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



A major step forward for education and training opportunities in Ireland



Since the National Qualifications Authority was set up in 2001, our main task has been to develop the National Framework of Qualifications, which was launched in October 2003. There are many changes currently taking place in education and training in Ireland. The National Framework of Qualifications is itself a key element in this changing landscape. It signals significant progress in the creation of a single, coherent, more easily understood qualifications system for all levels of education and training in this State. It also accords with European and international developments to enhance learner mobility within and between national systems. The Framework does not espouse a particular philosophy of education and training, but embodies a vision for the recognition of learning. This is a vision based on an understanding of learning as a lifelong process. This vision requires the recognition of all learning activity throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social or employment related perspective. The introduction of the Framework is the end result of a long and detailed process – a process which drew on significant national and international research,

undertaken in close consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, whose interests and views were fully taken into consideration at all stages. Having launched the Framework, we now commence the long-term process of implementation with stakeholders. The Framework provides exciting opportunities for all learners today. Through associated policies on ‘access, transfer and progression’, a new and highly flexible vision for the recognition of learning has been introduced and is being acted upon, encouraging learners to achieve awards for learning on a lifelong basis. At the same time, this innovative development allows important benefits to accrue to course providers, employers and other interested parties. This publication provides a general overview of the workings of the National Framework of Qualifications and outlines how these new developments impact on everybody participating in education and training. I would like to thank the many people who have provided assistance in reaching this historic milestone.

Seán Ó Foghlú
Chief Executive
National Qualifications Authority of Ireland



// The need for a more flexible and integrated system of qualifications arises in the main from the national objective of moving towards a 'lifelong learning society', in which learners will avail of learning opportunities at various stages throughout their lives.



A framework of qualifications – what and why?

The National Framework of Qualifications is a radical development in Irish education and training. This learner-centred Framework, which is transparent and readily understandable, relates all education and training awards made in Ireland to each other. In doing so, it brings coherence to the awards system. It establishes clearly-defined standards about the quality of awards and about what a learner can be expected to achieve for each award. The Framework is designed to bring about change. It introduces a new approach to the meaning of an award, that an award will recognise learning outcomes – what a person with an award knows, can do and understands – rather than time spent on a programme. It also shifts the emphasis of the awards system from the maintenance of existing systems and structures to meeting the needs of learners.

The need for a more flexible and integrated system of qualifications arises from the national objective of moving towards a 'lifelong learning society', in which learners will avail of learning opportunities at various

stages throughout their lives. The diffuse nature of the existing qualifications systems does not easily support portability of recognition for learning. The strong separation of responsibility for education and training across a range of government Departments has been reflected in the separation of qualifications systems, with linked but separate arrangements for schools, further education, institutes of technology, universities and a variety of training organisations.

Another reason for change is the need for learners, employers and others to be able to compare Irish qualifications more easily and accurately with those from other countries. This is particularly important in the European context, where the Bologna and Copenhagen Declarations signal a move towards greater compatibility and comparability of qualifications. These Declarations concern European cooperation in higher education and in vocational education and training.

Change is already under way

The process of changing the system of qualifications in Ireland is already under way. Under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, three new organisations were established in 2001 – the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and two new awards Councils, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). The main task of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland since its establishment has been to establish and develop a national framework of qualifications.

What is the framework of qualifications?

The National Framework of Qualifications is defined as *"The single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards."*

The Framework comprises ten levels, with each level based on specified standards of knowledge, skill and competence. These standards define the outcomes to be achieved by learners seeking to gain awards at each level. The ten levels will accommodate awards gained in schools, the workplace, the community, training centres, colleges and universities, from the most basic to the most advanced levels of learning. Learning achieved through experience in the workplace or other non-formal settings will also be recognised in awards.

The intention is not just to provide a frame of reference for existing awards: the awards Councils will develop systems of new awards for the National Framework of Qualifications. These new awards will be made on the basis of 'learning outcomes' defined in terms of standards of knowledge, skill and competence. The outcomes-based nature of the new awards is a significant change from the practice in most existing awards systems, of basing awards on inputs, or on time spent in programmes.

