Professional

Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland

Draft 1 for Consultation

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1. Introduction and Context

The early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector has developed exponentially in the past few decades, with a particularly fast pace of development in recent years. This has been driven by both the increased understanding of the value of quality ECEC experiences for young children and by the need to provide services for parents to participate in employment outside the home. Accompanying this has been an increased State involvement, regulation and investment in the sector with the advent of a number of universal and targeted initiatives in the provision of ECEC. The introduction of the Free Preschool Year (ECCE) scheme in 2010 and its extension to a second year in 2016 has introduced increased professional expectations of the early years workforce. Collectively, these developments have resulted in a much increased ECEC workforce and a more complex policy and practice landscape for the sector (Walsh, 2016; Urban, Robson & Saatchi, 2017).

This evolving policy and practice landscape has led to an increase in the level of qualifications achieved by early years professionals¹. This is both a response to the more complex role undertaken by early years professionals and to meet both the minimum criteria to work in the sector and the eligibility criteria for higher capitation paid by certain State initiatives. For example, higher capitation grants are awarded to ECEC settings in the Free Preschool Year scheme which employ early years professionals with higher qualifications (Level 7 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)², with three years post-qualification experience) and a minimum level of qualification has been introduced for all staff working with young children (Level 5 NFQ). It is evident that the professionalization of the sector is well underway. These, among other developments, have led to the emergence of a wide range of initial professional education offerings for early years professionals and a concomitant rise in the number of graduates at all levels of the NFQ.

Research clearly indicates that there is variability in the experiences of degree course participants at present depending on where they undertake their course (DES, 2016; Urban, Robson & Saatchi, 2017). Given the variability of the experience of degree courses, it follows that the experiences of our youngest citizens in ECEC settings will also be variable. The structure, duration and content of courses vary from institution to institution. The aim of these courses is to prepare early years professionals to work across a broad range of role profiles within the sector, including setting-based practitioners, teachers, lecturers, inspectors/evaluators, mentors and many more. This work may involve early years professionals working directly with children, with parents, with co-professional colleagues or in the wider community (or indeed with all of the above in the complex daily role). See figure 1 overleaf.

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¹ Early Years Professional is used as the term throughout these criteria and guidelines to refer to the range of professionals who work in the early years sector. Further debate is required by the sector to agree a title appropriate to the profession.

² Please visit http://www.nfq-qqi.com/index.html for an overview of the NFQ.
1.1 Structure of the Criteria and Guidelines

These criteria and guidelines are presented in the following structure:

1. Introduction and context
2. Purpose of and rationale for the draft criteria and guidelines
3. Development process of the draft criteria and guidelines
   a. Structures and processes
   b. Pillars of research
4. Draft Professional Award Criteria for Initial Professional Education in ECEC
   a. Structure of the Criteria and Guidelines
   b. Programme Content
   c. Programme delivery
5. Wider issues for consideration
6. Conclusion

2. Purpose of and Rationale for the Draft Criteria and Guidelines

While further education award standards were established for ECEC at Levels 4, 5 and 6 on the NFQ in 2011 (http://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/FET-Awards-Standards.aspx), there has been little national oversight around the structure and content of programmes at bachelor degree level and above. The purpose of these draft criteria and guidelines is to support the development of awards (Level 7 and Level 8\(^3\)) that will lead to the formation of early years

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\(^3\) Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) has a statutory remit to develop award standards at Levels 1-10 of the NFQ. QQI was represented on this working group to ensure alignment in the future development of criteria and standards at Levels, 4, 5 and 6 and to ensure coherence across all levels of the NFQ. Common Award Standards at Levels 4 - 6 for Early Childhood Care and Education, first published by QQI in 2011, are scheduled for review in 2018.
professional graduates who are fully prepared to take on the complex challenges of practice in this field. The criteria and guidelines do not identify specific occupational titles for graduate professionals at these levels nor the specific role they will undertake due to the fact that there is currently no single agreed professional title and a myriad of occupational titles that such a graduate may aspire to.

The rationale for the establishment of the working group and subsequent consultation with the sector is to clearly articulate in a set of criteria and guidelines national guidance for the development and review of ordinary and honours level (Level 7 and Level 8) degree ECEC courses in Ireland. These criteria and guidelines may be used in the development or review of programmes by individual institutions, by awarding bodies, by accreditation bodies or by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). They will be of use to employers in terms of clarifying the values, knowledge(s) and practices of a Level 7 or Level 8 ECEC graduate. It is also hoped that they will have a positive effect in the development of a more cohesive professional identity among early years graduates and ultimately enhance the experiences of young children in ECEC settings.

The criteria and guidelines specifically focus on the professional dimension of practice in the ECEC sector which must be integral to the professional formation of Level 7 and Level 8 graduates. It provides guidance and criteria on the journey from entry for a candidate onto a Level 7 or Level 8 undergraduate course to their exit as an early years professional graduate. It is intended that the criteria and guidelines will enable initial professional education course providers to design and deliver a course (including professional practice placement) that develops the necessary values, knowledge(s) and practices in their graduates to enable them to practise as early years professionals. The criteria are inclusive of both academic and professional indicators expected by early years graduates. Finally, but perhaps most critically, they aim to improve the experiences and outcomes of our youngest citizens in early years settings. It is not intended that these criteria and guidelines will standardise and homogenise the delivery and content of all Level 7 and Level 8 courses in Ireland; rather it aims to bring some consistency to the experiences and outcomes for students undertaking such courses.


