

Framework Implementation and Impact Study

Report of Study Team

September 2009

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The National Framework of Qualifications was introduced in October 2003. Five years on, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (Qualifications Authority) considered it timely to take stock of the extent to which the Framework and related policies on access, transfer and progression had been implemented and of their initial impact. It was intended that this would support implementation. To this end, the Qualifications Authority commissioned an international Study Team to undertake the study on its behalf.

The aims of the study were to:

- assess the extent to which the National Framework of Qualifications is being implemented;
- support deeper implementation of the Framework and policies on access, transfer and progression;
- identify progress in implementation;
- identify gaps and drivers/obstacles in respect of implementation; and
- assess the initial impact of the Framework.

In line with the terms of reference for the Study, a background paper and four sectoral reports on implementation and impact were prepared by the Qualifications Authority and key bodies engaged in the Framework process. The sectoral reports concerned further education and training; higher education and training (non-university); universities and schools. Two case studies complemented this work, one in the area of guidance/counselling and the other in nursing and midwifery. A final strand of the study was a public consultation process in which agencies and individuals contributed submissions and took part in a Consultative Forum.

The review period for the Study was October 2003 - September 2008. The brief of the Study Team was to review all the inputs to the Study and prepare a report which was to include conclusions and recommendations. It could also address any future review of the Framework or policies on access, transfer and progression.

In reviewing the inputs to the Study, four broad themes emerged:

1. Implementation and impact of the Framework on the qualifications system
2. Impact of the Framework on Learners: promoting access and pathways between qualifications
3. Learning outcomes and cultural change in education and training, and
4. Visibility and currency of the Framework within and outside the education and training environment

This report is structured around these themes, with each theme organised under the headings of context, key findings and issues arising. Drivers for and

obstacles to implementation are also identified. Chapter 1 concerns the background to the Framework. The subsequent four chapters address the main themes that emerged in the Study. The final chapter presents overall conclusions and recommendations to the Qualifications Authority.

Key Findings

Chapter 1 concerns the background to the National Framework of Qualifications. It sets out the aims and objectives of the Framework, its architecture, how it is implemented and the emergence of qualifications frameworks at the international level. The overarching objective of the Framework is to support lifelong learning and a cultural shift towards recognising the needs of learners of all ages. The aims are to promote flexibility and integration in respect of qualifications, develop new pathways, establish learning outcomes as the common reference point for qualifications and respond to the qualification needs of individuals, society and the economy. The Framework is an integrated and inclusive one. It 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."

The Framework is based on learning outcomes. These are organised around three main strands of knowledge, skill and competence. The main building blocks for qualifications are the ten Levels, Level indicators and award-types. Responsibility for implementation rests with the Qualifications Authority, awarding bodies and providers of education and training programmes across all sectors of education and training. They each engage with the Framework in accordance with their statutory roles and responsibilities. Consultation is a feature of this engagement.

Since 2001, there has been increased interest at the European and broader international levels in developing national qualifications frameworks. Two meta-frameworks have been introduced at the European level, one for higher education (the Bologna Framework) and one for lifelong learning (the European Qualifications Framework). Although different in scope and structure, these frameworks share common aims to enhance the transparency of qualifications and support the mobility of learners. The interplay between these developments and the Irish Framework is referred to in the various chapters on implementation and impact and, in particular, in Chapter 6.

Chapter 2 concerns the implementation and impact of the Framework on the qualifications system. Different processes of Framework implementation are discerned in this chapter. Substantial progress has been made with respect to the inclusion of existing and legacy awards in the Framework, although some awards other than major awards have yet to be included. Work on the deeper implementation of the learning-outcomes approach has commenced in all of the sectors, but is progressing at variable speeds. The introduction of new standards and criteria and their use to develop new awards in the further

education and training sector, in particular, is proceeding more slowly than some had hoped.

Different strategic approaches have been taken to implementation in each of the sectors. The general issues arising concern the differences in the extent of Framework implementation in each sector (and within higher education), concerns about the accurate placement or inclusion of awards, the development and use of awards at all Framework levels, the need to embed the Framework in quality assurance arrangements, and the challenge of raising awareness and knowledge of the Framework within education and training. These and the iterative, dynamic nature of the Framework give rise to a need for continued leadership of implementation and for a process to periodically re-visit issues that may affect the integrity or effective operation of the Framework. These issues are addressed in recommendations 1-8, 16, 18 and 19.

Chapter 3 concerns the impact of the Framework on learners – promoting access and pathways between qualifications. It finds that the full implementation of the Framework including the wider use of learning outcomes and the further development of awards and standards at Levels 1-6 is critical to the establishment and use of pathways throughout the Framework. Action in these areas would complement the significant attention paid by the Qualifications Authority and awarding bodies to progression into higher education and training. An assessment of overall progress on access, transfer and progression was hindered by the lack of data available to the Study Team. However, there is evidence that progression routes into higher education and training have increased and have become more transparent. There is considerable interest in and demand for the recognition of prior learning (RPL), but there are inconsistencies in policies and use of RPL, gaps in the communication of policies and in the development of credit. These issues are addressed by recommendations 6-11, 16 and 19.

Chapter 4 concerns learning outcomes and cultural change in education and training. This chapter reinforces the point that the introduction of learning outcomes underpins a radical shift in teaching and learning from inputs to outputs. The extent to which this shift has occurred is unclear. Although different strategic approaches have been and are being taken to the introduction of learning outcomes, there appears to be a common lag in implementation between the administrative centres within awarding bodies and institutions and those engaged in teaching, training and assessment. This is not unexpected given the short period since the Framework was introduced. The key issues emerging from the Study inputs concern the contested nature of learning outcomes, the need for on-going debate within and across sectors, raising awareness and the need to work through the implications for and alignment with assessment practice. These issues are addressed by recommendations 12-14, 18 and 19.

Chapter 5 concerns the visibility and currency of the Framework within and outside the education and training environment. The Study Team identified four broad areas in which the visibility and currency of the Framework are of key importance to its success. These are: the labour market; public funding; the

qualifications of regulatory, professional and international bodies, and international (especially European) developments. The Framework, with its focus on learning outcomes, has demonstrated that it has considerable potential to be used in recruitment, in developing career pathways, in planning work-based learning and training and in recognising transferable skills. However, its labour-market use is dependent upon the extent of implementation in the different sectors. As a consequence, it is hindered by such factors as: confusion about the equivalence of qualifications at the same Level, differing expectations of qualifications used as 'licences to practise' or in regulated occupations, delays in developing standards, difficulties in accessing awards and limited employer awareness and understanding of the Framework itself. There is scope to more closely align public funding with the Framework, and a need to do so, as this acts as a driver for implementation.

On-going work to enhance the recognition of the awards of regulatory, professional and international bodies, although complex, is important in meeting learner and labour market needs. The Study Team noted the significant influence and interplay between the Irish Framework and the European frameworks which have emerged since its launch. This, coupled with efforts to include awards of regulatory, professional and international bodies extends the reach and impact of the Framework. There is a need for sustained engagement with such developments and consideration of their impacts on the Irish Framework. These issues are addressed by recommendations 6-8, and 14-19.

Conclusions and recommendations

Chapter 6 sets out the conclusions and recommendations of the report. This chapter notes that the Framework is an ambitious and major undertaking, aiming as it does to encapsulate the full spectrum of education and training, both life-long and life-wide. It has established itself in a relatively short period of time with a high level of prominence on the landscape of Irish education and training. This is a significant achievement involving the agreement of multiple players and stakeholders. The Framework is beginning to have an impact on learners in terms of a language to underpin their choices, new approaches to teaching and learning, and new opportunities for progression. These developments are at an early stage and there is still a long road to travel.

The conclusions draw attention to the centrally-driven nature of the Framework; its role in creating a new currency; issues of trust and stability, and the cultural lag in insinuating the Framework in teaching and assessment. It notes the tension between an outcomes-based approach to qualifications and an education and training system largely predicated on inputs. The communication of the Framework remains critical to its visibility and success. This poses a challenge to simplicity and clarity whilst also addressing a need for deeper engagement at a technical level.

The Study underlines the nature of the Framework as a long-term, dynamic process. This reveals tensions that are similar those experienced in other countries where such qualifications frameworks have been introduced. They

concern the need for pragmatism and compromise and for sustained engagement of stakeholders in implementation. This may have implications for consistency and interpretation across sectors, many of which can be resolved as implementation unfolds. This brings into focus a need for sustained leadership and oversight of implementation. There is also a need to maintain a balance between stability and flexibility or dynamism in the operation of the Framework.

In reflecting on the themes which emerged in Ireland's case, the Study Team found that there were common features in its experience and that of countries such as Scotland and New Zealand. These are: time, stakeholder involvement and partnership, an iterative process of development, a sufficiently 'loose' Framework to accommodate differences, balance between implementation within sectors and system-wide arrangements, and the recognition that a qualifications framework may be an enabler of change more than a driver of change.

The report contains a total of 19 recommendations. These are addressed to the Qualifications Authority, which commissioned the Study, and other stakeholders, as appropriate. In framing its recommendations, the Study Team was cognisant of the lead role of the former as guardian of the Framework; the developmental nature of the Framework; the importance of ownership by awarding bodies and providers and the broader backdrop of pressures on the education and training system and the challenge of communicating the Framework. It also recognised that the proposed amalgamation of the Qualifications Authority, FETAC and HETAC and the assumption by the new body of the external quality review role of the universities, currently delegated authority to the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB), will create a new context for the Framework. As the Study addressed the period to September 2008, it is recognised that actions may already be underway in some of the areas covered by the recommendations. Where this is the case, it is intended that the recommendations would reinforce these actions.

Recommendations 1 and 2 address the overview and management of implementation, and the need to put in place a process to re-visit issues that may affect the integrity or effective operation of the Framework. This process should be used to address three issues as a matter of priority – the inclusion of all craft awards at one Level; the co-location of further and higher awards at Level 6 and the alleged confusion arising from that, and the challenges posed to the Framework by the inclusion of the Leaving Certificate across two Levels. Recommendations 4 and 6 address the need to advance implementation in the universities and in FETAC. Beyond this, the recommendations identify specific actions needed in the areas of quality assurance (recommendation 5), communicating the Framework (recommendations 7-9 and 14), the recognition of prior learning (recommendations 9 and 10), credit (recommendation 11) and learning outcomes (recommendations 12-13). Recommendation 14 calls for active and continued engagement with the labour market to communicate the use of the Framework, access to awards and the development of standards for the workplace.

The need to continue to use the Framework in recognising international qualifications in Ireland and Irish qualifications abroad is addressed in recommendation 15. Quality assurance should continue to underpin this work. In relation to public funding mechanisms, identified as an important driver of implementation, it is recommended that these be aligned with the Framework (recommendation 16). The legislative requirement that publicly funded bodies must in general have their programmes validated by HETAC or FETAC should be reconsidered by the relevant bodies in the context of amalgamation (recommendation 17). Continued engagement in European developments is also recommended (recommendation 18). Finally, it is recommended that the significant gaps in data, which emerged as a cross-cutting theme in the Study, be addressed. In particular, data gaps relating to the availability and use of pathways and their outcomes for learners, and the implementation of the Framework by institutions and providers should be addressed by the relevant bodies (recommendation 19). It is specifically recommended, with a view to establishing the value of the Framework from a learner perspective, that the Qualifications Authority should undertake a longitudinal study of a cohort of learners as they navigate their way through the Framework.

Introduction to Report

The National Framework of Qualifications was launched in October 2003. Five years on, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (Qualifications Authority) considered it timely to take stock of the extent to which the Framework and related policies on access, transfer and progression had been implemented. Accordingly, following consultation with stakeholders, the Qualifications Authority commissioned this Study on the implementation and impact of the Framework and the associated policies for access, transfer and progression for learners. The Study was also to incorporate a review of the implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression by universities, as provided for in legislation.

The Qualifications Authority appointed an international Study Team to undertake the Study on its behalf (see Appendix I). It was intended that the Study would reflect the developmental nature of the Framework and support its implementation. While it is important that gaps in implementation be identified and that steps are taken to address these, it was considered important that the Study also give weight to what has been achieved to date.

Since the Study was launched, the Government (October 2008) announced the amalgamation of key bodies engaged in Framework development and implementation - the Qualifications Authority, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). It was also announced that the responsibility for the external quality assurance of the universities will be vested in the new body, a role that is currently performed by the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB). The IUQB is also involved in aspects of the implementation of the Framework. The Study Team considered that, given the key roles of these bodies in the Framework, its recommendations should be mindful of amalgamation.

In the course of the Study, the Irish economy has experienced rapid economic decline. This of course has profound implications for all aspects of education and training in Ireland and its impact on the operation of the Framework into the future is as yet unclear.

This report presents the main issues and highlights key findings of the Study Team arising from inputs made to the Study and their recommendations to the Qualifications Authority for deeper implementation of the Framework.

1.1 Terms of Reference for the Study

The terms and scope of the Study reflect the relatively short time since the Framework was introduced (2003), and the fact that implementation was expected to take time and to vary across the different sectors of education and training. Different approaches were adopted to implementation in the sub-sectors. It was anticipated that the Study would draw out the sectoral

approaches, support shared learning and inform the next phase of implementation.

The aims of the Study (see terms of reference in Appendix II), are to:

- assess the extent to which the National Framework of Qualifications is being implemented
- support deeper implementation of the Framework and policies on access, transfer and progression
- identify progress in implementation
- identify gaps and drivers/obstacles in respect of implementation, and
- assess the initial impact of the Framework.

The Study does not constitute a review of the fundamental structures or objectives of the Framework. This was considered to be premature at this juncture. Rather, it focuses on implementation by key stakeholders – the Qualifications Authority, awarding bodies and providers. It also explores the initial impact of the Framework and related policies on learners and in key areas of employment, public policy and funding, together with its international impact.

1.2 Methodology

The Study is based on inputs¹, listed in Appendix III, from a wide variety of sources including:

- A background paper prepared by the Qualifications Authority on the development, implementation and impact of the Framework, of policies on access, transfer and progression, and an assessment of impact;
- Reports from key stakeholder bodies responsible for implementing the Framework in the schools, and in the further and higher education and training sectors.² These reports were prepared following consultation within the sectors and in line with a common template.
- Two case studies, one in the area of nursing and other in the area of guidance/counselling were undertaken. Guidance/counselling was selected because it is a feature of all areas of education and training (schools, further and higher education and training, adult guidance). Nursing was selected because it involves provision in universities and Institutes of Technology, involves specific entry routes from FETAC awards, and the provision of education and training involves engagement with professional bodies and major employers.
- Some twenty submissions were received from the public.

¹ These are available at: http://www.nqai.ie/framework_study.html:

² Reports were prepared by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) on behalf of the school sector; HETAC; FETAC; and the Irish Universities Association (IUA) on behalf of the university sector.

- A Consultative Forum was held on November 18th 2008. Its aim was to explore the issues and findings of the sectoral reports and the case studies, and to afford all stakeholders a further opportunity to put their views to the Study Team. This approach was deemed to be more useful than individual hearings with stakeholders as was initially envisaged.

All of these inputs dealt with a review period stretching from October 2003 to September 2008. The inputs were considered by the Study Team and formed the basis for this report. The inputs are referenced in brackets () throughout the report. This report and recommendations are presented to the Qualifications Authority for its consideration and follow-up.

1.3 Structure of Report

In reviewing the extensive inputs to the Study, four broad themes emerged:

- 1) Implementation and impact of the Framework on the qualifications system
- 2) Impact of the Framework on Learners: promoting access and pathways between qualifications
- 3) Learning outcomes and cultural change in education and training, and
- 4) Visibility and currency of the Framework within and outside the education and training environment

This report is structured around these themes, with each theme organised under the following headings: (i) context; (ii) key findings; and (iii) issues arising. The next chapter introduces the Framework and is followed by four chapters on the themes. The final chapter presents overall conclusions and recommendations to the Qualifications Authority.

Chapter 1: National Framework of Qualifications – background and operation

The National Framework of Qualifications was launched in October 2003. It arose out of discussion and debate, beginning in the early 1990s, on ways to create a more coherent and integrated qualifications system. These discussions were part of wider debates on lifelong learning, the future direction of education and training and international challenges. Debate on reshaping the qualifications system led to the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999. The Act set out the broad objectives and scope of a national framework of qualifications. It established the Qualifications Authority to drive the development process alongside two awards Councils, FETAC and HETAC. Coupled with existing legislation, the new legislation set out the roles and responsibilities of awarding bodies and providers in relation to qualifications and to the development and operation of a national framework of qualifications.

1.1 Aims and objectives of the Framework

The overarching objective of the Framework is to support lifelong learning and to promote a culture in which the learner is at the centre of the qualifications system. The aim was to create an integrated framework of qualifications responsive to the needs of the economy, society and the individual; to promote the quality of awards; and to facilitate the recognition of national and international qualifications. Overall, the Framework marked a radical shift towards recognising the needs of learners of all ages.

