Referencing of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF)

NATIONAL REPORT

Údarás Náisiúnta
Cáilíochtaí na hÉireann

National Qualifications
Authority of Ireland

European
Qualifications
Framework

This report establishes the referencing of the Irish NFQ to the EQF in accordance with the Criteria and Procedures agreed by the EQF Advisory Group

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Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)
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CONTENTS

SUMMARY

This Report, which has been prepared and agreed by the competent national bodies, is the single comprehensive report setting out the referencing, and supporting evidence, of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF).

Part 1 of the Report sets out the international context for the referencing exercise, by describing *inter alia* the background and purposes of EQF, the associated implementation process and structures, and the relationship between EQF and the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area ('Bologna Framework').

Part 2 of the Report sets out the national context for the referencing exercise by describing the Irish education and training system and the different sectors which comprise it, in order to facilitate a better understanding of the qualifications awarded in Ireland, the bodies that award them, the diverse range of providers that offer programmes leading to them, and their place in the NFQ.

The substance of the referencing exercise is contained in Part 3 of the Report, which describes the criteria and procedures used in the referencing exercise – the 10 criteria and procedures developed and agreed by the EQF Advisory Group – and sets out the Irish response to each one of them.

In relation to the key referencing criteria, Part 3 of the Report

- establishes a clear and demonstrable link, supported by a technical comparison of the NFQ and EQF set out in Annex 2, between the Levels in the NFQ and the level descriptors of EQF, as follows:
    - NFQ level 10 and EQF Level 8
    - NFQ level 9 and EQF Level 7
    - NFQ level 8 and EQF Level 6
    - NFQ level 7 and EQF Level 6
    - NFQ level 6 and EQF Level 5
    - NFQ level 5 and EQF Level 4
    - NFQ level 4 and EQF Level 3
    - NFQ level 3 and EQF Level 2
    - NFQ level 2 and EQF Level 1
    - NFQ level 1 and EQF Level 1

- demonstrates that the NFQ, and the qualifications within it, are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes, and are linked to credit systems and arrangements for the Recognition of Prior Learning (i.e. validation of non-formal and informal learning)

- describes and references the published criteria and procedures for the inclusion of qualifications in the NFQ

- describes the different quality assurance systems operating in Irish education and training and the manner in which they support the NFQ and its implementation.

PART 1

INTRODUCTION

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PART 1   INTRODUCTION

1.1   EQF: Background and Purposes

The development of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) commenced in 2004 in response to requests from Member States, the social partners and other stakeholders for a common reference tool to increase the transparency of qualifications. An initial blueprint, proposing an eight level qualifications Framework based on learning outcomes, was published by the European Commission and consulted upon in the latter half of 2005. The consultation demonstrated that there was widespread support for the initiative, and a revised text was adopted by the Commission as a proposal in September 2006.[1]

This proposal recommended the establishment of an overarching qualifications Framework, which would serve as a translation device to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems in Europe. The core of the EQF consists of 8 qualifications Levels, which are described through learning outcomes (knowledge, skill and competence). The principal aims of EQF are to promote citizens' mobility between countries and to facilitate their lifelong learning. The formal adoption by the European Parliament and Council of the Recommendation establishing EQF was completed on 23 April 2008.[2]

1.2   Implementation of EQF

Side by side with the adoption of EQF by the European Parliament and Council, a process of implementation was inaugurated in early 2008. There are two distinct elements to this process. Member states are invited:

- to relate their national qualifications Levels to EQF by 2010, in particular by referencing, in a transparent manner, their qualifications Levels to the EQF Levels set out in the Recommendation

  and

- to adopt measures, as appropriate, so that, by 2012, all new qualification certificates, diplomas and 'Europass' documents issued by the competent authorities contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications systems, to the appropriate EQF level.

This Report is concerned with the first element of implementation in Ireland: the referencing of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) to the EQF.

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[1] For the Irish national consultation on the Commission's initial blueprint see www.nqai.ie/EQF.html

[2] The full text of the Recommendation in English and other European languages can be downloaded at ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.html
A summary brochure setting out the EQF level descriptors is available at: www.nqai.ie/documents/eqfleaflet.pdf

1.3   Implementation Structures

National Coordination Points
The Recommendation establishing the EQF also advises that Member states designate National Coordination Points (NCPs)

> to support and, in conjunction with other relevant national authorities, guide the relationship between national qualifications systems and the European Qualifications Framework with a view to promoting the quality and transparency of that relationship.

It is recommended that the tasks of NCPs should include:

- referencing Levels of qualifications within national qualifications systems to the EQF Levels

- ensuring that a transparent methodology is used in the referencing process

- providing access to information and guidance to stakeholders on how qualifications relate to EQF through national qualifications systems

- promoting the participation of all relevant stakeholders, including in accordance with national legislation and practice, higher education and vocational education and training institutions, social partners, sectors and experts on the comparison and use of qualifications at the European level.

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (Qualifications Authority) has been designated Ireland's National Coordination Point by the Department of Education and Science and is responsible for overseeing the referencing of the Irish NFQ to the EQF.

EQF Advisory Group
The Recommendation establishing the EQF also endorsed the European Commission's intention to establish an EQF Advisory Group, composed of representatives of the Member states and involving social partners and other stakeholders. The EQF Advisory Group met for the first time in March 2008 and is responsible for providing overall coherence and promoting transparency of the process of relating qualifications systems to the EQF. The Qualifications Authority, as the Irish NCP, represents Ireland on the EQF Advisory Group.

1.4   The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was proposed in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. Under the Act, the Qualifications Authority was given the responsibility of developing and maintaining the NFQ. The NFQ was introduced in 2003 and has been defined by the Qualifications Authority as:

The single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards.

The NFQ is a system of ten Levels, based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence (learning outcomes), which incorporates awards made for all kinds of learning wherever it is gained.[3] As well as this 10 level structure, the NFQ includes award-types of different classes. An award-type is a class of named awards (i.e., Advanced Certificate, Honours Bachelor Degree) sharing common features and level. They reflect a mix of standards of knowledge, skill and competence which is independent of any specific field of learning. Amongst these are the large or 'major' awards. Major awards are the principal class of awards made at each level and capture a typical range of learning achievements at the level. Sixteen major award-types have been established for the Irish Framework (Figure 1, p. 12). Qualifications are also awarded for smaller learning achievements. These are known in the Framework as minor, special purpose and supplemental awards and are used as follows:

- Minor Awards: for partial completion of the outcomes for a major award
- Supplemental Awards: for learning that is additional to a major award
- Special Purpose Awards: for relatively narrow or purpose-specific achievement.

Additional information on the smaller award-types is available in *Policies and Criteria for Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental Award-types* (July 2004).[4]

School, further education and training and higher education and training awards – ranging from basic literacy awards to doctoral degrees – are included in the NFQ. Qualifications in the NFQ are quality assured and so a learner knows that the programme he or she is undertaking, and the provider offering the qualification, is reviewed internally and externally. The NFQ also enables learners to compare and contrast awards and plan their progression through the Framework.[5]

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[3] Information on the NFQ is available at www.nfq.ie and www.nqai.ie/framework.html

[4] These policies and criteria can be downloaded here: www.nqai.ie/framework_policies_criteria.html

[5] www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/about_NFQ/access_transfer_progress.html

Figure 1: Major Award-types in the NFQ

NFQ Levels	NFQ Major Award-types
1	Level 1 Certificate
2	Level 2 Certificate
3	Level 3 Certificate Junior Certificate
4	Level 4 Certificate Leaving Certificate
5	Level 5 Certificate Leaving Certificate
6	Advanced Certificate Higher Certificate
7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree
8	Honours Bachelor Degree Higher Diploma
9	Masters Degree Postgraduate Diploma
10	Doctoral Degree Higher Doctorate

Quality assured qualifications offered by professional bodies and international awarding bodies operating in Ireland can also be recognised through the NFQ. The NFQ provides the main reference point for recognising international qualifications in Ireland: the qualifications recognition service, provided by the Qualifications Authority, utilises the NFQ in offering recognition advice to migrants, educational providers and employers.[6]

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[6] www.qualificationsrecognition.ie/recognition/

1.5 The relationship between the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area ('Bologna' Framework) and the EQF

The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area, the 'Bologna' Framework', was adopted by European Ministers for higher education in Bergen in May 2005 under the Bologna Process. The Bologna Framework is an overarching Framework which, like the EQF, provides a mechanism for relating national Frameworks of qualifications to each other, in this instance, national Frameworks for higher education qualifications. It is evident that the Bologna Framework and the EQF display a number of similarities and contain overlapping areas. Both are overarching Frameworks, cover a broad scope of learning and are designed to improve transparency with regard to qualifications in Europe. They also have clear aspirations to support lifelong learning and labour mobility. In addition, quality assurance systems are integral to both and they use the concept of 'best fit' to determine how national qualifications Levels relate to the overarching Framework.

To acknowledge these similarities and overlaps, and to ensure that the two overarching Frameworks do not develop in isolation, the Recommendation establishing the EQF asserts that the Bologna Framework and EQF are compatible. Thus, the learning outcomes of certain EQF Levels correspond to the cycle descriptors of the Bologna Framework. Specifically, there is a clear cross-reference between the cycle descriptors and the descriptors at Levels 5 to 8 of EQF.

Figure 2: Compatibility of EQF Levels and the Bologna Cycles

EQF Levels	Bologna Framework
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	Short cycle within the first cycle
6	First Cycle
7	Second Cycle
8	Third Cycle

1.6   Self-Certification of compatibility of the Irish NFQ with the Bologna Framework in 2006

Following the Bergen Ministerial meeting in 2005, Ireland responded to an invitation to undertake a pilot project of the self-certification of the compatibility of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Bologna Framework. The project was completed in 2006[7] and concluded that The Irish Higher Certificate is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna first cycle.

- The Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degree is compatible with the Bologna first cycle descriptor. However, holders of Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degrees and their equivalent former awards do not generally immediately access programmes leading to second cycle awards.

- The Irish Honours Bachelor Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna first cycle.

- The Irish Higher Diploma is a qualification at the same level as completion of the first cycle, and is a qualification typically attained in a different field of learning than an initial first cycle award.

- The Irish Masters Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna second cycle.

- The Irish Post-Graduate Diploma is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna second cycle.

- The Irish Doctoral Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna third cycle.

It is of note that the Qualifications Authority has determined, under statute, that all qualifications at Levels 7 to 10 are higher education and training awards. Moreover, the Bologna verification did not exclude any 'higher VET' awards at these Levels from the alignment. The exercise did differentiate between further education and training and higher education and training awards at level 6. This conflation of learning types at higher Levels is a deliberate feature of Irish policy and legislation and, as a result, higher level vocationally oriented qualifications are encompassed by the higher education and training award-types at Levels 7 to 10 in the NFQ. In this context, the Bologna verification was thus a comprehensive exercise in terms of aligning all qualifications in the upper Levels of the NFQ with the Bologna Cycles.

It is also of note that, given the compatibility of the Bologna Framework and EQF, the conclusions of the verification process on the NFQ's compatibility with the Bologna Framework, which was completed in 2006, are relevant to the EQF referencing process. The process for referencing the Irish NFQ to the EQF has thus had regard to the self-certification process of the compatibility of the Irish NFQ with the Bologna Framework.

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[7] The final verification report certifying the compatibility of the NFQ and the Bologna Framework is available here: www.nqai.ie/publication_nov2006.html

It is recognised, however, that the Bologna verification of compatibility and EQF referencing exercises are not identical processes. The Bologna verification of compatibility exercise is concerned with verifying the extent to which particular qualifications or qualification types within national higher education qualifications Frameworks mark or do not mark the completion of the Bologna qualification cycles. EQF referencing, in contrast, does not directly concern particular qualifications or qualification types. Rather, it is concerned with the referencing of the qualification Levels in a national system, whether these are expressed in terms of a qualifications Framework or not, with the EQF level descriptors.

1.7 The relationship between the Irish NFQ and qualifications Frameworks in the United Kingdom

Ireland and the various jurisdictions in the United Kingdom have been amongst the first wave of European countries to develop qualifications Frameworks. Moreover, because the two islands have a close relationship in terms of the mobility of learners and workers, the Irish and United Kingdom qualifications and regulatory authorities have also undertaken work to reference the various qualifications Frameworks on the two islands in the publication *Qualifications can cross boundaries - a rough guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland* (first published, 2005; revised edition, 2009).[8] This document was developed to facilitate the recognition of qualifications across and within the two islands. The document also underpins the work of the Qualifications Authority and the Awards Councils in relation to the alignment of certain awards made by UK awarding bodies in Ireland to the National Framework of Qualifications. In this context, the Irish authorities have liaised with their UK counterparts in order to evaluate the impact of the EQF referencing processes, both in the UK and Ireland, on existing understandings of the referencing of the Irish and UK qualifications Frameworks. This liaison has taken place in the context of the regular meetings of the UK and Irish qualifications and regulatory authorities.

1.8 Process for referencing the Irish NFQ to EQF

The Qualifications Authority established a steering committee to assist it in overseeing the referencing process with representatives of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). In addition, three international experts on qualifications systems and Frameworks joined the committee: Dr Carita Blomqvist, from the Finnish National Board of Education; Mr Wilfried Boomgaert, from the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, Belgium, and Dr Mike Coles from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, England. Mr Edwin Mernagh, who undertook the detailed technical comparison of the NFQ level descriptors with the EQF level descriptors, together with the executive of the

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[8] *Qualifications can cross boundaries* is available at this link:
http://www.qualificationsrecognition.ie/recognition/int_qual_databse/uk/documents/CrossBoundaries.pdf

Qualifications Authority, completed the committee's membership.[9] The main task of the Steering Committee was to assist the Qualifications Authority in preparing the national referencing report, in accordance with the criteria and procedures developed and agreed by the EQF Advisory Group.

A draft report on the referencing process was discussed in the spring and early summer of 2009 with a wider group of stakeholders, including representatives of further and higher education and training providers, learner representatives, the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and social partners (including employer and trade unions representatives).

Following this consultative process, the final referencing report has been prepared by the steering committee and agreed among the national quality assurance bodies for education and training in Ireland, as follows:

- The Department of Education and Science

- The Further Education and Training Awards Council

- The Higher Education and Training Awards Council

- The Higher Education Authority

- The Irish Universities Quality Board

- The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.

[9] See Annex 1 for the full Committee membership.

PART 2

THE IRISH NFQ AND ITS QUALIFICATIONS IN CONTEXT

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PART 2 THE IRISH NFQ AND ITS QUALIFICATIONS IN CONTEXT: IRISH EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is the single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements in Ireland may be measured and related to each other, and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards. The following section describes the Irish education and training system and the different sectors which comprise it, in order to facilitate a better understanding of the qualifications that are awarded in Ireland, of the bodies that award the qualifications and of the diverse range of providers that offer programmes leading to NFQ qualifications.

2.1 General Education in Ireland

Primary Education

Although children are not obliged to attend school until the age of six, 65% of four year olds and most five year olds are enrolled in the infant classes in primary schools in Ireland. Primary schools operate an eight-year programme, consisting of two initial years (Junior and Senior Infants), followed by classes 1-6.

The primary education system emphasises a child-centred approach and is founded on the belief that high quality education enables children to realise their potential as individuals and to live their lives to the fullest capacity appropriate to their particular stages of development. The primary curriculum (recently completely revised) provides for an extensive learning experience and promotes a rich variety of approaches to teaching and learning.

The curriculum is divided into the following key areas:

- Languages

- Mathematics

- Social, environmental and scientific education

- Arts education (including visual arts, music and drama)

- Physical education

- Social, personal and health education

The aims of the curriculum are to ensure that all children are provided with learning opportunities that recognise and celebrate their uniqueness, develop their full potential and prepare them to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The focus is on the child as learner, and the use of a variety of teaching methodologies is an essential feature of the curriculum.

The curriculum aims to foster the development of key skills in communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, inquiry, investigation and analysis, and social and personal awareness and interaction. In particular, it places key emphasis on the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills.

The curriculum emphasises the need for greater attention to be paid to students with special educational needs and emphasises the importance of achieving functional literacy and numeracy. It also draws attention to the needs of gifted children.

There are no formal examinations at the end of the primary school cycle. In the primary school, assessment involves gathering information to understand better how each child is progressing at school and using that information to further the child's learning. Assessment at primary level goes beyond just testing. It concerns the daily interactions between the teacher and each child that include moment-by-moment conversations, observations and actions. Therefore, assessment in the primary school focuses on both the process of learning - assessment for learning (AfL) and the products of learning - assessment of learning (AoL).

Post-Primary Education

The post-primary education sector comprises secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools. Vocational schools are administered by vocational education committees (VECs) as established under the Vocational Education Act, 1930.[10] Traditionally, the objective of these schools was the provision of manual skills and preparation for employment in the trades. These schools now offer the full range of post-primary awards and are also providers of adult education and community education courses. Comprehensive and community schools offer academic and vocational subjects in a wide curriculum. They are managed by boards of management, supported by local vocational education committees and the Department of Education and Science. Community schools also provide facilities for adult education and community development projects.

All of these schools provide programmes leading to the certificate awards prescribed by the Department of Education and Science and are subject to inspection by the Department of Education and Science.

Post-primary education consists of a three-year junior cycle followed by a two or three-year senior cycle. A State examination, the Junior Certificate, is taken after the three-year junior cycle. In the senior cycle there is an optional one-year Transition Year after which the learner can take one of three Leaving Certificate programmes of two years duration: the Leaving Certificate (established), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied. A majority of learners complete the Leaving Certificate (established) programme.

The first stage of post-primary schooling that learners encounter, usually commencing at age 12, is junior cycle, a three-year programme within the compulsory period of

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[10] www.irishstatutebook.ie/1930/en/act/pub/0029/index.html

education that builds on the young person's educational experience at primary school by offering a broad, balanced and coherent programme of study across a wide range of curriculum subjects and areas. It is in junior cycle that the knowledge, understanding, attitudes and skills of learners—including the personal, social, moral and spiritual aspects—are extended and deepened with the aim of generating a love of learning in young people. In the process, junior cycle prepares learners for transition to senior cycle, for other further education opportunities, in some cases for employment and, in general, for the challenges involved in growing towards adulthood.

In junior cycle learners follow a number of subjects which include Irish, English, Mathematics, Social Personal & Health Education, Civic, Social and Political Education and two other subjects from a list which includes languages, Science, Business Studies, Art, Music etc. In addition, students in secondary schools must study History and Geography. The Junior Certificate examination takes place at the end of the junior cycle. Learners normally sit the examination at the age of 14 or 15. Junior Certificate subjects are usually assessed by means of a written terminal examination, along with practical examinations, project work, orals and aurals in some subjects. The majority of students in school will sit Junior Certificate examinations in at least seven subjects. However, candidates – including many learners in second chance education settings or repeat students – can also sit one or more individual subjects.

