



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

QQI Consultation on Draft Broad Award Standards at NFQ Levels 1–4

Full Report
2023

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Interpretations

Apprenticeship

Systematic, long-term training alternating periods at the workplace and in an educational institution or training centre. The apprentice is contractually linked to the employer and receives remuneration (wage or allowance). The employer assumes responsibility for providing the trainee with training leading to a specific occupation¹.

Assessment

Learner assessment (specifically assessment of learning) means inference (e.g., judgement or estimation or evaluation) of a learner's knowledge, skill or competence by comparison with a standard based on appropriate evidence. Self-assessment is included in this. Assessment has many purposes (including summative and formative).

Award

A decision to give a candidate a result for a qualification or for part of a qualification.

Award standard

The knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired, and where appropriate, demonstrated, by a learner before the specified award may be made.

Awarding body

"A body issuing [certified] qualifications (certificates, diplomas or titles) formally recognising the learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, competences) of an individual, following an assessment and validation procedure"²

Certificate

"An official document, issued by an awarding body, which records the achievement of an individual following an assessment and validation against a predefined standard. (Certification of learning outcomes ... The process of issuing a certificate, diploma or title formally attesting that a set of learning outcomes (knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences) acquired by an individual have been assessed and validated by a competent body against a predefined standard.)"³

Competence

Proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development (Source: European Commission, 2006).

or

Ability to apply learning outcomes adequately in a defined context (education, work, personal or professional development).

1 https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4106_en.pdf (accessed 30 June 2023)

2 https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4106_en.pdf (accessed 30 June 2023)

3 https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4106_en.pdf (accessed 30 June 2023)

Comment: competence is not limited to cognitive elements (involving use of theory, concepts or tacit knowledge); it also encompasses functional aspects (involving technical skills) as well as interpersonal attributes (e.g., social or organisational skills) and ethical values⁴.

Credit

“Confirmation that a part of a qualification, consisting of a coherent set of learning outcomes has been assessed and validated by a competent authority, according to an agreed standard; credit is awarded by competent authorities when the individual has achieved the defined learning outcomes, evidenced by appropriate assessments and can be expressed in a quantitative value (e.g. credits or credit points) demonstrating the estimated workload an individual typically needs for achieving related learning outcomes; ” (Council of the EU Recommendation 2017/C 189/03).

Credit (in the context of a programme of education and training)

“Credit” means an acknowledgement of an enrolled learner’s completion of a programme or part of a programme of education and training to a particular standard; “credit transfer” means transferring credits awarded for studies undertaken as part of one programme of education and training to another programme. (Section 56 of the [2012 Act](#)).

Certification of learning outcomes

Process of issuing a certificate, diploma or title of learning outcomes formally attesting that a set of learning outcomes (knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences) acquired by an individual have been assessed and validated by a competent body against a predefined standard.

Comment: certification may validate the outcome of learning acquired in formal, non-formal or informal settings⁵.

Digital literacy

Lays out a set of digital competencies. The digital competence areas include information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety, and problem-solving⁶.

Education or training pathway

Set of related education or training programmes provided by schools, training centres, higher education institutions or VET providers, that eases individuals’ progression within or between activity sectors⁷.

Employability

Combination of factors which enable individuals to progress towards or get into employment, stay in employment and progress during their careers.

Information and communication technology (ICT)

Covers all technical means used to handle information and aid communication. This includes both computer and network hardware, as well as their software⁸.

⁴ Cedefop, Tissot, 2004. European Commission, 2006

⁵ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4106_en.pdf (accessed 30 June 2023)

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Digital_literacy (accessed 30 June 2023)

⁷ Cedefop, 2008. https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4106_en.pdf (accessed 30 June 2023)

⁸ [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Information_and_communication_technology_\(ICT\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Information_and_communication_technology_(ICT)) (accessed 30 June 2023)

Learner

A person who is undertaking, planning to undertake or likely to undertake a programme of learning. The programme of learning may be designed to prepare learners for a qualification. Once a learner has entered, or been entered for a qualification, he or she is often referred to as a candidate.

Learning pathway

A learning pathway is a representation of the process followed by a learner to achieve knowledge, skill or competence.

Learning outcomes (expected, intended or actual)

Learning is principally the result of effort by an individual learner. Programmes of education and training are designed to help motivate, stimulate and guide learners. When we speak of intended *programme* learning outcomes, we are thinking of the result of the transformation of a learner who actively engages with the programme of education and training.

When considering the meanings that can be extracted from learning outcomes statements, we cannot rely only upon the statement text alone, we must also consider the person who is interpreting the statement and especially the consensus that is likely to be reached by relevant communities of practice. Such communities help provide definitive support for standards. They also help support trust in and recognition of qualifications.

To members of a community of practice, a compact statement can encode substantial information that would not be fully evident to non-members from the statement alone.

Within communities of practice words or phrases can be considered to encode or connect to information that would not be immediately evident to those outside the community of practice. A member of (or a group from) a community of practice can be expected to extrapolate knowledge, skill and competence from a learning outcome statement.

A learning outcome statement once established may take on new meaning as it is used over time within a community of practice. Learning outcome statements are partly symbolic (symbolising the meaning attached to them by the community of practice e.g., we know what we mean...) and rely on abstractions from the community of practitioners' repertoire.

Without communities of practice to decode the outcomes reliably and consistently, higher order learning outcome statements are challenged to encode or represent what has been learned in a way that can be understood by people outside the community of practice without being impractically detailed. The idea therefore that learning outcomes make everything transparent to everyone is naïve. However, they can be presented in such a way as to provide for layers of interpretation requiring increasing expertise.

In its most idealised form, a **learning outcome** is a stable transformation of an individual. By stable we mean enduring in time though subject to eventual decay. Though we cannot exactly measure or infer this kind of idealised learning outcome, it is nevertheless a useful concept when we are considering representations of learning outcomes and methods for the assessment (always against a standard) of learning. A learning outcome statement is a representation of a learning outcome.

Learning outcome statements are often expressed in terms of statements of knowledge, skill or competence.

It is useful to distinguish between statements of:

- expected learning outcomes (e.g., the learning outcome statements in occupational standards)
- intended learning outcomes (e.g., the learning outcomes that the designers of a programme of education and training intend that learners should achieve)
- achieved learning outcomes (e.g., the learning outcomes achieved by a specific learner).

In summary, learning outcomes statements are more or less specific statements that can be interpreted reliably by relevant communities of practice to describe educational achievements, intentions or expectations for a well-defined purpose while leaving a suitable amount of latitude for interpretation and innovation.

Lifelong learning

Encompasses all learning activities undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences, within personal, civic, social or employment-related perspectives. The intention or aim to learn is the critical point that distinguishes these activities from non-learning activities, such as cultural or sporting activities⁹.

Minimum intended programme learning outcomes (MIPLOs)

The minimum achievement (in terms of knowledge, skill and competence) that the learner is certified to have attained if he/she successfully completes a particular programme (i.e., passes all the required assessments). The minimum intended programme learning outcomes define the minimum learning outcomes for a particular programme at the programme level.

NFQ award class

There are currently five classes of awards in the NFQ (major, minor, special purpose, supplemental and professional) but professional awards may have a secondary class (major, etc.).

