

VERIFICATION OF COMPATIBILITY



of Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Framework
for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area

FINAL REPORT – November 2006

**Verification of Compatibility of Irish National Framework of Qualifications with
the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area**

Report of Steering Committee for National Consultation – November 2006

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Introduction

The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area, adopted by European Ministers for higher education in Bergen in May 2005, is based on the report of a working group established under the Bologna process. This report is available here:

http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf

The rationale for the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area is to provide a mechanism to relate national frameworks to each other so as to enable:

- **International transparency** – this is at the heart of the Bologna process and while devices, such as the Diploma Supplement, have a role to play in this objective, a framework provides a simplifying architecture for mutual understanding which increases the likelihood that qualifications will be easily read and compared across borders.
- **International recognition of qualifications** – this will be assisted through a framework, which should provide a common understanding of the outcomes represented by qualifications for the purposes of employment and access to continuing education.
- **International mobility of learners and graduates** – this depends on the recognition of their prior learning and qualifications gained. Learners can ultimately have greater confidence that the outcomes of study abroad will contribute to the qualification sought in their home country. A framework will also be of particular help in supporting the development and recognition of joint degrees from more than one country.

The first, second and third cycles established in the Bologna Process are the key elements of the overarching framework. These cycles can be best understood by reference to internationally acceptable descriptors which have been developed jointly by stakeholders across Europe – the so-called “Dublin descriptors” (see Appendix 1). These were developed by a group of European higher education specialists, and cover all three cycles, in addition to a short-cycle qualification (within or linked to the first cycle). They are of necessity quite general in nature. Not only must they accommodate a wide range of disciplines and profiles but they must also accommodate, as far as possible, the national variations in how qualifications have been developed and specified. Qualification descriptors are usually designed to be read as general statements of the typical achievement of learners who have been awarded a qualification on successful completion of a cycle.

There is a second European Meta-Framework for Qualifications under development at this time – the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The European Commission published a consultative document on EQF in July 2005 and the Commission consulted on this proposal for two years. Following this consultative process, the Commission published a further proposal in September 2006. The aim is that EQF will relate to all education and training awards in Europe, including those aligned with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. While EQF directly incorporates the cycle descriptors of the Bologna Framework, it does have its own separate level descriptors. It is anticipated by many stakeholders that the existence of two separate and distinct overarching frameworks, however complementary, will be problematic in implementation and communication. Stakeholders consider that this is particularly the case in relation to countries outside of the European Higher Education Area given that the two frameworks cover different, although significantly common, geographical areas.

The success and acceptance of the Bologna Framework depends on trust and confidence amongst all stakeholders. This is to be achieved through a ‘self-certification’ process in each participating country seeking to link its national framework to the Bologna Framework. Ireland has been invited by the chairperson of the Bologna Follow-Up Group Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks to undertake a pilot project of the self-certification of the Compatibility of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

This document sets out the Irish response in relation to the criteria and the procedures established in the report of the Bologna Framework Working group which was adopted by European Ministers for higher education in Bergen in May 2005.

The document has been agreed by the steering committee established for this purpose. The membership of the steering committee is as follows:

- Sjur Bergan, Head of the Department of Higher Education and History Teaching, Council of Europe
- Bryan Maguire, Higher Education and Training Awards Council
- Frank McMahon, Dublin Institute of Technology (alternate, Dr. Tom Duff)
- Jim Murray, Qualifications Authority
- Seán Ó Foghlú, Qualifications Authority, Chairperson of Steering Committee
- Lewis Purser, Irish Universities Association
- Robert Wagenaar, University of Groningen, joint co-ordinator of the Tuning project.

An initial draft of the document was published in June 2006 with a view to the consideration of the draft by stakeholders. On behalf of the steering committee, the Qualifications Authority distributed this draft to stakeholders. The steering committee also hosted a workshop on 3 October 2006 in the Davenport Hotel in Dublin. Stakeholders were invited to make submissions in advance of the planned workshop. The document has now been adopted by the relevant Irish authorities.

This document verifies the compatibility of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area which was established in May 2005.

Ireland has been invited by the chairperson of the Bologna Follow-Up Group Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks to undertake a pilot project of the self-certification of the Compatibility of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

The document sets out the Irish response in relation to the criteria and the procedures established.

Criteria & Procedures

Criteria for verifying that national frameworks are compatible with the EHEA framework were set out in the report to Ministers in Bergen as follows:

- “The national framework for higher education qualifications and the body or bodies responsible for its development are designated by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education
- There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework
- The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS compatible credits
- The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent
- The national quality assurance system for higher education refer to the national framework of qualifications and are consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent communiqué agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process
- The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements
- The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published.”

Procedures for verifying that national frameworks are compatible with the EHEA framework were set out in the report to Ministers in Bergen as follows:

- “The competent national body/bodies shall certify the compatibility of the national framework with the European framework.
- The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies in the country in question recognised through the Bologna Process
- The self-certification process shall involve international experts
- The self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall be published and shall address separately each of the criteria set out
- The ENIC and NARIC networks shall maintain a public listing of States that have confirmed that they have completed the self-certification process
- The completion of the self-certification process shall be noted on Diploma Supplements issued subsequently by showing the link between the national framework and the European framework”.

Process

The Authority established a steering group for the process, chaired by the Authority, with representatives of the Irish Universities Association, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology. In addition, following consultation with the Chairperson of the Bologna Qualifications Frameworks Working Group, Robert Wagenaar and Sjur Bergan joined the group. Robert Wagenaar of the University of Groningen is the joint co-ordinator of the Tuning project. Sjur Bergan is the Head of the Department of Higher Education and History Teaching at the Council of Europe (Directorate of School, Out-of-School and Higher Education Directorate General IV - Education, Culture and Cultural Heritage, Youth and Sport). Both were experts attached to the working group that prepared the report on the European Framework for the Ministers at Bergen.

A draft report on the verification process was discussed in summer and early autumn 2006 with a wider group of stakeholders, including representatives of higher education institutions, students, the Department of Education and Science, the Higher Education Authority, the Irish Universities Quality Board and social partners (including employer and trade union representatives).

Following this consultative process, the final verification report has been prepared by the steering committee and agreed among the Authority, the Irish Universities Association, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Dublin Institute of Technology and the Irish Universities Quality Board.

Conclusion

The document concludes that:

- The Irish Higher Certificate is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna first cycle.
- The Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degree is compatible with the Bologna first cycle descriptor. However, holders of Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degrees and their equivalent former awards do not generally immediately access programmes leading to second cycle awards.
- The Irish Honours Bachelor Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna first cycle.
- The Irish Higher Diploma is a qualification at the same level as completion of the first cycle, and is a qualification typically attained in a different field of learning than an initial first cycle award.
- The Irish Masters Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna second cycle.
- The Irish Post-Graduate Diploma is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna second cycle.
- The Irish Doctoral Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna third cycle.

It is of note that there is an apparent inconsistency or paradox in the treatment of both the Ordinary Bachelor Degree and the Honours Bachelor Degree as first cycle qualifications compatible with the Bologna first cycle descriptor. The compatibility of both with the Bologna first cycle descriptor has been demonstrated in terms of the comparisons of the learning outcomes. Notwithstanding this, these awards are included at two different levels in the Irish framework, with different descriptors, and the Ordinary Bachelor Degree does not typically give access to Masters Degree (second cycle) programmes at present in Ireland.

Furthermore, it is considered that the Irish authorities should review this verification in the light of the implementation of the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area by other countries, particularly in the context of new progression arrangements being put in place. It is anticipated that such a review might take place when at least 20 countries have aligned their national frameworks to the European Framework.

Verification of the Criteria

Each of the criteria is set out below and addressed in turn.

Criterion 1 – The national framework for higher education qualifications and the body or bodies responsible for its development are designated by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education.

The National Qualifications Authority was established on a statutory basis, under the Qualifications (Education and Training Act) 1999 on 26 February, 2001. This legislation was proposed by the Minister for Education and Science, whose responsibilities include higher education. The legislation can be found here:

[http://www.nqai.ie/Qualifications%20\(Education%20and%20Training\)%20Act,%201999.pdf](http://www.nqai.ie/Qualifications%20(Education%20and%20Training)%20Act,%201999.pdf)

Section 7 of the Qualifications Act requires the Authority “to establish and maintain a framework ... for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence”. Under section 8, the Authority is required to “establish policies and criteria on which the framework of qualifications shall be based.”

Building on this, the Authority has defined the National Framework of Qualifications 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 Irish Framework was developed by the Authority in consultation with stakeholders and was launched in October 2003. It is a ten level framework, which captures all learning, from the very initial stages to the most advanced. Qualifications achieved in school, further education and training and higher education and training are all included in the Framework. Each of these qualifications is quality assured and every provider delivering programmes that lead to qualifications in the Framework is also quality assured.

The Irish Framework includes award-types of different classes. Amongst these are the large or ‘major’ awards. In addition, qualifications are also awarded for smaller learning achievements which are known in the Framework as minor, special purpose and supplemental awards.

Sixteen major award-types have been established for the Irish Framework. Eight of these are higher education awards-types as follows:

- The Higher Certificate at level 6.
- The Ordinary Bachelor Degree at level 7.
- The Honours Bachelor Degree at level 8.
- The Higher Diploma at level 8.
- The Masters Degree at level 9.
- The Post-Graduate Diploma at level 9.
- The Doctoral Degree at level 10.
- The Higher Doctorate at level 10.

Each of these eight major award-types has a descriptor associated with it which describes the purpose, level, volume, learning outcomes, progression and transfer and articulation associated with it. Each of the award-types is understood to be different than the other award-types in an Irish context and has value and relevance for the labour market and for progression to further learning opportunities. Access to employment of different kinds is generally accepted across society with different levels and major award-types of higher education awards. This is underpinned in research undertaken annually by the Higher Education Authority which tracks the first destination (in employment or further learning) of graduates. It is also of note that the Bologna declaration set out that the degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification. In this regard, the research referred to above verifies such relevance.

Criterion 2 – There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework

The Dublin descriptors which were adopted as part of the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area were developed as the Irish National Framework of Qualifications was being developed and implemented. Representatives of Irish authorities (the Department of Education and Science, the Qualifications Authority and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council) were involved in the development of the Dublin descriptors in a cross-country collaboration of the Joint Quality Initiative and sought to ensure their compatibility with Irish Framework descriptors. The first two Dublin descriptors of the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (the first and second cycle descriptors) were in place prior to the establishment of the Irish Framework. The third Dublin descriptor (the third cycle) was developed after the establishment of the Irish Framework.

It is also of note that the February 2005 Report of the Working Group on the establishment of the Bologna Framework also recommended the inclusion in the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area of a descriptor for the higher education short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle). This was also one of the Dublin descriptors which was developed after the establishment of the Irish Framework. In adopting the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area in Bergen in May 2005, Ministers agreed that the Framework would include three cycles including, within national contexts, the possibility of intermediate qualifications. For the purposes of this verification of the compatibility of the Irish Framework with the Bologna Framework, the Irish authorities have decided to include in the verification process the alignment with the higher education short cycle (as an intermediate qualification signalled by Ministers) and its descriptor given that the descriptor has much agreement across Europe in the context of the work of the Joint Quality Initiative and the recommendations of the Bologna working group.

Detailed background work has been undertaken analysing the outcomes in the Irish Framework and comparing these with the cycle descriptors. This is attached at appendix 1. It is considered that there are clear and demonstrable links between the descriptors for particular major-award types in the Irish Framework and cycle qualification descriptors in the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

In the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the concept of substantial difference has been developed. The concept of substantial difference has to date related to comparing two individual qualifications, or to comparing an individual qualification to a generic type of qualification. To date, the concept has not generally related to comparing two generic descriptors for types of qualifications. However, it is considered that this concept is relevant to the consideration of the clear and demonstrable link between qualifications and national frameworks and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework. Accordingly, it is suggested that there are no substantial differences between certain descriptors for major award-types in the Irish National Framework of Qualifications and the cycle descriptors. This is set out in more detail below:

- The outcomes in the descriptors of the Irish Higher Certificate (at level 6 in the Irish Framework) and the higher education short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle), developed by the Joint Quality Initiative as part of the Bologna process generally correspond, within the limits of comparison possible across the two sets of strands. Thus it is considered that the Irish Higher Certificate is an intermediate qualification within the first cycle.
- Comparison of outcomes in the first cycle descriptor and the Ordinary Bachelor Degree descriptor (at level 7 in the Irish Framework) supports the contention that the Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degree is a first cycle qualification. Furthermore, the Ordinary Bachelor descriptor does not correspond with the descriptor for the short cycle and there are substantial differences between the two descriptors.
- Comparison of outcomes in the first cycle descriptor and the Honours Bachelor Degree descriptor (at level 8 in the Irish Framework) supports the contention that the Irish Honours Bachelor Degree is a first cycle qualification, although in some respects the outcomes go beyond those required for a first cycle qualification.
- Comparison of outcomes in the first cycle descriptor and the Higher Diploma descriptor (at level 8 in the Irish Framework) supports the contention that the Irish Higher Diploma is a qualification at the same level as completion of the first cycle.

- Comparison of outcomes in the second cycle descriptor and Masters Degree descriptor (at level 9 in the Irish Framework) supports the contention that the Irish Masters Degree is a second cycle qualification.
- Comparison of the outcomes of the second cycle descriptor and the Post-Graduate Diploma descriptor (at level 9 in the Irish Framework) supports the contention that the Irish Post-Graduate Diploma is an intermediate qualification within the second cycle.
- The third cycle descriptor and the Irish Doctoral Degree descriptor (at level 10 in the Irish Framework) are broadly similar in content, though the Irish descriptor appears somewhat broader in intention. Both focus on the creation of new knowledge and allude to the broader obligations such a function brings with it.

While the material above describes in detail comparisons between the descriptors for qualifications in the Irish Framework and the cycle descriptors of the Bologna Framework, it is also the case that there are other issues which are relevant to verifying the compatibility of the Irish Framework with the Bologna Framework. These issues relate to access and progression to programmes leading to Irish qualifications within the cycles and leading to European and other qualifications. They also relate to issues such as the credit associated with Irish programmes leading to Framework awards and the general format of programmes which is encouraged in Ireland. Collectively, these issues provide an important context for elucidating how Irish qualifications are perceived and understood both within and without Ireland. Detailed background work has been undertaken on these issues and it is attached at appendix 2.

A summary of the typical arrangements for progression are as follows:

- Entry to a programme leading to a Higher Certificate is generally for school leavers and holders of equivalent qualifications.
- Entry to a programme leading to an ab-initio Ordinary Bachelor Degree is typically for school leavers and those with equivalent qualifications. In addition, there are 1-year add-on Ordinary Bachelor Degree programmes for holders of the Higher Certificate.
- Entry to a programme leading to an Honours Bachelor degree is typically for high-achieving school leavers or holders of equivalent qualifications. In addition, there are typically programmes of 1 year duration leading to Honours Bachelor Degrees for holders of Ordinary Bachelor Degrees.
- Entry to a programme leading to a Higher Diploma is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees but can also be for holders of Ordinary Bachelor Degrees. It is of note that the Higher Diploma is typically in a different field of learning than the initial award.
- Entry to a programme leading to a taught Masters degree is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees. Also in some cases, entry to such programmes can be permitted for those with Ordinary Bachelor Degrees or equivalent who have some relevant work experience. Furthermore, in some cases, entry to such programmes is permitted for people with extensive experience.
- Entry to a programme leading to a research Masters Degree is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees, typically with a high classification attained – first or second class honours.
- Entry to a programme leading to a Post-Graduate Diploma is typically for holders of Honours Bachelors Degrees but can also be for holders of Ordinary Bachelor Degrees.
- Entry to a programme leading to a Doctoral Degree is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees. The general model is that a holder of an Honours Bachelor Degree with a high classification enters initially onto a Masters research programme, and transfers on to a Doctoral programme after one year on the Masters research programme. In total, the number of years in the programme would generally be at least 3 years. There is also access to research Doctoral Degrees for holders of Masters Degrees whether taught Masters or research Masters.

In conclusion, it is considered that:

- The Irish Higher Certificate is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna first cycle.
- The Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degree is compatible with the Bologna first cycle descriptor. However, holders of Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degrees and their equivalent former awards do not generally immediately access programmes leading to second cycle awards.
- The Irish Honours Bachelor Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna first cycle.
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- The Irish Masters Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna second cycle.
- The Irish Post-Graduate Diploma is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna second cycle.
- The Irish Doctoral Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna third cycle.

