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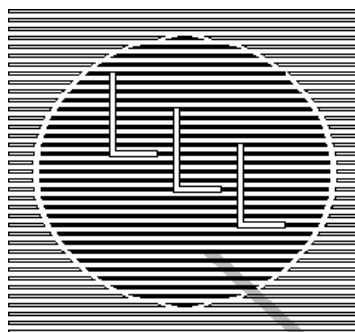


ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT

DIRECTION DE L'ÉDUCATION  
DIRECTORATE FOR EDUCATION

**The National Qualifications  
Authority of Ireland**

## **The Role of National Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning**



### **Background Report for Ireland**

**2003**

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# INTRODUCTION

This document is a Country Background Report, describing and analysing the qualifications system in Ireland. It forms a contribution to the OECD activity on ‘The Role of National Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning’. The report was prepared over the period 2002-2003 by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, which participated in the activity on behalf of the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, with the support of an Advisory Group representing key stakeholding organisations:

- Higher Education Authority
- Universities
- Institutes of Technology
- Adult Learning – AONTAS
- Training - FAS
- Social Partners – IBEC (Employers) and ICTU (Unions)
- Further Education and Training Awards Council
- Higher Education and Training Awards Council
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

The report is structured in accordance with agreed guidelines, in four main components followed by a concluding section. Component 1 contains a survey of the Irish qualifications system. Component 2 analyses the impact of the qualifications system on learners and employers, using available data. Component 3 sets out the pressures and initiatives that drive contemporary developments in the system. Component 4 reports on a small-scale research project undertaken in connection with the OECD activity, to gather information on how the qualifications system affects the experience of learners at the practical level.

# **COMPONENT 1**

## **DESCRIPTION OF QUALIFICATIONS SYSTEMS, PARTICIPATION AND OUTCOMES**

### **Background Description**

Ireland is an independent Republic at the extreme western edge of Europe. It has a small population of 3.75 million people. It is a full member of the European Union since 1973, and is part of the EURO monetary zone.

Ireland's economy is small and open, heavily dependent on international trade, and consequently reliant on competitiveness in knowledge and high skill areas to sustain economic growth and development. The 1994-2000 period was one of unprecedented economic growth, with employment expanding by 40%. This modern economy has been transformed over the past forty years, from a largely agricultural and low-technology base. This transformation has been achieved in tandem with very significant expansion of the education and training infrastructure and in rates of participation in education and training up to the highest levels.

The preparation of this report coincides with a period of major change and development in the Irish qualifications system. Recent legislation has established three new statutory organisations – a National Qualifications Authority and two Awards Councils – which have been set the task of developing and implementing a national framework of qualifications based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence. Work on this undertaking began in mid-2001, and it is intended that an outline framework will be published by the end of 2002. The framework and many associated systems and structures will therefore be operational by the time the final report on this OECD activity is issued.

The establishment of the new bodies, and the other provisions in the legislation, have already had significant effects throughout the structures and organisations that make up the qualifications system in Ireland: arising out of a concerted process of consultation driven by the new Authority, there is widespread debate and discussion on issues concerning all aspects of awards and qualifications; several awards systems previously located in vocational education and training organisations have been gathered together under the remit of the new Further Education and Training Awards Council; new relationships have been developed between many of the Higher Education institutions and the new Higher Education and Training Awards Council. The functions of these new bodies are further explained in following sections in this document.

The situation of ongoing change in this area in Ireland presents a particular challenge in the preparation of this background report. It will also create some difficulties for those engaged in the synthesis of the national reports. However, it is also likely that the learning from the activity as a whole will be enhanced by the inclusion in the OECD Report of an example of a qualifications system in transition. Accordingly, the report is structured to reflect the situation as it obtains in mid-2002. Anticipated changes are indicated wherever possible, but many aspects of the new framework can only be described in outline at this stage. To provide a context for the transitional situation, a short description is given below of the system as it was before the commencement of the change process. Many of the responses in particular subsections throughout the report refer to this “Pre 2001” situation, and should be interpreted in the context of this note.

### **The Irish Qualifications System Pre 2001.**

In Ireland, in common with many other countries, awards for achievement in learning were made through a variety of structures and agencies, operating a variety of systems and subsystems. These arrangements have evolved over the years: some elements of the system have their origins in the earliest stages of development of education and training in Ireland, while others were of quite recent vintage and have been developed in response to needs arising out of changing employment situations and corresponding new learning opportunities.

In general, the elements of the pre-2001 qualifications system mirror the organisational sectors that have evolved in the world of learning. The education and training strands of learning have separate organisational identities, and are co-ordinated through two Ministries (the Department of Education and Science, and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment). Several agencies are responsible for the provision of training for particular employment sectors – such as hotel and catering, farming and agriculture, fisheries – and for particular target populations such as people with disabilities. There is also a generalised training and employment agency, FÁS, the national authority for training and employment, which delivers and co-ordinates a wide range of training provision, including Apprenticeships. By 2001, each of these organisations had developed separate systems for the recognition of learning.

Education in Ireland has traditionally comprised three main strands: Primary, Post-primary or Second Level, and Higher Education or Third Level.<sup>1</sup> Higher Education is further divided into a binary system, comprising Universities on the one hand, and on the other, Institutes of Technology, National Institutions and certain other colleges and institutions. In very recent times, a new Further Education strand has been formalised, comprising a variety of learning opportunities for adults, a range of mainly vocational provisions organised on a sub-tertiary basis, and many community-based learning programmes. For each of these strands and sub-strands, separate systems of awards and qualifications have been developed.

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<sup>1</sup> See Department of Education and Science (2001), *Statistical Report*, Dublin, The Stationery Office

There has been no award made for learning at Primary Level since the nineteen-sixties. Pre-2001, awards for learning at Second Level were made by the Department of Education and Science. In Higher Education, the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology made their own awards. The other Institutes of Technology, National Institutions and certain other colleges and institutions availed of awards made by a statutory awarding body, the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA). In the various programmes that are now included under the Further Education umbrella, many different awards were used to recognise learning, including a variety of specialised and international awards; however, the most common award system in use in Further Education was that developed by the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA).

The graphic in Appendix 1 illustrates the components of the pre 2001 system of qualifications and the typical progression routes used by learners in the system. It features only one award from the training sector, the Apprenticeship or National Craft Certificate: essentially, most awards for learning in the training sector were free-standing, or formed part of narrow progression routes within an occupational field; however, in some of the training fields, the further and higher education awards systems were used.

In addition to these arrangements, all of which had a more or less statutory basis, a very wide range of awards was made in Ireland by other agencies:

- Professional organisations
- International awarding organisations (e.g. City and Guilds, Open University)
- Specialised training organisations.

Most of these awards were made for learning associated with a particular professional or occupational sector (often on an in-work or upskilling basis), but many were also used to recognise learning in community-based programmes and in mainstream training programmes.

### **Transitional Situation, 2002.**

The 1999 Qualifications (Education and Training) Act set in train a process of change across the entire system of qualifications in Ireland. As outlined above, a new National Qualifications Authority has been established, and is working to develop a comprehensive framework which will include all awards made in the State. Two new Awards Councils have been established under the Act:

- The Higher Education and Training Awards Council makes awards for learning in the Institutes of Technology, National Institutions and certain other colleges and institutions. Essentially this represents a development of the role of the former National Council for Educational Awards; the new Council will have a different relationship with its associated institutions, and some of them have already been delegated power to make awards under the remit of the Council. The new Council also includes in its remit the making of awards at appropriate levels for learning undertaken in Training contexts.

- The Further Education and Training Awards Council makes awards across a broad span of education and training areas. It incorporates the awards of the former National Council for Vocational Awards, and the awards previously made by various statutory training agencies, FÁS (the national authority for training and employment), Teagasc (agriculture) and CERT (hotel, catering and tourism). These agencies retain their function as programme providers, but their awarding functions are now transferred to the Awards Council.

Apart from these structural innovations, there have as yet been no changes in the range or types of actual awards made available: such changes will not begin to arise until the initial work of the Qualifications Authority is completed and the framework is published – this is planned for the end of 2002.

Awards for learning at Second Level continue to be made by the Department of Education and Science.

The universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology continue to make their own awards.

Professional and International awarding bodies continue to make awards as before.



## **Qualifications: the recognition of learning**

### **Recognition of Formal Learning**

The arrangements for the recognition of formal learning in 2002 are largely unchanged from the pre 2001 situation; even where new awarding bodies are in place, the actual awards are the same. The publication of the framework will bring about major changes, both in the range of awards available and in the relationship between awards. The framework will define awards by reference to a set of levels, based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence. At each level there will be (one or more) award-types, or classes of named awards sharing common features. The aim is that a common nomenclature, or titling system, will be adopted to describe awards by level and type. As the framework is in development at the time of writing, it is not possible to specify how many levels it will contain, or the criteria for the definition of award-types. It is intended that this initial development work will be completed by end 2002, and the shape of the framework will then be apparent. Many existing awards will continue to be made in the context of the new framework; however, it is anticipated that new awards will be developed, and that this process will take some time.

The awards described in this section are those that form a legacy from the pre 2001 system. They are set out in relation to the organisational groupings that characterised that system. Only the main awards and sets of awards are described. Apart from these, there are many other awards that are less used, or that pertain only to a narrow field of application, such as those indicated above that are made by professional organisations or international awarding bodies.

### **Training**

All of the awards made in recognition of learning in the training environment are now under the remit of the Awards Councils. The majority of these awards are currently made by the Further Education and Training Awards Council. This includes certification systems previously developed by the main training agencies, FÁS (broad-based training over a wide variety of occupational fields), the State Tourism Training Agency, CERT, and the National Tourism Certification Board (hotel, catering and tourism), Teagasc (agriculture) and Bord Iascaigh Mhara (fisheries). Some of these systems extended at advanced levels into the Higher Education area, particularly the CERT and Teagasc systems, and these awards are now made by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council. The Further Education and Training Awards Council has adopted all of the certification processes and procedures of FÁS, CERT, and Teagasc for a transitional period to allow for continuity of service to learners and providers and to allow time for the Further Education and Training Awards Council to develop its own processes.

- **FÁS certification**

FÁS Certification was available at several levels:

- Introductory Vocational Skills Certificates (including the Integrated Assessment System, IAS, jointly developed and awarded by FÁS, Teagasc and CERT)
- Specific Skills Certificate (SST)
- National Skills Certificate
- National Craft Certificate (following Apprenticeship, see below).

Learners undertaking the Special Skills Certificate received joint FÁS / City and Guilds Institute of London Certificates.

All awards previously made by FÁS are now made by the Further Education and Training Awards Council.

- **National Craft Certificate (Apprenticeship)**

The National Craft Certificate is awarded to learners on successful completion of the Standards-Based Apprenticeship programme. The modern apprenticeship in Ireland is described in some detail in Component 3 below. This is a strongly vocational qualification, and each apprenticeship is tightly focused on the requirements of the particular occupational field to which it relates. Ireland has a comparatively small range of apprenticeships – 25 in all. They are in occupations that traditionally attract males. Despite recent efforts to support and encourage participation by women, and by mature learners, apprenticeship remains primarily a learning route undertaken by young men as initial pre-occupational training.

Apprenticeship training, assessment and certification are coordinated by FÁS, the national Training and Employment Authority; however, some of the training is delivered through Institutes of Technology. The National Craft Certificate awards are now made by the Further Education and Training Awards Council

- **CERT Certification**

CERT, in partnership with the Department of Education and Science and industry bodies, established the National Tourism Certification Board to develop a national system of assessment and certification for the hotel, catering and tourism industry. Its awards are now made mainly by the Further Education and Training Awards Council:

- Elementary Certificates
- National Craft Certificates (following Apprenticeship)
- Advanced National Certificate.

Some learning strands in the hotel, catering and tourism industries are integrated into the further and higher education awards systems, availing of the awards of the former National Council for Vocational Awards and National Council for Educational Awards - see below in this section, Higher Education and Further Education.

- **Agriculture and Fisheries – Teagasc and Bord Iascaigh Mhara**

These two industries developed certification arrangements using awards from the Further and Higher Education systems, and these awards have now transferred into the systems of the new Awards Councils.

### **Primary Level Education**

There are no awards.

### **Second Level Education**

This is a two-cycle system, comprising successive phases of three years and 2-3 years. Awards are made by the Department of Education and Science, at the end of each cycle:

- **Junior Certificate** – an award made following formal examinations at the end of the three-year Junior Cycle. This award was initiated in 1988; it replaced two previous awards, one of which was more vocational. The Junior Certificate is attained by the vast majority of young people in Irish schools today. The objectives of the associated programmes are very largely developmental, and focused on progression. A Junior Certificate award can be made in one or more subjects, but typically learners undertake multiple subjects. There are variants of the Junior Certificate to cater for learners with special needs. A small number of adult learners each year work towards this award.
- **Leaving Certificate** – this is a key award in the Irish system. For its holders, it marks the end of Second Level learning; it has significant value in the labour market (as a general indicator of achievement rather than as an indicator of any specific occupationally-relevant attainment); most significantly, it is the basis of the mechanism that allocates places in Higher Education programmes, and minimum entry requirements for Higher Education programmes are defined in terms of Leaving Certificate attainment. The Leaving Certificate award can be made in one or more subjects, but typically learners undertake multiple subjects. Approximately 80% of young people in Irish schools today attain the Leaving Certificate. A significant number of adult learners each year work towards this award. Nevertheless, the suitability of the Leaving Certificate as an objective for adult learners is often questioned, as it is characterised by a largely academic focus, heavy emphasis on terminal examinations and rigidly standardised curricula.
- **Leaving Certificate Variants** – there are two variants, The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied. The Vocational variant involves selection of subjects in specific groupings, and an add-on vocational studies module. The Applied variant is a radically different award, made for achievement across a whole programme rather than for individual

subject attainment as is the case with the original Leaving Certificate as described above. It is strongly focused on vocational preparation, and multiple modes of assessment are used. Although the programme is modular, awards are made only on the basis of completion of the whole programme – essentially, it is a two-year full-time undertaking. This latter feature makes the Leaving Certificate Applied unsuitable for the needs of most adult learners. An added drawback is the non-acceptance of this award for entry to Higher Education (however, Applied holders can progress to programmes leading to Further Education awards, and transition from Further to Higher awards is possible under certain circumstances – see Higher Education Links Scheme in Component 3 below).

## **Higher Education**

This is a binary system, with separate organisational identities for the universities and the Institutes of Technology. Despite these significant differences, there is a considerable consistency in the range of awards made across the whole field of Higher Education. The key awards are National Certificate, National Diploma, Bachelors Degree, Masters Degree and Doctorate. A variety of other “supplemental” awards are made, associated with one or other of these key awards – e.g. graduate diplomas, and higher diplomas.

The awards made in the two strands of Higher Education share core objectives in common with higher education sectors worldwide. In both strands, various awards are focused across a continuum from personal development – progression in learning – occupational qualification. As a broad generalisation, there is an emphasis on occupational qualification in the awards made in the Institutes, whereas awards made in the universities are less likely to be focused on specific occupational outcomes; however, there are many exceptions to this, particularly in healthcare and law. Learner progression and transfer between the strands of Higher Education is infrequent, and unstructured.

The learner population in Higher Education in Ireland comprises mainly young adults who have made a direct transition from school to Higher Education. Approximately 56% of those completing second level make this transition each year. The heavy concentration on this learner group arose out of burgeoning demand from an expanding youth population. The same demand has also led to the development of a mechanism for allocating places (the so-called Points System) based on achievement in the Leaving Certificate award at the end of Second Level (see above). There are therefore comparatively few adult learners in Higher Education in Ireland at present. Recent demographic changes have seen a reduction in the youth cohort in the population of the country as a whole, and this will have significant effects on the size and makeup of the learner group in Higher Education in the future. A notable trend is the emergence in some Higher Education institutions of modular, part-time programmes of study aimed at the mature student or adult learner.

