

August 08

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

**Background paper on the
development, implementation and impact of the National Framework of
Qualifications and related policies on access, transfer and progression**

August 2008

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Introduction

This background paper was completed by the Authority executive as an input into the Framework Implementation and Impact Study. It describes the development, architecture, implementation and impact of the National Framework of Qualifications, and policies on access, transfer and progression up to May 2008. It is intended to inform the work of the Study Team¹ and be a reference point for the Study as a whole. The paper also sets out the broad relationships and responsibilities of the Authority and awarding bodies in relation to the Framework with respect to the autonomy and legislative responsibilities of each. The sections of the paper dealing with implementation and impact reflect the Authority's work and perspective. It is expected that the sectoral reports will complement this paper by elaborating on the themes and issues from their perspectives. These reports are being coordinated by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC sector), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC sector), the Irish Universities Association (universities) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (schools sector).

¹ A Study Team of national and international experts will review all inputs into the Study (Authority paper, sectoral reports, public submissions and outcomes of a consultative forum) and prepare a report on the implementation, operation and impact of the Framework and policies on access, transfer and progression. This report will also include findings and recommendations and will be completed by end April 2009. The members of the Study Team are: Prof. Tom Collins (Chair); Mr. Henry Murdoch; Prof. David Raffe; Ms. Frances Kelly and Dr. Anna Murphy (Secretary). For details see http://www.nqai.ie/framework_study.html. The Dublin Institute of Technology has been invited to make a submission to the study on developments in the Institute.

1 BACKGROUND

1.1 Background to the introduction of the National Framework of Qualifications - qualifications structures in Ireland prior to the introduction of the Framework (pre-2001)

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 established the legislative context for the development of the National Framework of Qualifications. The Act established three new statutory organisations: the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and two Awards Councils; the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education Training and Awards Council (FETAC). The Authority was given the task of developing and implementing a national framework of qualifications based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence. At that time in Ireland, in common with many other countries, awards for achievement in learning were made through a variety of structures and agencies, operating a variety of systems and subsystems. These arrangements had evolved over the years. Some had their origins in the earliest stages of the development of education and training in Ireland, while others were of quite recent vintage and had been developed in response to needs arising out of changing employment situations and corresponding new learning opportunities.

In general, the elements of the pre-2001 qualifications system mirror the organisational sectors that have evolved in the world of learning. The education and training strands of learning had separate organisational identities, and were co-ordinated through the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. Several agencies were responsible for the provision of training for particular employment sectors, such as hotel and catering, farming and agriculture, fisheries, and for particular target populations such as people with disabilities. FÁS, the national authority for training and employment, delivered and co-ordinated a wide range of training provision, including apprenticeships. By 2001, each of these organisations had developed separate systems for the recognition of learning.

Education in Ireland has traditionally comprised three main strands: primary, post-primary or second level, and higher education or third level. Higher education is further organised into a binary system, comprising universities on the one hand, and on the other, institutes of technology, national institutions and certain other colleges and institutions. Over the past twenty years, a further education strand has been formalised, comprising a variety of learning opportunities for adults, and based around a range of mainly vocational provisions organised on a sub-tertiary basis, and many community-based learning programmes. Separate systems of awards and qualifications have been developed for these different strands of education and training.

No award has been made for learning at primary level since the nineteen-sixties. Pre-2001, awards for learning at second level were made by the Department of Education and Science. In higher education, the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology made their own awards. The other institutes of technology, national institutions and certain other colleges and institutions availed of awards made by a statutory awarding body, the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA). Under the further education (including vocational education) umbrella, many different awards were used to recognise learning, including a variety of

specialised and international awards. The most common award system in use in further education, however, was that developed by the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA).

In addition to these arrangements, most of which had a statutory basis, a very wide range of awards was made in Ireland by other agencies:

- Professional organisations;
- International awarding organisations (e.g. City and Guilds, Open University); and
- Specialised training organisations.

Most of these awards were made for learning associated with a particular professional or occupational sector (often on an in-work or upskilling basis), but many were also used to recognise learning in community-based programmes and in mainstream training programmes.

1.1.1 The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 - Rationale for change

Discussions around the need for a more coherent and effective system of certification of learning took place in the early 1990s.² These took place in the context of lengthy and intense debate about the future direction of national education to address lifelong learning. The 1995 White Paper on Education, *Charting our Education Future*, included proposals to develop a further education sector, with a focus on developing vocational education and training and adult education in more cohesive, systematic and responsive ways. The scope of action included policy, provision, organisation and certification. In addition, there was consensus on the need to bring together the awards made outside the university sector and those made in the areas of further education and training. The aim was to meet the needs of the economy, as well as of society and the individual. Following on from this, major pieces of legislation were introduced: the Universities Act (1997); the Education Act (1998) and, in 1999, the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act.

The prominence of the object of promoting lifelong learning, as a response to national and international challenges to education and training, to the genesis of the Framework should also be noted. This was a key theme in Government policy generally since the early 1990s. The reform of the qualifications system was identified as an important factor in realising this policy. Initial development work on the qualifications system was funded by the EU. In 1996, the Irish Presidency of the EU took the concept of lifelong learning as one of three major themes for education. This also reflected the importance of the European and international dimension to the development of the Framework (see Section 6 for a fuller description). In the mid-1990s, a number of countries had taken specific steps to strengthen quality and standards of qualifications including, in a few cases, developing qualifications frameworks. In cognisance of this, it was recognised that the new system in Ireland would be informed by international developments and aim to promote the international recognition of awards and associated mobility of learners.

The 1995 White Paper announced government approval to establish TEASTAS, the national certification authority, with responsibility "... for the development, implementation, regulation

² The 1992 Green Paper on Education set out, inter alia, the need for an effective certification system to ensure standards, increase coherence and support student mobility (national and international) and to this end, proposed that a new Council for Educational and Vocational Awards be set up. The 1993 Report on the National Education Convention recorded broad approval for such a move.

and supervision of certification of all non-university programmes, and all further and continuation, education and training programmes". TEASTAS operated as an interim authority from 1995-1998 to take on this work. In its second report, 1998, Teastas recommended that an overall qualifications authority as well as two awarding councils (for the higher education non-university sector and for further education and training) be set up on a statutory basis (and the Dublin Institute of Technology would continue to exercise its newly acquired powers to make its own awards). Legislation was necessary to set out the roles and responsibilities of providers, awarding bodies and the qualifications authority and to transfer functions accordingly. At that point there was broad agreement on the overall objectives, but less on precisely how to get there or on the roles and inter-relationships of different bodies/institutions. Some awarding bodies had concerns that *inter alia* their qualifications and standing might be diminished under new arrangements.³ The Qualifications (Education and Training Act) 1999 addresses these issues (see Section 3 below).

The rationale for the creation of the National Framework of Qualifications is captured in the objects of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. These are summarised in the Box below.

Table 1: Rationale for change – Objects of the Qualifications Act, 1999

1. Coordinate and strengthen the qualifications system;
Specific aims are to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establish and develop standards of knowledge, skill and competence; • promote the quality of further education and training and higher education and training; • provide a system for coordinating and comparing awards.
2. Realise lifelong learning policies;
Specific aims are to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • facilitate lifelong learning; • promote and maintain procedures for access, transfer and progression; • promote the recognition of knowledge, skill and competence.
3. Anticipate and adapt to social and economic changes, national and international;
Specific are were to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contribute to the realisation of national education and training policies and objectives, including ensuring that the education and training requirements of industry are met; • promote cooperation between providers of education and training and industry; • promote recognition within the State of international awards and recognition internationally of Irish awards.

Further policy papers on Adult Education (Green Paper, 1998 and the White Paper, 2000) and the White Paper on Early Childhood Education: *Ready to Learn* (1999) copper-fastened the adoption of lifelong learning as the key governing principle of education policy. The report

³ See Ministerial speech on the background to the Qualifications Act, 1999, available at: <http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?maincat=&pcategory=40196&ecategory=40216§ionpage=12251&language=EN&link=link001&page=2&doc=14997>

of the Task Force on Lifelong Learning, 2002,⁴ noted that lifelong learning requires a 'significant, systemic shift within the education, training and certification systems and the enterprise sector along with a change of culture on the part of society and individual citizens'. It underscored the role of the National Framework of Qualifications and the new infrastructure for qualifications in the development of lifelong learning.

1.2 Approach to Framework development

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 sets out certain basic features of the National Framework of Qualifications as follows: it is to be

“a framework for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State . . . based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners”.

Accordingly, within the Framework, awards/qualifications are to be based on standards, and standards are to be specified in terms of knowledge, skill and competence. Knowledge, skill and competence are properties acquired by learners.

The Act refers in several places to the outcomes of education and training as the acquisition of knowledge, skill and competence. This is an implicit definition of learning outcomes for the purposes of the Act and of the National Framework of Qualifications. The Authority elaborated this implicit definition and made distinctions between the various kinds of learning outcomes. In 2002, the Authority, following consultation with stakeholders, agreed definitions of knowledge, skill and competence respectively, as well as definitions of eight sub-strands for the purpose of the Framework. These were set out in its policies and criteria for the establishment of the Framework (see Section 2 below on the architecture of the framework). A detailed note setting out the definitions used by the Authority is included at Appendix A.

The Authority also undertook international research in relation to national frameworks of qualifications. A summary of this work was published by the Authority on its website in June 2002. In September/October 2002, two surveys were conducted of learners and employers with the purpose of benchmarking awareness and attitudes to existing qualifications and awarding bodies; and of informing the introduction and implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications.

1.2.1 Consultation

Consultation has been a constant feature in the development, and subsequent implementation, of the National Framework of Qualifications. In November 2001, whilst developing the Framework, the Authority published a discussion document “Towards a National Framework of Qualifications”. This first formal paper by the Authority signalled the open, transparent and consultative approach being taken towards the development of the Framework. This approach has been maintained to support implementation and ongoing development of the Framework. The core values and principles underpinning the Framework were emphasised again with the publication of the first Authority corporate plan, covering the

⁴ www.entemp.ie/publications/labour/2002/lifelonglearning.pdf

period 2003-2006. The Authority determined that its work would be undertaken through consultation and inclusiveness; research and evaluation; best management practices; by facilitating change; by having regard to the international dimension, and subsidiarity and autonomy.

In March 2002, the Authority established a consultative group whose initial role was to assist the Authority in the preparation of the National Framework of Qualifications and of the policy approach to access, transfer and progression for learners. The consultative group has a broad membership representing the main stakeholders of the Authority: awarding bodies, providers of further and higher education and training and social partners, including learner representatives and statutory agencies. The group was and continues to be consulted in relation to the development and implementation of the Framework. It meets on a regular basis.

The Authority also engaged in a wide range of bi-lateral and multi-lateral meetings with stakeholders, including consultative meetings convened by the Authority and the two Awards Councils (the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Further Education and Training Awards Council) with representatives of the community and voluntary sector.

In addition to the consultation processes outlined above, the Authority also looked at the development of the Framework from an employment perspective. It convened a number of meetings with representatives of agencies and employer and employee representative bodies from 2002 to 2005. A report on focus groups organised in relation to its work by the Authority was published in January 2003.

The Authority also established an expert advisory group in relation to credit. The task of the group is to assist the Authority in the consideration of the possibilities for the development of a system or systems for credit accumulation and transfer to complement the National Framework of Qualifications, and the appropriate roles of stakeholders in such developments. This group, supported by the Authority, developed guidelines for credit in higher education and training, *Principles and operational guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training*. These were adopted by the Authority and published in 2004.

1.3 Key foundation stones for the Framework

a) Policies and criteria for the Framework

Section 8 (2)(a) of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 charges the Authority to determine policies and criteria for the National Framework of Qualifications. In April 2002, the Authority published a document, *“Towards a National Framework of Qualifications – Establishment of Policies and Criteria”* This document sets out:

- Vision and principles;
- Process guidelines;
- A definition of knowledge, skill and competence; and
- The basic architecture of the Framework.

b) Vision for the National Framework of Qualifications

The Qualifications Act refers to the Framework as being for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State. Accordingly, the National Framework of Qualifications is defined 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.”

1.3.1 Vision for the recognition of learning

The National Framework of Qualifications presents a new vision for the future, with the needs of the learner given priority. This represents a departure in Irish education and training, and a unique opportunity to further develop the awards system for education and training in an innovative and creative way, ensuring that Ireland is at the leading edge of international developments in this area.

The importance of knowledge and the development of lifelong learning to present-day society and economies have been emphasised at both a national and international level and is a stated national and European policy. It is recognised that in order to become a knowledge society we must also become a society which is engaged in lifelong learning. This will determine a vision of learning, the development of which will be facilitated by the Framework. Lifelong learning is about all learning activity throughout life and has been defined by the European Commission as:

*“... all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective”.*⁵

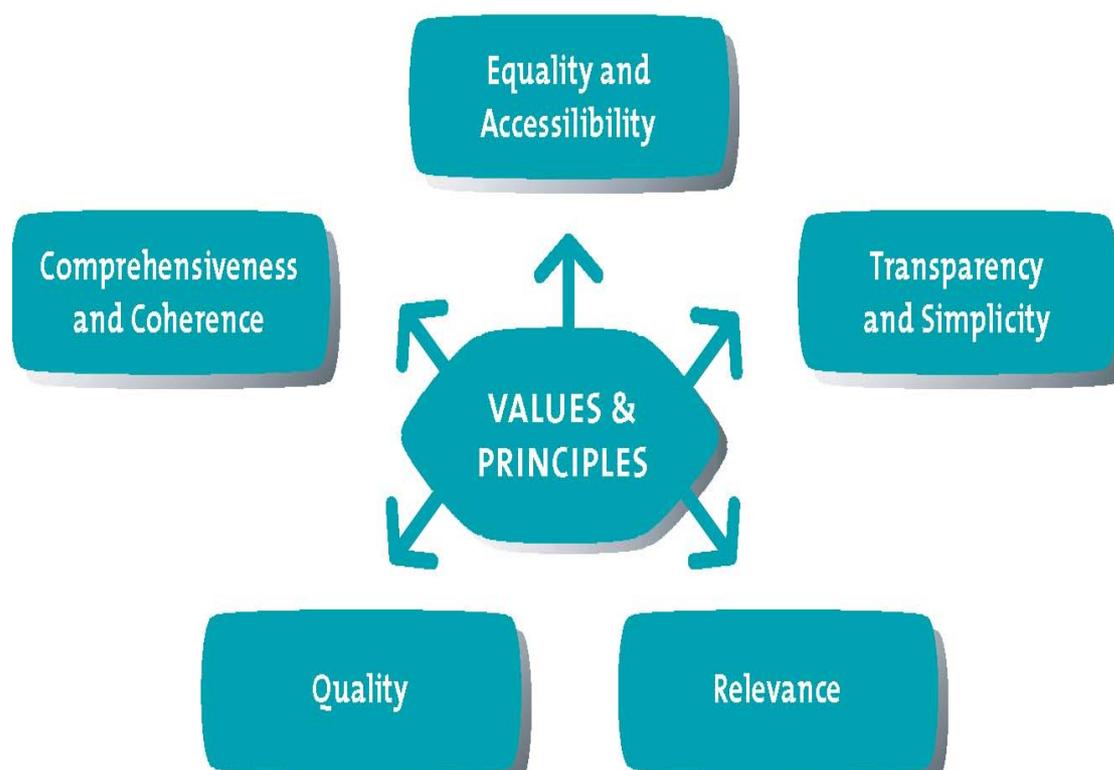
1.3.2 Values and principles for Framework development

The following set of values and principles were adopted by the Authority and set out in an April 2002 document of the Authority, *Towards a National Framework of Qualifications – Establishment of Policies and Criteria*.⁶ They were informed by the need for the Framework to be meaningful for all stakeholders, including learners, employers and providers. This involves providing all those involved with an understanding of how one type of award ‘fits’ relative to another, and facilitating the availability of opportunities for access, transfer and progression.

The values and principles are presented below:

⁵ Commission Communication, *Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality*, (November, 2001. p34).

⁶ This document was republished in 2003

Figure 1: Values and Principles Underpinning the National Framework of Qualifications

The values and principles do not accord with a particular order or hierarchy. They should not be viewed independently, but rather they overlap depending on the context and work together for a common objective. It is important to note that these values and principles primarily relate to the development of the Framework, rather than to the development of learning itself. For a full elaboration on each of the values and principles underpinning the Framework, see Appendix B.

1.4 Analysis and summary of key issues

The Framework was developed following discussion and debate on ways to create a more coherent, integrated qualifications system which had their origins in the early 1990s. These were part of wider debates on the future direction of education and training and meeting national and international challenges. These culminated in the introduction of legislation which set out roles and responsibilities of the Authority and awarding bodies in relation to the qualifications in general and the development and operation of a national framework of qualifications in particular. The overarching objective was to support lifelong learning and to promote a culture in which the learner is at the centre of the qualifications system. This is a radical shift from a focus on young people/youth and on a provider-driven culture of provision. It was intended that the Framework would maintain and promote quality; respond to the needs of the economy, society and the individual; and facilitate the recognition of national and international qualifications/awards.

Given the broad ambition of the Framework, and the requirements of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, the Authority undertook wide-ranging consultations at national level to achieve as much consensus as possible on the structure of the Framework. Research on qualifications frameworks in other jurisdictions was undertaken to inform the Irish approach and to link insofar as possible the national framework to international developments. It is noted that, in 2001 when the major development work began, qualification frameworks were a relatively new phenomenon. They both introduced new ways of looking at qualifications and raised questions about existing understandings of key concepts associated with qualifications. A step-by-step approach was taken to developing the framework – agreeing policies and criteria to develop the Framework, a vision for the Framework and agreement on an underlying set of values and principles to inform its development. Many of the initial concerns and disagreements were ironed out in extensive consultations with stakeholders and a refinement of draft proposals. The objectives were broadly supported, despite initial concerns of some that *inter alia* their qualifications and standing might be diminished under new arrangements. These formed the basis for determining the architecture of the Framework and for the overall approaches followed by the Authority in implementing the Framework. These are described in the following sections of the paper.

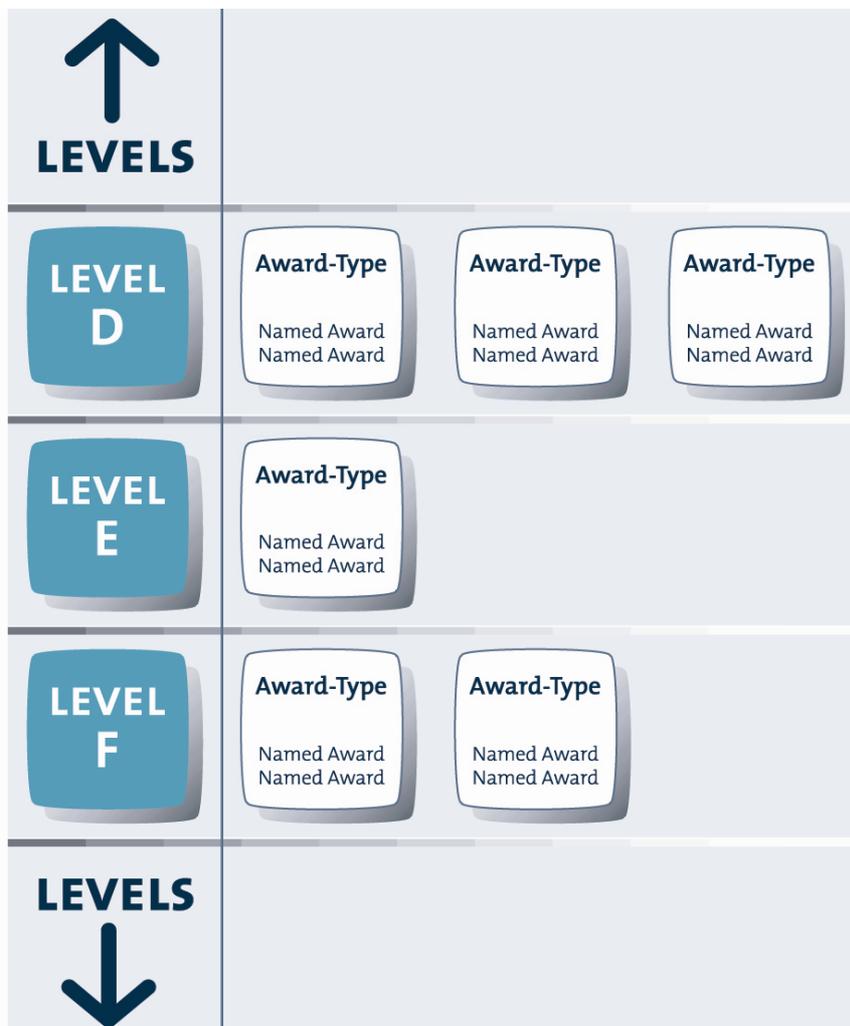
2 ARCHITECTURE OF THE FRAMEWORK

Between October 2002 and April 2003, the Authority made a number of determinations relating to the architecture of the National Framework of Qualifications as follows:

2.1 A 10-level Framework

The 2002 document *“Towards a National Framework of Qualifications – Establishment of Policies and Criteria”* set out that the Framework would be based on levels as follows: Each level will have a specified level indicator. At each level in the Framework there will be one, or more, award-types. Each award-type will have its own award-type descriptor. It is the responsibility of the Authority to develop these level indicators and award-type descriptors. For each award-type a wide range of named awards will be developed. It is the responsibility of awarding bodies to develop named awards.

Figure 2: Framework Structure



The diagram illustrates the relationship between the concepts of ‘level’, ‘award-type’ and ‘named awards’ in the Framework.

Levels are described as “a series of sequential steps”. Each level sets out a range of standards of knowledge, skill and competence acquired by learners. Levels are not in themselves standards, but indicators of a range of standards and can be described in an ordered sequence. The indicators enable award-types to be matched to a level on an overall, best-fit basis, rather than by conformity to a defined set of required standards. The level indicators are a key structural element from which the framework of qualifications is to be built.

The introduction of levels allows comparisons to be made between different award-types in the Framework and contributes to transparency and coherence in the Framework. Building on this, the placing of award-types at different levels in the Framework facilitates the development of progression opportunities.

To determine the level of a standard of knowledge, skill and competence it is necessary to analyse what a person who has attained such a standard at that level is able to do and use the output of that analysis to define the level of knowledge, skill and competence pertaining to the component parts.

A paper setting out the rationale for the decisions made on the number of levels is included at Appendix C. In the debates on the number of levels, differences of view were voiced about the range of learners who would/could avail of awards at the lowest level and whether providers could meet certification requirements at that level (level 1) On the other hand, it was generally acknowledged that a significant body of learning achievements at such a level were not formally recognised through qualifications. A further issue that emerged was the capacity of levels 7-10 in particular to capture and differentiate the full spectrum of qualifications then in existence in Ireland.

2.2 A 10-Level grid of level indicators for the Framework

A grid of level indicators was determined by the Authority, in consultation with stakeholders, in autumn 2002 (see Appendix D). The level indicators show how the outcomes in each of the eight sub-strands progress across the ten levels. The level indicators are intended to enable the Authority to place award-types at appropriate levels in the Framework based on the mix of learning outcomes they contain. The grid sets out three general strands of learning outcome that will be used in setting standards. These strands are knowledge, know-how and skill, and competence. A number of sub-strands are identified within these main strands that can be considered as the component structures of the three kinds of learning outcome. They identify the sources of order within the kinds of learning outcomes associated with awards at the various levels of the Framework. The sub-strands are based on the concepts introduced in the understandings of knowledge, skill and competence.

The main strands of learning outcome are divided into sub-strands as follows:

knowledge

breadth

kind

know-how and skill

range

selectivity

competence
 context
 role
 learning to learn
 insight

A synopsis of the outcomes at each level in the Framework is attached at Appendix E. The synopsis, while not being part of the formal determination of the Authority, is useful in understanding the nature of the learning outcomes at each level.

In the debates on learning outcomes, issues that arose included concerns that the Framework was reductionist of learning; that certain sub-strands (learning to learn and insight) could not be assessed for all qualifications and/or were not appropriate for all levels; and that there was a possible bias towards 'academic' learning outcomes in the Framework. These issues were addressed in the finalisation of the sub-strands and it was generally accepted that the assessment of learning to learn and insight were evolutionary and the inclusion of these sub-strands was designed to facilitate and encourage broader recognition of these kinds of learning outcomes. Moreover, it was emphasised that not all learning outcomes associated with a qualification need to be at the same level as the qualification and that there can be a difference of emphasis on the sub-strands of learning outcomes for individual qualifications depending on their overall purpose/orientation.

2.3 Award-types

The Authority determined a number of policies and criteria for determining award-types. Award-types are central to the Framework. An award-type is a class of named awards sharing common features and level. At each level in the Framework there is at least one award-type. Each award-type has its own award-type descriptor.

The Framework is intended to enable the recognition of all learning achievements and the range of award-types provided are intended to facilitate this inclusiveness. Not all combinations of achievement, at a given level, are of equal importance. Accordingly, the Authority has determined four classes of award-types:

- Major award-types
- Minor award-type
- Special-purpose award-types
- Supplemental award-types

Some award-types fulfil a broader range of purposes and these are labelled major award-types. Other, more limited or specialised, recognition needs are met by minor, supplemental and special-purpose award-types. The Authority's determinations in relation to award-types, and the policy basis for these determinations, are further elaborated in the policies and criteria companion paper (*Determinations for the outline National Framework of Qualifications, 2003*).

For each award-type a wide range of named awards has been developed. For example, the award-type descriptors for the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate are defined to enable the inclusion of these awards in the Framework. These descriptors are therefore indicative rather than prescriptive in their intent. For the purpose of inclusion in the Framework:

- the Junior Certificate is defined on the basis of published aims, objectives and outcomes associated with the Junior Certificate as an educational programme, incorporating the full spectrum of options and subjects. These are consistent with the indicators at Level 3 of the Framework;
- the Leaving Certificate is treated as a single award, incorporating the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), the Leaving Certificate Established and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The published, general aims, objectives and outcomes associated with the various Leaving Certificate options, in their totality, are consistent with the level indicators at Levels 4 and 5 of the Framework so the award is viewed as involving learning outcomes and standards spanning these levels.

It proved difficult to resolve all issues concerning the inclusion of the Leaving Certificate in the Framework and its inclusion across two levels was deemed a best-fit at the time. It was noted that this approach could make it difficult to articulate precise relations between the Leaving Certificate and further education and training qualifications at levels 4 and 5. The value of this approach, however, was that it allowed the three variants of the Leaving Certificate to be included on an equal footing in the framework and that it did not generally alter public understanding of the Leaving Certificate and its particular character. It was envisaged that this inclusion would be revisited in time.

2.3.1 Classes of award-type: major, minor, supplemental, and special-purpose

Some award-types fulfil a broader range of purposes and these are labelled major award-types. Descriptors for each of these award-types are contained in *Determinations for the outline National Framework of Qualifications, 2003* and *Descriptor for the Higher Doctorate, 2005*. They are attached at Appendix F. Other, more limited or specialised, recognition needs are met by minor, supplemental and special-purpose award-types, outlined below. The Authority determined its *Policies and criteria for minor, special purpose and supplemental awards* in summer 2002; and determined *Descriptors for minor, special purpose and supplemental award-types* in summer 2004. These are attached at Appendix G below.

