

National Qualifications
Authority of Ireland



Údarás Náisiúnta
Cáilíochtaí na hÉireann

**Report on the Workshop on the
inclusion of international awards in the
national framework of qualifications,
Dublin, 2 May 2003**

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Report on the workshop on the inclusion of international awards in the national framework of qualifications

2 May 2003

Introduction

The workshop was opened by Mr. Seán Ó Foghlú, chief executive of the Authority. He indicated that as a result of the submissions received to the discussion document on the Inclusion of Professional and International awards in the national framework of qualifications it was decided to hold two workshops to consider each of the two broad categories of awards. An earlier workshop had considered the professional awards issue in February 2003 and this workshop concerned the inclusion of international awards in the national framework of qualifications. (The report of the previous workshop on professional awards was included in the participants pack and is available from the Authority and its website at www.nqai.ie.)

A further differentiation between international and global awards was made for this workshop in order to address issues specific to each and to facilitate as much discussion as possible. Mr. Ó Foghlú outlined the purpose and the structure of the workshop. The aim was to review the submissions received on the inclusion of international and global awards in the national framework of qualifications, to discuss issues arising and possible approaches to inclusion.

The format of the workshop involved participants being updated on the developments and work to-date of the Authority, followed by a review of the submissions. This was followed by a perspective on developments in the higher education area at the European level. The presentations were followed by parallel sessions on issues relevant to international and global bodies in which participants had the opportunity to discuss and debate the issues. Each session had a chairperson and rapporteur. After these sessions reports were made back to the overall group based on the issues raised. This was followed by a general discussion.

Update on the Development of the National Framework of Qualifications

(Presentation by Mr. Eamonn Carey, Development Officer, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland)

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 was fully enacted in June 2001. Its main aims are to establish and develop standards of knowledge, skill and competence; promote the quality of further and higher education and training; provide a system for co-ordinating and comparing awards

and promote access, transfer and progression for learners. It focuses on learning outcomes which are described in terms of knowledge, skill and competence. It also aims to promote lifelong learning.

The structural arrangements in the Act provide for the establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and two awards Councils – the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC).

Role of the Authority and the awards Councils

The key role of the Authority is to establish and maintain a framework of qualifications; to establish and promote the maintenance of standards of awards of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology, and to promote and facilitate access, transfer and progression.

There are separate but interdependent roles for the Awards Councils and the Qualifications Authority under the Act. The role of the Awards Councils is to develop policies and criteria for the making of further/higher education and training awards and the validation of programmes of further/higher education and training and to implement such policies. In this context, it was noted that the Authority is not an awarding body: it does not provide or fund education or training and is not a support agency for providers of education and training programmes.

There is a strong rationale for separating the role of the Authority from that of the awards Councils in the Act. This reflects the role of the Authority to concern itself, as appropriate, with all awards made in the State, for example, the awards of the Dublin Institute of Technology, the universities and the Department of Education and Science in addition to the awards made by the Councils. The Authority has the key policy development role in setting out the cultural change that is implied in the implementation of the Act and in the development of the framework of qualifications, in leading such change and in ensuring that it is implemented.

Framework Development

In moving towards the establishment of the national framework of qualifications, the Authority has completed a number of phases of work. It published an overall Discussion Document in November 2001 and invited submissions on it. Over 80 public submissions were received in response to this document and this led to the public forum, held in Dublin Castle, in February 2002. This was followed by the publication of initial policies and criteria for the development of the framework in April 2002. Further policies and criteria for the framework were published in October 2002. Determinations on the

number of levels in the framework – it will have 10 levels – and indicators for each these levels were also published by the Authority in October 2002. Determinations on the initial major award-types and their titles were made in March/April 2003.

As part of the process of developing the framework, the Authority also prepared a research paper on the comparison of international frameworks (June 2002). Also, following initial consultations, it published a discussion document on the inclusion of professional and international awards (May 2002). This was accompanied by a request for responses and submissions. In parallel, work on the employment perspective is underway. This includes the publication of a report of focus group discussions on the issue in January 2003. (All the documents listed above and submissions received are publicly available on the Authority’s website (www.nqai.ie.)

A priority for the Authority has been to consult and to build as much consensus as possible among the stakeholders on the development of the framework. This process involved, for example, the establishment of a Consultative Group, comprising representatives of the major stakeholders, an Employment Perspective Group, a Technical Advisory Group on Credit and an on-going series of bilateral meetings with stakeholders.

What is the National Framework of Qualifications?

The national framework of qualifications is a new development and is not just an amalgam of existing awards and systems. It is “a framework for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State, based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners” (Qualifications Act, 1999). In its policies and criteria (April 2002), the Authority further defined this to be “the single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards”.

The framework embodies a vision for learning which recognises all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective.

There are many benefits associated with the national framework of qualifications. It focuses primarily on learner needs. It promotes the setting of standards for awards in a coherent and transparent way and promotes the quality of both programmes and awards. The framework will create a coherent and understandable system for co-ordinating and comparing awards. In addition, it will facilitate international comparisons between awards. By broadening the possibilities for recognising learning,

the framework will facilitate lifelong learning. In addition, it will also facilitate access, transfer and progression.