The introduction of modular and semesterised programme structures in the universities and in the Institutes of Technology is an ongoing process, but the extent to which these

approaches have been implemented varies widely, even within institutions. In addition, the Accumulation of Credits and Certification of Subjects (ACCS) scheme, operated by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, allows learners to follow programmes for individual subjects in courses offered in any of the institutions designated by the Council, and thus accumulate credits gained towards an award. However, apart from some exceptions such as these, it can be said that programme design and delivery, and modes of assessment, are generally quite rigid in Higher Education. Most awards are typically available via programmes delivered on a full-time basis. End-of-year or end-of-module examinations are by far the most common assessment approach.

- **Institutes of Technology** – There are fourteen Institutes of Technology. In thirteen of these, the awards made are those of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council: currently, the Council’s awards are the same as those made by the former National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA). An exception is the Dublin Institute of Technology, which makes its own awards. The NCEA awards form a progression ladder, Certificate-Diploma-Bachelors-Masters-Doctorate. Progression along this ladder is not automatic: it depends on the performance of the learner, and advanced awards are not available for every field of learning. Nevertheless, it can be said that learner progression works well within the Institutes of Technology, using the NCEA ladder of awards. In addition to the Institutes of Technology, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council makes awards in a range of National Institutions, colleges and other institutions – 38 institutions in all.
- **Universities** – there are seven universities, each of which has its own powers to make awards; however, four of the universities are constituent universities of the National University of Ireland, whose awards they make. Most of the universities have linked colleges to whose graduates they make awards – e.g. teacher training colleges. With a small number of exceptions, the first award made by the universities is the Bachelors Degree (more exactly, the so-called “Honours Bachelors” in almost all contemporary cases). Learner progression from the Bachelors to further awards is neither automatic nor standardised: arrangements vary from college to college, and between faculties. Transfer or progression between the universities (and with universities outside Ireland) is at the discretion of each university, and is essentially decided on a case-by-case basis; the decision process is often facilitated by articulation protocols (these may be at faculty level rather than at college level).

## **Further Education**

As indicated above, this strand in the Irish education system has only recently been formalised, comprising a variety of learning opportunities for adults, a range of mainly

vocational provisions organised on a sub-tertiary basis, and many community-based learning programmes. The awards most commonly used are made by the Further Education and Training Awards Council. While the Council now incorporates a wide variety of awards formerly made by training agencies, the system of awards developed by the former National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) is particularly significant in Further Education. This system provides awards at four Levels (Foundation, 1, 2 and 3) based on the accumulation of credit for modules. An NCVA Certificate is awarded for achievement of eight modules, but learners are given certificates of achievement for modules accumulated short of the full Certificate.

Delivery arrangements for programmes leading to Further Education awards tend to be flexible, and locally-designed either to meet learner group needs or in response to occupational opportunity. A wide variety of assessment methods are in use.

Progression from Further Education and Training awards generally has always been difficult; many of the learning routes involved are occupationally very specific. Progression is provided for within the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) award system; however, in practice, the majority of learners working towards Level 2 or 3 awards enter the NCVA system at that point, generally following completion of the Leaving Certificate. Levels 2 and 3 of the NCVA system are therefore, for many learners, an alternative to Higher Education. A progression bridge between Further Education and Higher Education is the Higher Education Links Scheme, which is described in Component 3 below.

## **Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning**

There are no national or standardised arrangements in Ireland for the recognition of non-formal or informal learning, as defined in the guidelines for this OECD action<sup>2</sup>.

Of the main sets of qualifications, the awards most frequently used in this learning strand are those in the system of the former National Council for Vocational Awards and those awards at Introductory Vocational Skills level (including Integrated Assessment System) previously made by the FÁS certification system (all now incorporated into the awards of the Further Education and Training Awards Council). These are the only awards currently available that are flexible enough to be used to recognise non-formal or informal learning, often through the provision of certificates of achievement rather than through full awards (see Further Education above).

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<sup>2</sup> The guidelines for this report classify learning as 'formal', 'non-formal', and 'informal'.<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this activity, *formal learning* is achieved through organised programmes delivered through schools and other providers and is recognised through a qualification or part of a qualification. *Non-formal learning* is achieved through an organised programme or instruction, but is not recognised through a qualification. *Informal learning* is achieved outside of organised provision. These three classifications are used commonly in other international activities, including those supported by the European Union.

A small number of Higher Education awards have been developed that are tailored to facilitate accessibility for non-formal or informal learner groups; these are usually associated with particular fields of learning that tend to recruit from a broadly adult base, such as community development. They are mostly sub-Bachelors Degree awards.

Many non-formal programmes use awards from professional/occupational or international awarding bodies, particularly to provide recognition for small units of learning for which there are few awards in the Irish system at present.

A particular issue in the recognition of non-formal and informal learning arises when the learner seeks to make a transition into the formal system – more particularly a transition into Higher Education, but the issue may arise at many points in the system. There is no national or standardised arrangement for accreditation of prior learning. Many institutions and organisations have developed procedures for accreditation, but these are very variable even between different faculties within institutions. A standardised arrangement for accreditation of prior learning has operated for some time within the set of designated institutions whose awards were made by the former National Council for Educational Awards (and are now made by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council). There are no independent accreditation systems – the process is invariably owned and operated by the receiving institution or agency. Each accreditation is therefore specific to the particular entry for which the learner has applied. Where an accreditation procedure is available, it is usually provided free or at nominal charge. In many instances, the accreditation process is linked to other institutional structures that support broader access policies – e.g. a unit that operates access or bridging programmes, or an office supporting the participation of non-standard learners. Accreditation of prior learning processes, where it exists, generally facilitates pure entry; it is much less common that it enables exemption from course requirements or direct eligibility for an award or part of an award.

The development of a national framework of qualifications will significantly improve the current arrangements for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. The vision, values and principles that underpin the framework development process are based on a comprehensive definition of lifelong learning that includes

“all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective”.

## **Funding for Qualifications**

In general, free-fee arrangements are in place for all full-time programmes leading to awards in the State-funded qualifications systems up to Degree level. Even so, participation by certain learner groups is negatively affected by funding issues, particularly adult learners and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Key issues are

- arrangements for State support for non-fee costs of participation vary in extent and in their eligibility-ranges; in particular, the adequacy of non-fee support for

Higher Education participation for low-income learners is an issue in national debate, and there is no system for income-replacement for learners in education (learners in training programmes receive allowances)

- with few exceptions, there are no free-fee arrangements for part-time programmes; as adults are frequently not available for full-time learning, they are the learner group most affected by this.

Programmes provided by the “private” or independent sector are generally not State-supported, so that learners are liable for fees as well as any other participation costs. A high proportion of the specialist and professional awards are only available on this basis.

The extent to which employers provide learning opportunities, or support their employees to participate externally, varies widely from one industry to another. There are no statutory obligations on employers in this respect.

Fee and funding arrangements in the mainstream education and training systems are

- **Training**
  - in general, no fees are payable; training allowances and participation expenses are paid
- **Education**
  - Primary – no fees, no participation supports
  - Second Level – fees only in a small number of (non-public) schools, no participation supports
  - Further Education – no fees; participation-cost support schemes operate on a means-tested basis; no income allowances (apart from some special programmes, e.g. for early school-leavers and long-term unemployed people)
  - Higher Education – for full-time undergraduate programmes, almost universal free-fee scheme, and means-tested participation-cost support scheme. Fees apply for part-time programmes and most postgraduate programmes. There are no learner supports for part-time programmes, and no income allowances. A tax relief scheme enabling learners to offset fees against income tax is regulated by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council; it applies to part-time and full-time learners on programmes greater than two years duration.

## **Participant Patterns**

The participation patterns can be drawn from OECD cross-country data. Some salient points assist in interpreting this data:

The Junior Certificate is attained by the vast majority of young people in Irish schools today, and is presently the most basic award available in the school system. Nevertheless, the population at large contains many adults whose original education experience did not include acquiring this or any equivalent award.



Approximately 80% of young people in Irish schools today attain the Leaving Certificate, and this figure seems to have stabilised: the Leaving Certificate has become the generally-accepted marker of the end of schooling. A significant number of adult learners each year work towards this award.

About 56% of learners make a direct transition from Second Level to Higher Education. Research into patterns of participation in Higher Education has been undertaken at regular intervals in recent years, by Patrick Clancy (referenced at the end of Component 2 below). In his fourth national survey (2001), Clancy finds that participation rates overall have continued a long-term trend to increase; against this background, participation by adult learners is very low, with less than 5% of entrants aged 23 or over; while participation by the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups has increased in absolute terms over the past twenty years, there is clearly still serious comparative inequality in the pattern of participation.

Looking at gender balance in Higher Education, there is a majority of female learners in universities (58.2%), and a majority of males in institutes of technology (55%). Within these broad statistics there are major gender imbalances in participation in certain fields of learning – e.g. colleges of education 89.5% female; science /engineering / technology in Institutes of Technology 70% male.

Apprenticeship in Ireland is almost entirely a male area of participation. Ireland has a comparatively small range of apprenticeships - 25 in all - in occupations that traditionally attract males. Despite recent efforts to support and encourage participation by women, and by mature learners, apprenticeship remains primarily a learning route undertaken by young men as initial pre-occupational training. The equivalent type of vocationally-targeted award in other occupational areas is the former National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) Level 2 or Level 3 award (now made by the Further Education and Training Awards Council). In certain fields of learning, programmes leading to these awards are undertaken mainly by females – e.g. Business 90%, Healthcare 97%.

Most of the elements that make up the education and training systems in Ireland are focused on the needs of young learners, those engaged in their initial pre-occupational learning experience. The qualifications system has mirrored this focus, which reflected national concerns with meeting the needs of a large youth cohort in the population over many years. This situation has changed, and demographic trends towards a smaller youth population enable increasing emphasis on the lifelong learning agenda generally.

# **Qualifications Systems: Governance, Linkages and Pathways**

## **National Qualification System**

Recent legislation has established three new statutory organisations – a National Qualifications Authority and two Awards Councils – which have been set the task of developing and implementing a national framework of qualifications based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence. Work on this undertaking began in mid-2001, and it is intended that an outline framework will be published by the end of 2002. The new framework is intended to encompass awards at all levels, including Higher Education.

As for the current system of qualifications: this has no regional characteristics. In general, the elements of the qualifications system mirror the organisational sectors that have evolved in the world of learning. The education and training strands of learning have separate organisational identities, and are co-ordinated through two Ministries (Education and Science, and Enterprise, Trade and Employment).

FÁS, the national authority for training and employment, delivers and co-ordinates a wide range of training provision, including Apprenticeships. The mission of FÁS is to meet the employability, skills and mobility needs of job seekers and employees and meet labour market needs, thereby promoting competitiveness and social inclusion. Several agencies are responsible for provision of training for particular employment sectors – such as hotel and catering, farming and agriculture, fisheries. By 2001, each of these organisations had developed separate systems for the recognition of learning.

Education in Ireland has traditionally comprised three main strands: Primary, Post-primary or Second Level, and Higher Education or Third Level. Higher Education is further divided into a binary system, comprising Universities and Institutes of Technology. In very recent times, a new Further Education strand has been formalised, comprising a variety of learning opportunities for adults, a range of mainly vocational provisions organised on a sub-tertiary basis, and many community-based learning programmes. By 2001, separate systems of awards and qualifications had been developed for each of these strands and sub-strands.

## **Qualification System – Goals and Principles**

As the pre-2001 qualifications system is not a single entity, goals and principles can only be ascribed to its component elements and these differ widely. The national framework of qualifications which is currently under development has clear goals and principles, and these derive from a vision explicitly based on lifelong learning. The vision, values and

principles that underpin the development of the framework are set out in a paper published by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, April 2002<sup>3</sup>:

### ***Vision for the Recognition of Learning***

*The establishment of the national framework of qualifications is a very exciting development. It addresses the long-standing problem of lack of coherence in further and higher education and training awards in Ireland. It presents a new vision for the future, with the needs of the learner taking priority. This represents a new departure in Irish education and training, and there is a unique opportunity to further develop the awards system for education and training in an innovative and creative way, ensuring that Ireland is at the leading edge of international developments in this area.*

*The importance of knowledge to present day society and economies has never been greater. We are entering an age of knowledge in which the key strategic resource necessary for prosperity has become knowledge itself. In order to be a knowledge society we must also become a lifelong learning society.*

*The development of a lifelong learning society is a stated national and European policy. This will determine a vision of learning whose development will have to be facilitated by the framework. Lifelong learning is about all learning activity throughout life and has been defined by the European Commission as:*

*“all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective”*

*Lifelong learning is concerned with all phases and forms of learning from preschool to post-retirement. The framework must facilitate the cultural, economic, political/democratic and/or social participation of citizens in society as a whole and in their community by measuring, as appropriate, relevant learning achievements in this regard and relating them to each other. Such participation by citizens in society has become known as “active citizenship” and has been discussed across the European Union as part of the process leading to the recent declaration on lifelong learning. The concept incorporates the mutually supporting objectives of personal fulfillment, democratic participation, social inclusion, adaptability and employability.*

*The context provided by the development of a society of lifelong learning and accessibility for all should inform the nature, development and implementation of an appropriate national framework of qualifications. The ultimate requirement will be to have a framework that is understood by all, in which all may participate and for which all will work together in a spirit of true collaboration and co-operation. The framework will aim to maximise the use of awards for a variety of purposes ranging from accessing further learning opportunities to employment.*

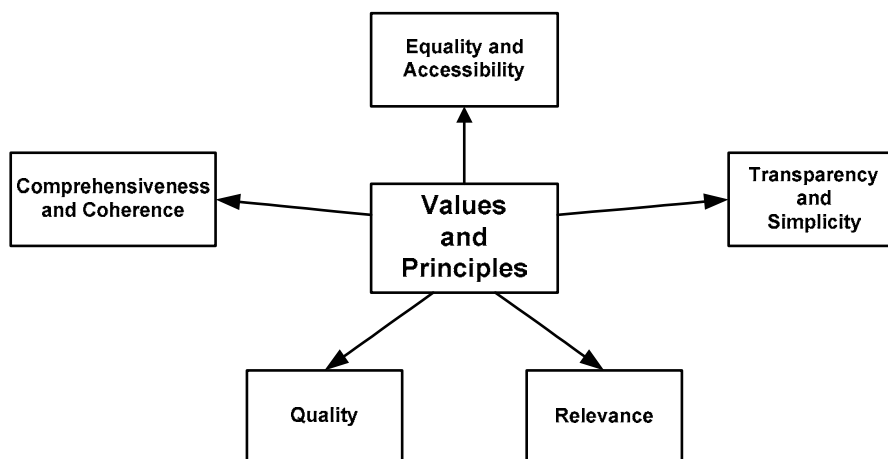
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<sup>3</sup> Towards a National Framework of Qualifications – Establishment of Policies and Criteria, NQAI, Dublin 2002. Also available @ [www.nqai.ie](http://www.nqai.ie)

*A key characteristic is the centrality of the learner within formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences. This is important because of the way in which knowledge, skill and competence impact on citizens' life opportunities. The new framework will drive the movement towards a knowledge society and lifelong learning, thereby enhancing social development and economic competitiveness. In addition, the further development of learning opportunities will also be affected by this emerging vision.*

*The formal recognition and valuing of all learning is an integral part of the work of the Authority. The emerging vision of the framework and the learning that it will facilitate is that of a diverse and complex process. In addition, the structure and management of the provision of education and training is changing and subject to major influences from societal developments and from communications technology and the market place. For the first time in Ireland, the framework will aim to facilitate all learners to receive recognition and facilitate progression. The framework will be totally open and accessible to all learners.*

The paper continues by defining a set of values and principles as a basis for the strategy that will realise the vision outlined:



## **Organisations and Authorities**

In the context of the development of a national framework of qualifications, the roles of the various relevant organisations in the recognition of learning are set out in a Discussion Document published by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland in 2001<sup>4</sup>. The development of the framework is driven by legislation, the 1999 Qualifications Act, which established the Authority and two new Awards Councils. These are the key organisational entities in the process. The Authority has three principal objects which are set out in the Act:

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<sup>4</sup> Towards a National Framework of Qualifications – A Discussion Document, NQAI, Dublin 2001, pp15-16.

- the establishment and maintenance of a framework of qualifications for the development, recognition and award of qualifications based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners;
- the establishment and promotion of the maintenance of the standards of awards of the further and higher education and training sector, other than in the existing universities;
- the promotion and facilitation of access, transfer and progression throughout the span of education and training provision.

