



***Report of the Dublin Institute of Technology in relation to
the implementation and impact of the National
Qualifications Framework in education and training***

(Updated October 2008)

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Introductory observation

In both the document entitled *Guidelines and Template of Report for Sectoral Co-ordinators* and the document entitled *Terms of Reference for a Study of the implementation and impact of the framework*, the Dublin Institute of Technology is omitted from the stakeholder bodies that are listed.

However, the Institute acknowledges its inclusion in parity with FETAC, HETAC and the universities in the *Background paper on the development, implementation and impact of the National Framework of Qualifications and related policies on access, transfer and progression August 2008* and looks forward to participating in the next stages of the impact study.

This updated report, October 2008, augments the information provided within the original template provided in the first document above under the ten major themes of inquiry. The sector in this case is taken to be the Dublin Institute of Technology.

1. Engagement with the Framework

1.1 Briefly outline the key areas of work in the sector in relation to the National Framework of Qualifications?

Under the provisions of the Qualifications (Education & Training) Act, 1999, the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) is both a provider and an awarding body. The Act also makes specific provisions regarding the relationship between the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and DIT in relation to quality assurance arrangements.

The Institute provides a wide range of full and part time higher education programmes leading to major awards of the Institute – from higher certificate to doctoral level – that are placed from level 6 to level 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NQF) by the Institute with the agreement of the Authority. In addition the Institute, in association with Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS) and Fáilte Ireland, provides education and training programmes for apprentices in the designated trades and the hospitality trades respectively that lead to level 6 awards of the Further Education & Training Awards Council.

The Institute also offers a range of short programmes that fall within the category of minor awards across the further and higher education and training spectrum.

Among the key areas of work undertaken by the Institute in relation to the NQF has been the placing on the Framework of both current and former awards and the work associated with this as outlined in the field of inquiry below. The other key area has been in relation to quality assurance. As part of the latter the European University Association in association with the NQAI carried out a successful review of the effectiveness of DIT's quality assurance processes in 2005.

1.2 What have been the main achievements to-date in the sector in respect of the Framework?

Following the introduction of the National Framework of Qualifications, the Institute engaged in a process of re-design of its programmes and modules to ensure that the learning outcomes

are appropriate for the knowledge, know-how and skill and competence associated with the different levels on the Framework.

There was a very significant process undertaken by the Institute in terms of the re-design of programmes and modules and the placement of awards – current and former – and was a major achievement by the Institute staff and the Institute's Academic Council. It was beneficial to the Institute's Schools and Faculties but also to the learners, both current and former. It is also beneficial to employers of Institute graduates.

Arising from the publicity at national level related to the launch of the Framework there was considerable interest and inquiries particularly from the holders of former awards. It led to a large number of requests from these former students of the Institute regarding the placement of such former awards. Such requests are ongoing and the Institute continues to accommodate them. Additionally, enquiries are increasing in relation to progression opportunities within the NQF in relation to both legacy and existing awards of the DIT and other awarding bodies.

2. Knowledge and understanding of the Framework

2.1 In your view, what is the extent of knowledge and understanding of the Framework in the sector?

The Institute's senior academic staff and lecturing staff members were centrally involved in the programme re-design process referred to in 1.2 and as a consequence there is a very good knowledge and understanding of Framework matters within and across the Institute. The level of knowledge and understanding was also supported by the fact that there were briefings and presentations to the Institute's Academic Council, Faculty Boards and Schools, following on from the circulation of the informative NQAI published materials regarding the Framework and related matters.

Student representatives, including student union members, participate in these various fora and as a result there is also a good level of knowledge of the Framework among the Institute's student body, although it is likely to be less so among students in the apprenticeship areas, though awareness of progression opportunities among apprentices is growing and likely to increase further as awareness grows.

2.2 How is the Framework perceived in the sector?

Although academic colleagues within the Institute were required to undertake the range of tasks referred to in 1.1 and 1.2 associated with the re-design of their academic programmes, the perception is that senior academic and lecturing staff members and learners view the Framework and matters associated with it as being positive, particularly with regard to the coherence it brings to the landscape of awards in Ireland and in relation to international comparability of awards.

With regard to lecturing staff members there is increasingly deeper understanding of the consequences of using now more clearly defined overall programme, as well as module, learning outcomes which are generally considered to be helpful in planning teaching programmes and their associated learner assessments. Similarly these clearly defined outcomes are helpful to learners in planning their studies and career paths. It should also be helpful to the latter in relation to their chosen field of employment.