Benefits for learners

Focussing on the needs of learners

The National Framework of Qualifications is now a reality. Very wide-ranging in its scope, it encompasses all awards made by national awarding bodies. The introduction of the Framework will, over time, result in many advantages for learners. The principal underlying benefit of the Framework is that it will put greater emphasis on the needs of learners — representing a major shift in policy on qualifications to date.

Meeting new needs . . . while valuing existing awards

In future a more diverse group of learners, with a higher proportion of adults, will be embraced within the Irish education and training system. The Framework is designed to meet the qualifications needs of this more diverse learner group, and many new awards will be developed and made available as lifelong learning gradually becomes the norm in Ireland. Existing and previous awards will be fully recognised as part of the new system. Previously obtained awards will retain their value for transfer or progression to further learning opportunities and for employment.

Coherence and comparability

The Framework will introduce greater understanding, coherence and transparency to the wide variety of awards available in Ireland in every area of education and training by including all awards in a single framework on

the same basis. It will therefore be easier for learners to identify awards that best suit their needs.

The Framework introduces a unified structure, clearly mapping out awards available at all levels through all education and training institutions. Better informed comparisons can be made between awards in diverse areas of learning - such as business and science. It will also be possible to compare awards that have different purposes and standards - for example general education awards as opposed to specific occupational training awards.

In the workplace

Employers will benefit from the Framework, as it will allow easy understanding and comparison of the nature and value of available awards. The more convenient comparison of awards and qualifications will also provide employees with enhanced support for career advancement.

Quality

A key objective of the Framework is to promote and maintain the standards of further and higher education and training awards. A number of different arrangements are already in place, backed by legislation, to ensure the quality of education and training in Ireland. The introduction of the Framework, which sets the overall standards of many

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awards, together with the measures taken by the awarding bodies and providers to build and monitor the quality of awards, will further enhance and guarantee the overall quality of awards made in Ireland.

Opportunities for progression

The Framework offers learners improved chances to reach their full potential through provisions for ‘access, transfer and progression for learners.’ These provisions promote wider access to awards, creating additional opportunities for transfer to different programmes or fields of learning, while encouraging learners to continue in the learning process and progress to awards at higher levels (See also page 12). It will mean that, for example, learners will gain recognition for previous relevant learning and should not have to start from scratch when they switch into a new field of learning.

At the same time, access to education and training will be greatly enhanced through the development of a system of awards flexible enough to value all forms of learning achievement, regardless of how or where the learning takes place.

Recognition of prior learning

Processes for the recognition of prior learning can potentially benefit all learners, but particularly those who have been engaged in learning on a non-formal or informal basis, or in the workplace. The Framework is designed to support the further development of prior learning recognition as a broad concept that can enable

entry to a programme, credit towards an award, or even eligibility for a full award.

No more cul-de-sacs

In the qualifications systems that operated in Ireland prior to the establishment of the Framework, many awards were achieved through specialised programmes and offered little or no potential for progression to further learning. This is not to say that these awards are of low value: on the contrary, many such awards are highly esteemed in particular occupations. Nevertheless, as it is important for learners that all awards should have some associated opportunities for progression, the Framework has been designed to ensure that there are no ‘cul-de-sac’ awards in the new system. The outcomes-based nature of the new awards ensures a high level of transferability of learning, and procedures set out to promote progression will strengthen this effect.

International benefits

The Framework will make it easier to compare awards from different jurisdictions, especially between Ireland and the United Kingdom. It also accords with developments across Europe in higher education and in vocational education and training to make qualifications more transparent, comparable and compatible. This will enable learners to move easily between different education and training systems, using their qualifications for employment in other countries.

Building the Framework

This section provides an overview of the main features of the National Framework of Qualifications. A full description can be found in the technical papers published in October 2003, ‘Determinations for a National Framework of Qualifications’, and ‘Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of a National Framework of Qualifications’.

A structure of ten levels

The National Framework of Qualifications has a simple basic ‘architecture’, comprising three central elements — levels, award-types and named awards. Essentially, it is a structure of ten levels. Each level is defined by a set of learning outcomes that are expected of a learner who is to receive an award at that level. Learning outcomes are packages of knowledge, skill and competence.

