The development and implementation of the Ireland’s National Framework of Qualifications

Presentation to Development of the European and National Qualifications Framework – international experiences

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Dr Anna Murphy
National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
Overview

- Why develop the national qualifications framework?
- Key features of Ireland’s National Framework of Qualifications
- Consultation process
- The operation of the NFQ
- Implementation of the NFQ since 2003
- Links to the European and international frameworks
- Conclusion
Qualifications landscape in Ireland in the 1990s

- responsibilities for ‘Education’ and ‘Training’ policy and funding divided amongst a number of government departments
- provision largely focused on young people and on transition from school to training or to higher education
- Number of qualifications systems – disconnected
  - many qualifications not understood by the public
  - dead ends/cul de sacs
- European-level actions to promote individual mobility and transparency of qualifications
Rationale for the national framework of qualifications

• Develop a coherent qualifications system
• Promote comparability and understanding of qualifications
• Support lifelong learning – shift the focus from provider to learner
• Encourage a more flexible system of qualifications
• Ensure the quality of qualifications
• Support the portability of qualifications across sectors and countries
1999 Education and Training (Qualifications) Act refers to:

‘a Framework for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State, based on standards of knowledge, skills or competence to be acquired by learners’

• outcomes-based – cultural shift
• aims to promote access, transfer and progression
• new agencies:
  - National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) to develop and introduce the Framework:
Developing the National Framework of Qualifications

- Higher Education and Training Awards Council HETAC (non-university higher education)

- Further Education and Training Awards Council FETAC (one qualifications body for all areas of adult education and vocational education and training)

• Other awarding bodies: Universities, State Examinations Commission (school awards), Dublin Institute of Technology
Developing the Framework 3

- **Legislation** – provided legitimacy and a driver for development

- **Research** – at the time, few national qualification frameworks (Scotland, New Zealand, South Africa, Australia)

- **Consultation** – with social partners, awarding bodies and providers of education and training (focus groups, regular meetings, public consultation, conferences)

- **Consensus-building** – initially with representative bodies
What is the National Framework of Qualifications?

‘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’
Key Features of the Framework

• 10 Levels – Level indicators set overall standards for qualifications
• 8 strands of knowledge, skill and competence (learning outcomes)
• Award-types: four ‘classes’ of named awards/qualifications
  - major, minor, special-purpose, supplemental
• Named awards – the qualification a learner achieves e.g. Honours Bachelor Degree in Chemical Engineering
• Comprehensive
  - basic literacy to doctoral level
  - facilitates the recognition of prior learning
AWARDS IN THE FRAMEWORK

There are four types of award in the National Framework of Qualifications:

- **Major Awards**: are the principal class of awards made at a level
- **Minor Awards**: are for partial completion of the outcomes for a Major Award
- **Supplemental Awards**: are for learning that is additional to a Major Award
- **Special Purpose Awards**: are for relatively narrow or purpose-specific achievement
The operation of the Framework

NQAI sets overall policies and procedures in relation to the Framework and access, transfer and progression

National awarding bodies set standards for qualifications in line with the Framework and in accordance with legislation e.g. Universities Act, 1997

Different relationships between the Framework and each sector of education and training:

- FETAC and HETAC - set standards for named awards, validate programmes, quality assurance, assessment, access, transfer and progression, may delegate authority to make awards to Institutes of Technology

- Universities – are both providers and awarding bodies

- Schools – number of bodies in setting standards, curricula, assessment
Framework implementation

- Significant progress since NFQ was introduced in 2003 in all sectors

- Framework Implementation and Impact Study 2009 assesses first 5 years of NFQ implementation

  http://www.nqai.ie/framework_study.html

- Key elements of implementation: communication; use of learning outcomes; legacy awards; ‘levelling’ awards; assessment; quality assurance; access, transfer and progression; use of the Framework in public funding, policy and the labour market
Framework Implementation 2

Universities (Levels 6-10)

- Vast majority of university awards in the Framework
- Work on implementation – individually and collectively (e.g. University Framework Implementation Network)

Non-university higher education and training (Levels 6-10) (HETAC)

- Developed disciplinary standards using NFQ learning outcomes
- New Assessment policies and procedures (2009) focus on learning outcomes
- Framework is used in the design of programmes, validation of programmes and assessment
- Institutes of Technology have power to make their own awards
Further Education and Training (Levels 1-6) (FETAC)

- New Common Awards System is under development
- New awards developed in response to industry and other needs (energy, health and safety)
- Awards developed for the first time at Levels 1 and 2
- All awards are based on Framework learning outcomes
Framework Implementation 4

