

Consultation on the Implementation and Impact of the National Framework of Qualifications and Access, Transfer and Progression policies: 2008

Respondent's Details

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Is this response a personal view or is it made on behalf of your organisation?

Personal [] On behalf of organisation []

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Yes [] No []

Expectations of the Framework

Expectations are that the framework will provide a clear pathway for all learners should they chose to either become involved in formal education or progress their educational achievements. The primary expectation of the FET sector is the facilitation of Access, Transfer and Progression processes for all learners.

Other expectations include:

- recognition of all learning
- facilitation of Lifelong Learning
- recognition of international certification
- identifying new opportunities for progression

We acknowledge that the NFQ has been effective in the delivery of the above expectations, but we recognise that some implementation phases are not yet complete, particularly with regard to ATP (Access in particular) to the Higher Education sector which may lead to a lack of realisation of expectations for FET learners.

Impact on learners

The following have had a positive impact on learners:

- The recognition of all learning experiences across the life long learning spectrum
- The facilitation of ATP processes
- The availability of recognition for international certification
- The introduction of the recognition of learning achievements at Level 1 and Level 2

Learner uncertainty and confusion may exist due to a lack of clarity around the documentation and the transferability of the framework, particularly from the European perspective. In the European/International context uniformity in the number of levels in each qualifications framework would facilitate comparison, transparency and transferability more readily for the learners. The 8 level structure of the EQF may lead to some confusion for those used to the Irish 10 level framework.

Key strengths and key weaknesses of the Framework

The strengths of the framework lie in its achievements. A main achievement has been the clear and defined mapping of all FET qualifications and learning pathways, leading to structured ATP pathways and clearer progression options for learners. The framework has brought better recognition and greater credibility to FET awards and courses for learners, education practitioners and employers. It has also facilitated recognition at an international level through the EQF, and international agreements. The placement of the FETAC legacy awards on the NFQ has ensured currency for previous awards and may have encouraged award holders to return to learning. The development phase of the NFQ has been extremely positive for the FET sector. The complete implementation of all related policies and processes will continue to contribute to the value of FET within the framework. The weakness of the framework lies in the inaccessibility of some documentation due to its technical terminology and orientation towards those with knowledge in the area of education and educational development. The variation in levels between the Irish and European frameworks in terms of levels may prove to be problematic in terms of understanding and recognition especially for learners.

Impact on programmes and qualifications

Consistency and transparency around standards, learning outcomes, assessment and quality assurance has had a positive effect on the programmes in terms of development, delivery and review. This has in turn positively impacted on the value of qualifications achieved by learners.

With respect to further education and training in particular learning outcomes and standards will be greatly improved with the implementation of the CAS and the Standards Development Process. Improvements in Assessment procedures will continue with the implementation of the Assessment Policy in July 2008. Internal improvements in assessment are acknowledged through implementation of QA processes. We acknowledge that resource concerns

exist within the FET sector.

Access, Transfer and Progression

- Expectations

It has already been noted that the primary expectation of the NFQ by the FET sector is the facilitation of Access Transfer and Progression processes for all learners. The FESS acknowledge that the NFQ has been effective in the delivery of Access Transfer and Progression processes for all learners, but we recognise that, whilst developments are ongoing on the ground, implementation phases are not yet complete with regard to ATP (Access in particular) in the Higher Education sector. This may be due in part to reluctance at Higher Education level to recognise developments for progression outside traditional pathways.

In order to expedite and operationalise ATP processes the FESS identify and suggest the prioritisation of the following key strategies;

- The recognition of all learning experiences across the life long learning spectrum
- The availability of recognition for international certification
- The increased credibility of FET certification by learners, education practitioners and employers across all sectors
- The introduction of the recognition of learning achievements at Level 1 and Level 2
- The facilitation of progression opportunities for FET programmes where applicable
- The development of increased opportunities for ATP pathways (with particular reference to previously excluded target groups), including increased ATP opportunities for immigrants and emigrants.

The introduction and continued development and implementation of RPL procedures and processes is welcomed, however the FESS envisage the possibility of resource implications for the implementation of RPL processes.

This is an issue which has the potential to impact negatively on ATP in practice on the ground.

Within the DES funded FET sector the current situation for transfer is effective; however within the CAS (Programme Development and Validation) issues for transferability may arise. To improve progression options for learners they should be provided with increased information on the NFQ and on the progression opportunities from the specific programme / award that they are undertaking. The sharing of validated programmes between providers will be beneficial in facilitating transfer and progression for learners.

The above cited strategies should be implemented through the further development, promotion and implementation of clear and structured policies and procedures supporting life long learning processes. Whilst the existing policies are inclusive and feasible the FESS acknowledge issues at implementation phase across all sectors, but in particular with regard to progression from FET to Higher Education.

- Impact on learners

Perhaps the main achievement of the NFQ has been the clear and defined mapping of all FET qualifications and learning pathways, leading to structured ATP pathways and clearer progression options for learners. This mapping continues to bring enhanced recognition and increased credibility to FET awards and courses for learners, education practitioners and employers. This applies at both a national and international level through comparisons and compatibility with the EQF, and international agreements.

In keeping with the key area of lifelong learning the placement of the FETAC legacy awards on the NFQ has ensured currency for previous awards and has facilitated and supported the return to learning of previous award holders.

The FESS has already recognised the primary expectation of the FET sector as the facilitation of Access Transfer and Progression processes for all learners. We acknowledge the inherent learner- centred expectations

including; the recognition of all learning; the facilitation of Lifelong Learning; the recognition of international certification; and the identification of new opportunities for progression.

Learner needs will continue to be addressed through the identification of clearer access requirements, including the relevance of work experience, across all sectors; the implementation of formal processes to support and implement the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning.

The FESS recommends the development of clear procedures to explain entry requirements to priority target groups. At NFQ Levels 1 - 6 these procedures should be implemented by FETAC at a national level and providers at local level. All initiatives should encompass processes to include the legacy awards, international and other certification.

- Key strengths and key weaknesses

As noted the main achievement of the NFQ, with specific relevance to ATP has been the clear and defined mapping of all FET qualifications and learning pathways, leading to structured ATP pathways and clearer progression options for learners. This has been successful in the overall context but a lack of understanding on the ground may prevent effective implementation of ATP procedures across sectors.

The FESS also recognises that the NFQ has lead to a greatly increased awareness of recognition opportunities for international certification, and facilitated ATP for those learners who hold those awards. It must be acknowledged however that the 10 level structure of the NFQ may be restrictive for international transparency.

Informal feedback from providers indicates that the level and nature of language used in NQAI documentation is found to be somewhat off-putting and overly complex by those who are not specialised in the area of formal qualifications. Lack of comprehension of procedures and processes will ultimately impact negatively on ATP. The FESS therefore recommends a

user-friendly approach to documentation, taking into account the needs of all stakeholders.

Relevance of the Framework to employment

When discussing the relevance of the NFQ to employment we must consider the impact on the employer and the jobseeker and /or employee.

The NFQ has brought better recognition and greater credibility to FET awards and courses for learners, education practitioners and employers. The facilitation of recognition at an international level through the EQF, and international agreements is imperative when exploring employment options outside the national sphere. The placement of the FETAC legacy awards on the NFQ has ensured currency for previous awards and encouraged award holders to return to learning. This lifelong learning contributes greatly to the employment market and to employment opportunities for the individual learner.

In the *Forfas All Island Skills Study (October 2008)* an analysis of current skills stock in the Irish labour market (ccurrent working-age skills stock) cites the following;

- 1.3m with low qualifications (31 per cent),
- 1.7m with medium qualifications (42 per cent)
- and 1.1m with higher qualifications (27 per cent).

It is noted that the share of working-age with low qualifications has fallen from 40 per cent in 1999 (1.4m), and that the share of working-age with third level qualifications is up from 18 per cent in 1999 (0.6m). The NFQ facilitates the analysis of these findings for all stakeholders, and the transparency afforded will contribute to the ongoing identification of needs and the upskilling of the workforce.

It is also recognized in the Forfas study that in international terms the Island has a high share of working-age persons with low qualifications, and a low – but significantly improving – share of third level qualified working-age persons. The Island’s skill structure (share of third level qualified working-age persons) is improving faster than each of the international comparators presented in the report and qualifications amongst the Island’s young working-age are on a par with international comparators. Again the FESS recognizes that the implementation of the NFQ continues to contribute to progression routes and enhanced employment opportunities for the workforce and labour market.

Use of the Framework in public funding

The FESS is not instrumental in the implementation of funding initiatives or the allocation of funding and thus is not in a position to comment in this area. It is acknowledged that the funding –related delay in the implementation of the ‘new’ FETAC processes at Levels 1 – 6 will impact negatively on developments at these levels.

Impact on the international recognition of qualifications

It has already been recognised that one of the main achievements of the NFQ is the clear and defined mapping of all FET qualifications and learning pathways, leading to structured ATP pathways and clearer progression options for learners. The framework has also facilitated recognition at an international level through the EQF, and international agreements.

The FESS recognises that the recognition of international certification is an expectation of the NFQ, especially when we consider Ireland’s changing demographic. The effective realisation of this expectation will lead to the development of increased opportunities for ATP pathways (with particular reference to previously excluded target groups) and enhanced ATP opportunities for immigrants and emigrants thus supporting life long learning processes within and beyond the national sphere.

The NFQ has lead to a greatly increased awareness of recognition opportunities for international certification, and facilitated ATP for those

learners who hold those awards.

However in the European / International context uniformity in the number of levels in each qualifications framework would facilitate comparison, transparency and transferability more readily. The 8 level structure of the EQF may lead to some confusion for those used to the 10 level structure of the Irish NFQ and the various numbers of levels / structures applicable to other national frameworks.

The Policies and Criteria for the Inclusion in, or Alignment with, the National Framework of Qualifications of the Awards of Certain Awarding Bodies, and the transnational agreement with the UK, have served to concretise the recognition processes identified and intended through the NFQ.