Senior cycle has a particular role to play in the preparation of learners for adult life in a changing economic and social context. A broad curriculum at senior cycle that allows for a degree of specialisation for learners continues to be viewed as the best means of achieving continuity and progression from junior cycle and assisting learners to prepare for the future. Senior cycle education seeks to provide learners with a high quality learning experience to prepare them for the world of work, for further and higher education and for successful personal lives, whatever that may entail for the individual learner.

Learners in senior cycle can currently follow a two or three-year programme of study, leading to the Leaving Certificate examination. They can take an initial Transition Year and proceed to choose from a number of options for the Leaving Certificate examination. Alternatively, they can proceed directly to one of these Leaving Certificate options and take the final examination after two years. Performance in the Leaving Certificate examination is the main basis on which places in universities, institutes of technology and other further and higher education and training colleges are allocated.

Transition Year

The Transition Year (TY) is a one-year programme that forms the first year of a three-year senior cycle in many schools. It is designed to act as a bridge between the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate. Transition Year offers learners an opportunity to mature and develop without the pressure of a formal examination. Its flexible structure allows for a broad range of learning experiences to be included, such as those related to personal and social awareness and development. It also provides an opportunity for learners to reflect on, and develop an appreciation of, the value of education and training in preparing them for the demands of the world of work and pays particular

attention to fostering a spirit of enterprise. Each school designs its own programme, within guidelines, to suit the needs and interests of its learners. Transition units are new units of study that can be selected or developed by teachers, as part of the programme. In establishing its own distinctive programme content, the school takes into account its own resources and the possibilities offered by local community interests.

Leaving Certificate

The Leaving Certificate is studied over two years and aims to provide learners with a broad, balanced education while also offering some potential for specialisation towards a particular career option. The Leaving Certificate is taken in almost all schools and students are required to study at least five subjects, one of which must be Irish. The majority of students in school will sit Leaving Certificate examinations in at least seven subjects. However, candidates – including many learners in second chance education settings or repeat students – can also sit one or more individual subjects. All subjects are offered at two Levels, Ordinary and Higher. Irish and Mathematics are also available at Foundation level. 33 Leaving Certificate subjects are available to schools.

Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is designed to enhance the vocational dimension of the Leaving Certificate. This two-year programme combines the academic strengths of the Leaving Certificate with a dynamic focus on self-directed learning, enterprise, work and the community. The defining features of the LCVP are that learners take some of their Leaving Certificate subjects from a specified set of vocational subjects, they study a recognised course in a modern European language, and take two additional courses, known as Link Modules, in the areas of Preparation for the World of Work and Enterprise Education.

Leaving Certificate Applied

The Leaving Certificate Applied is a discrete programme designed for those learners whose aptitudes, learning interests and ways of learning are not fully catered for by the other two Leaving Certificate programmes and for those learners who are at risk of early school leaving. Participants in the Leaving Certificate Applied engage in work and study of an active, practical and task-centred nature and it prepares participants for transition from the world of the school/centre to that of adult and working life. The Leaving Certificate Applied is a two-year programme made up of a range of courses that are structured round three elements:

- Vocational Preparation

- Vocational Education

- General Education.

For more information on the primary and post-primary curriculum visit www.curriculumonline.ie

Post-primary awards

> **Junior Certificate (NFQ Level 3)**
> **Leaving Certificate (NFQ Levels 4 and 5)**
>
> Awarded by the State Examinations Commission (www.examinations.ie[11])

Placement of the Leaving Certificate at Levels 4 and 5 of the NFQ

From the perspective of the school sector, the issues related to placing the Leaving Certificate and its various programmes at Levels 4 and 5 were complex. This complexity was only in part related to the task of matching learning aims, objectives and outcomes associated with the Leaving Certificate options with the level indicators of the Framework.

At the time, the view from the school sector was that when it comes to the Leaving Certificate, additional factors come into play. The Leaving Certificate is a high profile, and, in the context of its selection function for higher education and training, a high stakes qualification. It is taken in almost all schools and by an annual cohort of around 56,000 learners. It enjoys public confidence in its standards, status and currency. It is the terminal qualification for the vast majority of school leavers and a reference point for agencies and individuals involved in employment and training. As a consequence, it was felt that the placing of the Leaving Certificate would be subject to greater scrutiny than that associated with most other awards on the Framework.

For this reason, the NCCA advised

- That the Leaving Certificate should be treated as a single award incorporating the Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

- That it should be defined on the basis of the published general aims, objectives and outcomes associated with its various options

- That these were consistent with the level indicators at Levels 4 and 5 of the Framework so the award should be viewed as including learning outcomes and standards spanning these Levels.

At the time, the NCCA recognised that while the Leaving Certificate would be considered to extend across Level 4 and Level 5, the ultimate achievements of each individual learner would do so in varying proportions. The achievements of some learners would be reflective of indicators largely associated with Level 4 in the Framework while learners who take 'higher level' courses in their Leaving Certificate programme and achieve well are likely to acquire learning outcomes more akin to the indicators associated with Level

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[11] The State Examinations Commission was established in 2003 to assume operational responsibility for the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations. It is an executive agency of the Department of Education and Science established under Section 54 of the Education Act 1998.

5 than 4. However, on balance it was felt that regardless of the option taken, all learners would be engaged in attaining learning outcomes consistent with Framework indicators spanning in some measure Levels 4 and 5 rather than being exclusive to either one of these Levels.

The main criticisms of this placing then and now are that it is not definitive enough and that it does not address the question of the volume of learning associated with the award. However, the approach adopted by those involved in the NCCA discussions at the time was that the Leaving Certificate is viewed by the public as a single award and that the aims, objectives and learning outcomes associated with the various options, in each case, are consistent with indicators at both Levels 4 and 5.

2.2   Further Education and Training

Further education and training (FET) embraces education and training which occurs outside the general education and higher education and training systems, and which provides vocationally focussed learning, based on the needs of individuals. It is characterised by flexible modes of delivery, and built upon modular/unit systems that provide opportunities for credit accumulation. The FET sector also seeks to provide education and training that reflects national, regional and sectoral skills needs, and to facilitate social inclusion and accessibility.

Further education and training programmes are offered by a wide range of public and private providers. These include the state training agency, FÁS, which offers training courses suited to the needs of jobseekers looking for employment, employees wishing to take 'One Step Up' and improve their skills, and those training as crafts persons. Other state agencies provide training to meet particular sectoral needs such as BIM (Bord Iascaigh Mhara), which provides training for careers in the seafood industry; and Teagasc, the Agriculture and Food Development Authority, which provides further education and training courses in horticulture, agriculture, forestry and equine studies; and Fáilte Ireland, the National Tourism Development Authority, which provides training programmes relating to the tourism and hospitality industries. FET programmes are also offered by small training centres, vocational education committee (VEC) schools and colleges of further education, by private companies and professional bodies, and in community and adult education centres. In 2001, under the Qualifications Act, the state established a single awarding body to make and quality assure FET awards, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). As a result, most publicly funded FET programmes, and a significant volume of privately funded FET programmes lead to FETAC awards, which are included at Levels 1 to 6 of the NFQ.[12] Since its establishment in 2001, FETAC has awarded over 750,000 awards.[13]

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[12] For further information on the range of FETAC providers see www.fetac.ie/qa/ProviderQAList.htm

[13] For statistical analyses see www.fetac.ie/statistics/default.htm

Further Education and Training Awards[14]

> **Level 1 and 2 Certificates (NFQ Level 1, NFQ Level 2) and component (minor) and specific purpose (special purpose) awards at the same Levels**
>
> Awarded by FETAC

Level 1 and 2 certificates are designed to meet the needs of learners, both young and old, including those with intellectual and other disabilities, adults returning to training, and learners with few or no previous qualifications, including those within the workforce. These awards provide certification for learners who may progress to higher Levels and also for those whose principal achievements rest at these Levels. Each certificate comprises a number of components, most often in basic literacy and numeracy, which the learner can achieve at their own pace and accumulate over time towards one of the named certificates above. Examples of awards at Levels 1 and 2 include the Level 1 Certificate in Communications (major) and the Level 2 Certificate in General Learning (major).

> **Level 3 Certificate (NFQ Level 3) and component (minor) and specific purpose (special purpose) awards at the same level**
>
> Awarded by FETAC

The Level 3 Certificate enables learners to gain recognition for, specific personal skills, practical skills and knowledge, basic transferable skills, the enhancement of individual talents and qualities and achievements and learning relevant to a variety of progression options. Examples of awards at Level 3 would include the Level 3 Certificate in Keyboard and Computer Skills (major) and the Component Certificate (minor award) in Computer Literacy.

> **Level 4 Certificate (NFQ Level 4) and component (minor), specific purpose (special purpose) and supplemental awards at the same level**
>
> Awarded by FETAC

The Level 4 Certificate enables learners to gain recognition for the achievement of vocational and personal skills, knowledge and understanding to specified standards, the enhancement of individual talents and qualities and the achievement and learning relevant to a variety of progression options, including employment at an introductory vocational level, and programmes leading to a Level 5 Certificate. Examples of Level 4 awards would include the Level 4 Certificate in Horticulture (major); the Level 4 Certificate in Pharmacy Sales (major); and the Component Certificate in Child Development and Play (minor).

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[14] For more information on FET awards, including the full directory of awards, see
www.fetac.ie/link_pages/Awards_link_page.htm

> **Level 5 Certificate (NFQ Level 5) and component (minor), specific purpose (special purpose) and supplemental awards at the same level**
>
> Awarded by FETAC

The NFQ Level 5 Certificate enables learners to develop a broad range of skills, which are vocational specific and require a general theoretical understanding. They are enabled to work independently while subject to general direction. The majority of certificate/module holders at level 5 take up positions of employment. They are also deemed to meet the minimum entry requirements for a range of higher education institutions/programmes. Example of Level 5 awards would include the Level 5 Certificate in Restaurant Operations (major); the level 5 Certificate in Seafood Processing (major); the Component Certificate in Care of Older People (minor); the Component Certificate in Word Processing (minor).

> **Advanced Certificate (NFQ Level 6) and component (minor), specific purpose (special purpose) and supplemental awards at the same level**
>
> Awarded by FETAC

An Advanced Certificate award enables learners to develop a comprehensive range of skills, which may be vocationally specific and/or of a general supervisory nature, and require detailed theoretical understanding. Modules include advanced vocational/occupational skills, enabling certificate holders to work independently or progress to higher education and training. The majority of certificate/module holders at Level 6 take up positions of employment, some of whom may be self-employed. Examples of FET awards at Level 6 would include Advanced Certificate Craft-Electrical (major); Advanced Certificate Craft-Metal Fabrication (major); Advanced Certificate Farm Management (major); Component Certificate in Communications and Personal Development (minor); Component Certificate in Culinary Skills and Standards (minor).

2.3   Higher Education and Training

The higher education sector in Ireland comprises a range of higher education institutions – Universities, Institutes of Technology (IoTs) and other recognised institutions including private Higher Education Colleges, a list of which may be found by accessing the website of the Department of Education and Science at www.education.ie/servlet/blobservlet/he_providers_of_higher_education_ireland.htm?language=EN .

Entry to higher education is on a competitive basis with the most common entry point being through the Central Applications Office (CAO), following completion of the Leaving Certificate Examination.

Higher Education Institutions

Ireland has a binary system of higher education, comprising a range of higher education institutions that offer different types and Levels of programmes. The Universities are essentially concerned with undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, together with basic and applied research. The main work of the IoTs is in undergraduate programmes, with a smaller number of postgraduate programmes and a growing involvement in regionally orientated applied research.

There are eight universities recognised under the Universities Act, 1997 – University College Cork, University College Dublin, National University of Ireland Galway, National University of Ireland Maynooth, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Limerick, Dublin City University and the National University of Ireland (NUI). The Universities validate and award their own qualifications as well as those in institutions recognised by them including, for example, the Colleges of Education, and the recognised colleges of the NUI. The Universities have primary responsibility for their own quality assurance systems and have established the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) to promote best practice in quality assurance throughout their sector, and to undertake external reviews of the effectiveness of their quality assurance procedures. The Higher Education Authority (HEA), a state agency under the Department of Education and Science, also has an external review role in relation to quality assurance procedures in Universities. The HEA is primarily responsible for furthering the development of, and assisting in the co-ordination of state investment in, higher education.

There are thirteen IoTs which are designated under the Regional Technical Colleges Acts, 1992 to 1999. The institutions are Athlone IT, IT Blanchardstown, Cork IT, IT Carlow, Dundalk IT, Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Letterkenny IT, Galway-Mayo IT, Limerick IT, IT Sligo, IT Tallaght, IT Tralee and Waterford IT. Each of these has been delegated the power to make awards to varying degrees by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the national awarding body for non-university higher education and training. Following a review process, all of the IoTs have been delegated authority by HETAC to make awards at Levels 6-9 on the NFQ in respect of taught programmes. Delegated authority to award research degrees is at this time more restricted. Some IoTs have delegated authority to make awards at Levels 9 and/or 10 in specific disciplines. While the institutions individually have primary responsibility for quality assurance, HETAC has a quality assurance monitoring and review role in relation to the institutions. The Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), also recognised under state legislation, awards its own qualifications at Levels 6-10 of the NFQ. While it has primary responsibility for the implementation of quality assurance procedures, the Qualifications Authority has a statutory quality review role in relation to these procedures. Any provider of education and training regardless of the source of that provision, whether it is an educational institution, the workplace or the community, can apply to HETAC for validation of a higher education programme.

Higher Education Awards

> **Higher Certificate (NFQ Level 6) and minor, special purpose and supplemental awards at the same level**
>
> Awarded by HETAC, DIT, IoTs with delegated authority, and some Universities

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

> **Ordinary Bachelor Degree (NFQ Level 7) and minor, special purpose and supplemental awards at the same level**
>
> Awarded by HETAC, DIT, IoTs with delegated authority, and some Universities

The Ordinary Bachelor Degree is normally awarded after completion of an accredited programme of three years duration (180 ECTS credits) in a recognised higher education institution/provider. Entry to a programme leading to an ab-initio Ordinary Bachelor Degree is typically for school leavers and those with equivalent qualifications. In addition, there are 1 year add-on Ordinary Bachelor degree programmes (60 ECTS credits) for holders of the Higher Certificate. The Ordinary Bachelor Degree is compatible with the Bologna First Cycle descriptor, though holders of this award do not generally gain immediate access to programmes leading to Second Cycle awards in Ireland.

> **Honours Bachelor Degree (NFQ Level 8) and minor, special purpose and supplemental awards at the same level**
>
> Awarded by HETAC, DIT, IoTs with delegated authority, and Universities

The Honours Bachelor Degree is normally awarded following completion of a programme of three or four years duration (180-240 ECTS credits) in a recognised higher education institution/provider, although there are examples of longer programmes in areas such as architecture, dentistry and medicine. Entry to a programme leading to an ab-initio Honours Bachelor degree is typically for high achieving school leavers and those with equivalent qualifications. In addition, there are typically programmes of 1-year duration (60 ECTS credits) leading to Honours Bachelor Degrees available to holders of the Ordinary Bachelor Degree. The Honours Bachelor Degree is a Bologna First Cycle qualification.

Higher Diploma (NFQ Level 8)

Awarded by HETAC, DIT, IoTs with delegated authority, and Universities

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

Master Degree (NFQ Level 9) and minor, special purpose and supplemental awards at the same level

Awarded by HETAC, DIT, IoTs with delegated authority, and Universities

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There are two types of Masters Degree in Ireland: taught Masters Degrees and research Masters Degrees. The taught Masters Degree is awarded following the completion of an accredited programme of 1 to 2 years duration (60-120 ECTS credits). Entry to a programme leading to a taught Masters Degree is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees. Also, in some cases, entry to such programmes can be permitted for those with Ordinary Bachelor Degrees or equivalent who have some relevant work experience. Furthermore, in some cases, entry to such programmes is permitted for people with extensive experience in a relevant area.

Research Masters Degree programmes are typically of 2 years duration, though they are not credit rated. Entry to a programme leading to a research Masters Degree is typically for holders of an Honours Bachelor Degree, with a high classification, i.e. first or second class honours.

The Irish Masters Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna Second Cycle.

Post-Graduate Diploma (NFQ Level 9)

Awarded by HETAC, DIT, IoTs with delegated authority, and Universities

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

Doctoral Degree (NFQ Level 10)

Awarded by HETAC, DIT, IoTs with delegated authority, and Universities

Entry to a programme leading to a Doctoral Degree is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees. The general model is that a holder of an Honours Bachelor Degree with a high classification enters initially a Masters research programme, and transfers to a Doctoral programme after one year on the Masters research programme. In total, the number of years in the programme would generally be at least 3 years. There is also access to Doctoral Degrees for holders of Masters Degrees whether taught Masters or research Masters. Various models for Doctoral Degree programmes now exist, ranging from the traditional research doctorate to professional and practitioner doctoral programmes which have substantial taught components. Most doctoral programmes are now structured to include some taught components.

Figure 3:
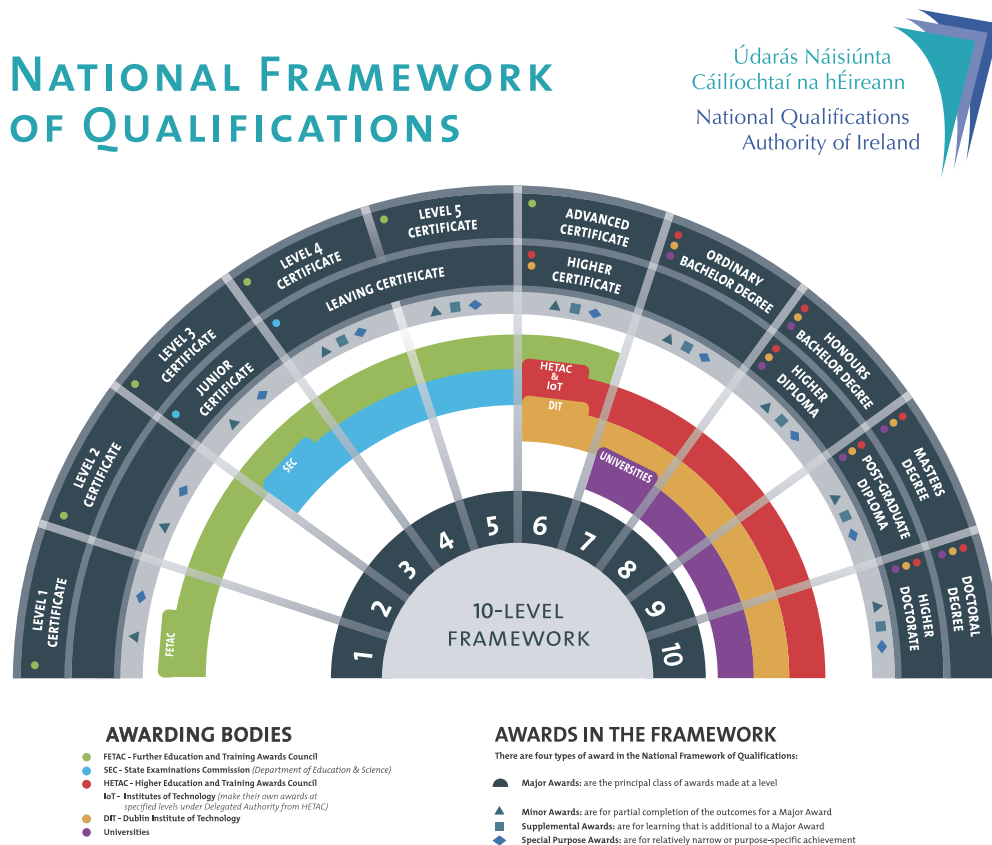
PART 3

CRITERIA AND PROCEDURES FOR REFERENCING THE IRISH NFQ TO THE EQF

3

PART 3
CRITERIA AND PROCEDURES FOR REFERENCING THE IRISH NFQ TO THE EQF

3.1   Introduction to EQF Advisory Group's criteria and procedures

The Recommendation establishing the EQF invites member states to refer their qualifications Levels to the overarching Framework by 2010. To guide and help member states meet this challenging deadline, and to ensure that the referencing process is well understood and trusted by stakeholders in the participating countries, the EQF Advisory Group has agreed the following set of ten referencing criteria and procedures:

Figure 4: Criteria and Procedures for referencing national qualifications Levels to EQF

1. The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process, including the National Coordination Point, are clearly determined and published by the competent public authorities.

