

POLICY AND CRITERIA FOR THE DETERMINATION OF AWARDS STANDARDS



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1. LEGAL BASIS AND INTRODUCTION

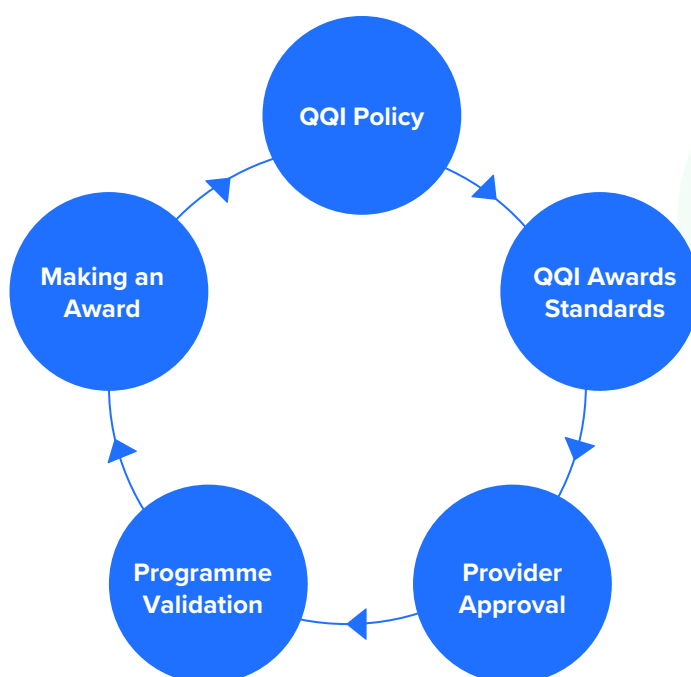
QQI awards standards are determined within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) which is maintained by QQI and comprises a grid of indicators, award-type descriptors and other policies, criteria, standards and guidelines that may be issued to support it. This policy sets out the legal and practical meaning of awards standards; the rationale for and purpose of awards standards; the different types of QQI awards standards, and the processes and practices that underpin and support their development and implementation.

QQI's general functions are set out in section 9 (1) of the 2012 Act. Sub-sections a, e, f, g and j are relevant here as is section 9(2) which features actions to be undertaken by QQI in the performance of its functions. QQI's authority to determine awards standards is established in section 49. Section 50 and 51 of the 2012 Act concern the making of awards by QQI and by providers with DA.

The 2012 Act requires that QQI ensure that its awards standards are relevant to the personal, social and economic interests of learners and that they support wider public policy objectives for education and training.

The 2012 Act confirms that awards made by QQI are deemed to be included within the NFQ. This recognition relies on the awarding function of QQI and crucially the full implementation of the NFQ by QQI in its awards standards, validation and certification activities. The determination of QQI awards standards secures the inclusion of QQI awards within the NFQ and facilitates the alignment of education and training programmes with the NFQ. The role of awards standards in QQI's awarding functions is outlined in Figure 1. For a more detailed process mapping of the relationship between the NFQ, QQI awards standards and education and training programmes see Appendix 1.

Figure 1. QQI Awarding Cycle



2. POLICY SCOPE

This policy applies to:

QQI as an Awarding Body

QQI determines awards standards for the education and training awards that it makes itself and that are made by providers to which it has delegated authority to make an award. Such standards are determined to be consistent with the NFQ's award-types.

Providers to which authority to make an award has been delegated (Providers with DA).

These providers make awards in respect of programmes of education and training that they validate against QQI awards standards.

3. POLICY PURPOSE

The purpose of the policy is to:

- promote a shared understanding of QQI's approach to the development (directly or indirectly) and the determination of awards standards
- guide QQI in the determination of awards standards
- set out the respective roles and responsibilities involved in the determination of QQI awards standards
- promote public confidence in the value of QQI's awards standards
- establish a basis for holding QQI accountable for the performance of its statutory function to establish fit for purpose awards standards consistent with the NFQ and to quality assure their effective implementation and maintenance.

4. INTERPRETATIONS

Awards standards describe the knowledge, skill or competency to be acquired by a learner before an award may be made by QQI or by a provider with DA. QQI may determine different standards for different awards or different classes of awards; these standards are always derived from the NFQ.

For the purpose of this policy, the following interpretations also apply:

Award means an award (qualification) which is conferred, granted or given by an awarding body and which records that a learner has acquired a standard of knowledge, skill or competence.

