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*December 2015*

*Submission by Quality and Qualifications Ireland on the  
Development of a New National Skills Strategy*

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Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) established in 2012 under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act performs functions that impact on the national skills system. These include responsibilities for reviewing and monitoring the effectiveness of providers' quality assurance procedures; validating, monitoring and reviewing programmes of education and training; and promoting the maintenance, further development and implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications. In carrying out its legislative functions it engages with over 700 providers and institutions in the public and private further and higher education and training sectors.

The relationship between skills and qualifications is complex. The constructs are not synonymous. *Qualifications*: the formal outcome (certificate, diploma, degree or title) of an assessment process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards and/or possesses the necessary competence to do a job in a specific area of work. A qualification confers official recognition of the value of learning outcomes in the labour market and in education and training. In occupations where access is regulated by a national law, regulated professions, a qualification can be a legal entitlement to practice<sup>1</sup>.

An award or qualification is used to record or certify that a learner has acquired a particular standard of knowledge, skill or competence<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Terminology in European Education and Training. CEDEFOP (2014)  
<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/4064>

<sup>2</sup> Quality and Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 2012  
<http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/bills28/acts/2012/a2812.pdf>

*Skill*: defined as the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems. Whereas Job requirements means the knowledge, aptitudes and skills required to perform specific tasks attached to a particular work position.<sup>3</sup>

Skills can be further conceptualised, for example *Core Skills* such as communication, problem solving, ICT, languages; *Literacy and Numeracy Skills*; *Employability Skills*; *Vocational Skills* – related to specific occupations/sectors.

The new National Skills Strategy should articulate a clear interpretation and conceptualisation of both skills and of qualifications and the anticipated interactions between both.

From the perspective of QQI, there are a number of opportunities for qualifications to contribute to national skills policy and where elements of the national skills infrastructure and system can contribute to enhancing the quality of qualifications. This perspective assumes that skills are understood primarily as vocational or occupationally oriented.

### **Transparency and Recognition of Qualifications and Skills**

Individuals have greater opportunity in participating more successfully in job search and recruitment processes when they can make their skills and qualifications more visible. The State has invested significantly in the reform of the national qualifications system aimed at improving the transparency of skills and qualifications. Transparency and recognition of learning achievements is important for mobility or portability of skills and qualifications. Mobility between education and training and work, between jobs or occupations, between sub-sectors within an education and training system and between countries. Improved transparency and recognition of qualifications and skills has the potential to contribute the efficient functioning of skills systems and labour markets.

It is arguable that the most prominent feature of the qualifications infrastructure that contributes to transparency and recognition of qualifications is the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Its defining feature is a system of levels that can be used to develop and recognise qualifications. Its primary innovation is that it promotes a re-conceptualisation of a qualification as signalling the achievement of knowledge, skill or competence. This innovation, sometimes referred to as a learning outcomes approach, together with the concept of qualification level has introduced a common language for qualifications in the State and increasingly internationally. It is reasonable to

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<sup>3</sup> CEDEFOP 2014 *ibid.*

conclude that learning outcomes designed qualifications allow for enhanced dialogue with the labour market in general and skills and competence requirements associated with occupations in particular. The promotion of learning outcomes, statements of knowledge, skill and competence, as a defining feature of vocationally oriented qualifications should be restated in the National Skills Strategy. Responding to the recent OECD findings on adult skills the EU reinforced its commitment to the learning outcomes approach ‘which better ensures that graduates from initial education and training are equipped not only with knowledge but also with relevant skills and competences. Both the learning outcomes approach and the quality of adult learning need to be promoted further in that context’<sup>4</sup>

Award types associated with the NFQ, major, minor, special purpose, supplemental and professional, are intended to provide for the recognition of a wide range of learning achievements that meet the social and economic needs of individuals and society. Qualifications for smaller volumes of learning have benefits in terms of facilitating the recognition of up-skilling or re-skilling achievement. For those at work and in need of continuing vocational education and training (CVET), a range of national award types affords flexible and responsive qualifications solutions. For those participating in initial vocational education and training (IVET) their learning experience should be holistic and typically lead to a major award. The new national skills strategy could signal the preferred qualifications profiles and outcomes expected in both IVET and CVET.

QQI intends to conduct a review of the NFQ commencing in 2016. The first phase in the review will focus on the process by which qualifications are initially assigned a level on the NFQ and also on the measures in place to promote public confidence that the achieved learning outcomes associated with a qualification on the NFQ are consistent with the level indicators or benchmarks. Transparency and trust in qualification level is fundamental to applications and impact of the NFQ including in labour market or skill contexts.

There are other instruments for transparency of qualifications, many of which have an international dimension but which also have uses and application domestically.

