



EUROPEAN  
INVENTORY  
OF NQFs 2024  
**IRELAND**

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## Contents

1.	Introduction .....	1
2.	National context .....	1
2.1.	Policy context .....	1
2.2.	NQF legal basis .....	2
3.	NQF objectives and functions .....	3
4.	Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications .....	3
4.1.	NQF structure and level descriptors .....	3
4.2.	NQF scope and coverage .....	4
4.3.	Use of learning outcomes .....	7
4.4.	Quality assurance arrangements .....	8
5.	Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement .....	9
6.	Recognition and validation of prior learning .....	10
6.1.1.	Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways .....	10
6.1.	Credit systems .....	11
6.2.	Recognition of foreign qualifications .....	11
6.3.	Promoting lifelong learning .....	12
7.	NQF implementation and impact .....	13
7.1.	Stage of implementation .....	13
7.2.	Procedures for including qualifications in the NQF .....	13
7.3.	Indicating EQF/NQF levels .....	15
7.4.	NQF dissemination .....	15
7.5.	Qualifications databases and registers .....	16
7.6.	Awareness and use of the NQF .....	16
7.7.	Monitoring and evaluating the NQF .....	17
7.8.	Impact of the NQF .....	18
8.	Referencing to the EQF .....	19
9.	Reflections and plans .....	20
	Acronyms .....	21
	References .....	22
	Web pages and databases .....	23

## 1. Introduction

Cedefop's work on qualifications frameworks dates back to 2003. The Centre has contributed to the conceptual development of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and has supported its further implementation, working alongside national authorities and stakeholders to introduce and develop national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). This report is part of the European inventory of NQFs, which systematically maps and analyses NQF developments in countries participating in the EQF process. The inventory is updated biennially in close cooperation with the EQF Advisory Group, the European Commission and the European Training Foundation. The report provides a detailed description of the structure of the Irish NQF and its institutional arrangements. It also examines the framework's implementation and its impact on broader policy areas, focusing on key developments since 2022.

The Irish national framework of qualifications (NFQ) is one of the older qualifications frameworks in Europe and has reached an advanced operational stage. It covers all education and training subsystems and all types of learning, including qualifications awarded outside formal education and training. It is structured into 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 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

Performance against most EU education and training benchmarks is high. In 2022, participation in early childhood education matched the EU average of 93.2%, while the rate of early leavers from education and training was 4.0% in 2023 (European Commission, DG Education, Youth, Sport & Culture, 2024). 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 courses, traineeships, workplace training options, apprenticeships and community education). In 2023, at the post-secondary non-tertiary level, all learners followed a vocational path, while at the upper secondary level, 22.2% of learners were in a

VET programme <sup>(1)</sup>. The percentage of tertiary education graduates (aged 25-34) is the highest in the EU (62.7% in 2023). Ireland, aiming to develop a unified tertiary sector, has increased the number of joint tertiary degree courses (see Section 7.8). The employment rate of recent tertiary graduates was 90.3% in 2023. Participation in adult learning (aged 25-64) more than doubled in a decade (48.3% in 2022). In 2022, public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP was significantly lower than the EU average (2.7% versus 4.7%) (European Commission, DG Education, Youth, Sport & Culture, 2024).

The NFQ is well embedded in strategic documents, legislation and regulatory instruments governing education and training <sup>(2)</sup>. NFQ levels are extensively used as a reference point to set several targets <sup>(3)</sup>. The NFQ is strongly interrelated with policies promoting recognition of prior learning (RPL) (see Section 6.1), access, transfer and progression (ATP) and credits (see Section 2.2). ATP has been fundamental in enabling learners to engage with and benefit from the NFQ, providing a structure of entry arrangements, transfer and progression routes (for example, between further and higher education), the possibility to accumulate credits and to recognise prior learning (QQI, 2024d). The 2024 [policy](#) on authorisation to use the International Education Mark (IEM) introduced the IEM as a statutory quality measure aimed at protecting international learners. According to the policy, in higher education, only providers offering programmes leading to NFQ awards and publishing award information in the Irish register of qualifications are eligible for the IEM (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

## 2.2. NQF legal basis

The NFQ was first proposed in the [Qualifications Act](#) in 1999, jointly with RPL and the policy on ATP, and it was established in 2003 (NQAI, 2003; QQI, 2024d; Hawley-Woodall, 2024). The operation of the framework is governed by a 2012 [Act](#) and its 2019 [Amendment Act](#). The latter introduced important changes that strengthened the comprehensive nature of the framework and its role as a central coordinating mechanism for qualifications, clarifying the legal route to the NFQ for all qualifications (European Commission & Cedefop, 2020).

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(1) More information at [Eurostat \[educ\\_uoe\\_enra13\]](#), accessed 15 May 2025.

