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The Irish National Framework of Qualifications: A Blueprint for Change

Abstract: A reform of the qualifications system in Ireland, undertaken in the early years of this century, introduced the concept of a qualifications framework as the system’s central organising structure. The key driver for this radical change was the perceived need for a qualifications system that would be in tune with the development of a society that embraced lifelong learning. The resulting National Framework of Qualifications incorporates a methodology for describing qualifications, based on the use of “learning outcomes” as a “language”. The Irish framework is designed to accommodate every kind of qualification, including those associated with all sectors of education and training, thus ensuring that the system can provide appropriate recognition for learning achievements in formal, non-formal and informal learning modes. The Irish approach to framework development was practical and progressive, involving a combination of legislation and consultation; as a result, all relevant stakeholders were able to participate in the development process, while nevertheless ensuring that rapid conclusions were reached about the way forward on any issue. The National Framework of Qualifications was introduced in 2003 and its implementation is ongoing. It is now a central feature in the world of education and training in Ireland.

Keywords: reform, lifelong learning, qualifications framework, learning outcomes, level, descriptor, award, award-type

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Introduction

This paper sets out to provide an overview of the National Framework of Qualifications developed and introduced in Ireland between 2001 and 2003. It explains the rationale for the development of a qualifications framework in Ireland. It also describes the development process used in this initiative.

It is, of course, possible to set these actions in the context of an academic discussion on patterns of qualifications framework development and the theories of education that underpin various approaches. However, this is not the intention here: rather, the paper attempts to describe the real, messy task of building a national structure for the reorganisation of the system of qualifications. It is a task for another study to consider how these real-life events should be interpreted in relation to the now rapidly-growing discourse on the subject of the recognition of learning achievement.

An understanding of the Irish experience may assist those charged with the task of developing qualifications frameworks in other countries. Indeed, as this process gets under way in many European countries, it can be seen that trends in good practice are emerging and the experiences of the early-adopters may help to shorten the task for those now following. However, it must be borne in mind that the Irish framework was developed for the local situation, long before the introduction of the European Qualifications Framework, and it has never been projected as a model for any other country to follow. As will be seen below, the undertaking in Ireland was not just a qualifications framework to explain the relationship between existing qualifications, but a deep and wide-ranging reform of the entire system, with new legislation, new organisations, many new qualifications and a coherent strategy of linking the qualifications framework into education and training policy generally.
The Irish context

For an understanding and appreciation of the reform of the qualifications system in Ireland, of which the National Framework of Qualifications is the key component, it is necessary to be aware of the context in which these developments took place. Ireland is a small state, with a population of just under 4 million. It has a centralised system of government with weak regional and local structures, particularly in relation to education. Responsibility for aspects of education and training is separated across a range of ministries. This diffuse governance was reflected in the range of qualifications systems in use in Ireland towards the end of the 20th century, with separate arrangements for qualifications for general education, further and vocational education, universities, institutes of technology and a variety of subsystems for areas of training including crafts/trades, agriculture, tourism and fisheries.

Another important feature is that the focus of provision for learning in Ireland has historically been on the needs of young people – not surprisingly, as the country has had a very youthful demographic profile for many years. This focus is evident in the investment of resources, as well as in the design of systems and organisational structures. Education, for most people, has been in the main a childhood/young adult, pre-employment experience, with a concentration on school-to-college and school-to-training development routes.

In the last decades of the 20th century, demographic changes saw the peak age cohort moving up towards 25 years. At the same time, industrial development policy and skill needs forecasts were highlighting the demand for a more knowledge-based workforce, predicting a near future in which most workers would need to re-skill and make career changes at intervals. The qualifications system was perceived to be ill-suited to this emerging new context: it was too complex and confusing to users, and it was focused very strongly on certifying completion of initial education and training processes.

