



**QQI**

Quality and Qualifications Ireland  
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

# Policy and Criteria for Recognising Professional Awards within the National Framework of Qualifications



QQI, an integrated agency for quality and qualifications in Ireland

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# Policy and Criteria for Recognising Professional Awards within the National Framework of Qualifications

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## 1 SUMMARY

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established in November 2012 by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 (the 2012 Act).

This document sets out the policy and criteria for the recognition of professional awards within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ or Framework).

QQI policy is developed through a consultative process involving all stakeholders. Details of the policy development process are available on [www.QQI.ie](http://www.QQI.ie).

QQI policy is adopted by its Board and implemented by its executive.

## 2 INTRODUCTION

This paper sets out Policy and Criteria for recognising professional awards within the NFQ.

Alignment is the name of a process for the recognition of professional awards within the Framework and this term will be used throughout the paper. Validation of a programme of education and training to enable a Framework award to be made is an alternative route to recognition of a professionally relevant award within the Framework.

This policy and these criteria are exclusively for the alignment of professional awards. The paper includes:

- An outline of the alignment process
- An outline of the criteria for alignment
- The general conditions for alignment

The policy will be supported by more detailed guidelines to be published by QQI.

More general policy and criteria for the recognition within the Framework will be addressed by future development.

Alignment is not directly relevant to directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications—its purpose is different. Alignment of professional awards with the NFQ facilitates the recognition of the relationship between a professional award and other qualifications (of Irish or non-Irish awarding bodies) that are recognised within the Framework. Specifically, the alignment process here determines whether a professional award made by an eligible professional body can be recognised to be at a particular level in the NFQ<sup>1</sup> where a professional Award-type Descriptor<sup>2</sup> has been determined for this purpose.

Alignment is not currently available at NFQ level 10. At this level recognition within the Framework is only available through a programme validation process (executed by QQI [see Section 2.2] or a self-validating higher education and training provider whose awards are recognised within the NFQ) using the Framework's Doctoral award-type.

Please refer to QQI's website ([www.QQI.ie](http://www.QQI.ie)) for information about other kinds of 'recognition within the Framework' not addressed by this policy.

<sup>1</sup>This comprehends alignment of statutory professional awards—see section 2

<sup>2</sup>Award-type descriptors are part of the National Framework of Qualifications.

## 2.1 Policy Context

The broad approach set out in the two documents ‘Policies and Criteria for the Inclusion in, or Alignment with, the National Framework of Qualifications of the Awards of Certain Awarding Bodies’ (NQAI, 2008) and ‘Policies and Criteria for the Alignment with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) of the Awards of certain International Sectoral Certifying Bodies which issue certification and in some cases provide programmes in Ireland (NQAI)’ continue to be the default position for recognition of qualifications within the Framework by QQI pending the establishment of a comprehensive recognition policy – but there are some exceptions. One is that professional award alignment must be with a professional award-type unless QQI determines otherwise. Another is that policy adjustments (in areas other than alignment of professional awards) will be required and made from time to time to address changing needs pending the establishment of a comprehensive recognition policy.

The policies identify four different groups of bodies that make awards:

- Group A: Certain Irish Bodies which make awards on a statutory basis
- Group B: Certain Irish Bodies which regulate professions
- Group C: Certain Bodies from outside the State which make awards in Ireland
- Group D: Certain international sectoral certifying bodies which issue certification in Ireland

These groups are not mutually exclusive.

## 2.2 Bodies which may Apply for Alignment of Professional Awards

Subject to Section 1.1.1, awarding bodies making professional awards in Ireland pertaining to the following functions may seek to have those awards aligned (i.e. recognised within the Framework):

- Bodies which make awards on an Irish statutory basis (other than the ‘designated awarding bodies’ under the 2012 Act and any person<sup>3</sup> to whom QQI has delegated authority to make awards)
- Professional recognition bodies<sup>4</sup> including bodies which have a function in relation to the regulation of professions under European Union Directives for the Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications
- Bodies making international sectoral awards, defined as awards developed to meet the industry-defined certification needs of a specific sector, internationally. Generally, these awards might not be part of the national awarding system of any particular country but they enjoy wide employer and learner acceptance within many countries

<sup>3</sup> Legal personality.

