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QQI GREEN PAPER

on Intermediate Qualifications
at NFQ Levels 5 & 6



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PREFACE

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was established in 2003. The NFQ is a single framework, covering school, tertiary education and professional awards. Over the past two decades, the 10-level Framework has become part of the national lexicon and is frequently referenced by students, guidance counsellors, education and training providers, government and employers.

Although the NFQ has been referenced against the two main European qualifications frameworks twice since its establishment, most recently in 2020¹, the placement of major awards in the framework has never been reviewed or revised. A list of the major awards available at each level of the NFQ is available in Table 1.

It should also be noted that when the NFQ was established, there were separate national awards councils for further and higher education, and the need to acknowledge the boundaries of the work of the Councils led to the differentiation between further and higher education awards at NFQ Level 6. Additionally, public further education and training was largely provided and overseen by separate bodies in the form of Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and the Training and Employment Authority (FÁS). In 2012, the further and higher education and training councils were merged into a national qualifications and quality assurance body, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), which was also given responsibility for the maintenance and further development of the NFQ. In 2013, FÁS was dissolved. The funding and oversight of further education and training passed to a new body, SOLAS, and the former FÁS training function was merged into 16 newly established regional education and training boards.

Irish NFQ Level	Major Awards Available
1	Level 1 Certificate
	Junior Cycle
2	Level 2 Certificate
	Junior Cycle
3	Level 3 Certificate
	Junior Cycle
4	Level 4 Certificate
	Leaving Certificate
5	Level 5 Certificate
	Leaving Certificate
6	Advanced Certificate
	Higher Certificate
7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree
	Honours Bachelor Degree
8	Higher Diploma
	Masters Degree
9	Postgraduate Diploma
	Doctoral Degree
10	Higher Doctorate

Table 1: Major Awards available in the NFQ

Since the establishment of the NFQ, there has been frequent discussion and some degree of tension about the placement of separate further and higher education awards at NFQ Level 6, in the form of the Advanced Certificate (AC) and Higher Certificate (HC) respectively. The parity of esteem of further and higher education awards has been challenged by the perception that those in possession of a higher education award at Level 6 have greater chances of progression to higher education awards at Levels 7 and beyond than their counterparts with a Level 6 further education and training qualification. Additionally, many HCs are integrated into degree programmes, leading to automatic progression for learners which is in contrast with AC where progression is not always guaranteed or available.

Several reports and reviews conducted in the last decade have pointed to this issue at Level 6. The *Policy Impact Assessment of the NFQ*² published in 2016 found that the two major awards at Level 6 was confusing for stakeholders and it was suggested that these awards should be reviewed. The *Evaluation of the Comparability of the Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate Qualifications*³ undertaken by Ecctis and published in 2021 concluded that both awards relate to NFQ Level 6 in terms of achieved learning outcomes but that the difference in distribution of NFQ sub-strands was significant enough to warrant differentiated award-type descriptors. *A Review of the Landscape of Practice Supporting Access, Transfer and Progression in Irish Education and Training*⁴ published in 2023 recommended that QQI ensure parity of treatment of NFQ Level 6 for the purposes of progression while observing that the use of two credit systems continues to be a barrier for progression. Finally, a report marking the 20th anniversary of the NFQ published in early 2024 titled *20 years of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications – A Story of Collaboration and Cooperation*⁵ outlined that stakeholders consider the contested space at Level 6 an ongoing issue as it resulted in unequal progression and pathways for learners. During a pre-conference workshop in November 2023, over 70% of senior leaders from further and higher education indicated support for replacing the two awards with a single major award at Level 6. In summary, the two awards at NFQ Level 6 constitute a barrier to progression for learners holding a further education qualification.

This Green Paper proposes changes to the intermediate qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 by proposing the introduction of a single major award at NFQ Level 6 and changes to the related Level 5 Certificate. The paper explores some of the associated issues, such as credit volume, credit systems and titling. This paper presents a firm perspective regarding how this can best be achieved with a focus on an appropriate transition period, comprehensive communications plan and ensuring continued referencing of the Irish NFQ to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA).

This Green Paper is the start of the conversation with stakeholders about this proposed change to the NFQ and we are keen to get diverse and varied perspectives to ensure that we have addressed all the relevant issues and that the proposed solution is fit for purpose. Following the end of the consultation process, we will publish the findings, a thematic analysis of the feedback and our response. The next step will be to formalise the proposed approach in a White Paper for a final round of feedback before confirming the new award type descriptor for the single major award at NFQ Level 6 and any associated changes to NFQ Level 5.

2 [Policy Impact Assessment of NFQ_Indecon Report with Cover_FINAL.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

3 [evaluation-of-nfq-level-6-awards.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

4 [qqi-insights_from-counting-to-cultivating-successful-participation-a-review-of-the-landscape-of-practice-supporting-access-transfer-and-progression-in-irish-education-and-training-2023.pdf](#)

5 [20-years-of-the-irish-national-framework-of-qualifications-a-story-of-collaboration-and-co-operation-2003-2023.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Green Paper proposes changes to intermediate qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6, introducing a single major award at Level 6, with a placeholder name of the Tertiary Certificate, to replace the Advanced and Higher Certificates.

- **Introduction of NFQ:** The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was established in 2003, covering school, tertiary education and professional awards, and has become a key reference for various stakeholders over the past two decades.
- **Issues with NFQ Level 6:** There has been ongoing tension regarding the placement of separate further and higher education awards at NFQ Level 6, with the Advanced Certificate (AC) and Higher Certificate (HC) causing confusion and unequal progression opportunities.
- **Rationale for Changes:** The changes aim to simplify the NFQ, improve access, transfer and progression opportunities for learners, and support a unified tertiary education system.
- **Proposed Changes:** The Green Paper proposes introducing a single major award at NFQ Level 6, termed the Tertiary Certificate, and changes to the related Level 5 Certificate to address issues like credit volume, systems, and titling.
- **Credit Systems:** The Tertiary Certificate will use the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), with a credit volume of 120 ECTS typically achieved over at least two years of full-time study.
- **Changes to Level 5 Certificate:** The Level 5 Certificate will be considered a partial qualification within the short cycle, expressed in terms of ECTS, to facilitate progression to higher education.
- **Implementation Timeline:** The Tertiary Certificate will be implemented from September 2025, with a five-year phase-out period for the existing Advanced and Higher Certificates.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Stakeholders are invited to provide feedback on various aspects of the proposal, including the designation of the Tertiary Certificate as a higher education award and the use of ECTS for all non-major awards at NFQ Level 6. Stakeholders are invited to consider if ECTS credit should also be extended to NFQ Level 5.

2. INTRODUCTION

This Green Paper (a discussion paper) outlines proposed changes to the intermediate qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6. NFQ Levels 5 and 6 can usefully be referred to as intermediate qualifications as they are an important transition point between the upper secondary school and higher education systems. NFQ Level 6 has always been offered by both further and higher education providers and despite different funding councils for higher and further education, both NFQ Levels 5 and 6 have become a key shared space across both these sectors. The National Tertiary Office (NTO) and the National Apprenticeship Office (NAO) both operate in this shared space of NFQ Levels 5 and 6.

This paper proposes changes to the awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 including the introduction of a single major award at NFQ Level 6 and associated changes to the Level 5 Certificate. Specific known issues and impacts arising from the proposal are outlined and briefly discussed, and specific solutions will be proposed.

The timelines associated with this proposal are ambitious as it is essential to ensure that learners are no longer disadvantaged and no longer experience unnecessary barriers to progression. It is also important to simplify the NFQ to reduce the confusion experienced by other end users of qualifications such as employers, recruiters, professional bodies and other organisations. This proposal will also support the progression to a unified tertiary system.

It is important that all stakeholders are engaged in this discussion including but not limited to:

- higher education institutions (HEIs),
- further education providers, including education and training boards (ETBs)
- Teagasc
- Private and independent providers
- Stakeholders involved in craft and consortia led apprenticeships
- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS),
- Department of Education
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
- State Examinations Commission
- Central Applications Office (CAO)
- Higher Education Authority (HEA)
- SOLAS
- National Tertiary Office (NTO)
- National Apprenticeship Office (NAO)
- Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI)
- Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and other learner representative organisations
- Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies

- Irish Universities Association (IUA)
- Technological Higher Education Association (THEA)
- Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA)
- Employers

2.1. ROLE OF QQI

QQI has a legislative function to promote, maintain, further develop and implement the National Framework of Qualifications. A change to the major awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 and the development of a new award-type descriptor are provided for in Section 42 of the legislation which permits QQI to review the policies and criteria on which the Framework is based and amend the Framework from time to time as it considers necessary.

QQI also has legislative responsibility for the development of policy and criteria for access, transfer and progression (ATP) in relation to learners. QQI is developing a separate, but related Green Paper on a Revised QQI ATP Policy which will set out a revised and updated approach to ATP more generally that will need to be adopted by providers and awarding bodies. However, this Green Paper on Intermediate Qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 seeks to resolve a known ATP issue experienced by learners.

In a similar vein, the addendum to the Green Paper on a Revised QQI ATP Policy which outlines the proposal and implications of moving from the Common Awards System (CAS) to Programme Derived Awards Standards (PDAS) also seeks to resolve known ATP issues experienced by learners holding NFQ Levels 5 and 6 qualifications awarded in FET accessing higher education via the CAO system.

Both Green Papers will be issued at the same time to enable considered feedback on ATP policy generally and proposed solutions to specific ATP issues.

2.2. RATIONALE

There are many reasons for proposing a change to intermediate qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 which are discussed below.

2.2.1. Simplify the NFQ

The two award-types at NFQ Level 6 are over 20 years old and are of similar length and have similar learning outcomes. The difference between the two awards is not easily understood by end users of qualifications, nationally and internationally. This confusion could disadvantage holders of NFQ Level 6 qualifications. Furthermore, colleagues involved in programme evaluation in ETBs, report no difference between the validation of advanced and higher certificates.

2.2.2. Access, Transfer and Progression

Learners holding NFQ Level 6 Advanced Certificate qualifications experience barriers to progression to NFQ Level 7 and 8 programmes that are not experienced by holders of Higher Certificates. The proposed changes to intermediate qualifications would enable the development of clear, fair and inclusive pathways and seamless progression for learners.

2.2.3. Unified Tertiary Strategy

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) has committed to the development of a more unified tertiary system to support a more coherent and complementary further and higher education system. The policy platform published in 2022⁶ points to the need for clear pathways for learners, greater integration of the two systems and joined up learning and development opportunities. The establishment of the National Tertiary Office (NTO) was a significant development in Ireland's education landscape and is responsible for coordinating and supporting the development of policy in relation to further and higher education progression pathways for students. Working with the Higher Education Institutions and the education and training boards, the NTO is advancing a strategic approach to enhancing the pathways between the Further Education and Training and Higher Education sectors in several specific programme areas. These collaborations between Higher Education Institutions and education and training boards will see students commence their third level experience in further education and complete it in a partner higher education institution.

2.2.4. SOLAS Strategy

The SOLAS 2020-2024 Strategy Future FET: Transforming Learning⁷ set out simplified pathways as a priority and specifically identified the need for a new proposition at Level 5 and 6 that is focused on the NFQ Level and linked to progression outcomes.

The SOLAS Green Skills 2030 strategy⁸ identifies the need to pursue and develop better aligned pathways from NFQ Levels 5 and 6 to higher education programmes at NFQ Levels 7 and 8.

2.2.5. Why now?

The difficulties associated with having two awards at NFQ Level 6 have been known since at least 2016 and there are arguably other issues in the Framework that need addressing but there are some key reasons that the major awards at Level 6 are being considered now and in advance of a more comprehensive full review of the NFQ.

- The distinction between the two awards at NFQ Level 6 in this shared space is causing confusion rather than clarity in an evolving environment. There is now greater fluidity in terms of programme offering in both higher and further education. Universities are now delivering programmes leading to awards at NFQ Levels 3, 4 and 5 due to Path 4 funding, and education and training boards and other further education providers are beginning to seek validation of programmes leading to the higher certificate and higher levels such as NFQ Level 7.

6 <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/225165/fff8a843-0df6-436a-ade1-ae060deadd45.pdf#page=null>

7 [solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf](#)

8 [green skills 2030 \(solas.ie\)](#)

- The ongoing lack of parity of esteem for graduates with NFQ Level 6 awards is a significant barrier for access, transfer and progression.
- The introduction of tertiary degree programmes is positive in terms of increasing pathways for learners. However, there is a risk that learners accessing programmes in education and training boards will be treated differently. Although most tertiary degrees have awards available after each year of study, 10% offer no award at the end of the first year. Of the remainder, over a quarter of programmes provide a Level 5 Certificate (a major award) at the end of the first year, with the remainder providing a Level 6 Certificate which is a non-major award. Over 70% of programmes offer a Higher Certificate after two years of study with 20% offering the Higher Certificate after 3 years of study. City of Dublin ETB (CDETB) outlined in a pre-conference workshop held in November 2024, that it is developing 15 further tertiary degrees some of which use the 2+2 model, while others use 3+1 and 1+4.
 - Learners successfully completing two years in a further education and training setting as part of a tertiary degree will generally receive the Higher Certificate award while learners completing the same learning with no progression as part of the tertiary degree will generally receive the Advanced Certificate.
 - Learners are often issued a non-major award at Level 6 by the Higher Education Institution (HEI) on completion of the first year of tertiary programmes, whereas learners enrolled directly with an Education and Training Board (ETB) will receive a major award at Level 5 for the same learning.
- The planned integration of craft apprenticeships and consortia-led apprenticeships to a single integrated model of apprenticeship presents an opportunity to ensure that apprenticeships at NFQ Level 6 are treated equally, regardless of where the award is made. A single award at NFQ Level 6 will assist with the single integrated model of apprenticeship.
- The introduction of a new type of awarding body, the Listed Awarding Body, arising from the amended legislation in 2019 further complicates the awarding space. To date, QQI has been the only awarding body at NFQ Levels 1-5 and the only awarding body for the Advanced Certificate at NFQ Level 6. Listed Awarding Bodies may seek voluntary, regulated access to the NFQ at all levels, but NFQ Level 6 will pose specific challenges for deciding if the Advanced or Higher Certificate is the most appropriate NFQ award for their programmes. This is particularly relevant for professional awards that do not typically differentiate between further and higher education.

It is worth noting that a more comprehensive review of the NFQ is envisaged to commence during the lifetime of the next QQI strategy⁹ which will run from 2025-2027. This review will include consideration of the major awards available at every level of the Framework to ensure they meet the needs of learners, employers, professional bodies and wider society.

The speed of change in the education and training landscape, with specific reference to the shared space at NFQ Levels 5 and 6, necessitate urgent action. There is a well reported barrier to progression for learners holding the Advanced Certificate and the number of learners achieving these qualifications is increasing each year, with almost 8,000 awards issued in 2023¹⁰. Over, 16,500 learners were awarded Level 5 Certificates. This compares with just over 4,000 learners receiving the Higher Certificate in the same year¹¹ and benefiting from enhanced access, transfer

9 [qqi-statement-of-strategy-2025-27.pdf](#)

10 [analysis-qqi-certification-data-2023.pdf](#)

11 [Access our Data – Students | Statistics | Higher Education Authority \(hea.ie\)](#)

and progression opportunities. Continuing to disadvantage over 20,000 learners a year cannot continue and will not progress the national ambition towards a unified tertiary system with clear, fair pathways for learner progression

The rationale for proposing a change to intermediate qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 is as follows:

- Simplify the structure of the NFQ for all stakeholders
- Improve access, transfer and progression opportunities for all learners but especially those being awarded NFQ Level 6 qualifications on completion of a programme of study and/or following an assessment of recognition of prior learning in further education and training settings
- Respond to the changing and evolving education and training landscape
- Ensure the NFQ continues to be fit for purpose now and into the future.
- Preserve alignment with both the EQF and QF-EHEA

2.3. CONSULTATION

We hope that the consultation process for this Green Paper will be an opportunity for the diverse stakeholder group to identify additional challenges and unidentified unintended consequences and to provide feedback on the proposed approach.

The deadline for written responses to the Green Paper is Friday 7th March at midday.

Submissions can be made to nfq@qqi.ie with the subject line Green Paper Intermediate Qualifications Response. Alternatively, feedback can be provided through a dedicated online [survey link](#).

