

# Introduction to Irish National Framework of Qualifications & its role in supporting RPL

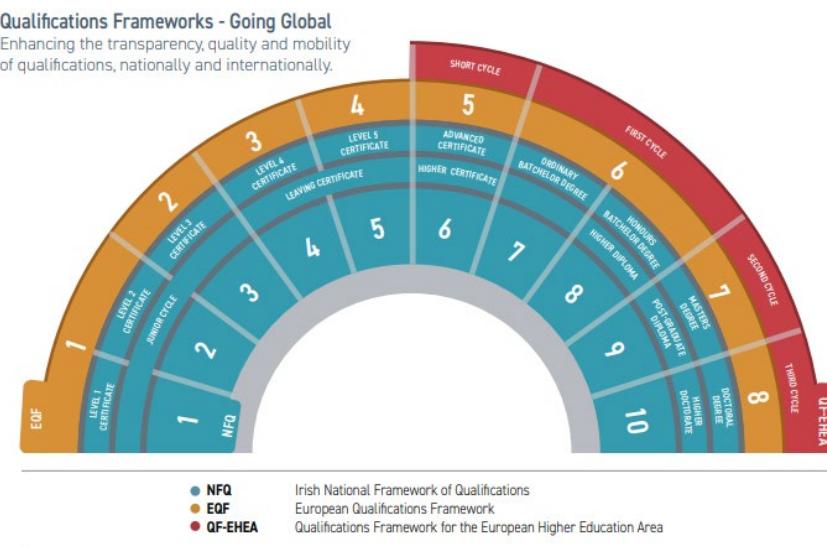
Órla Barry, Head of Qualifications Information & Learning Opportunities

# European Representations Hosted at QQI



# European leader in Lifelong Learning

- Irish NFQ is a cornerstone of education, skills and lifelong learning
- Comprehensive and inclusive
- Drives transparency and mobility
- Strong focus on RPL and validation of non-formal and informal learning
- Innovation and reforms are planned
- Widely used and big impact



EUROPEAN  
INVENTORY  
OF NQFs 2024  
IRELAND

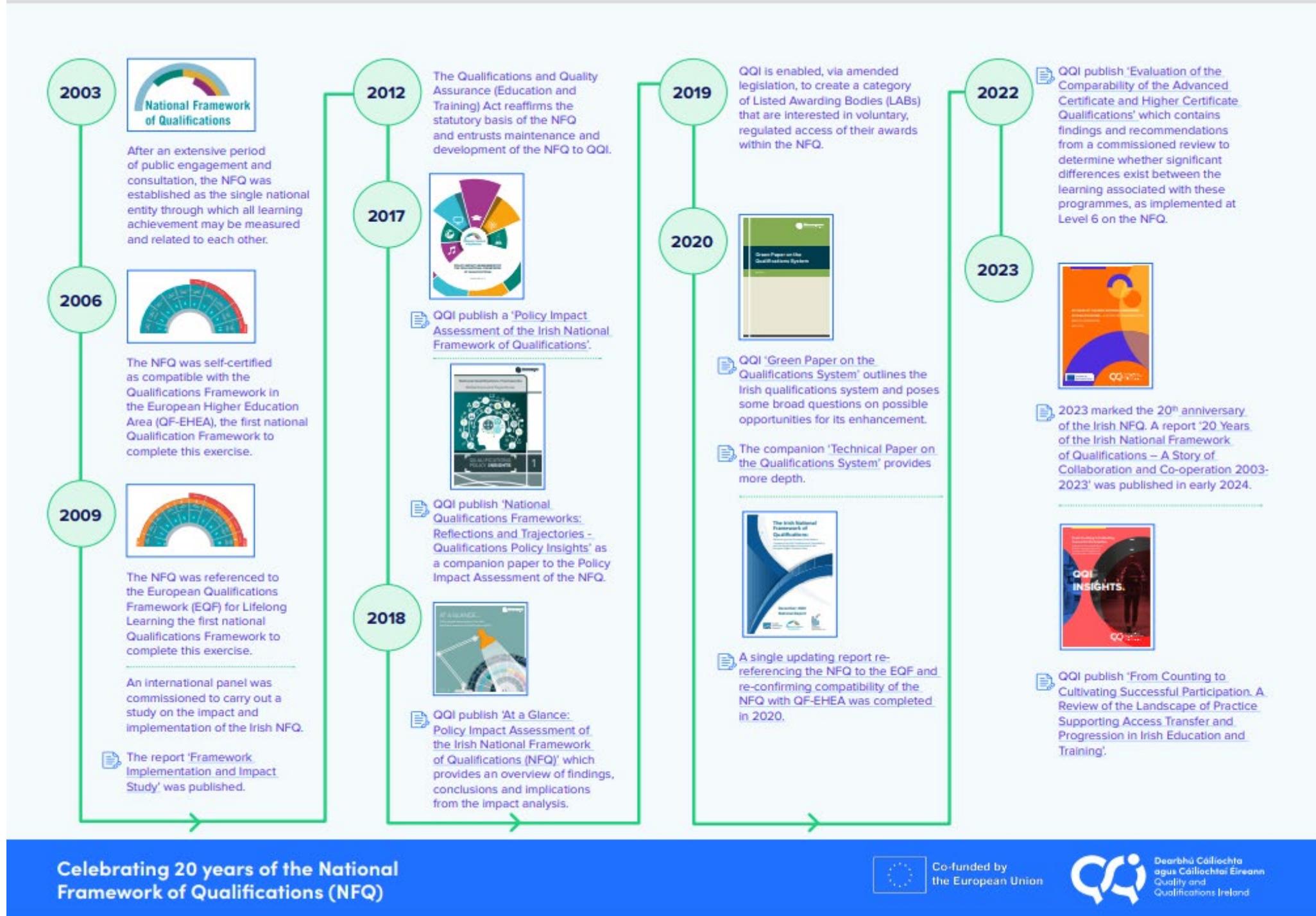
Figure 1. NQF stage of development

- OPERATIONAL
- ACTIVATION
- ADOPTION
- EXPLORATORY



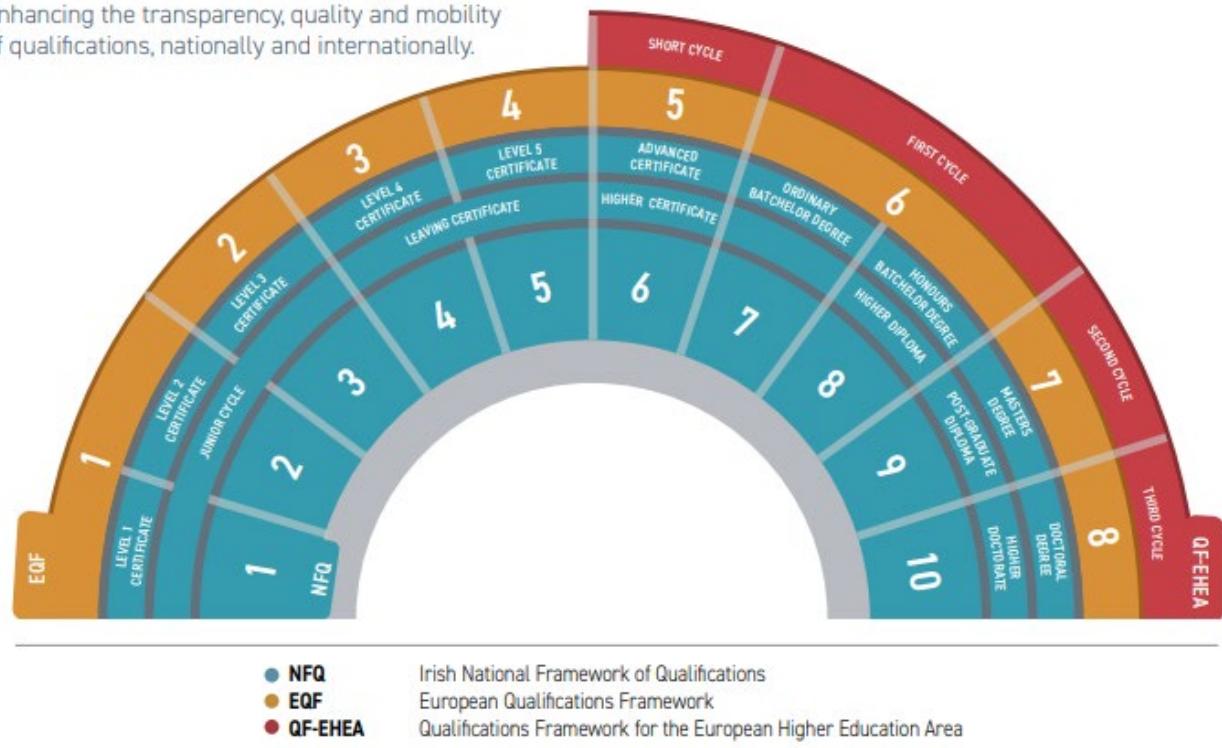
NB: The map refers to the 27 EU Member States, EFTA countries and EU candidate countries.

Belgium: BE-FL: operational stage, BE-FR and BE-DE: activation stage.

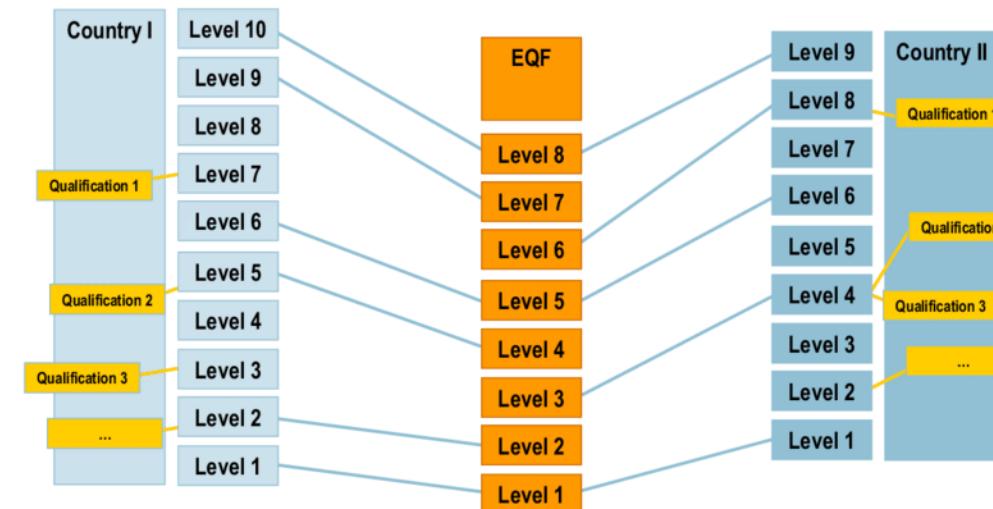


## Qualifications Frameworks - Going Global

Enhancing the transparency, quality and mobility of qualifications, nationally and internationally.



