comprehensive report on the past, present and future of the NFQ is planned for 2023, to mark its 20th anniversary ([44]).

7.7.   Impact of the NQF

The NFQ 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, 2020a).

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

Underpinning the NFQ's influence on progression in education and training, QQI's policy on ATP provides for credit, transfer and progression routes, entry arrangements and information provision to learners in further and higher education and training, adhering to the broad policy approach of the NFQ. Providers and awarding bodies are required to identify transfer and progression routes into, and

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([44]) 'Celebrating 20 years of the national framework of qualifications'.

onwards from, all programmes leading to NFQ awards. There are also arrangements for advanced entry into higher education on a case-by-case basis from certain Craft Apprenticeship awards at NFQ level 6 (EQF level 5) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022) ([45]).

As the NFQ is well established and understood in Ireland, there is an understanding of the equity between qualifications and a focus on comparing qualifications based on level and award type. The NFQ is objective and focused on learning outcomes, levels and award types, regardless of providers, delivery methods and other indicators that may affect parity of esteem between different types of education and training (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

The review of the two major award types at NFQ level 6 (Ecctis, 2021) illustrates the NFQ's contribution to reflecting on and enhancing articulation routes between FET and higher education programmes, and thus to progression through education and training and to qualification review; it also highlights the NFQ's influence on parity, by showing that both the advanced certificate (FET) and higher certificate qualifications were appropriately aligned with NFQ level 6 (EQF level 5) in terms of learning outcomes achieved.

The influence of the NFQ on quality assurance of qualifications, recognition of prior learning and recognition of foreign qualifications is outlined in the corresponding sections above.

8.　Referencing to the EQF

The Irish NFQ was the first NQF to complete its referencing to the EQF, in 2009 (NQAI, 2009b), building on experiences of self-certifying the compatibility of the NFQ with QF-EHEA, completed in 2006 (NQAI, 2006).

A single updated report on (re)referencing of the NFQ to the EQF and self-certification against QF-EHEA was approved by the EQF Advisory Group in November 2020 (QQI, 2020a). The report confirmed existing alignments with the European frameworks and detailed NFQ-related developments; it also covered wider reforms of the education and training system, and innovations in skills policy and governance.

([45]) Significant work has been undertaken in recent years on FET transitions, especially on enhancing progression from FET to higher education (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023). It has also been pointed out that, in practice, students' movement across NFQ levels is not linear; in addition to upward progression from FET to higher education, there is also evidence of downward movement and transitions from higher education to FET for upskilling and reskilling (Department of Education and Skills, 2020).

9.   Reflections and plans

The NFQ is well established, highly regarded, widely used and sustainable, delivering real benefits to stakeholders and end users (QQI, 2020a). A combination of factors contributed to its success: a mix of statutory and collaborative approaches with strong institutional arrangements; political support; and implementation of the NFQ in strong coherence with other policy initiatives. As 2023 marks the 20th anniversary of the framework, it is a year of reflection on its impact, achievements and opportunities. A comprehensive report, including stakeholder perspectives and case studies, is planned to be presented during the anniversary event in November 2023. A high-level review of ATP practice in Ireland is also planned for 2023, to inform future policy development ([46]).

The main priority for NFQ implementation relates to the development of policies and procedures to enable voluntary access to the framework of listed awarding bodies. This will give access to the NFQ to professional bodies, international awarding bodies operating in Ireland and other awarding bodies, for the first time, resulting in greater choice of quality-assured awards for learners, and greater confidence about the awards and the awarding bodies. The scheme is expected to be launched in 2023 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

The main challenges include the continued development and implementation of the NFQ as a responsive and adaptable mechanism for qualifications and skills policy, and the need to strengthen the monitoring and review of qualification levelling. A key area to be addressed is the implementation of an integrated and effective quality assurance process for learning-outcomes-referenced qualifications, operating across institutions, sectors, and levels of education and training (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

The IQQF supports the exchange of views and expertise on qualifications, and will play a key role in the future development and implementation of the NFQ. Recommendations set out following the evaluation conducted by Ecctis (2021), as well as questions put forth in the consultation on the Green Paper on the qualifications system (QQI, 2020b), will be further explored by and with the IQQF (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

A comprehensive evaluation of the response of higher and further education and training institutions to the COVID-19 crisis (QQI, 2020c) revealed that the tertiary education and training system met the challenges of the crisis reasonably well. Positive contributing factors included the regulatory flexibility within the tertiary system, the strength of the sector's communities of practice, and use of the

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([46]) 'QQI issue RFT for high level review of access, transfer & progression (ATP)'.

learning outcome approach in both teaching and assessment (European Commission and Cedefop, 2022).

Acronyms

ATP	access, transfer and progression
DAB	designated awarding body
EQF	European qualifications framework
FET	further education and training
IQQF	Irish Quality and Qualifications Forum
IRQ	Irish register of qualifications
LAB	listed awarding body
NARIC	national academic recognition information centre
NFQ	national framework of qualifications
NQF	national qualifications framework
QF-EHEA	qualifications framework of the European higher education area
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RPL	recognition of prior learning
SOLAS	Further Education and Training Authority [*An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna*]

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Web pages and databases

[URLs accessed 5.4.2023]

Irish register of qualifications.

NFQ web page.

QQI qualifications database.

QQI, which hosts the EQF national coordination point.