Awarding body means a body issuing awards that formally recognise the learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, competences) of an individual, following an assessment and validation procedure.

Award standard means the knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired, and where appropriate, demonstrated, by a learner before a specified QQI award may be made.

Credit means an acknowledgement of an enrolled learner's completion of a programme or part of a programme of education and training to a particular standard. Usually expressed as a quantitative value, credits indicating the estimated workload typically required for a learner to achieve required learning outcomes. Credit may be accumulated towards a QQI award.

Determine means to decide and establish the appropriate standards of knowledge, skill or competence that apply to QQI awards.

Learning outcomes means statements of expected knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners to justify the making of a QQI award. Awards standards, as determined by QQI, are always expressed in terms of learning outcomes.

NFQ Award-type Descriptor means the description of the breadth and kind of knowledge, the range and selectivity of skills, the role and context competence, learning competence and insight, appropriate to a specific award type.

NFQ Award Class means a category of awards. There are currently five classes of awards in the NFQ (Major, Minor, Special Purpose, Supplemental and Professional).

NFQ Level means statements about the indicative breadth and kind of knowledge, the range and selectivity of skills, the role and context competence, learning competence and insight, appropriate to a specific NFQ level.

Occupational profile means a description of the knowledge, skills, and competencies that a prospective practitioner must learn to perform competently in an occupational setting.

Occupational standard means what a practitioner is expected to be able to do. It consists of statements of the activities and tasks specific to a certain job and its practice.

Peak body means a non-government organisation that represents a sector, industry or community. They present the collective voice of their members to government. For QQI, recognised peak bodies with relevant subject matter expertise play a vital role in the determination, dissemination and maintenance of awards standards.

Programme of education and training (programme) means a process by which a learner acquires knowledge, skill or competence and includes a course of study, a course of instruction and an apprenticeship.

Threshold standards mean the minimum knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired, and where appropriate, demonstrated, by a learner before an award may be made. QQI awards standards are interpreted as threshold under the 2012 Act, supporting the cumulative nature of the NFQ and facilitating effective access, transfer and progression opportunities, and pathways for learners.

Validation of a programme of education and training designed to lead to a QQI award means a regulatory process that determines whether (or not) a particular QQI award can be offered in respect of a provider's programme of education and training.

5. POLICY AND CRITERIA

5.1 THE PURPOSE OF QQI AWARD STANDARDS

- to promote consistency in QQI awards over time and across providers of education and training
- to promote relevance of QQI awards so that they meet the personal, social and economic needs of learners
- to provide a point of reference for the development and validation of programmes of education and training leading to QQI awards
- to promote the use of learning outcomes in education and training programmes leading to QQI awards
- to support the implementation of the NFQ and to underpin confidence in the inclusion of QQI awards within the NFQ.

5.2 USERS OF QQI AWARDS STANDARDS

- QQI and providers with DA use QQI awards standards in the validation of education and training programmes, and in the making of relevant awards.
- providers of education and training programmes use QQI awards standards in the development and delivery of programmes validated by QQI.
- relevant providers, having regard to their established procedures for access, transfer and progression, including the recognition of prior learning, in making an application to QQI to make an award to a learner where the learner has, in the opinion of the provider, acquired, and where appropriate, demonstrated, the appropriate standard of knowledge, skill or competence as determined by QQI.
- other users of QQI awards with an interest in the knowledge, skill or competence recognised by a QQI award; these include bodies with a regulatory role in relation to an occupation or associated activities, other peak bodies, employers, labour market analysts, funders of education and training, and the guidance profession.

