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National Qualifications
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Ireland

Country Education Profile

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COUNTRY EDUCATION PROFILE: IRELAND

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Schools System	4
2.1 Primary Education	4
2.2 Post-primary education	5
2.2.1 Post-primary awards	8
3. Further Education and Training	14
3.1 Further Education and Training Awards	16
3.1.1 The Advanced Certificate - Craft	18
3.2 Grading	19
3.3 Credit	20
3.4 Quality Assurance	20
4. Higher Education and Training	21
4.1 Awarding Bodies	21
4.2 Higher Education and Training Awards	23
4.3 Grading	27
4.4 Credit	27
4.5 Quality Assurance	28
5. Professional Bodies and Professional Awards made in Ireland	30
6. International Awarding Bodies	31

7. The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)	32
7.1 Awards in the National Framework of Qualifications	32
7.1.1 Major Awards	33
7.1.2 Non-major Awards	34
7.2 Legacy Awards	34
8. International Context	36
8.1 The Irish NFQ and its relationship with the European frameworks	36
8.1.1 The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (the 'Bologna Framework')	36
8.1.2 The European Qualifications Framework (EQF)	36
8.2 Recognition agreements	38
8.2.1 A comparison of the qualifications in the UK and Ireland	38
8.2.2 Agreement on mutual recognition of higher education qualifications between Ireland and the People's Republic of China	38
8.3 The Diploma Supplement	39
8.4 The Certificate Supplement	39

1. INTRODUCTION

The following report describes the primary and the post-primary schools sector, the further/vocational education and training sector and the higher education and training sector in Ireland. It also incorporates information on professional qualifications and provides an overview of the international context as it relates to the Irish education and training system. Each section includes details of education and training awards made by the recognised awarding bodies operating in a given sector, as well as information on grading and credit systems and quality assurance procedures. The level of each qualification in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), where applicable, has also been identified.

2. SCHOOLS SYSTEM

2.1 Primary Education

Although children are not obliged to attend school until the age of six, 65% of four year olds and most five year olds are enrolled in the infant classes in primary schools in Ireland. Primary schools operate an eight-year programme, consisting of two initial years (Junior and Senior Infants), followed by classes 1-6. The primary education system emphasises a child-centred approach and is founded on the belief that high quality education enables children to realise their potential as individuals and to live their lives to the fullest capacity appropriate to their particular stages of development. The primary curriculum (recently completely revised) provides for an extensive learning experience and promotes a rich variety of approaches to teaching and learning.

The curriculum is divided into the following key areas:

- Languages
- Mathematics
- Social, environmental and scientific education
- Arts education (including visual arts, music and drama)
- Physical education
- Social, personal and health education

The aims of the curriculum are to ensure that all children are provided with learning opportunities that recognise and celebrate their uniqueness, develop their full potential and prepare them to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The focus is on the child as learner, and the use of a variety of teaching methodologies is an essential feature of the curriculum. The curriculum aims to foster the development of key skills in communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, inquiry, investigation and analysis, and social and personal awareness and interaction. In particular, it places key emphasis on the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills.

The curriculum emphasises the need for greater attention to be paid to students with special educational needs and emphasises the importance of achieving functional literacy and numeracy. It also draws attention to the needs of gifted children. There are no formal examinations at the end of the primary school cycle.¹ In the primary school, assessment involves gathering information to understand better how each child is progressing at school and using that information to further the child's learning. Assessment at primary goes beyond just testing. It concerns the daily interactions between the teacher and each child that include moment-by-moment conversations, observations and actions. Therefore, assessment in the primary school focuses on both the process of learning - assessment for learning (AfL) and the products of learning - assessment of learning (AoL).

2.2 Post-primary education

The post-primary education sector comprises secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools. Vocational schools are administered by vocational education committees (VECs) as established under the Vocational Education Act, 1930. Traditionally, the objective of these schools was the provision of manual skills and preparation for employment in the trades. These schools now offer the full range of post-primary awards and are also providers of adult education and community education courses. Comprehensive and community schools offer academic and vocational subjects in a wide curriculum. They are managed by boards of management, supported by local vocational education committees and the Department of Education and Science. Community schools also provide facilities for adult education and community development projects. All of these schools provide programmes leading to the certificate awards prescribed by the Department of Education and Science and are subject to inspection by the Department of Education and Science.

¹ A Primary Certificate was awarded by the Department of Education and Science at the end of the primary cycle until 1967. It is placed on the National Framework of Qualifications at Level 2.

Post-primary education consists of a three-year junior cycle followed by a two or three-year senior cycle. A State examination, the Junior Certificate², is taken after the three year junior cycle. In the senior cycle there is an optional one-year Transition Year after which the learner can take one of three Leaving Certificate programmes of two years duration: the Leaving Certificate (established), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied. A majority of learners complete the Leaving Certificate (established) programme.

The first stage of post-primary schooling that learners encounter, usually commencing at age 12, is junior cycle, a three-year programme within the compulsory period of education that builds on the young person's educational experience at primary school by offering a broad, balanced and coherent programme of study across a wide range of curriculum subjects and areas. It is in junior cycle that the knowledge, understanding, attitudes and skills of learners - including the personal, social, moral and spiritual aspects - are extended and deepened with the aim of generating a love of learning in young people. In the process, junior cycle prepares learners for transition to senior cycle, for other further education opportunities, in some cases for employment and, in general, for the challenges involved in growing towards adulthood.

In junior cycle learners follow a number of subjects which include Irish, English, Mathematics, Social Personal & Health Education, Civic, Social and Political Education and two other subjects from a list which includes languages, Science, Business Studies, Art, Music etc. In addition, students in secondary schools must study History and Geography. The Junior Certificate examination takes place at the end of the junior cycle, learners normally sit the examination at the age of 14 or 15. Junior Certificate subjects are usually assessed by means of a written terminal examination, along with practical examinations, project work, orals and aurals in some subjects. The majority of students in school will sit Junior Certificate examinations in at least seven subjects.