It is of note that there is an apparent inconsistency or paradox in the treatment of both the Ordinary Bachelor Degree and the Honours Bachelor Degree as first cycle qualifications compatible with the Bologna first cycle descriptor. The compatibility of both with the Bologna first cycle descriptor has been demonstrated in terms of the comparisons of the learning outcomes. Notwithstanding this, these awards are included at two different levels in the Irish framework, with different descriptors, and the Ordinary Bachelor Degree does not typically give access to Masters Degree (second cycle) programmes at present in Ireland.

This implies a recognition that Ireland has two sub-levels within the first cycle – the minimum attainment, represented by the Ordinary Bachelor Degree and a higher attainment with more advanced learning outcomes, represented by the Honours Bachelor Degree. The distinction between the Ordinary and Honours Bachelor Degree has a long history in Ireland, and is intended to serve the interests and needs of learners. In this connection, the Ordinary Bachelor Degree can serve either as an exit qualification for those learners who have not attained the full set of learning outcomes associated with the Honours Bachelor Degree; or as a key staging post in integrated programmes designed to bring learners from Level 6 through to Level 8. In addition, many Ordinary Bachelor Degrees are purposely designed to meet the education and training requirements of particular occupations.

Criterion 3 – The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS compatible credits

The Irish Framework is required in law to be based on learning outcomes (or as the legislation states, “standards of knowledge, skill and competence”) – this is set out in the material provided for in relation to criterion 1.

The descriptors for the major award-types in the framework are based on strands and sub-strands of learning outcomes as follows:

- knowledge: breadth and kind
- know-how and skill: range and selectivity
- competence: context, role, learning to learn and insight

The descriptors for the major award-types are included in appendix 4 of the Authority’s determinations document: <http://www.nqai.ie/determinations.pdf>

Irish higher education awarding bodies have agreed to use the descriptors of the higher education award-types as the descriptors of the awards that they make.

Following the establishment of the Irish Framework, the Authority – in partnership with education and training stakeholders, through its Technical Advisory Group on Credit – has been working towards the development of a national approach to credit. A twin track approach has been pursued (one for further education and training, the other for higher education and training), as the way forward on credit is more clearly signposted for higher education and training at this time within the context of the Bologna process and the general acceptance and use of ECTS. As part of this process, the Authority’s Technical Advisory Group on Credit (Higher Education Track) has produced a set of ‘Principles and operational guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training’. These ‘Principles and operational guidelines’ have been adopted by the Authority. The operational guidelines recommend that a typical credit volume or credit range be established for each major award-type from levels 6-9 in the Framework in line with existing ECTS conventions and current practice in the Irish higher education system as follows:

Level 6 Higher Certificate	=	120 credits
Level 7 Ordinary Bachelor Degree	=	180 credits
Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree	=	180-240 credits
Level 8 Higher Diploma	=	60 credits
Level 9 Masters Degree (Taught)	=	60-120 credits
Level 9 Postgraduate Diploma	=	60 credits

Irish Doctoral Degrees and Masters Degrees (by research) do not usually have credit values assigned. However, Masters Degrees (by research) typically have a 2 year duration which would equate with an appropriate number of credits. Also emerging practice on professional doctorates provide for a typical model of 180 credits. Institutional practice on assigning credit to professional doctorates differs. National discussions on developing a possible credit range for doctorates, which could include professional doctorates, are at an early stage.

All Irish higher education awarding bodies are operating within these arrangements. The Principles and operational guidelines are available here: <http://www.nqai.ie/en/Publications/File1,843,en.doc>

Criterion 4 – The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent

Under section 8, the Authority is required to “establish policies and criteria on which the framework of qualifications shall be based.” The initial Framework policies and criteria have been adopted by the Authority and are available here: <http://www.nqai.ie/polandcrit.pdf>

Chapter 6 of these policies sets out the process for the inclusion of awards in the Framework as follows:

- “It is the role of the Authority to determine the level indicators and the award-type descriptors. These will form the basis for the setting of standards for named awards by the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology.
- In relation to school and university awards, the aim is that the level indicators and the award-type descriptors in the framework will be developed in a way that will facilitate the inclusion of these.”

The Authority has also adopted policies and criteria on the inclusion in, or alignment with, the National Framework of Qualifications of the awards (or the learning outcomes associated with them) of certain awarding bodies which are not already recognised through the Framework under section 8 of the Qualifications Act. These policies and criteria are available here: <http://www.nqai.ie/en/FrameworkDevelopment/File1,1683,en.doc>

These make provision for the recognition through the Framework of

- The awards of Irish bodies which make awards on a statutory basis (where the body’s awards are not yet in the Framework and where the awards cannot be withdrawn).
- The learning outcomes associated with the awards of certain Irish bodies which do not make awards on a statutory basis but which recognise the attainment by learners of learning outcomes in a formal way associated with the legal regulation of the operation of a profession or of a professional title by such bodies.
- The awards of certain bodies from outside the State which make awards in Ireland

Awards made to learners in Ireland by awarding bodies based in other countries are not included in the Irish framework, but they may be formally aligned. A policy published in July 2006 provides for the alignment of such awards on the basis of best fit of learning outcomes to levels or award-types in the Irish national framework. Criteria include legal authority to make the awards in the home country; inclusion in the national framework or equivalent in the home country; and external quality assurance in the home country which is also applied to the awards made in Ireland. The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council review applications for the alignment of higher education awards under this process.

It is also of note that under the Qualifications Act, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council has the power to delegate to institutes of technology (other than the Dublin Institute of Technology which already was an awarding body) the power to make awards and that, to date, the power to make some awards has been delegated to all of the institutes of technology.

Accordingly, Irish higher education awarding bodies are now using the descriptors of the higher education award-types as the descriptors of the awards that they make and it is a matter for them to have processes in place for their own award-making. These are detailed further in the material provided for in relation to criterion 5 below.

It is also the case that as the Framework is implemented, many existing awards will no longer be granted. Also, many learners hold Irish awards that were part of former systems and have already ceased to be made. It is necessary to map these ‘existing and former’ awards (sometimes referred to as ‘legacy’ awards) onto the Framework, so that holders of such awards are not disadvantaged. The task of working out the placement of existing and former awards is well advanced. The Authority has agreed with two higher education and training awarding bodies – the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology – to the placement of a range of existing and former awards. Former awards may also be compatible with the Bologna Framework but this issue has not been systematically tested. These awards were designed on different principles. For example, while they may have represented the achievement of learning outcomes they were not specified in such terms.

Criterion 5 – The national quality assurance systems for higher education refer to the national framework of qualifications and are consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent communiqué agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process

There are three separate, but linked, systems for quality assurance in Irish higher education in place for each of the following:

- The universities and associated colleges
- The Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the associated institutes of technology and providers within the independent sector
- The Dublin Institute of Technology

In 2004 Irish stakeholders established the Irish Higher Education Quality Network to:

- Provide a forum for discussion of quality assurance issues amongst the principal national stakeholders involved in the quality assurance of higher education and training in Ireland
- Provide a forum for the dissemination of best practice in quality assurance amongst practitioners and policy makers involved in the Irish higher education and training sector
- Endeavour, where appropriate, to develop common national principles and approaches to quality assurance in Irish higher education and training.

The membership consists of the principal stakeholders - practitioners, policy makers and students - involved in quality assurance in Irish higher education and training, as set out below:

- Union of Students in Ireland
- Irish Universities Quality Board
- Council of Directors of the Institutes of Technology
- Irish Universities Association
- Dublin Institute of Technology
- Higher Education Colleges Association
- Higher Education Authority
- Higher Education and Training Awards Council
- National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
- Department of Education and Science

The work of the Network takes place in the context of the implementation of the Irish Framework in which all of its members are involved. Furthermore, the Network reviewed the legislative requirements and procedures for quality assurance for the different institutions in the Irish higher education sector and in May 2005 identified a set of common underpinning principles of Good Practice. The principles are agreed by the Network as consonant with the legislative arrangements that govern quality assurance in the Irish Higher Education sector, and as conforming to the principles outlined in the Berlin Communiqué, and to the 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area', as developed by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), in co-operation with the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) and as adopted by Ministers at Bergen in May 2005. The principles are available here: http://www.iheqn.ie/_fileupload/publications/File808en.doc

The universities are in the process of completing the implementation of the Framework. In December 2005, the Qualifications Authority and the Registrars of the Irish universities agreed a policy approach regarding the completion of the implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications in the university sector. The agreed approach focuses, in particular, on the inclusion of the universities sub-degree and other smaller awards in the Framework, and sets out an agreed basis and process for their inclusion. The process is to be completed during the 2006/07 academic year. Further details are available here: <http://www.nqai.ie/en/Publications/File,1183,en.doc>

The Irish Universities Quality Board has been established by decision of the governing authorities of the Irish Universities:

- to increase the level of inter-university co-operation in developing their quality assurance procedures and processes, in line with best international systems
- in representing their approach nationally and internationally as a unique quality model appropriate to the needs of the Irish Universities
- to facilitate the conduct of reviews of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures and their outcomes

The Irish Universities Quality Board is in the process of updating the Framework for Quality in Irish Universities and this will include the formal incorporation of the Irish Framework. This information is available here: www.iuqb.ie.

