

HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING AWARDS COUNCIL, IRELAND

Comhairle na nDámhachtainí Ardoideachais agus Oiliúna, Éire

Professional Award Alignment Policy and Criteria 2011

Short title	Professional Award Alignment Policy and Criteria		
Reference code:	Version:	Date of issue:	
A.2.3	1.0	16/12/2011	

Professional Award Alignment Policy and Criteria

1	Introduction	4
1.1	Candidate for Alignment	5
1.2	Validation as an Alternative to Professional Award Alignment	6
1.3	Duration of Professional Award Alignment	6
1.4	Professional Award Alignment and Change	6
1.5	Commencement of this policy	7
1.6	Rescinding of previous alignment policies	7
2	Key Stages in the Professional Award Alignment Process	8
3	Professional Award Alignment Criteria	8
3.1	Seven Outline Criteria for Professional Award Alignment	9
3.1.1	Using the Criteria for New Awards: Candidate for Alignment at a Specified NFQ Level	9
3.2	Elaborated Professional Award Alignment Criteria	10
3.2.1	Governance, Operations, Management and General Quality Assurance,	10
3.2.2	Professional Award Standards	10
3.2.3	Valid and Reliable Assessment	11
3.2.4	Quality Assurance of Associated Programmes (where relevant)	11
3.2.5	Access Standard	14
3.2.6	Continuing Professional Development	14
4	Alignment Processes	15
4.1	Bodies Which May Apply for Alignment	15
4.1.1	Additional Eligibility Criteria	15
4.2	Withdrawing an application for alignment of an award	16
4.3	Preparing the Application for Alignment and Self-assessment	16
4.4	The External Assessment Process for Alignment	17
4.5	Post-alignment Follow-up by HETAC	20
4.6	Renewal of Alignment and Re-alignment	20
4.6.1	Changes to professional awards following alignment	21
4.7	Review and withdrawal of alignment by HETAC	21
4.8	Review of Quality Assurance Procedures	21
4.9	Refusal of Alignment	21
4.10	Appeals Against Refusal or Withdrawal of Alignment by HETAC	21

5	Conditions of alignment	22
6	Estimating Volume Using ECTS Credit in the Context of Alignment	23
7	Database for Aligned Professional Awards	23
8	Interpretations	25
9	References	29
10	Professional Award-type Descriptors (Award Class: Professional) For the Alignment of Professional Awards at NFQ Levels 7, 8 and 9	30

1 Introduction

The purpose of this policy and criteria is to provide a transparent mechanism for the recognition, through the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), of the learning achievements of those who have received certain kinds of professional awards (i.e. qualifications). This purpose is realised through the process of 'alignment' of professional awards.

Alignment, with the National Framework of Qualification facilitates the recognition of the equivalency of the professional award with other (national and foreign) framework qualifications. It is hoped that this may enhance the mobility prospects for holders of aligned professional awards.

The alignment process, for the purpose of this policy, is to determine whether a professional award made by an eligible professional body can be recognised to be at either Level 7, 8 or 9 in the National Framework of Qualifications¹. The NQAI (www.nqai.ie) may be consulted about other kinds of alignment not addressed by this policy.

Alignment of vocational awards at lower levels is not addressed here. At NFQ Level 10 the relevant award is the Professional Doctorate and this is available exclusively through the validation process (executed by HETAC [Section 1.2] or a self-validating higher education and training provider).

This policy is substantially different from *Alignment of non-statutory awards of certain Irish bodies with the National Framework of Qualifications* (HETAC, 2006) (which is rescinded by Section 1.6).

In broad terms (but see Section 3) alignment examines whether or not a professional award:

- (i) is adequately quality assured (along with any associated programmes) by the professional body;
- (ii) is at the level in the National Framework of Qualifications at which alignment is sought; and
- (iii) certifies (**where relevant**) the volume of learning purported to be certified.

The alignment process includes both self-assessment by the professional body and external assessment (organised by HETAC). As part of the self-assessment the professional body must identify the NFQ Level at which it considers that its professional award should be aligned. Determination of NFQ Level in the alignment process involves establishing the *expected minimum knowledge, skill and competence* certified by the professional award and comparing this to the level of learning specified by the NFQ *Professional Award-type Descriptor* (Section 10) at the NFQ Level at which alignment is sought.

In the event that the external assessment does not concur with the self-assessment then the external assessment process may also consider which other Professional Award-type Descriptor, if any, matches the professional award.

Additionally (**where relevant**) alignment involves the recognition of the quantity of ECTS credit to be associated with the professional award.

Alignment of a professional award will always scrutinise the associated *summative assessment* procedures and may, where relevant, evaluate any associated *programmes of education and training*.

¹ This comprehends inclusion of statutory professional awards—see section 4.1.

An eligible (**Section 4.1**) *professional body* may seek to have one or more of its professional awards aligned. If its awards are international (made in more than one sovereign state) the application should be directed to the NQAI in the first instance—otherwise it may be directed to HETAC if alignment is sought at Level 7, 8 or 9 in the NFQ.

The alignment policy and criteria herein have been designed to focus attention to those elements which are considered intrinsic to professional awards, their associated assessment, and any associated programmes of education and training.

The term *programme of education and training*, in this context, means *any* process by which a person may acquire knowledge, skill or competence and it includes programmes of probationary professional practice. By focusing on what is considered intrinsic to all professional awards and associated programmes and assessment, the policy and criteria aim to avoid unintended bias in favour of any particular type of professional award or type of programme or assessment. In so doing they facilitate diversity and open the way for enhancing innovations.

This policy does not assume that a professional body is directly involved in the instruction of learners seeking its professional awards. Associated programmes of education and training may be provided directly by the professional body making the professional award and/or through the involvement of distinct education and training providers. Accordingly, there needs to be a clear distinction between the provision of programmes and the making of awards.

The range of professional bodies which are eligible to apply for alignment under this policy is set out in **Section 4.1**. It should be noted that validation is an alternative option for any professional bodies wishing to establish framework awards (see **Section 1.2** for details).

Alignment, when implemented rigorously, fairly and transparently, supports public confidence in the standards of the professional awards and in the quality of associated programmes. It also contributes to the enhancement of their quality. Nevertheless, professional bodies and any distinct *providers* of associated programmes have the principal responsibility for the quality of their own professional awards and (associated) programmes. Alignment should help professional awarding bodies, and (indirectly) any associated providers (i.e. providers of associated programmes), to discharge this responsibility and should help to hold professional awarding bodies accountable.

This document sets out the policy and criteria for the alignment of professional awards at NFQ Levels 7-9.

- It outlines the key stages in an alignment process (**Section 2**).
- It outlines generic criteria for alignment (**Section 3**).
- It details the HETAC alignment processes (**Section 4**).
- It presents the general conditions for alignment by HETAC (**Section 5**).

1.1 Candidate for Alignment

Alignment under this policy is an *ex post* process meaning that the relevant award must have been made. New awards can be endorsed by HETAC as *candidate awards for alignment* (or simply as *candidates for alignment*) at a specified level NFQ level (7-9). The processes and criteria for candidate alignment and its withdrawal will be the same as for the standard alignment process *mutatis mutandis*.

Candidate status may be converted to aligned status after the first batch of awards has been made. The conversion process is simply the standard (*ex post*) alignment process but should be somewhat less involved owing to the existence of relevant findings from the *ex ante* process.

Professional bodies seeking to develop new awards may, as an alternative, seek to avail of the validation process (**Section 1.2**) which is an *ex ante* process.

1.2 Validation as an Alternative to Professional Award Alignment

A professional body may choose to become a registered HETAC provider and submit one or more of its programmes for validation by HETAC (See *Core Validation Policy and Criteria 2010*). Alternatively it may approach a provider with the necessary self validating authority.

It should be noted that validation (as distinct from alignment) may be required by external agencies for some public policy purposes e.g. funding of associated programmes.