Another related, Green Paper on QQI Revised Access, Transfer and Progression Policy will be published at the same time. Respondents are welcome to submit a joint written response to both Green Papers if that is preferable.

3. OVERVIEW OF INTERMEDIATE QUALIFICATIONS AT NFQ LEVELS 5 AND 6

The NFQ is a system of levels for qualifications. It assumes that the learning required for any educational or training qualification can be described in terms of knowledge, skill or competence and that these can be represented by statements of learning outcomes. The NFQ includes 10 levels, which are defined by the NFQ Grid of Level Indicators¹² for each of three strands of learning (knowledge, skill and competence). These strands are further divided into a total of eight sub-strands.

The NFQ is referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). NFQ Level 6 is referenced to EQF Level 5, while NFQ Level 5 is EQF Level 4. The NFQ is aligned with the Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA). The Higher Certificate is compatible with the FQ-EHEA Short Cycle qualification. This ensures that learners can obtain international recognition of their NFQ qualifications.

There are five classes of NFQ awards. The four original ones include Major, Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental and the more recently established one is the Professional class of awards. Each of the NFQ classes also includes a range of award types. Each of these awards have a NFQ award-type descriptor that functions as the most general expression of standards for these qualifications. The original major award-type descriptors were mostly built using elements from the grid of level indicators. Some of these descriptors combine learning outcome indicators drawn from a mixture of NFQ Levels.

The learning outcome indicators included in the AC award-type descriptor contain a mixture of NFQ sub-strand level indicators drawn from NFQ Levels 5, 6 and 7. The learning outcome indicators included in the HC award-type descriptor also contain a mixture of NFQ level indicators drawn from Levels 5, 6 and 7 but the mixture is different from the AC award-type. The award-type descriptors for the Level 5 Certificate, Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate are provided in Table 2.

Title	Level 5 Certificate	Advanced Certificate	Higher Certificate
Class of Award-Type	Major	Major	Major
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.	This is a multi-purpose award type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.	This is a multi-purpose award type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level	5	6	6
Volume	Large	Large	Large
Knowledge - <i>Breath</i>	Broad range of knowledge	Specialised knowledge of a broad area	Specialised knowledge of a broad area

Knowledge - <i>Kind</i>	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant depth in some areas	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant depth in some areas	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant underpinning theory
Know-how and skill - <i>Range</i>	Demonstrate a broad range of specialised skills and tools	Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools	Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools
Know-how and skill - <i>Selectivity</i>	Evaluate and use information to plan and develop investigative strategies and to determine solutions to varied unfamiliar problems.	Formulate responses to well defined abstract problems	Formulate responses to well defined abstract problems
Competence - <i>Context</i>	Act in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs; identify and apply skills and knowledge in a wide variety of contexts	Utilise diagnostic & creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts	Act in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs; identify and apply skills and knowledge in a wide variety of contexts
Competence - <i>Role</i>	Exercise some initiative and independence in carrying out defined activities; join and function within multiple, complex and heterogenous groups.	Exercise substantial personal autonomy and often taken responsibility for the work of others and/or for the allocation of resources; form and function within, multiple complex and heterogenous groups	Exercise substantial personal autonomy and often taken responsibility for the work of others and/or for the allocation of resources; form and function within, multiple complex and heterogenous groups
Competence - <i>Learning to Learn</i>	Learn to take responsibility for own learning within a managed environment	Learn to take responsibility for own learning within a managed environment	Take initiative to identify and address learning needs and interact effectively in a learning group
Competence - <i>Insight</i>	Assume full responsibility for consistency of self-understanding and behaviour	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others
Progression and Transfer	Progression to a programme leading to an Advanced Certificate or higher education and training at Level 6,7 and 8.	Transfer to a programme leading to a Higher Certificate. Progression to a programme leading to an Ordinary Bachelor Degree or to an Honours Bachelor Degree	Transfer to a programme leading to an Advanced Certificate. Progression to a programme leading to an Ordinary Bachelor Degree or to an Honours Bachelor Degree
Articulation			

Table 2: Outline of Award-Type Descriptors for Level 5 Certificate, Advanced and Higher Certificates

The duration of study to achieve the AC is typically two academic years, with the Level 5 Certificate achieved in Year 1 and the AC in Year 2. For apprenticeships it is two to four years with most craft apprenticeships having a duration of four years. In further education one academic year is expected to involve 1,200 notional hours of learner effort (i.e. 120 FET credits).

The HC is a short-cycle post-secondary qualification within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) three-cycle system of the Bologna Process; the short-cycle award consists of 120 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits and sits within the first (undergraduate) cycle which consists of 180-240 ECTS credits. The duration of the higher education pathway to the HC is two academic years (post-Leaving Certificate). In higher education one academic year (60 ECTS credits) is expected to involve 1,500-1,800 notional hours of learner effort. Typically, short-cycle award holders within the Bologna Process can either progress to an undergraduate (first cycle) programme or be integrated within the programme; from 2018 they also became standalone qualifications within the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA.

In summary, the Advanced Certificate is achieved across two years with the Level 5 Certificate achieved in year 1 amounting to at least 240 FET credits in total. The Higher Certificate is two years of study amounting to 120 ECTS.

It is worth noting that currently the FET credit system is exclusively used by QQI, in its capacity as an awarding body. As mentioned, 10 hours of notional learning effort is associated with 1 FET credit with 120 FET credits (1,200 hours) being associated with a full time one year workload. ECTS is a tool of the EHEA and is used by all higher education institutions in Ireland. 60 ECTS credits constitutes a full-time academic year workload with 1 ECTS credit being associated with 20/25- 30 hours of notional learning hours.

The Green Paper on a Revised QQI Access, Transfer and Progression (ATP) Policy will provide more detail on the national approach to credit, credit systems and credit accumulation.

3.1. PURPOSE OF INTERMEDIATE QUALIFICATIONS

The above overview of the intermediate qualifications is a technical explanation that focuses on the Framework components of these qualifications. However, in considering a solution for the problems in this shared space between upper secondary and higher education, it is important to consider the purpose of these intermediate qualifications.

A challenge associated with these intermediate qualifications is that they serve many purposes, some of which conflict with each other.

- **Skills for employment** - Intermediate qualifications play an important role in the development of skills that are relevant to employment, labour market and vocations. These are often initial vocational qualifications and serve as a destination for learners seeking to enter the labour market.
- **Skills for progression** - Intermediate qualifications are also key in the development of academic and vocational skills that enable progression to higher education.
- **Supplementary qualifications** - Intermediate qualifications are essential for learners that are seeking to upskill or re-skill in new and emerging areas or specialist topics that are supplemental to their original qualification. This is relevant for learners already holding both intermediate and higher education qualifications.
- **Social inclusion** - Intermediate qualifications are central to social inclusion by offering qualifications to marginalised or disadvantaged learners for the purposes of employment and/or progression. Learners who achieve an initial vocational qualification may have

improved opportunity for progression through an ability to enter the labour market and earn at the same time as progressing to higher education.

This shows that intermediate qualifications can offer both initial and supplementary vocational qualifications for learners. Learners may complete an intermediate qualification to either enter the labour market or progress to study in higher education.

The existing Advanced and Higher Certificates are used to serve all the purposes above with neither being exclusively reserved for employment or progression or initial or supplementary qualifications. This suggests the delineation between further and higher education qualifications in the intermediate space does not clearly support the achievement of one purpose over another and that a single major award at NFQ Level 6 might better serve the needs of learners and other end users of qualifications.