Apart from the need for a more modern qualifications system, there was a growing sense that the traditional understandings of “sectors” in education and training were becoming less appropriate to the changing situation. New occupations were emerging, requiring new skill-sets, and many existing occupations were evolving rapidly: for example, the printing industry had exchanged a range of apprenticeship-based trades for graphic designers and electro-mechanical technicians – who typically were recruited with “higher education” qualifications. The planning for a reformed qualifications system in Ireland took account of these trends, introducing the concepts of “further education and training” and “higher education and training” as the organisational sectors in the new system and rejecting terminology such as “vocational education”, “training”, “VET” and “academic”.
A framework of qualifications – why?

The development of a national framework of qualifications in Ireland was directly related to the national objective of moving towards a “lifelong learning society”, in which citizens avail of learning opportunities at various stages throughout their lives. Realising this objective has required significant changes in education and training generally – including a need for a more flexible and integrated system of qualifications.

A key issue was the diffuse nature of the existing qualifications systems, which did not easily support portability of recognition for learning. The strong separation of responsibility for education and training across a range of government Departments was reflected in the qualifications systems, with separate arrangements for schools, further education, institutes of technology, universities, and a variety of training organisations.

Another reason for change was the perceived need to enable users – learners, employers and others – to compare Irish qualifications more easily and accurately with those from other countries.

For a coherent but flexible system – what was needed? The policy response to this need was to set in train a development process leading to:

– a framework for the development, quality assurance and recognition of qualifications in Ireland;
– one framework to encompass all qualifications, for all aspects of education and training;
– providing a simple, transparent frame of reference.

A new approach to the organisation of the system of qualifications

The National Framework of Qualifications has been a radical development in Irish education and training. The framework was designed from the outset to bring about change. Its key effect is that it has introduced a new approach to the meaning of a qualification, as an award\(^1\) made to recognise learning outcomes achieved – what the holder knows, can do and understands – rather than time spent on a programme. It thus shifts the emphasis of the qualifications system from supporting existing systems and structures (such as programmes or institutions) to meeting the needs of learners.

The Irish 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.” (Determinations for ... 2003)

\(^1\)In the language associated with the Irish NQF, the words “award” and “qualification” are synonymous; however, the term “award” is preferred throughout the framework literature to reinforce the key concept of awards made for the achievement of learning outcomes.
The framework comprises ten levels, with each level based on specified standards of knowledge, skill and competence. These standards define the outcomes to be achieved by learners seeking to gain awards at each level. The ten levels accommodate awards gained through learning in schools, the workplace, the community, training centres, colleges and universities, from the most basic to the most advanced levels of learning. Learning achieved through experience in the workplace or other non-formal settings can also be recognised in awards that are placed on the framework.

It should be noted that the intention was not just to provide a frame of reference for existing awards: the structures established for the framework enabled the development of systems of new awards. These new awards are made on the basis of “learning outcomes” defined in terms of standards of knowledge, skill and competence. The outcomes-based nature of the new awards was a significant change from the practice in most pre-framework awards systems, of basing awards on inputs, or on time spent in programmes.

**The Irish approach to qualifications framework development**

The reform of the qualifications system in Ireland was firmly based on legislation, specifically the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999). Under this Act, three new organisations were established in 2001 – the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and two new statutory awarding bodies, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). The National Qualifications Authority has the central role in the reform process, to establish and maintain a national framework of qualifications. However, the two Awards Councils also are a crucial element in the process: as they have now taken over the awarding functions of several other bodies, the range of organisations that are empowered to make awards in Ireland has been significantly reduced, which in itself simplifies and clarifies the qualifications system:\(^2\):

- FETAC makes awards for all learning in further education and training programmes, and has generally assumed the awarding functions of VET providers;
- HETAC makes awards for learning in a wide range of higher education and training institutions, including the Institutes of Technology;
- The State Examinations Commission makes awards for learning in secondary school programmes;
- The seven universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology are providers of programmes and also awarding bodies in their own right.

