IRELAND
European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

Ireland is well situated according to several performance indicators for education and training, surpassing the EU average figures and, in some cases, EU targets. The country has one of the highest rates of tertiary education attainment in Europe (52.2% in 2014), a low percentage of early leavers (6.9%, compared with the EU average of 11.1%), as well as positive developments in basic skills proficiency. Current reforms have among their priorities an increase in labour market relevance of higher education, upskilling and reskilling in further education and training (FET), and extension of the apprenticeship system to new sectors (European Commission, 2015).

The Irish national framework of qualifications (NFQ) is among the early developed qualifications frameworks in Europe, the concept having been first proposed in legislation in 1999 ([1]). The development of the framework was undertaken by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) supported by the two main awarding bodies, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Award Council (HETAC). The NFQ was officially launched in 2003 following extensive public consultation, and has now reached an advanced operational stage.

It is a comprehensive and learning outcomes-based framework, covering all subsystems and levels of qualifications. It is defined as a ' 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' ([2]) (NQAI, 2009). The 10 levels, defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence, capture all learning, from initial stages to the most advanced. All qualifications awarded by the national awarding bodies in Ireland are now included in the NFQ, including

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([1]) Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999.
http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1999/act/26/enacted/en/pdf

([2]) Framework implementation and impact study: report of study team, 2009.
http://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Framework%20Implementation%20and%20Impact%20Study.pdf

those developed by the State examinations commission, FETAC, HETAC ([3]), universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology.

In 2006 the NFQ was the first national qualification framework to be self-certified to the qualifications framework in the European higher education area (QF EHEA) and in 2009 it was referenced to the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning (EQF). A study on the impact and implementation of the Irish NFQ covering the period between 2003 and 2008 was carried out, and the results published in 2009, emphasising the long-term, cyclic and iterative nature of framework development.

Implementation was carried out by agreement within the education and training subsectors, with strong support from national stakeholders. The NFQ is seen as an enabler of institutional reform and further policy development in education, training and qualifications. Since 2012, the body responsible for the maintenance, implementation, further development and promotion of the framework is Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), a new agency established under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act ([4]).

Policy objectives

A national objective of moving towards a 'lifelong learning society', in which learners can benefit from learning opportunities at various stages throughout their lives, was a key factor in the developments that have taken place in Ireland. Major changes were envisaged for the qualifications system to achieve coherence, relate all qualifications to each other, ensure the quality of awards and shift the focus of qualifications from inputs to outcomes.

Although the NFQ was conceptualised as a driver of systemic change towards the objective of lifelong learning, it is currently viewed more as an enabler – rather than a driver – of wider reform, with implications for setting standards, developing awards, teaching, assessment, and programme design. The specific aims for the development of the NFQ included:

(a) development of a more flexible and integrated system of qualifications that could recognise all learning acquired by learners in Ireland;

(b) establishment of learning outcomes as a common reference point for qualifications and for recognition of non-formal and informal learning;

([3]) HETAC is the qualifications awarding body for higher education and training institutions outside the university sector.

([4]) Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012. http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/bills28/acts/2012/a2812.pdf

(c) responding to the qualification needs of individuals, society and the economy through a range of available qualifications and the recognition of diverse forms of learning (NQAI, 2009).

Levels and use of learning outcomes

The main building blocks of the Irish NFQ are the 10 learning outcomes-based levels of the framework, level indicators and award-types ([5]).

The 10 levels of the framework capture all learning, from initial stages to the most advanced: qualifications achieved in schools, further education and training, and higher education and training are all included, and are all quality assured. Each level has a specified level descriptor (broad description of the learning outcomes at a given level) and one or more award types also expressed in terms of learning outcomes. Four classes of award type have been determined to ensure that the framework is capable of recognising all types and sizes of learning achieved by a learner:

(a) major: the principal class of awards at each level, capturing a typical range of learning achievements at the level;

(b) minor: for partial completion of the outcomes for a major award;

(c) supplemental: for learning that is additional to a major award;

(d) special purpose: for relatively narrow or purpose-specific achievements.