(2) For example, the [action plan for apprenticeship, 2021 to 2025](#), the [national access plan, 2022 to 2028](#), the [student grant scheme 2022](#).

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

The 2022 [joint-sectoral protocol between designated awarding bodies \(DABs\) and QQI](#) <sup>(4)</sup> regulates the formal inclusion of qualifications developed by these institutes in the NFQ. It also aims to balance the autonomy of DABs with QQI's independent authority for promoting, maintaining and further developing the NFQ, alongside their shared responsibility for its implementation (QQI, 2022). The 2022 [Higher Education Authority Act](#) includes a condition that an institution of higher education can only be designated if it provides programmes and conducts examinations leading to awards included in the NFQ (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

In 2024, QQI published the [Policy and criteria](#) for the establishment of listed awarding bodies (LABs) and the [Quality assurance guidelines](#) for LABs. This policy enables the creation of a new type of awarding body and the inclusion of their awards in the NFQ, further opening the NFQ to qualifications awarded outside formal education and training (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

### 3. NQF objectives and functions

Originally, the NFQ was conceptualised as a driver of systemic change towards lifelong learning and the rationalisation of FET qualifications. A major aim of the framework is to support Ireland in becoming a lifelong learning society. 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, 2020; 2024a):

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

## 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

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<sup>(4)</sup> Universities, technological universities, and the institutes of technology constitute the DABs. This designation respects the autonomy of these institutions, their self-accrediting status, and the principle of academic freedom.

the learner to an award at a particular level, and of the type concerned, within the framework'. The building blocks of the framework <sup>(5)</sup> are the 10 levels, the learning outcomes-based level indicators, and the five award types.

Each NFQ level has specific level indicators or descriptors <sup>(6)</sup> 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).

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 originally determined: major (the principal class of awards at each level, capturing a typical range of learning achievements) <sup>(7)</sup>; minor (stand-alone qualifications that can also serve as intermediate qualifications towards a major award); supplemental (for learning that is additional to a major award); and special purpose (for relatively narrow or purpose-specific achievements) <sup>(8)</sup>.

A professional class of awards was established in 2014 at NFQ levels 5–9 (EQF levels 4–7) <sup>(9)</sup> to strengthen the capacity of the NFQ to specify the levels of professional or occupation-oriented awards. The professional class implicitly introduced the concept that an award can have more than one class and type <sup>(10)</sup>. These awards are typically used in conjunction with original NFQ award types.

## 4.2. NQF scope and coverage

The 10 levels of the NFQ capture stand-alone qualifications achieved in schools, FET, and higher education, as well as qualifications obtained through non-formal learning. The number of NFQ qualifications is constantly increasing (more than

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<sup>(5)</sup> The structure of the NFQ can be seen in [the fan diagram](#).

<sup>(6)</sup> See [grid of NFQ level indicators](#) for more details.

<sup>(7)</sup> See Addendum 4 of *Outline national framework of qualifications – Determinations made by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland* for more details.

<sup>(8)</sup> See 'Descriptors for minor, special purpose, supplemental award-types' for more details. Their standards may be specified for fewer than the eight sub-strands of NFQ level indicators (QQI, 2020).

<sup>(9)</sup> 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 or Irish apprenticeship awards at NFQ levels 5–9. Their extension to doctoral level (NFQ level 10) will be considered as part of the NFQ review (QQI, 2020; internal communication with QQI).

<sup>(10)</sup> For example, a specific honours bachelor degree award could be classed as both major and professional, and would need to be consistent with both the bachelor award-type and the professional award-type descriptors (QQI, 2020).

11 000 in August 2024); there are approximately 7 000 major awards and over 4 000 non-major awards. Supplemental awards are significantly underutilised, with only 25 awards included. The NFQ is open to international qualifications, but it does not yet include any; the listed awarding bodies (LABs) scheme could ease their introduction into the framework (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022; 2024; QQI 2024c).

In Ireland, qualification providers are classified as public or private/independent. The term non-formal education is informally used to refer to education and training that takes place outside the publicly funded education system. The NFQ includes non-formal qualifications offered by three types of providers:

- (a) private and independent providers, including community and voluntary providers, of further and higher education programmes (validated and awarded by the QQI); there are approximately 700 NFQ higher education qualifications and approximately 150 private/independent FET providers;
- (b) providers operating outside formal education and training but linked to designated awarding bodies (approximately 60 non-formal qualifications are offered by the Institute of Banking and awarded by the University College Dublin);
- (c) LABs offering non-formal learning outcomes-based qualifications. The LAB scheme is expected to broaden the scope of the NFQ in this respect (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

Minor, supplemental, and special purpose awards can be identified as microcredentials, included at all NFQ levels. They usually have fewer than 30 ECTS (minimum five) and 60 FET credits. In 2023, there were 1 542 NFQ qualifications with fewer than 30 ECTS (QQI, 2024c). The FET sector has heavily relied on small-volume credentials for many years. These NFQ awards are part of the Common Awards System (CAS), with specified intended learning outcomes and FET credits. They are absolutely and automatically transferrable between providers and can be aggregated, leading to 'compound' NFQ major, special purpose, or supplemental awards. QQI issued approximately 2.5 million awards between 2012 and 2021, of which 84% were non-major awards, and most were for FET with credit volumes as low as 50 hours of learner effort (QQI, 2024a).

