Outline Action Plan for Review and Renewal of QQI Common Award Standards

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Quality and Qualifications Ireland

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Introduction

This outline action plan for review and renewal of QQI Common Award Standards (CAS) was informed by an extensive engagement and collaborative process with all stakeholders.

It presents a short historical context and background, followed by an overview of the engagement and consultation with the sector and the key findings that and consensus that emerged. The final part of this report outlines an Outline Action Plan for Review and Renewal of QQI Common Award Standards and the next steps.

Background

CAS is an evolving system of further education and training (FET) QQI awards, made up of c. 1500 award standards at NFQ Levels 1 to 6. It emerged from the 'amalgamation' of five former awarding bodies namely, National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA), FÁS, Fáilte Ireland, Teagasc and Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM). A Diagram 1 below marks the key milestones in the development of national FET qualifications standards.

Diagram 1 Qualifications Standards - Key Milestones

CAS was first introduced by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) for the FET sector and is now maintained by QQI. CAS was originally intended to rationalise and integrate a diverse set of FET awards while aligning them with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The CAS approach built on the range of awards that predated its introduction.

> *"While a certain number of CAS awards specifications have been developed since the establishment of QQI, many CAS award specifications were developed prior to 2013 and many of those were the outcome of a migration process that applied to older standards including some NCVA (National Council for Vocational Awards) standards that predated FETAC"*[1]

CAS has supported the development and recognition of further education and training awards for almost fifteen years. The system is designed to emphasise educational and training goals represented as minimum expected learning outcomes aligned with the relevant level and award type descriptors within the NFQ. The purpose of CAS was to:

- Recognise learning achievements.
- Support learner mobility across FET and progression to further learning opportunities
- Establish a single integrated system for the development of FET awards.

The majority of QQI FET awards standards have emerged from or were developed within the CAS.

Legislative and Wider Policy Context

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) established in November 2012 by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 (the 2012 Act) is the independent State agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training in Ireland. The functions of QQI are set out in the 2012 Act and include the provision of advice and information to government on matters concerning policy and practice with respect to quality assurance and improvement in education and training. QQI has statutory responsibility for:

- External quality assurance of further and higher education and training.
- Validation of programmes and making of awards for certain Providers in the further and higher education and training sectors.
- Maintaining, developing, and reviewing the National Framework of Qualifications.
- Maintaining the Irish Register of Qualifications, a database of quality assured education and training programmes and qualifications in Ireland.

1 QQI. (2020). Technical Paper on the Qualifications System (page 38).

- Providing advice on the recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland through the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC) Ireland.
- Protecting academic integrity and addressing academic fraud and cheating within the further and higher education and training sectors.

In addition, Section 49 and section 50 of the 2012 Act specifically sets out the functions of QQI regarding the determination of standards of knowledge, skill or competence for awards and for making of awards where enrolled learners have demonstrated the achievement of such standards:

> *'The Authority shall determine the standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired, and where appropriate, demonstrated, by a learner before an award may be made by the Authority or by a provider to which authority to make an award has been delegated.*[2]

> *'The Authority shall make an award to a learner where the learner has, in the opinion of the provider, acquired, and where appropriate, demonstrated, the appropriate standard of knowledge, skill or competence as determined by the Authority'.*

The 2012 Act gives QQI discretionary powers to amend award standards over time and to determine different standards for different awards or different classes of awards. QQI must always have regard to the NFQ as it determines award standards and must, by law, engage with relevant stakeholders in the development of award standards.

QQI's approach to the determination of awards standards is set out further in the QQI Policy for Determining Awards Standards, 2014. Namely: "to prescribe learning outcomes sufficiently specifically to meet the needs of Ireland's qualifications and education and training systems for the benefit of Irish society but never to prescribe more specifically than that."

The policy covers both FET awards standards and higher education (HE) awards standards, and it specifically describes the CAS and provides for its evolutionary development. It emphasises that all QQI awards standards are determined within the NFQ and that awards standards are expressed as threshold expectations.

QQI'S FET AWARDS STANDARDS

QQI's FET awards standards, particularly CAS standards, tend to be more specific than its HE awards standards. CAS specifications identify specific core knowledge, skill and competence that underpin Provider programmes. QQI's Policies and criteria for the validation of programmes of education and training in 2016 (revised in 2017) relaxed the requirement that QQI FET programmes

2 Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 S49(1).

must be developed exclusively within the CAS and enabled providers to develop new non-CAS awards based on generic NFQ descriptors and elaborated in programme descriptors. The de facto award standard for a particular named award, including for CAS awards, is the statement of minimum intended programme/module learning outcomes approved at validation. Programme level award standards are implemented and assured by providers and certified by QQI.

The least specific QQI award standards are the NFQ award-type descriptors. These are generic awards standards for all QQI's education and training awards which apply unless a more specific award standard has been determined by QQI. While the CAS continues to be used by FET Providers for new programme development, it is not used exclusively.

OTHER QQI NON-CAS AWARD STANDARDS UTILISED BY THE FET SECTOR

Providers of FET programmes have made use of generic standards expressed in NFQ Level Indicators, the NFQ Award-Type Descriptors or the Professional Award Type Descriptor (PATD). For example, the PATDs have been typically utilised for the development of apprenticeships programmes. An annotated PATD has established an agreed national standard for awards, including FET awards, in Early Learning and Care.

Over the past few years QQI has worked together with the FET sector and co-created a **non-CAS suite of twenty discipline specific new broad award standards at NFQ Levels 1-4.** The suite of twenty broad award standards at NFQ Levels 1-4 will be available from 2024, supporting the development of diverse range of programmes and preparing learners to enter or progress within the world of work, or study.

In addition, QQI is presently testing out the design and desirability for **non-CAS broad award standards for business at NFQ Levels 5-9**. QQI has commissioned a project team to undertake the development of Integrated Awards Standards for Business. The new integrated award standards will offer an alternative to the current multiple business CAS standards in place at NFQ 5 and NFQ 6.

There has been a marked increase in apprenticeship programmes in recent years with almost 13% (3,181) of all QQI major awards made to apprentices in 2022. This was an increase of 56% from 2021. These numbers are expected to continue to grow over the coming years, with over 20 new apprenticeship programmes currently under development. The development and awarding arrangements for apprenticeship programmes does not depend on the CAS.

In addition, much of the recent work across the FET sector in Ireland has been in the development of small bespoke programmes, focusing on key skills areas, using the generic NFQ standards, leading to non-CAS minor, special purpose or supplemental awards. Often marketed as micro-credentials or micro-qualifications, the number of these programmes have focused on new emerging skills needs, such as green skills and sustainability.