QQI held a pre-conference workshop on 20 November 2024 which explored the role of intermediate qualifications and access, transfer and progression (ATP) policy in building a unified tertiary system. Participants outlined the important characteristics of Level 6 qualifications which are presented in Figure 1. This confirmed that NFQ Level 6 qualifications, and the associated Level 5 Certificate are used mostly for:

1. Progression to higher education
2. Access to employment and labour markets
3. Social inclusion

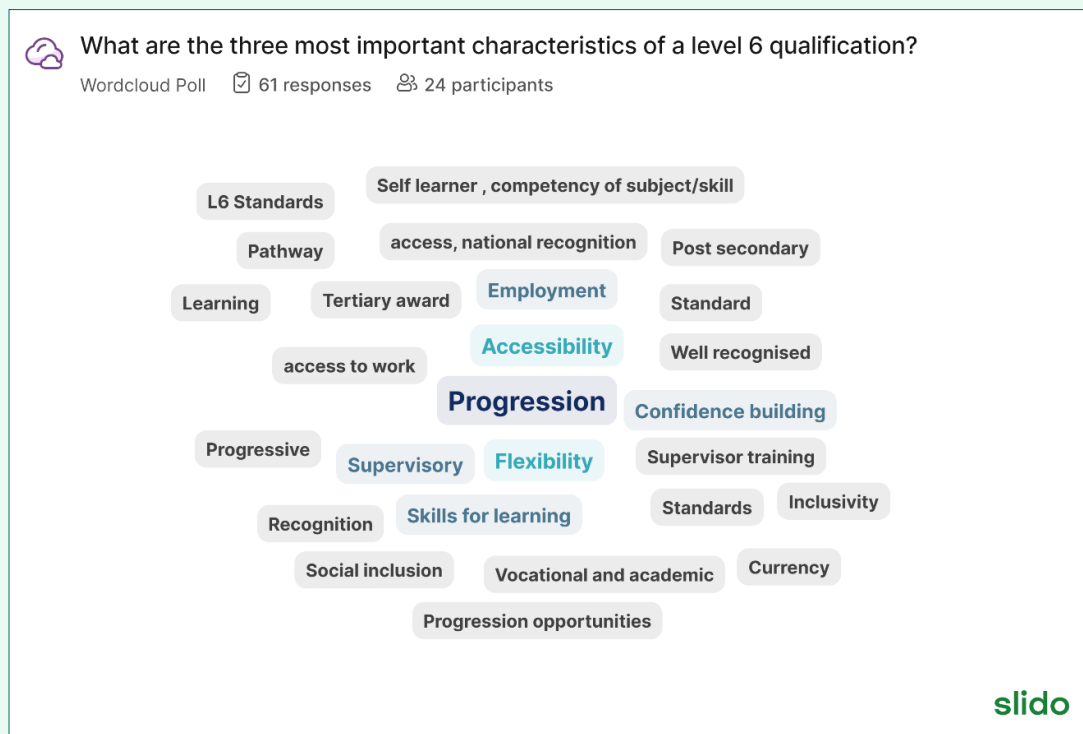


Figure 1. Word cloud from Slido question about the characteristics of Level 6 qualifications.

Participants confirmed that qualifications are no longer considered as academic or vocational qualifications making it difficult to select when to use the advanced certificate versus the higher certificate. It was further confirmed that both qualifications are suitable for use in professionally and academically oriented qualifications and this makes it difficult for industry to understand the difference between the two awards.

4. PROPOSED CHANGES TO INTERMEDIATE QUALIFICATIONS AT NFQ LEVELS 5 AND 6

The proposed solution to intermediate qualifications is focused on meeting the needs of learners by removing barriers to progression and to ensure that the purpose of intermediate qualifications can continue to be delivered.

4.1. PROPOSAL FOR A SINGLE MAJOR AWARD AT NFQ LEVEL 6

For the purposes of this Green Paper, we will use the term 'Tertiary Certificate' when referencing the proposed single major award at NFQ Level 6, but this should be considered a placeholder name. The proposal to introduce the Tertiary Certificate will result in the withdrawal of both the Advanced Certificate and the Higher Certificate. The Tertiary Certificate will have a new award-type descriptor, proposals for which are outlined in Part 4 of this paper, drawing on the existing components of both the AC and HC.

4.1.1. Will the award be a higher or further education award?

It is proposed that the Tertiary Certificate will be a higher education award. This is for several reasons.

- There is evidence that despite the existing AC and HC awards both being NFQ Level 6 awards of similar duration and with some level of comparability in terms of learning outcomes, holders of awards are treated differently for progression. The two different awards at NFQ Level 6 have caused confusion in the sector. As such, it is proposed that the Tertiary Certificate needs to be either an FE or HE award. To minimise some of the barriers to ATP experienced by learners, it will be most beneficial if the award is a higher education award and is articulated in terms of ECTS credits.
 - The Higher Certificate at NFQ Level 6 is a short cycle qualification under QF-EHEA. To continue to be QF EHEA compliant, it is important that we retain a short cycle qualification in the Irish education system. This requirement is set at European level and Ireland has adopted the approach.
 - The status as a higher education award relates not to the awarding body or awarding institution as the Tertiary Certificate will still be offered in both sectors. However, its classification as a higher education relates to the use of ECTS and relationship to QF-EHEA which are external requirements. It will also be a higher education award for the purposes of International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) (i.e.) ISCED Level 5.
 - The relationship between the Tertiary Certificate and tertiary degrees is fundamental to the proposed change so it is logical that the tertiary certificate would be a higher education award.
 - ETBs already access higher education awards via QQI and UK awarding bodies.
- **Stakeholders are invited to submit their views on the Tertiary Certificate being considered a higher education award only.**

4.1.2. What credit system will be used?

As the Tertiary Certificate is proposed to be a higher education award, it is logical that the credit volume of the award will be expressed in terms of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). In keeping with the existing higher education award at NFQ Level 6 and the system of ECTS, it is proposed that the Tertiary Certificate will be 120 ECTS credits, typically delivered across two academic years. The proposal for the Tertiary Certificate to be two years duration and of 120 ECTS ensures continued compliance with the QF-EHEA. This aligns with the requirements of ISCED Level 5.

Non-major awards such as minor awards, special purpose awards and supplemental awards at NFQ Level 6 are important for learners, especially those seeking employment and for social inclusion. Some learners may not complete a major award initially, as minor awards are sufficient for their needs. However, they may seek to return to study later and to avail of progression. As such, it is proposed that non-major awards at NFQ Level 6 will also be expressed in terms of ECTS. Titling for non-major awards at NFQ Level 6 should ensure clarity of the status of the award for learners and other end users. The existing titling conventions used by higher education institutions and further education providers can continue to be used but may be updated during the planned review of NFQ policies, scheduled for 2025-2027.

- ▶ **Stakeholders are invited to submit their views on the Tertiary Certificate being expressed in terms of ECTS and having a credit volume of 120 ECTS typically achieved over two years of full-time study.**
- ▶ **Stakeholders are invited to submit their views on the use of ECTS for all non-major awards at NFQ Level 6.**

4.1.3. What number of learning hours will apply?

The ECTS User Guide (2015) suggests that the notional learning hours associated with one ECTS credit is 25-30 hours, which would result in the notional learning hours of the Tertiary Certificate being 3,000-3600 hours.

However, the national agreement reached in 2008 as part of the Framework Implementation Network suggests that one ECTS is associated with 20-30 hours of learning¹³ and there is evidence that this is still the practice in institutions.¹⁴ This would result in the 120 ECTS credit Tertiary Certificate involving at least 2,400 hours of learning. The existing approach for FET is 1,200 notional learning hours per year resulting in 2,400 over the proposed two-year period.

As such, the introduction of the Tertiary Certificate does not necessitate a change in the teaching and/or academic calendars of institutions.

The ECTS User Guide (2015) is due to be updated in the coming years presenting a useful opportunity to suggest a review of the notional learning hours associated with ECTS to closer reflect the practice in Ireland.

¹³ https://www.nfqnetwork.ie/_fileupload/Part1%20-%20Final%20-%20posted%20on%20website.pdf

¹⁴ [Academic Credit System \(ECTS\) - Trinity Teaching and Learning - Trinity College Dublin \(tcd.ie\)](#)

[Jargon - UCD Registry](#)

- ▶ **Stakeholders are invited to express their views about the approach to learning hours described**
- ▶ **Stakeholders are invited to express their views about the accuracy of the notional learning hours associated with ECTS and to suggest feedback to be communicated by QQI a part of the review of the ECTS User Guide.**

4.1.4. What will the award be called?

As the single major award at NFQ Level 6 will have a new award-type descriptor it is essential that it is given a new award title. This is to ensure there is no confusion about the change and to confirm the status of the single major award. Participants at the pre-conference workshop firmly agreed that a new award title was needed.

The term Tertiary Certificate arguably has currency given the introduction of Tertiary Degrees and the renewed focus on the tertiary sector. It retains the term certificate in the award title, reflecting the commonality of the term in both the Advanced and Higher Certificates and confirms that the award will have applicability in both further and higher education settings.

