

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

Report on Work

2008 | 2009



Údarás Náisiúnta
Cáilíochtaí na hÉireann
National Qualifications
Authority of Ireland



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Chairperson's Foreword

This is the fourth biennial report to be published by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland since its establishment in 2001. It contains an overview of the work of the Authority over 2008 and 2009, much of which has been undertaken in partnership with national stakeholders across the education and training system. The fruitful nature of this partnership has ensured that substantial progress has been made in deepening the implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) across the different sectors of education and training. The NFQ brings greater clarity and transparency to the qualifications system for the benefit of Irish citizens and other stakeholders; and is a key instrument in building and promoting a truly lifelong learning culture in Ireland that supports active citizenship and social and economic development.

2008 and 2009 were difficult years for many organisations, both in the public and private sectors, as a result of the economic downturn and consequent financial pressures. Notwithstanding the constraints on funding and the moratorium on recruitment in the public service, the Authority maintained operations within these constraints and delivered on the organisation's objectives for the period. The majority of the action lines for 2008 and 2009, as set out in the Authority's Business Plans (2008-09 and 2009-10), were achieved. Notable highlights included the full integration into the Authority of QualifaX; the referencing of the NFQ to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) - Ireland was the first EU member state to complete this process; the inclusion of the non-major certificate and diploma awards of the universities in the NFQ; and the referencing of the NFQ in national statistics.

The Authority also responded to other key challenges, including making a full contribution to the initial work undertaken on the implementation of the Government's decision to establish a new, amalgamated qualifications and quality assurance body. The new body will assume the existing functions of the Authority and the awards Councils, and the external quality review role of the universities. The Authority participated in, and contributed to the outputs of the Implementation Advisory Group, which was established by the Department of Education and Science to advise it on high level matters pertaining to the functions, board composition, strategic planning, reporting arrangements and the name of the new body. In this context, too, the Authority has also been given a new role in relation to the regulation of international education programmes, as part of a broader policy initiative to establish a Quality Mark for English language schools and further and higher education colleges. The Quality Mark will be overseen in due course by the new qualifications and quality assurance body but, in the interim, the Authority will take on the responsibility of administering the existing Internationalisation Register, and for overseeing the Advisory Council for English Language Schools (ACELS), beginning in 2010. Significant preparatory work to facilitate the transfer of these functions to the Authority was undertaken in 2009.

The extent of achievement of the work plan during 2008 and 2009, and the positive response to the changing operational environment was due, in large measure, to the continued strong commitment of staff across the organisation, and the continued positive engagement of the Authority's stakeholders with its work. The Authority looks forward to this positive engagement continuing in the period leading up to the establishment of the amalgamated qualifications and quality assurance body.

Paul Haran
Chairperson

Introduction

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland was established on 26 February 2001 under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999.

The arrangements for membership of the Authority are set out in the Act and provide for a broad basis of background and expertise. The current members of the Authority are listed in appendix 1. The Authority currently has 27 members of staff. These are listed in appendix 2 and the Authority's organisation chart is set out in appendix 3.

The mission of the Authority is to lead the implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications. In particular, the Authority is focussed on achieving:

- the widespread use of learning outcomes in the development of qualifications
- the operation of effective pathways between qualifications in the Framework
- the recognition of international qualifications in Ireland, and the recognition of Framework qualifications internationally.

All of this is being done in partnership with awarding bodies and education and training providers, and with other key stakeholders. The Authority is endeavouring to ensure the quality and effectiveness of the National Framework of Qualifications and that it benefits learners, the economy and society.

Reporting Arrangements

In February 2008, the Authority adopted a five-year Strategic Plan (2008-2012) and a two-year Business Plan (2008-2009). These set out the strategic goals, and the objectives and key actions to be taken in the initial two-year timeframe. In March 2009, the Authority adopted an updated Business Plan to cover the next two year cycle within the Strategic Planning period, i.e. 2009-2010. The Strategic and Business Plans are available on the Authority's website at: http://www.nqai.ie/about_corporate.html.

The Authority executive monitors and reports on progress in achieving the Authority's strategic goals and the implementation of the related Business Plans, in line with the overall arrangements agreed in 2008. As part of this process, an annual report on the Business Plan is presented to the Authority at its first meeting of each year. Two such reports, within the current strategic planning cycle, have been presented to the Authority to date, and are published on the Authority's website at: http://www.nqai.ie/about_corporate.html

The Authority is required under section 59 of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 to prepare a report on its activities at least every two years. This document is the fourth two-yearly report on the Authority's work. It covers the period 2008-9 and brings together the published 2008 and 2009 annual reports on the Authority's Business Plan in a single document.

The following sections of this report highlight the major areas of work undertaken during 2008 and 2009, and which are expected to have the greatest impact on the achievement of the Authority's six strategic goals. These sections also report on performance indicators for each goal in line with those identified in the Authority's Strategic Plan. Although the indicators refer to performance over the five-year period, achievements in relation to 2008 and 2009 are reported where possible. Changes in the operational environment of the Authority during 2008 and 2009 which have impacted on its work are also noted.

Strategic Goals

The Authority's six strategic goals are that:

1. The National Framework of Qualifications is widely known, understood, used and valued in society
2. The National Framework of Qualifications is more deeply implemented in a way that is open and responsive to the needs of the learner, society and the economy
3. Effective and integrated pathways between qualifications operate throughout the National Framework of Qualifications
4. All Framework qualifications are quality assured to the highest international standards
5. Framework qualifications are fully recognised abroad and qualifications gained outside Ireland are appropriately recognised in Ireland
6. The Authority, in tandem with FETAC and HETAC, are high quality, effective and efficient state agencies.

