

The European qualifications framework: challenges and implications in the Irish further education and training sector

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SUMMARY

This paper examines recent reforms in the Irish further education and training (FET) sector in response to government commitments to move towards a lifelong learning society. The context is set by tracing development of the Irish FET sector. An outline of legislative change and measures that have been put in place to reform the Irish system in accordance with European developments on learner mobility is provided. The basic architecture of the Irish national framework of qualifications is set out with reference to the proposed EQF. A review of progress in implementation is presented with particular focus on developing quality assurance systems. The paper concludes by exploring the challenges in implementing new qualifications structures. More specifically, it is analysing policy on the one hand and praxis on the other in making lifelong learning a reality for all.

Key words

Lifelong learning,
quality assurance,
further education,
training

Introduction

The proposed European qualifications framework (EQF), which links the Bologna (1999) and Copenhagen (2002) processes, has promoted much discussion in European countries on VET policies on lifelong learning. In keeping with policies in the EU, the Irish government has focused on putting in place structures that define qualifications according to specific levels. This was much needed in a complex and diffuse system in its provision and progression opportunities for learners. This paper describes the Irish context and documents the progress made in qualification systems and approaches to quality assurance with particular reference to the further education and training (FET) sector. It explores the inherent challenges in successful implementation of reforms within a lifelong learning paradigm. It suggests that the Irish experience in developing a qualifications framework provides several insights into the challenges involved in implementing the proposed EQF elsewhere.

The Republic of Ireland context

Ireland is a small, open and trade-dependent economy with a population of 4.2 million (Central Statistics Office, 2006). The numbers in the labour force reached two million for the first time in the history of the State in the second quarter of 2005. The labour force now accounts for 61.5 % of all persons aged 15 years or over. The female participation rate increased from approximately 49 % to 51 %, while the male participation rate increased from approximately 70 % to 72 % from 2004 to 2005. In 2005, immigration accounted for 36 000 of the increase in the labour force (FAS, 2005). Because of globalisation and the fact that Ireland is an open economy, it is accepted that higher levels of skills, knowledge and competence will be required from the labour force. Sustained economic success has focused on the need to ensure that the education system, particularly the FET sector, is adequately prepared to meet future challenges.

There is currently a lack of clarity on what comprises the FET sector in Ireland (FETAC, 2005, p. 5). Comprehensive data related to FET enrolment numbers are limited, and this is mirrored in a paucity of international data (*ibid.*, p. 5). Equally, FET is difficult to define (*ibid.*, p. 6). Ireland differs from many of its European counterparts in that it only formalised a FET strand within its provision in 2001 with establishment of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). Recent recognition of a FET sector in Ireland could

be interpreted as reflecting negative perceptions of vocational education in an education system that has historically been classically oriented.

Vocational education was placed on a statutory footing under the 1930 Vocational Education Act, which established vocational education committees (VECs). Since their establishment, vocational schools in the VEC system have faced a struggle against the more academically oriented secondary schools. Analysts have related status and issues of parity of esteem for vocational programmes to the fact that vocational education has become synonymous with manual occupations and lower paid employment (Heraty, Morley, and McCarthy, 2000). Negative perceptions of vocational education particularly impacted on vocational schools when changing demographics in the 1980s brought falling enrolments across the second level education system. In response to this decline, the vocational sector developed vocational preparation and training programmes supported substantially through the European Social Fund (ESF). These courses became known as post leaving certificate (PLC) courses. Many vocational schools are now dedicated to PLC provision and have been renamed as colleges of further education (FE) to reflect the changed nature of provision. Effectively, an FE sector emerged from within the second level vocational school system.

While the VEC system is a key provider of FE, both in terms of PLC and part-time community-based education provision, several other organisations have developed as training providers. The most significant of these is Foras Aiseanna Saothair (FAS), which offers programmes in a range of areas including apprenticeships, training for the unemployed and training in the workplace (FETAC, 2005, p. 9). Other organisations engaged in sectoral training are Teagasc (agriculture) focusing mainly on farm training, Fáilte Ireland (tourism) and Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM) (fisheries). There are in excess of 300 000 enrolments annually in FET programmes in Ireland. This includes those enrolled in publicly funded programmes (approximately 183 000) operated by FE centres, FAS, Fáilte Ireland, Teagasc, and BIM, as well as those (approximately 140 000) enrolled on self-funded adult part-time courses in FE centres (*ibid.*, p. 26). These figures do not include privately funded or work-based learning.