However, it would be reasonable to conclude that there is some concern and even a degree of disenchantment with the bunching of awards at Level 6 without consistent, coherent and transparent justification in all cases. There may also be some concern that the ideology of the framework, which promises the expectation of progression and recognition possibilities, may not be experienced in reality.

2.3 What expectations do persons working in the sector have of the Framework?

Overall the first expectation is that it will be beneficial to learners in terms both of the standards of their awards and also to academic staff members in terms of the recognition of their programmes and the maintenance and enhancement of academic standards. Secondly, an expectation is that it will facilitate the transfer of students between HEIs and progression of students within and between HEIs. There may also be an expectation that eventually the Framework will deliver on the expectation, and indeed its promise, that it will enable all learning to be recognised within it, not just learning related to awards.

3. Implementation and operation of the Framework

3.1 What are the overall priorities concerning the Framework within the sector?

The priorities are to maintain and enhance the standards of the Institute's awards and to seek to ensure the further development of the long-established opportunities for learner access, transfer and progression and to use modular, credit-based systems to their optimum. Recently, a more extensive policy development process within the Institute in relation to the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was completed and adopted. It is intended that RPL policy and practice will both indicate compliance with agreed national principles and guidelines in this regard as well as intent to make creative and judicious use of the potential of RPL to enable sensible use of work-based learning/professional development opportunities.

3.2 What approach(es) are being taken to implement the Framework in the sector?

Framework matters are now embedded in the Academic Council's policies and procedures. At the beginning of the implementation phase, and as mentioned above, all senior academic and lecturing staff members were briefed in relation to Framework matters. This facilitated the re-design of existing programmes but also in the design of new programmes and in the design of teaching and assessment strategies. Quality Assurance Officers, centralised Learning & Teaching Development staff members as well as Learning Development staff at faculty level were closely involved in working with Institute academic staff members to ensure the implementation of the Framework within the Institute. Since the Institute has now moved to a School level review process it is likely that all academic and academic management staff will be acutely cognisant of relevant NQF matters.

All Institute prospectuses and marketing materials for programmes indicate the NQF level of each programme for prospective students and other interested parties.

3.3 What are the main actions taken in the sector?

It is the policy of the Academic Council that any new programmes developed within the Institute or the existing programmes that are reviewed periodically must comply with Framework matters. This includes matters relating to learner access, transfer and progression

pathways as well as the knowledge, know-how and skill, and competence as well as the learning outcomes at programme and module levels.

3.4 What is the extent of implementation of the Framework in the sector in respect of:

- *Development of award system and awards (major, minor, supplemental, special purpose);*
There has been full implementation of Framework matters in relation to major Institute awards. Faculties/Schools developing minor, supplemental and special purpose awards are required to identify the associated learning outcomes and specify the framework level in this regard. However, there are still some short courses in the Institute where there hasn't yet been full implementation. Some of these are associated with trade and other bodies.
- *Different levels of the Framework;*
Institute programmes cover the full range of Framework levels.
- *Placement of former awards;*
All of the Institute's former major awards have been placed on the Framework in agreement with the NQAI. From time to time a former student who may have undertaken studies in the 1970s seeks a placement of their former award but records may not be available; similarly the relevant academic staff member or members with knowledge of such programmes may have retired. Notwithstanding this the Institute endeavours to place all such awards.
- *Learning outcomes and standard-setting;*
There has been full implementation of these matters.
- *Titles of awards;*
Titles of Institute awards fully accord with the Framework. However, there is a temporary difficulty with two long-standing conjoint programmes that lead to University of Dublin awards as well as DIT awards. An agreed solution was arrived at with the Authority executive in this regard. The possibility of joint awards is under consideration and a proposal in this regard has been formulated.

3.5 What are the major gaps/issues to be addressed in implementing the Framework in the sector?

Three major gaps/issues that need to be addressed are referred to above. These are concerned, first, with the short type of part-time programme and how these can be accommodated on the Framework. Second, there is the issue of full implementation of access, transfer and progression opportunities particularly those from apprenticeship backgrounds with advanced certificate qualifications. Third, is the question of awards from other institutions, including international partnership awards, and the possibility of joint awards.