Each award type includes a wide range of qualifications which have been developed by awarding bodies.

Each level of the NFQ is based on nationally agreed standards of knowledge (breadth and kind), know-how and skills (range and selectivity) and competence. Competence is subdivided into context, role, learning to learn, and insight. Knowledge, skills and competences are defined as expected learning outcomes to be achieved by the qualification holder.

The learning outcomes approach was central to establishment of the NFQ, associated legislation and system reforms. The learning outcomes are indicators of what a person knows, can do and understands, rather than time spent on a programme. They refer both to general standards (for a level in the framework or an award type) and specific standards for awards in particular fields of learning.

The 2009 study on framework implementation and impact (NQAI, 2009a) concluded that a learning outcomes-based approach has been implemented in all subsystems, but is progressing at variable speeds. The study reported that

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([5])   http://www.nfq-qqi.com/index.html

'although different strategic approaches have been and are being taken to the introduction of learning outcomes, there appears to be a common lag in implementation between the administrative centres within awarding bodies and institutions and those engaged in teaching, training and assessment' (NQAI, 2009a, p. 39). The need for continued debate within and across sectors and the need to tackle the implications of the learning outcomes approach for assessment practices are also emphasised.

According to a recent Cedefop study (2016), 'there is no literature that explicitly sets out the definition used for learning outcomes in Ireland', but the concept is widely used in the literature and discussions related to the NFQ. The same study suggested that Ireland has recently focused on institutional reform, and relatively less attention has been paid in the country to learning outcomes. However, the learning outcomes approach has started to provide common ground for different stakeholders (general education, higher education, VET, policy-makers, students, trade unions) and it has become the basis for shared dialogue on the purpose of education. Increased progression between VET and higher education is deemed to be the biggest achievement in the steps taken so far. A key area to be addressed is implementation of an integrated and effective quality assurance process for learning outcomes referenced qualifications, operating across institutions, sectors and levels of education and training.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

The development of the NFQ was initially coordinated by the NQAI, established in 2001 by the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, following the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act from 1999. Two awards councils (HETAC and FETAC) were also created under the 1999 Act. Implementation of the framework was carried out by NQAI, while consultation and stakeholder involvement were key features of the process. Awarding bodies and education and training providers from all subsystems of education and training were engaged in accordance with their statutory roles and responsibilities. NQAI was designated as national coordination point and was responsible for referencing the Irish NFQ to the EQF. A national steering committee – made up of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, HETAC and FETAC – was convened by NQAI to oversee the referencing process.

A new agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), was established on 6 November 2012 under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 ([6]). The new authority was created by an amalgamation of four bodies that had both awarding and quality assurance responsibilities: FETAC, HETAC, NQAI and the Irish Universities Quality Board. QQI has assumed all functions of the four legacy bodies while also having new statutory responsibilities in particular areas. The agency is now responsible for the maintenance, promotion, further development and implementation of the framework.

This was an important step in consolidating the governance structure for deepening implementation of a comprehensive NFQ. It also suggests that Ireland's focus on qualifications has become more systematic, with stronger coordination of qualifications and quality assurance policies. The new agency sits at the centre of the qualification system and cooperates with ministries, higher education institutions, employers and the voluntary sector.

Current NFQ governance is ensured within the broader structures of QQI, which follow two strands: corporate and operational. The corporate strand includes the QQI board, appointed by the Minister for Education and Skills, and a consultative forum consisting of stakeholder representatives from further and higher education and training. The board includes 10 members, of which at least two must represent learners. The operational strand includes four sub-board committees made up of experts in the areas of their remit ([7]). Stakeholder consultation and knowledge-sharing continues to play an essential role ([8]). Along with the staff dedicated to NFQ development, other staff across this integrated agency contribute to QQI work on implementation of the NFQ: staff in awards development, validation, quality assurance, corporate services and communication, as well as the national Europass centre and the Irish National Recognition Information Centre (NARIC), both hosted by QQI.