The Act also provides for the establishment of the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, as independent bodies with their own functions, including the establishment of policies and criteria for the making of awards, the validation of programmes, and ensuring the implementation of any procedures for access, transfer and progression established by the Authority. The Act sets out separate interdependent roles for the Authority and the awards Councils. The objects of the Act are to be attained by co-operation between the three bodies and, indeed, with full involvement from a range of other stakeholders.

Apart from the two Awards Councils, awarding bodies in Ireland include the Department of Education and Science, the seven universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology.

It should be noted that the National Qualifications Authority sets the overall standards for the awards of the two Awards Councils and the Dublin Institute of Technology. In relation to the universities and the Department of Education and Science, the Authority includes their awards in the national framework of qualifications while not setting the standards of their awards.

## **Roles of the Social Partners**

The social partners are key stakeholders in the process of developing a national framework of qualifications and are mentioned in the legislation in this regard. Both the employers' and trade unions' national organisations make nominations to the memberships of the Qualifications Authority and each of the Awards Councils. In a consultation process undertaken by the Authority, both the trade unions and employers have been closely involved. This involvement extends to their participation in a broadly-based Consultative Group which functions as a sounding-board for ongoing development work; there is also a specific social partners' consultation forum, and this forum is driving research into employment perspectives on the issues arising in connection with the concept of a national framework of qualifications.

Employers and unions are also involved in a structural way in some aspects of the qualifications system, particularly in the development and monitoring of Apprenticeships.

Many employers are involved at programme level in local partnerships with providers of education or training.

## **Authority – Integration and Linkage between Qualifications**

The body with overall responsibility for integration and linkages between qualifications is the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. However, the Authority performs this role in close concert with the two awards Councils and with the other awarding bodies, as indicated in the 2001 Discussion Document.

The Authority is presently engaged in the task of designing a qualifications framework that will meet the needs of all learners in a lifelong learning context, and that will be comprehensive in its inclusion of all qualifications. This is being undertaken through a collaborative approach involving a very broad set of stakeholding groups representing a wide social spectrum. The maintenance and improvement of the relevance of the framework to learner needs will be an ongoing task.

The centrality of the promotion of lifelong learning in the work of the Authority has already been discussed above.

The work of the Authority is relevant to all qualifications, including any qualifications that may be tailored to adult needs. It should be noted that the Authority itself is not an awarding body: the making of awards in recognition of the learning of any group, including adults, is a role of the Awards Councils, or of one of the other awarding bodies.

## **Quality Assurance for Qualifications**

Responsibility for quality assurance for most of the qualifications in the national framework will rest with the Qualifications Authority and the two Awards Councils, acting in concert. The Authority does not have a quality assurance role in relation to school awards, and has a limited consultative role in relation to quality assurance in the universities.

A specific object of the Authority under the legislation is to establish, and promote the maintenance and improvement of, the standards of awards of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology. This object in turn is linked to the function of the Authority to determine the procedures to be followed by the Councils in the performance of their functions and the Authority's review role in this regard. It is also linked to the quality assurance procedures of the awards Councils and the quality assurance responsibilities of the Authority in relation to the Dublin Institute of Technology.

There are many functions of the Councils which have a clear link to the standards of their awards. These include:

- establishing and publishing policies and criteria for the making of awards
- establishing and publishing policies and criteria for validation of programmes
- determining the standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners before an award may be made
- monitoring and evaluating the quality of programmes
- ensuring that assessment procedures established by providers for the recognition of learning are fair and consistent and compliant with the award standards of the framework
- delegating authority for the making of awards.

The 1999 legislation obliges providers of education and training to establish procedures for quality assurance appropriate to their programmes, in consultation with the Councils. The Councils are to monitor the outcomes of providers' quality procedures and may make recommendations on the basis of those outcomes which providers are obliged to implement; they are also to review the effectiveness of providers' quality processes.

It is not the role of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland to oversee the quality of statutory award making bodies such as the Department of Education and Science and the universities. In the case of the Department, the quality assurance review arrangements for its awards are set out in the Education Act, 1998, and are the responsibility of the Minister for Education and Science and of the inspectorate of the Department. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment also has a responsibility for advising and reviewing curriculum and assessment in schools. Universities have statutory rights to determine the standards for their own awards. Statutory provisions in relation to quality assurance are set out in the Universities Act, 1997. The Higher Education Authority has a review role in relation to the universities' quality assurance procedures and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland is to be consulted by the Higher Education Authority when undertaking this task.

There are no dedicated quality assurance processes in place for learning in the non-formal or informal sectors. As indicated above, there are no recognition arrangements specifically designed for this sector or dedicated to its needs; consequently, non-formal and informal learning achievements are recognised through the qualifications systems of the formal sector, and the quality assurance procedures outlined above are relevant.

The quality assurance arrangements associated with the national framework of qualifications will be based on the same overall vision for the recognition of learning developed for the framework itself; this vision in turn is based on underlying lifelong learning principles.

## **Formal Credit Arrangements**

There has until now been no legislative basis for credit arrangements for learning in Ireland, and no general or overall public policy in this regard. The National Qualifications Authority has identified the development of a system or systems for credit accumulation and transfer as one of its key objectives. The national framework of qualifications will not be intrinsically credit-based (it will be based on levels and award-types); nevertheless, appropriate credit arrangements are considered to be an essential operating feature of the framework, particularly if the Authority is to fulfil its objectives in relation to Access, Transfer and Progression. It is intended that policies and procedures related to credit will form part of the matrix of determinations to be made by the Authority for the establishment of the national framework, probably towards the end of 2002. Already, an expert group has been convened to provide technical advice to the Authority on credit; however, it is not possible at this stage to indicate what policies will be adopted.

Within the various qualifications systems that currently operate, a variety of credit arrangements have been developed. These include

- The awards system of the former National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA), now incorporated into the remit of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, is based on a system of modules which can be accumulated into awards.
- Awards in the system of the former National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA), now made by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, are essentially modular, and the ACCS process ( Accumulation of Credits and Certification of Subjects) enables learners to accumulate credit towards these awards on a gradual basis.
- The Higher Education Links Scheme is a credit transfer arrangement that enables learners with certain specific NCVA awards to enter specific programmes leading to NCEA awards; this is, therefore, essentially a formalised set of progression protocols.
- The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is widely used in Higher Education in Ireland.

Apart from formal arrangements such as those outlined above, which have been set in place by awarding bodies, decisions on the awarding of credit generally reside with institutions. Similarly, decisions for the recognition of credit obtained elsewhere are made at programme provider or institution level. There are many specific protocols that enable transfer of credit for awards between institutions. Credit arrangements are far more commonly based on whole awards than on sub-award packages of learning, and are more often used to facilitate entry to a programme than to enable exemption from course or award requirements.

It is noticeable that those elements of the education and training system that organise programmes and/or awards on a modular basis tend also to have at least some arrangements for credit accumulation in place. Modular organisational approaches are



universal in further education, and in the training system, and are increasingly common in Higher Education.

Small-scale arrangements for accreditation of prior learning are available in most further and higher education institutions, and in relation to some opportunities for learning in the training sector. These arrangements vary widely in scope and range, and in the level of their acceptability even within their parent institutions – i.e. prior learning accreditation arrangements may only apply to certain programmes or awards. It is very difficult for learners to get information on the arrangements available, as the information has to be sought separately from many sources.

There are no financial incentives for organisations to implement credit arrangements, and there are no financial supports for learners to assist them in this regard. The issue of the additional resource requirements involved is frequently cited as an obstacle to the development of credit arrangements.

## **Other Types of Linkage**

The national framework of qualifications currently under development will create an environment in which linkages between qualifications and sets of qualifications can flourish.

At present, linkages operate within some awards systems, particularly those of the former National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) and National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA). Linkages between sets of qualifications are frequently based on programme-to-programme transfer protocols and agreements. The former NCVA and NCEA sets of qualifications are linked by the Higher Education Links Scheme.

FÁS developed a range of recognition agreements primarily to increase mobility opportunities available to learners. Particularly in times of high emigration from Ireland, it was deemed important to offer internationally recognised certification, where possible. The opportunity to benchmark curriculum standards against other states was also a critical element of this policy. FÁS developed recognition agreements with City & Guilds, with the French Ministry of Labour, with UK-based National Training Organisations etc.

The general scarcity of linkages and the inconsistent operation of many of those that do exist are significant inhibitors of progression and continuity in learning for many learners, particularly adults.

Use of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is very widespread in Higher Education in Ireland. ECTS is the basis of most international linkage arrangements, but is scarcely used in transfers within Ireland.

The graphic in Appendix 1 illustrates the components of the pre 2001 system of qualifications and the typical progression routes used by learners in the system. It should be noted from this graphic that the progression routes and linkages are essentially designed to facilitate progress along a fairly standard path by a learner group that is very largely made up of young people engaged in their initial pre-occupational learning experience. It should also be noted that a key transition point in the system is that between Second Level and Higher Education; the need to fairly allocate places in Higher Education programmes has led to the development of a Points System based on attainment in the Leaving Certificate award, and this effectively is the linkage mechanism at this point in the system.

## **Credit Transfer**

As credit arrangements at present are all specific to particular awards systems, or to particular institutions, or even to specific programmes, it is not possible to assemble any meaningful data on overall trends in applications for credit. A Network of practitioners of Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning in Higher Education and Training has informally gathered information on applications for accreditation services: this indicates a generally increasing pattern of application, even though the availability of the process is seldom openly advertised, and in many instances access based on APL is limited to a small proportion of the programmes available in an institution.

The data available for the rate of transfer between awards varies in quality. Transfer rates by “standard” learners at the main junctures in the system are very well documented in data available to OECD, e.g. transfers (by young learners) from Junior Certificate to Leaving Certificate to Higher Education Awards. The continued progression by these learners within the Higher Education system is also documented, along the Certificate-Diploma-Bachelors Degree-Postgraduate route (e.g. in *First Destination of Award Recipients in Higher Education 2000*<sup>5</sup>). None of these transitions depend on credit arrangements. There is no available data for “non-standard” transitions, or for transfers across the system; even in the case of a formalised horizontal transfer protocol such as the Higher Education Links Scheme (see Component 3 below) there is no central data gathered as the Scheme is essentially a collection of specific arrangements and there is no agency responsible for assembling information on the number of these arrangements that are activated in any particular year.

## **Transparency and Effectiveness of Credit and Linkage**

The present credit and linkage arrangements, and their associated procedures for learners, are generally extremely variable and inconsistent. There is no general or overall

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<sup>5</sup> Higher Education Authority, (2002) *First Destination of Award Recipients in Higher Education (2000)*, Dublin, HEA.

information source on these arrangements. Many learners need expert guidance support to even attempt to navigate the system; such support is only recently becoming available to adult learners through public provision (see OECD activity on Counselling and Guidance, Irish national report, 2002). The measures necessary to improve this situation will require the contribution of several agencies and organisations: to simplify and clarify credit and linkage arrangements, make better quality information available, and improve the apparatus for information provision and guidance. Some of these measures can be addressed through the ongoing reforms in the qualifications system. The Qualifications Act, 1999 specifies obligations on programme providers to make available information about qualifications associated with their programmes. Building on this legislative base, the National Qualifications Authority has identified a range of policies and procedures in relation to information provision to be adopted in the context of the development of a national framework of qualifications. The framework itself will clarify progression routes and transfer possibilities. In addition, procedures will be formulated for awarding bodies and programme providers to support the entitlement of learners to consistent, up-to-date and clear information.

## **Qualifications Framework**

Under the provisions of the 1999 Qualifications Act, a national framework of qualifications is in the process of development. This will be a comprehensive framework, comprising all awards made in the State, at all levels of the education and training systems. The organisational foundations of this development are outlined above; the key element in the framework development process is the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. The first object of the Authority is:

- the establishment and maintenance of a framework of qualifications for the development, recognition and award of qualifications based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners.

The task of developing the national framework began in mid-2001, and by mid 2002 is well advanced; however, it is not possible at this stage to provide a full model of the framework. The foundations of the framework – vision, principles and operating guidelines, and policies and criteria for the development process - have been determined by the Authority and were published in April 2002 (*Towards a National Framework of Qualifications – Establishment of Policies and Criteria*). This paper defines the national framework of qualifications 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.”

It indicates that the framework will be based on levels. Each level will have a specified level indicator. At each level in the framework there will be one, or more, award-types. Each award-type will have its own award-type descriptor. It is the responsibility of the

Authority to develop these level indicators and award-type descriptors. For each award-type a wide range of named awards will be developed. It is the responsibility of awarding bodies to develop named awards.

↑ LEVELS			
LEVEL D	Award-Type named award named award	Award-Type named award named award	Award-Type named award named award
LEVEL E	Award-Type named award named award		
LEVEL F	Award-Type named award named award	Award-Type named award named award	
LEVELS ↓			

It is important to note that the framework will be a new entity; its publication will bring about major changes in the qualifications systems in Ireland, both in the range of awards available and in the relationship between awards. It will be comprehensive and flexible enough to provide awards that will meet all learning recognition needs. It will be possible to map most existing awards (from the pre 2001 systems) onto the new framework, but it is not intended that the framework be a compendium of those awards – it will have its own integrity as a new entity. The aim is that a common nomenclature, or titling system, will be adopted to describe awards by level and type. As the framework is in development at the time of writing, it is not possible to specify how many levels it will contain, or the criteria for the definition of award-types. It is intended that this initial development work will be completed by end 2002, and the shape of the framework will then be apparent.

As the framework is intended to be comprehensive, it will include recognition arrangements for all learning, formal, non-formal and informal.

The rationale for the development of the national framework of qualifications is outlined above, and greatly elaborated in the April 2002 paper of the National Qualifications Authority (Part 2, Values and Principles), referenced above, and appended to this document. It is firmly based on a vision for the recognition of learning that in turn is based on an understanding of learning as a lifelong process:

*Lifelong learning is concerned with all phases and forms of learning from preschool to post-retirement. The framework must facilitate the cultural, economic, political/democratic and/or social participation of citizens in society as a whole and in their community by measuring, as appropriate, relevant learning achievements in this regard and relating them to each other. Such participation by citizens in society has become known as “active citizenship” and has been discussed across the European Union as part of the process leading to the recent declaration on lifelong learning. The*

*concept incorporates the mutually supporting objectives of personal fulfillment, democratic participation, social inclusion, adaptability and employability.*

The body with responsibility for the development and maintenance of the framework is the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. As set out above, the Authority operates in an interdependent relationship with two Awards Councils, and the implementation of the framework will require these three organisations to work in concert. The 1999 Qualifications (Education and Training) Act is the legislative instrument that enables all of this activity, and provides the Authority and the Councils with the necessary powers to carry out their functions.

## **Information Systems**

This information is available to OECD from the Irish report for the activity on Counselling and Guidance, 2002.

## **Recent Changes**

The significant change in the qualifications system in Ireland in recent years is the development of the national framework of qualifications, and the establishment of the associated statutory organisations, under new legislation. These developments and their context are described above. The promotion of lifelong learning is the core rationale for the whole process of change.

## **COMPONENT 2**

### **THE IMPACT OF QUALIFICATIONS SYSTEMS**

In this section, a number of reports and papers and publications are referred to. These are listed at the end of this Component for convenience. Several of the papers are published by ESRI, the Economic and Social Research Institute, an independent institute based in Dublin that undertakes research on socio-economic topics.

#### **Benefits to Individuals**

##### **Qualifications and Further Learning**

Hannan et al., 1998, investigated the extent to which Irish people engage in further education and training after completing their initial Second Level education experience. Their report is mainly based on analyses of a follow-up survey of 1985/86 school leavers, carried out in late 1992. They found that the level reached in the original experience, and the qualification marking that level, are strong predictors of likely further participation in learning. Of those without any qualifications, or with less than the Junior Certificate qualification, only 2% acquire any further qualification. It is noted that this small percentage take up opportunities within two years of leaving school, with a miniscule subsequent return for a “second chance”. For those leaving with an Intermediate / Junior Certificate, the subsequent learning experience is slightly better: 8% returned to full-time learning within six years. As for those with Leaving Certificate, apart from the large cohort (over 50%) who proceed immediately to Higher Education, about 33% subsequently undertake some full-time learning.

