

A short guide to Accreditation

What is Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)?

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is a new agency which has incorporated the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.

QQI is responsible for the external quality assurance of further and higher education and training. It makes awards for these sectors and validates programmes for providers. QQI is also responsible for the maintenance, development and review of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

What is accreditation and why is it important?

Accreditation is the formal recognition of what a student has learned.

As a student, having accreditation or a qualification has lots of benefits. Not only does it give a student a sense of personal achievement and show what they have learned, but achieving accreditation may also allow the student to progress to further education and training or better employment opportunities.

How does a student get accreditation?

In Ireland, there are many ways to get accreditation. While many young people go to primary and secondary school, and some do examinations to get a Junior or Leaving Certificate, others now choose to learn online or with different education providers to get specific qualifications and training more relevant to their needs and interests. Accreditation will allow you to achieve an award, for example a Certificate, Diploma or Degree.

How do I, as a tutor, help a student to achieve accreditation?

You need to look at the award specifications and the **Learning Outcomes** (LOs) to guide you and the student. You must ensure that the student has the opportunity to achieve each learning outcome.

If the centre where you are working has developed a programme for their centre or ETB (Education and Training Board), then you and the student must check with the Accreditation Support person, ALO or Centre Manager about appropriate supports. Different providers will have set out different approaches in their programmes.

How to decide what level a student is at?

Tutors should ask their ALO or Centre Manager about which initial assessment process their centre uses. It can be difficult to correctly assess learning needs and levels. For example, a student could be at level 3 in reading and writing and level 2 for numeracy. Usually when a tutor assesses a student's learning needs, he or she talks to the student about their:

- learning goals,
- educational attainment to date, and
- strengths and gaps in their literacy and numeracy skills and competencies.

Then the tutor and student can agree a learning plan, which may or may not include working towards accreditation. This depends on whether the student is interested in getting certification for their learning.

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

The NFQ is a system of ten levels (see Figure 1). Each level is based on nationally agreed standards setting out what a person is expected to know and be able to do following a process of learning. QQI oversees and regulates accreditation in Ireland.

Figure 1



This Framework brings greater clarity to the Irish education and training system, making it possible for learners, employers and providers to understand and compare different types of qualifications. All QQI awards already have a specific placing on the national framework between levels 1 and 6, allowing QQI award holders to progress more easily within the system.

Whatever or wherever your student wants to learn, the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) makes it easier for them to explain to others what qualifications they have, or are studying for. This becomes very important when they are considering further learning or when they are applying for a job – at home or abroad.

The Common Awards System

The Common Awards System is a structured award system for the further education sector where the focus is on the outcomes of learning. The awards share characteristics, such as a common format. The Common Awards System applies at Levels 1 – 6 of the NFQ. Standards of knowledge, skill and competence are expressed as learning outcomes (LOs). Students' work is assessed, and if it meets the requirements, they will receive an award.

How does a student get accreditation through the Common Awards System?

One benefit of the Common Awards System is that there is no set curriculum. There are instead, a set of LOs (Learning Outcomes) around which providers can develop programmes to suit their students' needs. Student's work is assessed, and if it meets the requirements, they will receive an award. This may be a major, minor, special purpose or supplemental award.

Minor awards are known as the building blocks of the common awards system. They are also known as components because they are part of a broader set of requirements for a major award. Many students work towards a major award by accumulating minor awards at a time and pace that suits their own personal commitments.

A Major award, often called 'the full Certificate' is generally achieved through the accumulation of a number of minor awards. For example, there are 20 credits for an award at level 1. Most minor awards (components) at level 1 offer 5 credits but there is a 10 credit component. Therefore it takes 3, or most likely 4 minor awards to achieve a major award at level 1.

30 credits are needed at Level 2 and 60 credits are need at Level 3.

Some components are mandatory. They may be grouped in 'pools' to give flexibility and choice.

What are the steps involved in providing accredited learning to students at levels 1 to 3?

The first thing that you need to know is that your centre (the education provider) can organise accredited learning by:

- (1) being a registered provider with QQI; and
- (2) having a programme validated with QQI for the delivery of named awards.

Every provider must deliver their programmes and assess their students in line with the award requirements and in keeping with their own Quality Assurance policies and procedures. A tutor delivering an accredited programme to a student needs to be familiar with these policies and procedures. If a provider does not have a validated programme, then the provider can't offer students the opportunity to achieve accreditation.

What does it mean to say Level 2 is a supported level?

The Award Specification for the Level 2 Certificate in General Learning describes it this way: 'An award at Level 2 reflects basic learning with well supported direction'. This means that tutors can 'support' students to an extent towards the achievement of accreditation at Level 2. However, at Level 3, it is expected that students will be able to work independently of the tutor.

Progression from level 2 to level 3

While it is logical to see Level 3 following Level 2, when tutors review the LOs (Learning Outcomes) contained in minor award specifications, they will see significant differences between levels. Just because a learner completes a Level 2 award, it does not follow that they will automatically be capable of achieving an award at Level 3. So, some students might

find it too much of a 'jump' to immediately begin working on the Level 3 award. The tutor, in consultation with the student, needs to decide this. They might decide to work on reinforcing Level 2 skills for a while before moving up to Level 3.

Can a student combine awards from two different providers or centres?

Yes, student's successes are recorded in the QQI Business System (QBS). If a student has already achieved awards through one provider or centre, this will be evident in the QBS, and the provider / centre may apply for major awards if appropriate.

What is www.writeon.ie?