Alignment and validation (by HETAC) have much in common but there are substantial differences between them:

1. Validation explicitly endorses specific programmes designed to lead to awards made by HETAC—alignment does not normally endorse the associated programmes directly but rather the professional body’s quality assurance procedures for associated programmes.
2. Validation is subject to standard and case-specific conditions concerning the provider, the programme and the corresponding awards. The standard conditions include ones concerning procedures for access, transfer and progression and arrangements for assessment and (in certain cases) for protection for learners. The conditions for alignment are different and, for example, don’t include arrangements for the protection for learners. The arrangements for external examining may also be somewhat different.
3. HETAC directly monitors the providers of programmes of education and training that it validates. For aligned professional awards, HETAC will monitor the relevant activities of the professional body concerned. The monitoring of providers of programmes associated with aligned awards is expected to be undertaken by the professional body.
4. When it validates a programme HETAC agrees that it will confer the relevant higher education and training award upon learners who successfully complete the programme. In the case of well-established international awards, HETAC awards may be issued dually with the professional body’s award. Such multiply issued awards constitute a joint award.
5. Validation is only available to Registered HETAC providers—a professional body seeing to have its programme validated must become a Registered HETAC provider and must enter into formal collaboration agreements with any other bodies involved in providing programmes associated with the award.

Some professional bodies accredit validated programmes and the corresponding awards are offered by (or through) providers of higher education and training. Normally, alignment is only possible, or indeed necessary, where the learning outcomes are not already reflected in a framework award associated with a validated programme, i.e. learning is not doubly certified except in the context of joint awarding. However, in exceptional conditions this policy may be waived—HETAC or the NQAI should be consulted early if such a waiver is to be sought.

1.3 Duration of Professional Award Alignment

Professional award alignment is normally for a specified period not exceeding five years. See **Section 4.6** on renewal of alignment.

1.4 Professional Award Alignment and Change

An aligned professional award is not a static entity (**Section 4.6.1**). It is expected that, informed by periodic review, changes will continually be made: for example, to corresponding standards and criteria, to any associated programmes and to procedures for the assessment of candidates

for the professional award. Changes should be considered and implemented in the context of the maintenance of required standards and the effectiveness of any associated programmes in enabling learners to achieve the relevant intended learning outcomes.

However, not all aspects of professional awards or associated programmes are likely to require frequent change. For example the overall standards for the professional awards will by their nature be relatively stable. Indeed it is the central role of the professional body to ensure just this and its own standing depends on it.

It is required that mechanisms are in place to ensure that necessary enhancements and adaptations to any associated programmes are implemented from year to year (see also **Section 4.6.1**). This will be informed by continual internal monitoring, analysis and annual reviews of the associated programmes (including inputs from external examiners and boards of examiners or equivalent). Professional bodies which make aligned awards **should have appropriate quality assurance procedures for this and have agreed these with HETAC**. Such procedures should provide for the quality assurance of associated providers where appropriate.

There are limits to what may be changed before a professional award must be re-aligned or before alignment must be renewed. An extensive change to a professional award's standard (i.e. changes that HETAC believes to make a substantial difference to the standard) will result in the automatic withdrawal of alignment. The interpretation of what does or does not constitute an 'extensive change' while often self-evident may be a matter for expert judgement. Undermining anything which was essential to support the original alignment decision would be judged to be an 'extensive change'. Elimination of any core expectations concerning the minimum knowledge, skill and competence required to qualify for the award would also be judged to be an 'extensive change'. A change in the pre-requisite learning requirements for an associated programme without corresponding changes to the programme may be judged to be an extensive change unless other compensating changes are made. A significant change to the assessment procedures may also constitute a substantial change if either their reliability or validity is compromised. A substantial change in governance of the professional body or a merger with another body may also necessitate a review of alignment.

In some cases the change may be such as to allow the findings of the original alignment process to be reused. The alignment of the modified professional award could focus on what has changed.

HETAC should be consulted in case of any doubt about whether or not re-alignment is necessary following change to an aligned professional award (whether direct or indirect through changed circumstances).

1.5 Commencement of this policy

The policy applies to all new alignment (or re-alignment or renewal of alignment) decisions starting from **the date of adoption** whether or not the process underpinning the decision had begun prior to the commencement of this policy and criteria. Where processes had begun under the rescinded policy (see **Section 1.6**) they will be completed under the new policy and criteria, *de novo* if necessary (but without a new fee being charged).

1.6 Rescinding of previous alignment policies

The following policy and criteria are rescinded and replaced by HETAC's *Alignment Policy and Criteria 2011* and the documents that depend on it:

Alignment of non-statutory Awards of certain Irish bodies with the National Framework of Qualifications 2006 (HETAC Reference A.2.1)

2 Key Stages in the Professional Award Alignment Process

The alignment process is consistent with the generic quality assurance model promoted by the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* and the Irish Higher Education Quality Network's (IHEQN) '*Principles of Good Practice in Quality Assurance/Quality Improvement for Higher Education and Training*'. Specifically, the **ESG Standard 3.7** states that the processes of external quality assurance agencies will normally be expected to include:

- **Self-assessment:** *"a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process²";*
- **External assessment:** *"an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate³, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency";*
- **Report publication:** *"publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes;"*
- **Follow-up:** *"a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report".*

Alignment fits into this framework. *Full alignment* is an *ex post* process. It occurs after the professional awards have been established and made. *Candidate alignment* (**Section 1.1**) is an *ex ante* process. Alignment of a professional award includes self-assessment by the professional body concerned (where relevant involving representative associated providers); external assessment; report publication; and follow-up.

To ensure objectivity and for the avoidance of (real or apparent) conflicts of interest the *expert panel* (group of experts) which conducts the "external assessment" must be independent of the professional body concerned and of providers of any associated programmes. The internal and external assessments constitute the core of the alignment process.

In all cases HETAC will endeavour to undertake external assessments as cost-effectively as feasible consistent with the maintenance of the required level of rigour and objectivity. For example participation in an expert panel may be by teleconference where considered appropriate for practical reasons.

Normally an alignment report will include conditions and recommendations to be implemented following alignment. These will be followed-up by HETAC.

Alignment reports may include prerequisite conditions which must be met prior to the formal completion of alignment. Any such prerequisites must be followed-up by HETAC before a formal alignment decision is made.

HETAC will monitor the quality of professional awards which it aligns. Monitoring can be seen as long-term follow-up.

Following the alignment decision, the expert panel report will be published along with any response of the body concerned.

3 Professional Award Alignment Criteria

Both the **self-assessment** and the **external assessment** mentioned in **Section 2** must be carried out against criteria which will be used to determine whether or not a particular professional

² The italicised text here and in the following three stages is quoted from **ESG** Standard 3.7.

³ Alignment expert panels will normally include an assessor who can represent the interests of learners (**Section 4.4**).

award can be aligned with the National Framework of Qualifications. The professional award alignment criteria are presented below, first in outline and then elaborated.

3.1 Seven Outline Criteria for Professional Award Alignment

The professional award alignment criteria are outlined as follows (each is elaborated in **Section 3.2**):

- **Eligibility:** only eligible professional bodies may apply for alignment of their professional awards (**Section 4.1**).
- **General quality assurance, governance, operations and management:** Demonstrably effective governance, operational and management arrangements and quality assurance procedures shall underpin the professional award and any associated programmes (i.e. programmes relating to the award, including underpinning programmes).
- **Professional Award Standards and (where relevant) Volume (ECTS) of Newly Certified Learning:** The *minimum expected knowledge, skill and competence* (i.e. the minimum standard) to be attained by a candidate before the professional award may be conferred and the *volume of newly certified learning* shall be consistent with the *Professional Award-type Descriptor* defined at the NFQ Level at which alignment is sought. For alignment, the minimum standard shall have been demonstrated in professional awards already made.
- **Valid and reliable assessment:** Candidates shall be validly and reliably assessed (directly and/or through recognition of prior certified learning) as having attained the minimum expected knowledge, skill and competence required for the professional award.
- **Associated Programmes where relevant (i.e. where provided or endorsed by the professional body) shall be quality assured:**
 - Comprehensive procedures for the quality assurance of associated programmes shall be established and implemented.
 - The professional body shall have procedures to **assure** that any associated programme shall enable its *target learners* to attain the *programme standard (minimum intended programme learning outcomes)* reliably and efficiently.
 - The extent (partial or full) to which successful completion of the programme meets the requirements for the professional award shall be explicit and published.
- **Access Standard—Programme and Professional Award:** The *prerequisite learning* for participation in any associated programme and any other assumptions relating to such a programme's *target learners* shall be explicit. The standards required to access the professional award shall normally be limited exclusively to knowledge, skill and competence specifications unless otherwise explicitly required by applicable law.
- **Continuing Professional Development:** The professional body shall commit to facilitating the continuing professional development of award-holders.

