

**Submission on the Implementation and Impact of the National framework of  
Qualifications and Access, Transfer and Progression policies: 2008**

**Royal Irish Academy of Music**

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Board of Studies.**

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## **1.1 Professional Music training in Ireland-the position of the RIAM**

The Royal Irish Academy of Music is arguably Ireland's leading music conservatory.

A national institution founded back in 1848, the Academy has functioned throughout its prestigious history as a leader in music education at all levels: from beginners at the preparatory division, to the development of talented and gifted second level students, right through to the internationally renowned performers, composers and professors that are counted among its various alumni. As such the Academy performs a multifaceted role in Irish musical education as it seeks to develop and shape musical endeavour to the very highest standards at all levels.

The third level courses currently on offer at the academy range from higher education certificates and diplomas to Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral degrees which are validated by Dublin City University and Trinity College Dublin, two of Ireland's most prestigious universities.

## **1.2 Expectations of the Framework- General comments**

Depending on where one is in the educational spectrum, the Framework means different things to different people.

On a national level, the Framework's goal is to be a means of ensuring 'a seamless spectrum of educational opportunity in Ireland' that ideally establishes a culture of lifelong learning across the country as a means of developing our human capital (IUA 2005) .

A **student** can expect from the Framework, in its fully evolved state, to understand the status of his/her qualification and also to understand how to progress to a further qualification. In real terms, however, this is problematic as some qualifications, particularly in the area of minor awards such as diplomas and certificates have widely varied workloads and learning outcomes.

An **education provider** can, in theory, use the Framework as a means of defining standards and educational goals. In reality however, many universities are most probably resistant to a certain homogeneity in their course offerings; as such, individuality will always prevail to some extent, as indeed it should. It is, however, the *level* of this individuality that is perhaps more the central question.

The **employer** can see from established learning outcomes what the student is competent to do. It is obvious that other factors will influence a student's employability and the Framework has its part to play in this issue, as is discussed in section 1.4.

### **1.3 Expectations of the Framework- RIAM reflections**

The Framework has much to offer the RIAM in the areas of access and progression policies. Our one-year post-leaving certificate and Diploma courses (called 'Access' and 'Diploma in Instrumental and Vocal teaching and Performance') are well established and are our means of bridging the gap in the standard of music ability between the standard of those leaving secondary school on the one hand, and the standard required at the outset of a third level degree. We believe that these courses have the potential to be of considerable value to school leavers and those returning to education.

We hope to use minor awards that are at a standard comparable to level 6 of the Framework as a means of taking in students who fail to reach the criteria for entrance to our degree programmes through the traditional Leaving Certificate CAO system. Although Dublin City University (who validates several of our degrees), have a system in place to accept students who have a FETAC award at level 6 into degree programmes, we have not sought to apply to FETAC for accreditation for our Access or Diploma programmes at this time. This is undoubtedly somewhat due to competing administrative demands, and to the volume of documentation required to complete this process.

As of writing, we accept students on the basis of a combination of audition, entrance examination and basic Leaving Certificate requirements. As we only accept ten students per annum to our Performance or Education degrees, it is, thus, a given that any student who is accepted has reached a high level of musical skill for their age, indicating independent work in music not necessarily recognized in school beyond,

Leaving Certificate music, for example. Currently such students are required to re-sit the Leaving Certificate to acquire the CAO points needed for progression.

We envisage in the future that our Access and Diploma programmes will achieve Level 6 FETAC accreditation, ensuring that gifted students can make the transition to 3<sup>rd</sup> level by undergoing further education in the area that is most related to their educational goals rather than face returning to the Leaving Certificate as their only option.

#### **1.4 Relevance of the Framework to employment in music**

RIAM programmes have been devised by our own staff and accredited by outside academics, music practitioners and representatives from employment (like music professionals, for example). Many of our own staff has retained their profile in the music sector outside of education and so consequently, the various programmes on offer are continually informed by our faculty's strong presence in the wider music world.

With all that said, we nonetheless acknowledge that one of the challenges lies in predicting trends in music consumption and employment and so we must rely on networks of colleagues throughout Ireland and the world - and of course through our connections with the Association of European Conservatoires (AEC) for example – to keep us abreast of new developments and future challenges.

Employers consider a degree in itself as only one factor in employability, citing international experience and an ability to live and work in different cultures as important too (Generation, 2006). The Framework's goal of transparency of qualifications across Europe has so far enabled 3<sup>rd</sup> level institutions such as ourselves to organize student-study and work-placements through the Erasmus scheme, adding further luster to our programmes from both the employer's and incoming student's perspective. Our Erasmus exchange programme, though new, has already seen a number of students visit us, as well as a number of our own students study abroad.

The key factor in enabling this process to work has been an understanding of the programmes being taught at other European conservatories and universities; such understanding has thus helped to more clearly render our own educational outcomes. To achieve a proper level of understanding, the Framework's clearly defined level indicators and learning outcomes have therefore been enormously helpful.

### **1.5 Impact on the international recognition of qualifications**

The usefulness of the Bologna process is in its commitment to creating a simplifying architecture for mutual understanding in relation to reading and comparing qualifications. By creating a culture of collaboration amongst the twenty five EU members and participating countries we are strengthening our competitive position internationally.

However, recent newspaper reports have alluded to the fact that our current national system of quality assessment continues to inhibit Irish universities from rising in the international league tables. By continuing our own internal processes of quality control as a nation, we are perhaps missing an opportunity to properly compare ourselves with the very highest levels of education provision abroad. We believe, therefore that our success today at collaborating and at improving communication between higher education establishments should make a clear argument for the need to review this current practice.

Having used outside experts in the RIAM accreditation process for degrees up to and including doctoral level – all of which has thus by necessity included significant input from various experts from places such as the United States amongst others - we believe that facing the challenge of outside assessment has significant benefits in terms of exposing us to new thinking and of upgrading the quality of our programmes based on the best international practices.

## **1.6 Conclusion: Key strengths and key weaknesses of the Framework**

The Framework has proven itself to be a transparent, intuitive means of understanding the positions of third-level Qualifications from Irish institutions as compared to those in Europe. We believe that the Framework has thus encouraged the pursuit of learning by easing the process of gaining further qualifications and we welcome the opportunity to develop courses that broaden a student's opportunity to progress to further education both here and abroad. We have experienced directly the benefit(s) of the Framework in establishing connections through the Erasmus programme.

Having said that, we would argue that the key weakness lies with the difficulty in generalizing the merits and standards over such a myriad of courses; and furthermore, as a result of this, the difficulty in getting universities to achieve consensus in terms of naming awards, of workload, of the duration of courses, and last but not least, in opening their doors to external quality assessment. We do believe, however, that such so-called weaknesses could be viewed perhaps more as challenges, however, and it is entirely possible that by consensus and continued dialogue, residual anomalies could be properly ironed out.

## **Bibliography**

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