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A Guide for Listed Awarding Bodies to Support Referencing Existing Qualifications to the National Framework of Qualifications

GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT FOR PROSPECTIVE LISTED AWARDING BODIES

QQI

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A Guide for Listed Awarding Bodies to Support Referencing Existing Qualifications to the National Framework of Qualifications

This guide is specifically designed for prospective Listed Awarding Bodies (LABs) and supporting them to retrospectively apply NFQ Levels, award types and credit volumes to existing awards that are proposed for inclusion in the NFQ.

LABs will be required to embed the NFQ and its associated policies into internal QA procedures so this guide will not be necessary to support the development of new and additional qualifications for inclusion in the NFQ. However, the steps outlined here might provide useful guidance for the development of said QA procedures.

Supporting Documents

There are several documents which are useful for this exercise and this guide should be read in conjunction with these documents:

- [Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications](#)
- [NQF Grid of Level Indicators](#)
- [Descriptors for Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental Award Types](#)
- [Professional Award Type Descriptors](#)
- [Cedefop Guide to Defining, Writing and Apply Learning Outcomes](#)
- [ECTS Users' Guide 2015](#)
- [Brief Guide to the NFQ](#)

Step 1: Document the Learning Outcomes

The fundamental component of any qualification, whether included in the NFQ or not, is the learning outcomes of the qualification and its associated programmes. Learning outcomes are statements of knowledge, skills and competence expected of an enrolled learner and where appropriate, demonstrate, on completion of a programme of education and training.

The first step of levelling a qualification is to document the existing learning outcomes associated with the programme. If you wish to review or update the learning outcomes at this stage, please review the Cedefop Guide.to.Defining?Writing.and.Applying.Learning.Outcomes¡[1]

QQI has developed award standards for a range of disciplines in higher education including science, business, law, and others which will give a sense of the volume and complexity of learning outcomes associated with each level. [QQI Awards standards | Quality and Qualifications Ireland](#)

LABs are not required to use the QQI award standards in the development of awards; instead, these should be viewed as an example of the development of award standards.

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[1] [Defining, writing and applying learning outcomes | CEDEFOP (europa.eu)](#)

Step 2: Compare Learning Outcomes with NFQ Grid of Level Indicators

The NFQ is articulated in terms of sub-strands labelled knowledge, skill and competence. The NFQ Grid of Level Indicators[2] shows how the outcomes in each of the eight sub-strands progress across the ten levels. The level indicators set out in this grid are intended to enable the placement of award types at appropriate levels within the Framework, based on the mix of learning outcomes they contain.[3]

- The prospective LAB should take each of its learning outcomes and consider, firstly, to which of the 8 sub strands it relates.
- Each learning outcome should then be mapped to the relevant NFQ level associated with that sub strand based on a best fit basis. There might be more than one sub strand represented by each learning outcome.
- For major awards, it would be expected that a qualification would have representation across most of the 8 sub strands, whereas in the case of smaller awards, there might be fewer sub strands represented.
- There may be a mix of levels associated with the learning outcomes, which is appropriate. Each learning outcome does not necessarily have to be at the one level.
- In deciding which level best reflects the overall level of the qualification, the awarding body should identify the most common NFQ level represented, noting that for higher education major awards – at least 60 credits must be at the level of the award.

Learning Outcome	Sub strands								NFQ Level
	Knowledge - Breadth	Knowledge – Kind	Know-how & skill - Range	Know-how & skill - Selectivity	Competence – Context	Competence – Role	Competence – Learning to Learn	Competence - Insight	
Critical evaluation of xx	x		x			x		x	8
Be able to xxx	7	7		8	7	7	7		7
Compare and contrast xx	6	7	7	8	8	8	8	8	8
Conclusion	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	8

[2] nfq-grid-of-level-indicators.pdf (qqi.ie)

[3] Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), 2019. *National Framework of Qualifications Grid of Level Indicators*. [pdf] Dublin: QQI. Available at: https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2022-09/NFQ%20Grid%20Level%20Indicators.pdf.