However, we understand that the title Tertiary Certificate might not sufficiently point to the depth and breadth of the learning undertaken to achieve the award, or its relationship as an embedded award within a degree, particularly the Tertiary Degrees.

Looking to our closest neighbours in the UK, similar short cycle qualifications are called Foundation Degrees and Diplomas of Higher Education. A Diploma of Higher Education is likely not suitable as it may cause confusion with the NFQ Level 8 Higher Diploma. This leaves Foundation Degree as a possible name for the award.

Another option is Associate Degree which has currency internationally in countries such as Australia, United States, Canada and China. The use of Associate Degree would confirm the fundamental operation of the ladder system of progression and the relationship between a major award at Level 6 and the Bachelor degrees available at Levels 7 and 8. The term associate degree would assist with the communication of the new award as a higher education award.

A simple approach would be to title it a Level 6 Certificate or a Level 6 Diploma.

- ▶ **Stakeholders are invited to indicate a preference for one or more of the titles or suggest an alternative which would be suitable for achieving the intended outcomes of moving to a single major award at NFQ Level 6.**
 - Tertiary Certificate
 - Foundation Degree
 - Associate Degree
 - Level 6 Certificate
 - Level 6 Diploma

4.2. CHANGES TO LEVEL 5 CERTIFICATE

The Level 5 Certificate is intrinsically linked to the existing Advanced Certificate and will continue to be intrinsically linked to the Tertiary Certificate. NFQ Level 5 is a key level within intermediate qualifications and is a key aspect of the shared space between FE and HE.

4.2.1. How does this proposal impact the existing relationship between the Advanced Certificate and the Level 5 Certificate?

The existing AC is officially only one year in duration and 120 FET credits which can crudely be calculated as equivalent to 60 ECTS. However, in most cases learners complete a Level 5 Certificate in the preceding year to achieve the AC. To preserve this important relationship between Level 5 Certificates and a major award at Level 6 while ensuring transparency and recognition of learning, it is proposed that the Level 5 Certificate will be considered a partial qualification within the short cycle.

This would also facilitate institutions in awarding a Level 5 Certificate to learners who exit after successfully completing the first year of a Tertiary Certificate programme or the first year of a Tertiary Degree. This is in keeping with the approach used in the UK for Higher National Certificates and Certificates of Higher Education which are at a comparable level on the Framework.

The Level 5 Certificate would continue to be a standalone qualification in the Irish NFQ and the EQF. It would be classified as ISCED Level 4 which is post-secondary and non-tertiary.

- ▶ **Stakeholders are invited to submit their views on the suitability of considering the Level 5 Certificate as a partial qualification within the short cycle as part of QF-EHEA.**

4.2.2. What credit volume will apply?

Due to its relationship to the short cycle under QF-EHEA, it is proposed that the Level 5 certificate would be expressed in terms of ECTS. Although it is not strictly required, this approach would better serve learners who may progress from the Level 5 Certificate to the Tertiary Certificate or qualifications at NFQ Levels 7 and 8.

It is important to note that ECTS is a tool for calculating and communicating learner effort associated with a qualification. Learners are more likely to benefit from enhanced ATP and simpler recognition of prior learning, if the qualification they hold is easily understood in terms of the programme to which they are applying. Learners holding a Level 5 Certificate will most often be seeking to access programmes at NFQ Levels 6, 7 and 8 – all of which use ECTS to articulate learner effort and credit volume.

The International Foundation Programme which is a pre-higher education foundation programme for international students and the award standards developed by QQI set the minimum standards at NFQ Level 5¹⁵. The Code of Practice for provision of Programmes of Higher Education to International Learners¹⁶ requires that all international foundation year programmes lead to awards

¹⁵ [IFY Standards 201115-LR3.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

¹⁶ [code-of-practice-for-provision-of-programmes-of-higher-education-to-international-learners.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

that are included in the NFQ within two years of being awarded the International Education Mark (IEM) as part of the TrustEd Ireland brand.

Firstly, by extending the use of ECTS credit to Level 5, it would be possible for higher education institutions to make the award for their international foundation programmes at NFQ Level 5 without having to amend their own academic governance arrangements to adopt the FET credit system. It would also maximise the likelihood of all international foundation year programmes being placed at the one NFQ Level offering greater clarity to end users. This could also be considered a new award-type for formal adoption during the planned review of the NFQ.

More importantly, these programmes are designed for progression into higher education and learners would benefit from enhanced access, transfer and progression if the award were articulated in ECTS credit. Arguably, the award would also have greater relevance on their return to their home country.

It is possible to continue to use FET credit (120 FET credits) for the Level 5 Certificate. The Green Paper on a Revised QQI Access, Transfer and Progression Policy will outline the national approach to credit, credit systems and credit accumulation and will confirm the translation of FET credit to ECTS credit on a basis of 2:1 and this may be sufficient for ensuring learners can easily transition from all NFQ Level 5 intermediate qualifications to higher education. However, it would require commitment from all institutions to recognise the Level 5 Certificate as a partial qualification of the short cycle under QF-EHEA.

All new and existing non-major awards (i.e.) minor, special purpose and supplemental awards at NFQ Level 5 would also be expressed in terms of ECTS, if the above proposal is accepted, to ensure appropriate recognition of learning and ATP for learners progressing to the Level 5 Certificate or the Tertiary Certificate. The existing titling conventions for non-major awards at NFQ Level 5 will continue to apply.

The same principle relating to hours above applies to the Level 5 Certificate and it is not expected that teaching and/or academic calendars would need to change to accommodate the switch to ECTS.

- ▶ **Stakeholders are invited to submit their views on the extension of ECTS to the Level 5 Certificate and the application of a credit volume of 60 ECTS for this qualification.**
- ▶ **Stakeholders are invited to submit their views on the use of ECTS for all non-major awards at NFQ Level 5.**
- ▶ **Stakeholders are invited to express their views about the approach to learning hours described.**
- ▶ **Stakeholders are invited to submit their views on whether retaining the existing FET credit system for Level 5 Certificates is preferable.**

4.2.3. Can some modules related to the Level 4 Certificate continue to be used towards the Level 5 Certificate?

Participants in the pre-conference workshop described practices where some modules or learning related to the Level 4 Certificate are used in the programme design of the Level 5 Certificate. This practice can continue regardless of the extension of ECTS credit to NFQ Level 5. The volume of FET credit associated with learning completed at NFQ Level 4 can be used

towards the achievement of the Level 5 Certificate with a calculation of 2:1 FET to ECTS credits. It is important that the overall programme leading to the award at NFQ Level 5 is in keeping with the requirements of the award-type descriptor. This approach will be confirmed QQIs Revised ATP Policy which will outline approaches to credit systems, credit transfer and credit accumulation.

4.2.4. Implications for retaining FET credit

Should the preference be to retain FET credit for the Level 5 Certificate, all institutions, including the universities, technological universities and institutes of technology will be required to use FET credit to describe the Level 5 Certificate.

All institutions, regardless of the credit system used, should issue the Level 5 Certificate as the exit award from the Tertiary Certificate.

4.2.5. Does the title Level 5 Certificate continue to be suitable for a major award at Level 5 that is a partial qualification of a short cycle qualification?

Although this proposal does not suggest significant changes to the Level 5 Certificate, the continued use of this title may not sufficiently signify the relationship between the Level 5 Certificate and the proposed Tertiary Certificate, or its status as a partial qualification of the short cycle under QF-EHEA.

The Level 5 Certificate will continue to be used in this paper, referring to the single post-secondary school major award available at NFQ Level 5. However, in the context of the proposed single major award at NFQ Level 6, it could be given a new title.

- ▶ **Stakeholders are invited to indicate if a new title for the Level 5 Certificate is required to reflect its status as a partial qualification in the QF-EHEA short cycle.**
- ▶ **Stakeholders are invited to suggest an alternative title.**

4.2.6. Can both the Level 5 Certificate and Tertiary Certificate continue to be awarded as separate awards to learners?

The current practice across further education allows for learners to be awarded both the NFQ Level 5 and NFQ Level 6 awards. It is proposed that the practice of issuing both awards to learners will continue, where relevant.