3.1.1 Using the Criteria for New Awards: Candidate for Alignment at a Specified NFQ Level

The criteria in **Sections 3.1** and **3.2** are for alignment. Professional awards which have not yet been made may be considered against these criteria for endorsement as candidates for alignment. In this case due allowances will be made for the fact that certain kinds of evidence will not exist.

3.2 Elaborated Professional Award Alignment Criteria

This section elaborates upon the outline professional award alignment criteria. The criteria as presented here parallel some of those in HETAC's *Core Validation Policy and Criteria* 2010 to an extent.

3.2.1 Governance, Operations, Management and General Quality Assurance

1. The professional body shall have demonstrably effective governance, operation and management arrangements and quality assurance procedures underpinning the professional award and any associated programmes.
2. The professional body's philosophy, mission and strategic imperatives shall be consistent with its seeking alignment of its professional awards with the National Framework of Qualifications.
3. Quality assurance procedures shall be established for the purpose of maintaining and enhancing the quality of the professional awards, associated summative assessment and any associated programmes of education and training whether provided directly or by other providers (whether or not collaboratively).
4. If any *associated programmes* are provided by persons or bodies other than the professional body itself, it shall have procedures in place for the quality assurance of the collaboration with those persons or bodies (see also **Section 3.2.4**).
5. A quality ethos shall be embedded within the professional body and permeate all relevant parts of the organisation. The quality assurance procedures must provide for the evaluation by the professional body at regular intervals of aligned professional awards, associated summative assessment procedures and any associated programmes as well as the processes, facilities and services relating to them.
6. The quality assurance procedures shall normally provide for the periodic renewal of the alignment of the award—normally once every five years (see **Section 4.6**).
7. The quality assurance procedures shall be substantially consistent with current (at the time of application) nationally agreed standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education. These quality standards and guidelines, inter alia, explain what the term 'quality' means in the context of higher education and training.

3.2.2 Professional Award Standards

1. The *minimum expected knowledge, skill and competence* (minimum standard) to be attained by a candidate before the professional award may be conferred shall be consistent with the Professional Award-type Descriptor defined at the NFQ Level at which alignment is sought or made (see **Section 10**). **In some cases HETAC may translate the generalised professional award-type descriptor into a discipline-specific professional award standard in consultation with stakeholders. Under this this policy alignment with such a standard shall be taken to be alignment with the descriptor.**
2. The minimum standard described in (1) shall have been demonstrated through two or more sets of summative assessments tasks for the professional award.
3. *Representative* examples of key assessment tasks (with model responses and grading schemes) and *borderline pass responses* to those tasks shall be presented to corroborate the minimum expected standards.

4. The historical evolution of the professional award shall be documented and consistent with the application for alignment (e.g. the current minimum standard must be sustainable).
5. The *volume (ECTS) of newly certified learning shall* be judged by HETAC to be consistent with the Professional Award-type Descriptor defined at the NFQ Level at which alignment is sought or made. The minimum standard for a professional award may be partially attained through prior completion of an academic programme as certified by an academic award. The newly certified learning is the difference between the minimum standard for the professional award and any prior certified learning.

The descriptor allows flexibility concerning volume in exceptional cases for example where individuals meet the minimum standard for the professional award but where there is negligible newly certified learning and where alignment of the professional award is required for mobility or access, transfer or progression purposes. In such a case as this example the professional body's awarding procedures shall specify that no ECTS credit shall be attached to the alignment and that this shall be reflected in the *Certificate Supplement*.

6. In making judgements against this criterion HETAC may take into consideration any alignment-relevant linkages between the professional award and other recognised benchmarks, for example, alignment with other qualifications frameworks or acceptance of the professional award in lieu of academic qualifications required for access to specified programmes in specified higher education institutions.
7. The professional body shall have explicit and effective procedures for maintaining the currency of the professional award standard i.e. the *minimum expected knowledge, skill and competence* to be attained by a candidate before the professional award may be conferred.

3.2.3 Valid and Reliable Assessment

1. Only knowledge, skill and competence which have been *validly* and *reliably* assessed for the purpose of making the professional award shall contribute towards qualifying a candidate to receive the professional award. The meanings of valid and reliable are provided in Interpretations (**Section 8**).
2. Relevant prior learning (prior to making the award) shall be assessed for the purpose of making the professional award unless any prior assessment carried out and certified (but see **Section 3.2.2 (5)**) by a competent body can be demonstrated to be valid and reliable for the purpose of contributing to qualifying a person for a professional award.
3. Non-assessed learning shall not qualify a person wholly or partially for a professional award aligned to the National Framework of Qualifications.

3.2.4 Quality Assurance of *Associated Programmes* (where relevant)

This criterion and sub-criteria apply whenever the professional body making a professional award provides, organises or procures programmes of education and training specifically designed to assist 'target learners' to attain the minimum standards required for the professional award. *Quality assured programmes leading to recognised educational awards (e.g. awards in the NFQ) which entitle a person to exemptions are not considered associated programmes.* If other persons or bodies are involved in the provision of any associated programmes which are endorsed by the professional body, **they and the relevant programmes will have to be quality assured by the professional body** to satisfy the following criteria.

This criterion and sub-criteria share much in common with HETAC's validation criteria. However in validation HETAC must examine each programme directly against each sub-criterion whereas in the context of alignment it is sufficient that HETAC is satisfied that there are quality assurance procedures which will deal with the problems that can occur under each criterion. It may look more closely at some of the programmes as examples but is unlikely to examine all of them as part of an alignment process.

1. The professional body has procedures to **assure** that any associated programme shall enable its *target learners* to attain the *minimum intended programme learning outcomes* reliably and efficiently (in terms of learner effort). The extent to which successful completion of the programme meets the requirements for the professional award shall be explicit and published.

It is important to note that the *minimum intended programme learning outcomes* of associated programmes may or may not be the same as the *minimum expected knowledge, skill and competence* to be attained by a candidate before the professional award may be conferred.

2. To quality assure a programme of education and training it is necessary to know 'where learners start' and 'where they ought to get to'. Therefore, the following shall be explicitly required for each programme associated with the professional award:
 - a) the target learners' prerequisite learning and any other relevant assumptions about programme participants;
 - b) the minimum intended programme learning outcomes and any other educational objectives of the programme.
3. The quality assurance procedures for approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes shall focus on programmes in the light of their intended programme learning outcomes and the change in learning they intend to bring about.

The following points elaborate on the specific evidence that should fall within the scope of the quality assurance procedures for any associated programmes. These criteria are informed by HETAC's *Core Validation Policy and Criteria* and the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area 3ed*.

- a) The programme's content and learning environment shall be appropriate to the programme's intended learning outcomes.
 - i. The programme's staff (assessors, teachers, etc.) as a group must be competent to enable learners to develop or achieve the intended programme learning outcomes and to assess learners' achievements (see HETAC's *Assessment and Standards 2009*);
 - ii. The programme's learning environment (physical, social, and intellectual and recognising that the environment may be virtual) including resources (see the final paragraph of this section) and supports should be consistent with the intended programme learning outcomes; the places at which, or virtual spaces within which, instruction is to be provided should be specified and suitable;
 - iii. Programme content including reading lists, lecture notes, and any other material used by the programme should be appropriate—lists of materials should be included in the self-assessment and these materials should be available for inspection at any site visit or when requested;

- iv. The programme should make reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities (including access) (see the various guidelines published by AHEAD www.ahead.ie and *Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners*);
 - v. If the programme will be accessed by international students appropriate provisions should be made: see *Provision of Education to International Students: Code of Practice and Guidelines for Irish Higher Education Institutions* (IHEQN) 2009.
- b) The programme shall provide authentic learning opportunities to enable the achievement of the intended programme learning outcomes.
- i. The programme's strategy for enabling learners to move from the minimum access standard to the minimum intended programme learning outcome (or beyond) should be explicit, realistic and effective. The programme should be provided in a way that its intended learning outcomes can be reliably and efficiently attained by the learners. It is to be expected that all learners who are judged qualified to access a particular programme should be able to graduate from that programme subject to their making a reasonable effort and complying with the programme's conditions.
 - ii. The programme and module assessment strategies (for both formative and summative assessment) should be both clear and appropriate (see HETAC's *Assessment and Standards 2009*). They should provide for the verification of the attainment of the intended learning outcomes.
 - iii. In the case of a modular programme with electives, the pool of modules and the learning pathway constraints should be explicit and appropriate in the light of the intended programme learning outcomes (see **section 7.0**). Providers of modular programmes should have effective guidance services for learners on the selection of appropriate learning pathways.
- c) The programme shall compare favourably against benchmarks (where appropriate). Evidence for this should be rigorously established and presented.
- d) The information about the programme as well as its procedures for access, transfer and progression should be consistent with the procedures described in national *Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners*.
- i. The presentation of the programme should not lead learners to presume that successful completion of the programme will automatically entitle them to enter a particular profession or progress to another programme unless this is actually the case.
 - ii. The programme's provisions for *Recognition of Prior Learning* should be consistent with HETAC's *Assessment and Standards 2009* and with relevant national policy including NQAI's *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training 2005*.
- e) Any associated programme which is compulsory should meet genuine education and training needs i.e. it should be necessary to enable a learner to progress towards meeting the professional award standard.