The table above represents a methodology for undertaking this activity. The specific learning outcome should be written in the left column and then the relevant sub strand that is represented by that learning outcome can be ticked, or the relevant NFQ level can be included. You should then provide an overall NFQ level for that learning outcome. This should be repeated for all learning outcomes and a conclusion made at the end. The conclusion will highlight which sub strands are represented in the overall learning outcomes and the overall NFQ level of the qualification.

For longer programmes, major awards, or those qualifications that include exit awards, it may be most appropriate to conduct the above activity based on each stage or year of the programme.

The figure below presents some options for allocating NFQ levels to each stage of a multistage Level 8 programme. This should be considered as an example, rather than a definitive approach, as the changes in education and training post 2012 have introduced new ways of breaking down these types of programmes. A similar approach can be used for those multistage programmes resulting in a different Level.
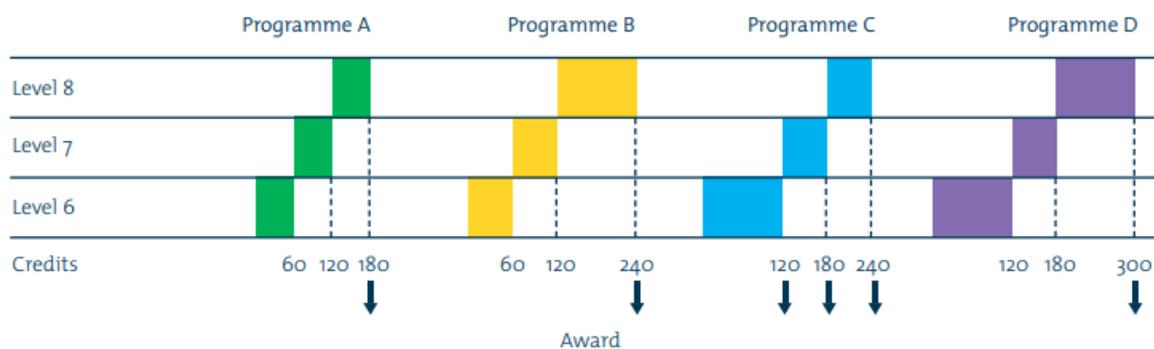
Step 3: Determining the Credit Volume

There are 2 credit systems in operation in Ireland – ECTS for higher education and FET credit for further higher education.

- For NFQ levels 1-5 – FET credit is used.
- For NFQ Levels 7-9[4] – ECTS is used.
- NFQ Level 6 uses both FET credit & ECTS and will depend on your scope of listing as a LAB and your target audience, whether you decide to use FET credit and the Advanced Certificate or ECTS and the Higher Certificate.

Please.note¿QQI.intends.to.review.the.two.awards.at.Level.❷with.the.view.to.replacing.the. existing.awards.with.one.award¡.This.award.will.most.likely.be.expressed.in.terms.of.ECTS.

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[4] Please note that there is no credit volume associated with major awards at Level 10. The non-major awards are designed for use up to Level 9.

Credit volume represents the volume of learning associated with an award. Learner effort relates not just to direct contact teaching hours but also all the self-directed learning, assignments and other relevant work that contributes to learning and assessment.

Credit volume associated with an award can be as low as 5 for a micro-credential or non-major award and as high as 300 ECTS for an integrated masters programmes or a 5 year bachelor degree. An integrated masters programme combines both undergraduate and postgraduate level study within one course. These programmes are typically associated with specific disciplines, often professional qualifications such as Pharmacy, Engineering and Architecture.

ECTS

Typically, one credit corresponds to 25-30 hours of work.
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.
The ECTS user guide may be a useful resource.[5]

FET Credit

Typically, one FET credit corresponds to 10 hours of work.
A programme is one year duration and comprises 1200 hours of approximate learner effort, representing 120 FET credits.

Approach

There are many ways to approach the allocation of credit. Some sample approaches are provided below.

The notional learner effort approach is most easily used if allocating credit on the basis of modules, stages or other small components of an award.

1. Start with full academic year:
   - You can assume that your full-time course, or a logical proportion of for non-full time, is either 60 ECTS or 120 FET credit per year. This is the case when an academic year is two traditional semesters. When a full academic year is three semesters, 90 ECTS and 180 FET credit is possible.
   - For non-full time, you should consider if it is reasonable for your target learners to achieve the credit volume within the time allocated to them. There is no official definition of part time. However, part time should be less than the full-time amount.
   - 60 ECTS is between 1500 and 1800 hours of learning, while 120 FET credit is 1200 hours of learning.
   - Review your programme offering and ensure that you have allocated the approximate hours of learning associated with the credit volume to the different types of learning.
   - The allocation of approximate hours of learning should be transparent and credible and should be communicated to learners.

