

Towards a National Framework of Qualifications

The Employment Perspective

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Report on Focus Group Meeting

November 2002

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National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

Integrating the employment perspective in the development of a national framework of qualifications

Report on focus group meetings, November 2002

1. Context

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland is in the process of developing a national framework of qualifications. The Authority is committed to working in partnership with employers, employees and enterprise advisory bodies to ensure that the framework fully comprehends and is relevant to their context. To facilitate this, the Authority, in consultation with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the two awards Councils, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), convened an Employment Perspectives Group. This Group proposed that work on the employment perspective be taken further through the medium of focus groups. In November 2002, the Authority convened two focus groups made up of those with an employment perspective who are concerned with questions such as matching qualifications to occupational needs, determining training needs, and recruitment. The objective in convening the focus groups was to elicit views, suggestions and feedback on the development of the framework of qualifications. As a background to the discussions of the focus groups, the Executive of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, in consultation with the awards Councils, prepared a *Review Paper on the Employment Perspective*. This paper was circulated in advance to the participants in the focus groups. It is included in Appendix 1.

The Authority engaged Cynthia Deane of *Options Consulting* to facilitate the focus groups and to prepare this report.

2. Outline of project

There were three phases in this project: advance briefing and preparation, facilitation of focus group meetings, and preparation/presentation of

composite report. The two focus group meetings were held on 11 and 13 November 2002 in Dublin. Each meeting started at 2.00 and finished at 5.00 p.m. The agenda for the meetings and the list of participants is included in Appendix 2. The consultant structured the discussions of the focus groups, incorporating the questions and issues arising from the background paper. The aim was to elicit views, feedback and suggestions from participants concerning the employment perspective.

Report of focus group meetings

This composite report includes a single summary of the two meetings, which outlines the participants' views on the *Report on the Employment Perspective*. It also identifies the key concerns and views of the focus groups with respect to the development and implementation of the national framework. The views expressed in this report are, accordingly, a summary of the views expressed by participants in the meetings. They do not represent the views of the consultant, the Authority or the awards Councils.

3. Feedback from focus groups

The facilitator opened the meetings by setting the context and outlining the purpose of the focus groups, explaining how the Authority, in implementing its strategy of developing a national framework of qualifications, is undertaking a broad consultative process that aims to integrate the perspectives of all stakeholder groups. As part of this process, participants were informed that the Authority, with the co-operation of the awards Councils, has convened a group to advise on the employment perspective. Linking to the work of this group, the focus group meetings were an opportunity for the participants to engage in a proactive and constructive way with the development of the framework.

The *Review Paper on the Employment Perspective* prepared by the Executive of the Authority, with the co-operation of the awards Councils, provided a starting point for discussion with the focus groups. The paper presented an overview of existing work that contributes to establishing links between employment and the framework of qualifications. The paper highlighted issues and concerns that were further explored in the focus group meetings.

Arising from the background paper, the key issues for the focus group discussions were as follows:

- There is a need to establish a clear view of the perceived *benefits* and *relevance* of a national framework of qualifications to stakeholders whose main focus is employment. (WHY have a framework?)
- Related to this, the possible future *impact* of the framework on employment and related issues needs to be explored in detail. (WHAT can be achieved? WHAT difference will it make?)
- The *roles and responsibilities* of the various players, including providers, awarding bodies, and those with an employment perspective need to be clear. (WHO does what?)
- The framework needs to be underpinned by efficient and effective *systems and structures* that are user friendly and coherent, especially in the employment context. (HOW is the system to be managed?)

Participants in the focus groups had an opportunity to address the following questions:

- What do you hope to achieve at the meeting?
- What in your view is the best possible outcome of having a national framework of qualifications in place?
- What are the critical factors that will *enhance* or *inhibit* the implementation of the framework, from an employment perspective?
- What solutions would you propose for any obstacles that might be encountered in developing or implementing the framework?
- What guidelines for action would you recommend to the Authority, the awards bodies, providers, employment interests?
- What goals and targets would you envisage being set for the widespread adoption of the framework in an employment context?
- What are you (your sector, your organisation) prepared to do to make it work?
- How should the employment perspective be incorporated into the process of setting awards standards?
- What is the best way of communicating with employment interests about the framework?
- Are there particular kinds or levels of knowledge, skills and competence that you would like to see included in awards within the framework?

3.1 Introduction of participants

Participants were asked to introduce themselves and to say what they hoped to achieve from the meeting. A wide range of employment-related perspectives was included in the two groups, with participants from

- **Specific industry sectors:** construction, retail, hotel and tourism, pharmaceutical and medical manufacturing, food and drink manufacturing, printing, financial services
- **Functional roles within organisations in industry and business:** human resources directors, managers of training and development, health and safety, production and operations and general managers
- **Development networks:** sector-specific skills development networks in retail and medical devices manufacturing; trainers' network
- **Employment-linked project:** information technology sector
- **Employee representative organisation:** education and training services.

Participants represented a range of organisation types within business and industry: small and medium enterprise, large indigenous companies, and subsidiaries of multinationals. Executives from the Authority and the awards Councils attended the meeting as observers.

3.2 General comments on the framework and the published documents of the Authority

"What we need is a framework that recognises the future potential rather than the past history of people".