These results indicate the extremely time-bound nature of the Irish education system, and its concentration on meeting the needs of a narrow learner population, i.e. those engaged in their initial pre-occupational learning experience. They also indicate the importance of the Leaving Certificate qualification as a platform for further learning and as a portal enabling entry to further learning opportunities. Hannan and his colleagues found a somewhat more re-distributive effect in post-school vocational training: the lower the level of initial education the greater the chances of receiving training opportunities. However, even via the vocational training route, learners with low levels of entry qualification are still unlikely to acquire post-school qualifications – only 26% for those with Junior Certificate or less. A Follow-Up Survey of participants in FÁS vocational programmes in 2000 (Fox, R., 2001) found that 82% of those completing their training obtained certification. The certification obtained varied widely, as the survey includes a range of programmes; however, only 28% of participants continued in training/education, mostly on job schemes, so that there was minimal progression towards further awards.

## Access to Learning

The general effect of changes in the Irish qualifications system in the 1990s – the introduction of the Junior Certificate, new variants in the Leaving Certificate, the Standards Based Apprenticeship - has been greater retention in initial learning and a rise in the average level of qualifications attained by young learners. This has had positive effects in educational and labour market terms (Hannan and McCoy, 1995). On the other hand, for those who leave without qualifications, or with only basic qualifications, including very many adults whose older qualifications have been downgraded by credential inflation, there is little opportunity to re-enter the education system (apart from the vocational training route) and acquire further qualifications. More fundamental change is required to affect the situation of these learners, and it is intended that this will be facilitated by the implementation of the 1999 Qualifications Act and the development of a national framework of qualifications.

There are many reports that deal with the issue of access to learning opportunities, and that analyse the groups in Irish society that are least able to participate in the education system. The key groups identified are adult learners or mature students; people with disabilities; learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds – more particularly, learners living in disadvantaged communities or in remote districts, members of minority ethnic groups including Travellers and refugees. There are many factors that combine to bring about under-participation by these groups, including financial factors and an amalgam of provision factors. It is difficult to identify from these the part played by the qualifications system in promoting or inhibiting access.

Much of the discussion on access issues has focused on progression to Higher Education, and many of the reports and papers referenced above deal with this particular aspect of access to learning. The 2001 Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education summarises most of the recent commentary on this discussion. Key issues identified include the singularity of the “standard” progression route (from Leaving Certificate straight into full-time Higher Education) and the scarcity of alternative routes; the competitive selection process for entry; the absence of any coordinated procedure for credit accumulation or transfer, or for accreditation of prior learning.

The 2000 White Paper “Learning for Life” captures the difficulty of atypical learner groups in dealing with

*“the rigidity of the Irish education system, with its predominant emphasis on full-time provision: time-specific entry and exit opportunities, and its linear, sequential organisation”.*

All of these features apply to the education system as a whole, and also to the associated qualifications arrangements. The White Paper looks to the development of a national qualifications framework to provide a context in which qualifications procedures appropriate to the needs of adult learners can be implemented. Lennon, 1999, describes the particular difficulty of learners in the informal and non-formal sectors with respect to qualifications:

*“The accreditation process is time-consuming and costly. To date, the process has been dominated by mainstream values and principles (e.g. competition, individualism, focused on limited range of intelligences). As such, it is neither accessible nor appropriate to the learning programmes being run in the community and voluntary sector”.*

## **Employability**

The International Adult Literacy Survey (1994-95) analyses how skills and credentials are rewarded in the labour market. It indicates that the Irish labour market puts a premium on literacy skill and educational attainment over labour experience. Hannan, *et al.*, (1998), examining returns to level of education, find that the linkage between educational and occupational achievement is primarily vertical: the more qualifications one has, the better the employment prospects. Backed up by evidence from Breen *et al.*, 1995, and Breen and Whelan, 1998, they also point to the relative unimportance of type of education in employment decision-making, by comparison with level of education attained, which means that those with lower “academic” abilities – but perhaps with rich vocational aptitudes – are at a comparative disadvantage:

*“While Ireland is not a “credentialist country”.....in the same sense as is Germany or the Netherlands – where a clear connection between type of education and type of occupation taken up exists for a majority of entrants – there is a very close connection between level of education achieved, grades achieved in examinations and success in the labour market.....Ireland shows high rates of “level congruence” and low rates of “content congruence” in the education / labour market relationship.”*

Hannan *et al.* point out that this bias in favour of general education has generated a high level of flexibility among the younger workforce. It also ensures high levels of competition between the more highly and more poorly educated in the labour market, so that the latter are restricted to poorly-paid, frequently impermanent jobs.

## **Trends in Benefits to Individuals**

In most aspects of the benefits to individuals discussed above, there are few studies that enable us to gauge trends over time. The significant changes in the qualifications system that will result from the 1999 Qualifications Act have yet to come. Trends in participation in Higher Education can be traced over the years in the series of reports by Patrick Clancy for the Higher Education Authority. His 2001 report indicates continued under-participation in Higher Education by learners from lower socio-economic groups and by adults. The small numbers of adults in Higher Education was also noted by the Commission on the Points System in its 1999 report

*“While there has been an increase in the number of mature students in third-level education in recent years, the Commission notes that participation rates in Ireland are still low by OECD standards. Figures published by the OECD in 1997 (Education Policy*



*Analysis) show that on average, 19.3% of entrants to universities in all OECD countries were aged 26 or over. This compared to an Irish figure of 2%. In the case of non-university tertiary education programmes, the Irish figure was 1.1% compared to an OECD average of 36.8%”.*

As for employability and its connection to qualifications, the ESRI 1997-2003 Medium-Term Review suggests that the pecuniary returns to education are increasing, with the returns to university-level qualifications especially noteworthy – see Component 2 below.

## **Matching Learning and Workplace Skill Needs**

Many of the innovations and changes in education and training provision over the years derive from a concern to achieve a good match between learning opportunities and skills needs. Various means are used to identify gaps or emerging trends, at both national and local levels. For example, at national level the Expert Group on Future Skill Needs undertakes periodic studies on the skills needs of the Irish labour market. Its Third Report (2001) investigates the employment and training needs of the construction industry 2001-2006, and recommends that the number of certain apprenticeships be increased, and suggests that the possibility of accelerating the training of some apprentices be considered. Other skill areas analysed include the IT industry, Life Sciences and Research. It attempts to quantify skills needs in terms of both occupation and level of qualifications. Local level needs analysis is seldom formally documented – an exception is where it forms part of a wider initiative for which a report or evaluation is undertaken: for example, a Job Rotation project funded under the E.U. Employment NOW initiative documents how a local skill gap was filled through the development of a customised training programme (Farrell Grant Sparks, 1999).

It is more difficult to find evidence of the role of recognition arrangements in facilitating the match between learning and skill needs. Nevertheless, skill needs considerations can be traced in some of the most significant changes in mainstream qualifications in recent years. In the 1992 Green Paper, the Department of Education and Science explored options for development of the Leaving Certificate, including the possibility of a separate award for a vocational/technical learning strand. It quotes a recommendation from the report of the Industrial Policy Review Group (Culliton, 1992) for the introduction of a “parallel stream of non-academic, vocationally-oriented education at second level which commands widespread recognition and respect”. However, the policy approach decided at the time was that separate streams would not be appropriate to the schools system, but that a broad curriculum would be put in place. This approach was subsequently realised in the development of the Vocational and Applied variants of the Leaving Certificate programme and in developments within the established Leaving Certificate. Another example of a broad qualifications system response to skills needs was the establishment of the National Council for Vocational Awards in 1991. The Council (which ceased with the establishment of the Further Education and Training Awards Council in 2001) developed an awards system to meet the recognition needs of a new type of vocational

education programmes that were in turn designed to respond to skills needs in the local labour markets. The importance of this matrix of programmes and qualifications was acknowledged in the Government White Paper on Education, Charting Our Education Future (1995). In the White Paper, along with the expansion of the Leaving Certificate, the new award system was integrated in a development policy that is referenced back to the 1992 Culliton Report.

In the area of vocational training, the development of the Standards Based Apprenticeship (see Component 3 below) was an example of a reform of a major qualification undertaken in response to changing needs on the workplace, and involving close cooperation between the social partners.

### **Employers' Use of Qualifications**

It is notable that the new Standards Based Apprenticeship was based on an analysis of future skill needs, and that trade employers are directly involved in the monitoring and ongoing development of this qualification, ensuring its continued relevance to the particular labour market sectors concerned. This connected-up process is not typical of the relationship between the Irish education and training system and the business world. The generalised nature of very many of the qualifications acquired by Irish learners is outlined above. Breen *et al.* (1995) illustrate that outside of trades - of which Ireland has only 25, a very small number by international standards - and other specialist occupational areas, Irish employers tend to use qualifications to maximise the “general human capital” of their employee intake – in terms of basic educational skills, but also in terms of the social/cultural skills and competencies associated with more highly educated workers. Qualifications are thus used as a screening device for entry-level recruitment. In selecting for more senior positions, employers use personal references and other indicators of relevant experience and skill: qualifications are considered as an item in a portfolio of suitability factors.

The emphasis on initial recruitment of generalists by employers in Ireland has resulted in a considerable participation in programmes leading to “add-on” qualifications, particularly at postgraduate level, as workers seek to develop their careers. For example, MBA and other business-oriented qualifications are often acquired by

- non-specialist Bachelors Degree holders who were recruited into management levels of organisations
- graduates such as Engineers who were recruited as specialists, but have been promoted into management or organisational development positions.

Several studies have noted the shortage of specific vocational skills in the Irish workforce, and some also note that this shortage does not appear to be corrected by in-work training programmes on any widespread basis (e.g. O’Connell and Lyons, 1995). On the other hand, many organisations have implemented upskilling programmes to enable their workforces to exploit the potential of information and communications technology. The extent to which employers provide learning opportunities, or support

their employees to participate externally, varies widely from one industry to another. There are no statutory obligations on employers in this respect.

In general, there is a shortage of data across time and sectors on the role of qualifications in meeting skills needs from the employers' perspective.

## **Mobility**

A 1991 NESC (National Economic and Social Council) report indicates that those most likely to achieve successful emigration are the more upwardly mobile holders of third level qualifications, and that local, national and international markets are differently structured by educational level and occupational status. Outside the larger cities, local labour markets tend to be more informal, catering disproportionately for those with middle-level qualifications entering equivalent occupational levels. The national labour market, with Dublin at its apex, is more formally structured, with recruitment based on more objective criteria, and with a higher percentage of higher-level occupational opportunities. Successful integration into the international labour market is even more dependent on high levels of qualification.

## **Pecuniary Benefits of Qualifications**

In a small proportion of occupational areas, there are regulated or agreed wage structures that can be related to specific qualifications or qualification levels. For example, some of the trades have set wage levels, and entry to these trades is limited to holders of the appropriate National Craft Certificate. Another example is that of primary teachers, whose wage levels are set as part of collective national agreements, and whose appointments are made on the basis of holding a particular teaching qualification. There are also many examples in the public service of positions where recruitment is on the basis of a particular level of qualification, or a particular qualification, and where the starting wage is related to the qualification held, but where the relationship between wage and qualification level may change as promotion is achieved. The public service also has many positions where additional allowances are paid on the basis of levels of qualifications held above the minimum for appointment.

There has been some research into the general relationship between qualifications and earnings on the Irish labour market. We have already cited the results of the research of Hannan, *et al.* (1998), who found a strong correlation between levels of education achieved and employment prospects. Further analysing the connection to earnings, they found significant returns to increasing levels of education within most occupational categories. However, they also found a negative effect on earnings from over-qualification: employers appear not to value highly educated workers who remain in low status jobs, perhaps on the basis of some negative personal characteristics or work

behaviours. Higher earnings are therefore dependent on the promotion achieved by the worker (facilitated by qualifications held) rather than on the level of qualification held per se.

The ESRI 1997-2003 Medium-Term Review suggests that the economic returns to education are increasing, with the returns to university-level qualifications especially noteworthy. Using the earnings of an average Leaving Certificate holder in 1994 as the baseline, it indicates that a degree-holder can expect to earn 54% more. Holders of Junior Certificates are likely to earn little more than those with no qualifications, about 25% less than the Leaving Certificate holder. Russell and Gannon (2002), using data generated by the Living In Ireland Survey (the Irish component of the European Community Household Panel, an EU-wide project to conduct harmonised longitudinal surveys dealing with household income and labour situation in the member states), traced similar trends. They analysed the male/female wage gap in 2000, finding that qualifications levels are a significant determinant of wages for both men and women, but that there is also a substantial gap between the earnings of men and women at each qualifications level. The wage gap widens as the qualifications level decreases, so that among those workers with no qualifications women earn less than 70% of the men's hourly rate. Totalling for men and women, the mean average earnings for the four categories were

No secondary qualifications	£6.54
Junior Certificate or equivalent	£7.35
Leaving Certificate	£9.14
Degree	£15.16

The wage premium on the degree qualification is 66%, up from 54% in 1994.

This data is further corroborated by Denny *et al*, (2000), who find that “With regard to tertiary level credentials, the findings show a strong positive impact of sub-degree (diploma and certificate level).....tertiary qualifications.....on the earnings of both men and women, although the returns are greater for men. Possession of advanced third level degrees.....leads to significant earnings gains”

## **Non-pecuniary Rewards of Qualification**

The extent to which learners build on their qualifications through further learning is explored above. Research on this issue suggests that those with very low levels of qualification are inhibited from further participation, and that the Leaving Certificate is a significant platform-qualification from which a high proportion of learners develop further learning participation.

Looking further at the extent to which the acquisition of qualifications can encourage or discourage further learning, the DEIS EQUATE report (2001) sublimates the experience of several EU ADAPT initiatives to describe the optimal flexible learning and

accreditation environment required by the workforce. Among the findings of the report is the perception of ADAPT project promoters that

*“Certification/accreditation of learning was seen as a passport to further learning and a way of facilitating lifelong learning. By providing learners with formal recognition of their learning, accreditation would enable them to progress to higher levels of education and training”.*

The report also notes, however, that some projects deliberately decided against seeking formal certification for their training, on the grounds that this would discourage participants. Many of the participants in ADAPT projects had low levels of educational qualifications, and the idea of being assessed during training to achieve certification would have deterred them from joining the programme.

It is clear that the accessibility of the qualifications system is a crucial factor in encouraging learners to continue with their learning, and that the existing Irish system does not always meet learners’ needs in this respect. The facilitation of access, transfer and progression is a core objective of the National Qualifications Authority in the development of a framework of qualifications.

The main programmes that make up the Irish education system all have inherent (and usually explicit) personal developmental objectives, and there are several studies that record the rewards to the learner of this aspect of the provision. It is more difficult to find evidence of learner perceptions that the recognition of learning through qualifications per se is a significant element in these rewards. Key research in this area is recorded in Kelly (1994), who surveys the provision and accreditation needs of adult learners in non-formal, community-based situations. She finds that for some adults who had left formal schooling without any qualifications, any kind of certification, however informal, has high personal value. It may also be valued by other people in the community, so that the learner is consulted in decision-making in the community and experiences support and gains affirmation from other learners and from tutors. Examining the factors that influence non-formal learners to seek accreditation, it finds that the majority (47%) did so for reasons of quality/credibility, as against progression opportunities (21%) and job-seeking (32%). This suggests that for many non-formal learners accreditation is important primarily in establishing the quality and credibility of the skills and competencies they have developed in a public way.

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## COMPONENT 3

### PRESSURES AND INITIATIVES

#### Major Drivers for Changes and Innovations

As discussed above, the main change in the qualifications system in Ireland in recent years is the enactment of the 1999 Qualifications Act. The outcomes of that Act include the establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and two new Awards Councils, and the development of a national framework of qualifications. The drivers of this deep and extensive change process are reflected in the objects of the Act. These objects relate to the need to

- Coordinate and strengthen the qualifications systems; objects include
  - to establish and develop standards of knowledge, skill and competence
  - to promote the quality of further education and training and higher education and training
  - to provide a system for coordinating and comparing awards
- Realise lifelong learning policies; objects include
  - to facilitate lifelong learning
  - to promote and maintain procedures for access, transfer and progression
  - to promote the recognition of knowledge, skill and competence
- Anticipate and adapt to social and economic changes, national and international; objects include
  - to contribute to the realisation of national education and training policies and objectives, including ensuring that the education and training requirements of industry are met
  - to promote cooperation between providers of education and training and industry
  - to promote recognition within the State of international awards and recognition internationally of Irish awards

The prominence of the object of promoting lifelong learning should be noted. This is a key theme in Government policy generally in relation to education and training, and the reform of the qualifications system is identified as an important factor in realising this policy.

