

Towards a National Framework of Qualifications

A Discussion Document

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Introduction

The publication of this discussion document, which is the first formal paper published by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, is an important step in advancing the work of the Authority. We need to move to develop a national framework of qualifications. A vital part of this will be to establish the future standards of the awards of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology. A further important element will be the procedures for access, transfer and progression.

The establishment of the national framework of qualifications should have a significant influence on the development of a society of lifelong learning. It is vital that the views of all of those involved in learning, generally, and upon whom the outcomes of learning impact would have an involvement in the development of the important work of the Authority. The publication of the document provides an opportunity to ensure that the approach of the Authority to performing its functions has regard to the views of stakeholders.

There is general agreement on a need for a national framework of qualifications and for the procedures for access, transfer and progression which will flow from that. The Authority is now publishing this document to assist it in developing the framework, such procedures for access, transfer and progression, and other related matters. We propose to put in place a framework with the recognition that all those involved in learning are interdependent on each other in the implementation of arrangements leading to and building on the framework. The Authority hopes that all those concerned will consider the issues that have been raised in this discussion document in an open and constructive manner. The feedback from all those with an interest in this work will be welcomed and valued.

Dick Langford, Chairperson
November 2001

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Part I
Background to Discussion

Chapter 1 – Overview

The aim of this discussion document is to set out the issues on which the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland is seeking the views of its partners in learning. The document is designed to provide a basis for informed discussion about the implementation of the functions of the Authority set out in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, and in particular, about the development of a national framework of qualifications. This Chapter provides an overview of the document, which contains three parts, outlining the background, presenting the issues and describing the format of the consultation.

Part I – Background

The Qualifications Act is intended to support the development of a society of lifelong learning. This first part of the document sets out the context for the establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and describes the conceptual and legislative background for the work of the Authority. The objects of the Act are summarised (Chapter 2). The Act establishes three new bodies with distinct functions, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council. These bodies, together with the providers of education and training and the other stakeholders who also have responsibilities, will need to work cohesively to implement the Qualifications Act, in a common mission to meet the needs of learners and society (Chapter 3).

Part II – Issues for Discussion

This section is the main body of the document. It comprises ten Chapters that discuss and explore the issues and implications of the actions to be performed by the Authority. At the end of each Chapter, a set of questions is posed: the Authority is seeking the support of its partners in learning in answering these questions. There is a certain element of repetition between Chapters as each Chapter attempts to present its issues in a standalone fashion.

Chapter 4 – The Authority has three primary objects under the Act: (a) to establish and maintain a national framework of qualifications; (b) to establish, and promote the maintenance of, the standards of the awards of the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology and (c) to promote and facilitate access, transfer and progression. This Chapter introduces the subsequent Chapters which discuss and explore the issues and implications of the actions to be performed by the Authority.

Chapter 5 – This Chapter suggests a set of broad principles that would underpin the establishment of a national framework of qualifications. These principles form a starting point and reference for the development of operational policies and strategies for the Authority, and for the design criteria of the framework itself. Seven principles are discussed: transparency, simplicity, quality, equality, relevance, comprehensiveness and flexibility.

Chapter 6 – This Chapter discusses how the Authority will go about its work. It suggests processes to be adopted by the Authority itself in undertaking the task of developing a framework of qualifications and implementing the other provisions of the Qualifications Act. Eight process guidelines are suggested for the work of the Authority: consultation, inclusiveness, quality process, realism, integrity, efficiency, international linking, and recognition of stakeholders' autonomy and roles.

Chapter 7 – This Chapter begins the exploration of policies and criteria that are to be determined by the Authority for the development of the national framework of qualifications. Award standards are the expected outcomes of learning, inclusive of all education and training. Levels of awards need to be defined in terms of the knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners. The related ideas of knowledge, skill and competence are themselves explored. Various approaches are discussed to setting policies and criteria for awards and award levels. Elements included in these approaches are entry arrangements, duration, development of learners, national currency and credibility, international comparability, stability of

award standards, assessment methodology, validation of programmes, permanence of awards, titles of awards, and employability. An important topic discussed is the relationship between generic award levels and award levels within specific areas. Different grouping factors for the definition of such areas referred to include economic sectors, occupations, fields of learning, and subjects. International models of level descriptors are briefly considered.

Chapter 8 – This Chapter continues the exploration of policies and criteria that are to be determined by the Authority for the development of the national framework of qualifications. It raises the issue of the need for the design of the framework of qualifications to contribute to the promotion and facilitation of opportunities for access, transfer and progression into and throughout further and higher education and training. Design features relating to this objective which are discussed include learning units, multiple access points to programmes, modular award structures, portal awards and possibilities for updating learning.

Chapter 9 – In this Chapter, the concepts that relate to the terms “further education and training” and “higher education and training” are discussed. In the context of the Act, it will be necessary to develop a workable differentiation between these two entities, so that, for example, the awards Councils can identify their proper areas of operation. The issues of relating further education and training and higher education and training to award levels are introduced against the background of existing practice and the concepts underlying the general work on the framework.

Chapter 10 – This Chapter addresses the issues involved in the inclusion in the framework of the awards made by various bodies. The framework is intended to open up the recognition of learning wherever it takes place and to be as comprehensive and inclusive of awards as possible. The inclusion of any award must depend on its standards. Awards to be included are those of public bodies in the State, namely the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Dublin Institute of Technology, the universities, and the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate of the Department of Education and Science. The issue of the inclusion of awards from private bodies in the State, such as professional bodies, and from international bodies making awards to learners in the State, is also explored. Finally, there are issues related to linking the framework to awards made to learners outside the State. The requirements of the Act and international obligations are set out and possible approaches discussed.

Chapter 11 – In this Chapter, the document proceeds to the second objective set out for the Authority in the Qualifications Act: this concerns establishing of the overall standards of the awards of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology. The concepts here are linked to those relating to the development of the framework. The chapter discusses the role of the Authority in setting the overarching procedures for the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, as well as its role in the review of the awards Councils and appeals of certain specific decisions of the awards Councils. The Authority’s functions in relation to quality assurance in the Dublin Institute of Technology are also discussed.

Chapter 12 – In this Chapter, the document addresses the issues raised by the third objective of the Authority: the promotion and facilitation of access, transfer and progression. Among the issues raised are accreditation of prior and experiential learning, recognition of learning units, the distinction between eligibility and entitlement, capacity to succeed, portal awards, the need to build on a learner’s most recent award, the accommodation of variety in outcome descriptions, the involvement of under-represented groups of learners, the desirability of multiple access points and modularity, the need for progression both within and between providers and awarding bodies, and the need for updating learning. It proceeds to explore a range of possible actions the Authority could take in response to these issues. These include consideration of the nature of the procedures for access, transfer and progression that are to be set by the Authority. In this regard the following elements were discussed: procedures for entry arrangements, systems for credit accumulation, accreditation of prior and experiential learning, the development of progression routes and protocols for providing information. The potential roles of the Authority in leading cultural change and in brokering progression linkages are discussed.

Chapter 13 – Recognising that the preceding Chapters may not have exhausted the issues of relevance to stakeholders, the Authority invites further discussion in relation to the performance of its functions in specific terms that may be relevant to learners, employers and providers.

Part III – Consultation & Next Steps

The document concludes by outlining a consultation process that is to take place in the coming months. Submissions are invited on the document and the consultation process will culminate in a public seminar in February 2002. This seminar will provide an opportunity for individuals and groups commenting on this document to meet and exchange views on the document and on each other's submissions. The proposed schedule of actions following the consultation will lead to the publication in March 2002 of the principles and the policies and criteria for the national framework of qualifications. Following this, the aim is to publish an outline framework and associated procedures to promote access, transfer and progression, by mid-2002.

Chapter 2 – Rationale

The aim of this discussion document is to provide the opportunity for the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland to seek the views of stakeholders in learning in relation to the functions that the Authority is to perform. It also provides an opportunity for the Authority to set out its understanding of what its functions are and for stakeholders to come to a common understanding of what the implementation of the main provisions of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, will mean for the development of a society of lifelong learning, in general, and for each of them, in particular.

In this context it is important to note that the objects of the Qualifications Act apply to every individual and organisation involved in the implementation of this Act and are not limited to any of the new bodies established under the Act – the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, the Further Education and Training Awards Council, and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council. In this way, the objects of the Act apply to all learners, providers of education and training, those employed by providers of education and training awarding bodies, State agencies, Government Departments and anyone else who is involved. The objects pull together the aims of the Oireachtas for the implementation of the Act.

The objects of the Act, accordingly, encompass a number of elements. First, there is a combination of objects which reflects a vision for the development of society where lifelong learning becomes a reality and where learning is of relevance. Second, there is a combination of specific objects which can be associated with the establishment of the three new bodies – the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council – and the successful performance by these bodies of their functions, which is dependent on co-operation between the bodies and stakeholders in learning generally. Third, there is a combination of objects which ensure that all stakeholders are involved in the development of learning generally. Individual objects need to be associated with more than one of these combinations.

The objects of the Act can be summarised as follows:

- to establish and develop standards of knowledge, skill and competence
- to promote the quality of further education and training and higher education and training
- to provide a system for coordinating and comparing awards
- to facilitate lifelong learning
- to promote and maintain procedures for access, transfer and progression
- to promote the recognition of knowledge, skill and competence
- to contribute to the realisation of national education and training policies and objectives, including ensuring that the education and training requirements of industry are met
- to promote cooperation between providers of education and training and industry
- to promote recognition within the State of international awards and recognition internationally of Irish awards
- to promote diversity in education and training generally and between further education and training and higher education and training so as to ensure that there is not a convergence of the provision of education and training
- to contribute to the realisation of national policy and objectives in relation to the extension of bilingualism in Irish society and, in particular, the achievement of a greater use of the Irish language and to contribute to the promotion of the distinctive cultures of Ireland.

This is the vision within which all those involved in the implementation of the Qualifications Act are to work.

Chapter 3 – Interdependence of Those Involved in Delivering the Implementation of the Qualifications Act

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

Meeting the needs of learners was the central driver for the establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. Learners are the critical group who will benefit from the development of a national framework of qualifications and from the implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression. Through the framework, learners can have confidence in the quality of their learning and in the relevance of that learning, in terms of their own personal development and in terms of the relevance of learning to society in general, and to the world of work, where this is appropriate. At the same time, it needs to be recognised that, while the work of the Authority will be to the benefit of learners, the functions of the Authority are immediately relevant principally to the Further Education and Training Awards Council and Higher Education and Training Awards Council and to providers of education and training generally. In most cases it is likely that the framework will become pertinent to learners through participation in learning opportunities being made available by providers.

The setting up of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland was a recognition that there needed to be a new body to oversee the development of the national framework of qualifications. Until the establishment of the Authority, there was no organisation with the power and responsibility to develop the framework and ensure that it would be implemented.

The objects and functions of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland are set out in the Qualifications Act. The first object of the Authority is to establish and maintain a framework of qualifications for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State, based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners. Related to this, the Authority has the function of establishing the policies and criteria on

which the framework of qualifications shall be based. It is important to note that the Authority is not an awarding body. A further major function of the Authority is to determine whether any particular programme of education and training is further education and training or higher education and training or whether the standard of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners for the purposes of an award is for a further education and training award or a higher education and training award. Building on the framework, the Authority also has a number of other explicit functions in relation to liaising with bodies to facilitate recognition of international awards in Ireland and of Irish awards internationally.

The second object of the Authority is to establish, and promote the maintenance and improvement of the standards of the awards of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology. There is a clear link between this and the development of the framework itself. This object, in turn, is relevant to the function of the Authority to determine the procedures which the Councils need to follow in the performance of their functions and the Authority's review role in this regard. It is also linked to the quality assurance procedures of the awards Councils and the quality assurance responsibilities of the Authority in relation to the Dublin Institute of Technology. The object also incorporates the appeals role of the Authority in relation to validation refused or withdrawn, or delegation of authority refused or withdrawn by an awards Council.

The third object of the Authority is to promote and facilitate access, transfer and progression. Arising out of this, the Authority has the function of determining the procedures to be implemented by providers of

programmes of education and training for access, transfer and progression, and publishing these procedures. Under the terms of the Act, providers with programmes validated by either of the two Councils as well as the Dublin Institute of Technology are required to implement the procedures. The role of the Authority is also to facilitate and advise the universities in implementing these procedures and to review the implementation of the procedures by the universities, in consultation with the Higher Education Authority.

Further Education and Training Awards Council & Higher Education and Training Awards Council

Under the Act, both the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council are independent bodies with their own functions. The principal functions that each of them has are as follows:

- to establish and publish policies and criteria for the making of awards and the validation of programmes and to review such policies and criteria
- to determine the standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners before an award may be made
- to validate programmes and make awards
- to promote their awards
- to ensure that relevant providers implement the procedures for access, transfer and progression established by the Authority
- to monitor and evaluate the quality of programmes in respect of which awards are made
- to put in place review processes that can provide for the delegation of authority to make awards to certain providers.

Clearly, in the Act, there are separate interdependent roles set out for the Authority and the awards Councils. The objects of the Act cannot be attained other than by co-operation between the three bodies and, indeed, with full involvement from a range of other stakeholders.

It is, of course, a matter for the statutorily independent awards Councils to undertake the tasks set out for them in the Qualifications Act. It is important for the Authority to set out that the expectations of stakeholders in relation to each of the three new bodies should be consistent with the statutory tasks of each of the new bodies, respectively.

Providers of Education and Training

Under the terms of the Qualifications Act and under their own legislation and charters, providers of education and training generally have their own rights and responsibilities. Providers, such as those who will have programmes validated by either of the two Councils as well as other providers with independent awarding powers, such as the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology, will all play an essential role in meeting the objectives of the Act. It is important that the arrangements put in place in the framework of qualifications and in related matters facilitate the involvement of all of these providers in attaining the objectives of the Qualifications Act.

It is significant that, in the Act, an important impact of the work of the Authority on learners will be the procedures for access, transfer and progression to be implemented by providers. A linked new requirement in the Act is that all providers of education and training are now to inform learners commencing programmes of the name of the awarding body and the title of the award and of the transfer and progression linkages for learners on attainment of the award. Accordingly, the Act sets out all the elements of relevance to learners and this includes the information that providers must give them. The statutory requirement to provide this information is not limited to any particular groups of providers – it refers to all providers with programmes provided over a continuous period of three months or more.

Furthermore, it is also of note that the two awards Councils will need to put in place mechanisms which provide for the making of an award directly to a learner who seeks such an award without participating in a programme. The Act sets out that the awards Councils may seek the assistance of a provider to perform this assessment function.

Part II
Issues for Discussion

Chapter 4 – Introduction to Issues

Approach in Subsequent Chapters

The Chapters in Part II are the core consultative element of this discussion document. The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland is putting forward the issues in these Chapters for consideration by all the stakeholders. The Authority has not decided that any particular approach set out in this document is to be adopted. Rather, it is suggesting possible ways forward and is looking for the views of stakeholders in this regard.

It is recognised that the Authority is becoming involved in an area within which there have been many developments over the years. In different ways, all those involved have had to consider the sort of issues that are discussed in this paper. For example, bodies making awards have developed their own arrangements for making awards, and such arrangements are in many cases well understood nationally.