Strategic Goal 1

The National Framework of Qualifications is widely known, understood, used and valued in society

The main achievements during 2008 and 2009 were in relation to communications, and in referencing the NFQ in national statistics and in key information sources of education and training providers.

Communications

In 2008, a joint approach to communications amongst the Authority and the awards Councils was put in place. A joint approach was considered to be more effective and efficient and was in line with government policy on shared services. As part of this approach, the Authority, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Further Education and Training Awards Council undertook a joint marketing campaign. This involved television advertising aimed at increasing awareness of the NFQ and of the awarding bodies. The resulting marketing materials were also used in the promotion of the NFQ at the Higher Options event, the Ploughing Championships and the FÁS Opportunities Fair, and in related press coverage.

In relation to awareness and use of the NFQ in employment/recruitment, the Authority's work focused largely on the public sector in 2008. It was anticipated that the use of the Framework by the Public Appointments Service (PAS) would, over time, impact on a major area of employment and could offer a lead to other areas. The work undertaken by the Authority in this area has included awareness raising within the PAS and Department of Finance; teasing out the implications of the use of the Framework in relation to setting job requirements and in identifying where the responsibility for decision-making lies in relation to acceptance of a broader range of qualifications for selection/recruitment. It has also focussed on the Authority's role in processing applications and/or giving advice on qualifications matters in particular public sector recruitment campaigns. Guidelines for mainstreaming the use of the Framework in public sector recruitment were agreed with PAS. Discussions have also been initiated with the Department of Finance with a view to disseminating the agreed approach more widely across the public sector.

The use of the NFQ levels to classify course choices in the Central Applications Office Handbook has been of significant benefit in promoting public awareness of the NFQ. In 2009, a revised description of the NFQ was agreed with the CAO and included in the 2010 CAO Handbook. Another key action was the inclusion of a Framework insert in a mail-shot to all CAO applicants in July 2009.

Following the successful integration of QualifaX into the Qualifications Authority in 2008 – which was confirmed in the outcome of an independent audit by Price Waterhouse Cooper undertaken in 2009 at the request of the Authority's Internal Audit Committee – further work was undertaken to utilise QualifaX, the National Learners' Database, as a tool for providing accurate information on the NFQ to the wider public. Specifically, in the updating of course information in the database, provision is made for the correct referencing of programmes, and the awards to which they lead, with the NFQ. An increased understanding has taken place amongst all staff of the benefit of QualifaX in this regard. In the case of the ongoing work on the inclusion of university awards in 2008-9, staff involved in the implementation of the Framework and the maintenance of QualifaX kept in close contact to ensure that information on award levels was communicated to the public as soon as it became available.

Significant work was also undertaken in 2009 on the redesign of the QualifaX and NFQ websites to make all information contained therein more accessible to the end user. Increasingly, too, other public sector organisations have been taking data feeds from QualifaX, which will enhance its utility as a communication tool for the NFQ.

Finally, a substantial communications campaign was initiated in 2009 to fulfil the Authority's responsibilities as the National Coordination Point for the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. In this capacity, the Authority is responsible for providing information and guidance on the EQF generally, the referencing of the NFQ to the EQF and the comparison and use of qualifications at European level.

Referencing the Framework in national statistics

Following engagement between the Authority, the Statistics Unit in the Department of Education and Science and the Central Statistics Office, the Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) now carries a revised education question that allows responses to be mapped to the NFQ. The first responses to the new question were collected from April 2009. The availability of national data on education and training attainment by NFQ levels will assist the Authority, its successor body, and other stakeholders, in undertaking future evaluations of these awards and award holders from a number of different perspectives, including the social and the economic.

Another key action in this area was the proposal by the Authority and the Department of Education and Science of a new education and training question for use in Census 2011. The question was piloted by the Central Statistics Office in 2009 and, following an analysis of data comparability with the education results of the 2006 Census, the proposal was adopted.

Finally, in response to a specific recommendation arising from the Framework Implementation and Impact Study (see SG 2 below) in relation to existing data gaps, both qualitative and quantitative, on the availability and use of pathways and their outcomes for learners, the Authority is supporting the Leaving School in Ireland programme of research which is being led by the Economic and Social Research Institute. The first study to be conducted under this programme of research will involve a major project on the post-school experiences of the cohort of young people who took part in the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study. The NFQ is being used as the classification system to capture education and training pathways for this study. The work will be guided by a Steering Group, made up of representatives of a number of education policy organisations including the Authority, HETAC and FETAC.

Referencing the Framework in key information sources of education and training providers

In response to inconsistent practice of NFQ referencing by providers of education and training, the Authority executive commenced the development of support guides to assist providers in referencing the NFQ appropriately. The first of these guides was published in March 2009 and provides advice and examples to Higher Education and Training providers on how to reference NFQ detail, including award-type, awarding body, NFQ level, credit, and access, transfer and progression (ATP) opportunities.

The Authority also provided support to FETAC in the publication of guidelines for registered providers on the provision of information for learners. These guidelines include key NFQ referencing requirements that will promote consistency in the provision of Framework information to learners.