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[5] ECTS users' guide 2015 - Publications Office of the EU (europa.eu)

- Confirm your credit volume.
- Please remember for higher education awards, at least 60 credits must be delivered at the overall level of the proposed award.

2. Start with notional learner effort:
   - If you have already determined a notional learner effort for your existing programme, this is a logical place to start.
   - Confirm the learner effort in terms of hours.
   - Divide this overall number of hours by 25 or 30 for higher education or by 10 for further education and this gives you the credit volume of the award.
   - As above, the allocation of approximate hours of learning should be transparent and credible and should be communicated to learners.

Step 4: Confirm the Award Type

Major vs Non-Major Award

Award Type	Description	Levels
Major	The main class of award made at each level. It represents a significant number of learning outcomes.	1-10

The first step is to confirm if your award is a major or non-major award. Using the NFQ Level and the credit volume identified above will confirm this. For an award to be a major award, the NFQ Level and the credit volume identified in the table below must match (or can exceed within reason). If the credit volume is less than that in the table below, it is a non-major award.

NFQ Level	NFQ Major Award-Types	Credit Volume
1	Level 1 Certificate	20 FET credits
2	Level 2 Certificate	30 FET credits
3	Level 3 Certificate	60 FET credits
4	Level 4 Certificate	90 FET credits
5	Level 5 Certificate	120 FET credits
6	Advanced Certificate Higher Certificate	120 FET credits 120 ECTS credits
7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree	180 ECTS credits

8	Higher Diploma Honours Bachelor Degree	60 ECTS credits 180-240 ECTS credits
9	Postgraduate Diploma Masters Degree	60 ECTS credits 60-120 ECTS credits
10	Doctoral Degree Higher Doctorate	n/a n/a

Non-Major Award Types

If your award is a non-major award, there are three categories available: Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental.

Award Type	Description	Levels
Minor	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
Special Purpose	Specific areas of learning that have a narrow scope.	3-9
Supplemental	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

You should consider which of the above best describes the award in terms of description, and considering the levels at which they are available. It is worth noting that the supplemental award type is not commonly used with less than 30 supplemental awards listed on the IRQ.

Professional Awards

An award can be both a major or non-major award and a professional award. An award cannot be simply a professional award. If you plan to use the term professional as part of the award stem (ie) Professional Certificate or Professional Diploma, you should make sure the award is in keeping with the professional award type descriptor too.

Award Type	Description	Levels
Professional	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[6]

Apprenticeships should be designed using the professional award type.

Step 5: Titling the Award

Major Awards

For major awards, the level and the credit volume dictate its titling as per the table above. You are free to specify the subject area of the award, but this should be coherent and transparent and offer clarity to learners.

For now, the term professional cannot be inserted in the award stem but can be included in the subject specification (eg) Bachelor Degree in Professional Insurance Practice.

Non-Major Awards

The term professional can be added in front of certificate or diploma at Levels 6-9 in all non-major awards. It will only be possible to use the term professional where the professional award type descriptor has been used and/or where the awarding body can demonstrate its clear authority or relationship in terms of the education of the profession.

Where the term certificate or diploma is used for non-major awards, an awarding body should consider including the NFQ level for clarity and transparency (ie) Level 7 (Professional) Certificate in xx.

The titles listed below for all non-major awards can be replaced with Micro-credential where the credit volume is less than 30 ECTS or 60 FET credits.

Minor Awards

The titling conventions for minor awards are outlined below. Please remember that a minor award must be connected to a major award overall. It is also permissible to call the award a Minor Certificate at Levels 1-6.

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[6] Professional award type descriptors are only available for levels 5-9, though apprenticeships have been designed at level 10.