In developing this part of the document, the Authority has recognised the criteria in place in the existing award-making arrangements in the State, including those previously in place in FÁS, the National Tourism Certification Board, Teagasc, Bord Iascaigh Mhara, the National Council for Vocational Awards and the National Council for Educational Awards. As well as this, the Authority has recognised the criteria in place in the Dublin Institute of Technology and the universities as well as those in place for the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate awards. The Authority has also had regard to the processes in place in providers of education and training. The Authority has also looked at international practices. In further developing the work of the Authority, there will be a need to look more closely at all of these criteria, policies and practices.

The Authority acknowledges the valuable contribution of unpublished work that was undertaken by the Teastas Executive, but was not considered by the Teastas board. The Authority has decided to make the Teastas Executive papers available on its website as background documentation for this discussion

and to inform people's thinking generally on the issues involved. The Authority would like to thank former members of the Teastas Executive for agreeing to make the papers publicly available in this way.

Building on this, the approach taken in subsequent Chapters is to consider the issues relevant to each of the three objects of the Authority in turn as follows:

- the central object of the Authority is to establish and maintain a framework of qualifications for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State, based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners
- the principles and values underpinning the development of a national framework of qualifications
- the process guidelines to be adopted by the Authority in developing a national framework of qualifications
- the policies and criteria on which the development of a national framework of qualifications should be based – what does this mean? How will the awards of various awarding bodies be included?
- how will the Authority establish, and promote the maintenance of, the standards of further education and training awards and higher education and training awards of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology?
- procedures for access, transfer and progression
- how do these relate to the framework?
- what should be the nature of the procedures to be implemented by providers of education and training for access, transfer and progression?
- how should the procedures operate?

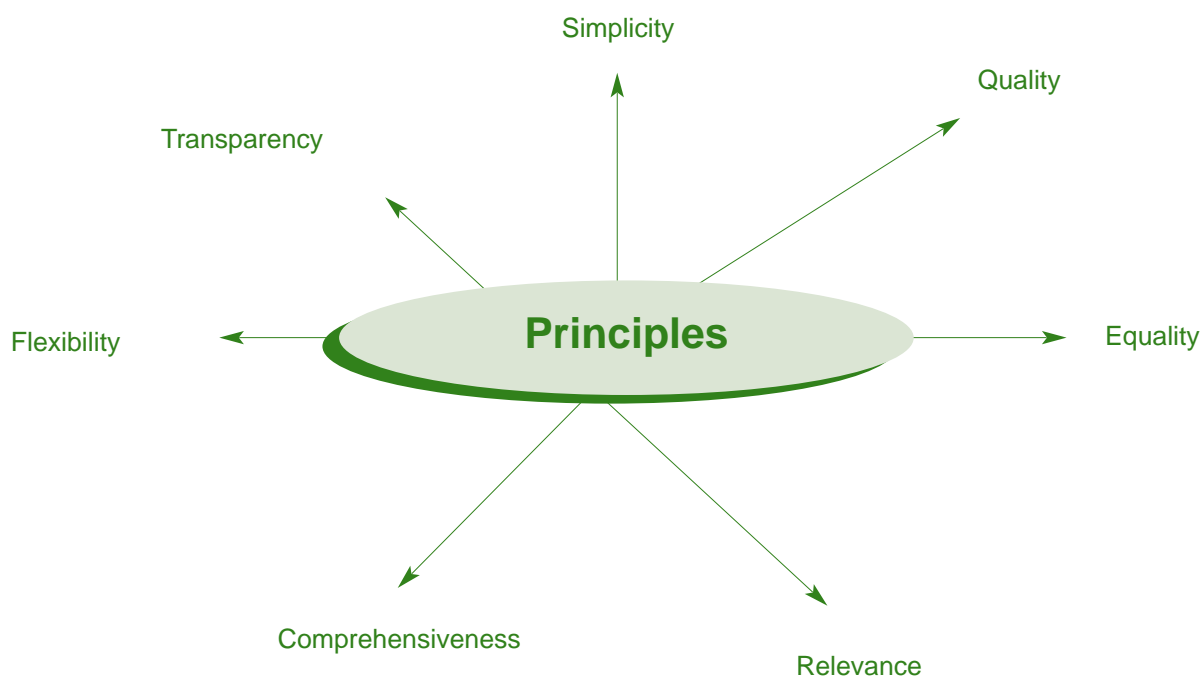
The subsequent Chapters are ordered in turn to address specific implementation aspects of each of the objects.

Chapter 5 – Principles Underpinning the Establishment of a National Framework of Qualifications

Introduction

The Qualifications Act refers to the framework of qualifications as being for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State. Essentially the framework is a mechanism through which all relevant learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way. The national framework of qualifications will become the single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, defining the relationship between all education and training awards. It will continue to be relevant to learners as they continue with learning throughout their lives: in this way, it can be a real step in the development of a lifelong learning society.

Comparative international research on different national systems, particularly the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, the United States, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia, reveals that a number of common characteristics of a national framework of qualifications can be identified. All stakeholders and users of the framework are involved in its development and recognise its relevance. In many cases, new qualifications frameworks build on existing arrangements, aiming to work towards greater coherence and flexibility. A crucial objective of any qualifications framework is that all awards have a meaning and a relationship to one another which learners, the public and all other stakeholders can readily understand. Often, a national framework of qualifications has its quality assured by a national authority.



The framework needs to be designed to encompass the certification arrangements of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Dublin Institute of Technology, the seven universities and the State examination system for second level schools.

The issue arises about how the framework will operate and what form it will take. It will need to be meaningful for all stakeholders, including learners, employers and providers. The framework will need to provide all those involved with an understanding of how one type of award fits relatively to another. It will need to facilitate the availability of opportunities for access, transfer and progression. The following Chapters of this document set out possible ways for the framework to develop.

The work of the Authority in developing all aspects of the framework will need to be defined by a coherent set of principles. Accordingly, as a first step it is useful to discuss the broad principles that might underpin the establishment of a national framework of qualifications. These form the starting point and reference for establishment process guidelines, development policies and criteria, and in turn the implementation of the framework.

Transparency

There is a need to ensure that all the elements that make up the framework are fully visible. The relationships within the framework need to be clear and easy to understand. Learners need to be able to compare awards. The framework must have clarity. This transparency will affect the development, operation and implementation of the framework. The criteria underpinning the framework will need to be clear to all.

The framework needs to be transparent for its users - learners, employers and providers. The framework needs to be understood by and accessible to all. The nature and purpose of an award and its associated progression routes from it should be clear. This is necessary in order to support informed choices and realistic expectations on the part of potential learners, employers and other stakeholders. Transparency is required for both the awards and the structure of the framework.

Simplicity

The principle of transparency is strongly linked with that of simplicity. Underpinning the development of the framework, it is vital that the framework is simple to use and easy to understand.

Building on this, there is a need to use titles for awards that are easily understood and used in a consistent manner. Award titles need to be developed in a way which is distinct and does not cause confusion. The Authority will need to encourage the development of such an approach.

While the structure may, perhaps, be two or three dimensional, there will be a need for the Authority to ensure that it does not become overly complex. Essentially, if there is a need for someone to develop a "simple guide to the national framework of qualifications", the development of the framework will have failed the simplicity test.

Quality

Quality is not only a central issue in relation to the national framework of qualifications; it permeates all aspects of learning and awards. Quality needs to underpin the setting of award standards by the Authority and indeed all of the work of the Authority. To achieve this, planned and systematic actions are necessary to provide confidence in the system. Quality processes will inform all actions of the Authority in establishing and maintaining the framework. These will also need to allow for the achievement of excellence.

Equality

It is vital that the framework be learner-centred, accessible to all learners and able to cater for all types of learning. The attainment of knowledge, skill and competence needs to be transferable between as many diverse awards and providers as possible. It should be possible for all learning to count towards an award. There needs to be parity of esteem for all learning and freedom of movement into and out of learning situations irrespective of learning mode. In addition, parity of esteem extends to all learning, regardless of whether it is acquired through Irish, English or any other language.

Mechanisms need to be put in place to allow for the recognition of previous learning achievements, including achievement that has not previously been recognised. Prerequisites for entry to awards need to be justifiable in terms of the award, promote equality of opportunity and be made clear to learners and stakeholders. This is to support informed choices and realistic expectations on the part of learners and to promote progression opportunities and equality of opportunity. Alternative routes to meeting entry requirements are very relevant.

Relevance

The framework has to be relevant to all users: learners, employers and providers. The framework must also be relevant to the social, cultural and educational needs of local, regional, national and international communities. Where an award aims to qualify a learner for a career or certify a competence in a profession or occupation, it should be able to demonstrate a clear relationship with the relevant occupational or professional standards.

Awards in the framework need to be relevant to a clearly identified need, either current or future. To ensure relevance, the framework will need to contain a variety of entry, exit and re-entry points for learners. Signposts will be needed to inform learners of the options. Within the framework all awards will have a purpose and a relationship to one another which learners, the public and all other stakeholders can readily understand.

Comprehensiveness

The framework needs to cater for all types of learning and for all learners in a comprehensive way. The awards in the framework need to be relevant to leisure, personal and cultural development and employment, and to learners from the whole spectrum of education and training activities.

The framework will need to be as comprehensive and inclusive as possible of all awards attained in the State. This will mean that the awards Councils, the Dublin Institute of Technology and the universities are included, as well as the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate. It will be necessary to consider the inclusion of other awards made in the State. These could be awards by professional bodies or by international awarding bodies operating within the State.

It will accommodate an approach which provides for the development of progression routes for learners in traditional occupations and in new and emerging employment contexts. The development of the framework must accommodate existing best practice and the framework should be able to incorporate new models as they emerge.

Flexibility

The framework must be capable of facilitating changing needs and evolving contexts. The framework itself needs to be subject to review. The national framework of qualifications will cater for changing awards and evolving relativities between awards.

The rate of change in occupations and technology will have to be accommodated by the framework. In addition to this, completely new occupational sectors continually emerge and will have to be incorporated. The Authority will need to ensure that the framework is prepared for new developments.

QUESTION 1

Principles Underpinning the Establishment of a National Framework of Qualifications

Do you agree with the approach of the Authority in building from an initial set of principles? What are your views on the principles – Should some of the ones referred to be excluded? Are there other ones that should have been mentioned? Are the principles outlined accurately described?

Chapter 6 – Process Guidelines for the Authority in Establishing the Framework

Introduction

The context provided by the development of a society of lifelong learning should inform the nature, development and implementation of an appropriate national framework of qualifications. The ultimate requirement will be to have a framework that is understood by all, to which all may contribute and for which all will work together in a spirit of true collaboration and co-operation.

The previous Chapter concerned the nature of the broad principles underpinning the establishment of a national framework of qualifications. These principles, in the first instance, form the starting point and reference for establishing the processes that the Authority is to follow in developing the framework.

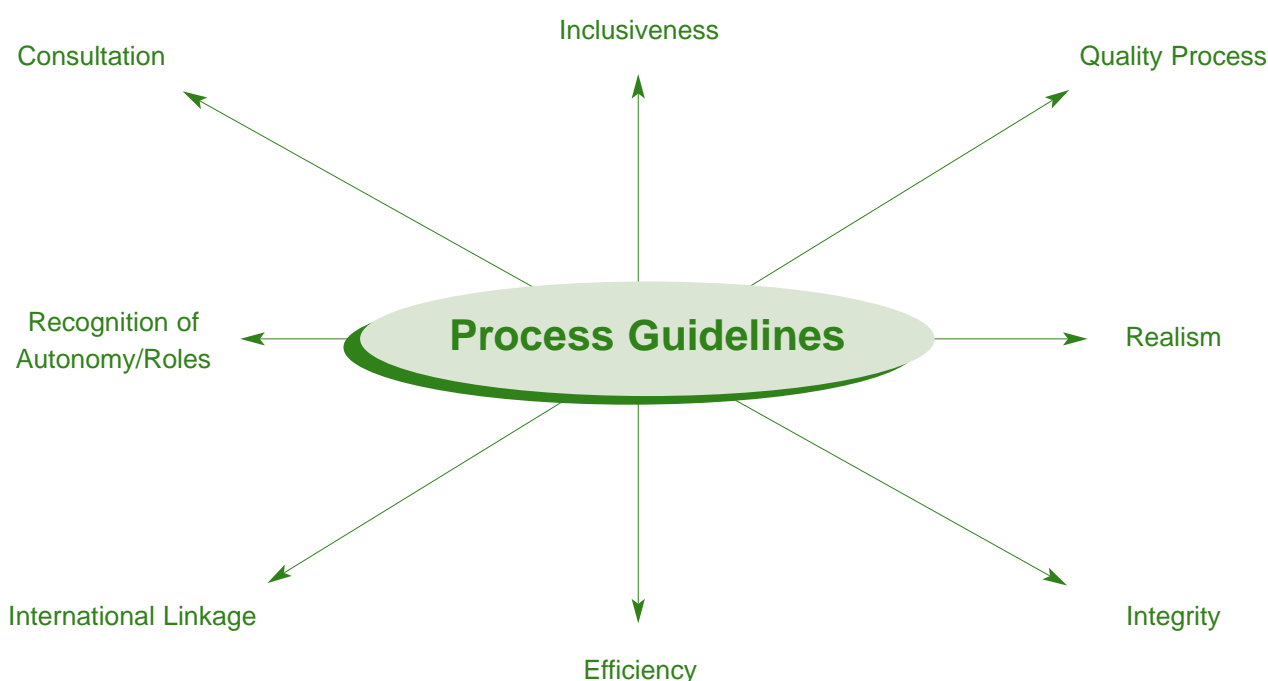
It is vital that the Authority establish guidelines for the processes to be followed in developing the framework. These process guidelines are concerned with what the Authority will do in undertaking the task of developing the framework, rather than with the practical elements of framework development.

The process guidelines are an indicator of the steps that need to be taken by the Authority.

Consultation

Stakeholders will be consulted on an on-going basis. The range and the diversity of stakeholders will require a comprehensive approach to such consultation. All aspects of the development of the framework will be the subject of consultation. On-going consultation will ensure that the Authority has appropriate regard to the views of stakeholders as the development process unfolds. Indeed, the publication of this document is the first public recognition of this commitment.

Establishing policies and criteria is the vital element in the development of the framework and forms an important part of the initial consultation that will follow on from the publication of this document. The Authority will need to give further consideration to ensuring that appropriate consultation takes place at all relevant stages of the work of the Authority.



Inclusiveness

All learners should find that the framework has an award or sequence of awards relevant to their needs. Similarly, all providers will be able to ensure that all programmes can lead to awards which are in the framework, subject to quality requirements. An inclusive framework can accommodate the accreditation and recognition of different kinds of achievement across all learning.

It is vital that ownership of the framework is shared with all stakeholders in the system. It is equally important that stakeholders become involved in implementing the elements of the framework for which they have responsibility. This is essential for the achievement of quality. It will be achieved by effective interaction and collaboration between the stakeholders.

Quality Process

For the framework to function effectively, quality processes will be developed and implemented. In the first instance, the Authority itself needs to ensure that its own activities are underpinned by a quality approach.

Realism

The Authority will accommodate awards in the framework in a consistent and practical manner. It will be vital to look at the practical consequences of the work of the Authority. The positioning of new and existing awards and the development of levels will take full cognisance of the existing awards systems that are in place. The immediate practical implications of a national framework will need to be facilitated. The diversity within education and training will require flexible approaches to the application of the policies and criteria of the framework.