2. There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications Levels in the national qualifications Framework or system and the level descriptors of the European Qualifications Framework.

3. The national Framework or qualifications system and its qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and linked to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where these exist, to credit systems.

4. The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications Framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system are transparent.

5. The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications Framework or system and are consistent with the relevant European principles and guidelines (as indicated in annex 3 of the Recommendation).

6. The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies.

7. The referencing process shall involve international experts.

8. The competent national body or bodies shall certify the referencing of the national Framework or system with the EQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing and the evidence supporting it shall be published by the competent national bodies, including the National Coordination Point, and shall address separately each of the criteria.

9. The official EQF platform shall maintain a public listing of member states that have confirmed that they have completed the referencing process, including links to completed referencing reports.

10. Following the referencing process, and in line with the timelines set in the Recommendation, all new qualification certificates, diplomas and Europass documents issued by the competent authorities contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications systems, to the appropriate European Qualifications Framework level.

The principal aim of these criteria and procedures is to ensure that the information and documentation published by the participating countries on their referencing processes is:

- validated by the competent authorities

- relevant

- transparent

- capable of being compared

- trustworthy.

The emphasis placed in the criteria and procedures on transparency and comparability is reflective of the fact that the ultimate success of EQF will depend on the ability of the participating countries to refer their qualifications systems and Levels to it in a demonstrable, explicit and defensible way. The intention is that those who consult this published referencing information, particularly those who are not familiar with a country's qualifications, will be able to judge its validity.

As well as the emphasis on transparency and comparability, the criteria and procedures also reflect the importance of certain key features of EQF. These include:

- the fundamental importance of the learning outcomes approach to national qualifications Frameworks and EQF (criterion 3)

- the principle that qualifications Frameworks, and qualifications systems more generally, should be underpinned by well developed and robust quality assurance systems (criteria 5 and 6)

- the strength of the relationship between EQF and the 'Bologna' Framework – the entire set of EQF referencing criteria and procedures are modelled on a similar set of criteria developed for verifying the compatibility of national higher education Frameworks of qualifications with the Bologna Framework.

The remainder of this section of the report sets out the Irish response to each of the ten referencing criteria and procedures.

3.2   The Irish responses to the referencing criteria and procedures

> **1. The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process, including the National Coordination Point, are clearly determined and published by the competent public authorities.**

Response to C & P 1

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland was established on a statutory basis, under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 on 26 February 2001.[15] This legislation was proposed by the Minister for Education and Science, whose responsibilities cover general education, further education and higher education in Ireland. The Qualifications Authority also operates under the aegis of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

The Authority itself has three principal objects under the Qualifications Act. These are:

- to establish and maintain a Framework of qualifications for the development, recognition and award of qualifications based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners

- to establish and promote the maintenance and improvement of the standards of awards of the further and higher education and training sectors, other than in the existing universities

- to promote and facilitate access, transfer and progression throughout the span of education and training provision.[16]

As the statutory body responsible for establishing and maintaining the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), the Qualifications Authority has been designated as the National Coordination Point for EQF in Ireland by the Department of Education and Science, and is thus responsible for overseeing the referencing of the NFQ to EQF.

In undertaking this task, the Qualifications Authority has worked closely with four organisations, who have acted as sectoral experts and advisors on the National Steering Committee convened by the Authority to oversee the referencing process. They are:

- The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment: general education/schools sector

- The Further Education and Training Awards Council: further education and training sector

- The Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Irish Universities Association: higher education and training sector.

[15] www.nqai.ie/documents/qualificationsact1999.pdf
[16] Additional information on the role of the Qualifications Authority is available at www.nqai.ie/about_role.html

A brief description of the responsibilities of the four bodies, including their legal competence, is set out below. Additional information on each body is available on their respective websites, links to which are provided in the accompanying footnotes.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

The responsibility for curriculum and qualifications in the school sector lies with the government and the statutory bodies involved:

- The Department of Education and Science (DES) has overall responsibility for policy related to curriculum, assessment and qualifications;

- The National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA) advises the DES on developments, specifications and standards in these areas; and

- The State Examinations Commission (SEC) runs the State examinations and acts as the awarding body for schools awards/qualifications.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment was established on a statutory basis in July 2001 under the Education Act 1998,[17] and acts as the liaison body on matters relating to the National Framework of Qualifications between the Schools sector and the Qualifications Authority. It is in this capacity that it is participating on the National Steering Committee for the referencing of the NFQ to the EQF. The NCCA's primary role is to advise the Minister for Education and Science on matters relating to curriculum and assessment for early childhood education and for primary and post-primary schools. This role encompasses advising the Minister on the standards of knowledge and skills which students at various age Levels should attain, and on the mechanisms for assessing the achievement of such standards, having regard to national and international standards and good practice in relation to such assessment.[18]

Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)

The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) was established as a statutory body in June 2001 under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. FETAC is the national awarding body for further education and training in Ireland, and gives people the opportunity to gain recognition for learning in education or training centres, in the work place and in the community. FETAC's functions include making and promoting awards; validating programmes; monitoring and ensuring the quality of programmes and determining standards. Programmes leading to FETAC awards are offered nationwide by a wide range of providers in diverse settings, including training centres, schools/colleges, companies, semi-state, community, professional and private sector bodies.[19]

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[17] The Education Act 1998 can be found here: www.education.ie/servlet/blobservlet/act_51_1998.pdf

[18] Additional information on the role and work of the Council is available at: www.ncca.ie/

[19] Additional information on the role and work of the Council is available at: www.fetac.ie/default.htm

Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC)

The Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) was established in June 2001 under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. HETAC is the national awarding and accreditation body responsible for the external quality assurance of academic programmes of higher education and training provided by Institutes of Technology and other higher education and training providers outside the university sector. HETAC's functions are to:

- establish policies and criteria for the making of higher education and training awards, and for the validation of programmes of higher education and training;

- determine standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners;

- make (or delegate authority to make) or recognise higher education and training awards at all Levels of higher education and training;

- monitor and evaluate the quality of programmes of higher education and training;

- agree and review providers' quality assurance arrangements;

- ensure that providers under its remit establish procedures for the assessment of learners that are fair and consistent and fit for purpose.

The 'learner' is at the centre of HETAC's vision and strategy. HETAC provides assurance to the public that programmes of higher education and training are above an acceptable threshold level of quality and that objective quality assurance processes are in place to meet the expectations of Irish society and the International community. Further information about HETAC is available at www.hetac.ie

Irish Universities Association (IUA)

The Irish Universities Association (IUA) is the representative body of the Heads of the seven Irish universities recognised under the Universities Act 1997, which sets down the legislative provisions which must be met for an educational institution or college to be established as a university in Ireland.20 The IUA is a non-profit making body with charitable status. The IUA seeks to advance university education and research through the formulation and pursuit of collective policies and actions on behalf of the Irish universities, thereby contributing to Ireland's social, cultural and economic well-being.[21]

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[20] The Universities Act 1997 can be found here: www.iheqn.ie/_fileupload/Publications/UniversitiesAct1997_79918537.pdf

[21] Additional information on the roles and work of the IUA, including links to the sites of its members, is available at: www.iua.ie/

> **2. There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications Levels in the national qualifications Framework or system and the level descriptors of the European Qualifications Framework.**

Response to C & P 2

To demonstrate the link between the qualifications Levels in the Irish NFQ and the EQF level descriptors, the Qualifications Authority commissioned a detailed technical comparison of the two Frameworks, which was undertaken by Edwin Mernagh Consulting. The final report relating to this study, setting out the methodology, results and conclusions, is attached as Annex 2. A brief summary is provided here as the response to C&P 2.

Methodological approach

The approach adopted in the study consisted of the following elements:

- a general background comparison of the two Frameworks and the purposes for which they were designed, comprising a comparison
    - of the architecture of the two Frameworks
    - the concepts of learning outcomes on which they are based, and
    - the way Levels are defined

- the identification of a rationale for analysing the Levels in the two Frameworks on the basis of learning outcomes defined in terms of knowledge, skill and competence

- a comparative analysis of the NFQ and EQF level descriptors which drew on earlier work undertaken to establish correspondences between the NFQ and other Frameworks, most notably the report on the verification of the compatibility of the NFQ with the Bologna Framework.

This approach yielded the following results:

- that the Irish NFQ and EQF share core design criteria which demonstrate that a direct comparison of the Levels in the two Frameworks is feasible

- that there is a strong correspondence between the Irish NFQ and EQF in the understandings of the meaning of learning outcomes on which they are based – this demonstrates that a meaningful comparison of the Levels in the two Frameworks can be based on knowledge, skill and competence as the primary comparative factors

- that the verification of compatibility of the Irish NFQ with the Bologna Framework provides a clear indication of how Levels 6-10 in the Irish NFQ align with the Bologna Cycles

- that, as the EQF recommendation sets out the correspondence between the Bologna Cycles and the EQF Levels, the body of evidence from formal investigation already undertaken indicates that Irish NFQ Levels 6-10 can be referenced to EQF Levels 5-8

- that a close analysis of the outcomes statements in the Irish NFQ and EQF confirms that the Irish NFQ Levels 6-10 can be referenced to EQF Levels 5-8, and that further correspondences were confirmed in descending order between NFQ level 5 and EQF level 4, between NFQ level 4 and EQF 3, between NFQ level 3 and EQF level 2, and NFQ Levels 1 and 2 and EQF level 1.

Conclusions

The objective of the study was to establish the correspondence between the qualifications Levels in the Irish NFQ and the level descriptors of the EQF. This task was undertaken in a staged process. It began by making a general comparison between the two Frameworks and the purposes for which they were designed; by comparing the architecture of the two Frameworks, the concepts of learning outcomes on which they are based and the way Levels are defined. This background comparison provided a rationale for analysing the Levels in the two Frameworks on the basis of the categorisation of learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skill and competence. The Levels analysis built on work already undertaken to establish correspondences between NFQ Levels and Levels in other Frameworks, notably the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area ('Bologna' Framework), continuing with a direct comparison of the text in the NFQ level indicators and in the EQF level descriptors. Drawing together the conclusions of the comparative analysis of the indicators and descriptors for Levels in the NFQ and the EQF, and taking into account the correspondences already established in earlier comparison exercises, an alignment can be demonstrated between the Levels in the two Frameworks as set out in the table below. Most EQF Levels are seen to correspond with single Levels in the NFQ. The exceptions are EQF level 6, which corresponds with NFQ Levels 7 and 8; and EQF level 1 which corresponds with NFQ Levels 1 and 2. The alignment of NFQ Levels 7 and 8 to one EQF level confirms the referencing of awards at both of these Levels to the Bologna First Cycle, as established in the 'Verification of Compatibility of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area'.

Figure 5: Correspondences established between the NFQ and EQF Levels

Irish NFQ	EQF
10	8
9	7
8	6
7	6
6	5
5	4
4	3
3	2
2	1
1	1

3. The national qualifications Framework or system and its qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and linked to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where these exist, to credit systems.

Response to C & P 3

The Irish NFQ and Learning Outcomes

The Irish Framework is required in law to be based on learning outcomes. Section 7 of the Qualifications Act requires the Qualifications Authority 'to establish and maintain a Framework . . . for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence'. Under section 8, the Authority is required to 'establish policies and criteria on which the Framework of qualifications shall

be based'. In its Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications (2003),[22] the Qualifications Authority determined that award standards are the expected outcomes of learning, inclusive of all education and training. They concern the knowledge, skill and competence that are expected from the learner who is to receive an award. They concern both general standards (for a level in the Framework or an award-type) and the specific standards for named awards in particular subjects or fields of learning.

The Irish Framework was developed by the Qualifications Authority in consultation with stakeholders and was launched in October 2003. As part of the development process, the Qualifications Authority determined that there would be three general strands of learning outcome underpinning the Framework: knowledge, know-how and skill, and competence. The general strands were further sub-divided into eight sub-strands as set out in Figure 6 below.

A full description of the learning outcomes approach in the NFQ, and the underlying concepts, is available in the publication *Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications (2003)*.[23]

Figure 6: Strands and sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence in the NFQ

Knowledge	Breadth
	Kind
Know-how and skill	Range
	Selectivity
Competence	Context
	Role
	Learning to learn
	Insight

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[22] www.nqai.ie/docs/publications/11.pdf

[23] www.nqai.ie/docs/publications/11.pdf

Using the eight sub-strands of knowledge, know-how and skill and competence (or learning outcomes), the Qualifications Authority designed the NFQ as a system of ten Levels. A grid of level indicators, setting out broad descriptions of the learning outcomes at a given level, was determined by the Qualifications Authority, with the intent of capturing all learning from the very initial stages to the most advanced. The grid of level indicators is published in *Determinations for the Outline National Framework of Qualifications* (2003), pp. 16-17,[24] and is attached as Annex 3 to this document.

In addition to this 10 level structure, the Irish Framework includes award-types of different classes: major, minor, supplemental and special purpose.

Each of the major types has a descriptor associated with it which describes the purpose, level, volume, learning outcomes, progression, transfer and articulation associated with it. Each of the award-types is understood to be different than the other award-types in an Irish context and has value and relevance for the labour market and for progression to further learning opportunities. The major award-type descriptors, which set out the associated learning outcomes, are published in *Determinations for the Outline National Framework of Qualifications* (2003), pp. 25-41.[25] The descriptors for the minor, supplemental and special-purpose award-types are also published.[26]

An extensive body of work has been undertaken to date by the awarding bodies across the further education and higher education and training sectors to implement the learning outcomes approach of the NFQ. Examples include the setting of generic disciplinary standards by HETAC for use in its sector, and the development of a related assessment policy (Levels 6-10); [27] FETAC's work on the development of its Common Awards System (Levels 1-6); [28] and the activities of the University Framework Implementation Network, which was jointly established by the Qualifications Authority and the Irish Universities Association at the end of 2007. The purpose of the network is to deepen the implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) within the university sector, primarily through the exchange of experience and practice between members.[29]

The Irish NFQ and arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning

From the outset, the NFQ was intended to form the basis of a new, more flexible and integrated system of qualifications, by putting the needs of the learner first and by supporting the national objective of moving towards a 'lifelong learning society'. The aim is that in this society, individual learners will be able to take up education and training

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[24] www.nqai.ie/docs/publications/12.pdf

[25] www.nqai.ie/docs/publications/12.pdf. The Higher Doctorate Descriptor, which was not part of the original determinations, is available at: http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/frame_action/Levels.html

[26] www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/about_NFQ/Award_Type_Descriptors.html

[27] www.hetac.ie/publications.cfm?sID=41 and http://www.hetac.ie/docs/Assessment_and_Standards_2009.pdf

[28] www.fetac.ie/cas/Default.htm

[29] www.nfqnetwork.ie/

opportunities at any stage throughout their lives that are appropriate to their ambitions, commitment and capacity and receive due recognition for what they achieve.

This commitment to lifelong learning is reflected in the Qualifications Act. Under section 7, the Qualifications Authority is required to promote and facilitate access, transfer and progression, and under section 8 (2) (d) it is required to determine and publish procedures for access, transfer and progression to be implemented by providers of education and training. The Act defines access, transfer and progression as follows:

- *Access:* the process by which learners may commence a programme of education and training having received recognition for knowledge, skill and competence required

- *Transfer:* the process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme having received recognition for knowledge, skill and competence acquired

- *Progression:* the process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme, where each programme is of a higher level than the preceding programme.

Building on the definitions in the Act, and side and side with the development of the NFQ, the Qualifications Authority has developed and published *Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression* (2003).[30] This document articulates a vision for learner mobility. It also sets out a range of policies which are designed to address many of the issues involved in improving learner mobility. It is in this context that the arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning - or the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), as it is commonly referred to in Ireland – and its linkage to the NFQ are established.

The overall policies on access, transfer and progression set out the Qualifications Authority's role to encourage and support the development of processes for the recognition of prior learning (RPL). This can be for the purposes of:

- entry to a programme leading to an award;

- credit towards an award or exemption from some programme requirements;

- eligibility for a full award.

While RPL for access, and credit/exemptions, is generally practised, the concept of making full awards on the basis of RPL is a relatively new one for Ireland. The Qualifications Acts sets out that learners may seek awards directly from HETAC or FETAC without having participated in specific programmes. To date, HETAC has made a number of full awards based solely on RPL, up to and including level 10.

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[30] www.nqai.ie/publication_oct2003a.html

The main responsibilities of the Qualifications Authority, awarding bodies and providers of education and training are set out in the Authority's policies on RPL. The Authority's main role is to encourage the continuation, expansion and further development of processes for RPL and to promote the co-ordination and harmonisation of these by providers. The role of the Awards Councils is to develop their awards systems in support of RPL; ensure that providers implement procedures concerning the development and publication of statements of arrangements in respect of programmes for RPL; monitor practice and manage direct applications for awards.

In 2005, the Qualifications Authority, working with an Advisory Group on RPL, developed and published national *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning.* [31] These were developed as a first step in co-ordinating the work of awarding bodies and providers. They address quality, assessment, documentation, communication and guidance. These issues are critical to building confidence in recognition processes and to meeting learner/applicant needs. They draw upon national and international practice including the common European principles on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (2004), which were adopted during the Irish Presidency of the EU. The principles and guidelines address issues of quality, assessment, documentation and procedures for the review of policy and practice. They aim to encourage the development and expansion of processes for RPL so that providers and awarding bodies may:

- communicate their commitment to the recognition of prior learning;

- bring coherence and consistency to the recognition of prior learning;

- remove difficulties that may confront an applicant wishing to transfer within and between different education and training sectors.