The Higher Education and Training Awards Council has incorporated the Irish Framework in its policies and criteria for setting the standards of awards, for making awards, for delegating authority to make awards and for quality assurance. Furthermore, in December 2005, a review of the performance by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council of its functions, incorporating the extent to which the Council complies with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, was commenced by the Qualifications Authority. Information on the review is available here: <http://www.hetac.ie/publications.cfm?slD=32>. The review was completed in July 2006.

The Dublin Institute of Technology has incorporated the Irish Framework into its quality assurance procedures. In March 2005, a review of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures of the Institute was commenced by the European University Association, on behalf of the Authority and the review process was completed in June 2006. This information is available here: <http://www.nqai.ie/en/PoliciesandProcedures/>

Criterion 6 – The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements

The Irish Framework is already referred to in Irish Diploma Supplements. In addition, the cycles of the Bologna process are referred to and this reference was in place prior to the adoption of the European Framework. A copy of the existing Irish template for the Diploma Supplement is available here: <http://www.europass.ie/europass/WhatisEuropass/DiplomaSupplement/File,1175,en.pdf>

It is the intention of the Irish authorities to review the existing template when the verification of the compatibility of the Irish Framework with the Bologna Framework has been completed.

Criterion 7 – The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published.

These are referred to above. These include the responsibility of the Authority for developing the Framework and for establishing policies and criteria, as well as the individual responsibilities of higher education awarding bodies.

It is also of note that a review of the implementation and impact of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications is planned – it is among the responsibilities of the Qualifications Authority to do so. Should any review result in major changes in the Framework, it would be necessary to review the alignment set out in this document.

Verification of the Procedures

Each of the procedures is set out below and addressed in turn.

Procedure 1 – The competent national body/bodies shall certify the compatibility of the national framework with the European framework

The verification process is considered important by Irish authorities.

The Authority established a steering group for the process, chaired by the Authority, with representatives of the Irish Universities Association, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Dublin Institute of Technology. In addition, following consultation with the Chairperson of the Bologna Qualifications Frameworks Working Group, Robert Wagenaar and Sjur Bergan joined the group. Robert Wagenaar of the University of Groningen is the joint co-ordinator of the Tuning project. Sjur Bergan is the Head of the Department of Higher Education and History Teaching at the Council of Europe (Directorate of School, Out-of-School and Higher Education Directorate General IV - Education, Culture and Cultural Heritage, Youth and Sport).

A draft report on the verification process was discussed in summer and early autumn 2006 with a wider group of stakeholders, including representatives of higher education institutions, students, the Department of Education and Science, the Higher Education Authority, the Irish Universities Quality Board and social partners (including employer and trade union representatives).

Following this consultation, a final verification report was produced by the steering group. This report has been agreed by the Authority, the Irish Universities Association, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Dublin Institute of Technology, the Higher Education Authority and the Irish Universities Quality Board.

Procedure 2 – The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies in the country in question recognised through the Bologna Process

This report on the verification of the compatibility of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications has been agreed, inter alia, by the Qualifications Authority, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education Authority and the Irish Universities Quality Board. These are the four quality assurance bodies in Ireland of relevance to the higher education sector and the Bologna process.

Procedure 3 – The self-certification process shall involve international experts

See the response to procedure 1 above. Robert Wagenaar and Sjur Bergan have been part of the steering group managing the verification process.

Procedure 4 – The self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall be published and shall address separately each of the criteria set out

On completion of the process, this report will be published on the website of the Authority and in hard copy format.

Procedure 5 – The ENIC and NARIC networks shall maintain a public listing of States that have confirmed that they have completed the self-certification process

The Authority is the Irish ENIC/NARIC and this document will be published on the website of the Authority. The Authority will inform the networks when the process has been completed.

Procedure 6 – The completion of the self-certification process shall be noted on Diploma Supplements issued subsequently by showing the link between the national framework and the European framework

It is the intention of the Irish authorities to review the existing Diploma Supplement template when the verification of the compatibility of the Irish Framework with the Bologna Framework has been completed.

Conclusion

The report concludes that:

- The Irish Higher Certificate is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna first cycle.
- The Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degree is compatible with the Bologna first cycle descriptor. However, holders of Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degrees and their equivalent former awards do not generally immediately access programmes leading to second cycle awards.
- The Irish Honours Bachelor Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna first cycle.
- The Irish Higher Diploma is a qualification at the same level as completion of the first cycle, and is a qualification typically attained in a different field of learning than an initial first cycle award.
- The Irish Masters Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna second cycle.
- The Irish Post-Graduate Diploma is an intermediate qualification within the Bologna second cycle.
- The Irish Doctoral Degree is compatible with completion of the Bologna third cycle.

It is of note that there is an apparent inconsistency or paradox in the treatment of both the Ordinary Bachelor Degree and the Honours Bachelor Degree as first cycle qualifications compatible with the Bologna first cycle descriptor. The compatibility of both with the Bologna first cycle descriptor has been demonstrated in terms of the comparisons of the learning outcomes. Notwithstanding this, these awards are included at two different levels in the Irish framework, with different descriptors, and the Ordinary Bachelor Degree does not typically give access to Masters Degree (second cycle) programmes at present in Ireland.

Furthermore, it is considered that the Irish authorities should review this verification in the light of the implementation of the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area by other countries, particularly in the context of new progression arrangements being put in place. It is anticipated that such a review might take place when at least 20 countries have aligned their national frameworks to the European Framework.

On completion of the process, this report will be published on the website of the Authority and in hard copy format, and the Authority will inform the ENIC/NARIC networks that the process has been completed.

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Documentation relating to the Irish Universities Quality Board is downloadable at www.iuqb.ie

Comparison of the Dublin descriptors with the award-type descriptors in the Irish National Framework of Qualifications

The origins of the two sets of descriptors

The Dublin descriptors were developed by the Joint Quality Initiative in a series of meetings held in Dublin in 2002-2004. They have subsequently been adopted by the Bologna Follow-Up Group in their proposal for a Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area to the ministerial meeting in Bergen in May 2005. The award-type descriptors for the National Framework of Qualifications (hereafter, the Irish descriptors) were developed by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland by an extended process of technical drafting and consultation and formally published in October 2003. These descriptors are intimately related to the level indicators devised for the Framework.

Both sets of descriptors describe higher education qualifications in terms of generic learning outcomes. Both sets are intended to cover comprehensively the qualifications referred to, regardless of discipline or field of learning. Both assume that all the qualifications described hold significant elements in common. Both assume that the different qualifications can be reliably differentiated by cycle (in the case of the Dublin descriptors) or level (Irish). Both refer to typical rather than threshold (or indeed maximal) achievement. Both are couched in outcomes terms and avoid reference to curriculum, duration or methods of reaching those learning outcomes.

Although there are many similarities between the Dublin descriptors and the national award-type descriptors there are also important differences in their purpose and underpinning methodology. The Dublin descriptors are intended to facilitate comparisons between qualifications awarded at the end of the cycles within the various Bologna states and it is to this end that they have been incorporated in to the overarching framework for the EHEA. The Irish descriptors too are part of a larger qualifications framework that has as its underpinning vision the recognition of all learning. The intended scope of this framework is broader than that of the EHEA.