The Framework is an integrated and inclusive one. It 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."

The Framework aims to recognise *all* learning achievements. The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 set out learning as encompassing the three areas of knowledge, skill and competence. This was the basis for elaborating a broad understanding of learning achievements (or learning outcomes) for the purposes of the Framework.

The Framework aims, which are set out in general terms in the Qualifications Act (see Appendix IV), are in summary to:

1. promote the flexibility and integration of qualifications and to facilitate the development of alternative learning pathways;
2. establish learning outcomes as the common reference point for qualifications and the recognition of non-formal and informal learning; and

3. respond to the need for qualifications on the part of individuals, society and the economy. This entails increasing the range of qualifications available to learners and recognising diverse kinds/forms of learning achievement.

1.2. Architecture of the Framework

A process of consultation with stakeholders on the development of the Framework led to an elaboration of the strands of knowledge, skill and competence as illustrated below:

Figure 1: Strands and sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence in the NFQ

Knowledge	<i>Breadth</i>
	<i>Kind</i>
Know-how and skill	<i>Range</i>
	<i>Selectivity</i>
Competence	<i>Context</i>
	<i>Role</i>
	<i>Learning to learn</i>
	<i>Insight</i>

These learning outcomes strands were used to identify and differentiate 10 Framework Levels. A broad, eclectic approach was used to develop the learning outcomes, taking account of existing practice, and to achieve comprehensiveness and coherence. The broad reach of the Framework differentiates it from some other national qualifications frameworks in that it creates a single reference frame for all qualifications – regardless of form or origin - available to learners in Ireland.

The Framework introduced new concepts and a new common language for qualifications (Qualifications Authority, p.10-31).³ A central concept is that of learning outcomes. New concepts of Levels, Level indicators and award-types were developed to form the architecture of the Framework. Award-type descriptors describe the main features of classes of awards. Named awards must then reflect these features. The Framework introduces the concepts of major, minor, special purpose and supplemental award-types. Major award-types are the principal class of awards made at each Level, are expected to offer significant progression and transfer opportunities and include many of the learning outcomes strands. Examples include the Junior Certificate (Level 3) and Honours Bachelor Degree (Level 8). Minor awards recognise part of

³ A full description of the architecture of the Framework is contained in the Qualifications Authority's background paper for the study, at <http://www.nqai.ie/documents/AuthoritybackgroundpaperNFQfinal.pdf>

the learning outcomes associated with major awards and they can be assigned credit. A combination of them can lead to a major award. Supplemental award-types concern learning that is additional to a previous award and is at the same Level as the previous award e.g., for continuing professional development. Special purpose award-types are for specific, relatively narrow purposes such as in tightly defined areas of health and safety, building and energy regulation.

Providers and institutions offer programmes or courses to learners who, following successful completion, achieve an award. In many fields or areas of learning there are clearly understood distinctions between the concepts of award and programme but in others, the distinctions are less clear cut (e.g., Junior Certificate, Advanced Certificate craft awards).

1.3 Who Implements the Framework?

The implementation of the Framework is based on a partnership between the Qualifications Authority, the awarding bodies and the providers of education and training programmes (Qualifications Authority, pp. 32-36). The Framework has a regulatory function in respect of all the qualifications made by FETAC, HETAC and the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), as it sets overall standards for their awards (in line with legislation).

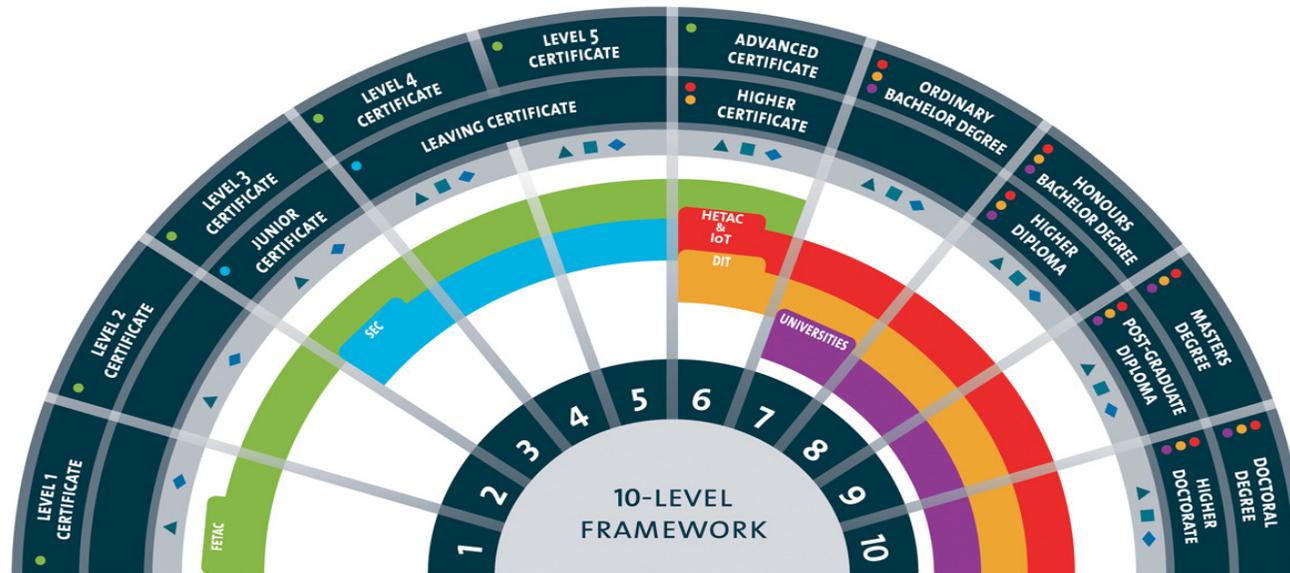
The Level indicators and award-type descriptors were designed to facilitate the inclusion of major school awards – Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate – as well as the major awards (Ordinary Bachelor Degree, Honours Bachelor Degree, Higher Diploma, Masters Degree, Post-Graduate Diploma and Doctoral Degree) of the universities in the Framework. The standards for school awards are set through a combination of the work of the NCCA and the State Examinations Commission with the approval/agreement of the Department of Education and Science. The universities set standards for their awards. The Framework reflects a continuity of standards with respect to these major awards. Significant work has also been undertaken on the inclusion of awards other than major awards of the universities in the Framework. The implementation of the Framework and related access, transfer and progression policies requires that they become embedded in education and training structures and arrangements of awarding bodies and providers. A range of consultative arrangements, advisory groups and fora are used to support this process.

Beyond awarding bodies and providers, the Framework is expected to be used by a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including *inter alia* education and training policy makers, learners and employers.

Figure 2

NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS

Údarás Náisiúnta
Cáilfochtaí na hÉireann
National Qualifications
Authority of Ireland



AWARDING BODIES

- FETAC - Further Education and Training Awards Council
- SEC - State Examinations Commission (Department of Education & Science)
- HETAC - Higher Education and Training Awards Council
- IOT - Institutes of Technology (make their own awards at specified levels under Delegated Authority from HETAC)
- DIT - Dublin Institute of Technology
- Universities

AWARDS IN THE FRAMEWORK

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

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

1.3 Framework development at the international level

The initial work on developing the Framework incorporated research into the experiences of the small number of countries who had by 2001 developed such Frameworks (e.g., Scotland, New Zealand and South Africa) and on related work at the European level to support student and labour mobility. Since 2001, there has been increased interest at the European and wider international levels in developing national qualifications frameworks. The Bologna Framework for higher education across Europe was introduced in 2005 and encompasses 46 states. The European Qualifications Framework, adopted in 2008, involves 32 states. These Frameworks are stimulating the introduction of national frameworks. Although different in scope and structure, these frameworks are based on learning outcomes and share a common purpose, namely to enhance the transparency of qualifications and to support the mobility of learners within and across education and training systems.

Chapter 2. Theme 1: Implementation and impact of the Framework on the qualifications system

2.1 Context

This chapter examines the overall approaches to implementation taken by awarding bodies and the issues arising therefrom.

The Framework was intended to introduce major change to the qualifications system in Ireland. Its objectives were to bring coherence to the qualifications system, relate all qualifications to each other and promote the quality of awards. It also aimed to shift the focus of qualifications from inputs to learning outcomes; create new relationships between qualifications, and introduce new classes or award-types of qualifications. This would create a clearer distinction between programmes and qualifications. The Framework would introduce a new language and set of concepts including the levelling of qualifications, learning outcomes and award-type descriptors. These changes would have implications for setting standards, developing awards, teaching, assessment and programme design. In order to become fully embedded, the Framework would need to be reflected in these arrangements and in related quality assurance practice. This chapter looks at the extent to which these ambitions were achieved.

2.2 Implementation – Key Findings

This section provides a summary of the key actions undertaken to develop and implement the Framework in the review period for this Study, October 2003 to September 2008.

- The basic architecture of Framework was introduced in October 2003
- Titles of initial set of award-types were agreed in 2003.
- Major schools awards were included in Framework (2003). The Leaving Certificate spans Levels 4 and 5.
- Major awards of universities included in the Framework (2003) based on the continuity of standards which were deemed to be consistent with the Framework
- Policies and criteria for the inclusion of legacy (former) awards in the Framework were agreed in 2003
- In 2003, HETAC adopted the Framework award-type descriptors as interim standards for all fields of learning, pending the development of detailed standards specific to fields of learning
- Descriptors for minor, special purpose and supplemental award-types and higher doctorate were adopted in June 2004
- HETAC re-cast all major awards in line with Framework descriptors in 2004

- Existing awards of HETAC, FETAC, and the DIT were placed in the Framework in 2004.
- Legacy awards of HETAC (2004), FETAC (2005), most of DIT legacy awards (2005) and most of those of the Department of Education and Science (2005) were included in Framework.
- FETAC proposed a new Common Awards System (2005)
- FETAC re-classified all its awards (2005/06) and published them in a Directory in 2006
- An initial approach to including professional and international awards was developed in 2005 and, following revision, introduced in 2007.
- HETAC developed detailed award standards specific to six fields of learning up to September 2008.
- FETAC developed new awards, for the first time, at Levels 1 and 2 in 2006.
- FETAC put a common standards setting process in place in 2007 (procedures of former awarding bodies operated until end 2006).
- The DIT re-designed programmes and modules for major awards in line with the Framework. New programmes for all awards are developed and validated in line with the Framework. The Framework is embedded in academic policies and procedures.
- Work was also undertaken to include university non-major awards in the Framework. Substantial lists of these were agreed in 2008.

These actions entailed significant work and continuous engagement by stakeholders. In many instances, they are underpinned by a long-term investment of resources by the relevant stakeholders. As some of the actions are part of a long-term process, work is on-going (post-September 2008) to complete and follow them through.

2.3 Implementation issues

In reviewing implementation since the introduction of the Framework in 2003, three distinct processes are discernable. The first of these involves the placement of existing and former awards in the Framework. The second involves the introduction of Framework standards and associated programme validation, and the third involves deeper implementation of a learning outcomes approach in all aspects of qualifications e.g., fully aligning programmes, assessment and quality assurance arrangements with the Framework. In practice, there are differences in the overall approaches taken to implementation in each sector of education and training and to each of these processes.

This section outlines a number of implementation issues that arise. It focuses on the following seven themes:

- 2.3.1 Development of awards and standards in line with the Framework
- 2.3.2 Inclusion of existing awards in the Framework

- 2.3.3 Inclusion of legacy awards in the Framework
- 2.3.4 Use of naming conventions
- 2.3.5 Framework implementation and quality assurance
- 2.3.6 Communication of the Framework and awareness and knowledge of the Framework amongst awarding bodies and providers
- 2.3.7 Framework review

2.3.1 Development of awards and standards in line with the Framework

From the outset, FETAC and HETAC took different approaches to standard setting. HETAC adopted the award-type descriptors as interim standards for its awards pending the development of standards for fields of learning. It then engaged with all providers to swiftly re-cast existing awards and to map existing programmes against those standards. This introduced the concept of learning outcomes across the sector. In the initial stages at least, there were concerns that the speed with which programmes leading to HETAC awards were re-validated/re-designed to accord with Framework standards was not conducive to real ownership of the Framework or of the learning outcomes approach by institutions (HETAC, p.19). Standards have since been set in six fields of learning: engineering, science, computing, business, art and design, and nursing (HETAC, p.10). The concurrent process of delegating authority to Institutes of Technology to make awards at particular Framework Levels means that they each have direct responsibility for all aspects of making such awards.

FETAC, until it began to introduce its Common Awards System in 2007, used the procedures of its former awarding bodies to set standards, validate programmes etc. from Levels 3-6. Prior to developing new Framework standards, it placed its existing awards in the Framework (a total of 319 awards made by four former awarding bodies). FETAC then classified these awards to fit Framework award-types - major, minor, special purpose and supplemental - and assigned them titles consistent with the Framework.⁴ This exercise concerned some 1, 900 awards. In 2006, FETAC developed new awards, in line with Framework standards, at Levels 1 and 2. This was the first time that awards were made at these Levels. The extent to which Framework learning outcomes were used to set standards for new awards at other Levels or accorded with existing standards of awards and programmes in relation to Levels 3-6 is not clear from the Study inputs.

A number of inputs to the Study welcomed developments in FETAC but, the size and diversity of the sector notwithstanding, expressed concern at the slow pace of developing Framework standards and awards and the lack of supports to some providers to enable them to access FETAC awards. There is a real challenge in meeting these demands and in managing their implications for existing structures of provision, standard setting, understandings of programme provision and assessment. These issues are

⁴ http://www.fetac.ie/PDF/FETAC_Directory_of_Awards_2006.pdf

particularly evident in the Guidance case study.⁵ Whilst the development of awards at Levels 1 and 2 is broadly welcomed by stakeholders, it was also pointed out that additional awards at these Levels and above would create further stepping stones for progression for learners.

2.3.2 Inclusion of existing awards in the Framework

The existing awards of HETAC, FETAC and the schools awards were placed in the Framework in accordance with policies and criteria agreed by the Qualifications Authority in 2003.⁶ Some of these were placed at the time the Framework was launched and some in 2004/05. The process involved an investigation of evidence of Framework learning outcomes (e.g. programme material, assessments, curricula). Given that they preceded the Framework and may have been designed for different purposes, these awards were placed as a 'best-fit' at an appropriate Framework level. Awards could be placed as a set provided that they shared common standards. Placement was deemed to be a necessary first step in implementation and was based on an understanding that it would take time to introduce Framework standards for awards.

Certain issues were highlighted in inputs to the Study in relation to the inclusion of existing awards in the Framework. These concerned the Leaving Certificate, craft awards and co-location of further and higher education and training awards at Level 6.

- With regard to the Leaving Certificate, the issues raised relate to the inclusion of the Leaving Certificate across two Levels on the Framework; its treatment as a single award even though there are significant differences between its variants; the level of achievement of learners (on the Leaving Certificate Established, Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational); and the limited progression to higher education and training for those completing the Leaving Certificate Applied or Vocational.
- The NCCA states that the rationale for including the Leaving Certificate across two Levels reflects the wide range of learning outcomes associated with each of its programmes (NCCA, p.28). The inclusion of the Leaving Certificate did not and was not expected to entail any change in the standards associated with it or its re-design in terms of Framework learning outcomes. Placement was predicated on the idea that the Framework would be seen as a work in progress and subject to rolling review (NCCA, p.6). Nonetheless, the differential level of achievement in the Leaving Certificate is both difficult to reflect in a single award and consequentially difficult to place in the Framework. While inclusion across two Levels made it possible to create an integrated Framework, this has the knock-on effect of making it difficult

⁵ <http://www.nqai.ie/documents/guidance.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.nqai.ie/docs/framework/policies/polandcrit.pdf>

to compare the Leaving Certificate with FETAC awards at these Levels.

- With regard to craft awards, the issue raised here is the inclusion of all craft awards (Advanced Certificate Craft) as a set at Level 6. Inputs to the Study refer to variation in the standards of these awards (e.g. DIT, pp.9-10). The inclusion of such a broad set of qualifications at Level 6 stretches the band-width of Level 6 and, according to some submissions, strains the credibility of Level 6 and even the Framework. FETAC⁷ followed the Qualifications Authority's policies and criteria on placement (above) in relation to the craft awards and consulted the former awarding bodies and external independent parties. The placement process focused on the standards associated with the craft awards. They were found to have sufficiently common standards to warrant placement as a single set and that they best fit with the totality of Level 6 learning outcomes. In agreeing this placement, the Qualifications Authority noted that learning outcomes at Level 7 were associated with some of the awards in the set and that this did not preclude existing programmes being validated at Level 7 in the future⁸ (as Framework standards are fully introduced).
- The placement of two major awards - the Higher Certificate and the Advanced Certificate⁹ - made by different awarding bodies at the same Level 6 is deemed by some stakeholders to be confusing. A number of Institutes of Technology (IT Sligo, Athlone IoT and GMIT) stated that the distinctions between these award-types are not well understood and that there is confusion between the further and higher education and training awards at this Level. The DIT (p.5), expresses a concern about the bunching of awards at Level 6 without consistent, coherent, transparent justification in all cases.