As mentioned, a separate Green Paper on QQI's Access Transfer and Progression Policy will deal with credit systems, credit transfer and credit accumulation in more detail. The approach outlined in the Green Paper on QQI's Access Transfer and Progression Policy will be mindful of the ambition for credit accumulation associated with micro-credentials which will likely result in credit being used more than once towards awards at the same level. It is important to note that the use of credit more than once, colloquially referred to as double counting, is not in contravention of the policies underpinning the NFQ which aims to recognise all learning achieved.

- ▶ **Stakeholders are invited to share their views on the proposal to continue issuing both the Level 5 and Tertiary Certificates to learners.**
- ▶ **Stakeholders will be invited to share their views on credit accumulation and credit transfer in response to the Green Paper on QQI's Access Transfer and Progression Policy.**

4.3. ACCESS, TRANSFER AND PROGRESSION

It is important that access, transfer and progression arrangements for intermediate qualifications continue to be fair, transparent and equitable.

Learners holding a Level 4 Certificate, or a Leaving Certificate will be eligible to enter both the Level 5 Certificate and the Tertiary Certificate. It is important to note that all learners must complete 2 years of study in the intermediate space to achieve the Tertiary Certificate.

Learners holding a Level 5 Certificate will be able to progress to the final year of the Tertiary Certificate so long as there is an articulation agreement in place or sufficient coherency and relevance of learning achieved during the Level 5 Certificate.

Learners holding a Tertiary Certificate will be able to progress to qualifications at NFQ Levels 7 and 8. Advanced entry into programmes leading to these awards may be possible where an articulation agreement is in place or there is sufficient coherency and relevance of learning achieved during the Tertiary Certificate.

Providers continue to be required to provide accurate information about the qualifications and associated programmes including transfer and progression routes. This should ensure that learners are clearly informed about the general and specific progression routes in place.

The Green Paper on QQIs Revised ATP Policy will provide more detail on the proposed approach for developing pathways between institutions, qualifications and programmes with an emphasis on pro-actively designing pathways and identifying articulation agreements at the outset of programme design and development.

4.4. DOES THIS PROPOSAL AFFECT THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE AT NFQ LEVEL 4/5?

The proposed changes to the intermediate qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 have no impact on the Leaving Certificate. The Level 5 Certificate has always been an intermediate qualification in the shared space of FE and HE and this paper does not propose to change that.

The Level 5 Certificate and Tertiary Certificate, as well as higher education awards at NFQ Levels 7 and 8 continue to be possible progression options for holders of the Leaving Certificate.

4.5. DOES THIS PROPOSAL AFFECT THE CREDIT SYSTEM AT NFQ LEVELS 1-4?

The proposed change to using ECTS for Level 5 Certificates and the Tertiary Certificate does not extend to Levels 1-4. Though the use of the two credit systems (ECTS and FET credit) have been identified as barriers to ATP, it can be proposed that this barrier is most apparent when progressing from school or intermediate qualifications to higher education. It is less likely that learners will seek to use credit achieved at Levels 1-4 for access, advanced entry or exemption in higher education programmes.

The pathways from Levels 1-4 to Level 5 or 6 are well embedded and understood and it is not anticipated that the change to ECTS at Levels 5 and 6 would have a negative impact on these pathways.

If such a barrier does exist, this can be resolved in the Revised QQI ATP Policy which will more explicitly deal with credit, credit accumulation, credit transfer and credit systems and will provide clarity about how to draw equivalences between FET credit and ECTS credit, when appropriate. This policy is likely to formally revoke existing policies on credit ensuring that the ATP policy is the definitive source of credit policy in the Irish education and training landscape.

However, it should be mentioned that the FET credit system applies at NFQ Levels 1-4 and all institutions, including the universities, technological universities and institutes of technology will be required to use FET credit to describe qualifications at NFQ Levels 1-4. It is worth mentioning that the Grid Level of Indicators, award-type descriptors and titling conventions for qualifications at NFQ Levels 1-4 must also be used should higher education institutions design qualifications at these levels. This has relevance to the existing suite of PATH 4 funded programmes, some of which are placed at NFQ Levels 1-4.

- ▶ **Stakeholders are invited to express their views about the proposal to retain the FET credit system for Levels 1-4 and to extend ECTS credit to non-school qualifications at Level 5 and use it exclusively at Levels 6.**

5. DEVELOPING A SINGLE AWARD TYPE DESCRIPTOR

The award-type descriptors for both the AC and HC were first set out in the *Determinations for the Outline of the National Framework of Qualifications*¹⁷ published in 2003. The comparability of the awards was analysed in depth in the *Evaluation of the Comparability of the Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate Qualifications* published in 2021 which found that both were appropriately referenced to Level 6.

The 8 sub strands of knowledge, skill and competence match directly in 5 of the 8 sub strands with only 3 differing slightly. This is outlined Table 3 below.

5.1. COMPARISON BETWEEN EXISTING AWARD TYPE DESCRIPTORS

Title	Advanced Certificate	NFQ Level	Higher Certificate	NFQ Level	Comparison
Class of Award-Type	Major		Major		✓
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.		This is a multi-purpose award type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.		✓
Level	6		6		✓
Volume	Large		Large		✓
Knowledge - <i>Breath</i>	Specialised knowledge of a broad area	6	Specialised knowledge of a broad area	6	✓
Knowledge - <i>Kind</i>	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant depth in some areas	5	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant underpinning theory	6	x
Know-how and skill - <i>Range</i>	Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools	6	Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools	6	✓
Know-how and skill - <i>Selectivity</i>	Formulate responses to well defined abstract problems	6	Formulate responses to well defined abstract problems	6	✓

Competence - Context	Utilise diagnostic & creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts	7	Act in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs; identify and apply skills and knowledge in a wide variety of contexts	6	x
Competence - Role	Exercise substantial personal autonomy and often taken responsibility for the work of others and/or for the allocation of resources; form and function within, multiple complex and heterogenous groups	6	Exercise substantial personal autonomy and often taken responsibility for the work of others and/or for the allocation of resources; form and function within, multiple complex and heterogenous groups	6	✓
Competence - Learning to Learn	Learn to take responsibility for own learning within a managed environment	5	Take initiative to identify and address learning needs and interact effectively in a learning group	7	x
Competence - Insight	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others	6	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others	6	✓
Progression and Transfer	Transfer to a programme leading to a Higher Certificate. Progression to a programme leading to an Ordinary Bachelor Degree or to an Honours Bachelor Degree	6	Transfer to a programme leading to an Advanced Certificate. Progression to a programme leading to an Ordinary Bachelor Degree or to an Honours Bachelor Degree	6	✓
Articulation					

Table 3: Comparison of Award-Type Descriptor of AC and HC

5.2. PROPOSED AWARD TYPE DESCRIPTOR FOR THE TERTIARY CERTIFICATE

Based on the brief comparison above, three different award type descriptors are proposed for consideration. In all three proposals, the 5 sub strands which match in the existing award type descriptors are retained. The three different sub strands were reviewed, and three different approaches are proposed for the proposed Tertiary Certificate

- I. Use all the indicators specified in the NFQ Grid Level Indicators for Level 6. This represents new indicators not previously used in either the AC or HC.
- II. Choose between the indicators used in either the AC or HC reflecting a balance between indicators of Levels 6 and 7.

- III. Depart from the indicators provided in the Grid of Level Indicators and combine the indicators used in the relevant 3 sub strands.

A table outlining a comparison of the three options is provided in Appendix 1.