Schools

• No change to school awards
• New subject curricula are based on the Framework and on learning outcomes
• Inclusion of Leaving Certificate (upper secondary education) across Levels 4 and 5 is being explored
• Consultation on proposed new Junior Cycle (lower secondary education) includes the possibility of offering more than a single award at a single level
International awards: over 1,000 (mainly UK vocational awards) aligned with NFQ

Some awards of professional bodies that have a function in law also aligned to the NFQ e.g., accountancy profession

International sectoral/global vendor awards may be aligned to the Framework
Framework Implementation 6

Overall progress:

• New awards and widespread use of learning outcomes
• Integrated framework - operates in all sectors
• Sustained engagement of key stakeholders
• Progression for learners has improved – further education to higher education
• Limited awareness of the Framework in the labour market
• Increasing alignment of the Framework with public funding
Framework implementation 7

Issues arising:

• Framework implementation is a long-term iterative process – some issues need to be re-visited

• Implementation of learning outcomes approach takes time - cultural change, need for debate (national and international)

• Pace of implementation differs across sectors

• Need for sustained engagement with international developments such as European and other international frameworks (referencing with EQF, Bologna Framework, New Zealand, Australia)

• Gaps in data on implementation

• Quality assurance is critical to the credibility of the Framework
Quality assurance

Critical to the credibility of the Framework (how do we know a qualification is at the correct level, how do we know that a learner has achieved the outcomes?)

- Legislative arrangements in place for each sector
- Best practice encouraged through networks
- Framework gradually incorporated into internal and external quality assurance arrangements e.g. HETAC institutional reviews
- International awards are aligned on the basis of quality assurance
On-going and future challenges

• Oversight of NFQ implementation will be a responsibility of a new amalgamated qualifications and quality assurance body – Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland

• Continued work on learning outcomes, quality assurance, assessment, international/sectoral awards

• Issues to be revisited: Level 6 (placement of craft awards at one level; differentiation of 2 major award-types in further and higher education and training); placement of Leaving certificate award at two levels

• Building effective learning pathways across the 10 levels of the Framework

• Encouraging the Recognition of Prior Learning

• Responsiveness of the qualifications system
Links between the Framework and the European overarching frameworks 1

- the NFQ makes sense of the Irish qualifications system
- overarching Frameworks are designed to act as translation devices to make national qualifications from one jurisdiction more easily understood in another
- Ireland quick to embrace idea of EQF, enthusiastic participant in its development and implementation
- Irish Presidency conference 2004 explored common themes across vocational education training and higher education
  - Quality, credit, mobility, lifelong learning
  - frameworks as a bridge between VET and higher education
Links between the NFQ and the European overarching Frameworks 2

Bologna Framework

- self-certification of compatibility of NFQ to Bologna Framework, 2006
  - verified the extent to which qualifications or qualification types mark the completion of Bologna cycles

European Qualifications Framework

- Referencing of NFQ to EQF, June 2009
  - Levels in the NFQ are referenced to EQF levels
- Referencing of EFQ in new certificate and diploma supplements by 2012
## Ireland’s NFQ and European Frameworks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EQF levels</th>
<th>EHEA Framework (Bologna)</th>
<th>NFQ Levels</th>
<th>NFQ Major Award-types</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Level 1 Certificate</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Level 2 Certificate</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Level 3 Certificate, Junior Certificate</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Level 4 Certificate, Leaving Certificate</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Level 5 Certificate, Leaving Certificate</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Short Cycle within First Cycle</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Advanced Certificate (FET award); Higher Certificate (HET award)</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>First Cycle</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Ordinary Bachelors Degree</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Honours Bachelor Degree, Higher Diploma</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Second Cycle</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Masters Degree, Post-Graduate Diploma</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Third Cycle</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Doctoral Degree, Higher Doctorate</td>
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Links between the NFQ and the EQF

• ‘neat’ results are not possible – 10 levels cannot map precisely to 8
• learning outcomes descriptions differ somewhat
• task is to compare rather than establish a perfect fit between frameworks
• EQF facilitates dialogue between qualifications frameworks
• EQF supports mobility and lifelong learning
• Stakeholders meet European responsibilities through implementation of the national framework – transparent implementation, accurate levelling of qualifications, strong quality assurance
Conclusions

• Ireland ahead of many countries in developing a national qualifications framework
  • Has a well established national framework
  • First country to have aligned to both the Bologna and EQF
• Frameworks becoming increasingly established in Europe and worldwide – over time they will become tools for the recognition of qualifications by education institutions and employers
  • Implementation takes time
  • On-going monitoring, leadership and review is required
• Further information: www.ngai.ie and www.nfq.ie