<sup>4</sup> “professional recognition body” means a body (including a professional association, professional institute or any other professional organisation) required or authorised by or under a law of the State to supervise or regulate the conduct of persons engaged in a profession (Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012).

This involves Group B as defined above (but is not defined by it) and there may be overlap with Groups A and D. It does not include professional bodies that do not have any of these functions.

QQI regards industry awards (sometimes referred to as Vendor awards) as being a distinct group and their recognition within the Framework will be addressed in a different policy document.

### 2.2.1 Additional eligibility criteria

To be eligible to submit a professional award for alignment an applicant professional body must satisfy the following eligibility criteria (in addition to the above):

- a) Have the standing required to make the professional award
- b) Have the capacity to maintain a secure and permanent professional awards archive (a database of persons who have received an award from the professional body)

Any professional body seeking to have an award aligned must be able to demonstrate that it operates within a stable community of practice that can support necessary standards to meet the criteria for alignment.

## 2.3 Legal Basis

The 2012 Act makes numerous references to the term 'recognised within the Framework' and cognate terms. For example Section 43(3) states that 'each body authorised by law to make awards in the State shall ensure, in so far as is reasonably practicable, that each award that it makes is recognised within the Framework.' One mode of recognition is to have programmes validated but this is not always feasible. Alternative tools are required for recognising awards within the Framework. This policy deals with alignment i.e. the recognition within the Framework of a particular class<sup>5</sup> of awards: namely professional awards.

Section 13 of the 2012 Act is also relevant here and requires professional recognition bodies to cooperate with and consult with QQI.

Section 67 of the 2012 Act applies to programmes of education and training of 3 months or longer duration.

## 2.4 Purpose of this Policy

This policy and these criteria provide a transparent mechanism for the recognition, within the Framework, of the learning achievements of those who have received certain kinds of professional awards (qualifications).

Programme validation is an alternative option for any professional body wishing to establish named awards that are recognised within the Framework (see Section 3.3 for details).

<sup>5</sup> There are five classes of award-types in the Framework: major, minor, special purpose, supplemental and professional.

## 2.5 Commencement of this Policy

The policy applies to all professional award alignment (or re-alignment or renewal of alignment) decisions starting from the date of adoption, whether or not the process underpinning the decision had begun prior to the commencement of this policy and criteria.

All professional awards aligned under previous policies must be submitted for alignment under the new policy (*de novo*) as soon as practicable (but no later than 12 months following commencement of this policy and these criteria). Alignment of professional awards will not be otherwise renewed.

Calls for applications for alignment will be issued by QQI from time to time. Applications may only be made in response to one of these calls for applications.

## 3 POLICY AND CRITERIA

### 3.1 Approach

In broad terms (but see Section 3.6 below) alignment examines whether or not a professional award:

- Is adequately quality assured (along with any associated programmes) by the professional body (the approach to the quality assurance of provision is in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA or any suitable quality standard matched to professional awarding needs and education and training needs)
- Is at the level in the Framework at which alignment is sought
- Certifies (where applicable) the volume of learning ostensibly certified

The alignment process includes both self-assessment by the professional body and external assessment by a group that is independent of the professional body. As part of the self-assessment the professional body must identify the NFQ Level at which it considers that its professional award should be aligned.

Determination of NFQ Level in the alignment process involves establishing the expected minimum knowledge, skill and competence certified by the professional award and comparing this to the level of learning specified by the NFQ Professional Award-type Descriptor at the NFQ Level at which alignment is sought.

QQI's decision on the application for alignment will be a binary one either to align at the level sought or not.

Additionally alignment involves (where applicable) the recognition of the quantity of ECTS credit to be associated with the professional award. Credit recognition is intended to be a helpful addition to the recognition of the level of the professional award within the Framework. Wide variations in credit are possible for different



professional awards aligned at the same Framework level. This is because professional awards are often capstone awards that follow a sequence of prior educational qualifications many of which are already credit bearing. The minimum credit value in the professional award type descriptor is provided to discourage recognition of awards that involve little learning that is not already recognised through formal qualifications (i.e. involving little newly certified learning) but even this minimum credit criterion can be waived in exceptional cases.