There was a general welcome from participants for the proposed national framework of qualifications. The Authority has defined a vision of how the future might be, and participants see this as imaginative and worthwhile. They have a very positive view of the benefits of the framework for individuals, for companies and the national economy. They recognise the potential of the framework to make qualifications easier to use and understand, support the upskilling of employees, provide recognition for work-based learning, and improve employability. Participants advised that the Authority should *"make sure that it (the framework) happens, and that it drives forward the necessary changes in the way provision is structured."* It

was generally felt that it is time to question and abandon old assumptions, and to build a forward-looking system based on best international practice. In summary, stakeholders with an employment perspective want the Authority to *"Get it done and get it right!"*

3.3 What participants hoped to achieve at the meeting

Participants welcomed the focus group meetings as a forum to discuss issues, concerns and experiences in relation to the proposed national framework of qualifications. They wanted, among other things, to hear more information about how the framework will operate, how existing awards will be incorporated, and how it will link Irish qualifications with European and other international standards. While many participants had read the Authority's earlier publications, they said that they did not yet fully understand the benefits of the framework to their specific context. They were keen to share ideas with other practitioners and with the Authority and the awards Councils.

In addition, some participants said that the meetings gave them an opportunity to voice their frustration about the perceived shortcomings of existing systems of course provision and qualifications. This led to constructive discussion of a range of issues, and to the identification of solutions that will enable effective implementation of the framework.

3.4 Participants' vision for the future

In answer to the question *"What is the best thing that can happen, in your view, as a result of the national framework of qualifications being implemented?"*, participants gave a range of responses from the perspective of learners, companies, trade unions and the national education and training system. It was generally agreed that the Authority could make an important step forward at all of these levels in realising its own vision of an inclusive and enabling framework.

The vision for learners

- The framework will help us to move to a system that is centred on the needs of the learner rather than those of the provider or other stakeholders.

- It will ensure access to education, training and qualifications for all, especially for those previously excluded, marginalised or whose learning is not formally recognised.
- There will be clear recognition of progression in skill levels, which will encourage individuals to achieve to the highest possible level, according to their own aspirations.
- Lifelong learning will become a reality.
- The framework will adopt a “lattice” model, rather than a linear hierarchical one, enabling movement in a number of directions according to the needs of the learner.
- It will be possible to achieve recognition for “small pieces” of learning that can, but need not always, be linked to a “big” award.

The vision for companies

- The implementation of the framework will encourage a strategic view of training and development within companies, particularly in terms of contribution to the “bottom line” of profit or returns on investment.
- It will help build a new commitment to the development of the workforce promoting a culture that values learning by changing the mindset away from *learning as cost* to *learning as investment in future productivity*.
- The specification of awards in terms of standards of knowledge, skill and competence achieved by the learner will make it possible to use qualifications in managing performance and continuous professional development as they will give a clearer indication of what the learner has achieved and can do
- The framework will provide a way of measuring the impact of training and development within companies
- The framework will enable sectoral, occupational or firm-specific qualifications to be validated at a national level and recognised as being national. It will link all in-company training to a recognised national system of validation and quality assurance – this will increase confidence in awards and encourage broader take-up of them.
- There will be an opportunity to build on the experience of industry-based skills development projects, and of skills identification, training and certification approaches developed in specific sectors. It will be possible to involve sectoral networks in setting standards for learning outcomes.
- The framework will make it possible to incorporate systems for accrediting prior learning and work-based learning. This will help to

break down the barriers that exist in traditional education and qualifications systems. There is a danger of losing a lot of talent in industry if prior learning and work-based learning are not recognised.

- It will be possible to develop recognised national qualifications for trainers, based on standards. This will help to improve the quality of the training process.

The vision for national education and training system

- There will be an objective system for comparing qualifications, which will help to remove the current mystique and confusion that prevails in the area. There was a view that a “snob” value can be attached to certain kinds of institutions and that the focus of the framework on learning outcomes will assist in introducing different perspectives. This will result in a better profile for vocational qualifications.
- The framework will influence and open up the whole education and training system, whereas the current educational system and especially the assessment system does not measure a person’s true capability.
- It will encourage flexible open systems of programme delivery, with a number of pathways to learning and qualifications.
- There will be a “seamless link” between all parts of the framework, with more collaboration and less competition between providers, awarding bodies and other key players in the new system.

3.5 Issues in Review Paper on the Employment Perspective

Some of the discussion at each meeting focussed on the issues and questions that were raised in the review paper. Participants, in general, did not dissent from the views expressed in the paper, but they offered comments and observations that further illuminated the particular perspective of employment interests, especially in a number of key areas as outlined below.

How participants see the relevance and benefits of the framework of qualifications

For the individual learner

- An opportunity for self-realisation, achievement and an enhanced sense of self-worth; increased employability either internally (with current company) or externally (career progression in other companies or sectors)

For the company

- People who are more skilled are more productive
- Assistance with recruitment and selection: many companies spend a lot of money on testing, especially at management level. The focus is on psychometric profiling, not on competence. By recognising a greater variety of learning outcomes and providing a greater variety of awards or qualifications, the framework will encourage and enable employers to reduce their reliance on the Leaving Certificate as the key marker for initial entry into most areas of the labour force. Some employers already began to move from this reliance in the period of labour market shortages
- Greater transparency and comparability of qualifications
- Performance management: a systematic way of identifying missing competences, then selecting or designing a learning programme and monitoring results
- A way of upskilling staff for a changing industry environment, which is an imperative for the survival of some companies and some sectors.
- In-company qualifications systems for employees: good for individuals and companies. Skillnets for example, reported higher levels of staff retention when qualifications were gained.

Things participants would like to see included in future awards within the framework

- Clear statements of the specific outcomes, in terms of knowledge, skill and competence, associated with a qualification
- A balance between core or key skills, generic transferable work skills (sometimes called "soft skills"), and specific job skills
- Customer service and quality focus, work based projects and certified work experience in industry
- Opportunities for personal and professional development for everybody, from school age onwards and throughout their life and career.

