

Descriptors for Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental Award-Types National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

Introduction – Policies and Criteria on Award-Types

The policies and criteria for the framework established by the Authority set out that, as well as major award-types, there are to be three other kinds of award-types in the framework:

- Minor award-types
- Supplemental award-types
- Special purpose award-types

This note sets out issues to be considered in determining descriptors for these and suggests possible descriptors.

It is of note that the Authority has set out that it is through the determination of award-types and descriptors for these that the Authority will set the overall standards of the awards of the two awards Councils and the Dublin Institute of Technology.

Summary of minor, special purpose and supplemental award-types

- **minor** award-types provide recognition for learners who achieve a range of learning outcomes, but not the specific combination of learning outcomes required for a major award. This recognition will have relevance in its own right.
- **special-purpose** award-types are made for specific, relatively narrow, purposes — for example, the Safe Pass certification of competence in health and safety in the construction industry
- **supplemental** award-types are for learning which is additional to a previous award. They could, for example, relate to updating and refreshing knowledge or skills, or to continuing professional development

Policy Issues arising for Descriptors

Award-types are central to the framework. The Framework is intended to enable the recognition of all learning achievements and the range of award-types provided will have to facilitate this inclusiveness.

It is considered that there is a need to take as simple an approach as possible to developing these descriptors to ensure that the concepts can be easily understood and that implementation is facilitated. There is a need to consider how the descriptors for these award-types might be further defined. To date, full descriptors for major award-types at each level in the framework have been written and each of these contains the elements listed in Box 1.

Box 1 Common elements of major award-type descriptors

- Title
- Class
- Purpose
- Level
- Volume
- Precise detail in relation to each of the 8 sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence
- Progression and transfer
- Articulation

There is no requirement in the existing policies and criteria that all descriptors should be written on the same basis. There are, however, a number of general issues relating to descriptors that will need to be considered. As the development of these award-types is for the recognition of learning outcomes in a way other than through major awards it is potentially helpful that the same approach be taken to these descriptors as had been taken for the major award-types.

The ‘relationships’ among the four classes of award-types – major, minor, supplemental and special purpose – are differentiating criteria and may be a helpful addition to the criteria to be used in the generic descriptors:

- Minor award-types are always linked to major award-types.
- Supplemental award-types always build upon a previous award
- Special-purpose award-types may comprise learning outcomes that also form part of major awards

The use of volume in generic descriptors for minor, special purpose and supplemental awards may pose particular difficulties as it can vary so much, both within and across levels. Volume is, along with purpose, one of the main ways to differentiate between these award-types and the major award-types. Volume has two dimensions - volume of learning outcomes and comprehensiveness of sub-strands. Both of these dimensions will be smaller for the minor, supplemental and special purpose award-types than for the major award-types. The volume of learning outcomes will vary across fields of learning as well as across levels. While all of the eight sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence have been determined for the major award-type, it is not the case that all of the named major awards will be as comprehensive. They may not encompass learning achievements for all of the sub-strands. This will be made apparent in the named awards for each of the award-types. Also, individual sub-strands of a named major award may be at a different level to the overall level of the major award-type. The overall package of learning outcomes for a named award must correspond to those of the award-type to which it belongs. It is considered that a similar variation in volume of learning and of sub-strands should also obtain for other classes of award-types. On this basis, it is a matter for the awarding bodies, in the context of their overall responsibilities for

determining standards and developing awards, to set out any further details or requirements concerning the volume of named awards. For example, they may use or develop credit accumulation systems as a tool to measure volume.

The titles of named awards of minor, special purpose and supplemental award-types are important. The titles of these awards should be consistent with the titles of major award-types and should be clearly distinguished in a consistent way from named major awards and from each other so as to enhance understanding and avoid any confusion. These distinctions should be signalled in supporting documentation and communication about the award-types, e.g., in certificate and diploma supplements.

Possible approaches to determining descriptors

Taking these issues and characteristics into account, it is proposed that generic award-type descriptors be determined for minor, supplemental and special purpose awards. Due to the nature and potentially large number of these awards it is not possible to produce level-specific award-type descriptors for these awards at this stage in the framework development process. Whether it would ever be a useful exercise is questionable. These generic award-type descriptors will be used to generate named awards of each of the respective award-types. The variation in the volume of learning and sub-strands for minor, supplemental and special purpose awards also militates against having specific award-type descriptors at this time.

It is suggested that the same approach be taken to determining all (three) award-type descriptors for all minor, special purpose and supplemental award-types. This means that the descriptors will contain the common elements of the major award-type descriptors, listed in Box 1, and two new elements 'Comprehensiveness' and 'Link to other classes of award-type'. The link establishes what the formal relationship between award-types is. It is anticipated that, as named awards are developed for all award-types, the relationship between named award-types will be identified.