The inclusion of most existing major awards made by the universities (Ordinary Degree, Honours Bachelor Degree, Masters Degree and Doctorate) in the Framework was based on an understanding that the standards of these were consistent with those of the Framework. Substantial progress has been made in relation to the inclusion of the universities' major diplomas at Levels 8 and 9 and of their non-major awards (certificates and diplomas). However, it is taking considerable time to include in the Framework the full range of awards including those of their associated colleges and the recognised colleges of the National University of Ireland. The process involves developing awareness and understanding of key Framework concepts across each university and their affiliated institutions, and cross-institutional agreements to avoid inconsistencies in the placement of similar awards. Strengthened mechanisms are needed to support this work, such as the Framework

⁷ For details see FETAC website: <http://www.fetac.ie/news/pressrelease20050127.htm>

⁸ http://www.nqai.ie/framework_pub_may2005.html

⁹ The Advanced Certificate is made by FETAC and the Higher Certificate is made by HETAC and Institutes of Technology with delegated authority to make awards. The distinction between them relates to emphasis each places on different strands of learning outcomes (Qualifications Authority, p.17).

Implementation Network of the universities. Greater progress here is important in order to achieve an effective, integrated Framework.

2.3.3 Inclusion of legacy awards in the Framework

From the commencement of the Framework process, it was acknowledged that former or legacy awards¹⁰ would need to be accommodated in the Framework. This would give holders of such awards the recognition required to access education and training and employment opportunities. The FETAC sector report and the Guidance case study point to the positive impact of this work on learners. This was also a major area of Framework work for DIT and was deemed to have been important to the institution as well as to learners and employers.

With the inclusion in the Framework of most university non-major awards, as well as Higher and Post-Graduate Diplomas (in September 2008), the inclusion of the broader range of legacy awards can now be addressed.

2.3.4 Use of naming conventions

The naming of awards impacts on the effectiveness of the Framework as a communication device. The Qualifications Authority has developed policies and criteria on the naming of major awards. It has worked with awarding bodies and education and training providers in relation to the implementation of these policies. However, there are inconsistencies in the application of the agreed nomenclature of Framework awards across almost all sectors, and concerns about the appropriateness of existing nomenclature for major awards at Levels 6-10 (Institutes of Technology Ireland, p.2). There has been no policy development on this since 2006. HETAC, in 2008, realigned its naming conventions for minor, special purpose and supplemental awards to coincide with those agreed by the Qualifications Authority and the university sector in the context of including awards other than major awards in the Framework.

The relationship between certification conventions and Framework nomenclature is not in some instances easily understood. For example, the relationship between FETAC component certificates and minor awards is unclear.

In regard to the use of titles and marketing, Skillnets (p.3) notes concerns that 'a course may be branded 'level 6' even if it is only one module of a Level 6 course, whereas another course with all 8 modules required for full certification could have the same name'. This suggests that there may be a lack of understanding of differences between types of awards (major, minor etc.) at the same Level, that the distinctions may not be clearly communicated by providers and that the titles themselves can mask those differences. Work also remains to be done to achieve consistency in the use of the agreed

¹⁰ Legacy awards are mainly former awards, made before the introduction of the Framework and which are no longer made.

approaches to the titles 'Diploma' and 'Certificate' for awards other than major awards in higher education and training (see section 3.3.3).

There is also confusion around naming conventions amongst learners and employers. They have particular difficulties in distinguishing between major and minor awards, especially in terms of progression.

2.3.5 Framework implementation and quality assurance

Different quality assurance arrangements exist in each of the sectors of education and training. It was anticipated that, over time, quality assurance arrangements particularly in the universities, FETAC (where a quality assurance system is being introduced for the first time for all providers), HETAC and DIT would take account of the Framework. However, it was not anticipated that the Framework would in the short term impact on quality assurance in relation to the Leaving Certificate and the Junior Certificate.

The key points of contact between the Framework and quality assurance are in programme design and validation, assessment, and oversight of the match between programme and awards. The key Framework issues are oversight of the Level at which awards are included and the achievement by learners of learning outcomes associated with programmes/awards.

The interaction between the Framework and quality assurance arrangements is difficult to ascertain on the basis of inputs to the Study. A number of submissions refer to Framework referencing in programme design and validation. The new (2008) HETAC institutional review process incorporates a review of implementation of the Framework and access, transfer and progression.

Questions raised in a number of inputs to the Study related to:

- how providers could accurately assess the appropriate Level for an award in the Framework
- the level of confidence that awards are included at the correct Level of the Framework, in particular in relation to Level 6
- the parity of esteem of awards at the same Level in the Framework. The question here related to whether the esteem in which awards are held comes from their Level on the Framework, the status of the awarding body, or the status of the delivering institution.

In addition to communicating standards of achievement, the Framework sets overall standards for the awards of FETAC (where a quality assurance system is being introduced for the first time for all providers), HETAC and the DIT. Confidence that these standards are adhered to in practice and over time may require further steps to embed and clearly articulate the Framework in quality assurance arrangements of both awarding bodies and providers. This is

relevant to the operation of the Framework at each Level as well as across the Levels.

There is still work to be done to design programmes with reference to Framework standards. Furthermore, programme design is not universally driven by Framework learning outcomes even though most programmes now incorporate them. In addition, the embedding of these and other aspects of the implementation of the Framework in existing quality assurance processes within and across the different sectors of education and training varies from sector to sector. Whilst there is no requirement for uniformity here, the identification or development of common approaches would provide transparency about how Framework standards are met. The Study Team notes the work of the Irish Higher Education Quality Network in identifying common elements of quality assurance more generally and its relevance to this issue.

2.3.6 Communication of the Framework and awareness and knowledge of the Framework

The Qualifications Authority adopted a phased approach to communicating the Framework with successive actions planned for awarding bodies, providers, employers and learners. Promotional material and advertising was developed for these different groupings in conjunction with, as appropriate, relevant bodies e.g., IUA, FÁS and the NCCA. In addition, FETAC and HETAC ran marketing campaigns to develop brand awareness.

Overall, the Study suggests that, at this stage in the Framework's development, awareness and understanding of the Framework appears to be somewhat disjointed. It depends on the level of engagement of individuals, either as administrators or academics/trainers within institutions, as learners, employers or as other stakeholders.

The FETAC report, for instance, shows evidence that FETAC's promotional activities have been very successful. Awareness of the FETAC 'brand' is high. This does not appear however to translate into connections being made between FETAC awards and the Framework (FETAC, p.30).

Inputs to the Study suggest that the HETAC brand is not as well known as the FETAC brand. If this is in fact the case, it may be attributable to the practice of delegating authority to individual institutions to make their own awards. Within this context, it is entirely understandable that each institution would aspire to achieve discrete institutional identity with regard to its own awards.

The Guidance case study highlights the role of guidance counsellors/advisors in schools, adult education and training and in agencies that have responsibilities for state interventions concerning training and employment, in relation to the Framework. They variously use the Framework to develop learning pathways, compare programmes and awards and recognise international awards for a wide diversity of individuals and groups. The case study shows that this broad guidance community has a potential role to

'broker' the Framework in respect of learners and of awarding bodies/providers, given their awareness of the impact of the Framework on the ground (i.e., the recognition of Framework awards, demand for the recognition of prior learning, extent of understanding of the Framework, and degree of implementation of the Framework). This could build on existing ties and work between the Qualifications Authority and the different bodies engaged in guidance.

Qualifax, a database for learners, has been integrated into the work of the Qualifications Authority since early 2008. Initially developed by guidance counsellors, it is a key communications tool for the Framework. It provides information *inter alia* on programmes, their award-type and Framework level and is widely used by guidance counsellors and second-level students. It is actively used by the Qualifications Authority to engage with the broader guidance/counselling community on the Framework.

A particular issue of concern across the Framework is learner understanding and expectations of minor awards (described in section 1.2). The distinctions between minor and major awards appear not to be generally well understood, in particular in relation to FETAC awards. This may cause frustration and disappointment where holders of minor awards at one Level expect to be able to progress to higher Framework Levels in a similar way as they would with major awards.

2.3.7 A process to periodically re-visit issues affecting the operation and integrity of the Framework

It is clear to the Study Team that the development of the Framework required the reconciling of sometimes competing objectives in relation to including all awards, developing standards and aligning programmes and assessment across very diverse sectors. The progressive implementation of the Framework allows increasing scope to compare programmes and awards. This, by its nature, gives rise to a requirement to regularly re-visit the operation of the Framework on a formalised basis. The aim should be to ensure that the Framework is sufficiently responsive to on-going change whilst at the same time guaranteeing stability.

2.4 Drivers and obstacles

A number of factors emerge in supporting the implementation of the Framework and others as barriers to its implementation. The key drivers of Framework implementation include:

- Funding mechanisms
- European developments
- Legislation and consultation
- The higher education reform process.

Funding mechanisms: The linking of public funding of education and training schemes to Framework awards acts as a driver as it encourages demand for and supply of Framework-related programmes. Traditional providers as well as new providers, including professional bodies and work-based learning centres, are incentivised to engage formally with the Framework through initiatives such as ‘One Step Up’,¹¹ and tax-relief schemes for learners.¹² The Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) in higher education and training uses the Framework amongst its reference points and, through this, stimulates inter-institutional research and cooperation on the Framework. The full alignment of institutional funding models to the Framework could support implementation. On the other hand, the Study inputs refer to the lack of supports for small providers to enable them access the awards and quality assurance processes of FETAC.

European developments: The Bologna Process and the related meta-framework of qualifications have a significant impact on Framework implementation, especially with respect to higher education. The IUA draws attention to the mutually reinforcing nature of the Framework and the Bologna process. The Copenhagen and Lisbon Processes, and the associated emergence of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, are also significant in maintaining the momentum of Framework implementation.

Legislation and consultation: The Qualifications (1999) Act was a driver insofar as it set out the objectives and responsibilities of key bodies for the Framework. The consultative approach taken by the Qualifications Authority and its engagement with stakeholders were highlighted in a number of submissions as being important success factors for the Framework. This approach is taken further in the universities’ Framework Implementation Network which extends beyond the central level of registrars to academic and administrative areas. Ongoing partnership and consultation, also built into standard setting by HETAC and FETAC, are important in building and maintaining trust and confidence in the Framework.

The higher education reform process: The broader reform process in higher education and the changing learner profile were identified as factors positively impacting on Framework implementation. The increased numbers pursuing higher education and training and their more diverse profile demands that more flexible delivery methods, such as modularisation, be developed to meet new learner needs. Within the university sector, the requirement for institutional strategic plans is identified as a motivating factor in focusing attention on the Framework (IUA, p.14).

The main obstacles and gaps to implementation include:

- The complexity of language surrounding the Framework

¹¹ Under the initiative, small to medium size enterprises are eligible for 70% of costs from FÁS provided the programme of study leads to an award on the Framework.

¹² Learners undertaking programmes that are recognised through the Framework are eligible for the tuition fees tax relief scheme administered by the Revenue Commissioners.

- Accurate placement of awards and parity of esteem
- Delays in developing Framework standards and new awards.

Complex language: The use of 'jargon' was identified by a number of stakeholders as both a challenge to a broad understanding of the Framework and a barrier to engagement with the Framework and its associated policies.

Accurate placement of awards: There remain concerns that some major awards at the same Level may not be comparable. This can arise from the different speeds with which Framework standards are set and learning outcomes are introduced, and from different interpretations of learning outcomes.

The integrity of the Framework depends on accuracy and consistency in the inclusion of awards at different Levels of the Framework so as to ensure parity of esteem between awards at the same Level. The inclusion or placement of awards at a Framework level is often done on a 'best-fit' basis. The full implementation of a learning-outcomes approach will allow for a more sophisticated and accurate 'levelling' of awards over time. As learning outcomes have to be fully insinuated into standard setting and curriculum development, it is likely that the anomalies and discrepancies will be resolved with the passage of time and with on-going review or monitoring of implementation. In this regard, the approach outlined in the IUA/IUQB *Framework for quality assurance in the universities* (2007) is welcome. This makes placement a key element of quality assurance. It is required that details of programmes and modules 'must include specific reference to the positioning of each qualification in the Framework, with sufficient information provided to allow the reviewers to understand the appropriateness of the level and type of the award' (p.7).

Delays in developing Framework standards and new awards: in 2005, FETAC announced that it would set up a new Common Awards System. The introduction of such a system would significantly expedite Framework implementation and the building of pathways throughout the Framework. The first new FETAC awards at Levels 1 and 2 were developed in 2006 and achieved by the first group of learners in 2008. Existing awards were classified to fit the Framework - that is, they were evaluated against the Framework and each was assigned an award-type and title. In 2006, these were published in a Directory of over 2000 FETAC awards. However, these are not in general articulated in terms of Framework learning outcomes. This articulation is anticipated as part of the implementation of its Common Awards System. While there was limited discussion of the Common Awards System in inputs to the Study, a number of calls were made for greater speed in introducing Framework standards for FETAC awards, introducing new FETAC awards and opening up access for all providers to all of its existing awards.

2.5 Are the Framework objectives for the qualifications system being met?

The Framework was developed with the overarching objectives of bringing coherence to the education and training system, facilitating the recognition of all learning achievements and improving the quality of qualifications.

Significant changes in the education and training system have occurred as a result of introducing and implementing the National Framework of Qualifications.

It is clear from a number of Study inputs (e.g., FETAC and FÁS) that the Framework has had a significant and positive impact on bringing transparency, clarity and coherence to the world of qualifications. The IUA notes that, *‘The Framework has helped provide greater transparency and clarity across the sector, both within and between institutions. Within institutions it has contributed to the impetus for programme coherence and compatibility – allowing for improved student choice, flexibility and outcomes-oriented learning – while across the sector it has allowed for greater comparability and transparency’* (p. 18). There is now a greater diversity of awards and of quality assured providers across further and higher education and training.

DIT (p.4) refers to *‘the benefits to learners in terms of the standards of awards and the benefits to academic staff in terms of the recognition of their programmes and the maintenance and enhancement of academic standards.’*

An objective of the Framework is to enhance the quality of awards. The use of learning outcomes and award-type descriptors was expected to lead to a common range of standards for the same type of award, regardless of the type of programme or institutional setting. In practice, as some inputs show, the achievement of these objectives is dependent on progress in deepening understanding and in furthering the move from an initial culture of compliance to one of deeper and pro-active engagement with the Framework.

2.6 Summary

The different processes of Framework implementation are noted in this chapter. Substantial progress has been made with respect to the inclusion of existing and legacy awards in the Framework, although some awards other than major awards have yet to be included. Work on the deeper implementation of the learning-outcomes approach has commenced in all of the sectors, but is progressing at variable speeds. The introduction of new standards and criteria and their use to develop new awards in the further education and training sector, in particular, is proceeding more slowly than some had hoped.

Different strategic approaches have been taken to implementation in each of the sectors. The general issues arising concern the differences in the extent

of Framework implementation in each sector (and within higher education), concerns about the accurate placement or inclusion of awards, the development and use of awards at all Framework levels, the need to embed the Framework in quality assurance arrangements, and the challenge of raising awareness and knowledge of the Framework within education and training. These and the iterative, dynamic nature of the Framework give rise to a need for continued leadership of implementation and for a process to periodically re-visit issues that may affect the integrity or effective operation of the Framework. These issues are addressed in recommendations 1-8, 16, 18 and 19 in Chapter 6 below.

Chapter 3. Theme 2: Impact of the Framework on Learners - promoting access and pathways between qualifications

3.1 Context

This chapter looks at the policies and actions of the Qualifications Authority and the awarding bodies to promote access and pathways between qualifications for learners. A central vision for the Framework, as set out in legislation and policy, is the development of a qualifications system that focuses on the needs of the learner and on lifelong learning. This envisages the development of integrated pathways between qualifications. The technical elements of the work needed to deliver on this vision are captured in the Qualifications Authority's policies on access, transfer and progression (Qualifications Authority, p. 22). These include requirements to:

- develop an integrated Framework;
- identify and realise a network of clearly signposted transfer and progression routes through the Framework;
- ensure that learners have entry arrangements to all programmes leading to awards in the Framework that are fair, transparent, and compliant with equality legislation; and
- ensure that accurate and reliable information is available to all learners, to enable them plan their learning on the basis of a clear understanding of the awards available and the associated entry arrangements and transfer and progression routes.

The main role of the Qualifications Authority in this area is to develop policies and procedures for access, transfer and progression and support implementation. Implementation is largely a matter for awarding bodies and institutions. The realisation of the vision depends on a number of inter-related factors, such as resources, funding and trust between programme providers - many of which are external to the Framework. It was anticipated that Framework implementation would need to be well advanced before more learning pathways would be developed.