Issues arising from the paper

- The links between further and higher education and training are not clear.
- The Authority needs to clarify the differentiation between further and higher education and training that is required under the Qualifications

(Education and Training) Act, 1999. This will help to remove the perceived barriers between further and higher education and training.

- Some participants thought it was not a good solution to have separate awarding bodies for these two areas: it maintained old territorial divisions and undermined the integration of awards in the framework. It was described as continuing a form of “educational apartheid” that was no longer relevant to users of the system.

3.6 Key enablers of the new framework

When asked to identify the key factors that would enable and support the effective implementation of the framework, participants emphasised the importance of leadership, creativity and vision, which it was agreed were already being shown by the Authority. Considerable change was seen as necessary in the attitudes and practices of learners, employers, employees, programme providers, awards Councils and others. A key role for the Authority is to help all of these groups “learn to change”, especially by putting in place an effective overarching communications strategy, based on the use of simple language, easily understood by all users. The focus should be on achieving absolute clarity about the benefits and use of the framework, with no ambiguity as to its accessibility and flexibility. In addition, the following were also mentioned as key enablers of implementation:

- Adequate resources to put the strategy in place
- Relevance of awards to sectors, ensuring acceptability and confidence in the framework
- Quality assurance of training provision
- Further clarity on the respective roles of the Authority and the awards Councils
- Assessment systems that fit and are integrated with new learning approaches and standards
- Support to upskill people in methods of learning and assessment, especially work-based assessors
- Support for companies to develop their own learning programmes and to submit these to the awards Councils
- Linkage with existing good practice models
- A sustainable and integrated infrastructure for *standards setting, learning programme design and provision, assessment and certification*, building on the work of projects, sectors, regional or professional networks

- Good targeted marketing of the framework and the awards to raise public awareness and gain public confidence in the system. The branding of awards at specific levels in the framework could also be a marketing tool.

3.7 Key factors that would *inhibit* implementation of the new framework

In addressing the question of what factors might inhibit implementation of the framework, participants expressed the view that the absence of any of the key enablers would certainly constitute an obstacle to effective and efficient progress. In particular, the following concerns were identified as potential barriers to progress:

- Inflexible, unresponsive and insufficiently customer-focussed systems of certification and provision
- Poor levels of service delivery from certification and provision systems
- Failure to remove the current levels of complexity, confusion, lack of coherence and relevance of some parts of the system
- The seeming unwillingness of some institutions to embrace change
- Failure on the part of providers to give good value for money
- Delayed or late responses to user needs – this applies both to validation and provision.

However, where providers have paid explicit attention to putting in place structures for liaison and development in partnership with employment interests, considerable progress has been achieved. Good models of practice do exist, for example in the retail and hospitality sectors and in trade unions. Participants suggested that there is potential for further study and development in this critical area of partnership.

3.8 Advice on implementing the framework

Arising from the points made in the preceding questions, participants were asked what specific advice they would offer to providers, to the awards Councils and to the Authority on implementing the framework.

Advice to providers

"Flexibility and institutions don't mix: there is tension between companies operating 24/7 versus a seven-month academic year"

- Engage less in politics and territorial protection, especially in publicly-funded provision
- Put in place better *quality assurance* systems at institutional level
- Measure *learning outcomes* as the *achievement* of knowledge, skills and competences, according to standards and criteria set in partnership with industry
- Regard industry as a partner in programme design, provision and assessment
- Be more responsive to needs of employment, in terms of flexibility of provision
- Provide courses matched to an altered agenda of productivity and performance
- Recognise that, since the provider base has now opened up, those seeking learning programmes have more options
- Encourage better management and continuing review of provision
- Provide programmes that meet diverse cultural needs of learners
- Provide relevant support for learners and learning as required
- Change methods and attitudes
- Ensure a balance between concern for curriculum content and for learners as people
- Value learning that is achieved in diverse contexts, including work
- Build the public profile of awards to achieve widespread recognition of their value
- Provide programmes that include a balance of core skills, generic transferable skills and job-specific skills (to include knowledge and competence also).

Advice to awards Councils

- Advance the work on their core functions, putting the framework and the awards standards in place
- Work in partnership with sectors to set standards: there will be a need for varying levels of involvement at different stages of the process. The question of funding for this process arises.

- Recognise that the process of setting standards will be a key stage in building confidence in the framework amongst those with an employment perspective
- Act in a *brokerage* role between employers and providers to ensure that programmes are provided to meet standards and employment needs
- Ensure that progression is possible between levels of awards, and especially between further and higher education
- Ensure that there is flexibility in the structure of awards, to include work-based learning and accredited prior learning and to ensure that diversity of provision is supported
- While the awards Councils do not have a direct role in assessment, they do need to facilitate the development of structures for the training of trainers and work-based assessors
- Promote and market awards
- Open up to their new role in validating programmes provided by a wide range of providers
- Incorporate the views of all stakeholders in all future developments.

Advice to Authority

- Get the framework in place, especially policies of access, transfer and progression
- Make provision for the certification of small units of learning
- Put in place a system for the consistent use of award titles in the framework
- Ensure that awards made prior to the establishment of the framework are placed appropriately in the framework
- Get all stakeholders to buy in to the vision
- Communicate, communicate, communicate. With everybody. And then communicate some more...
- Link further and higher education structures
- Link with other awards frameworks, for example the awards of professional bodies, and awards at international levels
- Change the culture of learning to make lifelong learning a reality for every citizen.