Key elements of the framework

In terms of the inclusion of awards, the national framework sets 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. It will also accommodate the awards of the Department of Education and Science and the Universities. The aim is that the framework will include other professional and international awards made in the State.

The framework will comprise 10 levels. These levels are a series of sequential steps. Each level sets out a range of standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners. Levels are not in themselves standards but indicators of a range of standards. They can be described in an ordered sequence. Level indicators are set out in the Grid of level indicators (which was determined by the Authority in October 2002 and is available on its website). The indicators are the principal element of the framework in terms of indicating overall standards associated with awards to be made at each level.

Award-types have been developed for each level in the framework. They reflect a mix of standards of knowledge, skill and competence which is independent of any specific field of learning. Level indicators enable award-types to be matched to a level on an overall, best-fit, basis rather than by conformity to a defined set of required standards. For each award-type, a wide range of named awards will be developed by the Awards Councils and other awarding bodies.

It is the responsibility of the Authority to develop level indicators and award-type descriptors. It is the responsibility of the awarding bodies to develop named awards. However the overall standards of named awards will be set by the award-type descriptors.

The following box indicates the set of initial award-types for each level in the framework that have been determined by the Authority based on the outcome of consultations to date.

Box 1: Initial Major Award-Types

Level 1	Level 1 Certificate
Level 2	Level 2 Certificate
Level 3	Level 3 Certificate and Junior Certificate
Level 4	Level 4 Certificate
Level 4/5	Leaving Certificate
Level 5	Level 5 Certificate
Level 6	Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate
Level 7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree
Level 8	Honours Bachelor Degree and Higher Diploma
Level 9	Masters Degree and Post-graduate Diploma
Level 10	Doctoral Degree

The titles of the initial major award-types are part of the framework determinations made by the Authority. The Authority has further decided that the two awards Councils should implement the titles as determined and the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology should be requested to implement the titles. The outline framework will contain fifteen award-types. The award-types at levels 7-10 will be made by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Dublin Institute of Technology and the universities. At level 6, the Advanced Certificate award will be made by the Further Education and Training Awards Council, and the Higher Certificate award will be made by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology. At levels 3 – 5 awards will be made by the Department of Education and Science (Examinations Commission). At levels 5 and below, the Further Education and Training Awards Council will make awards.

Access, Transfer and Progression

In March 2003, the Authority determined the policies and procedures that must be implemented by providers with programmes validated by the awards Councils or by those with delegated authority. These must also be actively considered by universities and their implementation will be reviewed by the Authority.

The objective is that the learner should be able to enter and successfully participate in a programme, or series of programmes leading to an award, or series of awards, in pursuit of his/her learning objectives.

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

In this context, the Authority has defined specific policies, actions and procedures through which it will meet its objectives in relation to access, transfer and progression. These are the areas of: credit (and recognition of prior learning); progression routes; entry arrangements and information provision.

Time-table for further development of the outline framework

The key elements of the outline framework, in addition to the policies and criteria, are the levels and award-types. The award-types and award-type descriptors have been determined by the Authority in March/April 2003. At the same time, the Authority has determined policies on access, transfer and progression. The Authority is now consulting with the awarding bodies in relation to their timetables for the setting of new standards and the placing of existing awards in the framework. The overall maximum transition period is until June 2006. The communication process about the framework is also continuing and will occur in a series of stages. It will initially focus on stakeholders who have key roles to play in implementing the framework. This will be followed by a public launch and broader communication with learners and other end users of the framework.

Review of the submissions on the inclusion of international awards in the national framework of qualifications.

(Presentation by Dr. Anna Murphy, Director of Framework Development)

The presentation covered the main issues concerning international awards that were addressed in the Discussion Document on the inclusion of professional and international awards and in the submissions received following its publication. First, the context for considering the question of inclusion is briefly set out.

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 refers to the emerging national framework of qualifications as being for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State. The vision for the framework is that it will be inclusive and comprehensive. However, the inclusion or exclusion of a particular international award from the framework does not impact upon the right of an international awarding body to operate in Ireland – i.e. the framework will not regulate such activities. Many currently operate in Ireland and have relations with the awarding bodies and a range of providers of further and higher education and training. While there is no compulsion for the inclusion

of awards in the framework, other than where these are made by public bodies, the aim of developing a comprehensive, coherent and inclusive national framework of qualifications raises the question of how awards made by international bodies can be included in it.

As part of the development process, and in response to the growing number of international and professional awards available to learners, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland engaged in a public consultation on the question of including professional and international awards in the framework. It published a Discussion Document which addressed this issue in May 2002. In response to the submissions received, a first workshop was held in February 2003 to address professional awards. This second workshop addresses the inclusion of international (and global) awards.

Of the 24 submissions made on the discussion document, five were from international bodies. The others were from national awards councils, providers, professional bodies and national organisations. Most international bodies indicated that, in principle, they favour inclusion of their awards in the framework. While many agreed with the rationale for inclusion presented in the document, some did not. A 'wait and see' approach was adopted by some bodies which was linked to the due to the developmental stage that the national framework is in. It was also suggested that an approach which aims for the 'recognition' of international awards might be more appropriate than one which seeks their formal inclusion in the framework.

