

OpenQAsS

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and Adult Education in Ireland

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Author: David Cleary

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Chapter 1 - Vocational Educational System in Ireland

1.1 Introduction to the Irish Education System, including VET

Education is deeply ingrained in Ireland's national psyche and Irish parents have long held a passionate interest in their children's schooling. From the earliest days of the hedge schools right through to the present, they have been prepared to make personal sacrifices to ensure that their children get the best possible education. They realise that in a time of uncertainty a sound education is the bedrock on which to secure their children's future.

Primary Education – 1st Level Education

Education is compulsory for children in Ireland from the ages of six to sixteen or until students have completed three years of second-level education. Children attend primary school between the ages of 4 and 12. Primary schools are also known as national schools. Primary education is also referred to as first level education. Primary school covers eight years - a two-year infant cycle followed by six years from first to sixth class. Children move to the next class at the end of each school year.

The primary education sector includes state-funded primary schools, special schools and private primary schools. State-funded primary schools used to be known as national schools and include:

- religious schools, such as Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland, Muslim;
- non-denominational schools;
- multi-denominational schools;
- Gaelscoileanna (schools that teach through the Irish language).

Single sex schools teach boys and girls separately. Co-educational schools teach boys and girls together. A number of special schools cater for particular types of disability and special needs.

Post-Primary Education – 2nd Level Education

Children from about 12 to 18 years attend a post-primary school, also referred to as second level education.

The post-primary education sector comprises secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools. Secondary schools are privately owned and managed. Vocational schools are state-established and administered by Education and Training Borads (ETBs), while community and comprehensive schools are managed by Boards of Management of differing compositions.

Higher Education – 3rd Level Education

Higher Education in Ireland is provided mainly by 7 Universities, 14 Institutes of Technology, including the Dublin Institute of Technology and 7 Colleges of Education. Access to higher education

for students progressing from post primary education is based on the Leaving Certificate, which is the examination completed at the end of second level school. Applications for entry to undergraduate courses in universities, colleges of education, institutes of technology and some other institutes of higher education, are processed by the Central Applications Office (CAO). The aim of the system is to process applications centrally and to deal with them in an efficient and fair manner. The participating institutions retain the function of making decisions on admissions.

There are other routes of entry for certain categories of students, for example mature students and those wishing to attend institutions not using the CAO application facility.

Further Education and Training (VET)

Further Education covers education and training which occurs after second level schooling but which is not part of the third level system. In Ireland there are number of providers of Further and Adult Education and Training and a wide variety of schools, organisations and institutions, are involved in the delivery of continuing education and training for young school leavers and adults.

Certification in the Further and Higher Education and Training Sector is usually in alignment with the National Framework of Qualifications – an awards framework of 10 levels which is aligned to the European Framework of Qualifications. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) quality assures institutions of further and higher education and training, validates educational programmes and makes awards to learners.

The two main providers in further and adult education and training are the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and SOLAS. SOLAS (formally known as FAS) is the new Further and Education and Training Authority in Ireland. It is responsible for funding, planning and co-ordinating training and further education programmes.

Ireland's further education and training sectors were developed separately over many years, largely through FAS (SOLAS) and the Vocational Education Committees. This separate development often resulted in 'turf wars', unnecessary duplication in some areas, and a waste of resources.

The Government has recognised the need for continuum between further education and training and has developed a unified and co-ordinated sector through the new body called SOLAS. The local provision of training and further education programmes is handled by 16 Education and Training Boards, that took the place of 33 VECs (Vocational Education Committees). The setting up of SOLAS and the ETBs has been a major piece of reform that brought further education and training into line with other developed countries.

Role of Solas in VET

SOLAS has been established to develop and give strategic direction to the Further Education and Training Sector in Ireland. It is responsible for funding, planning and co-ordinating a wide range of training and further education programmes and has a mandate to ensure the provision of 21st century high-quality programmes to jobseekers and other learners.