3.9 Communication issues

Since participants had emphasised so strongly the importance of communication, some time was spent discussing the question of how best to

communicate with employment interests about the framework and its development. Some of the points made in earlier parts of the discussion were re-iterated here, particularly in relation to the need for clear and simple language in conveying quite complex concepts and structures to users. "Users do not have to see all the complexity, they just need to know how to operate the bits that are relevant to them". Different audiences have different needs for information, and any communications strategy should take account of this. As well as providing information, communications also play an important role in *promoting* the framework, *persuading* people of its benefits and *regulating* its use. Participants also made the following points:

Communicating with learners

- It is not enough just to have a strategy: there is a need to bring it to every individual in society
- Raise awareness among learners that there are different pathways of access to learning and qualifications
- Use the framework to raise the profile of skills and competence gained through work, by putting a formal value on them
- Publicise the work of the Authority and the awards Councils on the framework: convey a positive message of achievement
- There is a need to change public attitudes and perceptions to vocational education and training: "eliminate apartheid"
- Make sure that there is clarity about the different levels in the framework.

Communicating with employment interests

- An important focus of communication is *marketing and promotion* among employers and employees: there is a great demand for qualifications. Make sure that the awards in the framework are attractive to companies: they are interested in "marketable qualifications"
- Work through the industrial/employment sectors: use them to channel two-way communications
- Industry is a customer of the qualifications framework as well as a contributor to it. It does not matter so much which awards Council is responsible for what, so long as the levels can be easily understood and accessed by all relevant users, including learners, managers, providers, and trainers

- Sell the idea of continuing education and training to people in the workplace; show the benefits of recognition and progression; build on the developments in companies achieved through pilot projects.

3.10 What employment interests will do to support the process of developing and implementing the framework

The final question that was put to participants at the meetings was " *What will you (or your organisation) do to support the process of developing and implementing the framework?*" It was understood that participants were speaking in a personal capacity, and were not formally committing their organisation to any specific actions. There was a very strong level of commitment among both groups to sharing responsibility for making a success of the new system. The view was expressed that the qualifications framework *"Has to be industry-driven, and industry-led, there is no other way."* With this in mind, participants said they are committed to the development and implementation process and will continue to engage with it. They will also continue to do what is working well in their sector or network, but within a newly defined national infrastructure. Using their networks, they will contribute to the setting of standards for their sectors. In addition, they will use their representative voice to advance the process as far as possible and to generate confidence in the awards.

All participants expressed a willingness to play a role in helping to "sell" the benefits of the framework within their sector, among their peers in professional roles, and in their own organisation. Human resources professionals will start using the framework in a way that creates a demand for programmes and awards. They will also use it in recruitment and selection to "fit" the person properly to the job role, and to motivate and encourage further development. Managers will enable people to access the framework, "Get people on the ladder" for example by paying for courses, and providing incentives for people to learn. This will help to remove barriers based on traditional models of qualifications.

Training and development professionals will change the focus to *learning*, promoting a more active engagement by the learner in the process. They will work towards developing national certification for trainers, based on competence standards set in partnership with industry experts. They see the need to re-position learning as a strategic imperative for companies, with a

clear link to productivity and performance. All participants will promote the benefits of the framework to learners, companies and colleagues. The trade union movement will support, inform and train their members so that they can play an active role in developing and implementing the framework.

4. Sectoral experiences

In this section of the report, there is a brief summary of the points that were raised at the meetings arising from the experiences and views of specific industry and employment sectors. In general discussion, it was clear that no sector wants the Authority or the awards Councils to set standards from the top down. The process needs to be industry-led, not to be taken over by providers. Otherwise it will lose its appeal and credibility for those with an employment perspective. There is a need to ensure that programmes and awards stay close to the needs of industry while still meeting national standards. It was suggested that a large sectoral network guarantees the transparency and acceptability of standards. Participants recommended that sectoral approaches, working across all levels of the framework and building on the positive experiences of existing sectoral approaches and best practice at national and international level, should be established as part of the standards-setting process. It was further suggested that the aim should be to advance the process of standards setting with some of the larger industry or occupational sectors first.

Sectoral skills development networks

The skills development networks established in a number of sectors under the Skillnets programme has worked very well, but there is no sustainable infrastructure in place to ensure that the experiences can be built on and mainstreamed into national policy and practice.

Hotel, catering and tourism sector

This sector has developed a successful collaborative and integrated model of skill needs identification, standards setting, training provision on and off the job, certification, and continuing professional development. The question to be addressed is how best to build on the successful practice of this and similar strong sectoral approaches within the new framework.

Retail sector

This is a very large sector with no formal national standards up to now. Industry led networks working within Skillnets are proving effective, and the links developed with national certification at some levels are very positive. However, there is a “hunger” for a new system that would present a comprehensive and integrated qualifications solution for the sector.

Construction sector

This is also a large and complex sector, with demand for qualifications at levels across the whole spectrum covered by the proposed national framework. The size and diversity of this sector requires special consideration in building effective links between providers and awarding bodies to ensure that employment needs are met. There is strong support for a new system that will bring coherence and co-ordination to the situation.

5. Conclusions

As is clear from the above summary, discussion at the focus group meetings was wide-ranging and thoughtful. Participants contributed willingly and generously, sharing their vision, their expertise and their experiences. It is significant that they sought to focus on the potential benefits that will flow from the establishment of the national framework of qualifications, rather than to dwell on some inadequacies of existing arrangements. They also urged the Authority and awards Councils to advance their work quickly.