- i. The provider should have evidence that the programme meets the target learners' education and training needs.
 - ii. Associated programmes processes and the intended programme learning outcomes should be adequately informed by the views of appropriate stakeholders such as learners, graduates, lecturers, employers and relevant advisory, statutory or regulatory bodies.
- f) The programme should be viable.
 - i. The programme's provider should have a viable delivery/business-plan for the programme. This is important for several reasons. For example if the programme assumes a certain cohort size it may not function as planned if either insufficient or excessive numbers are recruited.
 - ii. The programme's provider should have satisfactory contingency arrangements for adapting to changing circumstances or coping with the failure of the programme (having due regard for the interests of learners).
 - iii. The programme should be consistent with the provider's mission and strategy.
- g) The programme should have procedures for the assessment of learners which should be consistent with HETAC's *Assessment and Standards 2009* (but see also **Section 5.2** on conditions of alignment).
 - i. A *programme assessment strategy* should be provided for the programme as a whole and *module assessment strategies* for each of its constituent modules.
 - ii. The procedures for assessment for the professional award must require competent independent objective external involvement in the summative assessment decisions e.g. through the use of external examiners.
- h) The programme's provider should have appropriate quality assurance arrangements for the proposed programme. If the professional body is not the provider, it should agree these quality assurance arrangements with the provider concerned.

3.2.5 Access Standard

1. Access standard—associated programme: The *prerequisite learning* for participation in any associated programme and any other assumptions relating to such a programme's *target learners* shall be explicit.
2. Access standard—professional award: The standards required to access the award shall normally be limited exclusively to knowledge, skill and competence specifications unless otherwise explicitly required by applicable law.

3.2.6 Continuing Professional Development

The professional body shall undertake to facilitate the continuing professional development of members who are holders of aligned professional awards. (Continuing compliance with this criterion post alignment will not be monitored by HETAC. HETAC does not set down specific requirements for continuing professional development.)

4 Alignment Processes

This section explains which bodies may apply for alignment and sets out the main stages in the process.

Where a professional body has peer professional bodies issuing professional awards in the same or similar discipline areas, it shall inform HETAC of this. HETAC may, for the purpose of ensuring fairness and consistency, publish a call for expressions of interest indicating that it is considering the establishment of an alignment process in the discipline area in order to attempt to identify other professional bodies in relevant discipline areas so that it can invite them to submit their awards for alignment in parallel. The call for expression of interest need not identify the initiating applicant. Parallel alignment may use a single panel to consider multiple applications fairly and consistently. Nevertheless, alignment decisions are made by HETAC on the basis of the available evidence considered in the light of the alignment criteria (**Section 3**). Unwillingness of one body to seek alignment shall not impede another from doing so. This kind of parallel alignment may not be feasible in all foreseeable cases.

Submission of an application for alignment shall be accompanied by the appropriate fee and will be assumed by HETAC to imply acceptance of the professional award alignment policy and criteria.

Note that complaints may be made at any stage in accordance with the procedures set out in the *HETAC Customer Charter 2004* but subject to the *Professional Award Alignment Policy and Criteria*.

4.1 Bodies Which May Apply for Alignment

Subject to **Section 4.1.1**, professional bodies making professional awards in Ireland pertaining to the following functions may seek to have those awards aligned:

- Bodies which make awards on an Irish statutory basis other than those whose awards are already included in the NFQ i.e. currently the awards of the State Examinations Commission, the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the universities, the Dublin Institute of Technology, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and any institution with authority delegated from an awards Council to make awards.
- Bodies which have a function in relation to the regulation of professions under European Union Directives for the Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications. The regulation of a profession may relate to practice in a profession or to the use of certain professional titles.
- Bodies making international sectoral awards, defined as awards developed to meet the industry-defined certification needs of a specific sector, internationally. Generally, these awards are not part of the national awarding system of any particular country but they enjoy wide employer and learner acceptance within many countries.

Notwithstanding the above, any professional body seeking to have an award aligned shall be able to demonstrate that it operates within a stable community of practice which can support necessary standards to meet the criteria for alignment.

4.1.1 Additional Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible to submit a professional award for alignment an applicant professional body must satisfy the following (in addition to the above):

- (i) Have the standing required to make the professional award;

- (ii) Have the capacity to maintain a secure and permanent professional awards archive.

4.2 Withdrawing an application for alignment of an award

An application for alignment may be withdrawn by the applicant at any stage prior to the formal alignment decision by HETAC (see **section 4.4 Step 7**). No report will be published in this context. If withdrawal occurs following **Step 1** in **section 4.4** the application fee will not be refunded by HETAC.

4.3 Preparing the Application for Alignment and Self-assessment

Prior to making an application for alignment of a professional award, a professional body will conduct a self-assessment of its own eligibility, the relevant professional award, associated summative assessment methods, quality assurance procedures and its own governance, operation and management, any associated programmes and providers, access arrangements, and continuing professional development arrangements. This self-assessment process will be guided by the alignment criteria (see **Section 3**).

The self-assessment process should be critically reflective and may involve experts who are external to the professional body.

An application for alignment should specify the NFQ Level at which alignment is sought—this may be Level 7, 8 or 9 exclusively.

A report on the self-assessment along with supporting documentation including context, examples, descriptions, specifications, explanations, regulations and procedures, will be presented to HETAC, along with the application for alignment, for external assessment.

The following structure is required. All headings should be addressed in the light of the information needs implied by the alignment criteria. All assertions must be supported.

- The professional body and its context: explanatory and informative
- The professional award and its context: explanatory and informative
- Routes to gaining the professional award: explanatory and informative
- Rationale for seeking alignment of the professional award at the specified level: explanatory and informative
- Self-assessment against the alignment criteria: rigorous and reflective
- Conclusions
- Supporting Annexes: explanatory and informative
 - Professional body's standing (corporate, legal, professional, financial,...)
 - Professional body's quality assurance procedures
 - Two complete sets of summative assessment tasks with assessment strategies, marking schemes, model responses and a sample of anonymous candidate responses at the pass threshold
 - Detailed description of associated programmes provided or endorsed (see HETAC's General Programme Validation Manual for a possible template)
 - List of providers of endorsed programmes

4.4 The External Assessment Process for Alignment

It is not possible to specify a precise timeframe for an arbitrary alignment process. However, HETAC will attempt to undertake its work as quickly as possible and will attempt to estimate the timeframe at the enquiry stage on a case-by-case basis.

Alignment of professional awards involves the following steps.

Step 0: When a professional body decides to consider alignment it should make contact with HETAC well in advance of making a formal application.

At this stage HETAC will conduct a desk review of the discipline area to identify and define the relevant community(ies) of practice and context. As part of this study, HETAC will endeavour to contact other professional bodies in the discipline area informing them that it expects an application for alignment and inviting them to consider applying for alignment (see the second paragraph of Section 4).

Up to one year may be allowed to facilitate a coordinated approach to aligning multiple professional awards in the same discipline area. The purpose of coordination is to facilitate fairness and consistency of alignment decisions.

During Step 0 the prospective applicant may contact HETAC about the policy and criteria.

The prospective applicant may also discuss the presentation of the application with HETAC staff. Any feedback given by HETAC staff concerning the presentation of the application at this stage is entirely informal and will relate to HETAC's policy and criteria and will be given in good faith without prejudice to the ultimate alignment decision.