Range of international bodies

One of the first steps in the consultation process was to identify the kinds of international bodies that offer awards to learners and their existing relationships with the national education and training system in general and with learners, providers and national awarding bodies. Two broad categories were identified in the discussion paper and are summarised in Box 2 below:

Box 2: Range of International bodies

1. International Bodies

These are awarding bodies based primarily in one country but offering awards to learners based outside the host country. Generally there are two ways in which international awarding bodies operate. In some instances, they provide their own programmes and make the awards themselves, such as the Open University. In other instances, they operate as external certifiers for programmes provided by other providers of education and training in a State. In some cases, the awards of these international bodies are included in the framework of qualifications in their host country, where such a framework exists.

2. Global Bodies

There are international awarding bodies that operate in specific sectors of areas of education and training, principally in information technology. These tend to be bodies that are based in more than one country and that operate in a number of countries. They are often linked to global corporations. Examples of these include Microsoft, Intel, Cisco, Lotus, Novell and Sun. These global awarding bodies have been described as existing in a “parallel universe” to traditional awarding bodies. The awards they offer may be vendor-specific e.g. those developed by Microsoft or vendor-neutral e.g. those offered by Comptia and ECDL. These awards may also be offered by publicly-funded providers and/or integrated into programmes that lead to nationally recognised awards. There are no generally agreed international processes in place for the recognition of global awards in national frameworks of qualifications.

The two categories of bodies have different sets of relationships with providers of education and training, national awarding bodies, and learners. These relationships need to be considered when designing processes for including their awards in the national framework.

The role of international awarding bodies in setting standards, programme development, programme validation, programme accreditation, assessment, making awards and recognising awards are all of relevance. They generally have key functions in establishing standards for awards and in making awards. International bodies may also give exemptions to students who submit for their awards and recognise other international and professional awards. They may also use accreditation of prior learning. Some also delegate authority to third parties with respect to making their awards.

In general, the different possible sets of relations between international bodies and providers (of education and training) allow international bodies different options for managing international awards. These sets of relations also provide a number of mechanisms or processes for including such awards in the framework. The Qualifications Act sets out key sets of relations between providers and awarding bodies. In general, other than in the case of the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology, all publicly funded providers submit programmes to the awards Councils for validation. Validation is the process by which the Councils satisfy themselves that a learner may attain the knowledge, skill and

competence for the purpose of an award. This would usually lead to an award from the relevant Council.

Publicly funded providers who submit programmes for validation may also seek to have awards made by other awarding bodies, i.e., ‘parallel’ awards. The Act also stipulates that arrangements that the Institutes of Technology have for making awards with bodies other than the awards Councils must be approved by the Authority. This is in addition to the submission of programmes to the awards Councils for validation or any arrangements that may be in place for delegation.

Rationale for the inclusion of international awards in the framework

It is the Authority’s goal that the framework will become ‘the single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards’.

As already noted the framework is at an early stage of development and the full impact of the framework is not yet known. Also the awarding bodies are developing policies and procedures in line with framework development, in addition, the Authority’s policies on access, transfer and progression are being developed.

Of the submissions received from international awarding bodies, the majority indicated that they would like their awards to be included in the national framework of qualifications. They welcomed the discussion document and the opportunity to make a submission. A number of key issues arose in the consultation process. These include the different interactions between international bodies and awarding bodies and providers of education and training, validation processes, parallel awards, standard setting and quality assurance and the question of the international recognition of awards.

Advantages and disadvantages of inclusion of international awards in the framework

It has been difficult to have a full discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of inclusion at this stage in the development of the framework as the advantages and disadvantages may not yet be clear. However, a number of potential advantages can be identified. These include benefits to the learner who, also assisted by the related policies on access, transfer and progression, can access and progress in the national framework of awards. Inclusion would also assist the recognition of international awards for credit purposes, which could benefit international bodies that make such awards. Awards and smaller units of learning may be recognised for credit purposes and thus may enhance the marketability of international awards. The treatment of parallel awards may also have implications for competition between public and private providers. It was also highlighted that the framework will

facilitate linkages between national frameworks and qualification systems across jurisdictions with potential benefits to learners and users of awards.

Inclusion may enhance learner mobility and facilitate labour mobility at both the national and international level. Employers could benefit by being able to reference the international awards that they require and use, for recruitment purposes, in the framework. Inclusion may also increase the national and international standing of both the national framework and the international body in question. It may also confer an element of external quality assurance on international awards. It was noted in some submissions that the inclusion of international awards in the national framework at this time may break new ground and that it could lead to models that may be introduced elsewhere.

In terms of the disadvantages of inclusion, a contrary view expressed was that some international awards may be too product or sector specific to fit into national frameworks of qualifications. Concern was expressed that the identity and value of international awards must be maintained, whatever inclusion process is used. International bodies are concerned that the distinct features of their awards should be maintained. It was suggested that the inclusion of international awards in the national framework may have implications for access to public funding and tax relief for programmes leading to these awards. For some international bodies, there are concerns about the cost implications of inclusion. Inclusion could introduce added bureaucracy for international bodies in terms of programme validation and quality assurance. The possibility that a national awarding body could impose requirements to change programmes leading to an award may be unacceptable. There could be a duplication of effort for international bodies in the case of awards that are already subject to validation or accreditation processes in other jurisdictions.