SG 1 Performance Indicators

- Face-to-face market survey (Millward Brown) of 1000 adults (2008) demonstrated that 32% of all adults surveyed had heard of the Framework. Awareness levels were highest amongst students (48%) and those who had recently completed an education/training course. The fan diagram was seen by 25% of those surveyed. Awareness was higher in particular regions (Dublin and Connaught/Ulster at 42% and 43% respectively). Awareness of FETAC was at 61% and that of HETAC at 41% of respondents
- This survey compares with one (by Lansdowne Market Research) carried out in 2006, following a radio and press advertising campaign by the Authority. At that time, awareness of the Framework stood at 18% of those surveyed. Awareness levels were highest amongst those from higher socio-economic backgrounds (as was reported in the 2008 survey)
- Amendments to the DES register of courses from which non-national students may get limited work visas were made in 2008 to achieve NFQ compliance
- It was reported at the May 2008 annual Skillnets conference that 35% of the training it provided was linked to the Framework
- Agreement of CAO to include revised NFQ description in 2010 CAO Handbook
- Distribution of NFQ information 'postcards' to 73,000 CAO applicants (2009 cohort)
- 25.6% increase in 2009 in number of unique visitors to redesigned QualifaX website compared to previous year (unique visitors in 2008 amounted to 344,584 and increased to 432,969 in 2009)
- Visitors to redesigned QualifaX website spending an average of 6 minutes on site (40% reduction on previous year)
- 67% increase in 2009 in number of unique visitors to redesigned NFQ website compared to previous year (unique visitors in 2008 amounted to 35,318 and increased to 58,951 in 2009)
- Two EQF bulletins were distributed to all contacts, in March and June : positive feedback was received from the European Commission, who asked to circulate it more widely; from the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership, who contacted the Authority to use as it as a model for similar activity; and from Athlone Institute of Technology who committed to distribute it further
- EQF seminar was held on 20 April 2009 for national stakeholders – 63 participants attended
- A second seminar was organised jointly with the European Commission on 17 September 2009. Almost 100 participants attended, including 18 members of the EQF Advisory Group
- A new EQF webpage was published and regularly updated; and an EQF presentation was produced for use in briefing sessions – both have received positive feedback from stakeholders
- Agreement of CSO to include NFQ referenced education and training questions in QNHS and Census 2011

Strategic Goal 2

The National Framework of Qualifications is more deeply implemented in a way that is open and responsive to the needs of the learner, society and the economy

The main achievements during 2008 and 2009 were the inclusion of university awards in the NFQ, publication of the Framework Implementation and Impact Study, the completion of the first cycle of work by the university sector Framework Implementation Network and progress on alignment of international awards with the NFQ.

Inclusion of University awards in the NFQ and wider higher education issues

A major area of work during 2008 and 2009 was in relation to university engagement with the NFQ. The executive worked intensively with the universities to include their non-major awards in the Framework and to deepen NFQ implementation across the sector in the long-term.

In a first strand of work, each of the seven universities worked to identify and verify the level and award-type of their non-major awards, articulate learning outcomes and to ascribe credit and apply naming conventions. In June 2008, they provided individual listings of these awards, via the Irish Universities Association (IUA), to the Authority. These showed that, even though substantial gaps remained, the universities had assigned credit and a Framework level to the majority of their awards. The lists contain differences in credit ranges and naming conventions for awards. Work continued with the universities on the completion of these lists during 2009, as well as with the National University of Ireland in relation to awards made via the colleges that it recognises. In 2009, agreement was reached with the National University of Ireland for the inclusion of major diploma awards (Higher Diploma and Postgraduate Diplomas at Levels 8 and 9), and certain non-major awards (minor and special purpose) made by the NUI in the five colleges it recognises: the Institute of Public Administration (IPA); the National College of Art and Design (NCAD); the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI); Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy and Shannon College of Management. It is noted that this work, critical to the full implementation of the Framework in the universities, has taken much time to complete and is largely dependent on the continued engagement of the universities.

Beyond this, the executive has worked to achieve consistency and effective coordination between the NFQ and other areas of higher education policy and practice. It worked with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to link the activities of the Bologna experts programme with those of the Framework Implementation Network and the Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN). This included joint organisation of Bologna programme events, including, for example, a seminar on the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area (June 2008). The links between the NFQ and the Bologna framework are also promoted in these networks.

The Authority executive continued to act as joint secretary to the IHEQN during 2008 and 2009. The network met seven times over the two years. Its main areas of work were: follow up to quality improvement recommendations from quality reviews (Common Principles published December 2009); student involvement in quality review (Common Principles published December 2009); the code of practice and guidelines for Irish higher education institutions in relation to the provision of education to international students (Code of Practice and Guidelines published September 2009); and the development of common principles relating to external examining.

University sector Framework Implementation Network

The university sector Framework Implementation Network was jointly established by the Authority and the Irish Universities Association at the end of 2007. The purpose of the network is to deepen the implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) within the university sector, primarily through the exchange of experience and practice between members. The eight Irish universities, and twelve affiliated colleges, are members of the Network. In 2009, the Network completed its initial work programme, with the finalisation of guidelines on key issues relating to NFQ implementation in the sector: designing programmes for inclusion in the NFQ, developing discipline specific learning outcomes and designing appropriate assessment methods. Following online publication of the guidelines in December 2009, a hard copy publication

will be disseminated in early 2010. It was also agreed in early 2009 to continue the Network over the academic year 2009-10. A new work programme, centred around the theme of Lifelong Learning, will commence in 2010.

Framework Implementation and Impact Study

A major area of work that was completed in 2009 was the Framework Implementation and Impact Study. The final report, which was prepared by an external Study Team of national and international experts, under the chairmanship of Professor Tom Collins, was published by the Authority in September 2009. The Study covers the first five years (2003-08) of the operation of the NFQ and its purpose was to: assess the extent to which the NFQ is being implemented; support deeper implementation of the NFQ and policies on access, transfer and progression; identify progress in implementation; identify gaps and drivers/obstacles in respect of implementation; and assess the initial impact of the NFQ. The Study Report contains a total of 19 recommendations. These are addressed to the Qualifications Authority, and other stakeholders as appropriate, and will provide a basis for the continued development and implementation of the NFQ. In considering the Report, the Authority has been mindful of the Government's decision to amalgamate the Authority and the awards Councils. In this context, the report will be a key document in informing the work of the new qualifications and quality assurance body.