\(^2\)In addition to the statutory awarding bodies, a number of professional and international bodies make awards that are in common use in Ireland, and specific arrangements have been made for the inclusion of these awards in the framework.
The Qualifications Authority (NQAI) undertook the task of developing the framework of qualifications. A small team was established: this comprised four experienced practitioners drawn from various sectors within the education and training community – including, crucially, the key ministry responsible for education. Collectively, this group had a network of contacts throughout education and training and a strong awareness of the issues and policy lines of concern to the many stakeholder groups involved. The development team began its work with a period of intensive research on approaches to the organisation of qualifications systems and on the use of qualifications frameworks so that the design of the Irish framework was informed by the latest thinking and practice at the time. In a post-facto analysis of the framework, it is possible to identify influences from various sources, such as Benjamin Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom et al. 1956), Elliot Jacques’ levels of task complexity (Jacques 1973) and Hubert Dreyfus’ ladder of competence (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986; Dreyfus 1992), as well as elements borrowed from the small number of frameworks already in existence in other countries. However, it must be emphasised that no one approach was adopted from prior theory or practice, and that the Irish framework does not espouse any particular philosophy of education and training, other than a vision for the recognition of lifelong learning. Rather, the framework is a construct designed to address the particular needs of the local context and the most important influence on its design was the collective sensibility of the many stakeholders who contributed to its development.

The actual development process employed could be described as “consultative but progressive”. Following the research phase, and initial discussions with key senior stakeholders, a discussion paper was produced that set out various options for the framework and posed questions to stimulate consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of different possible scenarios (Towards a National Framework ... 2001). This paper was circulated widely to all stakeholder groups and organisations and responses were invited within a fairly tight timeframe. The many responses received were synthesised and the outline of a framework that might be acceptable generally began to emerge. This outline was discussed and analysed at a major national consultative conference, in February 2002. There followed a period of intensive development activity. A standing consultative group was established. The Qualifications Authority in itself is inclusive of all of the key stakeholder groups, but its members are policy-makers rather than practitioners. The framework development consultative group was somewhat broader-based and comprised experts and practitioners from the various sectoral organisations. As elements of the framework criteria were developed, they were considered by the consultative group, amended as required, and re-considered. Rather than seeking complete consensus on any particular issue, the emphasis was on finding a draft that all stakeholders would go along with. Thus, in an iterative process, the framework model emerged. The National Framework of Qualifications was introduced in October 2003 and its provisions have now been substantially implemented.

By comparison with other initiatives in the field of education and training in Ireland, the development of the National Framework of Qualifications was extremely rapid: nevertheless, it took two full years from the establishment of
the organisational infrastructure to the introduction of the framework, and implement-
mentation has been an ongoing process ever since. It should also be noted that the
establishment of NQAI and the Awards Councils took two years after the passing
of the framework legislation in 1999, and planning for the legislation had begun
in 1996. The implementation of the framework has been a many-faceted process,
but a key element in this was a communications strategy. The framework intro-
duced many concepts – such as learning outcomes, level, award-type, descriptors
– that were novel and unfamiliar to the education and training community. These
concepts have now been effectively inserted into the vocabulary used to discuss
qualifications issues in Ireland: achieving this insertion required a significant
communications effort sustained over several years.

Outline of the National Framework of Qualifications

There follows an overview of the main features of the National Framework of
Qualifications. A full description can be found in the technical papers published
by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland in October 2003 (see Deter-
minations for ... 2003; Policies and Criteria ... 2003).

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications has a simple basic “archi-
tecture”. Essentially, it is a structure of ten levels. The framework levels form
the basic instrument that enables different awards to be described and compared
in a coherent and consistent frame of understanding. The levels instrument is
enhanced by the provision of a classification that enables awards to be defined
by type. Together, the levels and award-types form a flexible mechanism that
can provide recognition for almost any imaginable learning achievement. It is
the responsibility of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland to define
levels and develop award-type descriptors. The levels and award types are used
by the awarding bodies as the basis of standards which they develop for actual
qualifications in specific fields of learning.