## EQF – The European Qualifications Framework



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# Qualifications can Cross Boundaries

A guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland

## About this leaflet:

- This leaflet provides information that enables comparability between qualifications across the UK and Ireland, and how those qualifications are organised.
- It shows which qualifications in UK and Ireland are broadly comparable in terms of the level of challenge.
- The principal table shows the main stages of education and employment and the comparable levels of similar kinds of qualification that are used in UK and Ireland that allows for broad comparisons in terms of the level of challenge rather than direct equivalences.
- Tables 1 and 2 illustrate how UK and Irish qualifications frameworks relate to qualifications frameworks in Europe.



This leaflet is published by QAA on behalf of the UK and Ireland Qualifications Frameworks and Policy Group

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## Comparing Qualifications in Ireland and New Zealand: A Guide

Making Connections for You



**QAI**  
Quality and Qualifications Ireland  
Deals Oideachais agus Colaisteoirí Éireann

**European Qualifications Framework**

With the support of the  
Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union  
**NZQA**  
New Zealand Qualifications Authority

[www.nzqa.govt.nz](http://www.nzqa.govt.nz)  
[www.QAI.ie](http://www.QAI.ie)

For more  
Information

## Comparing Qualifications in Ireland and Hong Kong

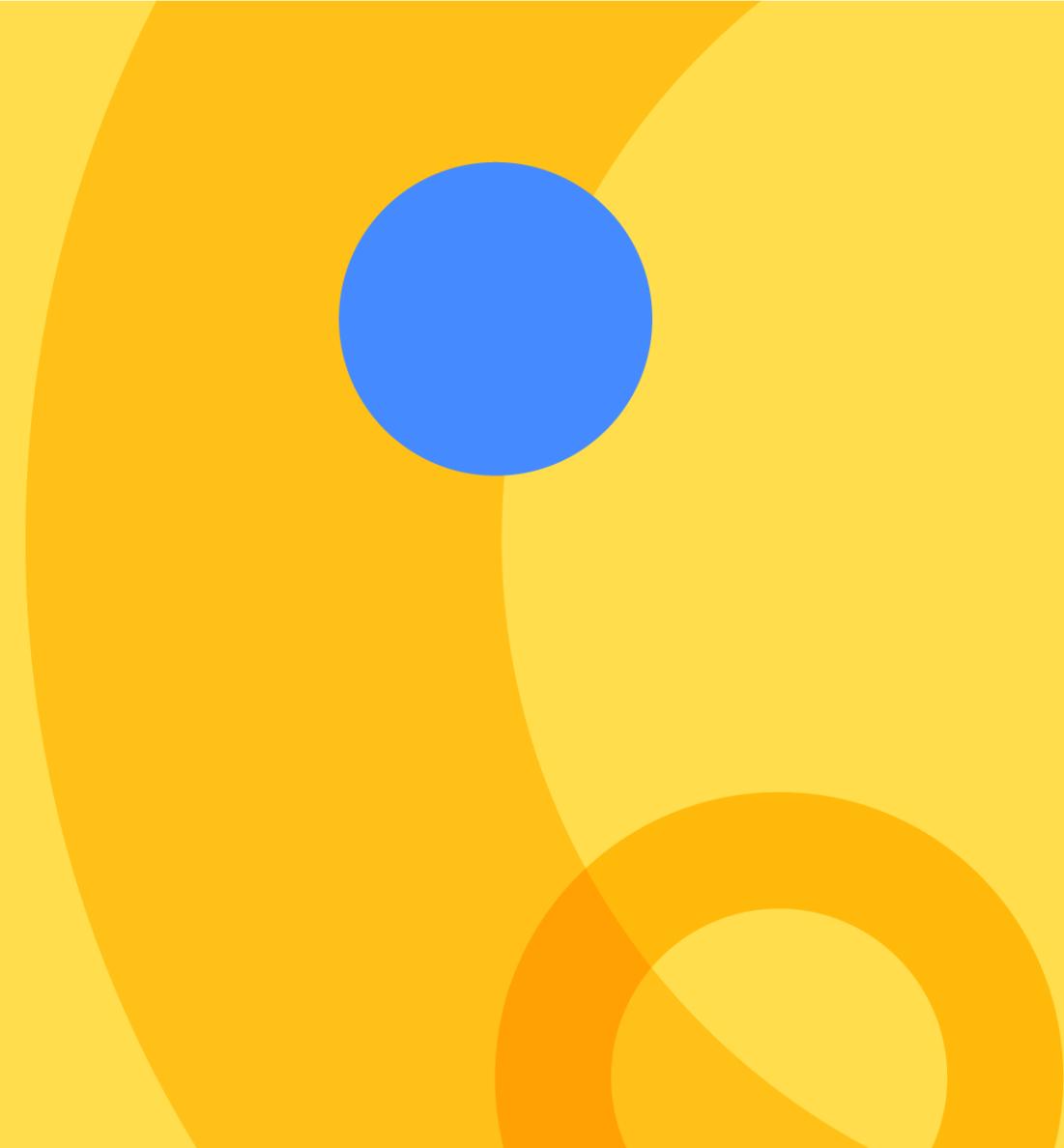
Making Connections for You



[www.QAI.ie](http://www.QAI.ie)  
[www.hkqf.gov.hk](http://www.hkqf.gov.hk)

What Does This  
Mean For You?

# QQI and the Irish NFQ



# QQI Strategy 2025 – 2027: Looking after Learning Interests

## Future-proof the National Framework of Qualifications as the authoritative information source for quality-assured tertiary qualifications

- ▷ further develop QQI's platforms to promote the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) as the authoritative source of information on quality-assured qualifications including micro-credentials
- ▷ review and modify the current award types in the NFQ to better serve learners in a more integrated tertiary education system
- ▷ improve choice for learners through our recognition of listed awarding bodies and include their academic and professional awards in the NFQ
- ▷ undertake a statutory review of individual provider adherence to access, transfer and progression policy and the appropriate recognition of prior learning

# Introduction

- In Ireland, we describe the qualifications used in our education and training system through the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).
- The NFQ classifies the
  - level,
  - class of award and
  - type of qualifications.
- The NFQ is made up of 10 levels with literacy and numeracy qualifications at Level 1, Junior Cycle at Levels 1-3, Leaving Certificate at Levels 4/5 and Bachelors Degrees at Level 7 and 8 right up to Level 10 doctoral degrees.
- The ambition of the NFQ is to recognise all learning.



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# More Information



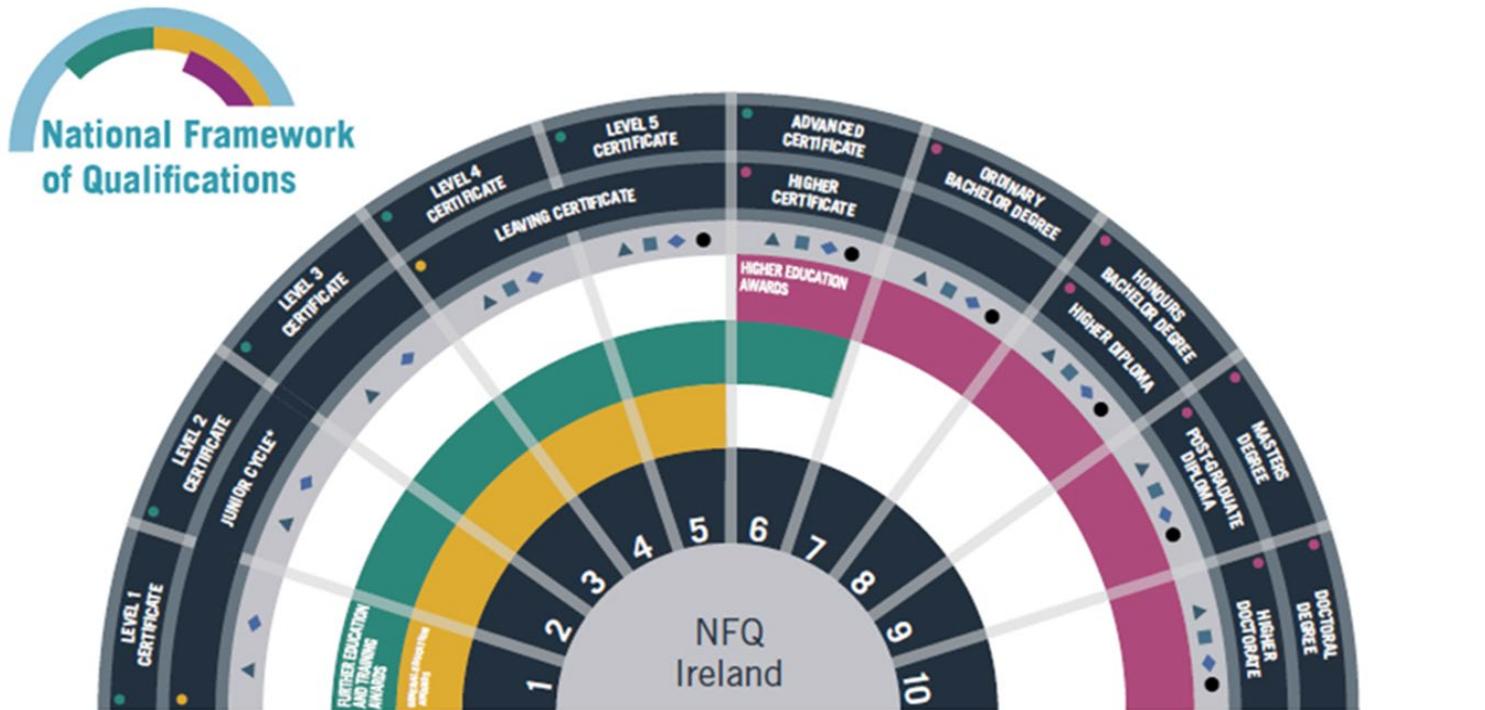
A qualification is a formal record awarded following a period of successful study or training. Qualifications recognise the knowledge and skills that have been achieved and can be practised by a learner. The legislation uses the term award rather than qualification and as a result, the terms qualification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



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



Each level sets out a range of standards of knowledge, skill and competence acquired by learners. Levels are not in themselves standards but indicators of a range of standards and can be described in an ordered sequence. The indicators enable award-types to be matched to a level on an overall best-fit basis rather than by conformity to a defined set of required standards. The [level indicators](#) are a key structural element of the Framework.