3.2 Implementation - Key Findings

This section provides a summary of the key actions related to the development of pathways between qualifications in the review period for this Study, October 2003-September 2008 (in addition to actions under Theme 1).

- The Qualifications Authority's policies on access, transfer and progression were published alongside the launch of the Framework in 2003.
- National guidelines on credit in higher education and training were developed in 2004, while national principles and guidelines for RPL were developed in 2005.

- FETAC introduced access, transfer and progression policy in 2004.
- The Qualifications Authority's policies were embedded in HETAC's programme validation process, the re-casting of awards (2004) and institutional review policy
- HETAC continues to operate and update pre-existing policies on RPL and credit
- FETAC initially designed a credit system in 2005, since which it was further refined
- FETAC RPL policy developed in 2005 and amended following pilot projects in 2007–08
- FETAC made 50 awards directly on the basis of RPL to learners (to September 2008). In 2008, eight providers agreed specific quality assurance procedures with FETAC which enable them to offer awards to learners solely on the basis of RPL.
- The Qualifications Authority/IUA published research on progression routes from FETAC into universities in 2006.
- HETAC made five awards directly on the basis of RPL (to September 2008)
- The DIT applies access, transfer and progression policies and guidelines on RPL to all programmes leading to major awards in 2008
- The Qualifications Authority facilitates and advises universities on access, transfer and progression policies
- There was no expectation on school awards to adjust to access, transfer and progression policies in respect of new entry points to the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate.

As stated in the previous chapter, these actions entailed significant work and continuous engagement by stakeholders. In many instances they are underpinned by a long-term investment of resources by the relevant stakeholders. As some of the actions are part of a long-term process, work is on-going (post- September 2008) to complete and follow them through.

As per the terms of reference for this Study, the implementation and impact of access, transfer and progression policies in the universities is dealt with separately in section 3.3 below.

3.3 Implementation issues

This section outlines a number of implementation issues structured around the following four themes:

- 3.3.1 Entry arrangements and progression
- 3.3.2 Information for learners and Framework users
- 3.3.3 Credit
- 3.3.4 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

3.3.1 Entry arrangements and progression

The main objective of the Qualifications Authority's policies is to focus entry arrangements on the factors necessary for the successful participation in and completion of programmes. Its policies were expected to lead to programme adaptations and, possibly, new arrangements for entry of adult/mature students into higher education and training. At the time the Framework was introduced (2003), there were relatively few barriers to entry to programmes leading to FETAC awards. In practice, the realisation of this goal is dependent on generating wider understandings of qualifications across sectors and the use of learning outcomes in designing qualifications and programmes.

Achievements in the area of entry and progression concern the availability of a range of awards, such as minor awards, to recognise learning achievements and to provide credit for learners who may not complete a programme for a major award. Considerable progress has been made since 2003 in building on pre-existing progression routes and in developing more pathways between major awards. The Framework has sharpened thinking around access programmes (IUA, p.19) and led to new progression routes for learners. However, there remains limited or *ad hoc* recognition of these programmes outside the institutions which provide them. There also remains a lack of clarity about the Level at which some of these programmes/awards are offered.

While much of the focus of implementation has concerned entry to higher education and training, operational pathways are also needed for major awards at Levels 1 through 6 of the Framework. Awards at Levels 1 and 2 were achieved by learners, for the first time, in 2008. These are extremely important for marginalised learners and offer a basis for accessing awards at other Levels. FETAC (p.22) shows that, in 2007, the bulk of major awards made by it are at Levels 5 (13,500) and 6 (6,500). This compares to about 1,700 major awards at Level 4 and some 1,000 major awards at Level 3. A small number of awards were made at Levels 1 and 2 in 2008.

The absence of data makes it difficult to evaluate the impact of the Framework on the progression of learners between FETAC awards. The overall take up of FETAC awards at different Levels could indicate that there are insufficient pathways within the FETAC sector or that there is little demand for such progression from learners. An absence of formalised pathways could be expected given that a number of separate awarding bodies developed awards in the sector in the past and continued to operate their own procedures until 2006. On the demand side, NALA (p.4-5) argues for the importance of providing additional awards and programmes at Levels 1 and 2 and the further development of core competencies and literacy strands in relation to awards at Levels 3 and above. According to it, this would open access to qualifications and provide progression for learners who have no or low levels of formal qualifications, who constitute some 30% of the workforce.

It is not clear from the Framework or from access, transfer and progression policies whether it was expected that FETAC Level 5 major awards and

indeed each of the different Leaving Certificate programmes would, in general, provide access to higher education and training. Discussions on pathways led by the Qualifications Authority resulted in an emphasis being placed on developing the FETAC routes. Progression from the Advanced Craft Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Applied were highlighted as obstacles in these discussions. This led to the publication of existing pathways from the Advanced Craft Certificate into programmes offered by the Institutes of Technology.

Further progress in this area is indicated by the increase in higher education institutions participating in the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS) to 40 in 2008, up from 21 in 2002. Also, some 10% of higher education and training places offered through the CAO are now offered to FETAC award holders, compared to about 3% in 2005. Some two-thirds of these were in Institutes of Technology (HEA Access Office, pp. 4, 11). Whilst wider supply-demand issues may be the primary factors here, the Framework is clearly an enabler.

The Nursing case study suggests that holders of Level 5 awards, which have been developed in part to facilitate progression into nursing programmes, face quotas on places in higher education and that preference is given to holders of the Leaving Certificate.

The Points system, a supply-demand mechanism, operated by the Central Applications Office (CAO) on behalf of higher education institutions, for entry into higher education prioritises the Leaving Certificate Established. Institutions operate quotas for some programmes for FETAC and/or mature students, aged 23 years or over. Many institutions also have targets in relation to the participation of disadvantaged groups, some of whom may have FETAC awards. Entry arrangements into these programmes in respect of mature students, for whom quotas operate, are not immediately transparent. They appear to vary widely from institution to institution. Whilst such transparency is desirable, it is also important to recognise the emergent nature of mature student entry routes and the significant progress made in this regard in recent years by higher education institutions.

The main issue arising for the Framework is to address the comparability between FETAC awards and the Leaving Certificate award so as to ensure that confidence in the FETAC award is maintained. This also relates to broad public acceptance of the 'normal' entry to higher education and training (and universities in particular) as coming from the Leaving Certificate. This perception can result in consigning FETAC awards in schools to those who do not follow the 'normal' route. This raises a concern that the Framework will come to be associated with non-mainstream awards and could in fact cement the division between mainstream and non-mainstream. This issue of comparability can best be addressed by tracking students entering higher education and training from both routeways.

3.3.2 Data and information for learners and Framework users

A major issue arising from the Study concerns the lack of widely available data on a number of key areas. These include:

- the transfer and progression rates of learners between institutions and qualifications across the Framework
- the quality of information made available by providers on pathways into and from their programmes and, in general, on links between their programmes and the Framework (e.g., in prospectuses and marketing material). HETAC, FETAC and the DIT require such information to be made available, and
- the comparison of the performance of different award-holders in higher education and training. This would allow consideration of the impact of prior learning achievement and other factors on success rates and on retention.

The absence of comprehensive data on existing policies and pathways and their use makes it difficult to assess the impact of the Framework and its policies. The availability of greater information on arrangements, transfer and progression rates and the factors that affect them is critical to learner choices and expectations. Greater clarity about the Qualifications Authority's policies is needed to increase awareness and engagement of staff in achieving their goals. Some progress has been made in addressing these data deficits e.g. publications concerning existing routes from craft awards and transfer and progression rates into university programmes.

3.3.3 Credit

The Framework was introduced without a credit system. At the time, it was considered very difficult to achieve a consensus on such a system amongst the major stakeholders (schools, FETAC, HETAC and universities). Some of the objectives of a credit system (e.g. recognition of more diverse forms of learning) were addressed by developing the concepts of minor, supplemental and special purpose award types (see section 2.2 above). By 2008, credit systems, based on ECTS, were incorporated into the programme validation requirements of HETAC and the DIT. Increasingly, all the universities are implementing ECTS, partly in response to the Bologna agenda. FETAC is in the early stages of introducing a credit system for further education and training awards.

ECTS and the national credit guidelines (Qualifications Authority, p.46) are now in use throughout the higher education and training system. These approaches have facilitated the development of credit systems which are now widely embedded in higher education institutions.

Inputs to the study highlight the need to introduce a credit system for awards in further education and training.¹³ FETAC's initial design for a credit system (2005) was refined in 2008. Implementation of this has commenced. It was pointed out in Study inputs that a credit system for further education and training awards should be compatible with the system in place in higher education and training. This would give greater clarity regarding the nature of those awards, e.g., programme duration, inputs and outcomes, and facilitate greater recognition of such awards, particularly at Levels 5 and 6. The full implementation of a credit system would also increase the transparency of awards where component units are placed at different Levels of the Framework.

Understandably, at this stage in implementing the Framework, work remains to be done to fully align the Framework concepts with credit practice in higher education and training i.e. to articulate the linkages between credit, learning outcomes, Levels and programme design. There appears to be patchy awareness of the national credit guidelines in particular concerning the range of credit assigned to Levels for major awards and that distinctions between the titles 'Diploma' and 'Certificate' in naming non-major awards should be based on the volume of credit associated with each. A number of submissions indicated that there are difficulties in relation to the fact that individual Honours Bachelors Degrees (Level 8) are of significantly different duration and credit volume (e.g., IoT Sligo, p.3). It is not clear whether this is a question of communication, as from the perspective of the Framework there is no difficulty in having different credit volumes associated with these awards) or whether some of these awards are deemed to have learning outcomes which would indicate that the award should be at a different Level.

Specific issues arising are:

- a lack of transparency about the calculation of typical learning effort for programmes and units of learning
- inconsistencies in the volume of credit allocated to similar awards
- limited knowledge and understanding of credit and its links to the Framework amongst learners and other users
- the allocation of credit within an award to different Levels,¹⁴ and
- the ease with which credits can be easily or automatically transferred¹⁵.

3.3.4 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

The Framework aims to recognise all kinds of learning achievements - formal, informal and non-formal. Formal or certified learning is recognised through the inclusion of as many qualifications as possible in the Framework (e.g. work-

¹³ The Study Team notes that there was limited discussion of FETAC's emerging credit system in the Study inputs and that it could not therefore consider it in detail.

¹⁴ It is noted the issues of linking modules to Levels and the match between specific learning outcomes strands and levels within an award (section 4.3.3) are often in practice entwined in debates on credit.

¹⁵ Note that there was limited discussion of transfer in inputs to the Study. HETAC, p.27, notes that there was a difficulty in gathering information on this.

based, international and professional awards). The Framework is used as a reference point to recognise non-national qualifications (by the Recognition Service of the Qualifications Authority). The language of learning outcomes and Levels creates common reference points for identifying and assessing non-formal and informal learning. It was expected that Framework implementation would be a pre-condition for substantial progress in RPL.

The national principles and guidelines, 2005, for RPL address further and higher education and training. At the time, advances were not anticipated in relation to the schools sector. The guidelines aim to promote, support and co-ordinate RPL practice and to support common understandings. They concern:

- Entry to programmes
- Credit towards a qualification or exemption from programme requirements
- Access to full awards

The latter point is particularly relevant to FETAC and HETAC. Under the Qualifications Act, an individual may apply to have his/her prior learning recognised by them for an award.

The national report on RPL compiled for the OECD (2007)¹⁶ was the first attempt to report comprehensively on policy and practice in RPL in Ireland. This report was used to indicate policy implementation in the different sectors for this Study. The report revealed a lack of comparative data on practice, participation rates and outcomes for learners. It showed a wide range of practice, policy and procedures for RPL at all levels. Much practice is localised and specific to particular groups of learners, programmes or sectors. Awareness and understanding of RPL is limited and the numbers of learners involved are relatively few.

Inputs to the Study demonstrated that there is demand from many stakeholders for greater availability of RPL (e.g., Skillnets, ISME, NALA). The issues to be addressed include:

- *Inconsistency in how RPL is used for the entry of mature students to higher education.* There is no transparent system in place to gauge how prior non-formal or informal learning is valued in entry processes.
- *Different weightings associated with RPL.* The Nursing case study points to different weightings being given to RPL by providers, in particular to qualifications achieved by nurses prior to those currently required for registration (for example, for entry and exemptions to post-graduate programmes). Similar differences appear to apply to craft awards¹⁷ and to the recognition of qualifications in the workplace.

¹⁶ Available at: http://www.nqai.ie/publication_aug2007.html.

¹⁷ FETAC publication on progression from craft awards (2007), http://www.fetac.ie/PDF/Progression_from_FETAC_Adv_Cert-Craft_to_HE_Courses.pdf

- *Lack of recognition of awards through RPL.* Learners who have accessed and successfully completed post-graduate programmes (e.g., conversion type diplomas at Level 8) on the basis of RPL may find that they are disenfranchised from entry to higher education programmes or to employment where they have not achieved the requisite Honours Bachelor Degree.
- *Resource requirements for RPL.* These are significant at both further and higher education and training levels.

The adoption of RPL policies is dependent on an acceptance amongst providers and professional accreditation bodies of Framework learning outcomes and a deeper embedding of the Framework. There continues to be considerable scope for the acceptance and use of RPL across the education and training system. This overall position is typical of the general state of play regarding RPL in other OECD countries.¹⁸

3.3.5 The implementation of access, transfer and progression in the universities

One objective of the Study was to examine the implementation by the universities of procedures for access, transfer and progression determined by the Qualifications Authority. However, there was insufficient evidence and discussion of the issue in inputs to the Study and so the Team could not fully examine this area of implementation. What follows are observations on the issue largely based on the submission from the Higher Education Authority National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education (Access Office).

The IUA and the Access Office note that mature student and FETAC access routes have become significant routes of access to most higher education institutions. Research on progression into universities¹⁹ showed that ‘the biggest developments in progression to the university sector are the acceptance of FETAC qualifications for entry’ (Access Office, p.5). The Access Office estimates that the FETAC route provides access to some 10% of first time entrants into all higher education institutions (2008) compared to 3% in 2005; that mature students account for 11% (compared to 9% in 2005). Some two-thirds of these were in Institutes of Technology (HEA Access Office, pp. 4,11) and that specific access routes account for 3% (compared to 2% in 2005) (Access Office, p.4).

The Higher Education Links Scheme, which involves 41 higher education institutions²⁰ (including six universities, five institutions that are affiliated to universities, and about eight private providers), creates a route between FETAC Level 5 and 6 qualifications and higher education programmes. It

¹⁸ OECD. *Ireland, Country Note* (note on the findings of OECD team on RPL) 2008, available at <http://www.nqai.ie/RecognitionofNon-FormalandInformalLearninginIreland.html>

¹⁹ Qualifications Authority/HEA/IUA research on progression into university under-graduate programmes, 2006, http://www.nqai.ie/publication_access_NAME.html

²⁰ http://www.fetac.ie/hels/Prog_HEC_2009.pdf

would appear to be a significant factor in the increase in applicants with FETAC awards who apply for entry to higher education and training. A detailed breakdown of the figures for university intake and by field of learning would facilitate greater understanding of which pathways are most used.

At a broad level, the distinction between the Framework concepts of access, transfer and progression which concern qualifications and that of the HEA and universities themselves, concerning disadvantaged socio-economic groups is noted. The concepts are not mutually exclusive but different policy instruments come into play for each.

The HEA Access Office notes concerns about the extent to which FETAC Level 5 and 6 awards are an effective preparation for access to higher education (p.8). However, no evidence was presented in relation to this. This concern is at variance with the anecdotal evidence concerning the high achievement levels of mature and other non-traditional students in universities. Clearly, as the number of FETAC entrants into universities (and other higher education institutions) increases, it is essential that tracking systems are put in place which can establish whether these concerns are soundly based. The on-going work of the HEA to track the progress of learners from disadvantaged socio-economic groups in higher education and training should assist in this regard.

The lack of data in relation to the recognition of prior learning also needs attention. The 2007 report on RPL (section 3.3.4 above) noted that universities in the main were primarily focused on recognising certified learning and that practice was somewhat restricted and ad hoc. Clearly, analysis is required to ascertain the reasons for the limited use of RPL. The wider development of institutional policies on RPL, a relatively recent process, would help to achieve greater transparency of existing practice and encourage the full recognition of learning achievements across institutions.

As mentioned in section 2.4, the alignment of funding mechanisms to support access, transfer and progression is necessary. University access programmes at Levels 6 and 7, for example, are not eligible for funding under the recurrent grant model of the HEA (IUA, p.16).