3.1 Structures and Processes
A working group was established in June 2017 by the Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) to lead the development of professional award criteria and guidelines to inform the development and review of ordinary and honours level degrees (Level 7 and Level 8) programmes in ECEC in Ireland. The working group was representative of key constituents of the education sector with a remit to authorise and implement the use of the draft criteria and guidelines in their various jurisdictions. Included were representatives from the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Technological Higher Education Authority (THEA). Membership of the working group can be found in Appendix 1. The terms of reference of the working group was shared with the wider early years sector in September 2017 (see Appendix 2). This is in keeping with the long tradition of consultation on policy development in partnership with the sector and consultation on a draft of the criteria and guidelines is central to the work of the group. Consultation is facilitated though the Early Years Advisory Group established by DES, the Early Years Forum established by DCYA and through wider
public consultation processes. This is to ensure the draft criteria and guidelines that ultimately emerge from the development processes are balanced, comprehensive and reflective of the diverse needs of the sector. Consultative processes will begin in December 2017 and will inform the final draft of the criteria and guidelines. Ultimately, the Minister for Education and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs will have the final say in the sign off of the criteria and guidelines.

3.2 Pillars of Research
3.2.1 ECEC Policy and Research

The draft criteria and guidelines are informed by research from a number of studies, both national and international, and distil the key elements of what is considered essential for the professional formation of a competent and confident early years professional. The work of the group was primarily informed by a commissioned review of the occupational role profiles in ECEC in Ireland conducted by the University of Roehampton (Urban, Robson & Saatchi, 2017). In turn, this report drew upon previous national and international research including:

- The Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform [DJELR], 2002). This set out occupational profiles and core skills for 5 levels of practitioner, from ‘Basic’ to ‘Expert’.
- A Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2010). This plan recognised the impact that the calibre and capacity of early years professionals has on the quality of experiences of young children. It made a number of recommendations relating to improving access to appropriate initial and continuing professional education to prepare early years professionals for the challenging role in the ECEC sector.
- The Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care (CoRe) report (Urban et al., 2011) was a European research project which explored conceptualisations of competence and professionalism in the ECEC sector. This report identified systemic conditions for developing, supporting and maintaining competence at all levels of the ECEC system.
- A survey of ECEC practitioners to seek their views on the extent to which current early childhood care and education qualifications provide early years practitioners with the appropriate blend of knowledge and skills to support the educational development of children in early years settings (DES, 2016).

These reports, particularly the Urban, Robson & Saatchi (2017) research, provided the starting point for the working group to establish criteria and guidelines for the development and review of ordinary and honours level degree (Level 7 and Level 8) ECEC programmes in Ireland. It has posited a common core professional profile, which is framed in general terms, and provides detail of the knowledge, practices and values expected in the initial professional education of Level 7 and Level 8 professional education courses.4

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4 For the purpose of the initial consultation document in November 2017, the criteria and guidelines relate to Level 8 degrees and these will be further developed to include Level 7 degrees in the next iteration of the draft criteria and guidelines.
Recent policy and practice developments are reflected in the criteria and guidelines. For example, the development of national practice frameworks such as *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009) and *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2006) are incorporated in the knowledge element of initial professional education courses. While using somewhat varying language, the research outlines a key range of values (principles, dispositions), knowledge(s) and practices (skills, competences) that are central to the professional formation of early years professionals. The criteria outline the essential components in the professional formation of early years professionals while the guidelines surrounding these criteria provide guidance on the inputs and processes that should assist the achievement of desired graduate attributes. It is envisaged that the achievement of a Level 7 or Level 8 degree does not represent the end of the learning processes or indeed complete professional formation but instead marks a milestone of achievement that will be built on by both formal and informal learning throughout the early years professional’s career. A commitment to such ongoing professional learning is inherent to the attributes and formation of an early years professional. It is expected that the criteria and guidelines for ordinary and honours level degrees (Level 7 and Level 8) can be further developed to provide clarity around expectations for Level 9 courses in the future. It is expected that these criteria and guidelines will be updated into the future to reflect ongoing developments within the sector.

### 3.2.2 Policy and Research relating to Developing Professional Award Criteria and Standards

All providers offering programmes leading to awards on the NFQ form part of the national education and training system. This system is underpinned by quality assurance, which seeks to provide public trust and confidence in the education and training delivered and the resulting qualifications obtained by learners. QQI has published Core Statutory Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines for providers of higher, further and English language education and training. Provider-owned quality assurance refers to the mechanisms and procedures developed and adopted by providers to achieve and maintain a desired level of quality in educational provision, research and related services.

Since the establishment of the NFQ (NQAI, 2002), a range of award standards have been developed to inform the development of programmes across the NFQ. QQI adopted the National Framework of Qualifications’ generic award-type descriptors as generic awards standards. These generic awards standards form the basis of all awards standards. In 2014, QQI published professional award-type descriptors for the alignment of professional awards (QQI, 2014). These are also documented in Appendix 2 (Level 8) and Appendix 3 (Level 7) alongside the general indicators. These draft criteria and guidelines are informed by these

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5 QQI was established in November 2012 by the amalgamation of the functions of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI). Amongst its functions, QQI is responsible for the maintenance, development and review of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).
standards. Moreover, each individual awarding body has established a set of criteria and guidelines that inform programmes leading to awards within their institutions.

QQI (2014:2) indicate that the purpose of a Level 8 Professional Award is to ensure that:

The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are proper to independent professional practice, as well as relevant to personal development, participation in society, employment and study including access to additional formal education and training.

An early years professional graduate requires a combination of attributes which are developed through a range of experiences. These include academic attributes (e.g., establishing sound academic principles), professional practice attributes (e.g., planning and developing a curriculum for children) and professional personal attributes (e.g., an ethical practice framework to inform their practice, the capacity for reflection and critical thinking).

