

National Framework
of Qualifications

POLICY IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF THE IRISH NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS

DECEMBER 2017

Policy Impact Assessment of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications

Submitted to

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List of Abbreviations

CAO	Central Applications Office
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
FE	Further Education
FET	Further Education and Training
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HELS	Higher Education Links Scheme
HET	Higher Education and Training
NES	National Employer Survey
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
QA	Quality Assurance
PEL	Protection of Enrolled Learners
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland

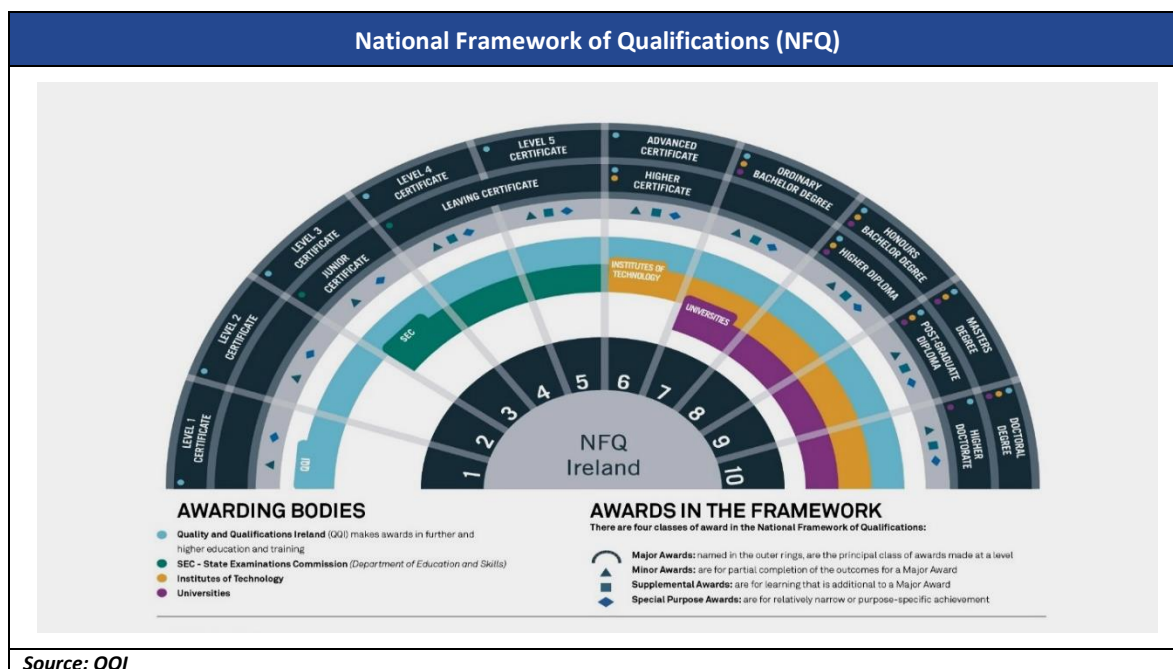
Executive Summary

Introduction, Background and Scope of Review

This report is submitted to Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) by Indecon International Economic Consultants. The report concerns a policy impact assessment of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

The NFQ was launched in 2003, and established a ten-level system of knowledge, skill and competence for the recognition of all types of learning. This ranges from Level 1 Certificates which recognise basic learning, to Level 10 for Doctoral Degrees and Higher Doctorates. The NFQ provides an objective basis to specify the breadth and depth of knowledge required to achieve awards at each level, as well as mapping out the relationships between the different levels.

The image below provides an outline of the NFQ, showing the relationships between different levels and different qualifications. Since the establishment of QQI in 2012, the agency has been responsible for maintaining the NFQ. QQI also acts as a statutory awarding body making awards included in the NFQ. QQI sets standards for awards and validates programmes of education and training developed by accredited providers. QQI is also responsible for conducting external quality assurance reviews of providers and awarding bodies offering education and training qualifications included in the NFQ.

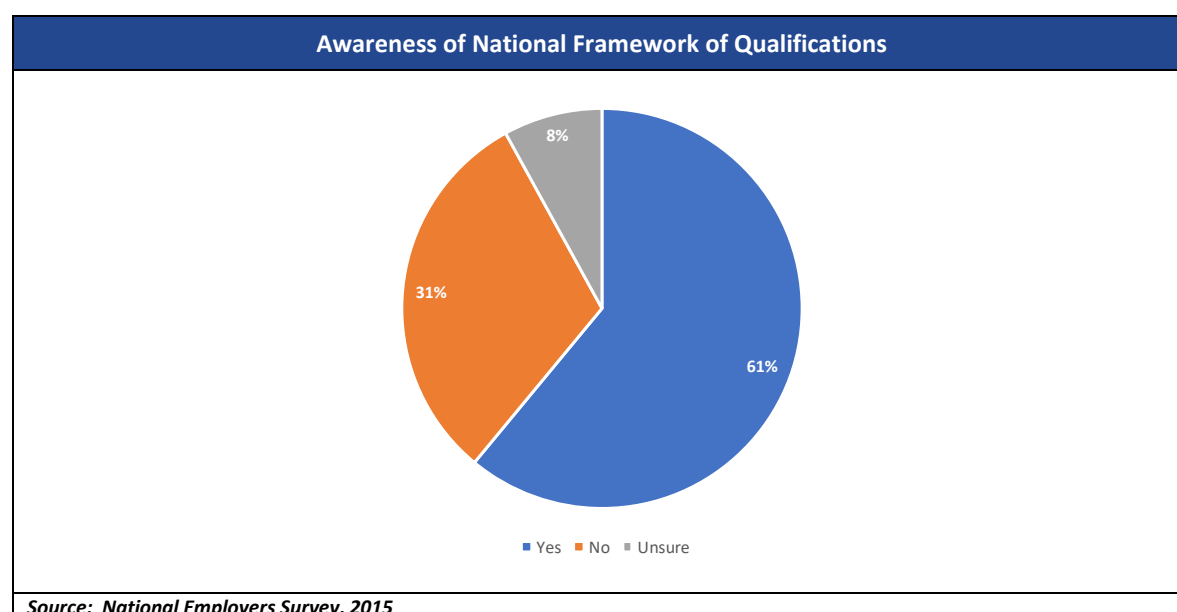


This report represents an independent policy impact assessment of the NFQ. It begins with a discussion of the levels of awareness of the NFQ among key stakeholder groups, and then reports on perceptions of the impact the NFQ has had on the quality of teaching and learning, in particular with respect to the learning outcomes approach. The report examines mobility, both in terms of learner progression between different levels of the NFQ, as well as the role that the NFQ has played in accommodating international migration to and from Ireland through the cross-border recognition of education and training qualifications. The report examines the extent to which the NFQ supports better matching of skills to employment opportunities. The final sections report on stakeholder views of the role of QQI as custodian of the NFQ and the future priorities for NFQ development. The report concludes with a summary of key findings and their implications.

Awareness and Transparency

The outcome of the stakeholder engagement process indicated that the NFQ, when it was established in 2003, brought coherence and structure to Irish education and training qualifications. Respondents to Indecon's survey indicated that students in particular do not think about the NFQ per se, and that the language of the NFQ had now established itself as "a common currency". The CAO was cited as one of the main contributory reasons why the level of awareness was so high among students and parents. Some stakeholders indicated that the NFQ allows students to look across different courses and quickly equate one course with another. Numerous interviewees, however, pointed to a perceived lack of depth of understanding among both students and employers regarding the NFQ levels. Finally, awareness and use of the NFQ among educators was reported as being ubiquitous.

The level of awareness among employers and inward migrants, however, was not as high. In particular, awareness among SMEs was said to be poor, and even among larger enterprises it was said to be far from uniform. This is supported by evidence from the 2015 National Employer Survey (NES) commissioned by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), SOLAS and QQI¹, which shows that 61% of all graduate employers had heard of the NFQ. Nearly one-third (31%) of all graduate employers had not heard of the NFQ and this was highest for small organisations (45%).



Indecon's survey research among NFQ stakeholders included a number of questions in relation to transparency of education and training qualifications and the findings are summarised in the table overleaf. Overall, the results indicate a widespread view that the introduction of the NFQ brought a significant improvement in transparency. Previously, the system was said to have been very fragmented and closed. Overall, a broad array of stakeholders indicated that the NFQ acted as a good signal of course/skills level.

¹ National Employer Survey collects employers' views on Irish further and higher education outcomes <https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/EmployerSurveyMay2015final.pdf>

Stakeholder views on how the NFQ increases transparency of qualifications					
	Percent of Responses				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The NFQ has made qualification pathways easier to explain and understand	38%	51%	8%	3%	0%
The NFQ has made the skills and competence of qualifications more visible	25%	55%	13%	6%	1%
The NFQ has made it easier to see how qualifications relate to each other	29%	55%	12%	3%	1%
The NFQ has made it easier to evaluate qualifications for work or study	23%	57%	12%	6%	1%
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications					

Quality of Teaching and Learning

An important development which was promoted in tandem with the NFQ was the ‘learning outcome’ approach. In Ireland, learning outcomes were first introduced in the apprenticeship system in 1991. However, it is only with the NFQ that the term learning outcome was systematically reflected in policy. Adopting a learning outcomes approach when developing curricula, is seen by many European countries as an effective way to ensure the successful matching of education and training provision to learner and labour market needs. The stakeholder engagement process indicated that switching to the learning outcome approach had initially been a huge challenge for the education and training system, but that Ireland had made progress in this regard, and that learning outcomes referenced qualifications have become an integral part of the Irish education system.

The views expressed throughout the stakeholder engagement process conducted as part of this study were generally supportive of the role that the NFQ has had on the quality of teaching. In particular, a view was expressed that the NFQ has had the effect of raising standards of private colleges. Concerns about the trustworthiness of certain education and training qualifications offered to international students are being addressed, in part, by using the NFQ in regulatory reform of international education in Ireland. The Indecon survey indicated that there is strong support for the contention that the NFQ has enhanced the quality and relevance of education and training qualifications in Ireland. While there is also strong agreement for the contention that these standards are consistently high, the overall level of agreement on this aspect was relatively lower (see table overleaf).

Stakeholder views on the impact of the NFQ on quality					
	Percent of Responses				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree / Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Qualifications included in the NFQ are relevant for users (learners, employers etc.)	27%	59%	10%	3%	0%
Qualifications included in the NFQ meet consistent quality standards wherever they are provided	12%	45%	24%	15%	4%
Qualifications included in the NFQ are highly trusted, nationally and internationally	18%	50%	24%	8%	1%
Overall, the NFQ has enhanced the quality of qualifications in Ireland	27%	51%	15%	6%	1%
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications					

The placement of two major award types at Level 6 is deemed by some stakeholders to be confusing. A number of interviewees also reported confusion in respect of the Leaving Certificate being spread across two levels: Level 4 and Level 5. One organisation argued that there needs to be clarification and publication of clear and consistent approaches to volume and density of learning in the FET sector. One further issue raised in the stakeholder engagement process was that English Language training and certification are not sufficiently recognised within the NFQ currently.

Promoting Educational Progression and Mobility

A central vision for the NFQ is the development of a qualifications system that focuses on the needs of the learner and on lifelong learning. Importantly, this envisages the development of integrated pathways between qualifications. The findings of the stakeholder survey (see table overleaf) indicated very strong support/agreement that the NFQ: (a) facilitated improved access to education and training; (b) improved progression between qualifications achieved in school, in further and in higher education and training; and (c) made it easier to value and recognise learning and qualifications achieved outside of the formal/public education and training system.

The engagement with stakeholders in the Further Education (FE) sector indicated a consistent view that the NFQ ideal of progression was theoretical, but that it did not work in practice. In particular, a number of respondents indicated that the progression practice lacked transparency, and local/regional arrangements with particular institutions still predominate. A more general issue raised by a large number of stakeholders in this study was the perceived excessive importance in the Irish education system, and Irish society generally, placed on a university education compared to other forms of education and training such as Further Education or Apprenticeships.

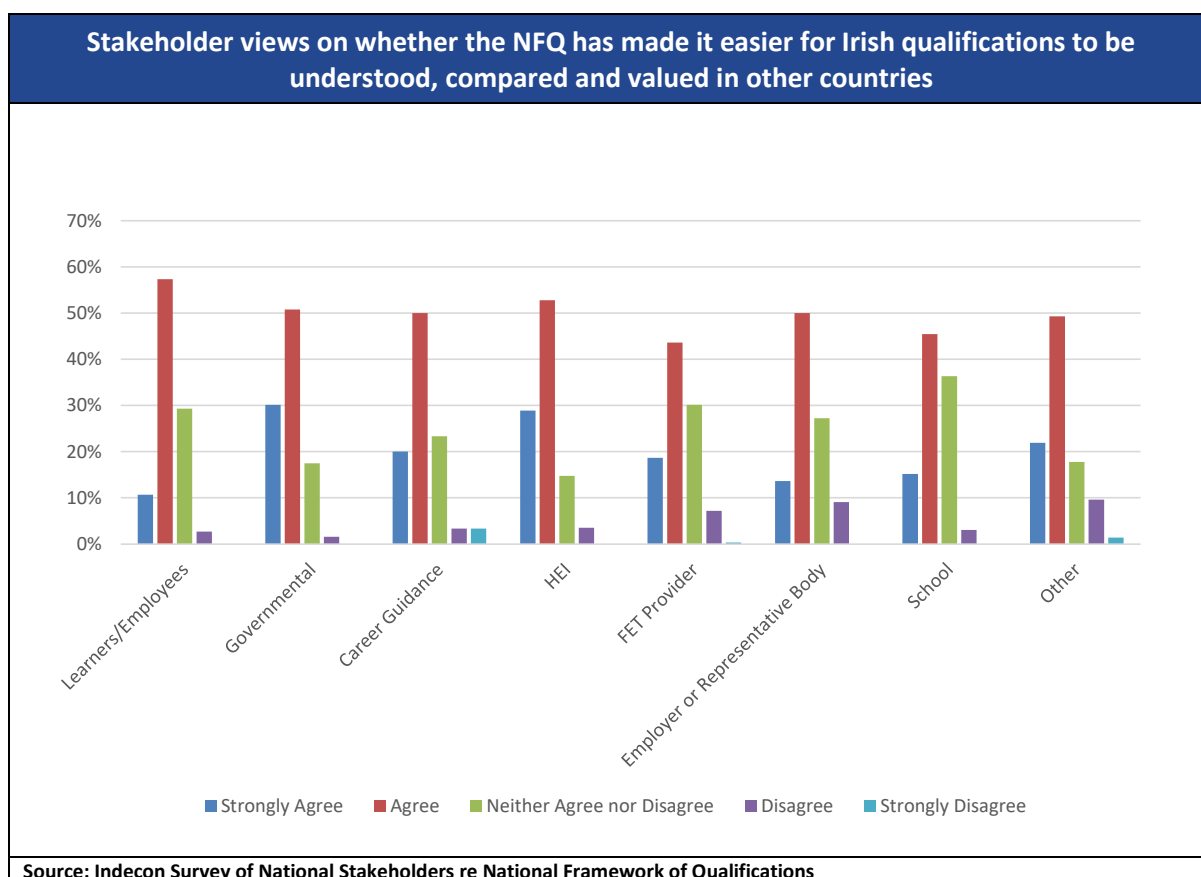
Stakeholder views on the impact of the NFQ on lifelong learning, progression and mobility of qualifications					
	Percent of Responses				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The NFQ has facilitated improved access to education and training courses	20%	48%	25%	7%	0%
The NFQ has improved progression between qualifications achieved in school, in further & in higher education and training	24%	57%	14%	6%	0%
The NFQ has made it easier to value and recognise learning and qualifications achieved outside of the formal/public education and training system	14%	49%	23%	12%	2%
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications					

International Mobility

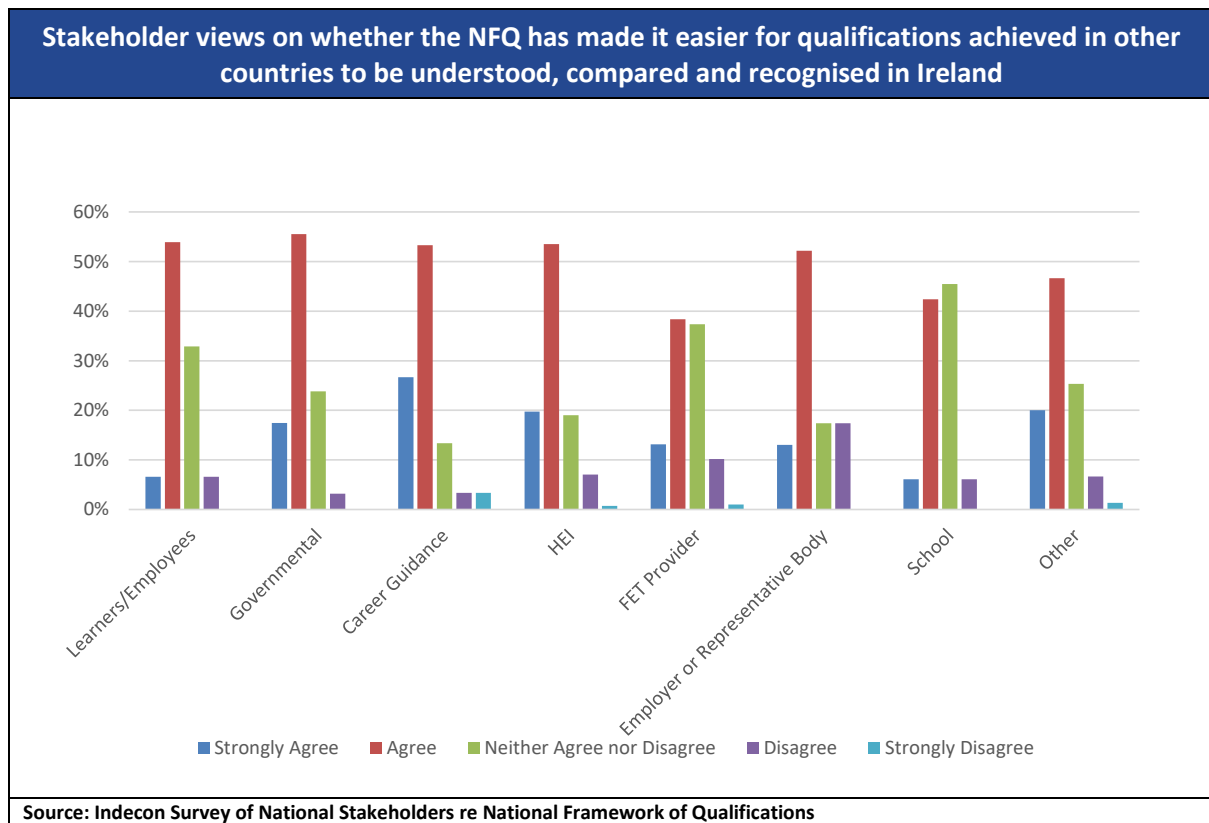
Ireland has always been characterised by very significant flows of inward and outward migrants, and their ability to fully utilise their skills and qualifications is important both individually and in terms of the broader economy. As such, the extent to which the NFQ facilitates people who were educated in Ireland but seeking work abroad is important, as well as the extent to which the NFQ is used to effectively recognise skills acquired abroad by immigrants and applied in an Irish work or study setting. The European Union developed the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) in 2008. In 2009, Ireland was one of the first countries to reference its own NFQ to the EQF; and today, 33 countries have related their national qualifications frameworks to the EQF. This is an important development as the EQF promotes mutual understanding and trust across national qualifications systems. Countries and regions outside Europe are interested in establishing relationships between their qualifications systems and the EQF.

Approximately 80,000 people per year have emigrated from Ireland in the period 2011-2016. Since 2011, a majority of emigrants from Ireland moved to another country within the European Union, with the UK being the single most important destination. However, a substantial minority of persons (45-50%) emigrate to non-EU countries. A majority of the emigrants from Ireland have had a third-level education, though a smaller but still significant minority of emigrants have higher secondary education or below. It is important to note that these figures not only include Irish persons moving abroad but also include non-Irish persons who had previously come to Ireland to live, study, and/or work. Persons engaged in the labour market – either at work or unemployed – represent the majority of emigrants from Ireland. However, students represent a substantial and growing share of emigrants, increasing from 23% of emigrants in 2011 to 36% of emigrants in 2016.

The results with respect to the mobility of Irish education and training qualifications abroad are shown in the figure overleaf. Respondents expressed general agreement that the NFQ has made it easier for Irish qualifications to be understood, compared and valued in other countries.



Immigration to Ireland has become increasingly global. Over 40% of immigrants to Ireland move from a country within the EU. However, immigration from non-EU countries has grown from 41% in 2011 to 53% in 2016. The total number of immigrants to Ireland has also increased from just over 53,000 in 2011 to almost 80,000 in 2016. The survey results presented in the figure overleaf indicate general agreement across different stakeholder groups that the NFQ has made it easier for foreign qualifications to be understood, compared and valued in Ireland.



Employability and Employment Impacts

The survey also indicated a high level of agreement among stakeholders that the NFAQ has improved skills matching, with a majority of respondents Strongly Agreeing/Agreeing that the NFAQ has improved the dialogue between the world of qualifications and the world of work; that the vocational qualifications included in the NFAQ signal relevant skills and competencies required for particular occupations; and that the NFAQ has facilitated better matching between skills and job vacancies (see table below). The research also showed a moderate level of agreement that the NFAQ has facilitated national monitoring and reporting of skills and qualifications output. There was a lower level of agreement that the NFAQ has facilitated workforce planning and development.

Stakeholder views on the impact of the NFAQ on employment matching					
	Percent of Responses				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The NFAQ has improved the dialogue between the world of qualifications & the world of work	12%	51%	26%	9%	2%
Vocational qualifications included in the NFAQ signal relevant skills and competencies required for particular occupations	11%	61%	20%	6%	2%
The NFAQ has facilitated better matching between skills and job vacancies	8%	43%	37%	11%	2%
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications					

NFQ Governance and Future Priorities

The survey research also sought the views of stakeholders in relation to NFQ governance and future priorities. The findings, summarised in the table below, indicate that the highest priority given by respondents was to the Quality Assurance Function to ensure that qualifications are more reliable and valid. The lowest relative priority was given to the Regulatory Function – in other words using the NFQ to control access to the market for education and training qualifications in Ireland.

Stakeholder views on future policy priorities for the NFQ			
	Percent of Responses		
	High Priority	Medium Priority	Low Priority
Communication Function	67%	30%	3%
Quality Assurance Function	76%	22%	2%
Regulatory Function	41%	51%	9%
Progression Function	60%	36%	4%
Recognition Function	60%	35%	4%
Curriculum Design Function	45%	44%	11%
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications			

Potential Areas/Aspects for Further Enhancement

Overall, through the extensive inputs provided via the survey research and based on bilateral semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, this impact assessment has found a generally high level of support for the NFQ and a positive assessment of the NFQ's contribution under a number of headings. The review has also identified aspects/areas where further enhancements could be made to the NFQ, and to the work of QQI in maintaining and developing the NFQ. A summary of selected potential areas for further enhancement is presented below and are elaborated upon in Section 8 of the main report. The areas highlighted are not exhaustive and are not presented as recommendations, but have been informed by the extensive survey research and engagement with different NFQ stakeholder groups and are presented as suggestions for consideration by QQI.

Summary of selected potential areas/aspects for further enhancement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Continue to Develop and Implement the NFQ as a responsive and adaptable mechanism for qualifications and skills policy. <input type="checkbox"/> Consider initiatives to further improve awareness of the NFQ among stakeholders. <input type="checkbox"/> Re-visit the operation of the NFQ for upper secondary school qualifications and for qualifications at NFQ Level 6. <input type="checkbox"/> Examine QQI awarding function and NFQ levelling processes more generally. <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure clarity and simplicity of communication. <input type="checkbox"/> Include a broader range of qualifications within the NFQ. <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure strong international engagement. <input type="checkbox"/> Establish data to investigate progression. <input type="checkbox"/> Establish a national forum for qualifications.

Overall Conclusion

This assessment, for the first time, has presented extensive new research among a diverse range of users of the National Framework of Qualifications to inform an examination of the policy impacts of the NFQ. Overall, the findings of the research indicate that the NFQ has been very positively received among learners, employers and other stakeholders. In terms of different aspects of the impact of the NFQ, the assessment found that the NFQ was viewed as having had a very positive impact on the transparency and quality of the qualifications system in Ireland; on promoting progression between education levels but also of mobility of qualifications internationally; as well as improving the match between skills and employment opportunities. However, while acknowledging the achievements of the NFQ to date, the stakeholder engagement interviews also indicated a diverse range of views of how the NFQ should evolve in the future, and what the priorities of QQI should be in this regard. As such, this report should be viewed as the start rather than the end of a process of consultation, review and, where necessary, reform, to ensure that the NFQ is well positioned to meet the future needs of Irish society and economy.

1 Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

This report is submitted to Quality and Qualifications Ireland by Indecon International Economic Consultants. The report concerns a policy impact assessment of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

1.2 Background to the Irish National Framework of Qualifications

Establishment and Objectives

The NFQ was established in 2003. The development of the NFQ was undertaken by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), supported by two awarding bodies, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). As outlined in the 2009 Framework Implementation and Impact Study,² the NFQ is defined as:

“The single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way which defines the relationship between all education and training awards.”

The legislative basis for the NFQ is the Qualifications (Education and Training Act) 1999, which included the provision ‘to establish and maintain a framework, being a framework for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State’ (Section 7a). The detailed objectives of the Framework, first outlined in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 were summarised in the 2009 study¹ and are as follows:

1. Establish and develop standards of knowledge, skill or competence;
2. Promote the quality of further education and training and higher education and training awards;
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 education 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;

² NQAI (2009) Framework Implementation and Impact Study Report

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 of the State;
9. 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 bilingualism in Irish society and in particular the achievement of a greater use of Irish language and to contribute to the promotion of distinctive cultures of Ireland.

As previously noted, the implementation of the NFQ was led by NQAI. A new agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established on 6 November 2012 under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012³ which represents the amalgamation of FETAC, HETAC, NQAI and the Irish Universities Quality Board. QQI assumes all functions of all the amalgamated bodies and is responsible for the maintenance and further development of the NFQ. The current national awarding bodies offering education and training qualifications under the NFQ are QQI, the State Examinations Commission, the Institutes of Technology and the universities. The 2012 Act maintains the NFQ as a mechanism for promoting transparency and trustworthiness of qualifications in Ireland.

The statutory functions of QQI as per the 2012 Act include:

- ☐ Promoting and developing the NFQ;
- ☐ Accrediting providers and validating programmes of education and training;
- ☐ Advising the Minister on matters relating to quality assurance and qualifications policy;
- ☐ Conducting external reviews of the effectiveness of providers quality assurance systems;
- ☐ Providing advice on the recognition of foreign qualifications;
- ☐ Authorising a quality mark for the provision of education and training programmes for international students; and,
- ☐ Developing a register of education and training qualifications included in the NFQ.

At the European level, national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) are seen as dynamic tools as their functions and objectives may shift in the short and long term in response to policy agendas. NQFs are tools for increasing the transparency of qualifications under the existing national education system but are also drivers or enablers of regulatory reform.⁴

³ Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012.

⁴ Global Inventory of Regional and National Qualifications Frameworks.

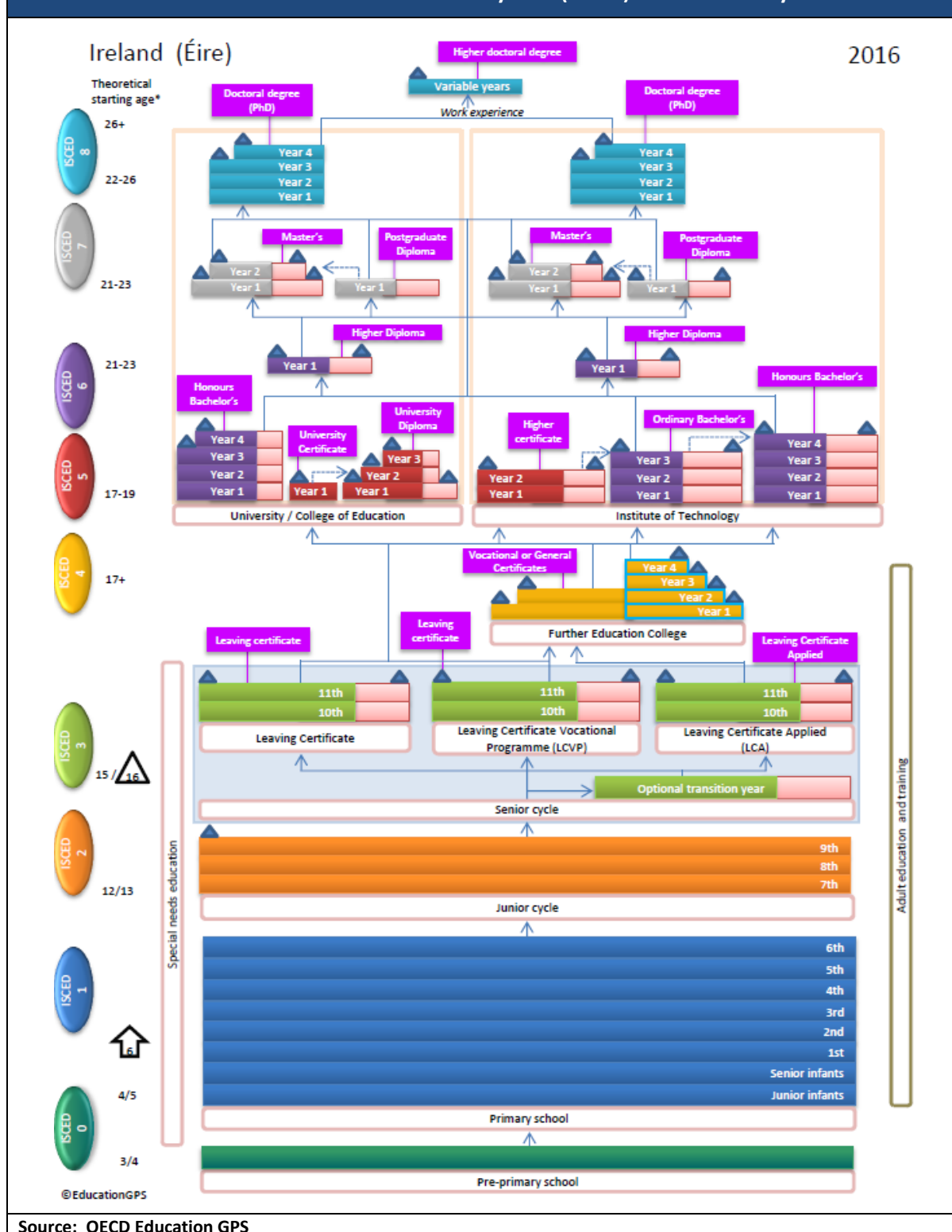
Design and Implementation

It is instructive to begin with an overview of the Irish education and training system, and the range of awards attainable at different stages. The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) has been developed to facilitate international reporting on levels of educational attainment. ISCED levels of educational attainment are as follows:

- ☐ Level 0 – early childhood education
- ☐ Level 1 – primary education
- ☐ Level 2 – lower secondary education
- ☐ Level 3 – upper secondary education
- ☐ Level 4 – post secondary, non-tertiary
- ☐ Level 5 – short-cycle tertiary
- ☐ Level 6 – Bachelor
- ☐ Level 7 – Master
- ☐ Level 8 – Doctoral or equivalent

The NFQ is the nationally agreed reference point for setting standards for qualifications achieved at these levels of education.