3.4 Drivers and obstacles

Framework development: There is evidence from the foregoing that the Framework is operating as a significant enabler of access, transfer and progression. The diversity of awards at each of the Levels creates multiple but effective pathways throughout the system. The number of these pathways from further education and training to higher education and training has expanded significantly – a phenomenon undoubtedly supported by the Framework. Greater use of learning outcomes would be likely to further extend these pathways. Also, the IUA notes, (p.16), that “the Framework has helped re-situate these challenges (*to access, transfer and progression*) in a more coherent setting, based on comparative levels of student achievement,

rather than the method by which this has been obtained; it is expected that on such a basis a more rational discussion will be possible regarding the future of such access, transfer and progression routes.”

Learning outcomes: The SIF project work on developing a framework for craft progression shows that mapping learning outcomes of craft awards against those of awards at higher Levels has a significant potential to create pathways.²¹ This project also shows the potential to mainstream or develop systemic pathways from particular awards as opposed to institutional arrangements. Notwithstanding this, there is evidence that the establishment of these new pathways has not been primarily driven by the concept of learning outcomes.

The embedding of learning outcomes in course design, teaching and learning and assessment is also critical to advancing RPL.

Public policy, funding and institutional priorities: The Study inputs underline the impact of broader public policies, funding and institutional priorities and structures on the availability and use of pathways.

CAO process: An external factor impacting on progression into higher education and training is the Points System operated by the CAO. This is well established and accepted as the primary selection mechanism for higher education and training. It operates on the basis of supply and demand rather than on the Framework concepts of learning outcomes and capacity to succeed (although the latter are reflected in entry requirements for particular programmes). This highlights a significant difference in the underpinning philosophical positioning of the Framework *vis-à-vis* the Points System. The Points System is by its nature selective, differentiating applicants for courses and regulating entry to courses. The Framework, on the other hand, is by its nature inclusive, tending towards widening access and progression and towards the distribution of places on the basis of learners achievement rather than on considerations of supply and demand.

Time: Time and resources are needed to debate, negotiate and embed change, and to develop trust and communicate changes to wider stakeholder groups, professional bodies and employers.

Gaps in Data: The absence of comprehensive data makes it difficult to identify factors influencing implementation. The gaps include system-wide data on demand for progression, the responsiveness of providers, and the ability to track learners’ mobility and progress through different sectors of education and training over time. The issue of progression has particular import for second chance learners and for those entering the Irish education and training system for the first time e.g., migrants. There is a lack of comprehensive data on those factors which influence their progress over time.

Overall, a number of particular factors appear to be inhibiting progression:

²¹ Education in Employment Project, Framework for progression of Craftspersons, 2008, www.eine.ie

- there appears to be inconsistent implementation of policies
- there is resistance to developing minor awards in some areas, for example, in relation to craft awards
- there are inconsistencies in the value given to prior learning and the availability of RPL in all sectors
- there are gaps in information provision and in awareness of policies amongst major stakeholders
- existing routes outside the Leaving Certificate largely depend on individual provider arrangements.

3.5 Summary

The full implementation of the Framework including the wider use of learning outcomes and the further development of awards and standards at levels 1-6 is critical to the establishment and use of pathways throughout the Framework. Action in these areas would complement the significant attention paid by the Qualifications Authority and awarding bodies to progression into higher education and training. An assessment of overall progress on access, transfer and progression was hindered by the lack of data available to the Study Team. However, there is evidence that progression routes into higher education and training have increased and become more transparent. There is considerable interest in and demand for RPL, but there are inconsistencies in policies and use of RPL, gaps in the communication of policies and in the development of credit. These issues are addressed by recommendations 6-11, 16 and 19 in Chapter 6 below.

Chapter 4. Theme 3: Learning outcomes and cultural change in education and training

4.1. Context

As stated in the Introduction, the Qualifications Act, 1999, stipulated that the Framework would be based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners. This chapter examines the introduction of Framework learning outcomes.

The 1999 Act established learning outcomes as a basis for the Framework. The Qualifications Authority, through a process of consultation, scoped out learning outcomes for the purpose of the Framework. They are set out in three main strands (knowledge, skill and competence) and eight sub-strands. The aim was to enable, insofar as possible, all learning achievements to be recognised in the Framework. The broad span of learning outcomes agreed for the Framework reflected national and international policy shifts to emphasise lifelong learning.

The major long-term implication of using learning outcomes as a basis for the Framework is that they would become the common language of qualifications. It was envisaged that learning outcomes would be introduced in some areas of qualifications for the first time, or be explicitly articulated, and that those already in use would be aligned with the Framework.

FETAC, HETAC and the DIT were required to set standards in line with those of the Framework. There was deemed to be a continuity of standards between the major awards made by universities and those of the Framework. Over time, these awards were expected to be articulated in Framework terms. Changes were first anticipated in standard setting for awards, programme design and approval. In the long-term, changes were anticipated in teaching, learning and in assessment. These would be introduced in a context of provision shaped largely by inputs – duration, programme content - and the primacy of them where regulated bodies determine what qualifications are required for access to work (e.g., under EU directives on the professions).

Other national qualifications frameworks are largely based on learning outcomes. CEDEFOP (2007)²² notes that learning outcomes began to make an impact in vocational education and training (VET) in the 1980s, primarily as a means of improving the labour market relevance of VET qualifications and the employability of young people and the unemployed. It notes that there are varying approaches to the use and interpretation of learning outcomes – including different kinds of descriptors for qualifications frameworks - in vocational education and training across Europe. In higher education and training, the Tuning project involves collaborative work on learning outcomes

²² CEDEFOP (2008) *The shift to learning outcomes: conceptual, political and practical developments in Europe*, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.

in subject areas.²³ Bloom's taxonomy²⁴ is an example of tool that is widely used in working with learning outcomes. CEDEFOP suggests that the post-compulsory phase of general education is least influenced by learning outcomes 'largely because, while upper secondary general education has an educative function, this can be overshadowed by the selective function' (p.33).

Both the Bologna Framework and the European Qualifications Framework are based on learning outcomes. This commonality of language masks significant differences at national, sectoral and occupational levels in relation to the detailed understanding, interpretation and use of learning outcomes.

4.2 Implementation – Key Findings

This section outlines the key actions taken in relation to Framework learning outcomes in the review period for this Study, October 2003 to September 2008.

- HETAC used Framework learning outcomes to set standards from 2003 onwards. It revalidated all programmes/major awards to meet major award-type descriptors in 2004. The award-type descriptors were adopted as the basis for standards in all fields pending the development of standards for specific fields of learning. Standards were developed in six fields (to September 2008)
- In 2006, FETAC developed awards at Levels 1 and 2 in accordance with Framework award-type descriptors. Standards in relation to the FETAC Common Awards System are being developed in line with the Framework.
- HETAC published a draft assessment policy for consultation in 2008.

²³ Tuning educational structures in Europe is an on-going collaboration between universities in different disciplines on the implementation of the Bologna process. It has led to the development of reference points for common curricula on the basis of agreed competences and learning outcomes as well as cycle level descriptors for many subject areas. See http://www.tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/index.php?option=com_docman&task=docclick&Itemid=59&bid=81&limitstart=0&limit=5 and work on subject areas. Other references for working with learning outcomes include: Kennedy, D. (2007) *Writing and Using Learning Outcomes : A Practical Guide*, University College Cork: Quality Promotion Unit, and benchmark statements developed by the Quality Assurance Agency (UK). Biggs, J (1999), *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, (SRHE and Open University Press, Buckingham) developed the concept of constructive alignment which is now often referred to in the alignment of learning outcomes, programme specifications, teaching and learning activities and assessment in higher education. <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/default.asp>

²⁴ The *Taxonomy of educational objectives: the classification of educational goals*, (Bloom, B.S. (Ed.), Engelhart M.D., Furst, E.J., Hill, W.H., and Krautwohl, D.R. (1956), New York: David McKay) ,commonly referred to as Bloom's taxonomy, was published in 1956. It is an organisational structure, which has developed over time, for classifying educational goals, objectives and standards. The taxonomy identifies three major domains of learning – cognitive, affective and psychomotor. Within the cognitive domain, six levels of learning are identified. The taxonomy, whilst it does not define or capture all learning outcomes, is generally used to aid the articulation of learning outcomes. See also Anderson, L.W. (Ed.), Krautwohl, D.R. (Ed), Airasian, P.W., Cruikshank, K.A., Mayer, R.E., Pintrich, P.R., Raths, J., and Wittock, M.C. (2001), *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: a Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (Complete edition), New York: Longman.

- The DIT requires that all programmes and assessment methods are designed in accordance with award-type descriptors and Framework learning outcomes.
- FETAC introduced quality assurance requirements for providers in 2005. In 2008, it introduced quality assurance requirements concerning assessment. Prior to 2008, the processes and procedures of the former awarding bodies were used for assessment.
- Significant work on the use of learning outcomes has commenced in the university sector, both collectively and at individual institutional level, though the rate of progress varies from institution to institution. The universities' Framework Implementation Network, established jointly by the IUA and the Qualifications Authority to support deeper implementation of the Framework through the exchange of experience and practice between its members, is also working on discipline specific learning outcomes, programme design and assessment of learning outcomes.
- In the schools sector, the Framework is a reference point for developing new outcomes-based subject syllabuses, new curriculum components and assessment components

As stated in relation to the key findings in previous chapters, these actions entailed significant work and continuous engagement by stakeholders. In many instances they are underpinned by a long-term investment of resources by the relevant stakeholders. As some of the actions are part of a long-term process, work is on-going (post-September 2008) to complete and follow them through.

4.3 Implementation issues

Implementation issues are discussed within seven themes as follow:

- 4.3.1 Diversity of approaches to implementation in the sectors
- 4.3.2 Time
- 4.3.3 Engaging in debate
- 4.3.4 International context
- 4.3.5 System wide engagement with learning outcomes
- 4.3.6 Assessment practice
- 4.3.7 Awareness and understanding of learning outcomes

4.3.1 Diversity of overall approaches to implementation in the sectors

Different approaches have been taken to introducing learning outcomes by HETAC, FETAC, the DIT and by individual universities. The diverse standard setting approaches of FETAC and HETAC were discussed in Chapter 1. HETAC used Framework learning outcomes to set standards. FETAC articulated Framework learning outcomes in its new awards at Levels 1 and 2; used them to re-classify existing awards in 2005 and is further embedding them through the introduction of the Common Awards System across the further education and training sector. The universities' Framework Implementation Network, involving administrative and lecturing staff, is

supporting the introduction and use of learning outcomes in that sector. At individual university level, implementation is taking place through re-writing course descriptors in Framework terms, and the extensive roll-out of modularisation and ECTS - all incorporating the use of a learning outcomes approach.

While the school awards were not required to be articulated in Framework learning outcomes, the NCCA (p.7) notes that at a policy level the move towards outcomes-based curricula in the schools sector has continued apace since the introduction of the Framework. This could, in the long term, impact on the articulation of awards and on assessment.

4.3.2 Time

The evidence on learning outcomes raises issues of how best to embed a learning outcomes culture in the qualifications system. International evidence (CEDEFOP 2007; Evaluation of the impact of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework²⁵) underlines the need for time to foster debate, understanding and engagement. Evidence from Scotland suggests that the status of the Framework learning outcomes as 'typical' (indicating what learners typically achieve) or 'threshold' (indicating a minimum standard of achievement) matters to how they are used in standard setting and in programme development. Overly prescriptive approaches can lead to box-ticking and a compliance culture whilst a more flexible approach can lead to real engagement. However, too much flexibility risks such diversity as to make learning outcomes meaningless as indicators of common standards of achievement.

The diversity of approaches taken to implementation offers opportunities for learning and borrowing across the different sectors.

It appears that Framework learning outcomes (in the Level indicators and award-type descriptors) are generally interpreted as a guide or a reference point rather than as a threshold but this is not universally so (IoT Sligo, p.4). The Qualifications Authority refers to award standards as being the 'expected outcomes of learning... they concern the knowledge, skill and competence that are expected from a learner who is to achieve an award'.²⁶ The DIT (pp.5-6) draws attention to 'the disquiet that in some areas/disciplines, a culture of compliance rather than of principles and guidance has become attached to level descriptors with consequent worrying implications for freedom/flexibility related to curriculum design, pedagogies and assessment.'

This state of play appears to mirror the position in Scotland where it has taken time for awarding bodies and providers to work through and elaborate their understandings of learning outcomes. A rushed approach can lead to compliance rather than real engagement if institutions prioritise meeting targets for implementation over effectiveness.

²⁵ <http://cci.scot.nhs.uk/Publications/2005/11/30173432/34323>

²⁶ Policies and criteria for the development of the Framework, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, p.20.

4.3.3 Engaging in debate

It is clear, from the Irish and international experience, that full engagement with learning outcomes takes time. Given this, there has been significant progress in Ireland (albeit to varying degrees across the sectors). International evidence points to a need for on-going debate within and across disciplines on learning outcomes. Such debate should not be construed as resistance. HETAC, for instance, notes (p.19) that some academics “advance that the tight implementation of the NFQ within the HETAC community limited the scope for debate of the underpinning pedagogical philosophy and that debate at this stage is now viewed as resistance to change.”

Many of the issues that arose in consultations on developing the learning outcomes strands are likely to re-surface in the future (see Qualifications Authority, p.12). These include:

- concerns that the exercise is reductionist
- different ‘vocational’ and ‘academic’ understanding and approaches to learning outcomes
- the feasibility/desirability of elaborating all learning outcomes for all Levels, and
- the development of assessment methods concerning learning outcomes e.g., ‘insight’ and ‘learning to learn’ which are central to lifelong learning.

The interpretation and application of the sub-strands of Framework learning outcomes as well as the attribution of learning outcomes to different Levels within an award is also presenting challenges.

More debate on these issues is encouraged. This would contribute to building more effective pathways (as discussed in Chapter 3). At the national level, it would be helpful to engage all the stakeholders in education and training in this debate, including learners, employers and sectoral organisations. It is also important to engage regulatory and professional bodies in this, especially given the tension between the inputs-based approach of EU professional directives and the learning outcomes basis of qualifications Frameworks.

4.3.4 International context

There is further scope to connect the debate in Ireland with related initiatives in the Bologna Process and the introduction of the European Qualifications Framework. Awareness of the contestation of the concepts of learning outcomes as well as of disciplinary debates in vocational and higher education and training across Europe do not appear to have permeated the debate within Irish institutions.

Furthermore, there is variance, for instance, in the implementation of the Bologna Framework across Europe. This draws attention to its enabling over its prescriptive intent. The interplay between the Bologna and the Irish

Framework is not generally well known beyond a small group of players. The Qualifications Authority, as the lead body in relation to the aligning the Framework with international frameworks, should take the lead in addressing this gap. It is also important that this is reinforced by the higher education institutions themselves, who have primary responsibility for introducing learning outcomes. They need to communicate this interplay and to encourage a wider dissemination and debate of their engagement, at subject/field level, in related projects at national and European levels, such as in Tuning.

4.3.5 Engagement with the broad span of learning outcomes

Labour market demands for qualifications that recognise transferable skills, generic skills and 'learning to learn' are addressed in the schools sector and in further and higher education and training. The broader lifelong learning context - learning within a personal, civic, social and employment-related context - shaped the determination of Framework learning outcomes. The focus was on facilitating the recognition of all relevant and measurable learning achievements through the Framework. This included those for which assessment methods were underdeveloped or which were traditionally bound up in programmes/curricula rather than being assessed in their own right. These relate to learning objectives such as learning to learn, insight, personal and inter-personal growth and development and the development of a critical capability. The extent to which these learning outcomes are articulated in awards and programmes is not clear from the Study inputs. HETAC (p.18) notes that initial difficulties encountered by institutions in working with the relevant Framework strands are counterbalanced by more recent evidence of the development of programme modules that focus on 'learning to learn'.

4.3.6 Assessment practice

It is expected that the shift towards learning outcomes will, in the long-term, impact on and be supported by teaching and assessment practices. A learning outcomes approach can challenge existing practice and norm-referenced assessment methods in particular. It takes time to develop alternative reliable methods and to build trust in them. The context of assessment is also an important consideration. In vocational education and training, for example, FÁS notes that, as qualifications can be licences to practise, assessment criteria must reflect this. In other cases, there can be tension between the selective function of qualifications and a learning-outcomes approach.

International evidence points to the need for time and for on-going engagement with stakeholders to align learning outcomes with assessment practice. There is a risk that in the initial stages of Framework implementation, there could be 'over-assessment' to compensate for any perceived shift in reliance on traditional assessment stages or methods. In the Irish context, there is a need to clarify whether the learning outcomes described in the award-type descriptors and Framework Levels are 'typical' or 'threshold'. The larger debates about reductionism and utilitarianism also need to be

continued. Issues here include the risks that assessment practice is a process of reductionism in which the holistic experience of learning can be lost, and that assessment can drive curricula.