NFQ Level	NFQ Minor Awards	Credit Volume
1	Component Certificate Level 1	5 or 10 FET credits
2	Component Certificate Level 2	5 or 10 FET credits
3	Component Certificate Level 3	5, 10 or 20 FET credits
4	Component Certificate Level 4	5, 10,15 or 20 FET credits
5	Component Certificate Level 5	5, 10,15 or 30 FET credits
6	Component Certificate Level 6	5, 10,15 or 30 FET credits
	Certificate	<120 ECTS
7	Certificate	<60 ECTS
	Diploma	≥60 ECTS
8	Certificate	<60 ECTS
	Diploma	≥60 ECTS
9	Certificate	<60 ECTS
	Diploma	≥60 ECTS

Special.Purpose.Awards

The titling conventions for special purpose awards are outlined below.

NFQ Level	NFQ Special Purpose Awards	Credit Volume
3	Level 3 Special Purpose Certificate	5-60 FET credits
4	Level 4 Special Purpose Certificate	5-90 FET credits
5	Level 5 Special Purpose Certificate	5-120 FET credits
6	Level 6 Special Purpose Certificate	5-120 FET credits
	Certificate	<120 ECTS
7	Certificate	<60 ECTS
	Diploma	≥60 ECTS
8	Certificate	<60 ECTS
	Diploma	≥60 ECTS
9	Certificate	<60 ECTS
	Diploma	≥60 ECTS

Supplemental.Awards

The titling conventions for supplemental awards are outlined below.

NFQ Level	NFQ Special Purpose Awards	Credit Volume
3	Level 3 Supplemental Certificate	5-60 FET credits
4	Level 4 Supplemental Certificate	5-90 FET credits
5	Level 5 Supplemental Certificate	5-120 FET credits
6	Level 6 Supplemental Certificate	5-120 FET credits
	Certificate	<120 ECTS

7	Certificate	<60 ECTS
	Diploma	≥60 ECTS
8	Certificate	<60 ECTS
	Diploma	≥60 ECTS
9	Certificate	<60 ECTS
	Diploma	≥60 ECTS

Step 6: Writing the Award Standard

By now, you have allocated an NFQ Level, an award type, credit volume and a title to your award. You also have articulated the learning outcomes. Now it is time to write the specific award standard.

- Remember, the specific award standard is informed by the Grid of Level Indicators and the award type descriptors. You should review the award-type descriptors for each bearing in mind that the descriptors for major awards are contained in the Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications.

- QQI as an awarding body has developed some award standards which may help in the development of your own award standards, or you may choose to adopt or adapt these award standards for use by your own organisation. QQI Awards standards | Quality and Qualifications Ireland

- The award standard will include additional information about access, transfer and progression including RPL and the link to other awards. RPL is a way in which prior learning, whether attained in a formal manner (such as a qualification you hold already) or non-formal and informal manner (including "on the job" learning gained working in a particular job) is assessed and given a value. Providers of courses can use RPL to allow a person entry to a programme of study; give them exemptions from part of the programme or to make a full award. The recognition of RPL for learning already undertaken is encouraged.

- The award standard should identify if there are exit awards, or if this award is a component of a larger award. An exit award refers to a qualification that a student can receive upon leaving a program of study before completing the full requirements for the intended qualification. Exit awards are meant to recognise the academic achievements of students exiting a programme. It is important that an exit award is developing in the same way as the intended qualification in terms of documenting learning outcomes, confirming an NFQ level, confirming a credit volume and confirming an award type. Exit awards must relate to the coherent achievement of learning that can be appropriately articulated in terms of a qualification. An exit award should be supported by an award standard.

- If you are developing your own award standard, the table below is a useful guide for this activity.

Class/Type of award	
Purpose	
NFQ Level	
Credit Volume	
Comprehensiveness (related to number of sub strands)	
Knowledge - Breadth	
Knowledge – Kind	
Know-how & skill - Range	
Know-how & skill -Selectivity	
Competence – Context	
Competence – Role	
Competence – Learning to Learn	
Competence - Insight	
Access including RPL	
Progression & Transfer	
Link to other awards	

Summary

On completion of these steps, you have appropriately referenced your qualification to the NFQ. You will note that the activity is more complex than simply assigning a level.

If you are proposing an exit award for any of your awards, you should conduct this exercise for all the awards. The evidence arising from such an exercise is suitable as supporting documentation for the application to include awards in the Framework.