In both the NQAI (2002) and the Urban, Robson and Saatchi (2017) reports, there are three core elements. NFQ indicators as outlined by the NQAI (2002) in Appendix 3 and Appendix 4 are used to frame the knowledge, skills and competences required by early years graduates. These align to the values, knowledge(s) and practices as outlined in the Urban, Robson and Saatchi (2017) report. The knowledge(s) align automatically. The practices in the Urban, Robson and Saatchi (2017) report are aligned to the skills and competences in the NFQ documentation. The values in the Urban Robson and Saatchi (2017) report are inherent within the competences in the NFQ indicators with the understanding that they will be expressed more fully within each individual award standard. This alignment is represented visually in Figure 2 below.

![Figure 2](image-url)

Figure 2: Alignment between the QQI (no date) and Urban et al. (2017) criteria

Professional and personal **values** are the lens through which we interpret professional knowledge. They orient our making sense of the world and underpin our practices. The criteria and guidelines are underpinned by and framed within a range of core principles. These principles have been developed through consultation with the sector and are well articulated within a range of policy documents. These include the *Model Framework* (DJELR, 2002), the *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) frameworks, as well as in the more recent national policy framework for children and young people, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* (DCYA, 2014) and the *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Guidelines and Charter* (DCYA, 2016). It is envisaged that the forthcoming *National Early Years Strategy* being developed by the DCYA will further articulate a shared orientation for the sector. These principles encapsulate a range of values that can be both inherent and
explicit within programmes and should underpin the initial professional education of students pursuing Level 7 and Level 8 degrees.
Higher Education Graduate Role Profiles in the Early Years Sector in Ireland

There are a wide range of higher education programmes in Early Childhood Education and Care on offer in Ireland. However, there is currently no occupation within early Years settings that can only be filled by a higher education graduate.

The table below demonstrates that the graduate from current level 7 or level 8 award programmes has little option but to seek employment in an occupation that could equally be filled by a level 5 or level 6 graduate. However if these graduate have ambitions to apply for jobs that do require a higher education qualification either within early years services or in the wider Early Years sector, they must have completed required minimum years of practice experience in Early Years services.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Minimum qualification required</th>
<th>Additional conditions (e.g. experience)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Childcare worker</td>
<td>NFQ Level 5 Major award in ECCE (regulatory requirement)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool Room Leader (ECCE Programme)</td>
<td>NFQ Level 6 Major award in ECCE (Contractual requirement)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool Room Leader (ECCE Programme) Higher Capitation Grant</td>
<td>NFQ Level 7 Major award in ECCE (Contractual requirement)</td>
<td>3 years practical experience of working in an early years service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Development Specialist (e.g. Better Start, Aistear/Siolta Initiative)</td>
<td>NFQ Level 8 Major award in ECCE</td>
<td>3 years practical experience of working in an early years service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Years Education Inspector (Department of Education and Skills)</td>
<td>NFQ Level 8 Major award in ECCE</td>
<td>5 years practical experience of working in an early years service</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This anomalous situation needs to be addressed if higher education graduates in ECEC are to be attracted to work in early years services and more importantly retained so that the benefits in terms of the delivery of high quality early childhood education and care provision can be realised.
4. Draft Professional Award Criteria for Initial Professional Education in ECEC

4.1 Structure of the Criteria and Guidelines
The criteria and guidelines below provide broad advice for the development and review of Level 7 and Level 8 degree programmes in Ireland. The approach taken is in line with CoRe report which advocates the framing of professional profiles in general terms rather than in detailed lists or descriptions (Urban et al., 2011). In April 2017, Urban, Robson & Saatchi (2017) developed a common core profile for the early childhood profession in Ireland. The three inter-related and inseparable dimensions of this professional profile are:

1. Knowledge(s)
2. Practices
3. Values

Figure 3: Components of the Professional Profile

These three dimensions are identified as relevant to four broad areas:

1. Working with children
2. Working with families and communities
3. Working with other professionals and institutions
4. Early childhood in the wider local, national and international context

These three components and four dimensions have arguably been expressed already within the CoRe report (Urban et al. (2011). In the next section, Programme Content, the
knowledge(s), practice and values as identified by the CoRe report are presented as representative of the individual competences required by a Level 8 ECEC professional graduate. The list is neither exhaustive nor definitive and will be flavoured by the distinctive elements of each individual programme. Through consultation, it is expected that these criteria will be reviewed to ensure their appropriateness for a Level 8 award in the Irish context. Furthermore, these will be developed to delineate specific criteria for Level 7 awards into the future. Section 5.2 then provides guidance around programme delivery.

4.2 Programme Content
Table 1: Programme Content from the CoRe Report Individual Competences (Urban et al., 2011:35-38)\(^6\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| - Knowledge of various developmental aspects of children from a holistic perspective (cognitive, social, emotional, creative…)
| - Building strong pedagogical relationships with children, based on sensitive responsivity
| - Taking into account children’s needs in order to promote their full potential and their participation in the life of ECEC institutions
| | - Observing children in order to identify their developmental needs
| - Adopting a holistic vision of education that encompasses learning, care and upbringing
| | - Planning and implementing a wide range of educational projects that respond to children’s needs supporting their holistic development
| - Committing to inclusive educational approaches
| | - Documenting children’s progress systematically in order to constantly redefine educational practices
| - Adopting a child-centred approach that views children as competent, active agents and as protagonists of their own learning
| | - Identifying children with special educational needs and elaborating strategies for their inclusion
| - Understanding learning as a co-constructed and open-ended process that ensures children’s successful social engagement and encourages further learning
| | - Creating and organising effective learning environments
| | - Encouraging children’s personal initiatives
| | - Arranging small-group project work starting from children's interests (inquiry-based learning)
| - Knowledge of children’s different strategies of learning (play-based, social learning, early literacy and numeracy, language acquisition and multilingualism)
| - Adopting a holistic vision of education that encompasses learning, care and upbringing