Integrity

The Authority will display integrity in dealing with learners, providers and awarding bodies. It will adhere to the stated principles and apply them in a full and appropriate manner. It will be necessary to develop confidence in the work of the Authority so that stakeholders can take ownership of the development of the framework. Honesty and openness will be applied to all processes involving the stakeholders. The principles of transparency and equality will underpin this approach.

Efficiency

The Authority will endeavour to be efficient in establishing the framework. It will balance the benefits for learners and other stakeholders in developing and implementing various aspects of the national framework of qualifications against the resources required. This includes having regard to the opportunity costs of failing to move ahead with satisfactory solutions even where these are incomplete or not absolutely perfect. The costs of framework development and administration will be kept to the minimum consistent with the achievement of excellence and the maintenance of a quality process. Likewise, there will be a need to ensure that any new requirement of the Authority does not become merely an administrative task. In simple terms, there is a need to ensure that a new paper-generating bureaucracy is not put in place and that energy is not spent on finding ways to get around the bureaucracy rather than on enhancing quality and on improving access, transfer and progression across all learning.

Efficiency, as a mere procedural guideline, should never be allowed to override the basic principles outlined above. In considering the efficiency of the procedures and processes, the Authority will include not just its own costs, and those of the Councils which it funds, but the costs to other stakeholders as well.

International Linkages

The Authority will be aware and informed of international systems. It will establish linkages to all relevant external systems. These linkages will be utilised both in the development of the framework and subsequently in its implementation. In conjunction with the awarding Councils, the Authority will ensure that all aspects of the framework have key linkages to international systems in a way consistent with the provisions of the Act.

Recognition of Autonomy/Roles

Each of the stakeholders has its own role, functions, traditions and responsibilities. These are set out in the legislation, charters, orders etc. covering the establishment of each of the stakeholders, as well as, in some cases, in the public's understanding of a particular stakeholder's role. These will all need to be fully recognised in the development of the framework. In recognising that this is the case, the requirements of the Act and the statutory role of the Authority also need to be taken into account by the

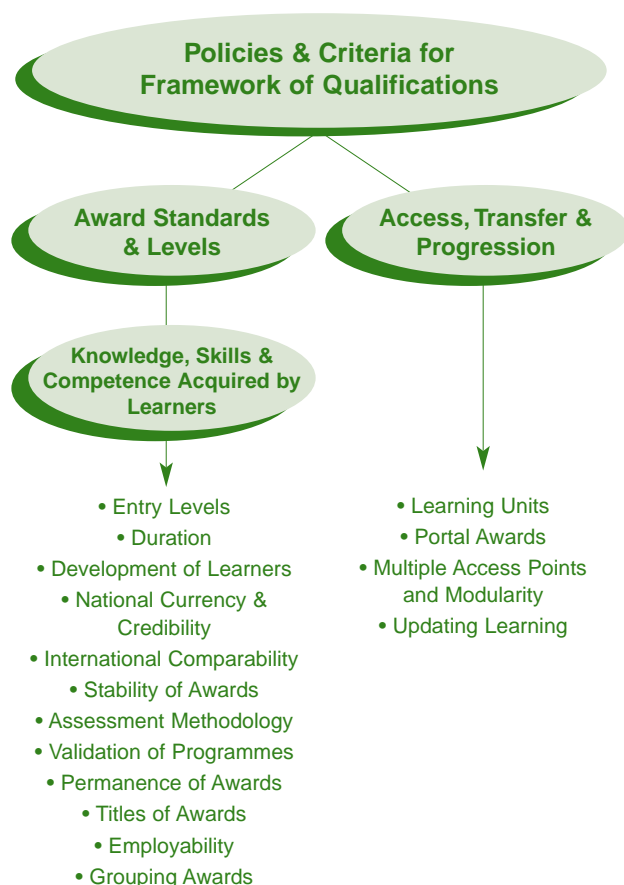
stakeholders. The Authority will need to acknowledge that it may take some time for all to become fully aware of the complexities involved. It is hoped that the publication of this document will play a significant role in this regard.

QUESTION 2

**Process Guidelines for the Authority in
Establishing the Framework**

Do you agree with the approach of the Authority in developing a set of guidelines for its working processes? What are your views on the guidelines – should some of the ones referred to be excluded? Are there other ones that should have been mentioned?

Chapter 7 – Relevance of Awards Standards to Policies and Criteria for the Development of the Framework



It is a matter of prime importance to identify and establish policies and criteria for the development of the framework of qualifications.

The Qualifications Act sets out that the framework is to be based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners. We need to examine how such standards can and should be measured and how the measurements of these standards can be organised. The following two Chapters explore design features that could be incorporated into the framework; the discussion is in the context of the key issues relating to award standards, and the need to promote access, transfer and progression.

Award standards

The framework of qualifications to be established by the Authority is to be based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners. The expression of these standards is an important aspect of awards systems and will require detailed elaboration in the implementation of the framework.

At this stage, there is a need to discuss what standards are and identify some of the issues to be addressed.

Award standards are the expected outcomes of learning, inclusive of all education and training. They concern the knowledge, skill and competence that are expected from the learner who is to receive an award. They concern both general standards (for an award level) and the specific standards for particular subjects or fields of learning. Award standards may refer to the attainment of credit or the receiving of an award.

It is of note that award standards are just one type of standard required for the development of quality systems in the programmes of education and training. For example, providers have standards for the delivery of education, training and services, and awarding bodies will need to develop standards for their own awarding processes. These standards are used by providers and awarding bodies respectively in the performance of their functions. It is recognised that there are various types of standards such as those referred to above. In this document, however, the approach taken is to use the term standards in reference only to the inter-related concepts of

- knowledge, skill and competence
- levels of awards
- the awards themselves.

Levels

Most qualifications frameworks are dominated by a single dimension often referred to as level. The Act facilitates such a structure for the national framework of qualifications and could be said to imply it. At the same time, a framework which is purely levels-based could imply a vertical hierarchy. There are other elements to a framework that may be used to supplement the levels definition. These are discussed further below in the section on Grouping Awards.

The levels in the framework will have to be linked to international developments and descriptors, particularly in Europe where much work has been done by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) in respect of vocational awards and is being done in relation to higher education and training on foot of the Bologna Declaration of June 1999, on the creation of a European higher education area.

In effect, it should be possible to define each level in a broad way in terms of the knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners. However, it is not clear whether this can be done without, in parallel, developing or having regard to existing award standards for specific fields of learning/sectors. Such award standards would not all have to be examined and further developed at once and, indeed, the history of previous efforts in other countries questions the feasibility of trying to achieve everything at once. However, parallel work on award standards for fields of learning/sectors could be used as a means of verifying the feasibility of the emerging general award standards.

Knowledge, skill and competence

The Act refers in several places to the outcomes of education and training as the acquisition of knowledge, skills and competence. This is an implicit definition of learning outcomes for the purposes of the Act and of the framework of qualifications. The Authority could engage in prolonged enquiry into the nature of knowledge, skills and competence and their use in the literature on education and training. The framework, however, needs working common understandings in order to progress and these are developed in the following paragraphs. Such understandings are not exhaustive. The aim in framing them was to provide a way to make some distinction between the three ideas. In practice, most awards, and certainly most outcomes of programmes of education and training, will include some mixture of all three.

Knowledge is the cognitive representation of ideas, events or happenings. Knowledge has meaning outside any context of application or practice. It can comprise description, memory, understanding, thinking, analysis, synthesis, debate and research. Knowledge outcomes may be stated in the form, “A learner knows that ...”

Skills are action-oriented personal plans for the performance of tasks in interaction with the environment. The exercise of a skill is the performance of a task that in some way responds to or manipulates the environment of the person. Skill outcomes may be stated in the form, “A learner knows how to ...”

Competence is the practical application of knowledge or skills. The unique characteristic of competence is the effective and creative deployment of knowledge and skills in human situations – such situations could comprise general social ones as well as specific occupational ones. Competence draws on attitudes and values as well as on skills and knowledge. Competence refers to the process and outcomes from the application of knowledge and skills to a set of tasks and is typically acquired by practice. Competence outcomes may be stated in the form, “A learner can ...”

Establishing Policies and Criteria for Award Levels

Any set of knowledge, skill and competence could be packaged as an award and its attainment used as the standard for that award. To develop a national framework of qualifications, criteria need to be developed for the assignment of awards to levels. A variety of policies and criteria, which are not mutually exclusive, are discussed in the following paragraphs.

There are many national and international examples of level descriptors. The following examples are set out to illustrate the diversity of such descriptors in the context of a particular award – the Bachelors Degree – that has a relatively common international currency. Four examples are given.

Examples of specifications for awards at Bachelors Degree level in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, The Netherlands (Universities), The Netherlands (Higher Vocational Education), and South Africa.

EXAMPLE 1

Learning outcomes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, framework level 6 (Honours Graduate)

An Honours graduate will have developed an understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of an academic discipline. Through this, the graduate will have developed analytical techniques and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many types of employment. The graduate will be able to evaluate evidence, arguments and assumptions, to reach sound judgements, and to communicate effectively.

An Honours graduate should have the qualities needed for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making in complex and unpredictable circumstances.

U.K. Quality Assurance Agency, 2001.

EXAMPLE 2

Award descriptor for South African level 6 (completion of undergraduate or equivalent higher education)

Systematic and coherent introduction to, and incipient specialization in, one or several fundamental or applied disciplines, with detailed knowledge of the discipline(s) and an awareness of the variety of contexts in which it/they may apply; introduction to the principles and concepts underpinning the field(s) of study, to techniques of self-directed work and learning, and to basic research, and identification of key elements of problems and selection of appropriate methods for their resolution; development of skills and attitudes needed to comprehend and evaluate new information, concepts and evidence from a range of sources; analysis of a range of information under minimal guidance; application of major theories of the discipline(s), and comparison of alternative methods for obtaining data; reformatting of a range of information towards the achievement of a given purpose; progressive study of the literature of the field(s) of study to a level which provides a basis for work at the next level; development of practical skills and techniques required in the effective application of knowledge in a professional context; effective communication in a format appropriate to the discipline(s) and clear and concise reporting of the practical procedures in a variety of formats; effective interaction within a learning group, and development of professional working relationships within the disciplines.

South African Qualifications Authority, 2000 (Draft for Discussion).

EXAMPLE 3

Core academic skills for Dutch university Bachelors awards

The core academic skills consist of three elements that should enable students 'to see the world differently than it first appears'. These are ability to reason, form judgements, and to communicate. These are in addition to acquiring a disciplinary/scholarly knowledge base.

- **regarding the ability to reason, the university bachelors curriculum should emphasise:**
 - logical reasoning, formulation of arguments (e.g., through separate courses in the subject)
 - analysis of reasoning and argumentation
 - the use of quantitative and qualitative data to construct or analyse reasoning and argumentation (i.e., through separate courses in research and statistical techniques)
 - the ability to obtain data (i.e. through research techniques, databases, reference libraries, computers).
 - the ability to apply the content of these courses to the student's main area of study
- **regarding the ability to form judgements, the university bachelors curriculum should emphasise:**
 - positioning the scientific aspects of the field of study in a realistic social context (preferably in the relevant disciplinary core courses)
 - positioning the primary field of study within the context of all relevant sciences (preferably in the relevant disciplinary core courses)
 - the ability to gather and interpret relevant data in order to form judgements on social, scientific, or ethical issues
 - the development of academic integrity and a capability for self-reflection
- **regarding the ability to communicate, university bachelors should emphasise:**
 - general verbal and writing skills, especially those needed for academic writing tasks (i.e., through separate courses in writing and composition, English for academic purposes, verbal presentation techniques, primarily delivered through the disciplinary core courses)
 - acquisition of one or more European languages (English plus one other)
 - the use of the Internet and modern communications technologies.

Trailblazers Committee for the Accreditation of Dutch Higher Education, 2001.

EXAMPLE 4

Generic core qualifications for Dutch higher vocational Bachelors awards

A broad professional approach to equip students with up-to-date knowledge, incorporating recent scientific information, perceptions and concepts, research and developments in the (international) professional field, preparing graduates who can: independently carry out assignments in their chosen profession from the outset; function effectively within a work organisation; gain further professional experience in their chosen field.

- multidisciplinary integration. An ability to integrate relevant knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and skills drawn from various disciplines in order to function professionally
- scientific application. An ability to apply relevant (scientific) insights, theories, concepts and research results to issues that confront graduates in professional practice
- broad application. An ability to use knowledge, insights and skills in diverse professional situations
- creative and complex problem solving. An ability to find alternative solutions to problems in the workplace that are neither straightforward nor amenable to standard procedures
- problem-oriented approach. An ability to independently define and analyse complex situations in professional practice based on relevant knowledge and theoretical insights; to develop and apply appropriate solutions, and to assess the effects
- thinking and acting in a methodical and reflective manner. An ability to formulate realistic objectives; to approach tasks in a systematic manner, gathering and analysing relevant information
- social communicative skills. An ability to communicate, cooperate with others, and meet the requirements of a multicultural, international and/or multidisciplinary work environment
- basic qualifications for management functions. An ability to carry out supervisory and management duties
- an awareness of social responsibility. An understanding and working grasp of the ethical, normative, and social issues related to the acquisition of knowledge and future professional practice.

Trailblazers Committee for the Accreditation of Dutch Higher Education, 2001.

Entry Arrangements

One factor in decisions on the level of award to be attained by learners has traditionally been based on the standards of knowledge, skill and competence of those entering a programme leading to an award or on previous awards attained – i.e., learners are selected on the basis of a qualifying performance at some previous level of awards. The fact of this

performance in itself and the evenness of learner preparation it ensures is a major input into the nature and level of the award which those learners receive on completion of the programme. For example, for an award at degree level, only learners who have matriculated to a degree course are eligible. This is a rather circular argument and it places high reliance on the qualifying assessments. Pedagogically it rests on one of two assumptions: only people who demonstrate an entry qualifying performance are of sufficient ability to proceed to the target award in any circumstance, or only qualifying entrants can proceed to the target award given the specific learning experience currently offered by a given provider.

Duration

A traditional factor in the nature and level of an award is the duration of a programme of education and training typically required by a (usually full-time) candidate seeking such an award at one attempt. Duration can comprise, for example, notional learning time, contact hours or number of years. In different learning situations these can have different meanings, as the length of learning year / learning week can vary widely from one institution or programme to another. It is recognised that, in a way, duration of itself is not the key factor, rather it is understood by all that duration is a way to ensure application on the part of the learner, which is also assessed by other means. For example, a National Craft Certificate is normally reached after four years, a Bachelors Degree is reached after three or four years, and a National Certificate is obtained after two years. Part-time courses and credit-based systems sometimes deal in full-time equivalents or in some way use analogies with duration. Duration is typically operated in a manner which includes pre-requisites for entry, defined programmes of education and training, and process measures such as progression examinations.

It is generally recognised that, if lifelong learning means anything, the concept of duration of learning cannot be the principal driver of the level attained by a learner. Also, the differences between full-time learning and part-time learning need to be overcome. In this regard, it is of note that the Bologna Declaration can appear to be based on a system of the number of years of learning leading to award. However, the fact that the Declaration also focuses on quality assurance processes is also relevant – it would appear that the approach in the Declar-

ation is really to ensure that each country is aware of and confident in the quality assurance approaches of other countries and thus programmes of similar duration can be expected to have consistent outcomes.