Ireland is currently participating in an OECD activity on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Further information on the practise of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is available in the associated reports: a country background report (2006-7), prepared by the Qualifications Authority and an advisory group of stakeholders,[32] and the OECD's country note (2008).[33]

The Irish NFQ and links to credit systems

Following the establishment of the NFQ, the Qualifications Authority – in partnership with education and training stakeholders – proceeded towards developing a national approach to credit, within the context of the general approach to access, transfer and progression. A twin track approach was pursued (one for further education and training, the other for higher education and training), as the way forward on credit was more clearly signposted for higher education and training at this time within the context of the Bologna process and the general acceptance and use of ECTS. Since that time,

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[31] www.nqai.ie/publication_jun2005.html

[32] www.nqai.ie/publication_aug2007.html

[33] www.nqai.ie/RecognitionofNon-FormalandInformalLearninginIreland.html

however, FETAC has been working on the development of a credit system for further education and training in the context of its ongoing work on developing its Common Awards System. The Common Awards System, and the associated credit arrangements, applies to FETAC awards at Levels 1 to 6 of the NFQ, but does not apply to the School awards – the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate – included at Levels 3 to 5 in the NFQ. At present, as is the case generally in Europe, there are no immediate plans to develop a credit system for general education within the schools sector. The following paragraphs outline developments with regard to credit in higher education and training and further education and training.

Credit and Higher Education and Training

The Qualifications Authority's Technical Advisory Group on Credit (Higher Education Track) published a set of *Principles and operational guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training* (2004).[34] These principles and operational guidelines have been adopted by the Authority.

The operational guidelines recommend that a typical credit volume or credit range be established for each major award-type from Levels 6-9 in the Framework in line with existing ECTS conventions and current practice in the Irish higher education and training system as follows:

Level 6 Higher Certificate	=	120 credits
Level 7 Ordinary Bachelor Degree	=	180 credits
Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree	=	180-240 credits
Level 8 Higher Diploma	=	60 credits
Level 9 Masters Degree (Taught)	=	60-120 credits
Level 9 Postgraduate Diploma	=	60 credits

Irish Doctoral Degrees and Masters Degrees (by research) do not usually have credit values assigned. However, Masters Degrees (by research) typically have a 2-year duration, which would equate with an appropriate number of credits. Institutional practice on assigning credit to professional doctorates differs. National discussions on developing a possible credit range for doctorates, which could include professional doctorates, are at an early stage. All Irish higher education and training awarding bodies are operating within these arrangements.

Credit and Further Education and Training

FETAC's Credit, Accumulation and Transfer System was initially devised in 2005 as part of the Common Awards System. At that time credit ranges were established for all FETAC award types at Levels 1-6. The intention was to refine these ranges further in the context of named awards, as more clarity emerged with regard to the optimum credit values for further education and training.

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[34] www.nqai.ie/documents/principlesandoperguidelinesgreen.pdf

Since 2005 and in conjunction with stakeholders the credit ranges have been refined further. A refined credit Framework was developed in 2008, as set out in Figure 7 (p. 47 below).

FETAC' s credit system is designed to complement the NFQ and, in particular, the use of award types. The assignment of credit values to major, minor, special purpose and supplemental awards provides greater transparency to the size and shape of the various awards and helps learners, employers and other users to relate awards to each other in a meaningful way. It meets the needs of learners in a lifelong learning context as it puts in place ways of measuring and comparing packages of learning outcomes. In addition, it is also designed with features that are compatible with ECVET, the new system of credit accumulation and transfer designed for vocational education and training in Europe.

The credit values for all FETAC award types are set at a national level. This will ensure credit value stability when the minor awards are exchanged or are transferred across major awards.

FETAC's Credit, Accumulation and Transfer System in the table opposite (p. 47) sets out fixed credit sizes for major awards and default sizes for minor awards. The concept of the default (standard) sizes will ensure maximum parity and transferability across all FETAC awards. It will also enable learners to accumulate learning over time. To provide greater flexibility to the award development process, non-standard minor awards can also be developed.

The key principles behind FETAC's Credit Accumulation and Transfer System are: simplicity (easy to understand), transferability (enables learners to move), parity (all major awards at a level have an agreed value including Level 6), and coherence (well structured).

The numeric value is based on a notional concept of time, i.e. an estimation of the average time it takes a learner to achieve outcomes.   Credit value is based on notional learner effort and not on time-served. It is a mechanism that is widely used (and the only one currently practised) to measure outcomes. In line with current practice within the vocational education and training arena the basic currency of credit is 1 credit equals up to 10 hours of Typical Learner Effort (TLE). TLE includes combinations of directed and non-directed learning including: class time/ tutorials/ practice/ lab-work/ work experience/ preparation/ study/ assessment/ reflection.

Figure 7: Further Education and Training Credit Framework

(The Credit Values below aim to ensure overall simplicity of the common awards system both in terms of development and awarding)

Aims	The Credit Values below aim to ensure parity of major awards per level	The Credit Values below aim to ensure maximum transferability of minors across a range of majors	The Credit Values below aim to provide some flexibility when designing awards	The Credit Values below aim to ensure that all learning can be recognised beyond a minor and below a major
Level	Level Major awards (credit values)	Default Minor Credit Values	Other permitted (allows minors of substantially different sizes not by small increments) Minor Credit Values	Special Purpose
L1	20	5	10	Not appropriate
L2	30	5	10	Not appropriate
L3	60	10	5, 20	≥ 5 < 60
L4	90	15	5, 10, 20	≥ 5 < 90
L5	120	15	5, 10, 30	≥ 5 < 120
L6	120	15	5, 10, 30	≥ 5 < 120

4. The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications Framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system are transparent.

Response to C & P 4

Policies on inclusion

Under section 8 of the Qualifications Act, the Qualifications Authority is required to 'establish policies and criteria on which the Framework of qualifications shall be based'. The initial Framework policies and criteria were adopted by the Authority and published in 2003 as *Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications.*[35]

Chapter 6 of these policies sets out the process for the inclusion of awards in the Framework as follows:

• It is the role of the Authority to determine the level indicators and the award-type descriptors. These will form the basis for the setting of standards for named awards by the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology.

• In relation to school and university awards, the aim is that the level indicators and the award-type descriptors in the Framework will be developed in a way that will facilitate the inclusion of these.

Accordingly, Irish school, further and higher education and training awarding bodies are now using the descriptors of the award-types as the descriptors of the awards that they make and it is a matter for them to have processes in place for their own award-making. These are detailed further in the material provided in relation to criterion 5 below.

Policies for the inclusion in, or alignment with the NFQ of awards not already recognised in the NFQ

The Qualifications Authority has also adopted policies and criteria for the inclusion in, or alignment with, the NFQ of the awards (or the learning outcomes associated with them) of certain awarding bodies which are not already recognised through the NFQ under section 8 of the Qualifications Act.[36] These make provision for the recognition through the Framework of:

• The awards of Irish bodies which make awards on a statutory basis (where the body's awards are not yet in the Framework and where the awards cannot be withdrawn) – this category would include awards made by bodies who make awards on an Irish

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[35] www.nqai.ie/docs/publications/11.pdf

[36] The policies and criteria are available here www.nqai.ie/documents/finalPoliciesandCriteriaforauthorityjune08.pdf

statutory basis other than those of the State Examinations Commission, the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the universities, the Dublin Institute of Technology and any institution with authority delegated from an awards Council to make awards. Examples of such bodies would include the Honorable Society of King's Inns and the Law Society of Ireland. To date, no awards made by bodies classifiable under this category have been included in the NFQ.

- The learning outcomes associated with the awards of certain Irish bodies which do not make awards on a statutory basis but which recognise the attainment by learners of learning outcomes in a formal way associated with the legal regulation of the operation of a profession or of a professional title by such bodies. Examples of such bodies whose awards have received recognition through the NFQ include the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ireland (ICAI) and Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA).

- The awards of certain bodies from outside the State which make awards in Ireland. Examples of such bodies whose awards have been aligned with the NFQ include the Scottish Qualifications Authority, City and Guilds and the Open University. [37]

Awards made to learners in Ireland by awarding bodies based in other countries are not included in the Irish NFQ, but they may be formally aligned. The policy provides for the alignment of such awards on the basis of best fit of learning outcomes to Levels or award-types in the Irish NFQ. Criteria include legal authority to make the awards in the home country; inclusion in the national Framework or equivalent in the home country; and external quality assurance in the home country which is also applied to the awards made in Ireland. The Qualifications Authority and FETAC review applications for the alignment of vocational and further education and training awards under this process. In relation to higher education and training awards, the alignment process is overseen by the Qualifications Authority and HETAC.

Existing and former ('Legacy') awards

It is also the case that as the Framework is implemented, many existing awards will no longer be granted. Further, many learners hold Irish awards that were part of former systems and have already ceased to be made. It is necessary to map these existing and former awards (sometimes referred to as 'legacy' awards) onto the Framework, so that holders of such awards are not disadvantaged. The general policy approach for the inclusion of 'legacy' awards is set out in *Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications,* pp. 43-5.[38]

The task of working out the placement of existing and former awards is well advanced. The Authority has agreed to the placement of a range of existing and former awards

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[37] For full information on the awards of international awarding bodies aligned to the NFQ see www.nqai.ie/AlignmentofUKawards.html

[38] www.nqai.ie/docs/framework/policies/polandcrit.pdf

with FETAC (January 2005), HETAC (March 2004), the Dublin Institute of Technology (March 2005) and the Department of Education and Science (May 2005).[39] A general approach for the placement of the legacy awards of the universities was agreed in early 2009, and the aim is to implement it throughout 2009-10.

Framework Implementation and Impact Study

The Qualifications Authority has commissioned a study on the implementation and impact of the National Framework of Qualifications and the associated policies for access, transfer and progression for learners.[40] The study will involve all stakeholders in Framework implementation and will last from Spring 2008 until Summer 2009.

The study will:

- assess the extent to which the National Framework of Qualifications is being implemented

- support deeper implementation of the Framework and policies on access, transfer and progression

- identify progress *inter alia* in implementation

- identify gaps and drivers/obstacles in respect of implementation

- assess the initial impact of the Framework

The study will focus primarily on the work of the Qualifications Authority, awarding bodies and providers of education and training, and comprises, *inter alia*, a series of reports from key stakeholder bodies responsible for implementing the Framework in the schooling, HETAC, FETAC and university sectors. These reports, which are published on the Authority's website, contain up to date information, relevant to criterion 4, on the progress of Framework implementation in the different sectors of Irish education and training.

The other elements of the study are:

- Case studies of implementation (Nursing and midwifery; Guidance)

- Submissions from the public

- Evaluation of inputs by study team of national and international experts

- Synthesis report and recommendations by study team

- Consideration of report and follow-up action by Authority.

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[39] www.nqai.ie/framework_pub_may2005.html

[40] All the available material relating to the study is accessible at: www.nqai.ie/framework_study.html

> **5. The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer (s) to the national qualifications Framework or system and are consistent with the relevant European principles and guidelines (as indicated in annex 3 of the Recommendation).**

Response to C & P 5

From the outset, the Qualifications Authority and education and training stakeholders identified 'quality' as one of the fundamental values and principles upon which the Framework would be based. It was also recognised, however, that putting this principle into operation would necessarily be complex as the legal responsibility for assuring the quality of awards in the Framework, and the education and training provision leading to them, is shared by a variety of awarding bodies, education and training providers and regulatory authorities, who function within distinct sectors or parts of sectors in the broader education and training system, and within distinct quality assurance traditions and cultures.

As the custodian of the NFQ and its values, the Qualifications Authority engages with all of these bodies and organisations in order to promote a consistent and internationally-recognised quality culture across the system. This task is greatly facilitated by the fact that the different sectoral QA systems share significant common features. All of the sectoral QA systems – whether in the schools sector, in further education and training and higher education and training – are enabled by underpinning national legislation and, since the advent of the NFQ in 2003, a shared interest in supporting the implementation of the Framework. A partnership approach between the awarding bodies, the providers of education and training and the regulatory authorities operating in each sector is also much in evidence, which not only facilitates the acceptance and smooth operation of the sectoral QA systems themselves but also provide important fora for disseminating information on the NFQ and how it can be integrated into the QA systems. Other enablers that are shared across the sectors include practitioner networks and, increasingly, international quality reference points. All of these are discussed in detail for each sector in the following pages.

As well as these shared 'enablers', the various sectors are also concerned to use quality assurance processes as developmental tools, whether the particular processes relate to schools, further education and training (FET) and higher education and training (HET) institutions, curricula, programmes of education and training and the related awards. Examples of such processes would include the provider registration processes operating in the FET sector under FETAC, the validation and course approval processes operating in the HET sector, or the internal development of schools through whole-school evaluation. This developmental dimension is frequently underpinned by research into good practice with a view to improving the quality processes on a continuing basis, and has been and continues to be a crucial factor in integrating the NFQ into the different QA systems.

One final dimension of quality assurance that operates across the different sectors is a common concern with monitoring and review. Particular monitoring and review

processes, which are described below under each of the sectors, would include the inspection and evaluation of schools by the Department of Education and Science, the institutional review of higher education institutions by HETAC and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) and the provider monitoring processes operated by both HETAC and FETAC. Such processes are also being used more and more to facilitate the implementation of the NFQ.

The existence of nationally-agreed quality assurance arrangements underpins the utility and credibility of the NFQ as a tool for comparing, contrasting and recognising qualifications, and for opening up diverse learning opportunities for prospective learners. It was understood from the outset that a level of implementation of the NFQ across the sectors was necessary before it would be directly referenced in the quality assurance arrangements of institutions/providers. As implementation of the NFQ has increased since 2003, such direct referencing of the NFQ in quality processes has become more evident. In addition, the Qualifications Authority, in partnership with stakeholders, is also exploring how it can put forward some overarching principles regarding the future referencing of the NFQ in the quality assurance arrangements across the further education and training and the higher education and training sectors. This discussion is taking place in the context of the implementation of a government proposal to amalgamate FETAC, HETAC and the Qualifications Authority in a new qualifications and quality assurance agency, which will also assume responsibility for the external quality review function of the universities that is currently performed by the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA). The key features of the existing arrangements and their interaction with the NFQ are set out below.

Quality assurance arrangement in higher education and training

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

- Universities and their associated colleges

- Institutes of Technology and providers within the independent sector (HETAC sector)

- Dublin Institute of Technology.

The impact of the Framework on quality assurance has been particularly marked in relation to higher education and training, where national and international developments have brought about increased co-operation amongst the quality community. This is most evident in the establishment of the Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN)[41] in 2003, for which the Qualifications Authority acts as the permanent secretariat. The network has brought together key players in quality assurance – provider representatives, student representatives, quality assurance agencies and the Department of Education and Science. Under the aegis of the IHEQN, the principal national stakeholders have worked collaboratively to promote a shared quality culture across the system. The network provides a forum for discussion of quality assurance issues and for the dissemination of good practice in quality assurance amongst

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[41] See www.iheqn.ie

practitioners and policy makers. It also endeavours, where appropriate, to develop common national principles and approaches to quality assurance in Irish higher education and training.

Since 2005, the IHEQN has agreed principles of good practice for quality assurance/ quality improvement in Irish higher education and training, and principles for reviewing the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures in Irish higher education and training.[42] Both sets of principles are compatible with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*,[43] and the quality assurance principles set out in annex 3 of the Recommendation for the establishment of EQF.

The principles incorporate the arrangements in each of the three separate systems for quality assurance in Irish higher education for:

• Internal assessment

• External review

• Publication of results.

These elements are statutory requirements in the Universities Act 1997 and the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999.

Concern with 'whole-system' quality assurance in Irish higher education and training is also informed and driven by international policy developments, particularly in relation to the Bologna Process. The emergence of the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area ('Bologna' Framework) in 2005, for example, and the related requirement that Bologna member states should not only develop their own national Frameworks of qualifications, but should also themselves verify the compatibility of their national Frameworks to the Bologna Framework, has been particularly significant in this regard. One of the criteria for verifying the compatibility of national Frameworks to the Bologna Framework is that the national quality assurance systems for higher education refer to the national Framework of qualifications and are consistent with the quality assurance developments within the Bologna Process. Ireland was one of the first countries to self-certify the compatibility of its national Framework with the Bologna Framework, a task which was completed in November 2006. All of the higher education quality systems were found to have referenced the NFQ and the four quality assurance agencies formally agreed with the self-certification report.[44]

As part of these broader international quality assurance developments, three of the four statutory external quality assurance agencies for higher education and training in Ireland – HETAC, the Qualifications Authority and the Irish Universities Quality Board – have undergone external reviews and successfully demonstrated their compliance with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*.

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[42] www.iheqn.ie/publications/default.asp?NCID=154

[43] www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20(2).pdf

[44] www.nqai.ie/interdev_bologna.html

The full set of documentation pertaining to these reviews – self-evaluation reports, external panel reports, agency responses, considerations of reviewing bodies – are published.[45]

Quality assurance arrangements within the HETAC sector

HETAC has responsibility for the external quality assurance of programmes of higher education and training provided by institutions/providers within the HETAC sector. Its role includes the registration of new providers of higher education and training programmes and subsequently monitoring the institutional quality-assurance procedures. These are established by institutions in agreement with HETAC. HETAC has also used its powers under the Qualifications Act to delegate authority for making awards to the Institutes of Technology. The power to make awards at Levels 6 – 9 in respect of taught programmes has been delegated to all of the Institutes of Technology. Delegated authority to award research degrees (level 9 and 10) is restricted and discipline specific. Some Institutes of Technology have delegated authority to make awards at Levels 9 and/or 10 in specific disciplines.

Quality assurance processes of HETAC include provider registration, programme accreditation, provider monitoring and Institutional Reviews.

In 2008, HETAC adopted a revised policy on the Registration of New Providers. It is intended that this will ensure that only bona fide providers offering quality assured programmes are registered as HETAC providers. All applicants under the revised policy must be engaged in, or plan to engage in, the delivery or procurement of programmes of higher education and training as defined in the NFQ, have a substantial base within the State, demonstrate a sound financial basis and comply with relevant legislation.

Within HETAC, programme accreditation is based on recommendations by panels of experts. These expert panels review documentation submitted by providers, visit the institution and make a recommendation. Expert panels are independent of the institution/provider and consist of experts in the academic discipline(s) concerned, experts from industry and the public service.

In 2008, HETAC adopted its policy on Monitoring of New Providers. This policy is designed to ensure that new providers deliver programmes as planned and accredited and should result in higher quality provision to the benefit of learners.

In 2008, HETAC also began a programme of Institutional Reviews. This is a major project which will, over time, result in the formal review of all HETAC providers.

The Institutional Review is intended:

• to enhance public confidence in the quality of education and training provided by the institution and the standards of the awards made;

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[45] HETAC review (concluded 2005): www.nqai.ie/award_hetac_rev.html; Qualifications Authority review (concluded 2007): www.nqai.ie/about_quality.html; IUQB review (concluded 2008): www.iuqb.ie/info/quality-review-of-iuqb2.aspx

- to assess the effectiveness of the quality assurance arrangements operated by the institution;

- to confirm the extent that the institution has implemented the national Framework of qualifications and procedures for access, transfer and progression;

- to evaluate the operation and management of delegated authority where it has been granted;

- to provide recommendations for the enhancement of the education and training provided by the institution;

- to contribute to coherent strategic planning and governance in the institution.