SOLAS' role is to focus all its energy on planning, funding and driving the development of a new,

integrated Further Education and Training service.

SOLAS strives to ensure that every learner has access to the best possible Further Education and Training (FET) and works to build a new learner focused FET service in Ireland that is fit for purpose and designed to meet future needs.

To achieve this, SOLAS works closely with a wide range of stakeholders including learners, employers, Education & Training Boards, Government departments, state bodies, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Institutes of Technology (IOTs) and representative organisations. Their aim is to build a clear, integrated pathway-to-work for learners through Further Education and Training.

Further Education and Training Strategy

One of the first tasks for SOLAS was to develop a 5 year strategy for the sector in consultation with relevant stakeholders. The Strategy sets out the vision for the FET sector in response to needs and opportunities for the short, medium and longer term.

Education and Training Boards (ETBs)

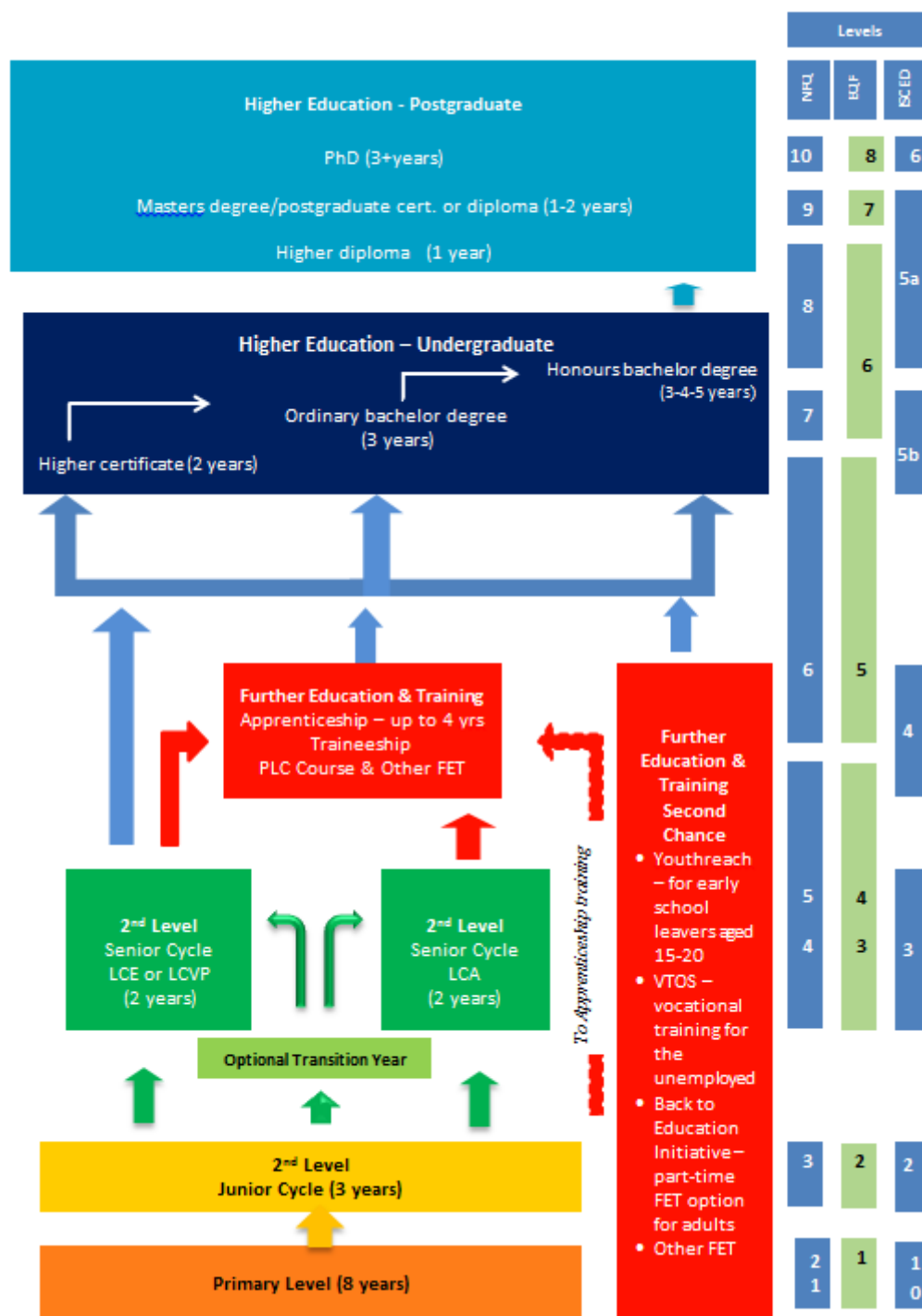
In the past, the Vocational Educational Committees (VECs) were the main providers of further education in Ireland.