It was also suggested that inclusion could lead to some conflict of interest between awarding bodies and international bodies were an awarding body to evaluate the awards of an international body for inclusion of that body's award in the framework. This joint involvement in awards also raised concerns about the protection of market confidentiality and copyright of programmes leading to international awards.

Specific Issues arising in the Consultative Process

For some bodies, inclusion may simply not be relevant to them as their awards already have recognition and currency in the market place. For example, there may be no additional benefit arising from inclusion in the framework if international awards are already recognised in another jurisdiction. Given the developmental state of the framework, some international bodies appear, at this stage, to be taking a 'wait and see' approach to the question of inclusion.

Other issues that arose in the consultation process were:

- The role and importance of international agreements and directives. For some occupational or employment sectors, programmes, awards and/or standards for awards are specified in international agreements and legislation.
- The process used for including international awards in the framework may impact on quality assurance systems that are in place for international bodies themselves as well as the providers they work with.
- Some international bodies also make awards for continuing professional development and these may need to be accommodated within the national framework.

A concern raised was that the actual placement of awards on the framework may not in all cases be acceptable to the international body -- procedures for consultation and appeals may be required to deal with this. In addition, the level at which an award is placed in the framework may need to be referenced to other frameworks or qualification systems. A further concern was raised about whether existing understandings and equivalencies between awards would be altered by the placement of awards in the framework.

Processes for inclusion of international awards in the national framework of qualifications

Consideration needs to be given to the possible processes for the inclusion of international awards in the framework. In its Discussion Document, the Authority identified three possible processes. These are set out in Box 3 below.

Box 3: Possible processes for inclusion of international awards in the framework of qualifications

Process I – Use the full Validation Process of Awarding Bodies

This process would involve the use of the validation processes of the national awards Councils. A programme of education and training would be submitted in the normal way to either of the Councils and an award of a Council would result from the successful completion of a programme. Similarly, in cases where there is a link to programmes offered by universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology, the validation processes of these institutions could be used.

Process II – The National Qualifications Authority to co-ordinate the process of recognition of awards with the assistance of national awarding bodies

This option could comprise the following elements:

- the body in question would attempt to align its awards with the national framework of qualifications in a manner consistent with the policies and criteria established by the Authority, and with the procedures for access, transfer and progression to be established by the Authority
- an application would be made to the Authority for inclusion
- procedures for the consideration of applications would have to be determined with the involvement of the national awarding bodies

Process III – The National Qualifications Authority co-ordinates a recognition process with the assistance of international quality assurance agencies

The Authority, or an agent of the Authority, would satisfy itself in relation to the standards setting and quality assurance procedures of the professional or international awarding body through an interaction with the appropriate quality assurance agency in the body's country of origin.

The Authority, in its consultations on the inclusion of international awards in the framework, received feedback on the general approach to inclusion and on the three options set out above. There is general support for the simplest possible mechanism and one which safeguards the standards of international awards. However, some suggested that no one option would suit all needs and that it may be necessary to develop a variety of inclusion processes to accommodate the diversity of interests, practices and arrangements international bodies have in place for their awards.

At this stage, in relation to Process I, some international bodies are clearly opposed to the prospect of being subject to the validation processes of (national) awarding bodies, in particular, if they specified different approaches or requirements to those the international bodies already operate. Both Process I and Process II raised concerns about how quality assurance and validation requirements will be addressed. It was noted that a number of international bodies have well-established and internationally recognised quality assurance systems in place as well as specific standard setting arrangements.

There is a potential for duplication of effort when an international body which has its award included in a qualifications framework in another jurisdiction has also to submit awards for validation in a number of countries in order to be included in their awards system. This is a particular concern for small bodies that have limited resources. A question that arose here is whether the agencies or

awarding bodies that are responsible for validation could co-operate at the international level or whether some kind of clearing house arrangement could be developed to facilitate recognition and avoid duplication across jurisdictions. Process III, for example, might best address this. In general, there was no consensus amongst those who made submissions on a preferred process for including international awards. In general, most international bodies that made a submission preferred Process III. Overall, the majority of those who made submissions preferred Process I.

The particular issues raised about each process are examined below.

Views on Process I

A general issue raised was whether awards made by international and global bodies would be included in their own name or as national awards in the framework. Process I (as outlined in Box 2 above), where the validation processes of the awards Councils are used to validate programmes submitted by international bodies, would lead to an award of the Council. This could, for example, be suitable for global awards where there is an established practice of embedding them in national awards and validation processes. However, the suggestion that Process I would lead to an award of the Council is not supported by some international bodies and so the resulting award would not be an international award. They stated that it is the title of the international award which is wanted by learners (for the purposes of international and market recognition and because of the associated confidence in the award) and that ‘to supplant this with a national title would deprive the learner of the benefit that attracted him/her in the first place’. It may also risk diluting the integrity and identity of the award.