## The NFQ is a system

- Of levels and types of awards based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by a learner to entitle the learner to an award at a particular level and of the type concerned within the Framework
- For the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State
- Major, Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental award classes are named in Section 67 of the Act (provision of information to learners)

# Award class and award types

- The classes of award types of the Irish NFQ are major awards, [minor awards](#), [special purpose awards](#), [supplemental awards](#), and [professional](#) awards.
- An award-type is a class of named awards sharing common features and level. Award-types can reflect a mix of standards of knowledge, skill and competence which is independent of any specific field of learning. Descriptors can be defined generically for award types.
- NFQ award-type descriptors state general learning achievements for all types of awards included in the NFQ.
- Awarding bodies are required to develop specific award standards for each award they include in the NFQ.
- No specific award type for micro-credentials.
- Micro-credentials are small units of learning, though there is no agreed credit volume yet. The NFQ is flexible enough to accommodate micro-credentials and the minor, special purpose, supplemental and professional award type descriptors can be used to develop micro-credentials included in the NFQ.

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

- **Section 43** Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012
- QQI is the authority responsible for
  - Review and further develop the policies and criteria
  - Promotion
  - Maintenance
  - Further development
  - Implementation of the NFQ
  - Reviewing the operation of the Framework
  - Amending from time to time
- Required to promote and facilitate the use by providers and awarding bodies of statements of what an enrolled learner is expected to know, understand and demonstrate on completion of a programme
- Each designated awarding body shall ensure that each award that it makes is an award that is included in the Framework.

# Roles & Responsibilities

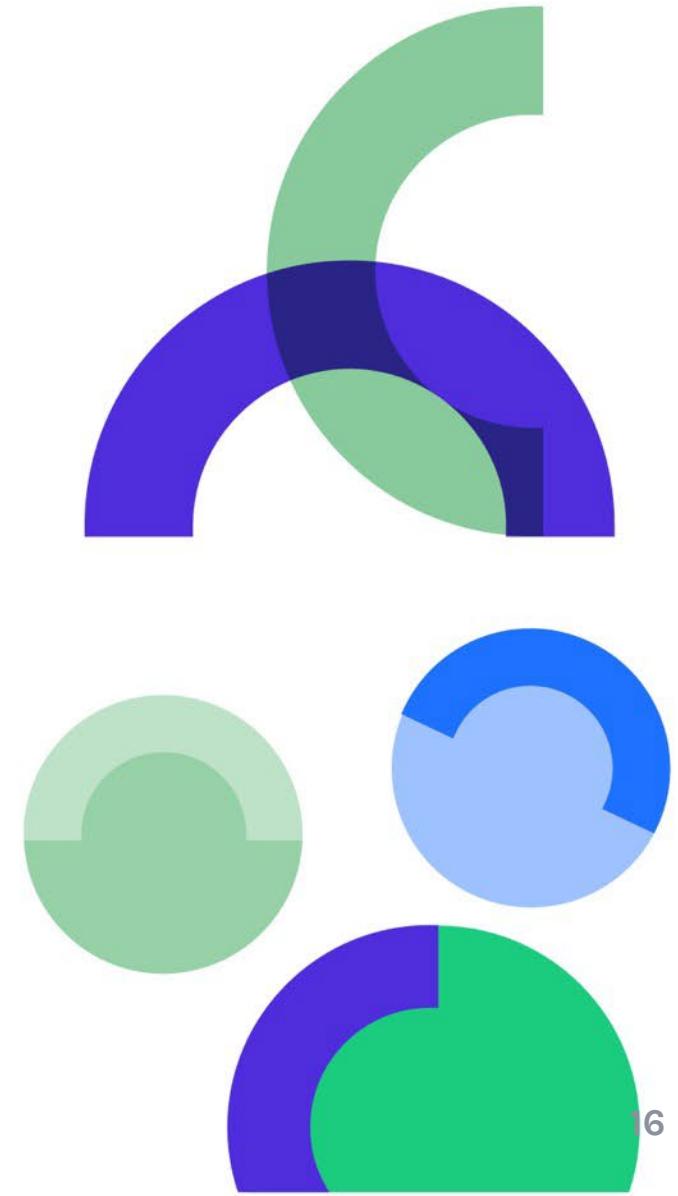


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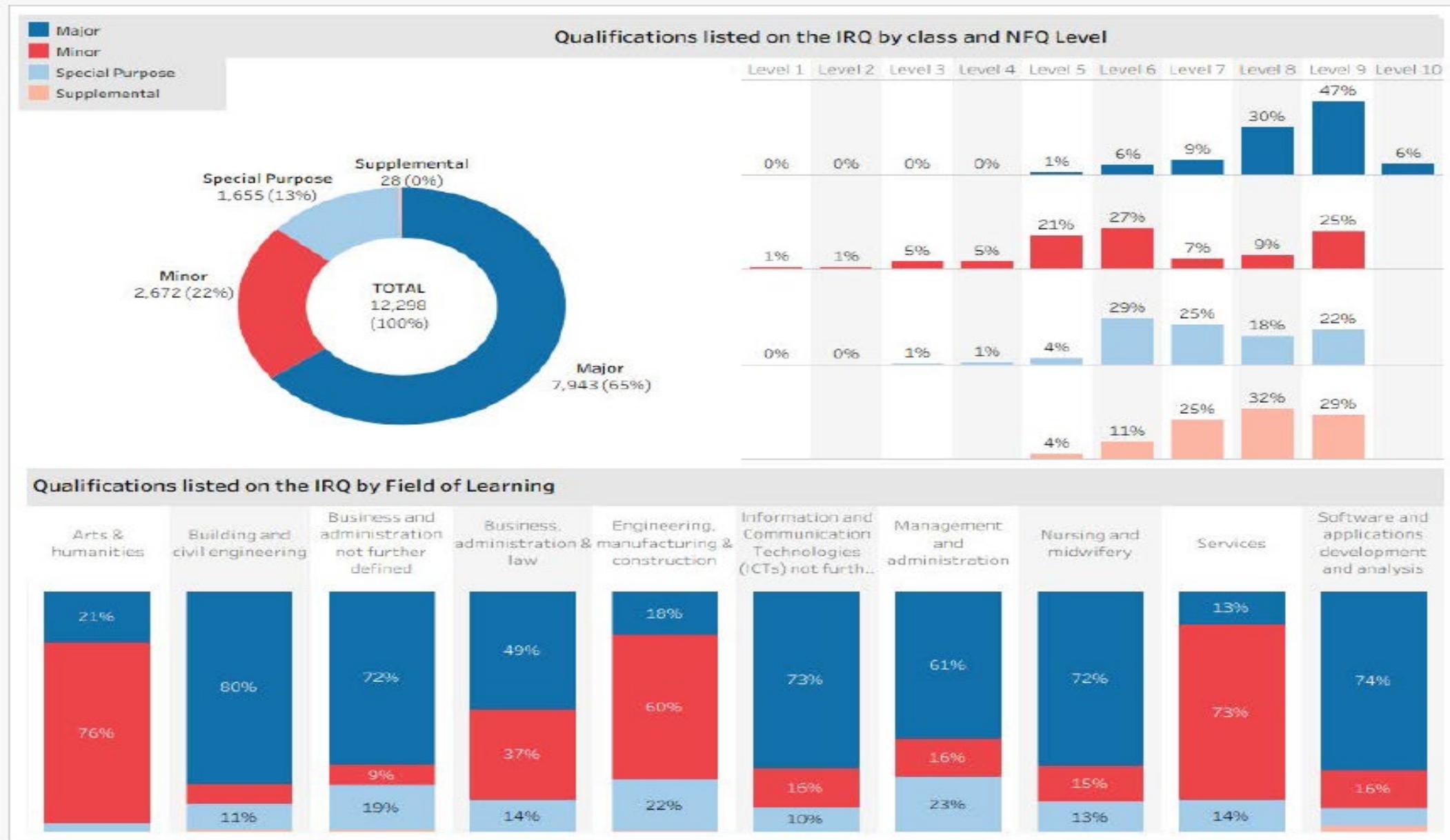
# Qualifications included in the NFQ

# Irish Register of Qualifications

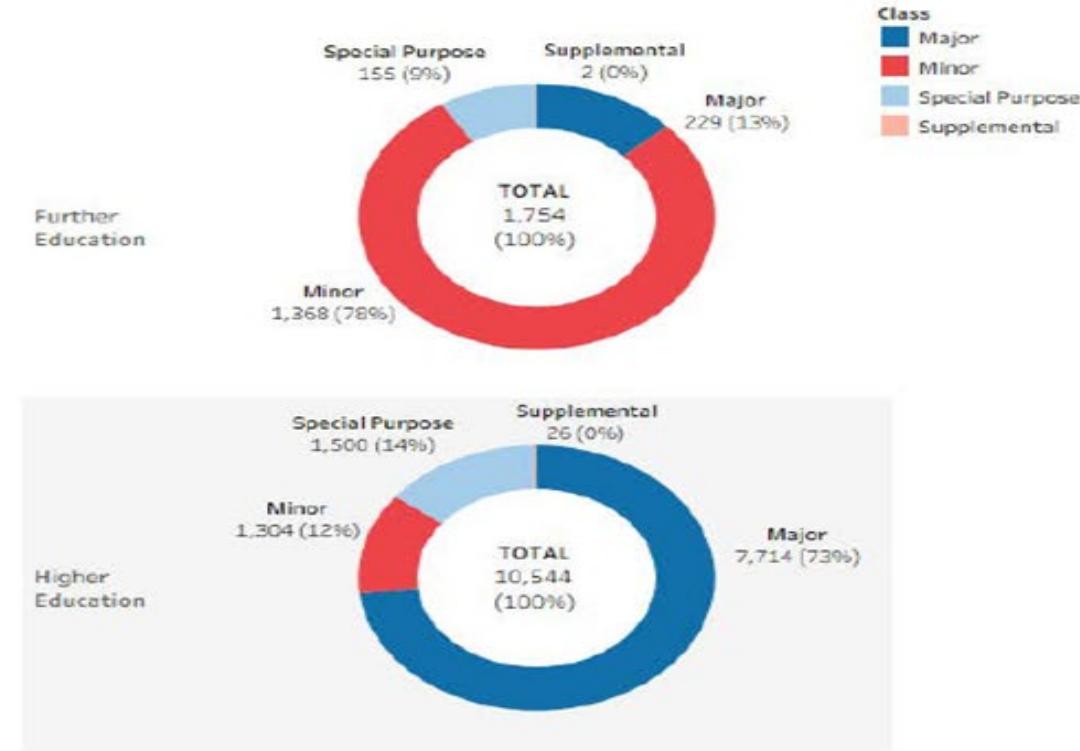
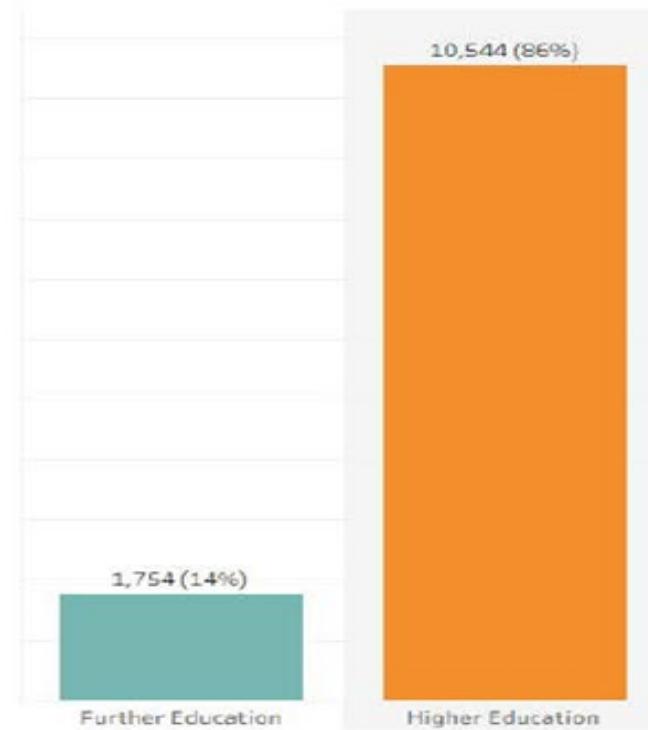
- Authoritative list of qualifications included in the NFQ.
- Statutory responsibility
- Lists awarding bodies, providers, qualifications and programmes
- 11525 qualifications
- 219 providers
- 15134 programmes
- Linked to Qualifications Dataset Register (QDR) in Europass