Alignment of international awards with the NFQ

Another key area of work that was advanced during 2008 and 2009 relates to the alignment of international awards with the NFQ. In February 2008, the first set of awards made by international awarding bodies in Ireland was aligned with the Framework. This concerns (i) 201 awards currently made in Ireland by the Open University (OU) across Framework levels 6-10 and (ii) seven awards currently made by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), at NFQ levels 4,5 and 6. Currently some 1000 learners achieve OU awards each year in Ireland.

In October 2008, certain awards made by nine UK vocational education and training awarding bodies to learners in Ireland were aligned with the NFQ. This followed a resolution to the difficulty that the quality assurance arrangements for these awards did not 'travel' to Ireland. A protocol agreed with the UK regulatory bodies in 2008 means that quality assurance arrangements for awards included in UK frameworks will apply to those awards when made in Ireland. The executive worked closely with HETAC and FETAC to process applications. As a result, a total of 1,046 awards from bodies including City and Guilds, Edexcel, London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art and the Institute of Leadership and Management were aligned. Given the different structures of some of these awards to Irish Framework awards, the awards are aligned to a Framework level rather than to specific award-types. Information on the Guided Learning Hours associated with these awards is published so that broad comparisons can be made with Irish awards in relation to the volume of learning.

Alignment work was built upon during 2009 and further sets of awards made by recognised UK awarding bodies operating in Ireland were also aligned with the NFQ. The awards aligned are made by the British Computer Society, City and Guilds, ITEC, the Qualifications Network, the Wine and Spirit Education Trust and University College Birmingham.

An important condition of alignment is the publication of the lists of aligned awards on the Authority website, on-going monitoring of quality review arrangements and the publication of annual statistics regarding learner take-up of such awards.

SG 2 Performance Indicators

- Dublin City University's new academic framework for innovation includes a requirement to describe awards in accordance with the NFQ
- Completion of Framework Implementation and Impact Study within projected timelines
- Continued participation in university sector Framework Implementation Network of all 8 Irish universities and 12 affiliated colleges – agreement to continue network in 2009-10 academic year
- Completion by FIN of first work programme and publication of outcomes
- Inclusion of 77 National University of Ireland major diploma and minor/special purpose awards in the NFQ
- Alignment of 1373 UK awards with the NFQ encompassing further and higher education and training awards

Strategic Goal 3

Effective and integrated pathways between qualifications operate throughout the National Framework of Qualifications

The main achievements in this area during 2008 and 2009 were in relation to work on improving progression for holders of Craft awards, increased Tripartite engagement on developing system wide approaches to qualifications matters, the Authority's participation in a POBAL/EU Lifelong Learning Project and the outcomes of the Framework Implementation and Impact Study (FIIS).

Craft progression

This work involved discussions and actions with the main stakeholders (including FAS, the institutes of technology, HETAC, FETAC and the HEA). In late 2007, the executive convened the main stakeholders to jointly consider ways to improve progression. The group met twice in 2008 and focused its attention on identifying and publicising existing pathways. To this end, FETAC identified and published a brochure on existing pathways from the Advanced Certificate Craft (level 6) into higher education and training programmes (levels 6, 7 and 8) offered by the institutes of technology. This shows the routes operating between 23 specific crafts and specific programmes, the applications process, any additional entry requirements and details of exemptions. It also shows general entry routes from any crafts programme into higher education and training programmes (which are offered by seven institutes of technology).

A further strand of work, which the Authority supported, was carried out as part of a Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) project (begun in 2007) by six institutes of technology. The major output of this work in 2008 was the publication of a 'Framework for craft progression' which advises learners, employers and higher education providers on overall progression routes to allow holders of Advanced certificates – Craft to progress to level 7 degree programmes. This publication provided survey results which demonstrated the interest of apprentices in progression to a higher qualification (95% of over 1,000 surveyed); and of employers in further learning for craft persons. The framework outlines a means by which Advanced Certificate–Craft holders could be afforded advanced entry to programmes – based on a consideration of learning outcomes – and any exemptions or additional prerequisites that might apply. Beyond this, more diverse delivery options could be developed. The framework includes recommendations concerning the widespread availability of information on progression opportunities to craft holders and apprentices; institutional collaboration to develop new routes, flexible learning opportunities and financial support to craftspeople pursuing higher education options.

Tripartite engagement

In 2009, the major effort with regard to developing integrated and effective pathways throughout the NFQ took place within the context of the preparations for amalgamation between the Authority and the awards Councils. One of the avowed aims of the amalgamation of the qualifications and quality assurance bodies is to achieve greater coherence within the education and training system, including in relation to the promotion of access, transfer and progression opportunities.

To this end, a Framework Executives Group (FEG) was established by the Authority and the awards Councils to examine the policy and technical aspects of award making and quality assurance, with a view to increasing knowledge and understanding across the three agencies of the different systems operating in further and higher education and training, and identifying the barriers to permeability between them. As part of this broader learning process in the lead up to amalgamation, the Authority is now working more closely with FETAC in relation to the development of standards and the migration of awards into its Common Awards System. Specifically, the Authority executive is participating in a standards migration project in the childcare sector to support FETAC, and collaboration on other similar, sectoral standards projects is also envisaged. The development of standards, and increasing the availability of Framework compliant awards within the further education and training sector, are necessary prerequisites of developing more integrated and effective pathways through the NFQ.

POBAL/EU Lifelong Learning Project

During 2009 the Authority executive was invited by POBAL to join a national steering group to agree the themes and outputs for a series of events in connection with an EU funded project 'Delivering Lifelong Learning for Disadvantaged Communities'. The overall strategic goal of the project is to support and value the implementation of the Irish Lifelong Learning Strategy within the context of the EU Education and Training work Programme.

Two thematic seminars were held in the autumn of 2009 on 'Community- based Access as a route to further and higher education and training' and 'Early Childhood Care and Education and Family living'. The final event took place during January 2010 at which the Authority executive hosted a round table discussion on 'The Role of the Qualifications System and Lifelong Learning'. The development and implementation of the NFQ has always been intended to support key social inclusion priorities as part of a national lifelong learning strategy. Involvement in this project has provided opportunities to reach a key audience and to examine the role of the NFQ and linked policies on access, transfer and progression in delivering quality lifelong learning opportunities for disadvantaged learners.

FIS Outcomes

The other key development in 2009 was the publication of the Framework Implementation and Impact Study, which contains recommendations that relate directly to access, transfer and progression (Recommendations 3, 7, 9, 10,11). These recommendations are currently being considered by the Authority and other relevant stakeholders, and will inform current and future work in relation to the achievement of Strategic goal 3, both by the Authority and its successor organisation.

SG 3 Performance Indicators

- FETAC brochure on progression from craft awards published (2008). Brochure identifies routes operating between 23 specific crafts and specific programmes. In addition, seven institutes of technology operate a range of routes for all crafts persons into higher education and training programmes
- New and deeper engagement with awards Councils on policies that support development of integrated and effective learning pathways – 9 full FEG meetings held in 2009; 4 additional sub-group meetings held on Standards and Registration
- New collaboration with FETAC on standards development/CAS migration – participation in Childcare Standards Group
- Identification by FIS of 5 Recommendations to enhance access, transfer and progression opportunities for learners through the NFQ
- Active participation in 3 thematic seminars within Pobal/EU Lifelong Learning project

Strategic Goal 4

All Framework qualifications are quality assured to the highest international standards

The main achievements in this area during 2008 and 2009 relate to the Authority's quality assurance role with the DIT and the awards Councils and its continued role in promoting collaboration amongst quality practitioners through the IHEQN.

DIT Quality Assurance

Under the Qualifications Act, the Authority is responsible for periodically reviewing the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures of the Dublin Institute of Technology (under section 39(3) and (4) of the Act), and for considering the findings arising from the application of the quality assurance procedures agreed with the Dublin Institute of Technology (under section 39(2) of the Act). As part of this ongoing engagement, the Institute and the Authority have agreed that the Institute should endeavour to accelerate the development of the systems for school, faculty and research review. Considerable progress was achieved in this area, particularly in 2009. In the academic year 2008-9, the Institute conducted 10 school reviews and 1 non-academic unit review. In addition, the Institute has put in place a schedule to conduct 10 school reviews and 1 non-academic unit review in 2010-11.

Quality Assurance and the Councils

The Authority has continued to discharge its quality-related responsibilities with regard to the two Councils.

In relation to HETAC, its follow-up report to the quality review completed in 2006 was discussed by it and the Authority executive in April 2008. It was noted that internal staff developments had impacted on this as had the deteriorating budgetary position within HETAC. The key issues being addressed concerned planning and training for institutional reviews and the recruitment of reviewers. In 2009, the Authority agreed to recommendations from the Council for the granting of delegation of authority to make awards to two recognised institutions; approved a new business plan for the Council, and commenced the hearing of a validation appeal from a provider.

In relation to FETAC, the Authority completed the quality review of FETAC in 2008. The review was developmental in intent and concerned with developing and enhancing a quality culture in the Council. The report of the external panel was presented to the Authority in late 2007. This commended FETAC on significant progress in its work since its establishment and found that it carried out its statutory functions satisfactorily. It contained a number of recommendations, including for the streamlining of procedures for developing awards, speeding up the pace of policy implementation, strengthening ties with industry, taking account of the diversity of its providers and working with HETAC to resolve the confusion around level 6 awards. These recommendations were addressed by FETAC in its response to the review and in its Strategic Plan (2008-2010). The Authority concurred with the review panel's findings and FETAC's follow-up to them. It noted the priority given to ensuring that FETAC has the capacity to deliver on its plans and the testing of a range of approaches to standard-setting as well as the establishment of an industry forum. It also welcomed the publication by FETAC of its response and its intention to report on its achievement in early 2009. Related to this, the Authority discussed bilaterally and through the tripartite structures, FETAC's strategic plan (2008-2010). In February 2008, the Authority formally approved this Plan. During 2009, the Authority worked closely with the Council with regard to the follow-up on the recommendations that arose from the 2007-8 review, with particular emphasis on a recommendation in relation to standard setting. As part of the process, the Authority and Council agreed a new six-monthly reporting mechanism to monitor progress on the implementation of the Common Awards System, and are also collaborating on particular standards development projects.

Quality Assurance and Amalgamation

Quality assurance arrangements in higher education are part of the discussions on the amalgamation of the Authority and the awards Councils, announced by the Government in October 2008. The amalgamation also envisages the transfer of the external quality review of the universities, currently performed by the HEA and the IUQB, to the new body. This will include

consideration of membership of ENQA and of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), established as part of the Bologna process.

A key consideration underpinning the Government's decision to establish an amalgamated qualifications and quality assurance agency is to promote greater coherence in quality assurance both within the higher education sector and across further education and higher education and training. The Authority has continued, in its role as secretary to the Irish Higher Education Quality Network, to promote collaboration and understanding amongst quality practitioners with a view to achieving this coherence. In 2009, and in the context of the upcoming amalgamation, FETAC was invited to participate in IHEQN meetings as an observer.