A further issue arises where national providers may include or ‘embed’ international awards in programmes they submit for validation to the awards Councils. It was suggested that, as this submission may not involve the international body, it could give rise to questions of ownership and copyright of programmes. Many of the submissions from parties other than international awarding bodies stated that Process I would be suitable for global awards, especially vendor awards, as they are normally independent of any accreditation or validation agency in their country of origin. Some international bodies also develop awards to meet local/national requirements. In this case, they might also rely on Process I for inclusion.

A variation on Process I was suggested in a submission which proposed that the phrase ‘award of the Council’ should be changed to ‘recognition by the Council’. It was felt that this would preserve the title and identity of the international award while ensuring that validation requirements and quality assurance requirements are met.

There is also the issue of whether the standards for programmes leading to awards that are validated by the Councils would be national or international. For many sectors, such as financial services and information technology, there is only the international marketplace – national standards are not the key referent. The Councils' standard setting processes would therefore be of interest to international and global bodies in considering whether to submit programmes for validation.

Views on Process II

Process II could result in the international award being included in the framework as an international award rather than as, for example, an award of the Council. This process was favoured by some international bodies. The main concern (as expressed with respect to Process I) was the extent to which existing awards might have to be changed to meet the requirements for inclusion. The concerns were twofold. First, the question was raised about what resources would be required, especially as, for small international bodies, 'the prospect of repeating the submission process on a nation by nation basis, particularly where the nations have close links, is not one that we like to contemplate'. Secondly, the possibility was raised that the requirements for inclusion could effectively lead to a case where a different award, based on different standards, was created – this would affect the commonality of the international award in question. Process II was felt to be more inclusive and to take greater account of relations between professional bodies and international bodies/federations. If this process were to be used, it was stated in the submissions that it must be open and subject to appeal. There was also a query as to whether this process would be over-elaborate.

Views on Process III

Process III was favoured by a majority of international bodies. For this process to be applied, a key factor would be that the international award in question is already included in at least one other national framework or has been submitted to a recognised national or international accreditation agency. A question that arises here is whether the agencies or awarding bodies that are responsible for validation could co-operate at the international level or whether some kind of clearing house arrangement could be developed to facilitate inclusion and avoid duplication across jurisdictions. However, regulatory structures for quality assurance, validation and the placement of awards in national frameworks differ between jurisdictions. This raises the question of how confidence can be achieved to ensure that the necessary standards and requirements are met. It was suggested that the involvement of international associations and groupings in discussions and consultation would assist in developing Process III further.

Next Steps

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland is continuing to examine the issues and options for the inclusion of awards made by professional and international bodies in the national framework of qualifications. While some of these are specific to the nature of the framework of qualifications in Ireland (for example, specific policies on access, transfer and progression apply to the framework) and to the particular legislative and regulatory context within which it develops, a number of issues arise for consideration at the international level. These include the question of international co-operation in areas of quality assurance and standard setting. It might also be useful to exchange information and practice about the treatment and inclusion of international awards in different frameworks of qualifications and awards systems.

In conclusion, there are differences of views on the rationale for the inclusion of international awards in the framework. Additional benefits for both learner and international body were identified. While benefits for both the learner and international body have been identified there are concerns about safeguarding the identity of international awards and the resource implications of specific inclusion processes. However, it should be noted that global bodies did not respond to the discussion document and that the number of international body respondents was also small. The views of global bodies and further input from international bodies to the workshop were welcomed. Further dialogue and consultation with stakeholders, of which today's workshop is a part, is required to advance the question of inclusion of international awards in the national framework of qualifications.

The higher education perspective: issues and approaches

(Presentation by Mr. Lewis Purser, Head of Geneva Office, European University Association)

Mr. Lewis Purser commenced his presentation by describing the European University Association and its functions. The European University Association is the result of the merger between the Association of European Universities and the Confederation of European Union Rectors' Conference. It represents 630 universities in 45 countries across Europe. It is the main voice of the higher education community in Europe. He began by pointing out that the present discussion on the national framework of qualifications in Ireland should be seen in the context of work going on in other countries. The Bologna process is particularly relevant to developments on inclusion. This process was started in June 1999 in response to a perceived need for a coherent higher education framework across Europe. The overall aim is to enhance employability, mobility, international competitiveness and to create a European higher education area. These aims coincide with those of the European Union of establishing a world-leading knowledge based economy by 2010. The Bologna process is leading to a common framework of readable and comparable degrees with undergraduate and postgraduate study

in all countries. It is also working towards creating a European dimension in quality assurance. The Bologna process also aims to develop further the European credit transfer system (ECTS).

Many formal reforms of higher education are underway across Europe, with many new bodies and legislation in place. There is an increased awareness and greater acceptability for the process. A number of issues to be addressed in the process were identified in a recent survey by the European University Association of 800 institutions and social partners. Many identified a gap between policy recommendations/objectives and implementation. Some feel that the vision is not yet set out clearly enough and that there is a need for greater policy dialogue. There is a need for an increased role for higher education institutions and students in the process.

In general, implementation of the goals of the Bologna process lags behind the targets. It is possible that greater overall monitoring of the process would have a positive impact on implementation at the national level. Looking ahead, there is a need to include the doctorate level in the process and to take account of the wider European policy objectives regarding competitiveness – this agenda creates linkages with education, research and training. The two-cycle system of higher education as presently generally operated in Ireland is becoming dominant across Europe. For some countries, this has required a comprehensive restructuring of degree structures. There is much work also taking place on the supply-side which is influenced by demographic and market changes. This will probably result in greater differentiation between institutions and across borders in course provision.