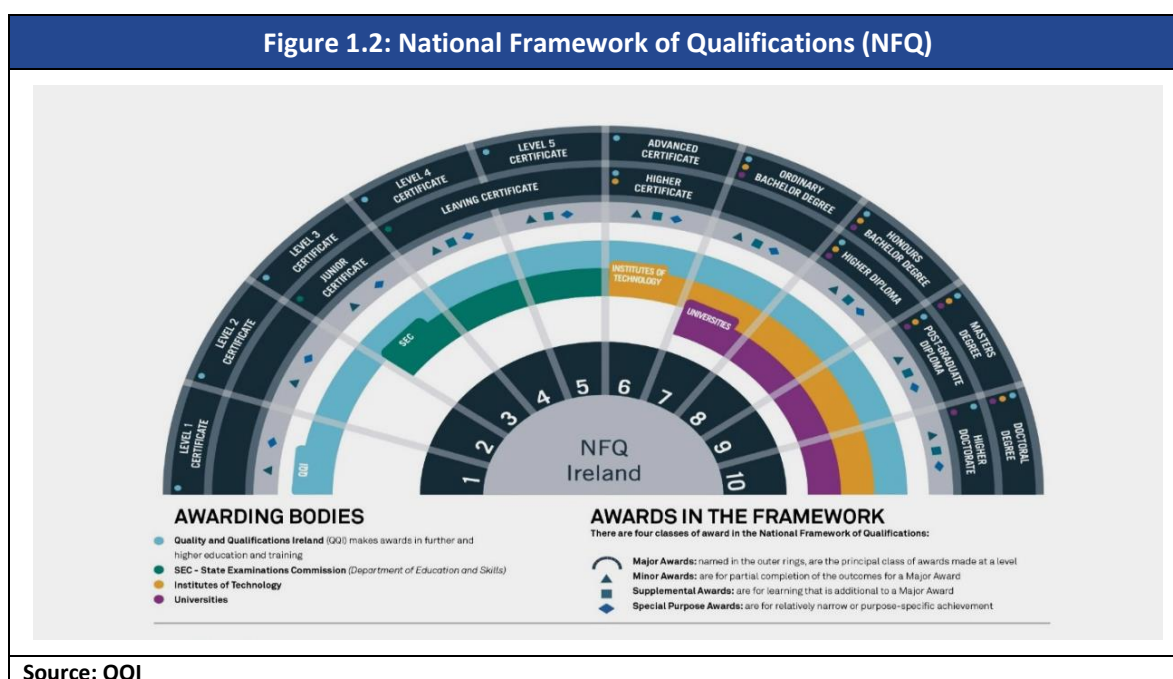
Figure 1.1: Overview of education and training system in Ireland within the International Standard Classification of Education System (ISCED) Classification System



Source: OECD Education GPS

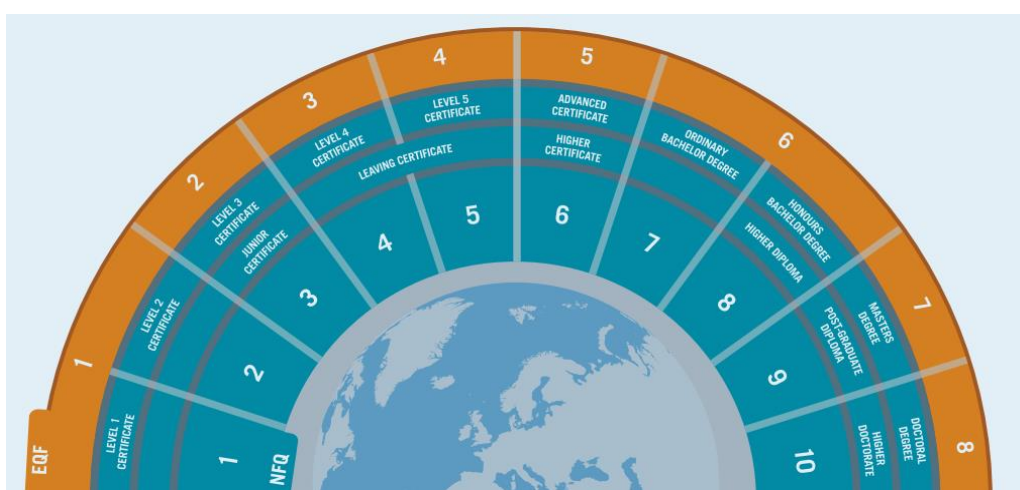
The NFQ is designed to represent a national consensus about what learners are expected to know, understand and do in order to achieve named qualifications. The NFQ helps learners to understand different levels of qualifications, as well as what is required to achieve an award at each of these levels. Similarly, it can assure employers that those applying for positions can demonstrate certain knowledge, skill and competency associated with the level of a qualification on the NFQ. This allows employers to set qualification requirements for positions, knowing the competence profile of NFQ award holders. The NFQ sets out a ten-level system of knowledge, skill and competence which captures all learning stages and all education and training qualifications awarded by the national awarding bodies in Ireland. It also maps the relationship between qualifications and sets out progression pathways for learners. General or school qualifications, further education and training (FET) qualifications made by QQI and higher qualifications made by public higher education institutions with degree awarding powers are all included in the NFQ.

The design and implementation stages of the NFQ are widely considered to be complete. The NFQ icon, which is presented below, has become widely used to visualise the national system of public qualifications. The NFQ adopts a learning outcomes-based approach. Each of the ten levels has a specified level descriptor (focused on learning outcomes) and one or more award type(s) also expressed in terms of learning outcomes. To ensure the framework recognises all types of learning achieved, there are four classes of award type, namely major, minor, supplemental and special purpose. Each award type includes a wide range of education and training qualifications developed by the awarding bodies.



In 2009 Ireland completed the alignment of the NFQ levels with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Since June 2015, the EFQ level is indicated on all QQI major, special purpose and supplemental awards. The correspondence between levels is shown in the diagram overleaf.

Figure 1.3: National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and European Qualifications Framework (EQF)



Source: QQI

At present, only higher education and further training qualifications can be acquired through validation of non-formal and informal learning. There is no national system for the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning leading to qualifications outside the remit of the national authorities. However, the implementation of the NFQ provides opportunity for this a targeted and strategic approach towards the implementation of a system for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) is evident in current policy with the most recent developments being consideration for the establishment of a national steering group for RPL.⁵ The 2012 EU Council Recommendation on the non-formal and informal learning⁶ provides political endorsement at EU level for member states to mainstream the availability of RPL services using a ranges of policy instruments including national qualifications frameworks.

Over time the NFQ has come to be used in many ways and by many different users of qualifications. They include the following:

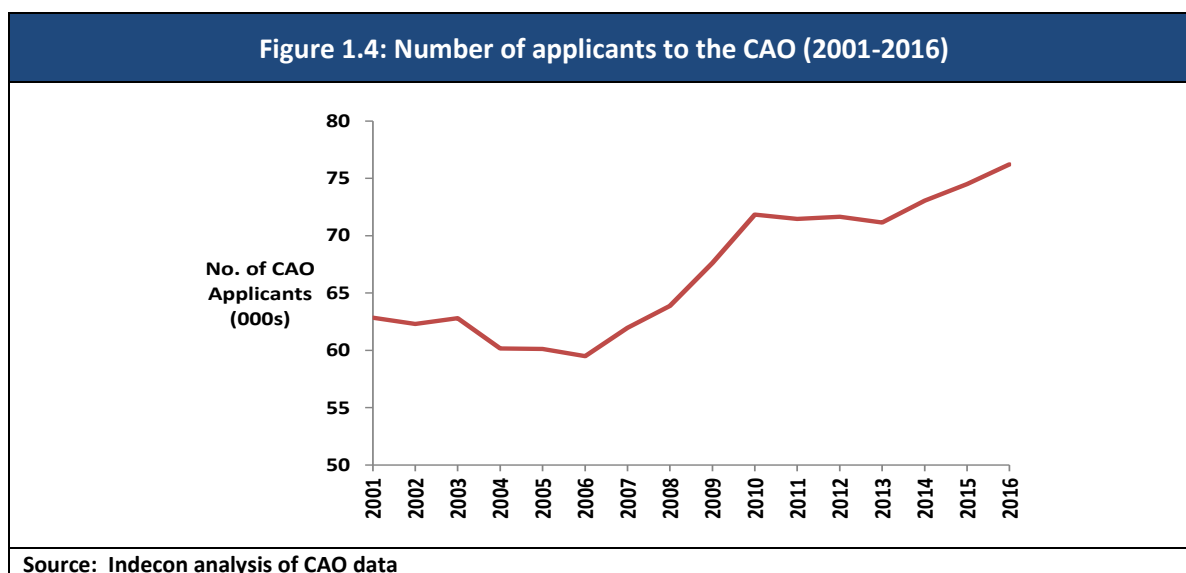
- ☐ Qualifications designers to signal learning opportunities and to recognise learning achievements;
- ☐ Guidance practitioners to identify learning opportunities for learners and job seekers;
- ☐ Public funding schemes as a clearing mechanism for trusted qualifications;
- ☐ Employers and regulators to set qualification requirements for access to employment;
- ☐ Statistics and research agencies as a classification system for reporting on qualifications and skills attainment; and,
- ☐ Education and qualifications authorities across borders as a tool for supporting mobility of learners and job seekers and to facilitate the recognition of qualifications and skills.

⁵ Cedefop (2016) Ireland - European inventory on NQF 2016.

⁶ 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning ([http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32012H1222\(01\)&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32012H1222(01)&from=EN)).

Context of demand for qualifications

It is instructive to also consider the trends in the demand for education and training qualifications, and therefore the requirement for the NFQ in this context. One important measure of demand for higher-level qualifications is the number of applications through the Central Applications Office (CAO). The figure below depicts the recent growth in the number of applicants to the CAO.



While it is always important to promote confidence in qualifications standards, the recent trend towards mass higher education has drawn attention to national standards and transition points. In this context the role of qualifications frameworks in making qualification standards transparent and facilitating smoother transitions within qualifications pathways, will be examined.

In 2016 174,815 major awards were made by QQI. Approximately 164,000 learners achieved QQI awards in 2015, with 37,000 of these receiving major awards.⁷ This impacts a significant number of learners. QQI, as an awarding body, acts to ensure that standards of knowledge, skill and competence are achieved before an award is made to a learner. Confidence in this process is essential for employers to identify the skill levels of applicants and assess their suitability for roles; for learners to identify their level of education and the recognised level of competency they have achieved; and for providers to develop teaching, learning and assessment strategies to allow learners to demonstrate the required level of learning.

Previous Reviews

QQI commissioned a review of the implementation and impact of the NFQ in 2009. The 2009 report noted that the NFQ had achieved a high level of prominence in a relatively short period of time since it had been formed in 2003, and that positive impacts on learners and teachers could already be observed. However, the review at the time also highlighted challenges and issues of priority for the organisation, and put forward recommendations aimed at addressing these.

The 2009 report also stressed the need to advance implementation in universities and in FET, as well as the need to enhance the recognition of prior learning and improve the communication of

⁷ See: <https://data.gov.ie/publisher/quality-and-qualifications-ireland>

pathways other than the Leaving Certificate into higher education and training. It also highlighted the need to continue engaging with the Irish labour market, and to enhance and to further harmonise the Irish qualification framework with various international qualification frameworks. The report noted confusion arising from the inclusion of further and higher awards at Level 6 and by including the Leaving Certificate across two levels, and also noted that the effective communication and promotion of the NFQ remained critical to its visibility and success.

The 2017 QQI publication '*National Qualifications Frameworks: Reflections and Trajectories*'⁸ provides a discussion of the effects, possibilities, and limitations of national and international qualification frameworks as policy tools. This analysis focused on the increasing internationalisation of education and employment and encouraged policymakers to consider how well national qualification frameworks function in a broader international environment. The paper argued that policymakers in Ireland should assess the NFQ in a more global context that includes but is not limited to EU developments. It also recommended that national qualification systems need to facilitate the recognition of certain non-national, sectoral and professional qualifications, and non-formal and informal learning.

1.3 Scope and Terms of Reference

The current review provides an initial policy impact assessment of the NFQ. This review is designed to inform future NFQ policy development, implementation and evaluation, and addresses the following aspects of the impact of the NFQ, and the role of QQI in this context:

- ☐ Awareness of the NFQ and its contribution to transparency of the system and of qualifications more generally;
- ☐ Quality of teaching and learning – contribution of the NFQ to ensuring that qualifications are responsive to the needs of the economy, society and the individual, including the quality of awards, and the facilitation of recognition of national and international qualifications;
- ☐ Promoting qualification progression – role of the NFQ in the development of integrated pathways between qualifications and facilitation of learner progression;
- ☐ International mobility – contribution of the NFQ to improving the international mobility of qualifications;
- ☐ Employability and employment – including the extent to which the NFQ has impacted the optimal matching of learners with employment opportunities, as well as the extent to which the NFQ has contributed to the development of labour market policy; and,
- ☐ The role that QQI plays in promotion and implementation of the NFQ and future policy priorities for the NFQ.

In examining the above areas of impact, this review encompasses the following tasks:

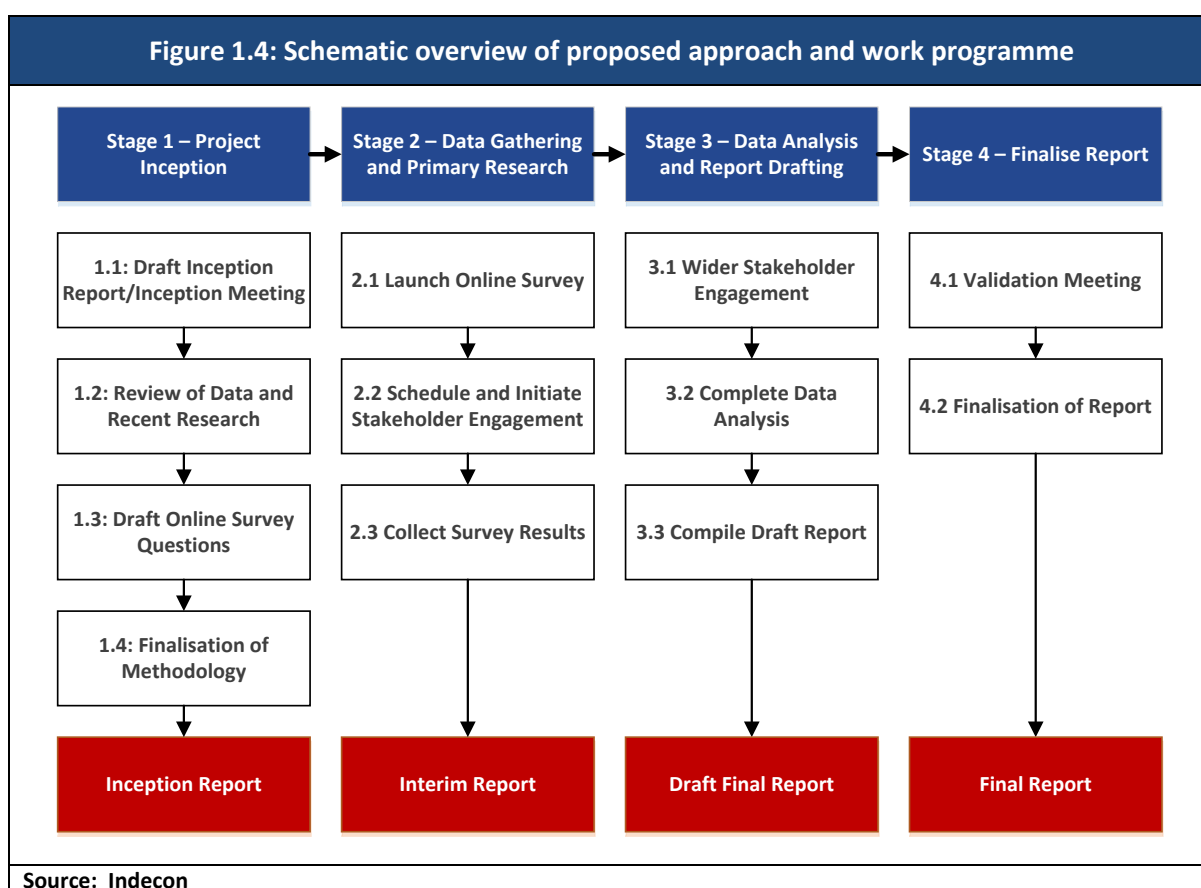
1. Develop and administer an online survey of national stakeholder views on both the impact of the NFQ to date and future policy priorities for the NFQ.

⁸ QQI (2017) national Qualifications Frameworks: Reflections and Trajectories. This paper was published as a companion piece to the current policy impact assessment (<http://www.qqi.ie/News/Pages/QQI-publishes-Qualifications-Frameworks-Reflections-and-Trajectories-.aspx>).

2. Conduct a series of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders to examine the role and contribution of the NFQ to policy objectives.
3. Analyse collected data and prepare a written report of findings concerning the initial impact of the NFQ to date and policy priorities for future NFQ development.

1.4 Methodological Approach

A four-phased methodology and work programme was applied by the Indecon team in completing the current review, a schematic overview of which is presented in the figure below. The approach was designed to rigorously address each aspect of the terms of reference.



1.4.1 Survey research

The key component of the research was a stakeholder engagement process with key national stakeholders, as well as wider stakeholder groups, in order to identify the key impacts of the NFQ. This stakeholder engagement process consisted of an online survey of national stakeholders' views and a series of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders.

The questionnaire for the online survey was designed in collaboration with QQI. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Annex 1. Contact details for a wide mix of stakeholders were provided to Indecon by QQI. A total of 3,823 individuals were contacted based on an invitation script agreed with QQI. Indecon sent the survey link by email to this database of contacts, and the survey participants were encouraged to circulate the link among their colleagues.

The survey research was undertaken between 12th December 2016 and 31st January 2017. A total of 781 responses to the survey were received. Based on the number of individuals contacted, this would indicate a response rate 20.4%. It is important to note that, because individuals contacted were asked if they could share the survey with colleagues, it is likely that a proportion of the overall number of responses received were from persons other than those initially contacted. However, the overall response achieved was very strong and was higher than typically expected for a survey of this kind. The response received provides a strong basis on which to assess a number of aspects of the impact of the NFQ.

Breakdown of Respondents

The survey was completed by 781 respondents across a broad range of stakeholder groups. A summary of the stakeholder groups as reported by the survey respondents is provided in Table 1.1 overleaf. It is important to note that respondents may be associated with multiple groups, e.g., it is possible a stakeholder is associated with both a higher education institution and a qualification awarding body or professional recognition body. Therefore, the total number of responses is greater than the total number of respondents.

The survey was completed by individuals associated with all stakeholder groups. The largest group of respondents were stakeholders associated with FET Providers, representing 29% of responses. This is followed by Teachers/Trainers/Lecturers (21%) and Higher Education Institutions (14%). The survey was completed by a relatively small number of individuals associated with trade unions or other employee representative bodies, learner/student representative or advocacy bodies, EU or other international organisations, and research or consultancy bodies. For the purposes of reporting the results in this report, these respondent types have been further aggregated into seven respondent groups.

Table 1.1: Survey of NFQ Stakeholders – Breakdown of Responses and Respondents by Category

Respondent Type	No. of Responses	Percent of Responses	Percent of Respondents
Higher Education Institution	142	14%	18%
FET Provider	305	29%	39%
Qualification Awarding Body or Professional Recognition Body	70	7%	9%
Employer or Employer Representative Body	23	2%	3%
Trade Union or Other Employee Representative Body	7	1%	1%
Learner/Student	61	6%	8%
Learner/Student Representative/Advocacy Body	8	1%	1%
Teacher/Trainer/Lecturer	223	21%	29%
Career Guidance Professional	30	3%	4%
School	33	3%	4%
Government Department or Government Agency	53	5%	7%
Research/Consultancy Body	12	1%	2%
EU/International Organisation	10	1%	1%
Individual Citizen	38	4%	5%
Other	26	2%	3%
Total Responses	1041	100%	
Total Unique Respondents*	781		
Source: Indecon Analysis * Note that as respondents could select more than one option (respond as an employee and as a learner), percentages based on respondents sum to more than 100%.			

1.4.2 Caveat re limitations of review

It is important to note that there are limitations to the determination of the precise impacts of a framework such as the NFQ, which essentially plays a facilitative role in the context of a wider education and training system. In particular, the effects of the NFQ are indirect in nature, and the NFQ is understood as an enabler rather than a driver of change. These features mean that determining the causal relationship between the NFQ and its impacts on society and the economy is challenging. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the emerging body of knowledge about the impact of qualifications frameworks in Europe and beyond.

1.5 Structure of the Report

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- ❑ Section 2 reviews the awareness and perceived transparency of the NFQ. In particular, it reports on differences in awareness among different stakeholder groups.
- ❑ Section 3 reports on perceptions of the impact the NFQ has had on the quality of qualifications, in particular by examining the impact of the NFQ in promoting the learning-outcomes approach.
- ❑ Section 4 sets out perception regarding ‘educational progression’, i.e., the ability of a learner to move from one level on the NFQ to another, and the ease and transparency of the process to so do.

- ❑ Section 5 reviews perceptions of international mobility, both in terms of the experience of migrants from Ireland in having their Irish education and training qualifications recognised abroad, and the experience of immigrants into Ireland in having their home-country qualifications recognised here.
- ❑ Section 6 examines the role of the NFQ in facilitating better matching of employment opportunities.
- ❑ Section 7 is forward looking and reports on the future role that QQI should play in promoting and developing the NFQ, and identifies the areas of particular focus.
- ❑ Finally, Section 8 presents conclusions and also sets out some potential areas/aspects where the NFQ, and the role of QQI as custodian of the NFQ, could be further enhanced.

1.6 Acknowledgements and Disclaimer

Indecon would like to acknowledge the inputs and assistance provided by a number of individuals and organisations during the course of completion of this assessment. We would particularly like to express our appreciation to senior management and staff within QQI, including Padraig Walsh (Chief Executive), John O'Connor, Anna Murphy, Barbara Kelly, Deirdre Miller, Susan MacNeill, and Beata Sokolowska, for their guidance throughout the process. In addition, we would like to thank the large number of individuals who met with Indecon during the course of the study. These include Vivienne Patterson and Gemma Irvine of the Higher Education Authority (HEA); Mary-Liz Trant (SOLAS); Philip Sheridan of City and Guilds; Cecilia Munro, Deirdre Hanamy, Alison Ward and Rory O'Sullivan of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD); Naomi Jackson of the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA); Pat O'Mahony and Marie Gould of Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI); Jim Murray of the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA); Lewis Purser of the Irish University Association (IUA); Joe Hanlon, Tom Pettit and Frank Murphy of Teagasc; Giles O'Neill and Lucia Reynolds of Enterprise Ireland; and Michael Walsh and Lorna Conway of the Department of Justice and Equality. We would also like to thank Gerard Walker and colleagues in the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation for their input to the report.

In addition, a number of stakeholder groups met directly with QQI to input into this report, and we would in particular like to thank senior officials within the Department of Education and Skills, as well as in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. We would also like to acknowledge the valuable inputs provided by the Aontas, the Irish Inter-Professional Association, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the National Centre for Guidance in Education, and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

Last but not least, we would also like to express our gratitude to all of the individuals and organisation who took the time to respond to the survey conducted by Indecon to inform this report.

The usual disclaimer applies and the analysis and findings in this independent report are the sole responsibility of Indecon.

2 Awareness and Transparency

2.1 Introduction

The first dimension examined as part of this assessment concerns the extent to which the NFQ makes the national system of education and training qualifications more transparent and easier to understand by all stakeholders (in particular, learners, educators, employers and policy makers). This section sets out the findings of the research in relation to the views of stakeholders regarding the awareness and transparency of the NFQ and of qualifications more generally.

2.2 Awareness of NFQ

The 2009 Framework Implementation and Impact Study highlighted in their recommendations the importance of continued active engagement with key stakeholders in the labour market to communicate the use of the Framework and to improve its visibility.⁹

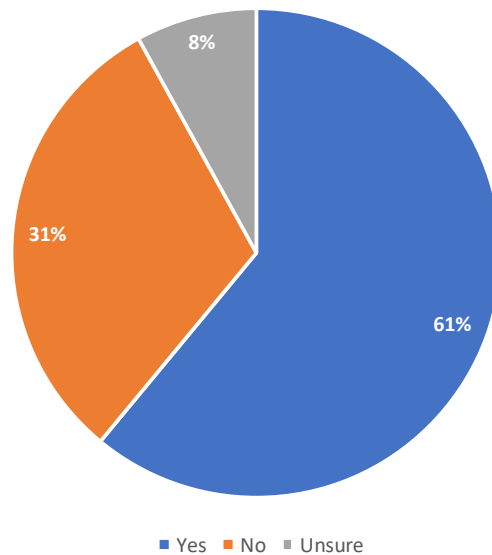
A number of stakeholders interviewed by Indecon indicated that the NFQ is now part of the infrastructure and language of Irish education and training, though that this has taken a number of years to establish. Two phases were identified in this:

- ❑ The period between 2003 and 2010 when very widespread stakeholder engagement was credited with having established a firm footing for the NFQ within the Irish education system; and,
- ❑ The 2012 Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act was cited as being critical in ensuring the more widespread adoption of the NFQ.

However, stakeholders also indicated that awareness levels among different groups are far from uniform. Notably, awareness levels among students/parents in particular were said to be very high, which is perhaps understandable given their need to interact with the NFQ on an ongoing basis. By contrast, awareness among employers generally, and among Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) in particular, was seen to be relatively poor. These perceptions are supported by evidence from the 2015 National Employers Survey, which shows that 61% of all graduate employers had heard of the NFQ (see figure overleaf). This proportion was highest for foreign organisations (70%), large organisations (75%) and the manufacturing sector (68%). Nearly one-third (31%) of all graduate employers had not heard of the NFQ, and this proportion was highest among small organisations (45%).

⁹ NQAI (2009) Framework Implementation and Impact Study Report

Figure 2.1: Awareness of National Framework of Qualifications among employers



Source: HEA National Employers Survey, 2015

The CAO was cited as one of the main contributory factors influencing awareness of the NFQ among students and parents. Some stakeholders indicated that the NFQ also enables students to more easily compare a wide range of course options. A number of interviewees, however, pointed to a perceived lack of depth of understanding among both students and employers in relation to the underlying features of the NFQ levels.

There was also a very strong view expressed across different stakeholders that awareness and use of the NFQ among educators is ubiquitous, and that the NFQ represents a key component of the national skills development architecture.

2.3 Transparency of NFQ

The 2009 Framework Implementation and Impact Study recommended that:

“The Qualifications Authority, awarding bodies and providers should work to improve transparency and consistency in the interpretation and application of prior learning.”

This present study provides an opportunity to consider the progress to date in relation to transparency and consistency. Overall, the views expressed in the Indecon stakeholder interviews regarding the NFQ’s impact on transparency of qualifications in Ireland were almost uniformly positive. A number of stakeholders expressed the view that the NFQ, when it was established in 2003, brought coherence and structure to qualifications in both the FET, and Higher Education and Training (HET) sectors.

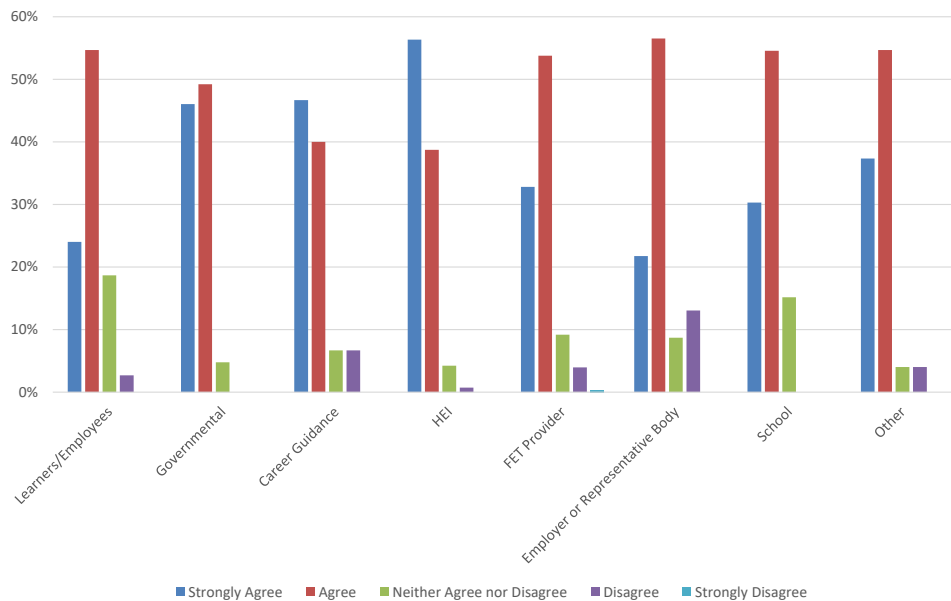
A widely held view expressed by stakeholders from the Indecon engagement process was that the introduction of the NFQ brought a significant improvement in transparency to the qualifications system. Previously, the system was said to have been very fragmented and closed. Overall, a broad range of stakeholders indicated that the NFQ has acted as an effective signal of course/skills level. Further, the clarity and simplicity that the NFQ brings has greatly helped in the collation and interpretation of statistics relating to skills, education and training. The survey questionnaire asked a number of questions in relation to transparency of qualifications, and the results are very consistent with the outcome of the stakeholder engagement process. These are shown in the next table.

Table 2.1: Stakeholder Views on the Impact of the NFQ on Transparency of Qualifications					
	Percent of Responses				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The NFQ has made qualification pathways easier to explain and understand	38%	51%	8%	3%	0%
The NFQ has made the skills and competence of qualifications more visible	25%	55%	13%	6%	1%
The NFQ has made it easier to see how qualifications relate to each other	29%	55%	12%	3%	1%
The NFQ has made it easier to evaluate qualifications for work or study	23%	57%	12%	6%	1%
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications					

As can be seen, there was a high level of overall agreement that the NFQ increases the transparency of education and training qualifications based on all aspects surveyed. In particular, survey respondents agreed that the NFQ has made qualification pathways easier to understand; has made skills and competence of qualifications more visible; has made it easier to see how qualifications relate to each other; and, has made it easier to evaluate education and training qualifications for work or study.

Looking at the breakdown of views across respondents, there was widespread agreement across all stakeholder groups that, “the NFQ has made it easier to evaluate qualifications for work or study.” In line with both the stakeholder group engagements and the 2015 National Employer Survey evidence cited above, employers expressed the lowest proportion that strongly agreed or agreed with this statement, though a large majority of employers (65%) had this view. Within the other stakeholder groups, this proportion ranged from 77% to 88%.

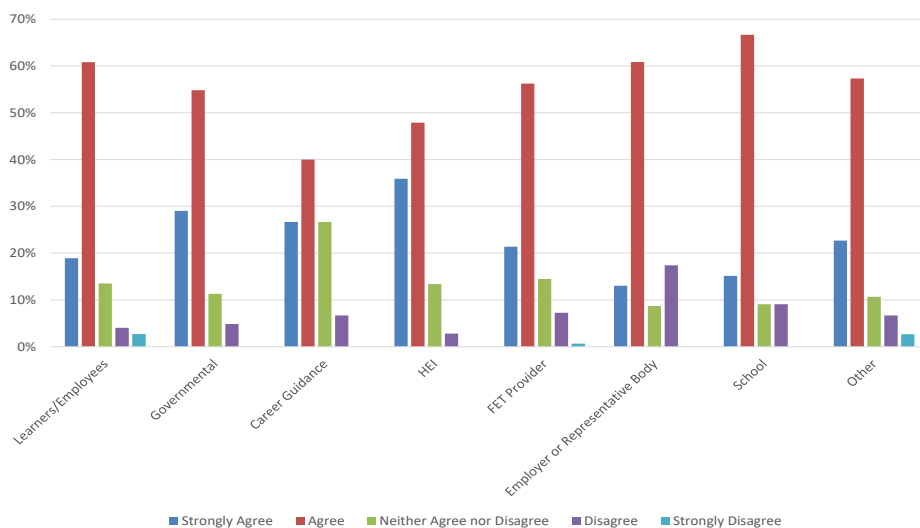
Figure 2.2: Stakeholder views on whether the NFQ has made it easier to evaluate qualifications for work or study



Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications.

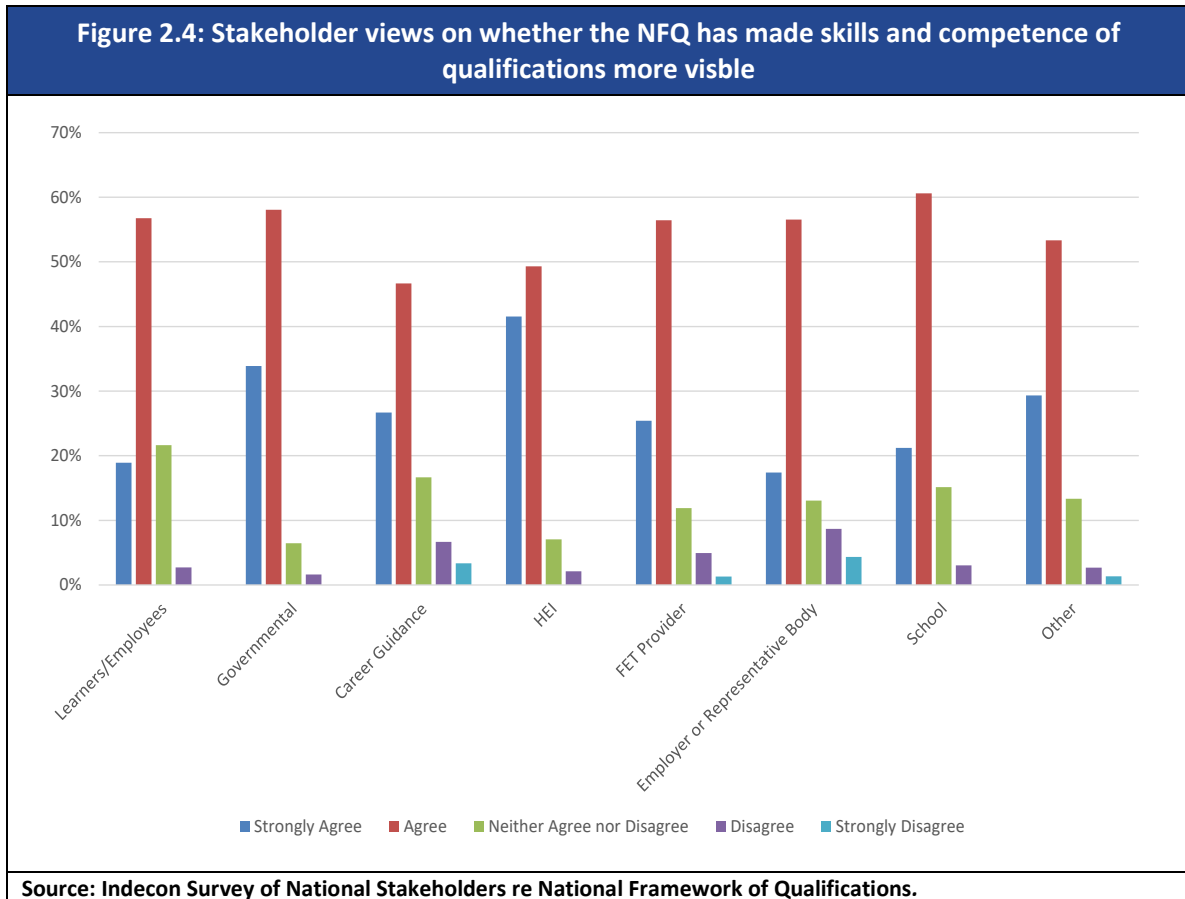
The breakdown of stakeholder responses to other questions is provided below. In terms of making qualification pathways easier to explain/understand, there was even stronger agreement across stakeholder groups.

Figure 2.3: Stakeholder views on whether the NFQ has made qualification pathways easier to explain and understand

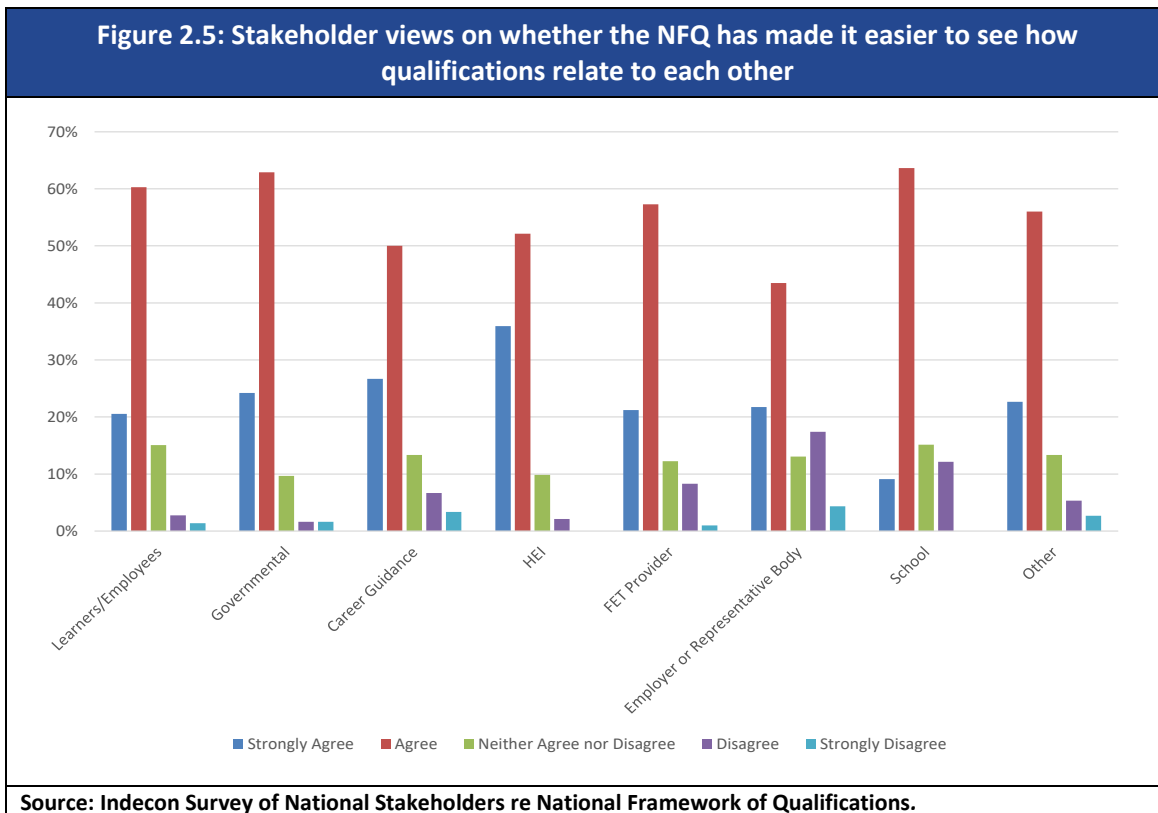


Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications.

The next figure shows stakeholders responses when asked if the NFQ has made skills and competence of qualifications more visible.



The figure below indicates the findings of the research in relation to stakeholder views in relation to whether the NFQ has made it easier to see how education and training qualifications relate to each other.



The table below reports a selection of responses to the open-ended question given in the questionnaire conducted as part of the study.

Table 2.2: Selected Views of Survey Respondents on Awareness and Transparency of NFQ
"I have found the NFQ very good in showing where qualifications fit together and progression from one college to another."
"An efficient and effective process, overall."
"For members of the public who don't work in the education and training sector, their level of knowledge of the NFQ can be limited and they may not understand its significance, e.g. different levels of the NFQ, qualifications, transfer and progression opportunities, etc."
"I think the levels are well understood by students, HEI staff, second level schools, etc. I am not sure how well employers understand the levels or what they mean in terms of skill and learning outcomes."
"Excellent tool for understanding. All stakeholders, particularly employers, do not have an understanding of knowledge of the levels and their equivalence to educational awards."
"A key problem with the current 10 level framework is the confusion that exists at Level 6 where FE and HE awards are equally mapped in this segment. A FE Level 6 award is not equal to a HE Level 6 award, but disagreements frequently occur between FE and HE providers as HE providers will not allow progression for FET graduates at FE Level 6 to the final award year of a HE Level 7 award."
"I have found that the system is poorly understood by employers, and equally poorly articulated by career guidance teachers."
"The NFQ 'fan diagram' is an invaluable asset to the NFQ itself - a single, one-stop-shop, explanatory and illustrative piece of information, easy to understand."
"For learners who come to my programme without a previous educational qualification or for learners who completed their education in a different schooling system, this framework helps me to explain the level of difficulty of the programme very well. It is very clear and easy to understand."
"The NFQ has been a great innovation, however, as with all systems designed to simplify approaches it causes some problems especially in relation to comparing qualifications on the basis of competencies, and the relationship between the levels can sometimes become a block rather than a facilitator."
"The NFQ has been highly successful in making the meaning of higher education qualifications more transparent. The challenges appear greater in the area of further education and there is more to be done there."
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications

2.4 Summary of Findings

This section set out the views of stakeholders as to the transparency of the NFQ. A summary of the findings are as follows:

- ❑ The outcome of the stakeholder engagement process indicated that the NFQ, when it was established in 2003, brought coherency and structure to Irish education and training qualifications. This view was very widely expressed across different stakeholder groups;
- ❑ While the level of awareness was said to be very high among students, with the exception of migrants, the level of awareness among employers was said to be far lower. The awareness, and use, of the NFQ in the education system itself was said to be ubiquitous; and,
- ❑ Overall, a broad range of stakeholders indicated that the NFQ acts as a good signal of course/skills level.

3 Quality of Learning and Qualifications

3.1 Introduction

The NFQ influences quality most directly by informing qualification standards, programme design, validation and learner assessment. The NFQ has been significant in promoting a ‘learning outcomes’ approach to qualifications. The learning outcomes approach can influence the quality of teaching and learning. In Ireland, learning outcomes were first introduced in the apprenticeship system in 1991. However, it was only when the NFQ was launched in 2003 that the definition and use of the term ‘learning outcomes’ was systematically reflected in policy.¹⁰ In Section 3.2 we discuss the adaption of the learning outcome approach in Ireland since the advent of the NFQ, while Section 3.3 focuses on the impact of the NFQ on the quality of qualifications.

3.2 Learning Outcomes Approach

Adopting a learning outcomes approach when developing curricula is seen by many European as an effective way to ensure the matching of education and training provision to learner and labour market needs appropriate.¹¹ This approach seeks to identify what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process. A review of the implementation and impact of the NFQ undertaken by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland¹² in 2009 recognised that the adoption of a learning outcomes approach entails a long-term cultural shift that will take time and require continued attention. The report found that in 2009:

“The extent to which this shift (in teaching and learning from inputs to outputs) 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 NFQ was introduced.”

The 2009 report recommended that universities and their affiliates should advance framework implementation and deepen the implementation of the learning outcomes approach. A recent CEDEFOP study on the application of the learning outcomes approach in European education and training policies and practices attributes progress to date to the emergence of comprehensive learning outcomes-based national qualification frameworks including explicit learning outcomes-based levels aligned with the EQF. The report found that this process has raised awareness among all stakeholders about learning outcomes approaches. The findings of the report suggest the successful implementation of learning outcomes-oriented policies requires a top-down and bottom-up approach. The bottom-up approach is essential for real changes in institutional practices.¹³ The Indecon stakeholder engagement process indicated that the learning outcome approach has now become an integral part of the Irish education and training system. The transition to the learning outcomes approach was reported as having initially been a challenge for

¹⁰ See: <https://data.gov.ie/publisher/quality-and-qualifications-ireland>

¹¹ Learning outcomes approaches in VET curricula A comparative analysis of nine European countries, European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (2010).

¹² NQAI (2009) *Framework Implementation and Impact Study Report*

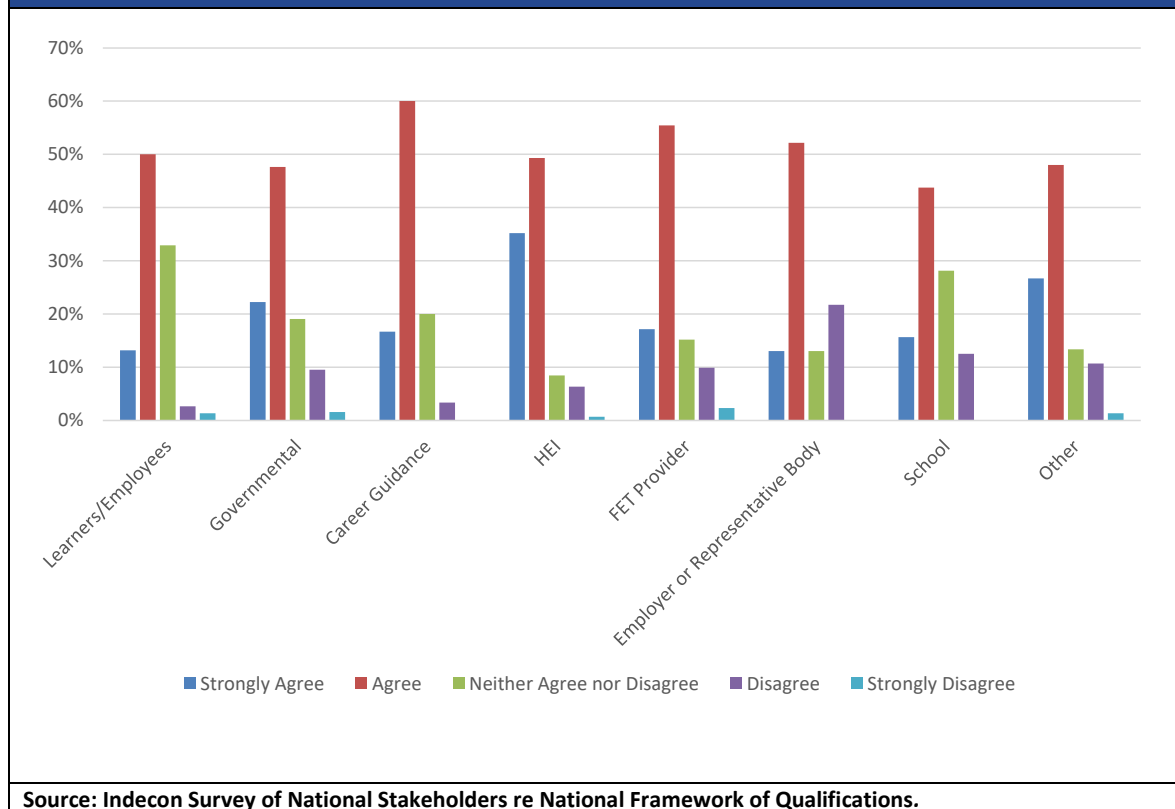
¹³ CEDEFOP Application of Learning-Outcomes-Based Approaches Across Europe: A Comparative Study.

the education and training system as a whole, though that the sector had progressed significantly in this regard. The research indicates a very high level of support for the contention that the NFQ has had a positive impact on course design; teaching practice; assessment practice; and the monitoring of standards.

Table 3.1: Stakeholder Views on the Impact of the NFQ on Teaching, Learning and Assessment practice					
	Percent of Responses				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The learning outcomes approach of the NFQ has improved the practice of course and curricula design	21%	53%	16%	8%	2%
The learning outcomes approach of the NFQ has improved teaching and learning practice	15%	49%	24%	9%	3%
The learning outcomes approach of the NFQ has improved assessment practice	18%	51%	20%	8%	2%
The learning outcomes approach of the NFQ has improved how standards of courses and curricula are monitored and maintained	16%	47%	25%	9%	3%
The NFQ has made a positive contribution to the enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment	19%	51%	22%	6%	2%
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications					

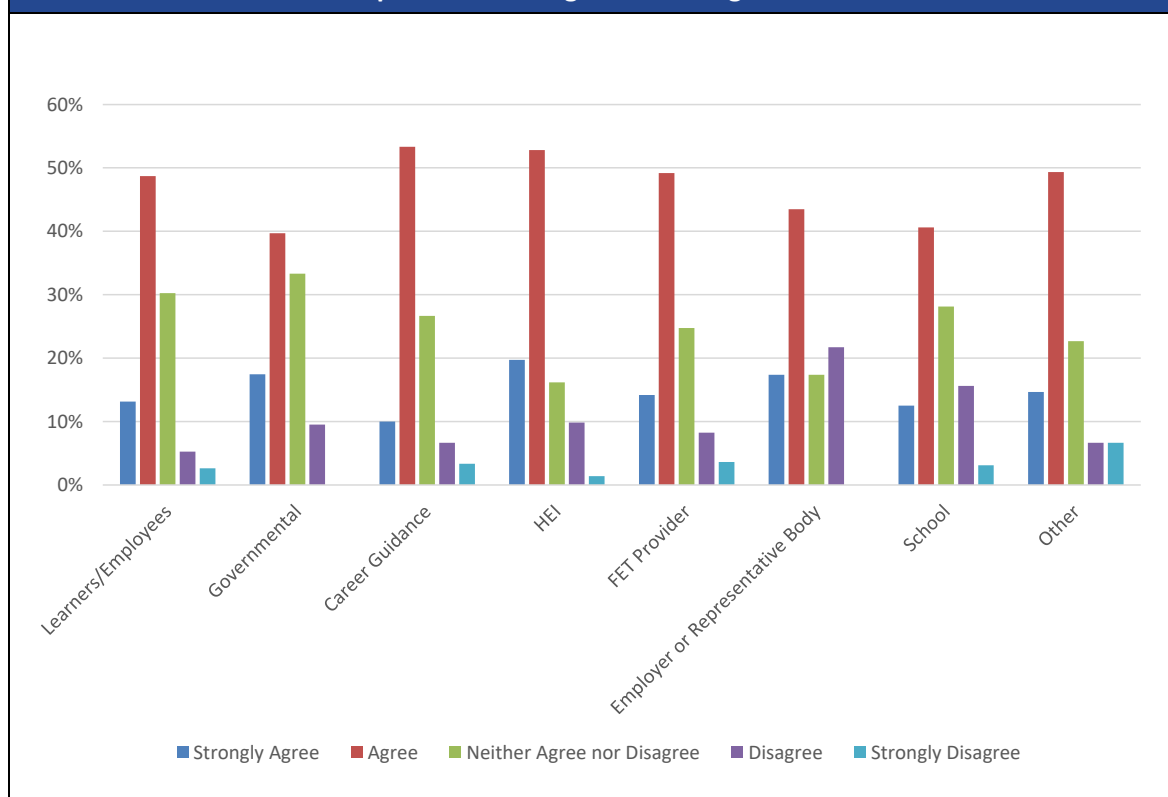
The breakdown of these views by stakeholder groups is shown in the subsequent figures. The figure below is in relation to the impact on course design, and shows very strong support across all stakeholder groups for the contention that the NFQ has had a positive effect. In light of the recommendation in the 2009 report to deepen the implementation of the learning outcomes approach in the university sector, it is reassuring to see high levels of agreement among HEI stakeholders on the benefits of this approach as can be seen in the subsequent figures.

Figure 3.1: Stakeholder Views on whether the Learning Outcomes Approach of the NFQ has Improved the Practice of Course and Curricula Design



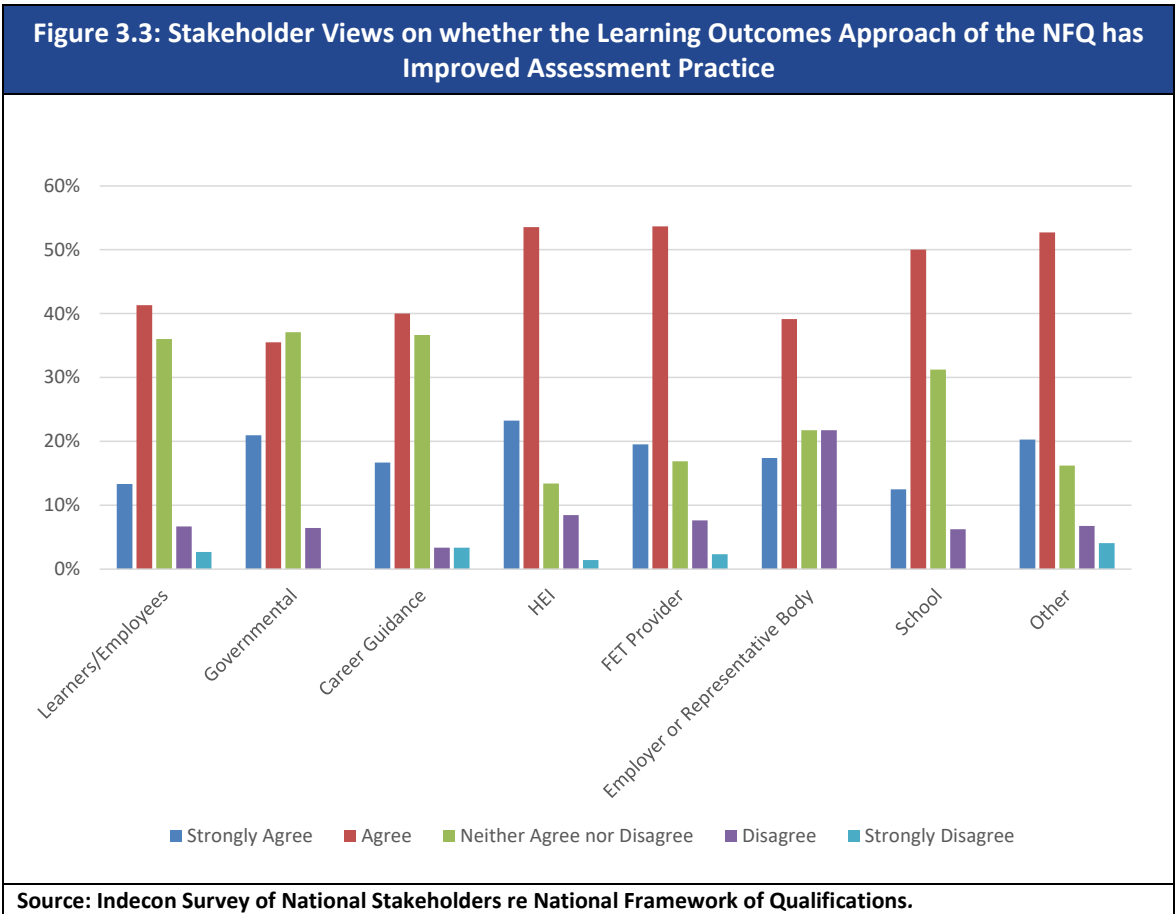
The figure below focuses on the impact on improving teaching and learning practice. The survey indicates very high levels of support for the impact of the NFQ. For teachers as a separate group (not reported in the figure below), 60% either agreed or strongly agreed that the NFQ had positively impacted teaching and learning practice.

Figure 3.2: Stakeholder Views on whether the Learning Outcomes Approach of the NFQ has Improved Teaching and Learning Practice



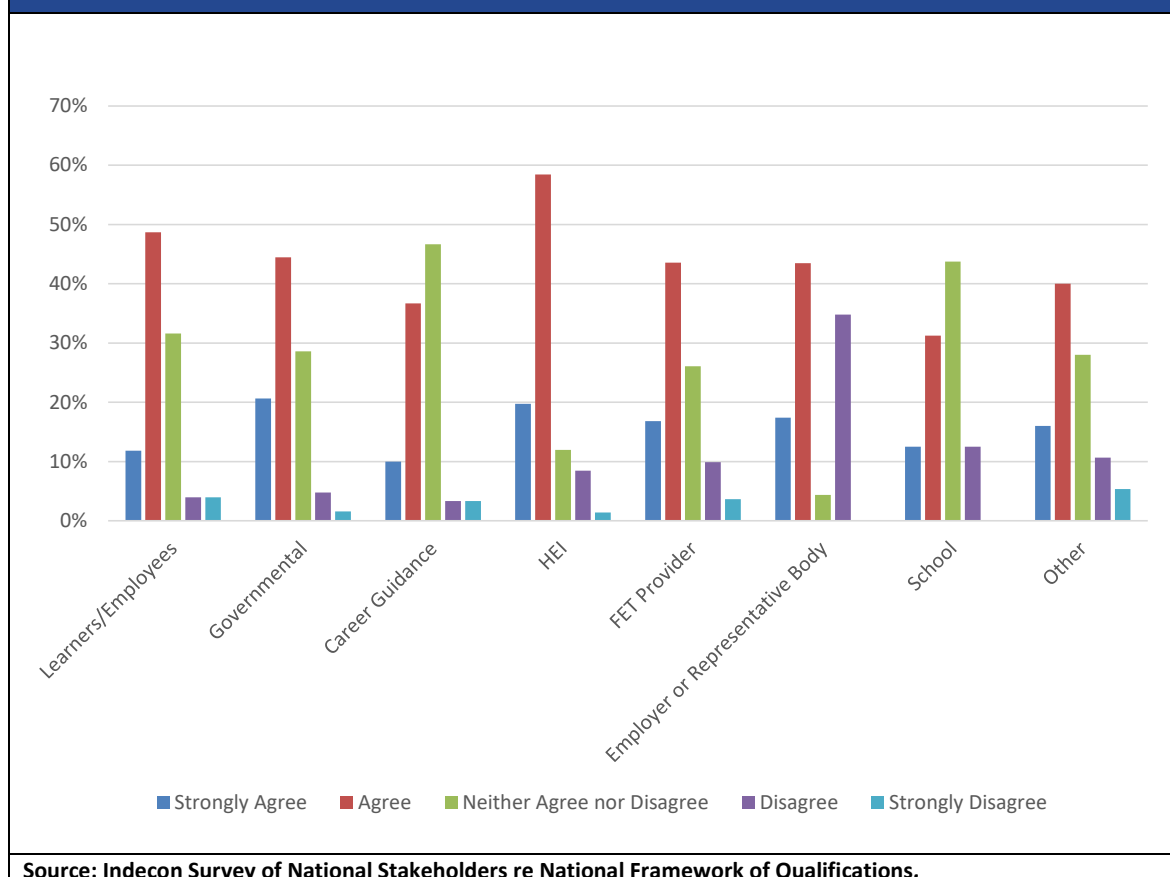
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications.

Stakeholders across all categories also felt that the NFQ had a positive impact on assessment practice. This is reported in the figure below.



The figure below shows the range of stakeholder views on the standards of monitoring and maintenance of courses and curricula, and again shows consistent support for the contention that the NFQ has had a positive impact.

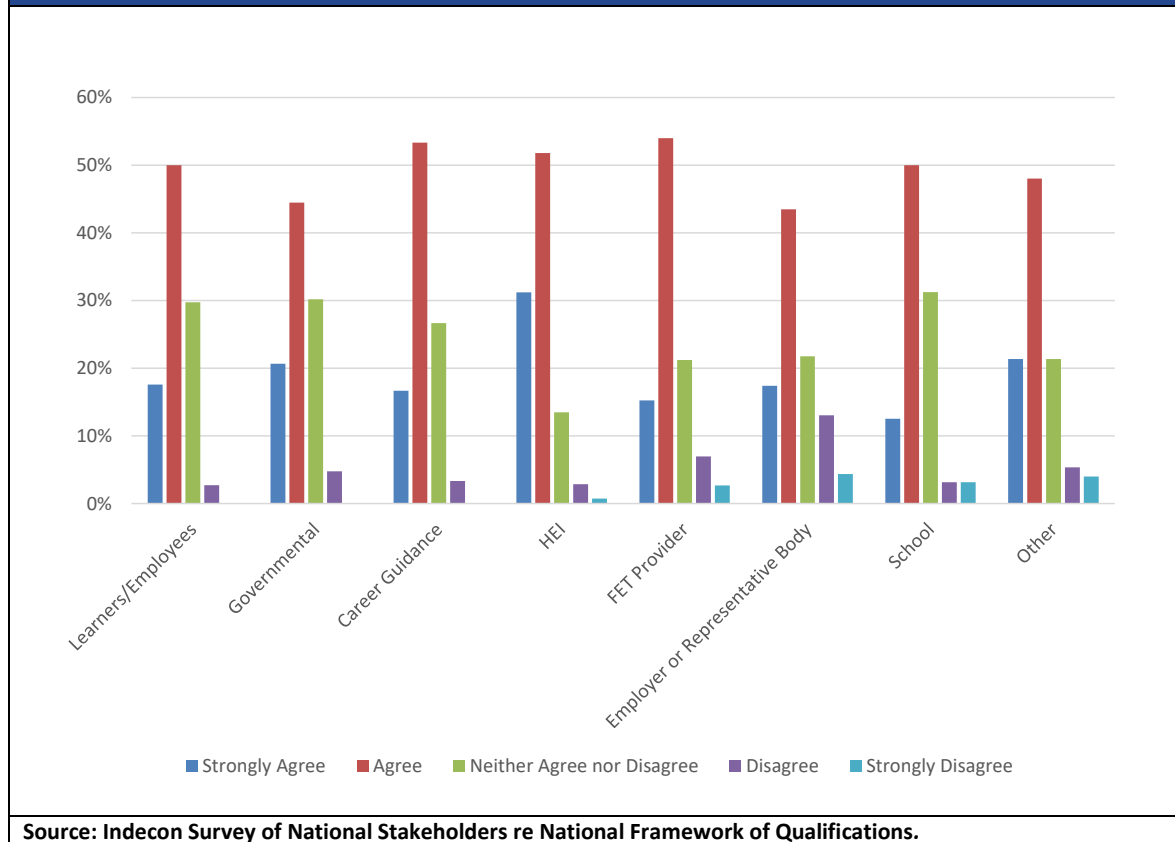
Figure 3.4: Stakeholder Views on whether the Learning Outcomes Approach has Improved how Standards of Courses and Curricula are Monitored and Maintained



Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications.

The final graph below shows strong agreement across all stakeholder groups for the contribution of the NFQ on overall teaching, learning and assessment.

Figure 3.5: Stakeholder Views on whether the NFQ has made a Positive Contribution to the Enhancement of Teaching, Learning and Assessment



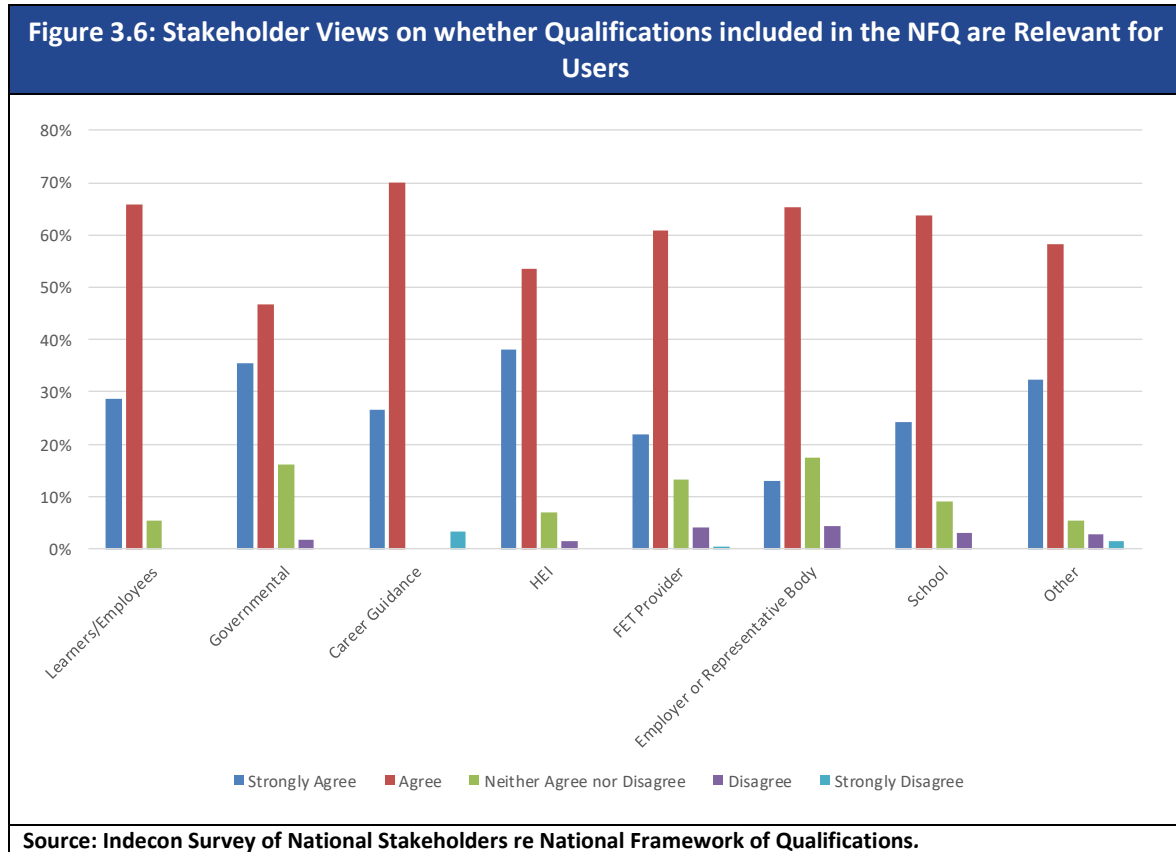
3.3 Quality of Qualifications

The survey questionnaire asked a number of questions in relation to the impact of the NFQ on the quality of education and training qualifications. The key results are shown in the table below. They indicate strong support for the contention that the NFQ has enhanced the quality and relevance of qualifications in Ireland. There is also strong agreement for the contention that these standards are consistently high. In the subsequent figures these responses are broken down by stakeholder groups. In the stakeholder engagement process, a view was expressed that the NFQ has had the effect of raising standards of private colleges. Concerns about the trustworthiness of certain qualifications offered to international students are being addressed, in part, by using the NFQ in regulatory reform of international education in Ireland.

Table 3.2: Stakeholder Views on the Impact of the NFQ on Quality

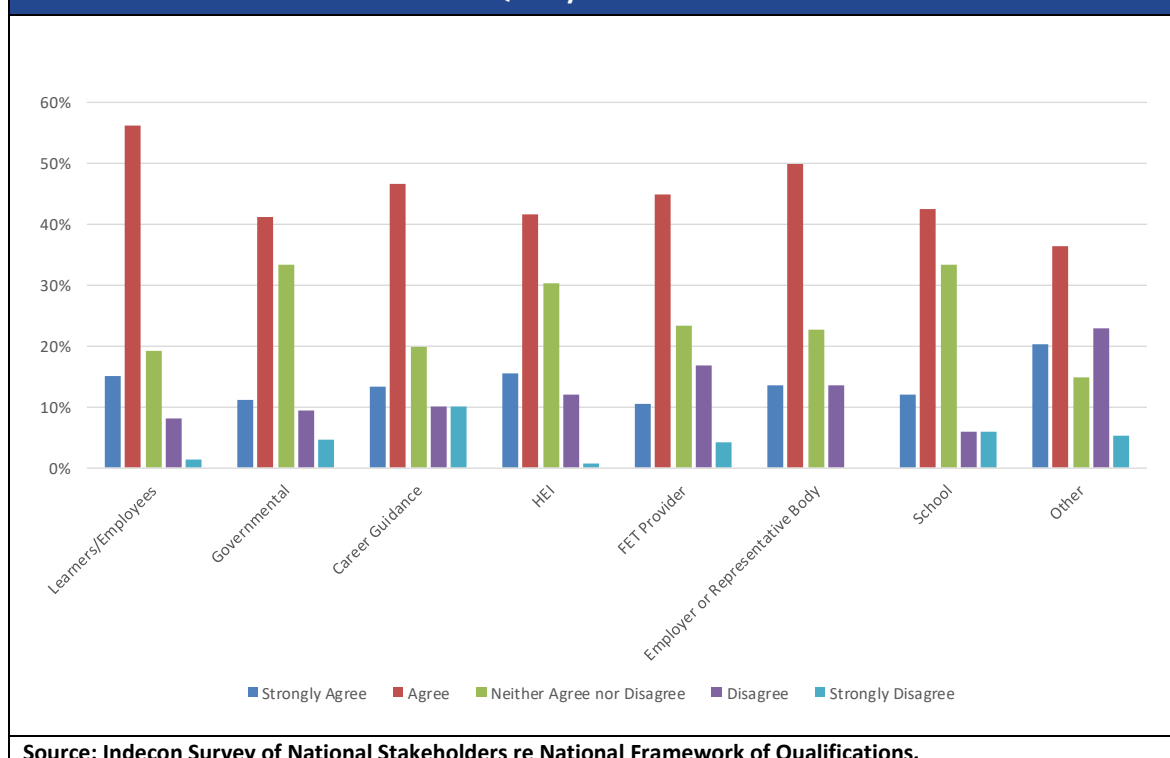
	Percent of Responses				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Qualifications included in the NFQ are relevant for users (learners, employers etc.)	27%	59%	10%	3%	0%
Qualifications included in the NFQ meet consistent quality standards wherever they are provided	12%	45%	24%	15%	4%
Qualifications included in the NFQ are highly trusted, nationally and internationally	18%	50%	24%	8%	1%
Overall, the NFQ has enhanced the quality of qualifications in Ireland	27%	51%	15%	6%	1%
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications					

The breakdown of the stakeholder responses to the other questions are provided below. They show that in terms of the relevance of qualifications included in the NFQ, the high level of agreement was observed across different categories, and was virtually unanimous among Career Guidance professionals.



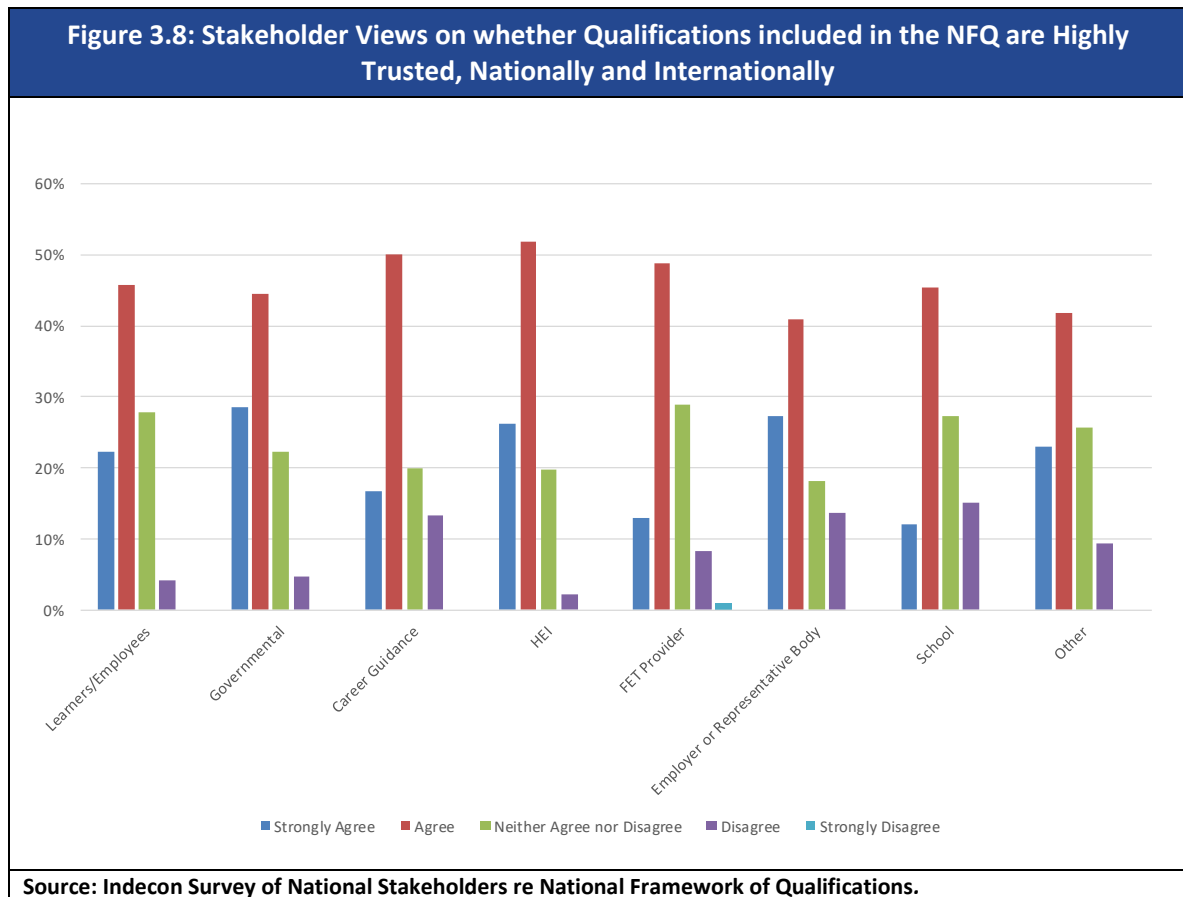
The figure below shows stakeholders responses when asked if the NFQ meets consistent quality standards, which again shows strong support across the different stakeholder categories. Stakeholder interviews suggested a number of ongoing concerns regarding the treatment of certain qualifications, and their placement on the NFQ. For example, the placement of two major awards at Level 6 is deemed by some stakeholders to be confusing. A number of interviewees also reported confusion in respect of the Leaving Certificate being spread across two levels, Level 4 and Level 5. Other concerns raised related to variable standards of knowledge, skill and competence associated with the same qualifications achieved in different providers.

Figure 3.7: Stakeholder Views on whether Qualifications included in the NFQ meet Consistent Quality Standards

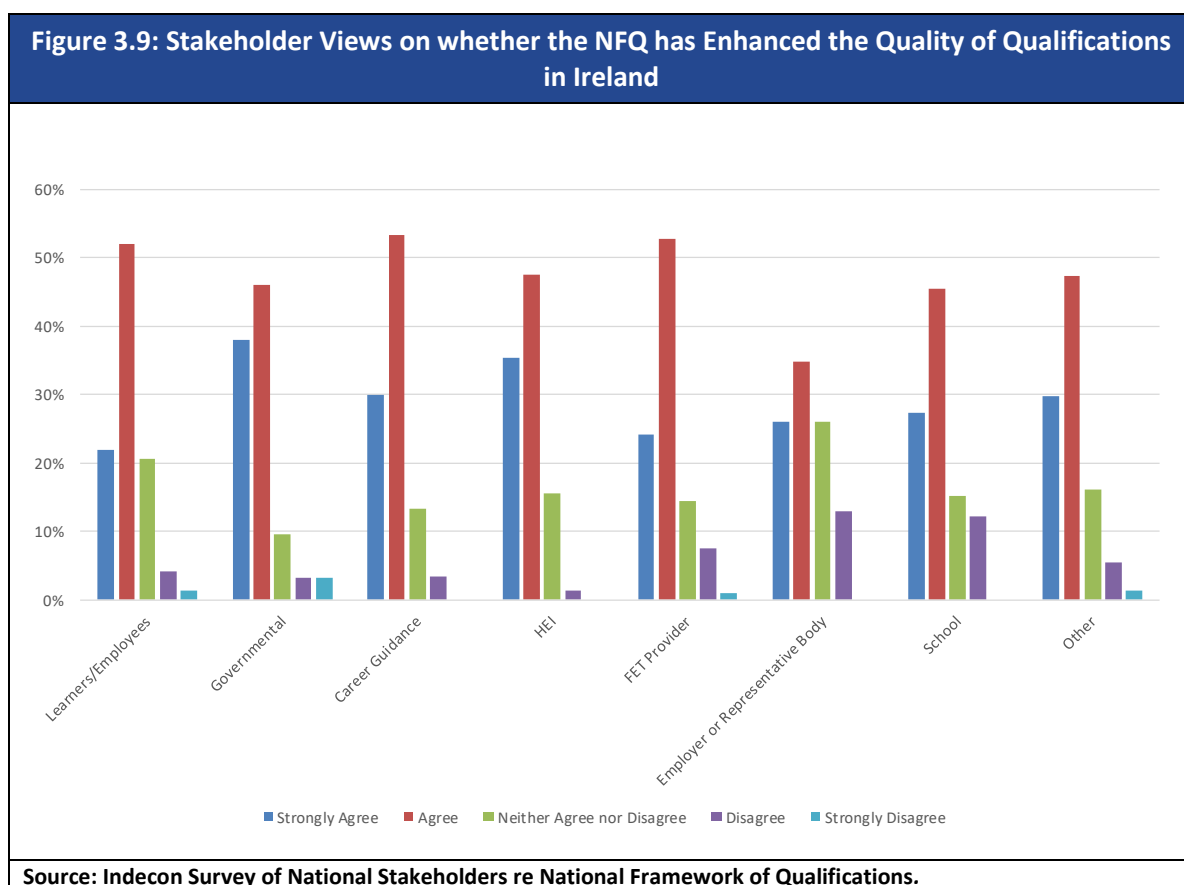


Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications.

The figure below shows stakeholder responses when asked if NFQ qualifications are highly trusted, nationally and internationally.



Finally, the figure below shows stakeholder responses when asked if NFQ has enhanced the quality of education and training qualifications in Ireland. Again, the support was high among stakeholder groups, though least strong among employers and their representative bodies.



The table below reports a selection of survey participants' responses to the open-ended question provided.

Table 3.3: Selected Additional Commentary
"Very difficult to monitor the quality of teaching and learning and to ensure consistency of delivery of course content or work experience from one institution and another."
"There are many positives to the NFQ and it has brought a fair degree of consistency to the training and education environment in Ireland. As a regulatory body, the NFQ has been invaluable [for us] in benchmarking national and international qualifications."
"For our sector (recognised English language schools) the NFQ does not always meet our assessment needs. The NFQ does recognise teaching qualifications but English-language proficiency awards (e.g. Cambridge) do not appear on the NFQ."
"The introduction of the NFQ and associated quality benchmarks has been a very positive development. My concerns relate to the implementation of the NFQ and quality assurance procedures within FET and HE. I think in some cases requirements of the NFQ are not followed and that the quality of teaching and learning experiences has not improved nor has the practice changed in any way - teaching is not to learning outcomes and there is a lack of constructive alignment."
"The social outcomes of learning are underdeveloped within the NFQ. There is an exclusive focus on employment outcomes at the expense of outcomes to nurture engagement in other spheres of life."
"The success of the NFQ is dependent on the quality control procedures present at the different levels of education and training. My experience across various levels of the NFQ is that the movement of quality control processes to providers with no outside monitoring has diminished much of the positive impact the NFQ should have."
"Protecting the integrity of learning and assessment requires closer monitoring. There are still discrepancies in the interpretation of standards between providers."
"As the NFQ encourages providers to consider the application of the knowledge, skills and competencies as well as their acquisition, examples of best practise would only serve to assist in high quality curricula design, teaching and learning practise, assessments and maintenance of academic practise."
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications.

3.4 Summary of Findings

This section discussed the views of stakeholders as to the impact of the NFQ on the quality of teaching and learning as a result of the introduction of the NFQ. A summary of the findings are as follows:

- ❑ In Ireland, learning outcomes were first introduced in the apprenticeship system in 1991. This study finds that 'learning outcomes' was only systematically reflected in policy following the introduction of the NFQ and that learning outcomes-referenced qualifications have now become an integral part of the Irish education system.
- ❑ The views expressed in the stakeholder interviews conducted by Indecon were generally supportive of the role that the NFQ has had on the quality of teaching, while the survey evidence suggested very strong support.
- ❑ The stakeholder survey indicates strong support for the contention that the NFQ has enhanced the quality and relevance of education and training qualifications in Ireland. There is also strong agreement for the contention that although expected standards are high, there are still concerns about problematic variance in the level of graduate learning outcomes achieved across comparable qualifications included in the NFQ.

4 Promoting Qualification Progression

4.1 Introduction

A central vision for the NFQ is the development of a qualifications system that focuses on the needs of the learner and that promotes lifelong learning. Importantly, this envisages the development of integrated pathways between qualifications. However, the NFQ is only a single policy instrument, and learners' experience of genuine opportunities for progression and transfer is multi-dimensional and multi-causal.

The technical elements of work needed to deliver on the vision of pathways between qualifications were captured in the original National Qualifications Authority's policies on access, transfer and progression. These include requirements to:

- ☐ Develop an integrated Framework;
- ☐ Identify and realise a network of clearly signposted transfer and progression routes through the NFQ;
- ☐ Ensure that learners have entry arrangements to all programmes leading to awards in the NFQ that are fair, transparent, and compliant with equality legislation; and,
- ☐ Ensure that accurate and reliable information is available to all learners.

This section assesses reported perceptions about the extent to which the NFQ promotes educational progression. However, the absence of comprehensive objective data on actual progression pathways and their use makes it difficult to isolate the impact of the NFQ. As such, the analysis focuses on stakeholder views on the role of the NFQ in progression possibilities in practice.

4.2 Qualifications Progression

The stakeholder survey asked respondents about the extent to which the NFQ has impacted on the progression opportunities for qualifications. The results are shown in the table below. Generally speaking, the level of support was very high. A large majority of respondents stated that they ‘Strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ with the statements that the NFQ has facilitated improved access to education and training (68%); improved progression between qualifications (81%); and made it easier to value learning achieved outside of the education system (63%).

Table 4.1: Stakeholder Views on the Impact of the NFQ on Progression Routes for Qualifications					
	Percent of Responses				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The NFQ has facilitated improved access to education and training courses	20%	48%	25%	7%	0%
The NFQ has improved progression between qualifications achieved in school, in further and in higher education and training	24%	57%	14%	6%	0%
The NFQ has made it easier to value and recognise learning and qualifications achieved outside of the formal/public education and training system	14%	49%	23%	12%	2%
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications					

The breakdown of the stakeholder responses to the other questions is provided below. It shows stakeholder views on the extent to which the NFQ has facilitated improved access to education and training courses, and shows uniformity of view across different stakeholder groups.