In 2024, QQI published a [green paper](#), suggesting the introduction of the tertiary certificate at NFQ level 6 to replace the advanced and higher certificates (QQI, 2024b) <sup>(11)</sup>. This may lead to the level 5 certificate becoming an intermediate

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<sup>(11)</sup> The green paper was released for public consultation in the first quarter of 2025.

qualification within the QF-EHEA short cycle; it will continue to be an NFQ stand-alone qualification (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

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

NFQ level	Qualification types	EQF level
10	Doctoral degree Higher doctorate	8
9	Master degree Postgraduate diploma Level 9 professional award (*) Minor awards Special purpose awards Supplemental awards	7
8	Honours bachelor degree Higher diploma Level 8 professional award (*) Minor awards Special purpose awards Supplemental awards	6
7	Ordinary bachelor degree Level 7 professional award (*) Minor awards Special purpose awards Supplemental awards	
6	Advanced certificate, e.g. level 6 advanced certificate in horticulture Higher certificate Level 6 professional award (*) Minor awards Special purpose awards Supplemental awards	5
5	Level 5 certificate, e.g. level 5 certificate in hospitality operations Leaving certificate Level 5 professional award (*) Minor awards Special purpose awards Supplemental awards	4

4	Level 4 certificate, e.g. level 4 certificate in engineering skills Leaving certificate Minor awards Special purpose awards Supplemental awards	3
3	Level 3 certificate, e.g. level 3 certificate in information and communication technology Junior cycle (**) Minor awards Special purpose awards	2
2	Level 2 certificate e.g. level 2 certificate in general learning Junior cycle (**) Minor awards Special purpose awards	1
1	Level 1 certificate, e.g. level 1 certificate in communications Minor awards Special purpose awards	N/A

(\*) 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 (2020) and European Commission & Cedefop (2024).

### 4.3. Use of learning outcomes

The learning outcomes approach has been central to the NFQ, associated legislation and system reforms. Extensive work has been carried out across all subsystems of education and training to implement the learning outcomes approach. This approach has increased dialogue among different stakeholders and facilitated progression between FET and higher education.

Award-type descriptors represent learning outcomes-based benchmark statements, offering a general expression of the necessary learning achievements to obtain a specific NFQ award type. They also refer to the NFQ level, volume and (sometimes) progression characteristics. Awarding bodies develop detailed award standards, consistent with the NFQ, for each NFQ qualification. The included minimum intended learning outcomes are part of the programme approval process.

All designated awarding bodies have robust procedures for assigning the appropriate NFQ level and award type to their awards (QQI, 2020; QQI, 2022).

In FET and higher education, the criteria for validating provider programmes leading to NFQ awards <sup>(12)</sup> require providers to develop minimum intended learning outcomes for the overall programme and for each module. In 2023, QQI launched a project to review and update the CAS award standards (over 1 700 FET award standards, covering major and non-major award types in all fields of learning at NFQ levels 1 to 6) (QQI, 2024a).

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](#). The senior cycle curriculum is based on a [key skills framework](#), 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, 2020). [Guidelines](#) for teachers on the use of learning outcomes and a [companion text](#) were developed.

#### **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. Trustworthy awarding bodies offering highly valued qualifications, underpinned by effective quality assurance arrangements, strengthen trust in the NFQ (QQI, 2022). Regarding listed awarding bodies (LABs), the QQI has published [statutory quality assurance guidelines](#), as well as two documents presenting the [criteria for the establishment of LABs](#) and for [inclusion of awards in the NFQ](#) (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

QQI is responsible for external quality assurance in FET and higher education. The learning outcomes approach features prominently in its activities, and implementation of the NFQ is embedded in national statutory [quality assurance policies and guidelines](#), which apply to all post-school providers (QQI, 2020).

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, 2020).

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(12) More information at [Validating QQI award programmes](#).

## 5. Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

Quality and qualifications Ireland (QQI) is the authority responsible for the NFQ, under the aegis of 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. QQI approves programmes offered by a variety of education providers, approves access, transfer and progression procedures of these 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).