In common with other E.U. countries, vendor qualifications are increasingly used in Ireland, particularly in the Information and Technology sector. Likewise, many international bodies offer accreditation / certification in Ireland, particularly for specific occupational needs. The relationship between such professional/vendor and international qualifications and the developing national framework of qualifications is being considered by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, and a consultation process is under way with the relevant stakeholders.



## **Reforms and Innovations**

The major reform in the qualifications system in Ireland in recent years is the development of a national framework of qualifications, currently under way, as already described above. The rationale for undertaking this reform is strongly based on the promotion of lifelong learning. The framework is to include all awards, and be relevant to all learner groups including adults. The effectiveness of this initiative cannot be judged at this point, as the development process is incomplete and its implementation has yet to begin. Constraints on the development process are discussed in Component 3 below.

Apart from the fundamental reform undertaken in the development of the national framework, several significant recent innovations can be identified in the pre-2001 systems. These include

- The development of the Applied variant of the Leaving Certificate, a radically different award, made for achievement across a whole programme rather than for individual subject attainment. It is strongly focused on vocational preparation, and multiple modes of assessment are used. Although the programme is modular, awards are made only on the basis of completion of the whole programme – essentially, it is a two-year full-time undertaking. This latter feature makes the Leaving Certificate Applied unsuitable for the needs of most adult learners. However, the introduction of the Leaving Certificate Applied has provided a suitable progression option for many young learners, including some learners on informal learning programmes.
- The development of the Accumulation of Credits and Certification of Subjects (ACCS) scheme by the former National Council for Educational Awards. This scheme is now part of the policy matrix of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council. Initiated in 1989, ACCS allows learners to follow programmes for individual subjects in courses offered in any of the designated institutions and thus accumulate credits gained towards an award. The objective of the scheme is to facilitate greater participation by learners on a part-time basis and promote adult learning. ACCS operates in accordance with the principles that underpin ECTS, and credit accumulated in this way can also be defined as ECTS credit.
- The development of a new model of standards-based apprenticeship, and its implementation on a national basis – see Component 3 below.
- The development and implementation of the Higher Education Links Scheme, a process designed to facilitate transitions from Further Education awards to programmes leading to Higher Education awards – see Component 3 below.

## **Reforming / Innovative Initiatives**

As the major reform in recent years – the development of a national framework of qualifications – is still at development stage, it is not possible to discuss its effectiveness or outcomes. Accordingly, two other recent initiatives have been selected for this section; these are the Standards Based Apprenticeship, and the Higher Education Links Scheme.

### **Standards Based Apprenticeship**

The genesis of this initiative is found in a National Agreement on the management of the economy between the Government, employer bodies, trade unions, farmers and community organisations, the 1991 Programme for Economic and Social Progress. While such agreements had traditionally been about pay, the 1991 Programme addressed many other issues, including setting out the basis for a new Standards Based Apprenticeship to replace the original system which was based on “time served”. The agreement also set up a National Apprenticeship Advisory Committee, to support FÁS, the Training and Employment Authority, in developing and implementing the new Apprenticeship. The objectives in establishing the new system included a significant increase in the number of qualified craftworkers to strengthen the national skill base, the extension of the apprenticeship training model into further occupations (Ireland has only 25 trades at present) and the inclusion of currently under-represented groups such as women, mature workers, long-term unemployed people and people with disabilities.

The new Apprenticeship model, introduced on a phased basis between 1993 and 1995, draws on best practice in Europe, and its development included benchmarking of standards with other E.U. member States. These international elements are adapted to integrate with the Irish administrative and business culture. The new system is modular, with alternating periods of on-the-job and off-the-job training over a four-year period. On successful completion of the training, the apprentice is awarded the National Craft Certificate (now awarded by the Further Education and Training Awards Council), which is now a compulsory requirement for recognition as a craftworker.

The Standards Based Apprenticeship is considered by stakeholders to be a success. Its primary objective, to significantly increase the number of qualified craftworkers, has been achieved; the original targets set in this respect have been greatly exceeded, with an annual intake of about 7,800 per annum compared to the target of 3,500. In recent years, about 25% of the male school leaving cohort has been entering apprenticeship, a testament to the success of the initiative. Total apprentice numbers in 2000 were 24,028 compared to 12,881 in 1993.

There has been less success in achieving the other objectives of the initiative. Efforts were made to attract more women into apprenticeships and widen the range of occupations involved; these measures included bursaries for employers, but there has been little response. The number of apprentices who have been formerly long-term unemployed has always been very low. Despite special entry arrangements and supports,

and active recruitment, participation by this category actually fell since the introduction of the new model apprenticeship. In 1995, FÁS reported a throughput of 54 formerly long-term unemployed apprentices (2.7%); this reduced to 20 (1%) in 1996 and 25 (0.5%) in 1997<sup>6</sup>. The reasons for this reduction are complex, and certainly include the rapid growth in employment opportunities generally over the period 1995-1997. Whatever the reasons, the situation remains that Apprenticeship in Ireland is a learning opportunity that is primarily undertaken by young males.

### **Higher Education Links Scheme (HELs)**

This scheme was initiated on a pilot basis in 1995. Its purpose is to facilitate transitions from Further Education awards to programmes leading to Higher Education awards – specifically, from Level 2 NCVA awards (of the former National Council for Vocational Awards, now made by the Further Education and Training Awards Council) to programmes leading to Certificate or Diploma courses in Institutes of Technology. HELs was developed to provide a transparent and consistent progression route at a transition point that had previously been characterised by a range of individual articulation arrangements.

It should be noted that entry to Higher Education programmes in Ireland has for many years been regulated by a national admissions system (the “Points System, administered centrally by the Central Applications Office). The Points System uses results from the Leaving Certificate examination to allocate places. Only a small proportion of places are allocated on other factors, including mature student status. With the growth of the Further Education sector, and in particular the increasing participation in programmes leading to Level 2 NCVA awards, it became clear that there was a need for an alternative progression route into Higher Education for this emerging category of learner. The Higher Education Links Scheme is a response to this need.

The Higher Education Links Scheme was based on an agreement between the two former awards Councils, the National Council for Vocational Awards and the National Council for Educational Awards. Other key organisations involved were the Institutes of Technology and the Central Applications Office. The scheme makes places available on a wide range of programmes in the Institutes, over 1000 places in 1998 in 171 programmes. Essentially these places are made available through links between particular Higher Education programmes and one or more NCVA Level 2 Certificate awards in related areas of study; the Scheme is therefore an assembly of articulation arrangements between specific areas of study, operating in the framework of an overall agreement.

The Higher Education Links Scheme was reviewed (by the National Council for Vocational Awards) in 1998. It was considered to be successful and continued on that basis. Since then, the range of links available has been extended, and efforts are being made to extend the concept of the Scheme to links with university programmes.

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<sup>6</sup> ESF (1998), Evaluation Report – *ESF and the Long-term Unemployed*, Dublin, ESF Evaluation Unit

The 1998 review identified a number of issues arising in the operation of the Scheme: it is very complex, and information available to learners in 1998 was inadequate (this has since been improved, and a scheme guide is now published). The range of arrangements in the links, including specific NCVA Certificate and/or Module requirements, was considered too wide. It was felt that the scheme was undermined by the fact that some of the participant Institutes had retained local “special relationships” with particular Further Education centres. Data on take-up of opportunities available under the Scheme has not been assembled, so it is difficult to gauge the extent to which learners feel it meets their progression needs. Comment from providers in the Further Education sector, gathered in the course of a public consultation on the requirements for a national framework of qualifications, revealed a perception that the entry level to Higher Education facilitated by the Scheme is too low.

## **Constraints on reform and innovation**

There is no doubt that reform and innovation in the qualifications system in Ireland has been constrained over the years by the complexity of the task involved in any initiative requiring change, and by the range of (often competing) stakeholding groups likely to be involved in any change process. This is illustrated in the range of interests involved in the innovative actions outlined above: the development of the new Apprenticeship required the construction of a broad partnership of stakeholders, made possible in the context of a major National Agreement; the Higher Education Links Scheme required the commitment of two Awards Councils, the Central Applications Office and thirteen Institutes of Technology.

The competing demands made on qualifications, both for employment and for selection to further levels of education or training, also contributes to the difficulty in assembling consensus for change. Qualifications in Ireland have very strong social and economic currency: in this environment, it is often the case that support for innovation submits to the need to maintain stability.

The 1999 Qualifications Act was an essential step in beginning the process of change in the qualifications system as a whole. The enabling power of the legislation is harnessed to the wide partnership of interests represented on the National Qualifications Authority, thus addressing the key constraint that has prevented or obstructed reform and innovation in the past. The requirement for stability that can inhibit minor or partial reforms can be satisfied in the context of a comprehensive framework embracing all awards at all levels in the system.

## Debates

As indicated above, the establishment of the new Qualifications Authority and Awards Councils, and the other provisions in the legislation, have already had significant effects throughout the structures and organisations that make up the qualifications system in Ireland: arising out of a concerted process of consultation driven by the new Authority, there is widespread debate and discussion on issues concerning all aspects of awards and qualifications. The Authority has already published two key Discussion Documents to encourage this debate, one aimed at the broader learning community generally, and another specifically directed at those concerned with professional and international awards. Following these publications, submissions were invited from all interested parties. Over 100 submissions were received, and these were all made publicly available on the Authority website, [www.nqai.ie](http://www.nqai.ie). A major public Forum was held in February 2002. A number of standing consultative and advisory groups meet regularly to debate key issues in the framework development process, and these are underpinned by internal consultations and debates taking place in many of the organisations represented. Finally, smaller consultative sessions are arranged as required to provide opportunities for input on particular issues to interested or concerned organisations.

A number of significant themes and issues have emerged from all of this discussion and debate; some of these are long-standing issues in the world of education and training in Ireland:

- The orientation of a framework – levels-based or credit-based?
- The understanding of standards of knowledge, skill and competence
- Criteria for framework levels, and for types of award
- Approaches to credit accumulation and transfer – impositional or compositional?
- The differentiation of “Further” and “Higher” education and training awards
- The academic / vocational divide in qualifications
- The facilitation of access, transfer and progression
- The inclusion of marginalised or under-represented groups in the qualifications system
- The recognition of formal, informal and non-formal learning

## COMPONENT 4

### QUALIFICATIONS AND LEARNING AT THE LEVEL OF PRACTICE AND USERS

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland commissioned a specific piece of research for Component Four of the national country report on the role of the qualifications system in promoting lifelong learning. This investigated how the qualifications system influences lifelong learning in selected sectors. The research was designed in the light of the OECD guidelines (April 2002) for this component:

*'In the fourth component of the background report you are asked to examine the impact of the qualifications system upon stakeholders in on or two key sectors or qualifications areas. The purpose of this component is to look at how qualification systems can promote or inhibit learning from the point of view of some key stakeholders: learners, practitioners and users'*

The research provides useful insights about how qualifications systems can promote or inhibit learning which may corroborate other studies or suggest areas for further research.

#### **Learning Programmes and Qualifications – a small-scale research study**

This component aims to investigate, through a small-scale research process, an aspect of how the Irish national qualification system influences the patterns and quality of lifelong learning.

Commissioned by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, the field research was carried out in Spring 2003. The main findings are presented here. It should be underlined that the research is not representative of the totality of schemes investigated, and that these schemes concern labour market interventions which include education and training for particular qualifications. The research findings alone cannot be relied upon as a guide or basis for further policy development with regard to the qualifications system itself. In addition, the focus of the research was specific qualifications in the area of vocational education and training which are now undergoing change as a result of the introduction of a new awarding body, the Further Education and Training Awards Council, and development and implementation of a national framework of qualifications. These will, over time, significantly alter the qualifications system in general and address some of the issues raised in the research. Nonetheless, the research provides useful insights about how qualifications systems can promote or inhibit learning which may corroborate other studies or suggest areas for further research.

## Research Methodology

The research was conducted primarily from a qualitative perspective. A primary goal of this research was to achieve understandings that approximate 'truth' and 'reality'. Qualitative methods, appropriately applied, provide a means of gaining a sympathetic understanding of the complexities of human motivation and social interaction (Sutton, 1993). The truth and reality are bound together in social research and their common ground is knowledge. Combined with statistical analysis from a range of quantitative questions, this research was primarily conducted by using a range of appropriate and sympathetic qualitative methods. These methods are:

- *Semi-structured and structured interviews (audio recording and note taking) for use with the service providers.*
- *Quantitative and qualitative questionnaires for the learners and participants of the training initiatives.*

## Data Analysis

The data from these interviews was primarily analysed by adopting Hycner's (1985) guidelines. This involves:

- *Transcription in full of each interview tape/MD.*
- *Listening to the interviews over and over again to determine a sense of the whole*
- *Identifying clusters of meanings from the raw data and determining themes*
- *Identifying common themes for all the interviews*

The questionnaires generated their own data, both qualitative and quantitative. These were analysed in two ways;

1. *Qualitative analysis of open questions using Hycner's method.*
2. *Quantitative analysis of closed questions using comparative analysis techniques.*

## Research Subjects

The OECD guidelines suggested that the research should focus on programmes in two of the following areas in which qualifications are made: workplace education and training, adult education or programmes for those at risk of dropping out of education. The overall aim was to elicit stakeholder views on the impacts and influences of the Irish qualifications system on lifelong learning. Programmes were selected from the areas of adult education and workplace education and training. In addition, it was decided that the research in Ireland should be conducted in both rural and urban contexts to ensure a

broad perspective on the issues. In accordance with the OECD guidelines, research sites were chosen on the basis that they are all attempting to expand learning for a diverse group of participants, either through opening up opportunities for groups that have had limited participation in learning, or through improving quality of learning. A total of four sites were selected.

As well as ensuring a range of locations it was considered important that there should be a range of types of learning programmes in the research sites. For this purpose, the following schemes were identified:

- VTOS (*Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme – delivered through local Vocational Education Committees*) – Adult Education
- CE (*Community Employment - a programme of FÁS, the national Training and Employment Authority*) – Workplace Education and Training

Learners and programme co-ordinators were interviewed from four such programmes: two Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme programmes and two Community Employment programmes.

It should be noted that the system through which awards are made in connection with these programmes is changing as a result of the establishment of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), June 2001 and that the research reveals a lack of awareness of these changes. These changes are explained in Component 1 of this report. In brief, FETAC has responsibility for making awards previously made by a number of agencies, including FÁS, in sectors such as hospitality, agriculture, crafts and vocational education and training. The functions of FETAC include the making and promoting of awards; the monitoring and assurance of the quality of programmes, the validation of programmes and the determination of standards. It aims to make quality assured awards; to create opportunities for all learners in further education and training to have their achievements recognised; and to build progression pathways into the awards system.



## **Research Findings**

### **Sample size and range**

This small-scale research is designed to provide a perspective on the impact of qualifications upon learning and at the level of practice and use. The research focused on four sites, including both urban and rural contexts. Two types of learning programme were researched. These were:

- *VTOS (Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme) – Adult Education*
- *CE (Community Employment) – Workplace Education and Training for Adults*

### ***VTOS (Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme)***

The Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) is an intervention in the Irish labour market, supported by the European Social Fund, on behalf of unemployed people who have been registered as unemployed for at least six months. Its purpose is to enable its target group to access education and training with a view to progression to employment. Ten per cent of places may be allocated under certain conditions to a wider category of unwaged people, including lone parents and people in certain disability categories, who are seeking employment. In all cases, the minimum age for participation in VTOS is 21 years. The two VTOS sites selected for the research have a total of three hundred (300) adult learners pursuing a range of qualifications.