Diagram 2 QQI's national qualifications standards portfolio

As outlined in the Diagram 2 above, QQI's national qualifications standards portfolio comprises many different qualifications standards with over 1700 CAS standards, of which most were developed over a decade ago. While the validity of QQI qualification award standards is not limited to a definite period of time, good practice indicates that the award standards should be reviewed and renewed regularly. Regardless of any reviews undertaken due to demand, over the last number of years, a systematic review of CAS standards has not occurred. Therefore, as outlined in QQI's Technical Paper on Qualifications System:

"We are at a pivotal time now for the Common Awards System because it needs substantial work either to update, reform or replace it with something else. In the meantime, the FET sector and its wider context have changed substantially in the past ten years."[3]

CONTEXT FOR THE REVIEW AND RENEWAL OF QQI CAS STANDARDS

The updating and renewal of CAS awards must be cognisant of the broader context in which a reformed set of national FET award standards must operate.

The most recent National FET strategy Future FET: Transforming Learning: The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-2024 prepared by SOLAS, has included the vision for the future of FET and for the transformation of learning. The new approach is based around three strategic pillars: building skills; fostering inclusion; and facilitating pathways. This will be underpinned by a strong focus on four enabling themes: digital transformation; learner and performance focus; staffing and structures; and capital development.

3 QQI. (2020). Technical Paper on the Qualifications System (page 31).

> *FET "needs to ensure that it can meet the needs of the future world and the evolving needs of economy and society. It must simplify its structure and learning pathways, facilitate easier access, ensure a more consistent learner experience and build a more powerful identity within communities and potential learners. [...] There is a real opportunity to grow the FET contribution to a more collaborative and cohesive, developing tertiary education system for Ireland."*[4]

The 2021 Adult Literacy for Life Strategy, A 10–Year Adult, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Strategy, has also made a number of commitments particularly regarding the expansion of the range of literacy and languages courses for learners and addressing unmet literacy, numeracy and basic digital skills needs for adults in Ireland. (SOLAS).

In recent years, there has been a strong Government commitment to FET and the tertiary sector. The establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) has brought a coherence to the tertiary system of education and training and is responsible for policy, funding and governance of Higher and Further Education and Training. Having undergone a number of years of reform,

> *"FET is making a valuable contribution to a more collaborative and cohesive tertiary education system for Ireland. In this context, the tertiary education system comprises FET and HE. Clear progression routes into higher education allow learners to make the transition from NFQ Levels 4 and 5 to NFQ Levels 6, 7, 8 and beyond" (Cedefop, 202: 42).*

> *DFHERIS highlights that "the rapid pace of technological change, combined with increased diversity across Irish society demonstrates the need for a dynamic system, primed to cater for a wide range of learners and responsive to ever-changing national and international challenges...".*

The recent OECD review of Irelands national policy on skills development[5] made a number of recommendations that are likely to have an important bearing on the development of vocational, professional and technical qualifications in Ireland. The assessment emphasised the need to 'improve pathways between further education and training and higher education to support the move towards a truly unified tertiary system'. Opportunities for lifelong learning are to be widely available and accessible. At the same time, 'the provision of further education and training and higher education must be aligned with strategic skills needs' and responsive to changes in such demand. These policy goals are to be achieved through a more 'inclusive, efficient and co-ordinated approach to stakeholder engagement in the co-design of education and training'. Public providers of FET are encouraged to experiment with "curriculum hubs" to better focus

4 Future FET: Transforming Learning: The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-2024

5 Government of Ireland 2023 gov.ie - OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations (www.gov.ie)

their stakeholder engagement efforts in further education and training. A key message from the OECD review for the reform of CAS awards, will be to ensure effective engagement from relevant stakeholders, including providers, employers and other users of QQI awards.

In Europe, there is a diversity of national approaches to setting qualification standards. There is little evidence that countries are moving towards a common European approach and the processes being put in place very much reflect national structures and traditions. Despite this, two common trends can be observed, firstly, more countries are introducing outcome-based standards, and secondly, more countries have institutionalised the participation of social partners in standard-setting procedures (Cedefop, 2009; Cedefop, 2021).

The nature of further education and training is also changing across Europe, driving a need for more flexible approaches including more emphasis on work practice and life-long provision.

> *"While the number of VET qualifications has decreased in most countries, reflecting changes in tasks and occupations, the increasing emphasis on individual tailoring (for example through modularisation) and institutional autonomy (for example in relation to curricula) point towards more flexible VET systems responding to inevitably changing skills and competence needs and requirements. Observing developments over the last three decades, the conception of VET in Europe is changing, increasingly emphasising the relevance of work-related and practice-based learning at all qualification levels and throughout life" (Cedefop, 2023:5).*

KEY COMPETENCES FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

The labour market is constantly changing and evolving, and specific occupations, skills and qualifications that are required change over time and qualification standards need to be able to support appropriate education and training responses. Transversal skills[6], relevant to a broad range of occupations and sectors, have become increasingly important in enabling people to gain and maintain employment and for enterprise. These skills include creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship, critical and analytical thinking, teamwork, communications and business acumen.

The EU Council Recommendation (22 May 2018), on key competences for lifelong learning[7] including digital and sustainability competences[8] also states that "Key competences and basic skills are needed by all for personal fulfilment and development, employability, social inclusion and active citizenship."

Demand for certain skills is also influenced by global trends including technological change, changing consumption patterns, new ways of working, global value networks, urbanisation and pressure and resources and shifting power structures. Periodic updates on the demand for skills in Ireland[9] have also highlighted growing interest in transversal skills and the corresponding need

6 Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025

7 EU Key Competences for Lifelong Learning 2018

8 GreenComp: the European sustainability competence framework

9 SOLAS Annual Skills Bulletin (2023) national-skills-bulletin-2023.pdf (solas.ie)

to identify and integrate these into skills formation efforts, including in qualifications design.

Given the number of initiatives and strategies underway, qualifications standards need to support responsive and flexible programme development while also maintaining consistency and reliability to that standards are maintained across different providers and over time.

OTHER AWARDING BODIES USED IN THE FET SECTOR

There are many other qualifications offered in Ireland, many in the FET sector that are widely used to meet the needs of learners. These include qualifications made by professional bodies in the areas of law and accountancy, vocational and technical qualifications issued by UK awarding bodies such as City and Guilds, and qualifications made by international organisations or sectoral bodies often linked to specific industries, technologies or occupations. QQI has been enabled to create a new category of those 'listed awarding bodies' (LABs) that are interested in voluntary, regulated access to the NFQ. It is anticipated that when the administrative scheme for including the awards of LABs is in place, further and higher education training providers will have an expanded range of regulated NFQ qualifications, to choose from. This may have implications for QQI as an awarding body.

