

DESCRIPTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN IRELAND¹

Introduction

The higher education or third-level sector in Ireland includes a range of Higher Education Institutions – Universities and Institutes of Technology as well as Colleges of Education, the National College of Art and Design, non-State aided private higher education colleges and other National institutions. The Universities and Colleges of Education are funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). The Institutes of Technology and the Dublin Institute of Technology are funded directly by the Department of Education and Science (www.education.ie).

Ireland has a binary system of higher education designed to ensure maximum flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of students and to the wide variety of social and economic requirements. However, within each sector and between the two sectors, a diversity of institutions offer differing types and levels of courses. The Universities are essentially concerned with under-graduate and post-graduate programmes, together with basic and applied research. The main work of the Institutes of Technology is in under-graduate programmes, with a smaller number of post-graduate programmes and a growing involvement in regionally orientated applied research.

Government Agencies

The Higher Education Authority (www.heai.ie), which was established in 1971, is responsible for furthering the development of higher education and assisting in the co-ordination of State investment in higher education. The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) (www.nqai.ie) was established in 2001 by the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 and is responsible for establishing and maintaining the National Framework of Qualifications. The Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) (www.hetac.ie), which was also established under the 1999 Act, is the qualifications awarding body for the Institutes of Technology and other non-university higher education colleges and institutions, excluding the Dublin Institute of Technology. HETAC may also delegate the authority to make awards to an Institute of Technology.

Higher Education Institutions

There are seven universities recognised under the Universities Act, 1997 - University College Cork, University College Dublin, National University of Ireland Galway, National University of Ireland Maynooth, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Limerick and Dublin City University. The Universities validate and award their own qualifications, as well as those in institutions recognised by them including, for example, the Colleges of Education. The Universities have primary responsibility for their own quality assurance arrangements and have established the Irish Universities Quality Board to promote best practice in quality assurance throughout their sector. The Higher Education Authority also has a review role in relation to quality assurance procedures in Universities.

There are thirteen Institutes of Technology (IoTs), which are designated under the Regional Technical Colleges Act 1999. The institutions are Athlone IT, IT Blanchardstown, Cork IT,

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IT Carlow, Dundalk IT, Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Galway-Mayo IT, Letterkenny IT, Limerick IT, IT Sligo, IT Tallaght, IT Tralee and Waterford IT.

These conduct programmes leading to awards made by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council. In some cases, following a review process, the institutions have been or may be delegated authority by the Council to make awards themselves. In addition, while the institutions have primary responsibility for quality assurance themselves, the Council has a quality assurance monitoring and review role in relation to the institutions.

Other higher education institutions include National institutions, private colleges and higher education and training institutions. However, under recent legislation any provider of education and training regardless of the source of that provision, whether it is in an educational institution, the workplace or the community, can apply to the Higher Education and Training Awards Council for validation of a programme.

Finally, the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) (www.dit.ie) makes its own awards following legislation which was passed in 1997. While the Institute has primary responsibility for quality assurance itself, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has a quality assurance review role in relation to these procedures.

National Framework of Qualifications

The National Framework of Qualifications (launched on 17 October 2003) sets the overall standards of the awards of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology, as well as accommodating the awards of the Universities. The Framework is the single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards. It is a 10-level framework with higher education and training awards being made at levels 6 to 10. The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has defined an initial set of 15 major award-types for each of the 10 levels as follows:

LEVEL MAJOR AWARD-TYPE

10	Doctoral Degree
9	Masters Degree and Post-graduate Diploma
8	Honours Bachelor Degree and Higher Diplor
7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree
6	Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate
5	Level 5 Certificate
4/5	Leaving Certificate
4	Level 4 Certificate
3	Level 3 Certificate and Junior Certificate
2	Level 2 Certificate
1	Level 1 Certificate

Awards at Levels 7 to 10 are made by the Higher Education and Training Awards Councils, the Dublin Institute of Technology and the Universities. At Level 6, the Higher Certificate award is made by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology.