

**National Qualifications Authority of Ireland**

**Towards a National Framework of Qualifications**

**Inclusion of Professional  
and International Awards –**

**A Discussion Paper**

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# **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

## **Context**

This paper has been prepared with a view to discussing how to include awards from private bodies in the State, such as professional bodies, and from international bodies of various kinds making awards to learners in the State in the national framework of qualifications.

This paper puts forward some ideas on how the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland might approach the performance of this function. Submissions are invited on this paper and the Authority would wish that all submissions be made prior to the end of August 2002. All submissions will be made publicly available.

Processes are already being put in place for the inclusion in the framework of awards of public bodies in the State, namely the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the Dublin Institute of Technology and the universities, as well as the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate of the Department of Education and Science.

At this time, the Authority is not seeking applications from awarding bodies for the inclusion of their awards in the framework.

## **Consultation Process to Date**

In November 2001 the Authority published “Towards a National Framework of Qualifications: A Discussion Document” / “I dtreo Chreatoibre Cáilíochtaí Náisiúnta: Cáipéis Díospóireachta”. The publication of the document was an important step by the Authority in the development of its work. The document set a context for the development of the work of the Authority and, in particular, for the development of the national framework of qualifications. The purpose of the document was to explore how the Authority might approach the performance of its functions.

The Discussion Document formed the basis of a broad consultative process. The Authority received over 80 written submissions. These have all been published by the Authority on its website ([www.nqai.ie](http://www.nqai.ie)).

On February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2002 the Authority hosted a National Forum at Dublin Castle. The Forum was attended by over 300 delegates. The Forum provided an opportunity for all stakeholders to consider the issues raised in the document and in the consultation process subsequent to the document.

Many of the submissions received were from private bodies in the State who make awards, such as professional bodies, and from international bodies making awards to learners in the State. These submissions set out that it would be appropriate for the Authority to include a wide range of awards in the framework and suggested possible ways that this could be done. Submissions also pointed out similar work in other jurisdictions and, for example, referred the Authority to the work of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in the United Kingdom. This work has been of great assistance to the Authority in considering its approach and the Authority wishes to acknowledge this.

## **Legislative Background**

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, sets out that the national framework of qualifications is to be

*“a framework for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State . . . based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners”.*

The Authority has defined the national framework of qualifications as being

*“The single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards.”*

The Authority has a statutory function to determine the policies and procedures on which the framework of qualifications is to be based and the Authority made such a determination in April 2002.

The Authority itself does not have a direct recognition function. The Qualifications Act sets out that Authority shall liaise with bodies outside the State which make education and training awards for the purposes of facilitating the recognition in the State of education and training awards made by those bodies and facilitate recognition outside the State of education and training awards made in the State. This gives the Authority a statutory role in international liaison and the facilitation of recognition, in addition to the various responsibilities that the Authority has in the Act.

Under the Qualifications Act the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council are given an explicit function of recognising awards. Under the Universities Act, 1997, the universities have the authority to make awards. Under the Dublin Institute of Technology Act, 1992, the Institute also has the authority to make awards. Award recognition functions are also implied for universities and the Institute.

## **Framework Development to Date**

While the nature of the framework itself and the procedures for access, transfer and progression have yet to be determined, the possible approaches to these have been set out in the Authority's Discussion Document. Furthermore the Authority has now established:

- a set of broad values and principles that will underpin the establishment of a national framework of qualifications. These values and principles form a starting and reference point for the development of operational policies and strategies for the Authority, and for the design criteria of the framework itself
- a set of process guidelines to be adopted by the Authority itself in undertaking the task of developing a framework of qualifications and implementing the other provisions of the Qualifications Act
- the policies and criteria for the development of the national framework of qualifications itself.

Key issues emerging are that the Authority will be developing a framework based on levels and award-types.

## **Why include these Awards in the Framework?**

The principles and values determined by the Authority set out the Authority's vision for a comprehensive, coherent and inclusive national framework of qualifications. The Authority recognises that many of the professional and international awarding bodies making awards in Ireland have been doing so for many years. In many cases, these bodies have been meeting the needs of learners in a way that the State was not in a position to do at the time. This has particularly been the case in areas outside of State intervention and regulation, but such bodies have also played a key role in some areas where they have been set up by the State or funded by the State. Such bodies have played, and continue to play, a key role in the development of Irish society.

Until the commencement of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, there had been a wide range of awarding bodies operating in the State. It could be argued that the societal recognition for the awards made by these bodies was a market recognition, within the particular area that each of these was operating.

The environment is now changing. With the move towards the establishment of the national framework of qualifications, there is now a move towards State recognition for the awards of these bodies.

While there is no compulsion for the inclusion of awards in the framework other than those made by public bodies, the aim is that the framework will become the single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way.

From the learner's point of view, it is important that there is an opportunity to include as many awards as possible that are made in the State in the national framework of qualifications. The Authority considers it vital that the framework be as inclusive as possible and that mechanisms should be developed for the inclusion of as wide a range of awards as possible. Through the process of consultation to date, many awarding bodies have sought that processes be developed for the inclusion of their awards in the framework.

The inclusion of the awards of such awarding bodies in the framework will provide recognition for such awards in a national context. Thus, there will be increased recognition for learners attaining awards and increased opportunities for transfer and progression. Furthermore, the inclusion of such awards will also provide an element of external quality assurance and scrutiny on the processes of the awarding bodies.

### ***Question 1 – Introduction***

***Do you agree with the rationale suggested for the inclusion of awards in the framework? Would you suggest that the rationale should be changed or further amended?***

## ***Chapter 2 – Range of Awarding Bodies***

### **Introduction**

There is a need to consider the different types of awarding bodies that are being discussed in this paper. These types are not meant to be exhaustive, but to indicate a range of practices currently in use and to clarify distinctions between them. Indeed, it is possible that some professional bodies operate a number of models of practice which allow for a number of the groupings identified below to apply to them.

### **International Bodies**

There are many international awarding bodies making awards to learners in the State. These tend to be bodies based primarily in one country but operating in a number of other countries. Many of these are United Kingdom awarding bodies that make awards in many States outside the United Kingdom. Examples of these include City and Guilds, Edexcel and the Open University.

Generally there are two ways in which international awarding bodies operate in Ireland. In some instances, they provide their own programmes and make the awards themselves, such as the Open University. In other instances they operate as external certifiers for programmes provided by other providers of education and training in the State. In some of these cases, they may set the assessment arrangements. In these instances, many providers have been publicly funded.

In some cases the awards of these international bodies are included in the framework of qualifications in their country of origin, where such a framework exists.

### **Global Bodies**

There are also international awarding bodies in specific sectoral areas, often in information technology. These tend to be bodies which would not primarily be based in any single country and would operate in a number of countries. Often they would be linked to global corporations. Examples of these would include Microsoft, Intel, Cisco, Lotus, Novell and Sun. These global awarding bodies have been described as existing in a “parallel universe” to traditional awarding bodies.

There are not generally agreed international processes in place for the recognition of global awards in national frameworks of qualifications. However, some of these bodies have their programmes incorporated into programmes that already lead to awards in the State, such as those of the awards Councils.

### **Professional Qualification which may lead to Renewable Membership**

One group of professional bodies awards qualifications that may lead to membership or registration. Prior to membership or registration additional criteria are sometimes applied. In the case of these professional bodies, the qualification is permanent while the membership is renewable, i.e. the practitioner could resign or be expelled from the body concerned, but would retain the qualification. Bodies operating qualifications of this type sometimes require candidates to have some form of membership (e.g. student or affiliate) before they can enter for the qualification. Some bodies link membership grades to different qualifications (e.g. associateship based on a certain award, full membership on a further award), and some offer qualifications designed for experienced practitioners.

Such professional bodies may or may not directly provide the programme of education and training themselves. Such bodies may either be based within the State or may operate within more than one state.

An example of a professional body like this in Ireland is the Marketing Institute. The Institution of Engineers of Ireland also makes some awards itself.

### **Renewable Membership following Attainment of an Award recognised by a Professional Body**

Another group of professional bodies provides membership or registration based on achieving awards or other criteria not administered by the professional or registration body. In such instances the professional body does not make the award itself, rather it recognises an award made by another awarding body following programmes of education and training which are provided by various providers of education and training. This practice is also known as accreditation by some professional bodies. Practices of professional bodies in this regard vary. Some have defined requirements that external qualifications have to meet, or operate a programme approval process, while others accept a variety of awards that were relevant to the area concerned and at the appropriate level. Prior to membership or registration additional criteria are sometimes applied.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in Ireland and the Institution of Engineers of Ireland are examples of professional bodies in Ireland which operate in this way.

### **Membership or Registration following Assessment**

Other professional bodies provide for membership or registration following an assessment similar to that which could be used for award of a qualification, again often subject to additional criteria. In such instances the practitioner has, in a sense, achieved an award as recognition for their learning at a point of admission, but does not receive a credential separate from membership and does not retain anything if he or she should leave the body concerned. In the case of membership or registration following assessment, an award is not being made and inclusion in the framework does not arise.

#### ***Question 2 –Range of Awarding Bodies***

***Do you agree with the range of awarding bodies described in this chapter? Are there other types of awarding bodies which the Authority should consider? Do you agree with the descriptions of awarding bodies set out in this Chapter? How should these descriptions be developed further?***



## ***Chapter 3 – Issues Arising***

### **Range of Awarding Bodies**

The wide range of awarding bodies other than the public awarding bodies is discussed above. These range from professional bodies to international bodies making awards to learners in the State. There are also different types of these bodies. The issues outlined below need to be considered in the context of this diverse range of bodies.

### **New Arrangements for State-Funded Provision**

Under the Qualifications Act, other than the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology, all State-funded providers of further and higher education and training, generally, are to submit their programmes for validation to either the Further Education and Training Awards Council or the Higher Education and Training Awards Council. Validation is the process by which either of the two awards Councils satisfies itself that a learner may attain knowledge, skill and competence for the purpose of an award.

Accordingly, all provision in State funded providers, other than the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology, in further education and training and higher education and training, is generally to lead to an award from either the Further Education and Training Awards Council or the Higher Education and Training Awards Council. It is recognised that it will take some time for the two awards Councils to develop new awards systems and validation processes.

It is clear that the present situation is changing. The requirement for publicly funded providers of education and training to submit programmes for validation does not take away from their freedom to also seek to have awards made by other awarding bodies in addition to the Further Education and Training Awards Council or the Higher Education and Training Awards Council.

It is likely that some publicly funded providers will consider it to be in the interest of learners to have (parallel) awards made by another body as well as by either of the awards Councils. It will, of course, be a matter for themselves and the bodies that fund them to make any decision to do so, with the exception of the institutes of technology which are discussed below. However, should public providers continue to seek a parallel award for a programme it will be the case that a recognition or equivalence could be implied by virtue of a programme

leading to an award of one of the awards Councils and, simultaneously, to an award from another body, even though that parallel award will not have been through any direct or explicit recognition process in this State.

## **Institutes of Technology**

Under the Act, there is a specific approval role for the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland in the case of the institutes of technology, other than the Dublin Institute of Technology, seeking to enter into an arrangement for making awards with any authority other than either of the two awards Councils, e.g., a professional body. In such instances, any arrangements would need to be approved of by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and the awards Councils themselves also have a role here. Any such approved arrangements are additional to the submission of programmes for validation to either of the awards Councils.

## **Thrust of Act**

There are further important issues relating to the possible inclusion in the national framework of qualifications of awards from private bodies in the State, such as professional bodies, and from international bodies making awards to learners in the State. These include the continuing arrangements for quality assurance in the programmes leading to these awards and the extent to which the awarding bodies would develop practices consistent with the procedures for access, transfer and progression that are to be put in place by the Authority.

In the first instance it would appear that it would be appropriate for the Authority to satisfy itself as to the processes in place in such an awarding body for establishing the standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners, and for validation of programmes, thus paralleling the validation and quality assurance functions of the awards Councils.

In relation to access, transfer and progression, the issue that arises is the extent to which bodies seeking to have their awards included in the framework would ensure that practices consistent with the Authority's procedures for access, transfer and progression are put in place by providers. This may raise difficulties for some professional awards, in particular, where there are few progression routes at present. The Authority's discussion document considered the nature of the procedures for access, transfer and progression that are to be set by the Authority. The following elements were discussed: procedures for entry arrangements, systems for credit accumulation, accreditation of prior and experiential learning, the development of progression routes and protocols for providing information. The

potential roles of the Authority in leading cultural change and in brokering progression linkages were also discussed.

## **Inclusion of Awards and International Recognition**

Some of the awards which are being considered in this paper are awards made by international bodies for learners in the State. Such international awarding bodies also make awards in other States and can be included within the frameworks of other States. The Authority has a statutory role in international liaison and the facilitation of the recognition of awards and will play a key role in the development and co-ordination of a system for the recognition of awards, while ensuring that the autonomy of awarding bodies, including the universities, the Dublin Institute of Technology and the awards Councils is fully protected.

Accordingly, there will be a need to ensure that the outcomes of arrangements for inclusion of awards made in Ireland in the framework and for the international recognition of awards are consistent.

One possible option when dealing with applications from an international awarding body for some of its awards to be included in the national framework of qualifications would be that the Authority, or its agent, would satisfy itself in relation to the quality assurance procedures in place in the awarding body through interaction with a recognised quality assurance agency in the body's country of origin. A network of higher education quality assurance agencies has been established in Europe and the establishment of an equivalent network in vocational education and training is being considered.

## **Nature and Status of Professional Awarding Bodies**

Professional bodies have a key role in qualifying people to practice in professions and occupations. It is often qualification or recognition by such bodies which provides a licence to practise or public recognition as a practitioner in the field concerned, rather than possession of an award from a public awarding body. The professional bodies also play an important quality assurance role in relation to professional work, through means such as requiring or promoting updating, setting ethical standards and codes of practice, and operating disciplinary and complaints procedures.

Professional bodies can be established by statute and their memberships and/or their qualifications can also be recognised by statute. Other professional bodies, while not having a base in statute, can have public recognition for their memberships and/or their qualifications. Others may be seeking such public recognition. For example, there is currently a consultation process being undertaken by the Department of Health and Children

in relation to the establishment of a system for the registration for Complementary Therapy Practitioners - Complementary Therapy qualifications are not generally recognised at present.

There is also a distinction between professions, generally longer established, whose operations are fully located within the State and those professions for whom the commonly recognised professional body is located outside the State.

At present, there is no formal grouping for professional bodies or clearing house to ensure mutual recognition or co-ordinate policy responses. This compares with, for example, the United Kingdom, where chartered status can be sought by professional bodies. There are no precise rules concerning eligibility for chartered status but the Privy Council in the United Kingdom lays down certain expectations which include:

- admission to full membership must be on the basis of a qualification in the specific discipline at first degree level or equivalent plus an appropriate period of professional practice
- support must be provided to those members to maintain the currency of their skills via continuing professional development programmes
- the organisation must be financially sound
- the organisation must hold a national profile within business and education
- the organisation must be the acknowledged professional body for the discipline it represents
- the organisation must uphold standards of professional conduct and practice.

## **Professional Bodies – Membership versus Qualifications**

The idea of a professional qualification can have two linked meanings. The first is a legal one and relates to someone who is qualified – i.e., recognised as able – to perform a particular function. This may be enshrined in law or in general custom, or have more limited recognition.

The second meaning is attainment-based, in the sense of having recognition for particular knowledge, skill and competence attained and thus the qualification confirms that someone has the abilities deemed necessary or important for practice in the profession.

It is important to consider that either or both of the above meanings can be used by professional bodies themselves. There is a need to distinguish between qualifications on the one hand, and registrations and memberships on the other. Membership or registration may act as a qualification in the legal sense, as distinct from a qualification in an attainment-based

sense and this can cause confusion. Professional and registration bodies operate widely differing models of qualification and membership or registration.

The role of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland is to facilitate the inclusion of all awards made in the State in the framework. However, such awards must be based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence attained. The Authority is, therefore, able to take an interest in the qualifications made by professional registration bodies, but it is outside the Authority's remit to consider how these bodies act in relation to operating their memberships or registers, or requiring practitioners to update qualifications for them to remain active.

The Authority has established a policy in relation to the permanency of awards. Awards once made are not revoked and do not expire and considers that it is vital that this continues to be the case. However, where awards have been made in the past, although the award still stands as a permanent record of the learner's attainment at a particular point in time, further learning may be required for access to a particular employment or progression to a programme of education and training. The Authority notes that professional or regulatory bodies make demands as to the currency of the knowledge, skill and competence recognised in an award which confers a licence to practise or equivalent access to employment. As any such demands do not relate directly to the award itself, which has already been made, such issues are not directly relevant to the framework or to the work of the Authority.

## **Tax Relief**

Section 6 of the Finance Act, 1995, made provision for the granting of tax relief in respect of tuition fees in respect of approved courses at approved colleges. The Minister for Education and Science can approve colleges and courses for this purpose and has issued Codes of Standards in this regard. The 1995 Act applies to full-time undergraduate courses of at least two years' duration and section 15 of the Finance Act, 1996, extended the relief to part-time undergraduate courses of at least two year's duration. The Higher Education and Training Awards Council carries out the process of evaluation of colleges and courses, to determine if they comply with the relevant Code of Standards. Some of the bodies referred to above, such as the Open University, have been successfully completed the evaluation process of the Council.

## **Professional Body not actually Making an Award**

In the case of renewable membership following attainment of an award recognised by a professional body, the award is not itself being made by the professional body. Accordingly, the inclusion of the award in the framework is a matter for the awarding body in question.

In such instances the professional body does not make the award itself, rather it recognises an award made by another awarding body following programmes of education and training which are provided by various providers of education and training.

However, the recognition requirements that the professional body sets are relevant to the framework in terms of their consistency with the thrust of the Act discussed above. It is possible that there could be tensions between these and it is appropriate for there to be a dialogue involving the provider in question, the awarding body validating the programme and the professional body recognising the award.

***Question 3 – Issues Arising***

***Do you agree with the range of issues identified in this chapter? Are there other issues which the Authority should consider? Do you agree with the discussion on the issues set out in this Chapter? How should this discussion be developed further?***

## **Chapter 4 – Consideration of Processes for Inclusion in Framework**

### **Possible Processes**

Consideration needs to be given to how awards made by the bodies outlined above should be included in the framework.

Accordingly, there is a need to look further at how the framework can facilitate the inclusion of awards made by the bodies classified under

- Global Awarding Bodies
- International Awarding Bodies
- Professional Awarding Bodies.

It is suggested that the approach to the inclusion of for these awards in the framework could vary.

### **Possible Process I – Use Full Validation Process of Awarding Bodies**

This process would involved the use of the validation processes of the awards Councils and the result would be that a programme of education and training would be submitted in the normal way to either of the Councils and an award of a Council would result from the successful completion of a programme.

Similarly, where there was a particular programmatic link with a university or the Dublin Institute of Technology, the validation processes of one of these could be used.

### **Possible Process II – Authority to Co-ordinate Award Recognition Process with assistance of Awarding Bodies in the State**

The possible process for the inclusion of the awards of bodies in the framework could involve the following elements:

- the body in question to attempt to align its awards with the developing framework in a manner consistent with the policies and criteria established by the Authority, the framework to be established by the Authority and the procedures for access, transfer and progression to be established by the Authority
- application to be made to the Authority for inclusion in the process

- the Authority would need a procedure to determine how applications would be considered – in this regard, it would need to involve the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the universities or the Dublin Institute of Technology as appropriate
- the consideration of an application would have regard to the consistency of the body's processes with the policies and criteria established by the Authority, the framework to be established by the Authority and the procedures for access, transfer and progression to be established by the Authority.

### **Possible Process III – Authority to Co-ordinate Recognition Process with assistance of Quality Assurance Agencies Internationally**

The possible process for the inclusion of awards of international bodies in the framework could involve the Authority, or its agent, satisfying itself in relation to the setting of standards of awards and quality assurance procedures in place in the awarding body through interaction with a quality assurance agency in the body's country of origin.

### **Consideration of Possible Processes**

The first option is an option that could be open to all awards bodies and would treat all equally. However, some bodies could have concerns if this was the only way to include their awards in the framework as they would not be being included as awards in their own right.

In relation to global awarding bodies, one possibility is that their awards should be included in the framework through the first option only. This is because the awards of these bodies are not generally included in their own independent right in national frameworks of qualifications. Furthermore, it is usually not the case that the awarding making status of these bodies is set out in law in their country of origin, to the extent that a country of origin can be determined.

The second option could be open to all international awarding bodies and to some professional awarding bodies. The issue arising for the second option and professional bodies is whether the Authority should put in place some requirements in relation to the status of awarding bodies whose own awards can be included in their own right in the framework.

The difficulty with the third option is that, to date, while there has been initial consideration of these issues, a methodology for this process has yet to emerge internationally. Furthermore, it leaves issues relating to consistency with the policies and criteria established by the Authority, the framework to be established by the Authority and the procedures for access, transfer and progression to be established by the Authority unresolved. The third option is not

being suggested as a way forward, for the time being, but may become more of a possibility in the future.

***Question 4 – Consideration of Processes for Inclusion in Framework***

***Do you agree with the possible processes for inclusion of awards in the framework? Are there other processes which the Authority should consider? Do you agree with the analysis of the processes? What steps do you think that the Authority should take now?***



## ***Chapter 5 – Conclusion***

This paper puts forward some ideas on how the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland might approach the performance of this function. Submissions are invited on this paper and the Authority would wish that all submissions be made prior to the end of August 2002. All submissions will be made publicly available.

At this time, the Authority is not seeking applications from awarding bodies for the inclusion of their awards in the framework.



# Questions

## **Question 1 – Introduction**

*Do you agree with the rationale suggested for the inclusion of awards in the framework? Would you suggest that the rationale should be changed or further amended?*

## **Question 2 – Range of Awarding Bodies**

*Do you agree with the range of awarding bodies described in this chapter? Are there other types of awarding bodies which the Authority should consider? Do you agree with the descriptions of awarding bodies set out in this Chapter? How should these descriptions be developed further?*

## **Question 3 – Issues Arising**

*Do you agree with the range of issues identified in this chapter? Are there other issues which the Authority should consider? Do you agree with the discussion on the issues set out in this Chapter? How should this discussion be developed further?*

## **Question 4 – Consideration of Processes for Inclusion in Framework**

*Do you agree with the possible processes for inclusion of awards in the framework? Are there other processes which the Authority should consider? Do you agree with the analysis of the processes? What steps do you think that the Authority should take now?*



## ***Notes***