NFQ award-type descriptor

The NFQ is a system of 10 levels. Multiple award-types may be defined at each NFQ level. Award-types are characterised by award-type descriptors. For more information please see: [Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications, NQAI, 2003](#)

NFQ level

The NFQ currently has 10 levels. Levels are defined using 'Level indicators.' These take the form of statements about the breadth and kind of knowledge, the range and selectivity of skills, the role and context competence, learning competence and insight. For more information, please see the [Grid of Level Indicators](#)

⁹ [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Lifelong_learning_\(LLL\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Lifelong_learning_(LLL)) (accessed 30 June 2023)

Occupation

A “job” is defined as a set of tasks and duties executed, or meant to be executed, by one person; a set of jobs whose main tasks and duties are characterised by a high degree of similarity constitutes an occupation. Persons are classified by occupation through their relationship to a past, present or future jobs.

Programme of education and training (programme)

A programme of education and training is a process by which a learner acquires knowledge, skill or competence and includes a course of study, a course of instruction and an apprenticeship. Often, a person will gain a qualification after having earned it through successful completion of a pre-planned programme or course of education and training.

Some people gain qualifications not by following a preplanned programme but through a process for the recognition of prior learning (RPL). In this context RPL can be thought of as being linked with a situation/individual specific and retrospectively revealed programme of education and training. A qualification is not a programme. However, it is not unusual to see qualifications used as proxies for programmes. It is useful to differentiate qualifications from the associated programmes or RPL processes.

Provider of a programme of education and training (Provider)

Provider means provider of a programme of education and training. Some providers certify their own learners, but others rely on external awarding bodies for certification.

provider of a programme is responsible for enrolling qualified learners, managing and implementing the programme; and guiding, caring for and assessing learners.

If the provider is also the awarding body for the programme, then they are responsible for summative assessment to determine whether a learner has met the standard for an award.

If the provider is not the awarding body, they may or may not be responsible for summative assessment to determine whether a learner has met the standard for an award.

Qualification

The formal outcome (certificate, diploma or title) of an assessment process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to a given standard and/or possesses the necessary competence to do a job in a specific area of work. A qualification confers official recognition of the value of learning outcomes in the labour market and in education and training. A qualification can be a legal entitlement to practise a trade¹⁰.

Recognition

Formal recognition: process of granting official status to learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences) either through:

- validation of non-formal and informal learning
- grant of equivalence, credit units or waivers
- award of qualifications (certificates, diploma or titles)

¹⁰ Cedefop, 2008. based on Eurydice, 2006; European Training Foundation, 1997; OECD, 2007.

and/or social recognition: acknowledgement of the value of knowledge, skills and/or competences by economic and social stakeholders. (Cedefop, 2014).

Recognition of prior learning

The process of recognising and valuing learning achieved outside of formal education and training programmes (for example from workplace and life experience or voluntary activities) is described nationally as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

Sustainability

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”¹¹ Source: UN World Commission on Environment and Development.

Standard

A series of elements whose content is defined by concerned actors. This can be:

- **competence standards:** *knowledge, skills, competences linked to the practice of a job*
- **education standards:** *statements of learning objectives, content of curricula, entry requirements and resources required to meet the learning objectives*
- **occupational standards:** *statements of the activities and tasks related to a specific job and its practice*
- **assessment standards:** *statements of the learning outcomes to be assessed and the methodology used on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. It means “the validation of learning outcomes, namely knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning.”*
- **validation standards:** *statements of the level of achievement to be reached by the person assessed, and the methodology used*
- **certification standards:** *statements of the rules applicable for obtaining a certificate or diploma as well as the rights conferred.*

The *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012* defines an **award standard** as the: *determination of the knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired, and where appropriate, demonstrated, by a learner before the specified award may be made.*

Comment: The standards underpinning qualifications are key to assessment and the recognition of qualifications by users.

The term **'standard'**, which featured in the qualification definition, can be defined as “norms and specifications regulating the award of qualifications”¹².

¹¹ UN World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987 (accessed 30 June 2023)

¹² Cedefop. 2009. *The Dynamics of Qualifications. Defining and renewing occupational and educational standards.*

Validation of a programme of education and training designed to lead to a QQI award

[Validation](#) is a regulatory process that (in essence) determines whether (or not) a particular QQI award can be offered in respect of a provider's programme of education and training.

List of abbreviations

DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
MIPOs	Minimum Intended Programme Learning Outcomes
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning

Executive summary

“Just as in most communities across the world, [learners in Ireland] are attempting to navigate the shift to a green and digital economy. This transformation comes against the backdrop of growing inequality, political polarisation, mass displacement and governments that struggle to create opportunities and high-quality jobs [...]. Education and training systems need to undergo a paradigm shift if people are to acquire the new skills, values and mindsets required for this era. The aim is to make new systems truly inclusive so as not to deepen existing social divides.”

(UNICEF and ETF 2021).

In Ireland and around the world, people use qualifications for many different social, economic and cultural reasons. Sometimes we take qualifications for granted and overlook the human and material aspects that support them to ensure qualifications are relevant and trustworthy¹³.

Over the past few years QOI has worked with and learned from experts and practitioners working at the initial levels of the national framework of the qualifications. We have also taken account of national and EU policy developments on lifelong learning, social inclusion and skill formation. Together with our partners across the FET sector we have co-created a suite of twenty new draft award standards at levels 1-4 of the NFQ.

A fundamental alteration in the proposed broad award standards format is the removal of highly prescriptive learning outcomes (E.g., Common Awards System standards); moving towards approaches where expected learning outcomes are expressed in more open terms.

This report presents an overview of the consultation process on the suite of twenty draft broad award standards and their Implementation Guidelines held online between November 2022 and February 2023. It outlines a summary of the feedback received and the next steps.

The aims of the consultation were:

- to gather general feedback on the appropriateness of each draft broad award standard;
- to seek views on the draft Implementation Guidelines for implementing broad award standards at NFQ Levels 1-4;
- to explore the flexibility, suitability and relevance of the new broad award standards in supporting the development of responsive programmes.

Key points identified in the feedback on the suite of twenty broad award standards and their Implementation Guidelines were:

Positives identified

- The innovation of the draft broad award standards suite was welcomed.
- Clear understanding of how the broad standards are advantageous for the sector.
- Acknowledgement that this format of award standard would support innovative and responsive programme development.

- Recognition of how the broad award standards could bring a broader scope of learning outcomes to address learner needs.
- The range and scope of the suite were welcomed.
- The concept of having more choice and freedom to develop programmes without the restrictions of a set format was welcomed.
- The transversal nature of the Core Competences was welcomed.
- Recognition that the broad award standards suite would support universal design elements.

Concerns highlighted

- Perceived loss of standardisation of programmes, e.g., General Learning Major Awards Levels 1-4.
- Terminology and language within the standards could be more accessible.
- Difficulties envisaging how programmes would be structured, specifically embedded programmes.
- Validation process was not clearly set out. Resources including guidelines, templates and interactive support forums were requested.
- Implementation perceived as challenging.
- Concerns that QQI will get rid of CAS.