National awarding bodies offering qualifications included in the NFQ are currently QQI, the State Examinations Commission, the Institutes of Technology, and the universities.

([6]) Qualifications and quality assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012.
http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/bills28/acts/2012/a2812.pdf

([7]) The four sub-board committees of QQI are: programmes and awards executive committee, programmes and awards oversight committee, policies and standards committee, and approvals and reviews committee.
http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/Policies-and-Standards-Committee-.aspx

([8]) Quality and Qualifications Ireland – QQI governance website.
http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/QQI-Governance-.aspx

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ([9])

There is currently no single national strategy for validation in Ireland, but there have been positive developments towards a system for recognition of prior learning (RPL) ([10]). NQAI principles and operational guidelines for RPL (NQAI, 2006) continue to provide the current policy and practice framework. Although theoretically possible for all qualifications, only higher education and further training qualifications (originally under the HETAC and FETAC remit) can be acquired through validation of non-formal and informal learning. As the qualification framework is based on learning outcomes, qualifications acquired through validation of non-formal or informal learning use the same standards as formal qualifications. It is also interesting to note, as the OECD indicated, that 'RPL arrangements in Ireland that lead to qualifications in the NFQ are fully integrated with existing arrangements for qualifications, e.g. they operate within the overarching funding arrangements, rules and regulations on provision, quality assurance and assessment' (Harold et al., 2008, p. 39).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) has a statutory obligation to establish updated policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression, including RPL. Since 2013, QQI has advanced a comprehensive policy development programme and is consulting and reflecting on development of several different policy areas, including RPL. More recently, a national recognition of prior learning practitioner network has been established to coordinate validation developments across sectors; the inaugural meeting was held in 2015. Further, the Department of Education and Skills has assumed a coordinating role and is considering the establishment of a national steering group for RPL. These developments demonstrate a targeted and strategic approach towards RPL implementation.

The National forum for the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education (NFETL) commissioned a focused research project on RPL in higher education ([11]) and QQI intends to commission parallel research into RPL in the

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([9]) This section draws mainly on input from the 2016 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning (European Commission et al., forthcoming).

([10]) RPL includes prior formal, informal and non-formal learning.

([11]) National forum for the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education (2015). *A current overview of recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Irish highereEducation*. Focused research report No 2.
http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Project-2.pdf

publicly funded FET sector during 2016. The NFETL research highlights the critical role of RPL as an instrument for access to education, training and formal qualifications, helping to meet individual, societal and national needs in a rapidly changing labour market and competitive global economy. Current issues and challenges were also identified: gaps in information and communication on RPL, lack of data on the costs, availability and outcomes of RPL, limited evaluation of practice, lack of dedicated funding and uncertainty around relevant roles of actors. All these contribute to a call for a national approach to RPL.

The new *National skills strategy: Ireland's future* ([12]), published in January 2016 includes among its objectives the development of a system for RPL and better recognition of workplace learning, supporting lifelong learning. Comprehensive reforms in both further education and training (FET) and higher education (HE) are under way to take forward the national skills strategy. Both the FET strategy and the HE strategy call for systematic implementation of RPL in the two sectors and a national RPL framework spanning across sectors.

QQI has issued a restatement of policy and criteria for access, transfer and progression (ATP), in relation to learners, for providers of further and higher education and training. Providers are required to submit to QQI for approval policies for access, transfer and progression, which should include arrangements for credit accumulation and transfer, and identification and formal assessment of knowledge, skills and competence previously acquired by learners. QQI has published two other relevant policy documents: *Quality assurance guidelines* ([13]) and *Validation policy and criteria* ([14]). The guidelines include recognition of non-formal and informal learning among the elements considered for learner admission, progression and recognition, while validation policy and criteria require that the provider has suitable procedures and criteria for RPL for access and advanced entry to programmes, and for exemptions.