An important output from the IHEQN in 2009 was a publication entitled 'Provision of Education to International Students: Code of Practice and Guidelines for Irish Higher Education Institutions'. The code of practice and guidelines were developed to enable higher education institutions to set their own education provision arrangements for international students against agreed sector wide benchmarks. It is intended that all higher education institutions will make a conscious commitment to adopt and maintain these standards in relation to the recruitment, reception, education, pastoral care and welfare of their international students, ensuring the continuing high standing of Irish higher education institutions as education and training providers worldwide. This initiative is significant in the context of the upcoming amalgamation, as the new body will be responsible for regulating certain aspects of international education in Ireland.

The IHEQN also concluded working groups and published documentation regarding student involvement in quality assurance and the development of common principles for follow-through on quality reviews.

SG 4 Performance Indicators

- Quality reviews of HETAC (2006), FETAC (2008) and IUQB (2008) found that they each carried out their functions and that they complied with the relevant international standards
- 10 School reviews and 1 non-academic unit review undertaken by DIT in 2008-9
- New collaboration with FETAC on standards development/CAS migration, including direct participation in Childcare Standards Group
- 2 delegation of authority recommendations agreed with HETAC
- New HETAC Business plan approved by the Authority
- Secretary to 7 IHEQN meetings
- Publication by IHEQN of Code of Practice for Higher Education Institutions on Provision of Education to International Students, and two other collaborative documents.

Strategic Goal 5

Framework qualifications are fully recognised abroad and qualifications gained outside Ireland are appropriately recognised in Ireland

The main achievements in this area during 2008 and 2009 were the completion of the referencing of the NFQ to the European Qualifications Framework, the completion of a joint-project with the New Zealand Qualifications Authority to enhance recognition between Ireland and New Zealand, and the introduction of an automated system within the Recognition service.

European Qualifications Framework

A major highlight for the Authority in 2009 was the completion of the referencing of the NFQ to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (see also SG1 above). The principal aims of EQF, which was formally adopted in 2008, are to promote citizens' mobility between countries and to facilitate their lifelong learning. From the Authority's perspective, it will also be an increasingly important tool to assist in the recognition of Irish qualifications in Europe and European qualifications in Ireland.

Ireland was the first member state to complete the referencing process, well in advance of the 2010 deadline set out in the Recommendation establishing EQF. The achievement was marked at a seminar held in Dublin on 17 September 2009, which was organised jointly by the Irish authorities and the European Commission, and which was opened by the Minister for Education and Science, Mr Batt O'Keeffe, TD, and the Director General for Education and Culture within the European Commission, Ms Odile Quintin. The Authority is the National Coordination Point for EQF in Ireland and was assisted in the referencing process by a steering committee, which included representatives from FETAC, HETAC, the Irish Universities Association and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and three international experts.

Joint-project with New Zealand Qualifications Authority

Another key development in relation to Strategic Goal 5 was the completion of work on a joint-project between the Authority and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, which aims to improve the basis on which Ireland and New Zealand recognise each other's qualifications. The final report – *The compatibility of degree qualifications in Ireland and New Zealand* – which establishes compatibility between the higher education degree qualifications at Levels 7-10 of the NFQ and the New Zealand Register of Quality Assured Qualifications, will be published early in 2010.

Recognition Service

An internal review and reorganisation of the Authority's recognition service was undertaken in 2008. This responded to the findings of the 2007 Quality review of the Authority and subsequent internal re-organisation. It aimed to fully integrate (and support) the service with that of developing and implementing the NFQ and promoting the recognition of qualifications at home and abroad. The review covered all aspects of the service – including the nature, extent and value of the advice provided, detailed operational procedures, the effectiveness of interactions with stakeholders, building and managing knowledge and practical ways to improve efficiency. Work continued throughout 2009 on the developmental processes inaugurated in 2008. The main development has been the introduction of a fully automated system for processing recognition applications, using the Microsoft Sharepoint application. The new system is also being used to enhance knowledge management processes and to store and retrieve all documentation associated with the service.

SG 5 Performance Indicators

- Availability of Certificate Supplements – 22 certificate supplements relating to crafts/trades were developed by FETAC in 2008. These are published on its website. Work on certificate supplements for other awards is continuing
- Availability of Diploma Supplements – a survey (jointly undertaken by HETAC and Authority) of the implementation of the Diploma Supplement in higher education institutions (2008) showed that of 43 respondents, 75% of them issued diploma supplements in 2008. Where these were not issued, technical/information technology issues were cited as the main obstacle
- Completion and publication of EQF Referencing report ahead of 2010 deadline
- Completion of report on the compatibility of Irish and New Zealand qualifications
- Introduction of automated system for handling recognition applications

Strategic Goal 6

The Authority, in tandem with FETAC and HETAC, are high-quality, effective and efficient state agencies

The major achievements during 2008 and 2009 were in the tripartite work undertaken with FETAC and HETAC, the integration of QualifaX into the Authority, in the area of Transforming Public Services (TPS), in the development of a new Human Resources strategy, and in the introduction of new HR and financial procedures and a new knowledge management system.

Tripartite work

Cooperation between the Authority, FETAC and HETAC is formalised through regular meetings at senior executive level. This work is in addition to the regular collaboration between the agencies on qualifications and quality assurance issues, which is now pursued through the Framework Executives Group (see SG 3 above). Tripartite meetings in 2008 resulted in joint agreements on budgetary matters (ways to meet reductions in budgetary allocations, fees and to address pensions), decentralisation, a joint approach to communications and marketing and a support service for providers. Tripartite meetings in 2009 resulted in the commencement of collaboration on the integration of the new FETAC Business System across the agencies, and in identifying other policy and organisational issues associated with the amalgamation. The Tripartite engagement also contributes to the achievement of shared services and public sector reform. In relation to the former, cooperative arrangements were advanced in 2009 with the wider set of education agencies on shared contracts for services.