Minor, supplemental and special purpose awards may often specify standards for fewer than the eight sub-strands. In some cases, their focus may be narrow and only a small number of sub-strands may be defined. If only one sub-strand is defined for the award then the level to which the award-type is allocated is decided on the basis of that strand. If more than one sub-strand is defined, a best-fit principle will apply. This will take into account the purpose and context for developing the award (and, where relevant, its link to other awards).

Minor awards, while having relevance in their own right, are always part of at least one major award. They facilitate the recognition of part of the learning outcomes of a major award. The range of learning outcomes they specify will have relevance in its own right. These awards will always be smaller in volume than the major award of which they are a part. Awarding bodies may develop their own approaches about what is the smallest part of a major award that is to be recognised as being a minor award. It is recognised that while constituent parts of a major award may be recognised as a minor award, awarding

bodies may also allocate credit to parts (or units) of an award as a way to recognise the achievement of particular learning outcomes. Thus, awarding bodies may use minor awards and credit as distinct tools to recognise learning.

Supplemental award-types are for learning that is additional to a previous major or special purpose award. In general, these are at the same level as the awards to which they are additional and the learning outcomes within the individual sub-strands are usually at the same level as in the previous award.

Special purpose awards are standalone and have a distinct identity which reflects their clearly defined purpose. There is no requirement that they be linked to a major award. They may however be integral to a major or minor award. A special purpose award will always be significantly smaller in volume than a major award. A special purpose award may also relate to more limited strands of learning outcomes than a major award. It is possible that a special purpose award could, for example, focus on discrete skills (concentrating on the skill strands of learning outcomes) only.

Building on the above, the following descriptors are determined. These descriptors are intended to enable as wide an array of awards as possible to be developed at different levels of the framework. It is to be expected that over time the descriptors at different levels may be defined more precisely and that more than one award-type may be defined at a given level.

AWARD-TYPE DESCRIPTOR 'MINOR AWARD-TYPE'

Class of Award	Minor award
Purpose	Multi-purpose award-type that recognises attainment of part of a major award and which has relevance in its own right.
Level	Generally, the same level as the major award to which it is linked
Volume	Variable - smaller than the major award of which it is a part
Comprehensiveness	Variable
Knowledge - breadth	Variable
Knowledge - kind	Variable
Know-how and skill - range	Variable
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Variable
Competence - context	Variable
Competence - role	Variable
Competence – learning to learn	Variable
Competence - insight	Variable
Progression & Transfer	Transfer to programmes leading to attainment of a part of one or more major awards Transfer to programmes leading to special purpose awards
Articulation	
Link to other Awards	Learning outcomes form part of those of a major award

AWARD-TYPE DESCRIPTOR ‘SPECIAL PURPOSE AWARD-TYPE’

Class	Special Purpose
Purpose	To meet specific, relatively narrow focused legislative, regulatory, economic, social or personal learning requirements
Level	Any Level – best-fit
Volume	Variable - between small and medium
Comprehensiveness	Usually limited to a small number of sub-strands
Knowledge - breadth	Variable
Knowledge – kind	Variable
Know-how and skill – range	Variable
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Variable
Competence - context	Variable
Competence – role	Variable
Competence – learning to learn	Variable
Competence - insight	Variable
Progression & Transfer	Transfer to programmes leading to major or minor awards at the same level or above Transfer to programmes leading to supplemental awards at the same level Transfer/progression to programmes leading to related special purpose awards at the same level or above
Articulation	
Link to other Awards	Learning outcomes may form part of those of a major award, minor award or supplemental award

AWARD-TYPE DESCRIPTOR ‘SUPPLEMENTAL AWARD-TYPE’

Class	Supplemental
Purpose	For learners who have already obtained a major or special purpose award. May be for refreshing/updating and continuous education and training with respect to an occupation/profession.
Level	Generally, the same level as the major or special purpose award to which it is linked
Volume	Variable - between small and medium
Comprehensiveness	Variable
Knowledge - breadth	Variable
Knowledge - kind	Variable
Know-how and skill - range	Variable
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Variable
Competence - context	Variable
Competence - role	Variable
Competence – learning to learn	Variable
Competence – insight	Variable
Progression & Transfer	Progression to programmes leading to major awards at the next level in a related field of learning
Articulation	From major or special purpose award at the same level
Link to other Awards	Learning outcomes are closely linked to those of a major award or of a special purpose award – they generally reflect a deepening of learning, up-dating or specialisation