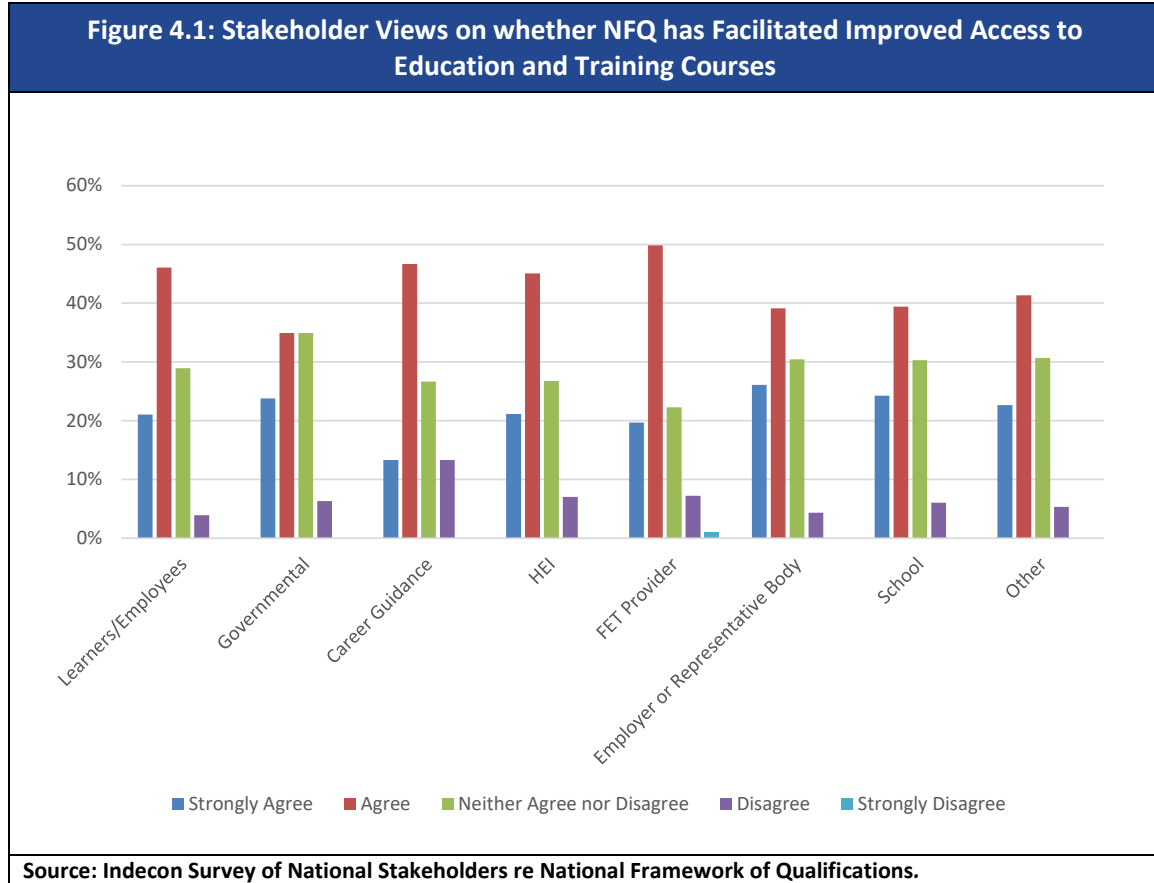
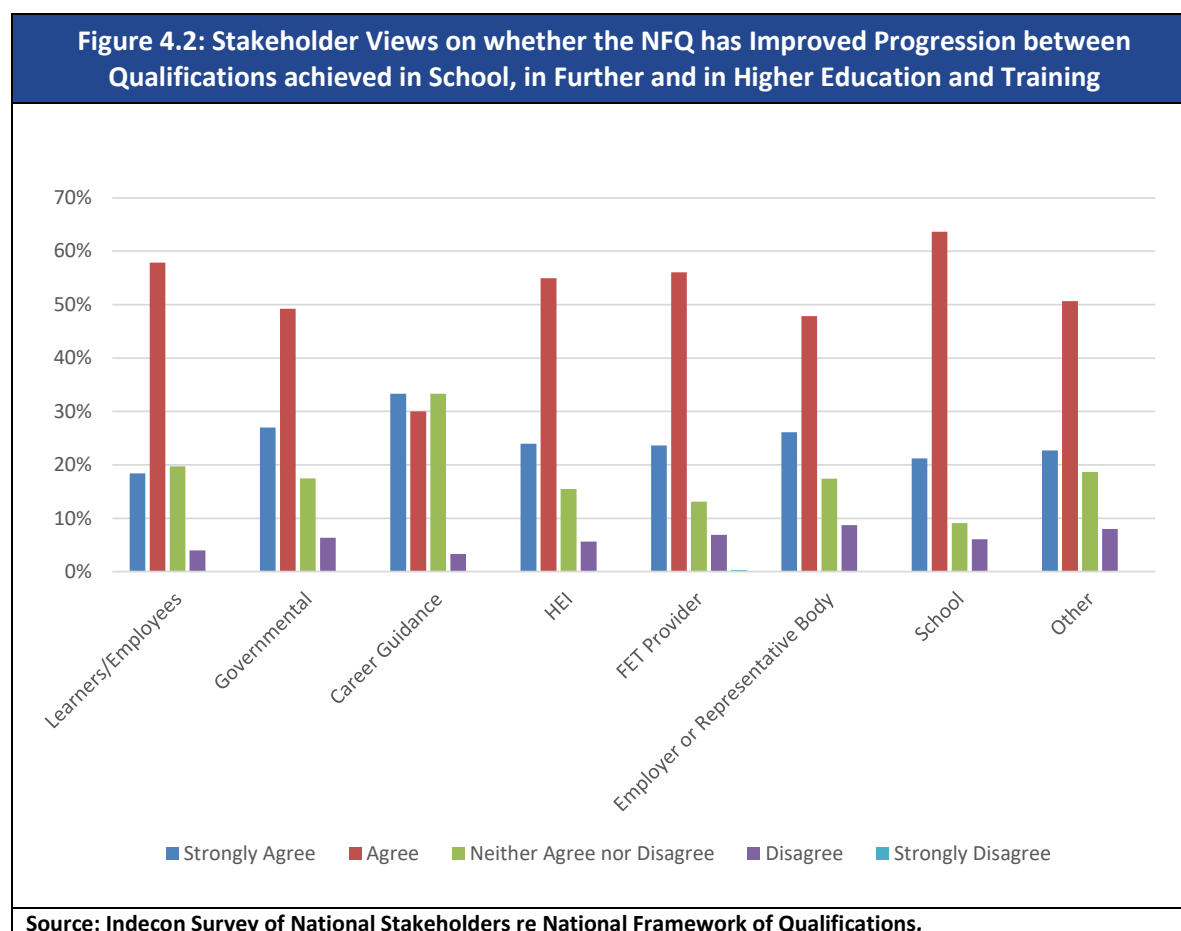
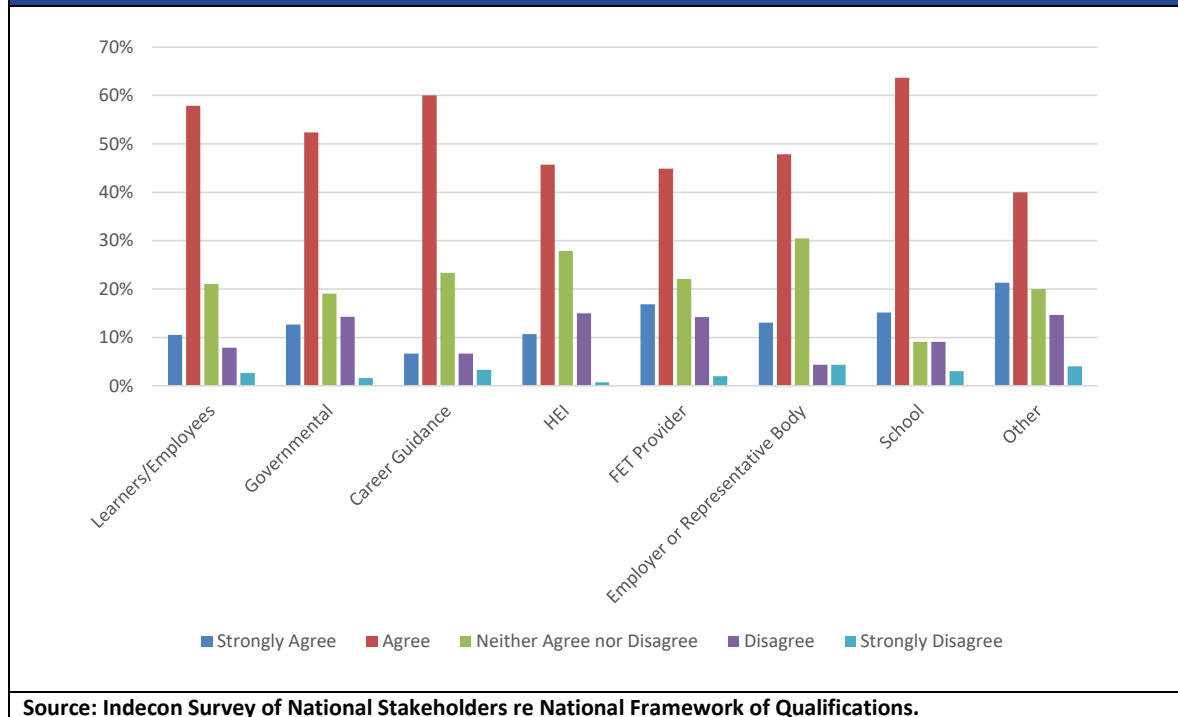


Figure 4.2 shows stakeholder responses when asked if the NFQ has improved progression between qualifications achieved in school, in further education, and in higher education and training. A similar pattern is observed as with the previous questions, with a high level of support observable across different stakeholder groups. The views expressed by the Career Guidance profession showed the greatest spread of opinion.



The figure below shows stakeholders' responses when asked if NFQ has made it easier to value and recognise learning and qualifications achieved outside of the education and training system.

Figure 4.3: Stakeholder Views on whether the NFQ has made it easier to Value and Recognise Learning and Qualifications achieved outside of the Education and Training System



The engagement with stakeholders in the Further Education (FE) sector indicated, however, a consistent view that the NFQ ideal of progression does not work in practice. In particular, a number of respondents indicated that progression in practice lacks transparency, and that local/regional arrangements with particular educational institutions still prevail. The example was given that while progression opportunities to Higher Education from Level 5 courses are advantaged through the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS), the value of a Level 6 qualification from a FET course does not hold a strong value and progression has to be negotiated outside of HELS.

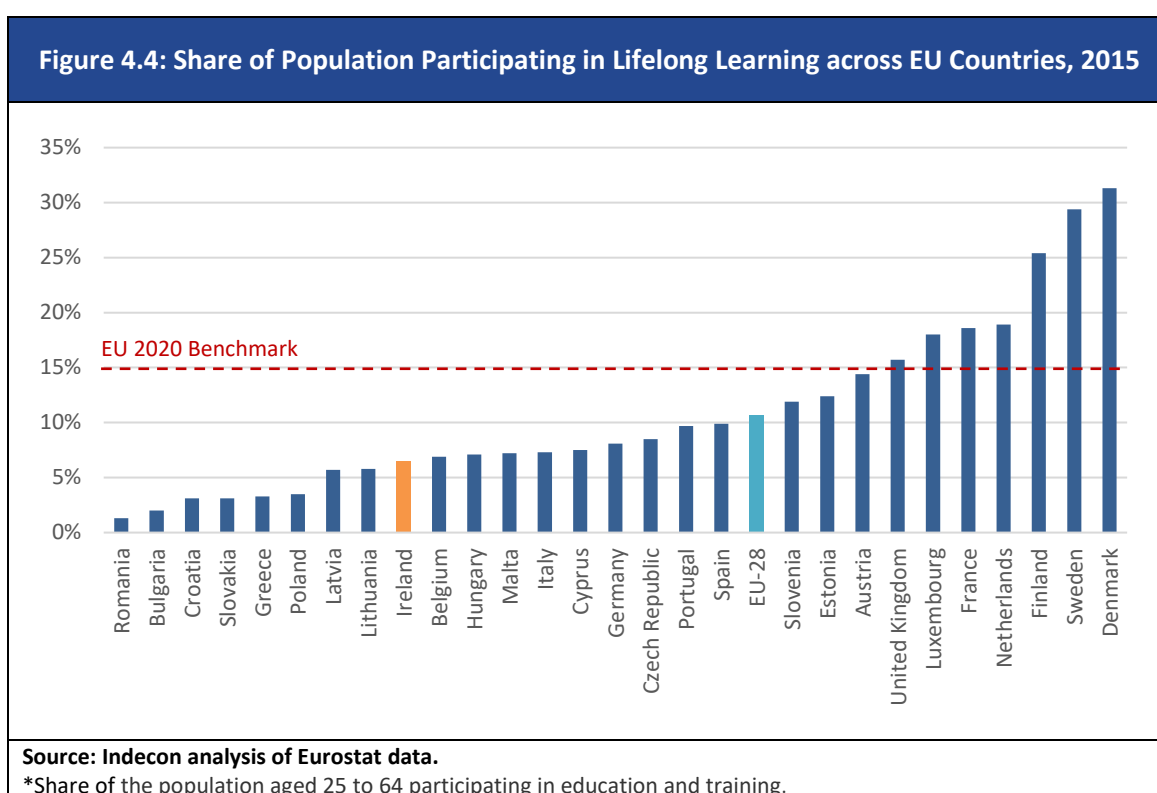
The following specific issues were raised during the consultation:

- ☐ Difficulties in promoting FET opportunities to leaving certificate students;
- ☐ A view that Guidance Counsellors are only interested in progression to higher education and training in response to the drive from parents, media and school leaders; and,
- ☐ Direct entry links from FE courses can be created, but this involves negotiation with each Institute of Technology or University. FET courses have to monitor the entry requirements for Institutes of Technology and Universities in order to ensure that the correct subjects are being included in the FET provision.

A more general issue raised by a large number of stakeholders was the perceived excessive importance the Irish education system, and Irish society generally, places on higher education and university education in particular compared to other forms of training such as Further Education or Apprenticeships.

4.3 Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is an issue of increasing importance in government policy in Ireland. A 2016 EGFSN/SOLAS report on adult participation in lifelong learning in Ireland noted that Ireland is below the EU-28 average in terms of the share of population participating in lifelong learning. The EU Education and Training framework set a benchmark target of 15% of adults aged 25 to 64 to be participating in education and training by 2020, which is more than twice the current Irish level.

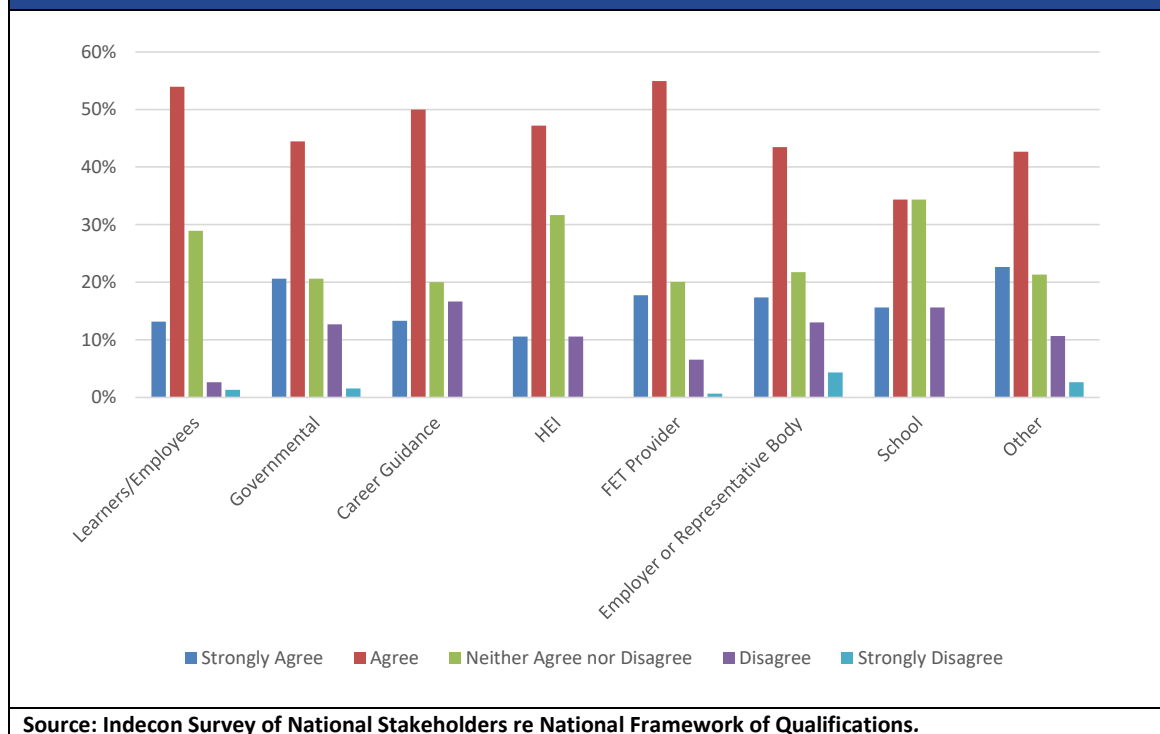


Lifelong learning featured prominently in Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 which was launched in 2016. The strategy aims to increase the number of flexible formal and informal learning opportunities; promote greater recognition of prior learning and workplace learning; and restructure the FET sector to enhance transitions between FET, HET, and employment. The survey data showed strong support for the contention that the NFQ had improved the prospects for lifelong learning. The stakeholder consultation exercise also indicated that the NFQ is beneficial for learners in building up their personal skills portfolio through lifelong learning and continuing professional development.

Table 4.2: Stakeholder Views on the Impact of the NFQ on Lifelong Learning

	Percent of Responses				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The NFQ has contributed to improving Ireland's national performance in the area of Lifelong Learning	17%	50%	24%	8%	1%
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications					

The figure below shows stakeholder responses when asked if the NFQ has contributed to improving Ireland's national performance in the area of Lifelong Learning. Again, support was consistently high among stakeholder groups, though a significant minority of Higher Education Institutes either disagreed or had no opinion.

Figure 4.5: Stakeholder Views on whether the NFQ has Contributed to Improving Ireland's National Performance in the area of Lifelong Learning

At the end of the Indecon survey, respondents were invited to provide any additional commentary on the impact of the NFQ regarding the promotion of educational progression. The table below reports a selection of responses.

Table 4.3: Selected Views of Survey Respondents on Impacts of NFQ on Promotion of Educational Progression
“While the NFQ (table) is a clear system and easy to understand, working within its parameters and with QQI has proved neither accessible nor transparent for specialist providers and in turn our learners...There is currently little provision for accredited modular programmes, to support lifelong learning and professional development.”
“The NFQ has achieved its goals and facilitated ATP across the sector.”
“Learners invariably don't understand the NFQ and what the levels mean relative to their own learning. In Ireland when it comes to progression we are very focused on programme specifics so we don't view the learner solely in the context of the level of their learning but also on the content. This is restrictive in terms of progression of a learner who may have 70-80% of the learning covered under a different type of programme.”
“With regard to NFQ, my problem is lack of consistency across further and third level education. What the NFQ says it is and what it actually does and mean in reality are poles apart. At the very outset when students are making a career choice they need to know what progression options and pathways are open to them once they embark on a particular education route, rather than arrive in college and realise that there is nowhere to go for them after they qualify.”
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications

4.4 Summary of Findings

This section reviewed the extent to which the NFQ promotes progression across qualification levels and the extent to which it promotes lifelong learning. A summary of the findings are as follows:

- ❑ The stakeholder survey showed very high support for the contention that the NFQ had impacted on the progression of qualifications. A large majority of respondents stated that they ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ with the statements that the NFQ has improved access to education and training (68%); improved progression between qualifications (81%); and, made it easier to value and recognise learning and qualifications achieved outside of the education and training system (63%).
- ❑ The consultation with stakeholders in the Further Education (FE) sector indicated a consistent view that the NFQ ideal of progression does not work in practice; progression opportunities lack transparency; and, local arrangements with particular institutions still dominate.
- ❑ Lifelong learning forms a prominent component of the Ireland’s National Skills Strategy 2025, which was launched in 2016. This review finds strong support among stakeholders for the contention that the NFQ supports lifelong learning.

5 International Mobility

5.1 Introduction

The increasing internationalisation of education and training qualifications systems and Ireland's position within this context is discussed in detail in the first of a planned series of policy insights into qualifications in Ireland.¹⁴ Competitiveness and economic growth are motivating factors for ensuring a national education system has international credibility. Advancements in ICT and digital technologies and growth in international migration has meant that international organisations are requesting transparency of national qualification systems. In 2009, Ireland was one of the first countries to reference its NFQ to the EQF as outlined in the introductory section of this report. The 2009 Framework Implementation and Impact Study also recommended that the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad and international qualifications in Ireland should remain a key element of the work of the qualifications authority.

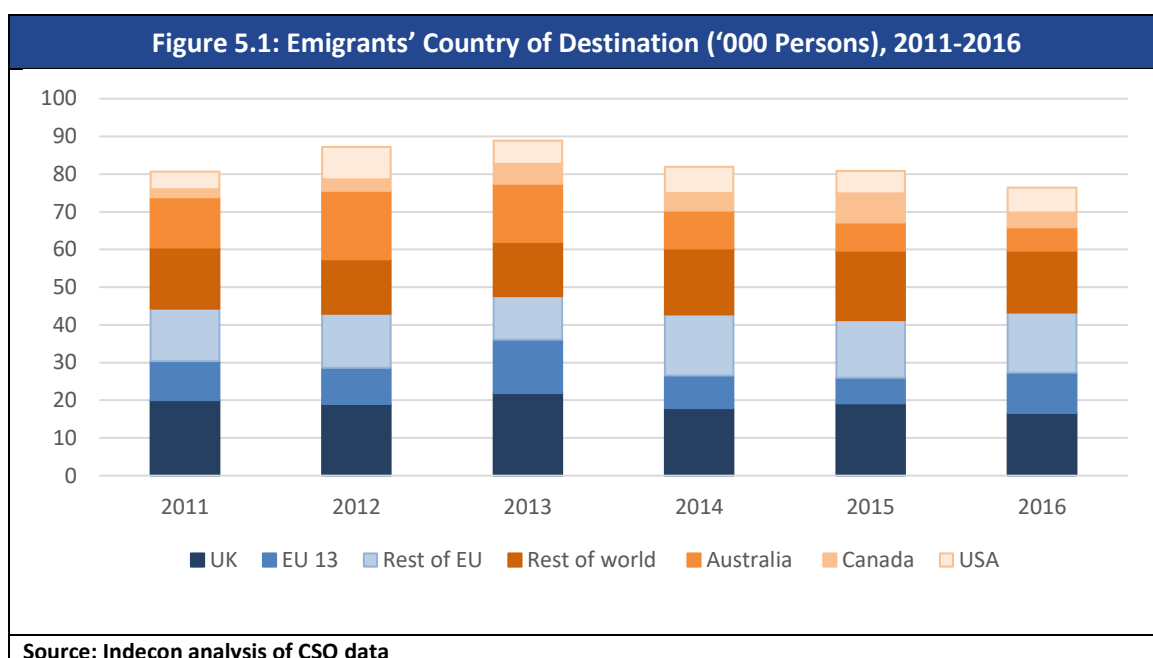
Ireland has always been characterised by very significant flows of inward and outward migrants, and their ability to fully utilise their skills and qualifications is important both individually and in terms of the broader economy. This section examines the extent to which the NFQ improves the international mobility of qualifications, in particular regarding the perception of Irish qualifications abroad (Section 5.2) and the perception of foreign qualifications in Ireland (Section 5.3). We also discuss the specific issue of Ireland as a destination for international students (Section 5.4).

5.2 Perceptions of Irish Qualifications Abroad

5.2.1 Emigration from Ireland

Ireland's economy is characterised by high levels of migrant flows. The figure overleaf shows that approximately 80,000 people per year emigrated from Ireland in the period 2011-2016. While the aggregate number of emigrants has been in decline since 2013, it still remains at around 1.5% of the size of the total population. Since 2011, a majority of emigrants from Ireland moved to another country within the European Union, with the UK being the single more important destination. However, a substantial minority of persons (45-50%) emigrate to non-EU countries. This pattern of migrant flows might change further in the aftermath of Brexit. A challenge for policymakers is to ensure that the education and training qualifications of people educated in Ireland is not only well recognised within the European Union, but can also be understood, compared, and valued globally.

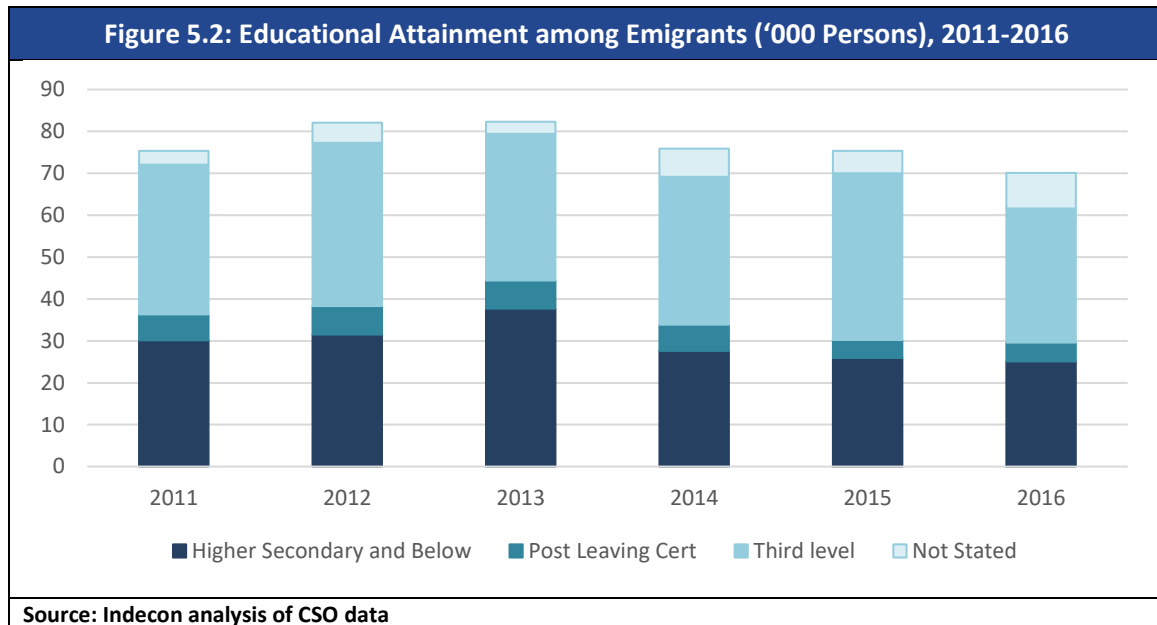
¹⁴ QQI National Qualifications Frameworks: Reflections and Trajectories.



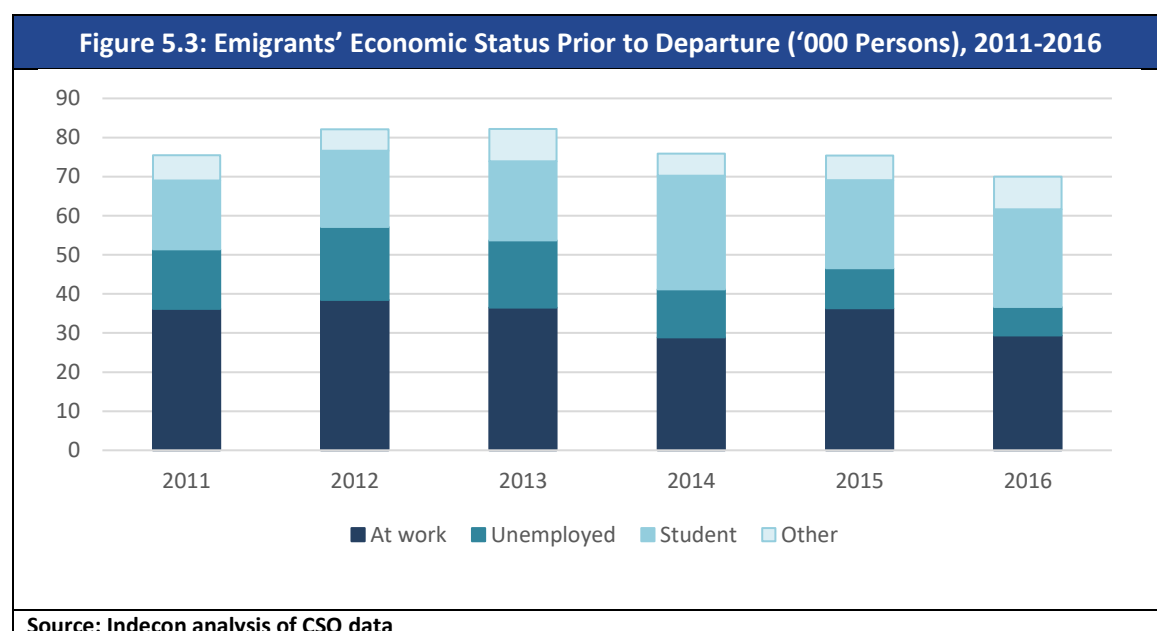
The European Union established the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) in 2008, and today 33 countries have related their national qualifications frameworks to the EQF. Ireland was one of the first countries to reference its own NFQ levels to the EQF in 2009. Many countries outside Europe also wish to establish a relationship between their NQFs to the EQF (for example, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong (SAR), India, United Arab Emirates). There is also interest from owners of international sectoral qualifications in having qualifications related to an EQF level.¹⁵

¹⁵ See: <http://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/National%20Qualifications%20Frameworks%20Reflections%20and%20Trajectories.pdf>.

Emigrants from Ireland often have high skill levels. As seen in the figure below, a majority of emigrants from Ireland have had a third-level education, though a smaller but still significant minority of emigrants have higher secondary education or below. It is important to note that these figures include not only Irish persons moving abroad, but also non-Irish persons who had previously come to Ireland to live, study, and/or work.



The majority of emigrants from Ireland had been labour market participants at the time of leaving. This can be seen in Figure 5.3 below. However, students represent a substantial and growing share of emigrants, increasing from 23% of emigrants in 2011 to 36% of emigrants in 2016. The EU Education and Training strategic framework set a benchmark that at least 20% of higher education graduates and 6% of 18- to 34-year-olds with an initial vocational qualification should have spent some time studying or training abroad by 2020.



5.2.2 Recognition of Irish Qualifications Abroad

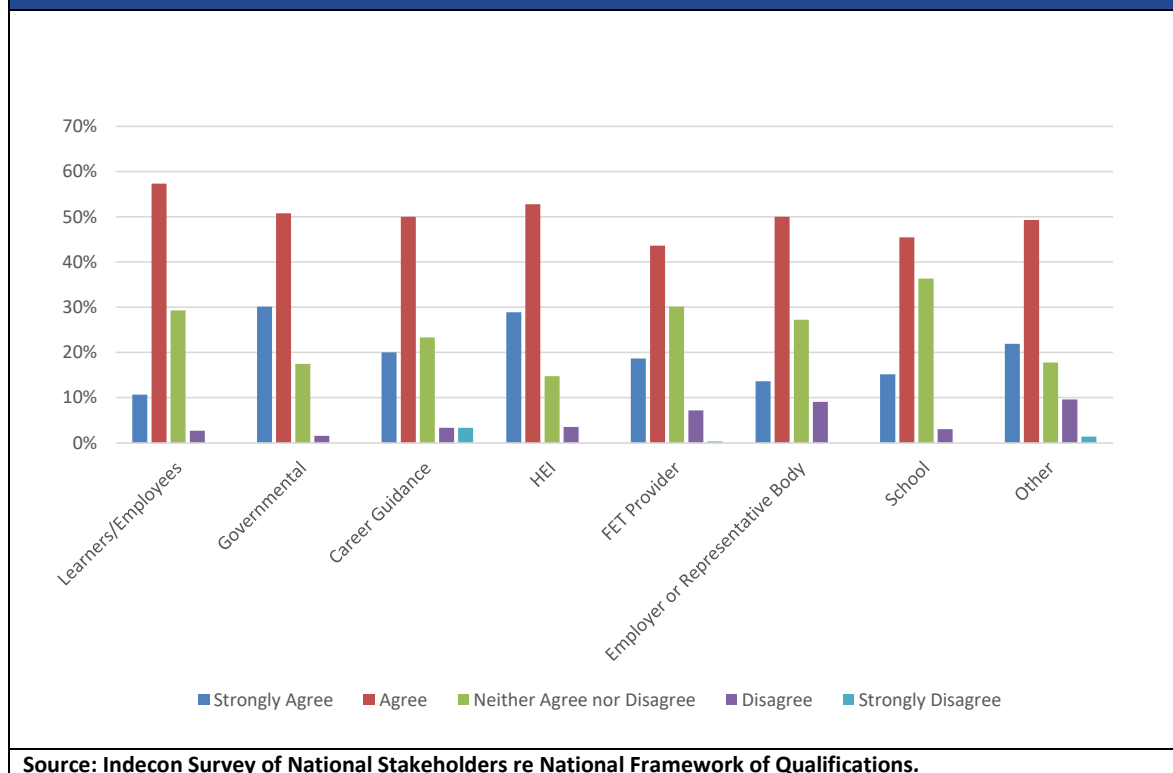
The survey questionnaire asked a number of questions in relation to the international recognition of qualifications awarded in Ireland. Respondents expressed general agreement that the NFQ has made it easier for Irish qualifications to be understood, compared and valued in other countries.