(a) Major award-types

Major award-types are the principal class of awards made at each level. At most levels, such award-types capture a typical range of achievements at that level. They include outcomes from many of the sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence appropriate to the level. An example of this is the Honours Bachelors Degree at level 8. A major award-type is expected to have significant progression options to higher-level awards, as well as options for transfer to other awards at the same level. Awards of the major award-type may also prepare learners for direct transition into employment. While named awards of major award-type relate to learning in a particular field, such awards share in the general purposes of their award-type. An award of a major award-type usually represents a significant volume of learning outcomes. The set of learning outcomes for such awards should be coherently planned to meet the purposes of the award.

The Authority's policy on the titles of award-types and named awards applies particularly to major awards. It is important that users of awards (learners, employers and others) can link

an award to other awards of the same major award-type and are enabled to identify clearly the level in the Framework to which the award belongs.

The Authority has determined the major award-types for each of the ten levels in the Framework, as follows:

- 10 – Doctoral Degree, Higher Doctorate
- 9 – Masters Degree & Post-graduate Diploma
- 8 – Honours Bachelor Degree & Higher Diploma
- 7 – Ordinary Bachelor Degree
- 6 – Advanced Certificate & Higher Certificate
- 5 – Level 5 Certificate
- 4/5 – Leaving Certificate
- 4 – Level 4 Certificate
- 3 – Level 3 Certificate & Junior Certificate
- 2 – Level 2 Certificate
- 1 – Level 1 Certificate

Debate on the award-types included a discussion of the number of major award-types needed for each Framework level; the need for a matriculation award-type (major) at level 6 for adult entry to higher education and training (see Section 4.4.4 below); the names/titles of major award-types and the impact of the Framework award-types on general understandings of existing award-types or classes of awards e.g. the ‘Bachelor Degree’. These debates also shed light on the existence of different naming conventions for classes of awards/award-types within and between providers, some imprecision about the use of the title ‘Degree’⁷ and the use of the term ‘post-’ to refer to time and/or level of qualification. Concerns about parity of esteem between different award-types and the extent to which they would each provide for progression were raised in the development of these award-types.

(b) *Minor award-types*

A minor award-type will provide recognition for learners who achieve a range of learning outcomes, without achieving the specific combination of learning outcomes required for a major award. The range of learning outcomes will have relevance in their own right. The minor award will also be a means of identifying the knowledge, skill or competence previously acquired by the learner.

Minor award-types may not have been designed with a distinct purpose and, in this way they may be distinguished from special purpose award-types. A minor award-type will be part of the learning outcomes associated with one or more major award-types at a given level in the Framework. The combination, number or volume of outcomes achieved may be variable. A minimum achievement in learning required for a minor award can be set. The nomenclature adopted for minor awards will clearly differentiate them from major awards. Minor awards may be combined with other learning outcomes towards the achievement of a major or special purpose award. Minor award-types may contribute towards the accumulation of credit

⁷ For example, the use of titles or references such as ‘General Degree’, ‘Primary Degree’, ‘Pass Degree’, as well as the use of ‘Diploma’ to describe a wide diversity of qualifications.

for major award-types, subject to the policies and regulations governing the use of credit to be developed by the awarding bodies in the Framework.

(c) Supplemental award-types

Supplemental award-types are for learning which is additional to a previous award. Programmes leading to such awards may be described as refresher, updating or continuing education and training. In some cases there may be regulatory requirements for such awards in order for learners to retain a licence to practice granted in respect of the initial award. Such supplemental awards are not at a higher level than the initial award. Learning of this type has not traditionally been explicitly recognised in the formal systems of awards. In some cases, where it cumulatively reaches a sufficient volume, it may have been deemed to merit an award at a notionally higher level than the initial award simply because it was subsequent in time to that award, rather than because it explicitly demanded outcomes at a higher level.

(d) Special purpose award-types

Special-purpose award-types are made for specific, relatively narrow, purposes. They may comprise learning outcomes that also form part of major awards. However, where there is a need for separate certification of set of outcomes, this should be a separate award. For example, there is a statutory obligation for construction workers to have certification of their competence in health and safety (Safe Pass). Such certification may be a component of a broader award in some part of the field of construction, but it has a standalone function also. The introduction of a common national credit transfer and accumulation system, such as currently being explored by various awarding bodies with the support of the Authority, would facilitate the articulation of such special-purpose awards with awards of the major award-types being determined by the Authority and made by awarding bodies. Nevertheless, there will continue to be legal requirements, economic incentives and personal desires for separate awards which are not merely parts or modules of some bigger award.

Much of the demand for professional and international awards in the marketplace of qualifications derives from the specificity of such awards. The class of special-purpose awards would include many of these. One of the characteristics of such awards is that they have little or no articulation with unrelated awards, even where these are at the same level. One of the functions of the Framework is to provide such linkage. Special-purpose awards may provide a basis for transfer into more broadly-based major awards at the same level and thus progression on to higher level awards or they may provide direct progression to further narrowly-based special-purpose awards.

By their nature, it is not so likely that the common branding of special-purpose awards will be as important as in the case of major awards. They derive their currency from the particular context of their use, such as in individual fields of employment. The named award will be dominant and it may be difficult to assure the same uniformity of titling as proposed for awards of the major award-types. The commonality of special-purpose awards is largely restricted to their level in the Framework. This commonality is important inasmuch as it indicates where the awards may be useful for transfer purposes.

If these certification activities reflected by special-purpose awards are left out of the Framework, the potential for articulation with major awards is reduced. Many of the important

learning activities and achievements of learners would be left out of the Framework. Stakeholders, such as employers may feel that the Framework is ignoring an important functional set of awards. There are resource implications in quality assuring some such special-purpose awards, particularly those that are of low volume. Special-purpose awards are also likely to be quite variable in volume, varying for instance, from field to field. Over time it may become necessary to introduce further distinctions between special-purpose awards based on volume.

It was generally accepted that it would take time for these award-types to be developed (by awarding bodies) and to be widely understood and used, but that they would enable the qualifications system to be more flexible, inclusive and responsive.

2.4 Titles of awards

The titles of the major award types are part of the Framework determinations made by the Authority. In line with overall relationships and responsibilities of awarding bodies regarding the Framework, the Awards Councils, FETAC and HETAC, are required to implement the titles as determined, and the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology are requested to implement the titles. It was considered important that titles of award-types and named awards, incorporating associated fields of learning and occupational labels should be as clear and consistent as possible. It is important that users of awards (learners, employers and others) can link an award to other awards of the same major award-type and are enabled to identify clearly the level in the Framework to which the award belongs. There were concerns about 'parity of esteem' for these award-types; the impact of the new titles on public perceptions/understanding of existing awards at these levels; the scope of autonomy of providers and awarding bodies in relation to use of titles; and the use of titles in marketing. It was very difficult to achieve consensus on titles for the major award-types for the Framework. For example, the titles of Advanced Certificate (title of the further education and training award-type at level 6), and Higher Certificate (title of the higher education and training award-type at level 6) were particularly contested. Some argued that different titles could lead to perceptions that one award was of greater status than another. Following subsequent discussions on this with the awarding bodies, it was decided by the Authority to retain them.

In 2004, the Authority determined that, for minor, special purpose and supplemental award-types, *'their titles should be consistent with the titles of major award-types and should be clearly distinguished in a consistent way from named major awards and from each other so as to enhance understanding and avoid any confusion. These distinctions should be signalled in supporting documentation and communication about the award-types, e.g., in certificate and diploma supplements.'* (*Policies and criteria for minor, special purpose and supplemental award-types*, 2004).

2.5 The differentiation between further and higher education and training

Under section 10 of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, the Authority is tasked with differentiating between further and higher education and training for the purposes of awards that are made by the Awards Councils. In April 2003, the Authority determined that:

- Further education and training awards are those made by the Further Education and Training Awards Council at levels 1 to 6;

- Higher education and training awards are those made by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council at levels 6 to 10;
- The differentiation at level 6 will relate to the major award-type descriptor for each respective Council's award.

The differentiation of award-types at Level 6 relates to standards of knowledge, skill and competence associated with each (not volume). These standards are set out in the descriptors for the award-types. The key differentiating factor between the two is the emphasis placed on particular learning outcomes in each. The Advanced Certificate emphasises a range of skills and the application of such skills and associated knowledge in a wide range of contexts. Relatively less stress would be placed on abstract thinking and autonomous learning capacity. Knowledge kind and competence – learning to learn are at level 5 for this award while competence – context is at level 7. All other learning outcomes are at level 6.

The Higher Certificate has outcomes that indicate greater competence by the learner in managing his/her learning processes, and engagement in more theoretical and abstract learning. It would reflect a less-developed capacity to apply knowledge and skills in various contexts. Competence – learning to learn is at level 7 and competence – context is at level 5. All other learning outcomes are at level 6.⁸ A comparison of the two descriptors is set out in Box 2 below. The Authority, at the time, decided that the effectiveness of the differentiation should be reviewed within 3 years. This recognised the fact that there were strong arguments for and against the decision taken by the Authority (including arguments for only higher education and training at level 6 and above, with further education and training awards at levels 1-5). In September 2006, the Authority decided to postpone this review until implementation of the Framework at level 6 is more advanced and the Authority review and Framework study have been implemented.

Table 2: Comparison of descriptors for major award-types at NFQ Level 6

	Advanced Certificate	6	Higher Certificate	6
Knowledge - breadth	Specialised knowledge of a broad area	6	Specialised knowledge of a broad area	6
Knowledge – kind	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant depth in some areas	5	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant underpinning theory	6
Know-how and skill – range	Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools	6	Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools	6
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Formulate responses to well-defined abstract problems	6	Formulate responses to well-defined abstract problems	6

⁸ The descriptors for these major award-types are in Appendix F.

Competence - context	Utilise diagnostic and creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts	7	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	5
Competence – role	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	6	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	6
Competence – learning to learn	Learn to take responsibility for own learning within a managed environment	5	Take initiative to identify and address learning needs and interact effectively in a learning group	7
Competence - insight	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others	6	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others	6
Progression & Transfer	Transfer to a programme leading to a Higher Certificate (award-type i). Progression to a programme leading to an Ordinary Bachelor Degree (award-type j) or to an Honours Bachelor Degree (award-type k).	N/A	Transfer to programme leading to an Advanced Certificate (Award-type h) Progression to a programme leading to an Ordinary Bachelor Degree (award-type j) or to an Honours Bachelor Degree (award-type k).	N/A

The distinction between the two award-types at Level 6 is in the learning outcomes described under the headings of Knowledge (kind), Competence (context) and Competence (learning to learn).

Awards at levels 7 to 10 are made by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Dublin Institute of Technology and the universities. At level 6, the Advanced Certificate award is made by the Further Education and Training Awards Council; the Higher Certificate award is made by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology. At levels 3 to 5 awards are made by the Department of Education and Science (Examinations Commission). At level 5 and below, the Further Education and Training Awards Council makes awards.

2.6 Additional policies and criteria for alignment/inclusion of awards

The principal areas in which actions to progress Framework development have taken place are as follows:

- Additional policies and criteria on the placement of existing and former awards in the Framework were determined by the Authority in spring 2005;
- Policies and criteria for the inclusion in, or alignment with, the National Framework of Qualifications of the awards of certain awarding bodies were determined in summer 2006 (addressing, generally speaking, the awards of professional and international bodies).

2.6.1 Placement of existing and former awards in the Framework

In 2005, the Authority agreed an approach to the inclusion of legacy awards (existing awards which were not included in the Framework as well as those formerly made by awarding bodies) in the Framework. This was recognised to be essential to meeting learner needs. The approach is for the Authority to agree to the placement of these with the awarding body in question. The term ‘placement’ recognises the fact that these awards may not have all the features and learning outcomes associated with the award-types that are included in the Framework. Since 2005, HETAC, FETAC and the DIT have placed most of the awards made by them or by former awarding bodies (in the case of HETAC and FETAC). This ensures that these awards retain their equivalent value against new qualifications and that the holders of these awards are not disadvantaged by the new system of qualifications. Placement was done on a best-fit basis and on the basis of those qualifications which are held by substantial numbers of learners. This recognises that many such qualifications have not been expressed in terms of learning outcomes and do not easily correlate with framework understandings. Placement does not therefore mean that the holders of such awards have achieved all of the learning outcomes at the relevant level or that they have achieved those of a new Framework award-type at that level. One of the major areas of difficulty in respect of placement was the apprenticeships, which were not a homogeneous grouping, although all attract the qualification of national craft certificate. It was agreed to place these as a set at level 6. It was acknowledged that there are level 7 outcomes associated with some of the awards in the set and that this placement does not preclude the possibility of existing National Craft Certificate programmes being validated at level 7.⁹

2.6.2 Awards of professional and international bodies

Given the overall vision for the Framework of inclusion of all awards made in Ireland, it was important to provide a means to recognise the awards made by professional and international bodies in Ireland through the National Framework of Qualifications. A wide range of such bodies, statutory and otherwise, make awards and/or recognise learning achievements for a variety of purposes including access to employment or professional practice. The *“Policies and Criteria for the Inclusion in, or Alignment with, the National Framework of Qualifications of the Awards of Certain Awarding Bodies”* were published by the Authority in July 2006. A detailed consultative process was followed in relation to professional and international awards which assisted in the development of the policies and criteria as follows:

- The Authority issued two formal consultative papers in May 2002 and September 2004
- Submissions were sought from relevant stakeholders and meetings were held on a bi-lateral and multi-lateral basis. Details of the consultative process are available on the Authority’s website.
- In April 2006 a consultative paper was published as the culmination of the consultative process in these areas. Draft policies and criteria were made publicly available and a multi-lateral briefing session was held with relevant stakeholders in May 2006.
- The policies and criteria were finalised taking account of the briefing session and feedback on the consultative paper.

⁹ For more details, see <http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/documents/AwardsintheFrameworkSeptember2005.pdf>

It was recognised that there are certain bodies which make awards in Ireland, but that do not have the formal recognition of the State in so doing.¹⁰ The policy approach is facilitative – there is no obligation on the awarding bodies in question to seek inclusion of their awards in the Framework, rather they are offered a way to do this.

The policy and criteria identify three broad groups of potential applicant bodies who may apply to have their awards recognised, as follows:

- Group A: The awards of Irish bodies which make awards on a statutory basis. The policy addresses those awards which are not yet in the Framework and which cannot be withdrawn.¹¹
- Group B: The learning outcomes associated with the awards of certain Irish bodies which do not make awards on a statutory basis, but which regulate professions. They recognise the attainment by learners of learning outcomes in a formal way associated with the regulation of the operation of a profession or of a professional title by such bodies. Many of these bodies have been identified under EU directives for the mutual recognition of professions as being the competent authority in relation to professional practice or use of professional titles. These bodies do not have a statutory power to make awards. Examples of these are the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ireland (ICAI) or the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA).
- Group C: The awards of certain bodies from outside the State which make awards in Ireland. Examples of these are the Open University and the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

Different processes apply to each of these groups. In all cases, the Authority works closely with FETAC and HETAC to process applications. Awards in Group A are included in the Framework and those from Groups B and C are aligned with the Framework. In each case, the relationship is established with reference to a Framework award-type and/or Framework level. A critical issue is that quality assurance arrangements are in place to ensure that Framework standards are achieved in respect of awards to be included or aligned. Hence, awards must be included in the national framework of the home jurisdiction in order to be eligible for alignment with the Framework, or where such frameworks are not in place, where there is an equivalent tool for relating qualifications to each other, and which incorporates quality assurance requirements external to the awarding body. For example, UK awarding bodies, therefore, cannot align awards made in Ireland that are not accredited in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The initial policy approach has been amended to allow for a greater range of awards to be aligned with the Framework. For example, the initial requirement that an awarding body must seek to align *all* of the awards it makes in Ireland was dropped in July 2008 to ensure that all

¹⁰ Those that have formal statutory recognition as awarding bodies (in the sense of qualifications) are the State Examinations Commission, HETAC, FETAC, the DIT, universities and institutions with delegated authority from the Councils to make awards

¹¹ The Framework recognises learning achievements and awards. Once achieved, these cannot be revoked. Professional or regulatory bodies make demands about the currency of knowledge, skill and competence in order to obtain and retain a licence to practice. Licences to practice can be revoked or may have a limited life. Awards may be recognised by professional and regulatory bodies as giving access to a register or licence to practice. The inclusion of such awards in the Framework recognises learning achievements only.

quality assured provision recognised in the home jurisdiction could be captured in the Framework. This means that those bodies which make awards in Ireland that are not nationally accredited can nevertheless align the relevant quality assured awards with the Framework. In addition, in 2008, the Authority reached agreement with UK vocational education and training awarding bodies on a way to facilitate the alignment of vocational education and training which are offered to learners in Ireland but which are not accredited/quality assured in the UK (i.e. quality assurance does not 'travel' to Ireland). Agreement was reached on quality assurance arrangements for such awards and this will operate for a provisional period of 18 months (June 2008 – November 2009). A pilot project is underway to allow alignment of awards in this area and, in June 2008, ten such bodies were engaged in this. The implementation of this and other alignment/inclusion agreements is subject to annual review.

2.7 Access, transfer and progression policies – development and implementation

One of the key functions of the Authority is to facilitate access, transfer and progression to learners through the spectrum of educational provision. The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, also sets out that the Authority is to determine the procedures to be implemented by providers; ensure the implementation of access, transfer and progression procedures by the DIT and any new universities that are established; facilitate and advise existing universities in implementing access, transfer and progression policies and, in consultation with the HEA, review their implementation. The Authority also incorporates its policies on access, transfer and progression into the procedures it sets for the Awards Councils.

The Qualifications 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.

The Authority's role in this area is to lead the development of the Framework; facilitate the necessary changes in education and training systems to support access, transfer and progression; develop supplementary policies on credit, the recognition of prior learning, transfer and progression routes, entry arrangements and information provision; and define actions to be taken by itself, the Awards Councils and providers in this area (set out in Policies etc. 2003).

2.7.1 Policy aims and key elements

Building on the definitions in the Act, the Qualifications Authority developed and published *Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners* in March 2003. This document articulates a vision for learner mobility:

- *“the learner should be able to enter and successfully participate in a programme, or series of programmes leading to an award, or series of awards, in pursuit of their learning objectives;*
- *the National Framework of Qualifications and associated programme provision should be structured to facilitate learner entry and to promote transfer and progression;*
- *thus, learners can be encouraged to participate in the learning process to enable them to realise their ambitions to the full extent of their abilities”.*

The key policy objectives are to:

- develop an integrated Framework;
- identify and realise a network of clearly signposted transfer and progression routes through the National Framework of Qualifications, and to ensure that learners are facilitated to avail of these routes;
- ensure that learners can avail of entry arrangements to all programmes leading to awards in the National Framework of Qualifications that are fair, transparent, and compliant with equality legislation; and
- ensure that accurate and reliable information is available to all learners, through a range of approaches and formats that is accessible to a diversity of learners, to enable them to plan their learning on the basis of a clear understanding of the awards available and the associated entry arrangements and transfer and progression routes.

Specific policies, actions and procedures through which objectives will be met are set out under four themes:

1. credit
2. transfer and progression routes
3. entry arrangements
4. information provision.

In relation to credit, the overall objective is to develop and implement a national approach to credit, taking account of the existing national and European contexts, which complements the Framework, facilitates access, transfer and progression and enables the recognition of prior learning.

In relation to transfer and progression, the broad objective is to facilitate award-holders who wish to move between levels, between award-types at the same level or between named awards. This involves building on existing routes, developing at least one progression route into and on from each programme and supporting learners in taking such routes. Three operational principles were developed:

- all awards should have some associated opportunities for transfer and progression;
- a learner’s continued participation in learning may require opportunities for either transfer or progression at any transition-point; and

- the framework concept implies that a learner achieving an award is, in principle, eligible to progress to a programme leading to another award at the next level up where there is such an award in the same or a related field of learning, and may be eligible to progress to a higher level than that. In addition, the framework concept implies that where there is not an award in the same or related field of learning, learners achieving an award are eligible for transfer to a programme leading to another award at the same level.

In relation to entry, the main objective is to improve access to programmes. The aim is to shift the focus of entry arrangements to the identification of the factors necessary for successful participation i.e. the achievement of the award by the learner. All applicants who demonstrate this capacity should be eligible for entry. The principles of fairness, transparency and equal opportunity are to apply to entry arrangements. It is expected that this approach will lead to the adaptation of programmes to meet entrants' needs, and in respect of adult or mature entrants into higher education, new procedures or entry arrangements to cater fully for their specific needs (which at the time of developing these policies were deemed, while used by many, to be unsatisfactory in some respects). It was anticipated that the Authority would address the latter issue with the HEA's National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education.

In relation to information provision, the key objective is to enable learners plan their learning on the basis of a clear understanding of awards available and of entry, transfer and progression routes associated with them. Awarding bodies and providers are expected to play a role here. Also, it was acknowledged that developments in relation to national initiatives such as the National Learning Line and an integrated guidance system relate to this. The kinds of information that should be available to learners include education and training opportunities, costs and subsidies available and job-related information. The anticipated actions for the Authority include developing a wide information base for learners; actions for awarding bodies include ensuring information protocols are implemented by providers, supporting the Authority's work in this area and including Framework-related information in any supplementary documentation produced in relation to awards, e.g. diploma and certificate supplements); actions for providers include provision of relevant, accessible and timely information to learners and prospective learners on access, transfer and progression including the recognition of prior learning (RPL).

It is recognised that these policies will involve changes in systems and structures that will impact on many organisations, groups and individuals. Under each of these headings, the respective roles of key stakeholders - the Authority, the Awards Councils and providers - were specified as follows:

The Authority will:

- determine procedures to be implemented by providers;
- actively intervene at various levels to encourage and facilitate the process of extending the network of routes;
- adopt a co-ordinating role in facilitating the web of transfer and progression arrangements and routes across and between the various elements of the system at a macro level i.e.

- initiate processes of transfer and progression route development across the divide of responsibilities of the various awarding bodies; and
- identify gaps and blockages in transfer and progression routes, indicate the arrangements required to bridge gaps or remove obstacles, and identify the appropriate bodies to take the necessary actions.

The Awards Councils will:

- ensure that providers implement all procedures set for them by the Authority in relation to transfer and progression routes, by setting appropriate arrangements for validation of programmes leading to awards and through conditions that they may set in relation to the delegation of authority to make awards;
- co-ordinate the identification of programme adaptations required to support achievement of awards by all learners and to facilitate transfer and progression routes;
- co-ordinate the identification of appropriate transfer and progression routes across all programmes leading to awards in their remit, and the mapping of those routes; and
- work together to co-ordinate the identification and implementation of appropriate transfer and progression routes between awards and programmes leading to awards in their separate remits, such as transfer and progression routes between the areas of further education and training and higher education and training.

Providers of further and higher education and training will:

- in co-operation with the relevant awarding bodies, identify transfer and progression routes into and onwards from all programmes leading to awards in the Framework;
- specify any particular attainments, in the awards to which their programmes lead, that are required for transfer or progression (e.g. where the achievement of a distinction in an award is required to facilitate access to a programme leading to an award at the next level);
- make the necessary adaptations to programmes to facilitate participants in making successful transitions.

2.8 Access, transfer and progression and the recognition of prior learning (RPL)¹²

This section sets out the main developments in the recognition of prior learning (RPL), and provides a review of implementation up to mid-2007. The section is based on a review of practice in further and in higher education and training undertaken in the context of an OECD activity. This was completed by the Authority in 2006/07 with the involvement of the Awards Councils in particular and an Advisory Group of key stakeholders. Given the scope of this report and to avoid unnecessary duplication in the sectoral reports for the Framework Implementation and Impact Study, RPL will not be addressed in detail in the sectoral reports.

¹² Note that this section draws on the findings of the country background report on RPL in Ireland (2007), prepared as part of the OECD activity in this area. It includes material on implementation and impact in the sectors which, for efficiency, will not be captured in the sectoral reports.

The overall policies on access, transfer and progression set out the 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, credit / exemptions is generally practised, the concept of making full awards on the basis of RPL is a relatively new one for Ireland (there is some international practice in this area). The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 sets out that learners may seek awards directly from HETAC or FETAC without having participated in specific programmes.

The main responsibilities of the 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 Authority, working with an Advisory Group on RPL, developed and published national *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning* (June 2005)¹³. 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 the different education and training sectors.

2.8.1 RPL practice: the Awards Councils

There are two strands to the RPL activities of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). Under the first strand, the Awards Councils set out policy for providers who offer education and training programmes leading to their awards (or to providers who have delegated authority to make their own awards) and oversee implementation by them of RPL. The Awards Councils also

¹³ Accessible at: <http://www.nqai.ie/en/Publications/File,824,en.doc>

make awards directly to learners on the basis of RPL. In 2006, HETAC published *the Recognition Policy, Criteria and Process for a Direct Application to HETAC for a Named Award* (see <http://www.hetac.ie>). HETAC has made three awards directly to learners on the basis of RPL (a Masters Degree, 2005; a Doctoral Degree, 2006 and an Ordinary Degree, 2007). HETAC has also developed an overall policy on experiential learning concerning providers. It is refining this policy and its approach to direct applications for awards in the light of experience. Its overall approach from 2007 is to work with providers in assessing applications for direct awards on the basis of RPL.

Providers who offer programmes leading to HETAC awards have responsibility to facilitate RPL for learners. The providers include the institutes of technology, private colleges and others including the Garda College and Military College. Most institutes of technology have adopted, or are operating, RPL based on HETAC policy and the national RPL policy and guidelines. Much of the current RPL activity can be traced back to the first APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) policy published by HETAC (formerly NCEA). In 1993, for example, the Garda College developed a Bachelor Degree at a senior level based on experience in various ranks, and assignments. This programme has been running to the present. A range of practice and experience exists across the HETAC sector, for example, Cork Institute of Technology introduced an RPL policy in 2005.¹⁴ This sets out the purposes of RPL, principles and rules that apply (e.g. concerning the award of credit, grading, awards classification and ceilings). The RPL policy has been introduced for an initial two year pilot period following which it shall be reviewed. In 1996, it established the Department of Education Development (DEIS) with a remit that included the development of RPL policy and practice and provision of support. This is only higher education institution that has such dedicated institution-wide support structures in place. DEIS has dedicated RPL officers who offer support for registered students who seek credit or exemptions for their prior learning (whether accredited or experiential)¹⁵. Over the period 2000 – April 2007, the total number of portfolios submitted to date is 1060. Some 260 portfolios were submitted in the academic year 2006/07 (to April 2007).

In the area of further education and training, FÁS, Fáilte Ireland and the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) have operated a range of different processes for the recognition of prior learning since 1990.¹⁶ In 2005, FETAC, which took over responsibility for qualifications in the sector as a whole, agreed a policy on RPL and published draft guidelines on RPL. (http://www.fetac.ie/rpl/RPL_Policy_and_draft_guidelines.pdf). The policy aims to support the implementation of RPL by registered providers by ensuring that learners with prior learning can gain access and/or exemptions within programmes, and full awards as appropriate. Providers offering programmes leading to FETAC awards are responsible for facilitating learners through RPL. The draft guidelines aim to support the implementation of RPL by providers especially those for whom RPL is new. In 2006, FETAC undertook a pilot project with a small number of providers to begin implementation of RPL and to identify the implementation issues for FETAC and providers. An evaluation report on the findings of the

¹⁴ See R. Coughlan, Examples of Good Practice – Cork Institute of Technology, for European Inventory on the Validation of non-formal and informal learning, www.ecotec.com, presentation to Accreditation and Assessment in Higher Education, NQAI/NUIM, January 2007 (at www.nqai.ie).