There are two European credit systems in education and training. The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)<sup>5</sup> and the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training

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<sup>4</sup> EU Commission 2013. The Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) Implications for Education and Training Policies in Europe. <http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/PIAAC%20EU%20Analysis%2008%2010%202013%20-%20WEB%20version.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> ECTS User Guide Approved by Ministerial Conference 2015

(ECVET)<sup>6</sup> facilitate and support learners in shaping their own learning pathway through accumulation of credits – whether within a certain institution, from institution to institution, from country to country, and between different educational sub-systems and contexts of learning.

The Europass<sup>7</sup> suite of documents and the European Skills Passport<sup>8</sup> are tools for the documentation of qualifications, skills and learning experiences, and are provided to individuals to describe their acquired knowledge, skills, competences and qualifications in a more transparent and structured way.

The European Network of Information Centres (ENIC)<sup>9</sup>, the National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC)<sup>10</sup>, the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications collectively provide common rules and networks of information points that should make recognition procedures quicker and mobility smoother. There is increased cooperation in the area of recognition of qualifications, important for skills mobility.

The European Skills Panorama<sup>11</sup> launched in December 2012 gathers comprehensive intelligence at European level on skills supply and needs in various sectors in the labour market. The European Skills, Competence, Occupations and Qualifications (ESCO)<sup>12</sup> is a multi-lingual classification of European skills, qualifications, competences and occupations relevant to the European labour market. These initiatives have been prompted by the need for a common language across qualifications, skills and occupations.

Qualifications and skills mobility is further supported by dedicated information websites and services of the various European tools listed above, as well as portals providing information on learning opportunities. Learning Opportunities and Qualifications in Europe<sup>13</sup> is a web-based portal that provides information on courses, work experience and qualifications in Europe. Besides online

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<sup>6</sup> ECVET <http://www.ecvet-team.eu/en>

<sup>7</sup> Europass <https://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/home>

<sup>8</sup> European Skills Passport <https://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/documents/european-skills-passport>

<sup>9</sup> ENIC-NARIC <http://www.enic-naric.net/>

<sup>10</sup> Irish NARIC <http://qsearch.qqi.ie/WebPart/Search?searchtype=recognitions>

<sup>11</sup> EU Skills Panorama <http://skillspanorama.cedefop.europa.eu/en>

<sup>12</sup> ESCO <https://ec.europa.eu/esco/portal/home#modal-one>

<sup>13</sup> Learning Opportunities and Qualifications in Europe  
[https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/search/site?f\[0\]=im\\_field\\_entity\\_type%3A97](https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/search/site?f[0]=im_field_entity_type%3A97)

support, information and guidance services Euroguidance<sup>14</sup> centres and Eurodesks<sup>15</sup> work in each country to provide advice to individuals.

These European influenced policies and services are either substantially implemented in Ireland or institutions and agencies in Ireland are actively involved in their development and implementation. No one of these initiatives can have systemic effects, their cumulative impact on the transparency of our national qualifications system could be further enhanced if efforts to enhance their co-ordination were promoted at national level. In 2013 QQI together with other stakeholders have established the reference Group for EU initiatives in Education and Skills. The purpose of this group is to improve the coordination and synergies between various EU initiatives for qualifications reform.

### **Lifelong Learning**

Lifelong learning requires systemic diagnosis and a systemic policy response (OECD 2007<sup>16</sup>; Ermenc and Keep 2015<sup>17</sup>). Ireland's measured performance in lifelong learning has not improved since the introduction of the NFQ and remains relatively poor by European standards (Eurostat 2015<sup>18</sup>; CSO 2010<sup>19</sup>; SOLAS 2015<sup>20</sup>).

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<sup>14</sup> Euroguidance <http://euroguidance.eu/>

<sup>15</sup> Eurodesks <http://eurodesk.org/>

<sup>16</sup> OECD (2007). *Qualifications Systems: Bridges to Lifelong Learning*. OECD, Paris.

