

HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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The higher education and training sector in Ireland comprises a range of higher education institutions – universities, institutes of technology, colleges of education and other recognised institutions, including private colleges. A list of higher education institutions is available on the website of the Department of Education and Science at: http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/he_providers_of_higher_education_ireland.htm?language=EN.

Entry to higher education is largely on a competitive basis with the most common entry mechanism being through the Central Applications Office (CAO), following completion of the Leaving Certificate examinations (www.cao.ie). However, increasing numbers of applicants to higher education are admitted through alternative progression mechanisms, including for mature entrants (23+); for holders of further education and training awards; or through the recognition of their prior learning.

1. Awarding bodies

Ireland has a binary system of higher education, comprising a range of higher education institutions that offer different types and levels of programmes. The universities' award a full range of undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications based on their combined missions of education, research and innovation. The main work of the IoTs is in undergraduate programmes, with a smaller number of postgraduate programmes and a growing involvement in regionally orientated applied research.

The University Sector

There are eight universities recognised under the Universities Act, 1997 – University College Cork (UCC), University College Dublin (UCD), National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG), National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM), Trinity College Dublin (TCD), the University of Limerick (UL), Dublin City University (DCU) and the National University of Ireland (NUI). The Universities validate and award their own qualifications as well as those in institutions recognised by them including, for example, the Colleges of Education, and the recognised colleges of the NUI. As a federal umbrella structure, the NUI is the formal awarding body for a number of recognised colleges, but is not itself a provider of education and research programmes.

In addition to these national universities, there exists, in Maynooth, St. Patrick's College (Pontifical University.) This college, which has its origins with the National University of Ireland in Maynooth, was founded as the National Seminary in 1875, and was subsequently granted a Pontifical Charter in 1896 to confer degrees in Theology, Philosophy, and Canon Law. These two institutions were established as separate entities under the Universities Act of 1997, and have continued to operate side by side since then. St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, is firmly linked into the Irish academic system, and the three undergraduate degree awards (listed below) currently offered, all have generic learning outcomes associated with them that conform to the general standards of Honours Bachelor Degrees within the Irish university system. The

undergraduate qualifications awarded by St. Patrick's College are:

- Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Arts (BATH)
- Bachelor of Divinity (BD)
- Bachelor of Theology (BTh)

Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) / Institutes of Technology

There are thirteen IoTs which are designated under the Regional Technical Colleges Acts, 1992 to 1999. The institutions are Athlone IT, IT Blanchardstown, Cork IT, IT Carlow, Dundalk IT, Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Letterkenny IT, Galway-Mayo IT, Limerick IT, IT Sligo, IT Tallaght, IT Tralee and Waterford IT. Each of these has been delegated the power to make awards to varying levels on the NFQ (and at least up to Level 8) by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the national awarding body for higher education awards outside of the university sector.

Any provider of education and training regardless of the source of that provision, whether it is an educational institution, the workplace or the community, can apply to HETAC for registration and validation of a higher education programme.

Dublin Institute of Technology

The Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) awards its own qualifications under the Dublin Institute of Technology Act, 1992.

2. Higher Education and Training Awards

Higher Certificate (NFQ Level 6) and minor, special purpose and supplemental awards at the same level

Awarded by DIT, HETAC, Institutes of Technology (with delegated authority), and some Universities

The Higher Certificate is normally awarded after completion of a programme of two years duration (120 ECTS credits) in a recognised higher education institution. Entry to these programmes is generally for school leavers and those with equivalent qualifications. The Higher Certificate is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna First Cycle.

Ordinary Bachelor Degree (NFQ Level 7) and minor, special purpose and supplemental awards at the same level

Awarded by DIT, HETAC, Institutes of Technology (with delegated authority), and some Universities

The Ordinary Bachelor Degree is normally awarded after completion of a programme of three years duration (180 ECTS credits) in a recognised higher education institution. Entry to a programme leading to an *ab initio* Ordinary Bachelor degree is typically for school leavers and those with equivalent qualifications. In addition, there are transfer arrangements in place across higher education and a number of programmes of 1 year duration (particularly in the IOT sector) leading to the Ordinary Bachelor Degree for holders of the Higher Certificate. The Ordinary Bachelor Degree is compatible with the Bologna First Cycle descriptor, though holders of this award do not generally immediately access programmes leading to Second Cycle awards in Ireland.

Honours Bachelor Degree (NFQ Level 8) and minor, special purpose and supplemental awards at the same level

Awarded by DIT, HETAC, Institutes of Technology (with delegated authority), and Universities

The Honours Bachelor Degree is normally awarded following completion of a programme of three to four years duration (180-240 ECTS credits) in a recognised higher education institution, although there are examples of longer programmes in areas such as architecture, dentistry and medicine. Entry to a programme leading to an *ab initio* Honours Bachelor degree is typically for high achieving school leavers and those with equivalent qualifications. In addition, there are transfer arrangements across higher education, and a number of programmes of 1 year duration (particularly in the IOT sector) leading to Honours Bachelor Degrees for holders of the Ordinary Bachelor Degree. The Honours Bachelor Degree is a Bologna First Cycle qualification.

Higher Diploma (NFQ Level 8)

Awarded by DIT, HETAC, Institutes of Technology (with delegated authority), and Universities

The Higher Diploma is normally awarded following completion of a programme of 1 year duration (60 ECTS credits) in a recognised higher education institution. Entry to a programme leading to a Higher Diploma is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees but can also be for holders of Ordinary Bachelor Degrees. It is of note that the Higher Diploma is typically in a different field of learning than the initial award. The Higher Diploma is a qualification at the same level as completion of the Bologna First Cycle.