There was a broad welcome for the framework and its vision of learning and qualifications. Expectations about the role of the framework in recognising all learning achievements, large and small, formal and informal, and in facilitating access and progression throughout life, are high. The framework is expected to act as an agent of change in terms of encouraging those with an employment perspective to treat education and training as a strategic investment rather than a cost to business. The framework is required to bridge rather than perpetuate the divide between further and higher education and training, and recognise diverse forms and pathways of learning. One of the main benefits of the framework is that it can link in-company training to a national system of validation and quality assurance.

This will optimise companies' investment in the learning of their employees and help to avoid duplication of local or sectoral approaches to training and education needs. It will also build on the success of existing sectoral and occupational approaches to skills and training needs.

Going forward, it is clear that the Authority and the awards Councils need to clarify and explain their different roles with respect to the development and implementation of the framework. Some of the discussion reflected a lack of clarity about their respective roles but identified important gaps in existing arrangements. There was a call for example, for the awards Councils to act in a brokerage role between employers and providers to ensure that programmes are provided to meet both national awards standards and employment needs

There was a strong message from the focus groups that partnerships in standards setting are critical in ensuring the relevance of the framework to those with an employment perspective and in building confidence in those standards. Participants identified the need for a structure and process through which the experiences of companies and others in devising sectoral or occupational programmes and standards, and their relevance to other sectors, could be discussed. Such a process would build on good practice and facilitate the mainstreaming or broader use of programmes and awards. Further supports are also necessary to enable people in employment to access awards. Especially important is the development of systems for the assessment and certification of prior and work-based learning.

Finally, a recurring theme in the focus groups was that of communication. The Authority and the awards Councils need to communicate their vision for the framework and information about its operation to all those who have an interest in it. There is a need for a comprehensive communications strategy for the framework. The Authority's published material is accessible and significant to an internal audience within the Authority, the awards Councils and national stakeholders. In this context it fulfils purposes such as ensuring an effective flow of information among the organisations and in building a corporate identity. The process of compiling information for public dissemination can sometimes draw attention to possible needs for development or change. Participants suggested that there was a need for an integrated communications strategy, designed to achieve "buy-in" from all

major stakeholders. Such a strategy needs to be based on a clear understanding of the intended *purpose, audience, message* and *medium of communication*. For communication to be effective, it must adequately convey the intended message to the desired target audience using appropriate media.

In summary, the focus group meetings provide a number of clear action points for the Authority and also for the awards Councils and providers of education and training. The major points might be summarised in three words:

Collaborate
Consolidate
Communicate.

Appendix 1

Development of a National Framework of Qualifications

Review Paper on the Employment Perspective

Introduction

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland is advancing with the development of a national framework of qualifications. 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'*. The framework will continue to be relevant to learners as they undertake learning throughout their lives: in this way, it can be a real step in the development of a lifelong learning society.

Following publication of its discussion document on the framework in November 2001, nearly 90 formal submissions were received from interested parties. Following consultations, the Authority published its policies and criteria for the development of the framework in April 2002. The Authority now envisages that the framework of qualifications will be published in late 2002.

One of the issues that arises in the development of the framework is the input of employers, employees and the enterprise advisory side of the State into the development of the framework. To facilitate this, the Authority, in consultation with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the two Awards Councils (the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council), convened an Employment Perspective Group meeting in May 2002 with representatives of the following:

- Irish Business and Employers Confederation
- Chambers of Commerce of Ireland
- Construction Industry Federation
- Small Firms Association
- Irish Exporters Association
- Irish Tourist Industry Confederation
- Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- Forfás
- FÁS

Arising from this meeting, it was agreed that the Authority needed to put in place a mechanism to include an employment perspective in the development of the framework. The term 'employment perspective' is used to include employers and employees. It was felt that this would need to go beyond a presentation on the on-going work of the Authority and a discussion on this with interested parties. It was intended that those with an employment perspective would be able to make a more active contribution to framework development. It was agreed that the best way to achieve this was for the Authority, in consultation with the two Awards Councils, to review available studies and evaluations on education, training and qualifications in

and for the workplace with a view to identifying the issues that are of relevance to the development of the national framework of qualifications. This review and the issues raised in the discussions of the Employment Perspective Group are brought together in this paper. The paper aims to facilitate debate by focus groups made up of those dealing directly with issues concerning qualifications and awards in the workplace, e.g. in recruitment and matching qualifications and skills to occupational needs, as a further step in ensuring that the employment perspective is fully taken into account in developing the national framework.

This review paper draws upon the main findings of existing studies and evaluations and discussions in the Employment Perspective Group in order to identify ways in which the development of the national framework of qualifications is relevant to those with an employment perspective. Given that many studies and evaluations pre-date the commencement of work on the framework, a comprehensive analysis of the issues relating to the framework is not possible. Rather, these reports can be used to identify the interests and needs of employers and employees and how the employment perspective might be considered in developing the framework. A series of questions are posed throughout the document as a means to focus the discussion on the relevance of the national framework of qualifications to employers and employees. A list of the relevant studies is contained in Appendix 1.