The Dublin descriptors were developed with a view to fulfilling the Bologna objective of adopting a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, based on two main cycles. The work of the JQI group, described in its initial document, "has been concerned with identifying the academic and other requirements that, as the outcomes of study, characterise and distinguish between Bachelor's and Master's". This was subsequently enlarged to include the doctoral and short cycle qualifications (and the terminology changed to the more inclusive "cycles"). This objective of comparison across cycles and between countries influenced the methodology adopted in framing the descriptors. It might be described as a common denominator approach. It was heavily influenced by the existing exemplars of generic descriptors, especially those used by the QAA for the UK Framework for Higher Education Qualifications. These in turn were rooted in the decade-long British debate about "graduateness", the defining characteristics of higher education graduates. An extensive programme of work and consultation formed the basis of the FHEQ descriptors. These are of the form, "an award holder will have demonstrated knowledge and understanding ... [of some kind] ... and typically will be able to ... [perform some tasks, including communication and further learning] ... and have qualities and transferable skills required for employment requiring ... [specified demands, including decision making]". Some of these distinguishing elements are found in the Dublin descriptors also. The Dublin descriptors might be said to have been derived inductively from the process of identifying common features of graduates across disciplines and countries for the various levels of award.

The Irish descriptors were derived rather more deductively from the overarching ambition to provide for the recognition of all learning in the Framework. Proceeding from the expression used in the legislation, which glossed learning as "knowledge, skill or competence", the Authority developed an understanding of how learning might be further analysed or parsed, first into three strands of knowledge, know-how and skill and competence and then further into eight sub-strands. This analysis drew on a number of different intellectual traditions, ancient and modern, formulating an understanding that was deliberately eclectic and hence as comprehensive as possible. Pragmatically this had the effect of being intelligible and acceptable to a wide variety of stakeholders, which is an essential feature for such a key element of a national framework, while at the same time having coherence. It was only after initially parsing learning in this comprehensive way that the national framework developers attempted to differentiate between levels, developing level indicators. To be sure, there was a measure of iteration, as the understanding of the sub-strands were tweaked, following the development of level indicators. Moreover the sub-strands were devised to cover all levels of learning, not just those associated with higher education and training. Therefore they did not focus in on the distinguishing characteristics of those who have received higher education awards in the way the Dublin descriptors do.

One consequence of this difference in methodology, with the cascade through the analysis of learning through strands, sub-strands, level indicators and award-type descriptors, is that the Irish descriptors implicitly include all learning outcomes, whereas the Dublin descriptors rely on the individual positive statements provided for each cycle. It is important to bear this distinction in mind when comparing, element by element, the cognate descriptors in the two Frameworks. The general understandings of the Irish strands and sub-strands in particular must be consulted in order to fully unpack the import of individual elements. The Dublin descriptors by contrast do not have any explicit underlying epistemology, though it might be argued that in the context of the EHEA Framework, and the BFUG Working Group Report in particular, there is a treatment of the purpose of European higher education and this is relevant to how the outcomes in the descriptors are to be read.

The respective policy contexts of the Bologna Process and the National Framework of Qualifications required that the sets of descriptors be developed quite quickly. Although initially put forward somewhat tentatively in each case, and in recognition that they would be a significant challenge when applied to specific awards, the context requires that the descriptors assume a more definitive status than they really deserve. The Irish descriptors were accompanied by a statement to the effect that they may be “further developed, added to, or amended, as required for the continued development of the Framework”. The Joint Quality Initiative was even more hesitant to claim status for its Dublin descriptors. Because of their centrality in the respective processes it will be difficult to change either set of descriptors unless there is compelling reason to do. It is important to bear this in mind when evaluating the compatibility of the two. A detailed scrutiny of both sets reveals their respective strengths and weaknesses, but the strengths are sufficient and the weaknesses few enough that both sets can be expected to stand and fulfil their complementary functions for some time.

Strands of learning in both descriptor sets

The Dublin descriptors have five strands, labelled by the Working Group as knowledge and understanding; applying knowledge and understanding; making judgements; communications skills; and learning skills. Even these strands were not explicitly identified or labelled during development, and not all strands are represented in the third cycle, in particular. The Irish descriptors have eight sub-strands: knowledge-breadth; knowledge-kind; know-how and skill-range; know-how and skill-selectivity; competence-context; competence-role; competence-learning to learn; and competence-insight. As pointed out above, the Irish Framework has positive statements of how the different sub-strands are to be understood whereas the strands in the EHEA Framework have to be inferred from the descriptors themselves.

Knowledge and understanding are central outcomes in many kinds of learning, particularly in higher education. In fact “knowledge” can sometimes be so generally interpreted as to be a synonym of learning. The Dublin descriptors use the expression “knowledge and understanding” whereas the Irish Framework explicitly includes “understanding” as a form of knowledge. Both the Dublin and Irish descriptors distinguish between knowledge (and understanding) on the one hand and the application of knowledge (and understanding) on the other. The application of knowledge and understanding is the second strand in the Dublin descriptors; in the Irish Framework the competence “refers to the process of governing the application of knowledge to a set of tasks”.

The Irish Framework explicitly distinguishes between declarative knowledge (“a learner knows that ...”), which forms the basis for the knowledge sub-strands, and procedural knowledge (“a learner knows how to ...”) which forms the basis for the sub-strands on know-how and skill. The sub-strand of know-how and skill – selectivity refers to “the judgement that the learner exercises in carrying out procedures”. The third strand of the Dublin descriptors is also largely about the capacity of the learner to make judgments, though at some levels other skills are referred to, such as the capacity to gather relevant data and to advance novel analyses. The third strand of the Dublin descriptors, in some cycles, also refers to aspects of judgement reflecting professional or social responsibility. As such the sub-strand overlaps with the competence sub-strands of the Irish Framework, notably insight, and possibly role.

The fourth sub-strand of the Dublin descriptors deals with communication skills, differentiating between cycles by reference to the content of the communication and more particularly with the audience. The Irish Framework does not separately address communication skills. Communication skills certainly fall within the generality of the understanding of skill put forward – “the performance of a task that in some way responds to or manipulates the physical, informational or social environment of the person”. Communications skills could be considered both from the point of view of the range of skills a learner has and the selectivity with which skills are used, that is both sub-strands of know-how and skill are relevant. The application of social skills, including communications skills, is part of the understanding of the sub-strand of competence – role.

The fifth strand of the Dublin descriptors has to do with learning skills. This corresponds to the sub-strand of the Irish Framework entitled competence–learning to learn. The Irish sub-strand is underpinned by a more general understanding of learning to learn than appears in the Bologna descriptors, but both include reference to the autonomy of the learner as a central construct.

Descriptors through the levels/cycles

Higher education descriptors in the Irish Framework begin with level 6. In a self-imposed restriction, the Irish descriptors refrain from describing outcomes at any level in terms of their relationship to a level below or above, though of course such comparisons, especially of the totality of each descriptor, are inevitably part of the understanding of the level. (We speak here of “level” though technically the Framework has level indicators and award-type descriptors. For the most part the elements are interchangeable, though not at level 6). The Dublin descriptors did not adopt such a restriction and the descriptor for the first cycle (and shorter cycle within the first cycle) refers to general secondary education, and the second cycle descriptor refers to the first cycle descriptor.

The Dublin descriptors and the associated award-type descriptors from the Irish Framework can be lined up alongside each other and the elements compared. The related strands, as identified above, are highlighted in the table at each level. It is important to bear in mind that these relationships are approximate. In the Dublin descriptors, in particular, the strands are not entirely consistent in their scope and phrasing. In the Irish Framework it is explicitly stated that all outcomes at a lower level can be assumed to have been attained at higher levels and the same is implied for the Dublin descriptors.

Short cycle – higher certificate (6)

The short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) can be compared to the Higher Certificate in the Irish Framework. The knowledge element of the Dublin descriptor explicitly contrasts this cycle (like the first cycle as a whole) with the knowledge acquired in general (as opposed to purely skills-based vocational) secondary education. The Irish descriptor addresses this dimension, and contrasts it with general secondary education, by reference to the increasingly abstract nature of the knowledge acquired. Both descriptors refer to a field of learning, implying a measure of specialisation, which would also contrast to general secondary education.

The application of knowledge in the Dublin descriptor merely refers to occupation whereas the Irish descriptor refers to a range of contexts and roles. The ability to function within multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups required in the Irish Framework implies the kind of communications skills specified in the Dublin descriptor.

The phraseology used in respect of problem solving is very similar in the two descriptors.

The learning skills elements in the Dublin descriptors are rather poorly differentiated from each other. One can discern a trend to greater autonomy at each level. The Irish descriptors are more explicit about the features of such autonomy. As such it is generally possible to claim that the Irish descriptors are compatible with the Dublin descriptors on this strand.