Development of Learners

Levels can be differentiated in relation to the demands they place on the learner. These demands, in turn, may be analysed in relation to established and empirically validated models of the development of learning. For example, it is generally recognised that the ability to describe something precedes the ability to analyse something. There are various such models, however, and they may have different implications for the determination of the nature and level of an award. It is not proposed to predicate the framework on any one such model. However, the framework will be informed by these models in a general way.

National Currency and Credibility

Whatever framework of qualifications is determined, it will be necessary to establish its relationship to existing awards in the State. Some of these awards such as the Leaving Certificate, National Craft Certificate and the Bachelors Degree enjoy widespread recognition by learners, employers and the public at large and the new awards framework would have to take this into account. These awards can mark major transition/progression points in the provision of education and training and into employment. Specifying the outcomes associated with these awards, at present, and using these comparators for future awards, opens up the associated progression opportunities to a wider range of learners without undermining public confidence in the integrity of the awards system.

International Comparability

A major advantage of a national framework of qualifications is the prospect of increasing the international comparability of the learning achievements of learners in the State with their peers internationally. Some Irish awards already enjoy some international currency. These include Leaving Certificate, National Craft Certificate and Bachelors Degree. Internationally, various countries are formally attempting to specify their awards in terms of outcomes and this makes it opportune for the emerging Irish framework to take account of these developments. It is not simply a case of adopting

existing specifications or descriptors from other countries. Irish awards will fit within a unique national framework and within national traditions of education and training.

Stability of Award Standards

Award standards are intended to be stable and durable. Someone holding an award at a given level should have confidence that another learner with an award at the same level has demonstrated comparable knowledge, skill and competence, regardless of when that award was made. The generic award standards are stable over time. This is not to say, of course, that the substantial content of knowledge, skill and competence will not have changed. Indeed, it is expected that the specific content will be continually updated by those making detailed award specifications and correspondingly by providers making available programmes of education and training.

The specific criteria whereby awards are made are subject to change as circumstances change. The generic award standards are also subject to periodic review in accordance with the principles set out for the framework.

Assessment Methodology

The desired stability of award standards raises questions about the manner in which providers themselves measure knowledge, skill and competence. It may not be appropriate to make an award contingent on the achievement of a learner relative to other learners in his/her specific class, providing institution, or age cohort (norm-referencing). The critical comparison is of the learner's achievement with respect to the award standards. This would not preclude the use of norm referencing within individual components of a learner's assessment or for purposes of making comparisons.

A further issue is that the framework does not presuppose a uniformity or even harmonisation of assessment methodology either within or across levels. There are a variety of appropriate methodologies that may be used to measure knowledge, skill and competence. Indeed, it is in the interests of learners that a diverse range of assessment methodologies is available for the purposes of demonstrating attainment of standards. It is of note that the awards Councils have a function of ensuring that providers establish procedures for the assessment of learning that are fair and consistent.

There can be differing outcomes of assessment processes. In some cases there can be a number of outcome grades – this tends to be more in traditional academic areas. In other words, even where someone has attained the standard of knowledge, skill and competence to attain an award, a specific grade within an award can be assigned. In other cases, awards can be made on the basis of pass or fail – this tends to be in occupation-specific areas. The awards can simply refer to whether someone is able to undertake a specific task. There will be a need to incorporate these different types of outcome within the framework.

Validation of Programmes

A related issue is that the awards in the framework do not relate to the validation of programmes. This is a different issue. For example, the validation of programmes by either of the awards Councils is their responsibility and relates to the processes that they may use to satisfy themselves that a learner on completion of a programme may attain a standard of knowledge, skill and competence. As such, certification would be available for the acquisition of skills whether achieved in formal courses, on the job or in informal settings.

Permanence of Awards

Awards, when made, are generally not revoked or do not expire. The learning achievement attested by the award persists. Where awards confer a license to practise or equivalent access to employment, it is reasonable that demands should be made as to the currency of the knowledge, skill and competence recognised in the award. The knowledge, skill and competence may have a “shelf-life”, that is, they may no longer be current. Likewise, the learner may have forgotten what she/he had once learned. Where awards have been made in the past, although the award still stands as a permanent record of the learner’s attainment at a particular point in time, further learning may be required for access to a particular employment or progression to a programme of education and training.

Titles of Awards

There is a wide variety of titles of individual awards and awards levels currently in use. In many cases there is some consistency in the use of titles: for example, the use of Bachelors, Masters and Doctorate. However, there is considerable confusion

in respect of awards prior to Bachelors and in post-Bachelors study prior to Masters, leading to, for example, Higher Certificate or Higher Diploma. Also, for example, certificates and diplomas are awarded for a diverse range of achievements by various providers and awarding bodies. Some of these bodies have internally coherent mechanisms for differentiation among awards of different title. Others do not. The Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate are well recognised awards using the word “certificate”. There is a need to consider the extent to which titles of individual awards and awards levels should be clear and consistent

Employability

For many learners, employability is an essential reason for choosing an award. Employability refers to suitability for employment generally, on the one hand, and also suitability for employment in a particular occupation. These could be used as criteria for establishing whether a given award is economically valuable to the holder and some awards can be differentiated on how much of a contribution they make towards this goal. On the other hand, there may be awards within the framework which are not directly relevant to an occupation although they may be relevant in terms of general employability.

Grouping Awards

There will be a need to group particular awards within the framework to assist in the setting of standards. Most existing frameworks group awards in particular ways, for example:

- economic sectors
- specific occupations
- fields of learning
- subjects

Economic Sectors

The basic definition of an economic sector is a ‘homogenous group of productive economic activities’. The most common set of sectors is found in national accounts data. Economists define sectors in terms of their output. The sectors can be broad groupings or more specific e.g., the transport sector or the motor sector.

There are a number of existing economic sectors and professional bodies already operating in Ireland. These would have formal committee structures and often carry out research to identify occupational change, labour requirements and standards. They also determine the requirements for entry, awards, progression and recognition. Some of these sectors are directly linked to Government Departments and some of the awards are governed by legislation. The fishing and aviation sectors are two examples.

Building on this approach, economic sectors could be used in a framework of awards to define occupations, which in turn helps in the definition of the standards of knowledge, skill and competence required.

This could give rise to further relevant considerations. Within an occupation or economic sector, relevant subjects and specific levels could be identified. The number and level of subjects/units required for an award could be defined. These could be made up of generic and specific units. These units could consist of the knowledge, skill and competence required. These, in turn, could be further classified on the basis of complexity/level. There could be linkage within a sector and externally. There could be sets of portable skills that would allow transfer, and specific skills that are less enabling in this respect.

Awards for people working within a sector can be defined in relation to other awards within that sector. In this approach, the sectoral context is a key part of the classification of an award. An advantage of a sectoral approach to setting award standards is that it facilitates the participation of stakeholders.

Specific Occupations

Another approach would use occupational groupings. Some awards could be classified in relation to the occupation for which they equip a learner. The assumption is that there is some commonality across subjects or sectors in the level of knowledge, skill and competence required to perform certain occupational roles. These would form the basis for classifying the awards designed to certify a learner as being prepared for these roles. This approach tends to be more prevalent in relation to further education and training awards than in relation to higher education and training awards. In many cases, providers have direct links with the relevant professional bodies and employers and this helps to ensure that the programmes and those attaining the awards meet the needs of the occupation.

The occupational definition faces a difficulty in establishing the comparability of occupational roles. One possible mechanism for making such comparisons is through the examination of the salary levels of the holders of various awards, in a confined way within a specific occupational sector. That is to say that, within a particular occupational sector, a person's salary tends to reflect their standard of knowledge, skill and competence. Such an approach is part of the French system. However, care would need to be taken as salary levels can also depend on supply and demand and comparisons between different occupations are very difficult.

Fields of Learning

Another option would be to adopt a fields of learning approach. This is very similar to the economic sector approach, except that it is based on trying to group learning outcomes into a number of fields. This approach would ensure that, not only are the economic sectors included but other sectors which are not immediately relevant to industry are also included.

Subjects

In this approach, the subject elements of an award, or full awards in a single subject, are coherently set out. A subjects-based approach means there are awards which are not specific to an occupational sector but which are focused on a specific academic discipline or set of disciplines and can be classified in relation to other awards within the same discipline.

Arguably, much of higher education and training is based on a combination of the field of learning and subject approach. In addition, some faculties or departments have an occupational focus e.g., medicine and law, and some have a link with an economic sector, e.g., engineering.

Developing Appropriate Groupings

It is important to maintain the central role of the learner when deciding on the most appropriate approach to assist in the setting of standards. For learners the purpose of the learning will vary. Some learners are focused and take an occupational route from the beginning. Other learners start with a general course of studies and decide later on an occupation. The purpose of the learning will vary and will be reflected in the choice of award.

GROUPING AWARDS: AN EXAMPLE

The Teastas Executive suggested ways to group awards and subjects in the State, to assist in the setting of standards. One of these is as follows:

Natural Resources

- Agriculture
- Forestry
- Fisheries
- Food
- Marine
- Horticulture

Science and Computing

- Physical Science
- Biological Science
- Chemical Science
- Information Technology
- Software Engineering
- Pharmaceuticals
- Health and Safety

Engineering Technology and Craft

- Mechanical Engineering
- Civil Engineering
- Production Engineering
- Engineering Trades
- Electronics
- Construction
- Printing
- Architecture
- Computer Aided Design
- Graphic Design
- Textiles

Business

- Administration
- Accounting
- Law
- Secretarial
- Marketing
- Management

Services

- Catering
- Tourism
- Childcare
- Leisure
- Retail
- Personal Services
- Teleservices

Humanities, Arts and Crafts

- Languages
- Media
- Performing Arts
- Music
- Drama
- Art and Craft
- Social Science

This listing is given as an example of a possible way to group awards and subjects rather than a specific proposal.

The implication of the above is that it may be necessary to have a mixed approach for the grouping of awards. One approach might not be suitable for all awards and trying to work from a single approach could lead to problems. Initially, existing awards and levels will have to be incorporated into the framework. Similarly, it will be necessary to accommodate existing economic sectors and professions that are organised and range over various levels of awards.

A further related issue is which organisation or organisations would be individually or collectively responsible for ensuring that appropriate standards are set within the levels framework determined by the Authority. It is clear that collaboration will be needed to ensure that the awards made at each level of the framework and within common fields of learning are appropriate and consistent. This will be an important task, and the relevant organisations will ensure effectiveness by working together, and as appropriate with the Authority. It will also be necessary to have regard to the roles and responsibilities of the Authority, the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Dublin Institute of Technology, the universities and professional bodies.

QUESTION 3

Relevance of Awards Standards to Policies and Criteria for the Development of the Framework

Do you agree with the approach of the Authority in outlining the issues in relation to the policies and criteria for the measurement of standards of knowledge, skill and competence and what are your views on the issues? What other issues are there? What other approaches should the Authority take? How should awards be grouped within the framework to assist in the setting of standards and in what way should the standards be set?

Chapter 8 –

Relevance of Access, Transfer and Progression to Policies and Criteria for the Development of the Framework

The previous Chapter dealt with awards standards, the first issue in relation to the policies and criteria to be used for the development of the national framework of qualifications.

This Chapter concerns the second issue in this regard – the relevance of access, transfer and progression. There is a need to address the impact of access, transfer and progression in the development of approaches for the measurement of standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners and in the organisation of these measurements.

The development of the awards framework will intrinsically contribute to the promotion of access, transfer and progression, in that it will make it clear how awards relate to one another. This will make it possible for the learner to identify

- how, and at what point, they can enter a learning programme that will lead to an award
- what possibilities there are for transfer to another programme, and what recognition they will get for the knowledge, skill and competence they have already acquired
- what possibilities there are for progression to higher level learning opportunities from their prior awards.

The framework will be a key element in any strategy developed to promote access, transfer and progression: it is necessary that the design of the framework should reflect this. In this context, design features upon which opportunities for access, transfer and progression can be built are a prerequisite of framework construction. This Chapter discusses briefly a number of such design features, which might possibly include:

- framework inclusive of a system of credits for “learning units”
- identification of “portal” awards that enable access, transfer and progression
- multiple access points / modular award structures
- possibilities for updating learning.

Many of the issues in this Chapter are further dealt with in Chapter 12 which concerns how the Authority will facilitate and promote access, transfer and progression and the procedures to be established by the Authority. These two Chapters should be considered in combination. The issues are addressed in this Chapter specifically in terms of their relevance to framework design

Framework Inclusive of a System of Credits for “Learning Units”

The concept of lifelong learning implies that learners should be able to undertake units of learning at varying rates of progress, and perhaps not all in a continuous process. This, in turn, implies that it should be possible for the learner to receive recognition for their learning achievements in units far smaller than awards. A system of credit accumulation and transfer could be a vital element in developing a national framework of qualifications.

While there is general agreement that a system of credits for learning units is desirable, it is also clear that many issues arise as to how a system could be structured, and how it would be implemented. These include the following:

- learning units could be based on contact or participation duration, or on outcomes
- size is important: too big is inaccessible for learners; too small is difficult to administer
- credit for learning units may need to be theme-specific or subject-specific
- learning units may need to have varying values, based on levels within the framework
- it will be a challenge to design a credit system across the various modular and non-modular elements of the education and training system in Ireland
- it will be necessary to arrange for recognition and cross-recognition of credit for learning units by all providers and awarding bodies.

Identification of “Portal” Awards that Enable Access, Transfer or Progression

In the range of awards available across Irish education and training, it is apparent that a small number of awards carry particular value and significance – the Leaving Certificate, the National Craft Certificate, and the Bachelors Degree. These can be described as “blue chip” awards. A National Craft Certificate opens access to specific, structured career opportunities. However, the Leaving Certificate and Bachelors Degree are recognised as “portal” awards that enable entry to further learning opportunities. Portal awards can open access to multiple transfer and progression possibilities; this can be more advantageous to the learner than a variety of specific progression channels, particularly in the long-term, in the context of lifelong participation in learning. It is important to maintain the value and credibility of existing blue chip awards in the framework, and it may be necessary to identify other major points in the framework of qualifications that could be developed as portal awards.

Multiple Access Points / Modular Award Structures

Many of the actions that could be built into an awards framework to promote access, transfer and progression are greatly simplified in the context of modular approaches to programme design and delivery. There is a slow but definite trend towards modular formats, often accompanied by semesterisation, by many providers of further and higher education and training. It may be that further development of modular approaches and structures will be a pre-requisite for the fully integrated operation of a framework, and particularly for the realisation of access, transfer and progression objectives.

A linked issue is the need for multiple access points to programmes: this includes the question of entry to multi-year programmes after the first year, but it also involves the possibility of programmes having more than one entry point in the year.

In the design of the framework, the Authority will need to have regard to the developing vision of future structures and practices that allows for more flexible entry.

Possibilities for Updating Learning

In many fields of learning, very rapid programme change is now taking place in response to the changing environment. It is important that providers of education and training should be able to maintain this response, and any new arrangements made in the development of the framework should enable constant updating. In relation to progression, it will become increasingly necessary for learners to be able to undertake add-on programmes so that their original awards can be updated. In many modern employment fields, it is also necessary for workers to have available programmes that lead to “bolt-on” awards that extend the application of their original awards, without necessarily changing the level of the award attained. Clearly, this availability will depend on allocation of resources, but it is also important to ensure that the awards framework is structured to encourage and facilitate updating and extension of awards.