² The Junior Certificate replaced the Day Vocational (Group) Certificate and the Intermediate Certificate in 1992. These qualifications are placed on the National Framework of Qualifications at Level 3.

However, candidates – including many learners in second chance education settings or repeat students – can also sit one or more individual subjects.

Senior cycle has a particular role to play in the preparation of learners for adult life in a changing economic and social context. A broad curriculum at senior cycle that allows for a degree of specialisation for learners continues to be viewed as the best means of achieving continuity and progression from junior cycle and assisting learners to prepare for the future. Senior cycle education seeks to provide learners with a high quality learning experience to prepare them for the world of work, for further and higher education and for successful personal lives, whatever that may entail for the individual learner.

Learners in senior cycle can currently follow a two or three-year programme of study, leading to the Leaving Certificate examination. They can take an initial Transition Year and proceed to choose from a number of options for the Leaving Certificate examination. Alternatively, they can proceed directly to one of these Leaving Certificate options and take the final examination after two years. Performance in the Leaving Certificate examination is the main basis on which places in universities, institutes of technology and other further and higher education colleges are allocated.

The Transition Year (TY) is a one-year programme that forms the first year of a three year senior cycle in many schools. It is designed to act as a bridge between the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate. Transition Year offers learners an opportunity to mature and develop without the pressure of a formal examination. Its flexible structure allows for a broad range of learning experiences to be included, such as those related to personal and social awareness and development. It also provides an opportunity for learners to reflect on, and develop an appreciation of, the value of education and training in preparing them for the demands of the world of work and pays particular attention to fostering a spirit of enterprise. Each school designs its own programme, within guidelines, to suit the needs and interests of its learners.

Transition units are new units of study that can be selected or developed by teachers, as part of the programme. In establishing its own distinctive programme content, the school takes into account its own resources and the possibilities offered by local community interests.

2.2.1 Post-primary awards

Junior Certificate (NFQ³ Level 3)

Award made by: The State Examinations Commission (Department of Education and Science)

The Junior Certificate examination is held at the end of the junior cycle in post-primary schools. The junior cycle caters for students in the 12 to 15 year old age group. Students normally sit for the examinations at the age of 14 or 15, after 3 years of post-primary education. Students take a number of subjects for examination, including English, Irish, Mathematics and Civic, Social and Political Education. Students in secondary schools (as opposed to vocational schools) must also study History and Geography. Students can then choose their other subjects from a broad range including Arts, Languages, Business, Science and other applied subjects (e.g. Home Economics, Mechanical Drawing, Woodwork etc.). In addition, all schools are required to provide Social, Personal and Health Education as part of the junior cycle curriculum.

Students may study and complete examinations in most subjects at either higher or ordinary level. Irish, English and Mathematics may also be studied at a foundation level. The examination incorporates written tests in all subjects except Art, Craft and Design. There are optional oral examinations in the subjects Irish, French, German, Italian and Spanish. There are practical examinations in Art, Craft and Design; Music; Home Economics; and Metalwork. There is Practical Course Work in Art, Craft and Design; Materials Technology (Wood); Home Economics; Religious Education;

³ The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was launched in 2003. It is a 10-level system used for recognising all education and training in Ireland. For further information see p.32

Metalwork; Environmental and Social Studies; Civic, Social and Political Education; Technology; Science; and Science with Local Studies.

Junior Certificate Grading⁴

Results of the Junior Certificate examination subjects are given in the form of grades. Each grade represents a percentage range of marks as follows:

Percentage Range	Grade
85 or over	A
70 but less than 85	B
55 but less than 70	C
40 but less than 55	D
25 but less than 40	E
10 but less than 25	F
Less than 10	No grade

Leaving Certificate (NFQ Levels 4 and 5)

Award made by: The State Examinations Commission (Department of Education and Science)

The Leaving Certificate is studied over two years and aims to provide learners with a broad, balanced education while also offering some potential for specialization towards a particular career option. The Leaving Certificate is taken in almost all schools and students are required to study at least five subjects, one of which must be Irish. In general, students take six or more subjects for examination. All subjects are offered at two levels, Ordinary and Higher. Irish and Mathematics are also available at Foundation level. Over 30 Leaving Certificate subjects are available to schools.

⁴ Information on grading from State Examinations Commission, <http://www.examinations.ie/index.php?l=en&mc=ca&sc=sc>, 26 June 2009

Leaving Certificate Grading⁵

Results of the Leaving Certificate examinations are given in the form of grades. Each grade represents a percentage range of marks as follows:

Percentage Range	Grade
90 or over	A1
85 but less than 90	A2
80 but less than 85	B1
75 but less than 80	B2
70 but less than 75	B3
65 but less than 70	C1
60 but less than 65	C2
55 but less than 60	C3
50 but less than 55	D1
45 but less than 50	D2
40 but less than 45	D3
25 but less than 40	E
10 but less than 25	F
Less than 10	No grade

Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) (NFQ Levels 4 and 5)

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is designed to enhance the vocational dimension of the Leaving Certificate. This two-year programme combines the academic strengths of the Leaving Certificate with a dynamic focus on self-directed learning, enterprise, work and the community. The defining features of the LCVP are that learners take some of their Leaving Certificate subjects from a specified set of vocational subjects, they study a recognised course in a modern European language,

⁵ Information on grading from State Examinations Commission,
<http://www.examinations.ie/index.php?l=en&mc=ca&sc=sb>, 26 June 2009

and take two additional courses, known as Link Modules, in the areas of Preparation for the World of Work and Enterprise Education.