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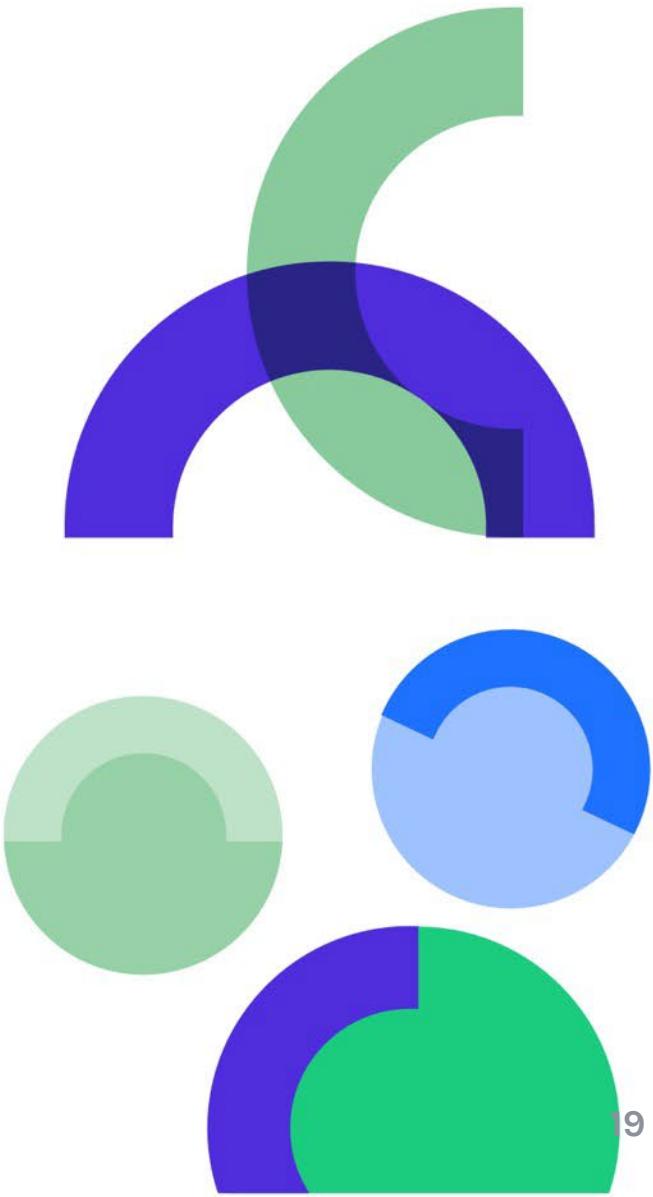


### Total number and proportions of qualifications listed on the IRQ by sector and class



# Redevelopment of the Register

- Use of ESCO to describe learning outcomes – improves application of validation of non-formal and informal learning
- Publishing of learning outcomes
- Include information about availability of RPL for programmes



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# Access, Transfer and Progression

# 2015 ATP Policy Restatement

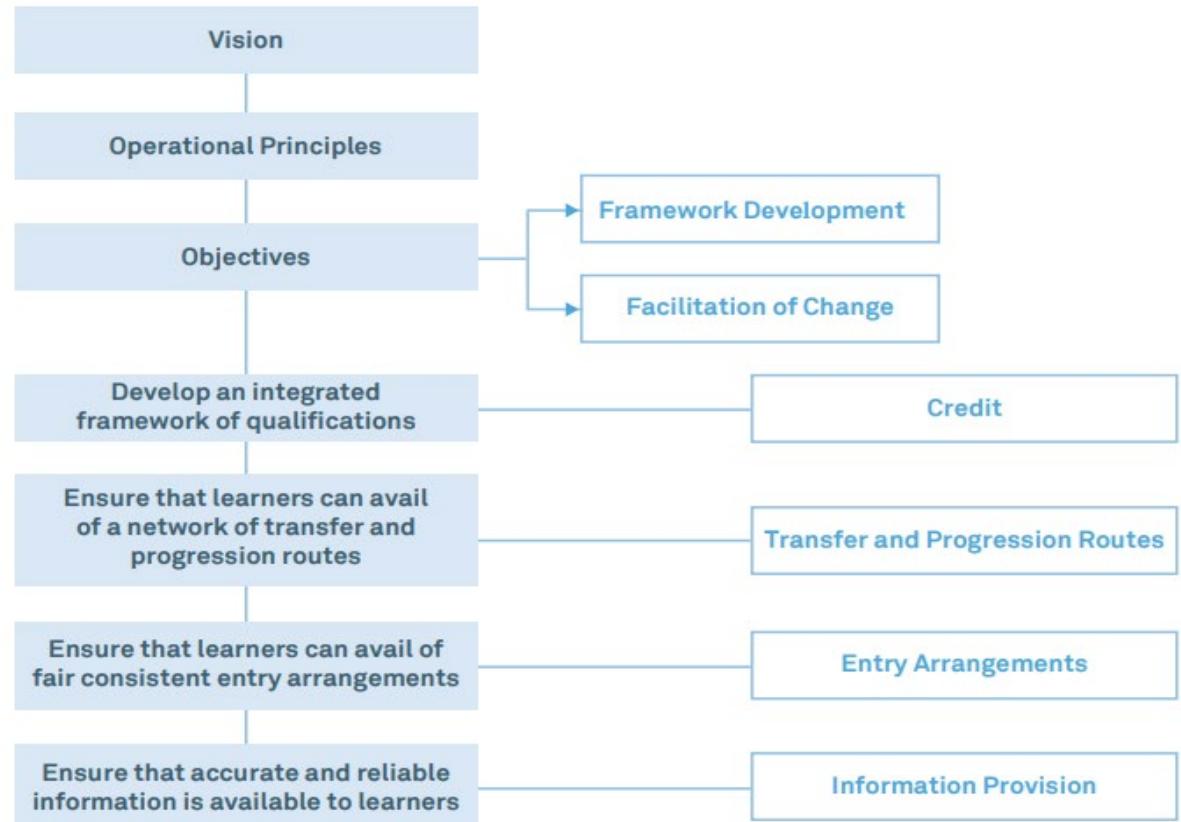
Focuses on

- Credit
- Progression and transfer routes
- Entry arrangements
- Information provision



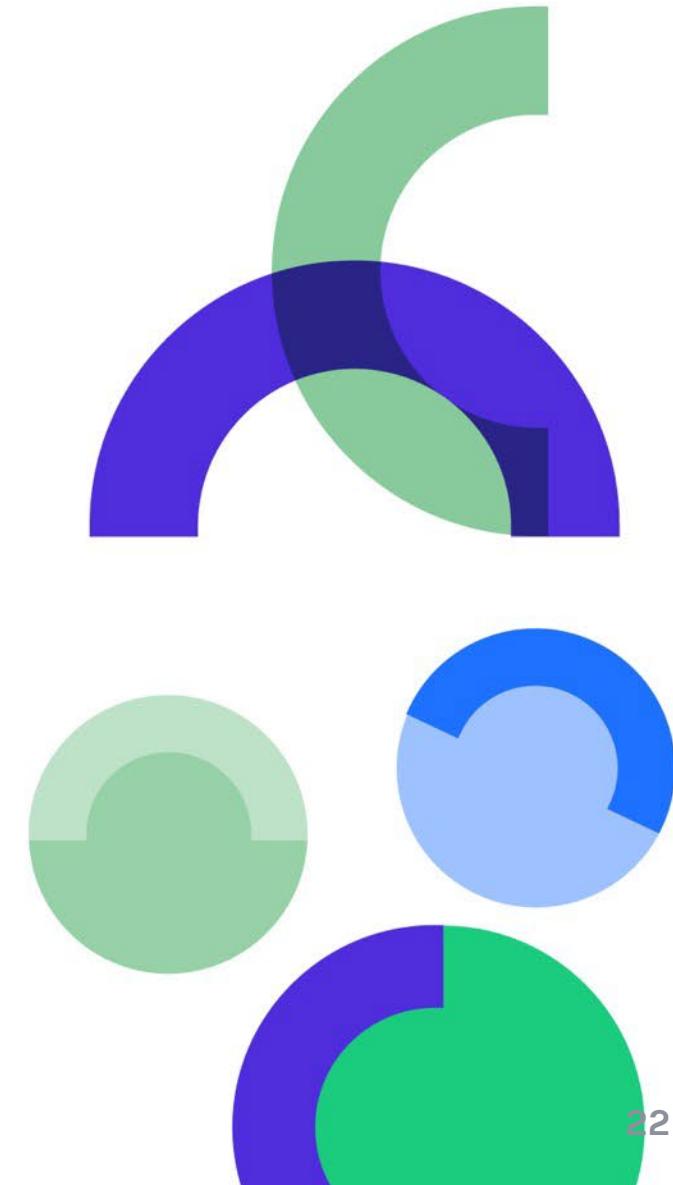
Dearbhú Cáilíochta  
agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann  
Quality and  
Qualifications Ireland