¹⁵ DEIS website, <http://www-deis.cit.ie/rpl.html>

¹⁶ FÁS worked with the Irish Electricity Supply Board to accredit semi-skilled linesmen and fast-track them through an electrical apprenticeship programme. Fáilte Ireland accredits prior learning for workers in the tourism, catering and hotel industry and awards certificates on the basis of assessment of portfolios.

pilot was completed in 2007.¹⁷ This report reiterates FETAC's policy approach which is that all providers must, as part of their quality assurance requirements, commence the development and implementation of policies and procedures to facilitate learners with prior learning to access programmes and to gain exemptions from programme requirements. In relation to learner's directly accessing FETAC awards on the basis of RPL, FETAC policy states that providers have responsibility for this but must be specifically quality assured to offer RPL for awards. This aims to ensure credible, rigorous, fair and effective processes. In addition, FETAC encourages the development of specialised centres of excellence in the delivery of RPL for the purpose of making awards in specific fields of learning. Where an individual makes a direct application to FETAC for an award on the basis of prior learning FETAC plans to refer the individual to an appropriate provider for assessment and support where appropriate.

2.8.2 RPL practice: the universities and Dublin Institute of Technology

The individual universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology, which are autonomous awarding bodies as well as providers, are each responsible for RPL in their respective areas. In drafting the national principles and guidelines on RPL above, the Authority requested that they each would consider them in the context of developing their own procedures. In this context, and that of facilitating access, transfer and progression in general, DIT has put in place a framework for RPL. In the universities, the purpose of RPL is limited to entry to programmes, credit towards/exemptions from programme requirements. To the extent that RPL occurs, it is generally not regarded as a core activity for institutions; that activity tends to be localised in particular centres or departments. The extent of practice also relates to overall institutional contexts and priorities concerning student intake (ranging from those where demand remains high and where there is less pressure to develop further access routes, at one end of the spectrum, to those who face falling student enrolments or which place increased emphasis on meeting the needs of part-time and mature students).

Much of the focus of RPL at institutional level in higher education is on the accreditation of prior *certificated* learning. Activity concerning the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, usually known as the accreditation of prior experiential learning, ranges from broad frameworks and institutional policies (in DIT, 2006, the University of Limerick, 2006, and National University of Ireland, Galway, February 2007¹⁸, with plans to introduce this in University College Dublin in 2007), to general use of RPL for access for particular student groups (e.g. adult learners/ mature students) and specific practice in fields such as nursing, adult and community education, and continuing professional development/programmes for the workplace. Institutional level policies emphasise quality assurance – the need for quality assurance is also the driver for institution-wide policies. The practices of RPL in general stemmed from individual departments or centres in response to meeting student needs, attracting diverse groups of students, meeting regulatory requirements for certification and/or participation in research projects in the area of RPL.

¹⁷ http://www.fetac.ie/rpl/RPL_Evaluation_Report_2007.pdf

¹⁸ In February 2007, Academic Council approved in principle the policy on APL developed by Lionra for the participating higher education institutions in its APL project and is currently refining and adapting that policy for NUIG (see Component 5 below for Lionra project). This will involve examining current practice, suitable options and resources and implementation issues. An officer has been appointed to co-ordinate this activity.

An example of an institutional approach to RPL is that in operation in DIT. It has, in the context of the national Framework of Qualifications and national principles and guidelines, set out a broad framework to support RPL through establishing a dedicated RPL unit, developing operational principles and policy to be applied across all faculties. It is intended that RPL would build on existing practice (where it is available for non-standard and exceptional case entry and for entry at advanced standing). It should be available for all levels of education and training for the purposes of entry to programmes, credits and/or exemptions from programme requirements. The issues to be addressed include embedding RPL in quality assurance, assessment, appeals, coherence of awards, documentation and records, staff development, guidance and support for staff and applicants and liaison with the relevant stakeholders. The RPL policy of the University of Limerick sets out the purposes of RPL (for entry, credit/and or exemptions from programme requirements), general principles on quality assurance, integrity of the awards system and standards, assessment and information and guidance for applicants.

2.8.3 Strategic Innovation Fund – Cycle 1 project on the recognition of prior learning

Under a three year project, starting in 2007, on education in employment, led by Cork Institute of Technology, seven institutes of technology and two universities are engaged in a strand on RPL. The objectives include that of standardising RPL policies and procedures in the collaborating institutions, developing a scalable approach to RPL, embedding RPL as a mainstream activity, and the recognition of RPL by employers, employees and other stakeholders. The anticipated outcomes include producing guidelines and documentation for students, mentors and assessors; developing online tools for RPL administration, portfolio preparation and assessment, the training and development of staff (400-450 in total), training of mentors in key employer organisations, developing research capability in RPL, developing modules on portfolio development, and piloting RPL procedures as part of a modular taught Masters programme.¹⁹

2.8.4 Key issues concerning RPL

The main issues concerning RPL in Ireland were summarised in the country background report, 2007, on non-formal and informal learning in Ireland which was completed as part of the OECD's activity in this area.²⁰ The report addressed how prior informal and non-formal learning is recognised in respect of qualifications.²¹ The report sets out the relevant legislation, policy and practice. Its main findings were that:

- There is a wide range of practice, policy and procedures for RPL at all levels;
- RPL is used to access programmes, gain credit or exemptions, and, in very limited cases, to gain full qualifications;
- Much practice is localised, specific to particular groups of learners, programmes or sectors and tends not to be known outside of them;
- Awareness and understanding of RPL is limited;

¹⁹ CIT is developing modules in portfolio development for RPL which will be offered at NQF levels 6, 7 and 8. In 2007, DIT piloted a module for academic staff. CIT (2007) is developing an e-portfolio concept.

²⁰ Accessible at: <http://www.ngai.ie/en/Publications/File,824,en.doc>

²¹ The term RPL is used throughout the OECD report, in keeping with the broad national understanding that this incorporates all forms of prior learning – formal, informal and non-formal.

- Numbers of learners involved are relatively few;
- RPL is used by workers/professionals to access qualifications required for practice, in particular in newly regulated areas;
- A number of actions recommended in the White Paper on Adult Education (2000) for RPL have been or are being implemented e.g. credit systems, modularisation, flexible delivery and new forms of assessment, and the use of learning outcomes;
- Public funding of RPL is very limited – tends to be once-off, project-based. Availability of funding is a major incentive.

The report concluded that a national action plan was needed to set out the role that RPL can play in achieving broad policy goals, in particular that of increasing access to education and training, and to identify areas or target groups in which RPL can be most effective and how to support this. The next steps for RPL are that a national action plan will be developed, drawing on the findings of an OECD team visit to Ireland in February 2008 (the findings of the team visit are to be completed by September 2008). The team's role was to review and assess RPL policy and practice and to make recommendations for the future.

2.9 Analysis and summary of key issues

By the end of the 1990s, there was broad agreement amongst stakeholders to develop a ten-level Framework to recognise all learning achievements from the most basic to the most advanced level, and to base this on learning outcomes. This represented a shift in emphasis of qualifications towards learning outcomes and away from time served as their key distinguishing (and relational) feature. It was recognised, in 2003, when the framework was introduced that, in many fields of learning and in many sectors, the use of learning outcomes would take some time to become fully embedded in curriculum design and assessment. The changes were deemed necessary to bring coherence, integration and clarity to the qualifications system as a whole. This, in turn, was key to implementing lifelong learning, a main tenet of national and European policy on education and training.

The Authority used the language of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, which set out learning as encompassing knowledge, skills and competence, to flesh out a broad understanding of learning achievements for the purposes of the Framework. This led to three main strands of knowledge, know-how and skill and competence, and eight sub-strands. A broad, eclectic approach was used to develop them in order to meet the stakeholder needs, achieve comprehensiveness and coherence. Following this, the Framework levels were differentiated and described in level indicators.

The broad reach of the Framework differentiates it from some other national qualifications frameworks in that a single reference frame now exists for all qualifications in the State. A key feature, from the national perspective is that, for the first time, it provides for national recognition of basic learning (e.g., literacy, numeracy). FETAC has developed awards at Framework levels 1 and 2, for this. In May 2008, for the first time, awards were achieved by 71 learners at these levels²² (see Sectoral report from FETAC on framework implementation and impact, forthcoming). Another feature is that the Framework was constructed to facilitate

²²See: http://www.fetac.ie/news/pr_Levels1&2_Awards_Ceremony_24.05.08.htm

the recognition of awards made by international bodies and professional bodies, as well as those of the nationally recognised awarding bodies. It was also intended to include all existing and former awards made by awarding bodies in Ireland. Major classes of awards formerly made have been placed in the Framework. Some legacy awards (mainly made by the Department of Education and Science and the universities) have yet to be placed.

In addition to the learning outcomes, levels and level indicators, award-type descriptors form part of the Framework. These describe the main features of classes of awards. The descriptors were determined on the basis of the learning outcomes for each level; access, transfer and progression; existing awards and international descriptors. In addition to major award-types, which are at each level in the Framework, three new award-types have been introduced in the Framework – minor, special purpose and supplemental. These are intended to facilitate the availability and recognition of a more diverse range of awards and learning achievements, including those specifically for the workplace or for more narrow, tightly defined purposes. The development of these new awards was expected to take some time, compared to major award-types. It has been difficult to achieve a consensus on the titles/naming conventions for these award-types, or to establish a new language for these, just as it was for major award-types. Notwithstanding the potential for confusion that may arise in relation to titles/naming conventions, in 2008, the approach of the Authority has been to prioritise other aspects of Framework implementation. In this connection, the inclusion of the non-major awards of the universities and recognised colleges has shown that different naming conventions are used for similar awards. The Authority approach is that the naming conventions for non-major award-types will be re-considered after the inclusion of such awards is completed.

The need to identify responsibility for making awards at different levels in the Framework made it necessary for the Authority, in line with the Qualifications (1999) Act, to differentiate between further and higher education and training awards. It found that, nationally and internationally, it is very difficult to maintain a clear distinction between these two areas. In practice, there is some blurring of traditional boundaries between the areas of vocational education and training (a major part of further education and training in Ireland) and higher education and training. The issue of differentiation was highly contested and the resultant Authority determination – that awards would be made in both further and higher education and training at Framework level 6 - was agreed on the basis that it would be subject to review. In 2006, it was agreed with stakeholders that this review will take place after implementation of the Framework at level 6 is more advanced and the Framework Implementation and Impact Study is completed. The issues at stake include the use of the two award-types, and the routes between awards at this level as well as progression from them to level 7 awards.

The question of how best to include the awards of professional and international awarding bodies in the Framework took some time to design. Amongst the issues to be addressed were the legal responsibilities and authority of different awarding bodies, the quality of their awards (key to ensuring that the standards for inclusion in the Framework are achieved), the types of awards they offer, and how best to design a fair and efficient process for inclusion. There was little international practice to draw upon. The recognition of different understandings, practice and regulatory arrangements came into play in determining the best approach, agreed in 2006. HETAC, FETAC and the Authority work together to process applications. A number of awards of awarding bodies are now included or aligned.

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In relation to access, transfer and progression policies, the Authority's quality review process indicated a need to clarify and communicate better these policies, and the responsibilities of awarding bodies and providers for their implementation. The Authority is (2008) developing a series of user guides on this aspect of its work to raise awareness and understandings about the policies, roles and responsibilities of stakeholders. At the same, the Authority continues to address the main blockages to progression (Leaving Certificate, level 5 Certificate and the Advanced Certificate). The question of the future policy direction for RPL is been taken up in the context of Ireland's participation in the OECD activity on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (ongoing since 2006) and the outcomes of this work will inform the development of a national action plan for RPL (identified as an Authority objective in its 2008-2012 Strategic Plan).

3 THE FRAMEWORK IN ACTION

3.1 Relations between key sectors and the Framework

This section sets out the relationship between each of the key sectors and the Framework; specifically, the institutional arrangements and roles / responsibilities of the different agencies and bodies are set out. The section does not elaborate on the degree of implementation of the Framework within each of the sectors as this is a matter for the sectoral reports.

As outlined in Section 1, the responsibility for the development and maintenance of the National Framework of Qualifications rests with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. It is the statutory authority established for this purpose in 2001. While all the awards made by the national awarding bodies in Ireland may be included in the Framework, they are not all included in the same way, because these bodies differ with respect to their structures, functions and autonomy. The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 established two awarding councils, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Further Education and Training Awards Council and set out separate, but interdependent, roles for the Authority and the Awards Councils in respect of the Framework. The roles of each organisation are set out in further detail below. The other major awarding bodies are the universities, the Dublin Institute of Technology and the State Examinations Commission.

3.1.1 The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland – role in Framework development and implementation

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI or Authority) was established on 26 February 2001 under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. The Authority is an agency of the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. Under Section 8 (2)(a) of the Act, the Authority is to determine policies and criteria for the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ or framework). The Authority itself has three primary objects, set out in the Act, that relate to the Framework:

- the establishment and maintenance of 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;
- the establishment and promotion of the maintenance and improvement of the standards of awards of the further and higher education and training sector, other than in the existing universities; and
- the promotion and facilitation of access, transfer and progression throughout the span of education and training provision.

The nature of the Authority's relationship with the various awarding bodies, in relation to the implementation of the Framework, is elaborated upon in the following sections.

3.1.2 The Further and Higher Education and Training Awards Councils – role in Framework development and implementation

The Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) were established on 11 June 2001, under the Qualifications Act 1999. HETAC makes awards for learning in the institutes of technology, national institutions and certain other colleges and institutions. Essentially this represents a development of the role of the former National Council for Educational Awards. FETAC makes awards across a broad span of education and training areas. It incorporates the awards of the former National Council for Vocational Awards, and most of the awards previously made by various statutory training agencies, FÁS (the national authority for training and employment), Teagasc (mainly agriculture) and CERT (hotel, catering and tourism). These agencies retain their functions as programme providers, but their awarding functions are now transferred to FETAC. Under the Act, both FETAC and HETAC are independent bodies with their own functions.

The overall standards of HETAC and FETAC awards are set by the Framework. The main role of HETAC and FETAC, as awarding bodies, is to set standards for named awards, validate programmes, make awards, agree and monitor quality-assurance procedures and ensure fair and consistent assessment of learners. The Qualifications Act also provides for the delegation of authority by the Councils to make awards in certain instances. HETAC can delegate such authority to institutes of technology and FETAC can do so in relation to FÁS, CERT (now Fáilte Ireland) and Teagasc. While this has not happened to date in the FETAC sector, delegation of authority by HETAC is being advanced with on the basis of criteria and procedures agreed between the Council and the Qualifications Authority. All institutes of technology have attained it to at least level 8 of the Framework. In addition, an understanding was reached between HETAC and the Authority in June 2004 relating to the connectivity between the various policies and processes pertaining to delegation and the policies and approaches pertaining to the validation / accreditation of research programmes and activity. From November 2003 to the present date, delegation of authority to make awards has been granted by HETAC to all thirteen institutes of technology to at least Level 8 in the National Framework of Qualifications.

The Qualifications Act requires the two Councils to ensure that procedures for access, transfer and progression determined by the Authority are implemented by providers of programmes, and that programmes leading to Council awards should accommodate a variety of access and entry requirements. FETAC and HETAC are required to assist the Authority in facilitating access, transfer and progression by ensuring that providers of validated programmes, or providers who have authority delegated from the Councils to make awards, have adequate procedures in place and that these are implemented (see section 2.7 below).

The Authority, with the co-operation of the Department of Education and Science, is responsible for ensuring that the Councils are appropriately funded on an annual basis and in a timeframe that enables them to perform their functions. From a corporate perspective, the Authority also reviews the fees charged by the Councils and formally approves their corporate plans. To date (July 2008), the Authority has agreed two corporate plans with each of the Councils.

The Authority has the responsibility on an ongoing basis, under section 9 of the Qualifications Act, to conduct reviews of the performance by the Councils of their functions. It is also responsible for reviewing the Councils' procedures on a regular basis and to make such recommendations as the Authority sees fit. The review process aims to evaluate how effectively the Councils have carried out their functions and implemented the associated procedures. The review process also provides a method to support and promote the implementation of the Framework by the Councils. The Authority completed a review of the effectiveness of HETAC in carrying out its functions in May 2006 and a review of FETAC in December 2007.

The Authority has two formal appeals roles in respect of the work of the Councils. Under Section 27 of the Qualifications Act, the Authority may hear appeals by providers against refusal or withdrawal of validation of a programme by the Councils. Under Section 29 of the Act, the Authority may hear appeals by providers against the withdrawal of delegated authority. Procedures for hearing such appeals, and the grounds upon which they may be made, have been established by the Authority and published on its website. No appeals have been made to date (July 2008).

3.1.3 Universities – role in Framework development and implementation

The universities are both providers and awarding bodies, and set the standards for their awards. The Authority and the universities have agreed that it is through the award-types and their descriptors that university awards can be accommodated in the Framework. The university awards that conform to the following major award-types have been in the Framework since 2004:

- Ordinary Bachelor Degree at Level 7
- Honours Bachelor Degree at Level 8
- Masters Degree (Taught and Research) at Level 9
- Doctoral Degrees (PhD, professional doctorates) at Level 10.

The universities are currently undertaking a process to include their non-major awards in the framework. This is being coordinated through the Irish Universities Association. In 2006, the Authority and the universities agreed a number of elements of this inclusion process, which were first articulated in a discussion document, *Towards the completion of Framework implementation in the universities*, published by the NQAI.²³

The universities and their associated colleges are also working individually, and in collaboration with each other, and with the Authority through a new university-sector Framework Implementation Network, to deepen implementation of the Framework within the sector.²⁴ The Authority also engages with the Irish Universities Quality Board in relation to quality assurance (see section 4.7 below)

²³ The paper is available on the Authority's website at the following link:
http://www.ngai.ie/publication_jan2006.html

²⁴ Further information on the network and the working groups that it has convened is available on the network website: <http://www.nfqnetwork.ie>

3.1.4 Schools – role in Framework development and implementation

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 SEC administers the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations and is the awarding body for these qualifications, which are accommodated in the framework on an agreed basis with the Authority. In this context, the SEC operates within the overall policy determined by the DES in relation to curriculum, assessment and qualifications.

The inclusion and placement of school awards in the Framework was made on the basis of agreement between the Authority, the SES, DES and the NCCA. The awards currently offered by schools have been included in the Framework since its introduction in October 2003. The Junior Certificate is included at Level 3 on the framework, while the Leaving Certificate, incorporating the award made for the Leaving Certificate Applied option, is included at Levels 4 and 5. Older 'legacy' school awards have also been placed in the Framework. There remain a number of legacy awards from the school sector which have yet to be placed. The Department of Education and Science is (2008) working on a proposal to move this forward. More generally, there is an expectation that the development of the Framework will inform the work of the NCCA and the SEC.

There are regular meetings between the Authority, the State Examinations Commission, the Department of Education and Science and the NCCA on framework-related issues. The Authority, in partnership with NCCA, produced publications to brief the schools community of Framework developments in September 2004 and 2005 ("faisnéis"). A further strand of work that is on-going concerns an exploration of the issues and possibilities of further elaborating on the inclusion of the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate in the Framework. A study comparing the Leaving Certificate with awards being made by FETAC at Levels 4 and 5 of the Framework is proposed as part of this exercise (July 2008). It is proposed that the study will be overseen by a steering group of key stakeholders.

3.1.5 The Dublin Institute of Technology – role in Framework development and implementation

The Authority, through the descriptors for the award-types, sets the overall standards for the Dublin Institute of Technology's (DIT) awards. In the case of the DIT, which is both an awarding body and a provider, the institution validates its own programmes and ensures that quality assurance procedures are in place. In relation to the Framework, the overall standards of awards of the DIT are set by the Framework, and DIT, as an awarding body, is responsible for setting detailed standards for named awards.

The Authority also exercises certain functions in relation to the DIT's quality assurance procedures. 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 2007.²⁵

3.2 Analysis and summary of key issues

Whilst the Framework addresses qualifications across the full span of education and training in Ireland, there are significant differences in how it relates to, and operates in, each of the broad sectors of schools, further education and training (FETAC sector) and higher education and training (HETAC, DIT and universities). This reflects the autonomy of awarding bodies in each of these sectors, generally enshrined in legislation. For this reason, the technical operation of the Framework differs in each sector. The specificities of each sector in relation to qualifications are also reflected in the different arrangements for cooperation, consultation and technical work on the Framework that operate between the Authority and the key stakeholder bodies in each sector. The principles of autonomy and subsidiarity underpin these arrangements.

The Qualifications Act establishes the Authority, as well as the Awards Councils, FETAC and HETAC. The relationship between the Authority and the Councils, whilst largely focused on the Framework, extends beyond this to issues of funding and performance. For their part, the Awards Councils' work in taking over the award-making responsibilities of previous awarding bodies and in developing new relations with providers (old and new) is closely connected with the development and implementation of the Framework. An additional, critical element of FETAC's work is to develop a common awards system, for the first time, for the sector. The delegation of authority to make awards, so far undertaken by HETAC, to providers also impacts on the detailed technical arrangements for implementing the Framework.

The universities are, for the purposes of qualifications, both providers and awarding bodies and are autonomous in this regard. They have, nonetheless, agreed with the Authority that their major awards are included on the Framework on the basis that they accord with the major award-type descriptors. The DIT, established under statute, is also a provider and an awarding body. Under the Qualifications Act, the Authority, through the Framework sets the overall standards for DIT's awards. These arrangements mean that, in practice, Framework standards for major award-types are common to the higher education and training sector as a whole. As indicated above, work is on-going to include the range of sub-degree and non-major award-types made by the universities in the Framework. This entails work on a collective, as well as on an individual, basis with the universities and their associated colleges.

²⁵ A fuller description of the Authority's role in relation to quality assurance at the Dublin Institute of Technology is set out in Section 4.3.1. See also Authority website, www.nqai for further information on its work regarding quality assurance.

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In relation to access, transfer and progression (outlined in Section 2 above), different sets of relations also pertain across the awarding bodies. Broadly speaking, the Awards Councils and DIT are required to implement Authority policies and procedures in this area, whilst the universities are encouraged to implement them.

4 FRAMEWORK IMPLEMENTATION

4.1 Authority responsibilities in implementing the National Framework of Qualifications

The National Framework of Qualifications was formally launched at a national conference on 17 October 2003. Since that time, the development and implementation of the Framework has continued to be a key focus of the work of the Qualifications Authority.

The Authority has utilised, and continues to utilise, a range of consultative groups and networks to promote implementation of the Framework. The Authority works with the various sectors, agencies and Departments to support implementation, and also meets with, funds and quality reviews the two Awards Councils. The following section focuses on the actions taken or led by the Authority. A more detailed review of Implementation in the sectors will be addressed in the sectoral reports for the HETAC, FETAC, schools and universities.

4.2 Key Authority actions and structures to support/advance implementation

The Authority has engaged in a number of activities to support implementation of the Framework. Key actions taken include:

- The Authority worked with higher education awarding bodies and providers in ensuring that coherent implementation arrangements for the Framework within higher education and training were put in place, and announced, by summer 2004 and announced. Following on from that, work was undertaken resulting in the use of the Framework by the Central Applications Office (CAO)²⁶ in autumn 2005. Parallel arrangements for further education and training were announced in autumn 2005, with a view to implementation in autumn 2006;
- The Authority continued discussions with the universities on the inclusion in the Framework of awards made by the universities other than the major awards at levels 7 to 10 and commenced a series of bi-lateral meetings with the universities in spring 2005. In 2006, the Authority and the universities agreed a number of elements of this inclusion process, which were articulated in a discussion document published by the Authority. The Authority has worked with the universities and their associated colleges, initially largely through the university registrar's group and the Irish University's Association (IUA). This work has been effective in reaching high level agreement on direction and in ensuring a consistent approach to Framework implementation. In order to assist institutions to implement the operational and academic changes arising from the introduction of the Framework, the Authority and the IUA jointly established the university-sector Framework Implementation Network in late 2007;
- The Authority, with the co-operation of awarding bodies, completed research on national and international practice in award classifications in further and higher education in summer 2005;

²⁶ The CAO is delegated authority by higher education institutions to centrally process applications to first-year under-graduate courses.

- The Authority, in October 2006, completed and published a review of professional doctorates, setting out the main issues they raise for the Framework. It found that the Doctorate award-type descriptor encompassed the learning outcomes associated with them. The issues they raise are primarily for the awarding bodies, providers and quality assurance bodies. The review found evidence of a rapid expansion of professional doctorates in Ireland, albeit from a very small base, and some blurring of the boundaries of forms of Doctorates. These trends were expected to continue.
- The Authority has worked closely with awarding bodies and providers of education and training in the implementation of its existing policies and criteria on the titles of awards. As indicated in section 2.7 above, there have been difficulties in achieving consensus on how to approach the detailed issues involved. In March 2005, the Authority suggested two possible ways to address the titles of minor, special purpose and supplemental award-types. This approach, pending the further development of the FETAC awards system, focused on higher education and training awards. The first option would see the use of the terms ‘Certificate’ and ‘Diploma’ at levels 6 to 10 and these would be distinguished by the volume of credit associated with each. The second would see the use of ‘Certificate’ at level 6 and the use of ‘Diploma’ at levels 7-10, thus a distinction based on levels. These options were considered by awarding bodies, but no consensus was reached and no further policy has since been determined on the issue. It is the aim of all awarding bodies to achieve a collective solution to this issue. At the time (2005), it was also recognised that work to include the sub-degrees and other non-major award-types of the universities in the Framework needed to be advanced before the titles issues could be fully resolved.
- The Authority established a policy approach to an overall Framework directory in summer 2004 and is working with stakeholders in implementing this. The idea behind this policy is that there would be a central repository of information on awards and on programmes leading to them. Users could be guided through the directory to detailed sources of information. Since then, moves have been undertaken to build on the major existing database, QualifaX, the National Learners’ Database. This is a “one stop shop” for learners, and is primarily used by those in the school system. In January 2008, QualifaX became part of the Authority. Work is on-going to further develop this database and its links to the Framework.
- A quality review of the Authority was commissioned by the Department of Education and Science, in association with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, and was conducted in 2007. This examined the effectiveness of the Authority both in meeting its statutory functions under the Qualifications Act, and in complying with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. With regard to the Framework, the external panel for the review noted that there was widespread support for the work of the Authority and asked the Department of Education and Science to consider ways in which the Authority might be used more actively as a lead body with government departments and agencies in promoting the existence and benefits of the framework. The Panel and the Authority’s self-evaluation report²⁷ highlighted key areas for further priority development: more active co-ordination and facilitation in progressing the Authority’s access, transfer and progression policies, particularly in regard to the development of streamlined progression pathways; accreditation of prior and work-based learning; more extensive

²⁷ The external panel report and the self evaluation report are available at http://www.nqai.ie/about_quality.html

use of minor, special purpose and supplemental awards, and implementation by providers of awards at Level 1 and 2 of the Framework.²⁸

The Authority's strategic plan (2008-2012), and its business plans 2008-2010, include actions to address the issues raised above.