NALA developed WriteOn.ie through its Distance Learning Service. This website is for level 2 and level 3 adult students. It allows adults to achieve nationally recognised awards (if they wish) through using this site. Using the site, students can study in private, at their own pace and in their own time. Users of the site can have their skills assessed across a number of areas and then be offered an individual learning plan to improve these areas. At the end of the learning phase, users have the chance to have their skills assessed and request a national qualification. This is the first time that accreditation at these levels has been offered in Ireland using the Internet.

NALA's www.writeon.ie site has dealt with students in 180 learning centres across Ireland, as well as independent and distance learners. In 2013, over 14,000 different people used the site for an average of 22 minutes per visit. Writeon had three rounds of accreditation in 2013, providing 4,842 level 2 minor awards and 729 level 3 minor awards to over 700 students.

Set up a free account on www.writeon.ie for further information.

Look at the videos in the 'Help' section or on NALA's YouTube channel at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNvbfqD5m0o>

Why is NALA a provider? www.writeon.ie

NALA recognised that some people wanted to study in their own home. We wanted to offer accreditation to the distance learners under the new Common Awards System. To do this, we needed to become a registered provider with QQI. As a result, we launched www.writeon.ie in September 2008 to offer accreditation and recognition of prior learning to our distance learners and those studying independently. We added Level 3 accreditation to WriteOn in 2010. Since then, we have found many literacy centres and other locations have contacted NALA to use writeon for accreditation in blended learning contexts. It was never intended for writeon to work with existing providers, but this is something that has proved very successful since 2009. NALA sends certificates back to registered centres and those centres can then note the certification in any official returns to the Department of Education and Skills if required.

Glossary of terms

Accreditation

Accreditation means having what you have learned recognised formally.

Award

A student achieves an award (component or certificate) when their work is assessed and it meets the specified requirements.

Blended learning

This refers to the mixing of different teaching and learning techniques. For example, a blended learning approach can combine face-to-face tuition with computer based learning.

Credits

The credit system gives learners an idea of the volume of learning required for each award. Each award, regardless of type, has a specific credit value which must be achieved.

Common Awards System

This is a structured award system for the further education sector where the focus is on the outcomes of learning. The awards share characteristics, such as a common format. Standards of knowledge, skill and competence are expressed as learning outcomes. Student's work is assessed, and if it meets the requirements, they will receive an award.

Distance learning

Distance learning occurs when students and tutors are separated by either space or time. For example, a student can follow an online computer programme from their home, while their tutor is in another location.

Education and Training Board (ETB)

An Education and Training Board (formerly VEC) manages adult and further education at city, regional and/or county level.

External authentication

External authentication is a process which shows that (i) results have been internally verified by the provider (ii) evidence has been produced and assessed in line with techniques outlined in the Award Specification and (iii) results presented are consistent with national standards for the award.

Note: External authentication is carried out by an external authenticator from the QQI 'external authentication panel'.

FETAC

Further Education and Training Awards Council.

Note: QQI has replaced FETAC as the national awarding body for Further Education.

Framework

A model or system used to organise information or to plan, develop or decide something.

Initial assessment

An initial assessment process is used to try to identify the learner's needs and interest.

Internal verification

Internal Verification is the process where the provider checks the student's work and verifies that it meets agreed standards and followed assessment processes.

Note: This task is carried out by an 'internal verifier' or an 'internal verification panel'.

The Internal Verification (IV) process involves:

- Verifying that the provider's assessment procedures have been applied across the range of assessment activities; and
- Confirming assessment results by checking learner evidence exists and marks and grades are recorded correctly.

Learning Outcomes (LOs)

The Learning Outcomes (LOs) are in award specifications. Standards of knowledge, skill and competence are expressed as Learning Outcomes.

Note: These were previously known as SLOs (Specific Learning Outcomes).

Major awards

A Major award, often called 'the full Certificate' is generally achieved through the accumulation of a number of minor awards. A major award or certificate typically gives eligibility for progression to learning opportunities at the next level on the NFQ.

Minor award or 'Component'

Minor awards are known as the building blocks of the common awards system. Some minor awards are mandatory because of the unique purpose of the major award. They are grouped in 'pools' of components, to give flexibility and choice.

Major Award specification

The QQI issues major award specifications. These explain what a student has to do to achieve that major award. These specifications include pools of awards from which students can select to build-up credits.

National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

The National Framework of Qualifications is a system of ten levels. Each level is based on nationally agreed standards setting out what a person is expected to know and be able to do following a process of learning.

Programme Validation

The programme validation sets out what a student has to do to achieve the major award under that particular programme. This includes pools of Minor awards from which students can select to build-up credits.

Quality Assurance

Providers have to develop their quality assurance system and the criteria for agreement with QQI in order to be a registered provider and have programmes validated. The content of the programmes should fit in with the providers' Quality Assurance agreement and the process set out in the validated programme.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

QQI oversees and regulates accreditation in Ireland. QQI has replaced FETAC.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

A process used to evaluate skills and knowledge acquired outside the classroom for the purpose of recognising competence against a given set of standards.

Registered provider

Learning centres can offer accreditation if QQI registers them to offer validated programmes. Every provider will have their own policies, procedures assessment and delivery methods.

Results Appeal

Providers allow for an agreed period of time for Results Appeal by students whose applications did not reach the standard.

Results Approval

The Provider or Learning Centre approves results and sends them to QQI for the award. This happens after the Results Approval Panel meets.

Summative assessment

Students complete a Summative Assessment to check that they meet the learning outcomes of the award.

www.writeon.ie

Writeon.ie is a NALA website which allows adults to check their skills and work on areas where they need help with their learning. Students can then use the site to apply for a national award at level 2 or 3.