**FIGURE 1: STRUCTURE OF QQI'S ATP POLICY**



# ATP Policy: RPL

- **With reference to credit:** These procedures relate to the specification of arrangements for the recognition of prior learning by providers of education and training programmes leading to awards.
- All providers are required to develop a **statement of arrangements available in respect of each of their programmes for the recognition of prior learning, for entry, for credit towards an award and for access to a full award.** These statements should define the purposes for which recognition of prior learning processes can be used, i.e., to enable entry to the programme; to provide exemption from programme requirements or credit towards an award; or to establish eligibility for a full award.
- Providers should make the necessary adaptations to programmes to facilitate participants in making successful transitions; this procedure refers to the participation needs of all learners, but particularly those who are accessing programmes by non-standard routes, and includes transfer or progression into and out of programmes



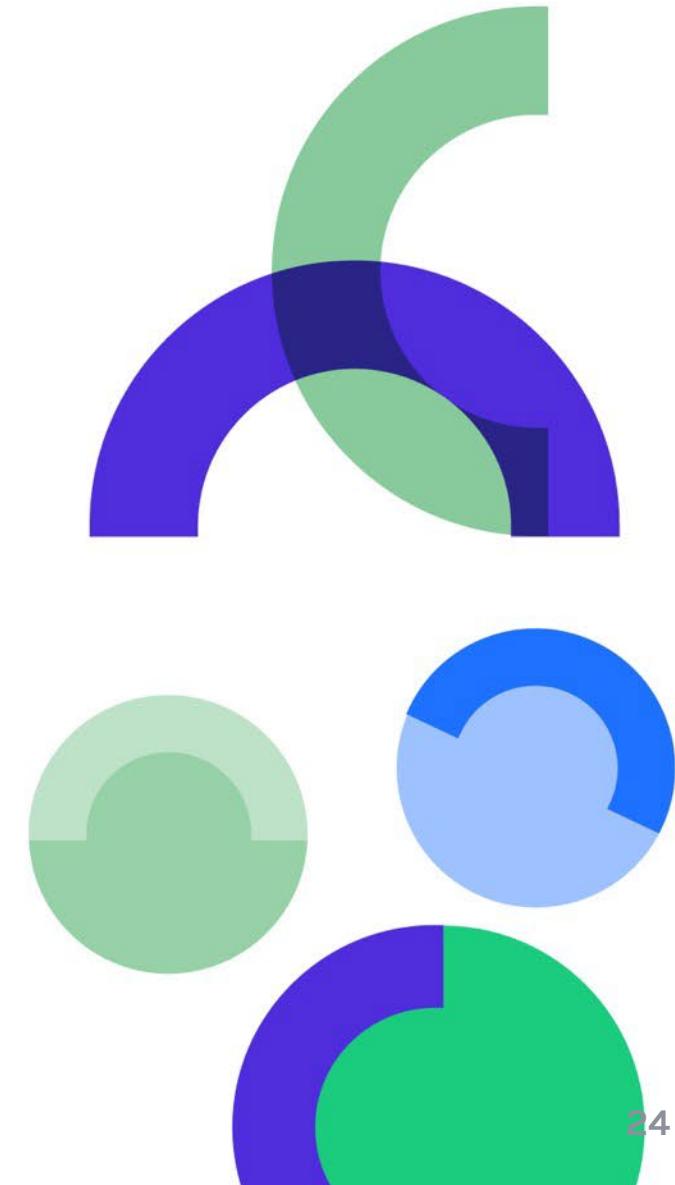
# Green Paper on Revised Access, Transfer and Progression Policy

- Building on previous policy
- Learner centred and focused on transparent and consistent pathways and **information provision**
- Reviewing our policy for access, transfer and progression with a focus on:
  - Programme Design
  - **Credit, credit accumulation & credit transfer**
  - Entry and Exit arrangements
  - **Transfer and progression routes**
  - **Information provision**
  - Data collection and provision
  - Include case studies of good practice
- Requires institutions to have policies for RPL that outlines procedures for RPL for access, advanced entry, credit exemptions and full award



# ATP and RPL

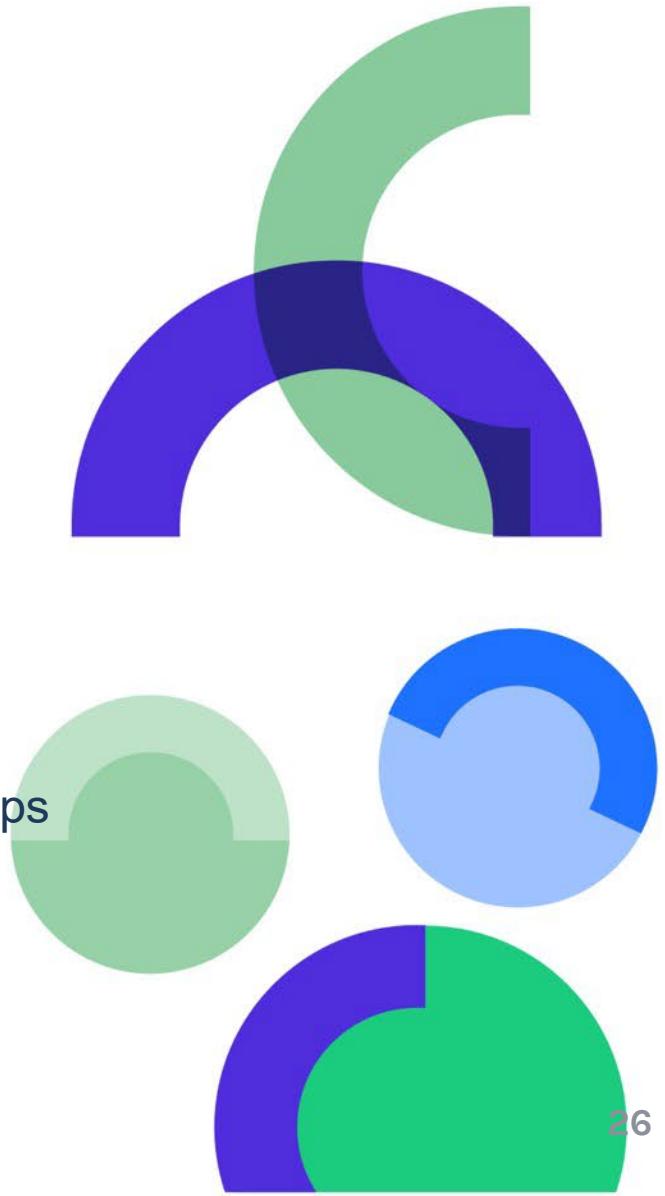
- Recognition and RPL are enablers of ATP. There is therefore a strong connection between ATP processes and procedures and an institution's RPL policy. Of particular importance is the role of RPL in ensuring that non-formal and informal learning are recognised and can be used as part of the admissions process.
- ATP policy and procedures are related specifically to programmes whereas recognition with regards to RPL is not limited in this way. For this reason, RPL for a full award does not fall under ATP however this is still a valid and appropriate application of RPL, and is related to broader NFQ policy.
- Confirmation that non-formal qualifications included in the NFQ should be treated in the same manner as formal qualifications for the purposes of recognition



# Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

# Legal Framework

- The legal basis for RPL is embedded in ATP
- Within the Act, QQI has direct policy responsibility for access, transfer and progression (ATP) of learners, where access, transfer and progression refer to:
  - Access by learners to programmes of education and training, including **recognition for knowledge, skill or competence previously acquired**,
  - Transfer of learners from one programme to another having received **recognition for knowledge, skill or competence previously acquired**, and
  - Progression of learners from a programme to another programme of a higher level
- However, much practice is focused on cooperation and collaborative partnerships which acknowledges and respects autonomy of institutions



# Introduction

- Encompasses all forms of prior learning, including certified learning
- Potential to focus on certified learning in procedures for credit accumulation and transfer, which is explored in the Green Paper and leave RPL for non-formal and informal.
- Can be used to access programmes leading to awards in the NFQ – including access, advanced entry and credit exemption
- Can also be used to obtain awards in the NFQ
- Commitment to national policy
- 2005 Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training continues to be used



# National Government Strategy

Department of Education & Skills Action Plan for Education 2016-2019

Programme for Government 2020

National Strategy for Higher Education 2030

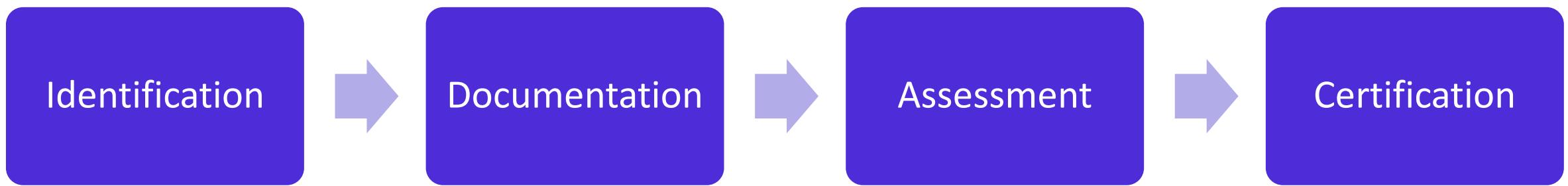
National Skills Strategy 2025

National Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education (2022-2028)

# Approach in Ireland

- Bottom up, test and learn approach that is demand driven
- Significant developments since 2018 as a result of increased investment and funding across FE and HE, and to some extent in adult education
- Uneven implementation across the country due to small pockets of committed practitioners and institutions
- Focus is often on identifying and documenting prior learning without formal certification
- Most common uses for access, advanced entry and credit exemption
- Some examples of full award in FET but often with bespoke approaches designed for cohorts of learners rather than on an individual basis
- Very little evidence of full award at HE
- ‘Gaps’ are overcome by assessment of experiential learning.
- Uneven implementation but traditionally focused on sectoral implementation and then devolved to regional/institutional implementation
- RPL is owned by providers
- Funded projects have enabled consolidation of pilots and implementation of new initiatives against a backdrop of ongoing RPL provision across all sectors



