

The ETBs' QQI Advanced Certificate in Early Learning and Care

A shared curriculum approach to developing a new programme for the Education and Training Boards' FET services



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Professional award standards for Early Learning and Care were published by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in November 2019. By September 2021, new programmes were ready for rollout. This article looks at the shared curriculum approach that the 16 Education and Training Boards took to developing new programmes leading to new awards.

Introduction

September 2021 marked a significant moment as 14 of the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) began the rollout of the new Early Learning and Care programmes in 39 of their centres and colleges around Ireland. The Advanced Certificate in Early Learning and Care is a two-stage programme at level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), and the level 5 Certificate in Early Learning and Care can be achieved at the end of stage 1 or delivered as a standalone programme. The programmes, which can be delivered full-time and part-time, lead to two new QQI professional awards.

This article looks at the rationale behind the new programmes, the processes involved, their implementation, and what lies ahead.

Genesis of the shared curriculum project

The need for developing new ETB further education and training (FET) programmes in early learning and care (ELC) must be seen in context. Since the publication of the QQI Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) awards at levels 5 and 6 on the NFQ, understanding of best practice in the ELC sector has evolved, and changes in regulation and legislation have occurred. There is a concomitant drive to professionalise the sector, as evidenced in social policy, for example in *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families 2019–2028* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2018).

Arising out of a review of the above-mentioned ECCE awards and extensive stakeholder consultation, in November 2019 QQI published new professional award standards for the newly renamed early learning and care sector (QQI, 2019), to replace the ECCE awards which are being phased out. These professional award standards for ELC are a radical move. For the first time, levels 5 to 8 are on the same framework, with all graduates identified as professionals, whatever their level of qualification on that framework. The

framework makes no distinction at level 6 between learning outcomes for the Advanced Certificate and the Higher Certificate. Also significant is that the professional awards are outside the Common Awards System familiar to FET.

The 16 ETBs decided to develop programmes in ELC on the basis of a shared curriculum. Dublin and Dún Laoghaire ETB (DDLETB) was nominated to lead the project with the support of the 15 other ETBs. This collaborative approach was decided upon to support the consistency of programme delivery across the ETBs and to avoid duplication of resources. The model was developed in collaboration with QQI and supported by SOLAS. Support was provided throughout by the Further Education Support Service.

Development and validation processes

DDLETB's responsibilities included assembling a programme board to advise the development and approve the programmes for submission for validation; a curriculum development group; and a local steering group to oversee day-to-day development. Terms of reference were developed for all groups involved. The timeline was ambitious. Intense work and collaboration prevailed between September 2020, when research began, to early June 2021, when validation panel meetings took place (see figure).

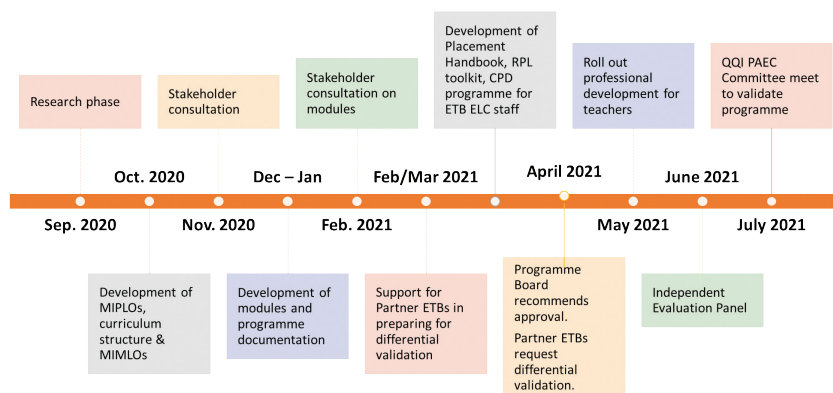


Figure: ELC shared curriculum project phases

Nine subject-matter experts were released from teaching duties in seven ETBs to the curriculum development group, to plan, research, and write the shared curriculum. This group was supported by a comprehensive series of continuing professional development (CPD) sessions in curriculum design, work-based assessment, supporting practice placement, the themes and principals of *Aistear*: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, and administration in an ELC service. They undertook an initial small-scale research study with FET ECCE graduates who were working as practitioners and studying the discipline in higher education, with ELC service providers, and with FET teaching staff.

As the writing of the shared curriculum progressed, there were two rounds of stakeholder consultation. All in all, research and consultation involved over 300 individual and group respondents, including FET graduates, FET teaching staff, ELC practitioners and employers, higher education representatives, parents, and most importantly two small groups of young

children facilitated by their practitioners. The purpose was to inform the curriculum and ensure that learners graduating from the programme down the line would be appropriately prepared to take up practitioner roles in an ELC setting and to progress in a related programme of higher education.