Insights from the feedback

- Some evidence of confusion between award standards and programmes.
- Understanding of the language of the NFQ, interpreting the grid of level indicators and award types and award classes, needs to be strengthened.
- Clarity required on how the broad award standards suite can be utilised.
- Concerns expressed about the approach to assessment.
- Terminology and language within the standards should be more accessible.

QQI recognises that this was a challenging consultation and thank the respondents for their time and engagement.

Next Steps:

- Feedback from this consultation will be considered in the final drafting of the broad award standards suite.
- Post-review direct engagement with stakeholders will be undertaken.
- Further Q&A Fora will be organised to support implementation of the broad award standards.
- All 20 broad award standards and the accompanying Implementation Guidelines will be reviewed prior to publishing to ensure better accessibility and plain English.
- Following QQI internal governance, QQI will commence publishing the broad award standards along with comprehensive Guidelines for their implementation, in the last quarter of 2023.

1. Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

QQI determines standards of knowledge, skill and competence for awards that it makes. These award standards act to guide providers in the development of programmes that meet the needs of learners and society. Award standards also play a crucial role in maintaining consistency and comparability of qualifications over time and across providers.

1.2 Background to the Development of Broad Award Standards at NFQ Levels 1-4

Legislation

Under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act 2012, QQI is required to establish the standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners before an award can be made by QQI or by a provider to which authority to make an award has been delegated. QQI may determine different standards for different awards or different classes of award. In doing so, QQI must consult on draft award standards to ensure that they are fit for purpose.

Providers offering QQI-validated programmes or providers operating under delegated authority to make awards from QQI are required to ensure that an enrolled learner acquires the standard of knowledge, skill or competence associated with the level of the award concerned within the NFQ before the award is made. QQI and providers offering QQI-validated programmes share responsibility for the development and maintenance of QQI award standards.

QQI Policy

The determination of the draft award standards is provided for both in legislation and in [QQI Policy on the Determination of Award Standards](#). In consultation with relevant stakeholders QQI may determine award standards that vary in terms of how broad or narrow statements of knowledge, skill or competence are expressed. The implementation of broad award standards is further enabled by [QQI Core Policy and Criteria for the Validation of programmes of Education and Training](#) and by [QQI Policy and Criteria for Making Awards](#).

National and European context

The draft broad award standards and the proposed Implementation Guidelines are designed to support national and European ambitions for the reform of qualifications at lower levels of the NFQ and the contribution of levels 1-4 to effective qualifications pathways and lifelong learning opportunities.

[The Adult Literacy for Life Strategy \(2021\)](#) highlights the development of QQI award standards at NFQ Levels 1-4 so that *'everyone has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to fully participate in society and reach their potential'...the work undertaken by QQI to develop standards at levels 1 to 4 will also support this process.*

Ireland's [Further Education and Training Strategy](#) (SOLAS 2020), supports the gradual development of integrated FET approaches across levels 1-4 while still preserving community access. The strategy calls for courses which are focused on foundation or transversal skills development, including literacy and numeracy, and are intended to build the core capabilities which will allow participants to move on to more advanced learning opportunities.

The [DFHERIS Statement of Strategy](#) (2021) sets out national ambitions for the development of talent, human capital and inclusion, all of which depend on suitable qualifications and qualifications pathways that support lifelong learning. Qualifications at low and intermediate levels are seen as 'empowering learners to become active members of society, engaging in employment, contributing to prosperity and driving vibrant and diverse communities.'

The [EU Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning](#) urges member states to support the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning and ensure opportunities for all to develop key competences from an early age and throughout life as part of national lifelong learning strategies and upskilling pathways.

Engagement with Stakeholders

The development of draft award standards at NFQ Levels 1-4 was informed by the findings of the [Review of QQI Award Standards at NFQ Levels 1-3](#) and subsequently by the findings from the [Review of QQI Award Standards at NFQ Levels 1-9](#).

While the development of the draft broad award standards at NFQ Levels 1-4 was coordinated by QQI, standards development groups comprising subject matter experts and other relevant stakeholders produced and agreed the content of the draft broad award standards. This consensus-driven and collaborative approach is consistent with international norms and conducive to the determination of QQI award standards that are fit for purpose.

1.3 Acknowledgements and Disclaimer

QQI is very grateful to the large number of experts and practitioners who gave generously of their time and professional judgement in the development of the draft broad award standards for consultation. Their institutional affiliation is included in Appendix 1.

We would like to express our gratitude to FET stakeholders, several organisations and individuals who took time to respond to the consultation survey or submitted coordinated responses on behalf of their organisations to inform this report.

2. Scope, Methodology and Respondents' Characteristics

2.1 Consultation Scope

As outlined in the introduction to this report, the twenty draft broad award standards have been co-created with the further education and training sector and were informed by national and European ambitions to support social inclusion and promote high-quality lifelong learning opportunities.

The key component of this project was a sectoral engagement process with key national stakeholders in the form of the national consultation. Through this public consultation-based development process, the aim has been to:

- A. gather general feedback on the appropriateness of each draft broad award standard;
- B. seek views on the Implementation Guidelines for using broad award standards at NFQ Levels 1-4;
- C. explore the flexibility, relevance and suitability of the new broad award standards in supporting the development of responsive programmes.

For the purpose of the consultation, the twenty draft broad award standards were divided into two groups.

The first group comprised core competences at NFQ Levels 1-4, aligned with the EU key competences for lifelong learning:

- Core Competence Sustainability
- Core Competence Digital
- Core Competence Mathematical and Numerical
- Core Competence Literacy
- Core Competence Science and Technology
- Core Competence Entrepreneurship
- Core Competence Citizenship
- Core Competence Personal, Social and Learning to Learn
- Core Competence Cultural Awareness and Expression
- Core Competence Multilingual (Foreign Language e.g., ESOL)

The second group comprised a suite of draft broad award standards in the vocational domain at NFQ Levels 3-4:

- Broad Award Standard for Agriculture
- Broad Award Standard for Aquaculture
- Broad Award Standard for Horticulture

- Broad Award Standard for Construction and Engineering
- Broad Award Standard for Fine Arts and Crafts
- Broad Award Standard for Hospitality and Personal Services
- Broad Award Standard for Care and Community work
- Broad Award Standard for Administration and Office work
- Broad Award Standard for Retail
- Broad Award Standard for ICT

The twenty draft broad award standards were published in this arrangement in the HTML format on the QQI's consultation web page, and the arrangement is also reflected in the analysis presented in this report.

2.2 Methodological Approach

The determination of the broad award standards at NFQ Levels 1-4 comprises five distinct milestones:



A mixed method approach was adopted. The stakeholder engagement process consisted of:

- Pre-consultation online Q&A Forums and bilateral meetings
- Online survey of national stakeholders' views
- Individual written submissions in response to consultation.

Survey questionnaires on each of the broad award standards included the following questions:

- Are the learning outcomes appropriate to the purpose of this draft broad award standard?
- Are the learning outcomes well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels?
- Does this draft broad award standard guide and support the development of responsive programmes?
- Are there any important areas of content that we have missed?