As a result of this diversity and restructuring, the need for a coherent qualifications framework reference for higher education in Europe has also been identified. This would bring greater coherence for the benefit of the public and students. The European ministers, at their September 2003 meeting in Berlin which will review progress in meeting the Bologna goals, are likely to encourage the elaboration of national qualification frameworks for higher education systems. These in turn should be based on a European higher education area qualifications framework or common understandings that have yet to be elaborated. He suggested that this could envisage qualifications being described in terms of: workload, level, quality, learning outcomes and profile. It is not envisaged that a detailed setting out of these at European level would be feasible or necessary, but these criteria could be looked upon as a scaffold to support national higher education frameworks. The question also arises of whether there is a need for national frameworks as well as a European framework. The UK, Ireland and Denmark provide existing models of national frameworks for higher education. Mr. Purser suggested that a European higher education framework might also help facilitate the inclusion of some international awards, mainly those originating within Europe.

Mr. Purser questioned whether the development of a European framework would resolve the issue of all international awards, particularly those made outside the European area, as some of these are not

covered by the Bologna process. He questioned whether awards and/or awarding bodies should be included in frameworks of qualifications. There are many other developments at European level that will impact on the inclusion process. These include: cooperation in quality assurance; the development of transparency tools such as the diploma supplement; the enlargement of the European Network of Information Centres/National Academic Recognition Centres network and the links between national frameworks of qualifications. He suggested that there must be transparency between these and any developments in the Irish system must be cognisant of them.

With respect to the inclusion of international awards in the Irish national framework of qualifications, Mr. Purser stressed that there is an essential public information role to be undertaken. This would answer key questions, for example, what the relationship between awards is, how inclusion can contribute to skills development etc. It is important for the learner and other users to know what the implications may be of an award being included or not. With respect to the wider international context, he asked whether, if the world trade organisation's General Agreement on Trade in Services negotiations on trade in education services lead to greater liberalisation, national frameworks would be seen as barriers to non-national providers and awarding bodies? This general liberalisation of trade will have implications for quality assurance agencies, qualifications, providers and national frameworks.

In conclusion, it was noted that the added value of the inclusion of international/global awards in the national framework of qualifications needs further development. While co-operation between the relevant agencies at international level needs to be considered further, this consultation process is seen as a very useful start.

Report from Session I - awards concerning global bodies

(Chair: Ms. Jackie Harrison, Director Social Policy, Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC). Rapporteur: Mr. Eamonn Carey, Development Officer, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland)

A number of contributions were made in response to the overarching question of why global awards should be included in the national framework of qualifications. The implications for public funding and tax relief were highlighted as perhaps being the most important ones. This is particularly important for smaller international/global bodies as the development costs of new programmes are high and there must be a potential for recouping these costs. In response to the presentations, participants called for further clarification of the differences between recognition and inclusion. This was deemed to have implications for both international bodies and states. The significance of the international dimension of standards that are set for international awards and the acceptability of global awards were underlined. Mobility was also noted as a further reason for inclusion, both from a

learners and an employer's viewpoint. In addition, it was stated that inclusion could provide linkages between national and international awards, full integration into national education and training awards and assist learners in their career planning. It could also provide opportunities for newer global bodies to develop awards. By being included in a national framework, such newly developed awards could also gain international credibility. There was general support in the workshop for the view that international and global bodies play a significant role in meeting market needs in Ireland as a small open economy.

The potential loss of identity/branding was cited as a reason for not including international/global awards in the framework. As employers and learners are familiar with the individual awards and their brand names, it was regarded as being important that inclusion does not affect this. It was noted that the non-inclusion of global awards could have negative implications for the national framework and that it could lead to duplication of provision. While the potential conflict between national and global awarding bodies was raised, those representing global bodies did not see any major cause for concern that this would arise.

The placement of global awards in the framework was identified as a potential area of difficulty. A transparent and open system, with avenues for appeal, it was suggested, could address any concerns in this area. Overall, the representatives of the global bodies present did not see any reason for conflict as they saw their roles as being different from national awarding bodies. Two separate domains for awards exist. It was also noted that international bodies offer different kinds of awards and, therefore, the processes for inclusion should take account of this.

The current situation whereby global awards are 'embedded' in programmes leading to national awards was also discussed. Many saw this as being of benefit to employers and learners. There are varying degrees of involvement by global bodies in this process. Some are fully involved and have licensing arrangements to allow this to happen. Others may be unaware of such embedding arrangements or may not be directly involved in the process. In terms of the framework, it was noted that embedding a global award in a programme would not mean that it is automatically allocated to a level in the framework. The global award could be part of a programme that leads to an award at a number of levels above the level of the global award. Hence, it was suggested that a separate process would be required to identify the appropriate level at which such global awards are placed in the framework.