Table 5.1: Stakeholder Views on whether the NFQ has Made it Easier for Irish Qualifications to be Understood, Compared and Valued in Other Countries					
	Percent of Responses				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The NFQ has made it easier for Irish qualifications to be understood, compared and valued in other countries	21%	48%	24%	6%	0%

Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications

The breakdown of the stakeholder responses to this question is provided below. This shows a high level of agreement across all respondent groups to this statement. However, given that this question relates to emigrants who, by definition, at some point chose to leave Ireland, it is possible that the direct experience of learners who completed this survey is limited and these results should be treated with caution. The Learner/Employee and the HEI stakeholder groups expressed the greatest proportion that strongly agreed or agreed.

Figure 5.4: Stakeholder Views on whether the NFQ has Made it Easier for Irish Qualifications to be Understood, Compared and Valued in Other Countries – Detailed Breakdown by Category of Respondent

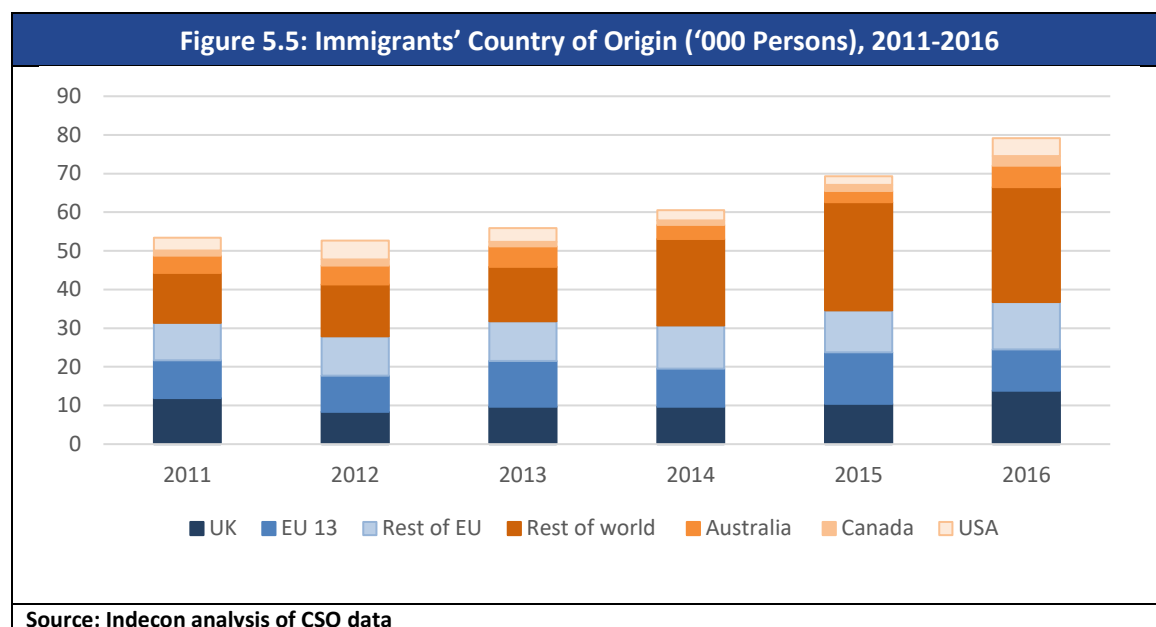


Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications.

5.3 Recognition of Foreign Qualifications in Ireland

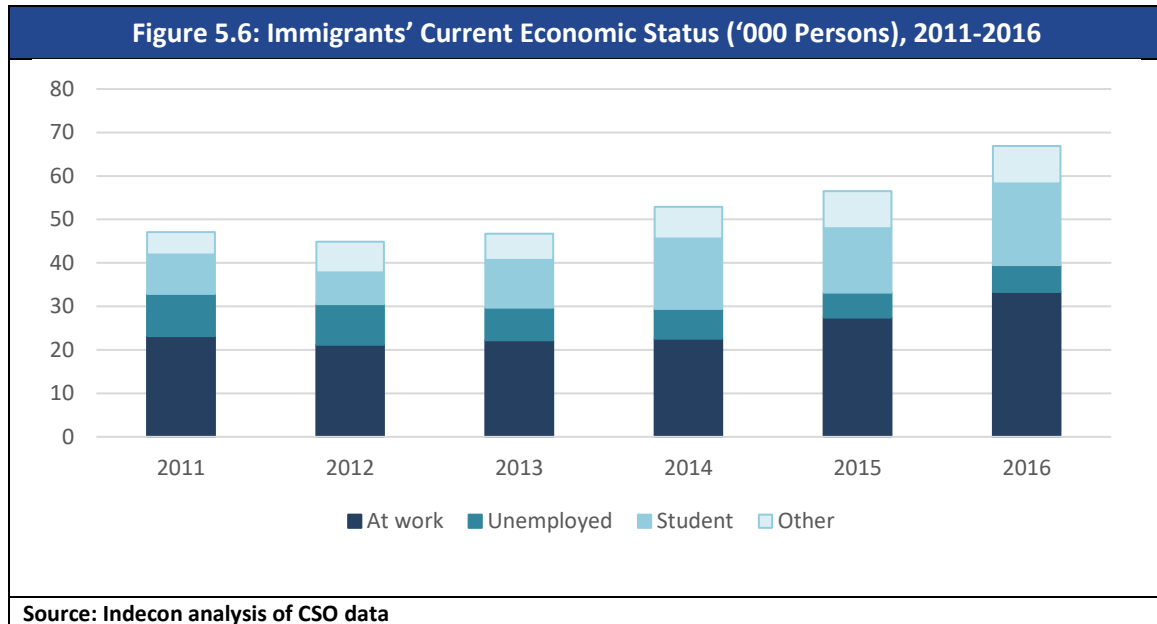
5.3.1 Immigration to Ireland

Since 2011, immigration to Ireland has been increasingly global. As seen in the figure below, over 40% of immigrants to Ireland move from a country within the European Union. However, immigration from non-EU countries has grown from 41% in 2011 to 53% in 2016. The total number of immigrants to Ireland has also increased from just over 53,000 in 2011 to almost 80,000 in 2016, driven in large part by the improvement in the employment situation in Ireland over this period.

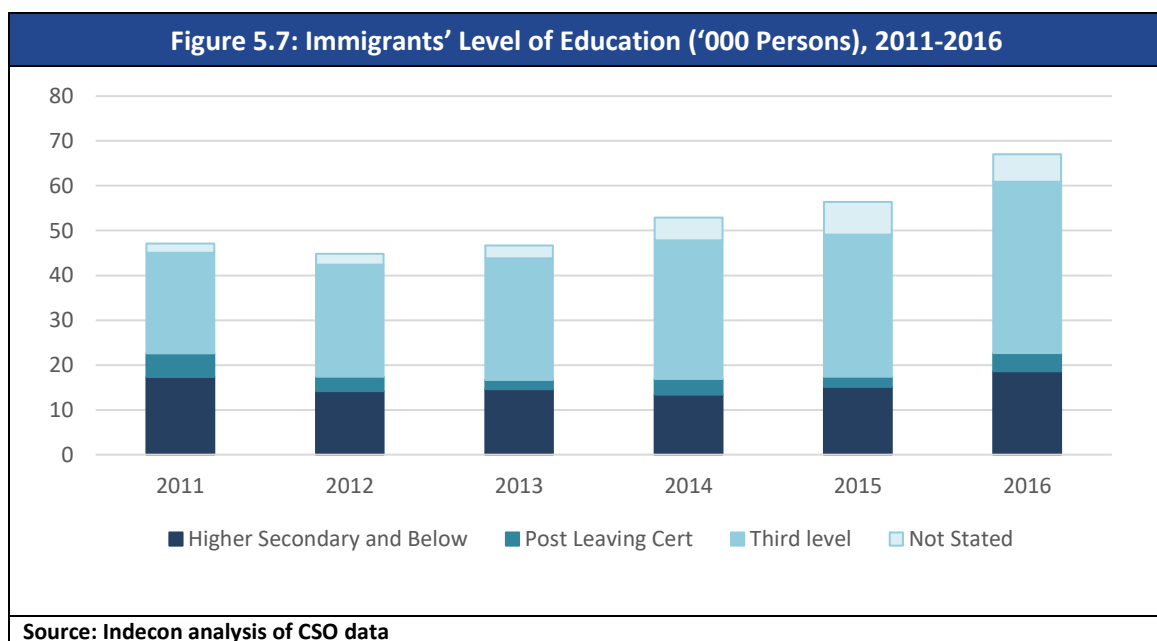


The National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC) for Ireland is hosted by QQI. NARIC facilitates the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad and advises on the recognition of foreign qualifications presented in Ireland. NARIC advice is provided in terms of the NFQ, and the online database of recognised foreign qualifications, maintained by NARIC, attracted over sixty thousand unique visits in 2016. NARIC Ireland data show that the top ten countries of origin for individuals seeking information about the international comparability of their qualifications were Brazil, UK, Poland, Spain, Croatia, India, Pakistan, Romania, USA and Ireland.

Students represent a substantial and growing share of immigrants to Ireland, increasing from 19% of all immigrants in 2011 to 28% in 2016 (see figure below, and see Section 5.4 below for further discussion). This is a similar pattern observed in terms of outward migration.



Ireland's recent experience suggests that immigrants are better educated than emigrants. In 2016, over 55% of immigrants to Ireland have third-level education, which is over 11 percentage points higher than the corresponding figure for emigrants. The share of immigrants with higher secondary education and below has fallen from 37% in 2011 to 28% in 2016 (see figure below).

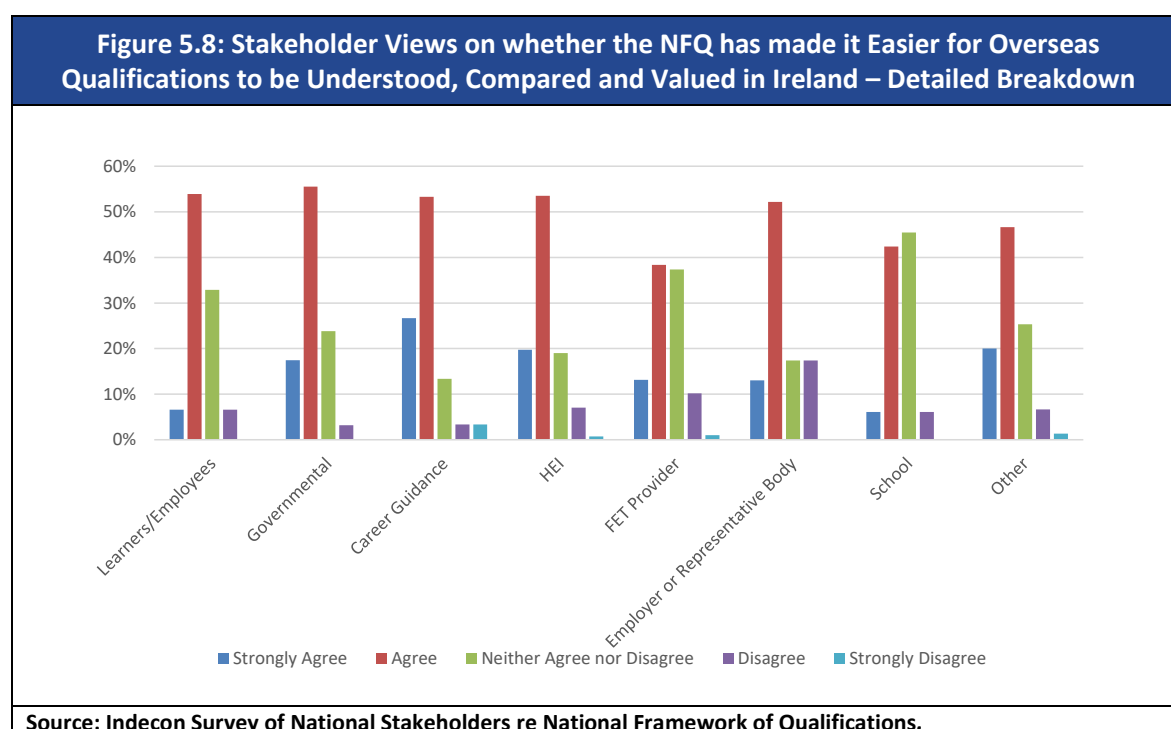


5.3.2 Recognition of Foreign Qualifications in Ireland

The survey questionnaire asked about perceptions on the impact that the NFQ has had for those with qualifications earned overseas. The results are shown in Table 5.2 below, and show general agreement that the NFQ has made it easier for foreign qualifications to be valued in Ireland. 61% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

Table 5.2: Stakeholder Views on whether the NFQ has made it Easier for Overseas Qualifications to be Understood, Compared and Valued in Ireland					
	Percent of Responses				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The NFQ has made it easier for qualifications achieved in other countries to be understood, compared and recognised in Ireland	14%	47%	30%	8%	1%
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications					

The breakdown of the stakeholder responses to the other questions is provided below. The results show broad support across all stakeholder groups. Survey respondents from the government departments/agencies, career guidance, and higher education institution stakeholder groups expressed the strongest support for this statement.



5.4 Ireland as an Exporter of Education Services

There is substantial demand for Irish qualifications from students outside the European Union, who represent over two-thirds of all third-level education students in Ireland from abroad. Students from Asia represent the largest share (44%) of all third-level education students from abroad studying in Ireland, followed by students from Europe, who account for 31% of the total.

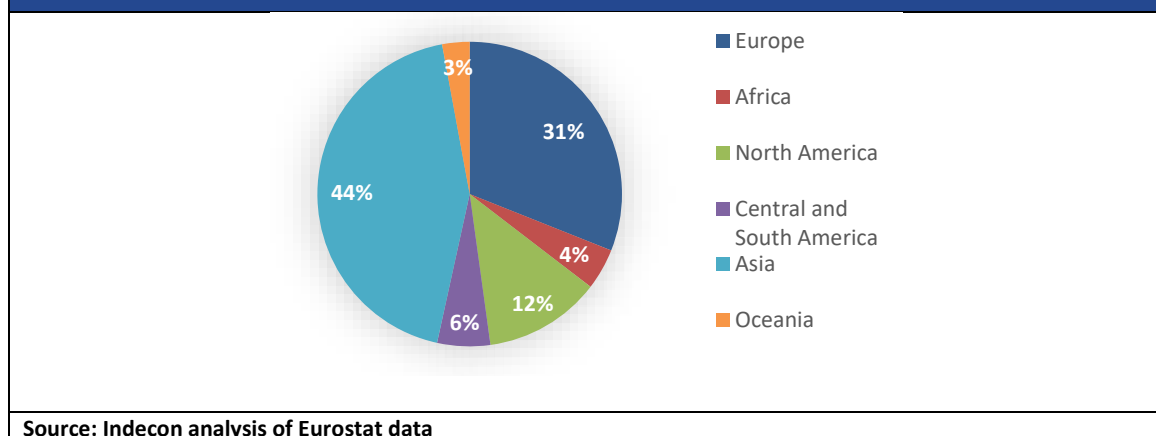
An important aspect of the management of incoming students is to ensure that education institutions are genuine, and are not offering disreputable qualifications. Stakeholders engaged by Indecon as part of this review indicated that prior to the establishment of the NFQ, it was very difficult to distinguish between genuine courses offered by reputable institutions and providers, and those which are not. They reported that the system is now more transparent, although policy in this area is still evolving. It was emphasised that the importance of an effective system stemmed not just from the importance of having adequate controls to prevent illegal immigration, but also that the existence of rogue operators damaged Ireland's reputation internationally as a provider of educational skills, as well as potentially damaging the reputation domestically of the FET sector, and of individual institutions.

Prior to 2014 there was a 'whole of framework' approach to recognising education and training qualifications for the purpose of issuing visas. A spate of closures of schools in 2014 resulted in a review of policy, which resulted in two major reforms, namely:

- ❑ A restriction was introduced so that only courses offering qualifications at NFQ Level 6 and upwards would be approved for visa required students, which is line with international practice; and,
- ❑ QQI requires providers to have PEL (Protection of Enrolled Learners) arrangements in place if they offer programmes of three months' duration or longer and where fees are charged. Relevant providers must have arrangements in place to ensure learners can transfer to another provider or be refunded if their programme ceases prematurely.

The outcome of the stakeholder consultation exercise conducted for this assessment suggested that policy in this area needs to continually evolve to protect the reputation of the education and training sector in Ireland, while also allowing Ireland to provide high quality and internationally recognised qualifications.

Figure 5.9: Share of 3rd Level Education Students in Ireland from Overseas by Continent, 2014



The table below reports a selection of responses to the open-ended question given in the questionnaire conducted as part of the study.

Table 5.3: Selected Views of Survey Respondents on Impacts of NFQ in Facilitating International Mobility
"For learners who come to my programme without a previous educational qualification or for learners who completed their education in a different schooling system, this framework helps me to explain the level of difficulty of the programme very well. It is clear and easy to understand."
"As an informed 'outsider' looking in, it appears a pity that the opportunity to align fully the numerical system with the EQF has not been taken. It remains confusing for employers, students, international providers etc., that there is not a simple, common language of levels within Europe."
"A gateway for professional and international qualifications is needed."
"Consideration needs to be given to increasing mobility of Irish students to undertake Erasmus abroad - seems to be more popular for students to travel here."
"The NFQ should more strongly develop its engagements with the EU and the different EU countries, in view of recent developments in the UK."
"Main benefit of the NFQ is to place Irish qualifications in an appropriate and comparable international framework."
"I find it difficult to navigate the website. I had a Pakistani student who had applied for a course. It took me quite a while to find the information that showed that Pakistan qualifications are not recognised in Ireland."
"I am a supporter of the NFQ and how it enables Irish education to communicate and work across sectors in Ireland and internationally."
"The relationship of the Irish NFQ to EQF needs to be easier for users to access and understand. Also as Ireland becomes more global there needs also to be a global quality framework that is internationally recognised."
"There are such a variety of qualifications across Ireland, the UK and Europe, it is difficult for learners, employers and trainers to understand what level the qualifications sit at on the NFQ. NARIC has improved this but could be made even more user friendly."
"There is one area in which the NFQ has failed to service my industry entirely, and that is by not matching UK and International standards in relation to part-time music performance training, delivered by the Conservatories in Ireland."
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications.

5.5 Summary of Findings

This section set out the views of stakeholders with respect to the international mobility of qualifications, both in terms of the experience of inward migrants, the experience of outward migrants, and the experience of those that come to Ireland to receive an education. A summary of the findings is as follows:

- ❑ The NFQ can support the promotion of Ireland as a destination for talented international students. The outcome of the consultation exercise suggested that policy in this area needs to continually evolve to both prevent legal immigration and to protect the reputation of the education sector in Ireland, while also allowing Ireland to provide a range of educational services.
- ❑ There was broad agreement among stakeholder that the NFQ had facilitated the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad and of foreign qualifications in Ireland.
- ❑ Ireland is characterised by very significant flows of inward and outward migrants. According to CSO data, approximately 80,000 people per year have emigrated and a similar number immigrated from/to Ireland in the period 2011-2016.
- ❑ Ireland's recent experience suggests that immigrants are better educated than emigrants, and that both cohorts have high levels of education attainment. According to CSO data since 2016, 57% of immigrants to Ireland have third-level education, which is over 11 percentage points higher than migrants.
- ❑ There is substantial demand for Irish qualifications from students outside the European Union. Students from outside the European Union represent 69% of all third-level education students in Ireland from abroad. Students from Asia represent the largest share (44%) of all third-level education students from abroad studying in Ireland, followed by students from Europe, who account for 31% of the total.

6 Employability Impacts

6.1 Introduction

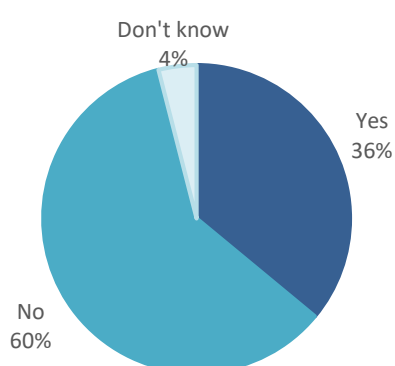
This section examines the extent to which the national framework has facilitated the matching of learners/trainees with appropriate employment opportunities, and to the broader development of labour market policy. A better matching of skills with the world of work can improve overall national productivity, while maximising the returns to investment in education for learners, companies and the State. The NFQ can facilitate such a matching by providing a better signalling of relevant skills achieved by learners and the skills required by employers. It can also help promote the continued development in skills through the promotion of lifelong learning (see Section 4.3), while on the supply side improving the responsiveness of the education and training system to changing occupational and work demands.

This section sets out the views of stakeholders as to employment impacts of the national framework. We begin in Section 6.2 by discussing the views with respect to the signalling and matching of skills to job vacancies, and then in Section 6.3 assess the NFQ in terms of policy development.

6.2 Skills Matching

This section focuses on the impact that the NFQ has had on improving the matching between skills and employment opportunities. Awareness of the NFQ among employers is moderate. Thirty-one percent of graduate employers who responded to the National Employer Survey reported that they were unaware of the National Framework of Qualifications. A further 8% were unsure. Of the graduate employers who were aware of the NFQ, only 36% reported that they refer to the NFQ during their recruitment process.

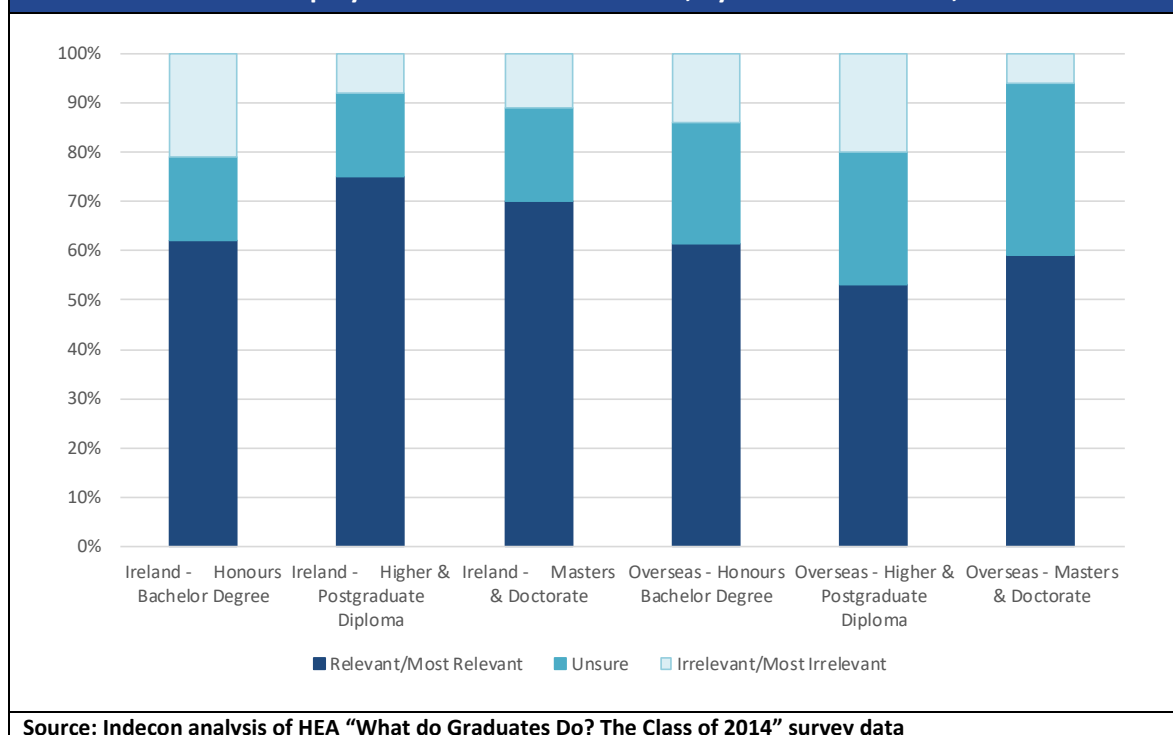
Figure 6.1: Share of Graduate Employers that referred to NFQ during Recruitment Process, 2015



Source: Indecon analysis of data from HEA National Employment Survey 2015

The optimal matching of skills and employment can also be considered from the learner/employee perspective. The HEA ‘What do Graduates Do’ survey of 2015 graduates from higher education programmes showed that 62% of graduates working in Ireland with an Honours Bachelor Degree rate their qualification as Relevant or Most Relevant to their employment. In contrast, only 53% of graduates with honours Higher and Postgraduate Diplomas working abroad rate their qualification as Relevant/Most Relevant to their employment. To a significant extent, these levels differed very widely based on education area. For example, 51% of graduates from Honours Bachelor Degree Arts and Humanities degrees reported that their education was irrelevant or largely irrelevant to their work, while the corresponding figure across all graduates was only 20%. This points to the importance of education as an end in itself, and that not all decisions regarding the choice of education or training course are made with employment opportunities as the main objective.

Figure 6.2: Relevance of Qualification to Employment for Graduates of Irish HE Programmes who are Employed in Ireland and Overseas, by Level of Graduate, 2015

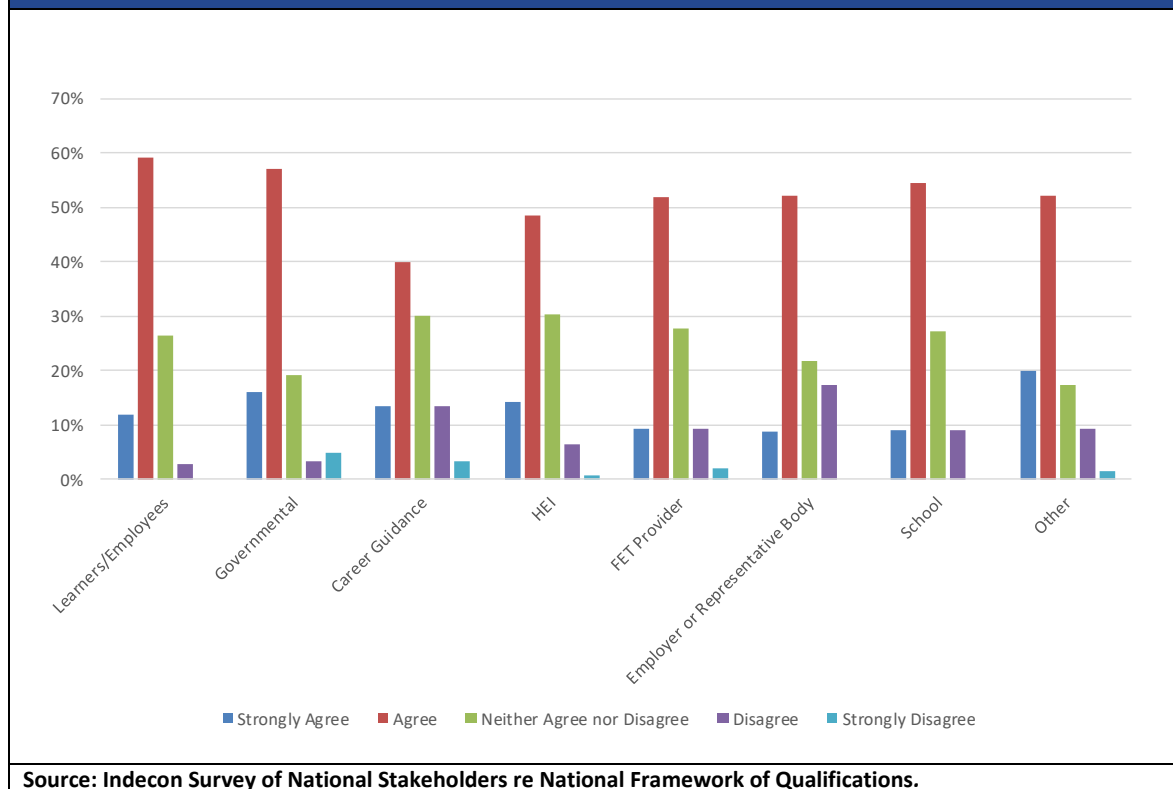


Indecon also surveyed stakeholders in relation to the role that the NFQ has played with respect to skills matching. The responses to these questions are shown in Table 6.1. As can be seen, there was a high level of agreement that the NFQ has improved skills matching. In particular, a majority of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the NFQ had improved the dialogue between the world of qualifications and the world of work; that the vocational qualifications included in the NFQ signalled relevant skills and competencies required for particular occupations; and that the NFQ had facilitated better matching between skills and job vacancies.

Table 6.1: Stakeholder Views on the Impact of the NFQ on Skills Matching					
	Percent of Responses				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The NFQ has improved the dialogue between the world of qualifications and the world of work	12%	51%	26%	9%	2%
Vocational qualifications included in the NFQ signal relevant skills and competencies required for particular occupations	11%	61%	20%	6%	2%
The NFQ has facilitated better matching between skills and job vacancies	8%	43%	37%	11%	2%
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications					

The breakdown of responses between different stakeholder groups is provided below. Figure 6.3 below shows a high level of agreement that the NFQ has improved the dialogue between the world of qualifications and the world of work. Across all stakeholder groups, the proportion in favour of this statement ranged from 53% to 73%.