Step 1: Acknowledgement and desk-review: Following receipt of an alignment application the HETAC executive acknowledges the application in writing and then conducts (or arranges) a desk-review to determine whether or not the application addresses the alignment criteria and ostensibly provides the information described in Section 4.3.

If HETAC considers that the application inadequately addresses the criteria, or is inadequately presented, it will inform the provider along with a written statement of the reasons. The provider may then revise its application and resubmit it within eight weeks of being informed by HETAC. If following resubmission the application is still unacceptable it will be refused and the application fee will not be refunded by HETAC.

Step 2: Expert panel selection: Following acceptance of an application an expert panel is established to make an assessment of the application.

The expert panel is constituted on a case-by-case basis in accordance with **Section 2**.

HETAC's Participating in an evaluation panel as an expert assessor: Guidelines should be used to guide the panel members.

Alignment expert panels will require expertise in the professional award's discipline-area and in generic areas including professional education, assessment, the national framework of qualifications, the EQF or other qualifications frameworks and quality assurance. Expert panels should be competent to make national and international comparisons. Alignment expert panels will normally include an assessor who can represent the interests of learners.

As noted at the beginning of **Section 4**, where multiple professional awards are to be aligned in the same discipline area the same panel may be used for different alignment applications and may handle the applications in parallel to ensure fairness and consistency.

The applicant professional body shall be informed in writing of the intended panel membership before it is confirmed and invited to disclose in writing whether or not there are any relevant interests that might conflict or appear to conflict with the alignment process and those interests.

Step 3A: Preliminary meeting:

The chairperson-designate of the expert panel and up to one other member-designate will meet the applicant with a member of the HETAC executive in attendance.

At this meeting the chairperson-designate will outline the approach to be taken in the external assessment. He or she will have read the application and may request that additional documents be submitted arising from the application material.

A minute of this meeting will be taken by the HETAC executive and agreed with participants.

Step 3: External assessment:

The expert panel assesses the case made by the applicant for alignment of the relevant professional award at the specified level against the alignment criteria.

The professional body's self-assessment report is a key *part* of the evidence considered by the expert panel. It will also consider the minute of the preliminary meeting and any supplementary material provided by request. If there is a site visit the findings arising from this are also considered.

The expert panel (or part of it) will normally undertake site-visit(s) (to relevant place(s)) as part of the assessment. The site-visit(s) enable(s) the expert panel to interview the professional body's leadership and other personnel about the application and related matters. It also allows the panel to experience the *learning environment* (where relevant) and environment in which assessment is conducted, explore the *quality assurance procedures*, and assess the appropriateness of relevant facilities and resources. The site-visit(s) may also provide an opportunity for the expert panel to discuss the professional award and associated matters *in situ* with other relevant stakeholders including any relevant learners. External arrangements for the site visit(s) will be made by HETAC in consultation with the expert panel and the professional body.

The expert panel will normally provide informal feedback to the professional body at the conclusion of a site visit. This feedback should not be taken as representing the final expert panel report which may contain material which modifies or qualifies the informal feedback because the expert panel's deliberations may continue until its report is finalised.

Should the expert panel be of the opinion that the professional award cannot be aligned at the NFQ Level sought it may, provided there is sufficient information available to it, recommend alignment at a different available level. If such a recommendation is being contemplated the applicant will be informed and it may elect to withdraw its application (**Section 4.2**) and halt the process.

Step 4: Expert panel report: Normally, shortly after the site visit the expert panel will agree a report of its findings, conclusions, prerequisites for alignment, conditions and recommendations. This report is known as the draft expert panel report.

The report must be explicit and unambiguous concerning:

- Whether or not the professional award should be aligned;
- Whether or not the quality assurance procedures should be agreed;
- Prerequisites for alignment (i.e. conditions which must be met before the professional award is aligned);
- Special conditions for alignment.

The conclusions must be based on judgements made against the alignment criteria. Its findings and recommendations should relate to the alignment criteria.

The prospective readers of the expert panel report include:

1. The HETAC Academic Committee and Council (for decision)
2. The professional body's Board or Governing Authority or equivalent (for quality assurance and enhancement)
3. The professional body's Professional Awards Committee or equivalent (for quality assurance and enhancement)
4. Persons involved in the provision of any associated programmes (for quality assurance and enhancement) including external examiners or equivalent persons.
5. The public including prospective candidates for the professional award and learners (for quality assurance and information).

These stakeholders have different information needs and expertise. Accordingly, the expert panel report should be divided into two parts. The first part should include the report's main findings, conclusions and recommendations. More detailed quality enhancement recommendations and related findings and conclusions should be included in the second part addressed to the programme board.

HETAC may set aside a draft expert panel report if in its opinion

- it does not address the alignment criteria or
- it demonstrates poor judgement on matters substantive to alignment or
- the credibility of the alignment process has been compromised in any way.

In this case a fresh external assessment process will be launched. However, normally HETAC will accept and abide by the clearly-expressed findings in a report of an independent expert panel.

After the expert panel has agreed a draft expert panel report and this has been accepted by the HETAC executive, this will be sent to the professional body by HETAC. **The professional body will be invited to indicate in writing, within the time specified, if it does not accept the factual accuracy of the report.**

If there are factual errors in the draft expert panel report these will be corrected and a revised report will be issued.

If at this stage the provider is not satisfied that the alignment process was conducted appropriately in accordance with HETAC policy and criteria it should make a written complaint. This will be investigated by a group comprising members of the HETAC executive not directly involved with the instance concerned and at least one person who is independent of HETAC. If on the basis of this investigation, the HETAC executive is satisfied that the process is reliable it will continue with the process and forward the professional body's comments to the HETAC Academic Committee. This does not impinge on the professional body's right to complain or to appeal under **Section 4.10**. If the HETAC executive is not satisfied that the process is reliable but considers that it can be remedied, it will take the necessary actions. Otherwise, a fresh external assessment process will be launched.

Step 5: Provider response: The expert panel report is sent to the professional body which is invited to respond in writing (within a specified time) on the expert panel report's findings, conclusions, prerequisites for alignment, conditions and recommendations. If the professional body does not respond in writing within the specified time the application will be considered withdrawn.

The professional body's response should:

- Demonstrate the modifications made to meet any prerequisites for validation.

- Explain how any special conditions have been met or will be met (in which case this should be addressed in the implementation plan [mentioned in the next bulleted item]).
- Provide an implementation plan to address the expert panel report's recommendations and conditions with specific objectives, actions, times, targets/success-metrics.

Step 6: Final expert panel assessment: Following consideration of the professional body's response, the expert panel agrees a brief statement setting out its reaction and its final recommendations to Council regarding alignment. This statement will be included as an addendum to the report and included in the submission to Academic Committee.

Step 7: HETAC Decision: The Higher Education and Training Awards Council has delegated the formal alignment decision and the decision to agree quality assurance procedures to its Academic Committee but **decisions are subject to confirmation by Council**. The Academic Committee's decision is based on HETAC's alignment policy and criteria and informed by the following evidence:

1. The expert panel report;
2. The provider's response;
3. The expert panel's reaction to the provider's response if any;
4. A memorandum from the HETAC executive on the context for and conduct of the process noting any concerns or complaints expressed by the provider.

The expert panel report may be adopted by the HETAC Academic Committee (or Council) as it is or with amendment. The Academic Committee (or Council) may impose additional conditions to those recommended by the panel. If major amendments are considered necessary, this will be managed by HETAC in consultation with the expert panel chairperson.

Step 8: Report Publication

The professional body is required to publish its quality assurance procedures on its website and meet all pre-conditions before alignment takes effect.

Following the alignment decision the expert panel report is published on the HETAC website.

If the decision is to align then a Certificate of Alignment will be issued and this will include conditions of alignment.

Right to Rebuttal

If a professional body makes any public claim whatsoever relating to alignment by HETAC or related matters which in HETAC's opinion is factually incorrect, HETAC reserves the right to publicly rebut that claim.

4.5 Post-alignment Follow-up by HETAC

HETAC will monitor professional bodies with aligned professional awards in a similar manner to the way in which it monitors providers of higher education and training. See also **Section 5** on conditions of alignment.