([12]) https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf

([13]) http://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Policy%20on%20Quality%20Assurance%20Guidelines.pdf

([14]) http://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Validation%20Policies%20and%20Criteria%20QP17.pdf

NQF implementation

The Irish NFQ has reached an advanced operational stage, and all national qualifications in general education, VET and higher education have now been included in the framework. The NFQ is an inclusive framework, with the stated policy intent that it be open also to fit-for-purpose qualifications awarded outside the remit of national authorities. Qualifications offered by professional bodies and international awarding bodies operating in Ireland may also be recognised through the NFQ (NQAI, 2003).

This has been achieved through a combination of legislation, institutional reform, and political support, which helped integrate the NFQ in broader education, training and labour market policies. In 2009 the NQAI commissioned a study (NQAI, 2009) into the implementation and impact of the framework; review of the Irish NFQ was initiated by QQI in 2016.

Although the 2009 study could not authoritatively determine the impact of the NFQ or identify causal contributions of the framework, it provided important insights into policy formation and implementation. Three distinct processes related to the implementation of the NFQ were discerned: placement of existing awards in the framework; introduction of framework standards and associated programme validation; and the deeper implementation of a learning outcomes approach in all aspects of qualifications ([15]). Though at an early stage, an initial impact on learners was already noticed and reported in the 2009 study. The NFQ was seen as providing a language to underpin learners' choices, encouraging new approaches to learning, teaching and assessment, as well as new career routes, stimulating the development of provision in new areas and opening up new opportunities for transfer and progression.

According to QQI (2014), by 2015 the NFQ had become widely known, its communications icon – the 'NFQ fan diagram' – is highly visible, and the idea of qualification level has become embedded in public consciousness. Approximately

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([15]) The study found that NFQ implementation was progressing well, though at an uneven pace across the system, in a long-term, dynamic process of progressive alignment between the framework and the education and training system. The NFQ was seen more as an enabler than a driver of change, developed in a centrally driven process which ensured political support, but also resulted in tension between an outcomes-based approach to qualifications and an education and training system largely predicated on inputs. Stakeholder involvement, partnerships and flexibility were essential and remaining challenges included labour market engagement with the NFQ (including assisting development of career pathways, certifying learning achievements acquired at work, guidance) and a need to deepen the implementation of the learning outcomes approach.

61% of all graduate employers and 33% of the general public had heard of the NFQ. Schools, colleges, the guidance and career management services, as well as the redesigned NFQ website hosted by QQI, are important channels providing information on the NFQ to end-users.

The NFQ is an outward-looking framework with a strong external dimension through engagement with non-European countries: Australia, Hong Kong, Jordan and Bahrain, Malaysia and New Zealand (NQAI and New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2010).

Referencing to the European qualifications framework (EQF)

The referencing of the Irish NFQ to the EQF was completed in 2009. It built on experiences and conclusions of self-certification of compatibility of the Irish NFQ with the qualifications framework for the European higher education area (QF-EHEA), completed in 2006.

NQF and EQF levels have been included in Europass diploma supplements and Europass certificate supplements since 2012 and since 2013, respectively, and since June 2015 EQF levels have been indicated on all QQI major, special purpose and supplemental awards. Other national awarding bodies in Ireland are, as yet, unconvinced of the merits of including EQF levels on qualifications, particularly in those cases where Europass diploma/certificate supplements are available [16].

Important lessons and future plans

Implementing the NFQ relies on a broad partnership approach, incremental development, and strong support from different stakeholders. The deeper the implementation, the greater the support required from different stakeholders. According to the 2009 impact study conducted by NQAI, 'sustained leadership and oversight of the implementation process is required. Flexibility and partnership should remain the guiding principles for managing the NFQ.' (NQAI, 2009, p. 50). The establishment of QQI in 2012 has been a key step in this direction.