The Qualifications Act also requires HETAC to determine standards of knowledge, skill, or competence to be acquired by learners 'before a higher education and training award may be made'. In November 2003, the Council adopted the generic award-type descriptors of the Framework as Interim Standards, for the development of programmes on the Framework. In 2005, the Council adopted award standards (Levels 6 – 9) for five fields of learning – Art and Design, Business, Computing, Engineering and Science. These were followed by award standards for Nursing and Midwifery in 2007 and Complementary Therapies in 2008. The development of Awards Standards in a range of additional fields of learning is already in progress. These Awards Standards are linked to the NFQ.[46]

In addition to its role in relation to the validation of programmes and the establishment and monitoring of standards, HETAC is also charged with ensuring that student assessment procedures within institutions are fair and consistent and fit for purpose and ensuring academic and/or financial protection for students in for-profit, educational institutions providing programmes validated by HETAC.

Quality assurance arrangements within the university sector

The universities are in the process of completing the implementation of the Framework. In December 2005, the Qualifications Authority and the Registrars of the Irish universities agreed a policy approach regarding the completion of the implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications in the university sector. The agreed approach focuses, in particular, on the inclusion of the universities sub-degree and other smaller awards in the Framework, and sets outs an agreed basis and process for their inclusion. The majority of these awards were included on an agreed basis in September 2008.[47]

Under Section 35 of the Universities Act 1997, Irish universities must undertake internal quality assurance reviews and publish the findings of such reviews. Additionally, in agreement with the Higher Education Authority (HEA), they must participate in external,

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[46] www.hetac.ie/publications.cfm?sID=41

[47] For institutional lists of the university awards included in 2008: www.nqai.ie/awardsframework.html#higher

quality assurance reviews at least once every ten years. The Qualifications Authority also has a consultative role with the Higher Education Authority in relation to the latter body's quality assurance review role for the universities (Qualifications Act, section 40(5)).

The Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) was established in 2002 to support and promote a culture of quality in the Irish university sector and independently evaluate the effectiveness of quality processes in Irish universities, as required by the Universities Act (1997). In 2004, the IUQB and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) jointly commissioned the European University Association to undertake the 1st cycle of institutional quality reviews of the seven Irish universities. In October 2007, the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and (IUQB), both members of the IHEQN, published *A Framework for Quality in Irish Universities: concerted action for institutional improvement.*[48] This publication updates the 2003 Conference of Heads of Irish Universities (CHIU) publication *A Framework for Quality in Irish Universities: meeting the challenge of change.* The publication was updated in the light of the adoption of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* and following the recommendations arising out of the EUA review.

With regard to the compliance of Irish universities with the European standards and guidelines, it is stated that as part of new programme approval procedures, every new award should also be placed on the NFQ (p. 29). In addition, the quality Framework recommends that in the self-assessment reports of academic units details of programmes and modules should be provided 'including specific reference to the positioning of each associated qualification in the National Framework of Qualifications with sufficient information provided to allow the reviewers to understand the appropriateness of the level and type of the award' (p.54). It is also noted that 'increasingly, the procedures used also request demonstration of adherence to the Bologna process and the National Framework of Qualifications, including the implementation of a learning outcomes approach to teaching and learning (which will be required under Bologna by 2010)' (p.54).

In 2009, following consultation with a range of key stakeholders, IUQB finalised the process for the 2nd cycle of institutional quality reviews in the universities. This process, which will operate in accordance with national legislation and agreed European standards and guidelines, is termed **Institutional Review of Irish Universities** (IRIU). A handbook has been published by the IUQB which sets out in detail the IRIU process for the external review of Irish Universities.[49] As part of this process, each university will be visited by an external team. The review visit will be used by the team to confirm the processes employed by the university for assuring the effectiveness of its quality management process in accordance with national and European requirements. The team will receive and consider inter alia evidence on the ways the university has been working to ensure that it has in place procedures (including, for example, internal reviews and its external examiner processes) designed to evaluate how the learning outcomes are

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[48] www.iuqb.ie/info/iuqb_publications.aspx?article=174bd944-3893-4a53-84a1-a438a2fdedd8

[49] The publication is available here: IRIU Handbook_2009_published IRIU_2.pdf

achieved for programmes that have been placed in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (IRIU Handbook, pp. 11-2).

Quality assurance arrangements in the Dublin Institute of Technology

The Dublin Institute of Technology has incorporated the NFQ into its quality assurance procedures. The Qualifications Authority exercises certain functions in relation to the quality assurance procedures of the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). Under the Qualifications Act, there is a requirement for the DIT to put quality assurance procedures in place and to agree those procedures with the Authority. The Authority and the Institute agreed an initial set of procedures in June 2002. The Institute adopted a revised Quality Enhancement Handbook in June 2006 which, inter alia, extends its quality assurance policies and procedures to non-academic departments. These revised procedures were agreed with the Authority in January 2007,[50] and contain a formal statement of their compatibility to the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.* They also note the Institute's agreement with the verification of the compatibility of the Irish NFQ with the Bologna Framework.

The Qualifications Act also provides that the Authority shall consider the findings arising out of the application of the agreed quality assurance procedures and may make recommendations to the Institute in respect of them. Following consultation between the Institute and the Authority, an agreed approach to this function was developed in February 2004. The findings from the Institute's programme validation and review processes, as well as school and faculty reviews, are considered by the Qualifications Authority on an annual basis, and recommendations are made as appropriate. Issues relating to the implementation of the NFQ in the Institute may be considered in this context, as the NFQ is the basis for the setting of standards of named awards in the Institute. To date, findings arising from the application of the quality assurance procedures were considered for the academic years 2002-3, 2003-4, 2004-5, 2005-6, 2006-7 and 2007-8. The agreed approach is kept under review by the Qualifications Authority and the Institute.

The Authority is also required under the Act to review the effectiveness of the Institute's quality assurance procedures on a periodic basis and to publish the results of these reviews. The European University Association was commissioned by the Authority to carry out such a review on its behalf. Its report, completed in 2006, and DIT's response were published on the Authority's website.[51] The Authority exercises all of the above functions within the context of a general policy approach which recognises that the primary responsibility for quality assurance in the Institute rests with the Institute itself.

Role of the Higher Education Authority (HEA)[52]

The Higher Education Authority is the statutory planning and development body for higher education and research in Ireland. The HEA has wide advisory powers throughout

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[50] www.nqai.ie/award_dit_pol.html

[51] www.nqai.ie/award_dit_rev.html

[52] For further information on the Higher Education Authority's role see www.hea.ie

the whole of the third-level education sector. It is the funding authority for the universities, institutes of technology and a number of designated higher education institutions. The HEA also plays a key role in facilitating educational access for those who are disadvantaged socially, economically and culturally, and for mature students and students with a disability who are under-represented in higher education, through the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, which was established in the HEA in 2003.The maintenance and continuous improvement of quality in higher education is a key priority for the HEA, which exercises statutory functions, in this regard, under the Universities Act, 1997.

Both in the context of its quality assurance and planning and funding roles, the HEA supports the ongoing implementation of the NFQ and the linking of the same to quality assurance processes in higher education institutions. A significant development in this regard has been the advent of the Strategic Innovation Fund, a multi-annual fund administered by the HEA, which is directed towards support for innovation in higher education institutions. It supports new approaches to enhancing quality and effectiveness within higher education and research, including *inter alia* projects designed to enhance teaching and learning, and to further the implementation of the NFQ in the context of developing lifelong learning opportunities in higher education.[53]

Quality assurance arrangements in further education and training

The Qualifications Act requires that all providers of further education and training programmes leading to FETAC awards must establish procedures to quality assure their programmes and agree these procedures with FETAC. FETAC has taken a three-sided approach to quality assurance through the implementation of policies and procedures for provider registration, programme validation and monitoring.

All providers offering FETAC awards are required to have a quality assurance system agreed by FETAC through provider registration. To do this, a provider will need to be able to demonstrate its capacity to monitor, evaluate and improve the quality of programmes and services it offers to learners. Providers who demonstrate this capacity for quality may register with FETAC and offer its awards at Levels 1 to 6 of the National Framework of Qualifications. FETAC has published Guidelines on Provider *Quality Assurance, Quality Assurance in Further Education and Training: Policy and Guidelines for Providers.*[54] Since January 2005, all providers who want to register with FETAC for the first time must do so through the agreement of their quality assurance procedures with FETAC, and providers already offering FETAC awards had to apply for agreement of their quality assurance procedures with FETAC by the end of December 2006.[55]

FETAC validates programmes submitted by providers whose quality assurance procedures have been agreed. Validation is the process by which FETAC evaluates a programme, before it is delivered, to ensure that it can provide a learner with the opportunity to achieve a specified award.

[53] For further information on SIF see http://www.hea.ie/en/sif

[54] www.fetac.ie/qa/Policy_and_Guidelines_on_Provider_QA_v1.3.pdf

[55] For the list of quality assured providers see www.fetac.ie/qa/ProviderQAList.htm

FETAC also monitors and evaluates programmes. Monitoring is a multi-faceted system of gathering information on providers' programmes, services and the quality assurance systems which support them. If the evaluation of this information indicates it is necessary, then either the validation of the programme or the agreement of the quality assurance procedures can be reviewed.

In May 2004, European Ministers for vocational education and training adopted a *Common Quality Assurance Framework* for European vocational education and training. The *Common Quality Assurance Framework* establishes standards for quality assurance in vocational education and training and refers to both providers of vocational education and training and external quality assurance systems and agencies. It is considered appropriate that these standards should form part of the review of the effectiveness of quality assurance agencies in vocational education and training.

The European Network on Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training was established in 2005 by the European Commission, with the support of Member States, candidate countries, EFTA-EEA countries and social partners. The network aims to promote the use of the *Common Quality Assurance Framework* for vocational education and training in Europe and to foster co-operative, inclusive and voluntary networks at all Levels. It also highlights the role of peer review within and across countries.

FETAC has played a leading role in the development of the Common Quality Assurance Framework for vocational education and training at European level and, following that, the development of a European network of quality assurance agencies, known as ENQA-VET. In 2007, as part of a quality review of FETAC undertaken by the Qualifications Authority, compliance of FETAC with the *Common Quality Assurance Framework* was verified and, by extension, the related principles and guidelines on quality assurance set out in annex 3 of the Recommendation on the establishment of the EQF. The documentation associated with the review, including FETAC's self-evaluation report and the report of the external panel, are published.[56]

Since 2001, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) has adopted and operated the processes and procedures of the former awarding bodies with regard to determining standards for awards. In September 2005, a policy for determining standards was approved by the FETAC Council. This policy, which is currently being implemented, aims to establish a quality Common Awards System (CAS) across further education and training grounded in the NFQ.[57] The Common Awards System is the new and single way of developing FETAC awards. It is a coherent and structured way of developing awards, which is consistent with the National Framework of Qualifications. It is outcomes based and incorporates the 4 classes of award-types (major, minor, special purpose and supplemental) defined in the NFQ. Minor awards are central to the operation of the CAS. They are the core building block of the system and when put together in particular designs or arrangements, form the whole. Minor awards are the smallest awards FETAC makes and they fit together in coherent ways to form major, special purpose and

55 For the list of quality assured providers see www.fetac.ie/qa/ProviderQAList.htm

56 www.nqai.ie/award_fetac_rev.html

supplemental awards. Learners can accumulate named minor awards over time to achieve named major, special purpose or supplemental awards.

The Common Awards System is also designed to align with the higher education and training awards system in Ireland. Under CAS all major awards at a particular level have a set credit value which will be used as a measurement instrument/tool for access to higher education, specifically at Levels 5 and 6. FETAC is working with higher education institutions to fully realize this aspect of the CAS and to ensure full implementation of the Framework. FETAC is currently in the process of migrating all existing awards to the Common Awards System. The aim of the migration project is to ensure all FETAC awards are constructed and formatted in a consistent way. This will ensure maximum transparency and parity across all FETAC awards. It will also ensure that learners can transfer more easily across awards and programmes. Since 2008 all new awards in the FETAC system are developed according to the Common Award System.

Quality assurance arrangements in schools

The two School awards, the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate, were included in the NFQ on an agreed basis between the Qualifications Authority and the Department of Education and Science, the State Examinations Commission and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in 2003. A succinct account of the placement and rationale behind it, and the subsequent implementation and impact of the NFQ in the sector, is available in the schools' sector's input to the Framework Implementation and Impact Study, which is available on the Qualification Authority's website.[58] The underpinning quality assurance of the awards and the related programme provision is described below.

A number of elements contribute to quality assurance in the school sector. The most familiar and significant of these is the work of the School Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science which has a statutory quality assurance obligation in relation to educational provision, as set out in Section 13 of the Education Act, 1998. This section sets out the main functions of the Inspectorate, among which is the evaluation of the education system, particularly at primary and second level. In recent years, the main vehicle for this has been a comprehensive Whole School Evaluation process which has been introduced by the Inspectorate and schools. The emphasis within this process is on teams of Inspectors evaluating the work and performance of schools, but in ways which connect with school development planning, leadership development and professional development processes already taking place in parallel in schools. In other words, whole school evaluation places a dual emphasis on evaluation and development. The results of the work of the Inspectorate are made available in the form of reports on the performance of individual schools which are published online. They also publish reports on teaching and learning in individual subjects, in curriculum programmes and in more cross-curricular thematic areas. In addition, the Inspectorate reports annually on its work and more generally on the education system.[59]

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[57] www.fetac.ie/cas/Common_Awards_System_Dec_05.pdf

[58] www.nqai.ie/documents/SchoolsNCCAreportSept2008.pdf. See also above pp. 17-8.

[59] Further information on Whole School Evaluation is available at:
www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?pcategory=32818&ecategory=35645&language=EN
School reports are available at: www.education.ie/insreports/school_inspection_report_listing.htm

Some elements of quality assurance are even more deeply rooted than in evaluation of the work of schools. The school sector in Ireland is unique in the extent to which the partners in education are instrumentally involved in the development of curriculum, assessment and educational programme specifications before they are introduced in schools and in reviewing them after they have been introduced. The consensus, shared purpose and understanding achieved through this approach contribute significantly to quality assurance in teaching and learning and the work of schools. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is the statutory body responsible for curriculum, assessment and programme development. It was established on a representative basis. The process through which it develops curriculum and assessment specifications involves structures which, to varying degrees, comprise representatives of teachers, parents, school management (primary, secondary, community/comprehensive and vocational schools), subject associations and professional support organisations, further and higher education, business, the community/voluntary pillar, the Department of Education and Science and the State Examinations Commission. Increasingly, the voice of learners is strongly featured in that representation too, as is direct work with groups and networks of schools in trialling and introducing curriculum and assessment change on a phased basis. In short, all the partners in education are directly and instrumentally involved on a continuous basis in the development and review of curriculum, assessment and programme specifications in the school sector in Ireland and this contributes to quality assurance in these areas.

Quality assurance is also supported through the emphasis in the school sector on review and development of pre-service and in-service teacher education. Over the past ten years or so there has been considerable investment in the continuing professional development of teachers and school managers in areas such as those of school development planning, leadership development, meeting special educational needs, and curriculum and assessment development. Initiatives in this area of continuing professional development have been supported through the establishment and building of a network of teacher Education Centres around the country as a locus for professional development and teacher professional networks. In addition, the establishment, during this period, of a professional body for teachers, the Teaching Council, is also seen as contributing to professionalism within the teaching body. All these developments, in turn, underpin quality assurance within the school sector.

Research plays a very important role in quality assurance in this sector. In recent years, bodies like the NCCA have allocated significant proportions of their budget to research activity designed to provide evidence on which to base policy and decisions in the areas of curriculum, assessment and qualifications. During the last five years, for example, a cohort study has been undertaken tracking the experience of learners as they make their way from first year to the sixth year of post-primary schooling. To date, three 'annual' reports have been published from this research with others to follow. This kind of research contributes directly to evidence-based decision making, which in turn contributes to quality assurance in the school sector.

Finally, the work of the State Examinations Commission in the areas of assessment and examinations should be mentioned. The school sector in Ireland is one of the few worldwide which operates two centralised national examinations, one on completion of

lower secondary education, the other on completion of upper secondary education. The combination of these makes a contribution to quality assurance in the school sector. Equally, the transparency associated with these examination processes and systems adds value to that contribution. That transparency is reflected in the publication of all materials related to the examinations – sample papers, all marking schemes, chief examiner reports on subjects and programmes, aggregated results. In addition, students have the facility to review their marked examination scripts after the examination. All of this contributes to quality assurance in the school sector.

In summary, the key elements associated with quality assurance in the schools sector include: the work of the inspectorate; the unique collaborative process of curriculum, assessment and programme development and review; the recognition and centrality of professional development, both pre and in-service; the quality and transparency associated with the State examinations system; and the increased investment across all these areas on research as a basis for decision making.

> **6. The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies.**

Response to C & P 6

This report on the referencing of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications to EQF has been agreed by

- The Department of Education and Science

- The Further Education and Training Awards Council

- The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

- The Higher Education and Training Awards Council

- The Higher Education Authority

- The Irish Universities Quality Board.

These are the quality assurance bodies in Ireland of relevance to the general, further and higher education and training sectors.

> **7. The referencing process shall involve international experts.**

Response to C & P 7

The Qualifications Authority established a steering committee to assist it in overseeing the referencing process. Three international experts on qualifications systems and Frameworks joined the committee:

- Dr Carita Blomqvist, from the Finnish National Board of Education

- Mr Wilfried Boomgaert, Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, Belgium

- Dr Mike Coles, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, England.

> **8. The competent national body or bodies shall certify the referencing of the national qualifications Framework or system with the EQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing and the evidence supporting it shall be published by the competent national bodies, including the National Coordination Point, and shall address separately each of the criteria.**

Response to C & P 8

This report, which has been prepared and agreed by the competent national bodies, is the single, comprehensive report setting out the referencing, and supporting evidence, of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications to the EQF. It addresses each of the ten criteria and procedures agreed by the EQF Advisory Group.

> **9. The official EQF platform shall maintain a public listing of member states that have confirmed that they have completed the referencing process, including links to completed referencing reports.**

Response to C & P 9

On completion of this report, the Qualifications Authority will inform the European Commission that the referencing process has been completed, and provide a link to the published referencing report.

> **10. Following the referencing process, and in line with the timelines set in the Recommendation, all new qualification certificates, diplomas and Europass documents issued by the competent authorities contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications systems, to the appropriate European Qualifications Framework level.**

Response to C & P 10

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has been designated as the National Europass Centre for Ireland and in this capacity is responsible for coordinating the implementation of the Diploma and Certificate Supplements.[60] The Qualifications Authority will coordinate a national response to criterion 10 on completion of the referencing process, including an agreed approach for the referencing of the established correspondences between the NFQ and EQF Levels in Certificate and Diploma Supplements.