The external assessment must always scrutinise the associated summative assessment procedures underpinning the professional award (including consideration of samples of assessment tasks, marking schemes and learner submissions) and may, where relevant, evaluate any associated programmes of education and training. The term “programme of education and training” (or programme), in this context, means any process by which a person may acquire knowledge, skill or competence and it includes programmes of probationary professional practice.

This policy does not assume that a professional body is directly involved in the instruction (or tuition) of learners seeking its professional awards. Associated programmes of education and training may be provided directly by the professional body making the professional award and/or through the involvement of distinct education and training providers. Accordingly, there needs to be a clear distinction between the provision of programmes and the making of professional awards so that responsibilities are clear and both processes are quality assured.

### 3.2 Candidate for Alignment

The typical alignment process under this policy is anticipated to be an *ex post* process meaning that the relevant award must have been made. Newly developed awards that have not yet been made can also be endorsed by QQI as candidate awards for alignment (or simply as candidates for alignment) at a specified NFQ level. This *ex ante* process also leads to a type of recognition within the Framework. The processes and criteria for candidate alignment and its withdrawal will be the same as for the *ex post* alignment process changing what needs to be changed.

Candidate status will only apply when a process leading to the professional award has been activated (e.g. an associated programme leading to the award has begun) and only if activated within 12 months of QQI’s decision to endorse it (otherwise it will not apply).

Candidate status may be converted to aligned status after the first batch of awards has been made. The conversion process is simply the standard (*ex post*) alignment process but taking due account of the findings of the *ex-ante* process.

### 3.3 Programme Validation as an Alternative to Professional Award Alignment for Gaining Recognition within the NFAQ

A professional body may choose to seek access to QQI's programme validation service and submit one or more of its programmes for validation by QQI. Alternatively it may approach a provider with the necessary self-validating authority and whose awards are recognised within the Framework.

Alignment and programme validation (by QQI) have much in common but there are significant differences between them:

- a) Programme validation (by QQI) explicitly endorses specific programmes designed to lead to awards (made by QQI)—alignment does not normally endorse the associated programmes directly but rather the professional body's quality assurance procedures for associated programmes.
- b) Programme validation is subject to standard and case-specific conditions concerning the provider, the programme and the corresponding awards. The standard conditions include ones concerning procedures for access, transfer and progression and arrangements for assessment and (in certain cases) for protection for learners. The conditions for alignment are different. The arrangements for external examining<sup>6</sup> may also be somewhat different.
- c) QQI directly monitors the providers of programmes of education and training that it validates. For aligned professional awards, QQI will monitor the relevant activities of the professional body concerned. The monitoring of providers of programmes associated with aligned awards is expected to be undertaken by the professional body.
- d) When it validates a programme QQI agrees that it will confer the relevant higher education and training award upon learners who successfully complete the programme. In the case of well-established international awards, QQI awards might be issued dually with the professional body's award. Such multiply issued awards constitute a joint award and would be subject to, and must comply with, QQI's policy on joint awarding.
- e) Programme validation by QQI is only available under certain conditions (see QQI's Policy and Criteria for Provider Access to Initial Validation of Programmes Leading to QQI Awards 2013)—a professional body seeking to have its programme validated must first satisfy these conditions and must enter into formal collaboration agreements with any other bodies (e.g. providers of programmes of education and training<sup>7</sup>) involved in providing programmes associated with the award.

<sup>6</sup> External examining is a quality assurance mechanism employed by [higher education] providers that supports public confidence in academic qualifications (HETAC, *Effective Practice Guideline for External Examining*, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> This can be interpreted as education, training or education and training.

- f) Some professional bodies accredit validated programmes and the corresponding awards are offered by (or through) providers of higher education and training. Normally, alignment is only possible, or indeed necessary, where the learning outcomes are not already reflected in a Framework award associated with a validated programme, i.e. learning is not doubly certified except in the context of joint awarding. However, in exceptional conditions this policy may be waived - QQI should be consulted early if such a waiver is to be sought.

### **3.4 Duration of Professional Award Alignment**

Professional award alignment is for awards made within a specified period following alignment normally (and not exceeding) seven years. See Section 3.11 on renewal of alignment.

### **3.5 Retrospective Alignment**

Retrospective alignment may be sought (by a professional body) for professional awards made within a specified interval in the past if there is sufficient evidence available for reliable assessment against the alignment criteria of the awards made in that interval. This also covers the case where the award is no longer being made.