The Executives of the Authority and the Awards Councils, in developing and implementing the national framework, wish to facilitate:

- lifelong learning and the promotion of access, transfer and progression
- the emergence of a comprehensive, national framework of qualifications
- transfer and progression for the learner between different learning contexts and formats e.g. workplace, college, further and higher education
- arrangements for the transfer and accumulation of credit

The issues that are relevant to the employment perspective are reviewed below in terms of general and specific issues. Part I examines general issues and questions concerning the national framework of qualifications:

- Benefits to employment
- The use of awards by employers and employees
- Generating confidence in qualifications and in setting and maintaining standards
- Access, transfer and progression

Part II examines specific issues and questions concerning the national framework:

- The importance of the level at which an award is placed in the framework
- Building from the existing situation to the introduction of the national framework
- Providers of education and training and awarding structures
- The need for new supports for employers and employees
- The communication of the national framework of qualifications

II GENERAL ISSUES AND QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS

1a Benefits of the framework of qualifications to employment

The establishment of the national framework of qualifications and the developments that will be facilitated by it are of major importance to employers and employees. Among the potential benefits are:

- increased confidence in the standards of awards – this applies in general as well as in terms of specific standards for occupations
- clear, meaningful understanding of awards which will be instantly recognised
- the communication of information about knowledge, skills, know-how and competence associated with each award
- the facilitation of access to learning, mobility and progression for learners
- the facilitation of the accreditation of work-based learning
- the facilitation of the provision of relevant education and training in more flexible formats, including e-learning
- the facilitation of international recognition of awards which will assist the mobility of workers.

1b The use of awards by employers and employees

Awards and qualifications are relevant to employers in terms of recruitment and promotion, the provision of training and education and partnership in setting standards for awards. Awards are also relevant to employees in terms of recruitment and promotion, access to learning, the recognition of education and training (whether informal or formal) and personal development.

In terms of recruitment, there is evidence that the reliance placed by employers on certain general education awards as a prerequisite for entry into employment may deter some learners from seeking qualifications that are more closely matched to their career goals. For example, employers may seek Leaving Certificate or higher level qualifications when, in reality, a vocational award would be more appropriate to the particular job requirements. Such requirements may reduce the attractiveness of vocational qualifications to potential employees. This suggests that mismatches do occur in the recruitment process between requirements for job entry and the actual skills, knowledge or competence required to do the job.

Are awards used as a screening device in recruitment/promotion by employers?

Do they convey sufficient information to employers about the standards of knowledge skill and competence associated with awards?

Are employers satisfied with the standards of current awards?

On the other hand, there are also anecdotal claims to the effect that, in some cases, the pursuit of training and awards are not encouraged by employers as they fear that staff will subsequently leave their employment, with the result that the employer may not obtain a return on investment. This concern may have been more acute in a period of greater labour supply

when it was cheaper to hire in additional human capital than to develop it internally (e.g. to hire a new graduate rather than to release a diploma-holder for a part-time add-on degree).

In other cases, there is evidence that recognised awards are particularly useful in an environment where an employer needs confidence that an employee can undertake a specific series of tasks. This may be necessary to meet legislative or regulatory requirements, health and safety standards or insurance requirements.

From the perspective of the employee, awards are a mechanism which formally recognises their learning. Access to learning and awards can help to retain staff and to provide supports for progression and mobility in the workplace. The reviews of employment/recruitment practices show that informal training undertaken by employees does not generally lead to awards. The absence of awards for such learning can restrict the possibility of progression and mobility in the workplace by employees. The framework will be an important agent of change in this respect by facilitating the recognition of all learning.

The certification of informal learning can also benefit employees. In addition, the national framework will support employers as providers of education and training by enabling them to link their own education/training and certification needs to awards in the national framework.

Do employees value awards when undertaking training/education programmes?

Is the absence of formal awards a widespread occurrence?

Is the absence of formal awards a barrier to employment or labour mobility?

In general, do employers/employees want training/education programmes to lead to national or internationally recognised awards?

Would the inclusion of awards in the national framework of qualifications encourage employers to provide or support education/training programmes leading to such awards?

1c Generating confidence in qualifications and in setting and maintaining standards.

Awards are devices intended to enhance communication and trust between

- those claiming to possess certain knowledge, skills and competence
- those who are seeking to hire or work alongside learners
- those responsible for having helped learners to acquire learning, and
- those public or private bodies responsible for certifying the attainment of that learning.

Such trust has been built up in a number of existing awards that they are commonly used by employers and employees, for example, in job adverts that ask for "senior trades certs". However, it is not always clear what standards of knowledge, skills, and competence must be achieved by a learner in order to acquire an award. In addition, there may be some

confusion amongst employers and employees about the claims of sometimes overlapping or competing awards.

A qualification that has credibility is one that is trusted by a specific community of users. In the past such communities may have been narrow in terms of occupation, and exclusive in respect of gender, ethnicity or social class. It is important that the standards for qualifications are determined in ways that are sufficiently inclusive to foster confidence and that the community of trust is sufficiently broad. The key devices used to build confidence in qualifications/awards are the processes of setting standards and quality assurance.

The national framework of qualifications will identify the standards of knowledge, skill and competence associated with awards. It is important that the key stakeholders are involved in setting standards and in developing the national framework. The degree and nature of involvement of the social partners, including employers and employees, has to be determined.

At present, employers and workers input into standards setting, particularly in the case of in-company training. Considerable steps have been taken by existing providers to devise programmes and associated standards that meet the needs of employers and employees. The Awards Councils will have the primary role to play in setting standards for awards in the national framework. The issues that arise in developing national awards and in developing the framework include the need to ensure that all standards setting takes account of the national dimension, that standards and awards are relevant to the workplace, and that there is flexibility to meet new needs and the international recognition of awards.

Assessment methodologies are also important to those with an employment perspective. These need to be tuned and relevant to the specific requirements of the workplace. This can build confidence that the learning outcomes have been achieved by award-holders.

How best can the trust of employers and employees be established in the awards and standards to be included in the framework of qualifications?

1d Access, transfer and progression.

Those with an employment perspective have a strong view that it is vital that access, transfer and progression should not be seen as purely vertical constructs, but that a learner should be able to enter programmes of education and training leading to awards at varying levels in the framework depending on the learner's needs at the time. The introduction of a framework which contains a number of levels could involve a learner attaining an award at a lower level in the framework than an award that she or he already has.