The Leaving Certificate subjects studied as part of the programme are assessed in the same way as the Leaving Certificate (established) (see pg 10). The Link Modules are assessed through a Terminal Examination Paper and a Portfolio of Coursework.

For more information on the LCVP please see www.lcvc.ie

Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCA) (NFQ Levels 4 and 5)

The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) is a discrete programme designed for those learners whose aptitudes, learning interests and ways of learning are not fully catered for by the other two Leaving Certificate programmes and for those learners who are at risk of early school leaving. Participants in the Leaving Certificate Applied engage in work and study of an active, practical and task-centred nature as it prepares participants for transition from the world of the school/centre to that of adult and working life. The Leaving Certificate Applied is a two-year programme made up of a range of courses that are structured round three elements:

- Vocational Preparation
- Vocational Education
- General Education.

Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) Grading⁶

This LCA Certificate is awarded at three levels:

Pass	60-69 %
Merit	70-84 %
Distinction	85-100%

⁶ Information on grading from State Examinations Commission, <http://www.examinations.ie/index.php?l=en&mc=ca&sc=sd>, 26 June 2009

Candidates who acquire less than 120 credits will receive a Record of Credits. This will also apply to those who leave before the end of the programme. Students wishing to further their education can do so by progressing to further education and training programmes. These are normally one-year courses (two in some cases) in a very wide range of specialist areas which can offer further progression routes.

Further information on the LCA is available on: <http://lca.slss.ie/>

Placement of the Leaving Certificate at Levels 4 and 5 of the NFQ

The Leaving Certificate is a high profile, and, in the context of its selection function for higher education and training, a high stakes qualification. It is taken in almost all schools and by an annual cohort of around 60,000 learners. It enjoys public confidence in its standards, status and currency. It is the terminal qualification for the vast majority of school leavers and a reference point for agencies and individuals involved in employment and training.

With regards to the inclusion of the Leaving Certificate in the NFQ, it was determined that:

- The Leaving Certificate should be treated as a single award incorporating the Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied
- It should be defined on the basis of the published general aims, objectives and outcomes associated with its various options, and that
- These are consistent with the level indicators at NFQ Levels 4 and 5 and the award should be viewed as including learning outcomes and standards spanning these levels.

It is recognised that while the Leaving Certificate is considered to extend across Level 4 and Level 5, the ultimate achievements of each individual learner will do so in varying proportions. The achievements of some learners will be reflective of indicators largely associated with Level 4 in the NFQ while learners who take 'higher level' courses in

their Leaving Certificate programme and achieve well are likely to acquire learning outcomes more akin to the indicators associated with Level 5 than 4. It is therefore considered that regardless of the option taken, all learners engage in attaining learning outcomes consistent with NFQ indicators spanning in some measure Levels 4 and 5 rather than being exclusive to either one of these levels.

3. FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Further education and training (FET) embraces education and training which occurs outside the general education and higher education and training systems, and which provides vocationally focussed learning, based on the needs of individuals. It is characterised by flexible modes of delivery, and built upon modular/unit systems that provide opportunities for credit accumulation. The FET sector also seeks to provide education and training that reflects national, regional and sectoral skills needs, and to facilitate social inclusion and accessibility.

FET programmes are offered by a wide range of public and private providers. These include the state training agency, FÁS, which offers training courses suited to the needs of individuals seeking employment, employees wishing to improve their skills, and those training as crafts persons. Other state agencies provide training to meet particular sectoral needs such as BIM (Bord Iascaigh Mhara), which provides training for careers in the seafood industry, and Teagasc, the Agriculture and Food Development Authority, which provides further education and training courses in horticulture, agriculture, forestry and equine studies. FET programmes are also offered by small training centres, vocational education committees (VECs), schools and colleges of further education and training, by private companies and professional bodies, and in community and adult education centres. In 2001, under the Qualifications Act, the state established a single awarding body to make and quality assure FET awards: the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). As a result, most publicly funded FET programmes, and a significant volume of privately funded FET programmes lead to FETAC awards, which are included at Levels 1 to 6 of the NFQ. Since its establishment in 2001, FETAC has awarded over 750,000 awards.

FETAC makes both major (large volume awards in terms of credit and learning outcomes) and non-major awards⁷ (minor, supplemental and special purpose awards) in the NFQ. Major FETAC awards at levels 1-5 on the NFQ refer to the level of the

⁷ Information on types of awards is set out in the section on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), p. 32

award and are titled as Certificates: e.g. Level 1 Certificate, Level 2 Certificate. The named award signals specific details of the nature of the award: e.g. Level 1 Certificate in Communications. The major further education and training award at NFQ Level 6 is referred to as the Advanced Certificate. It is distinguishable from the Higher Certificate (see higher education and training awards, pg 24) at the same level by its learning outcomes. It is important to note that a FETAC Advanced Certificate-Craft is awarded upon completion of an apprenticeship, which is the recognised means by which people are qualified to become craftspersons⁸ in Ireland. A transcript of all results is issued by FETAC with the major award certificate, listing the learner's certification history.

FETAC also make smaller, non-major awards which are classed as component, specific purpose and supplemental awards. An example of a component named award would be, for instance, a Component Certificate in Word Processing. There are no supplemental awards made by FETAC at Levels 1, 2 and 3 of the NFQ. Non-major awards, particularly component awards, may contribute towards the accumulation of credit for major awards.

The full directory of FETAC awards is available at the following link:

http://www.fetac.ie/link_pages/Awards_link_page.htm

⁸ The system of apprenticeship and the Advanced Certificate-Craft award is described on page 19 below.