QualifaX

In January 2008, QualifaX, with a staff of seven, joined the Authority. The vision behind this was to promote wide understanding, use and value of the NFQ through a high-quality information database for learners on qualifications. The major actions in 2008 were to integrate staff, to develop the QualifaX database and leverage it in the Authority's wider work. Staff across the organisation worked jointly to agree an approach to the future direction of QualifaX. Following consultation, arrangements were put in place to manage the work and engage with key stakeholders (an Advisory Group of the Authority and Institute of Guidance Counsellors; an internal executive group; and a Consultative Group representing almost 20 stakeholders). Key objectives for 2008 concerned greater choice for learners, accurate referencing of the Framework, high quality information and continued operational efficiency.

During 2008, the executive followed up on a request by the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment to reconvene discussions between the main bodies on the National Learning Line. Later, as funding for this became unavailable, this action was halted and the focus shifted to developing QualifaX as the national information database. One of the (unanticipated) impacts of this and the incorporation of QualifaX in the Authority was that third party providers of information to learners saw greater benefits in sharing information/data feeds with QualifaX. This led to requests for formal arrangements. The Authority, considering the mutual benefit to be gained from such arrangements, determined an overall approach and the possible charges that might apply. The latter reflected the considerable resource issues involved. On foot of these developments, data feeds with Fáilte Ireland, Education Ireland, Palliative Care (Irish Hospice Foundation) and Grad Ireland were established in 2008-9.

In summary, the major achievements in 2008 and 2009 were to:

- establish links with and views of major stakeholders on the information database
- include information, for the first time, on FÁS courses in QualifaX
- improve QualifaX user interface
- review the accuracy of information (on-going)
- explore and agree an approach to sharing data feeds with third parties including charges that might apply
- update QualifaX to reflect the increasing number of awards recognised through the Framework e.g. all Open University awards in the Framework are reflected in QualifaX
- re-design of QualifaX website

The overall impact of these actions has been to improve the quality and reach of QualifaX. The database is proving to be a critical tool in informing learner choice and in promoting the NFQ.

Transforming Public Services

The Transforming Public Services (TPS) programme is the new phase of public sector reform. This reform requires that the public service delivers value-for-money and maximises resources to meet the needs of the public. Sharing services is an aspect of reform that brings public sector reform to life. QualifaX has developed a shared data service which delivers on these performance objectives by:

- increasing access to high quality information on education and training across the public sector
- expanding the access points for education and training information for website users
- promoting accurate referencing of the National Framework of Qualifications to inform learners' choices
- addressing the national priorities of up-skilling and re-skilling
- supporting Lifelong Learning by enabling all learners to explore what opportunities are available both locally and nationally.

As outlined above, QualifaX has information on almost all education and training courses that are available in Ireland. There is now a facility to provide this data to other users, thus avoiding duplication in the area of data collection while enhancing public sector information provision.

Human Resources

Important work was also completed in 2009 in the area of Human Resources. A new Human Resources strategy was developed and introduced to all the Authority's staff. In addition, the Training and Development strategy has been broadened to encompass not only the training needs of individuals, but also organisational education and training needs that have been identified through the Performance Management Development System (PMDS), such as report writing and research skills.

Knowledge Management and Compliance Procedures

A new intranet system was also introduced in 2009 to improve knowledge management processes and knowledge resources within the Authority. This is an important development in the context of preparations for amalgamation. Revised financial and Human Resource procedures were also introduced in 2009 in line with best practice, legislative requirements and Department of Finance Guidelines.

SG 6 Performance Indicators

- Achieved Excellence Through People award, December 2008 (valid until 2010)
- QualifaX data feeds provided to Education Ireland, Failte Ireland, Palliative Care (Irish Hospice Foundation) and Grad Ireland
- Regular Tripartite meetings of Senior Executives held
- Effective financial management systems confirmed by 2008 and 2009 internal audits and audit of the Comptroller and Auditor General
- Introduction and dissemination of new HR strategy and financial procedures
- Introduction of new intranet (Sharepoint) system to improve knowledge management

Appendix 1 Members of the Authority

MEMBERS OF THE AUTHORITY	EXPENSES PAID (BY CATEGORY)	SALARY	NUMBER OF AUTHORITY MEETINGS 2008-9	MEMBERS ATTENDANCE AT AUTHORITY MEETINGS 2008-2009
Mr Paul Haran (Chairperson)			10	10/10
Ms Inez Bailey			10	6/10
Mr Mogens Berg	[2008] €2,409.80 [2009] €3,171.08		10	9/10
Dr Seán Conlan	[2008] €624.52 [2009] €330.84		10	10/10
Mr Eamon Devoy			10	4/10
Mr Tony Donohoe			10	10/10
Dr Caroline Hussey (Deputy Chairperson – resigned 23 October 2009)			9	9/9
Mr Shane Kelly (Resigned 30 June 2009)			5	5/5
Mr Hamidreza Khodabakhshi (Resigned 30 June 2008)			2	2/2
Mr Peter Mannion (Appointed 1 July 2009)			3	2/3
Prof Anne Moran	[2008] €815.40 [2009] €1,396.62		10	8/10
Mr Pat O'Callaghan	[2009] €473.75		10	7/10
Dr Pat Phelan (Appointed 24 October 2009)			1	1/1
Mr Martin Shanahan			10	6/10
Prof W.J. Smyth	[2009] €477.11		10	9/10
Mr Donal O'Rourke	[2008] €2,947.93 [2009] €2,288.66		10	8/10
Dr Jim Murray (Chief Executive – appointed 13 July 2008)	[2008] €3,278.22 [2009] €1,636.77	€106,442.09 €123,819.75	8	7/8
Mr Seán Ó Foghlú (Chief Executive – resigned 11 July 2008)	[2008] €1,570.90	€83,224.87	2	2/2