4.3 Authority actions to communicate the Framework

In September/October 2002, prior to the launch of the Framework, Lansdowne Market Research was commissioned to undertake two surveys of learners and employers on their awareness of, and attitudes to, existing qualifications and awarding bodies. These surveys were published by the Authority on its website in January 2003. The purpose of the surveys was twofold: to benchmark awareness and attitudes; and to inform the introduction and implementation of the Framework. The findings indicated that 20% of adults surveyed claimed awareness of the Framework, with the highest level of awareness amongst the most affluent socio-economic group. 20% of employers claimed awareness of the Framework, with the highest level of awareness within the public sector. This headline finding was derived from a specific question within the section on "Knowledge of Awarding Bodies" which asked, "Have you ever heard of the National Framework of Qualifications?" It should be noted, however, that the survey was conducted one year prior to the formal launch of the Framework and all other questions related to knowledge of the existing qualifications system. This may have influenced the responses recorded for this specific question. Further details about the survey are contained in Appendix H.

In 2003, the Authority developed a communications strategy with the following four objectives: generating awareness of the Framework; delivering accurate and comprehensive information about the Framework; creating confidence in the Framework, and preparing the ground for successful Framework implementation. Different audiences were identified for particular messages. The aim was that the Councils and major national stakeholders would be directly involved in the communication strategy and the coordination of onward communications. A cascading approach was implemented. This involved the sequential targeting of identified audiences over three phases. The first phase identified awarding bodies and major stakeholders. The second phase addressed providers of education and training, representative bodies and the social partners. The third phase addressed learners, employers, schools and the public. The phases initially set out in the strategy were intended to cover the period March 2003 to the end of 2004. In practice, the strategy extended beyond this period.

In follow-up, a number of conferences and workshops have been organised by the Authority on various aspects of the Framework, with the participation of stakeholders associated with

²⁸ The review process consisted of the following main elements:

- Self-evaluation by the Qualifications Authority (incorporating consultation with stakeholders);
- Evaluation by a panel of experts, appointed by the commissioning Departments;
- Consideration of the report of the panel by the Qualifications Authority and the development of a plan by the Qualifications Authority to implement the recommendations in the report;
- Consideration of the review report and the Qualifications Authority's plans by the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment; and
- Publication of Review Outcomes.

the first and second phase of the Authority's communications strategy. The Authority has developed materials for use by guidance counsellors in second-level schools and careers advisors in higher education institutions, in order to assist them in communicating the Framework to learners. The Authority has also worked with FÁS and the Irish Universities Association to develop specific information booklets to communicate the introduction of the Framework and its impact on their environments. In addition, the Authority has responded to numerous requests from stakeholders to deliver presentations on the Framework to various groups across further and higher education and training.

In 2006, the Authority began the third phase of its strategy: the communication of the Framework to learners and employers, using the professional advice of an advertising and marketing company. A four-week media campaign ensued in October 2006, which consisted of newspaper advertisements and radio advertising, tailored to address learner and employer interests. The Authority commissioned Lansdowne Market research to benchmark awareness of the Framework among the general population before and after this marketing campaign. The findings indicated that the campaign was effective in increasing the awareness of the Framework from 13% to 18% (from the beginning to the end of the campaign); and that, in terms of socio-economic background, it was mainly those from higher income and professional socio-economic backgrounds who had heard of the Framework. In terms of age, the profile of awareness changed from higher awareness before the campaign amongst the younger age band (15-24 year old) to an increased awareness after the campaign especially among those aged 25-34. After the campaign, the main understanding of a qualification that is recognised by the Framework was that such a qualification "has met particular standards". The results of this survey are contained in Appendix E.²⁹

In late 2006, the Authority re-designed its Framework website and reorganised the information contained therein to address the information needs of learners, employers, providers and advisors. The Authority, from the outset, has also been aware of the need to promote and influence the cultural changes required for the Framework to be implemented successfully, for example, the adoption of learning outcomes as a basis for programme development and the enabling and implementation of credit accumulation processes. It has pursued this task by working with the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and by contributing to policy-making at a national level in areas of relevance. The Authority has also embarked on a national awareness campaign in collaboration with the Awards Councils. A series of three related television advertisements was broadcast in May 2008. In general, advertising and other aspects of Framework communications are developed in close cooperation with the Awards Councils.

4.4 Implementation of access, transfer and progression policies

The key areas of implementation for which the Authority has key responsibility are addressed below. See also section 6.3 below on impact of the Framework, which identifies broad issues

²⁹ A similar survey commissioned by FETAC, using the same methodology, includes a question asking about awareness of the Framework. Awareness levels increased from 18% in March 2005 to 27% in January 2008. The differences in levels of awareness of the Framework recorded in the 2003 and the 2006 surveys may be due to differences in methodology and sample size and so are not directly comparable.

that have emerged in relation to understanding, communicating and implementing these policies.

4.4.1 Cooperation with the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education

In relation to access (entry arrangements) to higher education and training, the Authority has worked closely with the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education,³⁰ first, in the development of its National Action Plan (published late 2004), and subsequently in the implementation of that Plan. Specific issues addressed have included, for example, access of adult learners to higher education. The Authority has also continued to consult with providers in relation to the policy approach established by the Authority and on the procedures that are to be implemented by providers.

4.4.2 Information for learners

The Authority has identified the need to have a wider and more learner-centred information base in relation to qualifications as an aid to learners. This would enable learners and prospective learners to identify access, transfer and progression opportunities. The Authority has been involved in a number of discussions at a national level with a view to meeting this objective. In this regard, in winter 2007, following a request from the Department of Education and Science, the Authority agreed with the Institute of Guidance Counsellors to take over responsibility for Qualifax with effect from January 2008.

4.4.3 Progression into higher education and training

The Authority, on behalf of itself, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities (now the Irish Universities Association) commissioned a study of transfer and progression into undergraduate programmes leading to university awards, completed in 2006. This was considered to be priority to enhance transfer and progression opportunities for learners.

The report examined transfer and progression for holders of FETAC or equivalent awards, HETAC or NCEA awards and UK vocational education and training awards into undergraduate programmes leading to Honours Bachelor Degree awards. The research shows that the numbers transferring from non-school leaver backgrounds to such programmes/universities are very low in comparison with those progressing on the basis of the Leaving Certificate. Based on available figures, the following picture emerges:

- 554 students progressing or transferring from further education and similar backgrounds in 2004/05: which, with some upward adjustment for those not captured by the methodology, is about 4% of first-time entrants;
- 630 students transferring or progressing from HETAC and similar backgrounds in 2004/05: less than 4% of entrants; and
- 24 students progressing or transferring from UK backgrounds: approximately 0.1% of entrants.³¹

³⁰ The Authority is represented on the Office's Advisory Board. Note that the Office has a broad remit in terms of access, which relates to under-represented groups in higher education and training.

³¹ Available at: http://www.nqai.ie/publication_access_NAME.html

4.4.4 Work to address main blockages to progression

In 2006/07, the operation of transfer and progression routes was discussed in meetings of the Consultative Group. Key blockages to access, transfer and progression were also identified as being the Leaving Certificate Applied, the Advanced Certificate and the Level 5 Certificate (see below).

In March 2007, the Authority executive produced a paper outlining the extent of implementation of transfer and progression policies. At that point, all of the major award-types defined for the Framework were available to learners. It is the case, however, that the FETAC system of awards from levels 1-6 was only then becoming operational, with a more detailed set of arrangements to be introduced over the next five years. It will be some time before the effects of this on progression arrangements are evident. The analysis of the extent of implementation, thus, could only relate to progression routes that were developed in relation to former awards that are now incorporated into new FETAC award-types. In March 2007, it was also the case that the identification at levels 8 and 9 of various sub-degree awards in the universities was not yet complete. Analysis of progression routes for these was based on current practice.

The executive paper noted a number of contextual factors that affected the operation of these progression routes, including the growth in modularisation in higher education and training; alignment of awards made by UK awarding bodies operating in Ireland with the Framework and the increased mobility of learners and workers into and out of Ireland. For the purposes of looking at the extent of implementation of progression routes, three groups of awards were examined in the paper:

1. Progression routes associated with State Examination Commission awards;
2. Progression within, and out of, the FETAC system of awards; and
3. Progression within higher education and training awards systems.

Typically, progression routes have been based on programme to programme articulation routes and inter-institutional arrangements rather than on prior qualifications achieved. There has been a strong progression channel from the Junior Certificate to Leaving Certificate, to Honours Bachelors Degree and onwards to Masters Degree and beyond. Framework policies aim to change the traditional situation to one where all awards have associated progression opportunities and where a learner achieving an award is, in principle, eligible to progress to a programme leading to another award at the next level of the framework.

The paper identified three routes which were to a certain extent blocked. These were:

- ***The Leaving Certificate:*** This progression route operates within the context of the Points System which essentially is a mechanism to regulate supply and demand for undergraduate places. It does not fully reflect the Framework understanding that entry requirements into programmes leading to Framework awards should be based on the requirements necessary for successful participation. Altering the Points System, however, is extremely difficult. The Authority and stakeholders have focused on alternative ways to address the issue. A further issue concerns the limited progression opportunities for holders of the leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) award. The latter is being taken up in the context of discussions amongst the bodies responsible for schools awards. In the development phase of the Framework, consideration was given

to developing a specific matriculation award-type for progression of adults to higher education and training (argued strongly for by Aontas, the national adult learning organisation), but alternative arguments held that the development of the FETAC awards/progression routes could address this. Since then, the opening up of access and broader programme provision has led to increased access for adult learners. The development of an alternative award has not been advanced.

- **The Level 5 Certificate:** Much progress has been made in relation to developing progression routes from Level 5 (FETAC) certificates to programmes in the institutes of technology (many of which build on traditional progression from the FETAC/NCVA level 2 Certificate). A points-rating protocol has been developed by the institutes of technology to enable this progression route to operate, in parallel to the Leaving Certificate route. Progression arrangements in respect of the universities are more limited, but have expanded in recent years. One area where there has not been a progression route is between the Level 5 Certificate and the Advanced Certificate (level 6) within the FETAC system. A wide range of awards are captured within the Advanced Certificate grouping, including those offered by Fáilte Ireland and Teagasc. The latter have well-established, operational progression routes between awards in the fields of learning they are responsible for at levels 6 and 7.
- **The Advanced Certificate (level 6):** This new award-type is in itself of varied size and is associated with programmes of widely varying size. It represents a wide range of awards, including the National Craft Certificate, made by previous awarding bodies (including FÁS and Fáilte Ireland). The issues that arise are that entry routes into programmes leading to the Advanced Certificate are generally confined to holders of the major schools awards (Junior or Leaving Certificate); and that those who wish to enter the Advanced Certificate Craft must have secured employment as apprentices. Progression from the Advanced Certificate to Ordinary Bachelor degree or to Honours Bachelor degree is generally problematic. In respect of the Advanced Certificates in the craft areas, where progression routes to higher levels are largely informal, it is difficult to ascertain what routes are available and how they operate.

The blockages outlined above generally involve progression between programmes leading to awards of one awarding body to those of another. It was considered that the issue in the past (pre-Framework) of progression from HETAC/NCEA sub-Honours Bachelor Degree awards to Honours Bachelor Degree awards was no longer a major issue as there are now extensive progression opportunities available within the institutes of technology for such award holders and further ones are being developed.

An overall finding of the paper was that traditional arrangements are gradually evolving to take account of the Framework and that, in some areas, it was too early to predict how new routes will operate.

The blockages in respect of the Advanced Certificate are being taken up in meetings with FÁS, the institutes of technology, the Dublin Institute of Technology, the HEA, FETAC and HETAC. It has been agreed, in order to assist learners and to encourage take up of the routes, to prepare a single publication on existing progression routes (currently being done by FETAC). Related to this, the Authority has liaised with a Strategic Innovation Fund project (led by Cork Institute of Technology), which involves a strand on progression arrangements for

craft persons. This involves case studies of current practice and a commitment to build on existing modules and programmes to develop further opportunities.

Overall, discussions on progression held to-date (July 2008) indicate that the significant issues which impact upon implementation of progression routes include the following:

- The range of size of awards within major award types, particularly FETAC major award types at levels 5 and 6, creates difficulties in developing systemic progression routes from these award-types to awards at higher levels;
- There is some questioning of the level of demand for all of the progression routes identified in the Authority's policies, and some disagreement on which routes should be the focus of attention;
- The relevance and applicability of some of the theory behind the Authority's policies on progression routes to providers is questioned. In particular, there is a need to clarify and simplify what is expected of providers in terms of access, transfer and progression;
- The need to focus on practical solutions to particular blockages;
- The impact of common content or common fields of learning on the availability of progression routes – the operation of routes is linked to the availability of programmes at different levels in the same or cognate fields of learning;
- The possible negative impact of different kinds of state funding for providers and of state supports for learners on the development and implementation of progression routes;
- The issue of programmes whose entry, in addition to meeting programme entry criteria, is exclusively through becoming employed (e.g., apprenticeships), and the question of how policies on access, transfer and progression could and should impact on these; and
- The use of the Points System as the key selection mechanism for entry from the Leaving Certificate into higher education and training.

4.5 Credit and the Framework

In March 2003, within the context of its overall policies on access, transfer and progression, the Authority developed principles and objectives for the development of a national approach to credit. The overall aim was to complement the Framework, support the attainment of awards, including the recognition of outcomes of smaller units of learning, and support for the recognition of prior learning. A national approach to credit would also support comparison with other credit systems and participation in European and international initiatives on credit.

The Authority established an expert advisory group in relation to credit. Its role was to assist the Authority in considering the possibilities for developing a system or systems for credit accumulation and transfer to complement the framework, and the appropriate roles of stakeholders in these. Given that credit systems and practice, generally based on ECTS, were already in operation in most higher education institutions in Ireland and that, in 2004, the integration of pre-existing awards systems and the development of new awards was a priority for the further education and training sector, it was decided (2004) to focus on developing a national approach to credit in higher education and training. FETAC, at the same time, was working to develop a common awards system for further education and training that would also incorporate credit.

In late 2004, principles and operational guidelines concerning credit in higher education and training were developed. These aim to complement the Framework, to facilitate credit accumulation and transfer across all sectors, facilitate the recognition of learning achievement in particular small units of learning, and enhance the recognition of prior learning. The guidelines are also consistent with ECTS. They set out principles to underpin credit systems (including clarity, simplicity, compatibility with ECTS, respect for the autonomy of stakeholders in designing their programmes and awards) and guidelines (concerning *inter alia* that credit is awarded only after appropriate assessment and the achievement of learning outcomes; a recommendation for the basis for credit and minimum volume of credit to be assigned at the level at which the award is made, and a typical range of credit for major-award types). It was also recommended that higher education institutions would provide clear information to learners about credit arrangements. The principles and guidelines are recommended to awarding bodies and providers to guide the development and implementation of credit.

In relation to further education and training, the Authority participated in the advisory group on credit set up by FETAC (October 2004). The Authority also contributed to the technical work on developing a credit system for vocational education and training at the European level (FETAC led consultations on the proposed ECVET system).

A strand of work related to credit concerns the inclusion of non-major awards made by universities in the framework. It was agreed, between the Authority and the universities, that the distinctions between the titles 'certificate' and 'diploma' in the naming of non-major awards should be made on the basis of the volume of credit associated with each award.³² Discussions on this suggest that the use of credit as a distinguishing characteristic of different award-types will need to be examined across the higher education and training sector as a whole in the future.

4.6 Progress regarding the inclusion and alignment of qualifications of professional and international awarding bodies

As at 1 May 2008, the following bodies have had their qualifications included in, or aligned with, the Framework:

Group A (Certain Irish bodies which make awards on a statutory basis)

- No qualifications in this category have been included in, or aligned with, the Framework to date.

Group B (Certain Irish bodies which regulate professions)

- In 2005, HETAC recognised the award of Associate of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ireland (ICAI) as equivalent to an award the Council might make at level 9 on the Framework. Note that this recognition was granted prior to the determination of the Authority's policies on inclusion and alignment.

³² It was agreed, as set out in an Authority discussion paper on the topic, that the word 'certificate' would be confined to awards with a credit weighting of less than 60 credits and that the word 'diploma' would be confined to awards of 60 or more credits or equivalent (see paper on implementation of the framework in the universities at http://www.nqai.ie/framework_policies_criteria.html).

- The learning outcomes associated with the professional qualification of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) were aligned with those at level 9 on the Framework. It should be noted, however, that the ACCA professional qualification is not equivalent to either of the two major award-types currently at level 9, i.e. the Masters Degree and the Postgraduate Diploma.

Group C (Certain bodies from outside the State which make awards in Ireland)

- Open University awards delivered in Ireland were aligned with the Framework on 20 February 2008.
- Scottish Qualifications Authority awards to be delivered in Ireland were aligned with the Framework on 20 February 2008.

A number of other awarding bodies operating in the further education and training sector have applied for alignment of their awards with the Framework. These bodies are regulated by a number of UK regulatory bodies including Ofqual (previously known as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), DCELLS and CCEA. Quality assurance provided by the above regulatory bodies did not extend into Ireland. As quality assurance is one of the underpinning requirements of alignment, awarding bodies regulated by the above regulatory bodies did not fulfil the alignment criteria. The regulatory bodies, therefore, put in place a pilot project to extend their quality assurance procedures into Ireland. This commenced in May 2008 and involves nine awarding bodies.

4.7 Quality assurance

At the outset of the development of the framework, and following consensus amongst all the major stakeholders, the Authority 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; 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 framework and its values, the Authority engages with all of these bodies and organisations in order to promote a consistent and internationally-recognised quality culture across the system. The existence of nationally-agreed quality assurance arrangements would underpin the utility and credibility of the Framework as a tool for comparing, contrasting and recognising qualifications, and for opening up diverse learning opportunities for prospective learners. It was understood that a level of implementation of the framework across the sectors was necessary before the framework would be directly referenced in quality assurance arrangements of institutions/providers. The Authority is currently looking at those quality assurance arrangements and at how it can put forward some overarching principles for how the Framework might feature in the quality assurance arrangements across the further education and training and the higher education and training sectors. The key features of those arrangements and their interaction with the framework are set out below. It is expected that further information and exploration of quality assurance and its linkage to the Framework is will be addressed in the sectoral reports that are part of the Framework Implementation and Impact Study. Linkages that have been established for the university sector as a whole are illustrated below with reference to the Irish Universities Quality Board.

4.7.1 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:

- The universities and their associated colleges;
- The institutes of technology and providers within the independent sector (HETAC sector); and
- The 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) in 2003, to which the Qualifications Authority acts as 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 Authority has worked collaboratively with all the principal national stakeholders 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 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. In May 2005, the IHEQN agreed principles of good practice for quality assurance / quality improvement in Irish higher education and training, which are compatible with the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education*. The principles incorporate the arrangements in each of the three separate systems for quality assurance in Irish higher education for:

- Internal assessment;
- External review; and
- 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 both informed and driven by international policy developments, particularly in relation to the Bologna Process. The emergence of overarching meta-frameworks; the Framework of Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area in 2005 and the European Framework of Qualifications for Lifelong Learning (EQF) in April 2008, 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 (see Section 6.3 below).

As part of these broader international quality assurance developments, the HETAC and the Authority have undergone external reviews and successfully demonstrated compliance with the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education*, and are members of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The Irish Universities Quality Board is currently undergoing a review in compliance with the European standards.

(a) Quality assurance arrangements within the HETAC sector

HETAC has responsibility for quality assurance for institutions within the HETAC sector. Its role includes monitoring institutional quality-assurance procedures, which have been established by institutions in agreement with HETAC. HETAC has used its powers under existing legislation [the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999] to delegate authority for making awards to individual institutes of technology; all of the institutes now have delegated authority to make awards to varying levels up to level 10, but all have power to awards up to, and including, the level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree. HETAC also validates programmes offered by other higher education institutions that lead to its awards.

The Qualifications (Education & Training) Act 1999 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 for five fields of learning – Art and Design, Business, Computing, Engineering and Science.

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 ensuring academic and financial protection for students in commercial, educational institutions providing programmes validated by HETAC. HETAC also has responsibility for reviewing the effectiveness of established institutional procedures through institutional review. The Council adopted a new policy on institutional review of providers of higher education and training in December 2007. This replaces the *Criteria and Process for Reviewing the Effectiveness of Quality Assurance Procedures in Higher Education and Training*, adopted in June 2005. The Council will implement this policy in 2008, beginning with training reviewers and developing further guidelines to supports institutions undergoing review, and commencing review visits in autumn 2008.

(b) Quality assurance arrangements within the university sector

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, quality-assurance reviews at least once every ten years. The 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 [Education & Training] Act, 1999 section 40(5)).³³ The Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) was established by the universities in order to increase the level of inter-university co-operation in developing quality-assurance procedures and processes, in line with best international practice and in order to facilitate the conduct of reviews of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures and their outcomes. The IUQB and the Irish Universities Association (IUA) published an updated *Framework for Quality in Irish Universities* in October 2007. 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 review of quality assurance in Irish universities undertaken by the European University Association Institutional Evaluation Programme (EUA IEP) in 2004-05.

In October 2007, the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB), both members of the IHEQN, published *A Framework for Quality in Irish Universities: concerted action for institutional improvement*.³⁴ With regard to compliance of Irish universities with European standards and guidelines (agreed in 2005), 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, “details of programmes and modules, 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 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).

The IUQB is currently undergoing a review process, commissioned by the HEA, in order to evaluate its compliance with the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*.

(c) Quality assurance arrangements in the Dublin Institute of Technology

The Authority exercises certain functions in relation to the quality assurance procedures of the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). Under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, 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.

³³ The Qualifications Authority will acquire additional quality assurance functions with regard to any new universities that may be established under Section 9 of the Universities Act, 1997 (Qualifications [Education & Training] Act, 1999).

³⁴ Available at: http://www.iuqb.ie/info/iuqb_publications.aspx?article=174bd944-3893-4a53-84a1-a438a2fdedd8

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 Authority on an annual basis, and recommendations are made as appropriate. 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 and 2006-7. The agreed approach is kept under review by the 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 (www.nqai.ie/award_dit_rev.html). 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. Thus, the Authority endeavours to be supportive of the Institute's efforts to further develop its own internal quality culture and to add value at an appropriate overarching level.

4.7.2 Quality assurance arrangements in further education and training

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.

The Qualifications (Education & Training) Act 1999 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 will also monitor and evaluate the quality of programmes. 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. Provider registration is the agreement by FETAC that a provider can offer to learners, programmes leading to FETAC awards on the Framework. FETAC has published Guidelines on Provider Quality Assurance, *Quality Assurance in Further Education and Training: Policy and Guidelines for Providers*.

FETAC led the development of a common quality assurance framework for vocational education and training at European level (within the context of the Copenhagen process – Section 6.2 below) and, following that, the development of a European network of quality assurance agencies – ENQA-VET. In 2007, as part of a quality review of FETAC, compliance of FETAC with the common quality assurance framework was verified.

4.7.3 Quality assurance arrangements in schools

Within the Department of Education and Science, the School Inspectorate has a statutory quality assurance obligation in relation to educational provision, as set out in Section 13 of the Education Act, 1998. The Act defines the functions of an inspector in his / her dealings with teachers, schools and school management, and outlines the duty of the Inspectorate in advising the Minister for Education and Science. Section 13 defines the main functions of the Inspectorate, which may be categorised broadly as the evaluation of the education system (particularly at primary and second level); the provision of advice to the education system, and contributing to the formulation of education policy. To-date, the Framework has not impacted directly on these arrangements, nor was it expected to.

4.8 Analysis and summary of key issues

The Authority's overall approach is to support implementation by awarding bodies and providers, and to take a lead role in addressing particular cross-sectoral or overarching issues. One of the important cross-cutting areas is that of quality assurance, where separate systems operate in each of the sectors. In higher education and training, in particular, national and international developments have combined to bring about increased co-operation between the main stakeholders, and the increased referencing of the Framework in quality assurance policy and practice. The underlying arrangements within each sector, from registration of providers to programme validation and standard setting, are increasingly linked to the Framework. The work of the IUQB, noted above, indicates that this is 'work in progress' for that sector. One of the cross-cutting issues to emerge is that of building confidence within and across each sector. This has not been explicitly articulated in policy documents/debates, but is more subliminal in nature. The work of the Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN) contributes to confidence building in the higher education and training sector as a whole. The development of quality assurance arrangements in FETAC likewise contributes to building confidence in its awards. The alignment of awards of other awarding bodies to the Framework (professional and international bodies) also indicates that the quality of these awards is comparable with those offered by awarding bodies in the Framework. It is expected that the sectoral reports that will contribute to the Framework Implementation and Impact Study will address quality assurance arrangements and issues in more detail.

All current and legacy awards made by HETAC and FETAC are now in the Framework, as are those of the DIT, and all major-awards made by the universities. A key issue for the Authority (July 2008) is to conclude the process of including all university awards in the Framework (i.e., non-major and major Diploma awards) and, in due course, to include legacy university awards. The process of including current university awards in the Framework is nearing completion. An outstanding challenge for implementation of current awards is to achieve consistency and coherence in the use of award-titles, particularly in relation to non-major awards. There are particular difficulties in accessing appropriate material to determine the level at which older legacy awards (i.e. dating from the 1970s or earlier) are included in the Framework. Their inclusion can have important implications for progression in the workplace, as well as in education and training.

In relation to access, transfer and progression, a number of key blockages in relation to the Leaving Certificate, FETAC level 5 awards and the Advanced Certificate are being addressed

by the Authority with stakeholders. Here, one of the tasks is to promote wider awareness amongst learners of existing progression routes and enhance the effectiveness of these routes.

Progress has also been made with regard to the inclusion of awards made by professional and international bodies in the Framework. Key awards made by the professional accountancy bodies, ACCA (Associate) and ICAI (professional qualification) have been aligned with the Framework. Up to May 2008, the awards of the Open University and the Scottish Qualifications Authority have been aligned with the Framework. Ways have been found to address a key concern that quality assurance arrangements of these bodies and their awards are robust, and to ensure that Framework standards are achieved. In practice, as illustrated by the work with UK bodies, quality assurance arrangements of those bodies must 'travel' from the frameworks in place in the host jurisdiction to Ireland. A pilot project is underway to facilitate the extension of the quality assurance arrangements of a number of UK vocational education and training awarding bodies to Ireland.

Communicating the Framework to users and learners, and the promotion of its use in different contexts, is recognised by the Authority as being central to effective implementation. Work in this area includes ensuring accurate and appropriate referencing of the Framework in programme and qualifications documentation; awareness campaigns; developing information/communication tools and contributing to relevant areas of national policy. A phased approach to communications has been taken, with the initial emphasis on awarding bodies; then providers, representative bodies and social partners; and then, from 2006 onwards, learners, employers and the general public. This remains a key area of work for the Authority, working closely with the Awards Councils.

5 IMPACT OF THE FRAMEWORK AND ACCESS, TRANSFER AND PROGRESSION POLICIES

This section looks at the impact of the Framework in key areas in which, in the early years at least, it was expected to bring about changes in the policy and practice of awarding bodies and providers, as well as to impact on education and training policy in general. The focus here is on areas in which the Authority expected change to occur by 2008 and on areas in which it has been active. They are learning outcomes and assessment, access, transfer and progression, public policy and funding, the economy and labour market and guidance and dissemination of information on the Framework.

5.1 Learning outcomes and assessment

The widespread recognition and emerging use of the concept of learning outcomes in Irish education and training is inextricably linked to the development of the Framework. Each level of the Framework is defined by a set of learning outcomes that are expected of a learner who is to receive an award at that level. The overall standards for awards are established through the level indicators and the award-type descriptors. Through these, and in line with the Qualifications Act, 1999, the Authority sets overall standards for the awards of the FETAC, HETAC and the DIT. The universities and the schools sectors, on the other hand, are not subject to the same requirement, but as outlined in section 3.3 above have undertaken to implement the Framework. The Authority has no direct role in setting standards for awards (beyond supporting the maintenance and improvement of standards through the framework) or in assessment: these are matters for the awarding bodies and providers.