3.1 Further Education and Training Awards

Level 1 and Level 2 Certificates (NFQ Level 1, NFQ Level 2) and minor and special purpose awards at the same level

Awards made by: Further Education and Training Award Council (FETAC)
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Level 1 and 2 Certificates are designed to meet the needs of learners, both young and old, including those with intellectual and other disabilities, adults returning to training, and learners with few or no previous qualifications, including those within the workforce. These awards provide certification for learners who may progress to higher levels and also for those whose principal achievements rest at these levels. Each certificate comprises a number of components, most often in basic literacy and numeracy, which the learner can achieve at their own pace and accumulate over time towards one of the named certificates above. Examples of awards at Levels 1 and 2 include the Level 1 Certificate in Communications (major) and the Level 2 Certificate in General Learning (major).

Level 3 Certificate (NFQ Level 3) and minor and special purpose awards at the same level

Awards made by: Further Education and Training Award Council (FETAC)

The Level 3 Certificate enables learners to gain recognition for, specific personal skills, practical skills and knowledge, basic transferable skills, the enhancement of individual talents and qualities and achievements and learning relevant to a variety of progression options. Examples of awards at Level 3 would include the Level 3 Certificate in Keyboard and Computer Skills (major) and the Component Certificate (minor award) in Computer Literacy.

Level 4 Certificate (NFQ Level 4) and minor, special purpose, and supplemental awards at the same level

Awards made by: Further Education and Training Award Council (FETAC)

The Level 4 Certificate enables learners to gain recognition for the achievement of vocational and personal skills, knowledge and understanding to specified standards, the enhancement of individual talents and qualities and the achievement and learning relevant to a variety of progression options, including employment at an introductory vocational level, and programmes leading to a Level 5 Certificate. Examples of Level 4 awards would include the Level 4 Certificate in Horticulture (major); the Level 4 Certificate in Pharmacy Sales (major); and the Component Certificate in Child Development and Play (minor).

Level 5 Certificate (NFQ Level 5) and minor, special purpose and supplemental awards at the same level

Awards made by: Further Education and Training Award Council (FETAC)

The Level 5 Certificate enables learners to develop a broad range of skills, which are vocationally specific and require a general theoretical understanding. They are enabled to work independently while subject to general direction. The majority of certificate/module holders at Level 5 take up positions of employment. They are also deemed to meet the minimum entry requirements for a range of higher education institutions/programmes. Examples of Level 5 awards would include the Level 5 Certificate in Restaurant Operations (major); the Level 5 Certificate in Seafood Processing (major); the Component Certificate in Care of Older People (minor); the Component Certificate in Word Processing (minor).

Advanced Certificate (NFQ Level 6) and minor, special purpose and supplemental awards at the same level

Awards made by: Further Education and Training Award Council (FETAC)

An Advanced Certificate award enables learners to develop a comprehensive range of skills, which may be vocationally specific and/or of a general supervisory nature, and require detailed theoretical understanding. Modules include advanced vocational/occupational skills, enabling certificate holders to work independently or progress to higher education and training. The majority of certificate/module holders at Level 6 take up positions of employment, some of whom may be self-employed. Examples of FET awards at Level 6 would include Advanced Certificate Craft-Electrical (major); Advanced Certificate Craft-Metal Fabrication (major); Advanced Certificate Farm Management (major); Component Certificate in Communications and Personal Development (minor); Component Certificate in Culinary Skills and Standards (minor).

3.1.1 The Advanced Certificate - Craft⁹

Apprenticeship is the recognised means by which individuals are trained to become craftspersons in Ireland. The main craft trades have been designated by FÁS, the state employment agency, and come within the scope of the statutory apprenticeships system, which is organised in Ireland by FÁS in co-operation with the Department of Education and Science, employers and unions. The Advanced Certificate is the award received on successful completion of all stages of the apprenticeship and it is made by FETAC. All Advanced Certificate awards are included at Level 6 on the NFQ.

The curriculum for each apprenticeship programme is based on pre-specified standards which are agreed with industry. Apprentices are assessed on a structured ongoing basis throughout their apprenticeship. Modular assessments are carried out during off-the-job training phases, which are held in FÁS training centres or Department of Education and Science approved centres. The assessments incorporate work,

⁹ This award was preceded by the National Craft Certificate which is placed on the National Framework of Qualifications at level 6.

standardised practical assessments and theoretical assessments. During the on-the-job training phases of apprenticeships the apprentice's competence is assessed by the employer to pre-specified standards.

The apprenticeship cycle is deemed to be complete when an apprentice has completed all of the seven alternate on-the-job training and off-the-job phases of his/her apprenticeship, with the minimum timeframe from the date of registration, as well as achieving the qualifying standard throughout his/her apprenticeship. Generally, the duration of an apprenticeship is 4 years. (The Print Media apprenticeship has a duration of 3 years).

3.2 Further Education and Training grading system¹⁰

Further education and training assessment techniques are often determined nationally; the assessment instruments are devised locally. Each assessment instrument has assessment criteria which detail the range of marks to be awarded for specific standards of knowledge, skills and competence demonstrated by candidates.

FETAC awards are graded and classified as follows:

Awards at NFQ Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 are classified as Successful where a learner has achieved all the outcomes for the award. Awards at Level 4, Level 5 and Level 6 are classified as Pass, Merit or Distinction where a learner has achieved the standards for the award within the grading criteria¹¹ as detailed below.

- A Pass is a grade awarded to a learner who has attained the minimum standard. To be awarded a pass grade a learner must have achieved a mark of between 50-64%.

¹⁰ Information on assessment, including grading and guidelines for providers can be obtained on the FETAC website, <http://www.fetac.ie/assessment/default.htm>

¹¹ Grading criteria describe what a learner must attain to achieve a particular grade for an award at a particular level.