Regarding the Implementation Guidelines, responses were sought on the proposed implementation of the broad award standards under the following headings:

1. Programme Development and Review
2. Award Types and Award Classes
3. Broad Award Standards as an alternative to CAS
4. Broad Award Standards and Transversal Skills
5. Access Transfer and Progression (Including RPL, Credit and Provision of Information to Learners)
6. Assessment and Grading
7. The Making of Awards and Named Award Titles.

Given the overall number of draft broad award standards, the complexity and volume of each award standard and the intricacies of their Implementation Guidelines, the consultation required a user-friendly solution.

Powered by Qualtrics, a total number of 28 online surveys, compliant with GDPR requirements, were created and administered on the QQI website. To gather views on the Implementation Guidelines, eight stand-alone online surveys were added to the QQI website enabling the respondents to give their views on various aspects of implementation.

A link to the QQI's consultation page was circulated to all QQI providers and other key stakeholders. The consultation was also open to anyone who wanted to 'have a say' regarding this innovation. In total, 192 responses were received from various stakeholders (Brief respondent characteristics are outlined in Section 2.3 below).

2.3 Respondent Characteristics

Out of 192 responses, 181 were received via online surveys and 11 via individual written submissions. A breakdown of respondents is provided in Table 1 below. It is important to note that the large percentage of individual responses from key stakeholders is associated with multiple respondents. For example, many 'individual responses' submitted via online surveys or via written submissions draw on collective consultation sessions organised by key stakeholders with their staff, learners, and other relevant members from the sector. Therefore, the total number of respondents who engaged in the consultation is far greater than the totals reported below.

Table 1

Respondent Type	Total N=192
FET Provider	N=85
Gov Agency/State Agency	N=5
Teacher/Trainer/Lecturer	N=58
Trade Union/Employee Representative Body	N=3
Professional Recognition Body	N=5
Individual	N=8
Other	N=28

The number of responses generated a rich body of data, providing a strong basis on which QQI was able to assess the feedback on the appropriateness of each proposed draft broad award standard and its level, including the clarity of the Implementation Guidelines.

3. Overview of Core Draft Broad Award Standards at NFQ Levels 1-4

As mentioned in the introduction to this report, award standards act to guide providers in the development of programmes that meet the needs of learners and society. Core broad draft award standards are aligned with EU key competences for lifelong learning, outlining a broader set of competences relevant to life and society in general. Not only do they facilitate progression to further education or training, but they also represent a significant and innovative development at the foundational levels of the NFQ, support active inclusion and pave new pathways and opportunities for learners.

3.1 Core Competence Sustainability

The development of a European sustainability competence framework is one of the policy actions set out in the European Green Deal as a catalyst to promote learning on environmental sustainability in the European Union. The competence framework maps out the competences needed for the green transition, including critical thinking, initiative-taking, respecting nature and understanding the interconnections between the environment, society and the economy (See Bianchi et al. 2022).

The purpose of Core Competence Sustainability is to enable the design of a variety of programmes aiding the learner in acquiring the relevant “green” knowledge, skill and competence, to act on climate and environmental sustainability in compliance with the [European Sustainability Competence Framework](#).

Development of the broad award standard in sustainability was welcomed as “a breath of fresh air,” “timely” and “very well-aligned.” There was also a broad welcome for the standard being linked to the [European Sustainability Competence Framework](#) with a shared view that “sustainability should be built into all programmes”.

There were requests to expand areas of biodiversity, self-led recycling activity and a call for consideration to be given to an accompanying subject of environmental literacy to support learners. Some concern was raised about the levels of (sustainability) literacy impacting learners accessing learning outcomes.

Understandably, we were also interested in the appropriateness of learning outcomes and their alignment with the NFQ. As shown in Fig. 1 below, the majority of respondents (69%) agreed that the learning outcomes of Core Competence Sustainability are appropriate. There was also strong agreement (67%) that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels.

Figure 1

Core Competence Sustainability	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	69% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	67% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

3.2 Core Competence Digital

The purpose of this draft broad award standard is to enable the design of a variety of programmes supporting the learner in developing relevant digital knowledge, skill and competence. Digital competence involves “the confident, critical, and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, at work, and for participation in society. It includes information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, media literacy, digital content creation (including programming), safety (including digital well-being and competences related to cybersecurity), intellectual property-related questions, problem solving and critical thinking” (European Commission: Key Competences for Lifelong Learning).

This standard was noted as “very comprehensive,” and respondents recognised the challenge of keeping the standard as open as possible to reflect the fast-paced changes within this discipline.

The introduction of Core Competence Digital was perceived as “an important development” in supporting digital literacy and government policy to reduce digital barriers.

As shown in Fig. 2 below, 95% agreed that the learning outcomes of Core Competence Digital are appropriate, and 100% were in strong agreement that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels.

Figure 2

Core Competence Digital	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	95% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	100% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

3.3 Core Competence Mathematical and Numerical

The purpose of this draft broad award standard is to enable the design of a variety of programmes supporting the learner in developing the relevant citizenship knowledge, skill and competence.

Citizenship competence is “the ability to act as responsible citizens and to fully participate in civic and social life, based on understanding of social, economic, legal and political concepts and structures, as well as global developments and sustainability” (European Commission: Key Competences for Lifelong Learning).

The feedback on this standard highlighted two very distinct learners of this discipline. Learners who are on a progressive education path e.g., access to apprenticeship, requiring a programme spanning a broad range of mathematical subjects. And a distinct group of learners who require a smaller range of functional, practical mathematical and numerical skills. The feedback reflected both perspectives which recognises that both learner needs could be identified as met. Feedback noted the learning outcomes as being “well-aligned” and “sufficiently broad” to support the development of wide array of programmes. Feedback also detailed a request for QQI to mandate this standard in all programmes spanning NFQ Levels 1-4.

As shown in Fig. 3 below, 73% agreed that the learning outcomes of Core Competence Mathematical

and Numerical are appropriate, and 64% were in strong agreement that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels.

Figure 3

Core Competence Mathematical and Numerical	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	73% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	64% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

3.4 Core Competence Literacy

The three broad award standards, namely Literacy, Digital and Mathematical & Numeracy were recognised as the core foundation of the transversal skills. The purpose of Core Competence Literacy is to enable the design of a variety of programmes aiding the learner to develop the relevant knowledge, skill and competence in identifying, understanding, expressing, creating and interpreting concepts, facts and opinions in both oral and written forms, using visual, sound/audio and digital materials across disciplines and contexts (See European Commission: [Key Competences for Lifelong Learning](#)).

There was an acknowledgment that this particular standard may be accessed by learners starting from a non-literate status or who may have specific learning difficulties. This was reflected in the feedback where a welcome was given to the opportunity for learners to “present, give opinions, speak confidently”; these skills were also noted as being very challenging for some learners.

More focus on functional language was requested and references were made to the significant scaling up required by learners to secure “decoding skills” to access some of the learning outcomes at NFQ Levels 1 and 2. Overall, the standard was noted as having “great potential” and welcomed as a reliable resource for work-based education programmes.”

As shown in Fig. 4 below, the majority of respondents (80%) agreed that the learning outcomes of Core Competence Literacy are appropriate. There was also a strong agreement (93%) that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels.