In addition to the range of organisations engaged in providing education and training, a further difficulty in developing FET was the absence of a coherent qualifications structure. The National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) was not established until 1992, seven years after the introduction of PLCs. In the absence of an Irish FET awarding body, PLCs led to awards from United Kingdom bodies (such as City and Guilds of London Institute), Irish pro-

professional bodies (such as the Institute of Accounting Technicians in Ireland) and local providers such as the City of Dublin VEC (McIver, 2003). While establishing the NCVA brought an Irish system of certification, many FET providers continued to offer courses leading to qualifications from other bodies. This arose mainly because the NCVA did not develop a broad enough range of qualifications to match the diversity in course provision in the FET sector. This caused confusion for learners in relating different awards to one another, and in mapping out progression routes.

As this account has illustrated, development of the Irish FET sector lacked cohesion. By the end of the 20th century, the sector was somewhat weakened by the broad range of organisations engaged in provision, and lack of cohesion in a unified quality assured qualifications system. It is in this context that reforms introduced in the 1990s, particularly the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 were important developments. This legislation provided for establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and FETAC. The NQAI was established in 2001 with responsibility for establishing and maintaining a framework of qualifications, and promoting and simplifying access, transfer and progression (NQAI, 2003a).

National framework of qualifications

Following consultations, the NQAI launched the national framework of qualifications (NFQ) in October 2003. There are many similarities between the philosophy underpinning development of the NFQ and the proposed EQF. The NFQ was developed to bring transparency to the qualifications system and ensure that learners and other stakeholders are able to relate awards to one another thus improving learner mobility at national and international levels. Consultations leading to development of the NFQ emphasised the importance of transparent, fair and consistent entry arrangements for learners, clarity about the awards process, recognition of prior learning, participation in learning in various ways (accumulating credits over time), and information and guidance (NQAI, 2003b). The NFQ 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 (ibid., p. 3).'

Table 1 outlines the basic architecture of the NQF, and the corresponding awarding bodies. The State Examinations Commission (SEC) has responsibility for two awards in second level schools. The junior certificate, which is completed after three years, is a Level 3 award in the NQF, while the leaving certificate, which is completed after five years in the second level system, is at Level 5. The leaving certificate is the final examination in the Irish second level system. Since its establishment in 2001, HETAC has become the awarding body for institutes of technology in the Irish third level sector. There are 13 institutes providing courses in engineering, science, business and the humanities. HETAC has responsibility for awards from Levels 6 to 10 in the NQF and for agreeing quality assurance systems with the institutes of technology. The main task of awarding bodies is to develop and implement the new awards systems, while the remit of the NQAI is to develop and maintain the overall NQF.

Table 1: Architecture of national framework of qualifications

Level	Award-Type	Awarding body
Level 1	Level 1 certificate	FETAC
Level 2	Level 2 certificate	FETAC
Level 3	Level 3 certificate and junior certificate	FETAC and SEC
Level 4	Level 4 certificate	FETAC and SEC
Level 4/5	Leaving certificate	FETAC and SEC
Level 5	Level 5 certificate	FETAC and SEC
Level 6	Advanced certificate and higher certificate	FETAC, HETAC and DIT
Level 7	Ordinary bachelors degree	HETAC, DIT, universities
Level 8	Honours bachelors degree and higher diploma	HETAC, DIT, universities
Level 9	Masters degree and post-graduate diploma	HETAC, DIT, universities
Level 10	Doctoral degree	HETAC, DIT, universities

Source: NQAI, 2003a.

The NFQ basically comprises three central elements: levels, award-types and named awards. There are 10 levels in the framework and similar to the EQF, it is based on a learning outcomes approach, and embodies a vision for recognition of learning based on an understanding of learning as a lifelong process (NQAI, 2003a). This approach represents a shift from previous systems, which were primarily based on the length of time taken to complete a programme at a given institution. At each level, a set of learning outcomes (packages of knowledge, skill and competence) are defined which a learner would be expected to achieve to get an award at the respective level (*ibid.*). The 10 levels accommodate a broad range of learning, from Level 1, which recognises ability to undertake basic tasks to Level 10, which recognises ability to discover new knowledge.