### **3.6 Professional Award Alignment and Change**

An aligned professional award is not a static entity (see Section 2.12). It is expected that, informed by periodic review or changes in the legal or regulatory environment, changes will continually be made; for example: to corresponding standards and criteria, to any associated programmes and to procedures for the assessment of candidates for the professional award. Changes should be considered and implemented in the context of the maintenance of required standards and the effectiveness of any associated programmes in enabling learners to achieve the intended programme learning outcomes.

However, not all aspects of professional awards or associated programmes are likely to require frequent change. For example the overall standards for the professional awards will by their nature be relatively stable. Indeed it is the central role of the professional body to ensure just this and its own standing depends on it.

It is required that the professional body would have mechanisms in place to ensure that necessary enhancements and adaptations to any associated programmes are implemented from year to year (see also Section 3.14). This will be informed by continual internal monitoring, analysis and regular reviews of the associated programmes (including inputs from external examiners and boards of examiners or equivalent). Professional bodies which make aligned awards should have appropriate quality assurance procedures for this and have these approved by QQI. Such procedures should provide for the quality assurance of associated providers where appropriate.

There are limits to what may be changed before a professional award must be re-aligned or before alignment must be renewed. An extensive change to a professional award's standard (i.e. changes that in QQI's opinion make a substantial difference to the standard) will result in the automatic withdrawal of alignment. The interpretation of what does or does not constitute an 'extensive change' while often self-evident may be a matter for expert judgement:

- Undermining anything that was essential to support the original alignment decision would be judged to be an 'extensive change'
- Elimination of any core expectations concerning the minimum knowledge, skill and competence required to qualify for the award would also be judged to be an 'extensive change'
- A change in the pre-requisite learning requirements for an associated programme without corresponding changes to the programme may be judged to be an extensive change unless other compensating changes are made
- A significant change to the assessment procedures may also constitute a substantial change if either their reliability or validity is compromised
- A substantial change in governance of the professional body or a merger with another body may also necessitate a review of alignment

In some cases the change may be such as to allow the findings of the original alignment process to be reused. That means that the alignment of the modified professional award could focus on what has changed.

QQI should be consulted in case of any doubt about whether or not re-alignment is necessary following change to an aligned professional award (whether direct or indirect through changed circumstances).

### 3.7 Key Stages in the Professional Award Alignment Process

Calls for applications for alignment of professional awards will be issued by QQI from time to time. Applications may only be made in response to one of these calls for applications.

The alignment process is consistent with the generalised quality assurance model promoted by the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the Irish Higher Education Quality Network's (IHEQN) 'Principles of Good Practice in Quality Assurance/Quality Improvement for Higher Education and Training'. Specifically, the ESG Standard 3.7 states that the processes of external quality assurance agencies will normally be expected to include:

- Self-assessment: *"a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process<sup>8</sup>"*

<sup>8</sup> The italicised text here and in the following three stages is quoted from ESG Standard 3.7.

- External assessment: *“an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate<sup>9</sup>, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency”*
- Report publication: *“publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes”*
- Follow-up: *“a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report”*

Alignment fits into this generalised framework. However, while the framework for the process is consistent with higher education practice, it is not intrinsically academic in nature.

Full alignment is an *ex post* process. It occurs after the professional awards have been established and made. Candidate alignment (Section 2.2) is an *ex ante* process.

Alignment of a professional award includes self-assessment by the professional body concerned (where relevant involving representative associated providers); external assessment; report publication; and follow-up.

To ensure objectivity and for the avoidance of (real or apparent) conflicts of interest the expert panel (group of experts) which conducts the “external assessment” must be independent of the professional body concerned and of providers of any associated programmes.

The internal and external assessments constitute the core of the alignment process.

Following the alignment decision, the expert panel report will be published along with any response of the body concerned.

Submission of an application for alignment will be assumed by QQI to imply acceptance of the professional award alignment policy and criteria.