Figure 4

Core Competence Literacy	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	80% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	93% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

3.5 Core Competence Science and Technology

The purpose of this draft broad award standard is to enable the design of a variety of programmes supporting the learner in developing the relevant scientific and technological knowledge, skill and competence.

Competence in science refers to “the ability and willingness to explain the natural world by making use of the body of knowledge and methodology employed, including observation and experimentation, to identify questions and to draw evidence-based conclusions. Competences in technology and engineering are applications of that knowledge and methodology in response to perceived human wants or needs. Competence in science, technology and engineering involves an understanding of the changes caused by human activity and responsibility as an individual citizen” (European Commission: Key Competences for Lifelong Learning).

The standard was noted for being generic in nature – spanning a range of science disciplines. There is also an expectation that specified science standards would be available at higher levels of the NFQ.

There was feedback querying the lack of specific laws and formulas – this is deliberate to allow as broad a range of programmes as possible to be derived from the award standard.

Regarding the appropriateness of the learning outcomes and their alignment with the NFQ in this standard, 100% agreed that the learning outcomes of Core Competence Science and Technology are appropriate, and 100% were also in strong agreement that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels (See Fig. 5 below).

Figure 5

Core Competence Science and Technology	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	100% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	100% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

3.6 Core Competence Entrepreneurship

The purpose of Core Competence Entrepreneurship is to enable the design of a variety of programmes supporting the learner in developing the relevant entrepreneurship knowledge, skill and competence. Entrepreneurship competence refers to “the capacity to act upon opportunities and ideas, and to transform them into values for others. It is founded upon creativity, critical thinking and problem solving, taking initiative and perseverance and the ability to work collaboratively in order to plan and manage projects that are of cultural, social or financial value” (European Commission: Key Competences for Lifelong Learning).

The inclusion of a standard that supports self-advocacy skills was welcomed. Some respondents felt “the parameters were too broad;” equally the standard was welcomed as being “accessible” and “flexible.”

As shown in Fig. 6 below, 50% agreed that the learning outcomes of Core Competence Entrepreneurship are appropriate. There was also a strong agreement (100%) that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels.

Figure 6

Core Competence Entrepreneurship	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	50% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	100% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

3.7 Core Competence Citizenship

The purpose of the Core Competence Citizenship is to enable the design of a variety of programmes aiding the learner in developing the relevant citizenship knowledge, skill and competence. Citizenship competence “is the ability to act as responsible citizens and to fully participate in civic and social life, based on understanding of social, economic, legal and political concepts and structures, as well as global developments and sustainability” (European Commission: Key Competences for Lifelong Learning).

The learning outcomes of draft Core Competence Citizenship were deemed “appropriate” in the feedback. “Clear progression” of the learning outcomes was identified. The standard was welcomed as a support to learners in embracing their human and civil rights.

Feedback identified the variety of programmes this standard could support e.g., “Politics and Society module,” History and Civil Liberties.”

Regarding appropriateness of the learning outcomes and their alignment with the NFQ in this standard, 100% agreed that the learning outcomes of Core Competence Citizenship are appropriate, and 100% were also in strong agreement that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels (See Fig. 7 below).

Figure 7

Core Competence Citizenship	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	100% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	100% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

3.8 Core Competence Personal, Social and Learning to Learn

The purpose of this draft broad award standard is to enable the design of a variety of programmes supporting the learner to develop the relevant personal, social and learning to learn knowledge, skill and competence, understood as “the ability to reflect upon oneself, effectively manage time and information, work with others in a constructive way, remain resilient and manage one’s own learning and career. It includes the ability to cope with uncertainty and complexity, learn to learn, support one’s physical and emotional well-being, to maintain physical and mental health, and to be able to lead a health-conscious, future-oriented life, empathize and manage conflict in an inclusive and supportive context” (European Commission: Key Competences for Lifelong Learning).

While some concern was expressed about replacing very prescriptive awards, feedback also noted that “standards would benefit learners massively as it will give the correct tools to survive everyday challenges in life.”

There was recognition that elements of this broad award standard would support all programmes at NFQ Levels 1-4, in particular the learning to learn elements.

As shown in Fig. 8 below, 100% of respondents agreed that the learning outcomes of Core Competence Personal, Social and Learning to Learn are appropriate. There was also a strong agreement (86%) that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels.

Figure 8

Core Competence Personal, Social and Learning to Learn	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	100% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	86% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

3.9 Core Competence Cultural Awareness and Expression

Competence in cultural awareness and expression involves “having an understanding of and respect for how ideas and meaning are creatively expressed and communicated in different cultures and through a range of arts and other cultural forms. It involves being engaged in understanding, developing and expressing one’s own ideas and sense of place or role in society in a variety of ways and contexts” (European Commission: Key Competences for Lifelong Learning).

The learning outcomes in this core competence were described as “detailed and comprehensive” and “broad enough.” There was a welcome for a range of subject areas to engage the learner in “music, food, language.” There was a request to expand the NFQ Level 4 to encompass “historical events, political events..... impact on culture.” This request could be supported in a programme proposal within the current standard.

Regarding the appropriateness of the learning outcomes and their alignment with the NFQ in this standard, 100% agreed that the learning outcomes of Core Competence Cultural Awareness and Expression are appropriate, and 100% were also in strong agreement that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels (See Fig. 9 below).

Figure 9

Core Competence Cultural Awareness and Expression	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	100% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	100% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

3.10 Core Competence Multilingual (Foreign Language e.g., ESOL)

This standard is one of the broad award standards developed in response to "[The Levels 1–3 Award Standards Review](#)" published in March 2018, which identified the "lack of English as a second language modules". It also intends to address the request for more comprehensive language award standards at NFQ Levels 1–4.

The purpose of this draft broad award standard is to enable the design of a variety of programmes enabling the learner to develop the relevant multilingual knowledge, skill and competence as outlined in the EU competence for this standard:

"This competence defines the ability to use different languages appropriately and effectively for communication. It broadly shares the main skill dimensions of literacy: it is based on the ability to understand, express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in an appropriate range of societal and cultural contexts according to one's wants or needs. Languages competences integrate a historical dimension and intercultural competences. It relies on the ability to mediate between different languages and media, as outlined in the Common European Framework of Reference. As appropriate, it can include maintaining and further developing mother tongue competences, as well as the acquisition of a country's official language(s)".

(European Commission: Key Competences for Lifelong Learning).

The feedback on this standard was the most divisive with some viewing the standard as "generally suitable" with broad "learning outcomes." The core differentiator of the feedback was the learner profile. Feedback indicated that some learners would enter an ESOL programme at preliterate stage while the same standards are required to simultaneously support a personal development language programme.

Suggestions were also made to equate the internationally recognised levels A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2, of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)¹⁴ to the NFQ levels: "QOI are basing the key competences on literacy: 'This competence defines the ability to use different languages appropriately and effectively for communication. It broadly shares the main skill dimensions of literacy.' I think it is very important in the context of language learning that the competencies be aligned to the CEFR".

It is worth noting that in 2007 attempts were made towards the establishment of a relationship between the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the National Framework of Qualifications by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI)¹⁵ in order to understand how the frameworks align and correspond despite differences between CEFR descriptors and the NFQ level indicators.

Feedback recognised that the draft broad award standard is "flexible and offers an opportunity to create and develop a diverse range of programmes."