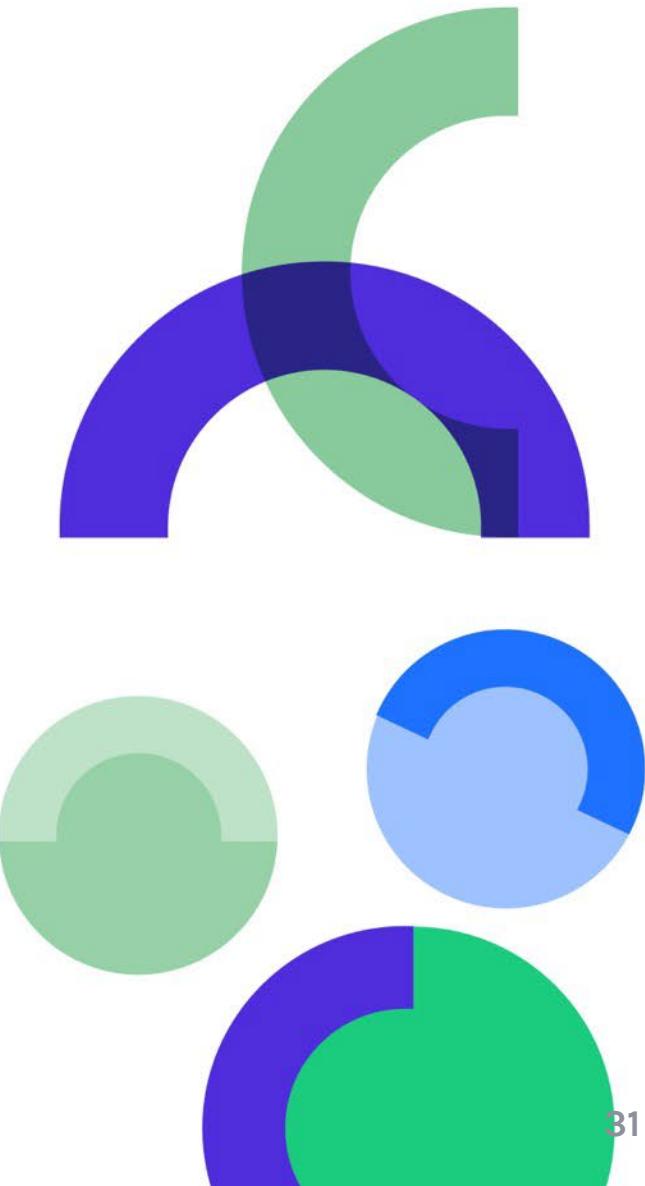


- **Role of NFQ**

- Clarity in learning outcomes
- Modularised systems
- Flexible, inclusive NFQ – many small programmes
- Requirement regarding information provision to learners which extends to RPL

- **Considerations:**

- Cost
- Support for learners
- Clarity of what can be achieved/awarded



# Communities of Practice

RPL Practitioner  
Network – FET  
and HE

PriorLearning.ie –  
public higher  
education  
institutions



Dearbhú Cáilíochta  
agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann  
Quality and  
Qualifications Ireland

# Case Study: Hairdressing

- National hairdressing apprenticeship is the first apprenticeship that can be achieved in full through experiential learning.
- Limerick and Clare ETB worked with industry-led consortium steering group to develop a process of RPL.

## Meet Michelle...

For close to 25 years, Michelle worked as a hairdresser in a successful salon. During this time, she worked hard to develop her knowledge and skills and won several awards for her hairdressing. Despite her success, there was no nationally-recognised award in her profession until recently. When the opportunity arose, she was determined to take it. As happy as Michelle was to finally have this opportunity, she felt a little deflated as she believed she would have to enrol in a three-year apprenticeship despite already having a successful career in hairdressing. After speaking with the salon manager, Michelle learned that she could achieve her goal a lot quicker by getting her experience recognised through RPL with Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board's College of FET.

After she applied for RPL, Michelle learned she was a suitable candidate and began the process. Having left formal education after Leaving Certificate, Michelle found it challenging to start her portfolio as she adapted to a new learning environment, but the support and guidance she received from her RPL Mentor helped her navigate the process. In the end, Michelle completed her portfolio and was awarded the QQI Level 6 Advanced Certificate in Hairdressing.

Having completed RPL, Michelle has explored opportunities outside of the salon but within the industry. She now works as a hairdressing tutor and an RPL Mentor, having been inspired by the help she received from her Mentor and the impact that RPL has had on her life.

*“ RPL has changed my life. I have a whole new career that I love, new colleagues that are amazingly supportive, a work life balance that I have always wanted, and I still get to be involved in the hairdressing industry. I am an RPL Mentor now, so I get to guide people through their RPL journey and I also teach Level 3 Hairdressing, so I really have the best of both worlds... ”*

— Michelle ”



# Case Study: Defence Forces



- National project building on two previous pilots run by Donegal ETB
- 10 ETBs worked with up to 10 soldiers each
- Prepared RPL portfolios for awards in subjects such as communications, word processing and team-working.
- 91 learners achieved 21 major awards and 386 minor awards through the project.
- Majority of awards at NFQ Level 5 but a mix of NFQ Level 3 to 6
- Assessment based on portfolio mainly but also use of skills demonstrations and assignments.

# Case Study: Banking

- Workers from the banking sector were identified as being at-risk after the closure of Ulster Bank.
- Although they had banking sector certificates, these are not recognised on the NFQ, which meant that when applying for jobs, applicants' qualifications were not recognised.
- Through RPL, 17 banking professionals gained NFQ Level 6 major awards in subjects 11 such as administration, management and business.
- Some of these went on to study at higher level at ATU, with advanced entry into the second year in recognition of their prior learning, saving them a year of tuition fees.

## Meet Nataliia...

In her native Ukraine, Nataliia studied teaching and qualified as a Maths and Physics teacher. However, she always loved children and was passionate about childcare. A few years ago, she had the opportunity to move to Dubai to pursue a career in childcare, where she worked as a preschool teacher for four years. Upon returning to Ukraine, she and her young daughter were forced to leave because of the ongoing conflict.

After arriving in Ireland, Nataliia was keen to continue working in childcare. She took English lessons to improve her job prospects. Nataliia secured a job in a childcare centre but could only work as an assistant as her teaching experience and qualifications were not recognised.

After discovering RPL, Nataliia was excited to learn she could get her prior experience recognised and continue improving her skillset to pursue her career in childcare. Rather than having to enrol in a new course, Nataliia enjoyed the flexibility afforded to her by undertaking RPL. The online check-ins with her RPL Mentor enabled her to balance being a single mother with her work and studies. After submitting her portfolio for assessment, she was awarded the QQI Level 5 Certificate in Early Childhood Care and Education. Soon after, Nataliia had the opportunity to progress at her workplace and was promoted from assistant to teacher.

*“I really wanted to work in childcare, but I could only be hired as an assistant. RPL was perfect because I didn’t have to start from zero, I could get my previous experience recognised. RPL has given me the chance to work in my dream job as an Early Years Educator and I couldn’t be more grateful..”*

– Nataliia



“My advice to someone looking into RPL in higher education would be – Do it! To put a value on your lived experience is a gift.”

When TV presenter, producer, broadcaster, activist, designer, and well-known Irish personality [Brendan Courtney](#) discovered the [#RPL](#) (Recognition of Prior Learning) process, he embarked on a life-changing journey in higher education. The RPL process allowed him to have his diverse skills and talents recognised, enabling him to pursue a qualification in an area he is passionate about.

University was not an option for Brendan after leaving school, but he always aspired to achieve a higher education qualification. He seized the opportunity to apply for the MA in Business in Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (Level 9) at [Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology](#).

By his own admission, Brendan says that without RPL, he wouldn't have the Master's qualification that has given him the confidence to thrive and pursue his passion.

# Case Study: Employment

**ACE developed an RPL approach for an initial cohort of 18 farmers to achieve a full Level 7 diploma in environmental science and social policy.**

**The farmers already had substantial expertise in farming sustainability, which they had gained through the Carbery Greener Dairy Farms Project (CGDF).**

- ACE developed an RPL approach for an initial cohort of 18 farmers to achieve a full Level 7 diploma in environmental science and social policy.
- The farmers already had substantial expertise in farming sustainability, which they had gained through the Carbery Greener Dairy Farms Project (CGDF).
- The approach which was developed by ACE is interesting because the 'burden of proof' for the RPL process was taken by the learning provider, rather than the individual learner.
- ACE mapped the learning and experience gained through the CGDF against the learning outcomes of the diploma.
- In total, exemptions were granted for five modules, equal to 40 out of 60 credits, meaning that the farmers only had to undertake three of the course modules
- This cohort approach means learners do not need to complete an individual portfolio to evidence their learning and therefore reduces the time commitment involved in undertaking RPL, whilst the RPL itself reduces the time commitment for completing the outstanding modules.
- Since the completion of the pilot project, UCC has adjusted the diploma in environmental science and social policy so that the modules which CGDF participants are required to complete are all offered in the first year of this two-year diploma, thereby reducing the timeframe in which the farmers can achieve the diploma.

# Data

- TOBAR project (2018-2019): A total of 91 learners achieved 21 major and 386 minor awards through the project (de Paor, 2021).
- VCCSE: Over 200 people in Donegal and Limerick and Clare ETBs working in the healthcare, financial and community sectors had their experience recognised, validated and certified during this two-year project which started in 2020, leading to around 600 awards.
- Cork Institute of Technology (now part of MTU) has processed 7,348 successful RPL applications, spanning 797 modules in 231 programmes. Thirty-seven individuals have gained full academic major awards (up to Masters degrees) via RPL and 112 individuals have gained advanced entry to programmes through RPL between 1999 and 2023.
- Since November 2021, 278 learners have undergone RPL with Limerick and Clare ETB, across 92 modules or full awards in the subjects of: business, early childcare and education, hairdressing, healthcare, inclusive education and training, regional tour guiding and sports and recreation.