QUESTION 4

Relevance of Access, Transfer and Progression to Policies and Criteria for the Development of the Framework

What design features upon which opportunities for access, transfer and progression can be built are a prerequisite of framework construction? Do you agree with the approach of the Authority in outlining the features set out and what are your views on the features? What other features should be built in? What other approaches should the Authority take?

Chapter 9 –

Differentiating Further and Higher Education and Training

In the Qualifications Act there are separate definitions of further education and training on the one hand and higher education and training on the other. Further education and training is defined as being education and training, other than primary or post primary education or higher education and training, which is determined by the Authority under section 10 of the Act to be further education and training. Similarly, higher education and training is defined as being education and training, other than primary or post primary education or further education and training which is determined by the Authority under section 10 to be higher education and training. It is clear that a crucial task for the Authority is to define further education and training and higher education and training separately for the purposes of this Act and its implementation.

This has an important implication for the work of the two awards Councils and for the framework in general. It will be necessary for everyone involved to know the separate, but linked, remits of each of the Councils and a significant part of this will be the definitions of further education and training on the one hand and higher education and training on the other.

Under section 10 of the Qualifications Act, the Authority has a specific function to determine either

- whether any particular programme of education and training is further education and training or higher education and training, or
- whether the standard of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by a learner for the purposes of an award is at the level of a further education and training award or a higher education and training award.

In making such a determination, the Authority is required to have regard, as appropriate, to:

- the programme of education and training concerned, or
- the standard of knowledge, skill and competence acquired by a learner however acquired, or
- a combination of these two.

There is also a guideline in the legislation that a programme of education and training, which leads to the attainment by learners of a standard of knowledge, skill and competence which is not higher than the level at which before the 3rd day of March, 1999, the National Council for Vocational Awards had made awards, is to be further education and training unless the Authority determines otherwise. At that date the National Council for Vocational Awards had made awards at a number of levels up to and including their level three award.

It would appear implicit that awards in the new framework at an equivalent to level three awards previously made by the National Council for Vocational Awards should be further education and training awards. However, the legislation does stress that it is a matter for the Authority to determine. There is a need to consider what are, or should be, the distinctive features between further education and training on the one hand and higher education and training on the other hand, and indeed, the distinctive features between standards of knowledge, skill and competence leading to further education and training awards or higher education and training awards.

Traditionally, there has been a separation between higher education and other education. Such a distinction was generally based around who were the providers of such education. In the 1995 White Paper on Education, *Charting Our Education Future*, a new distinction between further education and higher education was introduced for the first time, which set out to formally establish a new understanding of further education. This included what was previously known as vocational education and training – courses, which were funded by the Department of Education and Science, for learners who had completed second level. It also included apprenticeship programmes, which it referred to as operating primarily in designated trades. In addition, within further education, it was set out that adult and continuing education and training were to be part of this newly defined sector. The Qualifications Act is the first time that the terminology “further education

and training” has been introduced into legislation. Indeed, this Act is the first time that the State has made a separation between further education and training on the one hand and higher education and training on the other. It is also the case that it is the first time that the State has, in a composite piece of legislation, set out to address in an combined way all learning, whether it be in the traditional education or training sectors.

In addition, it is important to note that the distinction between further education and training and higher education and training is not meant to be a repeat of distinctions such as that between education and training or that between vocational and academic/liberal. Such distinctions are not made in the Act and it is not necessary for the Authority to define such terms in isolation from each other.

It is necessary for the Authority to come to an understanding of the difference between further education and training and higher education and training for the purposes of the implementation of the Act. The determination to be made by the Authority in this regard, while it may have an impact beyond the work of the Authority, is a determination that only applies in the context of the Qualifications Act.

It will be necessary for the Authority to establish criteria to define separately further education and training and higher education and training. It is considered that, in doing this, it would be necessary to build on the same policies and criteria that are used in the development of the framework in the first instance. Given that the framework is to be defined, in particular, in terms of the standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners, and that this is specifically referred to also in section 10 of the Act in relation to determining the difference between further education and training on the one hand and higher education and training on the other hand, the approach of the Authority could be to build further upon this.

There are deep conceptual questions arising from trying to separate further education and training and higher education and training, respectively. It would appear that there is a need to provide for direct progression from second level education into higher education and training, to reflect the existing situation for many school leaving learners. On the other hand, there is also a need to have regard to the availability of awards, within the framework, to be made by the Further Education and Training Awards

Council, for learners perhaps seeking access to awards for the first time and to ensure that the framework meets the need of such learners. It would also appear that there is a need for progression for school leaving learners into further education and training. A further related issue is how progression can be made available from a further education and training award to a higher education and training award and indeed, perhaps, from a higher education and training award to a further education and training award.

In considering these issues, questions arise as to whether levels of further education and training and higher education and training could or should overlap. In such a model, some levels would be exclusively for further education and training awards, some levels would be shared by further education and training and higher education and training awards and some levels would be exclusively for higher education and training awards. Furthermore, it is quite possible that a learner could attain, for example, a higher education and training award and may subsequently seek a further education and training award as part of their learning development.

QUESTION 5
Differentiating Further and Higher Education Training

How should the Authority define further education and training on the one hand and higher education and training on the other? Should levels of further education and training and higher education and training overlap? If so what are the characteristics which differentiate between the two at the shared levels?

Chapter 10 - The Inclusion of Awards in the Framework

Introduction

The framework will need to be as comprehensive and as inclusive as possible of all awards attained by learners in the State. This is important in terms of the immediate relevance of such awards to learners and to employers. In addition, it is relevant to progression opportunities for learners.

This Chapter sets out issues in relation to how awards can be included in the framework. It looks separately at the following groups of awards:

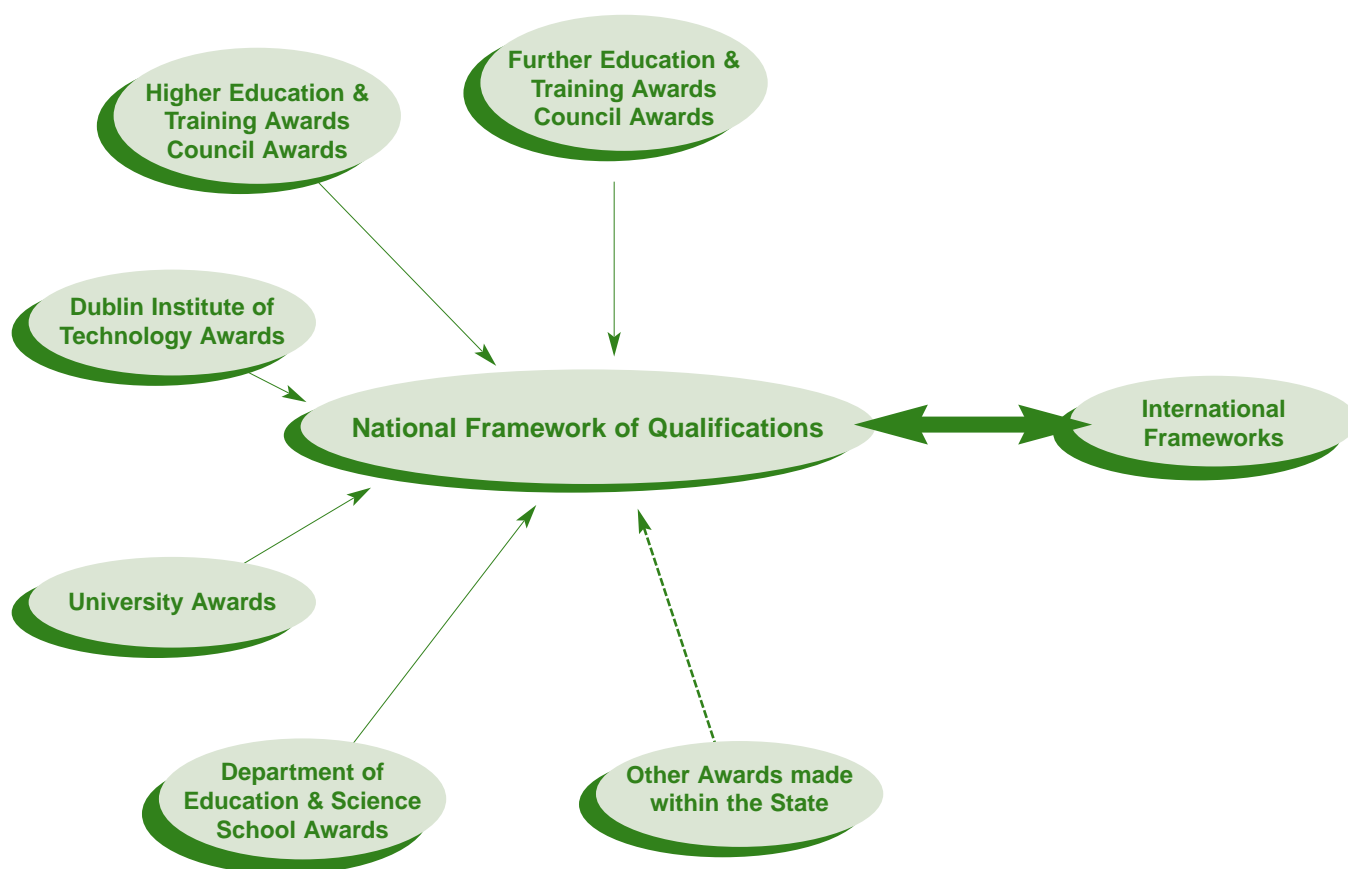
- awards from public bodies in the State
- private awards bodies and international awards bodies.

The Chapter also looks at international links with the national framework of qualifications.

Awards from Public Bodies in the State

The objects of the Act set out that the framework is for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State. It is clear that the awards of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Further Education and Training Awards Council and of the Dublin Institute of Technology can be included in the framework through the setting of the overall standards for these awards by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and the related functions of the Authority in relation to determining the procedures to be performed by the awards Councils in the performance of their functions and in relation to the quality assurance procedures of the Dublin Institute of Technology.

At the same time, there will be a need to include other awards in the State in the framework to be developed by the Authority. Under the Universities



Act, and previous legislation and charters, the universities have the right to make awards and to set their own standards of the awards. It will be necessary to include these awards in the framework. Universities have statutory rights to determine the standards for their own awards and their statutory provisions in relation to quality assurance are set out in the Universities Act, 1997. The Higher Education Authority has a review role in relation to these quality assurance procedures and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has a new role to be consulted by the Higher Education Authority when the Higher Education Authority is undertaking this task. Accordingly, while it is intended that university awards be included in the framework, a standard-setting or direct quality assurance review role for the Qualifications Authority in relation to university awards is not envisaged.

It is also important to include awards made at second level within the framework in a meaningful way. The quality assurance review arrangements for these awards are set out in the Education Act, 1998, and are the responsibility of the Minister for Education and Science and of the inspectorate. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment also has a responsibility for advising and reviewing curriculum and assessment in schools. It will be necessary to have regard to the diversity of certification arrangements at second level. Within the Junior Certificate, there will be a need to take account of the Junior Certificate School Programme. Within the Leaving Certificate, it will be necessary to include the Leaving Certificate Vocational and the Leaving Certificate Applied awards, as well as the established Leaving Certificate. In all of these awards, there is a need to cater for the variety of levels at which subjects are taken.

In summary, it is not the role of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland to oversee the quality of statutory award making bodies such as the Department of Education and Science and the universities. There will be a need for the Authority to ensure that it is aware of the processes and procedures that are in place, and to determine the position of their awards in the framework having regard to the standards of knowledge, skill and competence relating to these awards.

Private Awards Bodies and International Awards Bodies

A further issue relates to the inclusion in the framework of other awards and qualifications which are currently made in the State. These include awards by professional bodies or international awarding bodies which operate within the State.

Under the Act, other than the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology, all State-funded providers of education and training are to submit their programmes for validation to either the Further Education and Training Awards Council or the Higher Education and Training Awards Council. Validation is the process by which either of the two awards Councils satisfies itself that a learner may attain knowledge, skill and competence for the purpose of an award. Accordingly, all provision in State funded providers, other than the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology, in further education and training and higher education and training, is generally to lead to an award from either the Further Education and Training Awards Council or the Higher Education and Training Awards Council. In these circumstances, the need to fit national and international awards, other than the ones already referred to, into the framework may not arise, as all the programmes need to be submitted for validation in any case and they would link in through the awards and validation functions of the awarding Councils. The requirement for publicly funded providers of education and training to submit programmes for validation does not take away from their freedom to also seek to have awards made by other awarding bodies in addition to the Further Education and Training Awards Council or the Higher Education and Training Awards Council. Accordingly, the issue of other awards bodies offering awards to publicly funded providers can be considered in this context.

Also, in the case of the institutes of technology, other than the Dublin Institute of Technology, there are specific legislative requirements which they are to follow if they are seeking to enter into an arrangement for making awards with any authority other than either of the two awards Councils, e.g., a professional body. In such instances, any arrangements would need to be approved of by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.

Having considered the above, there may still be a need for the Authority to include in the framework awards by professional bodies or international awarding bodies which operate within the State, where the providers are not publicly funded. One possibility would be to establish the framework initially, and following this, to fit such awards into the framework in an appropriate way. Consideration needs to be given to how this could be done. It could involve working with the awards Councils and with the Dublin Institute of Technology and the universities as appropriate. There would also be a need

for the Authority to satisfy itself as to the processes in place in such a professional body or international body for establishing the standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners, and to validate programmes, thus paralleling the validation and quality assurance functions of the awards Councils. Appropriate and rigorous processes for this will need to be developed and implemented. The appropriate involvement of the awards Councils in these processes would need to be considered.

Linkages outside the State

An associated issue is the need to link the framework with international frameworks of awards. In this regard, the Authority has a statutory function to liaise with bodies outside the State which make awards for the purpose of facilitating the recognition in the State of the awards made by those bodies and to facilitate recognition outside the State of all the awards made in the State. This is an increasingly important issue. It is relevant to those with awards from outside the State entering the State and seeking employment or access to further learning opportunities. This issue has recently been raised by the Irish Refugee Council. In addition, it is relevant to those with awards from inside the State wishing to pursue employment or learning opportunities outside the State.

The Authority will need to determine procedures and mechanisms to fulfil this task and to link with other bodies responsible for national frameworks in doing so. There are, of course, countries where national frameworks have not been developed and this would make the task more difficult. Furthermore, while the Authority may be able to advise on an Irish equivalence for an award, it would be a matter for an employer or a provider to accept any such advice.

There are two separate qualifications systems on the island of Ireland. There will be a need for the Authority to work closely with our partners in Northern Ireland, so as to ensure that mobility is supported between the two jurisdictions. This mobility concerns both the mobility of learners themselves and of labour generally. The key role of the Authority will be in facilitating the mutual recognition of awards.

At present the Department of Education and Science is the contact point in relation to two EU Directives on the recognition of qualifications and planning is underway for the Authority to assist the Department.

The Directives are:

- Council Directive 89/48/EEC of 21 December 1988 on a general system for the recognition of higher-education diplomas awarded on completion of professional education and training of at least three years' duration
- Council Directive 92/51/EEC of 18 June 1992 on a second general system for the recognition of professional education and training - diplomas, certificates and titles other than those obtained by higher education of at least three years' duration.