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[60] www.europass.ie/europass/

PART 4

MATTERS ARISING FROM THE EQF REFERENCING EXERCISE

4

In the course of the referencing exercise certain matters and observations pertaining to the implementation of EQF, and its relationship with national qualifications systems/Frameworks and sectoral qualifications/Frameworks, were raised by participating stakeholders and members of the National Steering Committee. It was agreed by the National Steering Committee that these should be recorded in the report in order to inform future policy discussions both at the national and European Levels.

- *Transparency challenge: describing the different sectors of Irish education and training, the complex quality assurance systems that underpin them, and their relationship with the NFQ*

  In the course of the referencing process, it was noted – particularly by the international experts on the referencing committee – that the different sectors of education and training in Ireland (the general education sector, the further education and training sector and the binary higher education and training sector) have different legal relationships to the NFQ, ranging from voluntary co-operation with the Framework to full statutory obligation to implement it. Related to this, the different sectors also have distinct statutory quality assurance arrangements underpinning them. It was noted that these diverse and complex arrangements present a particular challenge in terms of describing the system as a whole, particularly for an audience based outside the country which is unfamiliar with education and training in Ireland and the range of qualifications offered within the system. To this end, a distinct section was included in the report, with references to additional information sources, which endeavours to provide an overview of the system and to show where the different qualifications – described in terms of NFQ level, award-type and the associated provision – are located.

- *Consultation Processes*

  Consultation with a wide group of stakeholders has been a key feature of the development and implementation of the Irish NFQ. The established consultation structures and processes, which are overseen by the Qualifications Authority, were also utilised during the referencing process. It was noted by the Referencing Committee that these added value to the process and also served as useful fora for the dissemination of general information on the EQF to national stakeholders.

- *The relationship of sectoral qualifications/Frameworks to national qualifications systems and EQF*

  A matter of concern to certain Irish stakeholders is how sectoral qualifications/Frameworks, particularly those that transcend national boundaries and which comprehend qualifications made by vendor bodies that are not sanctioned by public authority, will relate to the EQF. In broad terms, there is general support that such qualifications should be accommodated in national qualifications Frameworks and the EQF, but no clear view as yet as to what mechanism should be used to achieve this. It seems that the key question that needs to be addressed is whether such sectoral qualifications/Frameworks should be accommodated via inclusion in or mapping to one or more national Frameworks and then referenced to EQF, or directly

by inclusion in, or mapping to EQF, and back referencing to the national systems. Either way, a key issue that will need to be addressed is how external quality assurance – in a manner that would satisfy the national authorities – would apply to such sectoral qualifications/Frameworks in order to facilitate their recognition through national qualifications Frameworks and EQF.

- *The value of undertaking the Bologna verification of compatibility exercise in 2006*

  The prior verification of compatibility of the parts of the Irish NFQ covering higher education with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area ('Bologna' Framework) in 2006 facilitated the referencing of the NFQ to EQF. The detailed analysis and stakeholder consultation undertaken for that exercise provided a model approach and thus simplified the work of the Referencing Committee.

- *The relationship of EQF to Directive 2005/36/EC*

  The consolidated Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications continues to use a largely duration-based scale to distinguish five Levels of professional qualification (Article 11). It is unclear at this juncture how the Directive, particularly the 5 level scale, will ultimately relate to the EQF. This has been flagged as a concern by competent authorities and other organisations who find themselves operating both within the domains of the Directive and the EQF. However, the focus on learning outcomes, allied with the information in the Certificate and Diploma Supplements which are features of EUROPASS, will improve the information base available for comparing qualifications under the regulatory Framework of the Directive. The commitment to common quality assurance principles in VET and higher education will also assist in promoting transparency and mobility.

- *Implementation of ECVET*

  ECVET is a European system of credit accumulation and transfer designed for vocational education and training in Europe. As such, it designed to enhance mobility and to complement EQF. It was noted in the referencing process that ECVET was expected to receive final approval by the European Parliament and Council in this year (2009). It was also noted that, in this context, the implementation of ECVET had not yet commenced in Ireland by the time the referencing process was completed, but that it will be a significant feature of future mobility and lifelong learning developments in Ireland. FETAC's Credit system, which applies to vocational education and training awards in Ireland, is designed with features that are compatible with ECVET.

- *EQF and the definition of national qualifications in the Irish NFQ*

  It was noted that the referencing of Irish NFQ Levels 4 and 5 with EQF Levels 3 and 4 means, in effect, that the Leaving Certificate award will be translated and compared to qualifications in other jurisdictions via two EQF Levels. The Leaving Certificate is an example of a complex qualification which has evolved over time. It serves several important and inter-related purposes in the national qualifications system and the

national education system. When the NFQ was established, it proved impossible to disentangle the variety of learning outcomes associated with the Leaving Certificate and assign associated qualifications to different Levels in a way that satisfied these multiple purposes. In this context, it is noteworthy that EQF cannot bring sharper definition to particular qualifications than is achieved in a national qualifications Framework, nor indeed that it is expected to do so.

PART 5

CONCLUSIONS

5

The referencing process undertaken in Ireland establishes a clear and demonstrable link between the Levels in the NFQ and the level descriptors of EQF in the following manner:

Irish NFQ	EQF
10	8
9	7
8	6
7	6
6	5
5	4
4	3
3	2
2	1
1	1

The referencing process has also demonstrated that the NFQ, and the qualifications within it, are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes, and linked to credit systems and arrangements for the Recognition of Prior Learning (i.e., validation of non-formal and informal learning).

The referencing process has demonstrated that there are transparent criteria and procedures for the inclusion of qualifications in the NFQ, which are being implemented progressively by the different awarding bodies and providers of education and training.

The referencing process has demonstrated that the different quality assurance systems operating in Irish education and training underpin the NFQ and its implementation. The relevant quality assurance bodies have been consulted on the referencing process and have stated their agreement to it. Three international experts have also participated in the referencing process: Mr Wilfried Boomgaert, Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, Belgium; Dr Carita Blomqvist, Finnish National Board of Education and Dr Mike Coles, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), England.

This report, which has been prepared and agreed by the competent national bodies, is the single, comprehensive report setting out the referencing, and supporting evidence, of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications to the EQF. It addresses each of the ten criteria and procedures agreed by the EQF Advisory Group. The report also notes a number of issues and observations pertaining to the implementation of EQF, and its relationship with national qualifications systems/Frameworks and sectoral qualifications/Frameworks, which were raised by participating stakeholders or the members of the National Steering Committee, and which were recorded in the report in order to inform future policy discussions both at the national and European Levels.

The report will be published on the website of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and the European Commission will be informed that the referencing process has been completed and a link to the published report will be provided.

The Qualifications Authority, as the National Europass Centre, will consult with national stakeholders and coordinate an agreed approach for the referencing of the established correspondences between the NFQ and EQF Levels in Certificate and Diploma Supplements.

PART 6

SELECT REFERENCES

6

6.1   NFQ Documents

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, Determinations for the Outline National Framework of Qualifications (October, 2003): downloadable at www.nqai.ie/docs/framework/determinations/determinations.pdf

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, Policies and Criteria for the establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications (October, 2003): downloadable at www.nqai.ie/docs/framework/policies/polandcrit.pdf

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression (October, 2003): downloadable at www.nqai.ie/docs/framework/policies/atp.pdf

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, Additional policies and criteria established for the placement of existing and former awards in the National Framework of Qualifications (March, 2005), downloadable at www.nqai.ie/fra mework_policies_criteria.html

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, Policies and Criteria for the Inclusion in, or Alignment with, the National Framework of Qualifications of the Awards of Certain Awarding Bodies (Original version, July 2006; updated June 2008): downloadable at www.nqai.ie/documents/finalPoliciesandCriteriaforauthorityjune08.pdf

National Qualifications authority of Ireland, Policies and Criteria for Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental Award-types (July 2004), downloadable at www.nqai.ie/framework_policies_criteria.html

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, Towards the completion of Framework implementation in the universities – a discussion paper (January, 2006) downloadable at: www.nqai.ie/framework_policies_criteria.html

6.2   Framework Implementation and Impact Study Documents

The documentation associated with this review is available at: www.nqai.ie/framework_study.html

6.3   Quality Assurance Documents

National Quality Assurance Policies and Procedures

- HETAC Quality Assurance policies including Institutional Review and Monitoring: www.hetac.ie/publications.cfm?sID=44

- FETAC provider quality assurance and registration: www.fetac.ie/qa/default.htm

- Department of Education and Science - Whole School Evaluation:
  www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?pcategory=32818&ecategory=35645&language=E

- NQAI/DIT: http://www.dit.ie/services/academicregistrar/quality/handbook/ and
  www.nqai.ie/award_dit_pol.html

- Universities:
  A Framework for Quality in Irish Universities: concerted action for institutional improvement (Published by IUQB and IUA), available at:
  www.iuqb.ie/info/iuqb_publications.aspx?article=174bd944-3893-4a53-84a1-a438a2fdedd8

  Institutional Review of Irish Universities Handbook:
  IRIU Handbook_2009_published IRIU_2.pdf

Reviews of Quality Assurance Agencies

- Higher Education and Training Awards Council (concluded 2005):
  www.nqai.ie/award_hetac_rev.html;

- National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (concluded 2007):
  www.nqai.ie/about_quality.html;

- Further Education and Training Awards Council (concluded 2008):
  www.nqai.ie/award_fetac_rev.html

- Irish Universities Quality Board (concluded 2008):
  www.iuqb.ie/info/quality-review-of-iuqb2.aspx

Irish Higher Education Quality Network publications:

- *Principles of Good Practice in Quality Assurance / Quality Improvement for Irish Higher Education and Training*

- *Principles for Reviewing the Effectiveness of Quality Assurance Procedures in Irish Higher Education and Training*, both available at:
  www.iheqn.ie/publications/default.asp?NCID=154

European Policies and Guidelines

- Common Quality Assurance Framework for VET, produced by the Technical Working Group on Quality in VET in the context of the ENQA-VET work programme prior to 2008: www.enqavet.eu/downloads/TWG_A_European_Common_Quality_Assurance_Framework.pdf Proposal for a recommendation

- Proposal for a recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training: www.enqavet.eu/downloads/Recommendation_for_European_QA_Reference_ Framework_for_VET_090408.pdf

- *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (3rd edn, 2009): www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20(2).pdf

6.4   Recognition of Prior Learning and Credit Documents

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, *Principles and operational guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training* (first published on the Authority's website, November 2004; printed, July 2006): downloadable at: www.nqai.ie/docs/framework/policies/principles%20and%20oper% 20guidelines%20green.pdf

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, *Principles and operational guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning* (June 2005) downloadable at: www.nqai.ie/framework_policies_criteria.html

Thematic Review and Collaborative Policy Analysis: Recognition of Non0formal and Informal Learning – Ireland Country Note (OECD, 2008): www.nqai.ie/documents/finalcountrynote1.pdf

ANNEX 1

STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Referencing of Irish National Framework of Qualifications to EQF – National Steering Committee Members

Irish Sectoral Experts

Mr John Hammond, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

Ms Orla Lynch, Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)

Ms Mary Sheridan, Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC)

Mr Lewis Purser, Irish Universities Association (IUA)

International Experts

Mr Wilfried Boomgaert, Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, Belgium

Dr Carita Blomqvist, Finnish National Board of Education

Dr Mike Coles, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), England

Technical Consultant

Mr Edwin Mernagh, Edwin Mernagh Consulting

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

Ms Carmel Kelly

Ms Trish O'Brien

Mr Seán O'Reilly

Dr Jim Murray (Chair)

ANNEX 2

ESTABLISHING THE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN THE QUALIFICATIONS LEVELS IN THE NFQ AND THE LEVEL DESCRIPTORS OF THE EQF

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

Referencing the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF)

Establishing the correspondence between the qualifications Levels in the Irish National Framework of Qualifications and the level descriptors of the EQF

June 2009

CONTENTS

1   Introduction: the approach adopted

This paper reports on a 'referencing' exercise undertaken by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland in the context of the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF). The objective of this exercise was to establish the correspondence between the qualifications Levels in the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and the level descriptors of the EQF, in fulfillment of criterion 2 of the EQF Advisory Group's criteria and procedures for referencing the qualifications Levels of national systems to EQF. The approach adopted was to begin by making a general comparison between the two Frameworks and the purposes for which they were designed – comparing the architecture of the two Frameworks, the concepts of learning outcomes on which they are based and the way Levels are defined. From this background comparison, a rationale was developed for analyzing the Levels in the two Frameworks on the basis of learning outcomes defined in terms of knowledge, skill and competence. The Levels analysis built on work already undertaken to establish correspondences between NFQ Levels and Levels in other Frameworks, notably the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area, continuing with a direct comparison of the text in the NFQ level indicators and in the EQF level descriptors. The result of the exercise is an established correspondence between the NFQ and EQF Levels.

2   General Comparison of NFQ and EQF

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was introduced in 2003 as the key element in a broad reform of the system of qualifications in Ireland, arising out of the 1999 Qualifications (Education and Training) Act. The Irish NFQ is a national Framework of qualifications. It is the single structure in the Irish education and training system through which learning achievements are measured and related to one another; it defines the relationship between all education and training awards. The primary users of the NFQ are a defined set of 'awarding bodies' which, in turn, define the standards for awards which are then used by education and training providers in programme design.

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a common European reference Framework which links countries' qualifications systems together, acting as a translation device to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems in Europe. It has two principal aims: to promote citizens' mobility between countries and to facilitate their lifelong learning. EQF was introduced in a Recommendation which formally entered into force in April 2008.

Both NFQ and EQF are 'qualifications Frameworks', structures designed to enable users to compare aspects of learning. Both Frameworks share core concepts: they are based on the approach of identifying learning outcomes, described in terms of knowledge, skill and competence. There are, however, fundamental differences in the purposes for which these Frameworks were designed. NFQ is primarily a definitive structure and qualifications in the Irish system are related directly to the NFQ Levels. EQF, by contrast and despite its title, is a 'meta-Framework' rather than a true 'qualifications Framework in the national or sectoral context. As such, it is intended to function as an interchange or translation device enabling qualifications systems in different countries to relate their

various systems to a set of common reference points. In some ways EQF resembles a national qualifications system: it is focused on qualifications (i.e. on the outcomes of learning) rather than on the learning process; its descriptors refer to outcomes across the full span of knowledge, skill and competence and are field-neutral. In other ways, the intended function of EQF more closely resembles that of other international structures such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR): it sets out to provide a common reference rather than to define what sorts of qualifications there should be at any level.

3   The architecture of NFQ and EQF

Given the different purposes for which they were designed it is reasonable to expect that there should be differences in the way NFQ and EQF are constructed, and this is indeed the case. Nevertheless, they also display many common design features and the overall level of similarity contributes to the process of comparing the Levels in the two Frameworks.

The ten NFQ Levels are defined by 'indicator' statements set out in terms of expected learning outcomes. At each NFQ level, using the level indicator statements as building blocks, generic 'award-type descriptors' are defined. EQF, as a meta-Framework, does not define specific or generic awards. Its eight Levels are defined by 'descriptors'.

When we consider the way the Levels in the two Frameworks were designed, many similarities emerge:

- Both Frameworks are comprehensive and integrated, designed to relate to awards for all learning, whether acquired through formal, non-formal or informal processes, or through general education, VET or higher education programmes.

- In both Frameworks, the statements that define the Levels are completely neutral in terms of field(s) of learning.

- Both the NFQ level indicators and the EQF level descriptors are designed to be read across all strands of learning outcomes, and aspects of each strand are sometimes elaborated or clarified in other strands; also, in both Frameworks the outcomes for a given level build on and subsume the outcomes of the Levels beneath.

- In both Frameworks, key words or phrases are introduced as "threshold" or distinguishing factors in the description of learning outcomes at each level; these are illustrated for both NFQ and EQF at appendix 2.

Taking all of these similarities into account, it can be concluded that NFQ and EQF share core design criteria and this indicates that a direct comparison of the Levels in the two Frameworks is feasible.

4   The description of learning outcomes – knowledge, skill and competence

While there are fundamental differences between the NFQ and EQF in terms of their intended purposes, it is nevertheless evident that there are striking similarities in the way the two Frameworks address the task of describing learning outcomes. Both sets of level descriptors seek to cover the full range of learning outcomes, avoid referring to learning mode or institutional setting and are neutral in relation to specific occupational relevance and to 'fields of learning'. Above all, there is a strong similarity in the way the two Frameworks describe learning outcomes in three main 'strands': knowledge, skill and competence.

The definitions of knowledge, skill and competence in EQF are set out in Annex 1 of the EQF Recommendation: they are succinct and concise. The definitions of knowledge, skill and competence in NFQ, set out in the policies and criteria for the Framework,[1] are somewhat more expansive. The two sets of definitions are presented for comparison in a table in Appendix 1 and the comparison is analysed in the section below.

Knowledge

Both Frameworks' definitions of knowledge describe what is learned and also what learning processes are involved. NFQ refers to the 'cognitive representation of ideas, events or happenings', whereas EQF refers to the 'body of facts, principles, theories and practices that is related to a field of work or study'. The process of knowledge learning is described in NFQ as that 'which can comprise description, memory, understanding, thinking, analysis, synthesis, debate and research', and in EQF as 'the assimilation of information through learning'.

Skill

This aspect of learning outcomes is referred to as 'Skills' in EQF, where it is defined as 'the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems'. NFQ refers to 'Know-how and Skill'. Skill is defined as 'the goal-directed performance of a task in interaction with the environment' and this concept is elaborated by the further definition of know-how as 'the procedural knowledge required to carry out a task'.

Competence

Both Frameworks refer to competence in terms of the application of knowledge, skill and other abilities. NFQ describes competence as 'the effective and creative demonstration and deployment of knowledge and skill in human situations', acknowledging also that competence 'draws on attitudes, emotions, values and sense of self-efficacy of the learner'. This definition is closely matched in EQF, in which 'competence' means the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations'. Both definitions seek to describe the context in which competence is applied. NFQ describes the context as 'in human situations', which

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[1] Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications, NQAI, 2003, (pp21-22)

are further described as 'general social and civic ones, as well as specific occupational ones'. EQF refers to 'work or study situations'. The particular relevance of competence to further learning and development is acknowledged in both Frameworks. NFQ asserts that 'competence also encompasses the extent to which the learner can acknowledge his/her limitations and plan to transcend these through further learning'. EQF relates competence to 'work or study situations and … professional and personal development'.

From this analysis of the definitions of knowledge, skill and competence that underpin the construction of Levels in NFQ and EQF, it is clear that there is a strong correspondence between the Frameworks in the understandings of the meaning of learning outcomes on which they are based. Following on from this, it is evident that a meaningful comparison of the Levels in the two Frameworks can be based on knowledge, skill and competence as the primary comparative factors.

5   The description of learning outcomes – strands and sub-strands

Having established the correspondence between core understandings of learning outcomes in NFQ and EQF and the validity of comparing the Levels in the two Frameworks on the basis of knowledge, skill and competence as the key categorisation, it is nevertheless clear that there are differences in the way in which these three factors are deployed in the two Frameworks. It is useful to examine these differences to ensure that they do not challenge the proposed comparison.