NFQ LEVEL 6 – A CONTESTED SPACE

When the NFQ was introduced in 2003, there were two separate Awards Councils – one for Further Education and Training and the other for Higher Education and Training. The highest level of FET and the lowest level of HE overlapped at Level 6, giving rise to the awarding of the advanced Certificate at FET Level 6 and the awarding of the Higher Certificate at HE Level 6.

The contestation largely relates to the preferment that appears to be afforded to the HC over the AC in gaining advanced entry beyond first year of a Level 8 Honours degree programme in higher education. This has resulted in a large difference in the volume of QQI major awards at Levels 5 and 6. In 2022, QQI made 15,570 Level 5 major awards but only 6,539 Level 6 (including 3,181 Level 6 apprenticeships awards).

In 2021, QQI commissioned an evaluation of the two qualifications[10]. The report found that both awards were properly levelled at Level 6 with some learning at Level 5-7. It also noted that although there is a clear difference between the NFQ award-type descriptors that were designed for the two Level 6 awards, the FET Advanced Certificate and the HE Higher Certificate but that 'it is unclear whether the same level of differentiation is evident in the outcomes of the (two) qualifications as they are implemented in practice." The findings from this study prompt the question, 'Is it time for a single award at Level 6?

CURRENT USAGE OF CAS STANDARDS

From the Annual Analysis of Awards made by QQI in 2022, the number of QQI FET learners and awards has declined year on year since 2015 to 2021. The largest drop in numbers occurred in 2020 when learners declined by 21% and awards by 25%, possibly due to the impact of the COVID pandemic. In 2021, the number of learners remained stable, and awards dropped by just 2%, the lowest decline since 2016. In 2022, numbers increased from the previous year by 4% and 3% respectively, the largest % change increase since 2015.

10 Comparing NFQ Level 6 awards in higher and further education and training | Quality and Qualifications Ireland (qqi.ie)

In 2022, the total number of QQI awards made increased in FET and HE from 2020 and 2021. This signalled recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. In FET, major awards continued the downward trend observed in the sector since 2014 but minor, special purpose and supplemental awards increased in 2022 from 2021 and 2020. This shows demand remains for qualifications recognising relatively small learning achievements in the FET sector. However, it is important to note that some of these smaller qualifications include an increase in awards other than CAS awards developed by Providers to address specific demand areas in industry.

Minor awards continue to be a popular choice for Providers and learners. A large proportion of awards, 68% made by QQI in 2022 were minor awards showing an increase of 2% from 2021. Approximately 99.5% of all minor awards made were FET awards.

The number of QQI FET major awards made at the lower levels of the NFQ (Levels 2 to 3) grew significantly in 2022; while numbers declined at NFQ Levels 4 and 5 (by 14% and 9%) and increased at level 6 (by 10%) in FET.

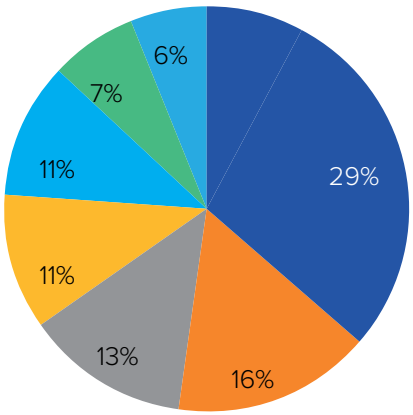
In 2022:

- The number of QQI major awards made in the FET sector was 25,225 of which 86% were CAS awards. Overall, there has been a decrease in the number of CAS Major awards being made in the last number of years. However, since 2021 there is an increase in other major awards in the FET sector. Almost 13% of QQI major awards were made to apprentices in 2022 (up 56% from 2021), mainly at NFQ Level 6 in the FET sector.
- The number of QQI minor awards made in the FET sector was 117,956, the vast majority were CAS awards.
- The number of QQI special purpose awards made in the FET sector was 17,858 of which, only 39% were QQI CAS awards. 2022 also saw an increase in the certification of other special purpose FET awards to meet demand in niche areas or in areas where CAS standards don't exist.
- The number of QQI supplemental awards made in the FET sector was 136 of which 69% were QQI CAS awards.

The following field areas (See Fig. 1 below) account for over 90% of all FET major awards made in 2022 of which the majority were CAS awards.

A large decrease in awards made in the 'Education' field area was also noted. These awards are down 32% since 2021.

Figure 1 The following field areas account for over 90% of all FET major awards made in 2022 of which the majority were CAS awards



29% Health and Welfare
16% Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary
13% Engineering, manufacturing and construction
11% Business, Administration and Law
11% Arts and Humanities
7% Generic proogrammes and Qualifications
6% Services

Top 10 Major CAS awards made in 2022 at NFQ Levels 5 and 6

Place	Code	CAS Major Award Name	NFQ Level
1	5M20454	Certificate in Agriculture	5
2	5M4339	Certificate in Healthcare Support	5
3	6M2007	*Advanced Certificate in Early Childhood Care and Education	6
4	5M2009	*Certificate in Early Childhood Care and Education	5
5	5M4349	Certificate in Nursing Studies	5
6	5M4468	Certificate in Community Health Services	5
7	5M3782	Certificate in Health Service Skills	5
8	5M2102	Certificate in Business Studies	5
9	5M1997	Certificate in Office Administration	5
10	5M5146	Certificate in Sports, Recreation and Exercise	5

*It is important to note that from 2023/2024, the usage of the QQI CAS major awards in Early Childhood Care and Education at NFQ Levels 5 and 6, will decrease significantly due to the introduction of the Professional Award-type Descriptors at NFQ Levels 5 to 8: Annotated for QQI Early Learning and Care (ELC) Awards and the subsequent validation of Provider programmes in this area.

However, it clear from the data presented that CAS major awards in the areas of healthcare continue to be used in strong numbers along with CAS major awards in the areas of agriculture, business, sports and general/employability studies. The top CAS major awards made in 2022 has been more or less consistent since 2019.

Top 10 CAS minor awards made in 2022 at NFQ Levels 5 and 6

Place	Code	CAS Minor Award Title	NFQ Level
1	5N0690	Communications	5
2	5N1786	Special Needs Assisting	5
3	5N2770	Care Skills	5
4	5N2706	Care of the Older Person	5
5	6N1957	Special Needs Assisting	6
6	5N1356	Work Experience	5
7	5N1794	Safety and Health at Work	5
8	5N1358	Word Processing	5
9	5N3734	Infection Prevention and Control	5
10	6N3326	Training Delivery and Evaluation	6

From the data on the top minor awards made in 2022, it is clear to see the correlation with the demand for major awards in the healthcare, business and general studies areas. Like the major awards made, the top 10 CAS minor awards made in 2022 has been more or less consistent since 2019.