¹⁴ The CEFR Levels - Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (coe.int)

¹⁵ NQAI (2007) Towards the establishment of a relationship between the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the National Framework of Qualifications, NQAI working paper.

As shown in Fig. 10 below, the majority (54%) agreed that the learning outcomes of Core Competence Multilingual are appropriate. However, only 36% agreed that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels (See Fig. 10 below).

Figure 10

Core Competence Multilingual	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	54% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	36% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

4 . Overview of Draft Broad Vocational Domain Standards at NFQ Levels 3-4

This chapter offers an overview of broad award standards at NFQ Levels 3-4 in vocational domains. Vocational education and training systems attract a diverse range of learners. "A common characteristic of these programmes is their central role in preparing young people for work and responding to labour market needs. Because of this, vocational programmes are fairly resilient to economic downturns." (OECD 2019). The draft broad vocational domain standards at NFQ Levels 3-4 have been developed to enable learners to acquire the relevant knowledge, skill and competence in a broad range of vocational domains. These broad award standards not only support active inclusion by paving new pathways and opportunities for learners, but also offer progression opportunities to further education or training.

4.1 Broad Award Standard for Agriculture

The purpose of this broad award standard is to enable learners to develop the relevant knowledge, skill and competence in a broad range of agriculture skills which enable employment, or progression to further education or training.

The Broad Award Standard for Agriculture was welcomed. Feedback noted the learning outcomes as being "well-aligned" and "broad enough" to support the development of a wide array of programmes.

As shown in Fig. 1 below, 100% agreed that the learning outcomes of the Broad Award Standard for Agriculture are appropriate. 100% also agreed that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels.

Figure 1

Broad Award Standard for Agriculture	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	100% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	100% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

4.2 Broad Award Standard for Aquaculture

The purpose of this broad award standard is to equip learners with the knowledge, skills and competence to assist with the growth and maintenance of a variety of aquatic species in a supervised environment or to progress to further education or training.

The Broad Award Standard for Aquaculture was welcomed. Feedback noted the learning outcomes as being "broad enough" to support the development of wide array of programmes. Changes around use of the word "shellfish"; and explicit mention of the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in the standard was requested.

Regarding appropriateness of the learning outcomes and their alignment with the NFQ in this standard, 100% agreed that the learning outcomes of the Broad Award Standard for Aquaculture are appropriate, and also 100% were in strong agreement that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels (See Fig. 2 below).

Figure 2

Broad Award Standard for Aquaculture	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	100% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	100% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

4.3 Broad Award Standard for Horticulture

The purpose of this broad award standard is to support learners in developing the relevant knowledge, skill and competence in a broad range of horticulture skills which enable employment, or progression to further education or training.

Feedback on this standard was somewhat mixed. It was pointed out that the amount of theory required at NFQ Levels 3 and 4 is "quite high", whilst other respondents agreed that the learning outcomes in the standard were "appropriate", "well-aligned" and would guide and support the development of suitable programmes. Overall, the Broad Award Standard for Horticulture was welcomed.

As shown in Fig. 3 below, 50% agreed that the learning outcomes of the Broad Award Standard for Horticulture are appropriate. The majority of respondents (67%) agreed that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels.

Figure 3

Broad Award Standard for Horticulture	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	50% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	67% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

4.4 Broad Award Standard for Construction and Engineering

The purpose of this broad award standard is to equip learners with the knowledge, skill and competence to:

- carry out routine simple tasks in a supervised construction/engineering environment.
- apply key features of engineering and problem-solving methods in a supervised environment.
- or to progress to further or higher education.

The feedback noted that the Broad Award Standard for Construction and Engineering are “...giving an opportunity to progress into and have understanding of the construction or engineering sector depending on the programme that will be developed,” and “It will help with apprenticeship sector and construction and engineering sector in FET.”

Regarding appropriateness of the learning outcomes and their alignment with the NFQ in this standard, 100% agreed that the learning outcomes of the Broad Award Standard for Construction and Engineering are appropriate, and also 100% were in strong agreement that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels (See Fig. 4 below).

Figure 4

Broad Award Standard for Construction and Engineering	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	100% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	100% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

4.5 Broad Award Standard for Fine Arts and Crafts

The purpose of this broad award standard is to enable learners to:

- develop the relevant knowledge, skill and competence to apply fine arts, crafts and design concepts and tools, in a broad range of situations.
- pursue a range of fine arts, crafts and design employment opportunities in a variety of settings under direct supervision or to progress to further education or training.

The feedback on the Broad Award Standard for Fine Arts and Crafts emphasised theoretical aspects of this standard. The feedback noted that “digital creative media” could be mentioned more explicitly. On this point, it might be worth mentioning that experts drafting this standard purposefully avoided defining a particular art form, to allow the freedom to include current and future forms of art.

Overall, the feedback focused on provision and delivery of the programme in this discipline rather than the standard.

As shown in Fig. 5 below, 100% agreed that the learning outcomes of the Broad Award Standard for Fine Arts and Crafts are appropriate. And 100% agreed that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels.

Figure 5

Broad Award Standard for Fine Arts and Crafts	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	100% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	100% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

4.6 Broad Award Standard for Tourism and Hospitality Services

The general purpose of this broad award standard is to enable learners to acquire the necessary knowledge, skill and competence for the tourism and hospitality service sectors, or to progress to further or higher education.

Feedback on this standard was somewhat mixed. Some respondents felt that the amount of theory required is "quite high." Others agreed that the learning outcomes in the standard were "well-aligned." There were a few concerns expressed regarding programme learning outcomes and not a standard. Overall, the feedback focused on provision and delivery of the programme in this discipline rather than the standard per se.

As shown in Fig. 6 below, there was 100% agreement that that the learning outcomes of the Broad Award Standard for Tourism and Hospitality Services are appropriate. In terms of alignment with the NFQ, 50% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels.

Figure 6

Broad Award Standard for Hospitality and Personal Services

Learning outcomes appropriateness	100% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	50% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

4.7 Broad Award Standard for Care and Community Work

The purpose of this broad award standard is to equip learners with the necessary knowledge, skill and competence for care and community work under general direction and supervision, or to progress to further or higher education.

Generally, there were several concerns expressed regarding alignment of the learning outcomes with the NFQ raised from a programme not a standard perspective.

Regarding appropriateness of the learning outcomes and their alignment with the NFQ in this standard, 100% agreed that the learning outcomes of the Broad Award Standard for Care and Community work are appropriate, and 50% were in strong agreement that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels (See Fig. 7 below).

Figure 7

Broad Award Standard for Care and Community work

Learning outcomes appropriateness	100% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	50% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

4.8 Broad Award Standard for Administration and Office Work

The purpose of this broad award standard is to enable and equip the learner to acquire a moderate range of knowledge, skill and competence relating to administration, office skills, organisations, personal and interpersonal skills, or to progress to further or higher education.

The Broad Award Standard for Administration and Office Work was welcomed. Feedback noted the learning outcomes as being generally “suitable” and “well-aligned” to support the development of wide array of programmes.

Regarding appropriateness of the learning outcomes and their alignment with the NFQ in this standard, 100% agreed that the learning outcomes of Broad Award Standard for Administration and Office Work are appropriate, and also 100% were in strong agreement that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels (See Fig. 8 below).