### ***CE (Community Employment)***

Community Employment (CE) is a programme of FÁS, the national Training and Employment Authority, that benefits both the community and the participants. The programme operates through local projects involving areas of activity such as arts, community recreation, environment, community advice and support, childcare, schools, tourism, health and welfare services. CE schemes provide long-term unemployed people with part-time work opportunities and training/development options and can help participants to access a job and/or further education and training. The CE sites surveyed had a combined total of forty (40) adult learners pursuing a range of qualifications.

The total number of adult learners participating at the research sites was three hundred and forty (340) learners. From this number, seventy (70) adult learners were randomly selected to participate in the research. Of these, fifty (50) completed the questionnaires. On top of this figure, four training co-ordinators were interviewed, one from each site.

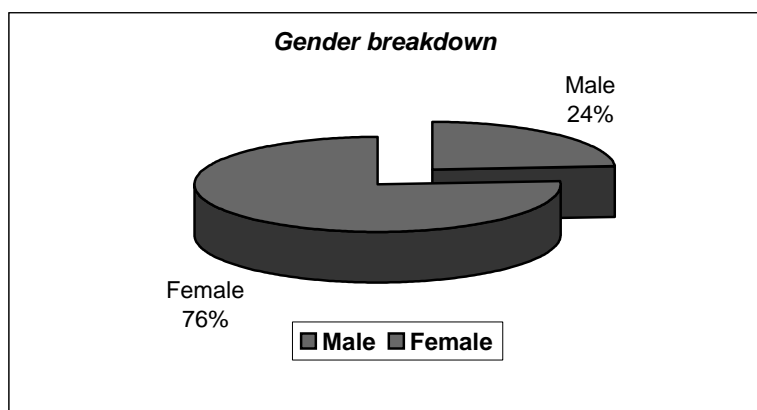
Based on responses to a range of questions asked, three distinct themes emerged:

- *The levels of awareness and transparency in relation to the qualification system and the awarding bodies.*
- *Awareness and knowledge of qualifications in relation to progression and lifelong learning.*
- *Assessment methods and systems and how these assist or hinder the students in their learning.*

## **Findings A. The Learners Perspectives**

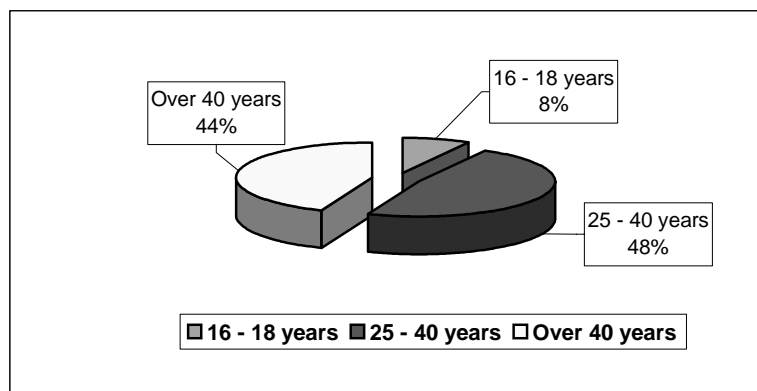
Below, in *figure 1*, is the gender breakdown of the sample studied. The figure shows that the significant majority of adults involved are female. This reflects the situation at the national level that the majority of those involved in adult learning are female.

*Figure 1: Gender Breakdown*



*Figure 2* shows the age profile of the population sample surveyed;

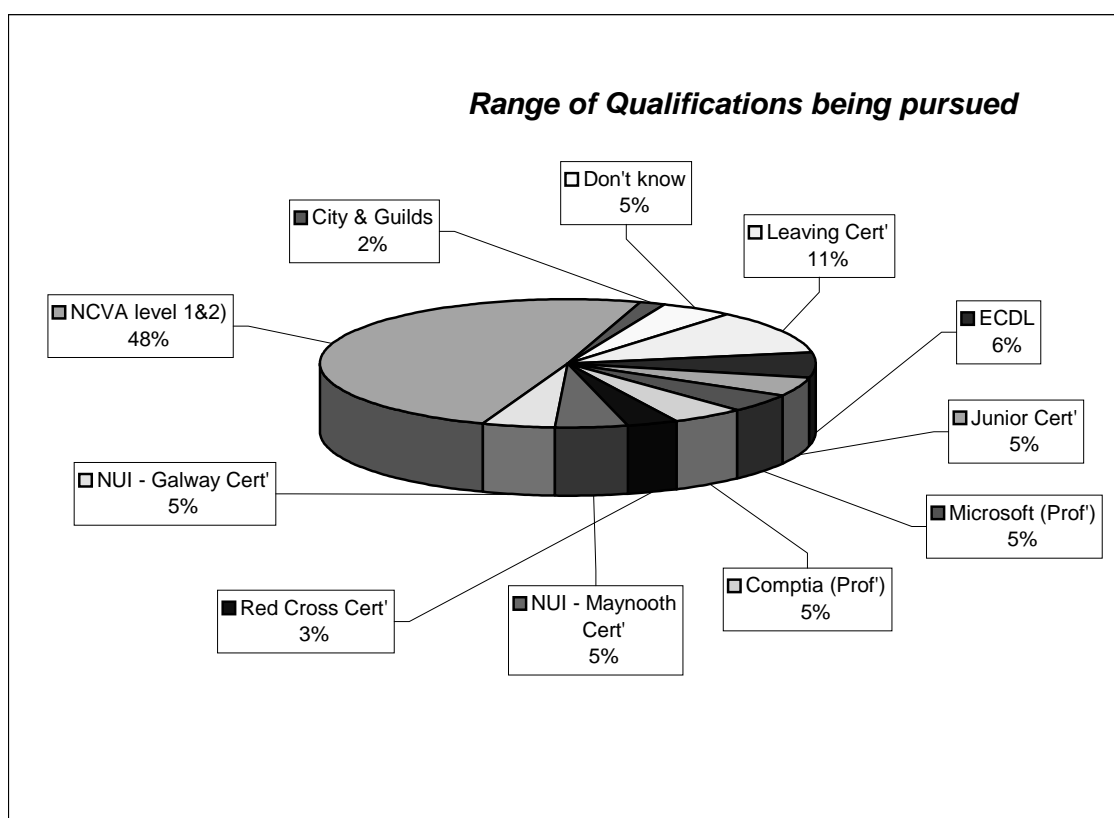
*Figure 2: Age Profile*



***The levels of awareness and transparency in relation to the qualification system and the awarding bodies.***

The diagram (Figure 3) shows the range of qualifications being pursued by the sample population surveyed. A point to notice is that 5% of the learners were not aware of the name of the qualification being pursued. However, a possible explanation for this is posited below.

*Figure 3 - Range of Qualifications*



The majority of the learners surveyed were aware of the nature of their target qualifications. There were strong levels of satisfaction from the learners with their own service providers in relation to the dissemination of information relating to their intended qualifications.

However a small percentage (5%) of the learners did not know the name of the awarding body or qualifications that they are pursuing. This appears to be due to the fact that the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) has been subsumed by FETAC (the Further Education and Training Awards Council).

### ***Awareness and knowledge of qualifications in relation to progression, recognition and lifelong learning.***

A range of questions was used to determine awareness and knowledge of qualifications in relation to progression, recognition and lifelong learning. A series of charts in the Addendum to Component 4 gives a visual representation of responses.

Outlined here are the key points drawn from the data.

1. Relevance of their qualification to their desired progression.  
(see Fig.4 – Addendum to Component 4 )
  - *The majority of learners feel that their intended qualification is relevant to their educational and employment future.*
  - *A small percentage did not feel it was relevant at all, (this may be due to the fact that these students are studying for entry to Higher Education Art/Design programmes where a portfolio of work often takes precedence over qualifications for entry.)*
  - *11% felt that qualifications are needed for progression of every kind.*
2. Relevance of their qualifications to career development/employment.  
(see Fig.5 – Addendum to Component 4 )
  - *85% of the sample said that they felt qualifications were needed to gain future employment.*
  - *55% of those agreed strongly that this was the case.*
  - *4% strongly disagreed*
3. Relevance of their qualifications to access to further and/or higher education.  
(see Fig.6 – Addendum to Component 4 )
  - *70% of the sample said that they felt qualifications were needed to gain entry to Further / Higher Education*
  - *17% were unsure and neither agreed nor disagreed.*
  - *Almost 13% of the learners surveyed disagreed that qualifications were needed to gain entry to Further / Higher Education.*
4. The recognition of their qualifications throughout Europe  
(see Fig.7 - Addendum to Component 4 )
  - *Almost 80% of the learners surveyed believed that their qualifications would be recognised and hold currency throughout the European Union.*
  - *2% strongly disagreed.*
5. The recognition of their qualifications outside of Europe  
(see Fig.8 - Addendum to Component 4 )

- 25% of the sample did not know or have an opinion on this matter.
- 14% felt that their qualifications would not have currency and be recognised outside of the EU.

The researcher also asked learners if they already had any qualifications awarded previous to their current educations and training, and the figure in the Addendum to Component 4 (*Figure 9*) shows the spread of qualifications previously attained.

***Assessment methods and systems used by the main national awarding bodies and how these assist or hinder the students in their learning.***

The learners were asked about how they felt about the assessments and assessment methods used with respect to their awards. They were also asked if they believed that they were informed by their service providers about how the assessments relate to the qualifications and if the assessments were designed in line with their learning, and lifelong learning.

*Views on assessment procedures.*

This question focussed on the level of understanding of the assessment procedures and mechanisms associated with qualifications (*see Figure 10, Addendum to Component 4*)

- *There was general agreement that the procedures were quite transparent*
- *6% felt that the procedures were not clear and that some of the procedures were too vague.*

*Views on modes of assessment.*

This question focussed on how the learners felt about the level of difficulty associated with five major modes of assessments generally used with respect to the qualifications they are seeking (*see Figure 11, Addendum to Component 4*).

**Additional findings (Learners)**

All the learners surveyed were also asked to contribute general comments about the qualifications system and how it affects their learning and future opportunities. Some two-thirds of those surveyed did not comment. The comments below generally reflect the views of a small number of learners. The focus of comment ranged from the location of courses (some wished them to be in the workplace), to the overall experience of learning (generally good) and to general satisfaction with the courses they were engaged in. Some learners believed that the process of learning was more important to them than achieving a qualification. Some of the learners who were surveyed also said that achieving a qualification would give them more choice although they had not yet thought about the purpose for which they might use their qualification.

When asked about what changes could help the learners in relation to the qualifications system, respondents suggested:

- *More support from the service providers in terms of providing learners with information relating to assessment.*
- *More group / project based assessment.*
- *Some adult learners felt that mixed groups (ie: younger further education students mixed with adult learners) do not often work well as there is less peer support and that adults can often feel isolated when studying in mixed groups.*

## **Findings B. The service providers' perspective**

This aspect of the research demonstrates the range of issues relating to qualifications that service providers feel need to be addressed. Personnel at the sites visited were all very keen to engage in the research process as well as being very open to participating in the ongoing discussion. The responses have been edited down to the three themes mentioned earlier in this report, to condense the focus of enquiry once again.

### ***The levels of awareness and transparency in relation to the qualification system and the awarding bodies.***

- *Service providers felt that the levels of information available about qualifications varied from one awarding body to another.*
- *It was felt that the Leaving Certificate still held the maximum share of currency value by most of their learners.*
- *Levels of awareness of the newly established FETAC (which subsumed the NCVA) are lower in rural than in urban settings. This impacts on the understandings of its responsibilities and roles.*
- *The FETAC system of evaluating work in May/June was thought to be out of line with many of the Community Employment programmes as they tend to run from September – September or January-January. This causes many logistical problems for these service providers.*
- *Some of the service providers interviewed stressed that information transmission and the public relations of the national awarding bodies needs to be improved.*

- *There was a consensus that the more commercially - focussed awarding bodies such as those offering ECDL and Microsoft Professional awards were more efficient at promoting the qualification.*

### ***Awareness and knowledge of qualifications in relation to progression and lifelong learning.***

Respondents stressed the importance of progression from the learner's perspective. They had strong opinions about employers in relation to recognition of qualifications. It was stated that "commercially driven" professional awards seemed to hold more currency in the eyes of the employers than the awards of the national awarding bodies.

- *It was suggested that FETAC could improve its public relations work not just to inform students but also to increase awareness and to encourage employers to recognise FETAC awards.*
- *Service providers agreed that FETAC awards were of a high quality and did have appropriate assessment criteria for adult learners, but they also said that this was not commonly recognised by students and employers alike as a valid form of currency.*
- *Much concern was expressed at the cost of the private/commercial awards such as ECDL, and Microsoft. All Sites / Centres have to subsidise the awards on behalf of the students and this had financial implications for their organisations.*
- *One service provider pointed out that not all FETAC awards have the same value in the employment sector. Awards at the same level are not all viewed in the same way.*

The NCVA Level 2 in the Business Computers and Languages is quite good and relevant. For example we mix the NCVA Level 2 in the Languages area with the Leaving Certificate. The FETAC Level 2 in Interior Design does not seem to have much progression, it doesn't seem to be as successful. (From interview with service provider)

### ***Assessment methods and systems and how these assist or hinder the students in their learning.***

Learners were also asked for their views on first, the assessment methodologies and second, the assessment requirements of awarding bodies and/or service providers. While contradictory views were given about the appropriateness of assessment methods applied

by those offering courses leading to FETAC awards, it should be noted that responsibility for assessment methods will in the future lie with providers.

- *There was a general view that the range of assessment procedures in use by the main awarding bodies was generally good and in particular was suitable for adult learners.*
- *Some service providers stressed the need to make the assessments more flexible to meet the unique learning needs of the student.*
- *There are different levels of awareness amongst students and providers about the existing range of assessment methods used for various FETAC awards – some, for instance, called for greater flexibility when that flexibility is in fact already available.*
- *There was a strong view amongst service providers that the FETAC assessments were certainly more appropriate for their clients than other awards, the only issue was the marking and time constraints involved in the procedures employed by FETAC.*

I think that the assessments methods are quite appropriate for FETAC learners. I think FETAC is weighted more towards Portfolio at the moment. This and oral exams rather than written exams suit adults coming back to education here. They are much more flexible. (From Interview with service provider)

- *One service provider believed that there are greater possibilities to access the Leaving Certificate Applied<sup>7</sup> compared with the Leaving Certificate 'established' and that this has allowed more adults to pursue this award.*

#### ***Additional findings (from the perspective of service providers)***

The service providers were asked about what they would change about the current qualifications system in Ireland and where improvements could be made from their point of view, the learner's point of view, from the employer's point of view and that of providers of education and training.

- *It was stated that many adult learners are forced into training and education programmes to meet the criteria for access to social welfare benefits. Because of this, the learners often are not ready to be introduced to the qualifications system straight away. It was suggested that a period of personal development and support is necessary prior to learners pursuing qualifications.*

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<sup>7</sup> The Leaving Certificate programme has three variants – the Leaving Certificate (established), the Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme.



- *More time needs to be spent conducting training needs analysis at point of entry to programmes.*
- *The links between employers and adult learning service providers is weak.*
- *In relation to higher education, it was stated by representatives from several sites that the gap is very wide between adult education in terms of certification and entry requirements for higher education. This point was made with reference to the main arrangements in place for such entry*

The Central Applications Office (CAO) system is not designed for adults. First of all, they have to apply through the CAO system, then they have to apply to most colleges directly with forms that are as long as a wet weekend. These are obstacles. Once they get into these institutions, the problems continue. Most Universities and Lecturers don't take into consideration these individuals as adults with issues and children and families, so they have to be conscious of that too. Universities have to change their cultures as such... in a big way. (from Interview with service provider: The CAO operates the national system used to process applications for places in under-graduate higher education Institutions)

The simple thing is this... we have found out that education is the key. We try to present people to the first step in that door, but we find that that the system fails miserably after that point. So we will take homeless people off the streets, we will nurture, educate and bang them to a point, it's the link between that point and university that is so weak. (from Interview with Service Provider)

## Summary of Main Issues and Findings

It should be noted that the limited size and scope of the survey (four centres and 50 respondents) means that it is not representative of all learning or indeed of all the learning undertaken under the two schemes investigated (Community Employment and Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme). The timing of the research (early 2003) appears to have had a bearing on the levels of awareness of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and its awards system. It was a relatively new body at the time when the research was conducted. It is the national awarding body with responsibility for the national awards made previously in connection with the two schemes investigated here. In the short term, FETAC has adopted all of the processes and procedures of the relevant former awarding bodies including FÁS and the National Council for Vocational Awards referred to in this research. This will allow for continuity of service and allow time for FETAC to develop its own processes in line with its aims and objectives as set out in its Strategic Plan 2003-2006 (see [www.fetac.ie](http://www.fetac.ie) for further details).