QQI has a dedicated NFQ unit<sup>(13)</sup>, responsible for implementing NFQ functions, with specific reference to designing and carrying out the overall strategy, policies and procedures for the promotion, implementation and evaluation of the NFQ and associated ATP policies. Nevertheless, all QQI's functions have a mandate to support the operation of the NFQ, including staff in awards development, validation, quality assurance, corporate services and communication. The Europass/EQF project supports NFQ implementation, while the LABs scheme is expected to generate modest additional income in the future (European Commission & Cedefop, 2020; 2024).

Collaboration and partnership have been hallmarks of the NFQ process since the beginning. Providers and awarding bodies are partners in implementing the NFQ, while other users of qualifications are stakeholders. National awarding bodies with statutory awarding powers offering qualifications included in the NFQ are QQI, the State Examinations Commission and DABs (i.e. universities, technological universities and the institutes of technology). LABs will have limited and regulated awarding powers. 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. Public consultation procedures are often used in NFQ implementation.

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<sup>(13)</sup> Five staff members support work on the NFQ on a permanent basis: the head of qualifications information and learning opportunities, one senior manager and three senior executive officers (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

In 2022, QQI set up the Irish Quality and Qualifications Forum (IQQF). The forum comprises representatives from all types of relevant stakeholders. The objectives of the forum are to:

- (a) provide a national cooperation platform on quality and qualifications challenges, as well as a forum to exchange ideas and insights into the workings of the qualifications system;
- (b) help identify specific initiatives to be pursued by collaborative working groups and monitor their progress;
- (c) advise QQI when requested.

As of 2024, only the subgroup of the Statutory Awarding Bodies Group (IQQF-SABG) has met (QQI, 2024c).

## 6. Recognition and validation of prior learning

### 1.1.1. Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) often includes certificated learning as well as non-formal and informal learning. It is well established in various education and training subsystems, particularly FET. RPL can provide access to or lead to NFQ awards from level 1 to 10. However, as the existing [Principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning in further and higher education](#) is 20 years old, QQI has committed to developing and publishing a document outlining a national approach to RPL in tertiary education. This will build on engagements with FET and HE stakeholders, as well as international collaborations (QQI, 2024d; Hawley-Woodall, 2024). QQI provides an overarching framework to enable RPL and support its implementation in partnership with stakeholders. The legislative framework underpinning the NFQ facilitates RPL opportunities at all NFQ levels. For example, the definition of levels of learning and the articulation of learning outcomes in the NFQ have proven useful for RPL purposes (QQI, 2020).

According to the ATP policy and the new joint sectoral protocol between QQI and DABs, all NFQ qualifications providers must clearly state for each of their programmes whether RPL is available. They must also outline the RPL arrangements for programme entry, exemptions, credits towards an award, or eligibility for a full award (Hawley-Woodall, 2024). Validation arrangements are not available for general education qualifications, such as the leaving certificate at NFQ levels 4 and 5 (EQF levels 3 and 4) and the junior cycle award at NFQ levels 2 and 3 (EQF levels 1 and 2). For all other major and professional NFQ qualifications, as well as minor, supplemental and special purpose awards

validation arrangements can provide credits/exemption towards an award or access to a programme. Some of the individual qualifications from all award classes can be awarded in full through validation arrangements (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024). Credentials obtained through validation can be combined to achieve an NFQ qualification. These credentials are typically NFQ minor, special purpose, or professional awards (Hawley-Woodall, 2024).

### **6.1. Credit systems**

The national approach to credits is part of the ATP policy (see Section 6.4) and is organised into two tracks: one for higher education and one for FET.

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) system is widely used in higher education, following guidelines in its [user guide](#) and [national guidelines](#). Typical credit volumes or ranges have been established for each major award type at NFQ levels 6–9 (QQI, 2020).

The credit, accumulation and transfer system for FET applies to NFQ levels 1–6. Credit values are assigned to major, minor, special purpose and supplemental awards, clarifying the size of and relationships between various awards. One credit corresponds to 10 hours of typical learner effort (QQI, 2020).

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

### **6.2. Recognition of foreign qualifications**

The NFQ and the EQF facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications, providing a means to interpret and advise on the level of academic achievements (QQI, 2020). NARIC Ireland provides recognition advice by comparing foreign qualifications to a major award and NFQ level. The [NARIC database](#) includes comparability statements for 1 927 qualifications from over 160 countries (as of June 2025), supporting competent authorities and stakeholders in authenticating qualifications or determining eligibility for access for work or continuing education <sup>(14)</sup> (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024). NARIC Ireland operates under QQI's [Policy and criteria for facilitating the academic recognition of foreign qualifications](#), which highlights the role of the NFQ in this area. NARIC oversees and facilitates national implementation of the [Lisbon Recognition Convention](#) and promotes fair recognition of academic qualifications in line with the [European area of recognition manual](#).