The Irish Framework sets out statements defining the learning outcomes relevant to each of its ten Levels in terms of eight factors: however, these eight 'sub-strands' were developed by elaborating a core set of three main strands identified in the founding legislation of the Framework, which sets out the objective of establishing a "Framework for the development, recognition and award of qualifications……based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners". It may be noted that the EQF level descriptors followed an opposite process of development: the original set of descriptors proposed for consultation among Member States was set out in six strands (knowledge, skill and four sub-strands describing aspects of personal and professional competence) and this was later refined to the three strands that now characterise EQF.

Although the NFQ level indicators are now set out in eight sub-strands, the original categorisation derived from the legislation is clearly evident, so that there are two sets of indicator statements each for 'knowledge' and 'know-how and skill' and four that describe aspects of 'competence'. Two of the 'competence' sub-strands in the NFQ, 'competence (role)' and 'competence (context)' describe learning outcomes that are closely paralleled by the 'competence' descriptors in EQF, which provide twin statements at most Levels (3-8) for 'autonomy' and 'responsibility': in other words, there are implied sub-strands within the 'competence' descriptors in EQF. The 'competence' factor in NFQ also includes a sub-strand of statements in relation to the level of 'insight' to be achieved and this is not explicitly reflected in the EQF descriptors at any level. The 'competence (learning to learn)' sub-strand in NFQ is seldom explicitly reflected in EQF,

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[2]   Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999

apart from the generic reference in the EQF competence strands to ' work or study' contexts.

This consideration of the 'strands' and 'substrands', in which the learning outcomes that characterise the Levels in NFQ and EQF are laid out, demonstrates that the two Frameworks share an underlying core structure of three stands that are essentially similar.

6   Basis for a Levels comparison

Taking into account the varying purposes of NFQ and EQF, and also the similarities between the two Frameworks in terms of their architecture, their understandings of learning outcomes and their expression of learning outcomes in terms of core categorisations of knowledge, skill and competence, there is a clear rationale for comparing the sets of Levels in NFQ and EQF on the basis of the categorisations set out in the following table:

Table 1
Strands and sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence in NFQ and EQF

IRISH NFQ	EQF
Knowledge *Sub-strands:* *'Breadth' and 'Kind'*	**Knowledge**
Know-how and skill *Sub-strands:* *'Range' and 'Selectivity'*	**Skills**
Competence *Sub-strands:* *'Context', 'Role',* *'Learning to Learn'* *and 'Insight'*	**Competence**

7 Levels Correspondence

The approach adopted to identifying the correspondence between the NFQ qualifications Levels and the EQF level descriptors is

- to begin by examining existing evidence from comparison exercises already undertaken

- to establish points at which strong correspondence is indicated

- to undertake a process of direct comparison of the text in the NFQ level indicators and in the EQF level descriptors, in order to

- verify correspondences indicated by previous exercises

- establish correspondences between other Levels

- where additional evidence is required, other information about Levels in either Framework may be proposed.

Existing evidence

In undertaking a comparison of the NFQ and EQF Levels, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland is building on the experience of examining the correspondences between the NFQ and several other Frameworks:

- In 2004 work began on comparing the NFQ with the national qualifications Frameworks in the UK jurisdictions, resulting in the publication in 2005 (revised in 2009)[3] of a general alignment between the Levels in the four Frameworks involved.

- In 2006, the Authority undertook a study to identify possible correspondences between the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and NFQ.The paper resulting from this study[4] was published on the website of the Authority in December 2007. The approach taken in the CEFR study was to make descriptor comparisons between CEFR and NFQ, and between CEFR and EQF; in the course of this study, it became clear that there were striking similarities in the emerging alignments between CEFR and the NFQ Levels on the one hand and between CEFR and the EQF Levels. It was noted at the time that these points of alignment could form the starting points for a more thorough investigation into the correspondence between the NFQ and EQF Levels generally.

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[3] *Qualifications can cross boundaries – a rough guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland:* www.qualificationsrecognition.ie/recognition/pdfs/File,886,en.pdf

[4] Towards the establishment of a relationship between the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the National Framework of Qualifications: www.nqai.ie/interdev_efl.html

- Following the Bergen Ministerial meeting in 2005, the Authority undertook as a pilot project on the verification of the compatibility of the NFQ with the Bologna Framework and the outcomes of this investigation were published in 2006.[5]

Of these three exercises in the comparison of Frameworks, the Verification of Compatibility with the EHEA Framework is by far the most significant, as the report on the verification has been formally adopted by the relevant authorities and has been published (in November 2006). It is also the case that the EQF Referencing Criteria and Procedures set out explicitly a recommendation that EHEA referencing processes already completed should be taken into account:

> *A country which has completed the referencing process within the context of the EHEA has the choice of not repeating it for the relevant Levels of the EQF. Aiming for one national referencing process covering both the EQF and the EHEA would not only help to avoid double work but also – most importantly – avoid confusion among individuals and employers – the main users of qualifications (Section 2.3 – EQF and the European Higher Education Area).*

Verification of Compatibility with EHEA Framework

The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was developed by a working group established under the Bologna process and was adopted by European Ministers of higher education in Bergen in May 2005. It is commonly referred to as the „Bologna Framework". The EHEA Framework incorporates the concept of cycles; each cycle descriptor offers a generic statement of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with qualifications that represent the end of that cycle. The implementation of EHEA is to be achieved through a self-certification process in which each participating country is to analyse the relationship between its own systems of qualifications in higher education and the EHEA cycle descriptors and verify the compatibility between them. Ireland was invited to undertake a pilot project of the self-certification process. The outcomes of this work are set out in the November 2006 report "Verification of Compatibility of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area" (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland). The report concludes that:

- The Irish Higher Certificate is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna first cycle.

- The Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degree is compatible with the Bologna first cycle descriptor. However, holders of Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degrees and their equivalent former awards do not generally immediately access programmes leading to second cycle awards.

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[5] *Verification of Compatibility of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA):* www.nqai.ie/documents/verificationofcompatibility1.pdf

- The Irish Honours Bachelor Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna first cycle.

- The Irish Higher Diploma is a qualification at the same level as completion of the first cycle, and is a qualification typically attained in a different field of learning than an initial first cycle award.

- The Irish Masters Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna second cycle.

- The Irish Post-Graduate Diploma is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna second cycle.

- The Irish Doctoral Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna third cycle.

The descriptors for "award types" (Higher Certificate, Honours Bachelor Degree etc) which are referenced to the EHEA cycles in this report are closely aligned with the relevant NFQ level indicators – in most instances, precisely so. On this basis, a correspondence between NFQ Levels and EHEA cycles can be indicated, with a further correspondence to EQF Levels implied from the EQF/EHEA Framework compatibility note set out in the EQF Recommendation. These correspondences can be summarised as follows:

Table 2
Correspondences between NFQ, EHEA and EQF Levels and cycles

IRISH NFQ LEVELS	EHEA CYCLES	EQF LEVELS
10	Third cycle	8
9	Second cycle	7
8/7	First cycle	6
6	Short cycle	5

It is clear from this table that two Irish NFQ Levels (7 and 8) are indicated as corresponding to the EHEA first cycle and to EQF level 6. This matter is addressed in the Report on the Verification of Compatibility with the EHEA Framework:

It is of note that there is an apparent inconsistency or paradox in the treatment of both the Ordinary Bachelor Degree and the Honours Bachelor Degree as first cycle qualifications compatible with the Bologna first cycle descriptor. The compatibility of both with the Bologna first cycle descriptor has been demonstrated in terms of the

*comparisons of the learning outcomes. Notwithstanding this, these awards are
included at two different Levels in the Irish Framework, with different descriptors, and
the Ordinary Bachelor Degree does not typically give access to Masters Degree (second
cycle) programmes at present in Ireland.*

Summarising existing evidence

The Verification of Compatibility of the NFQ with the EHEA Framework provides a clear
indication of how Levels 6-10 in the Irish NFQ align with the EHEA cycles. As the EQF
Recommendation sets out the correspondence between the EHEA cycles and the EQF
Levels, the body of evidence from formal investigation already undertaken indicates that
it is acceptable within the EQF Referencing Criteria and Procedures that qualifications at
Irish NFQ Levels 6-10 can be referenced to EQF Levels 5-8, as illustrated in Table 2 above.
Nevertheless, this alignment has been further verified through the process of text
comparison as set out in section 8 below.

8   Comparison of text in level indicators and descriptors

The most cursory examination of the statements describing Levels in NFQ and in EQF
suggests that that there is a close correspondence in the language used and in the
concepts that underlie the descriptor statements. This general correlation has been found
to be evident in practice in the study on the referencing of CEFR to NFQ, in the course of
which a collateral referencing of CEFR to EQF was undertaken. Taking into account also
the results of the general comparison between NFQ and EQF set out in section 2 above,
there are strong grounds for attempting to compare the NFQ and EQF Levels through a
detailed cross-referencing of the text in the statements that define the learning
outcomes relevant to the Levels in each Framework. This process has been undertaken,
with results that confirm the correspondence at certain Levels indicated in the
Verification of Compatibility with the EHEA Framework and that demonstrate
correspondences between the remaining Levels in NFQ and EQF.

In preparation for the referencing exercise, the EQF level descriptors and the NFQ level
indicators were aligned in tables, in sets of statements for the factors of knowledge, skill
and competence (see section 6 above). This enables cross-referencing of the statements
in the two Frameworks, level by level and factor by factor. The tables are set out in
Appendix 1.

The process of aligning the NFQ and EQF Levels began by taking the NFQ level 8
indicators and trying them against the statements defining EQF level 6, on the basis that
the correspondence between these Levels is identified as particularly strong in the EHEA
study. Confirming the validity of the existing evidence for NFQ Level 8, the process
continued by similarly examining NFQ level 9, Level 10 and then Level 7 and level 6. The
alignment indicated by the Verification of Compatibility with EHEA was confirmed in
relation to all Levels, i.e. NFQ Levels 6-10, as indicated in Table 2 above.

Looking at the other Levels in NFQ, correspondences were attempted and confirmed in descending order between NFQ level 5 and EQF level 4, between NFQ level 4 and EQF level 3, and between NFQ level 3 and EQF level 2. Finally, the statements defining NFQ Levels 1 and 2 were found to correspond with EQF level 1.

9 NFQ and EQF level correspondences: comparative analysis of text in descriptor and indicator statements

As explained in section 4 above, the Irish NFQ level indicators are more detailed than the EQF level descriptors. The three key factors or strands of 'knowledge, skill and competence' are elaborated in sub-strands in NFQ, so that there are generally more statements in the NFQ Levels indicators than there are in the EQF descriptors. Nevertheless, the core factors of 'knowledge, skill and competence' offer a realistic basis for comparison of the learning outcomes associated with the Levels in each Framework.

NFQ level 10 and EQF level 8

The statements that describe the knowledge outcomes required at NFQ level 10 refer to knowledge which is at the forefront of a field of learning, closely referencing the EQF level 8 description of knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study. The NFQ refers to the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, which is reflected in the competence strand in EQF as commitment to the development of new ideas or processes.

Under 'know-how and skill', the NFQ refers to the principal skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials which are associated with a field of learning, whereas EQF refers to specialised skills and techniques. In EQF these skills are required to service innovation: the NFQ requires the development of new skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials. NFQ requires the ability to respond to abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge; EQF similarly expects the holder of a level 8 award to be able to solve critical problems in research and/or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice.

The competence outcomes in both Frameworks refer to significant autonomy and personal responsibility or authority. There are references in both Frameworks to the research context of work or study. EQF requires the demonstration of innovation, paralleled in the NFQ requirement to lead and originate complex social processes and to reflect on social norms and relationships and lead action to change them.

There is clearly a strong correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these Levels in the two Frameworks.

NFQ level 9 and EQF level 7

There are close parallels in the description of knowledge outcomes for NFQ level 9 and EQF level 7, both of which refer explicitly to knowledge 'at the forefront of a field of learning' and to the need for 'critical awareness' of issues.

Similar parallels are found in the outcomes described under 'skill'. NFQ refers to specialised research or equivalent tools and techniques of enquiry, which relates closely to the EQF requirement for specialised problem-solving skills required in research. Both Frameworks also indicate a need for pioneer activity in relation to skill: NFQ requires the holder of a Level 9 award to develop new skills, whereas for a level 7 EQF award there is a requirement to develop new knowledge and procedures.

Under 'competence', the ability to operate in complex contexts is referred to in both NFQ, a wide and often unpredictable variety of ...ill defined contexts, and EQF, work or study contexts that are complex (and) unpredictable. Further parallels are evident in the statements that refer to role. The holder of an NFQ award should be able to take responsibility for the work of individuals and groups and for continuing academic/professional development; EQF refers to the need to take responsibility for reviewing the strategic performance of teams and for contributing to professional knowledge and practice.

The correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these Levels in the two Frameworks is very strong; in the case of the knowledge component of the learning outcomes, the correspondence is quite precise.

NFQ level 8 and EQF level 6

The EQF descriptor for knowledge at level 6 refers to advanced knowledge of a field and a critical understanding of theories and principles. Both of these concepts are reflected in the NFQ indicators for level 8, which refer to detailed knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of the field and to an understanding of the theory, concepts and methods pertaining to a field.

Under 'skill', both Frameworks refer explicitly to 'advanced skills' and to the need to 'demonstrate mastery'. EQF refers to the need to demonstrate innovation, whereas NFQ requires the ability to modify advanced skills and tools. The ability to deploy skills in challenging situations is required at these Levels in both Frameworks: in NFQ, in relation to complex planning, design, technical and/or management functions and in EQF to solve complex and unpredictable problems.

The challenging operating environment is referred to again in the description of the competence outcomes in both Frameworks: in NFQ, as variable and unfamiliar learning contexts and in EQF as unpredictable work or study contexts. The role envisaged for the holder of a level 8 award in NFQ is characterised by advanced technical or professional activity; this is closely parallel by the EQF level 6 reference to managing complex technical or professional activities. The leadership and managerial aspect of this role is specified in NFQ as accepting accountability for all related decision making and in the

requirement to lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups. Similarly, EQF refers to taking responsibility for decision-making and for managing the professional development of individuals and groups.

The correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these Levels in the two Frameworks is very strong.

NFQ level 7 and EQF level 6

The EQF requirement for advanced knowledge is paralleled by the NFQ requirement at level 7 for specialised knowledge. EQF also specifies a critical understanding of theories and principles, whereas NFQ refers to recognition of limitations of current knowledge and familiarity with sources of new knowledge and also to the integration of concepts. While these are not precise correspondences, the thrust of the NFQ indicator is broadly comparable to the level of knowledge described for EQF level 6.

The 'skill' outcomes for these Levels in both Frameworks are described as 'specialised'. EQF also refers to advanced skills, whereas NFQ is more specific in describing technical, creative or conceptual skills and tools. These skills are required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in EQF, and for planning, design, technical and/or supervisory functions in NFQ. As with the 'knowledge' outcomes, the statements for 'skills' in the two Frameworks use different language to describe comparable concepts.

Under 'competence, EQF identifies the need to take responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts. In NFQ this is reflected in the requirement to take significant or supervisory responsibility and to deploy skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts. The ability to take responsibility is further elaborated in EQF in relation to managing professional development of individuals and groups. In NFQ, a similar requirement is expressed as accepting accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes.

There is clearly a significant correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these Levels in the two Frameworks: this correspondence is not based on precise matching of the language used, but on the overall interpretation of the concepts reflected in the statements for 'knowledge' 'skill' and 'competence' respectively. It may be observed that the correspondence between the EQF descriptor for level 6 and the NFQ indicator for level 7, while sufficient to suggest comparability between these Levels, is not as strong as that between EQF level 6 and NFQ level 8. This relationship is in accord with the findings of the Verification of Compatibility with EHEA, that awards at both NFQ Levels 7 and 8 are compatible with the Bologna first cycle descriptor.

NFQ level 6 and EQF level 5

Both Frameworks rely on the terms 'specialised' and 'theoretical' to characterise the knowledge outcomes associated with these Levels. The NFQ indicator elaborates the 'theoretical' aspect, referring to abstract thinking and significant underpinning theory.

The 'skill' outcomes set out in the two Frameworks at these Levels are remarkably similar. EQF refers to a comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills, closely matched by comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools in the NFQ indicator. These skills are to be used to develop creative solutions to abstract problems in EQF, and in NFQ to formulate responses to well-defined abstract problems.

The 'competence' indicator for NFQ Level 6 is more detailed than the EQF descriptor for Level 5, but every aspect of the EQF descriptor can be matched to elements of the outcomes required in NFQ. EQF specifies the ability to exercise management and supervision, whereas NFQ describes the need to be able to exercise substantial personal autonomy and often take responsibility for the work of others. In EQF, these abilities are to be deployed in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change, and in NFQ in a range of varied and specific contexts involving creative and non-routine activities. The EQF requirement to be able to review and develop performance of self and others is reflected in several statements within the NFQ indicator, most succinctly in the requirements to take responsibility for the work of others and to evaluate own learning and to assist others in identifying learning needs.

There is clearly a strong correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these Levels in the two Frameworks.

NFQ level 5 and EQF level 4

The 'knowledge' outcomes in the two Frameworks at these Levels show close parallels. EQF refers to knowledge in broad contexts within a field, whereas NFQ refers to a broad range of knowledge. Both Frameworks specify the need for a theoretical component in the 'knowledge' outcomes.

Strong similarities are also evident in the 'skill' outcomes. Where EFQ refers to a range of cognitive and practical skills, the parallel statement in NFQ is a broad range of specialised skills and tools. In EQF these skills are required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field; in NFQ they are to plan and develop investigative strategies and to determine solutions to varied unfamiliar problems.

Both Frameworks base the 'competence' outcomes for these Levels on the concepts of autonomy within guidelines and operating in varied situations. EQF refers to the need to exercise self-management within … guidelines, which is matched by the NFQ requirement to exercise some initiative and independence in carrying out defined activities. EQF specifies the need to operate in contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change: NFQ refers to a range of varied and specific contexts. A supervisory element is also evident in both Frameworks' outcomes: this is somewhat stronger in EQF, where it is expressed as supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities. A related statement in NFQ refers to taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs.

There is a significant general correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these Levels in the two Frameworks.

NFQ level 4 and EQF level 3

The EQF descriptor for 'knowledge' at level 3 refers to knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts. The NFQ indicator at level 4 refers to a broad range of knowledge that is mainly concrete ... with some elements of abstraction or theory. The underlying concepts in these formulations are very similar.

Under 'skill, both Frameworks refer in almost identical terms to a 'range of cognitive and practical skills'. Similar uses are proposed for these skills: in EQF these are to solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information, a purpose paralleled in the NFQ indicator as select from a range of procedures and apply known solutions to a variety of predictable problems.

The 'competence' component of the EQF descriptor refers to the need to take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study; the matching statement in the NFQ indicator is somewhat more demanding: act with considerable amount of responsibility and autonomy. The EQF descriptor also mentions the need to adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems; several statements in the NFQ indicator address aspects of this outcome, requiring the learner to learn to take responsibility for own learning and to assume partial responsibility for consistency of self-understanding and behaviour.