4.3.7 Awareness and understanding of learning outcomes

Overall awareness and understanding of Framework learning outcomes is related to how they are introduced into institutional structures and into teaching and learning. In-house staff development/workshops and guides can generate awareness. In a small HETAC/IUA survey of learners in the higher education sector, learners expressed the view that there was little understanding of the role or significance of learning outcomes (HETAC, p.32). Respondents considered that much assessment practice is unchanged and unaffected by learning outcomes. However in this regard, the IUA (p.7) notes that “it is also likely that in some cases there may still be a gap between redesigned and rewritten programmes, and the actual delivery and perception of these on the ground. These issues will need to be monitored closely through student feedback and other quality assurance mechanisms”.

4.4 Summary

The Study reinforces the point that the introduction of learning outcomes underpins a radical shift in teaching and learning from inputs to outputs. The extent to which this shift has occurred is unclear. Although different strategic approaches have been and are being taken to the introduction of learning outcomes, there appears to be a common lag in implementation between the administrative centres within awarding bodies and institutions and those engaged in teaching, training and assessment. This is not unexpected given the short period since the Framework was introduced. The key issues emerging from the Study inputs concern the contested nature of learning outcomes, the need for on-going debate within and across sectors, raising awareness and the need to work through the implications for and alignment with assessment practice. These issues are addressed by recommendations 12-14, 18 and 19 in Chapter 6 below.

Chapter 5. Theme 4: Visibility and currency of the Framework within and outside the education and training environment

5.1 Context

The visibility and currency of the Framework inside and outside the education and training environment are important factors in its success and impact. Changes in the focus and weighting of qualifications, their relationships to each other and the emergence of new types of qualifications, will need to be communicated to users of qualifications and those whose policies and practice have a bearing on qualifications. The creation and operation of pathways between qualifications across sectors will require on-going co-operation between stakeholders across the education and training spectrum. Trust and confidence in the Framework and its qualifications are needed for the Framework to operate effectively and to engineer the cultural shift it entails. This chapter explores these issues.

Four particular areas emerged in the course of the Study in relation to the visibility and currency of the Framework. These were:

- the use of the Framework in the labour market (recruitment and access to work, training, developing standards)
- the alignment of public funding mechanisms to the Framework
- qualifications of professional, regulatory and international bodies, and
- the alignment of the Framework with international developments in relation to qualifications.

5.2 Implementation and impact – Key Findings

This section outlines the key actions in relation to the visibility and currency of the Framework in the review period for this Study, October 2003 to September 2008.

- In 2003, the Qualifications Authority operated a phased communications strategy targeted at different stakeholder groups (providers, employers and learners)
- In the period up to 2007, HETAC and FETAC and the Qualifications Authority ran marketing campaigns individually, and, in 2008, jointly
- The Framework was cross-referenced with qualifications frameworks in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in 2005
- Awareness of the Framework amongst the general public was at 18% of the population in 2006 (Qualifications Authority, p.41). In October 2008, following a marketing campaign, awareness was at 32% of adults surveyed (Millward Brown survey for the Qualifications Authority, August 2008). A HETAC survey (2007), reported 47% of employers surveyed knew of the Framework.

- The compatibility of the Irish Framework with the Bologna Framework was verified in 2006
- The National Skills Strategy (2007) sets targets for upskilling the labour force in relation to the achievement of Framework Levels of qualifications
- FÁS and Skillnets, major public funders of training schemes, have since 2007, increasingly tied their funding to Framework awards
- A number of Strategic Innovation Fund projects support access and progression and Framework implementation
- A process to include or align awards made by professional and international awarding bodies was agreed in 2006. Awards of two professional bodies, and those of Open University and Scottish Qualifications Authority and nine UK vocational and education training awards bodies were aligned in 2008
- Best practice guidelines were developed by the Qualifications Authority and the Public Appointments Service, in 2007, on the use of qualifications in public sector recruitment
- Qualifax, a national database for learners, since its transfer to the Qualifications Authority in 2008, has been developed as a key tool to communicate the Framework
- The Higher Education Authority's performance-based model of funding for higher education institutions, proposed in 2008, includes requirements to develop descriptors for units, programmes and awards in Framework terms
- Work to reference the Framework with the European Qualifications Framework started in 2008
- The Framework is used as a recognition tool for international qualifications by the Recognitions Service (of the Qualifications Authority), and is referenced in Diploma and Certificate Supplements.

As stated in relation to the key findings in previous chapters, these actions entailed significant work and continuous engagement by stakeholders. In many instances they are underpinned by a long-term investment of resources by the relevant stakeholders. As some of the actions are part of a long-term process, work is on-going (post-September 2008) to complete and follow them through.

5.3 Implementation Issues

Implementation issues are discussed under four themes:

- 5.3.1 The labour market
- 5.3.2 Public funding
- 5.3.3 Qualifications of professional, regulatory and international bodies
- 5.3.4. The international dimension

5.3.1 The labour market

There are high expectations of the Framework in relation to the labour market. These concern the recognition of qualifications, the responsiveness of the qualifications system to employment needs and the Framework's ability to offer clarity and comparisons between different qualifications. Stakeholders in the FETAC sector indicated that the Framework should be 'widely used in employment' both in the public and private sectors (FETAC, p. 29). FÁS (p.5) identifies the Framework's potential to support work-based learning. It notes that this has not been fully realised and that this could be advanced by developing and linking sectoral approaches to the Framework.

The potential of the Framework to assist in developing career pathways and the organisation of education and training provision in support of such pathways is demonstrated by the example of nurses and midwives working in clinical areas (Case study on nursing and midwifery, NCM, p.2). The articulation of learning outcomes in qualifications and programmes also opens up possibilities to recognise transferable skills such as 'learning to learn' which are particularly relevant to the labour market.

In relation to recruitment, Study inputs show that the Framework challenges traditional understandings and use of qualifications. In some cases, the inclusion of awards traditionally understood to be different at the same Framework Level challenges how these qualifications are used in recruitment.

A particular issue that arises is the recognition of a Framework award as a licence to practise. This employment-related recognition is generally a matter for the competent authority (i.e., the relevant regulator, professional body or government department). Different understandings and expectations of standards of achievement or competency can exist both in the context of education and in that of work. This has particular implications for assessment practice.

The on-going regulation of work involves the introduction of new qualifications as a requirement for practise. This raises questions about what qualifications are recognised for this and the value given to the experience and/or prior qualifications of those already practising in the regulated areas without the recognised qualifications. Here, there is a potential to use the Framework as a common point of reference for new qualifications and the evaluation of prior learning.

The Study inputs suggest that a mix of factors hinders the use of the Framework in the labour market, both in terms of recruitment and in terms of certifying learning achievements. There are time lags between understanding the Framework and reviewing its impact on recruitment procedures, delays in developing new awards and standards, and, for some, difficulty in accessing existing awards.

Inputs to the Study demonstrated that there is considerable interest in the recognition of prior learning in the labour market. There is an expectation that

RPL should be widely available but, as shown above in section 3.3.4, there is limited awareness of the processes involved and access to it.

In the employment sphere, as in many others, it is clear that time is needed to develop awareness and engagement beyond representative bodies to employers and others in the workplace. Evidence shows that there is a need to clarify for them what the Framework means for the labour market and for recruitment practice. The key concepts of award-types, Levels and the key differences between awards which are comparable as opposed to those which are equivalent need to be clearly communicated.

There is a need for sustained engagement with the relevant labour market bodies on the use of qualifications and on the development of standards and qualifications for the workplace. As the Nursing case study demonstrates, a wide range of interested parties and work practises (in professional regulation, recruitment, professional development, education and training provision) are impacted by new understandings and use of qualifications. The benefit of the Framework to the labour market hinges to a large extent on the responsiveness of providers and standard-setting bodies as well as the extent to which it is aligned with the interests and priorities of the main stakeholders in the labour market.

5.3.2 Public funding

A number of inputs to the Study noted inconsistencies between Framework objectives and State funding policies. This is part of a larger question of aligning public policy and practice with lifelong learning. Many elements of the State's institutional and student supports are based on a model of full-time participation and linear progression through education and training.

There are inconsistencies in relation to student supports for part-time and full-time learners in both further and higher education and training. A linear interpretation of progression blocks supports to learners who seek qualifications at the same Framework Level at which they have achieved qualifications.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the lack of State funding for university provision at Levels 6 and 7 can inhibit the development of pathways between all higher education and training qualifications. SIF project funding is available to institutions to develop access routes at these Levels whilst such funding is not, it is stated, available under the institutional recurrent grant model (IUA, p.15-16). The Framework provides a clear rationale for credit-based funding. The Study Team notes that there has been progress in this direction and suggests that further progress would contribute to wider access, transfer and progression.

Linking the public funding of in-company training to Framework qualifications can generate demand for Framework qualifications in preference to uncertified learning or non-Framework awards. Some inputs to the Study, however, suggest that total linkage to Framework is not desirable as:

- a) the obligation to undertake assessment is, for some adult learners, a disincentive to participation in education/training (ISME, p.1-3), and
- b) insistence on the achievement of Framework qualifications can inhibit innovation (an award must pre-exist funding) or prejudice non-Framework learning achievements.

A related funding issue is the general requirement of the Qualifications Act, 1999, that all publicly funded providers must, in effect, have their programmes validated by either FETAC or HETAC. The submission from City and Guilds, (p. 1-2) argues that this is superfluous and possibly anti-competitive where the awards of international bodies have already been aligned with the Framework.

In the long-term, complementarity between Framework objectives and public funding is important to effective implementation of the Framework. Anomalies are to be expected in the short- to medium-term as existing funding models based on different understandings remain in operation.

5.3.3 Qualifications of professional, regulatory and international bodies

A wide range of bodies, statutory and otherwise, make awards and/or recognise learning achievements for access to employment or professional practise. The issues above (section 5.3.1) in relation to the labour market are also of relevance to them. Policies and criteria for the inclusion in, or alignment with, the Framework of awards of such bodies (i.e. awards other than those already in the Framework) were determined in July 2006. At the time, there was little international practice to inform the approach to be taken. It took time to develop understandings, to ascertain how qualifications are used and to develop an appropriate approach to their inclusion. The policies also recognise the different statutory responsibilities of professional bodies to recognise national and international awards (in line with EU directives).

In 2008, the alignment of international awards was facilitated by agreement between the Qualifications Authority and UK vocational education and training awarding bodies. They agreed that quality assurance arrangements for the UK awards would 'travel' to Ireland. This allowed vocational education and training awards offered by them to learners in Ireland to be aligned with the Framework.

The recognition through the Framework of the awards of international bodies extends its reach and value for learners. It can assist the international mobility of award-holders. This is particularly important in Ireland where a number of mainly UK bodies have a well established place in offering vocational education and training awards.

The issues that arise include the difficulty of aligning awards that, in general, are substantially different from those of the Framework (HETAC, p.30); a need to clarify the meaning of alignment or inclusion of such awards by Level for award-holders, and to ensure that such awards are appropriately quality-assured.

5.3.4. The international dimension

Ireland's Framework and the underlying approach to developing it helped both to shape Europe-wide developments and to facilitate Ireland's participation in European initiatives. The overarching aim was to enhance the value of the national Framework by aligning it with international developments. This objective is broadly supported by the Study inputs, many of which emphasise the importance of the international recognition of the Framework and Irish qualifications.

On-going work within the context of the Lisbon agenda²⁷ and the Copenhagen process²⁸, in which the Qualifications Authority and FETAC are engaged, interacts with the implementation of the Framework. The key areas of work include co-operation on the mutual recognition of qualifications, the recognition of professional qualifications, lifelong learning, quality and credit in vocational education and training and the European Qualifications Frameworks for Lifelong Learning (EQF). Similarly, the Qualifications Authority, HETAC, IUA, IUQB and HEA are engaged in major areas of work in the Bologna process²⁹ including on quality, learning outcomes and the Bologna Framework. Individual institutions and providers are engaged in EU-funded collaborative projects within these areas. They engage in related work at the European level on quality assurance and standards in higher and in vocational education and training. Ireland was the first country to verify compatibility between a national qualifications framework and the Bologna framework (2006).

In addition to work on international qualifications frameworks at the European level, there is on-going engagement with UK counterparts and in OECD activities on qualifications systems. This enables the State to address barriers to mobility and to enhance the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad and vice versa. This work also facilitates the development of joint awards between awarding bodies (HETAC, p 15).

A number of the submissions to the Study signalled varying levels of awareness of the international dimension of the Framework. The Framework is used by the Recognitions Service of the Qualifications Authority to compare international qualifications (by Level and where possible award-type). It is important that work such as the liaison between the Recognitions Service and the Admissions Officers of higher education institutions continue so as to achieve consistency in the recognition of qualifications by institutions, providers, other awarding bodies and international counterpart agencies.

²⁷ Adopted in 2000, this aimed to make the European Union (EU) the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. In 2001 a programme of action and objectives of education and training was adopted in support of this, see http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/et_2010_en.html). The overall Lisbon strategy was revised and relaunched in 2005 to focus more clearly on jobs and growth..

²⁸ This concerns cooperation in vocational education and training and is integrated into the broad education and training policies above. See

http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/vocational_en.html

²⁹ See <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/>

Some submissions noted that further alignment of the Framework with UK qualifications is important to facilitate mobility. In the field of music, the RIAM (p.4) notes that European linkages in particular facilitate student mobility. They also help institutions recruit from a wider international student base.

The introduction of the Bologna Framework is occurring alongside the implementation of the national Framework. As noted in section 2.4, the alignment of the two Frameworks has provided a key stimulus in bringing together the NFQ and Bologna implementation issues. Higher education institutions are now beginning to see the benefits of these. However, the interplay between these Frameworks needs to be clarified.

In the future, it is likely that the development of the Bologna Framework and the European Qualifications Framework, each of which reflects specific understandings, will raise questions for Ireland's Framework about the inclusion of particular qualifications, the interpretation and use of learning outcomes and of Framework Levels. These concepts may be understood and applied differently in other national contexts or may evolve in different ways to those used in Ireland. In this connection, it is noted that Ireland's Framework was developed as a dynamic entity and has in-built flexibility to respond to such developments.

5.4 Summary

The Study Team identified four broad areas in which the visibility and currency of the Framework is of key importance to its success. These are: the labour market; public funding; the qualifications of regulatory, professional and international bodies, and international (especially European) developments. The Framework, with its focus on learning outcomes, has demonstrated that it has considerable potential to be used in recruitment, in developing career pathways, in planning work-based learning and training and in recognising transferable skills. However, its labour-market use is dependent upon the extent of implementation in the different sectors. As a consequence, this is hindered by such factors as: confusion about the equivalence of qualifications at the same Level, differing expectations for qualifications used as 'licences to practise' or in regulated occupations, delays in developing standards, difficulties in accessing awards and limited employer awareness and understanding of the Framework itself. There is scope to more closely align public funding with the Framework, and a need to do so, as this acts as a driver for implementation.

On-going work to enhance the recognition of the awards of regulatory, professional and international bodies, although complex, is important in meeting learner and labour market needs. The Study Team noted the significant influence and interplay between the Irish Framework and the European frameworks which have emerged since its launch. This, coupled with efforts to include awards of regulatory, professional and international bodies extends the reach and impact of the Framework. There is a need for

on-going engagement with such developments and for consideration of their impacts on the Irish Framework. These issues are addressed by recommendations 6-8 and 14-19 in the following Chapter.

Chapter 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

The National Framework of Qualifications is an ambitious and major undertaking, aiming as it does to encapsulate the full spectrum of education and training both life-long and life-wide. As a project in life-long learning, it embraces early life, compulsory and post-compulsory education at primary, second and tertiary levels. In terms of life-wide learning, it enables the recognition of learning gained outside of the formal structures of education and training provision to include the recognition of learning gained in multiple other sites. In this regard therefore, the Framework succeeds in providing an integrated scaffolding which allows not only for the placement of awards at different Levels but also for the accreditation of learning gained in diverse settings and for an integrated and progressive network of pathways within and between the different Levels on the Framework. The Framework can be seen as a structural response to the adoption of lifelong learning as the governing principle of education policy.³⁰ In doing so, the tensions between an education system which is selective and credentialist-based and the Framework's underpinning vision which sees all learning as a basis for progression needs to be creatively managed.

Considering the relatively short time since the launch of the Framework – 2003 - this Study shows that the Framework has established itself with a high level of prominence and visibility on the landscape of Irish education and training. While it has achieved a higher level of prominence in some sectors than in others, the Framework has secured a pivotal position in the overall structure of education and training provision in Ireland. This is a significant achievement involving the agreement of multiple players and stakeholders around the definition of a common currency to capture the totality of provision in the country.

As a result, the Framework is beginning to have an impact on the lives of learners. It is providing a language to underpin their choices in education and training. It is encouraging new approaches to learning, teaching and assessment. It is stimulating the development of provision in new areas, and opening up new opportunities for transfer and progression. And it is beginning to encourage new career routes. These developments are still at an early stage, and there is still a long road to travel.