Overall, NFQ Level 5 awards remain the most common awards to be made by QQI. 49% of all awards made by QQI in 2022 were at NFQ Level 5 (up 0.3% from 2021).

CONSULTATION PROCESS

Consultation with key stakeholders from across FET and other relevant sectors was seen as vital to inform the development of an outline action plan for the review and renewal of CAS award standards. Consequently, QQI's CAS Action Plan Project Team:

- Communicated with the sector by a communiqué to FET key stakeholders informing the sector about this project.
- Consulted with key stakeholders, to ensure the outline action plan was informed by the current needs of the FET sector and other relevant stakeholders. The purpose of this consultation process was to gather views on features of CAS including credit accumulation and articulation, specificity of learning outcomes, proportion of mandatory learning outcomes, stand alone or integrated transferable skills and assessment techniques. Between May and July 2023, we
  - Distributed a survey to all FET Providers and other key stakeholders. The purpose of the survey was to engage with key implementers of CAS standards, i.e., teachers,

tutors, trainers, instructors, programme managers, programme designers and external authenticators, seeking their expert and practitioner led views on the usability of CAS standards.

- Facilitated 14 focus groups, with representation of educators, curriculum designers, decision makers at programme support and implementation level and stakeholder directorate level. Direct phone contact was also made with participants when access to focus groups was limited. The main purpose of the focus groups was to supplement to survey and delve deeper with key stakeholders by discussing the main strengths, attractions and weaknesses of award standards developed under the CAS while also considering possible opportunities for, and potential threats to the QQI CAS review process.

In total, over **600 survey responses** were received with the largest percentage of respondents (61%) active at NFQ Level 5. It is important to note that a percentage of responses represented the collated views of a wider group of individuals within organisations.

The **focus groups** involved **54 individuals from 29 organisations and representative groups from across, or relevant to, the FET sector** (see Appendix 1 for list of invitees). These focus groups allowed us to gain a more in-depth understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the Common Awards System (CAS) and CAS standards while also considering the potential opportunities and threats when QQI undertakes the review.

Key Findings

There is a strong call from the sector to review and subsequently maintain a suite of reformed CAS awards. The definitive message both from survey respondents and focus groups was clear:

Reform CAS into a leaner form, maintain its' accumulative functionality (maintain opportunities for credit accumulation, transfer and progression) **and ensure interoperability between all QQI awards.**

The feedback highlights the need for updates, flexibility, responsiveness, relevance, and inclusivity in the CAS system to better equip learners to participate successfully in society and the economy. There is a need for regular updates of award specifications to reflect fast-paced changes in technology and other key areas of need in the world of work. **More flexible and less prescriptive standards are also desired to support innovative course designs**.

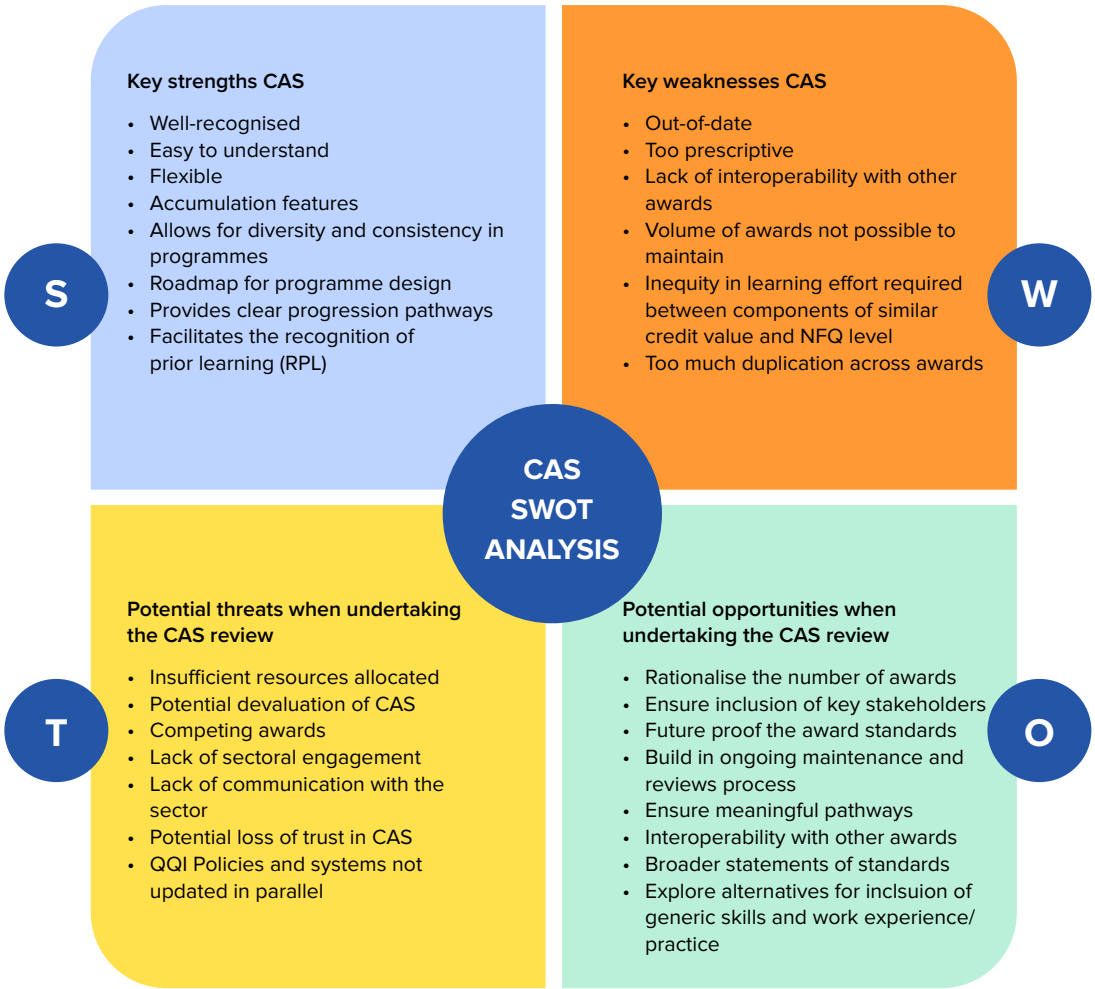
The learning outcomes approach to the development of CAS standards was seen as essential. While determining learning outcomes for minor awards was noted as helpful for promoting consistency between programmes, respondents noted problematic **overlapping of learning outcomes across minor awards within an overarching major award which can lead to over-assessment**.