5.3 APPROACH TO AWARDS STANDARDS DETERMINATION

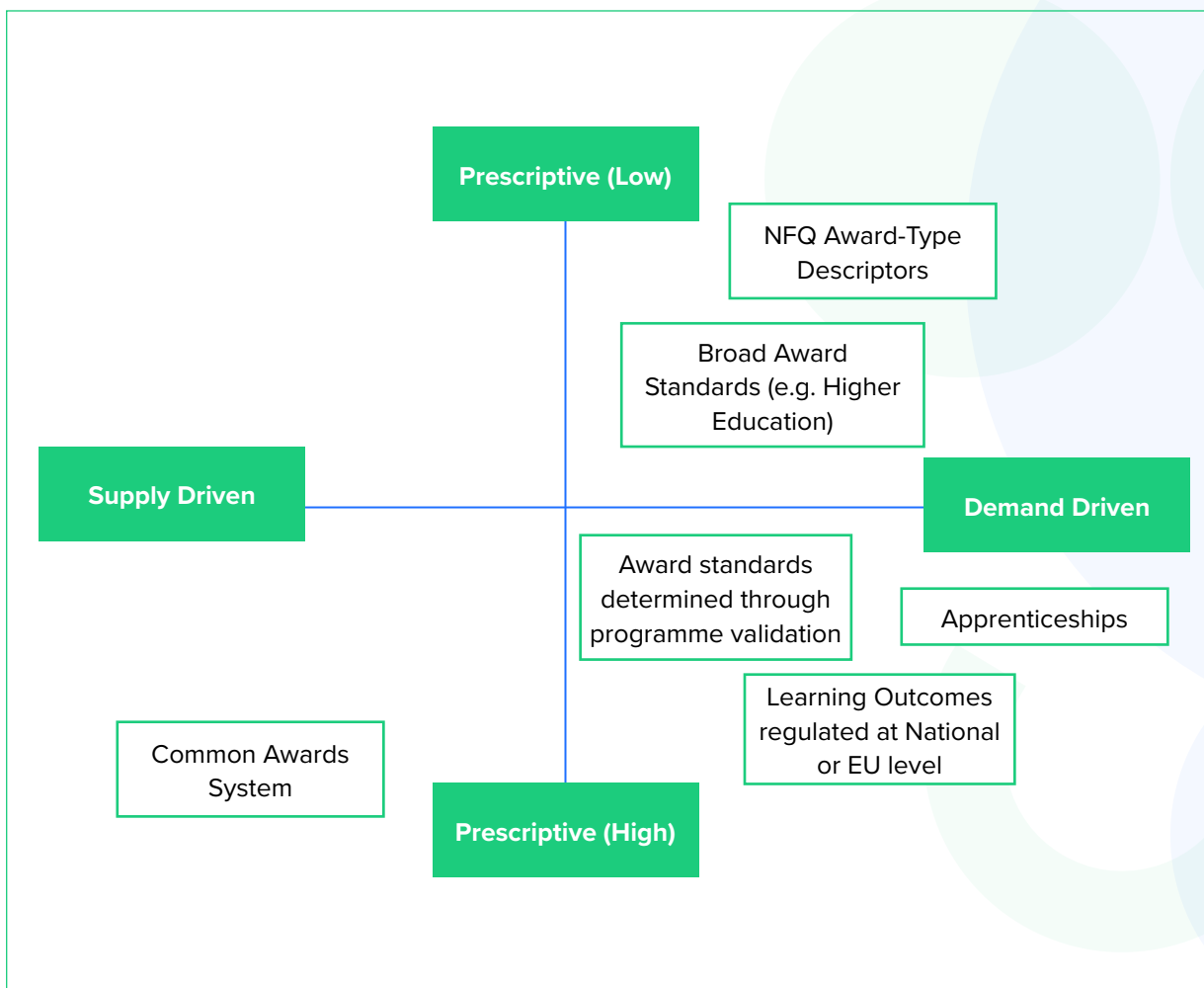
QQI's approach to the determination of awards standards will be guided by the requirement to meet the diverse needs of learners and support national ambitions for lifelong learning. Our approach must also establish effective governance arrangements for the quality assured creation of programmes and qualifications. QQI awards standards will facilitate learner's interests in flexible and accessible qualifications and associated pathways, while at the same time promoting system coherence, stability and consistency.

The determination of QQI awards standards will reflect a wide range of interests but prioritise the interests of learners.

National policy on skills¹ suggests that qualifications development should be demand led, and where appropriate, should support flexible delivery. The modularisation of qualifications is supported by NFQ policy on award types and award classes, along with national approaches to credit. These policy orientations will shape QQI’s approach to determining awards standards and have consequences for the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in that process.

Getting the balance right between the level of prescription in awards standards and the relative influence of supply and demand interests in their determination, maintenance and use, is context dependent. QQI has developed a range of different types of awards standards that can be mapped along two dimensions – **prescriptiveness** (Low/Hi), and **user influence** (supply/demand), see Figure 2.

Figure 2 Typology of QQI Awards Standards



¹ OECD (2023), OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/d7b8b40b-en>.