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<sup>(14)</sup> [NARIC Ireland 2023 & 2024 statistics on the recognition of foreign qualifications, Quality and Qualifications Ireland](#)

The NFQ is an outward-looking framework with a strong external dimension, engaging with non-European countries such as Australia, Bahrain, Jordan, and Malaysia. Bilateral comparisons of the NFQ have been conducted with the frameworks of [Hong Kong](#) and [New Zealand](#) (QQI, 2024c). Guides to recognition services in various languages and supplementary ‘rough guides’ to support the integration of refugees and displaced people (mainly from Ukraine, Syria, and Afghanistan) are available under [Recognition of foreign qualifications](#). Irish competent recognition authorities work closely to support the rapid integration of displaced people by recognising their qualifications. As inward migration continues to grow, competent authorities are alerted when new or updated rough guides are needed <sup>(15)</sup> (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022; 2024). Qualifications authorities in Ireland and the United Kingdom have jointly published ‘[Qualifications can cross boundaries](#)’, a short guide to comparing UK and Irish qualifications. This resource is aimed at learners, educators, employers, and governments (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024; QQI, 2024c).

### **6.3. Promoting lifelong learning**

The NFQ has supported lifelong learning and transitions into, within, and from education and training (QQI, 2020). A key function of the NFQ has been to recognise learning achievements in non-formal and informal settings, including the workplace, involvement in social and community activities, and learning through life experiences. It also supports the development of alternative pathways to qualifications. The framework has shifted the focus from young people pursuing linear learning progression to lifelong learning pursued by people at different stages of their lives (QQI, 2024a).

The ATP policy is closely linked to the NFQ and RPL. The 1999 Qualifications Act defines ATP as follows:

- (a) access is the process that enables learners to start a programme based on the validation of their achieved learning outcomes;
- (b) transfer is the process that allows learners to move to another programme after receiving recognition for their achieved learning outcomes;
- (c) progression is the process by which learners can move to a programme at a higher NFQ level (QQI, 2024d).

All providers offering programmes leading to NFQ awards have ATP procedures and use the NFQ building blocks, such as stated learning outcomes and FET or ECTS credits. Although significant progress has been made, the impact of the ATP policy is undermined by systems that do not integrate effectively.

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<sup>(15)</sup> Source: Internal communication with QQI.

For example, the ongoing existence of separate FET and ECTS credit systems and the differing treatment of FET and school NFQ level 5 awards for progression to higher education remain challenges (QQI, 2024d).

## 7. NQF implementation and impact

### 7.1. Stage of implementation

The NFQ is operational and a permanent and visible feature of education and training. The NFQ Implementation Plan 2024-26 has set four focal points:

- (a) building capacity through increased training and collaboration with relevant agencies, and developing materials to help specific audiences understand the NFQ;
- (b) providing regular, frequent updates about the NFQ, EQF, and EU transparency tools, leveraging involvement in networks and meetings;
- (c) prioritising policy areas such as NFQ Level 6 qualifications and ATP;
- (d) implementing the LABs, aiming to further open access to the NFQ (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024; QQI, 2024e).

### 7.2. Procedures for including qualifications in the NQF

The procedure for including qualifications in the NFQ depends on the status of the awarding body (i.e. designated awarding bodies (DABs), listed awarding bodies (LABs), QQI), rather than the type of qualification. In all cases, applicants must pay a fee.

The [Joint sectoral protocol with DABs](#) set six criteria for DABs. They must:

- (a) develop learning outcomes-based award standards, using the NFQ as the principal reference point;
- (b) specify all the necessary features for inclusion in the NFQ (i.e. learning outcomes, NFQ level, applicable award type, award class, volume in terms of ECTS, and appropriate and coherent titling), when designing or updating programmes;
- (c) have valid and reliable assessment policies and regulations in place (assessing learners' performance against the relevant award standard), while independent external examiners <sup>(16)</sup> regularly review the procedure;
- (d) implement quality assured ATP arrangements, including RPL when possible, and operate credit accumulation and transfer;

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<sup>(16)</sup> These are members of the broader community of practice within a programme's field of learning, whose authority to fulfil the responsibilities of the role is based on their accomplishments.

- (e) have documented procedures for the awarding and certifying of qualifications;
- (f) provide clear and comprehensive information on qualifications.

QQI is responsible for ensuring that DABs meet these criteria.