# Costs

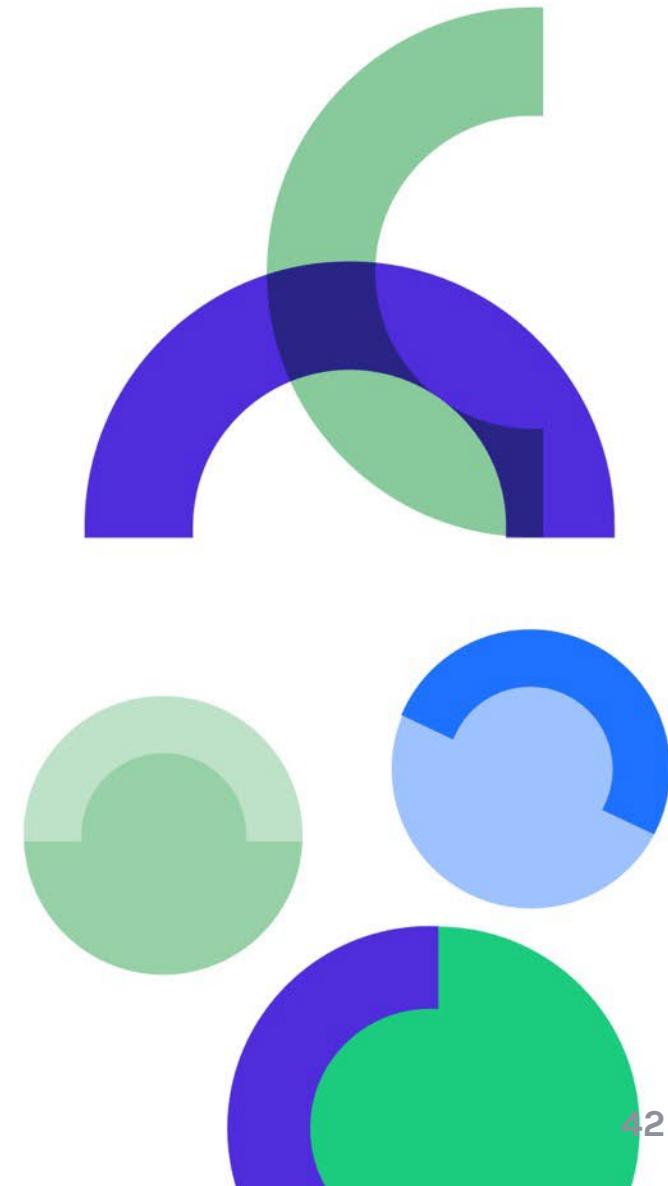
- Varies and difficult to allocate a cost
- Most costs relate to a cohort approach, rather than individual applicant.
- TOBAR project – ranged from no additional cost to €10,000 leading to 23 minor awards, 96 hours of mentoring and over 100 hours of assessment
- Donegal ETB estimates cost of €200 per minor award regardless of NFQ level

# Micro-credentials and the Irish NFQ

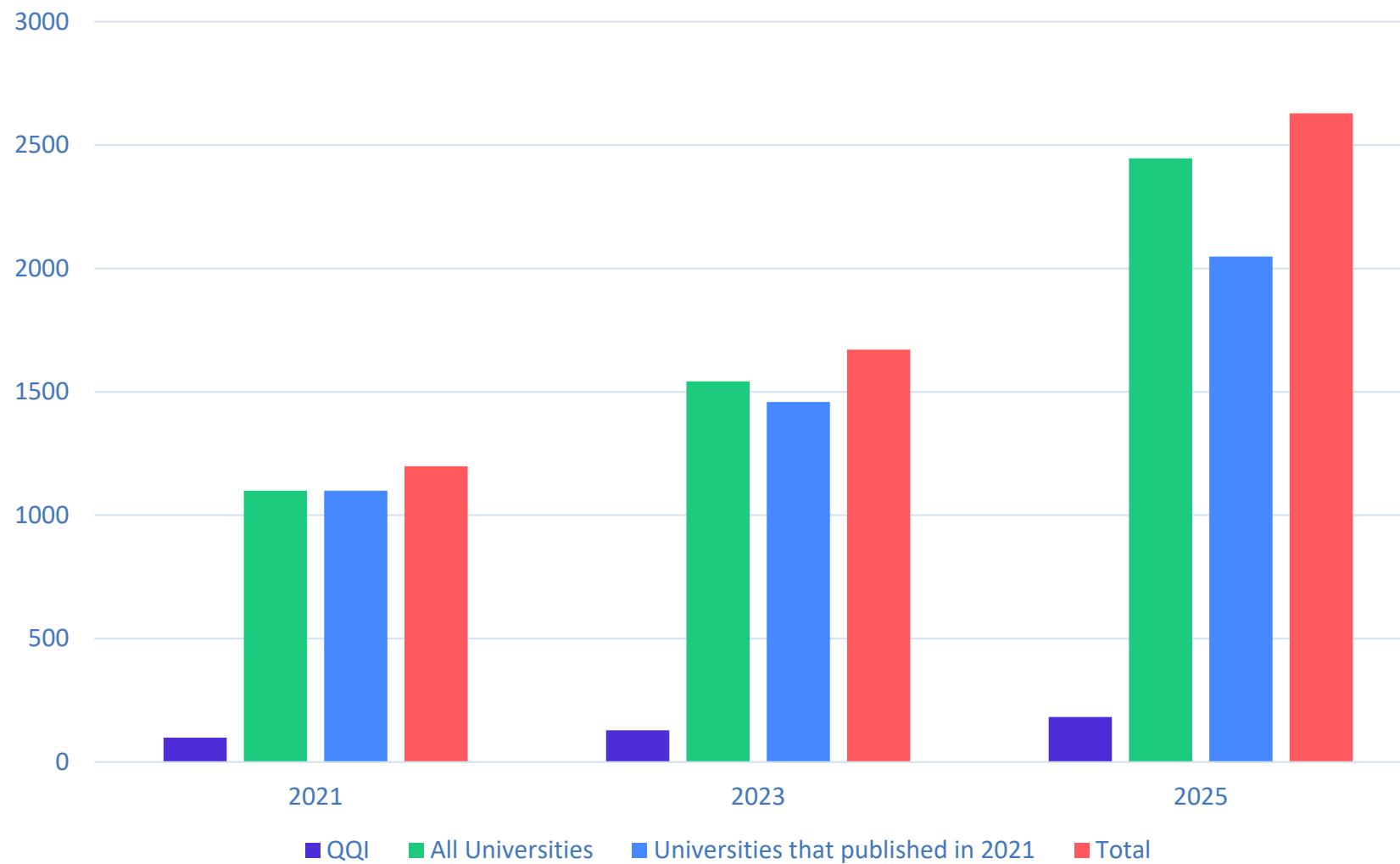


# Micro-credentials in Ireland

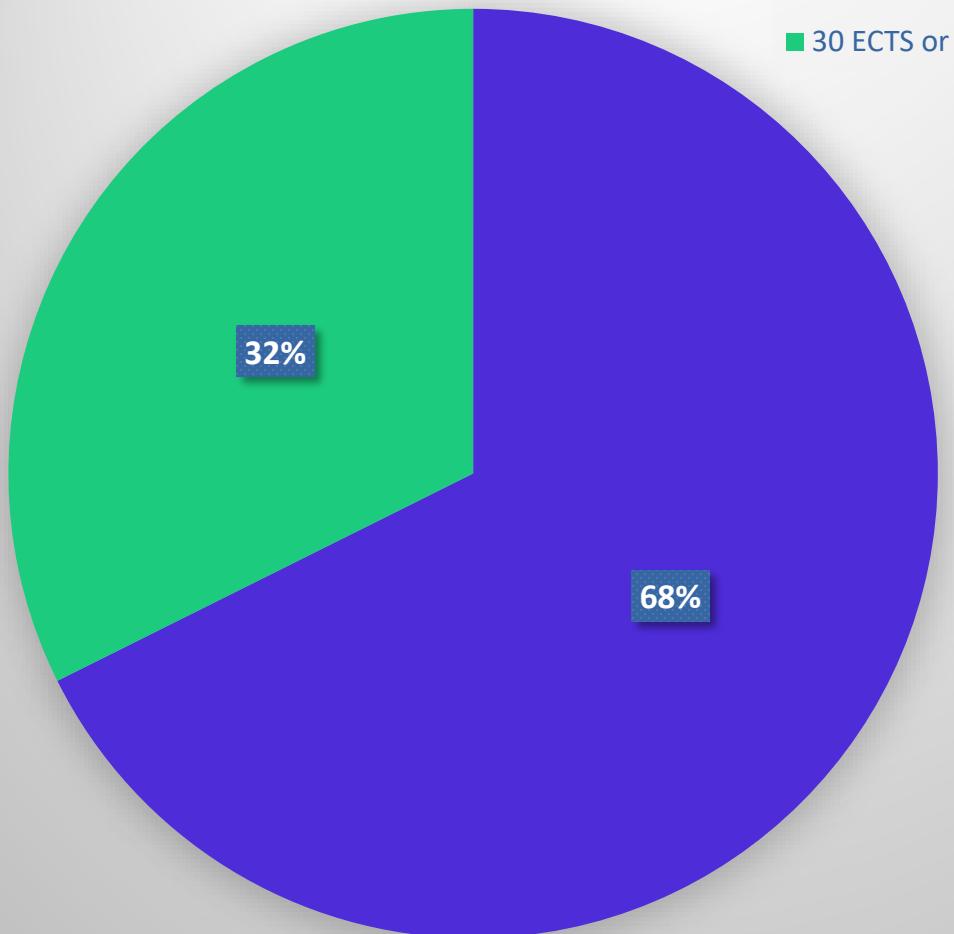
- New term but not a new concept in the Irish system
- No agreed definition yet
- Generally accepted as being less than 30 ECTS credits
- Smallest is typically 5 ECTS, but we do see some smaller
- Approx 4,000 published in the IRQ [www.irq.ie](http://www.irq.ie)
- Approx 60% offered in HE – mostly public providers
- 60% in technological higher education sector
- Available at every level of the NFQ
- Non-major award types – minor, special purpose and supplemental awards suitable for development
- Professional awards available as micro-credentials
- Mix of qualifications included in the NFQ and not qualifications
- Information provision to learners, certification and clarity of award on completion is key issue