It is the responsibility of awarding bodies to develop named awards – that is, the awards that learners receive for achievement in a specific field of learning. As a result, the standards of awards are expressed increasingly in terms of framework learning outcomes. Following on from this, education and training providers are increasingly describing the learning associated with their programmes and the component modules within these programmes in terms of the standards to be achieved, i.e. as learning outcomes, rather than in terms of the inputs and processes associated with the learning.

A major development in this regard, in 2003, was the revalidation of all programmes leading to awards of HETAC against the Framework learning outcomes and award-type descriptors. HETAC has since developed new standards in a number of disciplines. FETAC initially operated the procedures and processes of the former awarding bodies in its sector. Since 2004, following consultation with stakeholders, it introduced new processes for developing standards. The DIT has also re-designed its programmes and modules to align them with Framework learning outcomes. In the university sector, some individual institutions have recently advanced with a broad shift to learning outcomes, and such issues are being explored in the university-sector Framework Implementation Network. The Authority has not been prescriptive in terms of how individual education and training providers should set about translating the Framework level indicators and award-type descriptors into programmes, nor about aligning assessment methods. It has been the Authority's position that these are questions best addressed by awarding bodies and providers, but it is committed to supporting

them in this process and in the development of common approaches to these and related issues.

In this regard, the Authority and the Irish Universities Association established the university-sector Framework Implementation Network in 2007 with the aim of assisting institutions, both on an individual and collective basis, in the implementation of the operational and academic changes arising from the introduction of the Framework. Each university was invited to nominate two members to the network; a member of the registrar's office who deals with technical issues such as award-types, validation and inclusion of awards in the framework; and another with a lead role in promoting innovation in teaching and learning. A single representative from each associated college of each universities, with an involvement in one or both of the areas identified above, was similarly invited to participate in the network. The network provides an opportunity for members to share implementation experiences and issues arising and to develop, where appropriate, consistent approaches to practice. The network provides a forum for discussion, the dissemination of good practice and the development of common practices in relation to Framework implementation, use, and related issues. The network has convened working groups to explore and address issues around the design of discipline-specific learning outcomes, working with Framework levels and sub-strands, and the design of assessment methods that enable the demonstration of learning outcome attainment.

In a number of areas, particularly where the need for an integrated set of awards across further and higher education and training is needed, and where there is no single body to take the work forward, the Authority and Awards Councils cooperate to develop approaches to standard setting, for example, in childcare, management and financial services. Cross-sectoral work has been undertaken in the fields of engineering, nursing and childcare.

5.2 Access, transfer and progression

It was anticipated by the Authority that it would take some time before the full impact of its policies on access, transfer and progression would take effect. The implementation of the Framework (award-types, shift to learning outcomes and use of all award-types) also matters in this context. Nonetheless, the initial impact of access, transfer and progression policies is visible; there is increased diversity in arrangements for access, transfer and progression for learners, as illustrated in the examples below:

- There is broad access to programmes in institutes of technology for holders of certain FETAC awards³⁵;
- There is increasing use of a diversity of awards for entry to university programmes; and
- Progression routes for the Advanced Certificate (level 6) are under development since winter 2007.

Increased information is also available to learners about such diverse arrangements and this is generally set out in Framework terms. Other examples of framework referencing are:

- The use of Framework level designations in Central Applications Office (CAO) documentation;
- The use of Framework level designations and other Framework references in the prospectuses of higher education institutions; and

³⁵For more details, see sectoral report from FETAC and <http://www.fetac.ie/hels/default.htm>

- The use of Framework materials by guidance practitioners.

To-date, there are few available indicators of impact of access, transfer and progression policies (see Appendix H on main sources of statistics). There are few system-wide statistics on key issues, such as

- a) non-Leaving Certificate entry routes of learners;
- b) progression by holders of qualifications to other qualifications/levels;
- c) pathways into higher education and training (which largely operate on an institutional basis); and
- d) achievement record of learners on programmes leading to different qualifications.

It is likely that some institutions/providers have data relating to their settings. Ad hoc reports and periodical surveys address some of the issues. Beyond the availability of statistics, there is the question of identifying the extent to which, if any, the Framework and access, transfer and progression policies impact on the development and use of pathways. Key influences on these include supply/demand for programmes/places, funding arrangements for providers and financial supports for learners. The joint study of progression routes into university awards (2007, see section 4 above) provides a useful baseline from which progress can be subsequently measured. The Authority executive paper on progression routes (2007, see section 4, above) identified some of the factors that impinge on both the development and use of progression routes, as well as identifying key routes that are currently blocked. An overall finding of the paper was that traditional arrangements are gradually evolving to take account of the Framework and that in some areas it is too early to predict how new routes will operate.

Some indicators of impact can be taken from the quality review of the Authority (2007). The extent to which stakeholders have a positive view on the effectiveness of the policies of the Authority on access, transfer and progression for learners was indicated in the review. The review process established through its online survey that 84% of respondents agreed strongly or slightly that the work of the Authority had helped to increase the diversity of access, transfer and progression arrangements, and the same percentage of respondents agreed that it had contributed to national debate on issues relevant to this policy area. Only 4% and 2% disagreed with these statements respectively.³⁶

On the increased availability of information for learners about diverse access, transfer and progression arrangements, 77% of respondents agreed that there was more information available, while 2% of respondents indicated that they disagreed. A number of submissions to the review suggested that the public is not often aware of the access, transfer and progression opportunities available and that more information is needed for learners. Notwithstanding technical complexities, it was also suggested that the Authority's message on access, transfer and progression was not as clear as its Framework message. One result of this, it was suggested, was that the 'break through' impact of the policies and procedures on access, transfer and progression has not been as pronounced as that of the Framework.

Overall, the quality review found that there was a general recognition amongst stakeholders that there was still much to be done by the Authority, in partnership with the awarding bodies and providers of education and training. It was suggested that some of the issues to be resolved were not in the gift of the Authority and that the commitment of other stakeholders,

³⁶ Authority's self evaluation report, p.25 (available at www.ngai.ie)

particularly providers, would be required. The need to address some apparent contradictions in the state's overall policy approaches on access, transfer and progression matters was seen by some as an obstacle to speedy implementation. These contradictions relate to fees charged for part-time participation, but not for full-time undergraduate higher education and training; lack of direct access, or systematic access, from further education and training qualifications to higher education and training (compared to the Leaving Certificate Established); limitations on places made available to those seeking entry on the basis of further education and training qualifications, and difficulties for those who have not attained the required Leaving Certificate outcomes, and who are not mature students (age 23 and over) in accessing higher education and training. Note that mature students frequently are accepted onto reserved places on the basis of age alone but there is a limit on the number of places available to them.

An overall conclusion of the Authority's self evaluation report above was that there needs to be greater clarity about the access, transfer and progression policies and, in particular, the roles of providers and awarding bodies in their implementation. The external panel for the quality review endorsed the Authority's view that stakeholders were in favour of the Authority becoming more active in the coordination, facilitation and implementation of its policies and procedures on access, transfer and progression. The panel further suggested that the Authority should be more vigorous in its leadership in that regard. This would include providing clarification of the roles of the stakeholders involved in implementing policies; greater simplification of its messages, and further publicising and encouraging the removal of 'road blocks' to progression at various points in the Framework. The Authority agreed that clarification of roles, simplicity of messages and improved information for learners are core issues. It considers that it has already identified three key obstacles to progression within the Framework and has initiated discussions to alleviate them. It recognises that it will be necessary to adopt a strong and vigorous leadership role in order to achieve progress and to fully realise its policy objectives. It also noted that the then upcoming study of the impact and implementation of the Framework would offer a further opportunity to explore implementation in this area.

Since 2007, as indicated in the previous section, the Authority is working with stakeholders to address the main blockages, and is developing user guides to increase awareness and understanding. FETAC is working to publish information on existing progression routes concerning crafts.

5.3 Public policy and funding of education and training

The Authority has worked with the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment on policy issues that are relevant to the Framework and access, transfer and progression. It has also worked with government agencies, including the Higher Education Authority (HEA), and key national bodies involved in funding education and training (Skillnets, FÁS). The Authority's aim has been to create a culture of lifelong learning to support the qualifications system and implementation of the Framework; to introduce supports and remove obstacles to change; and engage with international partners. In this work, the Authority has acted as broker between different bodies and policy areas. Actions include contributing to policy-making at national level; participation in, and establishment and support of, national and sectoral coordinating; and developing group participation in debate

and discourse on issues relevant to qualifications and to access, transfer and progression, including the organisation of conferences, seminars and workshops.

The use of qualifications or Framework levels in policy highlights inconsistencies in some existing funding mechanisms which were designed to meet a traditional hierarchical, largely full-time, model of provision and participation. This can be at odds with a lifelong learning model that involves more diverse modes of provision, modularisation and a diverse learner community. Some funding arrangements may hinder the effective or full implementation of the Framework, whether in relation to access to certification arrangements, by providers, or learner participation in programmes leading to framework qualifications. In relation to the use of the Framework to guide public funding, it is noted that certain key concepts like 'access' and 'progression' may be interpreted differently in the context of the framework and in the context of public policy. This can also create difficulties.

The Framework has also shown a need for greater coherence in policy development and implementation in a number of areas, notably the National Skills Strategy (2007). Achieving the targets of the strategy requires the enactment of a range of measures from enabling individuals to place themselves on the Framework, to developing appropriate qualifications, and developing programmes and pathways to qualifications. Integrated approaches by government departments, agencies and stakeholders in the qualifications system are needed to achieve these. Prior to the National Skills Strategy, the potential role of the Framework in relation to the workforce was signalled in the 2004 report of the Enterprise Strategy Group. This report envisaged the Framework as facilitating the One Step Up initiative to upskill the workforce. The report of the Forum on the Workplace of the Future (2005) viewed the Framework as an important step forward in promoting a more integrated approach to work-related learning.³⁷

5.3.1 The Framework in the economy and labour market

The National Development Plan, 2007-2013, identifies the potential of the Framework to facilitate access to, and flexibility of delivery within, education; to help deliver the National Skills Strategy; facilitate international recognition and mobility, as well as to contribute to all-island co-operation in education and training.

The Framework is also vital to the delivery of a number of goals set out in *Towards 2016*, the 10-year Framework Social Partnership Agreement, 2006-2015:

- to increasing participation in lifelong learning, in particular amongst disadvantaged groups and those with low-skills in the workforce;
- to widening participation in, and increasing progression to, higher education and the acquisition of recognised qualifications;
- to developing flexible pathways through the education system; and
- to ensuring quality standards in education and training.³⁸

³⁷ The Authority executive has briefed the High Level Implementation Group on the national workplace strategy which emanated from the Forum (see <http://www.ncpp.ie/>)

³⁸ The orientation of the work of the Authority to place the individual at the centre of the qualifications system is also in keeping with the thrust of the lifecycle approach (which places the individual the centre of policy development and delivery) that underpins *Towards 2016*).

The *National Skills Strategy*, March 2007, has the broad aim of upskilling the workforce and creating a well-educated and highly-skilled population to meet future economic and societal needs. The strategy uses the Framework to set targets for upskilling and achievement in education and training. Its key proposals are that by 2020:

- 48 percent of the labour force should have qualifications at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Levels 6 to 10 - from Higher Certificate to PhD level;
- 45 percent should have qualifications at NFQ levels 4 and 5 - awards equivalent to Leaving Certificate Examination;
- The remaining seven percent are likely to have qualifications at NFQ levels 1 to 3 (i.e. below Junior Certificate) while aiming to transition to higher levels;
- An additional 500,000 individuals within the workforce will need to be upskilled and to progress by at least one NFQ level over and above their current level of education and training;
- The Leaving Certificate retention rate for young people should rise to 90 percent;
- The proportion of the population aged 20-24 with NFQ level 4 or 5 qualification (Leaving Certificate or equivalent), should be increased to 94 percent; and
- The progression from second to third-level education should increase from 55 percent to 72 percent.

A key implication of the strategy, from a Framework perspective, is that without identifying the Framework level of the qualifications held by individuals or to which they are working, it will be very difficult to estimate whether these targets are being achieved. In addition, provision that is not linked to such qualifications does not generally have the progression and transparency associated with Framework qualifications and its quality may not be assured. An important means to address these issues is to link public funding to qualifications that are in the Framework.

One of the major state-sponsored mechanisms to achieve this is the One-Step-Up initiative, funded by FÁS (the national employment and training authority).³⁹ Skillnets, an enterprise-led support body whose mission is to enhance the skills of people in employment, also plays a large role in funding programmes leading to Framework qualifications. The Authority has sought to develop a coherent approach amongst the relevant policy advisory bodies, departments and agencies in the implementation of the One Step Up initiative and other issues arising from the skills strategy. Regular meetings amongst the key bodies have been held in order to address these issues since mid-2007. There are a number of strands to this work:

- Linking, insofar as is possible, public funding of education and training under the One Step Up initiative to qualifications that are in the Framework, with the overall objective of enhancing the transferability and transparency of learning achieved. In 2007, it was estimated that less than 50% of education and training funded by FÁS and Skillnets led to awards in the Framework. Within this, the training programmes which FÁS does not provide itself, but funds are increasingly linked to the HETAC or FETAC awards.
- Developing a support service for small providers to access the certification services (including quality assurance, programme validation, assessment) of the Awards Councils. Such support is available in the VEC sector, but is not generally available to

³⁹ In 2007, FÁS had a budget of €39m for One Step Up. It both provides and funds education and training.

other small providers. Discussions on ways to address this have been advanced with the main stakeholders and departments in 2008; and

- Aligning UK vocational education and training qualifications with Irish qualifications.

5.3.2 Public funding of education and training

The majority of state-funded providers of further and higher education and training, such as the vocational education committees (VECs), the institutes of technology and FÁS, are seeking to ensure that all of the programmes that they provide, or fund, lead to awards of the HETAC or FETAC, or are made under authority delegated by the Awards Councils. This reflects the requirement set out in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, 15 and 25, that all recognised institutions, previous awarding bodies (FÁS, CERT, Teagasc, Bord lascaigh Mhara), educational and training institutions established and maintained by vocational education committees, or schools providing post-primary education will, in general, provide, organise or procure programmes validated by either of the Awards Councils i.e. they must lead to Council awards (other than those that are provided as recreational or leisure activities). As indicated above, in relation to FÁS, there are some difficulties in moving to this situation. In practice, a number of providers continue to offer programmes leading to awards of bodies other than the Councils e.g. Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas made by UK awarding bodies. This requirement, potentially, has implications for continued public funding of such programmes. One option for the providers/awarding bodies is to seek to have the relevant awards made jointly with the appropriate Council.⁴⁰

Other areas in which the Framework impacts on public funding include *inter alia* student supports and the funding of higher education and training. Actions in this regard are outlined below:

(a) **Student support**

State supports for participation of students in education and training programmes require that eligible courses/programmes be identified. The Student Support Bill (2008),⁴¹ February 2008, sets out a single statutory basis for all student grants in place of the four existing schemes. Students must undertake approved courses to be eligible for support. Section 9 of the Bill defines an approved course, and states that the Minister is to have regard to whether a course leads to a recognised qualification (defined in terms of the Framework within Ireland, and in parallel terms for qualifications pursued outside of Ireland) in prescribing a course for support purposes.

(b) **Funding structures for higher education and training**

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is developing a new strategic, performance-based model of funding for Irish universities, the institutes of technology and the Dublin Institute of

⁴⁰ There are exceptions to this – a) where providers have delegated authority from the Councils to make awards; and b) where the pre-existing arrangements of recognised institutions could operate for up to five years after the introduction of the Act (with the agreement of the Authority and the relevant Council).

⁴¹ Accessible from:

<http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?maincat=&pcategory=10861&ecategory=10876§ionpage=12251&language=EN&link=link001&page=1&doc=39395>

Technology, with *inter alia* the direct aim of ensuring that institutional strategies are aligned with national priorities. It envisages that an element of the overall core annual recurrent grant will be earmarked to promote strategic, long-term planning and achievement of objectives within institutions. In its proposals for the model, set out in January 2008 as a basis for consultation with stakeholders, the key goals for the sector are identified as quality of teaching and learning; equity of access; research outcomes; meeting specific skills needs and lifelong learning. Under the quality of teaching and learning heading, there is specific reference to the development of a learning outcomes approach in the context of the Framework. It is proposed that higher education institutions will have to demonstrate that they:

- Have written overarching programme descriptors for named awards and aligned them with the award descriptors of the Framework – in Framework terms, the programmes should lead to major, minor and special purpose or supplemental awards;
- Have written module / course / unit descriptors in a manner consistent with the overarching descriptors; and
- Have allocated ECTS to programmes in a manner that conforms to the agreed principles and operational guidelines for a national approach to credit in higher education established by the Authority.

The HEA is currently consulting on the new model.

The Framework is also the focus of a number of projects funded by the HEA under the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF), successor to the Strategic Initiatives Scheme begun in 1996. Two of the Fund's objectives concerning access and participation, and teaching and learning relate to the Framework. Under Cycle 1, funding was also provided for Framework relevant projects, including one on the recognition of prior learning (see Section 5.2.2) and progression for crafts persons.⁴² Under SIF Cycle 2, announced in April 2008, a number of projects are of relevance to the Framework. Some of these explicitly address the Framework. For example, funding has been given for a project focused on *A Work-Based Learning approach to progression for craft persons on the National Framework of Qualifications*. This project will address the needs of craft persons progressing to Level 7 and 8 on the Framework, in a manner which suits their learning styles. The proposal asserts that there are over 28,000 craft apprentices currently registered and tens of thousands of craft persons in the workforce, qualified at Level 6. The institutes of technology, with FÁS, provide apprenticeship training and acknowledge their statutory obligation to provide for progression beyond the narrow base of providing a licence to practice. A second example is that of the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT), in collaboration with National University of Ireland, Galway, which has been allocated funding for a project strand to examine the practical implementation of the Framework in the two institutions, and its impact on curriculum reform and quality assurance, with a view to developing a model for continuous curriculum development.⁴³

⁴² For a discussion on the issue of progression for crafts persons see Section 5.2

⁴³ For further information, please see:

<http://www.heai.ie/files/files/file/archive/policy/2006/SIF%20II%20programmes.doc>

5.3.3 Framework qualifications and recruitment

The Authority, in seeking to advance a more coherent approach to the use of qualifications in recruitment in the public sector, established an advisory group with representatives of awarding bodies. It was felt that it would be helpful to explore and address issues arising with a large employer and one in which there was significant coherence in recruitment practices. The advisory group produced a policy paper in August 2007 which formed the basis of discussions with the Public Appointments Service, undertaken in October 2007. The issues that arose (some of which pre-date the Framework) included ambiguity of terms used in relation to qualifications, e.g., 'primary degree', use of award classifications and use of a set of qualifications without regard for equivalents. These can lead to inconsistencies and ambiguity in the use of qualifications for recruitment. Agreement was reached with the Public Appointments Service on a set of guidelines and principles of good practice in the use of qualifications as one way to address these issues. In addition, agreement was reached to review a sample range of job specifications and to pilot a number of recruitment campaigns. A mapping exercise has since been carried out to test the feasibility, practicalities and implications of the guidelines. Following this, the general issues that arise in using the Framework will be addressed with the appropriate bodies and Departments. The awareness of senior staff within bodies such as the Public Appointments Service and the Health Services Executive of the benefits of appropriate use of the Framework demonstrates the significant impact that the Framework may have on recruitment practice and on the wider implementation and understanding of the Framework. The Authority receives many queries from job applicants and public sector recruiters in relation to competition requirements, the value of Irish qualifications (existing and legacy), as well as international qualifications.

Private recruitment agencies were also identified as an important target audience for growing awareness of the Framework and the recognition service of the Authority. From late 2007 to March 2008, 100 recruitment agencies were prioritised from a list of 600 for telephone contact to raise awareness of the work of the Authority. Agencies were offered relevant publications, in addition to a briefing session for their staff. A further 500 agencies were e-mailed with relevant publications, and an invitation to request a briefing session if desired. Of those agencies contacted by phone at that time, the Authority Executive noted confusion and limited awareness of the Framework and of services provided by the Authority. Recruiters welcomed the information provided and appreciated the contact made but only a limited number of briefing sessions have been requested to date (July 2008). Of those provided, the response has been very positive. The Authority will continue to seek ways to work with this audience as one element of the strategy to engage more widely with employers, employees and the general public.

One of the major issues to arise in the use of the framework in recruitment is that of the placement of qualifications which are used as a determinant for recruitment or assessment of salary in the Framework. The level at which specific qualifications, such as legacy awards issued to teachers and nurses, are placed may have a direct resource implication for organisations where such placement alters the previous understanding of what those qualifications related to or level they were deemed to be at. This issue may be of greater relevance in newly regulated professions or areas of work, where qualifications become a requirement for entry/practice.

5.4 The Framework and the social partners

As part of its consultation process during the development of the framework, the Authority engaged with social partners, including unions and the community and voluntary sectors. Social partner representatives are members of the Authority and of the Awards Councils. They have also participated in the Consultative Group (referenced in Section 1.3.1).

With the development of the framework progressing well, the need to consider the recognition of qualifications gained abroad was recognised. A Recognition Advisory Group was established in May 2003 to inform the development of a national policy concerning the recognition of international awards. Representatives to the group included the Awards Councils and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. The work of this group led to the publication of a "*Policy Approach to the Recognition of International Awards in Ireland*", published in June 2004.

There is currently no mechanism to formally measure the impact of the Framework among the social partners. Potential indicators are the engagement of the social partners in standard setting activities of awarding bodies, the volume of in-company training that leads to Framework awards and use by employers in particular of the recognition service of the Authority. In the January 2003 survey of employers conducted by the Authority (see section 4.1.2), employers considered that it is important to have recognised qualifications for in-company training. The survey noted that just over one in four employers actually had in-company training schemes which were certified by a recognised awarding body. Discussions relating to in-company training have continued. Specific challenges were identified relating to the access to the process for developing standards; assessment arrangements; and quality assurance mechanisms. The feasibility of a service to support providers of in-company training is being considered in discussions between the Councils, FÁS, the Authority and other stakeholders.

Engagement with the social partners has increasingly centred on specific issues relating to recognition of qualifications gained abroad either by Irish people, or most commonly by non-nationals seeking recognition of their qualifications in Ireland in order to pursue further study or enter employment. The Authority responds to requests from the social partners and regularly provides briefings and supporting materials on the framework and the qualifications recognition service. There is some evidence to indicate that various partners are aware of the Framework and that they know that the Authority is the appropriate national body with which to discuss issues relating to foreign qualifications. References to the Framework are increasingly evident in recruitment campaigns, particularly in the public sector. Holders of Irish legacy awards often contact the Authority for clarification of how their awards relate to the Framework, in order to access employment opportunities. There has been a significant increase in the number of such queries, particularly since the end of 2007.

Engagement with the social partners in a manner which they view as directly beneficial has proved challenging, particularly within the voluntary sector. HETAC and FTEAC both have mechanisms and plan to strengthen this engagement. In February 2008, the Authority held an information event in partnership with the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism to promote the qualifications recognition service of the Authority and plans are being made to increase awareness of this service amongst refugee and other minority groups.

5.5 Guidance and information on the Framework

The Authority has developed materials for use by guidance counsellors in second level schools and careers advisors in higher education institutions in order to assist them in communicating the Framework to learners. There has been significant engagement with the Institute of Guidance Counsellors. The Institute is the professional body representing over 1200 practitioners in second level schools, third level colleges, adult guidance services, private practice and in other settings. Until December 2007, the Institute held responsibility for QualifaX, the national learners' course database. Discussions with the Authority have occurred since 2005 to ensure that the Framework is accurately reflected in QualifaX. This led to the inclusion in QualifaX materials and QualifaX website of briefing information on the Framework itself, and explicit identification of programmes leading to awards included in the Framework.

Following discussions with the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, and at the request of the Department of Education and Science, QualifaX became part of the Authority from January 2008. The Authority has established two groups to inform the future development of QualifaX: an Advisory Group, with representatives of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors; and a Consultative Group, with representatives of all national stakeholders. Initial meetings of each group took place in April 2008.

In addition to the above, the Authority is working with the Employment Services Unit of FÁS, which provides guidance to those employed and seeking employment, to develop and promote awareness and use of the Framework. FÁS is also engaged in the further development of QualifaX.

5.6 Analysis and summary of key issues

The framework is increasingly impacting on the overall structures for education and training – from quality assurance, to standard setting and funding arrangements. This can have significant implications for existing practice. From the Authority's perspective, it appears that the Framework has had a limited impact to date on the widespread and effective use of learning outcomes within the education and training system. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the use of learning outcomes is contested in some sectors and amongst some providers. The link between them and assessment also appears to be at the early stages of exploration. The awarding bodies (including, in the HETAC sector, institutes of technology with delegated authority to make awards) have principal responsibility for these issues. The Authority is exploring these issues with universities and their associated colleges, in recognition of the absence of a single overarching awarding body for this sector. Achieving greater use of learning outcomes and aligning them with assessment practice will, in many instances, require developmental work on new methodologies and a cultural shift for many providers and awarding bodies.

The impact of the access, transfer and progression policies on access and progression for learners is difficult to measure. There is no integrated set of statistics for learner participation in education and training across the system as a whole or for transfer and progression across sectors. Discrete studies have identified some of the key blockages and factors that impinge on the take-up of progression routes by learners. In general, it appears that arrangements are gradually evolving to take account of new policies, but that to-date, these have not reached a

'break-through' point. A number of factors outside the Framework impact on progression (e.g., demographics, high rates of school leaver participation in higher education and training, and employment opportunities.). Greater awareness and understanding of existing opportunities, continued action to tackle blockages, as well as greater clarity amongst awarding bodies and providers of their responsibilities and roles is necessary. It is of note that the Framework is increasingly referenced in information material for prospective learners (prospectuses, CAO applications process).

In the area of guidance, it appears that students in second-level schools are generally aware of the Framework (through the work of guidance counsellors, QualifaX and the referencing of the Framework in the CAO applications process for higher education and training). The Authority has identified continued work with guidance counsellors, the development of QualifaX and cooperation with FÁS, in its guidance role with the employed and unemployed, as important means of spreading awareness and understanding of the Framework and access, transfer and progression amongst learners and individuals.

The Framework is also beginning to impact on recruitment practice and efforts are underway, mainly focused on the public sector, to develop good practice and ensure consistent and appropriate use of the Framework. This work can challenge long standing understandings and arrangements, as well as have unintended consequences for salary and pay scales where these are linked to qualifications.

The Framework remains a primary tool for government policy in enhance lifelong learning. For example, the National Skills Strategy bases its targets for raising educational and skills levels on Framework levels. This may encourage the development of new awards, more accreditation of in-company training and informal learning, and increased reliance on the Framework in the procurement and organisation of learning programmes, particularly if there is a connection between public funding and the Framework. There can also be a lack of fit between 'old' funding models/schemes that are linked to qualifications or programme participation and (new) Framework understandings. On a more specific note, the Strategic Innovation Fund (operated by the Higher Education Authority), can potentially act as a driver for Framework implementation in higher education and training.