The structure of the Irish framework is represented graphically in the following
diagram. It illustrates the ten levels and the major award types defined for each
level (in the boxes at the outside edge of the arc). It also shows the ranges of levels
at which the various awarding bodies make awards. The key to the diagram also
outlines the various classes of awards in the framework: in addition to the major
awards, there are “minor”, “supplemental” and “special purpose” types.

Levels

The ten levels in the Irish framework encompass the widest possible spread of
learning. Level 1 awards, for example, recognise the ability to perform basic tasks,
while Level 10 awards recognise the ability to discover and develop new knowledge
and skills at the frontier of research and scholarship. Each level is defined by a
set of “standards of learning outcomes” that are expected of a learner who is to
receive an award at that level. The standards are set out in terms of knowledge,
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**Figure 1: The structure of the Irish framework**

skill and competence. However, these three core factors are elaborated to provide two statements about knowledge, two about skill and four about aspects of competence – so that each level “descriptor” comprises eight statements. The result is a complex grid of eighty cells, providing a powerful instrument for description and comparison.

Why are there ten levels in the Irish framework? The approach to framework design was to strive to have as few levels as possible, while providing sufficient levels to differentiate between the ranges of qualifications that were to be included and to enable the design of systems of new qualifications as planned in the reform process. In short, ten levels are an appropriate “fit” for the Irish context. It should be noted that this design decision was not in any way conditioned by external factors such as the need to reference to other frameworks; moreover, the Irish framework has subsequently been successfully referenced to other frameworks with more or less levels than ten, such as SCQF (Scotland) and EQF.

**Award-types**

In addition to the levels structure, the Irish framework deploys an instrument for defining and describing “award-types”. Although this concept is new to Ireland, it builds upon the traditional practice of grouping awards for the purposes of setting standards, design and delivery of education and training programmes.
and generally communicating what awards mean. Internationally, the concept is not new: the Australian Qualifications Framework has until very recently been a structure of qualification types without explicit levels. An innovative feature of the use of award-types in the Irish framework is that it begins from a basic classification of all awards in four classes – major, minor, special-purpose and supplemental:

- **major** award-types are the principal class of awards made at each level, and capture a typical range of achievements at the level;
- a **minor** award-type provides recognition for learners who achieve a recognisable part (or “component”) of the learning outcomes required for a major award. An awards system may enable the accumulation of minor awards towards the eventual achievement of a relevant major;
- **special-purpose** award-types are made for learning achievement related to specific, relatively narrow, purposes; such awards are often associated with continuing professional development;
- **supplemental** award-types are for learning which is additional to a previous award; such awards often relate to updating and refreshing knowledge or skills.

Within the class of major awards, sixteen generic award-types have been developed with at least one at each framework level. Each has its own “award-type descriptor”, and these have been published as part of the criteria for the framework. A feature of the overall system is that the comparatively complex level descriptors enable award types to be defined that are at the same level but that differ in some respects: an example is the pair of award types at level 6, one of which recognises a high level of expertise and is associated with trade/craft qualifications, whereas the other represents learning with strong potential for progression and is associated with para-professional qualifications. These different types at the same level are constructed by the adoption of some elements from the descriptors for adjoining levels.

Taking into account the facility for developing different major award-types at a level, as well as the arrangement for defining award-types for smaller or highly-specialised learning awards, the Irish framework can be seen to provide an extremely flexible, inclusive mechanism for the recognition of the widest possible variety of learning achievements.

**Named awards**

How does this array of instruments relate to the actual qualification awarded to an individual learner? The Irish framework uses the term “named award” for the qualification a learner receives for achievement in a specific field of learning. A named award is related to the Framework through the award-type to which it belongs. For example, the Honours Bachelor Degree is a major award-type at Level 8 in the framework. So, an Honours Bachelor Degree in Electronic Engineering
could be a named award for this award-type. Similarly, the Level 5 Certificate is a major award-type at Level 5. A Level 5 Certificate in Office Skills could be a named award of this type. It is the responsibility of awarding bodies to develop named awards. Using the award-type descriptors as templates, they develop the standards for named awards in various fields of learning.

