

October 2008

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

Expectations from the Framework from a business perspective

The National Framework of Qualifications is a welcome and positive development but there is a need for ongoing information and promotion, particularly at employer level within the business community, so as to raise greater awareness of qualifications, and the standards of knowledge, skills and competences pertaining to each level.

There are two views as regards the National Framework of Qualifications and its relevance for the business community.

We agree that the certification of courses, their level and qualification is important and relevant to business. A guaranteed nationally recognised standard on a training course offered by a training provider, with appropriate systems of quality assurance is of added value to both employers and employees.

While business may have a more pronounced need for shorter term focussed training, it is important to recognise the role that training can play in up skilling the workforce, enhancing productivity and thereby improving Irish competitiveness. An additional positive to be gained from a recognised system of standardisation of training would be in the context of enabling new migrants to Ireland to reach their pertinent skills and remuneration level more quickly thereby reducing the time delay that is typically a feature of any new migrant's experience on entering a new labour market.

Relevance of the Framework to employment

The National Framework of Qualifications was established by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) in October 2003. Originally, the Framework was established to set out a national quality assurance system for the Higher Education Sector (Universities/DIT, HETAC, FETAC), but in subsequent years, the system has evolved to include the alignment of executive development programmes to the FETAC system.

At a general level, this would appear to be a positive trend conferring a level of certification (standards, skills, competences, assessments, quality assurance) to business training programmes. It provides terms of reference and standards for employers, although as already mentioned, more awareness of the National Framework of Qualifications needs to be created among employers in general, enabling them to make informed decisions and quickly identify the level of employees they are seeking to employ, or the level of training needed within the company.

From an employer/recruiter point of view, the qualifications needed for a specific position are more readily comparable and can be benchmarked against a national standard. From an access, transfer and progression perspective, there is less reliance on the traditional examination/qualification system and greater scope for alternative pathways to qualifications for people already in the workforce and options for those who need to up skill.

The National Framework of Qualifications does provide a more transparent understanding of qualifications in Ireland and their value. The implementation of provider quality assurance to ensure national standards in assessment and awards, the improvement in delivery and quality of programmes, and transparency in relation to qualifications are all vital. However, in reality, the system is 'onerous' (procedural, long) in terms of flexibility when applied to certain types of business training programmes. It is very "resource intensive" with regard to the human resources, finance and time required by the programme provider to develop appropriate quality assurance systems, within the context of an "ever changing" business learning environment.

Greater systematic flexibility – without compromising on the rigour – is required in terms of establishing industry standards for training and development. The market environment, nationally and globally, is highly dynamic; businesses struggle to maintain competitiveness and sometimes even to survive. If training and development is to play a key and strong role in terms of supporting and growing businesses, then the National Framework of Qualifications must be sufficiently flexible to allow for the creation of new training courses, modules, approaches, etc. that are designed with a specific intent or business objective in mind. The speed of response is critical in the executive education sector.

Use of the Framework in public funding

The principle of having an established National Framework of Qualifications within a public funding mechanism is sound; the question of how it is implemented is the more apt question. Presently, there is the challenge of two systems running parallel to each other.

The public funding mechanism for business programmes is currently aligned to two systems. These two systems are the National Framework of Qualifications and the FÁS QA58/01 certification system. Each system has its own merit; the National Framework of Qualifications provides standards for course modules through their series of module descriptors, whereas FAS ensures standards for a specific training course through their use of the FAS QA58/01 template, designed to promote and improve the quality of training.

The requirement to comply with two certification systems is bureaucratic and hinders creativity, innovation, and the ability to respond quickly to labour market dynamics and industry changes. Accordingly, we believe that one standard—preferably one that is recognised in a variety of different arenas should be selected and used, thereby reducing duplication.

Impact on the international recognition of qualifications

Chambers Ireland believes that all EU member states must align their National Qualifications Framework with the European Qualifications Framework both at tertiary level and executive development level. The need to ‘speak with one voice’ - not just in the field of education and training – is obvious as global threats and competition continue to intensify. This can only be positive in that it should lead to the recognition and acceptance of Irish qualifications abroad and to employers/recruiters in Ireland being more familiar with international standards and qualifications. Awareness is a key factor at EU level so that an employer in Ireland receiving a Curriculum Vitae for a job application is in a position to understand and appreciate the type and level of qualifications of any other EU citizen. From an employer and indeed employee perspective increased transparency and portability of qualifications should also lead to greater mobility of employees and recognition of the added value they can contribute to the companies within which they operate.

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