- A Merit is a grade awarded to a learner who has exceeded the minimum requirements. To be awarded a merit grade a learner must have achieved a mark of between 65-79%.
- A Distinction is a grade awarded to a learner who has substantially exceeded the minimum requirements. For a learner to be awarded a distinction he/she must have achieved a mark of 80% or over.

When a learner has not achieved the minimum standards for an award the grade is recorded as Referred. For competency based awards or awards with specific legislative requirements regarding levels of competences the assessment will be weighted accordingly and the grading criteria specified in the Award Specification will reflect the minimum standard of achievement required by the learner.

3.3 Credit

FETAC's Credit, Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS) was initially designed in 2005 to complement the NFQ and, in particular, the use of its award-types. The credit values for all FETAC award-types are set by FETAC at a national level. This ensures credit value stability when component awards are accumulated to make up major awards.

3.4 Quality Assurance

As per Section 18 (1) of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, all providers of further education and training programmes leading to FETAC awards establish procedures to quality assure their programmes and agree these procedures with FETAC. FETAC has taken a three-sided approach to quality assurance through the implementation of policies and procedures for provider registration, programme validation and monitoring. Since 2005, all providers who wish to register with FETAC for the first time do so through the agreement of quality assurance procedures. Further information on Provider Quality Assurance and Registration is available at the following link: <http://www.fetac.ie/qa/default.htm>.

4. HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The higher education and training sector in Ireland comprises a range of higher education institutions – universities, institutes of technology, colleges of education and other recognised institutions, including private colleges. A list of higher education institutions is available on the website of the Department of Education and Science at: http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/he_providers_of_higher_education_ireland.htm?language=EN.

Entry to higher education is largely on a competitive basis with the most common entry mechanism being through the Central Applications Office (CAO), following completion of the Leaving Certificate examinations (www.cao.ie). However, increasing numbers of applicants to higher education are admitted through alternative progression mechanisms, including for mature entrants (23+); for holders of further education and training awards; or through the recognition of their prior learning.

4.1 Awarding bodies

Ireland has a binary system of higher education, comprising a range of higher education institutions that offer different types and levels of programmes. The universities' award a full range of undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications based on their combined missions of education, research and innovation. The main work of the IoTs is in undergraduate programmes, with a smaller number of postgraduate programmes and a growing involvement in regionally orientated applied research.

The University Sector

There are eight universities recognised under the Universities Act, 1997 – University College Cork (UCC), University College Dublin (UCD), National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG), National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM), Trinity College Dublin (TCD), the University of Limerick (UL), Dublin City University (DCU) and the National

University of Ireland (NUI). The Universities validate and award their own qualifications as well as those in institutions recognised by them including, for example, the Colleges of Education, and the recognised colleges of the NUI. As a federal umbrella structure, the NUI is the formal awarding body for a number of recognised colleges, but is not itself a provider of education and research programmes.

In addition to these national universities, there exists, in Maynooth, St. Patrick's College (Pontifical University.) This college, which has its origins with the National University of Ireland in Maynooth, was founded as the National Seminary in 1875, and was subsequently granted a Pontifical Charter in 1896 to confer degrees in Theology, Philosophy, and Canon Law. These two institutions were established as separate entities under the Universities Act of 1997, and have continued to operate side by side since then. St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, is firmly linked into the Irish academic system, and the three undergraduate degree awards (listed below) currently offered, all have generic learning outcomes associated with them that conform to the general standards of Honours Bachelor Degrees within the Irish university system. The undergraduate qualifications awarded by St. Patrick's College are:

- Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Arts (BATH)
- Bachelor of Divinity (BD)
- Bachelor of Theology (BTh)

Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) / Institutes of Technology

There are thirteen IoTs which are designated under the Regional Technical Colleges Acts, 1992 to 1999. The institutions are Athlone IT, IT Blanchardstown, Cork IT, IT Carlow, Dundalk IT, Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Letterkenny IT, Galway-Mayo IT, Limerick IT, IT Sligo, IT Tallaght, IT Tralee and Waterford IT. Each of these has been delegated the power to make awards to varying levels on the NFQ (and at least up to Level 8) by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council

(HETAC), the national awarding body for higher education awards outside of the university sector.

Any provider of education and training regardless of the source of that provision, whether it is an educational institution, the workplace or the community, can apply to HETAC for registration and validation of a higher education programme.

Dublin Institute of Technology

The Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) awards its own qualifications under the Dublin Institute of Technology Act, 1992.

4.2 Higher Education and Training Awards

Higher Certificate (NFQ Level 6) and minor, special purpose and supplemental awards at the same level
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Awarded by DIT, HETAC, Institutes of Technology (with delegated authority), and some Universities

The Higher Certificate is normally awarded after completion of a programme of two years duration (120 ECTS credits) in a recognised higher education institution. Entry to these programmes is generally for school leavers and those with equivalent qualifications. The Higher Certificate is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna First Cycle.

Ordinary Bachelor Degree (NFQ Level 7) and minor, special purpose and supplemental awards at the same level

Awarded by DIT, HETAC, Institutes of Technology (with delegated authority), and some Universities

The Ordinary Bachelor Degree is normally awarded after completion of a programme of three years duration (180 ECTS credits) in a recognised higher education institution. Entry to a programme leading to an *ab initio* Ordinary Bachelor degree is typically for school leavers and those with equivalent qualifications. In addition, there are transfer arrangements in place across higher education and a number of programmes of 1 year duration (particularly in the IOT sector) leading to the Ordinary Bachelor Degree for holders of the Higher Certificate. The Ordinary Bachelor Degree is compatible with the Bologna First Cycle descriptor, though holders of this award do not generally immediately access programmes leading to Second Cycle awards in Ireland.