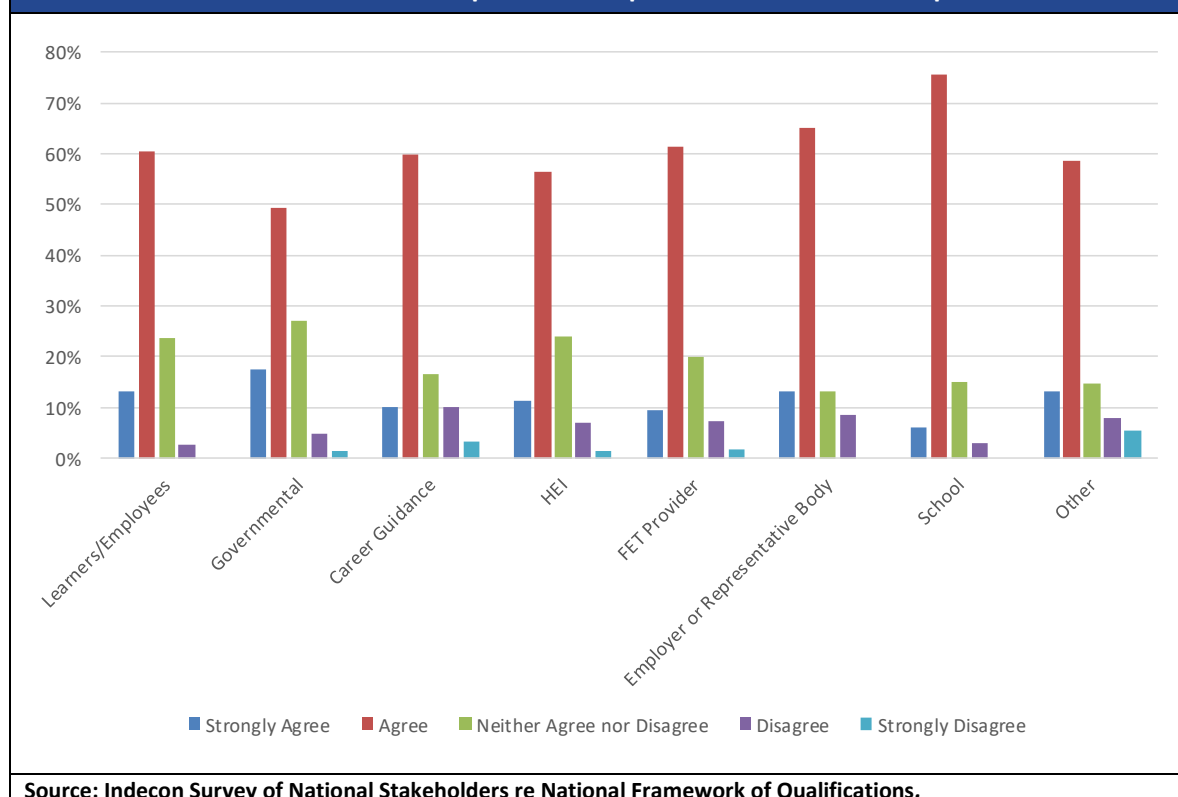
Figure 6.3: Stakeholder Views on whether the NFQ has Improved the Dialogue between the World of Qualifications and the World of Work



Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications.

Figure 6.4 below shows the views across respondent groups with respect to whether the vocational qualifications included in the NFQ signalled relevant skills and competencies required for particular occupations. The level of agreement across different groups, particularly among employers and FET Providers, was very strong, with less than 10% of each category expressing disagreement.

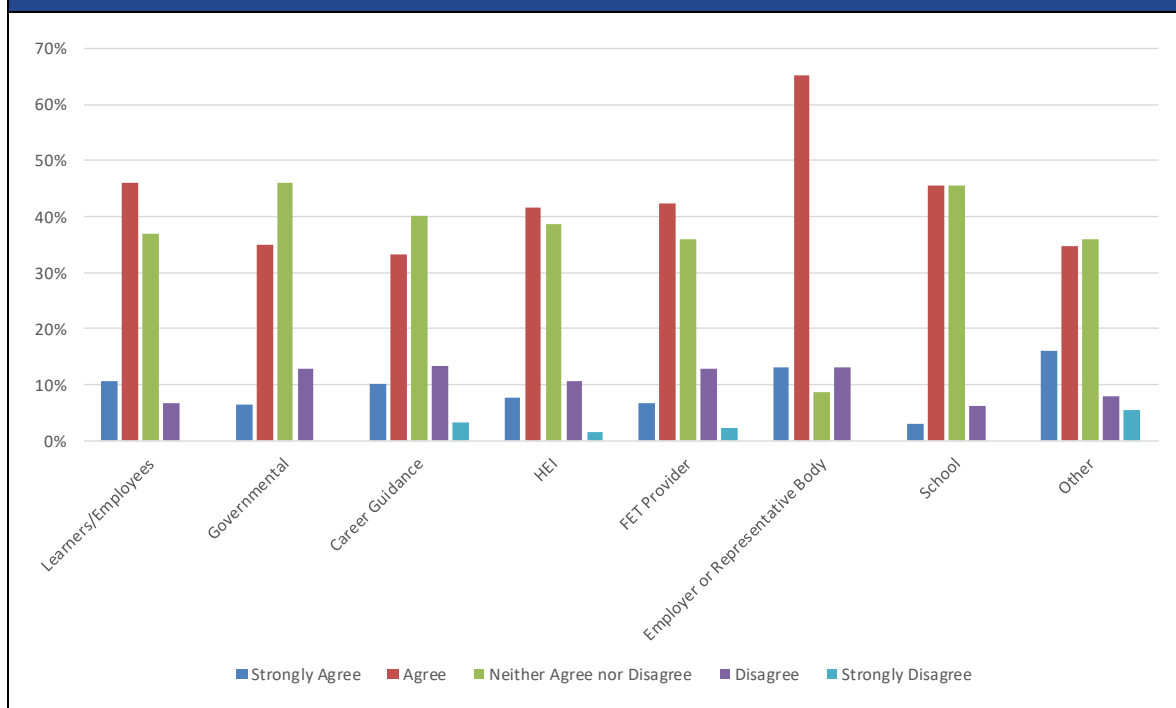
Figure 6.4: Stakeholder Views on whether Vocational Qualifications included in the NFQ signal Relevant Skills and Competencies required for Particular Occupations



Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications.

The final figure in this section shows strong agreement that the NFQ facilitates a better matching between skills and job vacancies. However, this should be interpreted with care. For example, while employers expressed strong support for this statement, this should be considered in light of the NES findings that a significant minority of employers are unaware of the NFQ, and that only 36% of employers who are aware of it reference the NFQ as part of their recruitment process. As such, the finding below might be the result of self-selection, whereby employers who are aware of the NFQ and use it as part of their recruitment process are more likely to have engaged in this survey than employers who were unaware or did not use it.

Figure 6.5: Stakeholder Views on whether the NFQ has Facilitated Better Matching between Skills and Job Vacancies



Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications.

6.3 Skills Policy Development

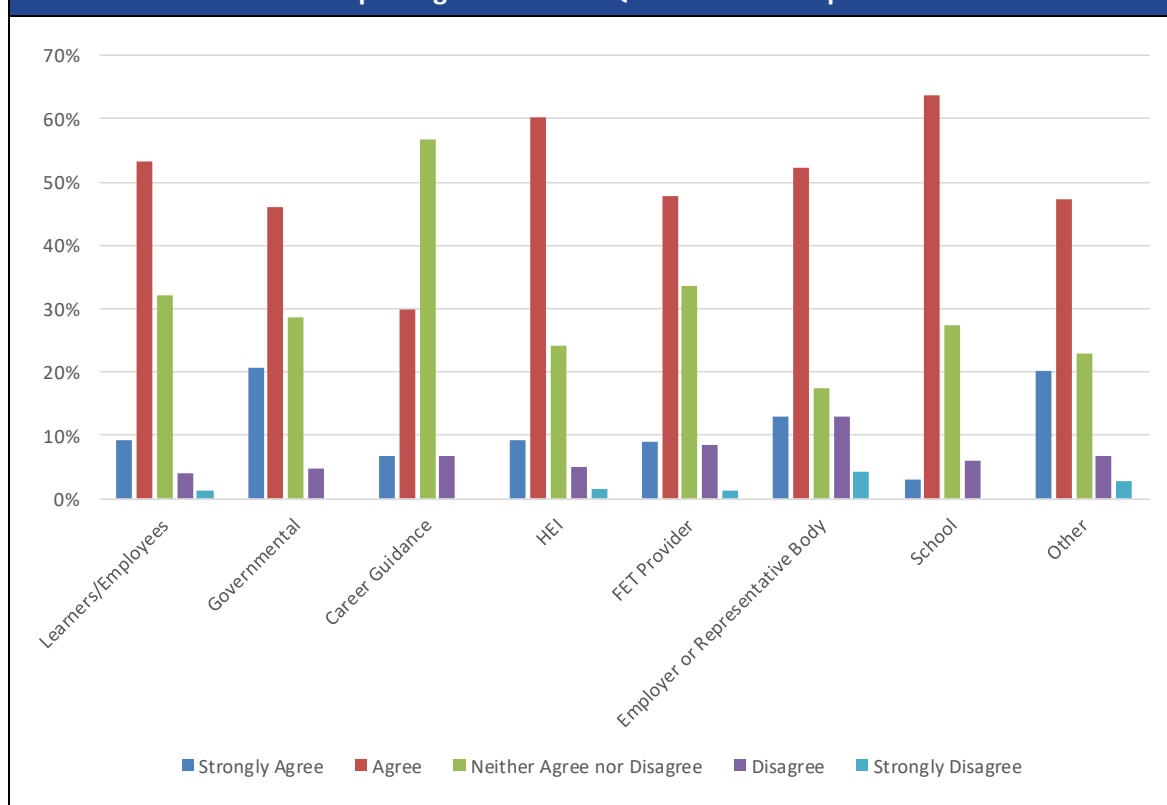
The NFQ can also play a role in allowing for better, more informed policy formation. The Department of Skills, Enterprise and Innovation indicates that the NFQ is valuable for skills forecasting work that the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs undertakes. This forecasting work compares the quantity, quality and diversity of current and future skills supply required at various NFQ levels with the skills-demand needs of enterprise. The responses provided by other stakeholder groups as part of the Indecon survey supports this contention that the NFQ has played a constructive role in terms of skills policy development.

Table 6.2: Stakeholder Views on the Impact of the NFQ on Skills Planning

	Percent of Responses				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The NFQ has facilitated national monitoring and reporting of skills and qualifications output	10%	51%	31%	7%	1%
The NFQ has facilitated workforce planning and development	5%	35%	46%	12%	2%

Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications

The breakdown of stakeholder responses to these questions is provided below, and generally showed strong support for the statement that the NFQ has supported skills monitoring and reporting.

Figure 6.6: Stakeholder Views on whether the NFQ has Facilitated National Monitoring and Reporting of Skills and Qualifications Output

Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications.

Figure 6.7 shows stakeholder responses when asked whether the NFQ has facilitated workforce planning and development. As before, this statement is broadly supported, though Careers Guidance professionals are split between those who agreed and those who disagreed. It should be emphasised that many stakeholder groups will have little insight into how workforce planning and development policy is conducted, and as such these findings should be interpreted as general perceptions only.

Figure 6.7: Stakeholder Views on whether the NFQ has Facilitated Workforce Planning and Development

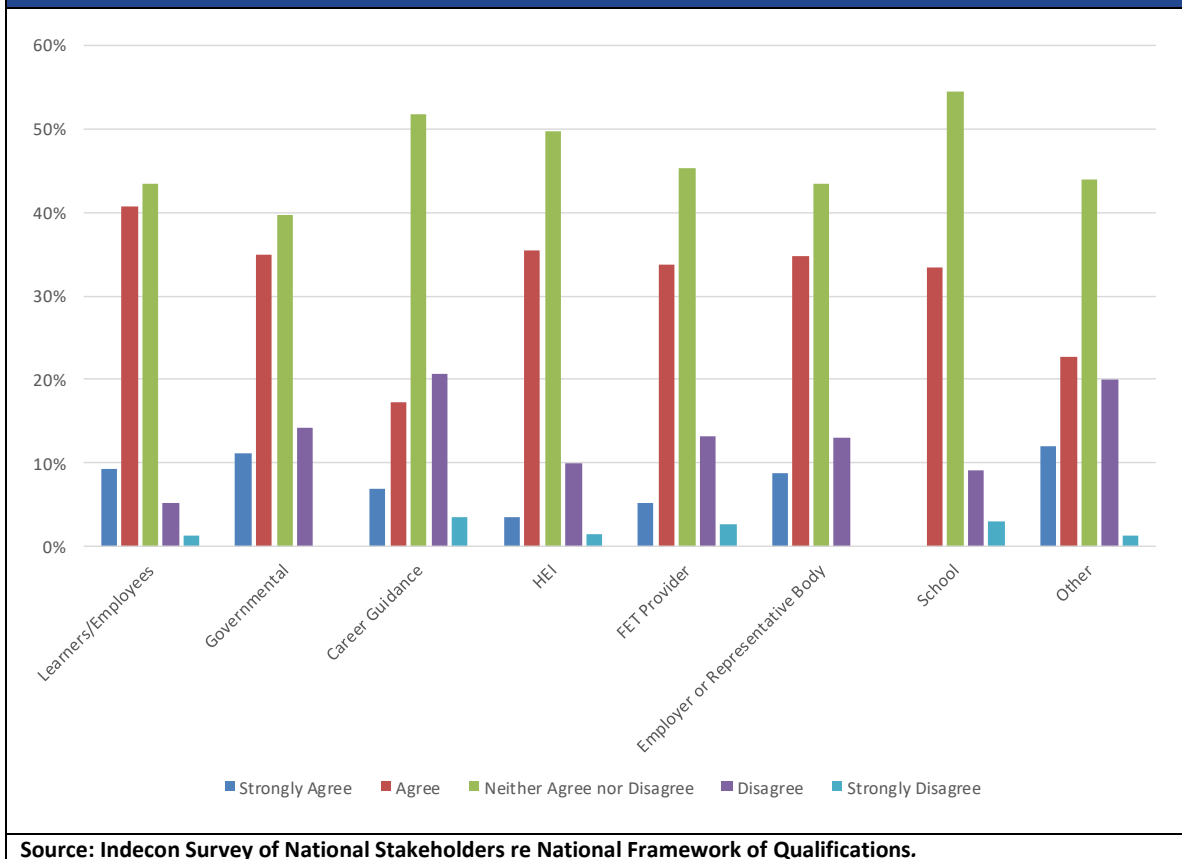


Table 6.3 reports a selection of direct quotations provided by survey respondents on the contribution of the NFQ to employability.

Table 6.3: Selected Views of Survey Respondents on Employability and Employment Impacts of NFQ
<p>“Most of the NFQ qualifications outside of apprenticeship are no indication of an individual’s competency regarding work related technical skills. There is a need to include competency based assessments in the award specifications. The composition of vocational major awards needs to be reviewed to include a greater number of core vocational skills components.”</p>
<p>“From an employer’s perspective, there is a need to ensure that courses include a high degree of work placement to ensure that graduates understand the work that they are training for.”</p>
<p>“Graduates are fine academically but lack work skills – as basic as communication, negotiation and report writing skills. To this end, industry needs to be challenged to get involved and be part of this solution.”</p>
<p>“Employers require more than tightly controlled factual learning – there seemed to be absolutely no space for personality development, confidence building, understanding client relationships and the creating a balanced potential employee.”</p>
<p>“Standards and quality are being diluted. How can we guarantee an employer that a learner from Cork as received the same 'knowledge, skills and competencies' as a learner in Donegal when every provider is either developing their own programmes or using programmes from the national database?”</p>
<p>“...emphasis needs to place on acquiring the skills as per the relevant module descriptor instead of getting students just to complete the programme module to pass the assessment.”</p>
<p>“In the professional context, reducing professional recognition processes to levels as opposed to a process based on expert assessment of knowledge skill and competence is neither productive or likely to contribute to professional competence and Ireland's capacity to lead in professional and intellectual service provision.”</p>
<p>Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications</p>

6.4 Summary of Findings

This section examined the extent to which the NFQ impact skills matching and policy development. A summary of conclusions is as follows:

- ❑ The Indecon data shows that the NFQ facilitates a better matching between skills and job vacancies, though this has to be interpreted in light of the level of awareness reported by employers of the NFQ. A view was expressed that many vocationally oriented qualifications could benefit from more opportunities for high quality work based learning.
- ❑ The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation indicates that the NFQ is valuable for skills forecasting work that the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs undertakes. The responses provided by other stakeholder groups as part of the Indecon survey supports this contention.
- ❑ The findings in the current assessment should be interpreted in conjunction with other findings from the National Employers Survey which show that 31% of graduate employers reported that they were unaware of the National Framework of Qualifications. This study also reported that of the graduate employers who were aware of the NFQ, only 36% reported that they refer to the NFQ during their recruitment process.
- ❑ The HEA 'What Do Graduates Do?' survey of 2014 graduates from higher education programmes showed that 62% of graduates working in Ireland with an Honours Bachelor Degree rate their qualification as relevant or most relevant to their employment. These levels differed very widely based on education area, reflecting the fact that career choice is only one consideration students make when deciding on their choice of education and training.

7 Role of QQI in NFQ Implementation and Promotion

7.1 Introduction

The final aspect examined relates to the role QQI plays in the promotion and implementation of the NFQ and the opinion on priorities for future NFQ development. Section 7.2 sets out the extent to which stakeholders believe that the NFQ has been successfully promoted and explained, while Section 7.3 presents views on the policy implementation of the NFQ. Section 7.4 focuses on the future NFQ priorities that stakeholders feel that QQI should pursue, while Section 7.5 concludes with a summary of findings.

7.2 Promotion of the NFQ

Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025¹⁶ includes various strategic objectives relating to potential opportunities and benefits offered by the NFQ, such as promoting active collaboration of employers with education and training providers; encouraging employers to have a stronger role in skills development; and improving career guidance and career information. The Indecon survey included questions on whether stakeholders felt sufficiently informed about the NFQ and national and international developments; whether the benefits of the NFQ were effectively promoted; and whether relevant guidance material and resources were appropriate to user needs. The results are provided in the table below.

The aggregate survey responses show a positive picture. In particular, more than three in four respondents reported that they were sufficiently informed about the NFQ. However, there was more evidence of a gap in knowledge and understanding of international developments in the field of qualifications, with 29% indicating that they were not sufficiently informed. A closer look this question across the stakeholder groups revealed that for the most part all stakeholder groups reported poor levels of understanding of international developments in the field of qualification including education institutions, students, teachers and government bodies.

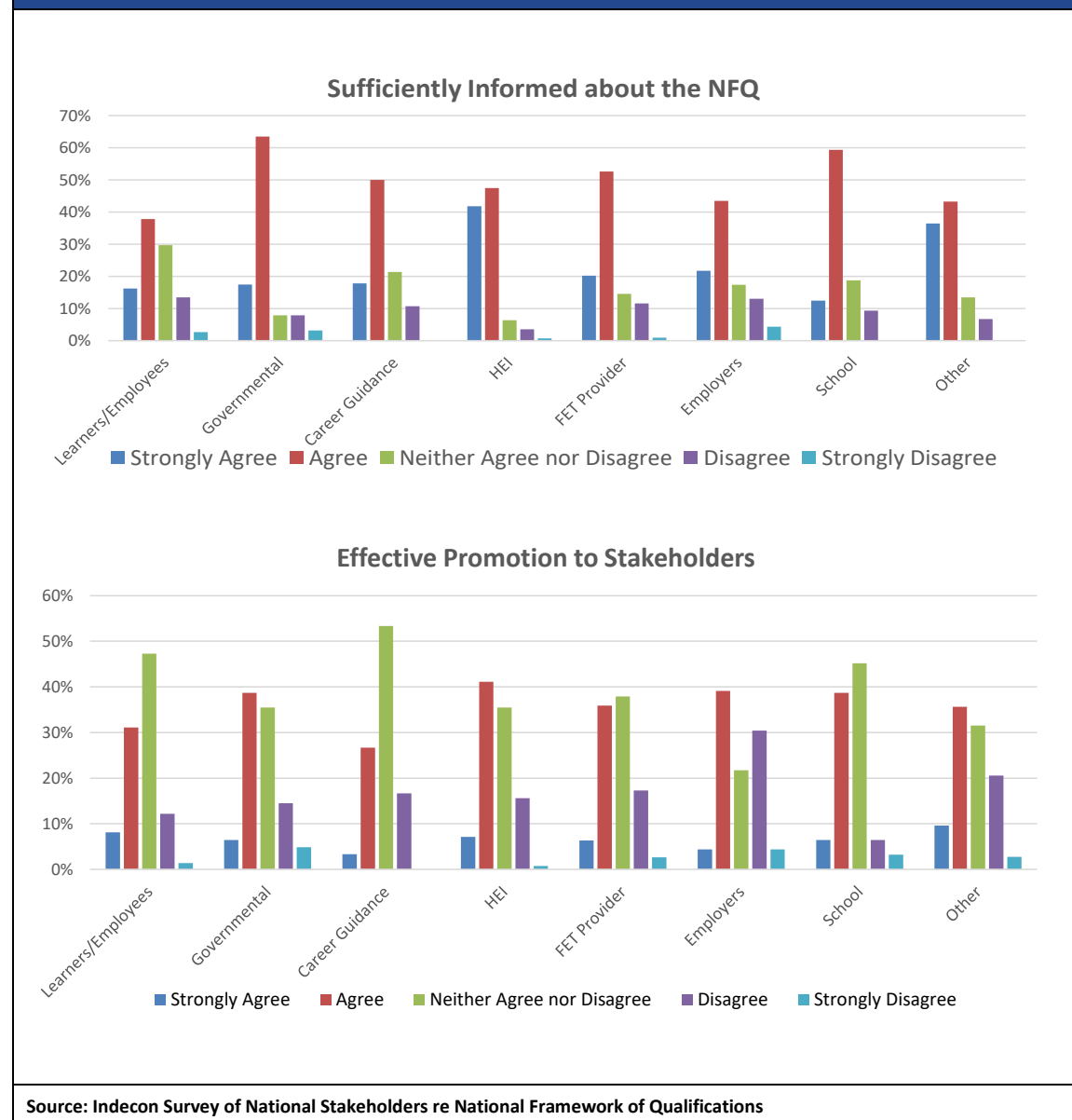
Table 7.1: Stakeholder Views on the Quality of NFQ Promotion					
	Percent of Responses				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am sufficiently informed about the NFQ	24%	52%	14%	9%	1%
The benefits/value of the NFQ are effectively promoted to stakeholders	6%	36%	39%	16%	3%
The availability of NFQ guidance material and resources are appropriate to my needs	10%	45%	27%	14%	4%

¹⁶ As part of the Action Plan for Jobs 2015, the Department of Education and Skills developed the National Skills Strategy 2025 – Ireland's Future. <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/National-Skills-Strategy/>

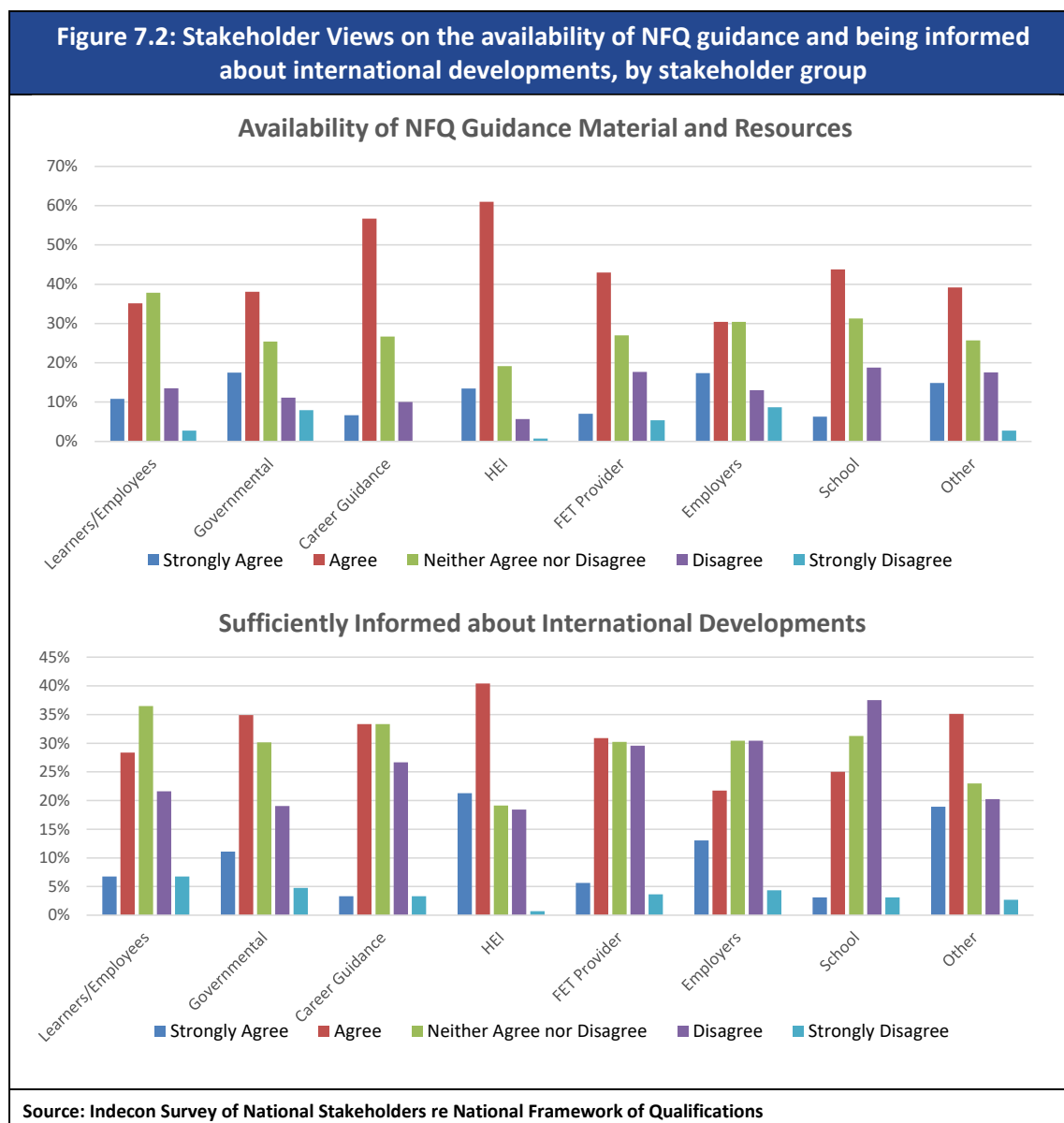
I am sufficiently informed about International developments relating to qualifications frameworks (e.g. EQF, Qualifications Framework for European Higher Education Area)	10%	34%	27%	25%	4%
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications					

The results for the first two components of this above question (being informed about the NFQ and effective promotion to stakeholders) are broken down by stakeholder group in the figure below.

Figure 7.1: Stakeholder Views on being Informed about the NFQ and effective promotion to stakeholders, by stakeholder group



The results for the latter two components of this above question (availability of NFQ guidance and being informed about international developments) are broken down by stakeholder group in the figure below.



A majority of all stakeholder groups felt that they were sufficiently informed about the NFQ. The survey results indicate that a significant minority of stakeholders did not feel sufficiently informed about international developments in qualifications. A number of interviewees commented that the documentation provided by QQI tended to be 'jargon-heavy', and hard to understand for employees, employers, and even industry insiders. Others expressed the view that QQI placed too much emphasis on quality and not enough on qualifications. A few interviewees stressed that the names given to awards are important, and that some of the names given were unhelpful.

Specifically, giving reference to ‘minor awards’ or ‘ordinary degree’ were cited as examples, particularly given the importance people place on these qualifications and the effort that they put into achieving them.

7.3 NFQ Policy Development and Implementation

Survey respondents were asked the extent to which they felt that they had been involved in developing and implementing the NFQ, and whether the NFQ was consistent with broader policy objectives in the area of skills and qualifications. Regarding the former, a significant minority of stakeholders (almost one in four) reported that they were not appropriately involved in the development and implementation of the NFQ. In terms of the consistency of the NFQ with other policy agendas, the overall response was neutral-to-positive, with almost one in two respondents neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement. This last finding confirms the challenge of demonstrating direct effects of the NFQ on broader policy aspirations.