Masters Degree (NFQ Level 9)

Awarded by DIT, HETAC, Institutes of Technology (with specified delegated authority), and Universities

There are two types of Masters Degree in Ireland: taught Masters Degrees and research Masters Degrees. The taught Masters Degree is awarded following the completion of a programme of 1 to 2 years duration (60-120 ECTS credits). Entry to a programme leading to a taught Masters Degree is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees. In some cases, entry to such programmes can be permitted for those with Ordinary Bachelor Degrees or equivalent who have some relevant work experience. Furthermore, in some cases, entry to such programmes is permitted for people with extensive experience. Research Masters Degree programmes are typically of 2 years duration (120 ECTS credits) though not all such programmes are credit rated. Entry to a programme leading to a research Masters Degree is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees, typically with a high classification attained – first or second class honours. The Irish Masters Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna Second Cycle.

Post Graduate Diploma (NFQ Level 9)

Awarded by DIT, HETAC, Institutes of Technology (with specified delegated authority), and Universities

The Postgraduate Diploma is normally awarded following completion of a programme of 1 year duration (60 ECTS credits) in a recognised higher education institution. Entry to a programme leading to a Postgraduate Diploma is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees but can also be for holders of Ordinary Bachelor Degrees. The Postgraduate Diploma is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna Second Cycle.

Doctoral Degree (NFQ Level 10)

Awarded by DIT, HETAC, Institutes of Technology (with specified delegated authority), and Universities

Possession of an Honours Bachelor Degree is normally required for entry to a doctoral programme. In some disciplines, a Master's Degree is also preferred. Normally those entering a doctoral programme with an Honours Bachelor Degree initially register for a research Master's Degree or provisional doctoral candidature. Upon successful completion of this initial stage, the candidate acquires full doctoral candidature. Doctoral programmes are between three and four years in duration. Varying doctoral programmes now exist, including professional and performance/practice based doctorates. The PhD remains the doctorate's most common form. Structured PhD programmes, which integrate disciplinary, professional, and generic skills development opportunities with the PhD, are becoming increasingly common. The Irish Doctoral Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna Third Cycle.

Higher Doctorate (NFQ Level 10)

Awarded by DIT, HETAC, Institutes of Technology (with specified delegated authority), and Universities

This award largely recognises excellent and distinguished contributions to learning. It may be used for career progression to advanced levels of academia and research. This award is never based on a provider's programme and, as such, is not subject to validation but is assessed by the awarding body for each individual provider. Normally, the learner already holds a first doctorate or equivalent for some period of time prior to becoming a candidate for the higher doctorate. The Irish Higher Doctorate is compatible with completion of the Bologna Third Cycle.

3. Grading

Grading systems and practices vary across the Irish higher education and training system.

Information on marks and standards which apply to all examinations leading to HETAC awards can be found in the *Assessment and Standards (2009)* document published by HETAC and available here:

http://www.hetac.ie/docs/Assessment_and_Standards_2009.pdf

For information on the grading systems and practices used by individual universities, their recognised colleges, and the Dublin Institute of Technology, please refer to their individual websites. A list of these institutions and their contact details is available at the following link: http://www.qualificationsrecognition.ie/recognition/ir_edu_train/list.html

4. Credit

In 2004, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland's Technical Advisory Group on Credit (Higher Education Track) published *Principles and operational guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training*. These operational guidelines recommend a typical credit volume or credit range for each major award-type from Levels 6-9 in the Framework in line with existing ECTS conventions and current practice in the Irish higher education and training system. The agreed credit range is as follows and Irish higher education and training awarding bodies operate within these arrangements:

Level 6 Higher Certificate = 120 credits

Level 7 Ordinary Bachelor Degree = 180 credits

Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree = 180-240 credits

Level 8 Higher Diploma = 60 credits

Level 9 Masters Degree (Taught) = 60-120 credits

Level 9 Postgraduate Diploma = 60 credits

No national credit ranges have been established for Doctoral Degrees and Masters Degrees (by research). However, some institutions do assign credit to these awards. The principles and operational guidelines document is available at the following link: http://www.nqai.ie/publication_nov2004.html

5. Quality Assurance

There are three systems in place for quality assurance in each of the following sub-sectors in Irish higher education and training:

- Universities and their associated colleges
- Institutes of Technology and providers within the independent sector (HETAC sector)
- Dublin Institute of Technology.

In all three instances, the primary responsibility for quality assurance rests with the institution, and external quality assurance processes are in place.

The universities established the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB, www.iuqb.ie), which has delegated authority as an independent body to organise the periodic external review of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures in place in the universities, as required under the Universities Act, 1997. The Higher Education Authority (HEA), a state agency under the Department of Education and Science (DES), also has an external review role in relation to quality assurance procedures in universities and consults with the IUQB in its fulfilling of this function.

Under the Qualifications Act 1999, HETAC has a periodic external monitoring role with regards to the Institutes of Technology, and carries out a range of quality review functions in the other education and training institutions which offer programmes leading to its awards. HETAC's policy in this area is available at the following link: <http://www.hetac.ie/docs/Policy%20on%20Inst%20Reviews%20December%2007.pdf>.

Also under the Qualifications Act 1999 the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has a statutory role evaluating the effectiveness of the DIT's quality assurance

processes and procedures. Its policy in this area is available at the following link:
http://www.nqai.ie/award_dit_pol.html