\(^6\) The conclusions and recommendations of the Urban, Robson and Scacchi (2017) report reflect and are informed by the earlier CoRe report (Urban et al., 2017)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support of children's symbolic play through appropriate provision of structured and unstructured materials</th>
<th>Generating an appropriate curriculum that stimulates emergent literacy, maths and science skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promoting language acquisition from a multilingual perspective (recognising children’s home language and supporting second language acquisition)</td>
<td>Offering more personalised and individual learning support to children with special educational needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopting a cross-disciplinary approach to learning</td>
<td>Adopting a multilingual approach that encourages learning in contexts of diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of communication with children and participation</td>
<td>Valuing and encouraging children's expression through different languages (painting, dancing, storytelling…)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making accessible to children the cultural heritage of local communities as well as the cultural heritage of humankind (arts, drama, music, dance, sports…)</td>
<td>Encouraging children to engage in cultural production as a way to express themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving children in community-based projects (festivals, cultural events,…) and valuing their</td>
<td>Adopting a rights-based approach to ECEC in which children’s right to citizenship encompasses their full participation in the social and cultural life of their community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promoting democracy, solidarity, active citizenship, creativity and personal fulfilment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributions (through exhibitions, documentaries…)</td>
<td>Knowledge of working with parents and local communities (knowledge about families, poverty and diversity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Co-constructing pedagogical knowledge together with children</td>
<td>• Analysing the needs of local communities to work effectively with parents and disadvantaged groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Establishing relationships with parents based on mutual understanding, trust and cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Enabling open communication and reciprocal dialogue with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Creating systematic opportunities fostering dialogue and exchanges (e.g. documentation, but also welcoming practices…)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Involving parents in the decision-making processes (collegial bodies, parents-teachers committees,… ) and taking their perspectives into account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Co-constructing pedagogical knowledge together with parents and supporting their parental role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Organising initiatives involving parents as well as members of local communities (e.g. workshops, debates and open conferences,… )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Building up support for ECEC services within local communities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Knowledge of team working (interpersonal communication and group-work dynamics) | Establishing collaborative relationships with other professionals (e.g. health and social services) | Continuously reviewing practices individually and collectively  
Sharing and exchanging expertise with colleagues in team meetings  
Engaging in discussion and learning from disagreement  
Developing educational practices together with colleagues through joint work  
Co-constructing pedagogical knowledge through documentation and collective evaluation of educational practices | Adopting a democratic and critically reflective approach to the education of young children |
|---|---|---|---|
| Knowledge of working in contexts of diversity (anti-biased approaches, intercultural dialogue, identity…) | Developing inclusive practices that facilitate the socialisation of children and families within a plurality of value systems and proactively address discrimination  
Facilitating intercultural dialogue within ECEC services and in the wider community through parents’ involvement  
Dealing with unpredictability and uncertainty | Adopting a democratic and inclusive approach that values diversity |
| Knowledge of the situation of ECEC in the broader local, national and international context | Actively engaging with local communities in promoting children’s and families’ rights and participation | Rights-based approach to ECEC that promotes children’s and families' active citizenship, solidarity and lifelong learning |
| Health and care of young children and basic knowledge of social protection | Implementing appropriate practices in relation to children’s safety, hygiene and nutrition | Commitment to child welfare and well-being |
4.3 Programme Delivery

Level 7 and Level 8 undergraduate degree programmes in ECEC should provide rich and diverse learning experiences for students to develop their values, knowledge(s) and practices as they develop as early years professionals. These experiences should include personal and professional development experiences that enable them to become reflective practitioners and prepare them for professional practice in the early years profession. Working with children, families and diverse communities not only requires a body of knowledge but the ability to translate that knowledge into action. In other comparable professions, undergraduate courses are four years in duration (e.g., primary school teaching, nursing, social studies) and postgraduate qualifications are two years in duration (e.g., primary and post-primary teaching). While providers have flexibility in terms of the design, development and delivery of degree programmes, courses should be informed by the following guidelines and students should have opportunities to experience the following elements throughout their course. These draw on the QQI list of core validation criteria (QQI, 2016) as well as providing specific guidance in relation to aspects of ECEC courses, including professional practice placement.

- The **programme objectives and outcomes** should be clear and consistent with the award sought.
- Each module objective and learning outcomes should be clear and communicated to the students.
- The programme’s **access, transfer and progression arrangements** should be clear and fair.
- There are sufficient **qualified and capable programme staff** with expertise and experience in ECEC available to implement the programme as planned. Allied professionals may also engage with students for discrete aspects of the course (e.g., psychologists, nutritionists, etc.).
- **Face-to-face and online learning and teaching** contact hours provide opportunities for individual, group and experiential learning. This should develop students’ knowledge(s) and practices and imbue them into the values of their professional role.
- There should be **significant opportunities for personal and professional development**. This should promote reflective practice, problem solving, intentionality and critical thinking and instil in students the capacity to become practitioner researchers with a disposition for lifelong learning.
- There should be **structured supervised assessed professional practice placement** for a minimum of 25%\(^7\) of the overall duration of the course in appropriate settings. This professional practice placement experience should be incremental/ spiral in nature and be integral to each phase of the programme. Professional practice placement experience should provide students with an opportunity to:
  - Observe experienced professionals and be supported to reflect on these observations in a variety of early years settings
  - Integrate theory and practice
  - Apply knowledge in practice

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\(^7\) This time allocation is common across other professional disciplines (e.g., teaching, social care).
Develop and demonstrate the required values, knowledge(s) and practices to work with young children in the context of their setting, family and community under the supervision of more experienced professionals.