According to the [Core policies and criteria for the inclusion of awards within the framework](#), LABs must meet specific prerequisites before applying to include an award in the NFQ:

- (a) they must be an established LAB (an awarding body can apply for establishment and inclusion of awards simultaneously);
- (b) quality assurance procedures regarding developing award standards, assessment, and awarding and certifying qualifications must align with the 2012 Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act;
- (c) LABs must implement the appropriate ATP procedures;
- (d) LABs may need to demonstrate ongoing compliance with due diligence regulations of the 2012 Act before including additional awards in the NFQ;
- (e) LABs must be endorsed by the regulator to apply for the inclusion of an apprenticeship award.

As part of the application, LABs must develop an evaluation report showing how they meet QQI's criteria for inclusion <sup>(17)</sup>. This evaluation can refer to individual awards or a group of awards. The report must include sufficient supporting documentation, such as the quality assurance procedures implemented by the LAB, while the approved associated providers of the LAB must be clearly indicated (if applicable). Applications must also include documentation demonstrating that the prerequisites are met. QQI will screen the supporting documentation before evaluating the application; if the documentation is incomplete, QQI may request a revised submission. Applications are evaluated by an independent evaluation panel against QQI's criteria for inclusion. The panel can recommend (through an evaluation report) to QQI that the application is satisfactory, satisfactory subject to proposed conditions, or not satisfactory. QQI decides whether establish a LAB and/or include awards in the NFQ. Negative decisions can be appealed. Following a positive decision the award will also be included in the Irish register of qualifications (IRQ). LABs must meet specific conditions and obligations for the awards to remain in the NFQ. LABs must ensure that any changes or modifications to the award do not affect its standing; when proposed changes significantly affect the award, approval for inclusion of a new award will be needed.

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<sup>(17)</sup> The criteria can be found in the [Policy and criteria for the establishment of LABs](#). For example, LABs must use the NFQ as the principal reference point for designing the award standard, must have appropriate and rigorous assessment practices, and must implement ATP practices.

According to the [Policies and criteria for the validation of programmes of education and training](#), QQI is responsible for validating, reviewing and monitoring programmes of education and training (2012 Act). As a prerequisite for applying, providers must implement quality assurance procedures in line with the 2012 Act and ATP procedures, comply with specific arrangements for the protection of enrolled learners, and consult with other providers that offer this programme wholly or partly. Applicants must also develop a report evaluating the programme against the validation policies and criteria (the latter are very detailed). The programme-related documentation of the application must include the intended learning outcomes, the assessment procedures, the teaching and learning strategies, the staffing requirements, samples of material provided to prospective and enrolled learners, etc. Independent evaluators will draft an evaluation report and conclude whether the application is satisfactory (meets the validation criteria), satisfactory subject to proposed conditions, or not satisfactory. QQI may disregard a report if it does not meet its quality standards. QQI will make the report available to the applicant for comments before taking the final decision. If the decision is positive, the applicant will receive a certificate of validation. The procedure must conclude within 25 weeks after the submission of a complete application. Awarding bodies must meet specific conditions and obligations for the awards to remain in the NFQ. QQI may review a programme and withdraw validation if the review outcome is not satisfactory. This policy is under review, with a [white paper](#) under [public consultation](#) in the first half of 2025.

### **7.3. Indicating EQF/NQF levels**

NFQ/EQF levels are indicated on some individual qualifications of all major and professional award types at NFQ levels 7 and above and on all FET qualifications issued by QQI (since 2015) <sup>(18)</sup>. They are not indicated on leaving certificates (NFQ levels 4 and 5) or junior cycle awards (NFQ levels 1, 2 and 3). NFQ/EQF levels are included on Europass certificate supplements in FET and diploma supplements in higher education (since 2013 and 2012, respectively). Their inclusion on Europass supplements was facilitated by coordination at central level and is believed to have made NFQ/EQF level references on qualification documents less critical (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

### **7.4. NQF dissemination**

An NFQ communications campaign was conducted throughout 2022 to promote the NFQ, IRQ and EQF as key reference points for all end users and stakeholders.

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<sup>(18)</sup> Minor, special purpose, and supplemental awards, issued by the QQI, indicate NFQ/EQF levels.

The campaign included regular promotion through social media platforms, direct mailing, an e-zine, a quarterly newsletter, webinars and the NFQ web page. (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022). In 2023, a communication campaign marked the 20th anniversary of the NFQ. This culminated in the high-level [NFQ 20th Anniversary Conference](#) and the publication of the report [20 Years of the Irish NFQ – A story of collaboration and co-operation](#). The NFQ Implementation Plan 2024-2026 introduces specific communication activities, which will be implemented according to a detailed timeline. These activities include updating the NFQ website, developing new information sources, participating in communication events, organising webinars and training for capacity building, and promoting the EQF (QQI, 2024e). Dissemination materials include the [NFQ fan diagram](#), designed to adapt to future changes, the guide [Qualifications can cross boundaries](#) (see Section 6.3), and publications, such as the 2023 [Review of ATP landscape in Ireland](#). The target groups are diverse, ranging from end users (e.g. learners) to policymakers and agencies. To support LABs, QQI has developed a dedicated [web page](#) featuring an [introductory guide to the NFQ](#) and a [guide](#) to help LABs reference qualifications to the NFQ (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