Key findings from the research are summarised as follows:

1. Adult learners are generally aware of the need for qualifications and certification in relation to future education and/or employment opportunities.
2. 85% of learners felt that qualifications were relevant to employment and 70% felt that they were relevant to access further/higher education.
3. Almost 15% of adult learners disagreed that qualifications were needed to gain entry to Further / Higher Education.
4. Almost 80% of the adult learners surveyed believed that their qualifications would be recognised and hold currency throughout the European Union, only 2% strongly disagreed.
5. Only 14% of adult learners felt that their qualifications would have currency and be recognized outside of the EU.
6. The transition from the NCVA awards system to FETAC has caused some confusion from the point of view of the learners.
7. It was suggested that FETAC could improve their communications and advertising, not just to inform students but also to create awareness and encourage employers to recognise FETAC awards
8. Employers should be part of the communication loop in relation to dissemination of information about qualifications made by the awarding bodies, especially to rural areas.
9. Adult learners are acutely aware of the currency value of the more traditional qualifications such as the Leaving Certificate, there is some confusion and lack of awareness about the currency of new qualifications such as FETAC awards.
10. There were important differences in levels of awareness of the variety of awards made, and the appropriateness of the assessment mechanisms for adult learners. Some service providers called for a greater range of assessment mechanisms to be established whilst others recognised that these were already available (note that service providers have increased responsibility for the design of assessment methods under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999).
11. In relation to higher education, difficulties with respect to access were raised. These concerned the entry process and the criteria for access. The gap between the level of certification acquired in adult education and the requirements for entry into higher education was deemed to be very wide.
12. Much concern was expressed at the cost of the private/commercial awards such as those of ECDL and Microsoft. However, these qualifications are perceived as having significant value in the labour market.
13. It was noted that service providers and learners all felt that more time needs to be spent conducting Training Needs Analysis prior to embarking on a course of study leading to a qualification.

Given the limited scope of the research, it is not considered sufficient in itself to inform policy development. However, it does raise some points that are worthy of further

investigation or that may corroborate or shed light on other research findings e.g. *Report on a seminar on making learning more attractive*, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, Dublin (2003) and *Surveys of Learners and Employers Perceptions of Awards and Qualifications* (2003). For example, in the context of lifelong learning, it may be worth noting that the research finds that adult learners in particular are interested in learning as a process and for itself as much as in learning for the purpose of achieving a particular qualification for some other purpose. Some learners referred to the importance of learning in creating more choices for them. This, and the need to undertake learning in order to access social welfare benefits, points to a mix of motivations that influence learners.

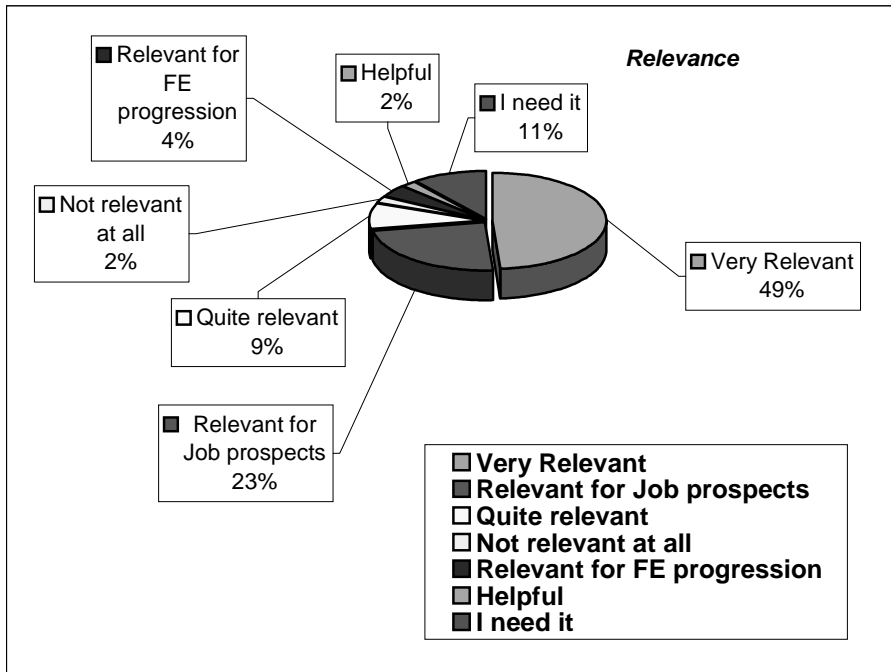
## Component 4 - Addendum

*Additional Graphs, illustrating points made in Component 4 above*

### Learner's perspectives

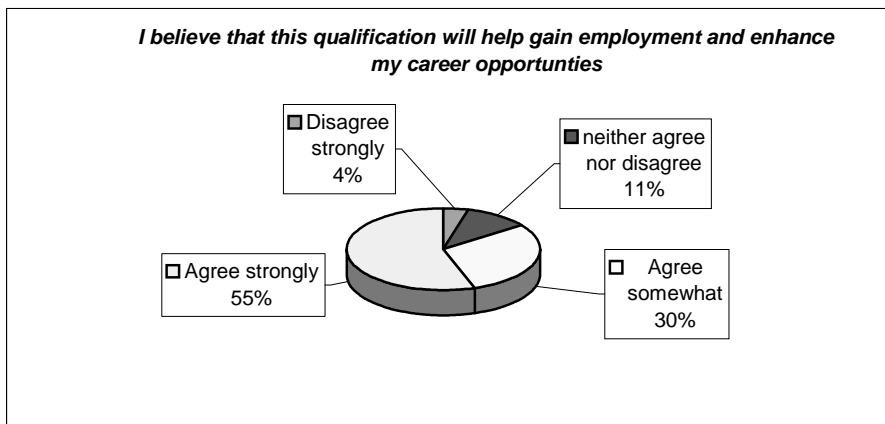
*(Awareness and knowledge of qualifications in relation to progression, recognition and lifelong learning).*

*Learners' perspective of the relevance of qualifications to them*



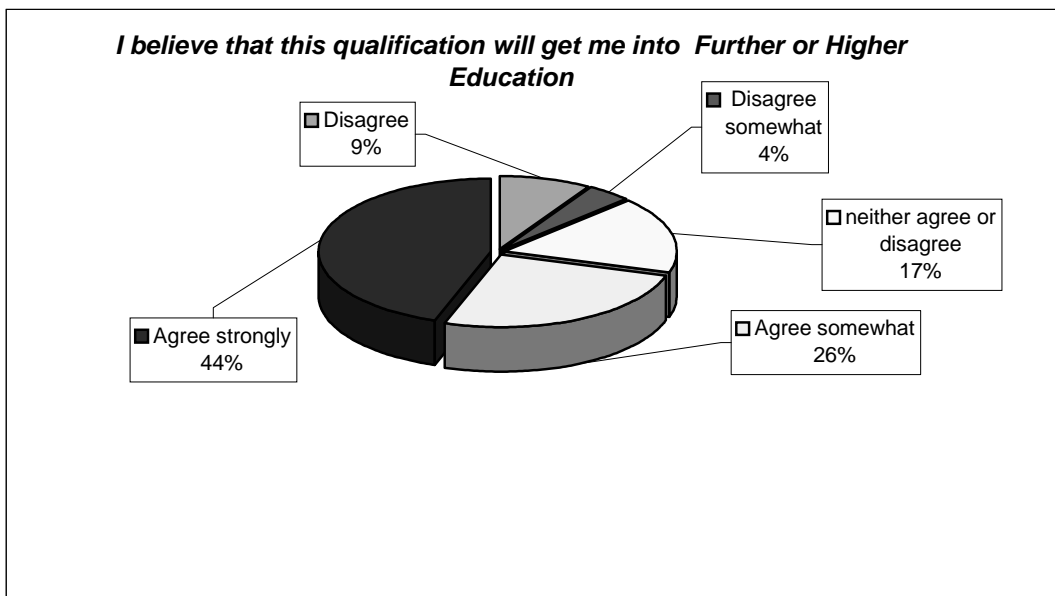
**Figure 4**

*Awareness and knowledge of qualifications in relation to progression and lifelong learning*



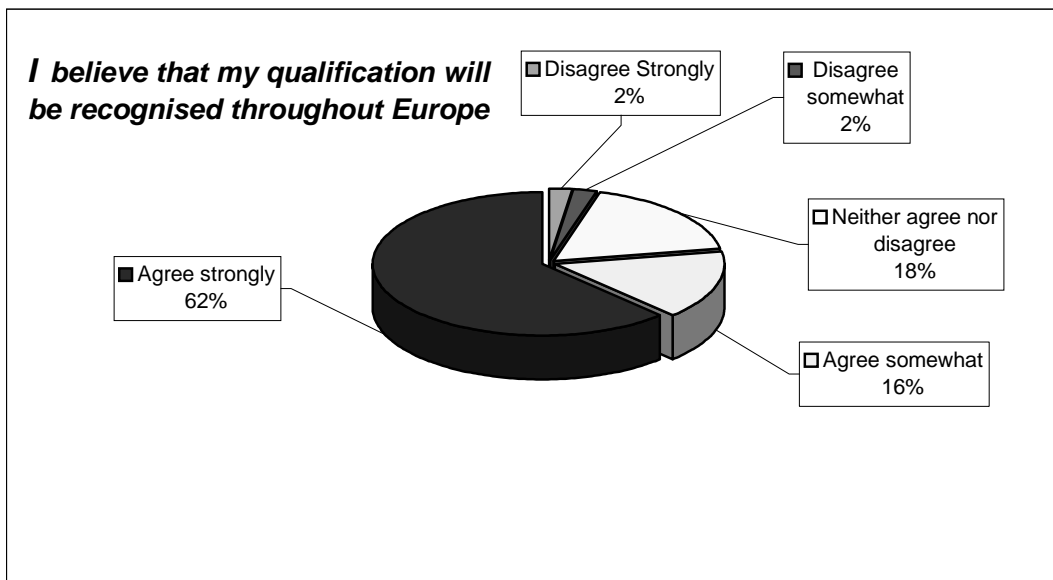
**Figure 5**

*Access*



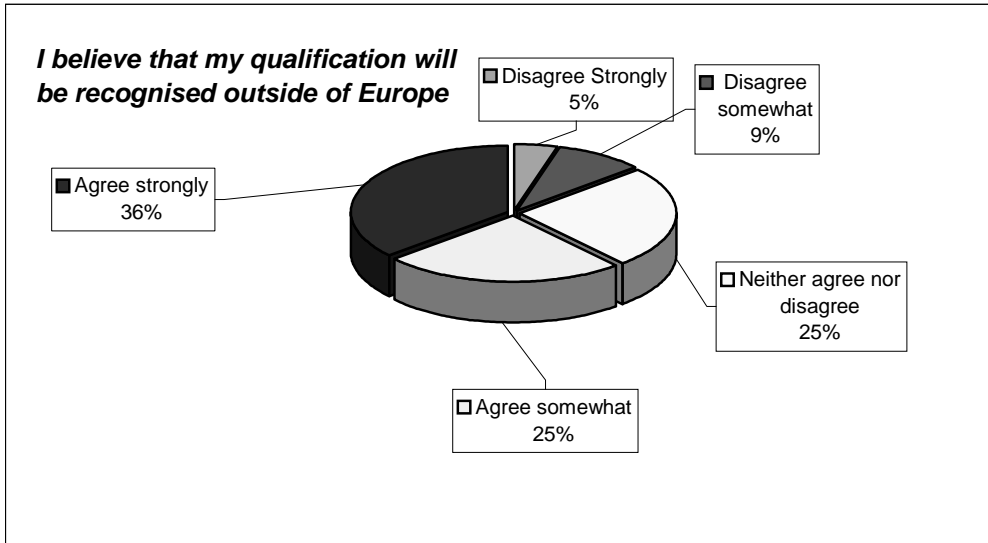
**Figure 6**

*Recognition in Europe*



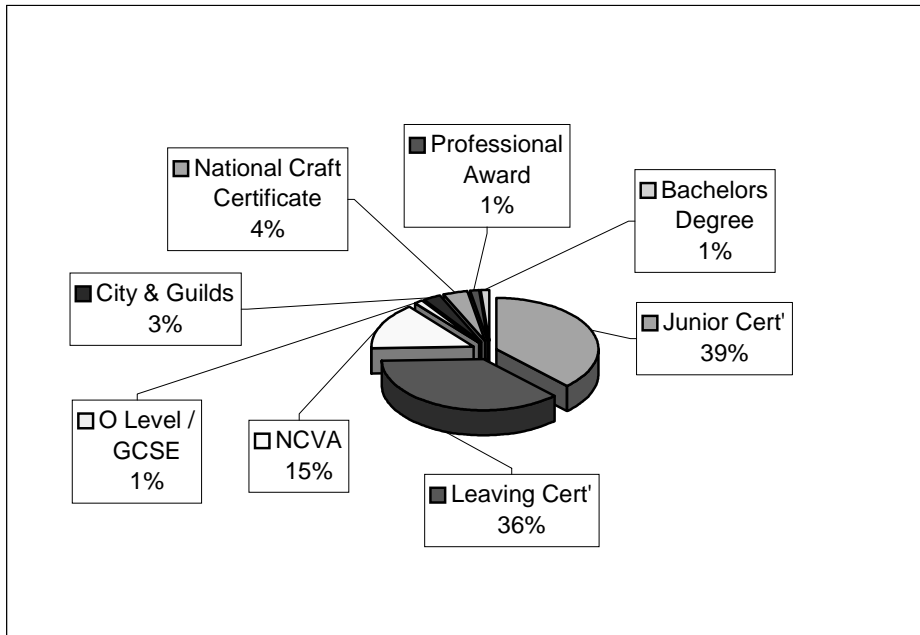
**Figure 7**

*Recognition outside Europe*



**Fig.8.**

*Awards held by respondents*

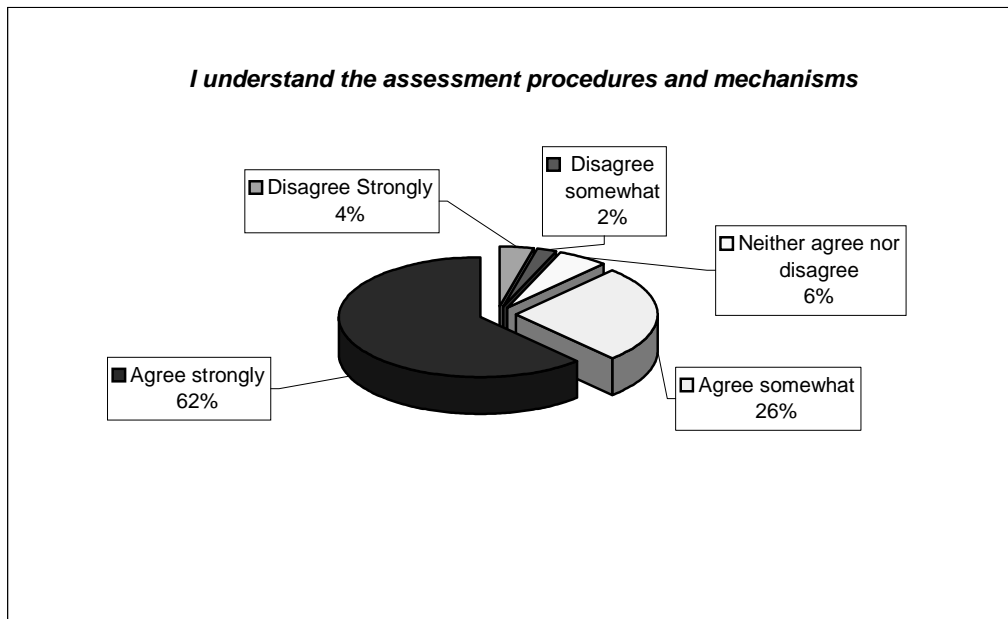


**Fig.9.**

## Learner's perspectives

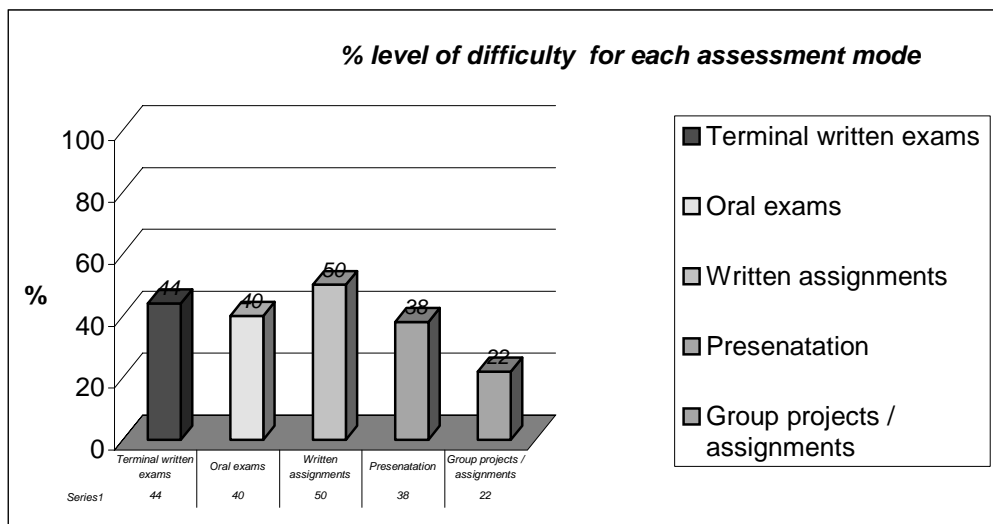
*(Assessment methods and systems used by the main national awarding bodies and how these assist or hinder the students in their learning).*