Qualifications in the Framework

The Irish policy is to have one comprehensive, integrated framework capable of including all qualifications in use in the state. Thus, the approach has been to seek the most appropriate way of including any particular pre-framework award or set of awards, rather than to set up criteria to exclude awards that do not fully comply with framework specifications for level or type. However, all awarding bodies are expected to design any new awards in line with the framework specifications. Apart from new awards, many pre-framework awards, as they become eligible for re-validation, have been re-cast to better match framework award-types. At the beginning of Framework implementation, HETAC coordinated a widespread re-validation of awards for programmes in the Institutes of Technology.

The framework accommodates qualifications achieved in secondary school, further education, vocational education and training (VET), higher education (HE) and non-formal or informal settings. It is important to note that the Irish framework does not have separate “HE levels” or “VET levels”. Awards made for learning achieved through VET programmes can be at any of the ten levels, as appropriate: it is significant that the Awards Councils both include awards for “training” in their remits.

Another key feature of the Irish framework is that it provides for the inclusion of the myriad qualifications that serve to recognise the achievement of small or narrow sets of learning outcomes, through the minor, special purpose and supplemental award classes. These arrangements are particularly relevant to programmes that cater for those with learning difficulties and adults returning to basic education. They are also relevant to many programmes in use in the workplace to up-skill or re-skill personnel. Many occupations, including some that recruit holders of awards at the highest levels, rely on supplemental programmes to provide for specialisation and progression within the field. Any and all of these awards can be included in the framework.

Recognition of outcomes of non-formal and informal learning

In the Irish system, there are no separate or “different” qualifications for non-formal or informal learning: the same qualifications serve to provide recognition for achievement of learning outcomes in all modes of learning, including full-time, part-time, apprenticeship, traineeship, distance learning, as well as learning in the workplace or in the home. The policy outlines of this approach were set out in
one of the technical papers published by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland in October 2003 (Policies, Actions and Procedures ... 2003). These policies were further elaborated in a paper dedicated to the theme of the recognition of prior learning, in June 2005 (Principles and operational guidelines ... 2005).

Processes for the recognition of prior learning benefit significantly where arrangements are in place to enable the learning outcomes for qualifications to be accumulated. This facility is provided for in the architecture of the Irish framework, in which the classification of award types allows for the design of awards for small packages of learning outcomes; also, within the organisational infrastructure of the framework, the Awards Councils are able to implement this policy. The 2003 policy matrix also sets out broad guidelines for an approach to credit accumulation and transfer and this is further elaborated in a paper on credit in higher education issued in November 2004 (see Principles and operational guidelines ... 2006).

Benefits of the Framework

The introduction of the National Framework of Qualifications has already resulted in many advantages for all users of the qualifications system in Ireland. The principal underlying benefit of the Framework is that it puts greater emphasis on the needs of learners — representing a major shift in Irish policy on qualifications.

Meeting new needs ... while valuing existing awards

Increasingly, a more diverse group of learners, with a higher proportion of adults, is being embraced within the Irish education and training system. The Framework is designed to meet the qualifications needs of this more diverse learner group, and many new awards are being developed and made available as lifelong learning gradually becomes the norm in Ireland.

Existing “pre-framework” awards are recognised as part of the new system. They retain their value for transfer or progression to further learning opportunities and for employment.

