

European Lifelong Learning Policy – Short track studies on good practices

National Framework of Qualifications in Ireland

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National lifelong learning strategies

Short track study: National Framework of Qualifications in Ireland

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

As a result of low economic growth and high unemployment in the 1980s and early 1990s the Irish Government then chose to focus on its economy and tackle the high unemployment rate. This resulted in measures on the labour market and in training. In order to respond to demands for higher levels of qualification and skilled recruit the result was a high level of public investment in vocational training. Training initiatives were intended mainly for those who were unemployed [1].

During the growth period from 1995 onwards, the changed the economic situation helped to start a review of vocational training policies. The goal was to counter the risk of a shortage of skilled labour that could become an obstacle to continued economic growth. The focus was now on the training of those who already had an employment, as the enterprises were less able to meet their skill needs. [1]

A proposal through the Qualifications (education and training) Act in 1999 led to the development of the National Framework of Qualifications of Ireland, NFQ that was launched in 2003. It became the first national qualifications framework from an EU Member State to refer to the EQF. The EQF Advisory group adopted the final referencing report in September 2009. [3]

1.2 Purpose

This short track study aims to highlight the Irish experience in the establishment of a National Framework of Qualifications and to study this framework from an international perspective.

1.3 Implementation

The study is based on information from the official websites of NFQ and published reports on education and work with lifelong learning in Ireland. The study focuses on experiences and other aspects that are deemed useful for the development of other countries NQF (National Qualification Framework NQF is the name used by the EU).

The National Framework of Ireland is in this report referred to as the NFQ, which is the Irish name.

2 NFQ - The National Framework of Qualifications

2.1 NFQ Overview

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications, NFQ, is based on both national preconditions and international experience. The labour market, macroeconomic fluctuations, the need for training of unemployed and need to meet industry's need for skilled workers has been strong driving forces to Ireland's commitment to lifelong learning and the establishment of a national framework.

A national approach to credit should meet the needs of learners in a lifelong learning [2]. Prior to the introduction of the NFQ, it was also difficult to compare and contrast the level and standard of different qualifications.

Some basic elements for the development of the NFQ have been, among others [2, 17]:

- The improving of access to, transfer and progression within education and training.
- The learning outcome approach - The outcomes should indicate what a person knows and can do rather than time spent on studies.

The Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment initiated the development of the NFQ. The National Qualification Authority of Ireland, NQAI [16] is

subordinated by these two departments and has since 2001 been responsible for development and maintenance of the NFQ.

The legislative history surrounding the Irish NFQ effort includes a study of other work and policies on NQF. The report [4] it is referred to the framework of several European countries and also New Zealand and South Africa.

2.2 Description of the NFQ

The NFQ of Ireland includes all levels of the traditional education in Ireland and all of the major national awards are included [3]. The NFQ has some similarities with the New Zealand qualification framework, which for example also has 10 levels of qualifications [4] – as shown in Figure 1.

Each level of the NFQ is based on nationally developed standards for the expected learning outcome: knowledge, skills and competence. Competence is divided into context, role, learning to learn and insight.