There is widespread recognition that there is a need to ensure that awards are accessible to learners at different times in their lives. This is linked to the realisation that it is very rare that someone remains in the same occupation or doing the same work throughout life and that many who obtain specific work-related qualifications may not remain in that single occupation for life. They need opportunities to attain awards and to facilitate adaptation to changes in the workplace throughout their lives.

The issue of learning units or qualification units is also relevant to such life long learning. These are seen by many as being a useful way to achieve an award in its own right and to facilitate the accumulation of credit leading to an award. It is intended that the framework will support these learner needs through facilitating modular systems of learning and arrangements for credit accumulation and transfer.

In relation to the development of human capital, it is worth noting that many analyses and systems of measurement use years of study or a similar time-based measure to indicate the level of attainment by a learner. In an era of lifelong learning and rapidly changing employment needs, such use of duration as an indication of level of learning is increasingly problematic. More and more learning may also be required simply to stay at a particular level. For this reason, an additional volume of learning at the same level must be distinguished from additional learning at a higher level.

There is also a need to facilitate and put in place mechanisms to recognise and accredit prior learning. While it is of relevance to the national framework in general, it is of particular relevance to those entering employment. This recognition plays a role in career progression as well as in gaining access to learning.

From the perspective of employment, what mechanisms can be put in place to facilitate access, transfer and progression for the learner?

Are employers and employees interested in obtaining credit for specific units of learning that are part of a larger award?

Are particular kinds of awards needed to identify additional learning achievements?

Is the lack of accreditation of prior learning a barrier to progression and mobility? Is it important that common approaches to such accreditation are developed?

II. SPECIFIC ISSUES AND QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS

2a The importance of the level at which an award is placed in the framework.

The national framework will contain a number of levels each of which will indicate the range of knowledge, skill and competence acquired by each learner. Awards will be placed at each of these levels. The placement of some awards at a lower or higher level than others in the framework may challenge the existing understandings of the equivalence of awards. It may in turn impact on the attractiveness of such awards and the number of people who enter programmes leading to those awards and from there into employment.

The question of the placement of awards is linked to access, transfer and progression. In the past, there was not a clear understanding about the relative value of awards and this led to difficulties for transfer and progression through education and training. The positioning of awards at specific levels in a single framework will address this.

Is the level at which awards are placed in the framework of importance to employment?

2b Building from the existing situation to the introduction of the national framework

Those with an employment perspective are keen to ensure that the existing awards that they value continue to be valued in the future. They have indicated that they are anxious that where there is a general acceptance and understanding of an existing award, such an acceptance and understanding should not be ignored in moving to a new system.

There is also a strong view that existing award holders must be able to benefit from the new framework and that the needs of such award holders will have to be considered in the development of the framework.

What value will existing awards have in the national framework of qualifications?

2c Providers of education and training and awarding structures

Reviews have shown that employers use a range of providers to address their learning needs. Indeed, many provide their own education and training programmes. The term 'provider' is used to describe a person or body which provides, organises or procures a programme of education and training.

The separation of the functions of providers of education and training and that of awarding bodies is, in general, envisaged as a result of the development of the framework of qualifications. This, in addition to the development of national awards based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence, will bring about changes in the roles of and relationships between existing providers and awarding bodies who, in many cases are one and the same. It will also have implications for relations between employers, providers and awarding bodies. Many employers are more familiar with

programmes of education and training rather than with issues of certification and validation that are the responsibility of awarding bodies. The future relations between employers and providers and awarding bodies will have to be determined.

Do the new arrangements regarding providers of education and training and awarding bodies raise particular issues or concerns from the perspective of employment?

2d Is there a need for new supports for employers and employees?

It appears from existing studies and discussions that the key issues, from an employment perspective, in relation to the framework are the setting of standards and the identification of transfer and progression routes in education and training.

The findings of the ADAPT (2001) project Equate (see Appendix for details) and other reviews suggest that a number of specific supports may be required by those with an employment perspective to:

- translate the education and training needs of industry into programmes that are validated by awarding bodies
- train and certify work-based assessors and others to support the achievement of the required standards and delivery of programmes
- facilitate work-based learning

What kinds of supports are needed for those with an employment perspective?

2e The communication of the national framework of qualifications to employers and employees

Given that the national framework of qualifications is a new development and that it will introduce a structure of levels of awards and place awards at these levels, information and guidance about the framework will be necessary for all stakeholders.

It will be necessary to communicate the framework to those with an employment perspective. This can be facilitated by involving the relevant stakeholders in the development process. They may also need guidance about the implementation of the national framework, including the sign-posting of transfer and progression paths.

The Equate project (above), which investigated perceptions of existing accreditation and certifications processes, identified employers concerns about flexibility in meeting their needs, gaps in understanding and information about certification and accreditation processes, and time lags in meeting their needs. Many of these concerns are being addressed in new initiatives. However, it appears important that questions of relevance and flexibility with respect to the framework and the clarification of the respective roles of providers, awarding bodies and the Authority will need to be addressed in developing the national framework of qualifications within the perspective of employment.

What kinds of information and guidance supports are necessary for employers and employees?

Whom should these supports target?

Appendix

List of studies and evaluations consulted in preparation of the review paper. Note that this list is not exhaustive.