Within this context, the development of new awards; access to them (by learners and users); improving awareness and use of progression routes, and the alignment of public funding for provision and for learners to the new system of qualifications is important to stimulating implementation and effective use of the Framework.

6 INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION OF FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

6.1 The international context

The international context of education and training has a considerable influence on the development, implementation and impact of the Framework. The development of the Framework was informed by research on existing frameworks (published by the Authority in 2001). The Framework was intended to, and has since, aided the recognition of qualifications not only for holders of Framework awards travelling abroad, but also for those travelling to Ireland with awards made outside the State. The flow of influence and impact has been two-directional. Since 2001, developments at European level and in the OECD in relation to frameworks and qualifications systems have been shaped by the Irish experience. Contributions from national bodies in Ireland have advanced the process of meta-European framework development.

The Lisbon agenda, the Bologna process and the Copenhagen process⁴⁴ are the major initiatives relevant to education and training on the European agenda. Under the Lisbon agenda, Ireland has made specific commitments to developing human capital, achieving lifelong learning and enhancing competitiveness. Areas of work that are relevant to the Framework include cooperation on the mutual recognition of qualifications, the recognition of professional qualifications (directives), the development of the European Qualifications Framework, and quality in vocational education and training. Under the Bologna process, relevant action lines include the development and implementation of the Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (Bologna Framework) and actions to enhance quality.

In order to fully participate in these initiatives, it became particularly important to be able to comprehend and articulate the Irish education and training system in a coherent manner, through the Framework. The Authority and Irish awarding bodies, on a collaborative basis, have made, and continue to make, a proactive and influential input on behalf of the State into the development of European policy approaches on qualifications-related matters, rather than merely being reactive to such change. The Authority has endeavoured to consult and collaborate extensively with national stakeholders when engaging internationally. The interdependency of the Authority and the Awards Councils is particularly reflected in international developments where they cooperate to maximise resources and effectiveness. They are each legally required to inform themselves of relevant international practice and an agreement is in place within which the three bodies discuss their respective individual and collaborative international engagements.

⁴⁴ The Lisbon agenda goals are to create a dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in Europe, with more and better jobs and greater social inclusion, by 2010. Work in the Bologna process aims to make European Higher Education more compatible and comparable, more competitive and more attractive. The Copenhagen process concerns cooperation in the area of vocational education and training.

6.2 The Copenhagen process

The main areas of work in which the Authority and FETAC have been involved since 2001 are informing Ireland's approach to Ministerial Declarations, as well as engaging in working groups on credit, the recognition of formal and informal learning and quality assurance. Activities included hosting consultative seminars at national level (on behalf of the relevant government Departments), representing the Departments on the Copenhagen Coordination Group and, in 2004, assisting the Irish EU Presidency in progressing work on the common European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, and a common quality assurance framework (CQAF) for vocational education and training. In March 2004, the Authority hosted a conference on the common themes⁴⁵ in European policy developments in higher education and in vocational education and training, the first of its kind. Following this, the EU Commission led work to develop a European Qualifications Framework. Ireland's engagement in this is addressed below. In addition, the Authority participated in a technical working group on credit in vocational education, a role which was taken over by FETAC in late 2006. This work led to a proposal for a system of credit accumulation and transfer in vocational education and training (ECVET). FETAC has organised national consultation on ECVET and coordinated Ireland's response to the initiative. FETAC has also actively contributed to the development and implementation of the Common Quality Assurance Framework (CQAF). This is a common and systematic approach to quality assurance to help policy makers and practitioners share best practice and improve quality systems. FETAC itself, as part of its quality review undertaken in 2007, was deemed to have met the requirements of the CQAF.⁴⁶

6.2.1 European Qualifications Framework

Following the Irish EU Presidency conference, March 2004, on common themes in higher education and in vocational education and training, the European Commission advanced with proposals for the development of a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. The conference recommended that a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) be taken forward within the context of the Education and Training 2010 work programme, to link existing work at European level on qualifications in vocational education and training and in higher education including the qualifications framework developed for the European Higher Education Area (Bologna Framework). The EQF has been viewed as the primary policy tool in education and training for the advancement of a coherent approach to the implementation of the Lisbon agenda. In autumn 2005, the Commission established a technical group to develop the EQF and invited the Authority to become a member of the group. In autumn 2006, the Commission adopted a proposal for the establishment of the EQF, which was launched in winter 2007. The Authority also engaged a new working group on the initial implementation of the EQF, spring 2008. It represents Ireland on the EQF Advisory Board and is the national coordinating point for the EQF.

The EQF was formally adopted at EU level in April 2008 as a voluntary scheme that will promote lifelong learning and mobility by making it easier to understand and compare

⁴⁵ The common themes included: the greater compatibility and comparability of awards systems; credit accumulation and transfer; quality assurance; increasing transparency and facilitating mobility of learners and workers.

⁴⁶ Also in this area, FETAC led the development of a European Network on Quality Assurance in VET (ENQA – VET) and is acting as Secretariat to the network.

qualifications around Europe. The next phase of work in relation to the Irish framework will be to:

- reference the National Framework of Qualifications to the EQF; i.e. reference national qualifications levels to EQF levels by 2010; and
- reference the EQF in all new certificates, diplomas and Europass documents by 2012.

Work has commenced in 2008 to align the Irish framework with the EQF, including Authority input into developing criteria for such alignment. This will follow a process similar to the verification of alignment of the Irish Framework to the Bologna Framework (below).

6.3 The Bologna Process and the Bologna Framework

Key areas of work for the Authority and Irish awarding bodies in the Bologna process relate to qualifications and quality assurance. In relation to this, the Authority has actively supported the development of an outcomes-based approach to describing and comparing qualifications. The Authority, together with HETAC, engaged in a collaborative exercise, involving Dutch, German, Flemish, UK, Irish, Spanish, Danish, Swedish and Norwegian agencies, entitled the Joint Quality Initiative. This group already agreed outcome descriptors for the first cycle and second cycles of Bologna by December 2003, and, in 2004, agreed two further outcomes descriptors for the intermediate first cycle of Bologna and the third cycle of Bologna. These descriptors are referred to as the 'Dublin Descriptors', as they were finalised at meetings hosted by the Council and the Authority in Dublin in 2002 and 2004. These descriptors subsequently informed the development and implementation of the Bologna Framework.

The Authority and HETAC provided expert support to the working group which published its report on a Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher education Area in spring 2005. In May 2005, European Ministers for Higher Education, meeting in Bergen, adopted this Framework, commonly referred to as the Bologna Framework. Following its adoption, Ireland (along with Scotland) was invited to undertake the initial self-certification of the compatibility of the Irish framework with the Bologna Framework. A Steering Committee, chaired by the Authority, and made up of representatives of the Authority, the Irish higher education and training awarding bodies and two co-opted international experts, prepared the Irish response in relation to the criteria and procedures for alignment. On completion of this work in winter 2006, Ireland became the first European country to verify the compatibility of its national framework of qualifications with the Bologna Framework. Ireland is represented on the Bologna Follow Up Group, which generally oversees progress.

As well as the above work on the Bologna Framework, the Authority also participates in the Department of Education and Science's (national) Bologna Steering Group, and is responsible for the implementation and promotion of the Diploma Supplement in its capacity as the National Europass Centre. It participates in the National Working Group on the Diploma Supplement and has supported the referencing of the Framework on the Diploma Supplement.

6.3.1 Bologna Framework descriptors and NFQ award-type descriptors – example of implementation issues

Increasingly, the implementation of the Framework and implementation of key aspects of the Bologna process are inter-twined. This can lead to confusion about the relationships between

each, and the nature of institutions' responsibilities under each. The Bologna process entails commitments entered into by governments and higher education institutions in relation to developing national frameworks, aligning levels and qualifications, credit, learning outcomes, and the use of the diploma supplement, all of which are connected to aspects of the Framework. On credit, ECTS is the basis for the principles and guidelines for credit in higher education. On the alignment of the Framework with the Bologna Framework, the issue of alignment of short-cycle qualifications and levels arose and could require some further attention. The example of the Dublin Descriptors and the Framework award-type descriptors is given to highlight the kinds of issues that arise.

The Dublin Descriptors were formally adopted as the cycle descriptors Bologna Framework. However, individual qualifications in any given country are not intended to map directly against these descriptors. Instead, qualifications made by individual higher-education institutions are intended to map onto a national framework of qualifications and, in turn, each national framework is to be aligned to the Bologna Framework according to agreed criteria and procedures. The Dublin Descriptors are necessarily very general in nature as they must accommodate the national variations in how qualifications have been developed and specified. They are even more generic statements of learning outcomes than the Framework descriptors.

On the basis of discussions with some institutions, the Authority notes (early 2008) that there appears to be some confusion around the commitments and responsibilities of institutions in relation to both the (Irish) national framework and the Bologna Framework, as well as to the relationships between them. A number of universities have 'written' or established their own descriptors, based on the Dublin Descriptors, for the Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral awards as part of their move towards a learning outcomes approach to curriculum design and reform, and in the context of their institutional response to Bologna. It is not clear why they have used these instead of the Framework award-type descriptors, which universities collectively support. This may represent a desire to assert institutional/academic autonomy, a lack of familiarity with Framework descriptors, or some sense that these descriptors are not entirely satisfactory for Bologna compliance purposes. It may also have been influenced by certain academic / sectoral networks (some of them emerging out of the Tuning Project), which have come together and drafted disciplinary versions of the Dublin Descriptors, for example, in music and chemistry.

The implication of working with the Dublin Descriptors alone is that because of their high level of abstraction, they are not easily adapted for use in relation to smaller awards, the non-major certificate and diploma awards, or the major diplomas at level 8 and 9 of the Framework. They do not, in themselves, enable accurate positioning of all qualifications in the Framework, nor are they expressed in a language that is common across all levels and thus more beneficial to learners, employers and society (the national framework award-type descriptors were developed in order to place and relate all learning achievements to each other). The use of 'Dublin Descriptors' rather than Framework descriptors as the basis for institutional descriptors can obscure mapping to the Framework and hide the access, transfer and progression dimension of the Framework. In practice, given the outcomes of the verification process and the alignment of the frameworks, any institution that implements the national Framework meets all the requirements demanded by Bologna.

This relationship between the different descriptors and their use is being addressed in the work of the university-sector Framework Implementation Network with the universities and the recognised colleges.

6.3.2 Quality assurance and the Bologna process

The Authority is a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA); the Higher Education Authority and HETAC are also members. The Irish Universities Quality Board is currently (mid-2008) undergoing a review process as part of the application process for membership of ENQA. ENQA is playing a key role in bringing about the European dimension to quality assurance which is part of the implementation of the Bologna Declaration. It provides an opportunity for the development of best practice models. In April 2008, the Authority acquired full membership following the completion of its quality review process.

6.4 Ireland, the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland

In recognition of the mobility of learners and workers across the UK and Ireland, on the one hand, and national efforts to develop cooperation on a North-South basis, the Authority has initiated a number of projects. It initiated meetings of the various qualifications and regulatory bodies in the jurisdictions on these islands. In 2005, in line with national policy and with a view to efficiently and speedily address the mutual recognition of qualifications across all jurisdictions, these discussions led to an agreement which cross-referenced Ireland's framework to frameworks in place in the United Kingdom (i.e., the NFQ, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, the National Qualifications Framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland and the England, Wales and Northern Ireland Framework for Higher Education Qualifications). A 'rough guide' to this was published with the aim of enabling learners, employers and other interested parties to make broad comparisons between qualifications and their levels across the different jurisdictions.⁴⁷ Since then, work has continued among the qualifications and regulatory bodies in Ireland and the United Kingdom. In summer 2007, agreement in principle was reached that the UK quality assurance arrangements would apply where UK vocational education and training awards are offered / made in Ireland (section 4.6 above)

6.5 OECD activities on qualifications systems and lifelong learning, and on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning

The Authority has also engaged in the OECD activity on the role of national qualification frameworks in the promotion of lifelong learning (2001-2004). This involved the preparation of a national report, published in 2002, and leading the work of a thematic group on framework development, completed and published in 2004.⁴⁸ The latter provided insights into issues and approaches to framework development, and uses of frameworks, which in turn, have fed into national and international debates. The overall project identified key ways in which qualifications systems and frameworks impact on lifelong learning.

⁴⁷ http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/frame_action/documents/QualificationsCanCrossBoundaries.pdf

⁴⁸ <http://www.nqai.ie/docs/framework/researchreports/Ireland%20country%20Background%20Report.doc>

Arising from that activity, the OECD began a project on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning as a means to support lifelong learning. Starting in 2006, and now involving some 20 countries, this project aims to provide policy makers with useful options in terms of developing systems and practice. This work provided a useful and timely opportunity to take stock of developments in Ireland, as key building blocks for the recognition of prior learning (RPL), generally, were in place in 2006,⁴⁹ and to use the work to help chart the future direction of RPL in Ireland (see section 2.8 above).

6.6 International recognition of qualifications

One of the objectives of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 is to address the difficulties faced in relation to the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad and of international qualifications in Ireland. The qualifications recognition service of the Authority facilitates the recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland and provides information regarding foreign education and training systems using the Framework as the basis for comparison. The service also provides information on the Irish education and training system and promotes recognition of Irish qualifications abroad.⁵⁰ On behalf of the State, the Authority represents Ireland on the European Network of Information Centres / National Academic Recognition Information Centres (ENIC/NARIC) for higher education. It also acts as a National Reference Point (NRP) for vocational education and training.

The Framework underpins all work conducted by the recognition service. Foreign awards are compared to an Irish award-type at a particular level on the Framework, e.g. to an Ordinary Bachelor Degree which is placed at Level 7 on the Framework. Further information on the learning outcomes associated with this award and level are also provided to the applicant. Comparisons are not made on the basis of grading or classifications of an award. Quality assurance is a key element of this, in that, in accordance with the Lisbon Convention on the recognition of qualifications, only awards made by (nationally or state-) recognised awarding bodies are recognised through the service.

In carrying out this service, the Framework has greatly assisted in placing the focus of recognition on the status of an awarding body; the type of award in question; how an award fits into the system of another country and on how that system relates to the Irish system. Engagement in international recognition has also highlighted the existence of 'quasi-regulation' in Ireland, for example, where qualifications are used to gain access to unregulated professional practice, as a particular challenge to recognition. There are limitations on the degree of precision that can be given in relation to the relationship between international qualifications and those in the Framework, notably where qualifications are not based on learning outcomes or are not easily comparable to those of the Irish Framework.

6.7 International impact of the Framework

The findings of the Authority's self-evaluation report (as part of its quality review process), 2007, provide some indicators of the impact of its work in the international arena.⁵¹ 70% of

⁴⁹ See Section 5 for further discussion on RPL.

⁵⁰ This work also includes the promotion of the Diploma and Certificate Supplements and EUROPASS (see <http://www.qualificationsrecognition.ie>)

⁵¹ http://www.nqai.ie/about_quality.html

respondents to the online questionnaire agreed strongly or slightly that the Authority had made an effective and proactive input into developing international policy approaches on qualifications related matters, with 28% registering that they neither agreed nor disagreed or didn't know. This reflects perhaps the wide range of stakeholders that responded to the online questionnaire and their varying levels of familiarity and direct involvement with international policy on qualifications related matters (self-evaluation report p.41). On the question of the extent to which Irish stakeholders are informed of and can participate, as appropriate, in international developments with which the Authority has an engagement – the Authority's quality review confirms the extent of this. 52% agreed strongly or slightly that the Authority had ensured that Irish stakeholders were informed of and could participate, as appropriate, in the international developments in which it had engaged. At the same time, 82% of respondents indicated that they agreed strongly or slightly that the Authority had contributed to the internationalisation of Irish education and training (self-evaluation report, p.41).

6.8 Analysis and summary of key issues

The initial work on developing the national framework of qualifications drew upon the experiences of other countries in this area, which, at the time, was confined to a small number of countries, and to related work at the European level to support student and labour mobility. Since 2001, there has been increased interest at the European and broader international levels in developing qualifications frameworks and in enhancing the transparency and portability of qualifications. These qualifications frameworks generally share a common purpose to enhance the transparency of qualifications and to support the mobility of learners within and across education and training systems. Ireland's framework and the underlying approach to developing it have helped shape Europe-wide developments. Representatives of national bodies have contributed to the political and technical work on the Bologna and the European qualifications frameworks. The Authority's overarching aim was and is to enhance the value of the national framework by aligning it with international developments so that learners and other users' needs are met. The Authority and Awards Councils, in particular, engage in related work at the European level on quality assurance and standards. The compatibility of the national framework with the Bologna Framework was verified in 2006, the first national one to complete the process.

The introduction of the Bologna Framework, which builds on many years of cooperation in higher education at the European level, is occurring alongside the implementation of the national framework. This can give rise to confusion between the two frameworks, including the question of whether one has precedence over the other, and their relationship to each other. It is also likely that the future development of the Bologna Framework and the European Qualifications Framework, which themselves represent a development of specific understandings and interpretations of key concepts, can raise questions for Ireland's Framework, such as placement/inclusion of particular qualifications or classes of awards (award-types, new and old), the interpretation and use of learning outcomes and the detailed interpretation of Framework levels. Key concepts may be understood and applied differently, or may evolve in different ways to those used in Ireland, thereby prompting a re-consideration of the latter. In this connection, it is noted that Ireland's Framework was developed as a dynamic entity. The major features, differences and similarities of the Irish and Bologna Frameworks were set out in the process leading to the verification of their compatibility with

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each other. The work of the university sector Framework Implementation Network, for example, will be important in clarifying issues that arise.

In addition to work at the European level, the Authority and national bodies have engaged in bilateral work with UK counterparts and in OECD activities on qualifications systems. These enable the Authority to address barriers to mobility, take an active part in developments and to learn from experience elsewhere. Taken together, the international engagement of the Authority and cooperation with stakeholders facilitates the work of the Authority to recognise international qualifications and to support the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad.

Appendix A: Definitions of Knowledge, Skill and Competence and their Sub-Strands

Knowledge, skill and competence as the outcomes of learning

In the Framework, 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.

In the consultation process, prior to 2003, the definition of knowledge, skill and competence was identified by various commentators as containing an important indication of the philosophy of learning underpinning the Framework. There is room for a tension to exist between a view of education and training as tightly orientated toward the achievement of specific behavioural capabilities, whether for economic or general social purposes, and a view of education and training as fulfilling broader goals of human development, only some of which may be measurable in terms of specific behavioural outcomes. The approach adopted by the Authority has been to be as broad as possible in spelling out our understanding of knowledge, skill and competence, while recognising that learning which is not assessed against standards cannot be included in the Framework.

The intention of the Authority is that all relevant and measurable learning should be covered by the Framework and that collectively the expression 'knowledge, skill and competence' should have this generality. This usage is similar to that of the European Commission in its communication on lifelong learning which encompasses "*all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective*".

It would have been possible to engage in a protracted project to determine a precise meaning for the terms knowledge, skill and competence. One might observe, for example, that learning could be equated with knowledge in a broad sense and that skill and competence are subsumed in knowledge. Many skills have an underlying, implicit, knowledge component and competence includes the application of knowledge in various contexts. On the other hand, competence could be adopted as the overarching term, encompassing knowledge and skill as subsets of competence. Various project teams and individual scholars have produced valuable, detailed, analyses of these concepts and their interrelationship. Without attempting to resolve these discussions in a definitive fashion, it was important to the Authority to make some distinctions within the overall basket of outcomes referred to as knowledge, skill and competence. This is because such distinctions will guide our further work on describing the standards for levels indicators and award descriptors.

The Authority has determined that there are three strands of learning outcome that will be used in setting standards. These are:

- knowledge
- know-how and skill
- competence.

Human learning is complex and various learning outcomes overlap. These three understandings of different types of learning outcomes are not to be interpreted as corresponding to sharply-bounded categories of knowledge, skill and competence. Rather, the overall set of knowledge, skill and competence is broken down heuristically into these three strands of outcome. They are intended to facilitate the elaboration of indicators and descriptors rather than to define learning as such. It should be possible to include all relevant learning outcomes within one or more of these strands.

It is also important to note that not all forms of learning that contribute to enabling a learner to perform in context can feasibly or reliably be captured by the assessment methods available. While such learning is important, and may be part of the desired learning outcomes for a programme of education and training, it cannot be compared against standards and as such cannot form part of the award standards for the inclusion of awards in the Framework.

The three strands of learning outcome can be further elaborated as follows:

Knowledge

This is the form of learning outcome commonly identified with declarative knowledge. Declarative knowledge is the cognitive representation of ideas, events or happenings. It can be derived empirically from practical or professional experience as well as from formal instruction or study. Such knowledge has meaning outside any specific context of application or practice. It can comprise description, memory, understanding, thinking, analysis, synthesis, debate and research. Any new knowledge is not simply added to the knowledge a learner has before, but is conditioned by the nature, richness and structure of one's previous knowledge and, furthermore, serves to modify and restructure the latter, however partially.

Know-how and skill

Skill is the goal-directed performance of a task in interaction with the environment. The exercise of a skill is the performance of a task that in some way responds to or manipulates the physical, informational or social environment of the person. Know-how underpins skill but is not identical to skill. Know-how, or *savoir faire*, is the procedural knowledge required to carry out a task. Know-how may be accompanied, or scaffolded, by declarative knowledge while a skill is being acquired but, unlike procedural knowledge, this declarative knowledge is not an intrinsic part of the skill. Know-how may be measured directly or implied from performance. Skill can only be measured by performance.

Competence

The practical application of knowledge and/or skill requires learning beyond their primary acquisition. The unique characteristic of competence is the effective and creative demonstration and deployment of knowledge and skill in human situations. Such situations could comprise general social and civic ones, as well as specific occupational ones. Competence draws on attitudes, emotions, values and sense of self-efficacy of the learner, as well as on declarative and procedural knowledge. Competence refers to the process of governing the application of knowledge to a set of tasks and is typically acquired by practice and reflection. Some aspects of performance in situations may depend on innate characteristics of an individual. Inasmuch as such performance is not learned it cannot be recognised as learning. Competence also encompasses the extent to which the learner can acknowledge his/her limitations and plan to transcend these through further learning. Moreover, while basic knowledge and skills can be described more or less independent of

context, for the description of competence it is essential to make explicit the range of contexts in which the learner can demonstrate their competence. Competence outcomes can thus be stated in the form, “In a specified range of circumstances, a learner will be able to ...”.

Division of knowledge, skill and competence into sub-strands

The Authority has determined that there are three general strands of learning outcome that will be used in setting standards. These strands are knowledge, know-how and skill, and competence. It is necessary to analyse the learning outcomes within these strands more fully. A number of sub-strands have been identified within these main strands that can be considered as the component structures of the three kinds of learning outcome. They identify the sources of order within the kinds of learning outcomes associated with awards at the various levels of the Framework. The sub-strands are based on the concepts introduced in the understandings of knowledge, skill and competence.

The main strands of learning outcome are divided into sub-strands as follows:

knowledge

breadth

kind

know-how and skill

range

selectivity

competence

context

role

learning to learn

insight

The sub-strands can be summarised as aiming to answer the following questions:

How extensive is the learner’s knowledge?

What nature or quality of knowing has the learner engaged in?

How extensive are the physical, intellectual, social and other skills demonstrated by the learner?

How complicated are the problems that a learner can tackle using the skills acquired and how does a learner tackle them?

In what contexts is a learner able to apply his/her knowledge and skills?

How much responsibility can the learner take, personally and in groups, for the application of his/her knowledge and skills?

To what extent can the learner identify the gaps in his/her learning and take steps to fill those gaps?

How far has the learner integrated the intellectual, emotional, physical and moral aspects of his/her learning into his/her self-identity and interaction with others?

Knowledge – breadth

Knowledge outcomes are associated with facts and concepts; that is, they refer to knowledge of, or about, something. The more diverse, complex and varied the facts and concepts, the

greater the breadth of knowledge and this is a matter of level. Breadth is distinguished from the number of different facts and concepts learned, which relates to volume.

Knowledge – kind

The representation of facts and concepts, including ideas, events or happenings, is cumulative. The more facts and concepts are layered on top of each other, and draw successively upon each other to construct meaning, the higher the level of learning. This process is typically associated with progressively greater abstraction from concrete phenomena into theory.

Know-how and skill – range

Skills, in both their execution and the demonstration of underpinning procedural knowledge, encompass the use of many different kinds of tool. 'Tool' refers to any device or process that facilitates individuals having some effect on their physical, informational or social environment. Tools include cognitive and social processes as well as physical implements. Tools, and the skills to use them, range from commonplace or familiar to novel or newly-invented. The sheer number of skills acquired is a matter of volume, rather than of level. The diversity of skills is a feature of this strand that contributes to differentiation in level. The completeness of the set of skills (and associated know-how) in respect of an area of activity is another feature that helps indicate the level.

Know-how and skill – selectivity

The performance of tasks depends on the learner having an appropriate understanding of the environment in which the tasks are performed and being aware of his/her own ability and limitations, while at the same time being able to correctly judge the fit between the demands and ability. Whereas the range of know-how and skill refers to what a learner can do, selectivity (which might also be called procedural responsiveness) refers to the judgement that the learner exercises in carrying out procedures, through selecting from the range of know-how and skills available to him/her, in accordance with his/her appraisal of the demands of the task.

Competence – context

Human situations, whether occupational or general social and civic, supply the context within which knowledge and skill are deployed for practical purposes. Such situations range in complexity and hence in the demands they place upon the person acting in them. Highly defined and structured situations or contexts constrain the behaviour of the individual and require lower levels of learning. The range of responses required, and hence the extent to which a broader range or higher level of knowledge and skill have to be drawn upon also depends on how predictable the context is. Acting effectively and autonomously in complex, ill-defined and unpredictable situations or contexts requires higher levels of learning.

Competence – role

For many purposes, joining and functioning in various kinds of group is a key component in putting knowledge and skill to effective use. Joining a group successfully requires individuals

to adopt appropriate roles within the group. This requires the application of social skills and an understanding of the tasks of the group. Higher levels of competence are associated with playing multiple roles as well as with roles requiring leadership, initiative and autonomy. Higher competence is also associated with participation in more complex and internally diverse groups.

Competence – learning to learn

This strand encompasses the extent to which an individual can recognise and acknowledge the limitations of his/her current knowledge, skill and competence and plan to transcend these limitations through further learning. Learning to learn is the ability to observe and participate in new experiences and to extract and retain meaning from these experiences. While drawing on other aspects of knowledge, skill and competence, this sub-strand places an emphasis on the relationship of the learner to his/her own learning processes. This provides a basis for abstraction and generalisation that, in principle, facilitates regarding this as a separate sub-strand of competence.

Competence – insight

Insight refers to ability to engage in increasingly complex understanding and consciousness, both internally and externally, through the process of reflection on experience. Insight involves the integration of the other strands of knowledge, skill and competence with the learner's attitudes, motivation, values, beliefs, cognitive style and personality. This integration is made clear in the learners' mode of interaction with social and cultural structures of his/her community and society, while also being an individual cognitive phenomenon. A learner's self-understanding develops through evaluating the feedback received from the general environment, particularly other people, and is essential to acting in the world in a manner that is increasingly autonomous.