### 3.7.1 Professional with multiple recognition bodies

Where a professional body has peer professional bodies issuing professional awards in the same or similar discipline areas, it shall inform QQI of this before making an application. QQI may, for the purpose of ensuring fairness and consistency, publish a call for expressions of interest indicating that it is considering the establishment of an alignment process in the discipline area in order to attempt to identify other professional bodies in relevant discipline areas so that it can invite them to submit their awards for alignment in parallel. The call for expression of interest need not identify the initiating applicant. Parallel alignment may use a single panel to consider multiple applications fairly and consistently. Nevertheless, alignment decisions are made by QQI on the basis of the available evidence presented for each professional award considered in light of the alignment criteria. Unwillingness of one body to seek alignment shall not impede another from doing so. This kind of parallel alignment may not be feasible in all professions.

<sup>9</sup> Alignment expert panels will normally include an assessor who can represent the interests of learners.

Professional qualifications deemed equivalent by a professional body to its aligned award are not entitled to automatic recognition within the Framework on the basis of this equivalence alone. However, such qualifications may be submitted by the awarding professional body to QQI for alignment.

### 3.7.2 The External Assessment Process

QQI will normally require the applicant (or group of applicants) to arrange and manage the external assessment process. The financial costs of external assessment (including external assessors' remuneration and expenses) incurred by the applicant cannot be recovered from QQI. Therefore before accepting an application for alignment QQI must be confident that the applicant is competent, resourced and sufficiently trustworthy and reliable to manage such a process without interference of conflicting interests. The arrangements must be established formally through a signed memorandum of agreement between QQI and the applicant concerned. The applicant process coordinator may liaise with the QQI executive as required throughout the process. QQI may be invited to brief the panel of external assessors on qualifications policy.

QQI may set an external assessment report aside if it is unsatisfied with the report or if it lacks confidence in any aspect of the external assessment process. In this situation it may require that the applicant instigates a completely new external assessment. Alternatively and in exceptional circumstances it may manage a new process itself (taking due account of the findings of the process that led to the report that was set aside).

Applicants will have no part in making alignment decisions concerning their own awards under any circumstances, alignment decisions are reserved to QQI.

Applicants will not be entitled to request QQI to manage the external assessment.

QQI may manage the external assessment process itself in exceptional cases.

## 3.8 Professional Award Alignment Criteria

Both the self-assessment and the external assessment mentioned in Section 3.7 must be carried out against criteria that will be used to determine whether or not a particular professional award can be aligned with the Framework. The professional award alignment criteria are presented below in outline.

### 3.8.1 Eight outline criteria for professional award alignment

The professional award alignment criteria are outlined as follows (each is elaborated in the guidelines that will support this policy):

- a) **Eligibility:** only eligible professional bodies may apply for alignment of their professional awards (Section 2.2).

- b) General quality assurance, governance, operations and management:** Demonstrably effective governance, operational and management arrangements and quality assurance procedures shall underpin the professional award and any associated programmes (i.e. programmes relating to the award, including underpinning programmes). QQI guidelines on QA in this context will be informed by the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) but implementation of any suitable quality standard matched to professional awarding and education and training needs will also be satisfactory. Furthermore, it is recognised that a professional award may not require the support of any formal programme of education and training—however there must always be reliance on formal assessment of the requisite knowledge, skill and competence.
- c) Professional Award Standards and (where applicable) Volume (ECTS) of Newly Certified Learning:** The minimum expected knowledge, skill and competence (i.e. the minimum standard) to be attained by a candidate before the professional award may be made (conferred) and the volume of newly certified learning shall be consistent with the Professional Award-type Descriptor defined at the NFQ Level at which alignment is sought. For alignment (as distinct from candidate for alignment), the minimum standard shall have been demonstrated in professional awards already made.
- d)** In some professions QQI may, in consultation with stakeholders, translate the generalised professional award-type descriptor into a discipline-specific professional award standard. Also, QQI may invite a profession to develop and propose a translation of the descriptor for agreement with QQI prior to the submission of an application for alignment of that profession's awards. Alignment with such translations shall be taken to be alignment with the professional award-type descriptor.
- e) Valid and reliable assessment:** Candidates shall be validly and reliably assessed (including through the recognition of prior certified learning) as having attained the minimum expected knowledge, skill and competence required for the professional award.
- f) Associated Programmes where relevant (i.e. where provided or endorsed by the professional body) shall be quality assured:**
- Comprehensive procedures for the quality assurance of associated programmes shall be established and implemented
  - The professional body shall have procedures to assure that any associated programme shall enable its target learners to attain the programme standard (minimum intended programme learning outcomes) reliably and efficiently
  - The extent (partial or full) to which successful completion of the programme meets the requirements for the professional award shall be explicit and published and if partial the other requirements shall also be explicit and published