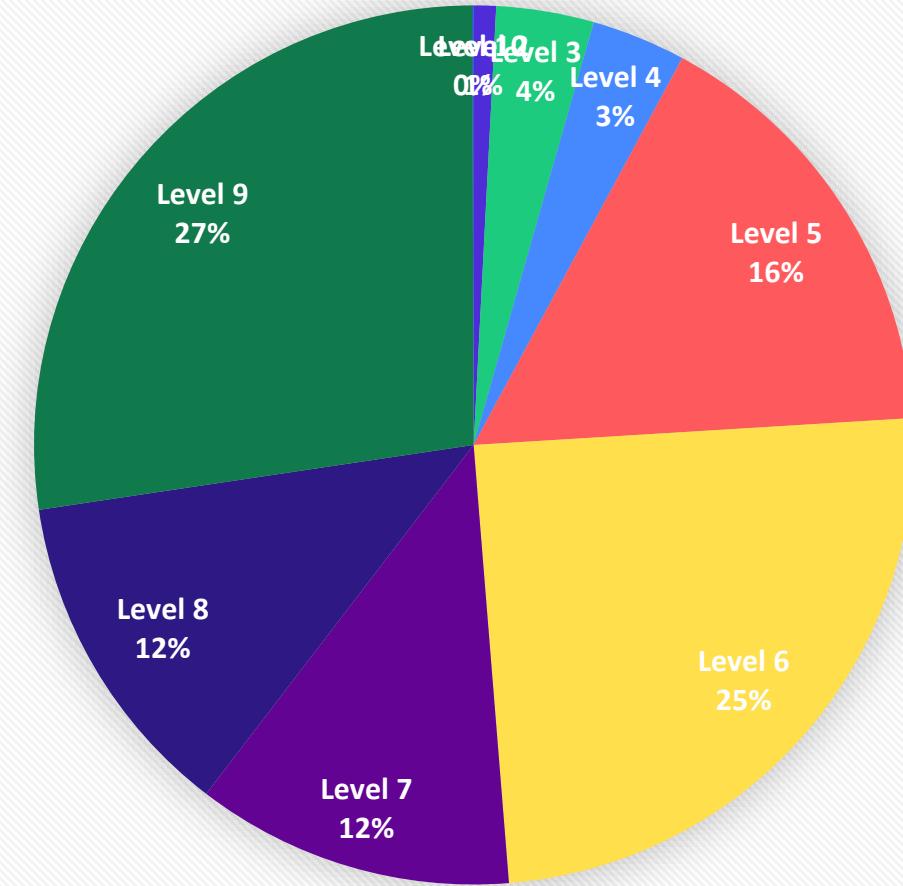
## HE Micro-credentials 2021-2025



## Qualifications



## Small Qualifications

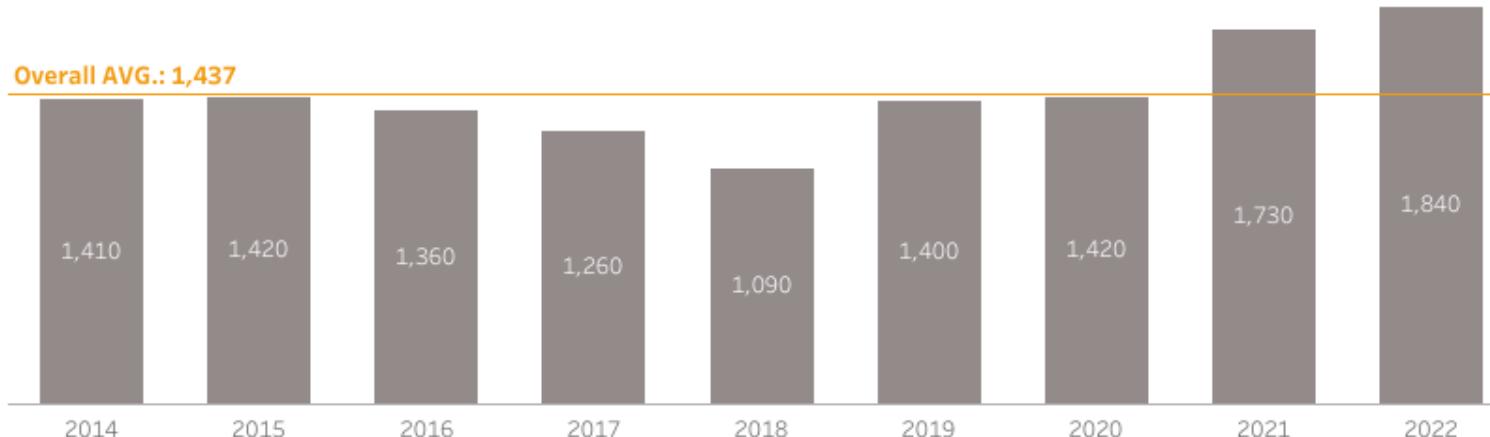


■ Level 2 ■ Level 3 ■ Level 4 ■ Level 5 ■ Level 6 ■ Level 7 ■ Level 8 ■ Level 9 ■ Level 10

## QQI HE micro-credential, certification data and trends 2014-2022

The number of learners who achieved micro-credentials increased in 2021 and 2022 by 20% and 28% respectively over the overall average for the period 2014-2022. Most micro-credentials achieved led to special purpose awards of 10 ECTS credits. Almost half were made at NFQ level 6, mostly by learners who attended a single HE institution in Dublin.

**TRENDS:** Numbers of learners who achieved QQI micro-credentials between 2014-2022. Hover over a year for information on award class



Use filters to segment data:

Award Class  
 Minor  
 Special Purpose

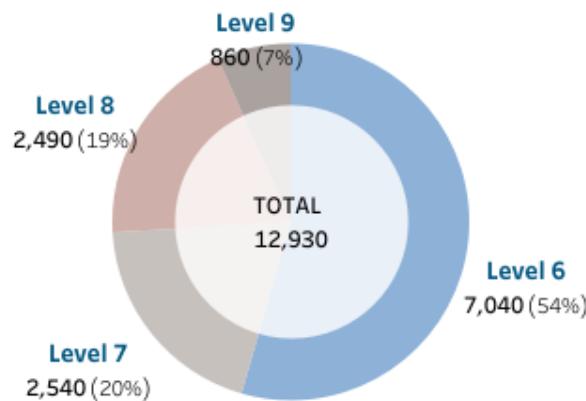
Award NFQ Level  
 All

ECTS Credit Value  
 All

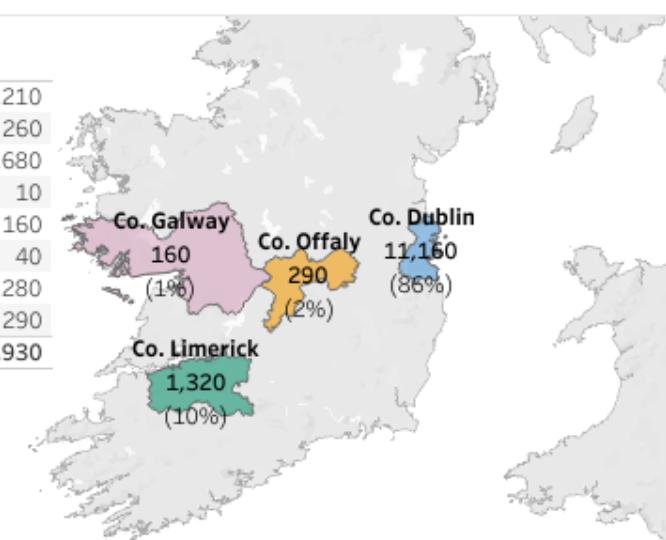
Numbers & proportions of learners who achieved QQI micro-credentials by NFQ level, 2014-2022

Select Year  
 All

Geographical location of HE institution attended. Hover over an area to view further information



Dublin City	9,210
Dublin Fingal	260
Dublin South	1,680
Dún Laoghaire / Rathdown	10
Galway City	160
Limerick City	40
Limerick County	1,280
Offaly	290
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>12,930</b>



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

Micro-credentials are playing an increasingly important role in lifelong learning, reskilling, and meeting emerging skills needs. This consultation is an opportunity to reflect on how Ireland's qualifications system can best support their use—while maintaining quality and clarity for learners, providers, and employers.

The paper explores key issues including:

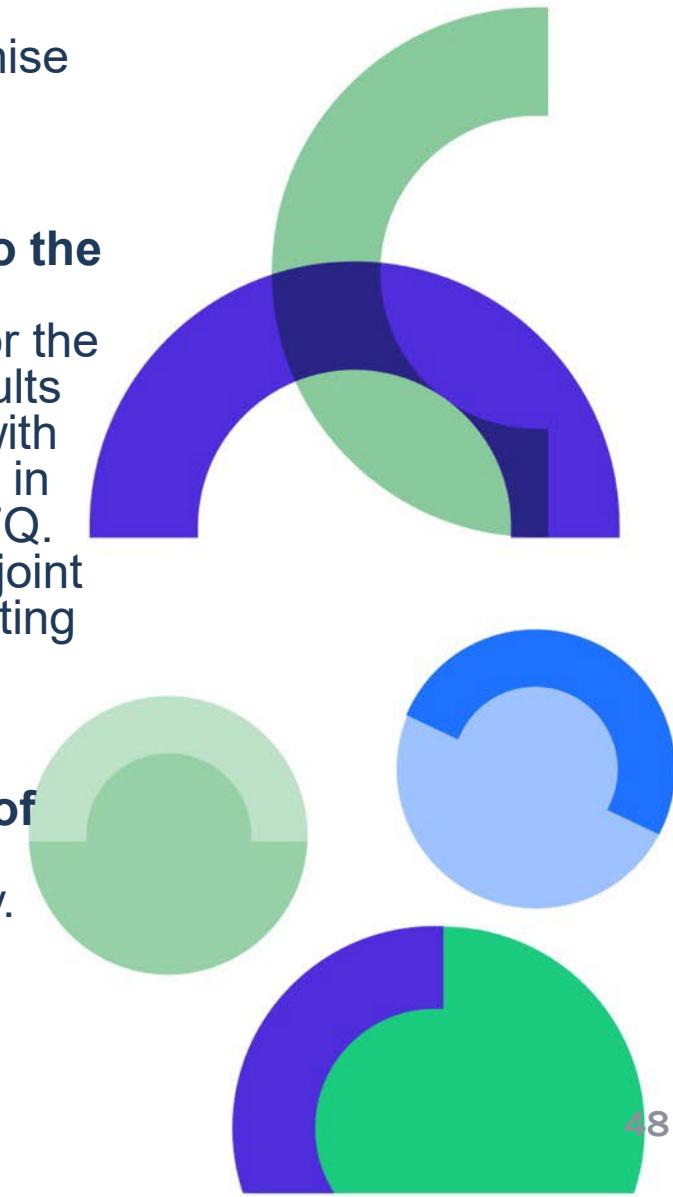
- Definitions and purposes of micro-credentials
- Their place within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)
- Quality assurance considerations
- Stackability and pathways to further qualifications
- Data, titling, and recognition—both within and outside the NFQ.

 Read the full Green Paper: [qqi-green-paper-on-micro-credentials.pdf](https://www.qqi.ie/qqi-green-paper-on-micro-credentials.pdf)

# Green Paper on Micro- credentials and the short programmes that lead to them

# Credit Accumulation – Approaches in the Green Paper

- 1. Pathways for credit accumulation of micro-credentials should be identified prospectively** and mapped out and made clear to learners. This is likely only possible within an institution. It is possible for institutions to prospectively recognise micro-credentials from another institution in their pathways.
- 2. Credit accumulation of micro-credentials can be retrospectively mapped to the achievement of a larger qualification.** The learning must be coherent to the achievement of a qualification and in keeping with the Grid of Level Indicators for the overall level of the award and with the relevant award-type descriptor. If this results in a new qualification, the institution must include this award in the NFQ in line with requirements of the Joint Sectoral Protocol. This qualification must be published in the Irish Register of Qualifications to be considered an award included in the NFQ. This would be possible within and between institutions and could be made as a joint award. There is not necessarily a need to design a programme, beyond the existing accumulation of smaller awards, to lead to this qualification.
- 3. Credit accumulation of micro-credentials can be treated as a Recognition of Prior Learning** for access to a programme of education and training or for the achievement of a full award but must be detailed in an organisational RPL policy. This would be possible within and between institutions.



# Thank You

Any questions?  
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Join the conversation!

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