

# A Brief Guide to the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

AN INTRODUCTION TO LEVELS, AWARD TYPES AND CREDIT  
QQI

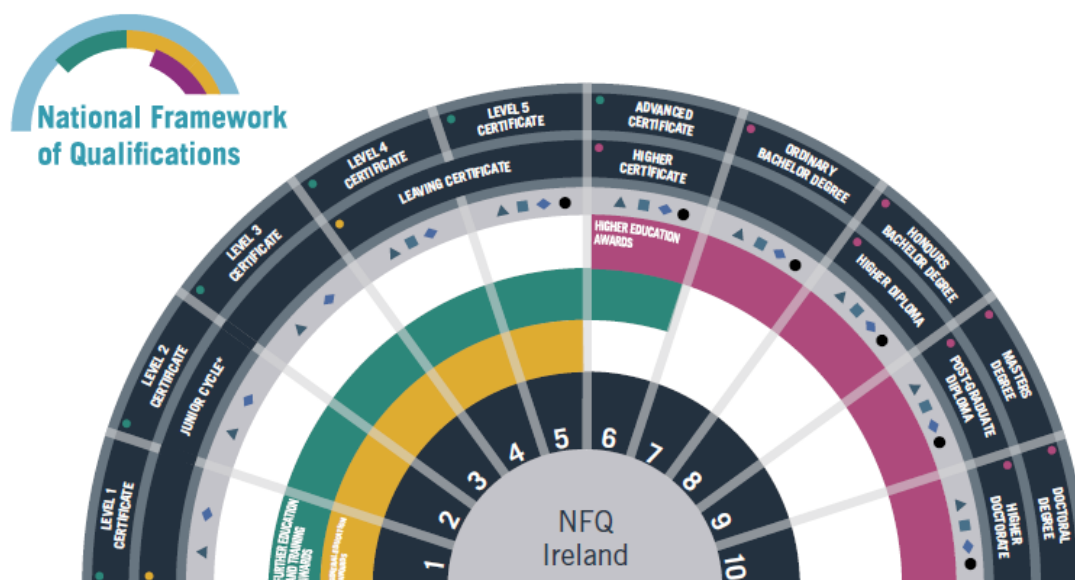
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## A Brief Guide to the National Framework of Qualifications

In Ireland, we describe the qualifications used in our education and training system through the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The NFQ classifies the level, class of award and type of qualifications in Ireland from Level 1 literacy qualifications, through to Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate and Level 8 Honours bachelor's degrees, right up Level 10 doctoral degrees.



### CLASSES OF AWARD

- Major Awards:** named in the outer rings, are the principal class of awards made at a level
  - Minor Awards:** are for partial completion of the outcomes for a Major Award
  - Supplemental Awards:** are for learning that is additional to a Major Award
  - Special Purpose Awards:** are for relatively narrow or purpose-specific achievement
  - Professional Awards:** are for occupation-orientated qualifications including apprenticeships
- \* Please refer to NCCA website, [ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/](http://ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/)

### IRISH REGISTER OF QUALIFICATIONS

- For more information on
- Qualifications
  - Providers
  - Courses
- visit [www.irq.ie](http://www.irq.ie)

## Why is a National Framework of Qualifications needed?

This 10-level National Framework of Qualifications helps you to compare different qualifications, showing how learners can progress from one level to another. The NFQ can also help you to compare a foreign qualification with its Irish equivalent and can help with the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad.

## What is a qualification?

A qualification is a formal record awarded following a period of successful study or training. Qualifications recognise the knowledge and skills that have been achieved and can be practised by a learner. The legislation uses the term award rather than qualification and as a result, the terms qualification and award are often used interchangeably.

## What is a level on the Framework?

Each level sets out a range of standards of knowledge, skill and competence acquired by learners. Levels are not in themselves standards but indicators of a range of standards and can be described in an ordered sequence. The indicators enable award-types to be matched to a level on an overall best-

fit basis rather than by conformity to a defined set of required standards. The [level indicators](#) are a key structural element of the Framework.

### What is an award-type?

An award-type is a class of named awards sharing common features and level. Award-types can reflect a mix of standards of knowledge, skill and competence which is independent of any specific field of learning. Descriptors can be defined generically for award types.

The classes of award types of the Irish NFQ are major awards, [minor awards](#), [special purpose awards](#), [supplemental awards](#), and [professional](#) awards.

NFQ award-type descriptors state general learning achievements for all types of awards included in the NFQ.

Awarding bodies are required to develop specific award standards for each award they include in the NFQ.

Award Type	Description	Levels
<b>Major</b>	The main class of award made at each level. It represents a significant number of learning outcomes.	1-10
<b>Minor</b>	All minor awards are linked to a major award which allows learners the opportunity to build on their minor awards and work towards gaining a major award. It is important to note that minor awards are achievements in their own right.	1-9
<b>Special Purpose</b>	Specific areas of learning that have a narrow scope.	3-9
<b>Supplemental</b>	Learning which is additional to a previous award. They could, for example, relate to updating and refreshing knowledge or skills, or to continuing professional development.	3-9
<b>Professional</b>	These were developed to strengthen the capacity of the NFQ to resolve differences between 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—e.g. a specific Honours Bachelor Degree award could be classed as both major and professional and would need to be consistent with the bachelor award-type as well as the professional award-type.	5-10 <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Professional award type descriptors are only available for levels 5-9, though apprenticeships have been designed at level 10.

