

University sectoral report on the implementation and impact of the

National Qualifications Framework

Draft for consultation September 2008

Methodology

This report is based on the following sources:

- Discussions in the IUA Registrars' group regarding NFQ implementation issues during the period 2006-2008;
- Documents provided to IUA by each university during 2007 and 2008 as part of the process of placing the university higher diplomas, postgraduate diplomas and minor, special purpose and supplemental awards on the Framework;
- Visits undertaken to the University of Limerick and to Dublin City University in July 2008 as part of preparing this report. The visit to DCU was held in conjunction with a visit by researchers from the European University Association investigating recent developments at Master level, as part of a Europe-wide study. Both visits involved meetings with senior management, academic leaders from a cross-section of disciplines, and relevant administrative staff in the university registry, academic policy and development, and student service sections;
- A meeting organised on 20 May 2007 by IUA and HETAC with USI education officers from across the universities and several IoTs, in order to obtain student opinions and feedback for this report (and the HETAC report);
- Discussions within the NQAI/IUA-led Framework Implementation Network and its associated working groups during the period December 2007 to September 2008.

While the report attempts to represent as fully as possible the current situation regarding the implementation and impact of the NFQ within the seven IUA member universities, it cannot claim to

do so to the same extent in the Colleges of Education associated with each university, or in the NUI and its recognised colleges.

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?

Unlike for FETAC, HETAC and the DIT, the NQAI does not set standards for awards made by the Universities or by the State Examinations Commission (Department of Education and Science). However, the award-type descriptors contained in the NFQ were the yardstick which was used to reach agreement between the universities and the NQAI for the accommodation of university awards within the Framework. The universities collectively engaged with the NQAI and other actors in reaching this agreement. While broad consensus on the architecture of the Framework and on the descriptors of levels and major award-types constituted a major landmark in the work of the NQAI, implementation of the Framework has since then required sustained work by the awarding bodies, i.e. the Awards Councils and education and training providers, including the universities.

In the case of the universities, this work has taken place at both collective and individual levels. The collective work has taken place through IUA and also through IUQB, notably in areas needing substantial coordination such as the placement of minor, special purpose and supplemental awards on the NFQ, or the revision of the collective university framework for quality to include Framework principles and relevant referencing to ongoing quality assurance policies and procedures.

Further examples of collective work include:

- a. The use of NFQ principles and references as part of the ongoing development and implementation of university access, transfer and progression policies and practices;
- b. the establishment (late 2007) and facilitation (2008), in cooperation with NQAI, of the universities' Framework Implementation Network to assist with Framework implementation at institutional levels and to enable the sector to work on common areas of interest and challenge;

- c. the development and approval of a 4th Level Skills Statement (September 2008), which includes the NFQ Level 10 PhD descriptors, for wide dissemination within Irish HE and abroad;
- d. Reference and outline explanation of NFQ as part of international marketing of Irish HE abroad. This includes the relative positioning of Irish awards to each other on the NFQ, and the relevance of quality assurance mechanisms underpinning the Framework.
- e. Use of Framework levels and language as part of the ongoing reform of HE public financing measures (negotiations between IUA and HEA).

The individual work has taken place at multiple levels within universities: from overall institutional academic policy level down to individual programme design, implementation and assessment. This work has obviously taken place at various speeds and levels of intensity across parts of any given university, and across the different universities.

Five years after the formal creation of the NFQ, it can be observed that Framework implementation issues come to the fore as part of the regular ongoing academic cycle of programme design, approval, implementation and assessment, including quality assurance activities. NFQ issues obviously also rise to the fore during change processes or new developments in internal institutional structures, the introduction or revision of academic and administrative tools such as modularisation, ECTS, the Diploma Supplement, quality assurance, national and international recognition procedures, etc.

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

- work towards inclusion of all major Diplomas, and minor, special purpose and supplemental awards. This has been a complex and lengthy process, taking place at the same time as the reorganisation of many of these awards and the relevant programmes within each institution. The seven IUA member universities have now submitted these awards for inclusion, with up to date lists as of September 2008 providing programme/award title, award-type, award-type classification, ECTS credit and NFQ level for approximately 95% of all university higher diplomas, postgraduate diplomas, and minor, special purpose and supplemental awards. These submissions were to be considered by the NQAI Authority at its meeting end September 2008. Following the (expected) formal response by NQAI to the

universities, these listings will need to be published and communicated so that learners and wider stakeholders are aware of these inclusions on the Framework.