Critically engage in self-reflection and self-evaluation of their own practice and engage in professional conversations with more experienced professionals (setting-based practitioners and supervisors) around their practice.

Professional practice placement should be undertaken in a range of various settings spanning the early years age range (birth to six years) and catering for a diverse range of children, including children with additional needs. Placements in non-practice settings such as policy development agencies, research centres, City and County Childcare Committees and regulatory agencies should also be considered. Placement settings should be TUSLA-registered and criteria for the selection of settings should be developed. There should be support by both course-based staff and ECEC professionals based in the setting. Visiting tutors or supervisors should have suitable qualifications for and experience of the early years sector and work alongside cooperating educators within professional practice placement settings to support and assess students (Moloney, 2017). There should be structures in place to build active partnership and relationships between course providers and professional practice placement settings. This could be achieved through the development of a Memorandum of Understanding or an agreement that provides comprehensive information about respective roles and responsibilities.

- There should be a range of assessment methods that capture the incremental acquisition of values, knowledge(s) and practices of students. These assessment methods should be fair, transparent and consistent. A combination of formative and summative assessments should be included and there should be a clear relationship between learning outcomes, learning experiences and the assessment criteria. There should be a requirement that students must pass the professional practice placement element of the programme independent of all other elements in order to progress the next year of the programme or to graduate. Students who fail professional practice placement should be offered mentoring and support if they are afforded the opportunity to repeat the professional practice placement. Continuing professional development opportunities should be available to visiting tutors to ensure coherence and consistency of the institutional assessment processes and procedures.
- The programme’s written curriculum should be well structured and fit-for-purpose.
- There should be sufficient physical resources to implement the programme as planned.
- The learning environment should be consistent with the needs of programme learners.
- Learners enrolled on the programme should be well informed, guided and cared for (including students with additional learning needs).
- The programme should be well managed and meet highest governance standards.

5. Wider issues for Consideration
As the CoRe report (Urban et al., 2011) identified, a wide range of factors impact on the competence of an ECEC system. The professional competence of the workforce is central to this but the effectiveness of the system is dependent on a myriad of factors at a macro and micro level. It identified four levels of a competent system – the individual, the team/institution, the inter-institutional level and the governance level. While there has been much activity in the development of the sector in recent years, a number of fundamental issues exist that, while outside the scope of these criteria and guidelines, will impact on the context in which ECEC graduates work. These are signposted briefly below.

**Access, Transfer and Progression**

Initial professional education course providers for Level 7 and Level 8 degrees should ensure that students entering have the necessary academic ability and are personally suitable to meet the demands of the programme. Providers should also adopt, where appropriate, policies and procedures relating to the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) in the assessment of candidates. These should involve an analysis of the content of prior courses undertaken and of prior experience to ensure all students, especially those on advanced entry, have the necessary knowledge, skills and values to undertake the course.

On a related issue it should be noted that QQI was represented on this working group to ensure alignment in the future development of criteria and standards at Levels, 4, 5 and 6 and to ensure coherence across all levels of the NFQ. Common Award Standards at Levels 4 - 6 for Early Childhood Care and Education, first published by QQI in 2011, are scheduled for review in 2018 and this has the potential to make a very positive contribution to the promotion of coherence and cohesion across all levels of pre and in-service education for early years practitioners."

**Induction for Newly Qualified Professionals**

There is increasing awareness of the value and importance of a structured induction process for entry to a profession. At other levels of the education system (e.g., primary and post-primary), structured induction programmes have been developed and are being introduced to support the transition for student teachers in the first year of teaching. A model of induction should be explored and developed for graduates of ECEC courses to support their entry to the profession. This has been shown in other professions to not only benefit the new graduate but also has a positive professional development component for more experienced professionals. A registration system and body for early years professionals should also be considered to set professional standards for the sector and to promote the work of professionals in the early years sector.

**Post-qualification Continuing Professional Development**

Early childhood professionals will graduate from Level 7 and Level 8 degree courses with the values, knowledge(s) and practices to enable them to work within the sector. Given the evolving nature of these understandings through research and the ongoing policy and practice developments within the sector, it will be necessary for graduates to keep abreast of ongoing changes and developments. This may be achieved through participation in a range of formal
and informal CPD activities throughout their careers. Level 7 and Level 8 courses should offer clear pathways for transfer and progression to further qualifications nationally and internationally.

**Professionalisation and working conditions**
While the ECEC workforce has become increasingly professionalised in terms of qualifications and the expectations placed on the sector, there has not been a concomitant movement to recognise or reward this professionalisation. These include the limited support for professionals to advance their qualifications, the remuneration of early years professionals, the absence of appropriate designated salary scales and the general terms and conditions of employment within the sector. Until these issues are addressed, graduates will enter a sector where their work feels undervalued and under rewarded which will impact on their capacity to practise and develop professionally. The establishment of an accreditation body or professional body with a register of professionals (such as CORU for social care professionals or the Teaching Council for Teachers) within the sector may be considered into the future as part of the journey to professionalisation.

**6. Summary and Conclusion**
These draft criteria and guidelines marks a first step in the important journey to developing a framework for the development and review of Level 7 and Level 8 ECEC courses in Ireland. Drawing on existing NQAI and QQI frameworks in Ireland and using the CoRe framework for the criteria, a possible framework for the presentation of these draft criteria and guidelines has been developed. This potential framework is attractive as it is informed by national and international policy, practice and research. The challenge for the sector is to now review, interrogate and comment upon the proposed draft criteria and guidelines and to improve them with its collective expertise.
References


QQI (2014). Professional Award-type Descriptors (Award Class: Professional). Dublin QQI; Available at: [https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Professional_Award-types_PS3_2014.pdf](https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Professional_Award-types_PS3_2014.pdf).