4.6 Renewal of Alignment and Re-alignment

Alignment is normally for five years. The process for the renewal of alignment is essentially the same as that for alignment however it only needs to focus on what has changed (e.g. in the award, in its assessment procedures, in the associated programmes or in the applicable alignment policy criteria) so it may be less onerous than the initial alignment. For renewal of

alignment the professional body may (and normally shall be required to) apply to HETAC seeking to take responsibility for implementing the routine elements of **Step 1** to **Step 6**.

In the unusual event that the application for renewal of alignment must be delayed a professional body may apply for an extension (for up to two years) of the alignment duration to enable it to complete its application (including self-assessment). Such extensions are not automatic and if granted by HETAC may be subject to conditions.

A professional body may seek to have its award re-aligned where reasonable grounds for suspecting that the actual level of that aligned award is inconsistent with the NFQ Level at which it is aligned. The process will be conducted by HETAC as a *de novo* alignment and the same appeals process will apply. This provision is not intended to serve as an appeal process.

4.6.1 Changes to professional awards following alignment

As already noted minor changes to professional awards will normally be required from year to year. Substantial changes may be proposed following quinquennial *self-assessment* when applying for renewal of alignment (see Section 4.6). Occasionally circumstances will require the self-assessment to be brought forward.

4.7 Review and withdrawal of alignment by HETAC

The review and withdrawal of alignment will, *mutatis mutandis*, be conducted in accordance with the process and criteria outlined in Section 26 of the *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act*. This means, for example, that HETAC may review an alignment at any time.

Withdrawal of alignment may only occur following a review described in the previous paragraph. If, following such a review, HETAC (specifically the Council) decides to withdraw a professional award's alignment the professional body concerned may make representations to HETAC as outlined in the same section of the *Qualifications Act*, *mutatis mutandis*.

4.8 Review of Quality Assurance Procedures

HETAC will review the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures underpinning each aligned award from time to time and in such a manner as it sees fit, will publish its findings and make recommendations. Failure to respond adequately to any such recommendations may result in the review and consequent withdrawal of alignment.

4.9 Refusal of Alignment

Refusal of alignment may occur when an application for alignment is not accepted (see **Sections 4.1** and **4.4 Step 1**) or when the HETAC Academic Committee (**subject to confirmation by the Council**) upon consideration of the findings of the expert panel is not satisfied (against the criteria in **Section 3**) that the alignment criteria have been demonstrated to have been satisfied. Where this occurs the professional body will be informed of this by notice in writing and of the reasons for this decision.

Where HETAC refuses to align a professional award the professional body concerned may make representations to HETAC. This process shall, *mutatis mutandis*, be that set out in **section 26** of the *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act* for representations concerning withdrawal of validation. The principles of natural justice will apply.

4.10 Appeals Against Refusal or Withdrawal of Alignment by HETAC

Where HETAC refuses or withdraws alignment and has confirmed its decision following consideration of any representations made by the provider, the provider of the programme concerned may appeal to the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (the Authority). This

process shall, mutatis mutandis, be that set out in **Section 27** of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act for appeals against refusal or withdrawal of validation. The principles of natural justice will apply.

5 Conditions of alignment

The conditions of alignment will be set out on the Certificate of Alignment. This section sets out standard conditions but normally additional situation-specific conditions will also be specified.

- Alignment normally applies for up to five years—in exceptional cases this may be extended by HETAC for up to two years. Such extensions if granted by HETAC may be subject to further conditions.

The professional body shall:

- **Issue annually to HETAC a signed declaration of compliance with the conditions of alignment.**
- Maintain the *standing* required to make the professional award.
- Maintain the standard of the professional award in accordance with the relevant Professional Award-type Descriptor.
- Maintain a permanent and secure awards database and periodically (as required and at least annually) provide statistical information to HETAC about each aligned professional award it makes in an agreed format.
- Implement quality assurance procedures agreed with HETAC.
- Implement procedures for the assessment of learners (including external examining arrangements or equivalent objective external interface to support public confidence in the assessment underpinning the professional award) which are consistent with HETAC's *Assessment and Standards 2009*.
- Implement the procedures described in the NQAI document *Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners*.
- Implement any special conditions of alignment attached to the relevant award-type descriptors.
- Co-operate with and assist HETAC, and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, in the performance of their functions.
- Maintain learner data records in order to assist HETAC in the performance of its functions
- Provide the information required by HETAC's external quality assurance functions.
- Subject to **Section 4.6** obtain HETAC's approval prior to substantially amending the professional award's minimum expected knowledge, skill and competence requirements, save in the case of incremental enhancements arising from the implementation of findings of the agreed quality assurance procedures.
- Notify HETAC of any information concerning the professional award, the associated assessment procedures, any associated programme, or any related matters or circumstances that may reasonably be expected to give HETAC cause to consider reviewing the alignment. Explicitly this includes where any other body withdraws or seeks to withdraw or alter conditions of alignment (or any other form of recognition) of the relevant professional award or of the approval of any associated programmes or other relevant processes or criteria.

- Notify HETAC of any change in circumstances affecting the professional body which could affect or be perceived to affect the professional award or related matters. This includes significant changes in governance, ownership, legal status, profile of staff or members or associates, profile of candidates or learners, numbers enrolled, facilities, or resources.

6 Estimating Volume Using ECTS Credit in the Context of Alignment

HETAC recognises that ECTS credit is difficult to reliably assign to professional education and training programmes. However, it is helpful to award-holders if credit can be associated with aligned awards. This section discusses the concept of ECTS credit and volume.

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is derived from formal higher education and training experience. It is not optimised for professional development programmes. However, it is the only widely recognised system presently available for quantifying volume of learning associated with periods of study. Associating ECTS credit with a professional award should, along with alignment, make it more likely that the professional award is given due recognition for access, transfer and progression (mobility) purposes.

This policy uses ECTS credit as a proxy for volume of learning—if alternative proxies or measures are discovered these may be used in place of ECTS credit provided they can be mapped to it.

In the ECTS, sixty credits represent the learning effort expended, on *average*, in one academic year by a full-time student. Using this as a starting point it is often claimed that 1 ECTS represents 25 to 30 hours of effort on average. Some students will have to expend much more effort some much less. The *ECTS Credit User's Guide* (2009) elaborates.

Applying ECTS credit to programmes based on instruction and formal assessment can be done with reference to the above. The difficulty involved is comparable to that faced by higher education institutions i.e. it is challenging but some benchmarks exist and people normally find ways of estimating credit (though unfortunately what one encounters in practice is not always reliable).

Applying ECTS to programmes of probationary professional practice is much more difficult—it is not appropriate to count all of the time spent working nor is it appropriate to count only the time spent in formal study.

One approach is to try to infer the ECTS credit from the change in learning. Comparing the change in *transferable* learning with the change that normally occurs in one academic year allows credit assignment. The qualifier 'transferable' is necessary because not everything which is learned in a period of professional practice should be counted.

It is important for the professional body to explain the rationale underpinning the estimation of any credit claimed.

7 Database for Aligned Professional Awards

HETAC shall maintain and publish a database of aligned professional awards. The following information shall be included:

- Name of the award
- Name of professional body making the award
- Award years aligned
- Any ECTS Credits associated with the professional award

16/12/2011 Professional Award Alignment Policy and Criteria

- Associated programmes which are quality assured by the professional body
- Conditions

8 Interpretations

Access	The process by which learners may commence a programme of education and training having received recognition for knowledge, skill or competence required. (See the NQAI document <i>Policies, actions and procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners.</i>)
Alignment, Renewal of Alignment, Re-alignment, Review of Alignment	<p>The alignment process, for the purpose of this policy, is to determine whether a professional award made by an eligible professional body can be recognised to be at either Level 7, 8 or 9 in the National Framework of Qualifications . The NQAI (www.nqai.ie) may be consulted about other kinds of alignment not addressed by this policy.</p> <p>The process for the renewal of alignment determines whether or not the continuing validity of the alignment of an award is warranted it may result in the renewal of alignment or cause the initiation of a review of alignment by HETAC.</p> <p>The process for the review of alignment determines whether or not the continuing validity of the alignment of an award is warranted and may result in the withdrawal of alignment.</p> <p>Re-alignment is a process by which the NFQ Level at which an award is aligned may be changed. The process is conducted as a <i>de novo</i> alignment.</p>
Associated programmes	Programmes of education and training specifically designed to assist ‘target learners’ to attain the minimum standards required for the professional award. <i>Quality assured programmes leading to recognised educational awards (e.g. awards in the NFQ) which entitle a person to exemptions are not considered associated programmes.</i>
Award	An award which is conferred, granted or given by an awarding body and which records that a learner has acquired a standard of knowledge, skill or competence.
Award-type descriptor	An award-type descriptor is a description of a class of named awards sharing common features and level. Award-type descriptors are determined by the National Framework of Qualifications.
ECTS	See <i>ECTS Users’ Guide</i> (2009) ‘ECTS credits are attached to the workload of a fulltime year of formal learning (academic year) and the associated learning outcomes. In most cases, student workload ranges from 1,500 to 1,800 hours for an academic year,

whereby one credit corresponds to 25 to 30 hours of work.’