The scale and breadth of the project was noted in all focus groups. **Sectoral involvement was highlighted as a crucial condition in any review process.** There was a clear message that the

review and renewal of CAS standards must involve key stakeholders with relevant expertise, a point already noted in QQI's technical paper on qualifications (pg.11-12):

> *"The qualifications system is a complex adaptive system that emerges from the collected activities of all users of qualifications including individuals, institutions, associations, and communities of practice." "Any attempt to change a qualifications system would need to acknowledge, involve, and influence communities of practice and, where they are missing or fragmented, to create environments that favour their emergence and cohesion."*[11]

Key strengths and weaknesses of CAS, and possible opportunities and potential threats linked to the review process, as identified by the research:



11 QQI. (2020). Technical Paper on the Qualifications System (page 12).

RELIABILITY OF CAS STANDARDS

The feedback clearly demonstrated the high value placed on CAS and the sector's trust in its structures and functionality. Based on survey responses specifically, there is a strong indication that the CAS suite of awards have been implemented in a reliable way. 73% of respondents agreed that the CAS standards are consistently applied across Providers while 78% agreed that the CAS standards have been consistently applied over time.

CAS underpins a vast array of programmes across the FET sector where many programmes and courses can lead to the one award, bringing a consistency of standard achieved by learners across the sector and highlighting the importance of national standards.

The NFQ benchmarking was noted as being vital to Providers and learners alike providing clarity on where they are on their learning journey(s). However, uneven steps were noted particularly between NFQ Levels 2, 3 and 4, which can potentially create stumbling blocks for learners. Ideally all programmes leading to QQI qualifications should support learning pathways; i.e., they should enable a learner to access, transfer to, or progress to, other programmes. It is important to avoid dead-end qualifications. **The review of award field of education and training across a range of NFQ Levels simultaneously was proposed to ensure smooth progression.**

Also identified was **the inequitable distribution of learning effort required within minor awards** at the same NFQ Level and with a comparable credit value. Examples were provided were minor awards at the same level and credit value contain a range of learning outcomes from eight to over twenty.

Focus group participants are positively disposed towards minor awards in the design of qualifications and for recognising achievement but welcomed the prospect of **fewer and broader learning outcomes allowing for interpretation by Providers at programme development stage**. In this regard, *QQI Technical Paper on the Qualifications System* suggests that "being more specific is not necessarily always better and in some situations may limit the effectiveness of learning outcome statements in their semantic, regulatory or educational functions. It can often be useful to leave the details to the persons responsible for implementing the standard where they can be assumed to have the necessary competence."[12]

It also states that:

> *"Learning outcomes statements are more or less specific statements that can be interpreted reliably by the relevant communities of practice to describe educational achievements, intentions or expectations for a well-defined purpose while leaving a suitable amount of latitude for interpretation and innovation." (Ibid.).*

Some concerns were raised about the **lack of focus on compound award statements of knowledge, skill and competence**, particularly where programmes leading to major awards are delivered in a fragmented manner. Respondents indicated that, in some instances, that CAS may **inhibit integrated (holistic) programme design.**

12 QQI. (2020). Technical Paper on the Qualifications System (page 15).

This issue was also raised by QQI "CAS attempts to realise a modularised system of standards has not fully reconciled the tension between learning outcome specifications at the compound and component levels in situations where there is a lot of choice available at the component level."[13]

In reforming CAS award standards, relevant stakeholders will need to decide the **appropriate degree and level of detail and specification of learning outcomes necessary to support the development of relevant and reliable FET qualifications.**

RECOGNITION AND RELEVANCE OF CAS STANDARDS

Focus group participants indicated that the CAS standards are **generally well recognised** for further learning and employment opportunities. Specifically, based on survey responses, 64% agreed that CAS standards are well understood and widely recognised, while 87% agreed that the accumulation features of CAS support **lifelong learning** opportunities. Furthermore, 76% agree that the learning outcomes in CAS standards promote opportunities for **social inclusion**. It is evident that stakeholders view CAS as supporting clear and transparent access, transfer and progression opportunities. Focus group members emphasised the need to ensure that any reform of CAS standards would continue to facilitate RPL for applicants.

73% of survey respondents agreed that learning outcomes in CAS standards support the effective transition to the world of work, while 83% agree that the learning outcomes in CAS standards support the effective transition to further study opportunities.

CREDIT ACCUMULATION AND CAS STANDARDS

CAS currently makes extensive use of minor awards, referred to as component awards, and the certification of minor awards is seen as a key strength. This accumulation feature of CAS is valued as highly beneficial for FET learners, allowing for flexibility and integration of modules. This flexible, accumulative, and structured format of CAS often described as building blocks or "Lego" by focus group participants. It is seen as an important learner-focused feature supporting diverse learning pathways. Also evident from the consultation process is **that a reformed CAS should retain this accumulation feature.**

The area of generic skills pools included in CAS major award specifications was highlighted by both survey respondents and focus group participants as needing consideration in the review process. While 73% of survey respondents agreed that key skills such as communications, team working, customer service, personal effectiveness, work experience and work practice in CAS standards are appropriate for living, working and learning, 80% agree that **QQI together with the FET sector should consider integrating work experience/work practice within award standards and programmes rather than as stand-alone awards.** This was further debated by focus group participants and while the concept of **integrating generic skills within other award standards was welcomed as an option**, the possibility of introducing **discipline-specific work experience award** standards in each field of education and training area was also noted as being a desirable change.

In as separate review exercise, learners, as part of the National FET Forum initiative, led by AONTAS, also highlighted concerns about the manner in which the work experience element of their programmes is organised, specifically stating that it is not always practically focused (AONTAS, 2022).

13 QQI. (2020). Technical Paper on the Qualifications System (page 80).

An issue also raised by focus groups members, **was the large volume of major and minor awards and noted that the review process should address any overlaps or duplication of major awards by rationalising the number of awards in the different field areas.** A preference was indicated for **having a smaller number of major awards with more mandatory components**. Respondents indicated support that these awards would include **streamed options to cater to different specialisations**. This approach would help reduce the number of awards to a more sustainable level, while ensuring programmes stay aligned with a common benchmark. **Rationalisation should also apply to minor awards where overlap occurs or where the awards are no longer required or used by the sector.** It was suggested that this would also negate the confusion caused for learners when undertaking programmes leading to different awards all with a similar focus and end the practice where learners can achieve additional FET major awards with small amounts of additional learning.

QQI points out that statements of "knowledge, skills and competence may atrophy or decay especially if unused."[14] Thus, rationalisation of the current suite of CAS awards will lead to a more sustainable volume of awards to be maintained into the future.

CURRENCY AND IMPLEMENTATION OF CAS STANDARDS

Focus group participants emphasised that programmes, underpinned by CAS award standards offer a wide variety of functions including support to lifelong learning, personal development, as well as providing recognition of education and training achievements for access to employment and progression to higher education.