A matter that some colleagues identify difficulties with is the question of placing 3 year, 4 year and 5 year honours degrees at the same level (level 8) on the Framework, and the credit rating assigned to each, that is 180, 240 and 300 respectively.

Additionally, there is disquiet in some knowledge areas/disciplines that a culture of compliance rather than of principled guidance has become attached to level descriptors with consequent worrying implications for freedoms/flexibility related to curriculum design, pedagogies and

assessment. This particular matter should be addressed by the NQAI in its impact study with both conceptual and technical consideration in its approach to quality assurance oversight.

3.6 What are the major successes in respect of implementing the Framework in the sector?

One of the major successes is that Institute staff and Schools/Departments have undertaken thorough reviews of their programmes in terms of the matters referred to at 1 above and associated with the placements of their programmes/awards on the framework. The Institute has developed a very good system and considerable expertise in identifying the relevant knowledge, know-how and skill, and competence associated with their programmes as well as the learning outcomes in this regard. This has been a very beneficial to the Institute as well as to students and employers.

4. Influencing Factors

4.1 What factors most assist in the implementing of the Framework in the sector? (Why)

Several influencing factors are considered relevant, some of which relate to national as well as European initiatives. First, with regard to the latter, there was the Bologna process, the cycles associated with this and the mobility factor that it entailed. Second, and most importantly, was the establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and the work undertaken by the Authority since then. A key enabling factor was the consultative approach taken by the Authority executive and its reaching out to involve all stakeholders. Finally, there was the European Framework of Qualifications. All of these were contributory factors. Institutions bought into the consultative process with designated staff members tasked to disseminate Framework matters within their own institutions.

4.2 What factors most hinder the implementation of the Framework in the sector? (Why)

It could be argued that the Framework is as fully implemented as it can be in the Institute. Some obstacles continue to exist in relation to access, transfer and progression opportunities for the reasons outlined in 3.5 and in relation to rigidity of implementation 'culture' at the cost of creativity and flexibility: a light touch is recommended.

4.3 Are there any award-types or levels in the Framework where implementation raises particular difficulties for the sector? If so, elaborate on these.

As referred to in 3.5, the different types of honours degrees. With regard to five year honours degrees there is movement towards converting this programme to a three year programme plus a Master degree. However, this raises the question of student fees.

4.4 Are there any fields of learning where implementation in the sector is particularly difficult? If so, elaborate on these.

Five year Architecture honours degree, for the reasons referred to at 3.5.

4.5 Are there any other particular difficulties in respect of implementation in the sector?

These have already been elaborated. With regard to quality assurance there remain some difficulties in terms of student feedback as is the case with other HE institutions in Ireland.

5. Implementation structures for the Framework

5.1 In your view, have bodies/departments/staff with a key role in implementation in the sector received or had access to appropriate information regarding the Framework? If not, what are the gaps?

Yes. See 1, 2 and 3.

5.2 How useful is the operation of the Framework to the sector as a whole?

Very useful in the programme development process and the overall structuring of the Institute's award offerings and internal and external transfer and progression arrangements.

5.3 In your view, do the existing mechanisms for interaction between the sector and the Framework ensure its effective implementation? If not, what needs to be addressed?

Broadly, yes, with cautions as in earlier responses.

6. Knowledge and understanding of Authority's policies on access, transfer and progression

6.1 What, in your view, is the extent of knowledge and understanding in the sector of the Authority's policies on access, transfer and progression?

There is an extensive knowledge and understanding within the DIT of the Authority's access, transfer and progression policies. The Academic Council established a sub-committee to address the Authority's policies in this area and its findings and recommendations has led to considerable debate across faculties that have led to the further development of the Institute's long-established and progressive approaches in this area.

6.2 To what extent are the roles and responsibilities for implementation of the various bodies in the sector known and understood?

The roles and responsibilities are well known and understood. However, there continues to be an impediment in some academic disciplines in the Institute to the progression of students from an apprenticeship background. There remains a concern among Faculty senior and other academic staff members at the ability of such FE students to be able to cope with HE programme demands, particularly in certain disciplines.

In addition former apprenticeship students are often in well-paid employment and many seem unwilling or unable to leave their employment to enter full-time education. There are also difficulties with part-time attendance in this regard and indeed related to free fees for this sector.

The impression is that there are clearly defined and well-established mechanisms for transfer and progression arrangements for learners among institutes of technology. However, it is not clear how well the transfer arrangements work in terms of transfer from an Institute to the universities in the case of level 6 and level 7 award holders, for example. Again, the expectations raised may not be realised.