It is clear from the Study that the establishment of the Framework was largely centrally driven. This is true at national level where its implementation was underpinned by legislation. It is also true at individual institutional level where the awarding bodies played a key role in engaging with the administrative

³⁰ Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education, p.30
http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/fe_adulted_wp.pdf

centres of individual education and training institutions in introducing the Framework at the point of delivery.

The central direction which has underpinned the introduction of the Framework has succeeded in ensuring that it is widely recognised, certainly at the provider level, in gaining increasing recognition from learners and to a lesser extent, employers. This recognition is deeper than mere visibility. It is more profoundly an acknowledgement of the currency value of awards within and between the different Levels on the Framework. It underpins the critical requirement of trust in the currency. From the point of view of different providers, trust in the Framework is essential to the guarantee of comparability between awards and of the parity of esteem in the awards provided by different bodies.

The requirement to establish the Framework on the basis of a centrally driven agenda, while critical to its success, has also come at some cost. The Study indicates that there is some cultural lag in the insinuation of the Framework into the daily processes of teaching and learning. This is evident in a number of ways. The focus on learning outcomes for instance, which is at the very core of the Framework's philosophical positioning, appears to have had as yet a limited impact on learning design and pedagogies. There continues to be a strong focus on inputs rather than outcomes in general provision. Equally, given the wider societal investment in the Leaving Certificate and the associated Points System, schools are finding it difficult to introduce complementary qualifications and routeways into higher education. Whilst recognising that there is important development work underway in this regard, the situation nonetheless creates a risk that the Framework will become associated with 'non-mainstream' qualifications and provision and that it may not come to be seen as a system-wide structure for all qualifications. Levels 1 to 3 of the Framework generally remain underutilised. With regard to higher education, Levels 6 to 10, HETAC institutions have more actively embraced the Framework than others but there is evidence that the universities are now also doing so. In both cases, however, it seems that the Framework has been more actively embraced by the administrative centres, such as the Registrars' offices than by the academic staff. Furthermore, considerable work remains to be done on the issue of the codification of access entitlements into higher education.

The communication of the Framework remains critical to its visibility and currency within and outside education and training. This poses a challenge to simplicity and clarity on the one hand and, on the other, the need for deeper understanding which necessitates engagement at a technical level.

The Study, in ways that are similar to the experience of other countries, highlights a tension between the political and pragmatic compromises necessary to achieve buy-in and sustained commitment to implementing the Framework. This tension may have implications for consistent and even interpretation and use of the Framework across all sectors (and sub-sectors). These tensions can be resolved over time as deeper implementation unfolds and creates a new basis for re-visiting them.

The discussion under the themes above shows that sustained leadership and oversight of the implementation process is required. Flexibility and partnership should remain the guiding principles for managing the Framework. These are needed to take account of the different regulatory structures and autonomy of awarding bodies in education and training.

Notwithstanding its very significant achievements, the Framework must by its nature remain a work in progress. All currencies regardless of their nature must manage a tension between stability and development. They must, on the one hand, maintain sufficient stability so as to give a guarantee of continuity and certitude while at the same time, achieve sufficient dynamism as to reflect ongoing change in the content and relationships of different awards. This means that the management of the Framework must always be active and prudent. The leadership of implementation and on-going monitoring must be a priority for the over-arching entity proposed in the amalgamation of the Qualifications Authority, HETAC and FETAC.

In reflecting on the themes which emerged in Ireland, the Study Team found common features in the experience of other countries such as Scotland and New Zealand in developing and implementing a National Qualifications Framework. These features included:

- the need for time, in which to develop familiarity and understanding, promote cultural change and establish the mutual trust essential for an effective Framework;
- the importance of stakeholder involvement and partnership, and acceptance that this will require pragmatic compromises at least in the short term;
- an iterative process of development, in which the existing education and training system and the Framework are progressively aligned with each other;
- the need for a Framework to be 'loose' enough to accommodate different types of learning, and to accommodate differences across sectors of education and training (which may be regulated by 'tighter' sub-frameworks);
- the need for a balance between implementation within sectors and the development of coherent system-wide arrangements, and for the emphasis to shift between these two over time;
- recognition that a qualifications framework may be an enabler of change more than a driver of change, and that its effectiveness will depend on its alignment with national policy, institutional priorities and other contextual pressures.

The Study Team saw all of these features in the development of the National Framework of Qualifications in Ireland, in the progress made to date, and in the challenges still faced.

6.2 Recommendations concerning the further implementation of the Framework and access, transfer and progression

It is acknowledged that the Qualifications Authority, as the guardian of the Framework, must take the lead in guiding and maintaining it. It is equally important that awarding bodies and providers fully engage in this process. The Study underlines the fact that their ownership of the Framework is critical to its success. Ownership is predicated on a shared understanding of the Framework and a willingness to engage with and communicate it. Recognising the complexity of the Framework, the Study Team acknowledges that this is a considerable challenge for all stakeholders.

In making these recommendations, the Team is also mindful of the developmental nature of the Framework, the capacity of the Qualifications Authority and others to oversee implementation and the broader backdrop of competing priorities and pressures in the education and training system. It also recognises that the amalgamation of the Qualifications Authority, FETAC and HETAC and the external quality review function of the universities will create a new context.³¹ It suggests that this opportunity be taken to increase Framework-wide integration in such areas as award titles, quality assurance, credit and RPL, while maintaining the momentum of development and implementation within sectors.

The Study Team recognises that five years is a short time since the introduction of the Framework and congratulates those involved in achieving progress to date. These recommendations offer strategic direction for the next stage. As the Study covered the period 2003-2008, the Study Team recognises that the relevant stakeholders may already have initiated projects in some of the areas covered by the recommendations. Where this is the case, the recommendations are intended to reinforce these actions.

Based on the foregoing, and in line with the terms of reference for the Study, the Study Team makes the following recommendations to the Qualifications Authority. As appropriate, awarding bodies, institutions, providers and agencies in education and training are also addressed in individual recommendations.

- 1. The overview and implementation of the Framework should be a top priority for the incoming body following on from the amalgamation of the Qualifications Authority, FETAC and HETAC.*

³¹ At the time of completing this report, it was envisaged that, following legislative change, the newly amalgamated body will be established in Winter 2010/Spring 2011. The Department of Education and Science consultation paper on amalgamation was not available prior to completion of this Study.

2. *Given the dynamic nature of the Framework, changes in qualifications and in the wider education and training context, the Qualifications Authority should put in place a process to periodically identify and re-visit issues that may affect the integrity of the Framework or its effective operation.*
3. *In the context of the process outlined in Recommendation 2, the Qualifications Authority should re-visit in consultation with the relevant stakeholders the following three issues as a matter of priority. They concern progression and the effective comparability of awards at Levels 4-6:*
 - a) *the inclusion of all craft awards at one Level*
 - b) *the co-location of further and higher education and training awards at Level 6 and the confusion which is deemed to arise therefrom*
 - c) *the challenges posed to the Framework by the inclusion of the Leaving Certificate, which is simultaneously a set of programmes and an award with a wide range of achievements, across two Levels.*
4. *The universities and their affiliated institutions, with the support of the Qualifications Authority, should advance Framework implementation in the university sector. They should, in particular, complete the inclusion of the remaining awards in the Framework and deepen the implementation of the learning-outcomes approach. Existing mechanisms used to address inconsistencies arising in the process of including similar awards in the Framework should be strengthened.*
5. *The Qualifications Authority together with awarding bodies, institutions and agencies responsible for quality assurance should put in place a single set of quality assurance principles for Framework qualifications and the programmes that lead to them. The critical importance of quality assurance to the integrity of the Framework must remain at the centre of the Qualifications Authority's work. It is recognised that specific models and procedures for applying these principles may be required in different sectors.*
6. *In relation to awards in further education and training at Levels 1-6, FETAC should advance the use of Framework standards and, as a matter of urgency, introduce new awards to meet learner and labour market needs and to support progression throughout the Framework.*
7. *Gaps in the understanding of the Framework should be addressed by the Qualifications Authority, awarding bodies and providers. A communications approach to the Framework should*
 - *focus on users and stakeholders at the point where they have a practical need to engage with the Framework.*

- *be in a language that is clear and simple*
 - *clarify the distinctions between major and minor awards*
 - *address inconsistencies in titling conventions within and across further and higher education and training*
 - *ensure that awards that are in the Framework are clearly communicated to learners in terms of their character as qualifications in the Framework (with reference to award-type, Level, title, credit or volume, entry routes and progression opportunities).*
8. *The Qualifications Authority should recognise and make use of the potential which the guidance/counselling community brings not only to communicating the Framework but also to brokering the relationship between the Framework and learners and other users in the labour market and in education and training.*
9. *The Qualifications Authority, awarding bodies and providers should work to improve transparency and consistency in the interpretation and application of prior learning and in the communication of pathways other than the Leaving Certificate into higher education and training.*
10. *Inconsistencies in the operation and application of RPL that present barriers to progression should be addressed. Action should be taken by the Qualifications Authority and awarding bodies to:*
- *encourage institutions and providers in further and higher education and training to clarify the contexts and circumstances in which RPL is available*
 - *promote awareness and knowledge of institutional and sectoral arrangements for RPL amongst users*
 - *explore the potential to develop cross-sectoral and cross-institutional brokerage services for RPL for learners*
 - *develop and implement transparent sector-wide approaches to RPL.*
11. *The Qualifications Authority and relevant bodies should address a range of issues associated with the operation of credit, including:*
- *the need to develop common arrangements to ensure that different credit systems are compatible with each other*
 - *the need for consistency in the association of credit volume with titles of awards*
 - *the need to fully implement a credit system for further education and training awards and to ensure that it is*

compatible with the emerging European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET).

12. *The Framework underpins a deep, long-term cultural shift in teaching and learning from an inputs-based approach to an outcomes-based one. The Qualifications Authority, awarding bodies, institutions and providers should continuously support and monitor this process.*

The alignment of assessment processes with teaching and learning will similarly take time and requires continued attention and support by the relevant bodies.

13. *As the concepts and use of learning outcomes are contested and subject to differing interpretations, the Qualifications Authority should facilitate on-going debate on them. This debate should be cognisant of the different interpretations and applications of learning outcomes internationally. All constructive contributions to this debate should be welcomed.*
14. *It is essential for the visibility and currency of the Framework that there continues to be active and continuous engagement with the key stakeholders in the labour market to communicate its use, facilitate access to awards and develop standards for the workplace. The Qualifications Authority and the relevant bodies should also continue to facilitate the greater use of the Framework in recruitment practices, particularly in the public sector, so as to ensure that Framework awards are fully recognised.*
15. *The role of the Framework in the recognition of international qualifications in Ireland and in the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad should remain a key element of the work of the Qualifications Authority. As with all other awards, the recognition of international qualifications must continue to be underpinned by rigorous quality assurance.*
16. *The Qualifications Authority should continue work with the relevant government departments and agencies to align public funding with the Framework. In higher education and training, this can best be done by introducing credit as a basis for institutional and learner supports. Dedicated funding of sectoral and cross-sectoral initiatives to support access, transfer and progression should also continue to be in place.*
17. *The requirement that publicly funded bodies must in general have programmes leading to qualifications validated by FETAC or HETAC should be reconsidered by the relevant bodies in the revision of the Qualifications (1999) Act underway in the context of amalgamation.*
18. *It is essential that there continues to be sustained engagement by the Qualifications Authority and key stakeholders in European developments relating to Qualifications Frameworks.*

19. *Existing gaps in data, both qualitative and quantitative, on the availability and use of pathways and of their outcomes for learners, and on the implementation of the Framework by institutions and providers should be addressed. In particular, so as to establish the value of the Framework from a learner perspective, it is recommended that the Qualifications Authority embark on a longitudinal study of a cohort of learners as they navigate their way through the Framework. The Qualifications Authority, awarding bodies, universities, the Higher Education Authority and Department of Education and Science should work together to address these gaps.*

Appendix I

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Appendix II

Terms of Reference for a Study of the implementation and impact of the Framework

28 November 2007

The study will:

- assess the extent to which the National Framework of Qualifications is being implemented
- support deeper implementation of the Framework and policies on access, transfer and progression
- identify progress in implementation
- identify gaps and drivers/obstacles in respect of implementation
- assess the initial impact of the Framework

The study will focus primarily on the work of the Authority, awarding bodies and providers of education and training.

The study will comprise:

- Papers on the state of development of the Framework, policies on access, transfer and progression, and assessment of impact by the Authority
- reports from key stakeholder bodies responsible for implementing the Framework in the schooling, HETAC, FETAC and university sectors
- Case studies of implementation
- Submissions from the public
- Evaluation of inputs by study team of national and international experts
- Synthesis report and recommendations by study team
- Consideration of report and follow-up action by Authority

The study will commence in March 2008 and be completed by June 2009.

Introduction

The National Framework of Qualifications was formally launched in October 2003, following earlier agreement on its key structures, policies and criteria. It is considered timely to take stock in 2008 of the extent to which it and the related policies on access, transfer and progression have been implemented and their initial impact. The study also addressed the Authority's statutory requirement (Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999) to review the operation of the Framework; and, in consultation with the Higher Education Authority, to review the implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression by universities.

The benefits of such a study are that it can document progress in implementation, support further implementation, extend awareness and ownership of the Framework and provide feedback on how well the Framework is working. The study is expected to help identify actions that can be taken to deepen implementation of the Framework and the related policies on access, transfer and progression. Studies of implementation and of the impact of qualifications frameworks in other jurisdictions have had such benefits. They have informed the approach proposed for this study.

The scope and objectives of the study reflect the relatively short period of time since the Framework has been established, the fact that some aspects of it continue to be developed and that the scope of implementation differs within each sector of education and training. The overall aim is that the study will deepen implementation and the overall approach and timeframe aims to achieve this. The main focus is on the work of the Authority, the awarding bodies and providers of education and training at strategic and operational levels. The study is expected to show different approaches, issues and practices in schooling and in further and higher education and training. It is anticipated that this can give rise to shared practice and learning and inform the next phase of implementation. The study will also assess the initial impact of the Framework, while recognising that overall impact on changing the culture of learning will take some years to achieve. Some impacts can be anticipated to occur more quickly, e.g., the use of the Framework in other areas of education and training policy, in recruitment and in guidance provision. There may also be some unexpected impacts.

The timing and approach to the study takes account of related performance reviews of the awarding bodies, HETAC (completed in 2006) and FETAC (underway in 2007), and the quality review of the Authority (underway in 2007). These reviews address in part the activities of the three bodies in relation to the Framework and access, transfer and progression.

The study does not entail a fundamental review of the original objectives and structure of the Framework. This is considered to be unnecessary and premature. Indicators of the need for this could be major changes in the policy environment or deep contestation of Framework structures or objectives - factors that have prompted fundamental reviews of frameworks in other jurisdictions. These are not evident here. A fundamental review is also deemed to be potentially distracting: it could (unnecessarily) re-open old debates and delay implementation, particularly where this is difficult. It is expected that the study will nonetheless allow for issues relating to the nature of the framework to be raised, should they impact on implementation. In this connection, it is noted that the Authority plans to review the differentiation between further and higher education and training (in September 2006, the Authority decided to postpone this review until implementation of the Framework at level 6 is more advanced and the Authority and Framework reviews have been implemented). The scope of the study does not include the recognition of international awards.

1. Purpose of study

The purpose is to

1. Assess the extent to which the Framework is implemented and how well it is working
2. Support deeper implementation of the Framework and policies on access, transfer and progression
3. Identify progress in implementation
4. Identify gaps in implementation and drivers/obstacles in respect of its operation and implementation
5. Assess the initial impact of the Framework

It is intended that the Authority and key stakeholders will consider the outcomes of the study and decide actions to be taken to reinforce progress made and to deepen implementation of the Framework and access, transfer and progression in the different sectors.

2. Scope of Study

The scope of the study concerns the implementation and operation of the Framework and the Authority's policies on access, transfer and progression. The point of departure for the study is the original aims and objectives of the Framework. These have been set out in determinations of the Authority. It has defined the national Framework of Qualifications to be

“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.”

The study will address:

1. awareness and knowledge of the Framework amongst key stakeholders and at different levels within them
2. extent of implementation and operation of the Framework by, in particular, the Authority, awarding bodies, providers of education and training and professional bodies
3. Initial impact of the Framework and policies on access, transfer and progression on
 - a) the key organisations involved in implementation (above) in terms of policies and practice. Areas to be considered include the design of qualification systems, standard-setting, use of learning outcomes, assessment, credit, access, progression, and information provision. This will involve seeking feedback from persons engaged in these areas of activity.
 - b) relevant government agencies and departments
 - c) learners, social partners and society in general
4. Identification of factors that affect implementation (drivers and obstacles) in key stakeholder bodies.

