



Beyond the Leaving Cert

A Guide for Parents: Navigating Pathways to the
Future

Diverse Pathways



The diagram is a semi-circle divided into 10 segments, each representing a level of the NFQ. The segments are numbered 1 to 10 from left to right. The outer ring of each segment contains the name of the award type. The inner ring contains the name of the award type. The center of the semi-circle is labeled 'NFQ IRELAND'. The segments are color-coded: Level 1 is green, Level 2 is blue, Level 3 is orange, Level 4 is yellow, Level 5 is light green, Level 6 is light blue, Level 7 is pink, Level 8 is light pink, Level 9 is light blue, and Level 10 is light green. The diagram also includes a legend for award types: Major Awards (outer ring), Minor Awards (inner ring), Supplemental Awards (blue triangle), Special Purpose Awards (orange diamond), and Professional Awards (black dot).

Level	Award Type
1	Level 1 Certificate
2	Level 2 Certificate
3	Level 3 Certificate
4	Level 4 Certificate
5	Level 5 Certificate
6	Advanced Certificate
7	Higher Certificate
8	Ordinary Bachelor Degree
9	Honours Bachelor Degree
10	Higher Diploma
11	Postgraduate Diploma
12	Masters Degree
13	Higher Doctorate
14	Doctoral Degree

Legend:

- Major Awards: named in the outer rings, are the principal class of awards made at a level
- Minor Awards: are for partial completion of the outcomes for a Major Award
- Supplemental Awards: are for learning that is additional to a Major Award
- Special Purpose Awards: are for relatively narrow or purpose-specific achievement
- Professional Awards: are for occupation-orientated qualifications including apprenticeships

Level 8: Honours Bachelor Degree (Typical University Entry).

Key Takeaway: Students can step up this ladder at their own pace. Completing a Level 5/6 can lead directly into Year 1 or 2 of a Level 8 degree.

Higher Education (CAO)

The Central Applications Office (CAO) handles applications for Universities, Technological Universities (TUs), and Institutes of Technology.

Points System: Based on the best 6 subjects in the Leaving Cert.

Minimum Requirements: Specific subjects (e.g., Maths, English, Science) are often required for matriculation.

Level 8 Degrees: Typically 3–4 years, academic focus.

Key Deadline: February 1st is the primary closing date for applications.



Further Education (PLC) APPLY DIRECTLY TO COLLEGE FROM NOW

A Bridge to Success

Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses are usually 1 year long (Level 5).

Low Cost: Fees have been largely abolished.

Career Ready: Excellent for vocational skills (e.g., Pre-Nursing, IT, Art).

University Route: A proven "back door" to University. High grades in a PLC can replace Leaving Cert points for many CAO courses.



Apprenticeships: Earn & Learn

Not Just for Trades

While traditional crafts (Plumbing, Electrical) remain strong, apprenticeships have expanded significantly.

New Fields: Finance, Insurance, Biopharma, ICT, Logistics, and Auctioneering.

Structure: Combine on-the-job training (paid) with off-the-job education (college).

Degree Level: You can now earn a Level 8 degree via an apprenticeship.

Employer Led: You typically apply to an employer, not the CAO.



The Tertiary Degree Pathway

An alternative pathway

Structure: This programme is a joint further and higher education degree.

Students start their course in a Further Education (FE) college (usually an Education and Training Board or ETB) for 1–2 years, and then seamlessly progress to a Higher Education Institution (university/technological university) to complete the degree.

Award: All Tertiary Degree programmes lead to an NFQ Level 7 or Level 8 degree.

<https://nto.heai.ie/courses/>



Study Abroad Options



Europe (EUNiCAS)

Hundreds of degrees taught through English in the Netherlands, Denmark, Poland, etc. often with lower entry requirements and lower fees.



UK (UCAS)

Northern Ireland and Great Britain remain popular. Note that fees can be higher in England, but Northern Ireland offers value.



Benefits

Independence, cultural experience, and a chance to study high-demand courses (like Medicine or Psychology) that are competitive at home.

Gap Years & The World of Work



Taking a Breath

A gap year is not "time off"—it's time on. It can be a valid and mature choice.

Maturity: Students often enter college more focused after a year of work or travel.

Financial: Working for a year allows students to save for college life.

Discovery: Helps undecided students figure out what they truly want to do before committing to a 4-year degree.

Useful Resources



CAO.ie

For all Higher
Education
applications and key
dates.

CareersPortal.ie

Comprehensive
database of courses,
careers, and guidance
tools.



Qualifax.ie

The national
learners' database
for course search
and entry
requirements.



Apprenticeship.ie

Information on all SOLAS
apprenticeships and how
to apply.

How You Can Support Them



Open Dialogue: Focus on their strengths and interests, not just "job titles."

Reduce Pressure: Remind them there is always more than one pathway to a destination.

Research Together: Look at course modules, not just college names. Is the content interesting?

Practicalities: Discuss accommodation, transport, and costs early to manage expectations.