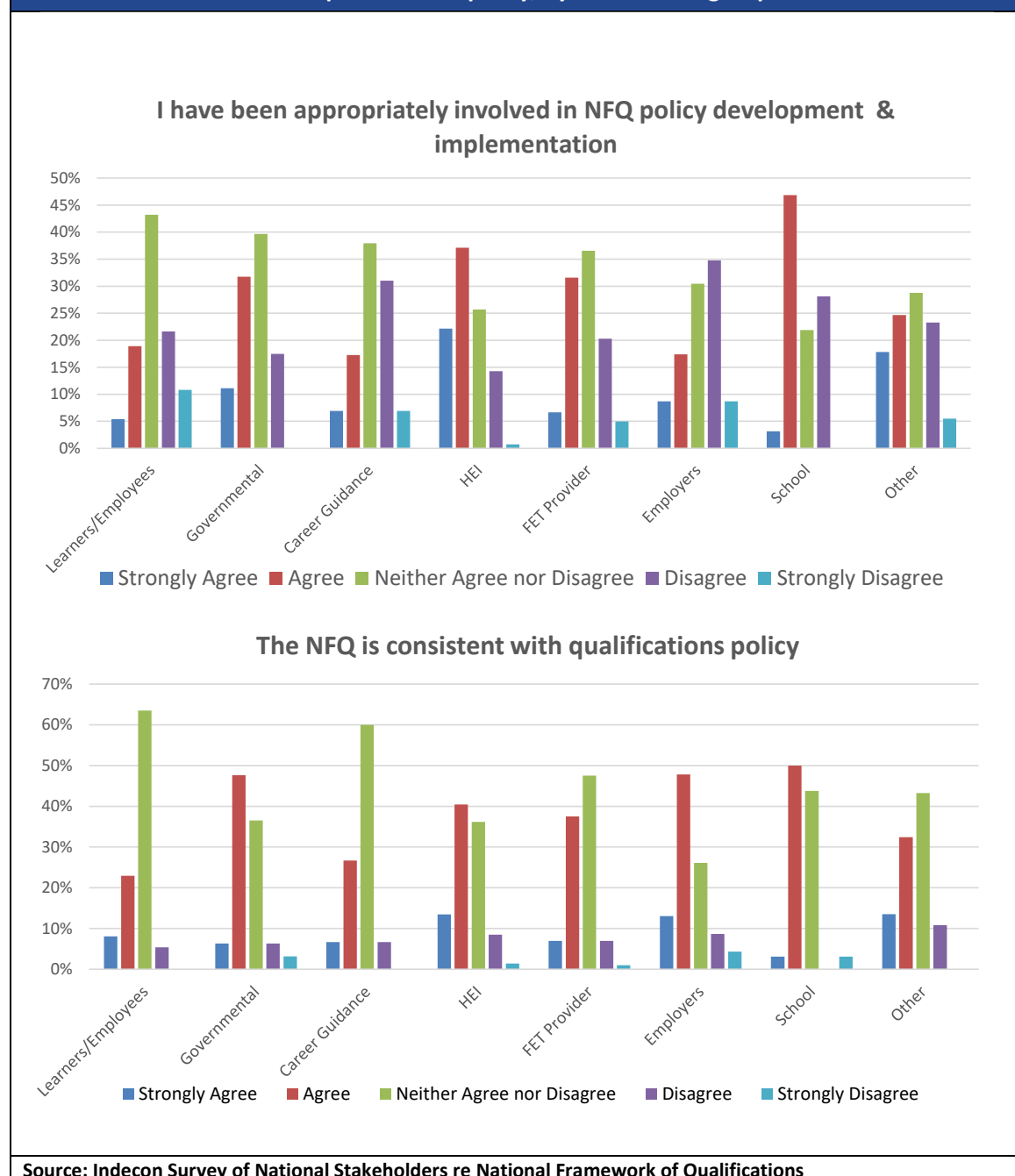
Table 7.2: Stakeholder Views on the quality of NFQ development and implementation					
	Percent of Responses				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I have been appropriately involved in NFQ policy development and implementation	10%	30%	37%	20%	4%
The NFQ as a policy instrument is consistent with other national policy in the area of qualifications (e.g. public funding policy, public sector recruitment, national strategies for skills development etc.)	8%	37%	46%	7%	1%
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications					

A breakdown of the responses to the survey by stakeholder groups is shown in the figure overleaf. In terms of the first question, Government department/agency respondents generally felt that they had significant involvement in the development of policy. Interestingly, the single strongest positive response in terms of involvement in policy came from HEIs, with almost three in five respondents answering that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Sentiment in the FET sector was far more balanced between those who felt they had been involved, and those that felt they had not.

A view expressed during the consultation exercise commented that there was a lot of engagement at the outset of the NFQ, though much less now, and QQI needed to re-engage with stakeholders. The view was also expressed by a number of FE participants that QQI was more influenced by ‘HE thinking’, and that its language and methodologies owed more to a traditional HE academic structure. A number of interviewees stated that the process of establishing QQI as a unified and integrated organisation was an ongoing process.

The question regarding consistency with other national policies generally received a high level of neutral responses (neither agreeing nor disagreeing) across most stakeholder groups, though employers and employer representative bodies in particular were more positive than others.

Figure 7.3: Stakeholder Views on policy development and implementation and consistency with qualifications policy, by stakeholder group



7.4 Future Policy Priorities

The survey of current stakeholder views on future policy priority for the NFQ are summarised in the table below. In total, six policy priorities were suggested to respondents, who were asked to rate their importance as being either 'Low Priority', 'Medium Priority' or 'High Priority'. The six areas were as follows:

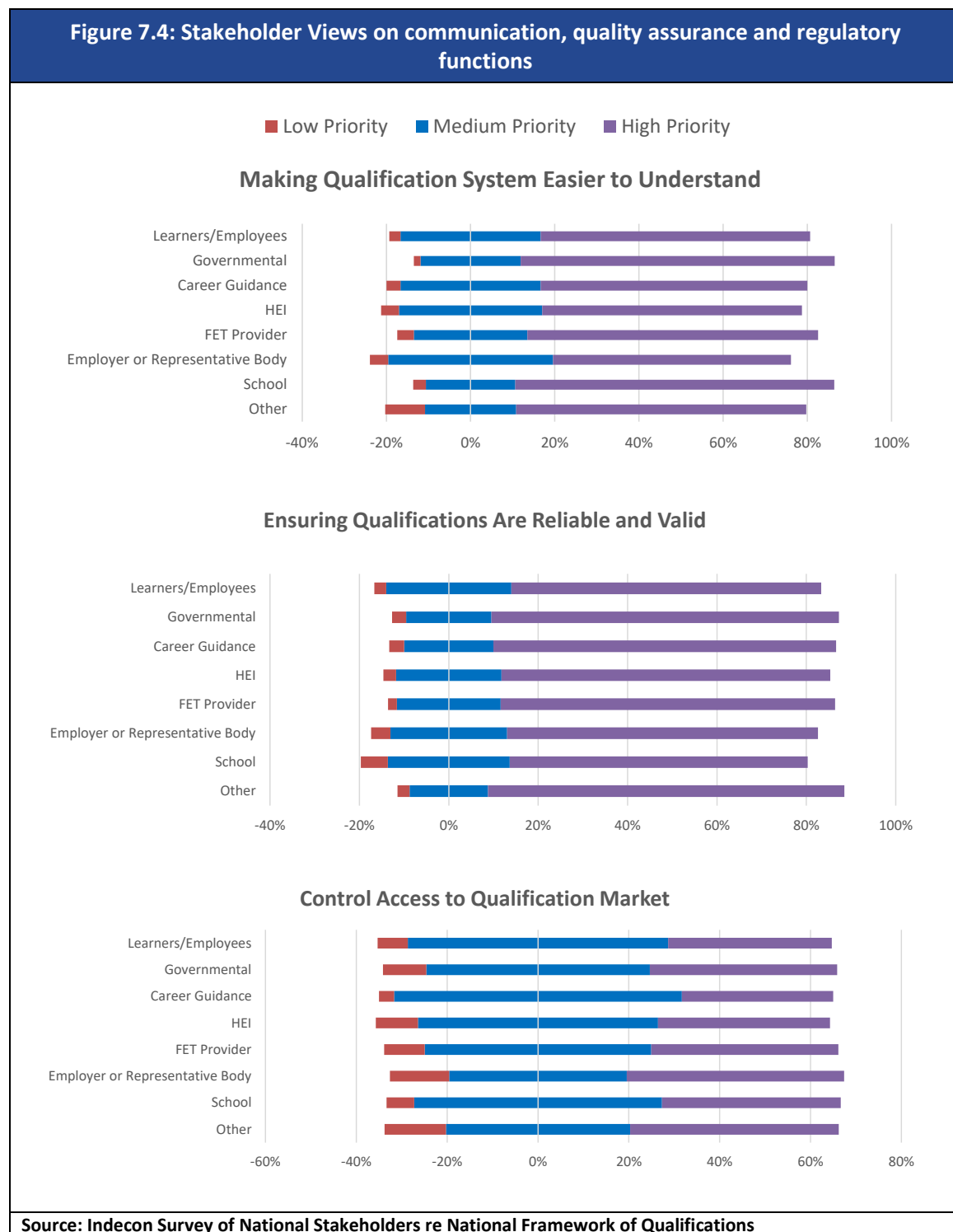
- ☐ Ensuring qualifications are reliable and valid;
- ☐ Making the qualifications system easier to understand;
- ☐ Controlling access to the regulated market for qualifications in Ireland;
- ☐ Addressing obstacles to progression or international mobility;
- ☐ Supporting recognition of cross-border qualifications; and,
- ☐ Supporting a deeper implementation of the learning outcomes approach.

The priority which ranked highest among respondents was that QQI should ensure that qualifications are 'reliable and valid'. Around three in four respondents named this as a high priority, while virtually all of the remaining respondents placed it as a medium priority. The priority which attracted the relatively lowest level of support was the need for the NFQ to support a learning outcome approach.

Table 7.3: Stakeholder Views on future policy priorities for the NFQ

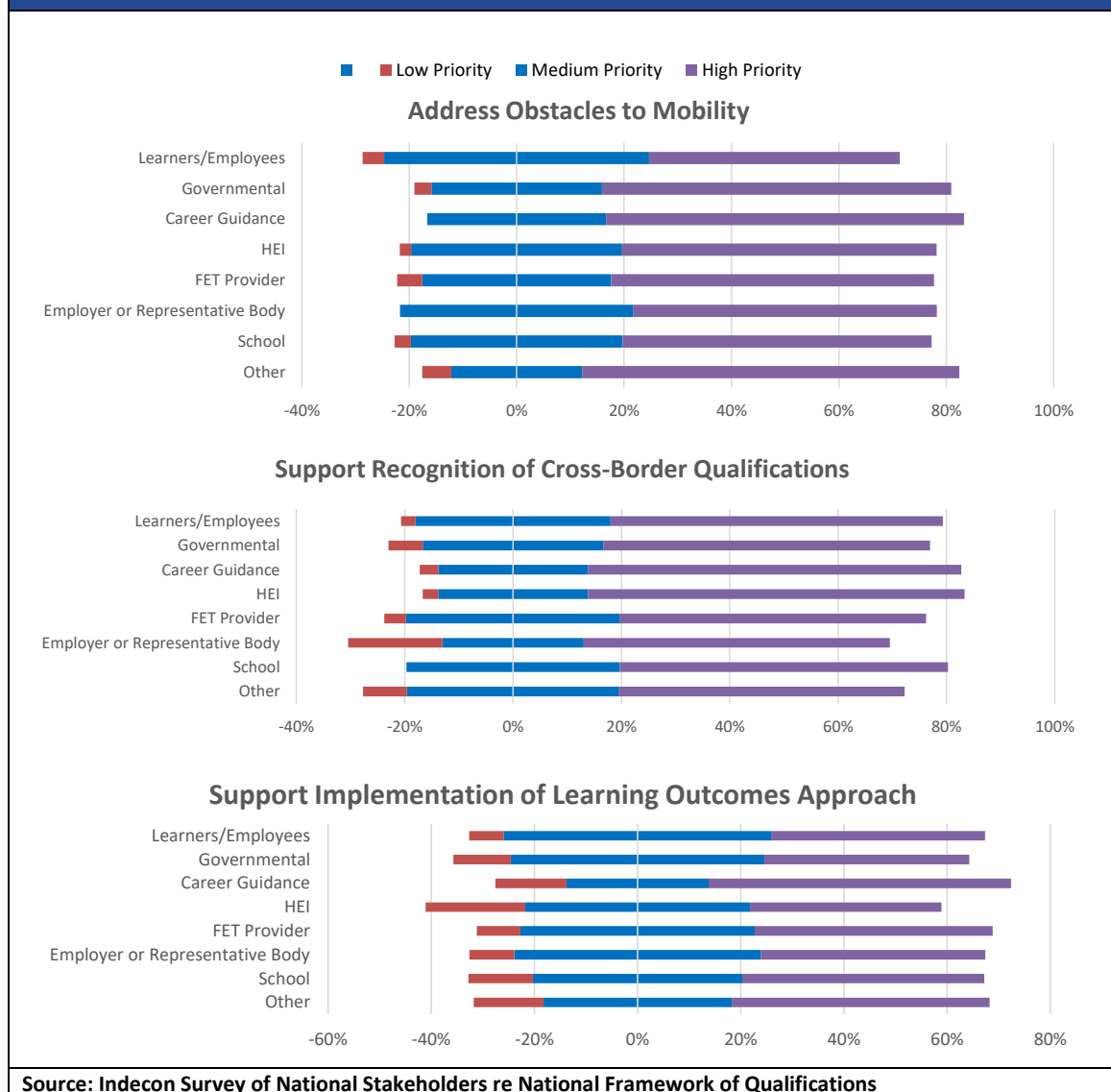
	Percent of Responses		
	High Priority	Medium Priority	Low Priority
Communication Function – making qualifications and the qualifications system easier to understand	67%	30%	3%
Quality Assurance Function – ensuring that qualifications are more reliable and valid	76%	22%	2%
Regulatory Function - using the NFQ to control access to the market for qualifications in Ireland	41%	51%	9%
Progression Function - using the NFQ to address obstacles to the progression of qualifications within, and the mobility between, the education and training system	60%	36%	4%
Recognition Function - supporting the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad and the recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland	60%	35%	4%
Curriculum Design Function - supporting deeper implementation of the learning outcomes approach in qualifications	45%	44%	11%
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications			

The next figure shows the breakdown of the result for the first three components of the above question by stakeholder group. The proportion of respondents in each stakeholder group which assign a low (red), medium (blue), or high (purple) level of priority to each of the domains is shown. As can be seen, the priorities identified are similar across different stakeholder groups.



The next figure shows the breakdown of the result for the first three components of the above question by stakeholder group. The career guidance, HEI and employer groups have a slightly higher level of priority assigned to the importance of the NFQ for recognition of cross-border qualifications. The career guidance group also place particularly high priority on implementation of learning outcomes approach.

Figure 7.5: Stakeholder Views on progression, recognition and curriculum design function



The table below reports a selection of responses to the open-ended question given in the questionnaire conducted as part of the study.

Table 7.4: Selected Additional Commentary
"The opportunity to contribute to; and inform such an agenda, is limited. Perhaps greater facility regarding a more pro-active engagement as opposed to passive information, aligned to outcomes and consistent with national policy by sector would allow greater visibility for stakeholders."
"The NFQ is widely considered to be a valuable tool for facilitating progression and promoting quality. The major weakness lies in how this is communicated. There needs to be a much greater, and clearer, emphasis on the contribution made by the NFQ to the policy landscape. We also need to produce more data to support these claims."
"I think the next steps for the NFQ could be a high-level review of the legal and policy basis for the NFQ; public consultation focusing on the education and training sector looking at the future needs of the NFQ; and a re-launch of the NFQ to either confirm its purpose and basis, or a strengthening of the law and policy underpinning the NFQ to allow it to be used as a more integrated regulatory system."
"There is a need for a national register of qualification to be further developed and on a secure - like ROS.ie - where individual can build up learning units leading to a qualification that are registered on the system - verified and accessible to individuals at any time."
"Greater transparency in the process of QQI validation for programmes to place on the NFQ as at present timelines are unclear and information links on the website are broken. An up-to-date breakdown of the procedures in plain English would be helpful before providers engage with the more detailed guidelines, policies and templates."
"Information is a challenge - I find the QQI website totally impenetrable and difficult if not impossible to navigate."
"Coming from Industry I found the complexities of QQI and the terminology/use of language very limiting and complex. Very simple requirements of an employer/engager of potential students were ignored because they didn't fit the usable terminology."
"I think future policy priorities must be strengthening QA arrangements and providing effective communication and resources for providers."
"Many communication documents are difficult to read and understand due to overuse of jargon."
"Secondary Schools would benefit from the availability of accessible resources, such as videos explaining the NFQ to teachers and students, perhaps through a promotional campaign."
"QA assessments are a pivotal next step for QQI. The ISO 9001 model is a good example of a QA assessment process."
Source: Indecon Survey of National Stakeholders re National Framework of Qualifications

7.5 Summary of Findings

This section examined the role that QQI plays in the NFQ, including in terms of promotion, implementation and policy development. The findings of this Section can be summarised as follows:

- ❑ More than three in four respondents reported that they were sufficiently informed about the NFQ. However, there was evidence of a gap in knowledge and understanding of international developments in the field of qualifications among a minority of respondents.
- ❑ There is a need for QQI to enhance the accessibility of the NFQ as policy and to more effectively disseminate information about national and European developments in the area of qualifications.
- ❑ Government departments/agencies and HEIs felt that they had significant involvement in policy formation, with around three in five respondents answering that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.
- ❑ The survey also sought stakeholders' views on the future policy priorities for the NFQ. Transparency and trust in the national qualifications system are reported as key priorities for the NFQ. Supporting recognition practice and systematic progression opportunities were also strongly endorsed by respondents.
- ❑ It is perhaps surprising that the learning outcomes approach to curriculum and programme design attracted relatively less support as a priority issue for the future development of the NFQ. This finding may prompt a re-visiting of the centrality of learning outcomes to the NFQ and to education and training more generally.
- ❑ The mixed views of stakeholders about the role of the NFQ as an instrument for regulating qualifications in Ireland suggests that this issue will require further exploration.

8 Overall Conclusions and Implications

8.1 Overall Conclusions

The 2009 Framework Implementation and Impact Study recommended that research be undertaken to establish the value of the Framework from a learner perspective. This report sets out the views of stakeholders on the impact of the National Framework of Qualifications, and the role that QQI should play in maintaining and developing it further. The evidence from the Indecon survey represents a progressive step towards addressing data gaps in this area.

The strong view of a broad array of stakeholders engaged by Indecon in completing this report was that the NFQ has brought coherence and structure to education and training qualifications in Ireland. The level of awareness of the NFQ was very high among most stakeholders, though the level of awareness among employers was modest. The awareness, and use, of the NFQ in the education system itself was said to be ubiquitous.

One of the most important impacts of the introduction of the NFQ was the promotion of the 'learning outcomes' approach. Following the introduction of the NFQ in 2003, the definition and use of the term learning outcomes was systematically reflected in policy. The views expressed in the stakeholder interviews conducted by Indecon were generally supportive of the role that the NFQ has had on the quality of teaching. While there was also strong agreement that these standards are consistently high, the level of support was lower, indicating that issues regarding consistency may require continued attention. Given the centrality of the learning outcomes approach to the NFQ, how the learning outcomes approach is used in the design, delivery and award of qualifications, will need to be made transparent by all awarding bodies accessing the NFQ.

The effectiveness of the NFQ in promoting the international mobility of education and training qualifications (both in relation to inward and outward migration) is particularly important for Ireland which experiences relatively high level of migrant flows. The survey indicated that stakeholders believed that the NFQ has made it easier for qualifications to be understood, compared and valued across borders. One of the key purposes of the NFQ is to support the better matching of skills with job opportunities. The Indecon survey showed that there was a high level of agreement that the NFQ has improved the matching of learners with employment opportunities.

When asked about the future role of QQI in meeting its statutory goal to 'promote, maintain, further develop and implement the NFQ', the highest priority given by respondents was that QQI should ensure that qualifications are reliable and valid. Around three in four respondents named this as a high priority, while virtually all of the remaining respondents placing it as a medium priority.

8.2 Potential Areas/Aspects for Enhancement

The review also identified areas/aspects where the impact of the NFQ could be strengthened, and the role that QQI could play in this regard. A summary of selected potential areas/aspects for further enhancement is presented below. The areas/aspects highlighted are not exhaustive and are not presented as recommendations. However, they have been informed by the extensive survey research and engagement with NFQ stakeholder groups and are presented here for consideration by QQI and other stakeholders.

Table 8.1: Summary of recommendations on National Qualification Framework

- ☐ Continue to Develop and Implement the NFQ as a responsive and adaptable mechanism for qualifications and skills policy.
- ☐ Consider initiatives to further improve awareness of the NFQ among stakeholders.
- ☐ Re-visit the operation of the NFQ for upper secondary school qualifications and for qualifications at NFQ level 6.
- ☐ Examine QQI awarding function and NFQ levelling processes more generally.
- ☐ Ensure clarity and simplicity of communication.
- ☐ Include a broader range of qualifications within the NFQ.
- ☐ Ensure strong international engagement.
- ☐ Establish data to investigate progression.
- ☐ Establish a national forum for qualifications.

Source: Indecon

1. Continue to Develop and Implement the NFQ as a responsive and adaptable mechanism for qualifications and skills policy

The continued development and implementation of the NFQ should remain a high priority for QQI. This assessment highlighted the important role that the NFQ is seen to have had in the development of the Irish education and training landscape. However, the detailed feedback reported in this study also shows that stakeholders believe that the NFQ is not ‘finished business’ and that continued effort is needed to develop the NFQ further to address existing challenges and to ensure that it remains relevant in the national and international economic and social context.

2. Consider Initiatives to Further Improve Awareness of the NFQ among Stakeholders

The research found that the levels of awareness and use of the NFQ among stakeholders, particularly learners and those in the education and training sector, is relatively high. However, the level of awareness among some employers is lower. The latter is most notable among SMEs, with evidence from the NES showing that nearly one-third (31%) of all graduate employers, and 45% of small organisations, had not heard of the NFQ. The reported level of awareness among inward migrants was also reported in the stakeholder consultations to be low.

3. Re-visit the operation of the NFQ for upper secondary school qualifications and for qualifications at NFQ level 6

There may be merit in revisiting some of the earlier decisions made at the outset of the NFQ. These include the co-location of further and higher education at Level 6; the challenges posed to the NFQ by the inclusion of the Leaving Certificate across two levels; and, the need for clarification regarding the NFQ status of the Applied Leaving Certificate.

4. Examine QQI awarding function and NFQ levelling processes more generally

There is evidence reported in this study that reinforces the importance of transparency and trust in how education and training qualifications are developed with reference to the NFQ; how the NFQ level of a qualification is determined; and, how standards of NFQ qualifications are maintained over time. This would suggest that there would be a merit in QQI, given its role as an awarding body, to assess how effectively it ensures that a learner acquires the standard of knowledge skill and competence associated with a level in the NFQ, before a qualification is awarded. All national awarding bodies currently share responsibility for promoting confidence in the 'currency' of the NFQ and the standards of qualifications associated with it. The processes for assigning an NFQ level to a qualification and how the NFQ level associated with a qualification is maintained and confirmed by internal and external quality assurance processes, should be transparent.

5. Ensure clarity and simplicity of communication

A number of interviewees commented that the documentation provided by QQI often tended to be 'jargon-heavy' and difficult to understand for employees, employers, and even industry insiders. The survey results also found that some respondents felt that NFQ guidance material and resources were not appropriate to their needs. This was most notable among learners and employers. These findings, while not widespread, would suggest scope for enhancing the clarity and simplicity/accessibility of communication by QQI on the NFQ.

6. Include a broader range of qualifications within the NFQ

The original intention of the NFQ was to recognise all learning achievements. Currently only qualifications that are issued by national awarding bodies in Ireland are included in the NFQ. There are many other qualifications that provide valuable recognition of relevant professional and technical skills and competence. Findings from this report suggest that the national qualifications system would be enhanced if a broader range of qualifications were to be included in the NFQ. Any expansion in the range of qualifications eligible for inclusion within the NFQ should be progressed in close consultation with all relevant stakeholders.

7. Ensure Strong International Engagement

It is important that the NFQ continues to serve the large number of outward and inward migrants to Ireland. This requires ensuring that there is continued engagement by QQI in European developments relating to skills and qualifications, and that there is very strong, clear and concise communication to inward migrants regarding the status of their qualifications in Ireland. NFQ should support future arrangements to facilitate the mobility and recognition of qualifications in the context of any new EU/UK relationship.

8. Establish Data to Investigate Progression

The absence of comprehensive data on existing progression pathways, and more importantly their use, means that it is challenging to assess the impacts of the NFQ in relation to assisting progression among learners. As such, the analysis in this report focuses on stakeholder views as to the extent of progression possibilities in practice. A study to investigate progression pathways, gaps and barriers should be considered by QQI, as a means of better informing policy regarding the future evolution of the NFQ, and of the education and training system in Ireland.

9. Establish a national forum for qualifications

QQI currently arranges periodic briefing sessions to improve communication with stakeholders. However, the complexity of the sector, coupled with the ranges of issues that it faces, suggests that there would be significant benefits in establishing a NFQ forum to inform the future development of the NFQ and to disseminate information in relation to national and regional qualifications frameworks. This is in line with the 2009 Framework Implementation and Impact Study, which recommended that a process to periodically identify and re-visit issues that may affect the integrity of the NFQ or its effective operation be put in place. Stakeholders consulted by Indecon in the course of the current NFQ impact assessment indicated strong support and interest in a forum that would inform qualifications policy and the NFQ as an instrument for policy.

8.3 Overall Conclusion

This assessment, for the first time, has presented extensive new research among a diverse range of users of the National Framework of Qualifications to inform an examination of the policy impacts of the NFQ. Overall, the findings of the research indicate that the NFQ has been very positively received among learners, employers and other stakeholders. In terms of different aspects of the impact of the NFQ, the assessment found that the NFQ was viewed as having had a very positive impact on the transparency and quality of the qualifications system in Ireland; on promoting progression between education levels but also of mobility of qualifications internationally; as well as improving the match between skills and employment opportunities. However, while acknowledging the achievements of the NFQ to date, the stakeholder engagement interviews also indicated a diverse range of views of how the NFQ should evolve in the future, and what the priorities of QQI should be in this regard. As such, this report should be viewed as the start rather than the end of a process of consultation, review and, where necessary, reform, to ensure that the NFQ is well positioned to meet the future needs of Irish society and economy.

Annex 1 Survey Questionnaire

Background Information

1. In what capacity are you responding? Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Higher Education Institution
- ☐ Further Education and Training Provider
- ☐ Qualification Awarding Body or Professional Recognition Body
- ☐ Employer or Employer Representative Body
- ☐ Trade Union or Other Employee Representative Body
- ☐ Learner/Student
- ☐ Learning/Student Representative/Advocacy Body
- ☐ Teacher/Trainer/Lecturer
- ☐ Career Guidance Professional
- ☐ School
- ☐ Government Department or Government Agency
- ☐ Research/Consultancy Body
- ☐ EU/International Organisation
- ☐ Individual Citizen
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Views on Policy Impacts of the National Framework of Qualifications

2. Please indicate your views below on the contribution of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in improving the transparency of qualifications in Ireland (please select one option per row below.):

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The NFQ has made qualification pathways easier to explain and understand	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The NFQ has made the skills and competence of qualifications more visible	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The NFQ has made it easier to see how qualifications relate to each other	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The NFQ has made it easier to evaluate qualifications for work or study	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

3. Please indicate your view in relation to the extent to which the development of the NFQ has contributed to achieving the following quality-related impacts (please select one option per row below):

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Qualifications included in the NFQ are relevant for users (learners, employers, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Qualifications included in the NFQ meet consistent quality standards wherever they are provided	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Qualifications included in the NFQ are highly trusted, nationally and internationally	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Overall, the NFQ has enhanced the quality of qualifications in Ireland	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. Please indicate below your views in relation to the extent to which the development of the NFQ has contributed to achieving the following impacts in relation to lifelong learning and the mobility of learning and qualifications (please select one option per row below):

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The NFQ has facilitated improved access to education and training courses	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The NFQ has improved progression between qualifications achieved in school, in further and higher education and training	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The NFQ has made it easier for Irish qualifications to be understood, compared, and valued in other countries	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The NFQ has made it easier to value and recognise learning and qualifications achieved outside of the formal/public education and training system	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The NFQ has contributed to improved Ireland's national performance in the area of lifelong learning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

5. Please indicate below your views in relation to the extent to which the development of the NFQ has contributed to achieving the following employability-related impacts (please select one option per row below):

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The NFQ has improved the dialogue between the world of qualifications and the world of work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Vocational Qualifications included in the NFQ signal relevant skills and competencies required for particular occupations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The NFQ has facilitated better matching between skills and job vacancies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The NFQ has facilitated national monitoring and reporting of skills and qualifications output	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The NFQ has facilitated workforce planning and development	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

6. Based on your familiarity with education and training in Ireland, please indicate below your views in relation to the extent to which the development to-date of the NFQ has contributed to achieving the following impacts in relation to teaching, learning, and assessment practice (please select one option per row below):

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The learning outcomes approach of the NFQ has improved the practice of course and curricula design	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The learning outcomes approach of the NFQ has improved teaching and learning practice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The learning outcomes approach of the NFQ has improved assessment practice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The NFQ has made a positive contribution to the enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Views on the Development, Promotion and Governance of the NFQ

7. Please indicate your views on how well informed you feel about the NFQ and how effectively the NFQ has been developed and promoted (please selection one option for each of the aspects/rows below):

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am sufficiently informed about the NFQ	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have been appropriately involved in NFQ policy development and implementation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The NFQ as a policy instrument is consistent with other national policy in the area of qualifications (e.g. public funding policy, public sector recruitment, national strategies for skills development, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The benefits/value of the NFQ are effectively promoted to stakeholders	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The availability of NFQ guidance material and resources are appropriate to my needs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am sufficiently informed about international developments relating to qualifications frameworks (e.g. European Qualifications Framework, Qualifications Framework for European Higher Education)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Views on Future Policy Priorities for the NFQ

8. Please indicate the level of priority you would attach to each of the following NFQ functions for the future development of the Framework (please select one option for each row below):

	High Priority	Medium Priority	Low Priority
Communication Function – making qualifications and the qualifications system easier to understand	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Quality Assurance Function – ensuring that qualifications are more reliable and valid	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Regulatory Function – using the NFQ to control access to the market for qualifications in Ireland	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Progression Function – using the NFQ to address obstacles to the mobility of qualifications within and between the education and training system	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recognition Function – supporting the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad and for the recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Design Function – supporting deeper implementation of the learning outcomes approach in qualifications	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Additional Feedback

9. We would also welcome any additional observations you may have, including in relation to successes or failures based on your engagement with the NFQ, any views on the effectiveness of how the NFQ has been developed, implemented and promoted, and any additional suggestions you may have concerning future policy priorities for the NFQ:



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