In relation to standard setting, the benefits of having global bodies involved in this were highlighted. It was stated that employers recognise and accept internationally agreed standards and this, in turn, leads to learners requiring awards that are based on these. In some sectors, local needs can influence and impact on the development of global awards. Examples were given of the marine and information

technology sectors where awards are developed to meet international standards. However, the different skill sets and approaches to regulation of occupations in the more traditional areas of employment, such as the trades sector, may make it difficult to reach agreement on international/global standards for awards relevant to those sectors compared to the information technology sector. This raised a general question about how global bodies can in general engage with standard setting processes for awards made in Ireland.

Employers have differing views of global awards -- some may be reluctant to support certified/accredited awards. It was suggested that this is influenced by fears about staff turnover. On the contrary, it was also stated that employees who receive certification on completion of education/training tend to remain with the company which supports them in achieving such awards. It was suggested that employers have different views about the impact of certification on staff retention.

It was stated that the interaction between national and global awarding bodies in terms of quality assurance needs to be clearly defined in order to avoid problems. The possibility of a role for the Authority in this interaction was identified, as was the need for transparency. Examples were given of situations where global and national awarding bodies had co-operated fully in ensuring that the quality assurance requirements of both are successfully met.

There was uncertainty about how programme validation will take place in the context of including global awards in the framework. Questions were raised about who is obliged to submit programmes for validation and who can submit them on a voluntary basis. Allied to this is the question of whether global awarding bodies can submit programmes on their own or whether they must do so with the provider who delivers their programmes.

Questions were also raised about the treatment or status of global awards that are recognised by statutory bodies in Ireland and whether these will be affected by stipulations in the Qualifications Act that publicly funded providers must submit programmes for validation to the awards Councils. Funding was identified as the main influence on learners and providers in determining what type of certification they seek. The importance of maintaining existing arrangements between global awarding bodies and providers was also highlighted. It was agreed that these should be maintained and progressed in the context of the development of the framework. These relationships are at different levels and range from full involvement in programme development and licensing arrangements to simply facilitating access to an award.

The importance of linking the Authority's approach to inclusion with developments at European and international levels in the area of access, transfer and progression was noted. The experience of global bodies present was that learners tend to progress from global awards to other awards and employment.

In the context of inclusion it was noted that the possibility of developing bi-lateral arrangements for access, transfer and progression between national and global awards should be considered.

Clarification was sought about the outcomes of each of the inclusion processes that were proposed in the discussion document. The question of whether successful learners would get one or two awards under Process I and II was raised. In terms of Process I would the provider or the global body make the submission for validation? For all processes, there was also the issue of whether the award itself has only to be validated once or whether all providers must submit programmes for validation for the same award. The example given was that of the ECDL which has 1,100 approved provider locations in Ireland alone. If each provider had to submit their programmes to an awards Council, would each programme/award have to be validated separately? This issue also arises in the context of the same global award being included in different programmes at the same or different levels. The global bodies present found Process I most acceptable, while other representatives favoured Process II for international awarding bodies that operate large numbers of awards.

It was also noted that developments with respect to European level certification should be taken into account particularly with respect to Process III – this process appeared to offer a means to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort for awarding bodies. It was also suggested that some combination of the processes might be considered to address the issues raised in the discussions. The need to facilitate developments and avoid rigidities was underlined.

Report from Session II - awards concerning international bodies

(Chair: Mr. Colm Jordan, President, Union of Students in Ireland. Rapporteur: Dr. Jim Murray, Development Officer, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland)

The key reason identified as to why international awards should be included in the national framework of qualifications was that it would benefit the learner. It was also deemed important that relationships with other awards be established, and where they currently exist, maintained. Inclusion of international awards would also facilitate transfer and progression. Given the requirements set out in the Act and public policy in general, the relationship of public funding with provision of programmes leading to awards within the framework will be a major encouragement for inclusion. Given the small size of the state, there are a proportionally larger number of international bodies involved in education and training in Ireland compared to many other countries.

Inclusion will facilitate the learner and providers in bringing coherence to awards from these bodies and to the entire awards system. Overall there was broad agreement from the group that inclusion was a good thing if the appropriate process is adopted. It would be important that a broad, facilitatory approach be adopted and not one that was narrow in vision and highly regulatory. From the

employment perspective, it was deemed important that a global outlook be taken, with future developments in mind, and to avoid a local or Eurocentric outlook.

In terms of possible processes for inclusion, there was a general preference for process III. The main reason stated for this was the avoidance of duplication of bureaucracy in the quality assurance process. This process inherently acknowledges that international awarding bodies have already been through rigorous quality assurance processes. It was noted, however, that this process may not be suitable in all cases. It will depend on the level of trust and recognition that exists between the Authority (or its agent) and the relevant agencies in other jurisdictions. If this process is used, then certain quality assurance systems may need to be changed or enhanced. This could be achieved by negotiation between the agencies concerned.

The preservation of the identity and branding of international awards was identified as being crucial to international bodies. One reason for this is the long history many international awards have in the State. A principal reason for their popularity is that they are the same as awards being offered in many states -- this international 'currency' is vital to learners.

How international bodies engage with the framework will depend on the inclusion process that is adopted and how it is implemented. There was a general willingness to engage with the development and implementation of the framework, provided that the international bodies are not straitjacketed by the requirements. It was also noted that the current dynamic process whereby employment needs drive the development of many of the international awards must be allowed to continue. The need to recognise the existing quality assurance and regulatory systems that are in place was identified as being essential.