- g) Access, Transfer and Progression:** Providers of associated programmes shall establish procedures for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners that are in line with the policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners determined by QQI under section 56(1) of the 2012 Act. These procedures shall include procedures for credit accumulation, credit transfer and identification and formal assessment of the knowledge, skills or competence previously acquired by learners.<sup>10</sup> Section 67 of the 2012 Act also applies.
- h) Access Standard—Programme and Professional Award:** The prerequisite learning for participation in any associated programme and any other assumptions relating to such a programme's target learners shall be explicit. The standards required to access the professional award shall normally be limited exclusively to knowledge, skill and competence specifications unless otherwise explicitly required by applicable law.
- i) Continuing Professional Development:** The professional body shall commit to facilitating the continuing professional development of award-holders.

### 3.8.2 Using the criteria for new awards: Candidate for alignment at a specified NFQ level

The criteria in this policy are for alignment. Professional awards that have not yet been made may be considered against these criteria for endorsement as candidates for alignment. In this case due allowances will be made for the fact that certain kinds of evidence will not exist.

### 3.8.3 Quality assurance of associated programmes

This criterion and sub-criteria apply whenever the professional body making a professional award provides, organises or procures programmes of education and training specifically designed to assist 'target learners' to attain (or partially attain) the minimum standards required for the professional award. Quality assured programmes leading to recognised educational awards (e.g. awards in the NFQ) which entitle a person to exemptions are not considered associated programmes. If other persons or bodies are involved in the provision of any associated programmes, which are endorsed by the professional body, they and the relevant programmes will have to be quality assured by the professional body.

Section 67 of the 2012 Act applies to programmes of education and training of 3 months or longer duration. In particular this extends to associated programmes. Professional bodies and associated providers must ensure compliance.

<sup>10</sup>This is based on Section 56 of the 2012 Act.



### **3.9 Withdrawing an Application for Alignment of an Award**

An application for alignment may be withdrawn by the applicant at any stage prior to the formal alignment decision by QQI. No report will be published in this context.

### **3.10 Post-alignment follow-up by QQI**

QQI will monitor the quality of professional awards that it aligns. Monitoring can be seen as long-term follow-up. One mode of monitoring will be the (normally) seven-yearly review. QQI will monitor professional bodies which have their professional awards aligned with the NFQ.

The detailed monitoring arrangements will be elaborated in supporting guidelines and may be specified in the conditions of alignment. See section 3.16.

### **3.11 Renewal of Alignment and Re-alignment**

Alignment is normally for awards made within an interval of seven years. The process for the renewal of alignment is essentially the same as that for alignment, however, it only needs to focus on what has changed (e.g. in the award, in its assessment procedures, in the associated programmes or in the applicable alignment policy criteria) so it may be less onerous than the initial alignment.

In the unusual event that the application for renewal of alignment must be delayed, a professional body may apply for an extension of the alignment duration to enable it to complete its application (including self-assessment). Such extensions are not automatic and if granted by QQI may be subject to conditions.

A professional body may seek to have its award re-aligned where reasonable grounds for suspecting that the actual level of that aligned award is inconsistent with the NFQ level at which it is aligned. The process will be conducted by QQI as a *de novo* alignment and the same appeals process will apply. This provision is not intended to serve as an appeal process (section 3.18).

### **3.12 Changes to Professional Awards Following Alignment**

As already noted minor changes to professional awards will normally be required from year to year. Substantial changes may be proposed following self-assessment when applying for renewal of alignment. Occasionally circumstances will require the self-assessment to be brought forward.

### **3.13 Review and Withdrawal of Alignment by QQI**

The review and withdrawal of alignment will be conducted in accordance with the process and criteria outlined in Sections 46 and 47 of the 2012 Act. This means, for example, that QQI may review an alignment at any time.

### **3.14 Review of the Effectiveness of Quality Assurance Procedures**

QQI will review the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures underpinning each aligned award from time to time and in such a manner as it sees fit, will publish its findings and make recommendations. Failure to respond adequately to any such recommendations may result in the review and consequent withdrawal of alignment.