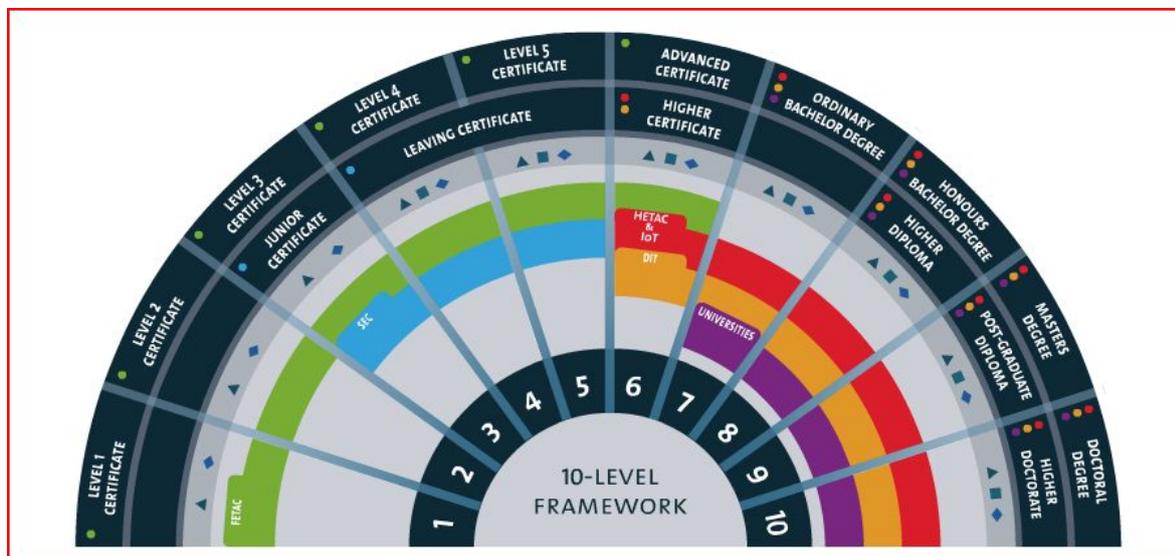


Figure 1. The Irish National Framework of Qualifications with 10 levels of qualifications, including certificates and different award types is officially illustrated as a fan diagram [17]

Each level within the framework can capture all different types of learning and up to four different types of awards [17]:

- Major Awards: the principal class of award made at a level. There are 16 major awards in the Framework.
- Minor Awards: for partial completion of the outcomes for a Major Award. These awards allow learners to build up units of learning at their own pace to meet their own needs.
- Supplemental Awards: for learning that is additional to a Major Award, and for very specific purposes, for example award is Driving - Heavy Goods Rigid.
- Special Purpose Awards: for relatively narrow or purpose-specific achievement, additional to a previous award. For example, relate to updating and refreshing knowledge or skills, or to continuing professional development.

2.3 Implementation

Ireland has established several state organizations and entities involved in implementation and counselling to facilitate understanding of the NFQ within different target groups. Information and guidance, background materials, reports and brochures, and links are on, and between, several different websites provided by among others NAQI.

The implementation of the learning outcome approach has been slower than expected [3]. In sectors of further education and training the NFQ has reached an advanced stage of implementation. In universities and the school sector the implementation has been voluntary and the impact is also smaller [3].

The NFQ seems to be used primarily for recognition of formal education and training – not so much for recognition of informal learning. The aim is also said to be improving access, transfer and progression to, or within, the education and training system.

2.4 Quality assurance

The importance of ensuring the quality of implementation and ease of use of the NFQ has been pointed out. Quality Assurance is therefore an important part of the implementation of the NFQ, the different award types and to recognition of qualifications.

The two councils The Further Education and Training Awards Council, FETAC, and The Higher Education and Training Awards Council, HETAC Should for example [2, 17]:

- determine standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners before an award may be made or recognised [2]
- recognise and make awards, where a person has achieved the required standard [2].
- agreeing and reviewing quality assurance procedures with providers delivering programmes that lead to awards

The Irish Universities Quality Board, IUQB, has been delegated to organise reviews of the quality assurance procedures at university level.

2.5 NFQ from an international perspective

The NFQ was referenced to by the 'Bologna Framework' in 2006 [6] and to the EQF in June 2009 [15]. In figure 2 the relationship between the Irish NFQ and EQF [3] is shown:

NFQ	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
EQF	1	1	2	3	4	5	6	6	7	8

Figure 2. The relationship between the Irish NFQ and the EQF. Source: The Development of National Qualification Framework in Europe CEDEFOP August 2010 [3].

The Irish awarding bodies and qualifications authorities & the UK awarding and Qualifications regulatory bodies have in cooperation produced a cross reference guide for the qualifications framework in the UK and Ireland [13] This work has resulted in a folder [22] where the National Framework of Qualification of Ireland, NFQ, with its 10 levels of qualifications, is compared and related to the frameworks of Northern Ireland (5 levels), Scotland (12 levels), Wales (8 levels) and to the common framework of the UK, i.e. Including England , Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The UK framework has 8 levels of qualifications.