At each level in the Framework there are one or more award-types. The award-type concept is central to the Framework, as it is the mechanism through which individual or ‘named’ awards are included. An award-type is a class of named award that shares common features and levels. Award-types are independent of fields of learning. For example, an ‘Honours Bachelor Degree’ is an award-type, whereas an ‘Honours Bachelor Degree in Business Management’ is a named award.

Each award-type has its own award-type descriptor. The descriptor sets out the key features, profile and overall standards of the award-type. On this basis, a range of named awards can be developed for each award-type. It is the responsibility of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland to define levels and develop award-type descriptors.

The ten levels in the Framework encompass the widest possible spread of learning. Level 1 awards, for example, recognise the ability to perform basic tasks, while Level 10 awards recognise the ability to discover and develop new knowledge and skills at the frontier of research and scholarship. The Framework model also provides for a variety of award-types (see ‘Award-types explained’, below). Together, the levels and award-types form a flexible mechanism that can provide recognition for all learning achievements.



The relationship between levels, award-types and named awards.

Award-types explained

Award-types are a key feature of the Framework. Although the concept of ‘award-types’ is new, it builds upon the traditional practice of grouping awards for the purposes of setting standards, design and delivery of education and training programmes and generally communicating what awards mean. An initial set of 15 award-types has been determined for the Framework, with at least one at each of the ten levels.

Key words

These terms and definitions are used with specific meanings, or are newly - developed for the Framework. They are explained in the text in this section

- Learning outcomes
- Level indicators
- Award - types
- Award - type description
- Named awards

Four classes of award-types have been identified for the Framework : major, minor, special-purpose and supplemental. All 15 award-types in the initial set are classed as ‘major’. Descriptors for award-types of other classes will be defined as required.

- major award-types are the principal class of awards made at each level, and capture a typical range of achievements at the level — for example, Junior Certificate at Level 3, or Honours Bachelor Degree at Level 8
- a minor award-type provides recognition for learners who achieve a range of learning outcomes, but not the specific combination of learning outcomes required for a major award
- special-purpose award-types are made for specific, relatively narrow, purposes — for example, the Safe Pass certification of competence in health and safety in the construction industry
- supplemental award-types are for learning which is additional to a previous award. They could, for

example, relate to updating and refreshing knowledge or skills, or to continuing professional development.

When the Framework is fully developed, it is anticipated that various classes of award-type will be available at each of the ten levels.