ADAPT (2001) *Equate: Developing the workforce through education and training – the experience of Irish innovation in practice* Cork: Deis

ADAPT (2000a) *Developing the workforce through education and training: key findings and recommendations that have emerged from three adapt projects and the roundtable on adapt thematic projects on 17th February 2000* Dublin: Leargas

ADAPT (2000b) *Results of ADAPT in Ireland: change at work* Dublin: Leargas

Alpin, C. and Shackleton, J. R. (1997) Labour market trends and information needs: their impact on personnel policies *European Journal of Vocational Training*, CEDEFOP, Vol. 3, No. 12, pp 7 – 13

Chambers of Commerce (1999) *Labour force: skills and training survey from the chambers of commerce of Ireland*, Dublin: Chambers of Commerce

Enterprise Ireland (2000) *Irish food industry development programme 2000 – 2006, human resource development*, unpublished guidelines: Enterprise Ireland

ESFEU (2000) *Challenges for human resource development 2000 – 2006* Dublin: ESF Evaluation Unit

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2000) *Report on In-company Training* Dublin: Forfás

FÁS (2001) *Irish Labour Market Review*, Dublin: FÁS

Hannon, D.F., McCabe, B, McCoy, S, (1998) *Trading Qualifications for Jobs* Dublin: ESRI

IBEC (1994) *Task Force on Small Businesses Report* Dublin: IBEC

IBEC (2000) *National training survey* Dublin: IBEC

Leargas (1998) *ADAPT Ireland, project directory phase two 1998-1999* Dublin: Leargas

Metcalf, H., Walling, A. and Fogarty M. (1994) *Individual commitment to learning: employer's attitudes* London: Employment Department Research Series No 40, November

Murphy, T. and Coldrick, A.J. (1998) *The role of social partners in vocational education and training including continuing education and training in Ireland* Berlin: CEDEFOP

NVCA (2000), *Interim report for Skillnets, November*, Dublin:NCVA

NCVA (2000) *Report of the Work-based learning project report*, July, Dublin: NCVA

Ryan, C. (2002) *Individual returns to vocational education and training qualifications*, Australia: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, www.ncver.edu.au

OECD (1994) *The OECD jobs study: facts analysis, strategies* Paris: OECD

Small Firms Association (2002) *Small Firms: The Training Imperative* Dublin, SFA, Skillnets

Training Awareness Campaign (1999) *Reflections and recommendations based on the roundtable on certification*, Dublin: IBEC, ICTU, ADAPT

Shavit, Y. and Muller, W. (1998) *From School to Work*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

Task Force on Training & Employment in the Irish Seafood Industry (2001) *Report of the Task Force on Training & Employment in the Irish Seafood Industry*, Dublin

Appendix 2

Agenda for focus group meetings and list of participants

Agenda

1. Introduction of participants

Brief statement by each participant highlighting specific issues that their organisation would like to see addressed in the development of the national qualifications framework.

2. Discussion of issues in Part I of the *Review Paper on the Employment Perspective* (circulated in advance)

General issues and questions concerning the national framework of qualifications:

- *Benefits to employment*
- *The use of awards by employers and employees*
- *Generating confidence in qualifications and in setting and maintaining standards*
- *Access, transfer and progression*

3. Discussion of issues in Part II of the *Review Paper on the Employment Perspective*

Specific issues and questions concerning the national framework:

- *The importance of the level at which an award is placed in the framework*
- *Building from the existing situation to the introduction of the national framework*
- *Providers of education and training and awarding structures*
- *The need for new supports for employers and employees*
- *The communication of the national framework of qualifications*

4. Discussion of factors that will *enable* or *inhibit* the effective implementation of the framework, from an employment perspective.

5. Conclusions of focus group

Summary of issues raised and views expressed

Action points for

- *Organisations with an employment perspective, in their capacity as stakeholders, customers, and providers of learning programmes*
- *Authority*
- *Awards councils.*

List of participants: Monday 11 November 2002

Nora Byrne	Managing Director	Calmar International Dublin
John Madden	Proprietor	Templegate Hotel, Ennis, Co. Clare
Bridie Corrigan Matthews	Training & Development Manager	Quinn Direct, Cavan
Sean Carlin	Network Co-Ordinator	Retail (IBEC) Skillnet, Donegal
Caroline Heagney	Human Resource Manager	O'Connor Group, Super Valu, Westport
Clare Ryan	Network Co-Ordinator	Medical Devices (MDA) Skillnet, Cork
Dr. Ann Chandler	Network Co-Ordinator	Medical Devices (MDA) Skillnet Cork
Barry McCabe	Human Resources Officer	Cadbury(Ireland) Ltd., Dublin
Cynthia Deane	Facilitator	Options Consulting, Cork
Dr. Anna Murphy	Director of Framework Development	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
Gráinne Cullen	Development Officer	Further Education and Training Awards Council
Des Carolan	Head of Delegated Authority	Higher Education and Training Awards Council

List of participants Wednesday 13 November 2002

Margaret Nolan	Director of Education and Training	Irish Congress of Trade Unions
Una Hassett	H R Administration Manager	Irish Distillers Ltd., Dublin
Ian Barrett	Human Resources Manager	P.J. Walls Ltd, Dublin
Tom Moloney	Health & Safety Manager	G&T Crompton Ltd., Dublin
Richard Burke	General Manager	Jury's Hotel and Towers Dublin
Brendan Gallagher	Health & Safety Manager	C & C Ireland, Dublin
Maureen McDonnell	Human Resource Manager	King Ireland, Dublin
Peter Davitt	Chief Executive Officer	FIT Ltd., Dublin
Peter Nolan	Production Manager	Computer Stationery Printers, Dublin
Cynthia Deane	Facilitator	Options Consulting, Cork
Eamonn Carey	Development Officer	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
Gráinne Cullen	Development Officer	Further Education and Training Awards Council
Des Carolan	Head of Delegated Authority	Higher Education and Training Awards Council