#### **7.5. Qualifications databases and registers**

The [Irish register of qualifications](#) (IRQ) was launched in 2019 by QQI to benefit learners, guidance counsellors, funding agencies, employers, recruiters and admissions offices. It also supports the implementation of RPL and ATP policies and the Joint Sectoral Protocol with DABs. The register includes 11 209 qualifications (September 2024) from FET and higher education. General education qualifications (i.e. junior cycle, and leaving certificate) are not included. It covers all award classes, except professional awards. The IRQ contains all required elements of Annex VI of the EQF recommendation, except the qualification description in learning outcomes; it also includes some optional elements (e.g. credit points). 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. QQI publishes information on qualifications from its IRQ service to the Europass platform via the Qualifications Dataset Register at least once per year. According to the NFQ Implementation Plan 2024-2026, the IRQ will be upgraded to improve the quality and quantity of published information. The new register is expected to launch in 2027 (QQI, 2024e). QQI also maintains a [national database of the FET qualifications](#) it offers.

#### **7.6. Awareness and use of the NQF**

The NFQ is widely known and used 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 also widely recognised and used by guidance and counselling practitioners, quality assurance bodies, and NARIC Ireland to provide academic recognition advice on foreign qualifications. 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 (45%) and regulatory function (41%). The NFQ is used as a filter for government funding, student grant aid, and employee recruitment. For example, in higher education, learners may be eligible for grant funding if they attend an approved course leading to an NFQ level 9 award. Recruitment procedures often specify the NFQ level of the qualification applicants should hold (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024). The NFQ is an important tool for professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) in professional recognition and accreditation procedures. DABs, QQI and PSRBs 'work in partnership to promote complementary approaches to programme accreditation/approval and to ensure that where academic and professional award standards both apply to a qualification, these are consistent with the learning outcomes approach and requirements of the NFQ' (QQI, 2022).

According to the Union of Students in Ireland, the NFQ 'brings numerous benefits for students, notably facilitating progression along education and training and promoting international mobility' (European Commission & Cedefop, 2020). Among labour 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 <sup>(19)</sup>.

The Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS) uses the NFQ to report on education and training outputs and to set targets <sup>(20)</sup>. The NFQ is also used by the National Skills Council and the Central Statistics Office to collect data on the education and training system and educational attainment, and by the Central Applications Office in the application process for higher education (European Commission & Cedefop, 2020; 2022).

### **7.7. Monitoring and evaluating the NQF**

The findings and recommendations of the 2017 policy impact assessment of the NFQ have informed subsequent developments, such as work towards including a wider range of qualifications in the NFQ and the establishment of the IQQF (Indecon, 2017).

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<sup>(19)</sup> See [Making sense of qualifications – How recruitment professionals in Ireland view qualifications](#).

<sup>(20)</sup> See [Monitoring Ireland's skills supply 2022](#).

The evaluation of the two major awards placed at NFQ level 6/EQF level 5 has led to the development of the [green paper](#) on the introduction of the tertiary certificate at NFQ level 6. It has also put forward NFQ-related recommendations, such as reviewing NFQ level descriptors, to ensure levels are clearly differentiated in terms of skill level and cognitive demand, while ensuring well-defined progression and relevance to the sub-strands (Ecctis, 2021).

An action-oriented policy review of the NFQ is being designed. It aims to develop a revised and updated policy framework for the NFQ, shape strategies for its maintenance and implementation, and strengthen NFQ promotion and communication (QQI, 2024c).

### **7.8. Impact of the NQF**

The NFQ is a core tool for promoting transparency and comparability of qualifications, and the IRQ is considered the authoritative source of information for NFQ qualifications (European Commission and Cedefop, 2024). 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%), explain and understand qualification pathways (89%) and evaluate qualifications for work or study (80%).

The strong connection between the NFQ, ATP and RPL policies has made horizontal and vertical progression in education and training easier and has contributed to bridging different subsystems. The introduction of the tertiary certificate at NFQ level 6 will also remove a barrier to the progression of FET learners. The policy impact assessment showed that 81% of participants believed that the NFQ has supported progression between qualifications achieved in school, in further education, and in higher education and training. Nevertheless, more needs to be done (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024; Indecon, 2017). The Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) highlighted the NFQ's role in offering citizens a roadmap for progression. The Irish Universities Association (IUA) considers the NFQ an invaluable tool for better articulating and aligning access, transfer and progression routes. This has significantly improved transparency in higher education, making it more accessible and equitable. The learning outcomes-based framework supports RPL by helping learners and providers map diverse learning pathways to a single reference point (QQI, 2024a). The NFQ also supports the development of a unified tertiary system, offering seamless progression pathways from FET to higher education. In 2024, more than 40 programmes were in place, allowing learners to begin degree studies in FET and then progress with guaranteed access to a degree programme in a higher

education institution (QQI, 2024a; European Commission & Cedefop, 2024; Cedefop & ReferNet, 2024).