The Dublin descriptors have no language addressing competence–insight in this level.

The short cycle was the last of the Dublin descriptors to be developed. The influence of the Higher Certificate descriptor is acknowledged in the documentation relating to the descriptor produced by the Joint Quality initiative. The outcomes in the two descriptors are generally well matched, within the limits of comparison possible across the two sets of strands.

First cycle – ordinary bachelors (7)

The first cycle descriptor is in many ways the most important of the Dublin descriptors. The introduction of a bachelors level qualification was a novelty in many Bologna Process countries, and these countries looked to Ireland and the UK for indications of how the outcomes of bachelors degrees should be understood. Within the Irish Framework too, the identification of the ordinary bachelors degree and the formal distinction in level between the ordinary and the honours bachelor (at levels 7 and 8 respectively) was an important development in the clarification of the Irish qualifications system. This implies a recognition that Ireland has two sub-levels within the first cycle – the minimum attainment, represented by the ordinary bachelors and a higher attainment with more advanced learning outcomes, represented by the honours bachelor degree. The intended first cycle standing of the ordinary bachelor degree is signalled by the choice of award title, ordinary bachelors degree, in place of the traditional National Diploma, which was also awarded at this level.

In the Dublin descriptor the knowledge associated with a first cycle award builds upon secondary education, is supported by advanced textbooks and “includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge at the forefront of the field of study”. This concept of “forefront of the field of study” or leading edge of knowledge discovery is key to the set of related distinctions made about the kind or level of knowledge (and understanding) found in both the Dublin descriptors and the Irish descriptors. In the Irish descriptor for level 7 it is formulated somewhat negatively as “recognition of limitations of current knowledge and familiarity with sources of new knowledge”, arguably a more precise formulation than the Dublin descriptor.

It should be noted that the Dublin descriptor is deliberately somewhat vague in this regard. It has to cover both the honours bachelor degree, for those countries which use that as their first cycle award, such as England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the ordinary bachelor degree in those countries which use that as well, such as Ireland and Scotland. Countries developing first cycles programmes for the first time in the Bologna Process have also to set their standards for these programmes, and in some cases have to do so in a way that recognises binary “profiles”. The upshot of this is that the first cycle does not provide the uniform clean break (and associated obvious, simple progression to the second cycle) that perhaps some had hoped for.

The application of knowledge and understanding in the Dublin descriptor takes note of professional approach to work and problem solving within the field of study. The Irish descriptor mentions taking responsibility for the work of others. These two elements are broadly comparable.

The Dublin descriptor emphasises the gathering of data to inform decisions. This does not feature in the corresponding definition of selectivity but does reflect “the familiarity with new sources of knowledge” already mentioned for this descriptor. The Dublin descriptor generally restricts this skill to a field of study, which the Irish descriptor does within know-how and skill-range. The Dublin descriptor introduces into this strand, and at this level only, reference to a broader set of “social, scientific or ethical issues” that might bear on the decision making of the learner. This finds an echo in the Irish descriptor’s reference under the competence–insight sub-strand to “an internalised personal world view, manifesting solidarity with others”.

Communication skills in the Dublin descriptor call for skills in addressing both specialist and non-specialist audiences. The Irish descriptor does not mention audiences, though this descriptor subsumes the level 6 descriptor with its references to “heterogeneous groups”.

The learning skills strand emphasises that autonomy of learning required by the first cycle award holder with a view to further study (implicitly second cycle), while the sub-strand in the Irish descriptor is identical of that of the Higher Certificate holder, focussing on the initiative a learner must take to identify and address learning needs and also to participate in group learning, something that does not figure in the Dublin descriptors.

This comparison of outcomes in the first cycle Dublin descriptor and the ordinary bachelor descriptor supports the contention that the Irish ordinary bachelor degree is a first cycle qualification.

First cycle – honours bachelor degree (8)

The Irish descriptor, in this instance, echoes the positive language found in the Dublin descriptor about the knowledge at this level being, in part, “at the current boundaries of the field”.

The application of knowledge in the honours bachelor descriptor speaks of a range of contexts for the exercise of professional accountability. This appears to go somewhat beyond that specified for the first cycle descriptor.

The judgments required by the honours bachelor are qualified as being in relation to “a number of complex planning, design, technical and/or management functions related to products, services, operations or process, including resourcing”. These are arguably more demanding than “solving problems within their field of study”. As noted previously the reflection on social and ethical issues of the first cycle Dublin descriptor is not dissimilar to what is required in the insight sub-strand, though the level 8 descriptor asks that the worldview be “comprehensive”.

The honours bachelor competence – role calls on the learner to demonstrate ability to lead complex and heterogeneous groups, a function that calls for high levels of communications skills.

The learning to learn sub-strand of the honours bachelor calls on the learner to “manage learning tasks independently professionally and ethically” in what can be seen as a step up from the high degree of autonomy specified in the first cycle descriptor.

The comparison of outcomes in the first cycle Dublin descriptor and the honours bachelor descriptor supports the contention that the Irish honours bachelor degree is a first cycle qualification, although in some respects the outcomes go beyond those required for a first cycle qualification.

Second cycle – masters degree (9)

The Dublin descriptor refers to building on the first cycle. The Irish descriptor affirms the importance of the concept forefront of the field of learning in masters' knowledge. The Dublin descriptor introduces the expression "basis or opportunity for originality" where the Irish descriptor speaks of "critical awareness of ... new insights". The two are quite compatible. Indeed, the experience of those drafting the Dublin descriptors was that the masters level was easier to agree on in generic terms than the bachelors, though the Tuning Project reported the reverse was the case when attempting to agree outcomes within individual disciplines, as was their task. The agreement on generic level is possible because the continental countries had a history of long cycle programmes with outcomes at approximately this level, already recognised as broadly similar to Anglophone masters degrees in terms of admitting to doctoral studies, whereas they were much less familiar with bachelors level qualifications.

The application of the knowledge and skills at this level is qualified in the Dublin descriptor as taking place "in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study" whereas the Irish descriptor refers to "a wide and often unpredictable variety of professional levels and ill-defined contexts".

Judgments in the Dublin descriptor are made with incomplete or limited information. In the Irish descriptor the skills include "specialized ... techniques of enquiry" (presumably to address gaps in information). The requirement of the Dublin descriptor to reflect on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgments is less demanding than the Irish descriptor's call in the insight sub-strand to "scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and act to change them" but it could be said to encompass it.

The Irish masters' descriptor does not contain any explicit reference to communication but they are included in the development of "new skills to a high level" and are certainly required to engage in the outcomes called for in the insight sub-strand cited above. In contrast, the Dublin descriptor is quite detailed about the substance of the communication, tying it specifically to the new knowledge acquired or originated by the learner.

While the Dublin descriptor says relatively little about the further development of autonomy at this level, the Irish descriptor places an onus on the learner to self evaluate and take responsibility for their own ongoing learning.

The comparison of outcomes in the second cycle Dublin descriptor and masters' descriptor supports the contention that the Irish masters degree is a second cycle qualification.

Third cycle - doctorate

The scheme of elements in the Dublin descriptors is varied for the third cycle. The Dublin descriptor for the third cycle treats knowledge and understanding across two strands, unlike the other descriptors where it is dealt with in one. There is a separate strand on (research) skills and no proper strand on the application of knowledge and understanding.

The first knowledge strand refers to the systematic understanding and mastery of a field; similar language is also found in the knowledge – breadth sub-strand of the Irish descriptor. Another strand in the Dublin descriptor refers to extending the frontiers of knowledge through original research. The corresponding entry under knowledge – kind in the Irish descriptor refers to "the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research". These are quite similar.

The other "new" strand at the doctoral level asks that the learner has demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity". The Irish descriptor has echoes of this in the skills strand that speaks of developing new skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials. It appears that the Irish descriptor is aiming for a greater degree of generality whereas the Dublin descriptor has a more traditional academic doctorate in mind, or at least uses language that would reflect this mindset.

The strand of judgment is also somewhat differently addressed in the third cycle descriptor than in the other cycles, focussing on the “critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new ideas”. The Irish descriptor zeroes in on responding to “abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge”, which is a rather more precise, though entirely compatible account of the doctoral competence.