- using NFQ as part of implementation of the Bologna process in Irish HE. The main lines of this - from the perspective of the Irish universities - are the full implementation of ECTS, adopting and integrating a learning outcomes approach, ensuring the Irish university quality assurance framework and practices are compatible with the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance, and the improved recognition of international and domestic qualifications. The process of aligning the Irish NFQ to the Framework for Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (Bologna Framework) – completed in late 2006 – provided a key stimulus in bringing together the NFQ and Bologna implementation issues, raising issues and areas of commonality for discussion and debate. The resulting alignment of the Irish NFQ with the Bologna Framework has meant that universities are now beginning to use the benefits of these - together with the acquired knowledge and expertise of Recognition Ireland – on a more systematic basis for the benefit of incoming and outgoing students.

- using Framework principles regarding access, transfer and progression. This has helped bring into mainstream perspective a number of ATP issues which may previously have been seen as marginal or external. Examples include the links between access/foundation courses and the main university awards, the operations and communications of supplementary admissions schemes to enhance access by various disadvantaged groups to higher education, and policies and practices surrounding student transfer and progression from Institutes of Technology and further education to university programmes.

- NFQ has been of major use in the development and roll-out of student-centred modular learning. This can be seen both in universities such as UCD – where no tradition of modularisation existed previously, but which has used NFQ principles to underpin its large-scale undergraduate Horizons programme (begun in 2005); and in UL, which previously operated an in-house credit system with 4,500 modules on its books, but which has now revised this substantially to become fully ECTS-based, with more transversal university-wide application, bringing its offer down to 2,500 modules, each with explicit learning outcomes. The learning outcomes at module level are based on Bloom’s taxonomy, while at programme level the learning outcomes have been based on the NFQ. This implementation has included training for staff on how to write learning outcomes, developing and using module and programme template, including identifying a suitable NFQ level for each module and programme. The vast majority of modules are placed at the level of the relevant award (eg level 8), but some are also

needed at levels 6 and 7. These new programmes will be fully integrated by the start of 09-10 academic year, including for external examiners, thus ensuring an important link to internal quality assurance processes. The work has been done through an online database, operating as a central repository for all module information, which then feeds the UL prospectus, official documentation, etc. All 300 UL programmes have been written (September 2008), with award type and level assigned.

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?

As noted above, Framework issues become most visible to the ordinary academic staff member of a university as part of the regular life cycle of an academic programme. A quote noted during a site visit to one university: “NFQ issues were not on the radar until the university brought it onto its own agenda”. During the time since the launch of the NFQ in 2003, most of these programmes have now been through at least one such cycle. There is therefore a certain level of knowledge and understanding of the Framework across each university, and has been assisted by in-house training as part of the academic life cycle (e.g. how to write learning outcomes as part of programme review). The extent of knowledge and understanding at this level tends however to be limited to certain micro elements of the Framework, rather than the broader macro picture. As part of its rollout of the new course structure, UL has put in place a system of training for course leaders over a three month timeframe. Further understanding and training is facilitated through weekly meetings of assistant deans and the registrar, the availability of structured templates online, regular workshops on writing learning outcomes run by the Centre for Teaching and Learning, an in-house booklet published on learning outcomes, and available online help.

A UCC publication¹ on the development and use of learning outcomes, produced as a by-product of UCC’s involvement in a European University Association (EUA) quality culture network in the field of learning outcomes, has been widely disseminated within Ireland and across Europe.

¹ Declan Kennedy (2007): Writing and Using Learning Outcomes. A Practical Guide, University College Cork

Students are generally unfamiliar with the Framework, except at point of entry where they are aware of the Level of programme to which they have applied. Much of the daily academic/administrative terminology used by students in relation to their study programmes is however “NFQ terminology” – in so far as it did not exist before the launch of the Framework and of the Bologna process – but is not seen by students as being linked to the Framework. Feedback obtained from USI education officers suggested that once registered on their programme of choice, students were the view that the need for NFQ awareness disappears. The learner becomes more focussed on achieving their award rather than the relationship between the award and the NFQ. The learners become embedded in normal student life – timely completion of assessments, preparation for examinations etc.

Central and faculty-level administrative staff and senior academics are more likely to be aware of Framework issues and to have a greater depth of knowledge and understanding, including of how Framework issues are shared across the sector. Those working in the teaching and learning policy areas are fully aware of these issues and generally are fully engaged – through inter-institutional networks and projects – in promoting Framework issues both internally and at a sectoral level.