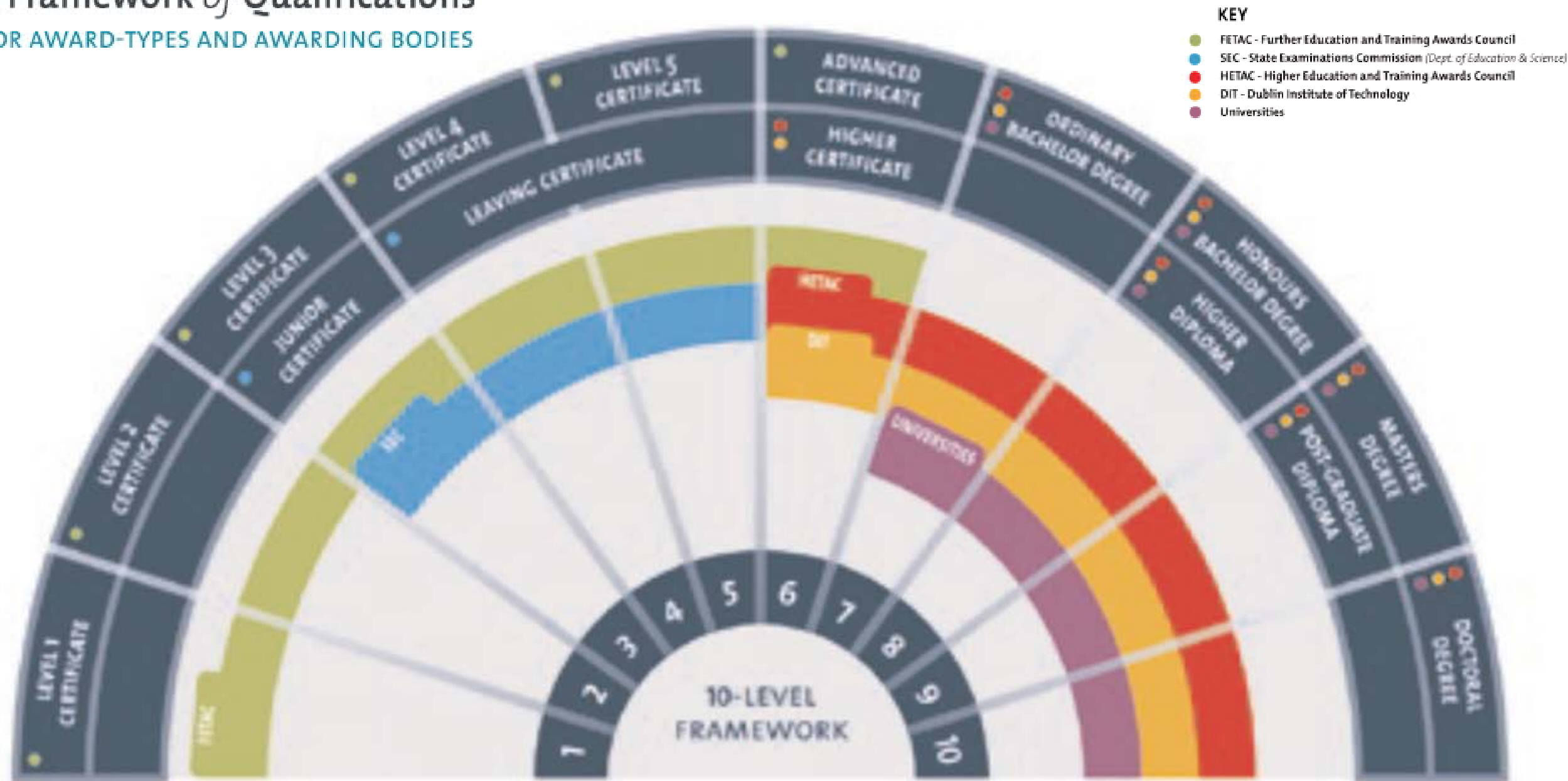
Named awards

A named award is the award a learner receives for achievement in a specific field of learning. A named award is related to the Framework through the award-type to which it belongs. The standards for a named award are specified on the basis of the award-type descriptor and the field of learning to which it relates. For example, the Honours Bachelor Degree is a major award-type at Level 8 in the Framework. So an Honours Bachelor Degree in Electronic Engineering or in Arts could be named awards for this award-type. Similarly, the Level 5 Certificate is a major award-type at Level 5. A Level 5 Certificate in Office Skills could be a named award of this type.

It is the responsibility of awarding bodies to develop named awards. Using the award-type descriptors as templates, they will develop the standards for named awards in various fields of learning.

National Framework of Qualifications

INITIAL MAJOR AWARD-TYPES AND AWARDING BODIES



The diagram illustrates the outline National Framework of Qualifications. The 10-level structure contains an initial set of 15 award-types for which descriptors have been determined and published. Each level has at least one award-type. It should be noted that all of these are major award-types. It is anticipated that additional major award-types, as well as various minor, special-purpose and supplemental award-types will be defined as the further

development of the Framework unfolds. In the Framework, awards at Levels 7 to 10 are made by HETAC, the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and the universities. At level 6, the Advanced Certificate is made by FETAC and the Higher Certificate award is made by HETAC and the Dublin Institute of Technology. At Levels 3 to 5, the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate awards are made by the State Examinations Commission (Department of

Education and Science). Other awards at Levels 1-5 are made by FETAC. The award-type descriptors for the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate are defined to enable the inclusion of these awards in the Framework. These descriptors are therefore indicative rather than prescriptive in their intent. For the purpose of inclusion in the Framework, the

Leaving Certificate is treated as a single award. The published general aims, objectives and outcomes associated with the various Leaving Certificate options, in their totality, are consistent with the learning outcomes defined for Levels 4 and 5 of the Framework, so the award is viewed as involving learning outcomes and standards spanning these levels.



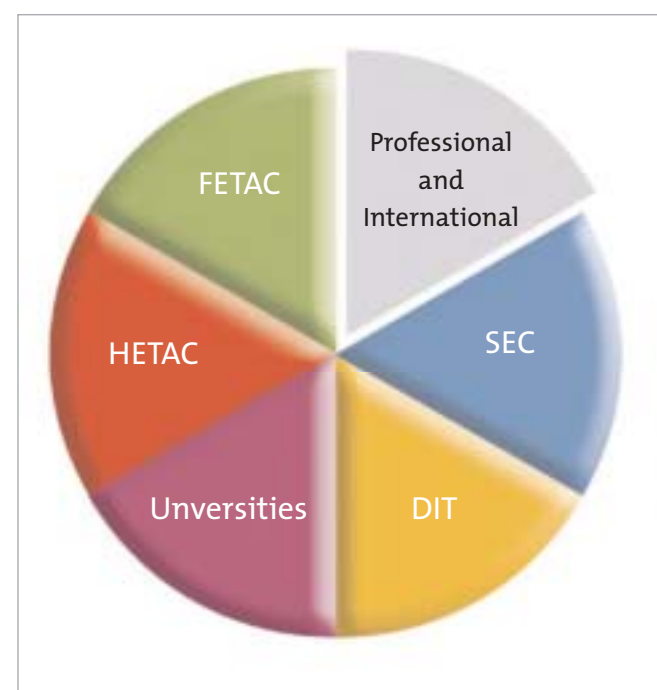
The Framework in action

Who makes awards in the Framework?

Even before the introduction of the Framework, many important changes had been made in the qualifications system in Ireland. The range of organisations that are empowered to make awards has been significantly reduced, as the two awards Councils (FETAC and HETAC) have now taken over the awarding functions of several other bodies. This new arrangement simplifies and clarifies the situation, and is in itself regarded internationally as a major innovation.

The diagram on pages 8-9 illustrates the levels in the Framework at which the various awarding bodies will make awards, in the context of the initial set of 15 major award-types. The section on 'Awards in the Framework' sets out the different bases on which awards will be included in the Framework, and this is also reflected in the relationship between the Framework and the awards systems of the various awarding bodies. FETAC, HETAC and the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) are developing new systems of awards in accordance with the specifications of the Framework. The universities and the Department of Education and Science (State Examinations Commission) have agreed with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland how their awards are

accommodated in the framework. The roles of these awarding bodies in the implementation of the Framework are set out on page 16. The relationship between the Framework and professional and international awarding bodies has yet to be defined.



The awarding bodies operating in the new qualifications system comprise the following organisations.

- Two awards Councils established to make awards in the Framework:
 - FETAC makes awards for all learning in further education and training programmes, and has generally assumed the awarding functions of the former National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA), FÁS, Teagasc, the National Tourism Certification Board (CERT) and Bord Iascaigh Mhara. It makes awards for a wide range of providers from training centres and colleges to the workplace.
 - HETAC makes awards for learning in a wide range of higher education and training institutions, including the Institutes of Technology.
- The State Examinations Commission (Department of Education and Science) makes awards for learning in school programmes — Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate
- The seven universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology are providers of programmes and are also awarding bodies in their own right.
- A number of professional and international bodies make awards that are in common use in Ireland, and the inclusion of these awards in the Framework is being explored.

Awards in the Framework

The National Framework of Qualifications is intended to encompass all education and training awards in Ireland, providing recognition for all learning achievements. It includes:

- New awards at all ten levels, to be made by the awards Councils and the Dublin Institute of Technology. These awards will be designed to fit the specifications set out in the award-type descriptors in the Framework. Learners will then have available a complete chain of awards, recognising achievement from initial learning to the most advanced levels.
- Awards made by the universities at Levels 7-10, and by the State Examinations Commission (Department of Education and Science) at Levels 3-5. These awards are accommodated in the Framework on the basis that their standards are consistent with the descriptors for the relevant award-types. These bodies set the standards for the awards they make.

Many existing awards will cease to be made when the Framework is implemented. Also, many learners hold Irish awards that were part of former systems and have already ceased to be made. It will be possible to map most of these existing and former awards onto the new Framework, and the task of working out the placement of such awards has already begun. A range of professional and international awards are also made in Ireland and their inclusion in the Framework is being explored.





A new era of mobility for learners

The National Framework of Qualifications forms the basis of a new, more flexible and integrated system of qualifications. This flexibility is key to the national objective of moving towards 'a lifelong learning society,' in which learners take up learning opportunities at chosen stages throughout their lives.

The result will be to create a more diverse learner community, with more diverse needs. To meet these needs, changes are required that impact on many organisations, structures and systems throughout education and training in Ireland. Systems therefore need to focus more closely on the needs of learners. Learners should be able to avail of programmes appropriate to their ambitions, commitment and capacities, and receive due recognition for what they achieve. As well as establishing the Framework, the Authority is committed to maximising learner mobility. A strategy has therefore been put into action to improve opportunities for 'access, transfer and progression' for all learners. This strategy is outlined here, and is set out in detail in the technical paper *Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners*.

A vision for learner mobility

"The learner should be able to enter and successfully participate in a programme, or series of programmes, leading to an award, or series of awards, in pursuit of their learning objectives.

The National Framework of Qualifications and associated programme provisions should be structured to facilitate learner entry, and to promote transfer and progression. Thus, learners will be encouraged to participate in the learning process to enable them to realise their ambitions to the full extent of their abilities."

What learners need for mobility

An extensive consultation was undertaken in the development of the National Framework of Qualifications. This revealed that a range of issues need to be addressed if the Framework is to have real meaning for learners. The following are the main needs identified.

- opportunity for entry - transparent, fair and consistent entry arrangements to programmes
- clarity about the awards process
 - a means to identify the relationship between different awards
 - clearly delineated transfer and progression routes through the system
- arrangements for participation in a variety of ways, including the possibility of achieving an award by accumulating credit for learning achievements over time
- information and guidance - accurate and reliable information to enable planning and choice of transfer and progression routes.

Meeting learner needs

Several actions are planned to meet learner needs for improved mobility. The overall strategy and key actions outlined below are set out in detail in the technical paper *Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners*. The development of the Framework itself is a primary action, and the need to enable learner mobility has strongly influenced the design of the Framework. Changes in systems, structures and attitudes are required to address many of the issues involved in improving learner mobility. The Authority will take a lead role in coordinating the cultural changes needed at structural, organisational and individual levels. A range of policies have been adopted. They are set out in four strands, as follows.

- credit (and recognition of prior learning)
- transfer and progression routes
- entry arrangements
- information provision



These policies will be realised through actions to be undertaken by the Authority and the awards Councils. New procedures also must be implemented by the awards Councils and by providers of further and higher education and training other than the universities. The universities are required to consider these procedures and their implementation will be reviewed by the Authority.

Key action lines

- a national policy approach to credit accumulation and transfer will be developed and implemented
- providers will specify arrangements available for the recognition of prior learning
- all awards should have some associated opportunities for transfer and progression
- a learner achieving an award will be, in principle, eligible to progress to a programme leading to another award at a higher level
- providers, in cooperation with the relevant awarding bodies, will identify transfer and progression routes into and onwards from all programmes leading to awards in the Framework. They should adapt programmes, where necessary to achieve this
- programmes leading to awards in the National Framework of Qualifications should accommodate a variety of access and entry arrangements
- appropriate arrangements for entry to higher education and training for adult learners will be developed
- providers are required to ensure that
 - learners have available statements of the knowledge, skill and competence needed as a basis for successful participation in a programme
 - there is comparability in the factors defined for similar programmes
 - for each programme, the awards in the Framework that are recognised as demonstrating eligibility for entry will be clearly defined and, where relevant, the attainments required in these awards
- protocols are set out for all providers which state how information about programmes and awards should be made available to learners.