Status of the sub-strands

Not all the sub-strands are equally familiar to current users of awards. The sub-strands within knowledge and know-how and skill have long formed the basis for awards. Context and role competence are familiar for users of some types of award. The competence of learning to learn makes explicit, as outcomes, certain kinds of learning that would previously have been considered as properties of programmes and, as such, are bound up in the learning process, rather than elements to be explicitly certified in awards. Insight is perhaps the most innovative sub-strand. It is not clear to what extent this sub-strand has been taken up as an explicit objective of education and training programmes or incorporated in the design of awards. There are considerable difficulties in devising appropriate methods for assessing the attainment of such outcomes. Nevertheless, it seems desirable to make provision for such outcomes within the Framework. It is likely that this sub-strand will need further refinement as education and training practice and associated awarding practice develops. This sub-strand will need to be developed iteratively in association with practitioners.

Appendix B: Values and Principles for Framework Development and Process Guidelines for the Authority in Establishing the Framework⁵²

Summary of values and principles

In its paper, *Policies and criteria for the establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications* (2003), the Authority set out a number of values and considerations that should inform the process. These are also relevant to implementation and provide points of enquiry and assessment.

The values are as follows:

- **Equality:** cater for all learners particularly those who have not benefited in the past (specific groups, language, geography, recognising non-formal/informal learning)
- **Comprehensiveness:** inclusiveness of the Framework
- **Coherence:** clarity enhances understanding and relative meanings of awards
- **Flexibility:** to accommodating change
- **Transparency and simplicity:** clarity of Framework and its elements e.g. nature and purpose of Framework and awards, relationships between awards, entry and exit points (and connections), ease of use e.g. titles
- **Quality:** overarching element of development and maintenance of Framework
- **Relevance:** to all users.

The considerations for Framework development are:

Standard setting

- international benchmarking (use of key reference points for standards e.g. in languages and engineering)
- stability
- the development of units of learning and credit systems
- titles of award-types and named awards (consistency, clarity) and usage
- relevance of awards for society as a whole
- assessment methodologies – diversity to be accommodated

Learners acquiring awards

- equal recognition/value to be given to awards made on the basis of successful completion of programmes and those made directly to learners
- Framework to allow for possibility that the achievement of grades can lead to the same qualification being at different levels in the Framework
- Framework to allow for multiple entry points, modular systems
- all awards to allow for some progression and transfer

Perception and reception of awards

- take account of existing award systems in designing the Framework

⁵² National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2003) *Policies and criteria for the establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications*. NQAI, Dublin. pp. 11-18

- international comparability – take account of international developments
- permanence of awards (issues of the currency of knowledge, skill or competence in a particular award for practice/profession are not matters for the Framework)

An abbreviated text of the values and principles, as well as the process guidelines for the Authority in establishing the Framework, is set out below:

Values and principles underpinning the establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications

The Qualifications Act refers to the Framework of qualifications as being for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State. Accordingly, the National Framework of Qualifications can be defined 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."

While the Framework is about awards, it is also learner-centred and values learning. As a result, its development will be based on certain values and principles. While the Framework will take provision of education and training into consideration, it is primarily an awards Framework.

Values:

1. Equality and accessibility

The Framework must contribute to building an inclusive society which offers equal opportunities throughout life to all people for access to quality learning opportunities leading to awards. The key to success will be to build on a sense of shared responsibility for lifelong learning among all stakeholders, so as to facilitate the development of a society in which everyone has the opportunity to develop their potential to the full, to feel that they can contribute and that they belong. This, in turn, will help to ensure that education and training provision is based, first and foremost, on the needs and demands of individuals.

It is vital that the Framework be accessible to all learners and able to cater for all types of awards, no matter how they are achieved. In particular, the Framework must cater for those learners who have in the past suffered from poor access to education and training awards. These include those who are poorly educated, older, unemployed, or not in the labour force, working in small, rather than large, companies, or working in less skilled occupational groups. In addition, other individuals and groups such as members of the Traveller community, people with disabilities, refugees, minority ethnic groups and those living in rural and island locations also suffer from relatively poor access. All learning outcomes must be included in the Framework, regardless of whether they have been acquired through Irish, English or any other language. While the Framework cannot remove all the barriers that exist, it must ensure that access to relevant awards is not one of them.

Whether an award is for personal development, economic benefit or community benefit, the Framework will treat all learning fairly and consistently. It should be possible for all learning to count towards an award. There needs to be a consistent framework developed which

differentiates between awards in a fair way and which relates such learning outcomes consistently to one another. This will facilitate freedom of movement for learners into and out of learning situations, irrespective of learning mode.

The recognition of previous learning achievements, including achievement that has not previously been recognised, will be an important part of the Framework. It will facilitate the inclusion of the full range of awards arising from formal, non-formal and informal learning and the availability of alternative routes to meeting entry requirements. The Framework will support informed choices and realistic expectations on the part of learners and promote progression opportunities and equality of opportunity. It will also promote social cohesion and inclusion by making awards accessible to those who were previously marginalised.

2. Comprehensiveness and coherence

It has been set out that, on the basis of equality, the Framework needs to cater for all types of awards and to make clear appropriate relationships among awards which recognise the outcomes of learning and which provides for the development of progression routes for learners. This is also important from the consideration of comprehensiveness and coherence.

The Framework needs to ensure that all relevant awards and emerging awards can be included. This will mean that the awards of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Dublin Institute of Technology and the universities are included, as well as the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate. It will be necessary also to facilitate the inclusion of other awards made in the State. These will include awards by professional bodies and international awarding bodies operating within the State. The Framework needs to provide for the development of existing awards and to ensure that the possibilities for development can be included within it. The Framework must be capable of facilitating changing needs and evolving contexts, at both national and international level, and for changing awards and evolving awards.

The rate of change in occupations and technology will have to be accommodated by the Framework. In addition to this, completely new occupational sectors continually emerge and will have to be incorporated. The Authority will need to ensure that the Framework is prepared for new developments. The widely varying types of knowledge and continuing discoveries will require a framework that is stable but flexible enough to survive into the immediate future. The Framework must cater for existing and future changes in provision, knowledge and learning.

3. Transparency and simplicity

There is a need to ensure that all the elements that make up the Framework are fully visible. The relationships within the Framework need to be clear and easy to understand. Learners and employers need to be able to compare awards. The Framework must have clarity. This transparency will affect the development, operation and implementation of the Framework.

Transparency must exist for all the stakeholders – learners, employers, providers, community and society at large. The nature and purpose of an award and the associated progression routes building on it should be clear. This is necessary in order to support informed choices and realistic expectations on the part of potential learners, providers of education and training,

employers and other stakeholders. Transparency is required for both the awards and the structure of the Framework. The accessibility of the Framework will be enhanced if it is transparent and simple.

While the development of the Framework is a complex matter, the Framework itself must be clear and easy to use. The relationships within the Framework must also be clear, unambiguous and non-conflicting. Learners need to be able to identify relevant awards, compare them, and identify entry and exit points.

It is vital that the Framework is simple to use and easy to understand. Building on this, there is a need to use titles for awards that are easily understood and used in a consistent manner. Award titles need to be developed in a way which is distinct and does not cause confusion. At the same time the integrity of existing award titles needs to be evaluated and developed. Cognisance will have to be taken also of international award titles, both at European and worldwide level.

4. Quality

The Framework will relate to the setting of overall standards. Quality needs to underpin the setting of award standards by the Authority and indeed all of the work of the Authority. To achieve this, planned and systematic actions are necessary to provide confidence in the system. Quality processes will inform all actions of the Authority in establishing and maintaining the Framework. These will also need to allow for the achievement of excellence. Quality should permeate all aspects of learning and awards and must be a central issue in relation to the National Framework of Qualifications. It must be seen as an over-arching element.

The Framework and the Authority itself will be subject to review. This will require measures which quantify what is happening. The wide range of awarding bodies whose awards are to be included in the Framework will play an important role in any such qualification.

5. Relevance

The Framework has to be relevant to all users: learners, employers, providers and wider society. The Framework must facilitate the cultural, economic, political/democratic and/or social participation of citizens in society as a whole and in their community by measuring, as appropriate, relevant learning achievements in this regard and relating them to each other. In this way, the Framework will cater for the active participation of learners in society. It will recognise the capacity of all individuals for effective life management and active participation – whatever their resources or position. The attributes arising in this regard – information, participation, skills, rights and responsibilities – must be recognised by awards within the Framework. Such awards must also recognise engagement at local, national and European level and the information and skills necessary for promoting identity and inclusion. These include the social and communicative competencies that are both part of new demands which flow from changing work and study contexts, and are themselves of critical importance for living in culturally, ethnically and linguistically pluralist worlds. These competencies are not simply desirable for some, they are becoming essential for all.

Where an award aims to qualify a learner for a career or certify a competence in a profession or occupation, the award should demonstrate a clear relationship with the relevant occupational or professional standards. Through strengthening the dialogue between industry, providers and professional bodies, where appropriate, the Framework will ensure the relevance of awards to the labour market and raise the skill levels of the labour force. The Framework will cater for these awards as well as for economic activity other than direct employment – e.g. self-employment, business start-up, community-based and other socio-economic activity, including personalised pathways of development.

Chapter 2

Process guidelines for the Authority in establishing the Framework

These process guidelines are concerned with how the Authority will act in undertaking the task of developing the Framework, rather than with the practical and operational elements of such work. The process guidelines are not presented in a particular order or hierarchy. The guidelines should not be viewed independently and should work together for a common objective. They overlap and will be operationalised in a balanced way, depending on the context.

Consultation and inclusiveness

The membership of the Authority itself is set out in the Qualifications Act. It has a broad base, and in this way the aim is that the membership of the Authority reflects the role of the Authority.

Stakeholders will be consulted on an ongoing basis by the Authority. The range and diversity of stakeholders requires a comprehensive approach to such consultation and this is already the practise of the Authority. All important aspects of the development of the Framework have been, and will continue to be the subject of consultation. Such ongoing consultation will ensure that the Authority has appropriate regard to the views of stakeholders as the development process unfolds. Consultation will continue after the development phase and will inform all actions of the Authority. It will be both informal and formal, including the establishment of consultative groups.

Broad consultation is vital to ensuring that the Framework meets the diverse needs of the various stakeholders. The Authority has identified a broad range of stakeholder groups. These include awarding bodies, providers of education and training, learner representative bodies, employer and employee representative bodies, trade unions, community and voluntary organisations and Government Departments and other State bodies. It is vital that ownership of the Framework is shared with all stakeholders in the system. It is equally important that stakeholders become involved in implementing the elements of the Framework for which they have responsibility. It will be achieved by effective interaction and collaboration between the stakeholders.

Research and evaluation

The actions of the Authority will be based on careful prior research. Regular review and evaluation will be undertaken to ensure the effectiveness of its work. There will be a research element to ensure that national and international developments are taken into account, while helping to inform the work of the Authority. Research, both formal and informal, can play a necessary part both in the development and maintenance of the Framework. This is particularly so in the context of new initiatives at European level. The current developments in information and communications technology, and economic and social activity in general, will require constant awareness to ensure that the Framework and its operation meet the present and future requirements of the learner and society.

All aspects of the Framework, its development and implementation, will be open to evaluation and review. The Authority itself has the key role in undertaking this task and inclusion of the views of stakeholders will be very significant in this regard. In addition, external expertise will also be involved in processes as they are developed. The ever-changing environment will require the Framework to continuously evolve and it can only meet this challenge by obtaining feedback from a system of evaluation.

Best management practices

Quality processes will be developed and implemented within the Authority. In the first instance, all posts in the Authority are being filled on the basis of open public competition, following best practice in recruitment. The staff of the Authority will endeavour to develop and implement quality processes. These processes will operate during both development and implementation.

The Authority will endeavour to be efficient in establishing the Framework. It will balance the benefits for learners and other stakeholders in developing and implementing various aspects of the National Framework of Qualifications against the resources required. This includes having regard to the opportunity costs of delaying the establishment of the Framework even where solutions are not absolutely perfect. In considering the efficiency of the procedures and processes, the Authority will include not just its own costs, and those of the Councils which it part-funds, but the costs to other stakeholders as well.

Facilitating change

There will be many issues relating to the implementation of the Framework. The Authority recognises that these will require significant changes in systems, structures and attitudes. The outcome will be a diverse learner community throughout further and higher education and training. This community will include a higher proportion its implementation. In conjunction with the awarding bodies, the Authority will ensure that all aspects of the Framework have key linkages to international systems in a way consistent with the objects of the Act. The Framework will be guided by developments in the coordination of awards systems in Europe. These include the Bologna process for higher education and the emerging broad understanding of some award- types in that regard, as well as recent developments in the understanding of vocational education and training awards across Europe, particularly in the areas of transparency and quality. As international developments take place and new initiatives arise, the Authority must be capable of recognising and responding to them. This

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will also include ensuring that the Framework facilitates the comparability and recognition of awards from other countries.

Subsidiarity and autonomy

Stakeholders in education and training have their own roles, functions, traditions and responsibilities. These are set out in the legislation, charters, orders and other legal instruments covering the establishment of each of the stakeholders, as well as, in some cases, in the public understanding of a particular stakeholder's role. These will all need to be fully recognised in the development of the Framework.

**Appendix C:
Rationale for the number of levels in the Framework –
Authority internal paper, December 2002**

The aim of this paper is to provide a rationale for the number of levels required in the Framework. It does not aim to define the levels themselves; that is the purpose of the level indicators. It does not attempt to describe the main outcomes of levels; that is done in the synopsis of level outcomes. Neither does it attempt to assign level indicators retrospectively to the range of existing awards; that is a matter for Framework implementation. Instead it proposes an approach to determining how many levels are needed and then works through this approach to show how it might yield a ten level Framework.

Defining of the number of levels to be used in a Framework is a pragmatic activity rather than an exact science. However it is not an arbitrary exercise. Criteria relating the function or purpose of levels within the Framework, as laid out in the policies and criteria document can be put forward. The number of levels will:

- Cover the full range of learning (comprehensiveness);
- Facilitate the inclusion of award-types;
- Facilitate objective distinctions between awards based on standards; and
- Facilitate international comparisons of awards.

Another consideration is parsimony, i.e. using as few levels as possible to achieve these purposes. The fewer levels, the simpler the framework will be and the easier to communicate it to the various users.

In other frameworks, or quasi-frameworks, of qualifications, award descriptors are often used as proxies for level descriptors or indicators. In the absence of defined levels, or generic level indicators in such frameworks, ladders of awards have an implied sequence of outcomes.

Learning outcomes can be distilled or inferred from existing individual awards. Such distilled, generic learning outcomes can be used to define anchor points for a levels-based framework. This is not to say that the traditional relative positioning of awards is to be taken forward into the new framework, but that the outcomes associated with these awards serve as the anchors for the new levels. Further levels are interpolated between these outcomes. Any scale will also have upper and lower bounds, associated with the lowest and highest levels of recognisable learning.

There are four main anchors in the Irish context, yielding three broad bands:

- Highest level
- End of 1st cycle 3rd level (approximate Honours Bachelors degree outcomes)
- End of post-primary education (approximate range of Senior Cycle outcomes)
- Lowest level of positive, recognisable, learning achievement

There are important international counterparts for the middle two anchor levels. These are further discussed in the paper on the criteria for award-types. These anchor points are

probably not equally spaced, and indeed it is not necessary that the levels themselves be equally spaced either.

National and international outcomes for awards at the intermediate anchor levels were identified and these formed an initial basis for writing level indicators. The highest and lowest anchors are formed by deduction from the definitions of the sub-strands. Not all sub-strands are equally well represented in the available statements of outcomes. Roughly speaking, the two middle anchor levels can be characterised, across sub-strands, as representing independence and innovation respectively.

The development of the other levels proceeds through interpolation between these anchors, according to the criteria listed above.

The lowest anchor level (level 1) includes positive learning achievements for many learners. There is no learning that cannot, in principle, be recognised within the Framework. At the same time many of the outcomes at this level are developmental and are typically achieved in a manner which is closely integrated with subsequent learning. In many cases, such outcomes are not, at present, discretely assessed in a summative manner. Learning outcomes at this level have sometimes been assessed for research purposes by the national and international organisations, particularly regarding the foundations of literacy and numeracy. Public policy in the State does not currently include the routine formal recognition of such initial learning in the school system. On the other hand, there are groups, especially of older learners, for whom recognition of such learning might be valuable, both for personal affirmation of their learning achievements and reinforcement of the effort they put in to acquiring learning, and for public recognition in relation to accessing programmes at higher levels of learning and for other social purposes. It may be that learners will seek recognition for learning that is low in volume, as well as level and the awards developed at this level will need to take this into account.

The range of outcomes at the next level will be somewhat smaller. Literacy and numeracy and the introduction to systematic learning are important outcomes at this level. There are no widely recognised awards made in the State at this level at present, though the outcomes associated with this level may currently be incorporated into awards which also include higher level outcomes, such as those recognised by the awards issuing from the Integrated Assessment Scheme carried out by FÁS. Public policy in the State does not currently include the routine formal recognition of this level learning in the school system. A full award at this level is an important gateway to further learning opportunities. This level might well be that associated with satisfactory completion of primary education. This is level 2.

As society has become more complex and, for the current generation of young people, the completion of post-primary education, reaching the second anchor point, has become the norm, there remains a need for a level to recognise the achievement of outcomes short of completion of post-primary education. This is for a variety of reasons. Not all young people complete post-primary education. Compulsory school attendance does not extend to the completion of post-primary education. It is desirable that those who complete the junior cycle of second-level schooling have awards made that recognise this level of achievement. Many adults have not previously had the opportunity to complete, even the junior cycle, and again require awards at this level, even where their ultimate learning goals are for higher levels of award. The achievements of awards at this level mark preparation for lifelong learning in a

variety of fields. They also confer a minimum employability for low-skilled occupations. This is level 3.

This analysis yields two levels between the first two anchors, so the second anchor point is level 4. This second anchor point corresponds to the lower range of typical outcomes associated with the Post-Primary Senior Cycle. The completion of post-primary education is now common in industrialised countries such as Ireland. There are variations in the standards of outcomes achieved. Not all learners within a given educational system achieve the same outcome levels. Some learners achieve outcomes in Senior Cycle above level 4. The awards system at Senior Cycle does not currently lend itself to distinguishing between these levels in terms of discrete award-types. There is a range of outcomes at this level achieved in systems other than the mainstream school education system and assessed by means other than the Leaving Certificate Examinations. Many holders of awards at this level proceed directly into employment.

The range of outcomes in the Senior Cycle, from the lower grades of Foundation Level subjects to the higher grades of Higher Level subjects, is quite wide. The outcomes from the upper end of this range are at level 5, that is, they overlap with the outcomes of some awards from the post-secondary system. This is similar to the position of Advanced Placement tests in high school in the United States, A-levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, or Advanced Higher in Scotland. In addition, there are a variety of other awards, some of them more vocational in orientation, that include outcomes that go beyond those associated with the typical end-of-second-level achievement. These are also at least at level 5.

The number of levels between the middle two anchor points has been contentious in several national frameworks. Awards at level 6 and above include all existing higher education and training awards, other than those awards that may be made by higher education and training awarding bodies to facilitate access. There may also be further education and training awards at some of these levels. The levels up to the third anchor point are, to some extent, defined negatively with respect to that point. At the honours bachelors level, the learner is on top of the field in which they hold a full award and have generic competences associated with such mastery. They are aware of the boundaries of the learning in the field and have the preparation required to push back those boundaries through further learning which is represented the topmost levels of the Framework. Partial mastery of a field, or various steps approaching mastery, is what characterises the other levels.

In a number of applied fields the anchor level is that of the independent, knowledge-based professional and the levels below are those of restricted professional and technician. Not every field or profession will necessarily make use of both these levels.

A junior technician or higher craftsperson typically holds an award at level 6. This is also the basic level of award for supervisors. There are a number of international awards that have outcomes that correspond approximately to level 6, such as the Higher National Certificate, National Vocational Qualification Level 3 and Certificate of Higher Education in the United Kingdom, the Diplôme d'Etudes Universitaires Générales in France and the Associate degree/Two-Year Certificate in the United States.

Most restricted professionals hold awards at level 7, though in some fields the relevant award may be at a higher level. Other awards at this level, including those not in professional fields,

reflect learning outcomes in a range of subjects that are not directly informed by research. Such awards do not prepare the learner to enter into second cycle programmes. These include ordinary or general bachelors degrees. Approximate international comparison awards with outcomes at about this level include the Foundation degree and the Diploma in Higher Education in the United Kingdom.

The traditional Irish honours bachelor degree has not been explicitly based on common standards across institutions and particularly across disciplines. One feature that honours bachelors degrees have in common is eligibility to advance into research pathways. The maintenance of disciplinary standards within the Irish system, and the assurance of parity of those standards with those of British degrees, has traditionally been ensured by the appointment of external examiners. The outcomes appear to be typically higher than those now being adopted for many of the first-cycle bachelors degrees being developed on the continent in response to the Bologna process. Some countries have explicit additional programmes to reach honours bachelors standard. Scotland and New Zealand are examples. Assigning three levels between the middle two anchors places the third anchor as level 8.

Much learning at the levels concerned with the discovery and development of new knowledge, skills and competence has traditionally not been assessed or certified. In many fields highly expert and innovative practice speaks for itself and brings commercial or professional returns. It is in the more “academic” fields that systems for formally developing and recognising such learning have been developed. As society becomes more knowledge-driven the need has been identified to develop such learning more widely and give it more formal recognition in a wide variety of fields. The doctoral degree is the traditional acme of academic recognition and this has informed the framing of the indicator for the highest level. It is based on the originality of the contribution made by the learner. There are also higher doctorates, which are awarded for sustained output at the highest level, and are thus distinct by volume rather than level. Awards for postdoctoral programmes, should they be developed, would also be at this level. This level is open-ended upwards: any awards in respect of learning higher than the minimum for this level are also at this highest level.

There are various learning outcomes beyond the honours bachelors degree that fall short of the originality criterion required for the doctorate level. While the individual awards at this level will have different purposes and volumes, and hence will be valued differently by various users, these distinctions are best captured by award-type descriptors than by attempting to differentiate by level. A taught masters and a research masters, for instance, are different in their content and purpose but it is difficult to see what advantages would accrue from assigning them to distinct levels. The Dearing report in the United Kingdom suggested three levels (for postgraduate diplomas, masters and research masters) but in the end the UK higher education framework only uses one level. All such awards will be at level 9.

The highest anchor, therefore, the highest level of the Framework, is at level 10.

Appendix D: Grid of Level Indicators⁵³

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National Framework of Qualifications		GRID OF LEVEL INDICATORS									
	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4	LEVEL 5	LEVEL 6	LEVEL 7	LEVEL 8	LEVEL 9	LEVEL 10	
Knowledge Breadth	Elementary knowledge.	Knowledge that is narrow in range.	Knowledge moderately broad in range.	Broad range of knowledge.	Broad range of knowledge.	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
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.	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).	Critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, generally informal 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
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 of 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.	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/develop research, professional or advanced practice 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 and practice underpinning research, which are associated with a field of learning; develop new skills, techniques, tools, practice and/or materials.	Know-How & Skill Range
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, uncertain problems.	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.	Exercise appropriate judgement to a number of complex planning, design, technical or senior management functions related to products, services, operations or processes, including research.	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 require and require creative problem-solving knowledge.	Know-How & Skill Selectivity
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.	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.	Exercise personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations in professional or equivalent contexts.	Competence Context
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, homogeneous groups.	Act with considerable amount of responsibility and autonomy.	Exercise some initiative and independence in carrying out defined activities, job and function within multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups.	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 organise complex social processes.	Competence Role
Competence Learning to Learn	Learn to acquire learning tasks; learn to access and use a range of learning resources.	Learn to learn in a directed 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.	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 visible and unfamiliar learning contexts; learn to manage learning tasks independently, professionally and ethically.	Learn to self-evaluate and take responsibility for continuing knowledge to professional development.	Learn to critique the broader implications of applying knowledge to particular contexts.	Competence Learning to Learn
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.	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

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

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

⁵³ National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2003) *Determinations for the National Framework of Qualifications*. Dublin. NQAI.

Appendix E: Synopsis of Learning Outcomes at each Framework Level⁵⁴

This synopsis, while not being part of the formal determination of the Authority, is useful in understanding the nature of the learning outcomes at each level.

Level 1

The learning outcomes relate to the performance of basic tasks in a controlled environment under supervision and the display of an ability to learn information and basic repetitive skills, as well as to sequence learning tasks. Literacy and numeracy achievements would correspond to those measured at the initial levels of international assessment systems.

Level 2

Key outcomes at this level are basic literacy and numeracy and the introduction to systematic learning. Learning outcomes relate to the ability to learn new skills and knowledge in a supervised environment and to carry out routine work under direction. Learning outcomes at this level are typically developmental rather than geared towards a specific occupation.

Level 3

Learning outcomes at this level relate to a low volume of practical capability and of knowledge of theory. The outcomes relate to the performance of relatively simple work and may be fairly quickly acquired. Outcomes at this level may also confer a minimum employability for low skilled occupations and include functional literacy and numeracy.

Level 4

Independence is the hallmark of this level. Learning outcomes at this level correspond to a growing sense of responsibility for participating in public life and shaping one's own life. The outcomes at this level would be associated with first-time entry to many occupational sectors.

Level 5

Learning outcomes at this level include a broad range of skills that require some theoretical understanding. The outcomes may relate to engaging in a specific activity, with the capacity to use the instruments and techniques relating to an occupation. They are associated with work being undertaken independently, subject to general direction.

Level 6

Learning outcomes at this level include a comprehensive range of skills which may be vocationally-specific and/or of a general supervisory nature, and require detailed theoretical understanding. The outcomes also provide for a particular focus on learning skills. The outcomes relate to working in a generally autonomous way to assume design and/or management and/or administrative responsibilities. Occupations at this level would include higher craft, junior technician and supervisor.

⁵⁴ National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2003) *Determinations for the Outline National Framework of Qualifications*. Dublin. NQAI. pp. 19-21

Level 7

Learning outcomes at this level relate to knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles in a field of study and the application of those principles in different contexts. This level includes knowledge of methods of enquiry and the ability to critically evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems. The outcomes include an understanding of the limits of the knowledge acquired and how this influences analyses and interpretations in a work context. Outcomes at this level would be appropriate to the upper end of many technical occupations and would include higher technicians, some restricted professionals and junior management.

Level 8

Innovation is a key feature of learning outcomes at this level. Learning outcomes at this level relate to being at the forefront of a field of learning in terms of knowledge and understanding. The outcomes include an awareness of the boundaries of the learning in the field and the preparation required to push back those boundaries through further learning. The outcomes relate to adaptability, flexibility, ability to cope with change and ability to exercise initiative and solve problems within their field of study. In a number of applied fields the outcomes are those linked with the independent, knowledge-based professional. In other fields the outcomes are linked with those of a generalist and would normally be appropriate to management positions.

Level 9

Learning outcomes at this level relate to the demonstration of knowledge and understanding which is the forefront of a field of learning. The outcomes relate to the application of knowledge, understanding and problem-solving abilities in new or unfamiliar contexts related to a field of study. The outcomes are associated with an ability to integrate knowledge, handle complexity and formulate judgements. Outcomes associated with this level would link with employment as a senior professional or manager with responsibility for the work outputs of teams.

Level 10

Learning outcomes at this level relate to the discovery and development of new knowledge and skills and delivering findings at the frontiers of knowledge and application. Further outcomes at this level relate to specialist skills and transferable skills required for managing such as the abilities to critique and develop organisational structures and initiate change.