Consultation in Ireland on the proposed EQF concluded that eight levels were adequate, however, some concern was expressed that the use of the word 'level' in the EQF may cause confusion with national frameworks, and also that eight levels may be taken as a model structure, whereas in reality some systems would require more or less levels. Irish stakeholders stressed the importance of distinguishing national frameworks from the EQF. Use of colour codes rather than numbers for EQF levels was suggested to help distinguish the EQF from national frameworks (NQAI, 2005). Overall, Irish stakeholders were positive about the proposed EQF, particularly the concept of the EQF as a meta-framework, or overarching structure rather than a replacement for national frameworks. They also welcomed the fact that the EQF was a voluntary entity not involving legal obligations on participating countries (*ibid.*).

There are one or more award-types at each level in the NFQ and an initial set of 15 award-types were determined in the framework as set out in Table 1. An award-type is defined as 'a class of named award that shares common features and levels' (NQAI, 2003b, p. 6). Each award-type has an award-type descriptor, which sets out the key features, profile and standards of an award-type. Within the framework, four classes of award-types have been identified:

- major (main class of award-type, all 15 initial award-types are classified as major);
- minor (awarded where learners achieve several learning outcomes but not a combination required to achieve a major award);
- special purpose (awards for specific narrow purposes);
- supplemental (awarded for learning additional to a previous award) (*ibid.*).

All award-types are independent from fields of learning.

A named-award is the award received by a learner in a particular field of learning. For example, an 'ordinary bachelors degree' is an award-type at Level 7, while an 'ordinary bachelors degree in science' is a named-award. Named-awards are developed at specific levels by awarding bodies as shown in Table 1. For FET providers, the fact that there are two award-types at Level 6 (advanced certificate awarded by FETAC and a higher certificate awarded by HETAC/DIT) is a contentious issue. While both are Level 6 awards, it is considered that the distinction between advanced and higher certificates may place learners with a FETAC advanced certificate at a disadvantage from their counterparts with a higher certificate. In the current environment where FET providers are competing with higher education providers to attract learners, the fact that FET providers are not permitted to offer the Level 6 higher certificate is a source of tension. The NQAI is committed to reviewing operation of the framework, including differentiation between further and higher education and training, in implementation (NQAI, 2003a).

Implementation of the national framework of qualifications

Launching the NFQ marked a major milestone for future Irish qualifications. Since 2003, implementation of the framework has progressed gradually with specific roles for the NQAI and awards councils. Much of the NQAI's work has focused on NFQ recognition/alignment of awards from professional, international and other awarding bodies. In September 2006, the NQAI produced *Guidelines for awarding bodies in accessing the national framework of qualifications* (NQAI, 2006). The process of recognition/alignment of awards from the above categories is ongoing, the outcome of which will be of particular significance to the Irish FET sector given that historically many courses were certified by UK awarding bodies and a range of Irish awarding bodies.

Establishing FETAC was important groundwork for implementing the NFQ in that it simplified the system of FET qualifications by reducing the number of organisations making FET awards. FETAC assumed responsibility for awards previously made by FAS, NCVA, Fáilte Ireland and Teagasc. Implementing the framework means that many existing awards will no longer be made, and learners who hold awards from former awarding bodies (legacy awards) will have to have their awards placed or 'mapped' into the new framework. This

was one of the first tasks undertaken by FETAC, in conjunction with the former awarding bodies, and was completed in 2004 (FETAC, 2005). This process is important to ensure that learners' previous qualifications are recognised and that learners are in a position to progress in line with the ethos of lifelong learning and learner mobility. It is also imperative from the perspective of employers seeking to understand where qualifications presented by job applicants are placed on the framework. Developing the EQF will further improve learner mobility in that it will simplify referencing of national qualifications with qualifications from other EU countries.