Next steps

A major milestone has been reached with the launch of the Framework, but the work of further developing the Framework will continue into the future. In the meantime, the Framework will be implemented on a gradual basis.

Implementing the Framework

A number of steps are involved in the implementation of the Framework. First, in accordance with the Framework, the awards Councils must establish standards for awards and procedures to validate programmes leading to those awards. This involves consulting with stakeholders, including providers of education and training, public bodies, industry and services, in order to ensure that awards are relevant to learner needs.

The overall standards of awards made by the awards Councils and the Dublin Institute of Technology are set out in the award-type descriptors. This means that they will use the descriptors to set detailed standards for their named awards. They will build into these named awards the required features to support access, transfer and progression. The standards will be set in consultation with experts in the area and with industry. Once standards have been set, providers will submit programmes that lead to these new awards to the awarding bodies for validation. Validation is the process by which an awarding body satisfies itself that a programme can support the learner to attain the standards of an award. In addition, the awarding body will agree quality assurance

procedures for these programmes.

The timescale for the implementation of the Framework is that awards meeting the new Framework standards will be available in June 2006. Many may be available earlier, depending on progress in establishing standards for named awards and in operating the associated validation and quality assurance processes.

Further development of the Framework

The Authority plans to develop the Framework further in consultation with the main stakeholders. The main areas of work are as follows:

- The Authority is working with the awarding bodies to develop additional award-types, for example to cater for specific sets of learning outcomes.
- Work is underway to determine how international and professional awards will be included in the Framework. It is planned that draft policies and criteria for the inclusion of professional and international awards in the Framework will be published in 2004.
- The Authority is working with stakeholders to implement a common approach to credit that will

operate for both further and higher education. This entails, for example, the introduction of credit in all institutions of higher education and the development of a credit system for all of further education and training.

- The implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications will bring about significant changes in education and training in Ireland. Through the consultation-based development process, the aim has been to reach as much broad consensus as possible with regard to the issues involved in these changes. Over time, the operation of the Framework will be reviewed. The review process will, for example, examine how objectives have been met, identify areas where adjustments may be needed and inform the further development and adaptation of the Framework to meet changing learner needs. The Authority has undertaken to review within a three-year period the specific issue of the determination made in relation to the differentiation of further and higher education and training. In addition, the Authority will continue to explore issues of concern with relevant stakeholders as they arise. At the time of publication, the Authority is

exploring the concerns of some stakeholders in relation to some of the titles of the initial major award-types.

- The Authority is to publish its Corporate Plan for 2003-2006 in November 2003. The Corporate Plan will set out the Authority's objectives for the next three years and how it plans to meet these.



Roles of the main organisations

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland establishes and maintains the Framework. While all the awards made by the national awarding bodies in Ireland are included in the Framework, they are not all included in the same way because these bodies differ with respect to their structures, functions and autonomy.

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, establishes separate but interdependent roles for the Authority and the awards Councils, FETAC and HETAC. The Authority establishes and develops the Framework. The overall standards of awards of FETAC, HETAC and the Dublin Institute of Technology are set by the Framework and these bodies, as awarding bodies, are responsible for setting detailed standards for named awards. Their main roles are to set standards for named awards, validate programmes, make awards, agree and monitor quality assurance procedures and ensure fair and consistent assessment of learners. In the case of the Dublin Institute of Technology, which is both an awarding body and a provider, it validates its own programmes and ensures that quality assurance procedures are in place.

The awards Councils may also delegate authority to make awards to institutions that are within their remit. This will be done on the basis of criteria and procedures agreed between the Council concerned and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.

The universities are both providers and awarding bodies and set the standards for their awards. Awards made by

the universities will be accommodated in the Framework on an agreed basis with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.

The State Examinations Commission is responsible for setting standards for the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate. These awards are accommodated in the Framework on an agreed basis with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.

Further reading

Publications of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland:

Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications

Determinations for the Outline National Framework of Qualifications

Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners

www.nqai.ie