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Quality and Qualifications Ireland  
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

## Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) submission to the State Examinations Commission (SEC) on the preparation of the SEC statement of strategy.

QQI welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the preparation of the SEC statement of strategy.

The SEC 2014-16 strategy sets out the context in which the work of the SEC takes place. QQI strongly endorses the importance and continued relevance attached to lifelong learning, the NFQ, the imperative for quality, the work on transitions, stakeholder engagement and developments in ICT. QQI considers that the high level goals and supporting objectives in the SEC 2014-16 strategy remain appropriate for the SEC as the national examinations body for general education in Ireland.

QQI is responsible for the further development, implementation, promotion and review of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). QQI is also responsible for developing and reviewing the effectiveness of quality assurance arrangements in post-secondary education and training. The work of the SEC is central to the national qualifications and quality assurance system. It is this perspective that informs the following response to the invitation from the SEC to participate in the preparation of SEC strategic and operational planning.

Maintaining standards in general education in Ireland is shared among a number of bodies, including the SEC, NCCA, the Inspectorate and the Teaching Council. The SEC as the assessment and certification body for school qualifications plays a leading role in setting and maintaining qualification standards. School curricula are increasingly expressed in terms of expected knowledge, skill and competence, consistent with the NFQ. The implementation of the learning outcomes approach in school qualifications in Ireland is well advanced. Assessment and certification practices play a crucial role in providing assurances about the learning outcomes that are actually achieved by students.



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The NFQ is intended to enhance the transparency of qualifications. It does this by indicating the level of a qualification within a national system. The NFQ has been referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). As holders of Irish qualifications, including school qualifications seek opportunities for further study and employment abroad, increasing importance is attached to the national and European level of their qualifications. QQI recently co-hosted an international event on the inclusion of school leaving qualifications in qualifications frameworks, the resulting paper<sup>1</sup> sets out a number of findings in relation to the transparency of school leaving qualifications in an international context. Furthermore, the 2008 EQF Recommendation requires member states to ensure that the relevant EQF level should appear on all relevant certificates. The SEC may wish to consider how transparency tools such as the NFQ can be used to enhance the international mobility and recognition of Irish school qualifications. The SEC may also wish to consider whether the NFQ could assist in facilitating the transfer and progression opportunities for the Senior and Junior Trade Certificates.

QQI is not an examining body but is a certification body. Developments in digitalisation in particular seem likely to disrupt traditional models of certification such as those operated by QQI, where students are issued with a paper certificate to officially record their learning attainments. It is arguable that paper certification is an information dead-end as it does not allow the holder of the certificate to effectively share and exchange data about their learning attainments, particularly in technologically rich environments. Certification bodies will likely need to reflect on the information and data exchange functions of certificates. Certification practices are unlikely to be immune from the demands of digital societies and digital economies. QQI recently published a paper<sup>2</sup> on policy developments in qualifications. Quality

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<sup>1</sup> Paper published by EU Commission on findings from School Leaving Qualifications and the EQF following a peer learning event jointly hosted by QQI in Belfast in June 2016. <http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/QQI-co-hosts-Peer-Learning-Activity-on-School-Leaving-Certificates-and-Qualifications-Frameworks-in-Europe---.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Qualifications Frameworks – Reflections and Trajectories. Published by QQI December 2016. <http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/QQI-publishes-Qualifications-Frameworks-Reflections-and-Trajectories-.aspx>



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assurance, internationalisation and digitalisation will continue to influence qualifications policy and practice.

The reform agenda underway for school qualifications is significant. The current SEC strategy considers the changes to the Junior Cycle curriculum and assessment as fundamental. The Transitions work has been informed by robust contributions commissioned by the SEC and NCCA in particular. The commitment of the SEC to high quality research and evaluation studies to inform policy could be made more explicit in future strategy. Recent developments such as the establishment of the ERC as an agency of the Department of Education and Skills and the foundation of the DCU Institute of Education, are likely to add to the capacity of the State to generate and mobilise policy relevant research.

Finally, the purpose of school qualifications, particularly the established Leaving Certificate, are not always clear. The SEC will be well familiar with how the leaving certificate has become defined by others as either addressing skill formation needs of enterprise, providing a clearing mechanism for progression into higher education or addressing issues of social disadvantage. It is difficult for a single qualification to effectively address these multiple and sometimes competing purposes. School certificates serve an important role in their own right. They attest key milestones in educational attainment. They are also a means to an end for the large cohort of learners certified each year. The current review of senior-cycle is timely in this regard and will hopefully make the purpose of school certificates, particularly the Leaving Certificate, more defined.

12 December, 2016.

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