6.3 To what extent are these policies promoted in the sector as part of Framework implementation?

The policies are promoted through the Institute's Academic Council and senior academic staff members both centrally, through the Council's committee structure and at faculty/school levels.

6.4 How are these policies perceived in the sector?

There is a good level of acceptance of these policies. But the concerns expressed at 6.2 above remain. See also 6.5.

6.5 What expectations to persons working in the sector have of these policies?

The need for mechanisms to overcome the difficulties referred to at 6.2 above.

7. Implementation of Authority's policies on access, transfer and progression

7.1 What are the overall priorities concerning access, transfer and progression in the sector?

DIT has long been at the forefront and a leader with considerable experience and successful experience of providing so-called 'ladders of opportunity' for learners. This is now more commonly referred to nationally as access, transfer and progression.

7.2 What approaches are being taken to implementation in the sector?

The Institute's Academic Council requires that all programmes attracting Institute major awards shall specify in the programme document the manner in which learner access, transfer and progression arrangements will operate.

7.3 What are the main actions taken in the sector?

See 7.2

7.4 What is the extent of implementation in the sector in respect of:

- *Access and entry arrangements*
Fully implemented.
- *Transfer arrangements*
Fully implemented.
- *Progression*
To a large extent implemented but still more work required for the progression of Advanced Certificate holders. Institute are participating in a group of national stakeholders convened by the NQAI to address this matter nationally.
- *Credit accumulation and transfer*
The Institute has had in place on its programmes the ECTS arrangements for more than 10 years.

- *Recognition of Prior Learning*

As part of the Institute's policies there are well-established processes for learner transfer and progression based on the recognition of certified learning achieved either in DIT or in other institutions. In addition, there has been some limited opportunity for progression based on experiential learning. The Institute appointed, on a seconded temporary basis, a RPL development officer to formulate RPL policies in order to address the NQAI policy document in relation to this topic. The development process is complete and the Institute's Academic Council approved policies in this regard at its meeting of June 2008.

This policy is now being actualised across Faculties through School and programme review processes and on-demand from academic staff. A specific CPD course in RPL for academic staff has been validated and is available on-demand. A specific RPL website is in development as well as appropriate documentation and information literature. Research projects in relation of aspects of RPL and the world of work are currently under way which are likely to further enhance the Institute's position as a national leader in such matters.

- *Information provision to learners/applicants*

Information setting out the Institute's policies is contained in Institute publications. In addition there are visitations by academic and other staff to second level schools as part of the recruitment process, information sessions and open days for potential applicants. At these events potential applicants and other interested parties are provided with information regarding access, transfer and progression opportunities within the Institute. There are also Guidance Counsellor sessions where such information is made available. It is routine that learners registered and participating in Institute programmes are informed of these opportunities.

7.5 What are the major gaps/issues to be addressed in implementation in the sector?

Progression opportunities for apprenticeship trade areas is a key area that need to be addressed. A related, and wider, gap is the lack of conceptualisation and design of mechanisms to value all learning regardless of its relationship to existing or legacy awards in the framework. Additionally, there is a perceived gap in the ability of the framework to conceptually and procedurally differentiate between levels of learning as indicative of an award and levels of learning related to elements of such an award. This gap is particularly relevant where experiential learning – both prior and concurrent – is involved in academic judgements related to levels as articulated in the NQF. A wider gap, and one which is likely to become more pressing in the future, is the gap between expectations that the promises of the NQF will be fulfilled at the level of the individual citizen and a context that is bounded by resources and strategic trajectories.

7.6 What are the major areas of success in the sector?

Progression from level 6 and level 7 as well as the more traditional progression from level 8. A very good example of the implementation of the Framework in terms of access, transfer and progression relates to electrical apprentices who have received the Advanced Certificate. The Institute has developed programmes to facilitate their progression to Bachelor and Master degree levels.

It could be argued, however, that there are significant differences between electrical and say, Wall and Floor Tiling or Plastering trades. First, there are significant numbers of electrical apprentices, the vast majority of whom have achieved a good level in the Leaving Certificate.

Second, the theoretical underpinning in the case of electrical apprentices is quite different to that of the other two trades cited and therefore progression can be facilitated much more easily. This highlights the point made earlier in relation to the unhelpful bunching of different 'levels' of awards at 6 where the effort to appear 'equitous' has not gained full credibility in the sector.