In addition to the programme itself, from February to April 2020 a number of resources were developed to support consistency in its implementation across the ETBs. These were a professional practice placement handbook to support all parties to the placements; an Access, Transfer and Progress & Recognition of Prior Learning toolkit; and an asynchronous online programme of professional development as an induction for staff on all aspects of the programme.

Validation in this shared curriculum scenario took careful planning, collaboration, and coordination with QQI and among the 16 ETBs' quality assurance (QA) managers. While DDLETB, as the lead ETB, applied for validation, the 15 other ETBs applied for *differential validation*, whereby validation was extended with regard to their differentiated ETB contexts and QA systems (QQI, 2017).

Teams from all 16 ETBs met with the validation panel in several sessions online over two days at the end of May and in early June. The shared curriculum and associated resources received very positive feedback, described as 'excellent' and 'a joy to read' by validation panel members. The panel was particularly impressed by the engagement of all the ETBs in the entire process. QQI validated the programmes for five years.

The programme's focus is on providing for the holistic well-being, development, and learning needs of children from 0–6 years across a range of early learning and care settings. It offers a balance of theory and practice, with professional practice placement as integral to the teaching and learning. Professional practice, reflective practice, children's rights, the centrality of play, relationships, inclusion, and ethics are reflected in the programme learning outcomes and weave through the modules. The table below shows the curriculum structure, with six mandatory modules at each stage.

Stage 1 NFQ Level 5, 120 FET credits Level 5 Certificate in Early Learning and Care 5M21473	Stage 2 NFQ Level 6, 120 FET credits Advanced Certificate in Early Learning and Care 6M21471
Professional Practice Placement in Early Learning and Care 25 credits	Advanced Professional Practice Placement in Early Learning and Care 25 credits
Children's Rights, Legislation and Regulation 15 credits	Sociology and Social Policy in Early Learning and Care 15 credits
Holistic Care of Children (0 to Six Years) 15 credits	The Developing Child 20 credits
Early Childhood Growth and Development 25 credits	Curriculum and Pedagogy 20 credits
Curriculum, Play and Creative Studies 25 credits	Inclusive Early Learning and Care 15 credits
Understanding and Assisting Children with Additional Needs 15 credits	Supervision and Administration in Early Learning and Care 25 credits

Table: Advanced Certificate in Early Learning and Care Programme curriculum structure: module titles and credit values

Implementation

Stage 1, or the level 5 Certificate, is being rolled out currently in most of the ETBs, both full-time and in a number of part-time contexts. In September 2022 the remaining ETBs and centres or colleges will follow suit, and stage 2 of the Advanced Certificate will begin as appropriate. The Early Childhood Care and Education programmes are being phased out, with deactivation due for December 2023.

A number of initiatives to support the implementation are in train. One is the nomination of an ELC programme manager in each ETB to support the implementation of the programme internally. Several ETBs have established a structure for their own delivery staff to engage in a community of practice. This is an invaluable peer resource for teachers and placement monitors to share knowledge of the ELC sector and ideas for teaching, learning, assessment, and supporting both learners and employers during the professional practice placements. A national community of practice for programme managers has also formed, to further ensure consistency of implementation, discuss questions that arise, and share resources.

Other initiatives involve collaboration with support organisations. Education and Training Boards Ireland's (ETBI) Digital Library is building a library resource and user guides for ETB teachers and learners so that they have access to the recommended reading lists and much more besides. The sector's ongoing collaboration with Further Education Support Service produced an extremely beneficial and timely CPD session in September on reflective practice in early learning and care, specifically for teachers of the new programmes.

Where to from here?

At this point, the development and validation process is just recently behind us, and the implementation of the new programmes is in the early days, with much ahead of us. The evaluation of the shared curriculum development process, which is under way at the time of writing, will no doubt

generate much learning to inform future shared curriculum development undertakings for the ETBs. One thing is certain: while Covid-19 disposed of plans for in-person work sessions, it quickly showed that agile collaborative programme development is enabled by working in the digital space.

As we move through 2022, the communities of practice provide space for critical friendship on the journey ahead and a forum for identifying the inevitable unforeseen challenges. After all, the programmes only come alive once they are in the classrooms, and this is when the new shared curriculum is really tested. Annual reviews will take place under the aegis of the programme board, with feedback from centres and colleges on the ground.

The ELC programme board is in place under new terms of reference as the 'custodian of the shared curriculum'. Its remit is to maintain the curriculum, ensuring it remains fit for purpose and responsive to upcoming developments in the ELC sector, including the anticipated publication of the Workforce Development Plan for Early Learning and Care and School Age Children, and the updated *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, among other developments that will surely take place in time.

The development of professional award standards for early learning and care is a move away from the QQI Common Awards System model, and one that the FET sector may see more of in future. The development and implementation experience set out in this article will provide rich learning for future shared curriculum development.

REFERENCES

- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2018) *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families 2019-2028*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.
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