Planning is also underway for the implementation of the recommendations of the European Forum on the Transparency of Vocational Qualifications. The European Forum proposed that each Member State would:

- establish a system to issue, together with each official national certificate, a certificate supplement in the official national language, which could be translated on a voluntary basis in one or more other EU languages; the certificate supplement will be based on a common European format
- designate one national reference point responsible for providing information on national vocational qualifications; the national point would be the national partner in a European network of reference points.

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, with appropriate support from the Further Education and Training Awards Council, is to act as the National Reference Point. The Further Education and Training Awards Council, working with the Authority and the providers of further education and training, is to lead the work of the development of certificate supplements.

There is also a need to explore appropriate linkages with the network of national academic recognition information centres (NARIC). This network is an initiative of the European Commission and was created in 1984. The network aims at improving academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study in the Member States of the European Union, the European Economic Area countries and the associated countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Cyprus. The network is part of the European Union's Programme SOCRATES/ERASMUS, which stimulates the mobility of learners and staff between higher education institutions in these countries. The

national centre in Ireland is located in the Higher Education Authority. There will also be a need to link with the European Network of Information Centres , set up following the Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region. Ireland has yet to ratify this treaty and the Department of Education and Science is at present reviewing its position in this regard.

QUESTION 6

**The Inclusion of Awards
in the Framework**

Through what processes should the Authority include different types of awards in the framework – e.g., those of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Dublin Institute of Technology, the universities, Department of Education and Science in relation to schools, private awarding bodies, international awarding bodies making awards in the State? Through what process should the Authority link the framework with frameworks of awards made outside the State?

Chapter 11 – Standards of Awards – of the Awards Councils and the Dublin Institute of Technology

Introduction

There is a need to discuss the Authority's second object – to establish, and promote the maintenance and improvement of, the standards of further education and training awards and higher education and training awards of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology. There is a clear link between this and the development of the framework itself. This standard-setting role is also relevant to any university which may be established in the future.

This object in turn is linked to the function of the Authority to determine the procedures to be followed by the Councils in the performance of their functions and the Authority's review role in this regard. It is also linked to the quality assurance procedures of the awards Councils and the quality assurance responsibilities of the Authority in relation to the Dublin Institute of Technology. The object is also linked to the appeals role of the Authority in relation to validation refused or withdrawn, or delegation of authority refused or withdrawn by an awards Council.

Role of the Authority in the Development of Award Standards

The national framework of qualifications is to be developed by the Authority building on the implementation of principles, policies and criteria discussed above.

In the case of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology, the Authority is required to initially establish the overarching standards of their awards. Subsequently, the Authority's role is to promote the maintenance of these standards.

In undertaking this task, the Authority will work with the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology. It must also have regard to the respective statutory roles and responsibilities of each of these.

The extent of the link between the level descriptions set out by the Authority in the framework and the standards of the awards of the Councils and the Dublin Institute of Technology is important. Accordingly, the addressing of this issue is very relevant to the criteria set out above and discussed in relation to the development of the framework.

Working with the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council

The Authority is required to determine the procedures to be followed by the Councils in the performance of their functions and the Authority is also to review the performance of their functions. This requirement means that the Authority will play a vital role in promoting the maintenance of the standards of the awards of the Councils.

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

- establishing and publishing policies and criteria for the making of awards
- establishing and publishing policies and criteria for validation of programmes
- determining the standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners before an award may be made

- monitoring and evaluating the quality of programmes
- ensuring that assessment procedures established by providers for the recognition of learning are fair and consistent and compliant with the award standards of the framework
- delegating authority for the making of awards.

The procedures to be developed by the Authority will be the overarching guide for the Councils to follow in the performance of these functions. It is the responsibility of each Council to implement its statutory functions, which are set out in the Act, and it is not the role of the Authority to either determine precisely how the Council should perform its functions or endorse the manner in which the Council is performing, or is intending to perform these. This is important in the context of the review role of the Authority. Were the Authority to be seen to be either determining how the Council should perform its functions or endorsing the performance of the functions by the Council, this would be inconsistent with the review role, in particular, and with the thrust of the Act, in general. Accordingly, the procedures set by the Authority cannot really be a detailed plan for each Council on how it intends to perform its functions, rather it is an outline of the overarching approach which each Council should take in performing them.

In any event, the Authority has already set a number of procedures for the Councils in relation to the performance of their functions. To date, these have mostly been transitional procedures. It will also be important for the Authority to ensure that, whatever procedures are set, these are reviewed and updated on a continuing basis.

The first crucial element to the development of procedures is that the Authority is required to consult with each Council on the matter. In relation to the transitional procedures, the practice has been for the Councils to formally advise the Authority and, to date, the Authority has acted on this advice. The advice has been prepared in consultation with the relevant stakeholders.

The possible nature of further procedures to be set by the Authority will be subject to further discussions with the Councils. The following are issues that should be considered in the context of such discussions and subsequent procedures to be set by the Authority

- the need for the Councils to consult with relevant stakeholders in the performance of their functions generally
- the need for the Councils to ensure consistency in the individual award standards that they are setting with the overall standards set by the Authority

- the need for the Councils to develop validation practices to reflect the diversity of programmes of education and training that are developing, including, in particular, new types of programmes such as work-based learning, community learning and e-learning.
- the need for the Councils to recognise the responsibility of providers of education and training for their own processes (e.g., assessment, quality assurance) and the extent to which different types of providers may be able to take more responsibility than others, while some may need more guidance and assistance
- the advisability for the two Councils to have consistent, but not necessarily identical, processes and arrangements in place
- the need to work together in relation to addressing key policy issues, e.g., accreditation of prior learning
- the need for the Councils to work together, and indeed with the Authority, in certain instances, e.g., certain work with defined fields of learning
- the need to ensure that the Councils inform themselves in a consistent manner of best practise inside and outside the State.
- the need to ensure that the Councils facilitate providers of education and training in implementing the Authority's procedures for access, transfer and progression.

The review role of the Authority in relation to the performance of the functions of each Council is also important.

Appeals Role of Authority

The Authority has a specific appeals role in relation to validation refused or withdrawn, or delegation of authority refused or withdrawn by an awards Council.

It is generally felt that the availability of appeals processes for these decisions will be of assistance to all concerned. It can help to ensure that the processes of the Councils are robust while also providing for an opportunity to ensure that the outcomes of processes are fair.

The Authority has already put in place the following transitional appeals mechanism in relation to validation being withdrawn or refused under sections 17 and 27 of the Act:

- the Authority would be requested in writing by the provider of the appeal and the provider would also inform the appropriate Council that it was appealing
- the provider would set out the grounds for the appeal and the nature of the appeal as part of the above request; the grounds for the appeal shall be:

- the processes and procedures of the awards Council
- the implementation of the processes and procedures of the awards Council
- information basis for decisions of the awards Council
- consistency of the awards Council's decisions
- conduct of meetings/hearings/visits by the awards Council
- integrity/conflict of interest
- the Authority would put in place a committee of at least four people comprising the Chairperson or a member of the Authority as his nominee (other than the Chairperson of either Council), the Secretary and such others (either members, employees or others) as may be appointed by the Authority – in exceptional circumstances, if it is not possible to convene a meeting of the Authority, the chairperson will appoint the committee
- the Authority will ensure that there is no conflict of interest in the membership of the committee
- the committee would consult with the provider and with the relevant Council in relation to the appeal and review the procedures implemented by the Council and any relevant documentation
- the committee would make a recommendation to the Authority
- the Authority would consider the advice of the committee and make a decision
- the provider and the relevant Council would be informed of the decision.

It will be necessary for the Authority to further develop this procedure as appropriate in the future. It will also be necessary in the future to develop particular procedures for appeals in relation to delegation of authority to make awards.

Working with the Dublin Institute of Technology

As well as having the function of setting the overall standards of the awards and of promoting the maintenance of the standards of the awards, the Authority has particular links with the Dublin Institute of Technology in relation to quality assurance. These links provide for the Dublin Institute of Technology agreeing its procedures for quality assurance with the Authority. The Authority also has a review role in relation to the implementation of these procedures.

The approach taken by the Authority in working with the Dublin Institute of Technology will need to help to ensure the effectiveness of the procedures and their consistency with procedures in place under the aegis of the Councils and in the universities.

Collaboration

In light of the common responsibility of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology for awards standards, these organisations will be among the stakeholders that the Authority will involve in the development of the framework of qualifications.

Collaboration will also be needed to ensure that the awards that they make at each level of the framework and within common fields of learning are consistent. This will be an important task, and its effective implementation will require the organisations working together, and as appropriate with the Authority.

QUESTION 7

Standards of Awards – of the Awards Councils and the Dublin Institute of Technology

How should the Authority set the overall standards of awards of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology? What approaches should the Authority take to determining the procedures which the Councils need to follow in the performance of their functions? How should the Authority develop its appeals role? What approach should the Authority take to working with the Dublin Institute of Technology in relation to quality assurance? How should the Authority encourage appropriate collaboration among the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology?

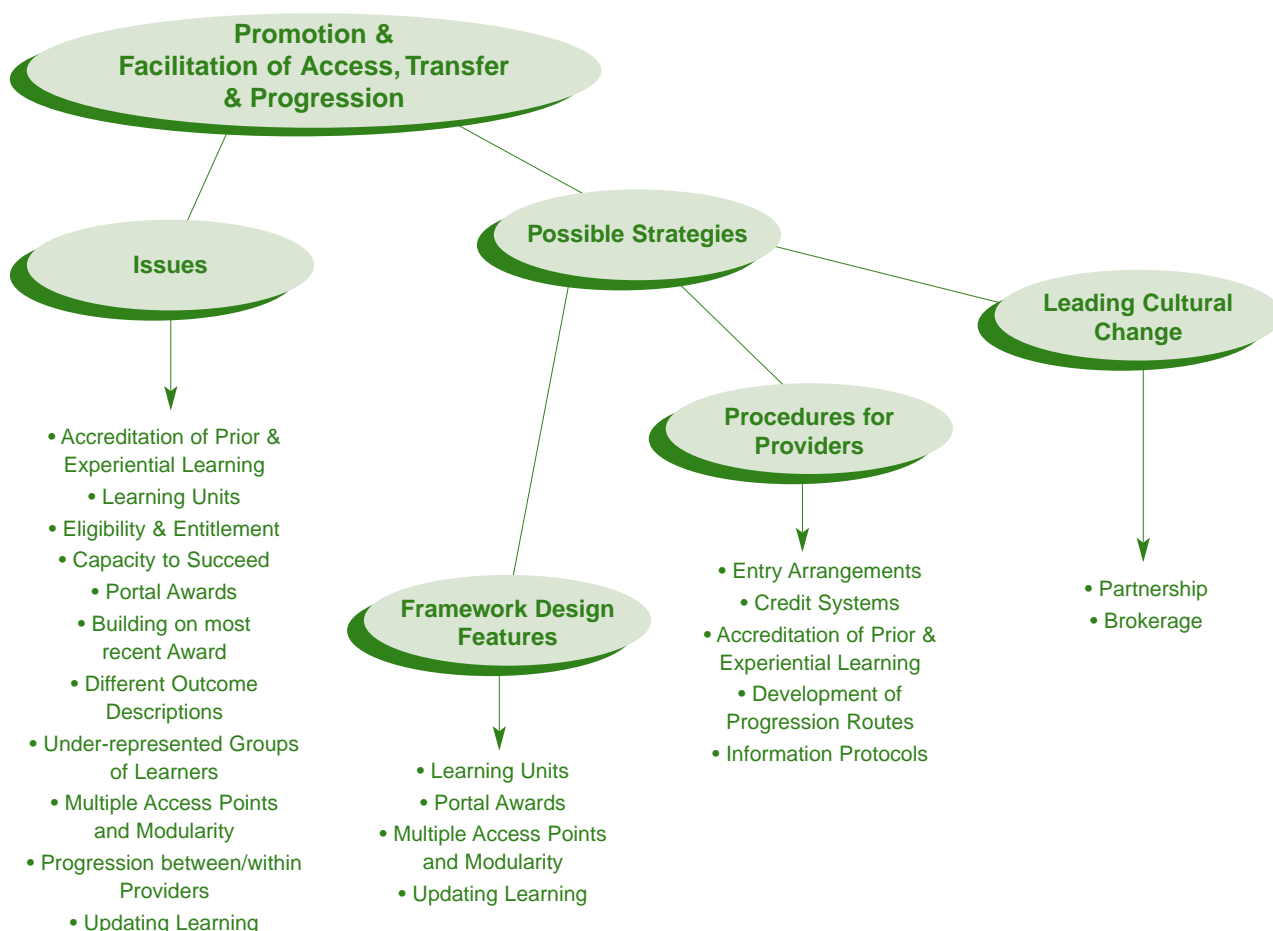
Chapter 12 – Facilitating and Promoting Access, Transfer and Progression

Context

A critical task of the Authority is to promote and facilitate the opportunities for learners to gain access to programmes of further and higher education and training, and to transfer and progress between programmes in pursuit of their goals of achieving awards. This is in line with the spirit and the specific provisions of several recent legislative and policy documents: the White Paper “Learning for Life” (2000), the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (Lisbon), the Universities Act (1997), the report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education (2001), the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999) and the work of the Task Force on Lifelong Learning (to be completed in 2002).

The Qualifications Act lists the promotion and facilitation of access, transfer and progression as one of the three core objectives of the Authority. It specifies among the functions of the Authority that it should determine and publish procedures for access, transfer and progression to be implemented by providers of programmes of education and training.

Apart from the legislative and policy contexts, it is clear that the facilitation of access, transfer and progression is identified as a priority issue by most of the significant stakeholders in the fields of education and training in Ireland today, and several sections of the learning community have already begun to add-



ress this issue in their structures and programmes. The work of the Authority will build on the advances already made, input into the development of a comprehensive strategy on a national basis, and facilitate the implementation of the strategy in a realistic timeframe.

This Chapter explores issues relating to the promotion and facilitation of access, transfer and progression. Following this, it suggests a range of possible actions that the Authority could undertake in this matter

Definitions

The Qualifications Act defines access, transfer and progression as follows:

- **Access** – The process by which learners may commence a programme of education and training having received recognition for knowledge, skill or competence required.
- **Transfer** – The process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme having received recognition for knowledge, skill or competence acquired.
- **Progression** – The process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme, where each programme is of a higher level than the preceding programme.

The Authority is not charged with comprehensive responsibility for all actions that need to be taken to extend the levels of participation in further and higher education and training: its remit relates to the promotion and facilitation of access, transfer and progression in the context of the establishment and maintenance of an awards framework. The definitions in the Act are made in this context.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to expand on these definitions, to ensure that actions undertaken can contribute as strongly as possible to the general objective of encouraging lifelong learning, as the Authority has a key role to play in realising this objective. In particular, it may be useful to consider the concept of “access”, as it applies to the participation of under-represented learner cohorts such as those with special education needs, learners from disadvantaged communities, learners in the workplace and adult learners generally. A more appropriate definition of access for these groups may need to include programme adaptation, or provision of in-process supports, or even the provision of new

variants or formats of programmes (e.g., part-time or modular formats). For all learners, it might be more productive to focus the access concept on completion (achievement of the award) rather than on entry. In straightforward terms, access to a programme of education and training is not a worthwhile aim if it is immediately followed by exit. This is very much in line with the understanding of access outlined by Professor Malcolm Skilbeck and Dr Helen Connell in the report “Access and Equity in Higher Education: An International Perspective on Issues and Strategies”, published by the Higher Education Authority in May 2000. They present the following definition of access for learners:

“the global, inclusive term of ‘equity’...refers to... policies and procedures for enabling and encouraging groups in society at present under-represented as students in higher education institutions and programmes or study areas, to gain access to and demonstrate successful performance in higher education, and transition to the labour market...”