7.7 What factors most assist in implementation in the sector?

The Framework itself which clearly articulates the spaces of different providers, level descriptors – when not rigidly interpreted – the judicious use of a learning outcomes model, and the availability of commonly-understood ECTS provisions.

7.8 What factors most hinder implementation in the sector?

Transfer from other institutions where there may be significant programme differences can impact poorly on students. There is a lack of clarity still regarding levels of learning outcomes across a programme and the culture that seems to expect technical compliance before conceptual clarity in this regard.

7.9 Are there any levels of the Framework or fields of learning in which implementation in the sector raises particular difficulties? If so, please elaborate in them.

Some issues not fully resolved in relation to level 8 awards as outlined in 3.5 and elsewhere in this report. Progression from level 6 (advanced certificate) to higher education awards is still problematic where higher level programmes may not necessarily be framed to take account of the need for progression.

7.10 Are there any other difficulties in respect of implementation in the sector?

One of the elements of the Institute's policy in relation to learner access, transfer and progression is the possibility of offering bridging studies where these are necessary, especially in relation to 7.9 above. Funding such studies is an issue.

8. Recognition of International Awards

8.1 To what extent has the recognition of international awards for access to or for exemptions from parts of programmes in the sector been improved by the Framework?

It has provided opportunities to recruit from a wider student base and to enable mobility of learners across Irish providers and internationally.

9. Impact of the Framework and related policies on access, transfer and progression

9.1 What, in your view, has been the overall impact on the sector in respect of:

- *Quality assurance*

The Dublin Institute of Technology has had quality assurance procedures in place for more than 30 years. These were successfully reviewed by an international panel appointed by

the HEA in 1996, leading to the Institute being granted the power to award its own degrees up to and including doctoral level in 1997 by the then Minister for Education. In 2002, and in accordance with the statutory requirements provided for in the Qualifications (Education & Training) Act, 1999, the NQAI and DIT 'agreed' the Institute's quality assurance procedures. The revised procedures contained in the *Handbook for Academic Quality Enhancement* were 'agreed' with the Authority in January 2007.

The NQAI has confirmed that these new procedures make provision for all of the elements of internal quality assurance set out in part 1 of the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance* that have been adopted by European Ministers for Education under the Bologna process. In 2005/06 the EUA endorsed the Institute's quality assurance arrangements.

- *Learning outcomes and standards*

By legislation, these matters fall within the remit of the Institute's Academic Council and in this regard the Council has formulated General Assessment Regulations under which standards are assured. Internal and external examiners work within the framework of the Regulations in order to ensure learning outcomes are achieved and award standards are comparable with international best practice for the disciplines concerned. In this context the impact of the framework in terms of learner access, transfer and progression has been positive.

- *Assessment*

Learner assessment strategies are designed to be cognisant of the knowledge, know-how and skill, and competence associated with the different levels on the Framework and the learning outcomes in this respect. In this regard the implementation of the Framework has had an overall positive impact in terms of the relationship between outcomes and appropriate assessment strategies to achieve these outcomes. In this context the impact of the framework in terms of learner access, transfer and progression has been positive.

- *Learners/ learning experience*

For the reasons outlined in the three preceding bullet points it is clear that the impact of the framework in terms of learner access, transfer and progression has been positive.

- *Partners in education and training (employers, trade unions, community, voluntary, representative bodies, professional bodies)*

The Institute has a long record of interaction and engagement with the type of partners referred to.

- *Resources/funding*

There are resource and funding issues associated with the full implementation of the Framework. These funding issues will intensify if there is to be a significant increase in transfer, progression and RPL matters.

- *Staff*

Staff have fully co-operated in the implementation of the Framework although there remain some issues in relation to student feedback matters as already mentioned and in relation to a number of conceptual issues which need to inform implementation.

- *International standing of Ireland's education and training*

It is very well regarded by overseas partners and contacts.

10. Conclusion/summary

10.1 Overall, how important would you say the Framework and related policies on access, transfer and progression is to the sector?

Very important for coherence and readability and for presenting the Institute as a publicly funded 'good' accessible to citizens.

10.2 Are there any other issues you would like to raise?

In completing this report it was felt there was a sense of overlap in some of the areas of inquiry. Notwithstanding this, efforts have been made to provide a comprehensive reply to all of the areas.