Honours Bachelor Degree (NFQ Level 8) and minor, special purpose and supplemental awards at the same level

Awarded by DIT, HETAC, Institutes of Technology (with delegated authority), and Universities

The Honours Bachelor Degree is normally awarded following completion of a programme of three to four years duration (180-240 ECTS credits) in a recognised higher education institution, although there are examples of longer programmes in areas such as architecture, dentistry and medicine. Entry to a programme leading to an *ab initio* Honours Bachelor degree is typically for high achieving school leavers and those with equivalent qualifications. In addition, there are transfer arrangements across higher education, and a number of programmes of 1 year duration (particularly in the IOT sector) leading to Honours Bachelor Degrees for holders of the Ordinary Bachelor Degree. The Honours Bachelor Degree is a Bologna First Cycle qualification.

Higher Diploma (NFQ Level 8)

Awarded by DIT, HETAC, Institutes of Technology (with delegated authority), and Universities

The Higher Diploma is normally awarded following completion of a programme of 1 year duration (60 ECTS credits) in a recognised higher education institution. Entry to a programme leading to a Higher Diploma is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees but can also be for holders of Ordinary Bachelor Degrees. It is of note that the Higher Diploma is typically in a different field of learning than the initial award. The Higher Diploma is a qualification at the same level as completion of the Bologna First Cycle.

Masters Degree (NFQ Level 9)

Awarded by DIT, HETAC, Institutes of Technology (with specified delegated authority), and Universities

There are two types of Masters Degree in Ireland: taught Masters Degrees and research Masters Degrees. The taught Masters Degree is awarded following the completion of a programme of 1 to 2 years duration (60-120 ECTS credits). Entry to a programme leading to a taught Masters Degree is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees. In some cases, entry to such programmes can be permitted for those with Ordinary Bachelor Degrees or equivalent who have some relevant work experience. Furthermore, in some cases, entry to such programmes is permitted for people with extensive experience. Research Masters Degree programmes are typically of 2 years duration (120 ECTS credits) though not all such programmes are credit rated. Entry to a programme leading to a research Masters Degree is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees, typically with a high classification attained – first or second class honours. The Irish Masters Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna Second Cycle.

Post Graduate Diploma (NFQ Level 9)

Awarded by DIT, HETAC, Institutes of Technology (with specified delegated authority), and Universities

The Postgraduate Diploma is normally awarded following completion of a programme of 1 year duration (60 ECTS credits) in a recognised higher education institution. Entry to a programme leading to a Postgraduate Diploma is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees but can also be for holders of Ordinary Bachelor Degrees. The Postgraduate Diploma is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna Second Cycle.

Doctoral Degree (NFQ Level 10)

Awarded by DIT, HETAC, Institutes of Technology (with specified delegated authority), and Universities

Possession of an Honours Bachelor Degree is normally required for entry to a doctoral programme. In some disciplines, a Master's Degree is also preferred. Normally those entering a doctoral programme with an Honours Bachelor Degree initially register for a research Master's Degree or provisional doctoral candidature. Upon successful completion of this initial stage, the candidate acquires full doctoral candidature. Doctoral programmes are between three and four years in duration. Varying doctoral programmes now exist, including professional and performance/practice based doctorates. The PhD remains the doctorate's most common form. Structured PhD programmes, which integrate disciplinary, professional, and generic skills development opportunities with the PhD, are becoming increasingly common. The Irish Doctoral Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna Third Cycle.

Higher Doctorate (NFQ Level 10)

Awarded by DIT, HETAC, Institutes of Technology (with specified delegated authority), and Universities

This award largely recognises excellent and distinguished contributions to learning. It may be used for career progression to advanced levels of academia and research. This award is never based on a provider's programme and, as such, is not subject to validation but is assessed by the awarding body for each individual provider. Normally, the learner already holds a first doctorate or equivalent for some period of time prior to becoming a candidate for the higher doctorate. The Irish Higher Doctorate is compatible with completion of the Bologna Third Cycle.

4.3 Grading

Grading systems and practices vary across the Irish higher education and training system.

Information on marks and standards which apply to all examinations leading to HETAC awards can be found in the *Assessment and Standards (2009)* document published by HETAC and available here:

http://www.hetac.ie/docs/Assessment_and_Standards_2009.pdf

For information on the grading systems and practices used by individual universities, their recognised colleges, and the Dublin Institute of Technology, please refer to their individual websites. A list of these institutions and their contact details is available at the following link: http://www.qualificationsrecognition.ie/recognition/ir_edu_train/list.html

4.4 Credit

In 2004, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland's Technical Advisory Group on Credit (Higher Education Track) published *Principles and operational guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training*.

These operational guidelines recommend a typical credit volume or credit range for each major award-type from Levels 6-9 in the Framework in line with existing ECTS conventions and current practice in the Irish higher education and training system. The agreed credit range is as follows and Irish higher education and training awarding bodies operate within these arrangements:

Level 6 Higher Certificate = 120 credits

Level 7 Ordinary Bachelor Degree = 180 credits

Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree = 180-240 credits

Level 8 Higher Diploma = 60 credits

Level 9 Masters Degree (Taught) = 60-120 credits

Level 9 Postgraduate Diploma = 60 credits

No national credit ranges have been established for Doctoral Degrees and Masters Degrees (by research). However, some institutions do assign credit to these awards. The principles and operational guidelines document is available at the following link: http://www.nqai.ie/publication_nov2004.html

4.5 Quality Assurance

There are three systems in place for quality assurance in each of the following sub-sectors in Irish higher education and training:

- Universities and their associated colleges
- Institutes of Technology and providers within the independent sector (HETAC sector)
- Dublin Institute of Technology.