The type of QQI awards standards determined by QQI is influenced by a range of factors, including:

- the purpose of QQI awards (e.g. more or less vocationally oriented)
- the extent of use of awards standards across providers
- the need to ensure high levels of consistency and comparability in expected and achieved learning outcomes across providers and over time
- any regulatory interests in the expected and achieved learning outcomes
- any international norms or benchmarks that impact on mobility and recognition of QQI awards

NFQ Level and Award-Type Descriptors

The NFQ award-type descriptors are the default awards standards for all QQI's education and training awards — they apply unless a more specific award standard has been determined by QQI. There are generic standards for special purpose, supplemental and minor award types. They derive from the major award-type descriptor or level indicators at the relevant NFQ level but relax the requirement that all sub-strand expected learning outcomes must be met. They typically involve a lower volume of learning than the major award types at the same NFQ level. QQI has adopted the major and non-major NFQ award-type descriptors as generic awards standards.

To facilitate the development and recognition of qualifications within a European context and for the purpose of determining QQI awards standards, QQI may adopt the cycle descriptors of the overarching framework for qualifications in the European higher education area (QF-EHEA). These so called 'Dublin descriptors' set out generic learning outcomes and competences and typical credit ranges for undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in Europe.

Broad Awards Standards

Broad award standards are developed in consultation with a wide range of users and are determined for named fields of education and training. Typically, QQI awards standards for higher education and training are of this type. They have also been introduced at lower levels of the NFQ for key competencies and pre-vocational awards. Broad award standards are contextualised and refined during the validation process where the de facto awards standards are the approved minimum intended programme learning outcomes. These standards are not programme specifications. It is through these, however, that the relationship between a programme, its component parts and the NFQ should be evident. The standards are a reference point and a point of comparison by which individual programmes may be justified. They are intended to provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with a particular field of learning. In designing programmes, providers must take cognisance of the standards for specific fields of learning as they relate to the programme being developed. Broad award standards are intended to operate in parallel with validation processes where minimum intended programme learning outcomes (MIPLOs) and minimum intended module learning outcomes (MIMLOs) for a specific named award are developed and approved.

Prescriptive Awards Standards

Prescriptive awards standards describe many of the existing QQI awards standards that apply in further education and training. The learning outcomes are typically described in detail and often accompanied by rules about how they are to be implemented and used by providers.

These are the most standardised forms of awards standards determined by QQI. Awards standards determined using the **common awards system** or standards determined in response to occupational or regulatory demands are typically tightly prescribed. **QQI awards standards for apprenticeship** are determined through the official establishment of an apprenticeship and specified using the professional award-type descriptor (PATD). Validated apprenticeship programmes are subject to awards standards of the agreed PATD, and the relevant NQF award type employed. Where more uniform QQI award standards are appropriate, they will be demand-led.

Awards Standards Determined at Programme Validation

The award standards that QQI determine to guide programme development, e.g. the Common Awards System, are standards for classes of named awards (normally at a specific NQF level) whereas the awards standard for a specific named award is the set of minimum intended programme learning outcomes (MIPLOs) approved at programme validation and thereafter maintained by the provider subject to the conditions of validation. Where QQI award standards are not determined for classes of named awards, the MIPLOs approved at programme validation constitute the relevant award standard as determined by QQI. The award is only created when the programme is validated.

QQI discipline-specific awards standards and programme standards apply in parallel and are intrinsically linked. When designing a programme, each learning outcome in the relevant QQI award standard should be considered. Where departure from these is necessary, it should be justified in the context of the specific orientation of the programme and other facts pertaining to it. Each programme provider should be able to demonstrate how the design and content of its own programmes has been informed by the standard. This text indicates that regardless of whether the learning outcome statements in the standards have a correspondence in the programme, they need to be considered and accounted for. This is typically demonstrated by mapping module and programme learning outcomes to the relevant award standard.

While QQI awards standards are more or less specific, the intended programme learning outcomes to be acquired, and where appropriate demonstrated before a named award associated with a validated programme may be made, must always be specific and sufficiently detailed to communicate the award-holder's knowledge, skill and competence to a prospective employer or an educational institution for the purpose of helping the award-holder gain access to, transfer to or progress to, a particular programme of education and training.

Providers with DA have responsibility for validating programmes of education and training and for making awards. They must ensure that awards standards, as determined through validation, are consistent with relevant QQI awards standards. This responsibility applies whether or not QQI has determined and defined award standards beyond the generic NQF level and award-type descriptors.