Appendix 1 – Working group membership

Dr Maresa Duignan, Assistant Chief Inspector, DES (Chair)
Ms Antoinette Gibbs, Early Years Specialist and Inspector, DES (Secretariat)
Dr Geraldine French, DCU (Irish Universities Association)
Ms Roisin McGlone, IT Sligo (Technological Higher Education Authority)
Ms Roisín Sweeney, Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Ms Valerie Harvey, Higher Education Authority

Dr Thomas Walsh, Maynooth University, was the Technical Expert to the Working Group.
Appendix 2 – Terms of Reference of the Working Group

Introduction
This short paper sets the context and rationale for the establishment of a working group to develop draft criteria and guidelines to inform the development of professional education awards at ordinary and honours bachelor degree level in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care. The group is being established by the Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) of the Department of Education and Skills which has had a long standing remit to provide advice to a range of government agencies and policymakers on workforce development issues in the early years sector. This paper also sets out the draft terms of reference, membership and timelines for the working group.

Background and Context
In 2010, the Department of Education and Skills published a Workforce Development Plan for the ECEC sector in Ireland, which built on the Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development that had been published in 2002. The report acknowledged the strong evidence base that early childhood experiences have a critical impact on the well-being, learning and development of children and that the calibre and capacity of adults delivering those early years services was a determining factor in the quality of those experiences. A number of recommended actions were included in the report highlighting the importance of improving access to appropriate initial and continuing professional education and training programmes designed to prepare staff for the range of roles and practice in early years settings.

In 2015, the Department of Education and Skills began an initial consultative review relating to the quality of education and training provision for professionals working in the early years sector. As part of the review, two surveys were completed by early years practitioners and employers respectively and a third survey was an open to all consultation. The early years professionals’ survey responses and the report was published in 2016. The findings reveal that there is overall satisfaction with the quality of education and training currently provided. However, significant gaps were identified in certain areas. These include lack of preparedness to cater for the educational needs of children with additional needs, including those with special educational needs and those whose first language is not English; lack of preparedness to implement the two national practice frameworks, Siolta and Aistear; and concerns around the quality of the supervised professional practice element of their studies. The gaps identified partly reflect the changing environment in which early years professionals must now work. This changed environment has been brought about by the introduction of a universal pre-school scheme, offering free pre-school places to all children and by an increased diversity in Irish society.

Since 2010, the policy and practice landscape of the early years sector in Ireland has changed dramatically. This change has resulted in higher professional expectations for staff in early years settings and of particular relevance for this initiative, there has been a steady growth in the number of higher education and training programmes in this field. There has been a concomitant increase in the number of graduates of these programmes working in practice in early years settings. All these factors point towards an urgent need to review the initial education programmes in ECEC. In advance of such work, which could take place in 2018, it

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is imperative that a set of criteria and guidelines be developed which will reflect the scope and nature of professional practice in the early years sector as informed by national and international research.

Review of Occupational Role Profiles
In mid-2016, building on work to date, as well as the first phase of information gathering outlined above, the Department of Education and Skills commissioned a literature and policy review and a review of the occupational role profiles for professionals in the early years sector. Professor Mathias Urban and his team in the Early Childhood Research Centre in the University of Roehampton carried out the commissioned research and presented initial findings to the Department of Education and Skills in December 2016. A consultation event to discuss these findings with the wider early years sector, was led by Professor Urban in Dublin Castle in late 2016 and a final report informed by the views of the stakeholders at that consultation was submitted to DES in April 2017.

The report\(^\text{11}\) puts forward a core common role profile for the early childhood profession in Ireland. Professor Urban concludes that the aim of national workforce development policy in the early years sector should be to develop a competent system that supports professional practice through the implementation of a coherent set of criteria and guidelines at all domains of potential influence (i.e. from national policy and governance to the local workplace and personal). Professor Urban states that a central requirement for achieving this goal is shared professional values and practices for all professionals working with children from birth to eight years, regardless of occupational status, job title and level of formal qualification. These shared professional values and practices should also feature in all professional occupations and institutions that constitute the ECEC system. The report sets out the knowledge, practices and values that should form the core requirement for an ECEC professional.

Review of Education and Training Programmes in ECEC
It is now proposed to use the *Review of Occupational Role Profiles in Ireland in Early Childhood Education and Care* by Urban, M. Robson, S. and Scacchi, V. (2017) as the starting point to establish criteria and guidelines for ordinary and honours degree programmes in ECEC\(^\text{12}\). It is also proposed to establish a small working group which will draft professional award criteria and guidelines for ordinary and honours undergraduate degree programmes in ECEC.

The working group is chaired by the Assistant Chief Inspector of the Early Years Education Inspection Unit in the Department of Education and Skills, Dr Maresa Duignan, and comprises of representatives, nominated by the Irish Universities Association and the Technological Higher Education Association, from the university and institute of technology sector with current expertise in the development of ECEC higher education programmes as well as representatives from the HEA and QQI. The technical drafting of the new award criteria and guidelines is carried out by an academic with established expertise in the field.

Group Membership
Dr Maresa Duignan, Assistant Chief Inspector, DES (Chair)

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\(^{12}\) Please note, for the purposes of the Working Group, the age range of birth to six years is considered to reflect the Irish context. In Ireland it is a legal requirement that children begin primary education at six years of age. Furthermore, this is the age range that is referenced in our current national frameworks, Aistear and Síolta.
Ms Antoinette Gibbs, Early Years Specialist and Inspector, DES (Secretariat)
Dr Geraldine French, DCU (Irish Universities Association)
Ms Roisín McGlone, IT Sligo (Technological Higher Education Authority)
Ms Róisín Sweeney, Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Ms Valerie Harvey, Higher Education Authority

Dr Thomas Walsh, Maynooth University, is the Technical Expert to the Working Group.