- ▶ **Stakeholders are invited to express their preference about the proposed award type descriptors, indicating which option of I, II and III is preferable.**

Proposal I – NFQ Level 6 Grid Level Indicators		
Title	NFQ Level	Tertiary Certificate
Class of Award-Type		Major
Purpose		This is a multi-purpose award type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level		6
Volume		Large
Knowledge - <i>Breadth</i>	6	Specialised knowledge of a broad area
Knowledge - <i>Kind</i>	6	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant underpinning theory
Know-how and skill - <i>Range</i>	6	Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools
Know-how and skill - <i>Selectivity</i>	6	Formulate responses to well defined abstract problems
Competence - <i>Context</i>	6	Act in a range of varied, and specific contexts involving creative and non-routine activities; transfer and apply theoretical concepts and/or technical or creative skills to a range of contexts
Competence - <i>Role</i>	6	Exercise substantial personal autonomy and often taken responsibility for the work of others and/or for the allocation of resources; form and function within, multiple complex and heterogenous groups
Competence - <i>Learning to Learn</i>	6	Learn to evaluate own learning and identify needs within a structured learning environment; assist others in identifying training needs
Competence - <i>Insight</i>	6	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others
Progression and Transfer	6	Progression to a programme leading to an Ordinary Bachelor Degree or to an Honours Bachelor Degree
Articulation		

Proposal II – Combination of NFQ Level 6 & 7 Grid Level Indicators		
Title	NFQ Level	Tertiary Certificate
Class of Award-Type		Major
Purpose		This is a multi-purpose award type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level		6
Volume		Large
Knowledge - <i>Breadth</i>	6	Specialised knowledge of a broad area
Knowledge - <i>Kind</i>	6	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant underpinning theory
Know-how and skill - <i>Range</i>	6	Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools
Know-how and skill - <i>Selectivity</i>	6	Formulate responses to well defined abstract problems
Competence - <i>Context</i>	7	Utilise diagnostic & creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts
Competence - <i>Role</i>	6	Exercise substantial personal autonomy and often taken responsibility for the work of others and/or for the allocation of resources; form and function within, multiple complex and heterogenous groups
Competence - <i>Learning to Learn</i>	7	Take initiative to identify and address learning needs and interact effectively in a learning group
Competence - <i>Insight</i>	6	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others
Progression and Transfer	6	Progression to a programme leading to an Ordinary Bachelor Degree or to an Honours Bachelor Degree
Articulation		

Proposal III – Combination of the sub strands in AC & HC		
Title	NFQ Level	Tertiary Certificate
Class of Award-Type		Major
Purpose		This is a multi-purpose award type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level		6
Volume		Large
Knowledge <i>- Breath</i>	6	Specialised knowledge of a broad area
Knowledge <i>- Kind</i>	6 & 7	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant depth and underpinning theory in certain areas
Know-how and skill <i>- Range</i>	6	Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools
Know-how and skill <i>- Selectivity</i>	6	Formulate responses to well defined abstract problems
Competence <i>- Context</i>	6 & 7	Utilise diagnostic & creative skills in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs
Competence <i>- Role</i>	6	Exercise substantial personal autonomy and often taken responsibility for the work of others and/or for the allocation of resources; form and function within, multiple complex and heterogenous groups
Competence <i>- Learning to Learn</i>	6 & 7	Take responsibility for own learning in a managed environment by identifying and addressing learning needs, and interact effectively within a managed learning environment
Competence <i>- Insight</i>	6	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others
Progression and Transfer	6	Progression to a programme leading to an Ordinary Bachelor Degree or to an Honours Bachelor Degree
Articulation		

5.3. LEVEL 5 CERTIFICATE AWARD TYPE DESCRIPTOR

This proposal is likely to result in the Level 5 Certificate becoming a partial qualification towards the Tertiary Certificate, as well as a stand-alone qualification. Therefore, it is worth considering if the Level 5 Certificate award-type descriptor warrants updating as part of this process.

In the pre-conference workshop, some participants felt the award-type descriptor required updating but there was no consensus on this approach.

The Level 5 Certificate award-type descriptor matches the Grid Level of Indicators for NFQ Level 5. It is possible to include some indicators from NFQ Level 6 in the award-type descriptor.

- ▶ **Stakeholders are invited to indicate if an updated award-type descriptor is required for the Level 5 Certificate and to suggest which strands and sub-strands need updating.**

5.4. PROFESSIONAL AWARD TYPE DESCRIPTOR

The Professional Award Type Descriptor for NFQ Level 6 is used for the development of apprenticeships and other professional awards. The Professional Award Type Descriptor will continue to be important in the development of programmes and awards regardless of the award type descriptor developed for the Tertiary Certificate.

5.5. PROGRAMME DESIGN

The change to a single major award at NFQ Level 6 and the development of a new award-type descriptor will, of course, impact on programme design as some programmes may need to make minor edits and updates to ensure alignment with the award-type descriptor.

However, the changes to the award-type descriptor will not dictate a particular approach to programme design. It will continue to be the responsibility of providers to design programmes that meet the needs of their learners and other stakeholders.

6. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TERTIARY CERTIFICATE

The introduction of the Tertiary Certificate as a single major award at NFQ Level 6 is a significant change to the NFQ. This will have implications for learners, awarding bodies and providers as well as impact on the wider education sector and all end users of qualifications.

6.1. TIMELINE

It is proposed that the Tertiary Certificate will be implemented from September 2025, with all new major awards at NFQ Level 6 being developed in line with the agreed and approved award type descriptor for the Tertiary Certificate.

However, the existing awards (AC and HC) will be phased out over a 5-year period. This is to allow for existing programmes to continue with existing and/or reasonable revalidation periods. When an existing major award at NFQ Level 6 is due for revalidation, it will be revalidated against the new award type descriptor. Should an awarding body choose to transition to the new Tertiary Certificate in advance of the 5-year sunset period, it will be welcome to do so.

The effect of this approach is as follows:

- three awards at NFQ Level 6 will co-exist from September 2025 to September 2030: Tertiary Certificate, Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate,
- From September 2025 all new major awards at NFQ Level 6 will be Tertiary Certificates and
- From September 2030 onwards the Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate will have been withdrawn and the Tertiary Certificate will be the single major award at NFQ Level 6.

Please note that if any changes to the Level 5 Certificate are accepted, a similar timeline and approach will apply.

- ▶ **Stakeholders are invited to express their views about the proposed timeline particularly the 5-year sunset period for existing Advanced and Higher Certificates.**

6.2. IMPACTS

There are several known impacts of the proposed change to intermediate qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6. It is not proposed that any impact is significant enough to justify not progressing but instead the impacts are named as they need to be managed during the transition period.

There is an underlying challenge associated with the proposal which relates to the tension between the concept of tertiary awards versus maintaining distinct higher and further education awards at NFQ Levels 5 and 6. Ireland is moving to a policy environment that relates to 'tertiary' generally, but there are some purposes for which the distinction between further and higher education is still used. Arguably, these issues extend beyond the remit of qualifications and will need to be addressed in the development of and responses to the tertiary strategy.

6.2.1. Designation of Providers

It is important to emphasise that the designation of the Tertiary Certificate as a higher education award does not impact the designation of the provider. For example, an ETB does not become a higher education provider because it offers a higher education award. The definition of a higher education provider in the HEA Act 2022¹⁸ specifies that a higher education provider is an institution which provides at least one programme of education and training leading to the award of a degree or other qualification which is at least at bachelor degree level and is included within the NFQ. The definition then only applies to those offering programmes leading to major awards at NFQ Level 7 and above. This is similar to the system that exists in the UK.

6.2.2. Grant Funding by SUSI

SUSI implements maximum periods of grant funding for learners at each level of study. This is outlined in Figure 2.

Essentially the existing approach allows 3 years of funding for study in further education at Level 5 Certificate and Advanced Certificate. While a maximum of 2 years of funding is available to a learner for the Higher Certificate, a maximum of 4 years funding is available to learners for awards at Levels 6 and 7 in higher education.

Considering the clarification offered in 5.2.1 above, this is easily resolved by focusing on the provider of the award, rather than the name of the award but will require engagement with DFHERIS and SUSI to ensure it is managed appropriately and in keeping with the spirit of the current approach.

Further/Higher Education	Level	Qualification	Maximum Periods of Grant Funding
Further Education	PLC Level 5	Certificate	- Maximum 3 years funding total at PLC level
Further Education	PLC Level 6	Advanced Certificate	
Higher Education	UG Level 6	Higher Certificate	- Maximum 2 years funding at undergraduate level
Higher Education	UG Level 7	Ordinary bachelor Degree	- Maximum 3 years funding at undergraduate level
Higher Education	UG Level 8	Honours bachelor Degree	- Maximum 4 years funding at undergraduate level - Maximum 4 years funding at undergraduate level where normal duration of course exceeds 4 years
Higher Education	PG Level 8	Higher Diploma	- Maximum 4 years funding in total at postgraduate level
Higher Education	PG Level 9	Diploma	All previous attendance and attainment at postgraduate level are considered regardless of whether a grant was received previously or not.
Higher Education	PG Level 9	Masters Degree	
Higher Education	PG Level 10	PHD	

Figure 2. Maximum Levels of Grant Funding by SUSI¹⁹

6.2.3. Other Forms of Funding

There may be other forms of funding that also use the distinction between the AC and HC to confirm eligibility. An example is the 1916 Bursary which is co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union through the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and aims to encourage participation and success by students

¹⁸ [Higher Education Authority Act 2022, Section 2 \(irishstatutebook.ie\)](https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act-12/section-2)

¹⁹ [Previous Education and Progression | SUSI](#)

who are most socio-economically disadvantaged and from groups most under-represented in higher education.²⁰

There may be other publicly funded bursaries and/or scholarships that refer to the AC and HC.