5. Recommendations for actions to be taken by the key stakeholders to support implementation

3. Organisation of the Study

Three strands are proposed:

- A. Implementation and operation of the Framework
- B. Implementation and operation of policies on access, transfer and progression
- C. Impact of the Framework and policies on access, transfer and progression

The values and considerations that underpinned the development of the Framework by the Authority inform the approach to the study (see Annex 1).

3. A Implementation and operation of the Framework

The following key elements will be examined: levels, award-type descriptors (major, minor, special purpose and supplemental), named awards, learning outcomes, the design of award systems and the use of Framework in standard setting, programme development and assessment. The study will examine the placement of existing and former awards and inclusion/alignment of awards made by professional, private and other international bodies in the Framework. It will also examine the use of titles agreed for award-types in the Framework.

3. B Implementation and operation of policies on access, transfer and progression

This stand concerns the achievement of the Authority's vision for access, transfer and progression:

'the learner should be able to enter and successfully participate in a programme, or series of programmes leading to an award, or series of awards, in pursuit of their learning objectives. The National Framework of Qualifications and associated programme provision should be structured to facilitate learner entry, and to promote transfer and progression, so that learners are encouraged to participate in the learning process to enable them to realise their ambitions to the full extent of their abilities' (2003).

The distinct roles and activities of the Authority, awarding bodies, providers of education and training and universities will be considered. This strand of the study incorporates the statutory review by the Authority, in consultation with the Higher Education Authority, of the implementation by the universities of the Authority's procedures for access, transfer and progression (Section 8f, Qualifications Act).

The study will address the four main areas of the Authority's policies:

Entry arrangements to programmes – fairness, transparency and consistency in entry arrangements, increased entry routes, focus of access arrangements on the

identification of factors for the successful completion of programme, particular actions to facilitate adult learners

Transfer and progression routes – development of new routes, identification of gaps and obstacles and actions to overcome these, programme adaptations to facilitate transfer and progression, identification and specification of transfer and progression routes (and requirements)

Credit – development of a national approach to credit in higher education and implementation of this approach, development of approach to credit in further education and training, credit systems and modular approaches to programmes, development of policies and arrangements for the recognition of prior learning

Information provision – availability of information to learners on access, transfer and progression to programmes and awards. This includes the development of a wider base for information for all learners, information protocols for providers, provision of information on key elements of programmes and their relationship to the Framework, wide accessibility of information.

3. C Impact of the Framework and policies on access, transfer and progression

The vision for the Framework is that of promoting lifelong learning, defined by the European Commission as: “*all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective*”. The impact of the Framework can be examined in terms of the achievement of this vision. This will be assessed in terms of a) stakeholder and public awareness of the Framework; b) impact of the Framework on key user groups - learners, employers, career/education guidance providers; key government departments and agencies and professional bodies.

- broad awareness of the Framework amongst the public, learners, employers and main national bodies/networks involved in guidance and recruitment
- impact on learners – increased access to learning opportunities and recognition of prior learning
- impact on employers – awareness and use of Framework in e.g. recruitment, identification of training/upskilling needs/opportunities
- use of Framework in broader education and training policy areas e.g. accreditation of providers, referencing of the Framework, recognition of international qualifications, labour market strategies, enterprise policy, funding of education and training.
- international use and impact of the Framework (in the international recognition of qualifications; development of linkages with international Frameworks and Framework development processes e.g. with Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales; European qualifications Frameworks, OECD initiatives and others)
- use of the Framework in particular employment sectors and by professional bodies e.g. nursing, engineering, education, childcare

4. Inputs into the Study

The following inputs will be used as a basis for assessing implementation and impact:

- Introductory paper on the state of development of the Framework (milestones, key features and policies) and policies on access, transfer and progression.

- Assessment of impact. This will also include surveys of awareness of the Framework amongst learners and users.
- Reports from key stakeholder bodies responsible for implementing the Framework in each of the main sectors
- Submissions from interested parties on reports on progress in implementation, operation and impact.
- Case studies of implementation/impact. These will drill further down into levels of awareness, and how the Framework is working and being implemented in particular fields or sectors. Possible case studies include those characterised by a continuum of education and training over different Framework levels or across a range of providers e.g. engineering, hospitality; areas in which professional bodies are engaged; or the recognition of prior learning. They could include a mix of cases where the Framework is working well, where implementation is relatively advanced and cases where relatively little progress has been made. The focus of case studies will be decided in consultation with the main stakeholders.
- Synthesis report and recommendations by study team

The Authority will prepare the first two papers on development and impact.

5. Methodology

The study will involve a number of stages and reports. Reports will be prepared for each of the four main education and training sectors. They will be prepared by the bodies with main responsibility/oversight for implementation in each sector and follow consultation within the sector: universities and associated colleges; HETAC; FETAC; the National Council for Curriculum Assessment and the State Examinations Commission (schooling). They will each develop their own processes to engage key bodies in their sector. A common template for sectoral reports, to allow for comparison and at the same time reflect the characteristics of each sector, will be used. A template will also be developed for the case studies. The Authority will consider survey needs for the study with the representative bodies for each sector. Where available, statistical information on implementation and impact is expected to be presented in the reports.

Stage 1

Papers and reports by the Authority and the main implementing bodies in each of four sectors. The latter will be requested to complete reports on the basis of a common template prepared by the Authority executive and agreed with the Chair of Study Team (see Annex 2 for example). They will each develop processes to engage with representatives from within the sectors. Case studies of implementation involving cross-section of bodies will be carried out using an appropriate template (an example is given in Annex 2). The focus of case studies will be decided in early 2007.

Stage 2

Papers and reports will be made publicly available on the Authority website. Submissions will be invited from interested parties (by open invitation on the Authority website) in response to these papers/reports.

Stage 3

A study team will review the papers, reports, case studies and submissions. It will meet with implementing bodies and others (as it sees fit) to clarify and tease out the main issues.

Stage 4

The study team prepares a synthesis report, to include conclusions and recommendations, concerning the implementation, operation and impact of the Framework and policies on access, transfer and progression. The team may also address issues concerning any future review of the Framework or policies on access, transfer and progression.

The study team will comprise of 4-5 persons with expertise of the Irish and international situation concerning qualifications Frameworks, higher and further education and training and the broader policy contexts for Frameworks and questions of access, transfer and progression.

Stage 5

The Authority will consider the synthesis report and outcomes of the study and follow-up actions.

6. Timeframe

The following timeframe takes account of timetables for the quality reviews of the Authority and of the Further Education and Training Awards Council. The study will not overlap with the main consultative phases of these reviews in order to avoid any potential confusion.

June- October 2007	Consultation with key stakeholders on draft terms of reference
November 2007	Agreement by Authority to terms of reference
January 2008	Appointment of Study Team by Authority
February 2008	Finalisation of template for reports and case studies by Chair of Study Team
March –September 2008	Preparatory paper by Authority executive, completion of implementation reports by main stakeholders and of case studies
September - Nov. 2008	Publication of reports and papers on Authority website and submissions from interested parties (public)
Dec 2008- Feb 09	Review of inputs by Study Team and interviews as appropriate
April 2009	Completion of synthesis report and recommendations by Study Team.
May/June 2009	Consideration of synthesis report and follow-up action by Authority

Terms of reference – Annex 1

Considerations in assessing implementation:

In its Discussion Document, *Towards a National Framework of Qualification: a Discussion Document* (2001) and its *Policies and criteria for the establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications* (2003), the Authority set out a number of values and considerations that should inform the process. These are also relevant to implementation and provide points of enquiry and assessment.

The values are as follows:

- equality: cater for all learners particularly those who have not benefited in the past (specific groups, language, geography, recognising non-formal/informal learning)
- comprehensiveness – inclusiveness of the Framework
- coherence – clarity enhances understanding and relative meanings of awards
- flexibility - to accommodating change
- transparency and simplicity – clarity of Framework and its elements e.g. nature and purpose of Framework and awards, relationships between awards, entry and exit points (and connections), ease of use e.g. titles
- Quality – overarching element of development and maintenance of Framework
- Relevance – to all users.

The considerations for Framework development are:

Standard setting

- international benchmarking (use of key reference points for standards e.g. in languages and engineering)
- stability
- the development of units of learning and credit systems
- titles of award-types and named awards (consistency, clarity) and usage
- relevance of awards for society as a whole
- assessment methodologies – diversity to be accommodated

Learners acquiring awards

- equal recognition/value to be given to awards made on the basis of successful completion of programmes and those made directly to learners
- Framework to allow for possibility that the achievement of grades can lead to the same qualification being at different levels in the Framework
- Framework to allow for multiple entry points, modular systems
- all awards to allow for some progression and transfer

Perception and reception of awards

- take account of existing award systems in designing the Framework
- international comparability – take account of international developments
- permanence of awards (issues of the currency of knowledge, skill or competence in a particular award for practice/profession are not matters for the Framework)

Terms of reference - Annex 2

Sample templates for reports and case studies

It is envisaged that reports on implementation would be prepared for each of the four main education and training sectors. These would be prepared by the bodies with main responsibility/oversight for implementation in each sector and follow consultation within the sector: universities and associated colleges; HETAC; FETAC; the National Council for Curriculum Assessment and the State Examinations Commission (schooling). It is intended that these would have a substantial common element, to allow for comparison, and also reflect the unique characteristics of each sectors' role and engagement with the Framework and access, transfer and progression policies. The reports are expected to take account of implementation at central/co-ordinating level and at provider level. Discussion of how best to capture this will be taken up with the appropriate bodies. An example of a template for completion of the reports is given below. The detailed questions are intended to give additional direction and clarity about each theme.

Example of template for report of implementation in education and training sector

1. Briefly outline the key areas of work in the sector in relation to the National Framework of Qualifications?
2. What have been the main achievements to-date in the sector in respect of the Framework?

Knowledge and understanding of the Framework

3. In your view, what is the extent of knowledge and understanding of the Framework in the sector?
4. How is the Framework perceived in the sector?
5. What expectations do persons working in the sector have of the Framework?

Implementation and operation of the Framework

6. What are the overall priorities concerning the Framework within the sector?
7. What approach(es) are being taken to implement the Framework in the sector?
8. What are the main actions taken in the sector?
9. What is the extent of implementation of the Framework in the sector in respect of:
 - Development of award system and awards (major, minor, supplemental, special purpose)
 - Different levels of the Framework
 - Placement of former awards
 - Learning outcomes and standard-setting
 - Titles of awards
 - Other
10. What are the major gaps/issues to be addressed in implementing the Framework in the sector?

11. What are the major successes in respect of implementing the Framework in the sector?

Influencing Factors

12. What factors most assist in the implementing of the Framework in the sector? (Why)
13. What factors most hinder the implementation of the Framework in the sector? (Why)
14. Are there any award-types or levels in the Framework where implementation raises particular difficulties for the sector? If so, elaborate on these.
15. Are there any fields of learning where implementation in the sector is particularly difficult? If so, elaborate on these.
16. Are there any other particular difficulties in respect of implementation in the sector?

Implementation structures for the Framework

17. In your view, have bodies/departments/staff with a key role in implementation in the sector received or had access to appropriate information regarding the Framework? If not, what are the gaps?
18. How useful is the operation of the Framework to the sector as a whole?
19. In your view, do the existing mechanisms for interaction between the sector and the Framework ensure its effective implementation? If not, what needs to be addressed?

Knowledge and understanding of Authority's policies on access, transfer and progression

20. What, in your view, is the extent of knowledge and understanding in the sector of the Authority's policies on access, transfer and progression?
21. To what extent are the roles and responsibilities for implementation of the various bodies in the sector known and understood?
22. To what extent are these policies promoted in the sector as part of Framework implementation?
23. How are these policies perceived in the sector?
24. What expectations to persons working in the sector have of these policies?

Implementation of Authority's policies on access, transfer and progression

25. what are the overall priorities concerning access, transfer and progression in the sector?
26. What approaches are being taken to implementation in the sector?
27. What are the main actions taken in the sector?
28. What is the extent of implementation in the sector in respect of:
 - Access and entry arrangements
 - Transfer arrangements
 - Progression
 - Credit accumulation and transfer
 - Recognition of Prior Learning

- Information provision to learners/applicants
29. What are the major gaps/issues to be addressed in implementation in the sector?
 30. What are the major areas of success in the sector?
 31. What factors most assist in implementation in the sector?
 32. What factors most hinder implementation in the sector?
 33. Are there any levels of the Framework or fields of learning in which implementation in the sector raises particular difficulties? If so, please elaborate in them.
 34. Are there any other difficulties in respect of implementation in the sector?

Recognition of International Awards

35. To what extent has the recognition of international awards for access to or for exemptions from parts of programmes in the sector been improved by the Framework?

Impact of the Framework and related policies on access, transfer and progression

36. What, in your view, has been the overall impact on the sector in respect of:
 - Quality assurance
 - Learning outcomes and standards
 - Assessment
 - Learners/ learning experience
 - Partners in education and training (employers, trade unions, community, voluntary, representative bodies, professional bodies)
 - Resources/funding
 - Staff
 - International standing of Ireland's education and training

Conclusion/summary

37. Overall, how important would you say the Framework and related policies on access, transfer and progression is to the sector?
38. Are there any other issues you would like to raise?

Terms of reference - Annex 3

Sample Template for Case Study Questionnaires

1. Are you aware of any particular developments in the subject area of XX with respect to the National Framework of Qualifications?

Knowledge and Understanding

2. In your view, what is the extent of the knowledge and understanding of the Framework within your organisation with respect to the subject area of XX?

3. How is the Framework perceived in your organisation with respect to the subject area of XXX?

4. What expectations do you/your organisation have in relation to the Framework with respect to the subject area of XXX?

Impact of the Framework

5. In your view, to what extent has the Framework impacted on the following:

- Design of programmes
- Availability of programmes
- Entry routes to programmes
- Transfer
- Progression
- Credit
- Recognition of prior learning
- Assessment
- Information available to learners/potential learners
- Learners/ learning experience
- Programme validation
- Learning outcomes and standards
- Resources
- Staff development
- Other

Influencing Factors

6. What factors assist your organisation in its response to the Framework with respect to the subject area of XX?

7. What factors hinder your organisation in its response to the Framework with respect to the subject area of XX?

Operation of the Framework

8. In your view has your organisation received or had access to appropriate information/guidance regarding the Framework in respect of the subject area of XX?

9. How useful is the operation of the Framework to your organisation with respect to the subject area of XX?

Conclusion/summary

10. Overall how important would you say the Framework is to the operation of your organisation with respect to the subject area of XX?

11. Are there any other issues you would like to raise?

Appendix III

List of Inputs made to the Study

The list below includes papers and case studies which were prepared in line with the terms of reference for the Study and the submissions made publicly available to the Study Team as part of the Consultation Process. A Consultative Forum, held on 18th November 2008, was also part of this process.

Background Paper, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (Qualifications Authority)

Sector Report, Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)

Sector Report, Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC)

Universities Report, Irish Universities Association (IUA)

Schools Report, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

Case study on Guidance/Counselling

Case study on Nursing and Midwifery

Submissions which were made publicly available:

- The Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT)
- Higher Education Authority National Access Office ((HEA Access Office)
- Crosscare Drug and Alcohol Programme
- Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI)
- Engineers Ireland
- Institute of Technology, Sligo (IT Sligo)
- Athlone Institute of Technology (Athlone IoT)
- Chambers Ireland
- Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association (ISME)
- National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)
- National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education
- Skillnets
- Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM)
- Further Education Support Service
- Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT)
- FÁS
- National Council for the Professional Development of Nursing and Midwifery (NCNM)
- Public Appointments Service (PAS)
- FETAC information note and background on RPL

These inputs are available at: http://www.nqai.ie/framework_study.html

Appendix IV

Aims of the Framework (extracts from the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999)

General Objects:

1. establish and develop standards of knowledge, skill or competence;
2. promote the quality of further education and training and higher education and training;
3. provide a system for coordinating and comparing education and training awards
4. promote and maintain procedures for transfer and progression
5. facilitate lifelong learning through the promotion of access and opportunities for all learners, including learners with special educational and training needs;
6. promote the recognition of knowledge, skill or competence acquired through research, adult and continuing education and training and employment
7. contribute to the realisation of national education and training policies and objectives, and, in particular, to meeting the education and training requirements of industry, including agriculture, business, tourism, trade, the professions and the public service
8. promote the recognition outside the State of awards made by bodies in the State and recognition in the State of awards made by bodies outside the State
9. having regard to the traditions of providers of education and training, to promote diversity in education and training between further education and training and higher cooperation and within each of these; and
10. contribute to the realisation of national policy and objectives in relation to the extension of bi-lingualism in Irish society and. In particular, the achievement of a greater use of the Irish language and to contribute to the promotion of the distinctive cultures of Ireland.

Objects of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland:

- a) to establish and maintain a framework, being a framework for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State, based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners
- b) to establish and promote the maintenance and improvement of the standards of further education and training and higher education and training awards of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) the Dublin Institute of Technology and the universities established under section 9 of the Act of 1997; and to promote access, transfer and progression.