The NFQ has encouraged a more systematic approach to the design, development, delivery, award and recognition of qualifications (QQI, 2020). Indecon (2017) showed that 74% of participants strongly agreed or agreed that the learning outcomes approach of the NFQ improved course and curriculum design. Further, the NFQ has contributed to improving the quality of teaching and learning, enabled the development of professional qualifications in early learning and care at levels 5 to 8, and increased the number of microcredentials. The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) stated that the framework has significantly supported adults in improving their reading, writing, numeracy, and digital literacy skills, by providing national and international standards to underpin provision, information on access and progression opportunities, and motivation for learners to progress through the NFQ levels (QQI, 2024a; European Commission & Cedefop, 2024). Some 61% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the NFQ made it easier for qualifications achieved in other countries to be understood, compared, and recognised in Ireland (Indecon, 2017).

The NFQ focuses 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. However, a lack of parity of esteem between qualifications has been identified, particularly at NFQ levels 5 and 6. The launch of the tertiary certificate and of the unified tertiary system aims to address this challenge (European Commission & Cedefop, 2022; 2024).

The establishment of the [National Tertiary Office](#), responsible for coordinating and supporting the unified tertiary system, and the IQQF has fostered cooperation platforms between education and training stakeholders. Multiple initiatives are systematically embedded to support partnerships between education and training and the labour market <sup>(21)</sup> (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024). According to Indecon (2017), 63% strongly agreed or agreed that the NFQ improved the dialogue between education and training and the world of work.

## 8. Referencing to the EQF

The Irish NFQ was the first NQF to complete its referencing to the EQF in 2009 (NQAI, 2009), building on experiences of self-certifying the compatibility of the

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<sup>(21)</sup> For example, the [Human Capital Initiative of the Higher Education Authority](#) and the [Skills to Advance by SOLAS](#).

NFQ with the QF-EHEA, completed in 2006 (NQAI, 2006). A single updated referencing report of the NFQ to the EQF and self-certification against the QF-EHEA was approved by the EQF Advisory Group in November 2020 (QQI, 2020). The country plans to develop an updated referencing report in 2030 (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

## 9. Reflections and plans

The development of the NFQ marked a significant milestone in the country's education system (QQI, 2024a). It is well established, highly regarded, widely used and sustainable, delivering real benefits to stakeholders and end users (QQI, 2020). These achievements are the result of enabling factors such as a mix of statutory and collaborative approaches, the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders, strong institutional arrangements, political support, and implementation of the NFQ in strong coherence with other policy initiatives. Additionally, the fan diagram has been very successful in communicating the NFQ to all end users. Learners consider the fan diagram an effective communication tool, but the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) noted the need for additional communication actions designed specifically for learners. A major success of the NFQ is that it has been embedded into the fabric of society (QQI, 2024a; European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

A key challenge is the continued development and implementation of the NFQ as a responsive and adaptable mechanism for qualifications and skills policy to remain fit for purpose and respond to societal challenges such as the green and digital transitions. There is also an urgent need for capacity building, particularly in terms of deep technical knowledge, for the new generation of administrative and academic staff responsible for NFQ implementation (QQI, 2024a; European Commission & Cedefop, 2024). Policies on RPL and ATP have not yet been fully realised. For example, the two credit systems in the tertiary sector and the different treatment of FET and school Level 5 awards for progression to higher education pose challenges that need to be addressed (QQI, 2024a; QQI, 2024c).

Priorities include reviewing and updating the ATP policy, developing a national RPL policy, introducing the tertiary certificate at NFQ level 6, upgrading the IRQ, building the capacity of NFQ implementers, and conducting a comprehensive review of the NFQ. Another priority is attracting listed awarding bodies and further opening the NFQ to non-formal qualifications. This will give professional bodies, international awarding bodies operating in Ireland, and other awarding bodies access to the NFQ for the first time, resulting in greater trust in these awards.

Finally, the development of a unified tertiary system is an important initiative (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024).

## 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
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

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## Web pages and databases

[URLs accessed 18/6/2025]

Irish [register](#) of qualifications.

NFQ [web page](#).

QQI qualifications [database](#).

QQI, which hosts the EQF [national coordination point](#).