Only **55% of survey respondents indicated** that they are satisfied with the suite of awards available, while **93% of respondents, agreed that QQI together with the FET sector should reform the current suite of CAS standards to ensure its currency and usability**. CAS was also noted by focus groups as being bloated and containing outdated and irrelevant awards. **The mandated pools of generic components were noted as no longer meeting current industry or learner requirements. It was suggested that the transversal skills associated with these components be discipline specific for different major award areas.**

Focus group participants agreed that the CAS award standards format provides clarity and consistency for programme design, delivery, and assessment but only 59% of survey respondents agreed that CAS standards support innovative and responsive programme design. Focus groups also highlighted that CAS awards need to allow Providers to be responsive to dynamic skill requirements. Any **lack interoperability between different kinds of QQI award standards was highlighted as a particular challenge with barriers in place on the usage of new smaller non-CAS awards towards the achievement of CAS major and non-major awards.**

Just 61% of survey respondents agreed that the detail provided in the assessment section in CAS minor award standards are fit for purpose. Focus groups identified dated learning outcomes and overly prescriptive and restrictive assessment guidance in CAS specifications **as inhibiting valid and reliable assessment practice**. The challenges posed by the inclusion of specific assessment information in award specifications can in turn lead to the creation of **barriers to the use of universal design for learning (UDL) principles in assessment** and can contribute to over-assessment of learners and plagiarism issues. It was also suggested by some focus group members, however, that **QQI still needs to address assessment in award specifications, but it**

14 QQI. (2020). Technical Paper on the Qualifications System (page 12).

should be reflected as guidance rather than prescription. (Many stakeholders appeared not to be aware that assessment detail in CAS specifications is now advisory and not prescriptive).

Any lack of interoperability between CAS awards and non-CAS awards was an important issue highlighted during the consultation process. Respondents were concerned that fragmented approaches to determining QQI award standards could present a challenge to a coordinated and integrated QQI awards offer, inhibiting lifelong learning opportunities. Questions were raised about how QQI awards could relate to the awards of other FET awarding bodies in the future. **CAS is not designed to work with unit awards of other awarding bodies and that this issue will become more prominent when the NFQ is opened to listing awarding bodies.**

The lack of clarity between the FET credit system[15] and the ECTS[16] used in higher education was raised by some focus groups participants, and it was felt that this could be a contributory factor to a lack of meaningful and appropriate progression pathways to higher education, particularly for learners holding NFQ Level 6 CAS major awards. Currently, there is an FET credit system in place for programmes leading to NFQ FET awards embedded in all QQI CAS awards where one QQI FET credit unit involves ten notional hours of learner input. "There is no direct equivalent to the ECTS Users' Guide for the FET credit system. There is a European Credit and Transfer System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) but, despite being in place for 10 years, it is not as developed or straightforward as ECTS."[17] The prospect of a single credit system for tertiary education and training in Ireland may be worth considering, but it is worth noting that for higher education, any credit system not compatible with ECTS, could hamper mobility and recognition opportunities for HE students.

REFORM OF CAS AND QBS

Respondent indicated that the QBS system serves its users well, but that significant modifications to CAS award standards would have implications for QBS and the data management systems of its users. Respondents acknowledged that providers rely too much on the QBS as their learner management system while also making the point that QQI as an awarding body is expected to hold student data and records appropriate to this function. Certification implications of a reformed CAS should be considered carefully and in good time. Some respondents indicated a preference that QBS would accommodate the processing of multiple compound awards per certification period.

KEY ISSUES IN A SUCCESSFUL REVIEW AND RENEWAL CAS STANDARDS?

Stakeholders, while welcoming reform of CAS, alerted QQI to the necessity of careful planning, constant engagement and communication and capacity building, as changes to CAS are introduced. In summary, stakeholders recommended:

1. Sectoral involvement will be crucial to the review process. Ensuring ongoing representation of all key stakeholders allied with the management, governance and oversight of the project was seen as critical to its success. There was a clear message that the review and renewal of CAS standards must involve a range of stakeholders with relevant expertise.

15 1 FET credit = 10 hours of learning effort

16 1 ECTS = 20-25 hours of learning

17 QQI. (2020). Technical Paper on the Qualifications System (page 30).

2. A reformed CAS should retain features of the existing CAS that are seen to be working well and seek to make improvements where they are necessary.
3. QQI to establish strong governance arrangements to oversee a project of this complexity and scale. Realistic and reasonable timelines should be communicated, priority fields of learning should be identified for rolling out the review of families of CAS awards across applicable NFQ levels. Regular reporting of project progress should be made available.
4. Ensure close alignment between a reform of CAS and other QQI initiatives that impact provider's as they design and deliver high quality programmes. While the key relationship between award standards and programme development was acknowledged, it was also agreed that a review and renewal of CAS should not unduly delay or inhibit providers from undertaking systematic reviews of their current programme offer and progressing improvements through approved internal and external quality assurance arrangements.
5. A review process should not only assess the suitability of existing CAS award standards but should also identify opportunity for the development of new award standards within a reformed CAS.
6. Any future CAS model should have built-in and sustainable mechanisms for ongoing systematic review and renewal of award standards, and this will need to be appropriately resourced and governed.

Towards Reformed CAS Standards

Based on the extensive consultation exercise, published papers and wider public policy on skills and FET development, the following principles will guide the future development of CAS award standards.

All CAS award standards will be:
open and nationally available to all approved Providers without undue restrictions
co-owned and maintained by their users including but not limited to Providers, social partners, sectoral peak bodies, regulators and learners
created by subject matter experts
expressed in terms of expected standards of knowledge skill and competence
consistent with NFQ Level indicators and award type descriptors from which they derive;
'fit for purpose' and accessible so that the content supports the development of learning programmes that promote equal access to education and training for a diverse range of learners

available for consultation so that all interested parties impacted by the standard can contribute to the development of it
suitable for the development and validation of education and training programmes and for the recognition of prior learning
designed to facilitate opportunities for credit accumulation, transfer and progression
systematically reviewed and approved according to an internationally recognised process (e.g., European norms for the development, design and recognition of qualifications).