In 2006 the Minister for Education and Science signed an international agreement with the Chinese Government regarding mutual recognition of higher education qualifications [17].

The NFQ has obvious similarities with the New Zealand qualification framework, which was studied at an early stage [4]. A joint project has been undertaken by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, NQAI, and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, NZQA in order to improve the compatibility of qualifications [23] [14, 16].

2.6 Development needs

Some deficiencies and suggestion of development has been expressed around the NFQ - among others [10, 12]:

- confusion about the equivalence of qualifications at the same Level,
- differing expectations for qualifications used as ‘licences to practise’ or in regulated occupations,
- delays in developing standards,
- difficulties in accessing awards and limited employer awareness and understanding of the Framework itself,
- varying levels of awareness of the international dimension of the Framework,
- importance to achieve consistency in the recognition of qualifications by institutions, providers and awarding bodies,
- the need for aligning public funding with the framework as a driver for implementation.

In one of the national studies on NFQ the following conclusion is made [10]:

“it is likely that the further development of the Bologna Framework and the European Qualifications Framework will raise questions for Ireland’s Framework and that the interplay between the national framework of Ireland and the Bologna framework needs to be clarified”.

3 NFQ and lifelong learning

This section outlines how the National Framework of Qualifications NFQ of Ireland synchronized with other parameters that appear in discussions of lifelong learning perspective.

Credit point system - yet, there is no credit point system linked directly to the NFQ. The goal is to create a credit point system in accordance with ECVET for all formal and informal learning. The credit point system used in Ireland today is associated with the higher education systems, where one year of study equals 60 credits. Today credits are based on education level and degree and not on the NFQ-level.

Table 1. Example of NFQ levels and awards. [5]

NFQ Level	Award	Credits	Bologna framework
Level 6	Higher Certificate	120	Short cycle within First cycle
Level 7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree	180	First Cycle
Level 8	Honours Bachelor Degree	180-240	
Level 8	Higher Diploma	60	
Level 9	Masters Degree (Taught)	60-120	Second Cycle
Level 9	Postgraduate Diploma	60	

Europass – The National Europass Centre coordinates and is responsible for information on Europass. On the official website of the Europass there are templates, information and links to create a CV and Europass Language Passport and the following [18]:

- The Europass Certificate Supplement - can be accessed in, English, German and Polish and is issued by the Further Education and Training Awards Council, FETAC.
- The Europass Diploma Supplement - issued by the higher education institution where the award was attained.
- The Europass Mobility - the personal document completed by the home and host organization in the country where the mobility experience takes place.

Guidance - Education and work guidance is available in both schools and in the Employment Services offices. There are also special Youth Information Centres, YIC, all over the country. The National Centre for Guidance in Education for counsellors in training and career choices was established in 1968 [2]. It is governed by the Department of Education and Science. The NFQ should be a tool for advisors and also aims to clarify the linkages between the various awards and levels of qualification [17].

Participation Rate - Participation in adult and further education is primarily determined by economic conditions, unemployment and the social needs of vocational qualifications. Up to the 1960s the majority of pupils finished school at the age of 11-12, with primary education only. Ireland's national commitment to lifelong learning, combined with the demand for workers with vocational or higher education has raised the level of education of the people of Ireland.

Learning Outcomes - The NFQ is expected to be used as a tool to support changes of qualification systems in education and training but the learning outcomes approach of the framework have had a limited impact on learning design and pedagogies, which continues to focus on inputs rather than outcomes [3,10].

Financing - Most adult and vocational educations in Ireland are provided by public sector organizations and is free of charge. The funding is from the state with support from the European Social Fund. [2]

Anyone who is unemployed and chooses to educate themselves is offered an elevated replacement - compared to the regular unemployment benefits. A person who is employed must bear the cost of their education on her/his own. Employers tend to finance the training required in the context of the work. [2]

Mobility - The development of the NFQ in Ireland seems at first to be meant to raise the domestic skills, combat unemployment and to strengthen the domestic economy - not so much to improve the mobility and exchange of work or study in other countries. Today the focus of the continuing development and implementation is more aimed toward mobility.