ESG

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Published by ENQA in 2005 and available at <http://www.enqa.eu>

Expert Panel

See ‘*Participating in an evaluation panel as an expert assessor: Guidelines 2009*’ (HETAC Reference H.4.3)

Institutional Review Policy

See ‘*Policy on Institutional Review of Providers of Higher Education and Training*’, December 2007 (HETAC Reference H.1.1)

Minimum Expected Knowledge, Skill and Competence (for a professional award)

The minimum achievement (in terms of knowledge, skill and competence) that the learner must demonstrate before he/she is entitled to receive the relevant professional award.

If the minimum expectations allow substantial choice to a candidate, there may need to be variant forms of the minimum expected knowledge, skill and competence — e.g. a professional award might allow elective specialisations in addition to the core.

A learner is eligible for the relevant professional award if he or she has demonstrated, through assessment (including by recognition of prior learning), attainment of the relevant minimum expected knowledge, skill and competence.

Minimum Intended Programme Learning Outcome

The interpretation here is from Assessment and Standards 2009.

The minimum achievement (in terms of knowledge, skill and Programme Learning 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. These must always be specified by the provider. If the programme allows substantial choice, there may need to be variant forms of the minimum intended programme outcomes — e.g. a programme might allow a person to choose from a number of specialisations.

A learner who completes a validated programme is eligible for the relevant award if he or she has demonstrated, through assessment (including by recognition of prior learning), attainment of the relevant minimum intended programme learning outcomes.

In addition to minimum intended programme learning outcomes, the programme provider may aspire to describing other ‘intended programme learning outcomes’ beyond the minimum. In this document, ‘intended learning outcomes’ refers to all or any of the intended outcomes, including the minimum ones. The term ‘Minimum intended learning outcomes’ refers exclusively to the minimum ones. The minimum intended programme learning outcomes identify the principal educational goal of the programme — effective assessment helps learners to attain that goal. Minimum intended programme learning outcomes are developed and maintained by providers. Programmes are

designed to enable learners to achieve minimum intended programme learning outcomes. Minimum intended learning outcomes are specified for each of a programme's constituent modules.

The number of learning outcomes in a statement of intended learning outcomes is variable (depending, for example, on the semantics and the level of explicitness used). This is not a proxy for credit.

Teachers and learners may strive for additional learning outcomes that are beyond the minimum. In addition to 'minimum intended programme learning outcomes', providers may describe other levels of intended programme learning outcomes beyond the minimum.

See also intended learning outcomes in *Assessment and Standards 2009*.

Learning Environment

Learning environments are diverse. Teachers and other learners are part of a learner's learning environment. Learning environments have both physical and social structures. Learners interact with the learning environment; the environment responds to the learner, and the learner to the environment. (*Assessment and Standards 2009*.)

Prerequisite Learning

Knowledge, skill and competence to be attained prior to enrolment on a programme or module.

Professional Award

It is a vocational qualification certifying that the holder has the necessary knowledge, skill and competence to practice a specified profession at a specified level under specified conditions.

Professional Award-type Descriptor

An award-type descriptor which is part of the National Framework of Qualifications (www.nfq.ie). The descriptor is provided in **Section 10** at the end of this document.

Professional Body

In the context of this paper, it is a body which makes professional awards. It may also have other functions.

Programme Assessment Strategy

See HETAC's *Assessment and Standards 2009* (pp. 13-14).

Provider

A 'provider of a programme of education and training' is a person who, or body which, provides, organises or procures a programme of education and training.

Quality Assurance Procedures

Providers of programmes of higher education and training are required to establish, having regard to existing procedures, if any, procedures for quality assurance for the purpose of further improving and maintaining the quality of education and training which is provided, organised or procured by that provider as part of the programme concerned and shall agree those procedures with the Council.

HETAC agrees registered provider's institutional procedures at

registration. Programme-specific procedures are normally agreed at validation. In the context of alignment HETAC agrees a professional body's procedures as part of the alignment process.

A professional body seeking alignment of its professional awards is required to have and agree quality assurance procedures for its awarding functions, its assessment functions, any associated programmes it provides or any associated programmes it endorses and their providers, as detailed in **Section 3.2.4**.

Recognition of Prior Learning

See '*Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training (NQAI June 2005*' and HETAC's *Assessment and Standards 2009* (pp. 29-30).

Registered HETAC Provider

See HETAC's Policy on Registration of Providers 2008 (HETAC Reference D.1.2).

Reliable [Assessment]

An assessment's reliability is the confidence one can have in the result or how informative it is. Inference in the assessment of learning may be inductive, in the sense that observing particular instances of a trait or quality may be used to infer the presence of that trait or quality. Inference may be deductive, in the sense that the existence of a particular trait may be deduced if associated traits are observed. Inference is subject to error. If a fully reliable assessment were possible, it would return a result with complete certainty. A simple measure to increase reliability is, for example, the double grading of essays (i.e. two examiners grading each essay independently). This is likely to reduce the variability in grading that is due to the examiners. The choice of assessment task, given the intended outcome and the learner, is another important source of variability. Using a diversity of assessment tasks to measure an outcome can increase reliability but at the expense of learner and assessor effort. Please see HETAC's *Assessment and Standards* for a fuller discussion of relevant matters.

Target learners

Target learners are persons with specified prerequisite learning and other legitimate prescribed characteristics (e.g. a programme might be designed for students who wish to study through a particular language).

Validation

"Validation" means the process by which an awarding body shall satisfy itself that a learner may attain knowledge, skill or competence for the purpose of an award made by the awarding body.'

Valid [Assessment]

Validity essentially means fitness-for-purpose. A valid assessment: (i) allows inference of the attainment of the learning outcomes it purports to address; (ii) assesses the person it purports to assess; and (iii) is appropriate for informing the decisions that it purports to inform. Condition (iii) is required because an assessment may be valid for informing one decision but invalid for another.

9 References

European Communities *ECTS User's Guide* 2009

HETAC *Assessment and Standards* 2009 (HETAC Reference C.1.1)

HETAC *Customer Charter* 2004 (HETAC Reference K.4.1)

HETAC *Core Validation Policy and Criteria* 2010 (HETAC Reference E.1.8)

HETAC *Participating in an evaluation panel as an expert assessor: Guidelines* 2009 (HETAC reference H.4.3)

HETAC *Provider Monitoring Policy and Procedures* 2010 (HETAC Reference F.1.2)

NQAI *Policies, actions and procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners* 2003

IHEQN *Provision of Education to International Students: Code of Practice and Guidelines for Irish Higher Education Institutions* 2009 (HETAC Reference E.2.3)

NQAI *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of a National Approach to Credit in Irish Higher Education and Training* 2006

NQAI *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training* 2005

10 Professional Award-type Descriptors (Award Class: Professional) For the Alignment of Professional Awards at NFQ Levels 7, 8 and 9.