<sup>17</sup> Ermenc, K.S., & Keep, E. (2015). Implementing national qualifications frameworks across five continents. *Journal of Education and Work*, Vol 28 No1, pp106-115

<sup>18</sup> Eurostat (2015). Online Data. Available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Lifelong\\_learning\\_statistics](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Lifelong_learning_statistics)

<sup>19</sup> CSO (2010). Quarterly National Household Survey. Special Module on Lifelong Learning. Available at: [http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/labourmarket/2008/qnhs\\_lifelonglearnin\\_gqtr32008.pdf](http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/labourmarket/2008/qnhs_lifelonglearnin_gqtr32008.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> SOLAS (2015). Lifelong Learning in Ireland Quarter 4 2014. Available [http://solas.ie/docs/Adult\\_Lifelong\\_Learning\\_Q4\\_2014.pdf](http://solas.ie/docs/Adult_Lifelong_Learning_Q4_2014.pdf)

The need for policy coherence and policy coordination in pursuit of lifelong learning has been recognised at European level also. The recent comprehensive mid-term review of the European education and training strategic framework (ET2020)<sup>21</sup> concluded that:

*'The great value of an integrated framework covering education and training at all levels was confirmed. Today's need for flexibility and permeability between learning experiences requires policy coherence from early childhood education and schools through to higher education, vocational education and training and adult learning.'* (p3)

The emerging National Skills Strategy is intended to cover the period 2015-2025. Most of those who will be participating in the labour market in 2025 are already in the workforce. This highlights the importance of CVET in particular in maintaining and raising the qualification and skills profile of the workforce. The importance of learning at work was highlighted by the OECD in reflecting on the most recent survey of adult skills *'Engaging in learning-conducive work is one way of developing and maintaining skills proficiency, participation in adult education and training is another. Lack of access to either of them will likely result in the decline of skills proficiency'*<sup>22</sup>

The importance attached to lifelong learning was reinforced by the EU Commission report that considered the implications of PIACC on education and training policy<sup>23</sup>. The report concluded that

*'Constant technological progress and prolonging careers require continued efforts to maintain and adapt skills once they have been acquired. While newly created jobs require more information processing skills such as literacy, numeracy and ICT knowledge, the number of jobs that require low levels of skills is declining. Monitoring skills development over a lifetime is important to support both EU and national policies for a better matching of skills supply and demand. Europe will not be able to realise the vision of smart growth, set out in the Europe 2020 Strategy, if its workers lose employability as they grow older. EU Member States have set up co-operation on education and training based on the approach that people should continue to learn throughout their entire life.'*

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<sup>21</sup> European Commission (2015) Draft 2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET2020). New priorities for European cooperation in education and training. Brussels 2015. Available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/documents/et-2020-draft-joint-report-408-2015\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/documents/et-2020-draft-joint-report-408-2015_en.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> OECD Skills Outlook 2013 First results from PIAAC

<sup>23</sup> EU Commission 2013 *ibid*.

*Against the background of the skills deficit among adults exposed by the Survey and the urgent need for re-skilling and up-skilling to keep the Europeans ready for the 21st century requirements, the EU needs to address the skills decline of its workforce through ageing’.*

The new National Skills Strategy could articulate national policy on Lifelong learning and how it contributes to the national skills agenda.

### **Skills and Qualifications use**

The latest results from the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) provides food for thought for policy makers in Ireland. The *Survey of Adult Skills* assesses the proficiency of adults aged between 16 and 65 in literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments in 22 OECD countries. Some key findings include:

- In Ireland almost 30% (27.2%) of workers considered that they had higher educational qualifications than would be required to get their own job today, compared to 21.4% on average. This percentage is amongst the highest of the participating countries
- Seven countries (France, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Spain, the United States and Cyprus) score significantly below the average in both literacy and numeracy
- While considerable differences in proficiency according to educational attainment can be expected, it is striking that graduates with lower levels of educational attainment in some countries outperform graduates with higher formal qualifications in other countries. E.g. upper secondary graduates in FI and NL score similar or better than higher education graduates in IE, UK, IT, ES, CY, PL, SK and DK in literacy. Among secondary level graduates, lower secondary graduates in Finland and NL score close to or better than upper secondary graduates in IE, UK, IT and CY.

While the OECD provide advice on policy reform aimed at addressing skills deficiencies, shortages and mismatches, it is important the participating countries understand the underlying causes of the observed differences in skills and of the patterns across and within countries needs further and

deeper analysis. The new National Skills Strategy should indicate how labour market, skills and qualifications intelligence and research will be harnessed to generate a high quality evidence base for skills and qualifications policy.

### **Qualifications as a proxy for skills**

As indicated earlier, qualifications are not a direct proxy for skills. Measuring success of a national skills strategy should not rely only on qualification attainment or progression of the workforce across qualification levels. Employment, skill utilisation and other outcomes should also be used. Even in the case of vocational qualifications there will not be a perfect overlap between a qualification and the skills required to perform a particular job or occupation. Vocationally oriented qualifications should however signal the attainment of knowledge skill and competence that facilitates the transition from education to work or from job to job.