FETAC has responsibility for making awards from Levels 1 to 6 on the NQF. It is also responsible for agreeing and monitoring providers quality assurance, validating programmes, ensuring fair and consistent assessment of learners and determining standards for named-awards (NQAI, 2003b). Between 2004 and 2005, FETAC finalised policies on quality assurance, recognition of other awards, recognition of prior learning, access, transfer and progression, standards, a common awards system and Level 1 and 2 awards. Work on developing Level 1 and 2 awards was imperative, as it emerged there were no awards at these levels when the process of placement of awards was completed in 2004. This year, FETAC finalised policies on validation, assessment and monitoring and now commences a period where focus is on the phased-implementation of all its policies (FETAC, 2006).

In terms of implementation, considerable progress has already been made in quality assurance. Under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, providers of programmes of education and training are required to establish and agree quality assurance procedures with FETAC. FETAC policy on quality assurance, published in 2004, identified providers as having a primary role in establishing and operating quality assurance, and it set out a common framework for all providers, including self-evaluation of programmes and services with emphasis on improvement (FETAC, 2004). Under this common framework, providers are required to establish policies and procedures in nine policy areas: communications, equality, staff recruitment and development, access, transfer and progression, programme development, delivery and review, fair and consistent assessment of learners, protection for learners, subcontracting/procuring programme delivery, and self-evaluation of programmes and services. Existing providers had until December 2006 to agree their quality assurance in order to be permitted to offer programmes leading to FETAC awards (FETAC, 2004). Implementation of quality assurance has been highlighted as a challenge for many providers, particularly, within the VEC system, where FE colleges are essentially funded as second level schools. This

challenge will be compounded with the phasing in of other FETAC policies, particularly in validation and assessment.

Challenges in implementing the Irish NFO

Much progress has been made through legislation and structural initiatives that have simplified a complicated qualifications system. However, there are challenges ahead in ensuring that the vision of lifelong learning embodied in the framework becomes a reality. Quality assurance poses significant challenges, specifically, meaningful support for lifelong learning approaches for all learners in the system including structures to allow learners gain recognition for prior learning, and to simplify accreditation of work-based learning. There is also the issue of support for FET teachers and trainers.

While the EQF seeks to promote the concept of lifelong learning, challenges remain in a European context. According to the European Commission, there is still some way to go before all EU countries have a well-developed lifelong learning culture with wide public acceptance and participation. There appears to be little or no legislation specifically on lifelong learning. Policy documents and published strategies on lifelong learning are more frequent (European Commission, 2003, p. 5). In the Irish context, while the Universities Act (1997), the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999), and the white paper on adult education *Learning for life* (2000) make specific reference to lifelong learning, issues remain that hinder a lifelong learning approach in the education system. Traditionally, there has been a focus on the needs of young learners in the initial stages of compulsory education, there has been a lack of opportunities to learn on a part-time basis, and there has been no integration between non-formal learning and informal learning in the system of qualifications (OECD, 2003, p. 69). Equally the OECD (ibid., p. 67) has suggested that:

'structural arrangements established under the 1999 legislation can be interpreted as a compromise between the need to create a system that would meet future needs in the lifelong learning context, and the need to maintain the confidence of users, both learners and employers, in the value of the awards and their underpinning structures in the existing system.'

While work is ongoing in Ireland to address these lifelong learning issues, there are other challenges which must also be considered.

As already indicated, Ireland's workforce has changed dramatically in recent years due to high levels of immigration. The needs and cultural diversities presented by the presence of foreign nationals must be supported in a framework that emphasises a learner-centred approach. The needs of learners with learning difficulties and special educational needs must also be supported more effectively, so their educational experiences become meaningful in a quality assurance system which promotes equality, access, transfer and progression, and fair and consistent assessment of learners. To date, at all levels in the Irish education system, the needs of those with learning difficulties and special educational needs have not been fully addressed. In the FET sector, these concerns are of utmost importance. Addressing these concerns is very much linked to the support available to those working in the sector.

