



**Impact and Implementation of the National  
Framework of Qualifications in the Higher Education  
and Training Awards Sector**

**Sectoral Report Prepared by HETAC**

OCTOBER 2008

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### *Scope of Impact Study*

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has launched a study to evaluate the impact of the National Framework of Qualifications, which was formally unveiled in October 2003. Now, some 5 years later, it is considered timely to take stock of the extent to which it and the related policies on access, transfer and progression have been implemented. The study will also address the Authority's statutory requirement - Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 - to review the operation of the Framework.

The scope and objectives of the study reflect the relatively short period of time since the Framework has been established. Some aspects of the national framework continue to be developed and that the scale of implementation differs within each sector of education and training. The main focus of the study is on the work of the Authority, the awarding bodies and providers of education and training at strategic and operational levels. The study is expected to show different approaches, issues and practices in schooling and in further and higher education and training. It is anticipated that this can give rise to shared practice and learning and inform the next phase of implementation. The study will also assess the initial impact of the Framework, while recognising that the full impact the culture of learning will take some years to achieve the change required.

### *Sources*

The NQAI has requested the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) to prepare a Sectoral Report on the NFQ insofar as it impacts on the Institutes of Technology and other providers. In April 2008, HETAC invited contributions from all of its providers based on the strands of enquiry identified by the Steering Committee overseeing this review. This material is referred to in this report as the *Sectoral Report Survey (SRS)*. Ten responses (7 of which were from the IoT Sector) were received. Other sources include:

1. Feedback from a meeting with representatives of the Union of Students of Ireland (USI), HETAC and Irish Universities Association (IUA)
2. Significant provider and other stakeholder feedback collated as part of the HETAC Self-Evaluation Report for an International review of HETAC activities in 2006.
3. Feedback from the HETAC Academic Committee; and,
4. Feedback gathered as a result of the extensive and interactive processes operated by HETAC between the diverse range of providers as part of the performance of functions on an ongoing basis.

HETAC would like to thank all for their contributions and trust that this Sectoral Report accurately reflects their contributions.

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## CHAPTER 2 HETAC BACKGROUND

### *Introduction*

The Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) was established in June 2001 with the commencement of the relevant sections of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 (referred to as the Act). The Act made HETAC the successor to the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA), which it dissolved, and it provided for a transitional period of five years for the introduction of new HETAC processes. The NCEA was established to serve as the awarding body for the Regional Technical Colleges founded in the early 1970s. It was paralleled on the Council for National Academic Awards in the United Kingdom. As the scale and diversity of education and training activities in Ireland increased into the 1990s and in response to changing national and international expectations around qualifications and quality assurance, the Act was passed by the Oireachtas.

HETAC was one of three new bodies established under the Act. The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) has responsibility for developing the National Framework of Qualifications and for determining procedures for the Awards Councils. It also acts as a conduit for State funding of their activities. The Council is a body corporate consisting of fifteen members. The chairperson is appointed by the Minister for Education and Science. The remaining members are nominated in accordance with Section 20 of the Act. These include two further nominations by the Ministers for Education and Science, and Enterprise, Trade and Employment, as well as representatives of learners, recognised institutes, IBEC and ICTU. The Council which meets about six times a year, has also established an Academic Committee to assist in undertaking certain functions, including the accreditation of programmes etc. In keeping with HETAC's underlying philosophy, it also is composed of key stakeholders from the higher education community. The Council is assisted by an executive, headed by a Chief Executive.

HETAC's responsibility extends to all parts of the higher education system other than the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology. The remit of the National Qualifications Authority encompasses all higher and further education in Ireland. The universities engage with the Qualifications Authority on the basis of agreement. HETAC's predecessor - NCEA- dealt exclusively with the Institutes of Technology and those institutions or providers that were referred to NCEA by request of the Minister for Education and Science for consideration as a designated institution. The scope of provision was largely in keeping with the type of programmes available in the "extra university sector" including such providers as the seminaries, An Garda Siochana and the Military College.

### *HETAC Functions*

One of the overarching objects of the Act is to promote the quality of higher education and training. Many of HETAC's functions relate directly or indirectly to that particular objective, including:

1. the establishment of policies and criteria for making awards and validating programmes;
2. the delegation of authority to make awards;
3. the determination of standards of knowledge, skill and competence;
4. the evaluation of and monitoring the quality of programmes;
5. ensuring that providers have fair and consistent procedures for assessment of learners.

Other objects of the Act relate to areas such as the recognition of learners, providing a system for comparing awards, facilitating access, transfer and progression for learners, promoting diversity in education and training, co-operating between providers and industry, promoting international recognition of awards, and contributing to the realisation of national policy objectives. The functions of the Council relating to these objects include:

1. recognising awards;
2. making awards on completion of programmes;
3. making awards directly to learners outside of programmes.

### ***HETAC Provider Profile***

The legislation articulated a clear objective that as many learners as possible should have their learning achievements recognised and that the validation of programmes of higher education and training is the most efficient means to achieving this. The impact of the new legislation on the profile of the provider associated with HETAC is significant in that it has increased the diversity of provider now engaging with HETAC. There is no longer a constraint on the type of provider or the higher education and training programmes validated, which now is a source of challenge to HETAC in the context of promulgating policies that facilitate full implementation of the policies of the National Framework of Qualifications and satisfy the quality assurance procedures. This is one of the major impacts of the NFQ.

In general terms the provider profile falls into three main categories as set out below:

#### **Institutes of Technology**

Thirteen Institutes of Technology (IoTs) have a statutorily prescribed relationship with HETAC. The legislation differentiates between the Institutes of Technology as “Recognised Institutions” and other higher education institutions that avail of HETAC services on a voluntary basis. Delegated Authority to the Institutes of Technology to make awards and validate programmes has dominated the IoT relationship with HETAC and has progressed the interaction to a new level. The Self Evaluation Report notes that

*“The institutes are very pleased with HETAC’s role in the transformation in the sector over the past five years. They note that HETAC is a very different organisation from the NCEA and commend the changes undergone. They believe that these changes have helped to shift the focus from agencies and institutions to the needs of learners in the manner envisaged by the Act. There has been continuous dialogue and cooperation between the institutes and HETAC to bring about these changes. Without denying that there have been disagreements, some territorial disputes and misinterpretations, nevertheless the Council of Directors believes that these were smothered by the over-riding willingness of the Institutes, the Qualifications Authority and HETAC to cooperate in order to develop the National Framework of Qualifications, revise programmes to meet defined learning outcomes and to accept responsibility for enhancing quality assurance procedures and the standing of awards”*

This new relationship between HETAC and the IOT sector has had a notable impact on the approach to policy development in all areas relating to the framework implementation.

#### **Established Independent and Other Providers**

Independent and other providers established with HETAC prior to the Qualifications Act i.e under the remit of NCEA, were required to go through an Institutional Evaluation the outcome of which was sanctioned by the Department of Education and Science. This was a prerequisite for programme validation for the provider. As all such providers were referred to NCEA by the Department; this was the only point of access to NCEA “designated institution” status. A concern noted for some of the larger independent colleges in the HETAC Self- Evaluation Report is that the legislation is framed in such a way that only institutions established by an Act of the Oireachtas or by the Government may be designated by the Minister for Education and Science as a recognised institution. This means that, however mature and sophisticated they become, these colleges cannot be delegated authority to make awards.

Three of the long established providers in this category have subsequently transferred their accreditation relationship with HETAC to the National University of Ireland.

#### **New Providers since the commencement of the Qualifications Act 1999**

The Council is obliged to facilitate as many providers of higher education and training as possible. This new category of providers is diverse. The defining characteristic of new providers are those engaged primarily in specialist programme provision, diverse programme delivery and unusual provider learner relationships for example employee providers where all the learners are employees of the provider and the programmes are

centred on work based learning. These providers are delivering programmes at all levels of Higher Education and Training leading to major, minor and special purpose awards. The latter category of awards is becoming the more typical as the programme accreditation process continues.

The overall feedback gathered from these providers during the HETAC self-evaluation process is “very positive about HETAC”. Others noted specifically that HETAC was supportive of small colleges and distance education providers. One institution expressed the view that *“the commitment to realising and enhancing quality through a determined partnership with constituent providers has been a hallmark of HETAC’s approach to date.”* New providers continue to be a source of reinvention for HETAC as standard policies and procedures are constantly tested in terms of alternative forms of framework implementation.

The significance of the diversity of this community of HETAC providers (13 IoTs, as well as 41 other providers) bears evidence to the extent of the impact of the NQF to date. This influence is extended through the

1. recognition of international awards
2. the evolution of joint awards as a result of national framework alignment agreements
3. the recognition of professional bodies on the national framework.

The NFQ is the central reference point for all types of diverse providers. The structure of the national framework and the many benefits of state recognition has encouraged those engaged in higher education and training and the professions to place what were recently viewed as programmes outside the traditional boundaries of higher education and training onto the Irish NFQ.

Appendix A details the range of providers currently accredited by HETAC, while Appendix B contains statistical data in respect of the number of awards made by HETAC providers in 2007

### ***The Role of HETAC and NQAI***

The role of HETAC, as an Awards Council, is to interpret the generality of the NFQ policies, and to elaborate on these for effective implementation of the framework in consultation with providers and taking into consideration the various levels of maturity and relationships that HETAC has with providers. The role of the NQAI and the perception of that role among HETAC providers is also important to note in this context. The development and dissemination of national Policies in collaboration with HETAC and other stakeholders has added further confusion to the clear differentiation of the role of NQAI national policies and the policy remit of HETAC whereby some providers work directly to the national policy rather than through the HETAC interpretation of such policies.

*By way of general comment, important to note that two perspectives may come through in certain issues which will reflect the relationship –HETAC as a ‘regulator’ and Providers as the recipient of those regulations etc*

## CHAPTER 3 ENGAGEMENT WITH THE FRAMEWORK

### *Introduction*

From an early stage, HETAC was actively engaged with the Qualifications Authority in the elaboration of the NFQ. As noted, working with all stakeholders in higher education, a number of key areas of work were undertaken in the sector, including:

1. The establishment of the first national collaborative network for all education and training in the State and in particular the higher education and training sector which promoted some parity of esteem for the “extra university sector at the time”.
2. The delegation of authority to the recognised institutes to validate programmes and make national awards.
3. The establishment of the new awards of the National Framework of Qualifications:
  - a. The design and development of the New Framework. The extensive collaboration and negotiation carried out on the structure of the new national framework and the type of awards that evolved.
  - b. The placement of legacy awards was a significant area of essential work and critical prerequisite towards the transition of existing awards over to the new national framework of qualifications.
  - c. The adoption of the generic framework standards as the HETAC “interim standards” of the national framework of qualifications to enable transition of all existing awards in the sector.
  - d. The Councils policy on making awards including the titling convention of HETAC “named awards” which was concluded over a period of eighteen months collaboration with the HETAC sector.
  - e. The transition process undertaken in the sector with the cooperation of all higher education and training providers associated with HETAC was the largest collaborative project ever undertaken in higher education and training to date. This process placed the new framework elements and structures under the focus of the primary implementers, the providers of higher education and training.
4. The determination of quality assurance procedures in accordance with international best practice.

### *Key Areas of Work*

#### *National Forum*

At the outset, it is important to contextualise the developments around this time of NFQ development and subsequent implementation. One of the key achievements of the Qualifications Act was to provide a single forum for all higher education and training stakeholders on the basis of parity of esteem. The NFQ established a single national reference point for all higher education awards, and the extension of this philosophy extends to all aspects of higher education delivery. The new emphasis on quality assurance led, *inter alia*, to the establishment of the Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN) which seeks to promote best practice in higher education and training on a national basis.

#### *Delegated Authority*

However, perhaps the single most important exercise for HETAC and its relationship with recognised institutions was the decision to exercise its powers under Sections 29 and 30 of the Act and to delegate authority to make awards. It gave considerable autonomy to recognised institutions. The Act made provision for a review that had already been undertaken within four institutes when the Act was commenced. The general expectation was that delegation of authority might have to wait until the National Framework of Qualifications had been established and the new agencies and quality assurance arrangements were in operation. However in 2001, the Council adopted as a policy goal the optimal delegation of authority within the transition period under review. Criteria and procedures were established for delegation in the first instance, and then for their subsequent review. These were revised in 2004 following the initial round of delegation reviews and in particular clarified the criteria for the delegation of awarding powers for Levels 9 and 10 Research Degrees.

The basic procedure is that the institute applies by way of a self-evaluation report, which addresses the criteria to the satisfaction of the Council and the Qualifications Authority, followed by a panel visit and report advising the Council on whether the criteria have been met. In the event of a positive report, it will lead to a decision of the Council subject to agreement with the Qualifications Authority.

At present all thirteen IoTs have attained some level of delegated authority. A number of the Institutes have delegation from Levels 6 to 9 inclusive (in respect of taught programmes) and four have delegation from Levels 6 to 10 (including some awards at Levels 9 and 10 attained by 'discipline specific' research programmes). A number of institutes have successfully applied for extension of delegation beyond the initial grant. HETAC has recognised the increased capacity of the IoT Sector in this area, and has again sought to optimise accreditation procedures. In one case, the review for extension under Section 29 was combined with a review under Section 30 of existing delegation.

The Council now links delegation of authority for research awards to its policy on accreditation to maintain research registers. All institutes that currently have delegation for awards that result from research programmes have complied with this policy. Delegation is effectively made by award-type in the national framework for taught programmes. However, for research degree programmes, delegation is by discipline area. This approach has ensured that confidence is maintained in the standards and is currently considered effective.

Input gathered by the HETAC self-Evaluation Process indicated that there is broad satisfaction with the operation of delegation of authority. The rigour of the review process, with its strong international input, combined with the publication of the resulting reports, has brought a high level of engagement with the process within the sector and a high level of confidence among stakeholders generally.

While HETAC welcomed this initiative, which took account of the maturity of the recognised institutions and the extent to which they have developed the capacity and processes to develop, quality assure and self-validate programmes of higher education and training, it took place against a backdrop of these institutions coming to terms with the NFQ and its impact on programme structure and procedures. Central to this process was the development of a coherent set of standards which would assist institutions and allow them to take responsibility for their own processes relating to programme development, is in line with international practice.

#### [The Establishment \(design and development\) of the new National Framework of Qualifications](#)

The NFQ was not designed to become a collection of existing awards, which has occurred with frameworks in other countries. While the design and development of the new framework would take due cognisance of existing national awards, it did not 'assume' that existing awards would be taken for granted on new structure. As a result, HETAC worked closely with established providers such as the IoTs to ensure the key awards of the existing NCEA/HETAC sector and associated providers were recognised by the emerging NFQ. For example the IoTs made some representations to HETAC to have the existing National Diploma established as a bachelor degree award on the national framework. The consistency of the NCEA/HETAC pre-framework programme and other accreditation processes was a significant advantage at that time. Some pre framework national awards did not feature as major awards on the new framework, for example, the old One-Year-Certificate. These awards were subsequently recognised and Minor and Special purpose awards.

#### [The Adoption of Interim Standards for the New HETAC Named Awards](#)

Under the Act, HETAC has responsibility for determining the standards of awards. The Act maps out a set of arrangements for setting standards for awards and the role of various stakeholders in this process. In 2003, having regard to the overall standards for the NFQ set by the Qualifications Authority through the award-type descriptors, the Council decided the standards of its named awards. Initially, the Council adopted the

award-type descriptors as the interim generic standards for its awards, while working on standards within individual fields of learning. In November 2003, HETAC adopted the generic award-type descriptors of the NFQ as Interim Standards.

#### The Placement of Legacy Awards

HETAC also advised the Qualifications Authority on the place of the legacy awards of the NCEA and HETAC in the NFQ in 2004. Awards made by certain professions with statutory functions may be assigned with the NFQ by HETAC. To date, this process has been completed by two such bodies. The placement of all higher education and training awards on the NFQ in 2004/05 (estimated at 1,000 or so), combined with the on-going alignment of professional and other qualifications, represents one of the key achievements of HETAC and its many stakeholders. However some of the new awards bear a striking resemblance to a number of legacy awards and as such, this may lead to confusion. These issues are set out later in the report

#### The Policy for Making (and titling) Higher Education and Training Awards

Related to the standards is the Council's policy on naming of awards. This seeks to reconcile the requirements of rationalisation and simplicity with the traditional understandings of various subject communities and stakeholder groups. The solution has found broad acceptance initially as the detail of programme titling is captured and supported by the Europass European Diploma Supplement which HETAC has actively supported and established as a compulsory requirement with providers in the sector. The naming convention of HETAC awards continues to cause some misgivings by some actors across the sector and the Council is committed to giving further consideration on the titles of named awards. This will form part of the input to the issues and gaps section of this report in order to highlight the national issues associated with a consistent or inconsistent titling convention.

#### The Transition Process from Existing Awards to New Awards of the National Framework

The naming of awards was an essential prerequisite to the establishment of new awards. In addition the adoption of "interim standards" was also essential to support the transition from old to new awards. The interim standards were tested through a transition process which facilitated the mapping of existing programmes onto the NFQ and its awards. The process was key to the establishment of the framework as it introduced the providers to the concept of learning outcomes, and encouraged its immediate application to individual programmes. This ensured the practical implementation of the Framework in a timely fashion while also capitalising on the cooperation and professionalism of the academic staff within the institutions.

The transition process facilitated by the Council was the single largest national event which permeated all levels of staff within all providers (including the IoTs) associated with HETAC. The panels of assessors engaged by HETAC to endorse the transition process were largely comprised of university representatives thereby providing a national impetus for the introduction of the national framework far beyond the traditional HETAC sector.

The Council's approach of starting with generic standards has been recognised by providers and others as a fruitful way of ensuring the practical implementation of the Framework in a timely fashion. Inevitably, there have been some question marks over how consistently the generic standards have been interpreted. However the transition process ensured that all providers in the sector focussed on the relevance of the Qualifications Authority's policies and procedures on Access, Transfer and Progression (ATP).

#### Determination of Standards for Fields of Learning

HETAC took the approach of determining standards for "fields of learning" as opposed to the "named awards" association as defined by the framework documentation. This was considered to be more appropriate for the maturity and diversity of the sector. The development and determination of the National standards co-ordinated by HETAC was in itself a national event focussing attention on the framework standards. The process involved national experts in each field of learning for the professional bodies,

industry; the DIT and the universities. It has also provided and continues to be a national platform and an opportunity to assist in the further implementation of the NFQ. This inclusive approach has resulted in a broad acceptance of the standards determined as national standards.

The standards for broad fields of learning represent an elaboration of the generic descriptors of the NFQ for that specific field, which seek to reconcile the requirements of consistency and simplicity with the traditional understandings of various subject communities and stakeholder groups. The solution has found broad acceptance amongst its stakeholders.

Standards for six fields of learning have been adopted by the Council to date. These are Engineering, Science, Computing, Business, Art & Design and Nursing. The latter were developed in collaboration with the statutory regulator, An Bord Altranais. These standards are for awards at Level 6 to Level 9 on the NFQ. They are intended to facilitate experts in particular fields of learning in creating the link between their programmes and the Framework. As such, they are a reference point to which programme outcomes may be compared. They provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with a particular field of learning. The standards were developed through a consultative process, using panels of disciplinary experts. Further standards are currently being developed. A standard for Complementary Therapies was recently adopted by the Council and a new standard for Social Studies is in the planning process stage of development. Sectoral feedback indicates that providers (including those within Universities) have acknowledged the value of these standards as a means of guiding the articulation of the NFQ for staff involved in programme development.

#### Minor and Special Purpose Awards Policy 2005

HETAC major awards were the first major awards to become part of the national framework in the higher education and training sector following the transition process. The diversity of the new providers seeking programme accreditation also prompted the first Special purpose and Minor awards following validation by HETAC. This category of new awards is considered a key aspect of the diversity of learning achievement facilitated by formal recognition through the national framework. HETAC adopted the generic templates of the new category of awards in 2005. This policy placed a minimum volume of 10 credits on the lowest award achievable. The Institutes of Technology received delegated authority to validate programmes make Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental awards in 2006. The policy has been revised recently

#### Determination of Quality Assurance Procedures (Section 28)

The Act requires providers of higher education and training programmes validated by HETAC, or to which HETAC has delegated the power to make awards, to establish quality assurance procedures and to agree those procedures with the Council.

In 2002, the Council published the document *Guidelines and Criteria for Quality Assurance Procedures in Higher Education and Training* (Guidelines and Criteria). These guidelines are intended to assist providers in establishing, or maintaining and improving, quality assurance procedures and simultaneously meet the requirements of the Council in respect of quality assurance. They are based on best international practice, including policies and procedures operated by national quality assurance agencies and higher education and training institutions in EU member states and other countries at the time. They incorporate recommendations and requirements set out in a wide range of national, international and institutional publications and drew on the experience of the Council/NCEA and institutional experience of operating and monitoring quality assurance systems. While pre-dating the publication of the European Standards and Guidelines and the INQAAHE Guidelines for Good Practice, they are consistent with both.

#### Re-establishing Quality Assurance Procedures

The process of agreeing quality assurance procedures with providers has been a key step in helping providers to take ownership of their own quality assurance function as required under the Act. A culture shift has taken

place with the established IoTs. This is one from compliance with external requirements to institutional taking responsibility for the maintenance of standards and enhancement of the learner experience. One source of satisfaction for many providers was discovering through the process of documentation and agreement the extent to which they had already been engaged in quality assurance at various levels.

The burden of documenting internal quality assurance practice has been considerable for some institutions, especially new and smaller providers. At the same time, the fact that the agreement process is a desk exercise means that the implementation of the quality assurance procedures so documented has not yet been verified. It was not the task of the quality review panel to verify that the procedures documented were in operation or to what effect. This is why the Council and its stakeholders are keen to proceed with the evaluation of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures. The findings from the evaluation of quality assurance procedures in the context of the Institutional Review accreditation process introduced in 2007 will be used to inform the agreement process for new providers in the immediate future.

#### **The determination of the National Approach to Credit**

HETAC established ECTS credit as an essential validation criterion in the pre-framework programme validation process. Both HETAC and associated providers were anxious to establish credit as a support to the concepts of the new framework configuration. The sectoral contributions towards the development of national approach to credit were significant in this regard, including critically, clarification of the role of credit.

#### **The determination of the Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning**

The recognition of prior learning was well established within that part of the higher education sector associated with HETAC. The national approach taken by the Qualifications Authority was considered by HETAC to be a significant step in the context of promoting a new impetus for RPL activity associated with ATP policies underpinning the national framework.

As well as awards based on programmes HETAC also makes awards directly to learners based on the learner achieving the standard of knowledge, skill and competence set for an award. HETAC adopted a policy for direct awards and made the first such award in 2005.

#### **Recognition Function**

HETAC has the function of recognising awards. It does this both by means of reviewing the awards of external bodies and by recognising the awards presented by individual learners. HETAC has policies for both of these activities and has been involved in the alignment of a number of professional awards with the NFQ. HETAC has also assisted the Authority on the alignment of specified awards of the Open University with the NFQ. This activity has assisted in bringing the existence of the Framework to new audiences and has been important in raising awareness of the Framework. Further work with a range of professional and other awarding bodies is ongoing.

#### **Joint Awards**

The alignment of other national frameworks and the work carried out by recognition Ireland has provided HETAC and the providers in the sector to initiate a number of joint awards following the adoption of a policy in 2005 which has since been revised to enable a series of national and international collaborative programme arrangements filtered through the various standards and levels of the national framework.

#### **Conclusion**

Overall, the experience of the engagement and implementation of the NFQ has been positive from HETAC's perspective. While there are issues that remain to be addressed, key HETAC and sectoral objectives were facilitated by the NFQ and the providers in cooperation with HETAC made a significant contribution to the key achievements and areas established under the remit of the national framework. The open, collaborative

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and professional approach adopted by the NQAI with multilateral and bilateral meetings also contributed in no small way to the overall success of reaching key milestones in the establishment of the NFQ.

From a provider perspective, there is an acknowledgement of the positive impact of the NFQ with higher education. At its most basic, its simplicity assists learners to focus on achievements, in addition to elaborating on various access pathways – horizontal and vertical.

Notwithstanding the achievement which is recognised by all stakeholders, the fact remains that the implementation is a work in progress. Stakeholders have identified a number of areas requiring further actions. HETAC will continue to advance these in partnership with its provider community. The development, for example, of learner assessment procedures is considered to be a significant area of work required to bring the further clarity to the fundamental structures of the NFQ.

## CHAPTER 4 KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE FRAMEWORK

### *Perception of NFQ*

The knowledge and understanding of the national framework can be viewed on a number of levels and from many different perspectives. The response provided in this section elaborates on the knowledge and understanding gained by providers and associated stakeholders as a result of formal engagement with the framework and the many policies developed by NQAI and HETAC to facilitate continuous implementation:

Evidence of the knowledge and understanding of the NQF come through, inter alia,

1. Engagement with HETAC as a result of Government policies relating to funding and formal recognition;
2. Existing and established providers completing programme accreditation and other accreditation initiatives such as re-accreditation under programmatic review ;
3. Established providers updating quality assurance procedures with HETAC.
4. Sector Reviews;
5. Surveys

### *New Providers - Formal engagement due to Government Policies*

Government policies and initiatives have encouraged new providers to engage formally with the NFQ. Such policies include the One-Step-Up programme which ensures that small to medium size enterprises are eligible for 70% of costs from FÁS provided the programme of study leads to an award which exists on the NFQ. Other initiatives include the tax relief scheme for learners. Programmes recognised by the national framework ensure that learners are eligible for the tuition fees tax relief scheme, as administered by the Revenue Commissioners. Both of these factors have contributed to the number of providers approaching HETAC for programme recognition. Professional bodies are also included in this category as the perception is that a place on the NFQ provides a competitive edge for all providers of knowledge, skill and competence.

New providers approaching HETAC for the first time tend to have less developed understanding of its policies and the approach to framework implementation. In particular, the categories of awards less well understood include the Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental awards.

### *Knowledge in Context of Programme Development and Quality Assurance Improvement*

Knowledge and understanding in the 'traditional' sense also arises in the context of programme development and accreditation. Anecdotal evidence arising during the course of programme validation visits confirms the value of the NFQ from a number of perspectives, including programme development in addition to communicating the programme outcomes to stakeholders such as learners and employers. However, more concrete evidence comes through the quality of the programme submissions being received by HETAC. These indicate that core concepts such as learning outcomes, award-types and descriptors, as well as developed institutional policies on access, transfer and progression are developed and understood within the sector. The continuous review of quality assurance procedures required to facilitate further implementation of framework policies also indicates a deeper understanding of the framework. For example, policies and procedures on the Recognition of Prior Learning confirm this approach.

The development of links with business and industry through collaborative design and development of programmes in particular work based learning initiatives, special purpose awards and even joint awards indicates that the sector is well disposed to avail of the many advantages of the NFQ.

### *Sectoral Reviews*

A recent Institute of Technology Ireland Report "*Developing and Mobilising Talent and Management Capacity to Exploit Future Opportunities* – acknowledges the impact of the NFQ on the learning patterns of students. This report noted that:

*“The provision of higher education is changing. This is largely driven by the Bologna Process, the National Framework of Qualifications and an increasing emphasis on learner focus and learning outcomes.”*

This is reflective of the wider shift within higher education from the ‘teaching/ input’ model to the ‘learning/ output model’. The national framework is also a constant source of reference and cited as a key instrument which will assist the sector to respond to wider policy initiatives, including skills strategies, Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation.

The knowledge understanding and practical legitimacy of the NFQ has been strengthened by wider usage and reference in the policies developed by Government Agencies.

#### ***Ipsos MORI Survey***

However, in late 2007, HETAC commissioned Ipsos MORI to assess the awareness and understanding of a range of stakeholders, inter alia, the NFQ. Of the employers surveyed, 47% claimed to have known about the NFQ to some extent, but only 3% knew about the NFQ spontaneously. When viewed in the context of company profile, only 28% of SMEs had heard of the NFQ compared with 47% of the top 1000 companies. A similar question was also asked of learners. In this instance, 25% had heard of the NFQ, but only 4% of these were aware of it spontaneously.

#### ***Sectoral Report Survey***

The Sectoral Report survey also confirms the increased knowledge of the NFQ and its core principles amongst the academic community. But, the responses also support the outcome of the MORI survey. However, many felt that the understanding and awareness amongst employers is weak and that they rely on the traditional model of higher education qualifications, or indeed, their own experiences and qualifications, in evaluating graduate and prospective employee’s qualifications.

It is also HETAC’s experience that the NFQ tends to be associated exclusively with major awards, and that there is little knowledge (*particularly amongst providers and employers*) of the other award types such as minor and special purpose. HETAC, reflecting its lead role in this area, has undertaken a series of workshops with existing providers and it is hopeful that this will improve developments in this specific area of minor and special purpose awards.

#### ***Conclusion***

In terms of expectations of the NFQ, its promise for the recognition of all learning achievement is a laudable and admirable objective. However this objective is sometimes interpreted by providers and learners alike outside the reality of the policy framework of the awards council or the framework itself. In addition some of the general statements articulated in the NQAI policy documents on Access, Transfer and Progression are all-embracing and as such, may be taken for granted by learners and new providers. However, these generic statements contain a contradiction of the policies in place and are in stark contrast to the NFQ articulation due to:

1. A lack of matching on learning outcomes from one level to the next.
2. A lack of prerequisite requirements for progression from one type of award to the next.

Simply, while cumulative learning is required to progress from one level to the next, the fact is that learning achievement at a particular level does not always encompass the levels below. For example the Higher Diploma Graduate attempting to progress onto a Master degree will not have the underpinning Bachelor Degree.

## CHAPTER 5 IMPLEMENTATION AND OPERATION OF THE FRAMEWORK

### *Overall Priorities concerning the NFQ within the Sector?*

The implementation and operation of the NFQ is governed by a series of priorities, including:

1. Recognition of programmes not currently validated
2. Recognition through the revalidation of programmes against the standards for fields of learning;
3. Recognition of collaborative arrangements and joint awards
4. Review of Quality Assurance Procedures

### *Recognition of Programmes*

The overall priorities within the sector are to gain access to the NFQ in terms of recognition of programmes leading to awards of the framework. Independent providers from a commercial perspective are constantly seeking recognition for programmes leading to minor, special purpose and major awards. Programme recognition has seen a significant increase in validation of continuing professional development programmes as special purpose awards. Public providers of higher education and training programmes are required by the Act to ensure that all programmes provided by them lead to awards on the NFQ. This is achieved through:

1. Validation of their own programmes under delegated authority (IoTs). Special purpose awards are a priority at present for programmes not currently recognised.
2. Validation of programmes by HETAC (following agreement of QA processes). this applies in particular to other public providers;
3. Re-validation of programmes under the remit of the programmatic review process is also a priority. The initial transition process facilitated by HETAC focussed on the programme transfer to the standards of the NFQ;
4. Liaising with industry and providing relevant programmes for continuing professional development; work based learning or specific legislative needs through the flexibility of the new awards structure of the framework; minor and special purpose awards.

### *Collaborative Arrangements and Joint Awards*

The various alignment agreements between the NFQ and those frameworks in other jurisdictions, as well as the significant work on the European Framework for Life-Long Learning and Bologna Framework have provided opportunities for Joint Award agreement through collaborative programmes with international awarding bodies. This applies to both independent and public providers who are eager to have the collaborative arrangements agreed by HETAC, and therefore in accordance with the principles of the NFQ.

### *Institutional Review (and Review of Quality Assurance)*

Significant priority has been focussed on processes and procedures to support research provision. This includes processes which lead to approval and accreditation and encompasses delegated authority which has been carried out by the IoTs under the quality assurance remit. The current priority for the higher education and training sector is the preparation for the first ever reviews of quality assurance procedures under the HETAC Institutional Review process which has already commenced. Provider engagement in the sector is extremely positive and proactive.

### *Other Policy Development*

There are other key areas supported by the NFQ. In this regard, there is now a new emphasis on the development of policies for the recognition of prior learning. This is one of the sub-strands of the framework policies on access transfer and progression that has inconsistent application throughout the sector. The development of best practice in the supporting QA processes for the RPL is also a HETAC priority. Many providers in the sector have used the newly developed concept of embedded standards and exit awards for ab-initio programmes to maximise opportunities for access transfer and progression. This concept is further complemented by the validation of minor awards to provide opportunities for learners to opt out with a view to returning to returning at a later stage.

### ***Sectoral Priorities – HETAC Perspective***

From the HETAC perspective, the initial priorities related to establishing the outline structures of the national framework in collaboration with the many stakeholders including providers, NQAI and FETAC. the priorities included:

1. placing existing awards on the framework
2. the completion of the initial transition of existing programmes to new awards as speedily and smoothly as possible.
3. the establishment of policies to support the framework structures such as the HETAC awards policy; policies on the delegation of authority to make award; the quality assurance agreement process and many more.
4. the publication of standards for fields of learning
5. the recognition of international awards through the NQAI NARIC office and contributions towards the development of the Bologna Framework and European Framework for Life-long Learning.
6. establishing new policies processes and procedures for dealing with new providers and a new category of awards (minor, supplemental and special purpose). In this regard, all special purpose awards were newly established and validated by HETAC
7. Establishing processes and procedures for interacting with IoTs such as the policies and procedures for research accreditation; extension of delegated authority to level 10; joint awards and collaborative programmes.
8. Establishing process and procedures for facilitating the alignment of professional awards.
9. Establishing policy and procedures for the recognition of prior learning for the purpose of gaining a full award.

At present the priorities for the sector centre around further and continuous implementation of the national framework at a more refined level with a more cohesive, relevant fit-for purpose and inclusive approach. the emerging priorities include:

1. the roll-out of the Institutional Review process has commenced. Learning from the output of this review process is a key priority for the sector and HETAC and evolving quality assurance support structures.
2. Publication of the HETAC fair and consistent learner assessment, which incorporate principles, sectoral conventions and guidelines. This policy development is considered a key priority as it is one of the most cohesive policy developments to date in terms of providing further clarity on where all of the dimensions of the framework sit together. Learner assessment is a key support to all other aspects of the NFQ.
3. Focus on the concept of life long learning and bringing industry and business closer to higher education and training.
4. Continuous promotion of the many opportunities available within the policies of the NFQ.
5. Managing the diverse provider relationships and bringing quality assurance and programme validation closer together in the context of new providers. Increasingly, HETAC is being approached by employers and specialist providers looking to develop specialist models provision.

### ***Some Examples of NFQ Implementation Approaches***

The approaches in the sector relate to deepening an understanding of the key aspects of the NFQ, including further development of policies and procedures to support broader implementation of the NFQ.

Some of the main actions here relate to:

1. Institutional review of programme provision. A significant number of institutional reviews that focus on the programme module standards for the fields of learning and new structures and awards to facilitate broader access, flexibility and progression. HETAC is currently facilitating seminars and workshops in preparation for the Institutional Review Process.
2. Training for staff on learning outcomes. A number of providers have commissioned seminars and training to ensure that staff on adopt a consistent approach to writing and assessing **learning outcomes**

3. devising new programme structure and new award types. In this regard, HETAC has facilitated a number of seminars on minor, special purpose and supplemental award types
4. entering into collaborative projects to gain further experience in specific areas requiring further development. Continuous development of quality assurance procedures by providers to support the framework provision on access transfer and progression, including the validation of exit, minor and special purpose awards. Establishing policies and procedures to support the recognition of prior learning incorporating work based learning. Developing Institute wide procedures to support research provision and extending collaborative networks. In the context of research degree programmes the introduction of the framework has helped HETAC to encourage a broadening of the formation given to research students. A working group was established and research carried out by HETAC. This led to a Workshop on Generic Skills in 2006. The generic skills agenda has been taken up by a SIF project entitled 'Research Alliance'. HETAC is also participating in a Strategic Innovation Fund projects designed to facilitate policy development across the higher education sector as a whole.

***What is the extent of implementation of the National Framework in the sector in respect of:***

***Development of Awards System and Awards (Major and other)***

The awards system is established in the sector. All award types have been developed under HETAC policies and where appropriate, under the delegation of authority to make awards to the IoTs. The Council has recently revised the policy relating to the Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental awards category to bring the titling convention into line with the remainder of the higher education sector. To date no supplemental awards have been validated. However some discussions are underway with providers with a view to developing these award types in the future. The Council considered the award-type descriptor for the Higher Doctorate in 2007 established by the authority. The Higher Doctorate is not part of the HETAC system of awards to date as it was not adopted by the Council at that time.

The Council has made five awards under the direct application route based on learner portfolio assessment. Guidelines on the validation, titling and placement of Minor, Special Purpose awards are currently under development to enhance a consistent approach towards implementation of these awards in the sector.

***Different levels of the National Framework***

All levels of the national framework have been developed through the programme accreditation process operated by HETAC. Delegated authority to the IoTs has occurred at all levels from 6 to 10 on the NFQ. Further coordination with FETAC is required at Level 6 as the programme provision for many new providers is recognised at Level 6. Significant implementation has also occurred at level 8 with the Higher Diploma and Level 9 with the postgraduate and master degree links. Issues regarding these are set out below.

***Placement of Former Awards***

The placement of former awards was completed some time ago. This was a significant process for HETAC notwithstanding the consistent approach towards validation of programmes by the predecessor organisation NCEA. Issues that arose at the time included the placement of the NCEA Diploma for Art and Design teachers. This was provisionally placed at level 8 pending the placement of the Higher Diploma by the university sector. The other issue for HETAC at the time was the small number of three year Business Studies programmes validated by NCEA. The typical template for an honours bachelor degree was and is 240 credits or 4 years. This has continued to cause problems as outlined later on.

***Learning Outcomes***

The initial interpretation by providers of learning outcomes was a difficult aspect of implementation and continues to be the key to a real and genuine understanding of the national framework and how all the learning strands (*learning outcomes, levels, ATP, credit and most importantly learner assessment*) work together. Some established providers considered that the long-term use of the learning objectives statements for programmes and subjects (under NCEA/HETAC validation) were sufficient for the initial translation to the new awards

structure when in contrast clear succinct statements of what the learner is required to do was the real task at hand. This interpretation was compounded by a lack of timely planning of support workshops on how to write and interpret learning outcomes, an initiative that should have been taken up by NQAI or HETAC or both. As a result the initial interpretation of learning outcomes was therefore a poor start and some sub-strands on the national framework such as Competence - “learning to learn” and “insight” were often reported by providers as unworkable and used to undermine the general concept.

Programme validations presented to HETAC by the IoT's has recently indicated a reverse of this interpretation as an increasing number of “free choice modules” on the most recent programmes validated referred to as “learning to learn”. In addition, many have engaged experts to deliver workshops on how to write and interpret learning outcomes and, most importantly how to link learning outcomes to effective learner assessment programme strategies.

#### Standard Setting

As previously noted, the standards for broad fields of learning represent an elaboration of the generic descriptors of the NFQ for that specific field, which seek to reconcile the requirements of consistency and simplicity with the traditional understandings of various subject communities and stakeholder groups. The solution has found broad acceptance amongst its stakeholders. Providers (*including those within Universities*) have acknowledged the value of these standards as a means of guiding the articulation of the NFQ for staff involved in programme development.

#### Titles of Awards

HETAC published the approach to titles of awards under the *Policy and Criteria for the Making of Higher Education and Training Awards 2004* following a significant process of consultation with providers and a number of choices in the initial approach. Since the adoption of the initial list of generic titles new generic titles for Music and Architecture have been adopted. The current list of HETAC named award titles is attached in Appendix C.

As previously noted, the titling convention for major awards is a source of constant debate within the sector. Some providers have remarked on the restrictions arising from the titling of HETAC Awards. For example, some providers will treat “Software Development” by reference to the HETAC Business standards which result in a Bachelor of Business degree. Others will use the Science standards (for broadly the same curriculum content) which results in a Bachelor of Science degree. The risk is that such differentiation generates confusion in the mind of employers and the wider public. Linked to this issue, HETAC has recognised the limitations and has provisionally extended the number of titles – Bachelor of Architecture etc. In January 2008, a commitment was also given by HETAC to review this matter. It is intended to engage in a series of consultations on this matter which would seek to achieve a more appropriate balance in this area.

The lack of a national approach to titling of major awards across all higher education and training undermines any approach that HETAC and the associated providers may take. This issue is further elaborated below. HETAC has recently realigned the titling convention for Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental awards to coincide with that agreed by NQAI and the university sector. Programme titles are a matter for a provider and appear on the Europass Diploma Supplement.

#### *Examples of the Major Successes in implementing the NFQ*

Based on the detail cited throughout this report, the major successes can be identified as follows:

1. The openness and transparency that now exists in the sector with the framework as the single entity and point of reference for all higher education and training learners, providers and other stakeholders.
2. A learner centred approach to the provision and recognition of higher education and training is bringing the teaching and learning experience back to the learner.

3. The advanced standing that Ireland enjoys in the European context as a result of the cohesive national framework of qualifications in place and the many successful policies established and implemented to date. The Bologna developments are evidence of the success of the Irish national framework.
4. The collaborative networks that now exist in the sector for all higher education and training providers and policy makers, including the IHEQN and collaborative projects on improving quality assurance in the sector. The parity of esteem factor associated with this aspect is significant.
5. Recognition of the maturity and establishment of the autonomy for the Institutes of Technology through optimum delegated authority and through the support of the framework structures (in particular quality assurance procedures and strategic remit of the various agencies).
6. The structures and policies of the national framework facilitate greater more relevant links with industry and business.
7. The linking into the further education and training sector and work on streamlining the two sectors. While much work remains to be done the opportunities and structures in place are all in place for further elaboration.

### ***Conclusion***

However, such positive expressions must also be balanced with a view expressed by a number of academics who put forward the concept of 'learned helplessness'. Specifically, they advance that the tight implementation of the NFQ within the HETAC community limited the scope for debate of the underpinning pedagogical philosophy and that debate at this stage is now viewed as resistance to change. Such expressions reflect a concern that programme development centred on the articulation of learning outcomes is driven by a compliance mentality (select the correct verb, ticking the 'right boxes' etc) rather than a genuine promotion and generation of new knowledge.

## CHAPTER 6 INFLUENCING FACTORS

### *Introduction*

The NFQ developments coincided with other reforms in higher education – Bologna and Copenhagen Processes, Lisbon Agenda, modularisation and semisterisation. In addition, the legislative requirements for State-aided HEIs to develop strategic plans created a ‘space’ which made it opportune to review the pedagogical aspects of programme construction.

### *Learner Profile*

The changing profile of the learner also contributed to this issue. As noted in the previously referred to IOTI report, life long learning, continuing education and the provision of part-time courses require the development of more flexible mode of delivery. However, the funding model has not fundamentally changed from its emphasis on the ‘traditional, full-time learner’ and therefore, has hampered the full exploitation of programme development for part-time learners. HEIs have responded to varying degrees to these factors. Recent elaborations on minor, supplemental and special purpose awards have also been triggered in response to this. In addition, the promulgation of standards now provided the basis for HEIs to benchmark learning with their peers.

### *Other Challenges*

Other challenges exist in areas previously noted – Level 6, minor and special purpose awards - though with increased experience, providers are coming to terms with their purpose and role. Providers also cited a number of difficulties - some of which were encountered during implementation stage which continue to challenge the sector. These include:

1. inter-changeability of modules between programme at different levels, which also emphasises the need to exercise greater distinction between levels;
2. co-location of difference award types within the same level;
3. Higher Diploma as a route to an Honours Degree in a non-cognate area;
4. relationship with professional awards;

By way of general comment, a number of providers, in addition to the learner representatives, (see detailed contribution from USI elsewhere in report) noted the continued embedded culture amongst parents to continue to regard the Level 8 award in universities as of a different status than the Level 8 award within the Institutes of Technology or other HETAC providers.

### *Conclusion*

However, it is also important to note that this convergence of reform ‘*pressure points*’ are also amongst those factors which may hinder the implementation at HEI level. The time demand to respond to specific initiatives such as the Strategic Innovation Fund leads to prioritisation of certain projects rather than an holistic strategic approach to higher education.

## CHAPTER 7 IMPLEMENTATION STRUCTURES FOR THE FRAMEWORK

### *Introduction*

In any discussion in this section, it is important for a body such as HETAC to strike an appropriate balance between over-prescription and institutional autonomy. Notwithstanding this, HETAC also sees its role as facilitating the promotion of best practice as envisaged by the NFQ. It is central to its role in terms of bringing in new providers and identifying new fields of learning. The clearest representation of HETAC achieving this balance has been the delegation of authority to recognised institutions to make awards. Recognised institutions with delegation of authority have serious responsibilities and are accountable through regular review for meeting those responsibilities. The criteria for this delegation are defined by the Council and agreed with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.

### *Institutional Review*

In addition to the policy mechanisms articulated in other sections, the implementation structure will also feature in the context of the HETAC's recent launched Institutional Review policy. All providers offering HETAC awards are subject to external quality assurance review of their institutions. HETAC will carry out such reviews. In order to minimise the burden on institutions, the terms of reference for institutional reviews will normally incorporate prescribed statutory review functions, particularly those provided for in Section 28(4) (review of the effectiveness of agreed quality assurance procedures) and Section 30 (review of delegation of authority) of the Qualifications Act (1999). Reviews will normally be held on a five year cycle.

In addition to the enhancing public confidence within the sector, institutional review is also intended to capture and confirm the extent that the institution has implemented the NFQ and procedures for access, transfer and progression. The review will consist of six phases,

1. HETAC sets terms of reference following consultation with institution;
2. Self-study by the institution;
3. Visit by expert panel appointed by HETAC and written panel report;
4. Institutional response including implementation plan;
5. Panel report and response published;
6. Follow-up report submitted by the institution.

The review will be based on the European Standards and Guidelines, and will incorporate the features required by statute in respect of review of the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures that the Council has agreed with providers offering HETAC awards. While the review will focus on the traditional elements – policy for QA, appropriateness of assessment methodologies, learning resources etc, the terms of reference will also examine the implementation of the institution's procedures for access, transfer and progression. The institution's research activity, if any, will come within the terms of the review. In the case of recognised institutions, the terms of reference will also include the operation of delegated authority by the institution. The review may also address specific HETAC requirements such as accommodating joint review with other statutory or non-statutory bodies from Ireland or overseas; and integrating institutional review and review of programmes (as required under Section 28(2)) in the case of small, specialised institutions having a single (or few related) programmes.

A key feature of the Institutional Review process is the institution self-study, which emphasises that quality derives from the activity of the institution. External review builds on internal quality assurance processes and any previous institutional reviews. The self-study should be based on broad consultation with internal and external stakeholders of the institution, including especially students. The report should be analytical and succinct with substantiating evidence retained for examination by expert panel. The institution will publish the self-study report.

The evaluation of this and other material will be conducted by an expert panel, appointed by HETAC who will be also responsible for the appointment a chair and a secretary to the panel. The recommendations of the panel will inform any decisions the Council makes on foot of the review. The membership of each panel will include persons reflecting the perspective of learners and of the world of work and persons with senior management experience of higher education and training provision. At least one of the members will be from outside Ireland, bringing an international perspective to the review.

The panel will schedule a visit or visits to the institution. The panel will meet with members of the institution, learners and other stakeholders according to an agenda drawn up by the panel in consultation with the institution. Once this phase is complete, it will prepare a report following the site visit(s) to be submitted to the institution to comment on factual inaccuracies before the final version is drafted. The institution will prepare a response to the report, including a plan with a timeline for the implementation of any changes. The Academic Committee of HETAC will consider the panel report, the institutional response and the views of the HETAC Executive and will make recommendations to Council for adoption. The Council may impose conditions on institutions arising from the review. When considered and adopted by Council the report and response will be published in full on the website of the Council. For the avoidance of doubt, it should be noted that sanctions available to the Council include withdrawal of programme validation or withdrawal of delegated authority. These sanctions would normally arise only in circumstances where serious problems were evident in advance of the review and flagged in the terms of reference. The relevant criteria are set out in the Council's policies on delegation of authority and programme accreditation.

### ***Challenges***

However, it will take some time for evidence of the impact of the NFQ to come though this policy initiative and therefore, we must rely on other sources. As previously noted, evidence of the positive impact of the NFQ emerges through the engagement with stakeholders in consultation processes. Providers noted the increased emphasis on learner's experience which empowered their role within higher education. However, where 'gaps' appear, it is often in the context of programme development and the preparation of learning outcomes. This also emerged at the HETAC/ NQAI/ NUIM conference in January 2007 when comments were made on the need to ensure consistent use of language in learning outcomes and ensuring that these can be subsequently assessed. A variation on this view was also expressed in terms of risks – namely that the expression of learning outcomes may be viewed as an exercise of 'verb' selection and choice, tantamount to 'tick box' selection.

### ***Conclusion***

This possible gap should cause key players – NQAI, HETAC and providers – to reflect on the means to promote best practice in programme development in order to protect the standards articulated in the NFQ. Such areas present an opportunity to further underpin close collaboration between all key stakeholders in higher education. Other areas include:

1. maximising engagement with professional bodies, particularly in the areas of learning outcomes and their alignment with NFQ;
2. increased training for academic staff, in order to strengthen communications. This would also minimise the risk of the 'tick box' mentality in programme development.
3. greater emphasis on access, transfer and progression, again with the aim of promotion of best practice and consistency of decisions;

## CHAPTER 8 KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF AUTHORITY'S POLICIES ON ACCESS, TRANSFER AND PROGRESSION

### *Introduction*

The framework policies on Access, Transfer and Progression (ATP) are embedded in the policies and procedures devised by HETAC in the performance of its functions. This is primarily evidenced by:

1. Providers are obliged to illustrate the explicit achievement of ATP as a key element of programme design and development and subsequent validation by a panel of experts.
2. This is also a requirement of both programmatic review
3. Policies on Access Transfer and Progression will be central to the review of quality assurance procedures under the forthcoming institutional reviews.
4. The sector has facilitated pathways into higher education from further education and training. Common access criteria such as the Links scheme.

### *Extent of knowledge and understanding in the sector of the Authority's policies on ATP*

The knowledge and understanding of the Authority's policies on ATP (incorporating credit and the RPL) was initially limited to the cultural practice within the sector at the time the policies and framework were introduced. It is only through the Institutional accreditation process that HETAC will gain insight into the wider interpretation of the ATP policies in particular as they relate to the newer category of award types - Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental awards.

As mentioned previously, the HETAC transition process was tasked with the responsibility of requesting each provider to sign-off or guarantee that the Authority's policies on ATP were applied to each programme presented for transition onto the new framework awards. This served to highlight the underpinning policy as opposed to demonstrating implementation or effectiveness. Most programmes at that time were mainstream major awards in Business, Science, Engineering and Humanities, the majority of which had tried and tested transfer and progression routes within the sector. The position on entry to programmes was consistently interpreted as a matter for each (established) provider and has largely remained unchanged.

Entry from Level 5 qualifications has improved a small amount evidenced by the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education. The position regarding progression where the NFQ bestowed some rights on the learners to progress from one programme level to the next based solely on the principle of gaining a pass (threshold standard) caused significant consternation within the IoT sector. This policy position was endorsed by HETAC in the only policy statement provided initially on ATP. However many providers retained the old classification thresholds as benchmarks for progression from one award to the next, and indeed, held the view that ATP should only apply to major awards. HETAC acknowledges that practice varies today. The true understanding of ATP will emerge over time through the increased availability of the non-major award category

Much evidence exists that the knowledge and understanding of the role and place of credit as part of the framework ATP policies is not clearly understood despite the promotion of the National Approach to Credit. Some confusion exists as evidenced by the large number of queries to the HETAC office.

The knowledge and understanding of the Recognition of Prior Learning as part of the Authority's ATP policy has not unilaterally adopted by providers but improvements have taken place in recent times due to the external influences at play:

1. The OECD Report on Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning.
2. The Strategic Innovation Fund projects on work based learning and RPL with national policy evolving. The new Strand Two project on the Flexible Learning Environment coordinated by IOTI with all 14 participating IoTs will place further emphasis on this.

3. The direct application process established by HETAC has placed an indirect emphasis on the internal RPL mechanisms available with provider programmes.
4. The HETAC validation process has demonstrated a significant increase in RPL entry, and has advanced standing for learners of the newer providers.

#### ***Understanding of roles and responsibilities for implementation of the various bodies***

The roles and responsibilities for ATP appear to be better understood by the IoTs and the few independent and other providers that have a long association with HETAC and NCEA before.

#### ***Extent of Promotion of Policies in the Sector as Part of NFQ Implementation***

The promotion of policies incorporating ATP policies includes:

1. HETAC policies were promoted through the transition process thereby supporting continued framework development and implementation;
2. All validation and accreditation policies undertaken directly by HETAC from programme (Taught and Research) to Institutional Review focus on the criteria established by the ATP policies which are incorporated into and referenced in the associated HETAC policies.
3. Conditions attached to HETAC validation of programmes are conditional to the requirements of the NFQ policies on ATP being fulfilled
4. ECTS Credit is automatically incorporated into all programme validation including that carried out by IoTs with delegated authority.
5. HETAC supports the implementation of the Europass Diploma Supplement as mandatory for all providers to implement.
6. The RPL for direct awards by HETAC is now established. The management of the assessment process has been delegated to providers in order to create some momentum.
7. HETAC has and is engaged with a significant number of working parties and focus groups in order to establish and promote the policies further including the SIF groups mentioned earlier.
8. The review of QA procedures as part of the forthcoming Institutional Review process will focus on the implementation of the ATP which will provide a new emphasis and an opportunity to gain further insight into the effectiveness of the policies as they operate on the ground.
9. HETAC has established a programme monitoring function recently to monitor the fairness and consistency of all framework and HETAC policy interpretation and implementation.
10. The HETAC policy on Joint Awards and Collaborative programmes are subject to the ATP policies of the framework.
11. Many providers have published policies on RPL based on the national principles and operational guidelines.

#### ***Perception of Policies in the Sector***

The policies are perceived in different ways within the HETAC community of providers. It depends upon the level of provider interaction and relationship HETAC has established with the provider.

Recognised institutions will interpret the ATP policies in the context of their own independence and responsibilities as established under the delegated authority to make awards and the strategic remit of HETAC to pursue its quality assurance monitoring function. As a result, new arrangements which IoTs may develop in the ATP area may not always come to the attention of HETAC until a later stage. For example the phenomenon of embedded standards and exit awards originated in the IOT sector and gained significant momentum prior to interaction with HETAC. This alternative exit route had immediate follow-on implications for other HETAC providers in the context of programme validation and revalidation under programmatic review.

The majority of established independent providers perceive this policy as one which they need to liaise closely with HETAC. Thus, any new ATP arrangements proposed and developed by the IoTs can lead to a perceived lack of national fairness and consistency.

New providers who seek validation and recognition for the first time, are encouraged to seek a high level of approval from HETAC, during the accreditation process and in terms of the monitoring period for follow-up. Attention is focussed on advanced or accelerated entry to a new programme and initial alternative entry to the typical learners including and RPL policies and procedures. The reliance on HETAC is greater and the guidance requested is significant for the initial period of monitoring. It is evident from this engagement that there is little or no policy and understanding of RPL with the exception of exemptions for prior learning. The concept of credit is completely new and old ATP relationships and interpretations may have existed prior to accreditation and may be conflict with the framework ATP policies and legacy award placement or alignment. In this context, the perception of entry is rarely understood as a central element in the overall programme package leading to the award standard.

ECTS credit is used mainly to interpret or estimate the volume of learning associated with a new programme.

### ***Feedback from Providers***

Feedback from providers indicates that awareness of ATP is increasing and driven in part by employers and also by need to respond to the massification of higher education. The issue of increased variation in access and transfer routes to higher education and the fear of inconsistent treatment within the sector is increasing. One contribution noted that the 'non-standard' application is often associated with disadvantage groups when it represented an opportunity for providers to promote lifelong learning. Providers also noted the challenges that arise from the diverse learner body, and the need to ensure that policy in this area was complemented by appropriate resources.

There is evidence of the learner body using the progression paths elaborated within the NFQ. The recent First Destinations Survey of the 2006 graduate cohort confirm this.

Table 1: Present situation of Graduate Cohort

	Level 6 Award	Level 7 Award	Level 8 Award	Level 9 Award	Level 10 Award
Gained Employment	21.6%	36.6%	77.0%	86.9%	100.0%
Further Study or Training	75.9%	57.9%	14.6%	8.2%	0.0%
Seeking Employment	1.6%	3.4%	4.6%	3.3%	0.0%
Not available for employment or study	0.9%	2.2%	3.9%	1.6%	0.0%
Total Number of Respondents	1,273	1,726	2,143	182	14

The main exit point of graduates from the HE system takes place from Level 8 onwards, while 76% and 58% of Levels 6 and 7 graduates will continue onto the next level.

### ***Conclusion***

Contributions from providers reflected a positive disposition to this area, but that the operationalisation of the policy was now taking place within HEIs. Again, the emphasis was on the need to develop a coherent set of guidelines overseen by a resourced unit e.g. an assigned RPL officer etc, within the institution.

## CHAPTER 9 IMPLEMENTATION OF AUTHORITY'S POLICIES ON ACCESS, TRANSFER AND PROGRESSION

### *Overall Priorities regarding ATP*

The overall priorities for access transfer and progression within the sector are to enhance access to higher education and training while ensuring there is a fairness and consistency of application on entry transfer and progression routes.

The operational aspects of recognising prior learning for access and awarding advanced standing to learners is also one which requires fairness and consistency in so far as possible. There is some concern in this context that there is an over emphasis on access in the sector and less emphasis on the potential for transfer and progression. Many programmes have been designed with specific groups in mind and advanced standing based on RPL. However, the consequences for progression for the learners are not always an option where the learner is transferring to an alternative provider. Some examples set out below may illustrate this point:

1. The Higher Diploma major award can become a cul-de-sac for many learners that demonstrated the capacity to take on the programme, perhaps through experiential learning or some other equivalent means. However learners that do not have an honours bachelor degree are often unable to progress on to a Master Degree as providers are reluctant to take them.
2. Another aspect of this award is recognition. Learners are provided with access to the Higher Diploma award which is widely recognised as a teaching Diploma. However the Teaching Council will not recognise the learner due to the fact that the learner has not attained an Honours Bachelor Degree. In both examples there appears to be a misunderstanding between the capacity to participate in and engage with a programme at a particular level and the interpretation of this capacity to proceed. The latter is not considered to be equivalent to a learner having acquired or attained the learning outcomes for the lower level awards (Bachelor degree) in the national framework and recognition is denied.
3. Another example in this category is the Special Purpose Award. It is not reasonable to state that the access, transfer and progression requirements for these awards (specialised by nature) are fully applicable. Despite the many benefits bestowed on the learner by the ATP policies and the generic statements supporting the implementation of the NFQ in practice the implementation may be quite different. A Special Purpose award will have very little transfer or progression as it is quite narrowly focussed with a specific set of learning outcomes. These awards are probably the single most successful (non-major) award-types on the national framework for a variety of reasons one of which extending the recognition of learning achievement. Special purpose awards facilitate recognition for unique learning achievement and bring industry and business closer to education and training in general. However the general ATP expectations of learners appear to be labelling these awards as cul-de-sac awards that will receive no more recognition for further study. There may be a case for separating these awards out for special promotion and inclusion outside the very open statements supporting the promotion of the national framework.

### *Transfer and Progression Based upon Matching Learning Outcomes*

The primary consideration for implementation of transfer and progression in the sector is the matching of learning outcomes and the cognate match of those learning outcomes from one programme to the programme on the next level. The credit associated with the learning outcomes does not add a significant amount of clarity to progression or transfer apart from an indicative estimate of the amount of learning involved. The matching of learning outcomes applies to all major and other award-types. This concept needs to be contextualised or explored further in contrast to the broad generic ATP policy statements which support the implementation of the NFQ going forward.

The policies actions and procedures for the facilitation of ATP is a very enabling set of policies that have added significant clarity and support to the structure and operation of the NFQ. Many of the issues and gaps highlighted are down to misinterpretation and a lack of guidance on interpretation. However not all of the enabling statements are applicable in many different contexts.

### ***Summary Comments on Implementation of ATP in the Sector***

Some additional elaboration on the extent of implementation in the sector for the topics is detailed below. However, it is important to note that the comment relates to operational experience and no research has been carried out by HETAC to date on these headings with the exception of named reports and surveys.

#### **Access and Entry**

1. There appears to be a genuine attempt by providers to open up access and entry to a variety of learners.
2. There is an increase in the allocation of exemptions to learners (cited under RPL) based on more programmes receiving recognition and the ability to match learning outcomes.
3. The commercial aspect towards widening access and lowering entry requirements can sometimes dominate the academic arguments and capacity to participate in a programme.
4. Access and entry can sometimes undermine transfer and progression for the learner as a graduate

#### **Transfer Arrangements**

1. Transfer arrangements are somewhat elusive and less well understood. Generally transfer is interpreted as learners moving from one award at a particular level over to a higher level ab-initio programme/award. For example transfer from a Higher Certificate to year three of a 4 year honours bachelor degree programme.
2. Transfer arrangements vary depending upon the provider. Some learners may gain access to year three of a three year honours bachelor degree. This has led to considerable unrest within the sector. The duration of the honours bachelor degree is a real issue that requires consideration within the sector of higher education and training sector.
3. Transfer arrangements are not generally available to the alternative award-type categories such as special purpose awards.

#### **Progression**

1. The HETAC policy on progression is based upon the principle of learners attaining an award and progressing to the next level.
2. Providers operate internal progression thresholds the majority of which are based upon the award classification system where places are limited.

#### **Credit Accumulation and Transfer**

1. Credit is a useful tool for the HETAC programme accreditation process. The National Approach to Credit has helped place credit on a national footing as an NFQ support.
2. Credit is embedded in all higher education and training programmes validated by HETAC including the Minor and Special Purpose awards. No supplemental awards have been made to date.
3. The level of understanding of the credit concepts and how they relate to learning outcomes and programme design is low among new providers. Credit and credit level can become the misguided focus of priority.
4. There is significant confusion on the place and role of credit in contrast to the place and role of learning outcomes with the more established providers. For example, there is a perception that all 240 credits of a level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree are also all at level 8. This perception gained momentum as the national approach to credit extended to all providers in higher education and training.
5. There is a growing tendency to use half credits as more programmes become standardised units of learning effort. This may complicate transfer of credits and accumulation.
6. There is no information available on how the typical learning effort for a learner is determined and the programme units/modules standardised as a result.

*Recognition of Prior Learning*

1. The National Principles and Operational Guidelines on the Recognition of Prior learning was a significant step in promoting and highlighting the benefits of RPL in the context of Access transfer and progression.
2. Advanced standing for learners can sometimes undermine progression to the next level on the NFQ. Further work on streamlining of ATP policies is required.
3. New providers in the sector associate RPL exclusively with prior certified learning and exemptions granted.
4. HETAC is working closely with the collaborative SIF projects are developing awareness and enabling capacities on the ground for providers. Practical guidance and sharing effective practice is valued above all else in the context of facilitating RPL in the sector.
5. Training and staff development is a significant feature of success for RPL. Some established providers are validating continuing professional development programmes (minor and special purpose awards) to support initiatives in RPL
6. Some of the most established providers have almost no processes in place for the recognition of experiential learning.
7. Assessment is key to supporting the implementation of wider activity in this area. The HETAC learner Assessment Procedures will provide significant support for the assessment of all learning achievement and recreate the vital links back to quality assurance and the standards of the national framework.

***Conclusion***

HETAC continues to support implementation and promote the Authority's policies on ATP. It is envisaged that the sector-wide Institutional Review Process will provide more insight into the effectiveness of the implementation of these policies and the approaches required for the future.

## CHAPTER 10 RECOGNITION OF INTERNATIONAL AWARDS

### *Introduction*

The alignment of the NFQ with the Bologna Framework will increase the understanding of international HEIs of the structure of Irish qualifications, and as such, this will enhance the capacity of Irish HEIs to respond to the international awards. A similar move in respect of the alignment with the European Qualifications Framework for Life Long Learning will reinforce the international standing of the Irish NQF. Providers noted that the NFQ assisted the inward group though there was a gradual increase of Irish students to ERASMUS partner institutions. However, while the NFQ assisted in the top level decision, it was still necessary for each HEI to evaluate international awards on an individual basis. HETAC activity, in an international context occurs in a number of areas – joint awards and alignment of awards.

### *Joint Awards*

Joint accreditation of a programme by HETAC will normally result in the production and issue of an Order of Council and a Certificate of Programme Accreditation, which will stipulate, amongst other things, the Programme Title, the Award Title(s) and the dates of the first and last student intakes. The Order of Council will also include such conditions as HETAC thinks fit, which shall include but not necessarily be limited to, those conditions specified under Section 25(5) of the Qualifications Act. The conditions specified under Section 25(5) require the provider to:

1. co-operate with and assist HETAC, and the NQAI where appropriate, in the performance of their functions;
2. establish procedures for the assessment of learners which are fair and consistent and for the purpose of compliance with standards determined by HETAC;
3. implement the procedures for access, transfer and progression determined by the NQAI, and
4. provide such information as HETAC may from time to time require for the purposes of the performance of its functions, including information in respect of completion rates.

It is also worth noting that HETAC has a number of Joint Awards with HEIs in the UK and Germany, and the NFQ has been particularly useful in facilitating this activity.

### *Alignment with, or Inclusion in the Framework of the Awards of Certain Awarding Bodies*

HETAC's interface with international awards also takes place in the context of the alignment of non-statutory awards with the NFQ. They recognise, in a formal way, the attainment by learners of learning outcomes associated with the legal regulation of the operation of the profession, or the professional title. A professional body may choose to submit its programmes for validation to one of the awards councils or another State awarding body. Many professional bodies accredit qualifications offered by others. Alignment is only possible, or necessary, where the learning outcomes are not already reflected in a Framework award, i.e. there is no parallel Framework award. The Policies and Criteria in relation to the above provide for the alignment of the awards of certain professional bodies with the Framework. These awards are divided into three broad categories:

1. awards of Irish bodies which make awards on a statutory basis, where the awards are not in the Framework and where the awards cannot be withdrawn;
2. awards of Irish bodies which do not make awards on a statutory basis but which recognise the attainment by learners of learning outcomes associated with the legal regulation of the operation of a profession, or of a professional title by such bodies;
3. awards of certain bodies from outside the State which make awards in Ireland.

A number of applications for alignment under Category B have been made to date. Two of these have been successfully concluded and the respective learning outcomes are aligned to the Framework at a level and not to an award-type. Both alignments are in respect of professional accountancy qualifications. These alignment

processes and discussions with applicant bodies and potential applicant bodies have given rise to the following issues:

1. the difficulty of aligning awards of professional bodies to existing award-types, which are substantially different from those of professional bodies (in purpose, size etc.). Application for alignment at level 9 has given rise to significant debate in relation to the nature of the Master award (particular the research Masters);
2. alignment to level can give rise to confusion and does not necessarily meet the needs of the relevant learners in respect of ATP or perhaps qualification for salary based on specific award-types;
3. the professional award and not the component parts have been aligned; this has given rise to queries in relation to the level etc of component parts in respect of ATP, qualification for grants; level and size of minor awards etc;
4. the meaning/purpose/ usefulness of the process in the absence of credit weighting etc. Assignment of credit has been given substantial consideration by each expert panel, but no progress has been made in this regard;
5. there is an assumption that all applications for alignment of related professional awards will result in the same alignment level; the potential consequences arising if this does not happen perhaps requires further serious consideration as the consequences of a range of results will potentially have significant consequences for the applicant bodies. The approach of light-touch versus rigorous should be discussed in terms of the purpose of such alignments.

Two main alignment processes have occurred under category C. These are

1. the alignment of specified awards of the Open University. These are awards offered in this jurisdiction. All of the awards aligned are quality assured by QAA; they are mainstream higher education awards and therefore alignment to award-types was possible. Credit is also specified. The outcome of the alignment exercise is clear and doesn't lead to any confusion in terms of ATP etc.
2. the alignment of the awards of a range of UK awarding bodies under an 18 month Pilot Project intended to test the QA of the specified programmes. Many of the awards/programmes in question are further education rather than higher education programmes. Those which relate to higher education have been aligned at a level, rather than to an award-type. Many of the programmes are small in volume, use nomenclature which is contrary to HETAC policy etc, therefore there is potential for the results of this exercise to give rise to a range of issues as yet to be identified.

In the early stages of the development of these policies, it was anticipated that the inclusion of awards in the Framework, and alignment of awards to the Framework would have a positive impact on the relevant awards – in terms of funding, tax relief, internationalisation register. More progress needs to be made in this regard.

The Qualifications Authority will be informed of decisions made in relation to the alignment with the Framework of the learning outcomes of awards of applicant bodies which are assessed under this policy.

### ***Conclusion***

In addition to these specific activities, HETAC also plays a strong supporting role to the Irish NARIC in the recognition and assessment of international awards.

## **CHAPTER 11 IMPACT OF THE FRAMEWORK AND RELATED POLICIES ON ACCESS, TRANSFER AND PROGRESSION**

At the level of the Award Body, the overall impact of the NFQ in the areas identified has been positive, reflecting HETAC's desire to promote a learner-centred culture amongst its providers. However, this would not be possible without the professionalism of the academic community.

A key message from providers noted a positive impact, but that the realisation of the full benefits of the NFQ would take some time to emerge. It afforded the opportunity for learners to take responsibility for their learning, though the failure to link in a substantial manner the assessment process and learning outcomes had a negative impact on this process. Submissions made as part of the SRS noted that employer engagement remains tardy.

As previously noted, HETAC will continue to support implementation and promote the Authority's policies. Further evidence of the NFQ's impact will emerge in the context of the sector-wide Institutional Review Process. This will allow the sector to learn and provide more insight into the effectiveness of the implementation of these policies and the approaches required for the future.

## CHAPTER 12 STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

This material is based on a meeting organised in May 2008 between the USI (Education Officers from a number of Universities and IoTs) and the representatives of HETAC and the IUA. While the exchange was 'free flowing', the observations were gathered under the headings for convenience.

### Awareness of NFQ

The USI representatives were agreed that awareness was high in the context of the learner's entry into higher education. This was underpinned by the CAO application procedure as well as the information provided by career guidance teachers in post-primary schools. However, once the learner was in the system, the USI are 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 the student life – timely completion of assessments, preparation for terminal examinations etc. The question of whether the learning outcomes (LOs) are achieved by assessment methodologies does not surface.

It was also stated that the influence of parents remained a critical element in children's choice of programme. Parents identified with their own higher education experiences and as such, contributed to the perception that a 'university degree' was worth more than a degree from an IoT or another provider. Such perceptions ignored the reality of the NFQ levels, and in fact, perpetuated the notion that IoTs were feeder institutions for universities.

It was also noted that each institution will seek to market their programmes as 'slightly' different, and in so doing, the appropriateness of the LOs and their level become irrelevant.

Some discussion took place on the learner role within the Academic Council of the HEI. Learners considered that other business pushed out any opportunity for meaningful discussions on the NFQ. In this regard, they did not consider this to be an appropriate forum to promote the framework or advance the positive elements within the HEI.

### Learning Outcomes (LOs) etc

The USI representatives expressed the view that there was no appreciation of the significance of LOs, 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 semesterisation 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 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, they 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.

### Access, Transfer and Progression (ATP)

The history of ATP was embedded within the IoT sector, and as such, the impact of the 'ladder' system shaped programme development within that sector. However, it was the USI opinion that such a culture did not exist in the university sector – a learner completed their 4 years and that was that. In the event of failing to complete the 4 years, s/he were compensated with the award of a lesser three year degree.

In addition, the USI are aware of a case where a learner with a FETAC award was denied access to a 'natural' progression route in higher education. He was requested to undertake a Leaving Certificate examination and once this was complete, the learner was accepted.

Overall, their view was that ATP was at best 'patchy'.

### ECTS

The question of ECTS is becoming more contentious for learners. In their opinion, the distribution of ECTS varies from module to module and the time associated with a credit bears little resemblance to the recommended guidelines in this area. It was also their view that it is necessary to assign proper weighting to continuous assessments. Again, practice varied within institutions and faculties.

This variance also surfaced in the context of continuous assignments with the observation that appropriate weighting should be allocated to them.

### International Context

Learner reported no issues with the NFQ in an international context. From their experiences, such arrangements are addressed in the context of learning agreements which ensures compatibility of outcomes between partners.

### Pressure for Change

The USI welcomed the NFQ and the clarity it brings to programmes. In their offices, they use the promotional material to advise their constituency. However, they would like more support in communicating the benefits on the NFQ. It had given rise to a new language with very specific meanings – learning outcomes, competences, know-how etc and it was important to have a shared understanding of these.

It was put to the learner representatives that they were a source of change with each HEI, and that pressure from them could assist in further embedding the culture and philosophy of NFQ. Whilst they acknowledged their role, it was their view that this was not possible in the absence of information. However, they were also of the view that the NFQ would only truly impact on education when evidence of its support emerges from the centre. This would require a 'top-down' approach, with agencies such as the NQAI taking a strong leading role.

## CHAPTER 12 CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding some negative comments within the academic community, the overall, contribution of the NFQ has been positive. Increasingly, it is becoming embedded within the education and training context in Ireland. As noted throughout the report, this is evidenced through:

1. programme development and accreditation;
2. integration with other innovative process currently on-going in the sector – Strategic Innovation Fund, semisterisation, modularisation etc;
3. citations in various recruitment campaigns;
4. references in the CAO process, which most HETAC providers use to determine applications;
5. the determination of financial compliance/ incentives within a public sector context e.g. eligibility for FÁS funding for courses, tax refunds on fees etc;
6. underpinning legislative initiatives for professional regulation etc;
7. reference in the context of promotional literature across the complete spectrum of the HETAC provider community;

However, it is important to recognise that the NFQ and its further strengthening is on-going, and many of negative comments reflect provider's deeper engagement with the NFQ which raises certain issues. HETAC has found this the completion of this Sectoral Report productive. There are key messages for HETAC, including:

1. Communications with employers and parents on the NFQ;
2. Engagement with academic community – promotion of best practice in terms of the development of Learning Outcomes etc;
3. Bring the HETAC review of Learner Assessment to a conclusion. This intensive process seeks to strengthen the link between learning outcomes and assessment;
4. Press ahead with review of titling conventions within a national context;
5. Engage on tri-partite basis for review of co-existence of Level 6 awards;

As noted at the start of the report, HETAC noted one of the key achievements of the NFQ was to promote parity of esteem throughout the higher education and training sector. HETAC looks forward to continuing in this vein, in collaboration with all higher education stakeholders, into the future.