The development of Occupational Standards are a central feature of the labour market, skills and training infrastructure in other European countries. They are always enterprise led and often Government supported. Outside of established apprenticeships and regulated professions, Ireland does not have a systematic approach to the development of skills and competence profiles for occupations. Where labour market forecasts for occupations can be expressed in terms of skills and competence, this strengthens the interconnection between occupations and qualifications that are increasingly specified in terms of knowledge skill and competence. Qualification standards are not an alternative for occupational standards.

In the UK over 20,000 National Occupational Standards (NOS) are connected to the Standard Occupational Classification (UK SOC) codes and occupations. This means that the competence descriptions within the NOS have a clear link to occupations. At the same time, there is also a clear connection to qualifications in the UK. The NOS serve as the basis for all relevant vocational qualifications and their 'units of learning' in England, Wales and Northern Ireland on the regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) and for the Scottish Vocational Qualifications and their 'units of learning' on the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF). While it is not suggested that Ireland should borrow policy from elsewhere and there are challenges and difficulties in maintaining occupational standards, national policy on skills should at least consider what policy learning opportunities arise from the growth of occupational standards in modern economies.

Most countries connect or map their occupational system to ISCO. The UK and Ireland relate to the occupational classification SOC (standard occupational classification in the UK). Ireland has an occupational classification system but does not have a national system of occupational standards.

Skills and competence provides for a common language between occupations and qualifications. This is only made possible when both occupations and qualifications are expressed using a shared understanding of skill and competence. The new National Skills Strategy should consider what role occupational standards might play in the national skills system.

### **Quality Assurance**

Flexibility and responsiveness in how vocational qualifications are developed, delivered and ultimately used is of interest to all stakeholders in a national skills and qualifications system. How effectively this policy outcome is implemented and the impact that it produces is a shared responsibility. Education and training providers, quality assurance agencies, competent authorities and professional bodies, regulators, social partners, labour market researchers, regulators and Government all contribute to the quality of vocational qualifications.

Internationally the policy goal is to have demand-led, fit for purpose flexible qualifications. Where learners can navigate their qualifications system and choose how they qualify. Where partnership characterises the development of vocational qualifications and where strong labour market signals are available.

In the interest of quality, supply driven approaches to the development of qualifications should be avoided. Unfettered flexibility can lead to the proliferation of qualifications for trivial amounts of learning or incoherent qualifications and expensive duplication and overlap. We should avoid an uncritical lurch towards bite sized qualifications, overly conditioned by demand sized considerations or worse still, overly conditioned by supply side considerations. Shared responsibility for the quality of our national skills system, including vocational qualifications requires national policy direction and balance between supply and demand side influences and between flexible and solid, dependable qualifications.

Vocationally oriented qualifications are developed by public authorities, private and professional organisations and by international and sectoral organisations. Where such qualifications are provided in public institutions or are supported by public monies, the State has a legitimate interest

in the quality of such qualifications. The National Skills Strategy should set out its view on the system or market for vocational qualifications it considers appropriate. Where the State considers that there may be market failure and there is a risk to the interests of learners, the State should also set out what forms of intervention, ranging from information to regulation, that it considers appropriate in the public interest. It should be stated that the development and maintenance of high quality qualifications is a costly exercise. How the State wishes to recognise and use private sector investment in qualifications development could be set out in the new National Skills Strategy.

The general model of quality assurance used by QQI assumes that education and training providers are responsible for the quality of the programmes that they offer. Providers can achieve greater autonomy in their relationship with QQI based on their performance. QQI holds all providers accountable for the effectiveness of their internal quality assurance systems. A provider centred model of quality assurance based on appropriate balance of provider autonomy and public accountability is reliant on a reciprocal investment in the capacity of providers to deliver quality and to innovate in the interest of learners.

### **Validation of Non-formal and Informal learning**

The 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning requires member States to put in place systems for the validation of learning achieved outside of the formal education and training system. Validation can include the award of a qualification for such learning. While validation of non-formal and informal learning does not directly lead to an increase in the amount or level of skill available, rather it makes existing skills more visible. It is likely that validation could incentivise further education and training which would add to the national stock of skills. It is beyond the scope of this submission to consider the contribution of validation of non-formal and informal learning or to propose potential systematic configurations in response to the 2012 Recommendation, however the new National Skills Strategy provides an opportunity to signal the national intention in this regard.

### **Conclusion**

This submission intends to draw attention to the role of qualifications in a new National Skills Strategy. The transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications can make a contribution to the efficient and effective functioning of our skills system. High quality and relevant qualifications are of

interest to all stakeholders, not least to qualifications holders themselves. High quality labour market intelligence including demand side expectations and labour market outcomes for graduates is important for enhancing, productive collaboration between the world of education and training and the world of work. QQI looks forward to contributing further to the development of Irelands National Skill Strategy and to working with others towards its successful implementation.

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