There is a strong correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these Levels in the two Frameworks.

NFQ level 3 and EQF level 2

The EQF descriptor for Level 2 refers to basic factual knowledge of a field, which is reflected in the NFQ indicator as knowledge moderately broad in range and mainly concrete in reference.

Under 'skills', EQF refers to basic cognitive and practical skills, matched in NFQ by a limited range of practical and cognitive skills and tools. In the EQF descriptor, these skills are to be deployed to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools. Similarly, in NFQ, using the skills for this level involves the ability to select from a limited range of varied procedures and apply known solutions to a limited range of predictable problems.

The 'competence' outcomes for this level in EQF are set out succinctly as work or study under supervision with some autonomy; this is matched closely in the NFQ requirement to act under direction with limited autonomy, augmented by the requirement to be able to learn within a managed environment.

There is clearly a close correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these Levels in the two Frameworks.

NFQ level 2 and EQF level 1

The EQF descriptor's reference to basic general knowledge at this level is matched in NFQ references to knowledge that is narrow in range, concrete in reference and basic in comprehension.

Both Frameworks refer to 'basic skills', to be used to perform simple tasks (in EQF) and routine tasks (in NFQ).

Under 'competence', both Frameworks refer explicitly to operating in a 'structured context', under direct supervision in EQF and in a range of roles under direction in NFQ, which also refers to the ability to learn ...in a well-structured and supervised environment.

There is a strong correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these Levels in the two Frameworks, particularly in relation to 'knowledge' and 'skill' outcomes. The 'competence' outcomes in NFQ refer to a slightly more complex operational range than in the EQF equivalent.

NFQ level 1 and EQF level 1

The EQF refers to basic general knowledge in the descriptor for Level 1, which corresponds with the NFQ reference to elementary knowledge, demonstrable by recognition or recall.

The keyword 'basic' is used to describe the skill component in both Frameworks. Skills are to be used to carry out basic tasks (EQF) and in NFQ to carry out directed activity and to perform processes that are repetitive and predictable.

The two Frameworks refer to 'competence' outcomes in similar terms; in EQF, the ability to work or study under direct supervision in a structured context, and in NFQ the ability to act in closely defined and highly structured contexts.

There is a strong correspondence between the NFQ indicator and the EQF descriptor at these Levels in the two Frameworks.

10   Conclusions

The objective of this exercise was to establish the correspondence between the qualifications Levels in the Irish National Framework of Qualifications and the level descriptors of the European Qualifications Framework. This task was undertaken in a staged process. It began by making a general comparison between the two Frameworks and the purposes for which they were designed; by comparing the architecture of the two Frameworks, the concepts of learning outcomes on which they are based and the way Levels are defined. This background comparison provided a rationale for analyzing the Levels in the two Frameworks on the basis of the categorization of learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skill and competence. The Levels analysis built on work already undertaken to establish correspondences between NFQ Levels and Levels in other Frameworks, notably the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area, continuing with a direct comparison of the text in the NFQ level indicators and in the EQF level descriptors.

Drawing together the conclusions of the comparative analysis of the indicators and descriptors for Levels in NFQ and EQF, and taking into account the correspondences already established in earlier comparison exercises, an alignment can be proposed between the Levels in the two Frameworks as set out in Table 3 below. Most EQF Levels are seen to correspond with single Levels in NFQ. The exceptions are EQF level 6, which corresponds with NFQ Levels 7 and 8; and EQF level 1 which corresponds with NFQ Levels 1 and 2. The alignment of NFQ Levels 7 and 8 to one EQF level confirms the referencing of awards at both of these Levels to the Bologna First Cycle, as established in the 'Verification of Compatibility of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area'.

Table 3
Correspondences between Irish NFQ and EQF Levels

IRISH NFQ	EQF
10	8
9	7
8	6
7	6
6	5
5	4
4	3
3	2
2	1
1	1

APPENDICES

- Tabular comparison of NFQ level indicators and EQF level descriptors

- Comparison of thresholds between Levels in NFQ level indicators and in EQF level descriptors

APPENDIX 1

COMPARISON OF IRISH NFQ LEVEL INDICATORS AND EQF LEVEL DESCRIPTORS

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of a field of learning The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy review by peers	10K	8K	knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields
Demonstrate a significant range of the principal skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials which are associated with a field of learning; develop new skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials Respond to abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge	10S	8K	the most advanced and specialised skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in research and/or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice
Exercise personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent contexts Communicate results of research and innovation to peers; engage in critical dialogue; lead and originate complex social processes Learn to critique the broader implications of applying knowledge to particular contexts Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and lead action to change them	10C	8C	demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
A systematic understanding of knowledge, at, or informed by, the forefront of a field of learning A critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, generally informed by the forefront of a field of learning	9K	7K	highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields
Demonstrate a range of standard and specialised research or equivalent tools and techniques of enquiry Select from complex and advanced skills across a field of learning; develop new skills to a high level, including novel and emerging techniques	9S	7S	specialised problem–solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields
Act in a wide and often unpredictable variety of professional Levels and ill defined contexts Take significant responsibility for the work of individuals and groups; lead and initiate activity Learn to self–evaluate and take responsibility for continuing academic/professional development Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and act to change them	9C	7C	manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
An understanding of the theory, concepts and methods pertaining to a field (or fields) of learning Detailed knowledge and understanding in one or more specialised areas, some of it at the current boundaries of the field(s)	8K	6K	advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles
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 Exercise appropriate judgement in a number of complex planning, design, technical and/or management functions related to products, services, operations or processes, including resourcing	8S	6S	advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study
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 Act effectively under guidance in a peer relationship with qualified practitioners; lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups Learn to act in variable and unfamiliar learning contexts; learn to manage learning tasks independently, professionally and ethically Express a comprehensive, internalised, personal world view manifesting solidarity with others	8C	6C	manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
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	7K	6K	advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles
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	7S	6S	advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study
Utilise diagnostic and creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts 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 Take initiative to identify and address learning needs and interact effectively in a learning group Express an internalised, personal world view, manifesting solidarity with others	7C	6C	manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
Specialised knowledge of a broad area Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant underpinning theory	6K	5K	comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge
Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools Formulate responses to well-defined abstract problems	6S	5S	a comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems
Act in a range of varied and specific contexts involving creative and non-routine activities; transfer and apply theoretical concepts and/or technical or creative skills to a range of contexts Exercise substantial personal autonomy and often take responsibility for the work of others and/or for the allocation of resources; form, and function within, multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups Learn to evaluate own learning and identify needs within a structured learning environment; assist others in identifying learning needs Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others	6C	5C	exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change review and develop performance of self and others

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
Broad range of knowledge **Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking**, with significant depth in some areas	5K	4K	factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study
Demonstrate a broad range of specialised skills and tools Evaluate and use information to plan and develop investigative strategies and to determine solutions to varied unfamiliar problems	5S	4S	a range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study
Act in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs; identify and apply skill and knowledge to a wide variety of contexts Exercise some initiative and independence in carrying out defined activities; join and function within multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups Learn to take responsibility for own learning within a managed environment Assume full responsibility for consistency of self–understanding and behaviour	5C	4C	exercise self–management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
Broad range of knowledge Mainly concrete in reference and with some elements of abstraction or theory	4K	3K	knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts, in a field of work or study
Demonstrate a moderate range of practical and cognitive skills and tools Select from a range of procedures and apply known solutions to a variety of predictable problems	4S	3S	a range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information
Act in familiar and unfamiliar contexts Act with considerable amount of responsibility and autonomy Learn to take responsibility for own learning within a supervised environment Assume partial responsibility for consistency of self–understanding and behaviour	4C	3C	take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
Knowledge moderately broad in range Mainly concrete in reference and with some comprehension of relationship between knowledge elements	3K	2K	basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study
Demonstrate a limited range of practical and cognitive skills and tools Select from a limited range of varied procedures and apply known solutions to a limited range of predictable problems	3S	2S	basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools
Act within a limited range of contexts Act under direction with limited autonomy; function within familiar, homogeneous groups Learn to learn within a managed environment Assume limited responsibility for consistency of self–understanding and behaviour	3C	2C	work or study under supervision with some autonomy

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
Knowledge that is narrow in range Concrete in reference and basic in comprehension	2K	1K	basic general knowledge
Demonstrate limited range of basic practical skills, including the use of relevant tools Perform a sequence of routine tasks given clear direction	2S	1S	basic skills required to carry out simple tasks
Act in a limited range of predictable and structured contexts Act in a range of roles under direction Learn to learn in a disciplined manner in a well-structured and supervised environment Demonstrate awareness of independent role for self	2C	1C	work or study under direct supervision in a structured context

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
Elementary knowledge **Demonstrable by recognition or recall**	1K	1K	**basic general knowledge**
Demonstrate **basic practical skills**, and **carry out directed activity** using basic tools **Perform processes that are repetitive and predictable**	1S	1S	**basic skills** required to **carry out simple tasks**
Act in **closely defined and highly structured contexts** Act in a limited range of roles Learn to sequence learning tasks; learn to access and use a range of learning resources Begin to demonstrate awareness of independent role for self	1C	1C	work or study under **direct supervision in a structured context**

APPENDIX 2

COMPARISON OF THRESHOLDS BETWEEN LEVELS IN IRISH NFQ LEVEL INDICATORS AND EQF LEVEL DESCRIPTORS

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
Substantial knowledge at the forefront of a field of learning and the creation and interpretation of new knowledge	10K	8K	frontier knowledge
Apply the principal skills, techniques, tools and practices of a field to respond to abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge	10S	8S	application of the highest-level skills to ground-breaking activities
Exercise autonomous initiative to lead and originate complex social processes	10C	8C	authoritative and pioneering professional or academic role

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
A systematic understanding of knowledge at the forefront of a field of learning and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights	9K	7K	highly specialised knowledge and original thinking command of the issues in a field
Apply a range of research or equivalent tools and techniques of enquiry to develop new skills to a high level, including novel and emerging techniques	9S	7S	application of professional and research skills in innovative activities
Lead and initiate activity to bring about change in a wide and often unpredictable variety of ill-defined contexts, taking significant responsibility for the work of individuals and groups	9C	7C	transformational role in unpredictable contexts strategic responsibility

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
Detailed knowledge and understanding of the theory, concepts and methods pertaining to a field, some of it at the current boundaries of the field	8K	6K	advanced knowledge with critical understanding
Deploy mastery of a complex and specialised area of advanced skills and tools to perform complex planning, design, technical and/or management functions and to conduct closely guided research, professional or advanced technical activity	8S	6S	mastery and innovation in the application of advanced skills
accept accountability for all related decision making in conducting research or other advanced technical or professional activity	8C	6C	responsibility for decision-making in complex activities

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
specialised knowledge across a variety of areas, including the integration of concepts, the recognition of the limitations of current knowledge and familiarity with sources of new knowledge	7K	6K	advanced knowledge with critical understanding
Demonstrate appropriate judgement in the use of specialised technical, creative or conceptual skills and tools in planning, design, technical and/or supervisory functions	7S	6S	mastery and innovation in the application of skills
take significant or supervisory responsibility and accept accountability for the use of diagnostic and creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts	7C	6C	responsibility for decision-making in complex activities

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
specialised knowledge of a broad area, with significant underpinning theory	6K	5K	comprehensive knowledge in a specialist field
use a comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools to formulate responses to well-defined abstract problems	6S	5S	creative application of expertise
exercise substantial personal autonomy and take responsibility for the work and development of others in a range of varied and specific contexts involving creative and non-routine activities transfer and apply theoretical concepts and/or technical or creative skills to a range of contexts	6C	5C	management in unpredictable contexts performance development

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
Broad range of knowledge with some theoretical concepts	5K	4K	broad factual and theoretical knowledge
Use a broad range of specialised skills and tools to plan and develop investigative strategies and to respond to varied unfamiliar problems	5S	4S	expertise in specialised skills
Exercise some initiative and independence in carrying out defined activities in a wide range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for outputs	5C	4C	coping with change supervision in routine contexts

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
Broad range of knowledge, with some elements of abstraction	4K	3K	broad range of knowledge
Select from a moderate range of skills, tools and procedures and apply known solutions to a variety of predictable problems	4S	3S	autonomous application of a range of skills
Act in familiar and unfamiliar contexts with considerable responsibility and autonomy	4C	3C	self-management

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
Knowledge moderately broad, with some comprehension of relationship between knowledge elements	3K	2K	field-specific knowledge
Use a limited range of skills and tools to select and apply known solutions to a limited range of predictable problems	3S	2S	application of skills to basic problem-solving
Act with limited autonomy	3C	2C	operating with some autonomy

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
Knowledge that is narrow, concrete and basic	2K	1K	basic knowledge
use of relevant tools to perform routine tasks given clear direction	2S	1S	basic skills
act in structured contexts, under direction	2C	1C	operating under supervision

IRISH NFQ INDICATORS	NFQ LEVEL	EQF LEVEL	EQF DESCRIPTORS
elementary knowledge	1K	1K	basic knowledge
use basic, practical skills to perform repetitive and predictable tasks	1S	1S	basic skills
act in highly structured contexts in a limited range of roles	1C	1C	operating under supervision

APPENDIX 3

NFQ GRID OF LEVEL INDICATORS

National Framework *of* Qualifications

National Framework of Qualifications
Creatoibre Náisiúnta na gCáilíochtaí

	LEVEL 1	**LEVEL 2**	**LEVEL 3**	**LEVEL 4**	**LEVEL 5**
Knowledge *Breadth*	Elementary knowledge.	Knowledge that is narrow in range.	Knowledge moderately broad in range.	Broad range of knowledge.	Broad range of knowledge.
Knowledge *Kind*	Demonstrable by recognition or recall.	Concrete in reference and basic in comprehension.	Mainly concrete in reference and with some comprehension of relationship between knowledge elements.	Mainly concrete in reference and with some elements of abstraction or theory.	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant depth in some areas.
Know-How & Skill *Range*	Demonstrate basic practical skills, and carry out directed activity using basic tools.	Demonstrate limited range of basic practical skills, including the use of relevant tools.	Demonstrate a limited range or practical and cognitive skills and tools.	Demonstrate a moderate range of practical and cognitive skills and tools.	Demonstrate a broad range of specialised skills and tools.
Know-How & Skill *Selectivity*	Perform processes that are repetitive and predictable.	Perform a sequence of routine tasks given clear direction.	Select from a limited range of varied procedures and apply known solutions to a limited range of predictable problems.	Select from a range of procedures and apply known solutions to a variety of predictable problems.	Evaluate and use information to plan and develop investigative strategies and to determine solutions to varied unfamiliar problems.
Competence *Context*	Act in closely defined and highly structured contexts.	Act in a limited range of predictable and structured contexts.	Act within a limited range of contexts.	Act in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.	Act in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs; identify and apply skill and knowledge to a variety of contexts.
Competence *Role*	Act in a limited range of roles.	Act in a range of roles under direction.	Act under direction with limited autonomy; function within familiar, homogenous groups.	Act with considerable amount of responsibility and autonomy.	Exercise some initiative and independence in carrying out defined activities; join and function within multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups.
Competence *Learning to Learn*	Learn to sequence learning tasks; learn to access and use a range of learning resources.	Learn to learn in a disciplined manner in a well-structured and supervised environment.	Learn to learn within a managed environment.	Learn to take responsibility for own learning within a supervised environment.	Learn to take responsibility for own learning within a managed environment.
Competence *Insight*	Begin to demonstrate awareness of independent role for self.	Demonstrate awareness of independent role for self.	Assume limited responsibility for consistency of self-understanding and behaviour.	Assume partial responsibility for consistency of self-understanding and behaviour.	Assume full responsibility for consistency of self-understanding and behaviour.

This 10-Level grid of Level Indicators forms part of the determination of the National Framework of Qualifications under Section 7(a) of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999

GRID OF LEVEL INDICATORS

National Framework *of* Qualifications
Creatoíbre Náisiúnta na gCáilíochtaí

LEVEL 6	LEVEL 7	LEVEL 8	LEVEL 9	LEVEL 10	
Specialised knowledge of a broad area.	Specialised knowledge across a variety of areas.	An understanding of the theory, concepts and methods pertaining to a field (or fields) of learning.	A systematic understanding of knowledge, at, or informed by, the forefront of a field of learning.	A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of a field of learning.	**Knowledge** *Breadth*
Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant underpinning theory.	Recognition of limitations of current knowledge and familiarity with sources of new knowledge; integration of concepts across a variety of areas.	Detailed knowledge and understanding in one or more specialised areas, some of it at the current boundaries of the field(s).	A critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, generally informed by the forefront of a field of learning.	The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy review by peers.	**Knowledge** *Kind*
Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools.	Demonstrate specialised technical, creative or conceptual skills and tools across an area of study.	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.	Demonstrate a range of standard and specialised research or equivalent tools and techniques of enquiry.	Demonstrate a significant range of the principal skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials which are associated with a field of learning; develop new skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials.	**Know-How & Skill** *Range*
Formulate responses to well-defined abstract problems.	Exercise appropriate judgement in planning design, technical and/or supervisory functions related to products, services operations or processes.	Excercise appropriate judgement in a number of complex planning, design, technical and/or management functions related to products, services, operations or processes, including resourcing.	Select from complex and advanced skills across a field of learning; develop new skills to a high level, including novel and emerging techniques.	Respond to abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge.	**Know-How & Skill** *Selectivity*
Act in a range of varied and specific contexts involving creative and non-routine activities; transfer and apply theoretical concepts and/or technical or creative skills to a range of contexts.	Utilise diagnostic and creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts.	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.	Act in a wide and often unpredictable variety of professional levels and ill-defined contexts.	Excercise personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent contexts.	**Competence** *Context*
Exercise substantial personal autonomy and often take responsibility for the work of others and/or for allocation of resources; form, and function within, multiple complex and heterogeneous groups.	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.	Act effectively under guidance in a peer relationship with qualified practitioners; lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups.	Take significant responsibility for the work of individuals and groups; lead and initiate activity.	Communicate results of research and innovation to peers; engage in critical dialogue; lead and originate complex social processes.	**Competence** *Role*
Learn to evaluate own learning and identify needs within a structured learning environment; assist others in identifying learning needs.	Take initiative to identify and address learning needs and interact effectively in a learning group.	Learn to act in variable and unfamiliar learning contexts; learn to manage learning tasks independently, professionally and ethically.	Learn to self-evaluate and take responsibility for continuing academic/professional development.	Learn to critique the broader implications of applying knowledge to particular contexts.	**Competence** *Learning to Learn*
Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others.	Express an internalised, personal world view, manifesting solidarity with others.	Express a comprehensive, internalised, personal world view, manifesting solidarity with others.	Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and act to change them.	Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and lead action to change them.	**Competence** *Insight*

Note: The outcomes at each level include those of all the lower levels in the same sub-strand.

NOTES