It is at the doctoral level only that the Irish Framework makes explicit, within the sub-strand of competence – role, the communicative outcomes of the qualification. This is consistent with the approach taken within this report that communication outcomes can be found implicit within competence – role in particular. Having said that, the content of the sub-strand does not match up precisely with that of the Dublin descriptor. The Irish descriptor emphasises communication with peers, while the Dublin descriptor also refers to the larger scholarly community and society in general. However the capacity and responsibility to communicate with society in general is implicit in the requirement of competence – insight in the Irish descriptor to not only scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships but also to “lead action to change them”. This in turn echoes another atypical strand in the Dublin descriptor for the third cycle which expects the learner “to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge-based society”. The Irish descriptor’s “learn to critique the broader implications of applying knowledge to particular contexts” has a similar flavour to it.

The third cycle Dublin descriptor and the Irish doctoral descriptor are broadly similar in content, though the Irish descriptor appears somewhat broader in intention. Both focus on the creation of new knowledge and allude to the broader obligations such a function brings with it.

Bologna	Irish framework	Dublin descriptor	Irish award-type descriptor
Short cycle	Higher cert 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and that provides an underpinning for a field of vocational activity or broader activities and studies; • can apply their knowledge and understanding in an occupational context; • HAVE THE ABILITY TO FORMULATE RESPONSES TO WELL-DEFINED ABSTRACT AND CONCRETE PROBLEMS; • can communicate about their activities and understanding with colleagues; • have the learning skills to undertake further studies within structured learning environments while demonstrating some elements of autonomy; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialised knowledge of a broad area. • Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant underpinning theory. • Demonstrate comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools. • FORMULATE RESPONSES TO WELL DEFINED ABSTRACT PROBLEMS. • Act in a range of varied and specific contexts involving creative and non-routine activities; transfer and apply theoretical concepts and/or technical or creative skills to a range of contexts. • Exercise substantial personal autonomy and often take responsibility for the work of others and/or for allocation of resources; form, and function within, multiple complex and heterogeneous groups. • Take initiative to identify and address learning needs and interact effectively in a learning group. • Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others
1st cycle	Ordinary bachelors 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialised knowledge across a variety of areas. • Recognition of limitations of current knowledge and familiarity with sources of new knowledge; integration of concepts across a variety of areas.

Bologna	Irish framework	Dublin descriptor	Irish award-type descriptor
1st cycle (continued)	Ordinary bachelors 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study; • HAVE THE ABILITY TO GATHER AND INTERPRET RELEVANT DATA (USUALLY WITHIN THEIR FIELD OF STUDY) TO INFORM JUDGEMENTS THAT INCLUDE REFLECTION ON RELEVANT SOCIAL, SCIENTIFIC OR ETHICAL ISSUES; • can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences; • have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate specialised technical, creative or conceptual skills and tools across an area of study. • EXERCISE APPROPRIATE JUDGEMENT IN PLANNING, DESIGN, TECHNICAL AND/OR SUPERVISORY FUNCTIONS RELATED TO PRODUCTS, SERVICES, OPERATIONS OR PROCESSES. • Utilise diagnostic and creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts. • Accept accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes; take significant or supervisory responsibility for the work of others in defined areas of work. • Take initiative to identify and address learning needs and interact effectively in a learning group. • Express an internalised, personal world view, manifesting solidarity with others.
	Honours bachelors 8		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An understanding of the theory, concepts and methods pertaining to a field (or fields) of learning. • Detailed knowledge and understanding in one or more specialised areas, some of it at the current boundaries of the field(s) • Demonstrate mastery of a complex and specialised area of skills and tools; use and modify advanced skills and tools to conduct closely guided research, professional or advanced technical activity.

Bologna	Irish framework	Dublin descriptor	Irish award-type descriptor
	Honours bachelors 8 (continued)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EXERCISE APPROPRIATE JUDGEMENT IN A NUMBER OF COMPLEX PLANNING, DESIGN, TECHNICAL AND/OR MANAGEMENT FUNCTIONS RELATED TO PRODUCTS, SERVICES, OPERATIONS OR PROCESSES, INCLUDING RESOURCING. • Use advanced skills to conduct research, or advanced technical or professional activity, accepting accountability for all related decision making; transfer and apply diagnostic and creative skills in a range of contexts. • Act effectively under guidance in a peer relationship with qualified practitioners; lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups. • Learn to act in variable and unfamiliar learning contexts; learn to manage learning tasks independently, professionally and ethically. • Express a comprehensive, internalised, personal worldview, manifesting solidarity with others.
2nd cycle	Masters 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with first cycle, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research context; • can apply their knowledge and understanding, and problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A systematic understanding of knowledge, at, or informed by, the forefront of a field of learning. • A critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, generally informed by the forefront of a field of learning. • Demonstrate a range of standard and specialized research or equivalent tools and techniques of enquiry.

Bologna	Irish framework	Dublin descriptor	Irish award-type descriptor
2nd cycle (continued)	Masters 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HAVE THE ABILITY TO INTEGRATE KNOWLEDGE AND HANDLE COMPLEXITY, AND FORMULATE JUDGEMENTS WITH INCOMPLETE OR LIMITED INFORMATION, BUT THAT INCLUDE REFLECTING ON SOCIAL AND ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES LINKED TO THE APPLICATION OF THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND JUDGEMENTS; • can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously; • have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SELECT FROM COMPLEX AND ADVANCED SKILLS ACROSS A FIELD OF LEARNING; DEVELOP NEW SKILLS TO A HIGH LEVEL, INCLUDING NOVEL AND EMERGING TECHNIQUES. • Act in a wide and often unpredictable variety of professional levels and ill-defined contexts. • Take significant responsibility for the work of individuals and groups; lead and initiate activity. • Learn to self-evaluate and take responsibility for continuing academic/professional development. • Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and act to change them.
3rd cycle	Doctorate 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field; • have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity; • have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of a field of learning. • The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy review by peers. • Demonstrate a significant range of the principal skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials which are associated with a field of learning; develop new skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials.

Bologna	Irish framework	Dublin descriptor	Irish award-type descriptor
3rd cycle (continued)	Doctorate 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ARE CAPABLE OF CRITICAL ANALYSIS, EVALUATION AND SYNTHESIS OF NEW AND COMPLEX IDEAS; • can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise; • can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge based society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RESPOND TO ABSTRACT PROBLEMS THAT EXPAND AND REDEFINE EXISTING PROCEDURAL KNOWLEDGE. • Exercise personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent contexts. • Communicate results of research and innovation to peers; engage in critical dialogue; lead and originate complex social processes. • Learn to critique the broader implications of applying knowledge to particular contexts. • Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and lead action to change them.

Analysis of non-outcomes issues which are relevant to verifying the compatibility of the Irish Framework with the Bologna Framework

These issues relate to access and progression to programmes leading to Irish qualifications within the cycles and leading to European and other qualifications, as well as the credit associated with Irish programmes leading to Framework awards and the general format of programmes which is encouraged in Ireland.

Access and Progression

In relation to access and progression, the Lisbon Recognition Convention makes a distinction between access (minimum standards) and admission (being given a place). Furthermore, in Ireland, the implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications has introduced a concept which is generally consistent with the Lisbon Recognition Convention concepts. This concept is referred to as the basis for successful participation. As part of the procedures for access, transfer and progression established by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, providers of education and training, including higher education institutions, are to set out for every programme statements of the knowledge, skill and competence needed as a basis for successful participation and the awards associated with those.

Following the establishment of the Irish Framework, the Authority – in partnership with higher education stakeholders – established a set of 'Principles and operational guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training'. The operational guidelines recommend that a typical credit volume or credit range be established for each major award-type from levels 6-9 in the Framework in line with existing ECTS conventions and current practice in the Irish higher education system as follows:

Level 6 Higher Certificate	=	120 credits
Level 7 Ordinary Bachelor Degree	=	180 credits
Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree	=	180-240 credits
Level 8 Higher Diploma	=	60 credits
Level 9 Masters Degree (Taught)	=	60-120 credits
Level 9 Postgraduate Diploma	=	60 credits

All Irish higher education awarding bodies are operating within these arrangements. There are further details on the development of these principles and operational guidelines under the third criterion.