There was a general view that the fact that standards of many international awards are already agreed needs to be taken into account when setting standards for awards that are included in the framework. This also has implications for the mapping of existing international awards onto the national framework at appropriate levels. It was also noted that it is important that policies and processes for inclusion take account of the standard setting arrangements for international awards in cases where national quality assurance processes do not apply.

In terms of the overall approach to inclusion, quality assurance was stated to be the key to everything. In those situations where good and recognised systems exist, Process III was seen as a possible option. This process does however pose a challenge to national and other recognised quality assurance agencies to engage with each other, both at a European and possibly at a wider international level.

Clarification is required as to who will be involved if process III is adopted, will it be the international body or the relevant quality assurance/regulatory body that will be involved in the inclusion and placement process?

Process I was identified as possibly leading to duplication for those international awarding bodies which have had programmes validated in other jurisdictions. There were also questions on who would make the decision on validation, the Authority, the awarding Councils or other international bodies? It would be important that the process is implemented in an open and bias-free manner. It was felt that the issue of validation required further discussion and consultation.

Existing relations with providers were highly valued by both parties. International bodies were seen as being supportive and especially innovative. It was stated that these relations should not be impeded or disrupted by any demands of the framework. At the same time, it was recognised that the national regulatory framework has to be respected and complied with. This also applies to interim arrangements currently in place with the award Councils pending the full implementation of the framework.

International bodies expressed a willingness to engage with the Authority and the awards Councils. It was noted that there must be mutual respect and understanding from all parties involved in this process. The needs of the learner were identified as being paramount in the context of access, transfer and progression. International awarding bodies need to be involved in further discussion and consultation on the policies and criteria being determined by the Authority in this regard.

Where good and recognised systems exist, it was suggested that process III is possible. If required, elements of Process I and II could be included in Process III. The dynamic nature of international awards must be recognised and accommodated in whatever Process is adopted. It will require a flexible and responsive system.

General Discussion

(Chair: Mr. Richard Langford, Chairperson, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland)

The presentation of the rapporteur's reports was followed by a general discussion. A number of issues that had arisen were highlighted by the Chairperson. These referred to the central role of the learner and why international/global bodies might want their awards included in the national framework of qualifications. It was also important to bear in mind the legislative background to the work of the Authority and to the development of the framework, particularly the requirements set out for publicly funded provision. It was noted that the workshop was generally more positively disposed to inclusion

than the previous one on professional awards. A possible reason given for this was the greater involvement of international/global bodies with providers over a long period. It was also stated that professional bodies can be more selective in their dealings with providers, while international/global bodies have fewer options. It was suggested that the issue of public funding and the legal status of awarding bodies might also influence attitudes to inclusion. In terms of reasons for and against inclusion, it was reiterated that the identity and branding of international/global awards was very important and that this had to be maintained whatever process is adopted. The title or what appears on the parchment relating to an award will have to be agreed with the awarding bodies.

As employers and learners look for specific international/global awards, the issue of parallel awards arise. National awards on their own may not be sufficient as learners may require 'passport' awards and are prepared to pay for them. If two awards are made upon completion of a programme, the cost of issuing parchments will have to be addressed.

It was deemed important for learners that all awards available in the state should be in the framework. It was noted in general that the inclusion of all awards in the national framework would also benefit providers by facilitating programme development and attracting learners. The implications of inclusion should be clear to providers and to the wider public, as should the issue of parallel awards. The different implications of alternative processes for inclusion should also be explored further. The long history of having a diversity of qualifications in the State should be taken into account in developing policy.

There was also discussion on the issue of the added value given to learners by international/global awards. Recognition and mobility were identified as key elements of this added value which result from the status of the international/global bodies. It was noted that this added value could also come from both the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council as they develop and implement their awards and establish a national and international presence. There was also a query on what is submitted for validation and the process of validation, as well as whether validation relates to the award, the provider or the programme. The issue of the same award being embedded in a large number of different programmes was also raised. It was noted that there is a difference between programme and award validation and it was up to the awarding bodies to decide how they interact with providers. Many national awarding bodies currently treat providers individually for the purpose of both programme and award validation.

The specific quality assurance requirements for publicly funded providers were also highlighted as was the possible impact that these may have on the inclusion of international/global awards. It was noted that, there may be a need to dedicate large resources to the initial phase of including awards in the framework. It was deemed important that the inclusion process must maintain the inclusive,

simple and transparent nature of the framework. This can be achieved by providing an effective public information service to all stakeholders.

In concluding, the Chairperson noted the size of the task of trying to accommodate all awards made in the state in a single framework. It was also important that people will want to subscribe to this framework. From the European viewpoint, it was stated that developments in Ireland were being closely watched, particularly in the context of the forthcoming meeting of European ministers in the Bologna process. In conclusion, the Chairperson thanked all participants for their contributions and for their active and constructive engagement in the consultation process. He indicated that, as was clear from the discussions in the workshop, there is a need for further consideration of the issues and consultation by the Authority prior to any decisions being made on possible approaches to the inclusion of international awards in the national framework of qualifications.