If a member cannot attend a meeting, an alternative is not required. However, all members must commit to assessing and commenting on drafts as they emerge.

**Early Years Education Advisory Group (EYAG)**

The Early Years Advisory Group (EYAG) was established in 2014 by the Minister for Education and Skills to provide guidance and expert advice on educational policy in the ECEC sector and which is chaired by the Department of Education and Skills. In this context, the Group has provided valuable input into the process undertaken by the Department of Education and Skills in relation to the review of the quality of education and training programmes which commenced with an extensive consultation survey of employers and practitioners in 2015.

Membership of the EYAG is drawn from a wide range of education and sectoral professional representative groups. The full membership of the Early Years Education Advisory Group is: NCCA, SOLAS, Irish Universities Association, Institutes of Technology Ireland, County Childcare Committees, Better Start, the National Early Years Quality Support Service, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, Parents representatives, Barnardos, Early Childhood Ireland, Association of Childcare Professionals, INTO, IMPACT, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate, EYEPU, NEPS, NCSE, ETB, IPPN and QQI.

The EYAG, in terms of its broader contribution and expertise, will provide the forum with guidance and advice on the emerging draft criteria and guidelines and due consideration will be given to this guidance and advice by the working group. Finalisation of the criteria and guidelines following the input of EYAG and wider consultation in the sector will rest with the Department of Education and Skills.

The final criteria and guidelines will be shared with partners in the Higher Education sector (THEA, IOTI and QQI) to inform the development and oversight of the quality of education programmes and training for early years professionals. It will also inform the advice provided to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs whose remit it is to fund and regulate the provision and practice of ECEC services for children and families.

**Terms of Reference**

The establishment of the working group forms part of the Review of Education and Training in Early Years Qualifications that was launched by the Minister for Education and Skills in February 2015, commencing with a consultation on the quality of education and training in the field. In May 2016, DES published a *Survey of Early Years Practitioners* following this consultation (DES, 2016). This report highlighted a number of gaps in the existing initial professional education programmes for the ECEC sector, including a lack of preparedness to use the national curriculum framework (*Aistear*) and the national quality framework (*Síolta*) and a diversity of practices in relation to the practicum element of courses. This latter issue has
also been further explored by the Pedagogy, Learning and Education (PLÉ) Association of Ireland.

In April 2017, the University of Roehampton completed a commissioned piece of research for DES in which it put forward a core common role profile for an early years professional in Ireland within the context of an overall competent system (Urban, Robson and Scacchi, 2017). This research report was based on a review of national and international policy and theoretical literature and conversations/consultation with key stakeholders in Ireland. The resulting core common role profile outlined in the report delineates the knowledge, practices and values that should form the core requirement for an early years professional.

The working group will draft criteria and guidelines to inform the development of ordinary and honours undergraduate degree programmes in ECEC. The work of the group is primarily informed by research conducted by University of Roehampton. In turn, this report (Urban, M. Robson, S. and Scacchi, V. (2017), drew upon previous national research including:

- The Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform [DJELR], 2002) set out occupational profiles and core skills for 5 levels of practitioner, from ‘Basic’ to ‘Expert’.
- A Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2010). This plan recognised the impact that the calibre and capacity of early years professionals has on the quality of experiences of young children. It made a number of recommendations relating to improving access to appropriate initial and continuing professional education to prepare early years professionals for the challenging role in the ECEC sector.

The draft criteria and guidelines should take into account the following content from these foundation documents:

- Conceptual Framework (Urban Report);
- Proposed general Occupation Role Profile (Knowledge, Practices and Values);
- Advanced and Expert Occupational Role Profiles (Model Framework);
- Mapping of role profiles to award criteria and guidelines (Workforce Development Plan).

This content will inform the development of the award criteria and guidelines to include

- Programme aims and design;
- Areas of study;
- Teaching, learning and assessment strategies;
- Professional placement and formation;
- Programme outcomes.

The working group should also give consideration to wider issues that may include:

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• The duration and nature of undergraduate programmes
• Entry and advanced entry (to be aligned with current CAS)
• Staffing
• Facilities
• Student supports and guidance systems

The draft will be submitted to the EYAG appointed by the Minister for Education and Skills for its consideration and input before being submitted for wider consultation.

Timeframe
The first meeting of the Working Group is to take place on Wednesday 28\textsuperscript{th} June 2017.

It is envisaged that a further 3 meetings of the Working Group is required in the period from September to early November 2017. Meetings will be hosted in the Department of Education and Skills.

Meeting Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28/06/17</td>
<td>10:30-13.00</td>
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<td>18/08/17</td>
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<td>22/09/17</td>
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<td>20/10/2017</td>
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<td>17/11/2017</td>
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Setting the Agenda
The agenda will be set by the Chair, having regard to the objectives of the Working Group, and incorporating, as appropriate, items suggested by the members. An ‘Any Other Business’ item will facilitate the inclusion of unscheduled agenda items at each meeting but these will be kept to a minimum.