The National Framework of Qualifications provides a levels referent for awards in Ireland. The levels can be used to clarify the meaning of credit packages attributed to multi-year programmes, i.e. as the basis of 'credit profiles' which can illustrate the (real or notional) 'attribution' of credit at stages within programmes. A particular issue arising is the interpretation of the credit associated with the Honours Bachelors Degree at Level 8 and the Ordinary Bachelor Degree at Level 7. A question arises: if an award is made at Level 8, and a typical programme leading to this award is 3 or 4 years in duration, does this imply that the learning involved is all at level 8? This is clearly not the case, and yet the typical weighting of such a programme as '180 credit' or '240 credit' appears to suggest it. A further question arises: if two awards are made, both typically achieved via programmes with a credit weighting of 180, and both recruiting from the same (school-leaving) learner pool, does this imply that both awards should be at the same level? This also is clearly not the case, as both Level 7 and Level 8 Ordinary Bachelor Degree and Honours Bachelor Degree awards may be attributed credit totals of 180.

This apparent paradox can be interpreted by looking at various models for the attribution of credit to various higher education 'first cycle' awards. The key concepts are those of credit profile and credit attribution. Depending on the practice in the awarding body concerned, the credit may be allocated to a learner at intervals (e.g., for completion of programme modules, or on the basis of yearly assessment) or it may all be allocated at the end of the programme (e.g., following a final examination). In any of these situations, it is still valid to 'attribute' the credits available, on a real or notional basis, to stages in the programme that correspond to Framework levels.

For a typical Ordinary Bachelor Degree, the total credit package for the programme in ECTS terms is 180, and an award is made only when a learner has accumulated this amount of credits. The programme leads to a Level 7 award, but the total credit package can be notionally attributed as 120 for learning with Level 6 outcomes and 60 for learning with Level 7 outcomes. Alternatively, it is possible that the total credit package can be notionally attributed as 60 for learning with Level 6 outcomes and 120 for learning with Level 7 outcomes. A key issue is that at least 60 credits must be at the level of the award in the Irish Framework.

For a typical Honours Bachelor Degree where the total credit package for the programme in ECTS terms is 180, an award is also made only when a learner has accumulated this amount of credits. Thus, the programme leads to a Level 8 award, but the total credit package is notionally attributed as 60 for learning with Level 6 outcomes, 60 for learning with Level 7 outcomes and 60 for learning with Level 8 outcomes.

For a typical Honours Bachelor Degree where the total credit package for the programme in ECTS terms is 240, an award is also made only when a learner has accumulated this amount of credits. There are two typical programmes and credit profile arrangements for this programme as follows:

- 60 at Level 6, 60 at Level 7 and 120 at Level 8.
- 120 at Level 6, 60 at Level 7 and 60 at Level 8.

It is also important to note that there are also diverse credit arrangements for the kind of longer programme that typically leads to the award of an Honours Bachelors Degree in certain disciplines in many Irish higher education institutions, e.g. Architecture.

It is noteworthy, in Framework terms, that these examples point up the variation and diversity that can be accommodated in the profiles of named awards conforming to one of the two award-types.

It is also helpful to consider the typical arrangements for learners entering programmes leading to these awards. In doing so, it is important to note that these are typical arrangements reflecting current practice and that there are instances outside of typical arrangements which are understood and acceptable in Ireland. The typical arrangements are as follows:

- Entry to a programme leading to a Higher Certificate is generally for school leavers and holders of equivalent qualifications.
- Entry to a programme leading to an ab-initio Ordinary Bachelor Degree is typically for school leavers and those with equivalent qualifications. In addition, there are 1-year add-on Ordinary Bachelor Degree programmes for holders of the Higher Certificate.
- Entry to a programme leading to an Honours Bachelor degree is typically for high-achieving school leavers or holders of equivalent qualifications. In addition, there are typically programmes of 1 year duration leading to Honours Bachelor Degrees for holders of Ordinary Bachelor Degrees – in a small number of cases such add-on programmes are of a two-year duration.
- Entry to a programme leading to a Higher Diploma is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees but can also be for holders of Ordinary Bachelor Degrees. It is of note that the Higher Diploma is typically in a different field of learning than the initial award.
- Entry to a programme leading to a taught Masters degree is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees. Also in some cases, entry to such programmes can be permitted for those with Ordinary Bachelor Degrees or equivalent who have some relevant work experience. Furthermore, in some cases, entry to such programmes is permitted for people with extensive experience.
- Entry to a programme leading to a research Masters Degree is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees, typically with a high classification attained – first or second class honours (While there is no national system of higher education classifications, there is a broad understanding within which higher education awarding bodies operate. This was established in research undertaken by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, in conjunction with the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Dublin Institute of Technology, and the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities into national and international practices and trends in the classification or grading of awards which was published in July 2005).

- Entry to a programme leading to a Post-Graduate Diploma is typically for holders of Honours Bachelors Degrees but can also be for holders of Ordinary Bachelor Degrees.
- Entry to a programme leading to a Doctoral Degree is typically for holders of Honours Bachelor Degrees. The general model is that a holder of an Honours Bachelor Degree with a high classification enters initially onto a Masters research programme, and transfers on to a Doctoral programme after one year on the Masters research programme. In total, the number of years in the programme would generally be at least 3 years. There is also access to research Doctoral Degrees for holders of Masters Degrees whether taught Masters or research Masters.

There is also, within the Doctoral degree award-type, an increasing tendency for the development of professional Doctorates. Typically, the access requirement for these is to have an Honours Bachelor Degree or a Masters Degree. These have not been significantly developed in Ireland to date and are thus few in number at this time.

It is also important to note that it is generally the case that learners from the European Union undertaking full-time undergraduate programmes in Ireland have their fees paid for by the State. This means that there is an encouragement for learners to access programmes leading to Honours Bachelor Degrees while they are studying full time. As a corollary, there is little encouragement in State funded provision, which makes up the vast majority of Irish provision, for Masters programmes building on Ordinary Bachelor Degrees as the State encourages Honours Bachelor Degree programmes building on Ordinary Bachelor Degrees for which fees would be paid on behalf of EU learners by the State.

Links with International Programmes and Awards

It is also important to look at progression routes for holders of Irish qualifications within Europe and on a wider international basis. Typically, there is a very close relationship between qualifications in Ireland and in the United Kingdom and in relation to movement of learners between Ireland and the United Kingdom. Indeed, qualifications and regulatory authorities in Ireland and the United Kingdom have agreed a general cross-referencing of the Frameworks of qualifications that are in place. In contrast, it is more difficult to compare Irish qualifications with qualifications in Europe generally, especially having regard to both pre-Bologna and post-Bologna developments. Holders of Irish Masters Degrees typically have access to third cycle programmes in Europe. It is also of note that there are extensive profile issues arising internationally in Europe in the consideration of the compatibility of Frameworks from other European countries with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. It is unclear at this time what decisions will be made on the verification process by these countries. Ireland also has a close link with the United States of America in relation to the movement of learners and experiences in the recognition of Irish qualifications there is also relevant.

In this context, each country in the Bologna process is now preparing a national action plan to improve the quality of the process associated with the recognition of international qualifications. The Qualifications Authority, in partnership with stakeholders in higher education, issued a questionnaire to Irish higher education institutions in June 2006 with a view to finding out information on the arrangements for such recognition at institutional level. As part of this questionnaire, information was sought which might have been of relevance to the verification of the alignment of the Irish Framework and the Bologna Framework. Furthermore, the Authority also sought information from European and other countries concerning the recognition by them of Irish qualifications. This work was completed in October 2006. There was not significant additional information gathered in these exercises to impact on the verification process.

While, at this stage it is not possible to be certain of the recognition of Irish qualifications by higher education institutions in other countries and of the recognition of other countries awards by Irish higher education institutions, a possible outcome of this work might be:

- Holders of an Irish Ordinary Bachelor Degree do not appear to typically have access to programmes leading to second cycle completion awards in Europe or in the United States – it is hoped that over time there will be a testing of the standards of Ordinary Bachelor Degrees for entry purposes to second cycle programmes in European countries in line with the requirements of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. This would be particularly the case where there are countries which have in place various progression arrangements for holders of different types of first cycle completion qualifications with different profiles.

- Holders of an Irish Honours Bachelor Degree appear to typically have access to programmes leading to qualifications for completion of the second cycle in Europe. Often a high attainment is required for access to a second cycle research programme.
- Holders of first cycle European qualifications typically can have access to Irish Masters. At the same time, where an Irish institution shows that there is substantial difference between such a European qualification and a qualification giving typical entry to its programmes, the institution sometimes puts in place a formalised progression and bridging requirement and has a clear rationale for this.