Appendix 2 Staff of the Authority

Ms Siobhan Brennan, Staff Officer, QualifaX

Ms Norma Brophy, Qualifications Recognition Advisor

Ms Claire Byrne, Director of Corporate Affairs and Communications

Ms Breda Cahill, Clerical Officer, QualifaX

Mr Eamonn Collins, Corporate Business Manager

Ms Alison Condon, Staff Officer

Ms Lorna Conway, Qualifications Recognition Advisor

Mr Tom Farrell, Head of Operations, QualifaX

Mr Jim Ferguson, Head of Operations, ACELS

Ms Sue Hackett, Project Manager, ACELS

Ms Carmel Kelly, Project Officer

Ms Celine Kelly, Human Resources Executive

Ms Niamh Lenehan, Manager of Operations, Qualifications Recognition

Ms Mairéad McMahon, Finance Executive

Dr Anna Murphy, Director of Research and Strategic Development

Dr Jim Murray, Chief Executive

Ms Deborah O'Brien, Clerical Officer

Mr John O'Connor, Development Officer

Ms Trish O'Brien, Head of Framework Implementation and Qualifications Recognition

Mr William O'Keefe, Qualifications Recognition Advisor

Mr. Sean O'Reilly, Project Officer

Ms. Annette Reddy, Clerical Officer, QualifaX

Ms. Patricia Reddy, Staff Officer, QualifaX

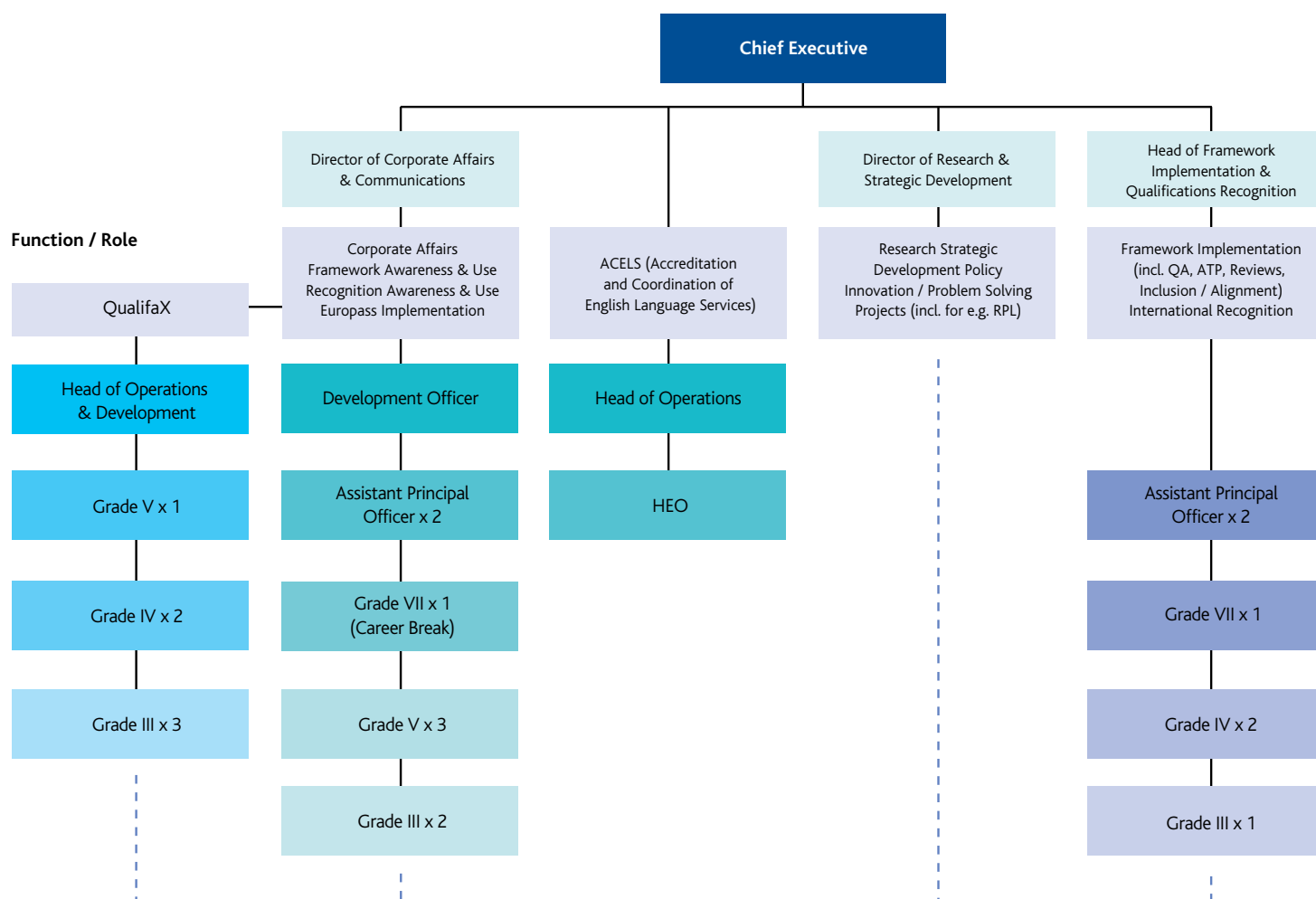
Mr. Brendan Slattery, Clerical Officer, QualifaX

Dr. Deirdre Stritch, Project Officer

Ms Yvonne Rudden, Clerical Officer

Ms. Anne Walsh, Clerical Officer, QualifaX

Appendix 3 The Authority Executive - Organisation Chart





Transforming Ireland

Funded by the Irish
Government under the
National Development
Plan, 2007-2013

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