Support to the meetings of the Working Group
The EYEPU and the Chair will coordinate arrangements for the servicing of the Working Group. The Chair will organise the hosting and servicing of the meetings. The agenda and documents will be circulated by soft copy to all members of the Working Group, where possible in advance of the meeting. Secretariat is provided by the EYEPU and a record of all meetings will be kept and circulated.
Appendix 3: Required competences of an early years professional graduate (Level 8) to work in the early years sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Knowledge breadth and kind</th>
<th>Know-how and skill: range and selectivity</th>
<th>Competence-context</th>
<th>Competence-role</th>
<th>Competence-learning to learn</th>
<th>Competence-insight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 8 indicators</strong> (NQAI, 2002)</td>
<td>An understanding of the theory, concepts and methods pertaining to a field (or fields) of learning</td>
<td>Demonstrate mastery of a complex and specialised area of skills and tools; use and modify advanced skills and tools to conduct closely guided research, professional or advanced technical activity</td>
<td>Use advanced skills to conduct research, or advanced technical or professional activity, accepting accountability for all related decision-making; transfer and apply diagnostic and creative skills in a range of contexts</td>
<td>Act effectively under guidance in a peer relationship with qualified practitioners; lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups</td>
<td>Learn to act in variable and unfamiliar learning contexts; learn to manage learning tasks independently, professionally and ethically</td>
<td>Express a comprehensive, internalised, personal world view manifesting solidarity with others</td>
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<td>Area</td>
<td>Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of:</td>
<td>Demonstrate ability to:</td>
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<td>QQI Level 8 Professional Award Type Descriptors (QQI, 2014)</td>
<td>Knowledge - Scope and Coherence: Broad and up-to-date general knowledge and specialised knowledge of a variety of areas comprising a professional discipline and of the connections between these areas and with related disciplines; to include knowledge about recent developments and trends in the</td>
<td>Use cognitive and practical skills (analytical and synthetic) to solve problems Select, modify and apply advanced skills to critically analyse, research (under close guidance) and formulate responses to unpredictable, complex and ill-defined problems arising in the profession and its reflective</td>
<td>Exercising autonomy and judgement Exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a wide variety of complex contexts including professional practice and study</td>
<td>Exercising responsibility Manage complex and innovative technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making and decisions in unpredictable and unfamiliar work or study contexts, balancing responsibilities towards service-users and employer</td>
<td>Working with others Act effectively in team roles and take responsibility for managing individuals and lead complex and heterogeneous groups</td>
<td>Learning and teaching Manage learning tasks independently, professionally and ethically; seek necessary guidance when working independently and provide guidance to peers</td>
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<td>Professional discipline or its practice</td>
<td>Knowledge-Structure</td>
<td>Knowledge of Issues</td>
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<td>Critical understanding of facts, concepts, rules, models, schools of thought, methods, technology; their development and limitations; and how they arise and are applied in current professional practice</td>
<td>Draw insightful conclusions</td>
<td>Knowledge of the context for professional practice (including regulatory, economic, scientific,</td>
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<td>Prepare and analyse evidence-based conclusions that take due account of social, disciplinary and ethical insights</td>
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<td>Communicate and influence</td>
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<td>Communicate advanced information, transfer one’s knowledge and skills, and justify decisions, to specialists and non-specialists, including clients</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Express a comprehensive internalised, personal and professional world-view, manifesting solidarity with others at all levels including the personal, professional, societal and environmental</td>
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<td>technological, social and cultural aspects) and of significant issues at the interfaces with related disciplines and professions</td>
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Appendix 4: Required competences of an early years professional graduate (Level 7) to work in the early years sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Knowledge breadth and kind</th>
<th>Know-how and skill: range and selectivity</th>
<th>Competence-context</th>
<th>Competence-role learning to learn</th>
<th>Competence-insight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 7 indicators (NQAI, 2002)</td>
<td>Specialised knowledge across a variety of areas. Recognition of limitations of current knowledge and familiarity with sources of new knowledge; integration of concepts across a variety of areas.</td>
<td>Demonstrate specialised technical, creative or conceptual skills and tools across an area of study. Exercise appropriate judgement in planning, design, technical and/or supervisory functions related to products, services, operations or processes.</td>
<td>Utilise diagnostic and creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts.</td>
<td>Accept accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes; take significant or supervisory responsibility for the work of others in defined areas of work.</td>
<td>Take initiative to identify and address learning needs and interact effectively in a learning group.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of:</th>
<th>Demonstrate ability to:</th>
<th>Demonstrate ability to:</th>
<th>Demonstrate ability to:</th>
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</table>
| QQI Level 7 Professional Award Type Descriptors (QQI, 2014) | Knowledge - Scope and Coherence: 
Broad and up-to-date general knowledge and specialised knowledge of a variety of areas comprising a professional discipline and of the connections between these areas and with related disciplines | Use cognitive and practical skills (analytical and synthetic) to solve problems
Select and apply advanced skills to analyse and respond to unpredictable and complex problems arising in the profession and its reflective practice. | Exercising autonomy and judgement
Exercise autonomy and judgement in applying knowledge and skills in a wide variety of contexts including professional practice and study |
| --- | Knowledge-Structure
Understanding of facts, concepts, rules, models, schools of thought, methods, technology; their development and limitations; and how they arise and are applied in current contexts | Draw insightful conclusions
Prepare evidence-based conclusions that take due account of social, disciplinary and ethical insights | Exercising responsibility
Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making and decisions in unpredictable work or study contexts |
|  | Communicate and influence
Communicate information | Working with others
Act effectively in team roles and take responsibility for managing individuals and groups | Learning and teaching
Take initiative to identify and address learning needs; seek necessary guidance when working independently |
|  | Attitudes
Express an internalised personal world-view (see Notes below) manifesting solidarity with others at all levels including the personal, professional, societal, and environmental |
| Knowledge of Issues | Context for professional practice (including regulatory, economic, scientific, technological, social and cultural aspects) and awareness of other disciplines likely to be encountered as a practitioner and member of the profession | Effectively, transfer one’s knowledge and skills, and justify decisions, to specialists and non-specialists, including clients |