### **3.15 Refusal of Alignment**

Refusal of alignment may occur when an application for alignment is not accepted or when QQI is not satisfied that the alignment criteria have been demonstrated to have been satisfied. Where this occurs the professional body will be informed of this by notice in writing and of the reasons for this decision.

Reapplication following refusal of alignment may only be made after a prescribed period and only after significant changes have been made and have had time to take effect.

### **3.16 Conditions of Alignment**

This section sets out standard conditions but normally additional situation-specific conditions will also be specified.

Alignment normally applies to awards made within a specified period of up to seven years—in exceptional cases this may be extended by QQI for up to two years. Such extensions if granted by QQI may be subject to further conditions.

The professional body shall:

- Issue annually to QQI a signed declaration of compliance with the conditions of alignment
- Maintain the standing required to make the professional award
- Maintain the standard (expected knowledge, skill and competence) of the professional award in accordance with the relevant Professional Award-type Descriptor
- Maintain a permanent and secure awards and learner data records database and periodically (as required and at least annually) provide statistical information to QQI about
  - » Each aligned professional award it makes in an agreed format
  - » Each associated programme of education and training that leads to an aligned award
- Implement quality assurance procedures approved by QQI
- Implement procedures for the assessment of learners (including external examining arrangements or equivalent objective external interface to support public confidence in the assessment underpinning the professional award) that are broadly consistent with Assessment and Standards, Revised 2013

- Implement the actions and procedures for access, transfer and progression for learners required by this QQI policy
- Implement any special conditions of alignment attached to the translation of the award-type descriptors
- Co-operate with and assist QQI in the performance of its functions
- Provide the information required by QQI's external quality assurance functions
- Subject to Section 3.6 obtain QQI's approval prior to substantially amending the professional award's minimum expected knowledge, skill and competence requirements, save in the case of incremental enhancements arising from the implementation of findings of the approved quality assurance procedures
- Notify QQI of any information concerning the professional award, the associated assessment procedures, any associated programme, or any related matters or circumstances that may reasonably be expected to give QQI cause to consider reviewing the alignment. Explicitly this includes where any other body withdraws or seeks to withdraw or alter conditions of alignment (or any other form of recognition) of the relevant professional award or of the approval of any associated programmes or other relevant processes or criteria
- Notify QQI of any change in circumstances affecting the professional body that could affect or be perceived to affect the professional award or related matters. This includes significant changes in governance, ownership, legal status, profile of staff or members or associates, profile of candidates or learners, numbers enrolled, facilities, or resources

### **3.17 Database for Aligned Professional Awards and Associated Programmes**

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QQI will maintain and publish a database of aligned professional awards and associated programmes.

### **3.18 Complaints and Appeals Against Refusal or Withdrawal of Alignment by QQI**

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Complaints concerning the operation of this policy may be made under QQI's complaints procedures.

Where QQI refuses or withdraws alignment and has confirmed its decision following consideration of any observations made by the applicant, the applicant may appeal against the decision under QQI's appeals procedures.

## **4 REVIEW OF THIS POLICY**

The policy and criteria for the alignment of professional awards within the NFQ at levels 7, 8 and 9 will be reviewed two years after the date of adoption by the Board or earlier if necessary and whenever the more general policy on recognition of awards within the Framework is adopted by the QQI Board.

## **5 REFERENCES**

European Communities *ECTS User's Guide* 2009

Higher Education and Training Awards Council *Assessment and Standards, Revised* 2013

Higher Education and Training Awards Council *Core Validation Policy and Criteria* 2010

NQAI *Policies, actions and procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners* 2003

NQAI *Policies and Criteria for the Inclusion in, or Alignment with, the National Framework of Qualifications of the Awards of Certain Awarding Bodies* 2008

NQAI *Policies and Criteria for the Alignment with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) of the Awards of certain International Sectoral Certifying Bodies which issue certification and in some cases provide programmes in Ireland*

IHEQN *Provision of Education to International Students: Code of Practice and Guidelines for Irish Higher Education Institutions* 2009

NQAI *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of a National Approach to Credit in Irish Higher Education and Training* 2006

NQAI *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training* 2005

QQI *Policy and Criteria for Provider Access to Initial Validation of Programmes Leading to QQI Awards* 2013









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