Key features of the reformed CAS

- Award standards will be developed and maintained only where there is **a demonstrable and enduring need**.
- Award standards will be informed by the best available **evidence based on user requirements.**
- Award standards will signal **distinct learning achievements**, minimising overlap and duplication of learning outcomes and ensuring that a significant volume of new learning is required to achieve an additional major award.
- Expected standards of learning outcomes will be **specified to the level of detail necessary** to support the development of education and training programmes that are both relevant and nationally comparable.
- CAS awards will retain the structure where **award standards are determined centrally at the major level and for associated non-major awards**.
- Award standards will include any **special validation conditions** required to support a validation application.
- Award standards will include any **transversal skills** which should be integrated into the design and delivery of approved programmes.
- Award standards will be determined across multiple NFQ levels where appropriate, to facilitate **progressive and integrated learning pathways**.
- Award standards will specify a **purpose statement** and indicative **access, transfer and progression** pathways, together with **credit ranges** for awards and for associated units.
- For vocationally oriented award standards, **a target occupation** will be identified using a recognised classification system (e.g., ESCO).
- Award standards will be **benchmarked against relevant international comparators**.
- Award standards will be **endorsed by relevant users before release.**
- Award standards will **not prescribe the detail of assessment practice or methods**, these will be proposed by providers and confirmed during a programme validation process.
- Award standards will be **supported by a coherent set of awarding policies**, including QQI policy on programme validation and QQI policy on the making of awards (certification)

- Award standards will be **maintained and ensured by providers** using their internal quality assurance procedures for effective programme development and design and for teaching, learning and assessment.
- Award standards will be periodically reviewed and updated based on the **systematic collection of feedback and robust evaluation.**

PROPOSED REFORMED CAS AWARD SPECIFICATIONS

Future CAS award specification to include:

- Title (in English and Irish)
- Award Type
- Code
- NFQ Level / EQF Level
- Credit Value
- Field of Learning
- Purpose
- Statements of Knowledge, Skill and Competence aligned to the relevant NFQ Level/s
- Mandatory and elective units of learning outcomes will be guided by the purpose of the award. There will be no residual learning outcomes or what was commonly known as residual credit.
- A minimum requirement for award specific transversal skills. Where work experience/work practice are required, these will be vocationally specific and integrated into the delivery of each named award.
- Assessment (Prescribed only in case of Specific Validation Requirements)
- Grading Arrangements
- Access Statement (including RPL)
- Transfer and Progression Statement/s
- Certificate Requirements for the achievement of a CAS major award and associated non major awards.
- Specific Requirements including supporting documentation.

Proposed Outline Action Plan

Our vision is to create the next generation of CAS standards which will be recognised and valued by our wider stakeholders as the clear, relevant, concise, and consistent articulations of specific knowledge skill and competence for use by FET in an ever changing and dynamic sector.

The analysis of the gathered data indicates that QQI, when undertaking the review of CAS standards, should prioritise the review of CAS standards by demand (based on the recent usage of awards) and field of learning. Other factors such as relationship to other awards, relevance of learning outcomes, duplication of learning outcomes, degree of granularity, mandatory units, credit values, regulatory context, transversal skills etc. will also be considered in assessing the opportunities for rationalisation of existing award standards.

An initial 3-year timeline is proposed to review and renew award standards identified as prioritised areas. As the review of CAS is likely to commence at the time, when the new Broad Award Standards at NFQ Levels 1-4 will be launched, it is advisable to maintain all CAS standards at L1-L4 at least for the next three years, to allow Providers to utilise the new broad award standards to develop new, responsive programmes across these levels. After three years, QQI shall review the situation and as outlined above maintain CAS in the areas where there is objective evidence (based on demand and usage).

Existing CAS awards will be reviewed only where they constitute a national award, openly available to all providers and where there is strong support to maintain the existing structure, where the learning outcomes are centrally determined by QQI at the level of both the major award and for the suite of associated non-major awards. Other existing CAS awards will be systematically retired in consultation with the sector. This will not inhibit programme development as QQI validation policy has since 2017 facilitated the development of FET programmes outside of CAS, where providers wish to have more ownership of the programme development process, more flexible use of award types and classes to recognise learning achievements. Learning outcomes validated as part of programmes developed, in whole or in part, outside of the CAS, will be eligible for use towards the achievement of CAS awards subject to the application of quality assurance procedures and arrangements for determining that a learner is entitled to an award.

It is evident from the data presented that CAS major awards in the areas of healthcare continue to be used in strong numbers along with CAS major awards in the areas of agriculture, business, sports and general/employability studies. These areas of demand are also reflected in minor and special purpose award usage. These key areas of demand will be prioritised when scheduling reviews. To facilitate ongoing meaningful progression pathways, reviews are best carried out across NFQ Levels for specific field of education and training.

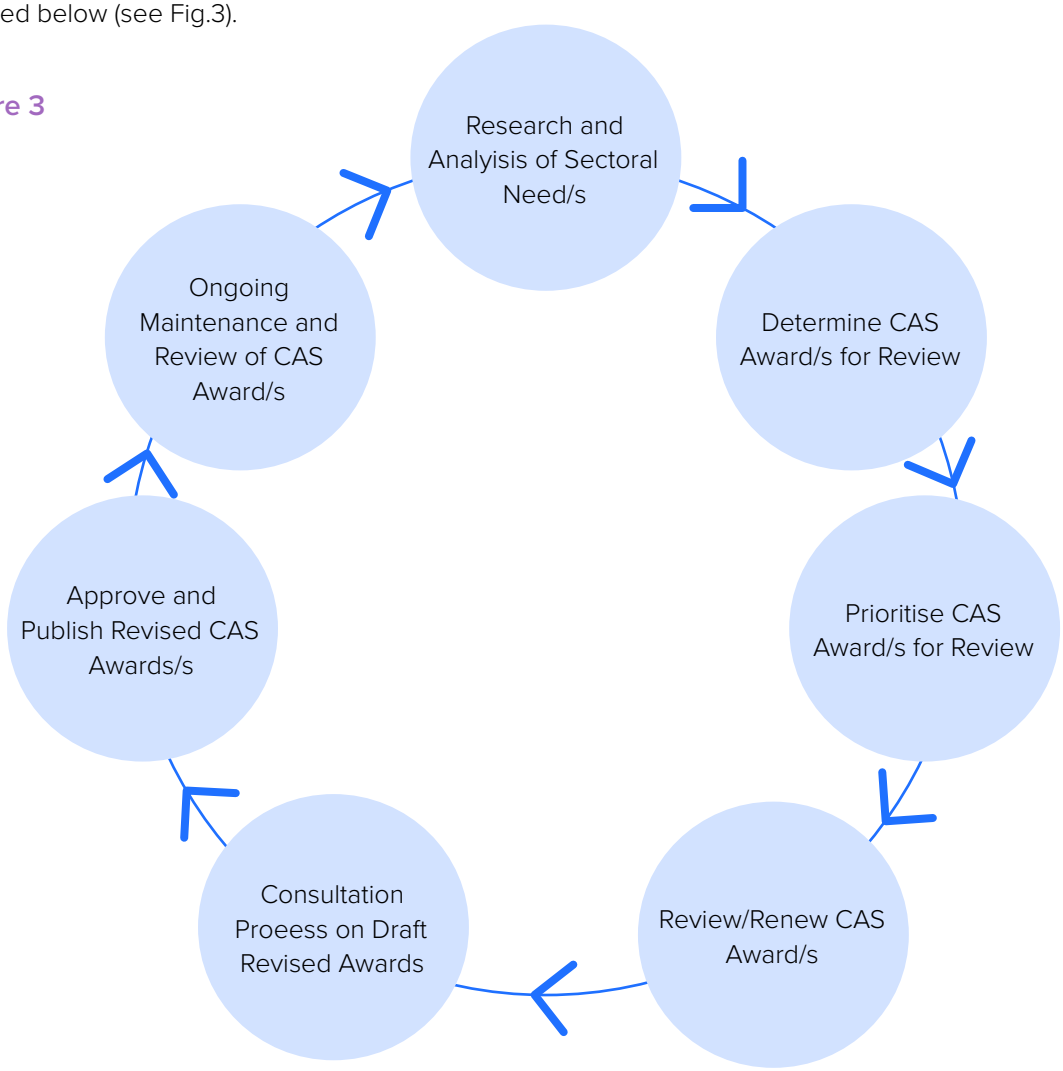
With the above in mind, existing FET award standards at NFQ Levels 5 & 6 will be prioritised for review over a 3-year period in the following areas:

- Healthcare
- Agriculture
- Sport
- Business

The proposed schedule will be reviewed on an ongoing basis in light of the relevant FET awarding arrangements raised in this paper.

The proposed process for updating and review of CAS standards will utilise a similar process to the determination of award standards outlined in QQI's Policy for Determining Standards and is outlined below (see Fig.3).

Figure 3



METHODOLOGY

To achieve our goal, the following methodology is proposed:

1. Develop a communications strategy for the project to ensure that the FET sector and all relevant stakeholders are informed about the review project and its progress.
2. Identify field of education and training areas most urgently in need of review, based on recent usage of CAS awards, and sectoral demand.
3. Establish CAS oversight review group.
4. Establish CAS standards review/development groups.
5. Oversee the CAS review and ensure CAS standards review development groups:
    A. Rationalise the volume of current CAS awards across all award types, where appropriate.
    B. Maintain the accumulation feature of CAS i.e., minor awards making up compound awards.
    C. Ensure relevance, currency and sustainability of award standards by updating the statements on knowledge, skill and competence or learning outcomes while also facilitating the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and move away from narrow and specific standards, where possible.
    D. Consider the integration of transferable skills and core competencies across compound awards, while considering the EU Council Recommendations, 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning "Key competences and basic skills are needed by all for personal fulfilment and development, employability, social inclusion and active citizenship."
    G. Ensure vocationally specific, relevant and authentic options for including work experience and work practice knowledge, skill and competences for major awards.
6. Embed an ongoing maintenance system to ensure sustainability of the revised CAS awards into the future.
7. Identify and amend relevant QQI awarding policies, for e.g. validation and certification, to support the development and recognition of programmes developed within a reformed CAS.
8. Engage with relevant actors to secure national and international recognition of awards made within a reformed CAS. Strengthen national progression arrangements for CAS awards.

NEXT STEPS

QQI acknowledges that drafting a QQI award standard can be a time-consuming process. It can take several meetings to review or develop a single occupation-oriented standard. We can see that review and development typically requires at least four meetings using the current approach and this baseline is independent of the volume of material involved[18].

18 QQI. (2020). Technical Paper on the Qualifications System (page 40).

MILESTONES AND TIMELINE

Publishing of the Outline Action Plan for the Review of CAS	Q4 2023
Commence communication of project across FET sector	Q4 2023
Convening the CAS award review oversight group. Standards Working Groups (in collaboration with the sector) Beginning with Healthcare – followed by Agriculture, Sports -	2024 (Healthcare) 2025 (Agriculture)* 2026 (Sport) 2027 (Business)**
Review and developmental work	2024 (Healthcare) 2025 (Agriculture)* 2026 (Sport) 2027 (Business)**
Public consultation(s)	2024 (Healthcare) 2025 (Agriculture)* 2026 (Sport) 2027 (Business)**
Feedback analysis and reporting	2024 (Healthcare) 2025 (Agriculture)* 2026 (Sport) 2027 (Business)**
Submission of the final versions of revised CAS award standards for approval by the PSC and for adoption by the Board	Q4 2024 (Healthcare) Q4 2025 (Agriculture)* Q4 2026 (Sport) 2027 (Business)**
Publication of new standards	Q1 2025 (Healthcare) Q1 2026 (Agriculture)* Q1 2027 (Sport) Q1 2028 (Business)**

Expected Impact

Rationalisation and deactivation of the number of CAS awards across all award types will address unnecessary duplication across awards to ensure the ongoing sustainability of CAS standards into the future.

WHO WILL BE INVOLVED?

The success of this project, led by QQI, is dependent on the involvement of range of key stakeholders including QQI, education and training Providers, funders, learners, regulators, industry, trade unions and social partners. Systematic engagement with the parties across the lifecycle of the project is critical to its success. Access to a broad range of subject-matter expertise linked to the different discipline areas, both from a programme design and delivery perspective and from the users of the award standards including industry and learners is vital for this project. A system of governance and oversight for the project is also required.

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APPENDIX 1

List of Invitees to Focus Groups and Bilateral Meetings

Further Education and Training Providers

- Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM)
- Community/Voluntary Providers
- Education and Training Boards (ETBs)

HSE Consortium of Centres of Nursing and Midwifery Education (CCNME)

- Private Providers
- REHAB Group (National Learning Network)
- Special National Schools
- Teagasc
- Voluntary Secondary and Community and Comprehensive Schools

Other Key Stakeholders

- Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)
- ETBI External Authenticator Directory
- Further Education Support Service (FESS)
- Irish Universities Association (IUA)
- SOLAS
- Technological Higher Education Association (THEA)

In addition to the survey and the focus groups, National Tertiary Office was also consulted.

Appendix 2

SWOT: QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUPS

Strengths

- What are the key strengths of the Common Award System (CAS)?
- What are the strong features of CAS award standards?
- Do the CAS award specifications bring clarity and consistency to programme design, delivery and assessment?

Weaknesses

- What are the main weaknesses of the Common Award System (CAS)?
- What are the weaknesses of the CAS award standards?
- Do the CAS award specifications negatively influence programme design, delivery and assessment?

Opportunities

- What aspects of the current CAS system should be retained in the next generation of CAS?
- What aspects of the current CAS award specifications, including award standards should be retained in the next generation of CAS?
- Could this review be an opportunity to rationalise the number of compound and minor awards?
- How can sectoral involvement in the review be facilitated?

Threats

- When QQI undertakes the review of CAS standards what do you perceive the main threats might be?
- What if QQI does not put any field specific award standards in place between the NFQ descriptors and programme LOs?