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[16] QQI, in response to a survey on the sustainability and visibility of NQFs, conducted by Cedefop in 2015.

The increased institutional coherence, the statutory basis underpinning the NFQ, a commitment to decision-making by consensus, and political support since its establishment have been important factors in the success of the Irish NFQ.

A recent Cedefop study on the application of learning outcomes (Cedefop, 2016) suggested that further work towards the shift to a learning outcomes approach may strengthen the capacity of the NFQ to meet its aims. Establishing an effective quality assurance process for learning outcomes, operating across institutions and levels of education and training, could be a positive step forward.

In a recent survey conducted by Cedefop [17], QQI identified new opportunities and challenges for the Irish NFQ. The structural and strategic reforms that are currently underway in Ireland [18] – *Further education and training strategy 2015-20*; *National strategy for higher education to 2030*; and *Review of apprenticeship training in Ireland* – present an opportunity to establish the NFQ as a mechanism contributing to the quality and qualifications interests of these reforms.

A key challenge remains: to demonstrate the impact of the framework. The sustainability of NFQ depends on whether or not it can be shown to contribute to education, training and labour market national policy agendas. Several factors have already been suggested as determining the impact and utilisation of the Irish NFQ: institutional and statutory arrangements, consensus and capacity building, timing issues, international influences, and connections with broader policy agendas. However, further empirical studies and evidence-informed explanations are necessary to assess more rigorously the effects of the NFQ, its relevance to education and skills policy in Ireland and the conditions necessary for its sustainability, to warrant public and private investment in the framework.

As a first step in tackling this challenge, QQI has initiated discussion and critical reflection on the purpose and contribution of the NFQ, and on the appropriate design and methodology for the framework review to be carried out in 2016. In a reflection paper (QQI, 2015) set out for discussion, it is argued that

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[17] Cedefop (2015). *Survey on the sustainability and visibility of NQFs.*

[18] (a) Further education and training strategy 2015-20.
https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Further-Education-and-Training-Strategy-2014-2019.pdf.

(b) National strategy for higher education to 2030.
http://www.hea.ie/sites/default/files/national_strategy_for_higher_education_2030.pdf

(c) Review of apprenticeship training in Ireland. Department of Education and Skills 2014.

https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Review-of-Apprenticeship-Training-in-Ireland.pdf

there is a need to understand 'how NQFs operate within complex and dynamic social, cultural, political, historical, technical and economic contexts. This ambition may be undermined if we subject NQFs to narrow instrumental assessments, aimed at isolating discrete impacts. Unreflexive approaches that seek to measure only 'what works' should be expanded to include critical reflection about why, how, for who and under what conditions NQFs 'work'.' (QQI 2015, p. 13).

Further source of information

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI): http://www.qqi.ie/

Irish national qualifications framework (NFQ)

NFQ levels	Qualifications	EQF levels
10	Doctoral degree	8
9	Master degree Postgraduate diploma	7
8	Honours bachelor degree Higher diploma	6
7	Ordinary bachelor degree	6
6	Advanced certificate e.g. Level 6 advanced certificate in horticulture Higher certificate	5
5	Level 5 certificate e.g. Level 5 certificate in hospitality operations Leaving certificate	4
4	Level 4 certificate e.g. Level 4 certificate in engineering skills Leaving certificate	3
3	Level 3 certificate e.g. Level 3 certificate in information and communication technology Junior certificate	2
2	Level 2 certificate e.g. Level 2 certificate in general learning	1

NFQ levels	Qualifications	EQF levels
1	Level 1 certificate e.g. Level 1 certificate in communications	1

Source: Adapted from NQAI, 2009a.

List of abbreviations

EQF	European qualifications framework
FET	further education and training
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Award Council
NFETL	national forum for the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education
NFQ	national framework of qualifications
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RPL	recognition of prior learning

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