Figure 8

Broad Award Standard for Administration and Office Work	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	100% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	100% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

4.9 Broad Award Standard for Retail

The purpose of this broad award standard is to enable and equip the learner to acquire a moderate range of knowledge, skill and competence relating to the retail industry and employment opportunities, or to progress to further or higher education.

Feedback noted the learning outcomes as being “well-aligned” and “broad enough” to support the development of a wide array of programmes. Suggestions were made to incorporate “digital technologies in retail environment.” Overall, the feedback focused on provision and delivery of the programme in this discipline rather than the standard.

As shown in Fig. 9 below, 100% agreed that the learning outcomes of the Broad Award Standard for Retail are appropriate. There was 100% agreement that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels.

Figure 9

Broad Award Standard for Retail	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	100% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	100% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

4.10 Broad Award Standard for ICT

The purpose of this broad award standard is to equip learners with the necessary knowledge, skill and competence in Information Communication Technologies (ICT) area and to operate a device safely, or to progress to further or higher education.

The feedback noted that while the learning outcomes are “well-aligned,” the standard is not futureproofed.

As shown in Fig. 10 below, 67% of the respondents agreed that the learning outcomes of the Broad Award Standard for ICT are appropriate. The majority (67%) also agreed that the learning outcomes of this draft broad award standard are well-aligned to the respective NFQ levels.

Figure 10

Broad Award Standard for ICT	
Learning outcomes appropriateness	67% Agree/Strongly agree
Alignment with the NFQ	57% Agree/Strongly agree

Source: Qualtrics online survey

5. Draft Implementation Guidelines

The draft Implementation Guidelines for using broad award standards at NFQ Levels 1–4 aimed to explain broad award standards in the context of:

- Programme Development and Review
- Award Types and Award Classes
- Broad Award Standards as an alternative to CAS
- Broad Award Standards and Transversal Skills
- Access Transfer and Progression (Including RPL, Credit and Provision of Information to Learners)
- Assessment and Grading
- The Making of Awards and Named Award Titles

At the same time, it is clearly stated that detailed planning and guidelines to support the implementation of broad award standards at NFQ Levels 1–4 will be developed in collaboration with the sector and in acknowledgement of:

- the need for continuity of provision for learners already studying;
- the need to ensure that providers have the time and capacity to adapt to using new broad award standards;
- the need for QQI to provide detailed guidance, advice and support for implementation;
- the large number of broad award standards that may become active within a relatively short timeframe;
- the need to ensure that learners can choose effectively from a range of high-quality programmes and opportunities for learners who depend on smaller-sized qualifications;
- that the existing system for producing, delivering and certifying programmes and qualifications cannot be simply turned off: any changes must be introduced into a dynamic education, training and qualifications system.

The feedback from the sector indicates that the FET sector welcomes this innovation. However, detailed Implementation Guidelines, ideally in bullet points, in plain English and with illustrative examples and tutorials, are needed as there is still a lot of confusion regarding:

- award types and classes;
- assessment and grading;
- titling convention;
- access, transfer and progression (ATP);
- the difference between the award standards expressed in terms of learning outcomes and programmes expressed in terms of learning outcomes;

- the difference between CAS award standards and broad award standards;
- the difference between CAS awards and other QQI awards;
- interoperability between non-CAS awards and CAS awards.

Other remarks and further considerations

<p>“The guidelines would appear to guide and support responsive programmes at levels 1-4. The inclusion of both core and pre-vocational areas supports this goal, particularly the ability to combine learning outcomes across standards as appropriate to the proposed programme”</p>
<p>“The proposed move towards a system where awards and not programme modules would be certified by QQI was considered to be problematic in terms of implementation. How an award is named needs to be clarified as there was uncertainty as to how this would be applied where an award has embedded programmes”</p>
<p>“Guidance needed on how to apply for validation using these standards. A FAQ section would be helpful”</p>
<p>“Guidelines for developing programmes using these standards would be very useful. Outlining templates to use, documentation required”</p>
<p>“It was felt that there was a lack of clarity on the question of credit values and whether the new broad standards allowed for ‘stackability’ of credit values, as this flexibility was considered to be crucial for FET learners”</p>
<p>“Using the broad award standards as an alternative to CAS and as a bedrock to the creation of programmes requires some testing. The strength of the CAS, for NFQ Levels 1-3 in particular, is the ability to award learners for achievement with small credit value. Such awards, while small in credit value, are of great significance to learners and help those commencing to build confidence on their learning”</p>
<p>“The broad award standards names often do not sufficiently reflect content and may even be at odds with the programme content. There is scope for a new vocational field of learning for sustainability, for example. Currently a learner could complete a special purpose award in sustainability which would fall under agriculture or construction perhaps, which would not be an accurate reflection of the field of learning”</p>
<p>“More information on the role/relevance of Europass Certificate Supplements needed here”</p>
<p>“A working example of the broad standards process from start to finish using a demo provider would be welcomed, so providers can see exactly how the new standards work in detail”</p>

"...While not all field areas may be covered in levels 1-4, allowances could be made to cover certain field areas by using the award type descriptors for each level from the determinations document"

"The new broad standards have the potential to allow providers the opportunity to develop courses that are more meaningful and relevant to the lived experiences of learners"

"QQI should ensure the implementation of the new broad standards are piloted in a variety of settings, including in community education settings, before national roll-out"

"Link these broad standards to other standards. For example, how will these broad award standards link to the levels and standards used in the [OECD Programme for Assessment of Adult Competencies \(PIAAC\) Cycle 2?](#)"

"Role of broad award standards in a new core skills framework [The Adult Literacy For Life 10-year strategy](#) has an action for the "Development of a core skills framework facilitating learners to understand the skills they need and the learning pathways that are available" (page 76). How will these standards, when piloted and updated, influence or support the development of a core skills framework for adults? Who will coordinate collaboration on this?"

"The published set of 'learning outcomes' attached to each standard appears as if it will support RPL: as programmes are explicitly mapped to identified 'learning outcomes' attached to the standards, this should facilitate future RPL applications for exemptions or indeed towards qualifications"

6 Summary of Findings, QOI Response and Next Steps

This chapter provides a summary of findings to the consultation on the draft broad award standards and their Implementation Guidelines.

6.1 Summary of Findings

Generally, the FET sector welcome this innovation. The education and training boards (ETBs) in particular, see huge opportunities in this new proposition, enabling them to develop comprehensive, responsive and “fit for purpose” programmes across a broad range of new broad award standards at levels 1–4. The response from the ETBI was informed by focus groups with representatives of 16 ETBs:

“While the draft broad award standards are broadly welcomed by the ETB FET sector, there is a sense that their application and implementation will be difficult to ascertain until ETBs are in a position to apply them in practice and see how they interact with the programme development process. Overall, in the light of ongoing discussion and developments around programme development, there was a clear sense of anticipation towards using these new draft broad award standards to develop programmes which are badly needed in the face of fast paced societal change and transition.”

(ETB FET Sector Response to the Consultation on the Draft Broad Award Standards at NFQ Levels 1–4, 2023).