In 2009 the total number of applications for recognition of prior of learning was 1669, which is a decrease compared to the previous year. The decline in the number of applications is explained by the fact that immigration of non-Irish National's to Ireland dropped from 67,600 in 2008 to 38,900 in 2009 [9]. It was mainly the applications from non-EU countries that fell. The number of applications for recognition of higher education undertaken in Poland rose from [9].

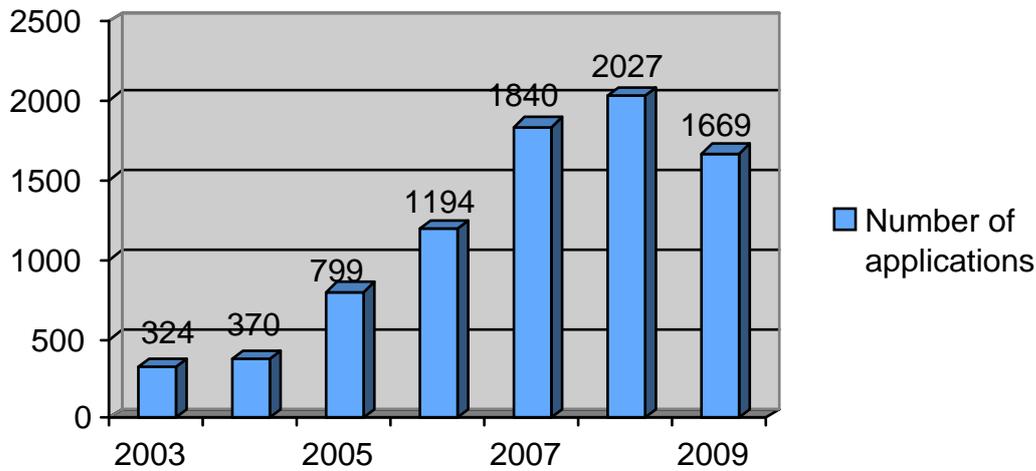


Figure 3. Total number of applications received in respect for recognition of prior of learning in Other countries, 2003-2009 [9].

Table2: Applications Received for Recognition of Higher and Further Education in 2009 and 2008 [9].

<i>Higher Edu: 1132 applications received in respect of the total from 82 Countries (2009)</i>		
2009 Total 1132		2008 Total 1288
Poland	25% (279 applications)	Poland (261 applications)
Nigeria	7% (84 applications)	Nigeria (116 applications)
Lithuania	7% (75 applications)	Lithuania (92 applications)
India	5% (53 applications)	India (75 applications)
U.S.	4% (44 applications)	
Russia	4% (40 applications)	
Romania	3% (39 applications)	Romania (52 applications)
<i>Further Edu: 315 applications received in respect of the total from 38 Countries (2009)</i>		
2009	Total 315	2008 Total 289
UK	30% (94 applications)	UK (40 applications)
Poland	18% (56 applications)	Poland (56 applications)
Ireland	7% (23 applications)	Germany (20 applications)
Australia	4% (13 applications)	Australia (16 applications)

Validation - There is a range of experience in *recognition of prior learning* in education and training but there is little statistical data available. Providers of education must cover arrangement for recognition of prior learning for entry to any programme and for access to an award [2] but the number of learners who avail of recognition of prior learning has been small compared to those who access education and training qualifications by formal routes [12].

The Qualification Recognition at the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland is the centre for the recognition of international qualifications. The International Qualifications Database of the authority contains information regarding foreign qualifications and education and training systems [10, 20].

Certificates of Experience are issued by FÁS' (The National Training and Employment Authority). Evidence of previous training and work experience and the signature of two referees are needed. To qualify for a Certificate, is usually the following needed [19]:

- managerial or self-employed experience for a number of years in the job concerned or
- work experience for a number of years, in a non-managerial job and as a manager or self-employed person or
- having received an acceptable level of training and have worked in the job for a number of years.

For recognition of regulated professions in Ireland, for example teaching, medicine and physiotherapy, an approval of a designated competent authority is needed [19].

Recognition service is resource-intensive and has technical difficulties in developing and implementing. According to a national report [12] there are issues to be addressed and the main obstacles for Recognition of Prior Learning, RPL, are [10, 12]:

- Limited awareness and understanding of RPL
- Inconsistency in how RPL is used.
- Lack of recognition of awards through RPL.
- Resource requirements for RPL

4 Reflections and discussion

Ireland's work with lifelong learning and the establishment of a National Framework of Qualifications, NFQ, has resulted in a national anchored tool which, through the European Qualification Framework, EQF also can be related to other countries' frameworks. Ireland has some work left on the domestic implementation of the NFQ but experience acquired so far is probably of good value also for other countries' efforts to develop their qualification framework. Since this is a limited short track study the following discussion and suggestions in this section on preliminary findings and reflections on available documentation.

Some of this study, spontaneous reflections on Ireland's work with lifelong learning and the establishment of a national framework:

- The investment in a national framework, NFQ, was *originally aimed* at enhancing the educational level in the country, reducing unemployment and strengthening the competitiveness of the Irish business community - not to primarily promote international mobility.
- It appears that the national framework of New Zealand had a relatively greater influence in the *formulation* of Ireland's framework - than e.g. EQF appears to have had.
- Although the Irish NFQ should involve all forms of learning it seems to focus mainly on the *access* within the formal education system and the appropriate national awards - not on the recognition of informal learning.
- NFQ is said to be a *learning outcome*-based model - but the recognition of previous work only by the signatures of the referees is hardly a fair measure of learning outcomes.
- Validation of professional experience has limitations regarding experience from work in senior positions - not professional work in general.
- Responsibility for information and implementation is divided among many different parties, departments and websites, all with similar, non-synchronized and overlapping information. Excess and non-appropriate structured information might slow down the implementation process rather than making it efficient.

4.1 The basic elements of a national framework

In order to effectively develop a National Qualification Framework a recommendation is that each and every country should based it on their actual own national conditions and resources and, first of all take a position on the national and international targets to be achieved versus what it is prepared to short-and long- term change in the educational system.

The fact that Ireland chose to build its framework around the national situation in the first place and then compared with the European framework is perhaps a realistic approach to obtain a model that corresponds with the country's education, graduation and job market imperatives. National freedom is perhaps also an important prerequisite to, as quickly as possible; achieve national qualification frameworks in all EU countries. When the NQF's are established these frameworks should be reliable and comparable throughout the common labour market in Europe.

4.2 Implementation of a national framework

Organization, responsibilities and resources for implementation of the NQF can be of great importance for the outcome. Perhaps, in the example of the Irish NFQ, there could have been a possibility to achieve faster and better penetration if the responsibility had not been allocated to as many agencies and suburbanisation's, and if the focus on information had been more efficient, and if the stakeholders that were assigned the task to in practice enforce the requirements, e.g. recognition of priors or informal learning activities was assigned necessary resources for this.

Ireland's experience with NFQ might give other countries reason to consider in particular the strategies, resource allocation and priorities in the establishment and implementation of national qualifications frameworks. In following up the experience of Ireland it is noted that implementation work must be given time [3]. But perhaps a different allocation of resources could have contributed to a different outcome and a greater impact of NFQ? While this study reflects on the fact that Ireland seems to have invested relatively heavily in the establishment of various government functions, as well as on information from these it is said in a national study, that there is a lack of resources for universities to develop and work with among other things, recognition of prior of learning [9]

This study has particularly noted the *information glut*, around Irish NFQ, and questioned the functionality of information and if abundance of information does not rather represent a limiting factor for implementation - than supportive. NQAI has several official websites, a lot of background information, both old and new research reports and position descriptions which makes it difficult to find wanted relevant information. Instead of easily accessible, with concrete and practical guidance for each target group the websites have overlapping information, is relatively heavy to navigate and gives a poor overview.

4.3 An international perspective on a national qualification framework

As long as the NQF is applicable to, and quality assured in relation to, the national education system and labour market the basic preconditions for mobility should be met - i.e., once a reliable "translation" is made to the EQF. Maybe it's both the fastest route, and the most cost-effective, practical applicability and sustainability of the strategy, that every country is building up just its own national framework based on national conditions and national education and labour policy, and then relate this framework to the common European reference point EQF.

Irish qualifications framework and the relation to EQF demonstrate the ability to have both national freedom to design an own national framework and international functionality through anchorage to the EQF. With a NQF which correspond with domestic conditions, the risk of short-term call for costly changes in the existing educational and labour market policies is avoided.

Through the flexibility that Ireland say they have in their NFQ [10] it is still made possible to have a long-term and controlled development in areas such as the national education system. This vision and approach does not exclude the possibility of also developing European Sectorial Qualification Framework's, SQF, in areas and occupations where special expertise is required or where the training

and qualification according to NQF differs between countries. Some issues to discuss and decide in that regard can be:

- If a SQF shall reflect the professional qualifications, i.e. qualifications seen from industry requirements while NQF is primarily based on education and degree level, and specifying learning outcomes in relation to: Knowledge, Skills and Competence?
- If the SQF can be the framework best suited for the specification and in particular clarification of the industry's demands and expectations regarding Knowledge, Skills and Competence for different professionals?
- If the SQF in this case, can be coordinated for sectors in different countries, while subordinated to respective NQF it would be possible to provide both national and sectorial flexibility while maintaining stability in mobility between countries and the joint development efforts around qualification framework?
- Would SQF – which in detailed form study, compare and call for actual professional qualifications in various sectors – be able to become the framework that will clarify and specify some of the common professional skills in different sectors of industry.
- Would SQF then also - through a potential long-term impact on national education systems through the link to each country's NQF and education system – be able to constitute a future relatively strong momentum for a stable and sustainable, development towards a more standardized education and labour market structure in Europe?

This philosophy and vision requires that each country, like Ireland, first of all look to develop a realistic national qualification framework and is responsible for this NQF to be updated and reliable in relation to the common reference and comparison point EQF, while at the same time maintaining its national freedom to determine how educational policy is conducted.

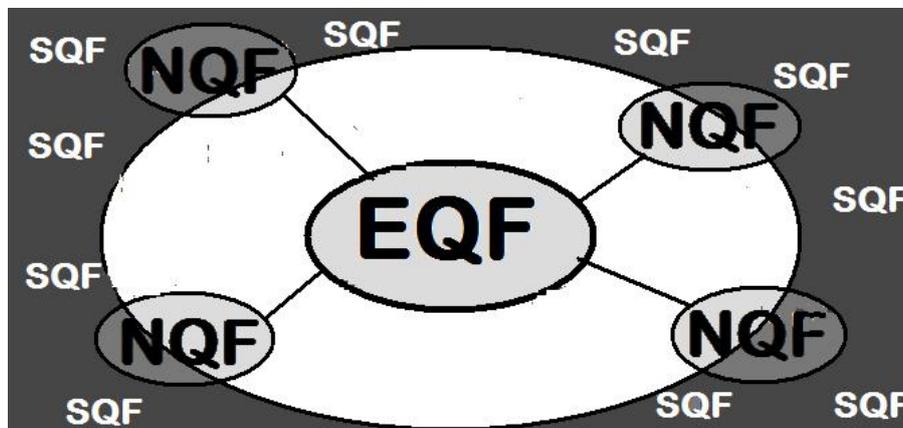


Figure 4. Potential relationship between the framework in different countries and at different levels. SQF may reflect the EU industry's common and specific expectations of different professional qualifications. The more united the various sectors of industry are around the SQF the more uniform requirements on each country's education system and ultimately the greater the opportunity for a coherence between national NQF.

It is the conclusion of this study shown that it is quite possible to implement the first step towards a common development in the EU at the national level and that a national qualification framework, NQF, with an country specific design provides better opportunities for mobility and international comparisons - than no framework at all!

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