In order to progress the key academic issues which the Framework supports, NFQ elements have been integrated into each universities’ in-house staff development procedures, within centres promoting excellence in teaching and learning, programme development, quality assurance, etc. A number of institutional and inter-institutional projects are underway, several with support from the DES/HEA Strategic Innovation Fund and co-funded by each participating institution, in the areas of teaching and learning and academic development. Examples include NAIRTL (National Academy for Integration of Research & Teaching & Learning – lead institution UCC, involving three universities and two IoTs) and the Enhancement of Learning strand of the Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA), involving four universities and four IoTs. DCU is the lead institution for this strand, comprising four major projects including the establishment of the Dublin Centre for Academic Development (DCAD). Each project concerns different aspects of enhancing learning: reforming the curriculum, teaching for engagement and retention, E-learning, and supporting the learner. The NFQ will be central to underpinning this work.

The Framework Implementation Network, a joint initiative of the NQAI and IUA, is also a mechanism to promote understanding and knowledge of the Framework across the sector, by working with nominated academics and administrators in each institution to progress key areas for the in-depth

implementation and future development of the Framework. These persons are key agents within their own institutions, and in turn serve as Framework promoters and facilitators at local and sectoral levels.

2.2 How is the Framework perceived in the sector?

From the various sources which have been used to provide input to this report, it was clear that the existence of the NFQ is widely welcomed in the university sector. USI representatives welcomed the clarity it brings to programmes and its usefulness in providing supporting information for students. The benefits of the NFQ need however to be better understood at the level of the individual student, including an improved understanding of topics such as learning outcomes, competences, know-how etc.

This lack of student familiarity with high level Framework issues was acknowledged within universities visited for this study, however it was claimed that students were fully aware of module issues and the concepts behind these. As part of its rollout of the new programme structure, UL is preparing a student information campaign for 08-09 on all NFQ issues, and academic course leaders will liaise with class reps. Framework issues are also incorporated into student handbooks at other universities to provide basic levels of information. It is also likely that in some cases there may still be a gap between redesigned and rewritten programmes, and the actual delivery and perception of these on the ground. These issues will need to be monitored closely through student feedback and other quality assurance mechanisms.

During the site visits to universities, it was reported that employers are increasingly aware of NFQ Levels and the concept of learning outcomes, and see these as positive developments. A number of professional bodies, most notably Engineers Ireland who were first to move in this direction but who have since also been followed by many others, most recently An Bord Altranais, now also look for evidence of a learning outcomes approach in their own professional accreditation mechanisms.

Within universities, the Framework is seen as part and parcel of the wider academic reform process underway. During a site visit, the opinion was expressed that the NFQ filled a vacuum which existed and will improve information for the public and for students. While this is useful conceptually, there can also be elements of confusion regarding the actual role of the Framework. Linking the Framework to funding issues through the HEA's recurrent grant allocation model (RGAM) is seen as a potentially

distorting driver, in that it may be perceived by some as pushing universities towards certain types and sizes of programmes.

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

Given that the Framework is helping universities move away from a multitude of stand-alone internal systems of academic credit, course structure, assessment and recognition, towards more coherent and transparent systems which can be shared across and between programmes and institutions, UL credit originally was known within a programme, but not across programmes, there is an expectation that mobility (virtual and physical) and recognition will increase and improve. It is seen as potentially a win-win situation for both students and academic staff. However, academics are also wary of increased standardisation and over-bureaucratisation of learning and general academic activity, and some early elements of Framework implementation have contributed to those fears, through, for example, the need to write descriptors and learning outcomes for each module.

3. *Implementation and operation of the Framework*

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

The priorities within the sector have been:

- inclusion of all minor, special purpose and supplemental awards.
- improved knowledge of the Framework across the sector, particularly in the teaching and learning areas
- improved alignment of Framework issues and institutional academic policies.

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

In order to implement the Framework in these priority areas, the main approaches have been based on communications and awareness raising through various opportunities, see below.

3.3 What are the main actions taken in the sector?

A lengthy process was undertaken to work through the lists of minor, special purpose and supplemental awards of each university, in its own academic context, and to bring these together as a sector to try to ensure highest levels of coherence and transparency. The approach used was agreed between the universities and the NQAI in January 2006. Regular meetings were held between university representatives and the NQAI executive during this process in order to advance issues identified and to support the implementation of the process agreed.

For non-major awards, each university examined its existing portfolio of non-major Certificates and Diplomas and made an initial classification of these, in the light of the Framework, as major, minor, supplemental or special purpose awards. A naming convention for non-major awards was agreed on the basis of credit volume and level. The title Certificate is used for awards of less than 60 ECTS credits and the title Diploma for awards of 60, and generally not more than 120, ECTS credits. Having classified the awards, each awarding body then articulated the broad learning outcomes associated with each award, so that the appropriate Framework level could be determined. This process took a considerable amount of time, due in part to the number of such awards in certain institutions, to the ongoing internal restructuring within universities and the place of these awards in the new emerging structures, and to the ongoing reform of the programmes which themselves lead to these awards. During the course of this self-validation work each university kept the IUA informed of progress, and the IUA liaised with the NQAI executive, which provided helpful feedback and support. Draft listings of proposed placements were also discussed between the universities and the NQAI, as part of finalising such listings. Each university's decisions regarding these listings and the process undertaken to reach them were collectively submitted in June 2008 by IUA, with updates from three universities in September 2008.

Due to its nature, and the range of stakeholder interests associated with the award, it was agreed that it was appropriate to put in place a separate process to address the inclusion in the Framework of the award formerly titled the Higher Diploma in Education. There are a number of specific issues linked to this award which require particular attention in placing it on the NFQ: its professional standing and history; the varied interests of a number of relevant stakeholders – including different providers, awarding bodies, award holders, students, employers and professional bodies; its relationship with other education awards at levels 8 and 9 in the NFQ; the current and future needs of the teaching

profession; its relevance for teachers' salary scales; and the wider relationship between the universities and the Colleges of Education.

At a meeting convened by IUA on 25 April 2008, consisting of university registrars, heads of university departments of education and members of the NQAI executive, it was agreed that the heads of education departments and other university representatives would consider the outcomes associated with the award and overall level; how the award relates to the concurrent Honours Bachelor Degrees in Education at Level 8 and Masters Degrees in Education at Level 9; and, how the award relates to existing Higher Diploma and Postgraduate Diploma awards in other fields.

It should be noted that similar issues linked to postgraduate qualifications in the field of computing and information technology have likewise resulted in several of these awards not being included in the university listings for NFQ placement as of September 2008. It is intended to address and resolve all outstanding issues in these areas during the academic year 2008-09.

Similar processes to those outlined above would apply to the placement of the awards made by the universities prior to the introduction of the Framework. To date, only a small number of these awards have been placed on the NFQ, mostly those which operated as higher diplomas but which have been recently discontinued.

In late 2005 a booklet was published by IUA entitled "The universities and the National Framework of Qualifications", with widespread distribution across all IUA member universities and to other HEIs in Ireland and abroad. The aim at that time was to provide initial information to the internal university community regarding the main issues surrounding the NFQ and its relevance to the work of the universities. The booklet was used as a starting point for internal work on the issues discussed elsewhere in this report.

- regular discussion of NFQ issues at IUA Registrars' group meetings. NFQ issues have been a standing item on IUA Registrar quarterly meetings since 2005.

- inclusion of NFQ issues in HE sector networks such as the Irish Higher Education Quality Network. Through links with quality assurance policies and practices, and the active involvement of the NQAI

executive, Framework issues have been linked into the work of the IHEQN, including developing links with professional bodies in the relevant areas.

- recent links have been made between Framework implementation issues and Bologna process promotion activity. The latter, supported by EU funding through the HEA, has begun since 2007 to focus on the issue of learning outcomes, and at the suggestion of both IUA and NQAI, it has been agreed to use these opportunities to support the work of the IUA/NQAI led Framework Implementation Network. A work programme for 2008-09 is currently under preparation.

- startup and operations – with significant input also from NQAI – of the Framework Implementation Network, bringing together relevant academic and administrative players from across the university sector.

- a number of inter-institutional collaborative projects in the teaching and learning area – including SIF funded initiatives – are based around Framework principles. See above for references to NAIRTL and DRHEA projects.

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);
- Different levels of the Framework;
- Placement of former awards;
- Learning outcomes and standard-setting;
- Titles of awards; and
- Other.

Please provide examples.

By July 2004 the universities' Ordinary Bachelor Degree, Honours Bachelor Degree, Masters and Doctoral awards were included in the Framework at Levels 7, 8, 9 and 10 respectively. This work, which was undertaken collectively, through IUA and in close concertation with NQAI, was done as part of the preparation for publication of the *CAO Handbook 2005*, CAO being the mechanism by

which an overwhelming proportion of young people enter Irish universities. The major bulk of undergraduate degrees awarded by the universities are Level 8 awards and the IUA and NQAI agreed that they should be described as such in the CAO literature. A small number of Level 7 degrees (Ordinary Bachelor Degree) are awarded by some universities, many of which are “exit mechanisms” from programmes which normally lead to Level 8 degrees. Since the publication in autumn 2004 of the *CAO Handbook 2005*, all university courses included in the CAO listings have included a reference to their Framework level, including those listed in the CAO-operated Postgraduate Applications Centre (PAC).

Collective work has also taken place regarding the placement of other university awards – postgraduate diplomas, higher diplomas, and various minor, special purpose and supplemental awards – on the NFQ. In certain cases – e.g. in the field of education – this work has meant trying to reconcile differing interests regarding the placement – or redesignation - of such awards, particularly where the same award is made across a number of universities. Please see above for further details.

Most universities, particularly through their Lifelong Learning, Adult Education and Continuing Education programmes, also offer a wide variety of sub-degree awards. These vary widely, within and between universities, in complexity and volume, as well as purpose. Some university degree courses designed specifically for adult students provide staging posts where candidates may qualify for a certificate and/or diploma, so that students who might not be in a position to complete the course do not leave empty handed. These full degrees are usually level 8 awards, while the sub-degree awards could be accommodated at levels 6 and/or 7, perhaps by the use of minor awards. A number of universities have substantially re-organised their provision of such programmes and awards in recent years, or are in the process of doing so, and have used Framework principles as part of this process.

Historical or legacy awards (awards made in the past, prior to the NFQ and which are no longer on offer) have also been mapped to the NFQ so that the holders of such awards, as well as their employers and other stakeholders, can know where they fit into the new framework of qualifications. Examples include the BA Pass. Most other university awards have continued in the context of the Framework, e.g. Honours Bachelor, Master, Doctorate, etc and there is a *de facto* continuity pre- and post-Framework in relation to these. Others, however, have ceased or will cease to be made, such as those of former awarding bodies such as FÁS and Teagasc, and have been placed in the Framework as suitably as possible, in the interest of the award holders, employers and other stakeholders.

The placement of awards made by the universities prior to the introduction of the Framework has not yet been addressed. The Authority executive is currently considering how this process might be expedited and will be reverting to the Authority with a paper in this regard at an appropriate time.

The universities have collectively contributed to the NQAI's deliberations regarding the inclusion within the Framework of awards and other qualifications offered by professional bodies. A large number of professional bodies make awards or extend other benefits, e.g. membership, to candidates in Ireland, in areas which are, to a large extent, also covered by the universities. Some of these bodies have statutory rights and responsibilities under Irish legislation, while other professional bodies operate on a non-statutory basis. Given that some of these bodies do not make their own awards, but operate by recognising awards made by the universities or other awarding bodies, it has been important to ensure that the NFQ is operational in this area also. An important conference took place in October 2006 covering this area, under the aegis of the IHEQN.

Key elements of the framework rely on the correct and systematic use of credit, in order to define, assess and record the achievement of learning outcomes. Awards are described in terms of credits to clarify its size and (normal) duration. The universities, together with other providers, contributed to the NQAI deliberations and subsequent adoption of a set of "Principles for operational guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training". These principles, which are compatible with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), are in use throughout the university sector.

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

- although the NFQ has been fully referenced in the 2nd edition of the Irish Universities Framework for Quality (2008), the consistent use of these during internal and external reviews of QA will need to be pursued over the coming years. This includes working to integrate Framework issues fully into the annual External Examiner process within each university's own academic procedures.
- ongoing development of the learning outcomes approach in programme design and assessment. This is being supported by the Framework Implementation Network and also through the national group of Bologna Experts, with some limited resources from the European Commission.

- raising learner awareness of Framework issues, beyond the simple concept of Levels. It is apparent from a variety of feedback that a large majority of students are not aware of many aspects of the NFQ and how it affects them. This is despite readily available information within universities and more generally in the public domain.

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

- work towards inclusion of almost all minor, special purpose and supplemental awards. This has been a complex and lengthy process, taking place at the same time as the reorganisation of many of these awards and the relevant programmes within each institution.

- using Framework as part of implementation of Bologna process in Irish HE (ECTS, learning outcomes approach, improved recognition of qualifications)

- using Framework principles regarding access, transfer and progression.

- NFQ has been of major use in the development and roll-out of student-centred modular learning.

4. *Influencing Factors*

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

The ongoing broader reform of higher education is key to Framework implementation. Many of the key Framework elements are also part of the Bologna process, of broader developments in teaching and learning (the move to learning outcomes and student-centred learning), and of generally increased transparency across publicly-funded institutions. While Bologna may initially have been perceived within the Irish universities as of little relevance (given the focus elsewhere in Europe on implementing a three-cycle degree structure), the importance of effective and functioning credit systems, student centred learning, learning outcomes, recognition procedures and quality assurance have all helped to raise the profile of the Bologna process in Irish HEIs. These issues have dovetailed substantially – both in terms of content and timing – with the implementation of the NFQ. Indeed, it is unlikely that without the joint impetus of both Bologna implementation (European) and NFQ implementation (national), that

either would have had the same impact. The same actors have been active covering both agendas within HEIs and other bodies (NQAI, IUA, HEA, USI, etc).

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

The NFQ was originally intended to improve academic transparency for both students and the public, but it is now also being used for a number of other purposes such as funding, student financing (grants etc), and possibly for ranking in the media. As yet these have not adversely affected the overall implementation of the Framework, but at local levels (within parts of institutions) these auxiliary uses have been the subject of negative discussion.

Examples of consequences of Framework implementation which have fed such discussion include:

- There are a number of professional graduate programmes placed at Level 8. However, students on grants lose their entitlement to such supports on these programmes (e.g. graduate LLB, graduate medicine). This is a negative consequence for students in need of such support and who previously would have qualified for such a grant on the basis that their programme of study was “postgraduate”.
- Similarly, postgraduate students on conversion type diplomas who were previously treated as postgrad students are now at Level 8, with negative administrative consequences such as losing their postgraduate borrowing rights at the university library, no longer being members of the postgraduate students association. The conversion diploma was previously considered very important as part of the national policy for upskilling, and was encouraged by HEA targeted funding, skills funding, etc. However these sit uneasily with need to increase graduate student numbers.
- The confusion regarding this also affects front line student statistics, with knock on effects on newspaper rankings, etc which can be based on numbers of students studying at different NFQ Levels without taking into account the subtleties within any one Level.
- Conversely, the use of Framework principles by the HEA to inform its Recurrent Grant Allocation Model may also have provided an indirect stimulus to the development of a more

flexible structure for student learning, since the RGAM is built on student FTEs, which themselves are now reported on a module basis. Each module is classified in a particular price group for RGAM purposes. Thus the module has become important not just in terms of student learning but also for other (non academic) reasons. But academics have to decide what outcomes are needed for each module and how these fit together to form a coherent programme.

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.

The Framework has raised useful issues around the interface between levels 8 and 9. This is normal given the changes currently taking place internationally at Master level, and the variety within Ireland at Level 8 in terms of volume and profile. The positions of the Higher Diploma and Postgraduate Diploma have been discussed extensively, with many longstanding Higher Diplomas now being “upgraded” to Level 9 Postgraduate Diplomas. Some universities have done this in a systematic way, others on a more limited basis. The continued role of the Higher Diploma has in some cases been called into question, and a number of H.Dips have been discontinued.

The Framework has also brought to the fore incoherencies between poorly articulated national policies regarding progression to higher education from further education, and the longstanding provision by a number of universities and other HEIs of access / foundation programmes to higher education for under-represented student groups. Given that universities not funded for Levels 6 and 7 under RGAM, but that access awards at these levels are useful for progression, these incoherencies have come to the fore. In order to avoid funding decisions becoming a blunt instrument, and as part of a renewed effort to increase participation among such groups and to improve progression from FE to HE, these policies and practices are now being examined more from a student-centred rather than ideological approach, and it is expected that more coherent solutions will be found to meet these challenges. The NFQ has helped resituate these challenges in a more coherent setting, based on comparative levels of student achievement, rather than at the method by which this has been obtained; it is expected that on such a basis a more rational discussion will be possible regarding the future of such access, transfer and progression routes.

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

4.5 Are there any other particular difficulties in respect of implementation in the sector? Please provide examples.

The USI representatives met as part of preparing this report expressed the view that there was no broad appreciation of the significance of Los among the wider student body, or indeed, their importance in the context of assessment. It was their view that many HE assessment processes continued in their traditional format. Allied to this discussion, they also stated that modularisation and semisterisation has not resulted in a radical ‘shake-up’ of delivery modes, but rather represented a ‘chopping up’ of the existing courses to achieve institutional compliance.

Where LOs were used, their experience would suggest that HEIs used the ‘correct’ verbs without genuinely testing their appropriateness to the programme or module. This was felt to be particularly evident in programme such as law and medicine where the opportunity to ‘freshen’ programmes was not grasped but the verbs were made to suit existing programme. Indeed, USI reps noted the risk that LOs were being reduced to a ‘tick box’ exercise.

However, learners cited the influence of professional bodies as positive in terms of promoting the use of LOs. This was particularly evident in engineering and health therapy programmes etc.

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?

This has evolved over the 5 years since the launch of the Framework. As can be expected, at the start there was neither a large volume of information in the system to support key players at institutional level, neither was there the experience or understanding of some Framework issues needed to take forward a broader agenda. This has now changed, through regular contacts directly between NQAI staff and institutions (with considerable time being invested by NQAI in this during the early years), and

also collectively between NQAI, IUA, IUQB and institutional actors, often in conjunction with other HE players.

The NFQ and NQAI websites now provide substantial resources to help implementation across a broad range of issues. Various publications – by NQAI, IUA and also internally within institutions (e.g. guidelines on issues such as learning outcomes or modularisation) have also been made available to fill the need for greater information in specific areas.

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

The Framework has helped provide greater transparency and clarity across the sector, both within and between institutions. Within institutions it has contributed to the impetus for programme coherence and compatibility – allowing for improved student choice, flexibility and outcomes-oriented learning – while across the sector it has allowed for greater comparability and transparency.

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?

The university sector and the NQAI (as guardians of the Framework) have enjoyed a close and open working relationship since the foundation of the NQAI. Now that much of the early stage of implementation has been achieved, and that many of the early policies of the NQAI have been tried and tested, and considerable experience gained in the process, it may be useful to consider what next phases may be necessary to ensure ongoing development of the underlying objectives of the NFQ. This could include the establishment of a higher education forum – bringing together actors from across the HE sector - to discuss a range of matters relating to credit and naming conventions, including: credit ranges of major awards; credit ranges and naming conventions of non-major awards; and, minimum ECTS credit associated with non-major awards. This forum would also review the national approach to credit, which was published by the Authority in 2004, and prior to the implementation of ECTS credit across the higher education and training sector.

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?

While there is wide knowledge across the university sector of issues linked to ATP, including Framework issues in these areas, discussions in the preparation of this report showed that the NQAI's own policies in these areas are not widely known.

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

Each university has extensive policies in place in these areas, often linked to specific targets in its own institutional strategic plan. Responsibilities generally lie within the broader remit of the university Registrar, and on a day-to-day basis with an Access manager/director. There is close cooperation between all universities, DIT and many IoTs and other HE providers in these areas.

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

- use of Framework language and levels in revised sectoral application forms for socio-economic disadvantaged students
- transparency of programmes and levels provides big advantages for students, enabling them to progress from one level to the next.
- use of NFQ levels as part of resource allocation, both by HEA and within individual HEIs. There are concerns within institutions regarding the funding and definition of access students in this context.
- NFQ has been helpful in sharpening institutional thinking around access programmes in general.

6.4 How are these policies perceived in the sector?

As noted above (4.3) there is a certain amount of incoherence regarding the provision of access / foundation courses for HE, and the respective roles of HEIs and FETAC. These issues are currently under examination.

National policies regarding part-time students and the fact that these must pay fees are perceived poorly in the sector, particularly in light of the need to increase participation (and progression from alternative routes, including FETAC) and current very low levels of adult learners in Irish HE.

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

The learner-centred construct of the NFQ and the continued and open possibilities of progression from one level to another, which are now underpinned by academic policies across most actors in the “NFQ chain”, are not supported by national funding policies, either for providers of these routes or for individual students wishing to progress. Discussions have taken place – at irregular intervals and with little overall progress – with DES regarding alignment of student support policies with Framework principles.

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?

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

Please provide examples.

7.3 What are the main actions taken in the sector?

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

- Access and entry arrangements
- Transfer arrangements
- Progression
- Credit accumulation and transfer
- Recognition of Prior Learning
- Information provision to learners/applicants

Where possible, please provide examples.

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

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

7.7 What factors most assist in implementation in the sector?

7.8 What factors most hinder implementation in the sector?

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.

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

Please provide examples.

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?

Please provide examples.

The strategic importance attached to the recognition of international awards in Ireland has become much clearer in recent years, and the NFQ can play a key role here. Given that universities are actively trying to attract students from across the globe at both undergraduate and graduate levels, senior academics questioned as part of the preparation of this report stated that the internationalisation aspects of the NFQ should be made more evident. IUA and other actors have been working with Enterprise Ireland – as a significant promoter of Irish HE in Asia and various other key regions – to include clear and accurate information regarding the NFQ in its local literature about Irish HE, and this has become more frequent since mid-2007. Referencing the full alignment with Bologna is also useful. Better use of the Diploma Supplement, and including the NFQ (and Bologna Framework) levels in that would also help. These tools need to be used also from a marketing perspective.

At institutional level, some universities are working on the possibilities to include specific references to modules obtained through international exchange on a student's transcript of records, as opposed to the current standard denomination of XP (exchange programme).

It is worth noting that the changes currently underway in Irish HE have also been noticed by partner institutions in the US. In particular, US university study abroad coordinators have become familiar with ECTS, and now wish to know how many ECTS their students will receive while on their study abroad visits to an Irish university. It is expected that similar things will happen regarding the use of NFQ levels (and, in due course, the newly agreed European Framework of Qualifications). Universities reported that the NFQ was useful as tool for aligning Scottish awards.

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

Framework focus on ATP issues has assisted with these debates at institutional level also. Until the recent placement of university minor and special purpose awards, the access/foundation programmes offered by a number of the universities were not officially included on any listing. This meant that, although most students progress to a Level 8 programme in the same university, those who did not were not granted any official recognition of their award. This has now changed with the NFQ, and should encourage greater options for such students in moving up the Framework. This is a big advantage in terms of access and progression, enabling students to move from one level to the next.

It was stated during the interviews for this report that there are now considerably fewer students transferring from the IoT sector to universities, since IoTs now make their own Level 8 awards. However, with increased levels of transparency now available, comparability issues are now reportedly occurring between e.g. a Level 8 from IoT, or a level 8 from University. This involves the use of informal market intelligence as used by all employers and graduate recruitment people. The NFQ formalises this situation, at least by stating they are broadly comparable and leaving it up to individual employers to make their own choices based on this information.

For those universities with longstanding access and foundation programmes, often run in conjunction with local learning support and outreach centres, there are currently major concerns re the broader definition of an access student and funding for these programmes. Universities cannot offer such courses unless they are funded in some way; the issue is even bigger re funding for part-time students, especially at levels 5 and 6. Many evening and part-time programmes (often delivered through a

university LLL or Adult Education centre) have students coming through a FETAC route. These are aimed at trying to get professional qualifications for those in employment, and such programmes are increasingly moving to the use of APL and APEL.

Universities and other HE partners have used the Strategic Innovation Fund to help develop links between institutions operating at different NFQ levels – i.e. FE and HE. For example, the Shannon Regional Consortium is running programmes which enable students to move into an IoT at levels 5 or 6, 7, and to move on into UL for levels 8 or 9.

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

- Quality assurance
- Learning outcomes and standards
- Assessment
- Learners/ learning experience
- Partners in education and training (employers, trade unions, community, voluntary, representative bodies, professional bodies)
- Resources/funding
- Staff
- International standing of Ireland's education and training

Where possible, please provide examples.

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?

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

It is clear that since its inception in 2003, the NFQ has played a major role in the reform of Irish HE. The results of this have been considerably greater transparency across the macro-structures of the HE system, as well as across the micro-structures of individual programmes and fields of study. This transparency allows learners, providers and wider stakeholders to access and use key information regarding many crucial aspects of the learning experience, in order to make their own informed choices for their respective requirements.

This transparency has recently begun to be exploited by HE institutions, through the development of greater inter-institutional collaboration at all levels, and for mutual benefits across a wide variety of fields – administrative, academic and strategic. These developments will need time to flourish and produce results, and policy makers, including the NQAI, should not rush students and providers into reaching premature conclusions. It will therefore also be necessary to consider the ongoing development of new aspects of the Framework, such as possible new award types, naming conventions (since these will in any case change over time depending on fashions, markets and other influences), developing strategic links with NFQs in major partner countries, as these countries themselves develop such Frameworks, etc.

A major challenge will be to harness the potential of the NFQ in the forthcoming development of a national HE strategy. This will require funding mechanisms which are fully coherent with the principles of access, transfer and progression, and which encourage and facilitate greater cooperation and synergies across the broader education sector.