While this definition is in the context of one type of learning (higher education), it can also apply beyond this and across all learning.

The concept of “progression” is very much linked with that of access to learning. It can also have a further dimension of progression into an occupational field or into an occupational level, particularly in relation to programmes that are intended to have a direct occupational outcome.

A composite concept of access, transfer and progression suggests that the learner should be able to enter, participate and succeed in a programme, or series of programmes leading to an award, and, where appropriate, be able to use the award as an entry to employment. Acceptance of the composite concept of access, transfer and progression implies that the learner should have available

- information and guidance
- opportunity for entry – this includes eligibility and availability of a place (there is no point in having eligibility for a non-existent opportunity)
- support in participation
- clarity of process leading to an award outcome, including possibilities for transfer and progression.

The Authority, through its strategic actions, can contribute to the provision of many of these requirements – information, eligibility for entry, and clarity of processes.

Issues

In developing a strategy to promote and facilitate access, transfer and progression, it will be necessary to take into account a number of factors that have been the subject of considerable debate, or that are perceived as issues. The following discussion is exploratory; no decisions have been made as to how these factors should influence the framework or any other work of the Authority. It is hoped that further discussion and comment on these matters, as well as the identification of any further issues not listed here, will arise out of the forthcoming consultation process.

Accreditation of Prior (and Experiential) Learning

Interest in the accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning has grown considerably in recent years; this interest is on both the learner and provider sides of education and training. Much work has already been undertaken in Ireland on developing systems for accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning. The benefits of accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning are clear, particularly in the context of lifelong learning and the objective of extending arrangements for access, transfer and progression. Accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning offers

- possibility of entry to programmes for many under-represented categories of learner, at levels appropriate to their capacities
- possibility of accessing awards without participation in a programme or through a modified programme
- a way of enabling those with low attainment levels to be accommodated in the framework
- recognition of the learning undertaken abroad by foreign nationals – e.g., refugees or immigrant workers (this is not the same issue as the recognition of foreign professional qualifications).

In considering these issues, it will be necessary to address some difficulties already encountered in the work done so far:

- the effective deployment of accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning procedures may require considerable commitment of resources
- practices in the accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning can differ significantly among various providers
- take-up of accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning opportunities by learners has not been extensive: it is by no means an easy process, and it places a heavy onus on the learner

- there has been confusion among learners and providers between exemptions from programme requirements for recognised prior learning (or credit towards awards) and accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning directly for awards
- the implementation of accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning is much easier in a context where a credit or learning-unit system is already part of the assessment and awards structures
- the extent to which the accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning can be seen as leading directly to an award rather than as an access point to a programme.

It is necessary to consider what is the best way to address these difficulties. The Authority has the potential to play a central role in this regard and the issue is strongly linked to development of the Authority's procedures for access, transfer and progression.

Learning Units

The concept of lifelong learning implies that learners should be able to undertake units of learning at varying rates of progress, and perhaps not all in a continuous process. This, in turn, implies that it should be possible for the learner to receive recognition for their learning achievements in units far smaller than many existing awards. A system of credit accumulation and transfer could be a significant element in the opening up of the national framework of qualifications for learners. It would significantly facilitate the implementation of accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning measures. There has been little formal or systematic use of credit systems across further and higher education and training programmes, although within particular areas varying approaches have been developed. In particular, there is little opportunity for learners to use credit for learning units to move between programmes or between providers.

While there is general agreement that a credit system is desirable, it is also clear that many issues arise as to how a system could be structured, and how it would be implemented. There are many possible models for the design of a system, and it is most important that any design to be implemented should meet the needs of the learners while operating realistically in the Irish education and training environment. Learning units could be based on contact / participation hours, or on outcomes. The size of the basic learning unit will be a critical factor: if it is too big, many learners will be unable to use it, but very small units would be extremely costly to administer. The European Credit Transfer System might provide a starting point for development, particularly in higher education and training.

Another issue is the acceptability of credit for learning across different fields of learning or subjects. It may be necessary that credit for learning units be “subject-specific”, or that credits be valid for transfer and progression only within defined thematic strands. Where successful participation on a programme requires a particular mix of knowledge, skill and competence, it might be feasible to identify this mix from the credit profile of applicants. Advancing from the issue of subject-specificity, it will be necessary to decide whether all learning units should have the same value or should be in a hierarchy – e.g., based on levels within the framework.

The implementation of credit systems is significantly easier in modular than in non-modular programmes, and it will be a challenge in the Irish situation to design a common system of credits that will be able to operate across and between modular and non-modular systems.

It is stressed that the guiding principles of simplicity and transparency are particularly relevant to the development of a system which facilitates credit accumulation and credit transfer.

Apart from these operational issues, there is a need to address the wider question of the recognition of credit for learning units by all providers, and the supports that would be required to enable institutions to participate in a credit system. Many organisations have responsibility for aspects of this matter – institutions, awarding bodies, professional bodies, and the Authority.

Eligibility and Entitlement

The issue of eligibility versus entitlement is a crucial one. At present, entry to many programmes is decided by selection processes: it is generally the case that many applicants have achieved the basic entry requirements (and are therefore eligible to participate), but are not selected – there is no entitlement to a place.

The most common selection mechanism for entry into higher education and training is the points system; however, adult applicants are selected by a wide variety of selection processes. These were discussed in the reports of the Commission on the Points System and of the Action Group on Access to Third-Level Education. In the case of adult applicants, a further issue of quotas arises, as the number of places available outside the points system can vary widely from programme to programme.

The development of a framework of qualifications, and systems for credit accumulation and accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning, have the potential to facilitate learners in demonstrating eligibility and capacity to succeed on a programme; these measures will not in themselves affect the level of provision, or the number of places made available to particular applicant groups. It also has the potential to help providers to develop their thinking in relation to how they should continually review and adapt, as appropriate, their definitions of eligibility.

Capacity to Succeed

It is commonly suggested that it is in the interests of learners, programme providers and awarding bodies – and ultimately employers – that capacity to succeed should be the main criterion for entry to any programme.

The difficulty lies in establishing capacity to succeed. It is difficult for generalised institution-wide minimum entry standards to assess capacity to succeed on a particular programme. For entry to third-level education and training, there are also programme-specific requirements. It may be an issue that such minimum entry Leaving Certificate requirements are not high enough in some instances to provide that entrants have the ability to participate effectively in a programme and succeed in achieving an award. At the same time, there needs to be flexibility in other ways for entry standards to be measured to ensure that the needs of diverse learners are met.

The availability of the framework as a reference point should enable progress to be made in establishing the capacity of learners progressing through the award structure. It is more difficult to establish reliable predictors in the case of learners entering from non-formal learning backgrounds, but an effective credit system could greatly facilitate this. However the assessment of suitability is made, it is essential that the process be clear and transparent, and consistent across similar programmes from different providers. Effective assessment of capacity to succeed could have potential benefits for providers, as their main objective in selecting is to ensure that those entering have the capacity to participate and complete the programme.

From the learners' viewpoint, it is very difficult to know whether a programme would be suitable, or to prepare for undertaking a programme, if the factors that would predict success are not analysed and published. If this information was available, the learner could focus clearly on the optimum objective of a successful outcome, i.e., the attainment of the award, not on success in gaining entry.

Portal Awards

In the range of awards available in the Irish education and training systems, it is apparent that a small number of awards carry particular value and significance – the Leaving Certificate, the National Craft Certificate, and the Bachelors Degree. These can be described as “blue chip” awards. A National Craft Certificate opens access to specific, structured career opportunities. However, the Leaving Certificate and Bachelors Degree are recognised as “portal” awards that enable entry to further learning opportunities.

There is general agreement that it is important to maintain the value and credibility of these blue-chip awards in the context of any new arrangements made for access, transfer and progression. Portal awards can open access to multiple transfer and progression opportunities; this can be more advantageous to the learner than a variety of specific progression channels, particularly in the long-term, in the context of lifelong participation in learning. It may be necessary to identify other particular points in the framework that could be developed as portal awards: there is much potential for new thinking in this regard and consideration will need to be given to achieving this.

Building on Most Recent Award

There can be difficulties in relation to progression, due in part to the diverse range of existing practices. There may be an entry requirement on progression, e.g., to have a National Diploma, where there is also a requirement to have a specific attainment in the Leaving Certificate. This can often create difficulties for learners in trying to progress. Related to this is the situation where a learner has a specific attainment in an award, but that attainment is not considered high enough to provide for progression to an award at a higher level. There will be a need to consider what steps need to be taken to ensure that appropriate common approaches are introduced to facilitate meeting the progression needs of learners.

Different Outcome Descriptions

There can be differing outcomes of assessment processes. In some cases (typically in more traditional academic areas of learning) there can be a number of outcome grades: in other words, even where a learner has attained the standard of knowledge, skill and competence to attain an award, a specific grade within the award can be assigned. In other cases, awards are made on the basis of pass or fail - this tends to be in occupation-specific areas. These

awards can simply refer to whether a learner is able to undertake a specific task. There will be a need to incorporate such different types of outcome within the framework. It is important that differences such as these are not used in a way which impedes progression: in other words, threshold performance (pass) should permit learners to proceed to programmes of education and training and to access awards at higher levels, and there is a need to develop appropriate strategies to support learners in doing so.

Under-represented Groups of Learners

Some providers of further and higher education and training have always oriented their provision towards a wide range of learner groups: particularly the training organisations, but latterly also in the Post-Leaving Certificate programmes. Other providers have tended to cater mainly for particular learner cohorts, typically those making the direct transition from post-primary education. It is an objective of the Qualifications Act, and of the Authority, to facilitate much greater opportunity for participation across further and higher education and training by under-represented groups of learners such as those with special education needs, learners from disadvantaged communities, learners in the workplace and adult learners generally. There has been much discussion in relation to the identification of such groups, the barriers they face, and possible ways of removing these barriers.

The framework is to be developed based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence. There is a view that a tension exists between maintaining the standards of awards and increasing and diversifying the types of learners accessing programmes leading to awards. There is evidence that this issue can be addressed through the development of appropriate strategies. This requires the commitment of all stakeholders. Providers need the support of these stakeholders to assist them in meeting the needs of such diverse groups of learners.

It is generally understood that entry arrangements alone will not be a sufficient response to the access issue for many of these learners. It will be necessary to adapt curricula and teaching methodologies to new learners' needs, provide supports and focus on successful outcomes as the objective. In relation to higher education, for example, the report of the Action Group on Access to Third-Level Education sets out the range of supports needed. Apart from financial and other material support, this includes additional programme inputs, and guidance and mentoring provision.

Ultimately, the involvement of significant numbers from under-represented groups of learners will depend on the achievement of fundamental changes in the way programmes are designed and delivered, with much more availability of modular formats and part-time provision. A multi-faceted partnership of organisations will be needed to bring this about. The Authority, through the national framework of qualifications and the setting of procedures to promote access, transfer and progression, can make a significant contribution to the task of increasing participation by under-represented groups of learners. It will be necessary to plan and implement any actions undertaken in close co-operation with other structures and organisations that provide support to these learners. Funding agencies have a key role in the development of successful strategies, as such agencies can deliver the necessary resources to assist providers.

Multiple Access Points / Modularity

Multiple access points and modularity are two separate but related issues. Many of the actions that could be undertaken to promote access, transfer and progression – and the concept of the qualifications framework itself – are greatly simplified in the context of modular approaches to programme design and delivery. There is a slow but definite trend towards modular formats, often accompanied by semesterisation, by many providers of further and higher education and training; in particular, the approach is already well developed by some further education and training providers, and in many programmes leading to professional awards at post-graduate level. It may be that further development of modular approaches and structures will be a prerequisite for the fully-integrated implementation of actions arising from the establishment of a framework, and particularly for the realisation of access, transfer and progression objectives.

A linked issue is the need for multiple access points to programmes; this includes the question of entry to multi-year programmes after the first year, but it also involves the possibility of programmes having more than one entry point in the year. Obviously, the introduction of such arrangements would require significant cultural changes for providers, and the allocation of significant resources. These changes would be much easier to achieve in a context where modularity and semesterisation, and a system of accredited units of learning, already operate.

In the development of the framework, and in the design of procedures to promote access, transfer and progression, the Authority will need to have regard to the developing vision of future structures and practices that allows for more flexible entry.

Progression between / within Providers

The development of an awards framework implies that learners will have opportunities for transfer and progression in several dimensions – within institutions, between institutions, within and between awarding bodies. This will involve addressing issues of recognition of learning for progression, and deciding whether this should be done on the basis of level and general subject area, or whether closer content matching is necessary; as with several other issues, this process would be greatly simplified in a context where a system of credit for learning units was in operation.

From the point of view of the learner, there needs to be consideration about how all of the progression routes that are being developed are presented to them. There will be a need to ensure that these are initially developed and then mapped out for learners in a coherent way.

It is vital that any arrangements made avoid solving one inequality by creating another. The implementation of the procedures for access, transfer and progression will inevitably lead to increased access by progression to programmes that also accept learners on an ab initio basis through the points system. Care will need to be taken to ensure that any such routes being developed do not become primarily a new direct route for those who narrowly missed entry to such a programme. In the development of progression routes, there will be responsibilities for both the provider of a programme from which a learner is progressing and the provider of a programme into which a learner is progressing. Consideration will have to be given to the adaptation of programmes on both sides of the progression equation, to ensure that progression opportunities are available to learners, and to provide for entrants from under-represented learner groups, who may have special needs. It is important to recognise that such developments are unlikely to take place spontaneously; appropriate facilitation and co-ordination may be required

Current Learners and Previous Awards

In any actions undertaken to develop the awards framework, and in any procedures set out to promote access, transfer and progression, it will be necessary to ensure that current learners are protected, and that there is consistency in the new system with awards made under previous awarding bodies.

Updating Learning

In many fields of learning, very rapid programme change is now taking place in response to the changing environment. It is important that providers of education and training should be able to maintain this response, and any new arrangements made in the development of the framework should enable constant updating. In relation to progression, it will become increasingly necessary for learners to be able to undertake add-on programmes so that their original awards can be updated. In many modern employment fields, it is also necessary for workers to have available programmes that lead to “bolt-on” awards that extend the application of their original awards, without necessarily changing the level of the award attained. Clearly, this availability will depend largely on allocation of resources, but it is also important to ensure that the awards framework is structured to encourage and facilitate updating and extension of awards.

Possible Strategies to Promote and Facilitate Access, Transfer and Progression

The Qualifications Act sets as an object for the Authority to “promote and facilitate access, transfer and progression”. The Act also defines the functions of the Authority, some of which are directly relevant to the access, transfer and progression agenda. The Authority is to

- determine the procedures to be implemented by providers of programmes of education and training for access, transfer and progression, and publish those procedures
- ensure, in consultation with the Dublin Institute of Technology and any new universities established, that access, transfer and progression procedures are implemented
- facilitate and advise universities in implementing access, transfer and progression procedures, and review their implementation.