In all three instances, the primary responsibility for quality assurance rests with the institution, and external quality assurance processes are in place.

The universities established the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB, www.iuqb.ie), which has delegated authority as an independent body to organise the periodic external review of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures in place in the universities, as required under the Universities Act, 1997. The Higher Education Authority (HEA), a state agency under the Department of Education and Science (DES), also has an external review role in relation to quality assurance procedures in universities and consults with the IUQB in its fulfilling of this function.

Under the Qualifications Act 1999, HETAC has a periodic external monitoring role with regards to the Institutes of Technology, and carries out a range of quality review functions in the other education and training institutions which offer programmes leading to its awards. HETAC's policy in this area is available at the following link:

<http://www.hetac.ie/docs/Policy%20on%20Inst%20Reviews%20December%2007.pdf>.

Also under the Qualifications Act 1999 the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has a statutory role evaluating the effectiveness of the DIT's quality assurance processes and procedures. Its policy in this area is available at the following link:

http://www.nqai.ie/award_dit_pol.html

5. PROFESSIONAL BODIES AND PROFESSIONAL AWARDS MADE IN IRELAND

There are a large number of professional bodies operating in Ireland. The role and functions of professional bodies can include the regulation of a profession or the use of a professional title; providing representation; offering opportunities for continuous professional development; and standard setting. Where a profession is regulated by law, a competent authority is assigned to determine the eligibility or otherwise of applicants seeking to work within that field. The competent authority will maintain a register of persons qualified to work in the profession and will review and make decisions on qualifications presented from abroad in line with EU law. Professions which are not regulated may have a voluntary system of registration organised by the respective professional body.

Some professional bodies, established by statute or Charter, offer awards leading to membership and/or registration with the body. Bodies not established by statute or Charter may however enjoy strong public recognition of their awards. Where professional bodies do not themselves make awards, they often assess education awards and/or other criteria in determining eligibility for membership/registration.

The NQAI published its policies on the inclusion/alignment of the awards of professional bodies in the National Framework of Qualifications in 2006. They are available from the following link: <http://www.nqai.ie/applications.html>

A list of the regulated professions in Ireland is available here: <http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?maincat=17216&pcategory=17216&ecategory=28970§ionpage=12251&language=EN&link=link001&page=1&doc=26573>

6. INTERNATIONAL AWARDING BODIES

A number of education and training bodies from outside the State make awards in Ireland.

The NQAI agreed a policy approach in 2006 for the alignment of the qualifications of certain international education and training awarding bodies, delivered in Ireland, with the Irish NFQ. The main purpose of aligning these qualifications is to provide learners with clear information regarding the qualification and the level at which it best fits on the Irish NFQ.

All of the UK qualifications that have been aligned with the National Framework of Qualifications are included in the National Qualification Frameworks of England, Wales and Northern Ireland or the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework of Scotland; delivered in Ireland to the same specification as they are in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland; and are subject to external quality assurance processes and procedures. Information on the alignment process, the listings of awarding bodies and awards aligned to the Irish NFQ and the alignment application process open to awarding bodies from outside the State delivering courses in Ireland is available here: <http://www.nqai.ie/AlignmentofUKawards.html>

7. THE IRISH NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS (NFQ)

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is the single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements in Ireland may be measured and related to each other, and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards. It was developed by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) in consultation with stakeholders and launched in October 2003.

The NFQ is a system consisting of 10 levels, which collectively capture further, higher and schools awards in Ireland. There are overarching level indicators at each level of the Framework with associated sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence appropriate to the achievement of an award at each of these levels. These indicators are expressed in terms of learning outcomes. The NFQ is diagrammatically represented below:



7.1 Awards in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

There are two overall types of award in the Framework: Major and Non-Major. Each of the major award-types has a descriptor associated with it, which describes its purpose, level, volume, learning outcomes, progression, transfer and articulation.

7.1.1 Major Awards

The following table provides an overview of the major awards referenced throughout this profile, the level of these awards on the National Framework of Qualifications and the associated awarding body. The table reflects the situation as at 31 July 2009.

NFQ Level	NFQ Major Award-Types	Awarding Body
NFQ Level 1	Level 1 Certificate	FETAC
NFQ Level 2	Level 2 Certificate	FETAC
NFQ Level 3	Level 3 Certificate	FETAC
	Junior Certificate	State Examinations Commission
NFQ Level 4	Level 4 Certificate	FETAC
	Leaving Certificate	State Examinations Commission
NFQ Level 5	Leaving Certificate	State Examinations Commission
	Level 5 Certificate	FETAC
NFQ Level 6	Advanced Certificate	FETAC
	Higher Certificate	HETAC/IOTs/DIT
NFQ Level 7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree	HETAC/IOTs/DIT/Universities
NFQ Level 8	Honours Bachelor Degree; Higher Diploma	HETAC/IOTs/DIT/Universities
NFQ Level 9	Masters Degree; Post-Graduate Diploma	HETAC/IOTs/DIT/Universities
NFQ Level 10	Doctoral Degree; Higher Doctorate	HETAC/IOTs/DIT/Universities

Note: All Institutes of Technology make awards to at least Level 8 on the National Framework of Qualification under Delegated Authority from the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC).

7.1.2 Non-major awards

- There are three types of non-major award recognised through the Framework. These awards capture smaller pieces of learning and are characterised as follows:

- *Minor awards* recognise partial completion of the outcomes of a Major Award. Minor awards may be combined with other learning outcomes towards the achievement of a major or special purpose award. Minor award-types may contribute towards the accumulation of credit for major award-types.
- *Supplemental awards* recognise learning that is additional to a Major Award. Programmes leading to such awards may be described as refresher, updating or continuing education and training. In some cases there may be regulatory requirements for such awards in order for learners to retain a license to practice granted in respect of the initial award. Supplemental awards are not at a higher level than the initial award.
- *Special purpose awards* recognise relatively narrow or purpose-specific achievement. Such certification may be a component of a broader award in some part of the field of construction, but it has a standalone function also. Special-purpose awards may provide a basis for transfer into more broadly-based major awards at the same level and thus progression on to higher level awards, or they may provide direct progression to further narrowly-based special-purpose awards.