SOLAS also strongly supports this innovation:

“SOLAS is proud to support the reform of standards at NFQ Levels 1–4, working in partnership with QOI since the establishment of the Standards Review Group in 2018. Our common goal is to ensure that all learners, including the most marginalised, can avail of FET programmes, regardless of their location or individual circumstances.

SOLAS welcomes the review and believes this alignment of programmes will support the delivery of the 2020–2024 national FET system targets¹⁶. Building on ETB capacity to develop comprehensive and responsive programmes through robust frameworks aligns closely with our vision for Future FET.¹⁷ The standards reform will no doubt contribute to strengthening FET’s reach to priority learners, growing transversal skills, facilitating FET pathways, and driving successful outcomes for all.”

(SOLAS Endorsement of the Reform of QOI Standards at Levels 1–4, 2023).

Although feedback was positive, overall, some concerns were expressed and matters for consideration identified. The sub-sections below offer a summary of the key points identified in the feedback on the suite of twenty broad award standards and their Implementation Guidelines.

The feedback is structured as follows:

- ✓ Positives identified.
- ✓ Concerns highlighted.
- ✓ Insights from the feedback.

¹⁶ Supporting jobs, learning pathways, facilitating inclusion, upskilling through life and careers and targeting key skills needs.

¹⁷ solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf, p.42

6.1.1 Positives identified

- The innovation of the draft broad award standards suite was welcomed.
- Clear understanding of how the broad award standards would be a positive move for the sector.
- Acknowledgement that this format of award standard would support innovative and responsive programme development.
- The range and scope of the suite were welcomed.
- Recognition of how the broad award standards could produce a broader scope of learning outcomes to address learner needs.
- The concept of having more choice and freedom to develop programmes without the restrictions of a set format was welcomed.
- The transversal nature of the Core Competences was welcomed.
- Recognition that the broad award standards suite would support universal design elements.

6.1.2 Concerns highlighted

- Perceived loss of standardisation and consistency of programmes, e.g., General Learning Major Awards Levels 1–4.
- Terminology and language within the standards could be more accessible (Plain English for Standards and Guidelines).
- Difficulties envisaging how programmes would be structured, specifically embedded programmes.
- Validation process was not clearly set out. Support resources including guidelines, templates and interactive forums were requested.
- Implementation perceived as challenging. (Clear guidelines with examples and piloting are imperative).
- Concerns around assessment were expressed.
- Interoperability between CAS and non-CAS (Preferably, automated facility that would allow for the use of CAS and non-CAS credits in a seamless way toward the acquisition of awards, facilitating the traditional building block approach. “Stackability” of credits crucial for learners in this sector).
- Concerns that QQI might get rid of CA

6.1.3 Insights from the feedback

The FET sector welcome the draft broad award standards at NFQ Levels 1–4.

- Some evidence of confusion between award standards and programmes.
- Understanding of the language of the NFQ, interpreting the grid of level indicators and award types and award classes, needs to be strengthened.
- Terminology and language within the standards should be more accessible.
- Clarity regarding programmes structure, validation process, and implementation of the broad award standards suite including piloting needs to be provided.

6.2 QQI response to the feedback

QQI recognise that this was a challenging consultation to engage with and thank the respondents for their time and engagement.

The feedback queried how **standardisation of learning volume, assessment and content** in programmes could be supported.

Programme **validation** provides a robust process ensuring programmes contain an appropriate range of learning volume, learning outcomes and appropriate assessment methodologies. User-friendly templates and practical webinars concerning validation process and the implementation of the broad award standards will be provided.

Each of the areas identified have referenceable sources to support them. QQI will continue to review and develop further resources. In addition, QQI will facilitate further Q&A Fora, stakeholder meetings, website publications and a revised Implementation Guidelines.

Consistency across programmes to date has been supported within the CAS system by each chosen award standard having specific detailed learning outcomes. Programmes derived from the broad award standards may have different learning outcomes, but all programmes developed using the broad award standards suite will be benchmarked against the standard(s) in the relevant field of learning, supporting Recognition Prior Learning (RPL).

Regarding the concerns raised about the **range of common programmes** which are delivered nationally across providers e.g., General Learning, the broad award standards suite will continue to support this activity. The core difference will be that learning outcomes will be sourced from identified broad award standard(s).

With reference to **the role of broad award standards and a new core skills framework and the Adult Literacy For Life 10-year strategy**, the development of the broad award standards at NFQ Levels 1-4 will support the development of core skills facilitating learners and learning pathways.

In terms of simplifying the language, QQI will ensure that the suite of twenty broad award standards and their Implementation Guidelines will be published in **plain English**.

A glossary of new terms will also be provided.

Broad Award Standards Support Resources

Programme Validation:	QQI website
Assessment:	QQI Assessment Policy
NFQ Language:	NFQ - resources
Using the Broad Award Standards:	Guidelines will be published, and supportive webinars will be organised in due course.

6.3 Next Steps

Overall, as outlined above, it is envisaged that the broad award standards will support a diverse range of programme purposes: preparing learners to enter or progress within the world of work, or study, personal growth and social inclusion.

Next Steps:

- Feedback from this consultation will be considered in the final drafting of the broad award standards suite.
- There will be post-review direct engagement with stakeholders.
- Further Q&A Fora will be organised to support implementation of the broad award standards.
- All 20 broad award standards and the accompanying Implementation Guidelines will be reviewed prior to publishing to ensure better accessibility and plain English.
- Following QQI internal governance, QQI will commence publishing the broad award standards along with comprehensive Guidelines for their implementation, in the last quarter of 2023.

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Appendix 1

Institutional Affiliation of Experts Aand Practitioners Who Supported Development of the Broad Award Standards At Nfq Levels 1-4
An Cosán
An Post
Aontas
Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools
Bord Bia
Bray Adult Learning Centre
Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board
Cdetb Teachers Centre, Mountjoy Prison
Chartered Institute of Building in Ireland
Cif Education, Training and Skills Committee
City of Dublin Education and Training Board
Cope Foundation
Cork Educational Training Board
Department of Education and Skills
Design and Crafts Council Ireland
Director of English Language School
Donegal Education Training Board
Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board
Dublin Institute of Technology - Technological University Dublin
Early Childhood Ireland
Education and Training Boards Ireland (Etb)
Fáilte Ireland
Fit (Fastrack into Information Technology)
Frs Recruitment
Further Education Support Service
Galway Roscommon Education Training Board
Gorey School of Art
Health Services Executive
Health Services Executive - Donegal

Institute of Technology Tralee - Now Munster Technological University (Mtu)
Irish Hospitality Institute Education Committee
Kerry Education and Training Board
Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board
Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board
Laois and Offaly Education Training Board
Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board
Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board
Members of Qa Committees, Etb Oversight Language
Microsoft Ireland
National Adult Literacy Agency
National Council for Curriculum And Assessment
National Learning Network
National Quality Improvement Office Disability Services, H.s.e.
Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council (Phecc)
Rehab Ireland
Sisk
Society Of Chartered Surveyors Ireland
Solas
Solas Training Centre(S)
Stewarts Care Ireland
Teagasc
National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education
Tipperary Education and Training Board
Trinity Access Programme
Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board
Whitehall College of Further Education