In addition to these, there are several functions set out that relate to the establishment and maintenance of a national framework of qualifications. The deployment of these functions would enable the Authority to develop and implement a strategic programme of actions towards the access, transfer and progression objectives outlined. This programme could include

- the incorporation of features relevant to access, transfer and progression in the design of the framework of qualifications – this is addressed in Chapter 8 above
- the development of procedures to be implemented by providers in relation to
- entry arrangements for to programmes
- systems for credit accumulation
- arrangements for accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning
- procedures for the development of progression routes
- information protocols
- leading a cultural change.

It will also be necessary to ensure that the implementation of any such programme is appropriately reviewed so that the programme can be further developed.

Development of the Framework of Qualifications

The framework will intrinsically contribute to the access, transfer and progression agenda, in that it will make it clear how awards relate to one another. This will make it possible for the learner to identify

- how, and at what point they can enter a learning programme that will lead to an award
- what possibilities there are for transfer to another programme, and what recognition they will get for the knowledge, skill and competence they have already acquired
- what possibilities there are for progression onto more advanced study from their prior awards.

The design of the framework will be influenced by factors arising out of the access, transfer and progression agenda. In this context, key design features could include

- development of a system of credits or “learning units”
- identification of “portal” awards that enable access, transfer or progression
- multiple access points / modular award structures
- possibilities for updating learning.

These possible design features are discussed in Chapter 8 above.

Access, Transfer and Progression Procedures

A critical function of the Authority is to determine the procedures to be implemented by providers of programmes of education and training for access, transfer and progression. There is a need to consider the nature of the procedures to be determined by the Authority and the following paragraphs discuss some possible procedures, under five headings:

- arrangements for entry to programmes
- systems for credit accumulation
- arrangements for accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning
- procedures for the development of progression routes
- protocols for information on access and progression.

Entry Arrangements

Consideration needs to be given to setting procedures in relation to the arrangements put in place by providers for application for entry to further and higher education and training programmes. In this context, entry is understood as being entry on initial access or by transfer or progression. Transparency of arrangements is clearly an important dimension to this, as is the need to show that all applicants are treated in a fair, equal and consistent manner. The sort of issues that could be considered would relate to

- the development of statements of the knowledge, skill and competence needed by the learner to succeed on the programme
- the nature of the assessment of learners for entry and how “capacity to succeed” might be assessed in this regard
- the organisation of learning in a way which provides for units of learning and appropriate systematic credit for these
- the requirement, as appropriate, to recognise nationally certified awards for entry.

In addition, the Authority could consider how it might encourage providers to undertake structural and procedural changes that would extend the accessibility of programmes leading to awards, e.g.:

- the adaptation of programmes to meet the needs of entrants from under-represented learner groups, e.g., modular arrangements, or the availability of add-on learning units to meet a knowledge, skill or competence deficit in a progression route
- the development of the decision-making process on the manner in which places are made available.

Systems for Credit Accumulation

Consideration could be given by the Authority to setting out possible requirements for providers in relation to the development of a system or systems of credit accumulation and transfer. Any such developments could be facilitated by the Authority and the awards Councils, as appropriate. Such a system or systems could be a significant element in the opening up of access, transfer and progression opportunities for learners.

Elements of the procedures could include:

- a possible model for the design of a system or systems
- policies on the value, acceptability and recognition of credit for learning across different fields of learning or subjects and across levels
- the need for common approaches across providers.

Arrangements for Accreditation of Prior (and Experiential) Learning

Linked to this, it is possible that the procedures could set out particular arrangements for the use of accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning and suggest ways in which practices could be harmonised by providers. Elements of this could include:

- all providers developing and publishing in a defined format a statement of arrangements available for accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning, for entry to each of their programmes, and for access to an award; these statements would define the interface between the possibilities for accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning and the statement of competencies needed by the learner to succeed on a programme (see above)
- all awarding bodies developing and publishing a statement of arrangements available for accreditation of prior (and experiential) learning for access to each of their awards.

Procedures for the Development of Progression Routes

The awards framework will define the relationship between awards; this will contribute to improved transfer and progression arrangements. However, the framework in itself will not satisfy the requirement for clarity, transparency and consistency of transfer and progression possibilities that is central to the ultimate implementation of a lifelong learning strategy.

Accordingly, the Authority will need to consider procedures to be implemented by providers to promote

the extension of progression routes at all levels of the system, and to clarify for learners the arrangements for use of progression routes. The following elements are relevant for consideration:

- the need for providers to ensure that specific progression routes are put in place by agreement with other providers
- the need to ensure that these routes are integrated and mapped out so that learners can have options
- the need to develop progression routes for the particular portal awards determined by the Authority and other nationally certified awards as appropriate
- the need to adapt programmes to provide for progression into them from other programmes.

Information Protocols

Building on this and the need for transparency, there is a need to consider the establishment of procedures to ensure that learners and prospective learners are able to get comprehensive information in a clear, straightforward and consistent manner in relation to all of the issues covered above.

These procedures could include adherence to protocols whereby

- all providers would publish in a common and accessible format for each programme
- the arrangements for eligibility to enter, including a statement of the knowledge, skill and competence needed by the learner to succeed on the programme
- arrangements to assess capability to succeed
- further selection arrangements, where these apply
- possibilities for transfer and/or progression associated with the programme, including any relevant specific progression linkages
- all providers would gather and make publicly available in a common format data to indicate the take-up of access, transfer and progression opportunities in their programmes
- all information and publicity documentation referring to a programme leading to an award would include a statement of the arrangements for entry, and a description of the transfer / progression possibilities into and out of the programme.

Leading a Cultural Change

Many of the issues to be addressed in achieving the objective of enhanced arrangements for access, transfer and progression will require significant changes in systems and structures, and in attitudes. The outcome will be a diverse learner community throughout further and higher education and training; it will include a higher proportion of adults,

more learners engaged in part-time programmes, workers seeking to update or extend their awards, and many learners with a variety of special needs. These new participants will require new entry procedures to ensure accurate matching of learner and programme, new kinds of provision, and new arrangements for progression as they seek to meet their personal learning and award objectives. Whatever specific strategies are adopted, it is certain that it will be necessary for many groups and individuals at all levels in our education and training systems to participate in and contribute to processes of change. Furthermore, it will be necessary for funding agencies to consider the deployment of appropriate resources to encourage and contribute to such changes.

The Authority will need to take a lead role in the implementation of change. There will be a need to consider the appropriate role of the Authority in brokering progression arrangements. In this regard, the objectives of the Authority will be supported by the two awards Councils, whose function it is to ensure that the procedures set down for access, transfer and progression are implemented by providers under their aegis.

It is important to note that the Authority has a specific facilitatory and advisory role for the universities in this matter. Consideration will need to be given to how the Authority could perform this function in a way that best meets the needs of the universities.

In relation to the development of a system or systems of credit accumulation and transfer, many organisations have responsibility for aspects of this matter – institutions, awarding bodies, professional bodies and the Authority. Should the Authority set out procedures for providers, there will be a need for the Authority to work with the providers and the awards Councils, as appropriate, in planning for the implementation of such change. It will be necessary to identify the appropriate roles and responsibilities for the development and implementation of a system, and to set a realistic development schedule.

QUESTION 8

Facilitating and Promoting Access, Transfer and Progression

Do you agree with the approach of the Authority in coming to an understanding of access, transfer and progression? What are your views on the issues raised – Are they properly described? Should some of the ones referred to be excluded? Are there other ones that should have been mentioned? What are your views on the possible procedures discussed – Should some of the ones referred to be excluded? Are there other ones that should have been mentioned?

Chapter 13 – Overarching Questions

It is recognised that the preceding Chapters of this Part may not have exhausted the issues of relevance to stakeholders. Accordingly, it is relevant for learners, employers and providers to consider how the Authority will perform its functions generally, having regard to the preceding Chapters.

The issues addressed by this document are both far ranging and specific. It is considered that there is a need to consider these issues from the perspective of learners, employers and providers. The questions posed elsewhere in this document are directly related to the detail of the Chapter to which they refer.

Learners will be those that to whom the implementation of the framework will be immediately relevant. It will form the backdrop to life changing decisions. It will impact on themselves and their families. Lifelong learning can become a reality for them through its implementation. Learners will be of all ages and backgrounds, of all abilities and needs. The framework must facilitate the meeting of all their needs and requirements, specifically in the areas of access, transfer and progression.

Employers are another group for which the framework will be relevant on a regular basis – for recruiting staff, for staff training and developing staff. The framework will impact on economic development as it will set out the standards of knowledge, skill and competence that the labour force will achieve. It will have to cater for changes in technology and the markets. A future focus will have to be built in. Employers will have a large part to play in both developing and maintaining the framework. Industry in many cases can be the only source of expertise and knowledge of certain developments. Full co-operation with providers and award bodies will be required to ensure that the needs of all are met.

Providers of education and training provide services to the other two major stakeholders. They form the interface between the framework and the learner and employer. They are the key to the successful implementation of access, transfer and progression. Providers are very diverse, ranging from individuals to institutions employing thousands of people. They

are a source of innovation in methods of facilitating and assessing learning. While the framework may be formalised, providers are independent of the Authority in their activities. They will have a responsibility and an obligation to participate fully in delivering the outcomes of the framework. They will have to form partnerships with learners and employers in order to obtain maximum benefit from these new developments. They will need to be aware of the needs of the wider society.

QUESTION 9

What are your views on the relevance of the issues and suggestions made in this document to meeting the needs of learners? Are there other ones that should have been mentioned? Does the document fully address the diversity of learners and potential learners? What are the main actions that the Authority should take to meet the needs of learners?

QUESTION 10

What are your views on the relevance of the issues and suggestions made in this document to meeting the needs of employers? Are there other ones that should have been mentioned? What are the main actions that the Authority should take to meet the needs of employers?

QUESTION 11

What are your views on the relevance of the issues and suggestions made in this document to the role of providers? Are there other ones that should have been mentioned? Does the document fully address the diversity of providers and potential future providers and their appropriate roles and responsibilities?

Part III
Consultation & Next Steps

Chapter 14 – Consultation Process

The role of this document, and in particular of Part II above, is to put forward some ideas on how the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland will approach the performance of its functions. It is stressed that the Authority is seeking views in relation to the performance of the functions for which the Authority itself has responsibility. Views are requested in relation to any of the issues raised in Part II of the document and indeed, in relation to the performance of the Authority's functions generally.

Submissions are invited on this document and the Authority would wish that all submissions be made prior to the end of January 2002.

There is a provision on the Authority's website to download a response form to this paper. The website of the Authority is at www.nqai.ie. All those submitting responses are requested to try and return this form as their submission to the Authority, or as part of their submission. Written submissions are requested. The Authority would also request that, if possible, submissions would be made electronically. The intention is that all of the submissions made to the Authority will be publicly available on the website and may also be distributed by the Authority. In this way the views of each of the various stakeholders can be apparent to other stakeholders. The website also contains some background information on the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. The Qualifications Act is also available on the website.

The Authority will always welcome the views of stakeholders in relation to how it should perform its functions and should it not be possible to make a submission by the end of January 2002 the Authority will, of course, give consideration to those views submitted. However, the formal period for making submissions will cease at the end of January, as there is a need for the Authority to advance with its further work.

The Authority will host a public seminar on 14 February 2002 in Dublin Castle. The aim of this seminar will be to provide stakeholders and all interested parties with an opportunity to discuss this document as well as the submissions that have been made in relation to it. Details in relation to the seminar will be publicised on the website of the Authority and all are welcome to attend.

Chapter 15 – Next Steps

After the seminar and the completion of the formal consultation process on this document, it will be a matter for the Authority to advance with the performance of its functions.

The initial step envisaged is to determine the principles and the policies and criteria on which the national framework of qualifications will be based. The Authority is required to establish policies and criteria under section 8 (2)(a) of the Act. The Authority aims to establish these in March 2002 and to make them publicly available.

Following this, the Authority aims to make an initial determination on an outline national framework of qualifications in May or June 2002. As well as publishing an outline framework, the Authority also aims to determine the procedures to be implemented by providers of the programmes of education and training for access, transfer and progression as are required under section 8(2) (d) of the Act at the same time.

In addition this consultative process will also inform the Authority in performing its functions generally. The Authority wishes to stress that the publication of this document is merely the first consultative step of many in the work of the Authority.

Appendix
Summary of Questions arising from
Chapters 4 – 13

Appendix – *Summary of Questions arising from Chapters 4 - 13*

Question 1 – Chapter 5

Do you agree with the approach of the Authority in building from an initial set of principles? What are your views on the principles – Should some of the ones referred to be excluded? Are there other ones that should have been mentioned? Are the principles outlined accurately described?

Question 2 – Chapter 6

Do you agree with the approach of the Authority in developing a set of guidelines for its working processes? What are your views on the guidelines – should some of the ones referred to be excluded? Are there other ones that should have been mentioned?

Question 3 – Chapter 7

Do you agree with the approach of the Authority in outlining the issues in relation to the policies and criteria for the measurement of standards of knowledge, skill and competence and what are your views on the issues? What other issues are there? What other approaches should the Authority take? How should awards be grouped within the framework to assist in the setting of standards and in what way should the standards be set?

Question 4 – Chapter 8

What design features upon which opportunities for access, transfer and progression can be built are a prerequisite of framework construction? Do you agree with the approach of the Authority in outlining the features set out and what are your views on the features? What other features should be built in? What other approaches should the Authority take?

Question 5 – Chapter 9

How should the Authority define further education and training on the one hand and higher education and training on the other? Should levels of further education and training and higher education and training overlap? If so what are the characteristics which differentiate between the two at the shared levels?

Question 6 – Chapter 10

Through what processes should the Authority include different types of awards in the framework – e.g., those of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Dublin Institute of Technology, the universities, Department of Education and Science in relation to schools, private awarding bodies, international awarding bodies making awards in the State? Through what process should the Authority link the framework with frameworks of awards made outside the State?

Question 7 – Chapter 11

How should the Authority set the overall standards of awards of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology? What approaches should the Authority take to determining the procedures which the Councils need to follow in the performance of their functions? How should the Authority develop its appeals role? What approach should the Authority take to working with the Dublin Institute of Technology in relation to quality assurance? How should the Authority encourage appropriate collaboration among the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology?

Question 8 – Chapter 12

Do you agree with the approach of the Authority in coming to an understanding of access, transfer and progression? What are your views on the issues raised – Are they properly described? Should some of the ones referred to be excluded? Are there other ones that should have been mentioned? What are your views on the possible procedures discussed – Should some of the ones referred to be excluded? Are there other ones that should have been mentioned?

Question 9 – Chapter 13

What are your views on the relevance of the issues and suggestions made in this document to meeting the needs of learners? Are there other ones that should have been mentioned? Does the document fully address the diversity of learners and potential learners? What are the main actions that the Authority should take to meet the needs of learners?

Question 10 – Chapter 13

What are your views on the relevance of the issues and suggestions made in this document to meeting the needs of employers? Are there other ones that should have been mentioned? What are the main actions that the Authority should take to meet the needs of employers?

Question 11 – Chapter 13

What are your views on the relevance of the issues and suggestions made in this document to the role of providers? Are there other ones that should have been mentioned? Does the document fully address the diversity of providers and potential future providers and their appropriate roles and responsibilities?