7.2 Legacy Awards

The NFQ introduced a number of new awards to the Irish education and training system and discontinued the awarding of some others. It has been necessary to map all former awards (sometimes referred to as 'legacy' awards) onto the NFQ, so that holders of such awards are not disadvantaged. The general policy approach to the placement of 'legacy' awards on the NFQ is set out in *Policies and Criteria for the*

Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications, pp. 43-5 and available here: http://www.nqai.ie/publication_oct2003b.html

The task of placing existing and former awards on the NFQ is well advanced. The Authority has agreed to the placement of a range of existing and former awards with FETAC (January 2005), HETAC (March 2004), the Dublin Institute of Technology (March 2005) and the Department of Education and Science (May 2005). A general approach for the placement of the legacy awards of the universities was agreed in early 2009 and is currently being implemented.

8. THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

8.1 The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and its relationship with the European Frameworks

8.1.1 The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (the 'Bologna Framework')

The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the 'Bologna Framework', is an overarching framework which provides a mechanism for relating national frameworks of *higher education qualifications* to each other. Ireland was invited to undertake a pilot project of the self-certification of the compatibility of the Irish NFQ with the Bologna Framework in 2005. The Irish NFQ was formally aligned with the Bologna Framework in November 2006. The document below sets out the verification of the compatibility of the NFQ with the cycles of the Bologna Framework: http://www.nqai.ie/publication_nov2006.html

8.1.2 The European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is an overarching *lifelong learning framework* through which different countries' national qualifications systems can be compared. The EQF encompasses general and adult education, vocational education and training, and higher education. It applies to all types of qualifications from those achieved at the end of compulsory education to those awarded at the highest level of academic and professional or vocational education and training. The core of the EQF consists of 8 levels, which are described through learning outcomes. The principal aims of EQF are to promote citizens' mobility between countries and to facilitate their lifelong learning. The EQF was formally adopted by the European Parliament and Council on 23 April 2008.

The process of referencing the Irish NFQ to the EQF was completed in 2009. Further information on the referencing process, including its terms of reference, is available here: http://www.nqai.ie/interdev_eqf.html.

The relationship between the Irish Framework and the European Frameworks is illustrated below:

<i>EQF levels</i>	<i>EHEA Framework (Bologna)</i>	<i>NFQ Levels</i>	<i>NFQ Major Award-types</i>
1		1	Level 1 Certificate
		2	Level 2 Certificate
		3	Level 3 Certificate, Junior Certificate
		4	Level 4 Certificate, Leaving Certificate
		5	Level 5 Certificate, Leaving Certificate
5	Short Cycle within First Cycle	6	Advanced Certificate (FET award)* Higher Certificate (HET award)
6	First Cycle	7	Ordinary Bachelors Degree
		8	Honours Bachelor Degree, Higher Diploma
7	Second Cycle	9	Masters Degree, Post-Graduate Diploma
8	Third cycle	10	Doctoral Degree, Higher Doctorate

*The Advanced Certificate is a further education and training award at Level 6 on the NFQ and is not aligned with the Bologna Framework.

8.2 Recognition Agreements

Ireland has actively sought to establish links with other countries and education and training authorities to encourage an understanding of the Irish education system and to facilitate improved mobility and recognition for learners.

8.2.1 A Comparison of qualifications in the UK and Ireland

The Irish awarding bodies and NQAI and the UK awarding and qualifications regulatory bodies have undertaken an exercise to compare the qualifications frameworks in the UK and Ireland. The exercise was completed in June 2005 and the document, *Qualifications can cross boundaries - a rough guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland* was published. The leaflet is a 'ready reckoner' for employers, learners and other interested parties, designed to enable broad comparisons to be drawn between qualifications and their levels in Ireland, Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

An updated version of the leaflet was published in April 2009 and can be accessed online here:

http://www.qualificationsrecognition.ie/recognition/int_qual_database/uk/uk_list_of_qualifications.html

8.2.2 Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications between the Government of Ireland and the Government of The People's Republic of China

In 2001 an international agreement was signed by the Irish and Chinese governments for the mutual recognition of higher education qualifications. The agreement provides for the mutual recognition of higher education awards from sub-degree (higher certificate) to doctorate levels. The agreement seeks to ensure that students and graduates travelling between both countries for the pursuit of further study or employment will have their existing qualifications understood and recognised.

8.3 The Diploma Supplement

As part of the full implementation of the Bologna Process reforms (www.bologna.ie) in higher education the issuing to graduates of Europass Diploma Supplements has been required since 2005 for all higher education institutions in Ireland. These documents are issued automatically, free of charge and in English in the majority of institutions. Diploma Supplements follow the model developed by the European Commission, Council of Europe and UNESCO / CEPES. Implementation of the Diploma Supplement in Ireland is coordinated by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (www.nqai.ie).

8.4 Certificate Supplement

The Europass Certificate Supplement is provided to learners who hold a vocational education and training award. The Certificate Supplement provides additional information regarding the award which is not available on the official certificate, such as the skills and competences acquired, the level of the certificate, and entry requirements and access opportunities to the next level of education etc. The information contained on the Certificate Supplement is provided in a standardised format and is supplied by the relevant awarding body which makes the award. In Ireland, the Certificate Supplement is issued by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC).