

NQF state of play

 **Ireland 2018**

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Introduction and context

Ireland is well situated according to several performance indicators for education and training, surpassing EU average figures and, in some cases, EU targets. The country has one of the highest rates of tertiary education attainment in Europe (53.5% in 2017) and a low percentage of early leavers from education and training (5.1%, compared with the EU average of 10.6%). The performance of 15-year-olds in basic skills is very good. Adult participation in lifelong learning and participation in vocational education and training (VET) are, however, below EU averages. Employment rates are strongly correlated with skill levels. Current reforms have among their priorities to increase quality, relevance and achievement across all levels of the education system, to modernise curricula, increase the labour market relevance of higher education with a focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects, upskilling and reskilling in further education and training (FET), and development of the apprenticeship system. The Department of Education and Skills published its 2018 Action plan for education with more than 370 actions and sub-actions ([1]) (European Commission, 2018).

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 ([2]). 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) ([3]). The NFQ was officially established in 2003 following extensive public consultation. The statutory basis of the framework was reaffirmed in the 2012 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act ([4]) this also established Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) as the custodian of the NFQ, and most recently in the 2018 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (amendment) Bill ([5]). QQI was set up as a single national qualifications and external quality assurance body for post-school education and training in Ireland, and is responsible for the promotion, maintenance, implementation, further development and review of the NFQ.

The NFQ is a comprehensive and learning outcomes-based framework, covering all subsystems and levels of qualifications. It has 10 qualification

levels, defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence, capturing 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. At the time of writing (November 2018), draft legislation is before the Irish Parliament, intended to provide for regulated access to the NFQ to qualifications issued by private, professional and international awarding bodies.

The NFQ has reached an advanced operational stage. Implementation has been carried out by agreement within the education and training subsectors, with strong support from national stakeholders. The framework is seen as an enabler of institutional reform and further policy development in education, training and qualifications. A study on the impact and implementation of the Irish NFQ covering the period between 2003 and 2008 was published in 2009 (NQAI, 2009), emphasising the long-term, cyclic and iterative nature of framework development. An independent external evaluation of the policy impact of the framework (Indecon, 2017) was also carried out; results published in 2017 suggest that the NFQ has a positive impact on the quality and transparency of qualifications and on the mobility and employability of qualification holders; it also makes qualification pathways easier to access and understand.

In 2006 the NFQ was the first national qualification framework to be self-certified to the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) and in 2009 it was referenced to the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning (EQF) (NQAI, 2009a).

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. In this context, the NFQ aims to encompass in its 10 learning outcomes-based levels the entire spectrum of learning achievements. It was 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' (NQAI, 2003).

Although the NFQ was conceptualised as a driver of systemic change towards the objective of lifelong learning and rationalisation of the VET qualification system, it is currently viewed more as an enabler – rather than a driver – of wider reform, with implications for setting standards, quality assurance, developing awards, teaching, assessment, and programme design.

The aims for the development of the NFQ included:

- a. to promote development of a more flexible and integrated system of qualifications and of alternative learning pathways;
- b. to establish learning outcomes as a common reference point for qualifications and for recognition of non-formal and informal learning;
- c. to respond to the qualification needs of individuals, society and the economy through increasing the range of available qualifications and the recognition of diverse forms of learning (NQAI, 2009a).

The 2012 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act reaffirms the role of the NFQ as:

- a. a system for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State;
- b. a system of levels of awards based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by a learner, to entitle the learner to an award at a particular level within the framework.

The potential of the Irish NFQ to fulfil its purpose is strongly linked to its integration with related policies and initiatives. This has been aided by the establishment of QQI, whose work on quality assurance reinforces key elements of the NFQ, such as the learning outcomes approach. One of the conclusions of the 2017 NFQ policy impact assessment was the need to embed the NFQ in quality assurance policy and practice; this was seen by 76% of study respondents as a high priority for the future. At the same time, stakeholders had diverse views on future policy priorities for the NFQ: communication (67% of respondents viewed this as a high priority); progression and recognition functions (60% of respondents); curriculum design function (45% of respondents); and regulatory function (41% of respondents) (Indecon, 2017).

The 2018 amendment to the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act ([6]) includes provisions giving QQI statutory powers to include in the NFQ, qualifications issued by a broader range of awarding bodies. This development is seen as strengthening the comprehensive nature of the framework and its regulatory role. Over the past fifteen years, the NFQ has taken on a more regulatory role compared to what was originally intended. While classification and transparency of qualifications remain important objectives, many users of qualifications that exercise regulatory or quasi-regulatory functions in relation to access to study or to employment have used the NFQ as a regulatory tool. In addition to the NFQ being used in regulatory ways by stakeholders such as employers and funding bodies for education and training, it is also true that the implementation of the framework has assumed more of a regulatory character over time. For example, statutory quality assurance guidelines for education and training providers ([7]) make repeated reference to the NFQ and related policies, embedding the NFQ in the statutory quality assurance arrangements for post-school education and training in Ireland. This shifting balance between the information and regulation functions of the NFQ is not well understood. In time, commentators may come to understand the significance of the altered institutional settings prompted by the 2012 Act, whereby the functions of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, were subsumed into an integrated quality assurance and qualifications agency, QQI. Regardless of the causes that may have prompted rebalancing of the informative and regulatory properties of the NFQ, these kinds of change are likely to have implications for its future development (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

The 2017 policy impact assessment of the NFQ also reports that the potential opportunities and benefits brought about by the NFQ are

relevant to many of the strategic objectives set out in Ireland's *National skills strategy 2025* ([8]): active collaboration between employers and education and training providers; strengthening the role of employers in skills development; and improving career information and guidance services.

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

The learning outcomes approach was central to establishment of the NFQ, associated legislation and system reforms. The added value of learning outcomes is seen in giving direction to what a person is expected to know, understand and be able to do at the end of a programme of study. Concerning the differing views of learning outcomes as result-oriented, measureable and objective, and learning outcomes as process-oriented, open to negotiation and only partly measurable, the country recognises that both approaches may be needed and have a role, and sees the focus on learner profile and on programme context as part of the answer to this issue.

The main building blocks of the Irish NFQ are the 10 learning outcomes-based levels of the framework, level indicators and award-types ([9]). The 10 levels of the NFQ 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. Over time, the NFQ also seeks to accommodate qualifications obtained through non-formal learning, offered by international, private and professional bodies.

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. Levels describe nationally agreed standards of learning in terms of eight sub-strands of learning outcomes grouped as follows: knowledge (breadth and kind), know-how and skills (range and selectivity) and competence (context, role, learning to learn, and insight). Knowledge, skills and competences are defined following a constructivist approach.

At VET award level, in the Common award system (CAS-2008), learning outcomes are written using the NFQ sub-strands but customised to the specific vocational area. Detailed learning outcomes are written at subject specific level, This allows learning outcomes in CAS standards to vary in number and detail depending on requirements (such as broad in art and design, detailed in business, and very detailed in agriculture). Professional award type descriptors (PATD) were published in 2014 ([10]) to aid the levelling of qualifications from apprenticeship programmes; they are similar to those in the NFQ, but with an

occupational/professional focus related to specific programme context. In 2016 QQI introduced a new policy and criteria for validation of provider programmes leading to awards issued by QQI ([11]), requiring them to develop minimum intended programme learning outcomes (MIPLOs) for the overall programme and minimum intended module learning outcomes (MIMLOS) for each module within it.

NFQ award-types describe the purpose, volume and progression opportunities associated with a particular award. Each award-type includes a wide range of qualifications developed by awarding bodies. 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.

As all types of qualification involve their own unique combination of technical, social and political dimensions, the principle of 'best fit' was found useful for allocating qualifications to NFQ levels in Ireland. Levelling of the main school leaving certificate ([12]) and the initial levelling of qualifications linked to apprenticeships were relatively more challenging, while allocating higher education qualifications to levels, broadly mirroring the Bologna three-cycle system, was less contentious. For apprenticeship qualifications leading to Advanced certificate at NFQ level 6/ EQF level 5, the initial 'block levelling' of traditional craft apprenticeships has been revisited and largely confirmed (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018). The need to revisit the original levelling of certain qualifications in the light of emerging practice, experience and evidence was highlighted in the most recent (2017) NFQ policy impact assessment.

The 2009 study on framework implementation and impact (NQAI, 2009a) concluded that adopting the learning outcomes-based approach entailed a long-term cultural shift that required time and continued attention, and that implementation of learning outcomes was progressing at variable speeds in the different subsystems. The study reported that '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, were also emphasised.

According to a Cedefop study, '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 (Cedefop, 2016). The learning outcomes approach has started to provide common ground for different stakeholders (general education, higher education, VET, policy-makers, students, trade unions) and has become the basis for shared dialogue on the purpose of education. Increased progression between VET and higher education is considered 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. The NFQ and the learning outcomes approach feature prominently in statutory quality assurance guidelines ([13]) for post-school education and training in Ireland.

The 2017 policy impact assessment of the NFQ also concluded that the learning outcomes approach has become integral to the Irish education and training system. The study indicated strong agreement across all stakeholder groups on the view that the NFQ has had a positive impact on course design, teaching, assessment and the monitoring of standards.

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

Development of the NFQ was initially coordinated by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (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. For a decade, implementation of the framework was carried out by NQAI, designated EQF national coordination point (EQF NCP) and 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 ([14]), as an independent State agency of the Department of Education and Skills. It 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 promotion, maintenance, implementation, further development and review of the NFQ.

This was an important step in consolidating the governance structure for deepening implementation of a comprehensive framework. It also suggests that Ireland's focus on qualifications has become more systematic, with stronger coordination of qualifications and quality assurance policies. QQI also has other functions: conducting reviews of access, transfer and progression policies in education and training; approving programmes offered by a variety of education providers; and promoting and regulating the quality of programmes ([15]). It sits at the centre of the qualification system and cooperates with ministries, higher education institutions, employers and the voluntary sector.

NFQ governance is currently ensured within the broader structures of QQI, which follow two strands: corporate and operational/academic. 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/academic strand includes four sub-board committees made up of experts in the areas of their remit ([16]).

Along with the staff dedicated to NFQ development, other staff across QQI contribute to its work on NFQ implementation: 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.

The 2018 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (amendment) Bill strengthens the regulatory role of QQI, giving it statutory power to include qualifications issued by a broader range of awarding bodies in the NFQ. National awarding bodies offering qualifications included in the NFQ are currently QQI, the State Examinations Commission, the institutes of technology, and the universities.

The four key priorities outlined in QQI's strategy for 2019-21 are:

- a. ensuring the integrity of the NFQ;
- b. analysis and impact of measures taken to improve quality in education and training;
- c. collaboration and engagement of stakeholders through strategic partnerships;
- d. building organisational capacity ([17]).

Consultation and stakeholder involvement have been key features of the NFQ process since the beginning. The development and early implementation of the NFQ drew together many actors from across the skills and education system. Awarding bodies and education and training providers from all subsystems were engaged in accordance with their statutory roles and responsibilities. Early cooperation and collaboration has arguably led to the position where the NFQ reflects a strong consensus about the kind and complexity of knowledge, skill and competence associated with qualifications at each of its ten levels. As the NFQ has become more settled, engagement has become more an issue of specific interests of different stakeholder groups. The risk that the NFQ may become taken for granted has been acknowledged; periodic reviews and renewal of the NFQ are seen as a way to regenerate stakeholder engagement, and this has already taken place (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

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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) ([19]), including the commitment of the Department of Education and Skills, announced in the *Action plan for education 2016-19* ([20]), to establish a national policy. The *National skills strategy 2025 – Ireland's future* ([21]), published in 2016, also included among its objectives the development of a system for RPL and better recognition of workplace learning, supporting lifelong learning. Both the further education and training (FET) strategy and the higher education strategy called for systematic implementation of RPL in the two sectors and a national RPL framework spanning sectors.

RPL-related initiatives over recent years grew organically and with commitment to excellent practice, but they have also highlighted the complexity of the RPL concept and implementation. While RPL is established as a powerful tool for widening participation in education and training and the labour market, the lack of a national policy based on a solid theoretical foundation has raised concerns that RPL implementation should not be done very quickly.

QQI provides an overarching governing structure for the coordination of RPL and supports implementation in partnership with stakeholders. Under the 2012 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, the agency has policy responsibility for access, transfer and progression (ATP) of learners. In 2015, QQI issued a restatement of the *Policy and criteria for access, transfer and progression for providers of further and higher education and training* ([22]) – first published in 2003 – and the *Principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning in further and higher education and training* ([23]), first published in 2005 by NQAI. Providers must comply with QQI policies on credit accumulation, credit transfer, and identification and assessment of previously acquired knowledge, skill and competence, and must establish at local level their own policies and procedures on ATP. With the 2018 Qualifications and quality assurance (amendment) Bill, providers are to be given a more central role in application processes for RPL.

Another strength of the Irish approach to VNFI is the voluntary RPL practitioner network ([24]) created in 2015 and supported by major stakeholders. Aims include contributing to policy development and it has enabled collaboration and sharing of practice. These developments demonstrate a targeted and strategic approach towards RPL implementation.

Arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFI), linked to the NFQ and leading to full or partial qualifications and/or giving access to education and training programmes, are in place in all education and training sub-sectors except general education. Learners can achieve entry to a programme through RPL, and can gain exemptions within a programme, gain credit towards an award and attain an award. In higher education, the national forum for the enhancement of teaching and learning (NFETL) commissioned a research project on RPL in higher education ([25]) which showed that most institutions considered claims for RPL in relation to advanced entry to a course and module exemptions; a limited number considered claims for full awards. QQI also funded a parallel research project on RPL approaches and practices in FET ([26]), which suggested that RPL is seen more appropriate at the lower levels of the NFQ (levels 1-3); at higher levels (4-6) it seems to be approached with more caution, due to more direct links at these levels to entry to the labour market.

There is also evidence that employer attitudes towards RPL are becoming more favourable, but there are important differences in the use of RPL in the education sector compared to the labour market and the third sector. Four stages of validation consistent with those in the 2012 Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning ([27]) (identification, documentation, assessment and certification) are used, but the use and combination of these stages differs in practice depending on the purpose of RPL.

Qualifications acquired through validation of non-formal or informal learning use the same standards as formal qualifications. The definition of levels of learning and the articulation of learning outcomes in the NFQ have been found useful for RPL purposes. 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). On the other hand, it is not yet clear how, if at all, the NFQ will play a role in the current process of policy formation and implementation of

validation of non-formal and informal learning (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018)

Among the challenges that Ireland is facing are the need for common definition and understanding, as well as data collection systems and indicators, on RPL, perceived lack of resources for capacity building (especially in the FET and third sectors) and need for clarity around the drivers and priorities for RPL.

NQF implementation and impact

The Irish NFQ is an inclusive framework that has reached an advanced operational stage. Initial implementation prioritised qualifications in general education, VET and higher education awarded by national public bodies, which have now all been included in the framework. The NFQ is also open to fit-for-purpose qualifications offered by professional bodies and private and international awarding bodies operating in Ireland (NQAI, 2003). Work is currently under way to include qualifications awarded outside the nationally regulated qualification system, aiming to reach the NFQ's original aspirations (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

QQI maintains a national database of the further education and training qualifications that it offers ([28]). The development of a statutory comprehensive database of all qualifications included within the NFQ is under way. The new national database is expected to include VET qualifications currently in the QQI database, higher education qualifications and private and international ones, pending policy development on non-formal qualifications and the interest of awarding bodies. General education qualifications are not intended to be included in any national database. NQF and EQF levels are indicated in the existing QQI database and foreseen to be included in the comprehensive national database. Since June 2015 they have also been included on all further education and training qualifications issued by QQI (since June 2015) as well as on Europass diploma supplements in higher education and Europass certificate supplements in VET (since 2012 and 2013, respectively). However, they are not included on general education and higher education qualification documents, which are issued by autonomous bodies; this decision was the result of cost-benefit analysis. Inclusion of NQF and EQF levels on Europass supplements was facilitated by coordination at central level and is believed to have made NQF/EQF level references on qualification documents less important (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Independent measures of public awareness of the NFQ and EQF suggest that both are well known (33% and 28%, respectively, of all adults are aware of the two frameworks) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018). The NFQ is known and used extensively by education and training institutions and providers, and guidance and counselling practitioners; it is well known and reasonably well used by labour market stakeholders. It is also well known by recognition authorities and bodies within the

education system, but less so by those outside the system.

Initial communication of the NFQ at the time of its establishment targeted the general public with TV campaigns but, over time, communications strategies have shifted toward the use of intermediaries or brokers to promote awareness and use of the NFQ. Education and training providers are the primary channel for promoting awareness of the NFQ to learners, while the guidance community has also had a significant impact on promoting to end users. Other intermediaries such as the Irish Central Statistics Office (CSO) disseminate the NFQ in surveys, including the national census. The CSO have adopted the framework as an official classification for collection of data and publication of statistics on educational attainment. The National Skills Council collects and reports outputs of the education and training system using the NFQ in its annual publication *Monitoring Ireland's skill supply* ([29]). In higher education, the Central Applications Office (CAO) manages the applications process using NFQ levels ([30]). Evidence also suggests that the framework is now a widely used instrument in employment offices (Elken, 2016). For direct promotion, QQI relies primarily on the QQI website ([31]), podcast/radio and social media, post/mail, and newsletters of various national networks. An NQF video, podcasts, infographics and other promotional materials have been produced.

A comprehensive NFQ/EQF communication strategy is currently being developed, aiming to bring the frameworks closer to the end-users. The target groups for NQF communication are education and training providers, awarding bodies, learners, government officials, advocacy bodies, researchers, legislators and social partners, with a current focus on recruiters. The QQI strategy for employers and recruiters is intended to involve participation in events and consultations with targeted stakeholders, providing insights into labour market requirements and socio-economic realities. An instrument is intended to be developed to survey employers/recruiters with a view to getting a better understanding of the role and use of qualifications in recruitment (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Two NFQ evaluation studies have been carried out so far: a 2009 study on the impact and implementation of the NFQ ([32]) and a 2017 policy impact assessment of the Irish NFQ (Indecon, 2017) ([33]).

Although the 2009 study (NQAI, 2009) could not authoritatively determine the impact of the NFQ or identify causal contributions by 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. The study also indicated that progression routes into higher education and training have increased and have become more transparent since the introduction of the NFQ, and that the framework had considerable potential to be used in recruitment, in developing career pathways, and in planning work-based learning and training. The challenges identified at that time for NQF implementation included concerns about the accurate placement of awards on framework levels, the development and use of awards at all framework levels, the need to embed the framework in quality assurance arrangements, and the challenge of raising awareness about the NFQ within the education and training system.

The 2017 policy impact assessment of the Irish NFQ (Indecon, 2017) found that the NFQ had a positive impact on the quality, transparency and comparability of qualifications, and the mobility and employability of holders of qualifications in Ireland. It also showed that there was continued strong support for the NFQ as an important element of the national skills and qualifications architecture, continued interest in a qualifications agenda and support for a national forum for knowledge exchange on all qualifications developments, including NFQ and EQF. At the same time, the risks of the NFQ becoming taken for granted and of the weakening of vigilance in maintaining the integrity of the NFQ were acknowledged, including the need to revisit the original levelling of certain qualifications in the light of emerging practice, experience and evidence. Specific recommendations included:

- a. to continue to develop and implement the NFQ as a responsive and adaptable mechanism for qualifications and skills policy;
- b. to consider initiatives to improve awareness of the NFQ among stakeholders, particularly recruiters;
- c. to revisit the operation of the NFQ for upper secondary school qualifications in Ireland and for qualifications at EQF level 5;
- d. to examine QQI's awarding function and NFQ levelling processes more generally;
- e. to ensure clarity and simplicity of communication;
- f. to include a broader range of qualifications within the NFQ;
- g. to ensure strong international engagement;
- h. to establish data to investigate transfer and progression pathways through the national qualifications system;
- i. to establish a national forum for qualifications (Indecon, 2017).

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 ([34]). The importance of maintaining the international connectedness of the NFQ was also highlighted in the 2017 review (Indecon, 2017), while the EQF was seen as a valuable asset for promoting the international recognition of Irish qualifications abroad and of foreign qualifications in Ireland.

Referencing to the EQF

The Irish NFQ was the first national qualification framework to complete its referencing to the European qualifications framework (EQF), in 2009. The country 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.

Since then, significant changes in the institutional and legislative landscape have taken place. Most of the agencies that endorsed the 2009 referencing report were abolished and the 2012 Qualifications and quality assurance Act established new institutional arrangements for NFQ governance. It introduced more coherent and strengthened provisions for the integration of the NFQ and access, transfer and progression policies into quality assurance arrangements in post school education and training. The NFQ has also undergone some technical changes. A new professional award type at NQF levels 5 to 9 (EQF levels 4 to 7) ([35]) was introduced and is now operational. A new school qualification at NQF level 3 (EQF level 2) has been introduced to replace the junior certificate which was last issued in 2016.

Drawing on the conclusions and recommendations of the most recent evaluation of the framework, it is envisaged to commence re-referencing of the NFQ to EQF in 2019.

Important lessons and future plans

Following an incremental approach to implementation, the NFQ has reached an advanced operational stage. A combination of factors contributed to its success: a strong legislative basis; institutional reform leading to increased institutional coherence, including the establishment of QQI in 2012 as an integrated quality assurance and qualifications body; political support; and a commitment to decision-making by consensus. All these led to a better integration of the NFQ with broader education, training and labour market policies and practices.

Experience with the framework and available evidence indicate that the NFQ has had a strong influence on the promotion of learning outcomes in Ireland and on the permeability of education and training by improving access and progression (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018). It has had impact on access of non-traditional students to higher education (Elken, 2016). The 2009 study on the impact and implementation of the Irish NFQ (NQAI, 2009) suggested that there was a common lag in learning outcomes implementation. A Cedefop study on the application of learning outcomes (Cedefop, 2016) suggested that further work to implement the 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. The NFQ and the learning outcomes approach feature prominently in statutory quality assurance guidelines ([36]) on post-school education and training in Ireland.

The NFQ is also perceived as an important tool in supporting the recognition of foreign qualifications. It has had a moderate influence on the review, renewal and quality assurance of qualifications, and on increasing parity of esteem between types of education and training and qualifications. Implementation relied on strong support from, and partnerships between, different stakeholders. The NFQ is seen as having had a strong influence on improved dialogue and cooperation between stakeholders within education and training and a moderate influence on cooperation between education and training and labour market stakeholders (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

One of the key challenges for the future implementation of the framework is ensuring the protection of standards and improving quality through developing and promoting the integrity of the Irish NFQ. The

2017 policy impact assessment (Indecon, 2017) showed that the need to embed the NFQ in quality assurance policy and practice was seen by the majority of responders (76%) as a high priority for the future. This is particularly important in the context of opening the Irish NFQ for inclusion of qualifications from other awarding bodies following the 2018 amendment to the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act. Another aspect that will require careful attention in the next period is clear communication about the framework, particularly in the context of the changing role and nature of the NFQ. The use of 'jargon' was identified by a number of stakeholders as both a challenge to a broad understanding of the framework and a potential barrier to engagement with the NFQ and its associated policies (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

An important point of discussion in the country is related to demonstrating the impact of the framework. The sustainability of the NFQ depends on whether or not it can be shown to contribute to education, training and labour market national policy agendas. The Irish experience has highlighted an important difference between framework use and framework impact. That latter is believed to be more difficult to assess and any general conclusions are still tentative and partial. What has become clear is that the NFQ on its own is capable of delivering relatively modest impact. The timely and effective deployment of the NFQ alongside, and appropriately integrated with, other policy interventions seems to concentrate its reform impact. Analysts and commentators are only beginning to understand the precise combination of conditions and interventions required for the NFQ to address real-world problems (European Commission and Cedefop, 2018).

Main sources of information

- Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) hosts the EQF NCP:
<http://www.qqi.ie/>
- The QQI qualifications database is available at:
<https://qsearch.qqi.ie/WebPart/Search?searchtype=awards>
- National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2009). *Referencing of the Irish national framework of qualifications to the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning.*
<http://www.qqi.ie/Documents/Referencing%20Irish%20NFQ%20to%20the%20European%20QF%20for%20Lifelong%20Learning.pdf>

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
10	Doctoral degree Higher Doctorate	8
9	Master degree Postgraduate diploma Professional Award	7
8	Honours bachelor degree Higher diploma Professional Award	6
7	Ordinary bachelor degree Professional Award	
6	Advanced certificate e.g. level 6 advanced certificate in horticulture Higher certificate Professional Award	5
5	Level 5 certificate e.g. level 5 certificate in hospitality operations Leaving certificate Professional Award	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 The Junior certificate (NQF level 3) was last issued in 2016. It has been replaced by a Junior cycle profile of achievement (JCPA); the formal inclusion of the JCPA within the NQF is subject to discussion.	2

2

Level 2 certificate

e.g. level 2 certificate in general learning

1



1

Level 1 certificate

e.g. level 1 certificate in communications

Acronyms

ATP	access, transfer and progression
EQF	European qualifications framework
FET	further education and training
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Award Council
MIMLOs	minimum intended module learning outcomes
MIPLOs	minimum intended programme learning outcomes
NFETL	national forum for the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education
NFQ	national framework of qualifications
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
NQF	national qualifications framework
PATD	professional award type descriptors
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RPL	recognition of prior learning
STEM	science, technology, engineering and mathematics
VNFIL	validation of non-formal and informal learning

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