### Understanding of the assessment mechanisms



**Fig.10.**

### How the learners view each assessment mode in terms of level of difficulty.



**Fig.11**

## **COMPONENT 5**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND CHALLENGES**

#### **Conclusions and lessons**

In drawing conclusions about the Irish qualifications system, based on the four main components of this report, it is important to reiterate the point made at the outset, in Component 1, that this report describes a transitional situation. The task of reforming the qualifications system in Ireland is underway – see Appendix 2 – but is far from complete and it will take time for these reforms to take effect. A further caution must be reiterated in relation to drawing policy conclusions based on Component 4, because of the small sample and narrow scope of the research that underpins this Component.

Components 1, 2 and 3 of this report were written in 2002, and the research for Component 4 took place in spring 2003. These concluding sections were written later in 2003, by which stage very significant changes were beginning to become evident in the Irish system of qualifications.

The progress made in the process of reforming the qualifications system in Ireland from mid-2001 to end 2003 is summarised in Appendix 2. In this time, a wide-ranging and intensive consultative process was developed and implemented. This process was a key element in the reform initiative; it provided a means of rapidly developing, testing and refining concepts; it also enabled stakeholders to take ownership of the emerging cultural and structural changes. By the end of 2003, this development process had enabled the publication of policies and criteria for a national framework of qualifications, policies and procedures to promote learner mobility and a set of key determinations defining a framework of 10 levels which will be able to accommodate all qualifications made in Ireland.

#### **Demands on the qualifications system**

The reform of the qualifications system in Ireland, which has been under way since the enactment of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act in 1999, has been undertaken as a response to the changing needs of learners. The existing system was widely considered to have become diffuse and incoherent. It contains many narrow lines of progression that hinder rather than support continuation in the learning process throughout life. In addition, the strong separation between education and training policy and structures has been reflected in the qualifications arrangements. In the 1990s, the national objective of building a lifelong learning society introduced a key demand for a more coherent and flexible system of qualifications, which can meet the needs of a more diverse learning community.



A second significant demand is the need for the Irish system to be in concert with international developments. This is particularly important as the national economy is small and open, and is reliant on external trade and inward investment. There are particularly close linkages between the labour market in Ireland and in the United Kingdom. There is also a strong policy of engagement in the ongoing processes of achieving greater comparability and compatibility of qualifications in Europe, in both higher education and vocational education and training.

To respond to these new demands, the existing qualifications system will be reformed over time while retaining some elements of the existing system (see Appendix 1).

### **Promoting lifelong learning**

The development of a national framework of qualifications is the key element in the reform of the qualifications system in Ireland. This task has been undertaken in the context of achieving the lifelong learning objective, as understood in terms of the European Commission's definition of lifelong learning as

*“all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective”*

This central objective is acknowledged in the vision for the recognition of learning that underpins the national framework of qualifications:

*The context provided by the development of a society of lifelong learning and accessibility for all should inform the nature, development and implementation of an appropriate national framework of qualifications. The ultimate requirement will be to have a framework that is understood by all, in which all may participate and for which all will work together in a spirit of true collaboration and co-operation. The framework will aim to maximise the use of awards for a variety of purposes ranging from accessing further learning opportunities to employment.*

*A key characteristic is the centrality of the learner within formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences. This is important because of the way in which knowledge, skill and competence impact on citizens' life opportunities. The new framework will drive the movement towards a knowledge society and lifelong learning, thereby enhancing social development and economic competitiveness. In addition, the further development of learning opportunities will also be affected by this emerging vision.*

In addition to the structure provided by the framework, a matrix of policies, strategies and procedures has been developed to support and facilitate learners in using the system of qualifications. These provisions embody a composite vision for the promotion and facilitation of mobility for learners:

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

*learning objectives. The national framework of qualifications and associated programme provision should be structured to facilitate learner entry, and to promote transfer and progression, so that learners are encouraged to participate in the learning process to enable them to realise their ambitions to the full extent of their abilities.*

### **Hindering lifelong learning**

Several aspects of the existing qualifications system in Ireland can be identified as hindering lifelong learning:

- The distinction between awards for learning in education and training contexts
- The existence of many separate subsystems of qualifications
- The singular nature of many awards, with little or no opportunity for learners to progress
- The focus of the system on the needs of young learners in their initial learning experience
- The general non-integration of non-formal and informal learning in the system of qualifications

### **Tensions between lifelong learning and other objectives**

In developing a new focus on lifelong learning for the system of qualifications in Ireland, it has been necessary to address the tensions that arise between the existing system and the new one. The longstanding focus of the existing system has been on the needs of young learners and their initial learning experiences. The qualifications system evolved over time to meet the qualifications needs of this particular learner-group and to match the matrix of provision which is also strongly dedicated to providing learning opportunities for the youth population. The tensions between meeting the ongoing needs of this learner group and a more diverse learning community is increased by the high value attached to qualifications in Ireland in social and occupational contexts: any alteration in the relative meaning of an award, or in the arrangements for gaining access to an award, can be perceived as a threat to the interests of award-holders and to the integrity of the award itself and its meaning in society.

The reform of the qualifications system embodies a significant rationalisation of the range of bodies that make awards in Ireland. In addition, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has an overall standard-setting role in relation to the awards of some awarding bodies and not others. The concept of the National Framework of Qualifications has had to take account of this. The structural arrangements established under the 1999 legislation can be interpreted as a compromise between the need to create a system that would meet future needs in the lifelong learning context, and the need to maintain the confidence of users, both learners and employers, in the value of the awards and their underpinning structures in the existing system.

### **Reconciling tensions**

The reforming effect of the National Framework of Qualifications is supported by the strong legislative base underpinning the initiative. However, the work of developing the

framework has been undertaken where possible through consultation and consensus-building with all relevant stakeholding groups. In the Irish context, this mix of statutory legitimisation and participative development has been a crucial factor in ensuring that a framework can be constructed in a comparatively short timeframe, achieves the necessary broad support of stakeholders and can be effectively implemented across all elements of the education and training system.

### **Policy instruments that promote lifelong learning**

The key policy instruments in relation to qualifications that promote lifelong learning are

- **Legislation and Policy:**
  - The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999
  - Universities Act (1997) which makes specific reference to Lifelong Learning
  - Learning for Life (2000) – White Paper on Adult Education, recommended the initiation of the National Adult Learning Council
  
- **Organisations:** The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council
  
- **Policies:** policies and criteria published by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland for the development of the National Framework of Qualifications and for the promotion and facilitation of access, transfer and progression for learners
  
- **Structures:** the National Framework of Qualifications (published in October 2003), and associated new systems of awards to be developed by the two awards Councils.

### **Gaps in the approach**

The shortcomings of the existing system of qualifications in relation to the promotion of lifelong learning are set out above under ‘Hindering Lifelong Learning’. The reforms now taking place are designed to address these shortcomings. In due course, the effect of this reform approach will be reviewed and evaluated, but gaps in the approach can not be identified at this early and incomplete stage of development.

### **Expectations from the OECD activity**

In participating in the OECD activity on ‘The Role of National Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning, it is anticipated that the ongoing Irish reform initiative can be informed by experiences and developments in other countries. In addition, it is expected that the Irish experience can contribute to the international debate on qualifications and qualifications systems, and in particular to the developing discourse on the use of frameworks as a means of improving the clarity, coherence and comparability of systems.

### **Future research and development**

A major milestone has been reached with the launch of the Framework in October 2003, 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. A number of steps are involved in the implementation of the Framework:

- in accordance with the Framework, the awards Councils must establish standards for awards and procedures to validate programmes leading to those awards.
- the placement of existing and previously-made awards at appropriate levels in the Framework.
- making available awards meeting the new Framework standards by June 2006, or sooner.

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

- the development of additional award-types.
- drafting policies and criteria for the inclusion of international and professional awards in the Framework. It is planned that draft policies and criteria will be published in 2004.
- the implementation of a common approach to credit that will operate for both further and higher education.
- planning for a review, in time, of the Framework

### **Opportunities and Challenges**

The most significant opportunity in the immediate future for the Irish qualifications system in promoting lifelong learning is the implementation and further development of the National Framework of Qualifications. A second allied opportunity is the implementation of the Authority's policies (2003) for the promotion and facilitation of access, transfer and progression.

An immediate challenge is to reach agreement with the relevant stakeholders on the inclusion in the Framework of formerly-made awards and existing awards that are to cease as the new outcomes-based Framework awards are introduced. Other challenges identified are the inclusion of professional and international awards and the development of a national approach to credit. Further into the future, it is anticipated that it will be necessary to address the challenge of integrating or aligning the new system in Ireland with new systems or structures that may emerge at European level in the Bologna and Copenhagen processes.

## **Influences on lifelong learning**

The need to promote lifelong learning is a primary driver of the reform of the qualifications system in Ireland. Nevertheless, it is not suggested that a qualifications system in itself, no matter how well it is adapted, can achieve the development of a society of lifelong learning. Many other factors come into play for this wider objective. The most significant issues to be addressed include:

- a continuing focus of provision on the needs of young learners, including systems and structures for the provision of support to learners
- developing and expanding opportunities to learn on a part-time basis
- developing non-formal and informal learning routes
- providing appropriate information and educational/vocational guidance services to support learning across the lifespan
- creating a culture of lifelong learning in which the common identification of lifelong learning with adult education, and the general lack of awareness that young learners are in the early stages of lifelong learning, is overcome and in which lifelong learning is seen to embrace all forms, stages and communities of learning.
- focusing school curricula on developing the 'learning to learn' capacities of young people as a preparation for lifelong involvement in the learning process
- Achieving the integration of policies, actions and financial supports, that impact on lifelong learning, that currently exist and operate in separate spheres.

## **Appendices**

- Appendix 1**      Diagram of Progression Routes in the Irish Qualifications System
- Appendix 2**      Progress note on developments in the qualifications system  
in Ireland, November 2003.











## **Appendix 1.**





### **Diagram of Progression Routes in the Irish Qualifications System**





## Progression Routes in the Irish Qualifications System, 2002 Key to Graphic

<b>School Programme</b>	
<b>Access: School to Further Education</b>	
<b>University Programme</b>	
<b>Institute of Technology Programme</b>	
<b>Apprenticeship Programmes</b>	
<b>Further Education Programmes - NCVA Awards</b>	
<b>Higher Education Links Scheme</b>	
<b>Further Education Programmes - Non-formal, Informal</b>	
<b>Adult Access Procedures - to Higher Education</b>	
<b>- to Further Education / NCVA</b>	

<b>Schools Awards</b>	
<b>Higher Education Awards</b>	
<b>National Craft Certificate</b>	
<b>NCVA Awards (Further Education and Training Awards Council)</b>	

## Appendix 2.

### **Progress note on developments in the qualifications system in Ireland, November 2003.**

The launch of the National Framework of Qualifications in October 2003 marks a key stage in the development of a new qualifications system in Ireland, signalling a major change in the education and training landscape.

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. The diffuse nature of the existing qualifications systems does not easily support portability of recognition for learning. In addition, in the European context, the Bologna and Copenhagen Declarations signal a move towards greater compatibility and comparability in qualifications systems.

The changes under way are underpinned in legislation, in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999. Significant developments have already taken place, as three new organisations were established under the Act in 2001 – the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and two new awards Councils, the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council. The establishment of the Councils has already removed some of the complexity in the existing systems – they now incorporate in two Councils the awarding functions of seven former awarding bodies.

The key element in the change process is the development of a national framework of qualifications. This has been the main work of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland since its establishment. Development work has been undertaken in a partnership mode, with deep and wide consultation across the world of education and training and close involvement of key stakeholders. This work has now advanced to a stage at which an Outline National Framework of Qualifications has been defined. This was launched on 17 October 2003, when the Authority published several documents:

- an overview of the new Framework, and the plans and arrangements for its implementation
- three technical papers, setting out
  - the key determinations that define the National Framework of Qualifications
  - the policies and criteria determined by the Authority for the development and establishment of the Framework
  - policies, actions and procedures determined by the Authority for the promotion and facilitation of access, transfer and progression.

The Irish Framework is defined by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland 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.”*

It is noteworthy that the intention is not to just provide a frame of reference for existing awards: the awards Councils will develop systems of new awards for the National Framework. 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 many existing awards systems, of basing awards on inputs, or on time spent in programmes.

The key features of the Framework are:

- the Framework is a structure of ten ‘levels’, ranging from recognition for the most basic learning achievements to Doctoral awards
- levels are defined by ‘level indicators’, which are broad descriptions of learning outcomes
- from the level indicators, ‘award-types’ are defined, and their features are set out in ‘award-type descriptors’
- award-types are classes of named awards sharing common features and level – e.g. an Honours Bachelors Degree is an award-type
- the National Framework of Qualifications contains an initial set of 15 major award-types, with at least one at each of the ten levels in the framework. Other award-types will be developed in the future

It will be the responsibility of the various awarding bodies, including the two awards Councils, to develop the outcomes to be associated with named awards within the specification of the award-type descriptors – e.g. the Higher Education and Training Awards Council might define an Honours Bachelors Degree in Business.

Awards in the National Framework of Qualifications will be made by:

- the Further Education and Training Awards Council
- the Higher Education and Training Awards Council
- the Dublin Institute of Technology
- the seven Irish universities
- the State Examinations Commission (Department of Education and Science).

The Framework sets the overall standards of awards of the two Councils and the Dublin Institute of Technology. These bodies are now engaged in determining new standard-setting and validation arrangements for their new awards.

The Framework accommodates school and university awards, and the general manner of their inclusion is set out in the published technical papers.

It is intended that the Framework will include other awards made in the State such as professional and international awards, and consultation is underway on how to achieve this.

It is also intended that existing and previous awards will be placed on the Framework, so that learners holding such awards are not disadvantaged.

In addition to the development of the Framework, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has developed a comprehensive strategy to promote opportunities for learner mobility. This is to ensure that the Framework fulfils its primary purpose of supporting lifelong learning. The strategy is described in a technical document which sets out:

- policies to bring about changes in the system to promote access, transfer and progression
- actions to be undertaken by the Authority and by the awarding bodies
- procedures to be implemented by providers of education and training.

Further information and published documents are available from the Authority's website at: [www.nqai.ie](http://www.nqai.ie), and on the dedicated website of the Framework [www.nfq.ie](http://www.nfq.ie) .