Appendix F:

Major Award-Type Descriptors

Award-type Descriptor **a**

Title	Level 1 Certificate
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level	1
Volume	Small
Knowledge - breadth	Elementary knowledge
Knowledge - kind	Demonstrable by recognition or recall
Know-how and skill - range	Demonstrate basic practical skills, and carry out directed activity using basic tools
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Perform processes that are repetitive and predictable
Competence - context	Act in closely defined and highly structured contexts
Competence - role	Act in a limited range of roles
Competence – learning to learn	Learn to sequence learning tasks; learn to access and use a range of learning resources
Competence - insight	Begin to demonstrate awareness of independent role for self
Progression & Transfer	Progression to programme leading to a Level 2 Certificate, or at a higher level if appropriate.
Articulation	

Award-type Descriptor **b**

Title	Level 2 Certificate
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level	2
Volume	Medium
Knowledge - breadth	Knowledge that is narrow in range
Knowledge - kind	Concrete in reference and basic in comprehension
Know-how and skill - range	Demonstrate limited range of basic practical skills, including the use of relevant tools
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Perform a sequence of routine tasks given clear direction
Competence - context	Act in a limited range of predictable and structured contexts
Competence - role	Act in a range of roles under direction
Competence – learning to learn	Learn to learn in a disciplined manner in a well-structured and supervised environment
Competence - insight	Demonstrate awareness of independent role for self
Progression & Transfer	Progression to programme leading to a Level 3 Certificate, or at a higher level if appropriate.
Articulation	

Award-type Descriptor **C**

Title	Level 3 Certificate
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level	3
Volume	Large
Knowledge - breadth	Knowledge moderately broad in range
Knowledge - kind	Mainly concrete in reference and with some comprehension of relationship between knowledge elements
Know-how and skill - range	Demonstrate a limited range of practical and cognitive skills and tools
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Select from a limited range of varied procedures and apply known solutions to a limited range of predictable problems
Competence - context	Act within a limited range of contexts
Competence - role	Act under direction with limited autonomy; function within familiar, homogeneous groups
Competence – learning to learn	Learn to learn within a managed environment
Competence - insight	Assume limited responsibility for consistency of self- understanding and behaviour
Progression & Transfer	Progression to programme leading to a Level 4 Certificate, or at a higher level if appropriate.
Articulation	

Award-type Descriptor **d**

Title	Junior Certificate.
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level	3
Volume	Large
Knowledge - breadth	Knowledge moderately broad in range.
Knowledge - kind	Mainly concrete in reference. Some comprehension of relationships between knowledge elements.
Know-how and Skill - range	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate a limited range of skills and tools in various domains of activity - artistic, intellectual, scientific, physical and practical.
Know-how and Skill - selectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose from a limited range of varied procedures. • Apply known solutions to a limited range of predictable problems.
Competence - context	Act within a limited range of contexts
Competence - role	Act under direction with limited autonomy. Function within familiar homogeneous groups.
Competence - learning to learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn to learn within a managed environment.
Competence - insight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assume limited responsibility for consistency of self- understanding and behaviour.
Progression and transfer	Progression to programme leading to Leaving Certificate. Progression to programme leading to Level 4 Certificate, or at a higher level.
Articulation	

The Junior Certificate is typically awarded to learners following a three-year full-time programme prescribed by the Department of Education and Science.

Award-type Descriptor e

Title	Level 4 Certificate
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level	4
Volume	Large
Knowledge - breadth	Broad range of knowledge
Knowledge - kind	Mainly concrete in reference and with some elements of abstraction or theory
Know-how and skill - range	Demonstrate a moderate range of practical and cognitive skills and tools
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Select from a range of procedures and apply known solutions to a variety of predictable problems
Competence - context	Act in familiar and unfamiliar contexts
Competence - role	Act with considerable amount of responsibility and autonomy
Competence – learning to learn	Learn to take responsibility for own learning within a supervised environment
Competence - insight	Assume partial responsibility for consistency of self-understanding and behaviour
Progression & Transfer	Progression to programme leading to a Level 5 Certificate, or at a higher level if appropriate.
Articulation	

Award-type Descriptor **f**

Title	Leaving Certificate
7 Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level	4/5
Volume	Large
Knowledge - breadth	Broad range of knowledge.
Knowledge - kind	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking with significant depth in some areas. Some underpinning theory.
Know-how and Skill - range	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate a broad range of cognitive and practical skills, and tools.
Know-how and Skill - selectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.
Competence - context	Identify and apply skill and knowledge to a moderately broad range of contexts. Take responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs.
Competence - role	Exercise some initiative and independence in carrying out defined activities. Function within familiar homogeneous groups.
Competence - learning to learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn to take responsibility for own learning within a managed environment.
Competence - insight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assume responsibility for consistency of self-understanding and behaviour
Progression and transfer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progression to programme leading to a further education and training award at level 5, or at a higher level. • Progression to programme leading to a higher education and training award at level 6, or at a higher level.
Articulation	

The Leaving Certificate is typically awarded following a two-year full-time programme of education prescribed by the Department of Education and Science.

Award-type Descriptor **g**

Title	Level 5 Certificate
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level	5
Volume	Large
Knowledge - breadth	Broad range of knowledge
Knowledge - kind	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant depth in some areas
Know-how and skill - range	Demonstrate a broad range of specialised skills and tools
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Evaluate and use information to plan and develop investigative strategies and to determine solutions to varied unfamiliar problems
Competence - context	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
Competence - role	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 take responsibility for own learning within a managed environment
Competence - insight	Assume full responsibility for consistency of self- understanding and behaviour
Progression & Transfer	Progression to a programme leading to an Advanced Certificate or a higher education and training award at Level 6, 7 or 8
Articulation	

Award-type Descriptor **h**

8 Title	Advanced Certificate
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level	6
Volume	Large
Knowledge - breadth	Specialised knowledge of a broad area
Knowledge - kind	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant depth in some areas
Know-how and skill - range	Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Formulate responses to well-defined abstract problems
Competence - context	Utilise diagnostic and creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts
Competence - role	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
Competence – learning to learn	Learn to take responsibility for own learning within a managed environment
Competence - insight	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others
Progression & Transfer	Transfer to a programme leading to a Higher Certificate (award-type i). Progression to a programme leading to an Ordinary Bachelor Degree (award-type j) or to an Honours Bachelor Degree (award-type k).
Articulation	

Award-type Descriptor **i**

Title	Higher Certificate
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level	6
Volume	Large
Knowledge - breadth	Specialised knowledge of a broad area
Knowledge - kind	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant underpinning theory
Know-how and skill - range	Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Formulate responses to well-defined abstract problems
Competence - context	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
Competence - role	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
Competence – learning to learn	Take initiative to identify and address learning needs and interact effectively in a learning group
Competence - insight	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others
Progression & Transfer	Transfer to programme leading to an Advanced Certificate (Award-type h) Progression to a programme leading to an Ordinary Bachelor Degree (award-type j) or to an Honours Bachelor Degree (award-type k).
Articulation	

Award-type Descriptor **j**

Title	Ordinary Bachelor Degree
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level	7
Volume	Large
Knowledge - breadth	Specialised knowledge across a variety of areas
Knowledge - kind	Recognition of limitations of current knowledge and familiarity with sources of new knowledge; integration of concepts across a variety of areas
Know-how and skill - range	Demonstrate specialised technical, creative or conceptual skills and tools across an area of study
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Exercise appropriate judgement in planning, design, technical and/or supervisory functions related to products, services, operations or processes
Competence - context	Utilise diagnostic and creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts
Competence - role	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
Competence – learning to learn	Take initiative to identify and address learning needs and interact effectively in a learning group
Competence - insight	Express an internalised, personal world view, manifesting solidarity with others
Progression & Transfer	Progression to programme leading to an Honours Bachelor Degree (Award-type k) or to a Higher Diploma (Award-type l) Progression internationally to some second cycle (i.e. " Bologna masters") degree programmes.
Articulation	

Award-type Descriptor **k**

Title	Honours Bachelor Degree
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level	8
Volume	Large
Knowledge - breadth	An understanding of the theory, concepts and methods pertaining to a field (or fields) of learning
Knowledge - kind	Detailed knowledge and understanding in one or more specialised areas, some of it at the current boundaries of the field(s)
Know-how and skill - range	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
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Exercise appropriate judgement in a number of complex planning, design, technical and/or management functions related to products, services, operations or processes, including resourcing
Competence - context	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
Competence - role	Act effectively under guidance in a peer relationship with qualified practitioners; lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups
Competence – learning to learn	Learn to act in variable and unfamiliar learning contexts; learn to manage learning tasks independently, professionally and ethically
Competence - insight	Express a comprehensive, internalised, personal world view manifesting solidarity with others
Progression & Transfer	Transfer to programmes leading to Higher Diploma (Award-type l). Progression to programmes leading to Masters Degree or Post-graduate Diploma (Award-types m or n), or in some cases, to programmes leading to a Doctoral Degree (Award-type o). Progression internationally to second cycle (i.e. "Bologna masters") degree programmes
Articulation	

Award-type Descriptor I

Title	Higher Diploma
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level	8
Volume	Medium
Knowledge - breadth	An understanding of the theory, concepts and methods pertaining to a field (or fields) of learning
Knowledge - kind	Detailed knowledge and understanding in one or more specialised areas, some of it at the current boundaries of the field
Know-how and skill - range	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
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Exercise appropriate judgement in a number of complex planning, design, technical and/or management functions related to products, services, operations or processes, including resourcing
Competence - context	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
Competence - role	Act effectively under guidance in a peer relationship with qualified practitioners; lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups
Competence – learning to learn	Learn to act in variable and unfamiliar learning contexts; learn to manage learning tasks independently, professionally and ethically
Competence - insight	Express a comprehensive, internalised, personal world view manifesting solidarity with others
Progression & Transfer	Progression to programmes leading to Masters Degree or Post-graduate Diploma (Award-types m or n)
Articulation	From an Ordinary Bachelor Degree (Award-type j) , or from an Honours Bachelor Degree (Award-type k), into a new field of learning

Award-type Descriptor **m**

Title	Masters Degree
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level	9
Volume	Large
Knowledge - breadth	A systematic understanding of knowledge at, or informed by, the forefront of a field of learning
Knowledge - kind	A critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, generally informed by the forefront of a field of learning
Know-how and skill - range	Demonstrate a range of standard and specialised research or equivalent tools and techniques of enquiry
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Select from complex and advanced skills across a field of learning; develop new skills to a high level, including novel and emerging techniques
Competence - context	Act in a wide and often unpredictable variety of professional levels and ill defined contexts
Competence - role	Take significant responsibility for the work of individuals and groups; lead and initiate activity
Competence – learning to learn	Learn to self-evaluate and take responsibility for continuing academic/professional development
Competence - insight	Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and act to change them
Progression & Transfer	Progression to programmes leading to Doctoral Degree (Award-type O), or to another Masters Degree or to a Post-graduate Diploma (Award-types m or n).
Articulation	

Award-type Descriptor **n**

Title	Post-graduate Diploma
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level	9
Volume	Medium
Knowledge - breadth	A systematic understanding of knowledge, at, or informed by, the forefront of a field of learning
Knowledge - kind	A critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, generally informed by the forefront of a field of learning
Know-how and skill - range	Demonstrate a range of standard and specialised research or equivalent tools and techniques of enquiry
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Select from complex and advanced skills across a field of learning; develop new skills to a high level, including novel and emerging techniques
Competence - context	Act in a wide and often unpredictable variety of professional levels and ill defined contexts
Competence - role	Take significant responsibility for the work of individuals and groups; lead and initiate activity
Competence – learning to learn	Learn to self-evaluate and take responsibility for continuing academic/professional development
Competence - insight	Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and act to change them
Progression & Transfer	May exempt from part of the programme leading to a Masters Degree (Award-type m)
Articulation	

Award-type Descriptor ●

Title	Doctoral Degree
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
Level	10
Volume	Large
Knowledge - breadth	A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of a field of learning
Knowledge - kind	The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy review by peers
Know-how and skill - range	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 and skill - selectivity	Respond to abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge
Competence - context	Exercise personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent contexts
Competence - role	Communicate results of research and innovation to peers; engage in critical dialogue; lead and originate complex social processes
Competence – learning to learn	Learn to critique the broader implications of applying knowledge to particular contexts
Competence - insight	Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and lead action to change them
Progression & Transfer	
Articulation	

Major Award-type Descriptor **p**

Title	Higher Doctorate
Purpose	This award is largely recognises excellent and distinguished contributions to learning. It may be used for career progression to advanced levels of academia and research.
Level	10
Volume	Large
Knowledge - breadth	The systematic development of a large and coherent body of knowledge which is at the forefront of a field of learning
Knowledge – kind	The creation and interpretation of seminal knowledge, through original research, or other advanced creative scholarship that is of a quality to satisfy review by peers
Know-how and skill – range	Bring to publication the output of scholarly work in the production or application of knowledge in a form that admits to scholarly assessment
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Respond to abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge
Competence - context	Make a substantial and sustained contribution to the application of knowledge and skill, perhaps in novel contexts
Competence – role	Acts as a recognised leading authority, influencing others in a field of learning over a period of time
Competence – learning to learn	Learn to critique the broader implications of applying knowledge to particular contexts
Competence - insight	Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and lead action to change them
Progression & Transfer	None
Articulation	This award is never based on a provider's programme and, as such, is not subject to validation but is assessed by the awarding body for each individual learner. Normally, the learner already holds a first doctorate or equivalent for some period of time prior to becoming a candidate for the higher doctorate

APPENDIX G:

Descriptors for minor, special purpose and supplemental award-types

Award-type descriptor 'minor award-type'

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

Award-type descriptor ‘special purpose award-type’

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

Award-type descriptor 'supplemental award-type'

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

Appendix H:

Market research conducted in January 2003 and December 2006

Two market research surveys on awareness of the National Framework of Qualifications were conducted on behalf of the Qualifications Authority. These were published in January 2003 and in December 2006. Summaries of the surveys and their major findings are set out below.

A. Awards and Qualifications – a survey of learners and employers (January 2003)

During the development phase, the Authority identified learners and employers as key stakeholder groups for the Framework and commissioned Lansdowne Market Research to conduct a survey of public awareness and understanding of the existing qualifications system. The specific objectives identified for each phase of the study can be summarised as:

Learners Survey

- To establish the current status of awards/qualification amongst the adult population of Ireland;
- To investigate perceptions regarding the value of awards/qualifications gained in terms of personal development; the creation of employment opportunities; and access to further education;
- To measure awareness of, and attitudes towards, existing awarding bodies, and
- To investigate attitudes towards existing systems of awards and regulatory bodies.

Employers Survey

- To measure awareness of, and attitudes towards, existing award types; existing systems of awards and the associated regulatory bodies;
- To identify those awards/qualifications relevant to individual industry sectors;
- To examine the role of these awards/qualifications in terms of recruitment procedures;
- To explore the importance of recognised qualifications/awards within staff training/development procedures;
- To measure the incidence of existing links with education/training providers; and
- To examine existing levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with current standards of Irish qualifications along with opinions regarding who should be setting the standards for these qualifications.

Learners Survey - Executive Summary

Following the survey of learners conducted in September / October 2002, one in five Irish adults claimed awareness of the National Framework for Qualifications. The highest level of awareness existed amongst the most affluent AB socio economic group – 39%. (This was derived from a specific question within the section on “Knowledge of Awarding Bodies”, which asked “Have you ever heard of the National Framework of Qualifications?”. It is of note that the survey was conducted one year prior to the formal launch of the Framework and that all other questions related to knowledge of the existing qualifications system. This may have influenced the responses recorded for this specific question. The bulk of the results provided a useful indicator of public awareness of, and attitudes to, qualifications and awarding bodies.

FÁS enjoyed the highest recognition of all awarding bodies in the state (95%), with the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and the National University of Ireland (NUI) completing the top three. Awareness of FÁS was evenly balanced across all socio-economic groups; the other awarding bodies, however, tended to have a higher level of awareness amongst those in middle to upper socio-economic groups.

Those holding or studying for various awards or qualifications had varying levels of confidence in the utility of their qualification in terms of seeking employment. Unsurprisingly, those with, or studying for, a professional qualification had the most confidence in their qualification. Those with, or studying for, primary degrees, however, were less sure, reflecting perhaps the more generalised nature of these studies. A degree of uncertainty was also attached to primary degrees in terms of their use in personal development, with almost one in four being unsure about the degrees' impact in this area. FÁS and City and Guilds/Trades qualifications were well endorsed on this measure with almost eight in ten of those with experience of them finding them useful for personal development. Most qualifications from Leaving Certificate upwards were well recognised for the further education and training opportunities to which they can lead.

Almost 3 in 4 adults believed that the reputation of an awarding body was important. There was more ambivalence concerning whether employers were more interested in the type of award rather than the awarding body. It was encouraging that over eight in ten respondents believed that Irish qualifications have good standards, a testament to both the qualifications and the awarding bodies in the eye of the public. The reputation of the awarding body was most important for those with advanced postgraduate degrees. Those with FÁS/City and Guilds/Trades qualifications tended to attach more importance to the qualification itself rather than the place of learning – highlighting perhaps, the more focussed and functional nature of these qualifications. Graduates with professional qualifications also inclined to this view, which is more likely driven by the fact that in general they have limited choice of awarding body. Those holding, or working towards, FÁS/City and Guilds/Trades qualifications were also more likely to value the role of experience over formal qualifications. Those holding or working towards studies that are less vocational or occupational in nature were more likely to place emphasis on the qualification itself (e.g. postgraduate students). Despite the importance of reputation, and the evidence of something of a divergence between the academic and vocational/occupational in terms of experience versus qualification, few were convinced that they judge educational proficiency on the basis of college rather than qualification. The stated importance of reputation, however, is likely to have some influence on this judgement

Employers Survey – Executive Summary

Along with the general public, one in five of the employers interviewed claimed awareness of the National Framework for Qualifications. The highest level of awareness existed within the Government sector – 50%. Apart from secondary school awards (which were selected by the majority), the top three awards deemed most relevant within each employment sector are as follows:

<p>Agri Business/Mining/ Construction/Transport</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. FÁS/City & Guilds/Trades Dip/Cert. 2. Qualification from Professional Bodies. 3. National Certificate
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Manufacturing/ Communications/Utilities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. FÁS/City & Guilds/Trades Dip/Cert. 2. National Certificate. 3. National Diploma.
Wholesale/Retail	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. FÁS/City & Guilds/Trades Dip/Cert. 2. Qualification from Professional Bodies. 3. National Certificate.
Financial/Business/ Personal Service	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Qualification from Professional Bodies. 2. National Diploma. 3. Primary Degree.
Government	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Primary Degree. 2. Qualification from Professional Bodies. 3. National Diploma.

Secondary school qualifications, unsurprisingly, were most likely to be rated as essential screening requirements for staff recruitment. Whilst over a third of employers interviewed made this claim about the Leaving Certificate, a further third considered it desirable, but allocated a greater weight to work experience. The greater the company size, the more essential the qualification appeared to become (due perhaps to the existence of more formal recruitment procedures). Amongst the sectors where an award was considered relevant, the top five other awards considered as essential screening devices were; a Primary Degree, National Diploma, qualifications from professional bodies, National Certificate and a postgraduate degree. Amongst those for whom FÁS/City & Guilds or other trades awards were relevant, nearly two thirds considered the qualifications desirable, but rated work experience more highly.

Just over half of the employers surveyed requested proof of qualifications from job candidates. Those in the financial/business or personal services sector were least likely to make this request. Formalities were, once again, most likely to be observed in larger companies (50+ employees). Fewer than one in five employers agreed that the grade achieved is very important in terms of screening or selecting candidates for a job and just one in eight made this claim in relation to pay scale determination.

Recognised qualifications for in-company training were considered to be important (although just over one in four employers actually had in-company training schemes which were certified by a recognised awarding body). This was particularly evident in the Government and manufacturing/communications/utilities sectors. Overall, the majority felt that standards set for qualifications in Ireland reflect the needs of employers fairly well. Within the industry sector, however, those in manufacturing/communication or utilities were least likely to agree with this statement and one in four felt that the standards set do not meet their needs at all.

B. Lansdowne Market Research – December 2006

In 2006, the Qualifications Authority commissioned Lansdowne Market Research to conduct research in order to benchmark the awareness level of the Framework amongst the general population. A radio and press advertising campaign ran between 20th September and 22nd October 2006. The aim of that campaign was to increase awareness

of the National Framework of Qualifications. . The survey was conducted using a nationally representative sample of all telephone landline owners aged 15+ and specifically looked at the impact of the marketing campaign.

The main objectives of this research were:

- To measure awareness levels before and after the advertising campaign;
- To assess through which media people recalled seeing/hearing the advertising; and
- To determine the publics' understanding of qualifications recognised by the National Framework of Qualifications.

Key findings:

- The October 2006 advertising campaign was effective in increasing the awareness of the National Framework of Qualifications from 13% to 18%;
- In terms of socio-economic background, it is mainly those from higher socio-economic backgrounds who have heard of the National Framework of Qualifications;
- The biggest increase in awareness of the Framework was amongst the 25 – 34 year old age cohort. Before the campaign the younger age band (15-24 year old) were more aware than their older counterparts;
- The news press is the medium most often mentioned as a source of information (both in terms of advertising and of general coverage) about the Framework, though personal experience is also important in this regard;
- Following the advertising campaign, the primary understanding of a qualification recognised by the National Framework of Qualifications is that such a qualification “has met particular standards”. This response increased from 22% pre-campaign to 36% post-campaign. Other responses included that it meant the qualification was quality assured (17%), is highly regarded by employers and industry (17%) and will be recognised abroad (16%).

Appendix I: Sources of Statistical Information

Statistics on participation in education and training and the level of educational attainment of the population can be accessed from the following sources:

- The Department of Education and Science collects and publishes statistical information on schools, and, formerly, collected and published statistics on the non-HEA designated higher-education institutions i.e. the institutes of technology, a number of the associated colleges of higher education and private colleges. From the 2007- 2008 academic year, all higher education statistics are being collected by the Higher Education Authority. Statistical data collected by the Department can be accessed from:

<http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?maincat=17216&pcategory=17216&ecategory=17241&language=EN>

- The Higher Education Authority (HEA) collects statistical information on new entrants, postgraduate enrolments, full and part-time participation and graduates (undergraduate and postgraduate) from the HEA-designated institutions; statistical information up to, and including, 2007 is therefore available from the following institutions:

University College Dublin
University College Cork
National University of Ireland, Galway
Trinity College Dublin
National University of Ireland, Maynooth
Dublin City University
St.Patrick's College Drumcondra
University of Limerick
Mary Immaculate College Limerick
National College of Art and Design
Royal College of Surgeons Ireland
Mater Dei Institute of Education

Information can be accessed from: <http://www.hea.ie/statistics>

As noted above, from the 2007-08 academic year, the HEA are collecting data from all higher education institutions.

- The HEA also produces reports on the first destinations of graduates entitled *What do Graduates Do?* These reports provide information on the percentage of new graduates that enter employment, pursue further study, travel abroad or whose current activities are described as "other". The reports do not specify, however, what kind of further study graduate are pursuing. These reports can be accessed from: <http://www.hea.ie/en/statistics+publications>

Data informing the first destinations reports are collected from the following institutions:

All Hallows College
Cork Institute of Technology
Dublin Business School
Dublin Institute of Technology
Dundalk Institute of Technology

Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology
Griffith College, Dublin
HSI Limerick Business School
Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown
Institute of Technology, Sligo
Institute of Technology, Tralee
Letterkenny Institute of Technology
Midwest Business Institute, Limerick
Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy
National College of Ireland
National University of Ireland, Maynooth
Royal College of Surgeons, Ireland
Skerry's College, Cork
St. Patrick's College, Carlow
The Open Training College
Trinity College, Dublin
University College Dublin
Waterford Institute of Technology
Athlone Institute of Technology
Crawford College of Art & Design, Cork
Dublin City University
Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology
FISC Ireland Ltd
Garda Siochana College, Templemore
Holy Ghost College, Kimmage Manor
Institute of Public Administration
Institute of Technology, Carlow
Institute of Technology, Tallaght
Irish Management Institute
Limerick Institute of Technology
Military College, Curragh Camp
National College of Art & Design
National University of Ireland, Galway
Portobello College
Shannon College of Hotel Management
St. Nicholas Montessori College Ireland
The American College, Dublin
Tipperary Institute
University College Cork
University of Limerick

- The HEA published a report *Who Went to College in 2004? A National Survey of New Entrants to Higher Education* in March 2006. The report was prepared by the ESRI and Fitzpatrick Associates and continued the series of HEA commissioned studies on admission rates to higher education and the social background of new entrants, which commenced in 1980. The reports focus on the school to college transition exclusively and do not provide information on the those students who progress from school to further education and training or from further into higher education and training. These reports are often commonly referred to as the Clancy reports after their author, Prof. Pat Clancy. The most recent report is accessible online:

- O'Connell, P. (ESRI), Clancy, D. (Fitzpatrick Associates) & S. McCoy (ESRI) (2006) *Who Went to College in 2004? A National Survey of New Entrants to Higher Education*. Higher Education Authority. Available from: <http://extranet.hea.ie/uploads/pdf/HEA%20PART%20REP%20Updated%20%20WEB.pdf>
- The Annual School Leavers' Survey has been undertaken, since its initiation in 1980, at the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). The survey examines the experiences of young people as they leave school, both currently and over time. The School Leavers' Survey of 2007, funded by the Department of Education and Science, comprises a sample of leavers from the academic year 2004/2005 (mostly leaving school in June 2005) who left up to and including Leaving Certificate and/or PLC. The survey includes a substantial over-sampling of early leavers and also the Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme groups, to allow particular focus on these groups.
 - The 2007 School Leavers' Survey has not yet been published, but the 2006 survey can be accessed online from: http://www.esri.ie/publications/search_for_a_publication/search_results/view/index.xml?id=2426
 - Previous School Leavers' Surveys can be accessed from the ESRI website: http://www.esri.ie/publications/search_for_a_publication/search_results/index.xml
 - The Irish Social Science Data Archive (ISSDA) currently holds data from the School Leavers' Survey from 1980-98. Users must fill out a data request form and send it to ISSDA; Data request forms are available on the ISSDA website or by email request from issda@ucd.ie.
- A range of statistical information on the further education and training sector is available in the annual reports of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). The reports are accessible from: http://www.fetac.ie/link_pages/publications_link_page.htm
- In 2001, the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) established a Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) to act as a central data gathering, analytical and research resource for the group. It is located in FÁS, the national training and employment authority, and reports to the EGFSN. The unit maintains a comprehensive database containing all available statistics relating to skills and the labour market in Ireland. FÁS and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs jointly publish quarterly skills and labour market reports which include data on qualifications. These reports can be accessed from: <http://www.fas.ie/en/About+Us/Publications+and+Resources/Skills+and+Labour+Market+Reports/default.htm>
- The Central statistics Office (CSO) publishes education and training statistical data which is generated from the output of two different surveys:
 - **The Census of Population**
The census of population gathers statistics on the educational attainment of the population.
 - **The Quarterly National Household Survey.**
The Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) is a large-scale, nationwide survey of households in Ireland. It is designed to produce quarterly labour force estimates that include the official measure of

employment and unemployment in the state (ILO basis). The survey began in September 1997, replacing the annual April Labour Force Survey (LFS). The QNHS also conducts special modules on different social topics each quarter; Lifelong learning featured as a special module in 2003. Data from the CSO can be accessed from:

http://www.cso.ie/surveysandmethodologies/survey_education.htm