Coherence and comparability

The Framework has enabled much improved understanding of the meaning of the wide variety of awards available in Ireland. By including all awards in a single structure on the same basis, it clearly maps out awards available at all levels, from all awarding bodies and through programmes in all education and training institutions. This inherent coherence is enhanced by the integration of the Framework with the national database of courses and programmes (known as Qualifax). As a result, it is now easier for learners to identify awards that best suit their needs. For instance, better-informed comparisons can be made between awards in diverse areas of learning — such as business and science; it is also
possible to compare awards that have different purposes and standards — such as general education awards as opposed to specific occupational training awards. Employers and recruiters benefit from the Framework, as it allows easy understanding and comparison of the nature and value of available awards — a feature that also provides employees with enhanced support for continuing professional development and career advancement.

Quality

A key objective of the Framework is to promote and maintain the standards of further and higher education and training awards. Various arrangements were already in place, backed by legislation, to ensure the quality of education and training in Ireland. The introduction of the Framework, which sets the overall standards of awards, together with the measures taken by the awarding bodies and providers to build and monitor the quality of awards, has further enhanced and guaranteed the overall quality of awards made in Ireland.

Opportunities for progression

The Framework seeks to improve opportunities for learners to reach their full potential through the development of a system of awards flexible enough to value all forms of learning achievement, regardless of how or where the learning takes place. In addition, the Framework policies include provisions for “access, transfer and progression for learners” (Policies, Actions and Procedures ... 2003). These provisions promote wider access to awards and create additional opportunities for transfer to different programmes or fields of learning, encouraging learners to continue in the learning process and progress to awards at higher levels.

Recognition of prior learning

Processes for the recognition of prior learning can potentially benefit all learners, but particularly those who have been engaged in learning on a non-formal or informal basis, or in the workplace. For example, learners need to be able to gain recognition for previous relevant learning so that they do not have to start from scratch when they switch into a new field of learning. The Framework incorporates policies designed to support the further development of prior learning recognition as a broad concept that can enable entry to a programme, credit towards an award, or even eligibility for a full award.

Avoiding progression “cul-de-sacs”

In the qualifications systems that operated in Ireland prior to the establishment of the Framework, many awards were achieved through specialised programmes and offered little or no potential for progression to further learning. This is not to say that these awards are of low value: on the contrary, many such awards are
highly esteemed in particular occupations. Nevertheless, as it is important for learners that all awards should have some associated opportunities for progression, the Framework has been designed to ensure that there are no “cul-de-sac” awards in the new system. The outcomes-based nature of the new awards ensures a high level of transferability of learning, and procedures to promote progression and strengthen transferability of awards are included in the policy matrix of the Framework.

*International comparability of awards*

The Framework has already made it easier to compare Irish awards with those from different jurisdictions, especially between Ireland and the United Kingdom. It also provides the basis of linkage with European meta-frameworks. The expectation is that this will enable learners to move more easily between different education and training systems, and use their qualifications for employment in other countries.

**The Irish reform process: notable features**

As indicated at the outset of this paper, the Irish framework is not proposed as a model for adoption in any other country; it is possible to draw useful lessons from the Irish experience of framework development, but in doing so it is important to take into account the radical nature of the task that was undertaken in Ireland – not just a qualifications framework, but a general reform of the system using a qualifications framework as the central structure of a new system. The Irish framework is supported by new legislation, new structures and new organisations.

The Irish approach to framework development was practical and progressive, involving a combination of legislation and consultation: much time and attention was devoted to ensuring that all relevant stakeholders were able to participate in the development process, while at the same time ensuring that rapid conclusions were reached about the way forward on any issue.

In interpreting the way the Irish framework operates, it is important to bear in mind that it contains new qualifications at all ten levels, but also many pre-existing qualifications that continue to be awarded and even some obsolete qualifications: ways had to be found to accommodate all of them, within the general specifications and criteria of the framework.

**References**


Further Information

The development of the National Framework of Qualifications has been well documented and it has resulted in the production of many papers and publications. All of these are available on-line, at one or other of the following websites:

– website of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland: www.nqai.ie
– website for the Framework : www.nfq.ie
– see also the awards Councils’ websites:
  • www.fetac.ie
  • www.hetac.ie