	Thread	L7	L8	L9
		Level 7 Professional Award	Level 8 Professional Award	Level 9 Professional Award
Volume	Volume of corresponding programme	Variable. Normally the volume of newly certified learning will be at least 30 credits or equivalent however, in exceptional conditions this may be waived by the Authority.	Variable. Normally the volume of newly certified learning will be at least 30 credits or equivalent however, in exceptional conditions this may be waived by the Authority.	Variable. Normally the volume of newly certified learning will be at least 30 credits or equivalent however, in exceptional conditions this may be waived by the Authority.
Purpose	The uses to which the knowledge, skill and competence will be put	The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are proper to <u>autonomous professional practice typically in a structured setting or in an organisation</u> , as well as relevant to personal development, participation in society, employment and study including access to additional formal education and training	The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are proper to <u>independent professional practice</u> , well as relevant to personal development, participation in society, employment and study including access to additional formal education and training	The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are proper to <u>advanced and/or innovative independent professional practice</u> , well as relevant to personal development, participation in society, employment and study including access to additional formal education and training
Knowledge— Breadth and Kind	Knowledge scope and coherence	Broad and up-to-date general knowledge and specialised knowledge of a variety of areas comprising a professional discipline and of the connections between these areas and with related disciplines	Broad and up-to-date general knowledge and specialised knowledge of a variety of areas comprising a professional discipline and of the connections between these areas and with related disciplines; to include knowledge about recent developments and trends in the professional discipline or its practice	Broad and up-to-date general knowledge and specialised knowledge of a variety of areas comprising a professional discipline and of the connections between these areas and related disciplines; to include knowledge about recent developments and trends in the professional discipline or its practice;
	Knowledge structure	Understanding of facts, concepts, rules, models, schools of thought, methods, technology; their development and limitations; and how they arise and are applied in current professional practice	Critical understanding of facts, concepts, rules, models, schools of thought, methods, technology; their development and limitations; and how they arise and are applied in current professional practice	Comprehensive and critical evaluation of current developments and trends in the relevant professional or academic literature and as the basis for research or innovation and strategic change and leadership
	Knowledge of issues	Knowledge of the context for professional practice (including regulatory, economic, scientific, technological, social and cultural aspects) and awareness of other disciplines likely to be encountered as a practitioner and member of the profession	Knowledge of the context for professional practice (including regulatory, economic, scientific, technological, social and cultural aspects) and of significant issues at the interfaces with related disciplines and professions	Knowledge of the wider context for practice in the profession including critical awareness and anticipation of the fundamental issues for the profession and at the interfaces with other disciplines and professions
Skill and know-how— Range and Selectivity	Use cognitive and practical skills (analytical and synthetic) to solve problems	Select and apply advanced skills to analyse and respond to unpredictable and complex problems arising in the profession and its reflective practice.	Select, modify and apply advanced skills to critically analyse, research (under close guidance) and formulate responses to unpredictable, complex and ill-defined problems arising in the profession and its reflective professional practice	Select, modify and apply advanced skills, including research or innovation skills , to critically analyse, research independently and formulate responses to unpredictable, complex and ill-defined problems with many interacting factors, in order to develop new knowledge or procedures and integrate knowledge from other disciplines
	Draw insightful conclusions	Prepare evidence-based conclusions that take due account of social, disciplinary and ethical insights	Prepare and analyse evidence-based conclusions that take due account of social, disciplinary and ethical insights	Prepare and evaluate evidence-based conclusions that take due account of social, disciplinary and ethical insights.
	Communicate and influence	Communicate information effectively, transfer one's knowledge and skills, and justify decisions, to specialists and non-specialists, including clients	Communicate advanced information, transfer one's knowledge and skills, and justify decisions, to specialists and non-specialists, including clients	Communicate complex information effectively, transfer one's knowledge and skills, and justify recommendations and research findings , to specialists and non-specialists, including clients; influence and lead professional practice
Competence— Context, Role, learning-to-learn and Insight	Exercising autonomy and judgement	Exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a wide variety of contexts including professional practice and study	Exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a wide variety of complex contexts including professional practice and study,	Exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a wide variety of complex contexts, including professional practice and study, and transfer them to unfamiliar and emerging contexts
	Exercising responsibility	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making and decisions in unpredictable work or study contexts	Manage complex and innovative technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making and decisions in unpredictable and unfamiliar work or study contexts, balancing responsibilities towards service-users and employer ,	Manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches ; take responsibility for decisions and contributing to professional knowledge and practice

	Working with others	Act effectively in team roles and take responsibility for managing individuals and groups	Act effectively in team roles and take responsibility for managing individuals and lead complex and heterogeneous groups	Act effectively in team roles and take responsibility for managing individuals and lead complex and heterogeneous groups and for reviewing the strategic performance of teams
	Learning and teaching	Take initiative to identify and address learning needs; seek necessary guidance when working independently	Manage learning tasks independently, professionally and ethically; seek necessary guidance when working independently and provide guidance to peers	Evaluate learning needs of self and others and take responsibility for continuing academic/professional development of same;
	Attitudes	Express an internalised personal world-view (see Notes below) manifesting solidarity with others at all levels including the personal, professional, societal, and environmental	Express a comprehensive internalised, personal and professional world-view, manifesting solidarity with others at all levels including the personal, professional, societal and environmental	Scrutinise and reflect on social and professional norms and relationships and act to change them in the interests of professional standards, society or the wider environment
Articulation and Progression	Possible entry points to corresponding programmes and the associated ECTS (or equivalent) credit.	From completion of a broad secondary-level education (to NFQ Level 5) into autonomous professional practice (normal minimum 180 ECTS or equivalent) but normally from an Ordinary Bachelor's Degree into autonomous professional practice; a change of discipline will involve an instructional element	From completion of a broad secondary-level education (to Level 5) into autonomous professional practice (normal minimum 240 ECTS or equivalent) but normally from an Ordinary or Honours Bachelor's Degree into autonomous professional practice; a change of discipline will involve an instructional element	From an Ordinary or Honours Bachelor's Degree into autonomous professional practice (normal minimum 120 and 90 ECTS respectively); a change of discipline will involve an instructional element
Assessment	What must be assessed and the level of rigour expected	The <u>minimum</u> expected knowledge, skill and competence associated with the award must be expressed and validly and reliably assessed	The <u>minimum</u> expected knowledge, skill and competence associated with the award must be expressed and validly and reliably assessed	The <u>minimum</u> expected knowledge, skill and competence associated with the award must be expressed and validly and reliably assessed

Notes:

World-view:

A set of fundamental beliefs, attitudes, values, etc., determining or constituting a comprehensive outlook on life, the universe, etc. Oxford Dictionary 1997

Research:

The word 'research' is used to cover a wide variety of activities, with the context often related to a field of study; the term is used here to represent a careful study or investigation based on a systematic understanding and critical awareness of knowledge. The word is used in an inclusive way to accommodate the range of activities that support original and innovative work in the whole range of academic, professional and technological fields, including the humanities, and traditional, performing, and other creative arts. It is not used in any limited or restricted sense, or relating solely to a traditional 'scientific method'. Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area 2005 (and Dublin Descriptors before this)

Cumulative levels:

Note that the levels of learning are cumulative—learning at Level N assumes attainment of Level N-1—the grey text is learning attained from a lower level.

Acknowledgement

The gloss above contains material (directly or paraphrased) from some of the following sources and is generally informed by them. The text would be unreadable if fragments were individually cited.

National Framework of Qualifications (Ireland)

<http://www.nfq.ie>

Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) UK

http://www.qcda.gov.uk/docs/QFUK_Joint_Report_140pp.pdf

Dublin Descriptors Joint Quality Initiative

<http://www.jointquality.org/content/descriptors/CompletesetDublinDescriptors.doc>

Qualifications Framework Denmark

<http://en.iu.dk/transparency/qualifications-frameworks/levels/level-7>

Australian Qualifications Framework (incl. Vocational Graduate Diploma) (Also the final version adopted in March 2011)

<http://www.aqf.edu.au/Portals/0/Documents/The%20Australian%20Qualifications%20Framework%20for%20MCTEE%20approval%2019%20Nov%202010.pdf>

Accounting Threshold Learning Outcomes – Draft 2 (Australian Business Deans Council and Australian Teaching and Learning Council)

<http://www.abdc.edu.au/download.php?id=244793,246,1>

German Qualifications Framework

http://www.akkreditierungsrat.de/fileadmin/Seiteninhalte/Dokumente/kmk/kmk_englisch/kmk_qualification_framework_apr_05.pdf

Criteria for Academic Bachelor's and Master's Curricula (Engineering) Netherlands

http://www.jointquality.org/content/descriptors/AC_English_Gweb.pdf

Implementation Of The Bologna Process: Learning Outcomes And Level Descriptors

http://www.tcd.ie/vpcao/academic-development/assets/pdf/tcd_level_descriptors_full_text_council_8_march_06.pdf

UKIPG Education Position Statement

http://www.ukipg.org.uk/publications/Educ_Position_Statement.pdf

A number of university websites detailing information about relevant business programmes were also considered