Occupational Standards and Fitness to Practise

Here 'occupational standard' means a standard of knowledge, skill and competence that must be achieved to qualify or licence a person to practise in a specific occupation. If an occupation is regulated, an occupational standard might be maintained by the regulator.

As expressions of expected learning outcomes, occupational standards are comparable to education and training standards, but their purpose and origin are typically different, and warrant making a clear distinction between them.

Some competencies required for performance at work are beyond the scope of an education and training award. Also, occupational standards often take the form of listing the competencies clustered around the main tasks and activities of an occupation, while award standards follow a pedagogic logic supporting the progressive accumulation of knowledge, skill or competence.

An education and training award is permanent and cannot function as a periodically renewable licence to practise nor as an indicator of continuing fitness to practise a particular occupation. It is not a proxy for a licence to practise.

The interaction between occupational and awards standards is important. The shared use of the NFQ and mutual recognition of quality assurance processes in the development of standards can support the efficient design of qualifications intended to respond to both types of standards.

For vocationally oriented awards that sit at the interface of education and work, occupational standards can inform the development of QQI awards standards and associated programmes. Where a recognised national occupational standard is not available, QQI will promote the use of the occupational profiles developed under the European Skills, Competencies, Qualifications and Occupations initiative².

External Reference Points

QQI may adopt external standards, criteria, norms or benchmarks in determining its own award standards. Where nationally or internationally recognised learning outcomes-based standards exist, QQI may adopt or incorporate such learning outcomes into QQI awards standards. Such external reference points may be officially mandated in national or European legislation, or non-statutory sectoral, competence or proficiency frameworks that have strong practitioner endorsement and sector wide acceptance.

² ESCO (European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations) is the European multilingual classification of Skills, Competences and Occupations. <https://esco.ec.europa.eu/en>

6. QQI STANDARDS DEVELOPMENT AND DETERMINATION PROCESS

The detailed process for standards development will vary considerably from one situation to another. All processes share certain broad features, and these are outlined here. QQI maintains and publishes separate guidelines and criteria on proposals for the review and development of awards standards.

6.1 PROPOSALS FOR REVIEW OR DEVELOPMENT OF AWARDS STANDARDS

As indicated above, the NFQ's award-type descriptors provide a default system of standards. Additional specificity may be provided by QQI awards standards determinations where required. A decision by QQI to determine award standards for any class of named awards is made on the basis that such an intervention is warranted in the best interest of learners. A request for development or review of QQI awards standards may be initiated by QQI or by relevant interested parties.

6.2 DEVELOPMENT

The expertise required in the development of awards standards includes an understanding of:

- the field of learning
- education and training needs (for employment and/or educational development)
- the occupation concerned (where applicable), employer and practitioner perspectives on the occupation and the occupation's education and training needs.
- occupational regulation (where applicable)
- the practice of education and training.

QQI has a coordinating role in standards development. It must ensure that:

- The necessary development expertise is assembled and applied.
- A valid, reliable and open development process is implemented.
- Awards standards are comprehensible and implementable.
- Awards standards meet significant education and training needs (for employment or educational development) and are normally designed to be valid for five years or more.
- Awards standards are consistent with the NFQ.
- Awards will be recognised nationally and internationally.
- Awards standards will regulate assessable intended programme learning outcomes.

QQI may manage the development of an award standard itself or enter into an arrangement with another body. QQI may adopt external standards, criteria, norms or benchmarks in determining its own award standards.

6.3 CONSULTATION ON DRAFT AWARDS STANDARDS

Once a draft standard has been developed, it will normally be published for public consultation. The draft may be modified following consideration of the consultation feedback.

6.4 FORMAL DETERMINATION

If the QQI executive is satisfied that a draft award standard is suitable for determination by QQI, it will present it to the QQI Policies and Standards Committee for adoption.

6.5 PUBLICATION

QQI will publish awards standards on its website.

6.6 REVIEW OF AWARDS STANDARDS

Awards standards will be reviewed from time to time, as necessary. Minor changes may be made by the QQI Executive outside the review cycle where necessary.

Changes to standards will be published on QQI's website. Providers with delegated authority to make awards and providers of QQI validated programmes are responsible for monitoring relevant standards and making necessary responses to changes.

7. REVIEW OF THIS POLICY

This policy will be reviewed no later than five years after adoption by the QQI Board.

APPENDIX 1

Process map showing the relationship between the NQF, QQI awards standards, and education and training programmes.