6.2.4. CAO

Learners holding the existing Advanced Certificate apply to the CAO for direct access to higher education, in some cases. The existing CAO route is entirely based on the existing Common Awards System. Regardless of the proposed change to the Tertiary Certificate, QQI is seeking to update the CAS to programme derived awards standards which would have a knock-on impact to the CAO.

6.2.5. Communication

The introduction of the Tertiary Certificate will be a significant change and will be supported by a comprehensive communication plan to inform and update all relevant stakeholders. This will include updating existing tools and resources including the Qualifications Can Cross Boundaries Guide²¹, the NFQ fan diagram and associated documentation.

This is the first time in the 20-year history of the NFQ that major awards and the associated names will be retired. Although, several awards were retired in 2003 upon the introduction of the NFQ. It will be important that the Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate are added to the list of legacy awards and comparability statements will be available through the NARIC Ireland service.

On a separate piece of work, the Qualifications Information and Learning Opportunities Division and the NARIC Ireland service are working on developing improved information resources for learners and other stakeholders about qualifications and the NFQ. This includes improving the accessibility of information about legacy awards.

6.2.6. NFQ Foundation Documents

The NFQ foundation documents are considered the following:

- *Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications*²²
- *Determinations for the Outline National Framework of Qualifications*²³
- *NFQ Grid Level Indicators*²⁴
- *Descriptors for Minor, Special Purpose, Supplemental Award-Types*²⁵

The *Professional Award Type Descriptors*²⁶ and *Higher Doctorate Award Descriptors*²⁷ are also important documents but were issued later.

20 [Home - The 1916 Bursary](#)

21 [Qualifications can Cross Boundaries \(qqi.ie\)](#)

22 [pol_&_crit.qxd \(qqi.ie\)](#)

23 [determinations.qxd \(qqi.ie\)](#)

24 [NFQ Grid Level Indicators.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

25 [descriptors-minor-spa-supplemental-awards.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

26 [Professional Award Type Descriptors.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

27 [Higher Doctorate Award Descriptors.pdf \(qqi.ie\)](#)

Although these documents will always be important as the policies that founded the NFQ, it is likely time to retire them and replace them with updated documents that simplify the policy associated with the NFQ and clearly communicate the structures underpinning the Framework.

As previously mentioned, a full review of the NFQ is scheduled to commence in the lifetime of the next QQI strategy, 2025-2027 but it might be prudent to undertake a cosmetic review and update of the existing suite of policy documents.

6.2.7. Short Cycle Qualifications under QF-EHEA

As previously mentioned, the Tertiary Certificate will be a short cycle qualification under QF-EHEA, and the Level 5 Certificate will be a partial qualification of the short cycle. This has some further implications:

- Graduates of the Tertiary Certificate will be eligible to receive a Europass Diploma Supplement²⁸. This will require further education providers to issue Diploma Supplements to eligible graduates.
- The Europass Diploma Supplement Template will need to be updated to reflect these significant changes to the Irish education system, specifically in higher education. It will be important that all providers responsible for issuing Europass Diploma Supplements adopt the new template, which will be developed and issued by QQI in its capacity as the National Europass Centre (NEC), quickly and efficiently.
- This will extend the European Standards and Guidelines²⁹ (ESG) to further education providers of Level 5 Certificates and Tertiary Certificates. QQI's overall approach to quality assurance is ESG compliant so will have little impact on the existing approach to quality assurance.
- However, it will mean that quality assurance of ETBs will come into scope for future ENQA Agency Reviews³⁰ of QQI and that institutional review reports and some programme validation reports (those for the Tertiary Certificate and potentially Level 5 Certificates) will need to be published in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR)³¹.

6.2.8. Referencing to EQF and QF-EHEA

The introduction of the Tertiary Certificate reflects a significant change to the NFQ and will require an update to the referencing report to the EQF and self-certification to QF-EHEA.

It may be sufficient to do an addendum to the report which will describe the change at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 and the introduction of Listed Awarding Bodies. The timing and approach will be agreed with the Commission.

- **Stakeholders are invited to express their views about the highlighted impacts and to identify any additional impacts not presented.**

28 [The Diploma Supplement | Europass](#)

29 [ESG • ENQA](#)

30 [About • ENQA](#)

31 [The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education - EQAR](#)

7. CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The proposal to make changes to intermediate qualifications at NFQ Levels 5 and 6 including to introduce the Tertiary Certificate as the single major award at NFQ Level 6 is a significant change but it is necessary to remove barriers to progression experienced by learners and to further the progress to a unified tertiary system.

This Green Paper sets out a proposal for how the Tertiary Certificate will be structured and how it will be implemented. Stakeholder views are invited on all aspects of the proposal, but it is important to bear in mind that the objectives of the change are as follows:

- Simplify the structure of the NFQ for all stakeholders
- Improve access, transfer and progression opportunities for all learners but especially those being awarded Level 6 qualifications following study in further education and training
- Respond to the changing education and training landscape, particularly the tertiary education strategy
- Ensure the NFQ continues to be fit for purpose now and into the future
- Preserve alignment with the EQF and QF-EHEA.

The Green Paper identifies as many impacts and consequences of the change as possible, but it is important that any additional impacts are identified at this point. QQI commits to collaborating with all necessary stakeholders to make appropriate plans to manage these impacts so far as is possible.

Following the end of the consultation process, we will publish the findings, a thematic analysis of the feedback and our response. The next step will be to formalise the proposed approach in a White Paper for a final round of feedback before confirming the new award type descriptor for the single major award at NFQ Level 6. It is expected that a White Paper will issue in early Q2 of 2025 with a view to the QQI Board approving the new award type descriptor no later than June 2025 to facilitate the introduction of the Tertiary Certificate from September 2025 onwards.

	Proposal 1		Proposal 2		Proposal 3	
	NFQ Level	Content	NFQ Level	Content	NFQ Level	Content
Knowledge <i>- Breath</i>	6	Specialised knowledge of a broad area	6	Specialised knowledge of a broad area	6	Specialised knowledge of a broad area
Knowledge <i>- Kind</i>	6	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant underpinning theory	6	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant underpinning theory	6 & 7	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant depth and underpinning theory in certain areas
Know-how & skill <i>- Range</i>	6	Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools	6	Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools	6	Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools
Know-how & skill <i>- Selectivity</i>	6	Formulate responses to well defined abstract problems	6	Formulate responses to well defined abstract problems	6	Formulate responses to well defined abstract problems
Competence <i>- context</i>	6	Act in a range of varied, and specific contexts involving creative and non-routine activities; transfer and apply theoretical concepts and/or technical or creative skills to a range of contexts	7	Utilise diagnostic & creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts	6 & 7	Utilise diagnostic & creative skills in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs
Competence <i>- role</i>	6	Exercise substantial personal autonomy and often taken responsibility for the work of others and/or for the allocation of resources; form and function within, multiple complex and heterogenous groups	6	Exercise substantial personal autonomy and often taken responsibility for the work of others and/or for the allocation of resources; form and function within, multiple complex and heterogenous groups	6	Exercise substantial personal autonomy and often taken responsibility for the work of others and/or for the allocation of resources; form and function within, multiple complex and heterogenous groups
Competence <i>- learning to learn</i>	6	Learn to evaluate own learning and identify needs within a structured learning environment; assist others in identifying training needs	7	Take initiative to identify and address learning needs and interact effectively in a learning group	6 & 7	Take responsibility for own learning in a managed environment by identifying and addressing learning needs, and interact effectively within a managed learning environment
Competence <i>- insight</i>	6	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others	6	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others	6	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others



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