## What are the major awards at each level?

NFQ Level	NFQ Major Award-Types	Credit Volume
<b>1</b>	Junior Cycle Level 1 Certificate	n/a 20 FET credits
<b>2</b>	Junior Cycle Level 2 Certificate	n/a 30 FET credits
<b>3</b>	Junior Cycle Level 3 Certificate	n/a 60 FET credits
<b>4</b>	Leaving Certificate Level 4 Certificate	n/a 90 FET credits
<b>5</b>	Leaving Certificate Level 5 Certificate	n/a 120 FET credits
<b>6</b>	Advanced Certificate Higher Certificate	120 FET credits 120 ECTS credits
<b>7</b>	Ordinary Bachelor Degree	180 ECTS credits
<b>8</b>	Higher Diploma Honours Bachelor Degree	60 ECTS 180-240 ECTS credits
<b>9</b>	Postgraduate Diploma Masters Degree	60 ECTS credits 60-120 ECTS credits
<b>10</b>	Doctoral Degree Higher Doctorate	n/a n/a

## What is credit?

There are two credit systems in operation in Ireland – one in further education and another in higher education. Credit volumes allow learners and others to understand the volume of learning and effort associated with a qualification. Major awards, for example, will typically have the largest credit volumes associated with qualifications at each level.

### *Higher Education Credit System*

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a tool of the European Higher Education Area for making studies and courses more transparent. It helps students to move between countries and to have their academic qualifications and study periods abroad recognised.

60 ECTS credits are the equivalent of a full year of study or work. In a standard academic year, these credits are usually broken down into several smaller modules.

Typically, one credit corresponds to 25-30 hours of notional work.

More information about ECTS is available in the [ECTS Users' Guide 2015](#).

1 ECTS = 25-30 hours

60 ECTS = full time academic year or 1500-1800 notional hours

### *Further Education and Training (FET) Credit System*

The FET credit system emerged from the old school system where it was estimated (at that time) that an academic year comprised 1200 hours of approximate learner effort.

1 FET credit = 10 hours

120 FET = full time academic year or 1200 notional hours

## Are there guidelines about titling conventions and credit volumes for non-major awards?

Non-major awards are minor, special purpose, supplemental and some professional awards. There will be a general guideline about the titling of non-major awards in higher education.

At levels 6-9, non-major awards that are greater than 60 credits (or equal to 60 credits where no major award is available at the same volume of learning) should be titled **Diplomas**, while non-major awards of less than 60 credits should be titled **Certificates**.

≥60 ECTS = Diploma

<60 ECTS = Certificate

There is no official guidance regarding the use of the term “Professional” as a pre-fix to either Diploma or Certificate (ie) Professional Diploma or Professional Certificate. However, awarding bodies and providers are encouraged to ensure that use of the term professional in award titles provides clarity to learners and wider stakeholders.

### What are micro-credentials?

Micro-credentials are small units of learning, though there is no agreed credit volume yet. The NFQ is flexible enough to accommodate micro-credentials and the minor, special purpose, supplemental and professional award type descriptors can be used to develop micro-credentials included in the NFQ.

### Where do I find information about qualifications included in the NFQ?

The qualifications included in the NFQ and the programmes leading to them are listed in the Irish Register of Qualifications. [www.irq.ie](http://www.irq.ie)

### Who can make awards on the Framework?

Certain bodies have been designated by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 (as amended) as awarding bodies.

The **Designated Awarding Bodies (DABs)** which are universities, technological universities, institutes of technology and Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) have autonomous awarding powers to make NFQ awards. The Joint Sectoral Protocol between QQI and DABs<sup>2</sup> sets out the requirements for the formal inclusion of these awards in the Framework.

DABs can make awards for ‘linked providers’ too, where the linked provider can offer programmes leading to an award of the DAB. A full list of Linked Providers is available [here](#).

**QQI** is the awarding body for public further education and training. Private and independent further and higher education providers may also seek to have their programmes validated by QQI. QQI may delegate authority to providers, and these will be termed **Delegated Authority Awarding Bodies**.

The **State Examinations Commission**, under the delegated authority of the Department of Education, awards the Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate.

A new type of awarding body called **Listed Awarding Bodies** will be established in the course of 2025. These will be professional, sectoral, and international awarding bodies who have achieved voluntary, regulated access to the NFQ.

Designated Awarding Bodies	Other Statutory Awarding Bodies	Listed Awarding Bodies	Delegated Authority Awarding Bodies
<b>Universities</b>	<b>QQI</b>	None (as of 2024)	None (as of 2023)
<b>Technological Universities</b>	<b>State Examinations Commission via Department of Education.</b>		
<b>Institutes of Technology</b>			
<b>RCSI University</b>			

<sup>2</sup> [Joint-sectoral protocol DABs.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

Information on awarding bodies and providers can be found on the IRQ. [www.irq.ie](http://www.irq.ie)



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