VET teachers and trainers are facing many challenges and demands. These relate to their roles as tutors and mentors, working with learners of different age groups and diverse backgrounds, administrative work, curricular design and working closely with employers and other agencies. In a European context, the entry requirements for a vocational subject teacher position typically include a vocational qualification, work experience and a teaching qualification, while a general subject teacher has a university degree with a teaching qualification (Kultanen-Mahlamaki, Susimetsa, and Ilseley, 2006). Initial vocational education trainers have, in general, no formal qualification requirement as compared for instance with Austria, Germany and Iceland. The entry requirements into a continuous vocational education trainer position are even more varied and the field is totally unregulated. Continuous training of VET teachers and trainers is across Europe very heterogeneous (Baur, 2006). In the Irish context, the complexity of FET provision has already been outlined. This complexity is equally present in the backgrounds of teachers, trainers and tutors working in the FET sector. They include post-primary teachers with a degree and teaching qualification, those with subject specialist degrees such as ICT, skilled professionals and craftspeople with professional qualifications and experience and volunteer tutors who may have no teaching experience or qualifications (Magee, 2006). To ensure this range of personnel are equipped to implement the framework and provide quality assured programmes and services, initial and continuous professional development is essential in areas such as programme development, delivery and review, assessment of learners and programme/self-evaluation.

The taskforce on lifelong learning (Government of Ireland, 2002, p. 17) made the point that effective and timely resourcing and operation of new qualifica-

tions structures was of vital importance. However, question marks remain over government commitment to the FET sector as recommendations in a government commissioned report, published in 2003, have so far not been implemented. The McIver report called for establishing FE as a distinct sector from second level provision. It recommended several changes to reflect the distinction between the needs of staff and learners in FE and second level education. This report called for an increase in funding to provide the type of resources required by FET providers. The measures recommended included a revised organisational structure, addressing the teaching workload, upgrading buildings, facilities and learner support services, and addressing issues relating to teacher qualifications, induction and development (McIver, 2003). These issues must be addressed to ensure framework implementation and delivery of a quality assured service to all learners.

Conclusion

The Irish experience in developing qualifications structures, their implementation and supporting quality assurance mechanisms provides interesting insights into the challenges facing the proposed EQF. Ireland, despite recent emergence of a more unified FET sector, has developed structures that could promote and support the proposed EQF. In both contexts, there is recognition of the need for transparency, learner progression and mobility in a life-long learning paradigm. However, as pointed out in the Irish submission on the proposed EQF, potential for confusion exists in award levels and specifically the terminology and number of levels appropriate to national contexts. The Irish context also illustrates the imperative of having a structured national framework underpinned by quality assurance mechanisms to gain maximum benefit from the proposed EQF. Equally, there are several challenges to address in creating conditions that provide learners with meaningful educational experiences, teachers with opportunities for continuing professional development and adequately resourced quality assurance systems.

Acronyms

BIM	<i>Bord Iascaigh Mhara</i> (Fisheries Board)
DIT	Dublin Institute of Technology
EC	European Commission
EQF	European qualifications framework
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
FAS	<i>Foras Aiseann Saothair</i>
FE	Further education
FET	Further education and training
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
ICT	Information and communications technology
NCVA	National Council for Vocational Awards
NFQ	National framework of qualifications
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PLC	Post leaving certificate
SEC	State Examinations Commission
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
VET	Vocational education and training

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European qualifications framework influences on a national framework: the case of Slovenia

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SUMMARY

Until now, developing and evaluating qualifications in the European Union have been dictated primarily by the principle of subsidiarity. Homogenisation of education in the European Union can no longer be based on a partial approach to recognising and evaluating qualifications, but requires synthesis of international and sectoral evaluation and development of qualifications. This is reflected in the desire to design a European qualifications framework. At the same time, designing a European qualifications framework implies creating and developing national qualifications frameworks. This article presents the Slovenian method of designing, with particular reference to the influence of the European qualifications framework on the national qualifications framework. Although the European qualifications framework encouraged Slovenia to design a national qualifications framework, the negative side of using an open method of coordination in designing the European qualifications framework, led to consideration of the following possible problems: (horizontal and vertical) complexity, unpredictability, slowness, and the phenomena of the 'Trojan horse' and the 'emperor's new clothes'. In the national debate on the draft European qualifications framework and designing the Slovenian qualifications framework, it emerged that all the aforementioned problems are closely interconnected, and taking attention away from one could lead to the outbreak of another. As a solution, the national debate on the European qualifications framework saw the rise of transparency and partnership.

Key words

Certification of competences, European Union, government policy, social dialogue, Slovenia and transparency of qualifications