On July 1st 2013, Minister for Education and Skills Ruairí Quinn T.D. announced the establishment of sixteen Education and Training Boards. These new statutory education authorities, formed from the aggregation of Ireland's 33 VECs (abolished on July 1st) and the integration of the 16 FÁS Training Centres, are the vehicles for the delivery of coordinated education and training programmes across Ireland. The revised sixteen ETBs are:

- City of Dublin
- City of Cork and Co. Cork
- Co. Dublin and Dun Laoghaire
- City of Limerick, Co. Limerick and Co. Clare
- Co. Donegal
- Co. Kerry
- Co. Tipperary North and South
- City of Waterford, Co. Waterford and Co. Wexford
- City of Galway, Co. Galway and Co. Roscommon
- Co. Mayo, Co. Sligo and Co. Leitrim
- Co. Cavan and Co. Monaghan
- Co. Louth and Co. Meath
- Co. Longford and Co. Westmeath
- Co. Laois and Co. Offaly
- Co. Kildare and Co. Wicklow
- Co. Kilkenny and Co. Carlow

1.2 VET Framework

Diagram of the national education and training system



Within Ireland's second level education system there are two cycles:

(a) the Junior Cycle takes approximately 3 years and leads to the Junior

Certificate examination — which students usually take at the age of 15 or 16;

(b) the Senior Cycle takes 2 years and leads to the Leaving Certificate examination — which students usually take at the age of 17 or 18. There are three types of Leaving Certificate programme:

- The Leaving Certificate (Established) is studied over two years and aims to provide learners with a broad, balanced education while also offering some potential for specialisation towards a particular career option. The Leaving Certificate is taken in almost all schools and students are required to study at least five subjects, one of which must be Irish. In general, students take six or more subjects for examination;
- The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is designed to enhance the vocational dimension of the Leaving Certificate. This two year programme combines the academic strengths of the Leaving Certificate with a dynamic focus on self-directed learning, enterprise, work and the community. The defining features of the LCVP are that learners take some of their Leaving Certificate subjects from a specified set of vocational subjects, they study a recognised course in a modern European language and take two additional courses, known as Link Modules, in the areas of Preparation for the World of Work and Enterprise Education.
- The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) is a discrete programme designed for those learners whose aptitudes, learning interests and ways of learning are not fully catered for by the other two Leaving Certificate programmes and for those learners who are at risk of early school leaving. Participants in the LCA engage in work and study of an active, practical and task-centred nature as it prepares participants for transition from the world of the school/centre to that of adult and working life. The LCA is a two-year programme made up of a range of courses that are structured round three elements: Vocational Preparation, Vocational Education and General Education. Students who achieve the first two types of Leaving Certificate are eligible to access third level education. Secondary schools may offer an optional year, Transition Year, which occurs between Junior and Senior Cycles. Transition Year aims to provide students with an opportunity to receive a wide range of educational inputs, soft skills and work experience. On completion of second level education, students can opt for third level education in either a university or Institute of Technology. Alternatively, they can opt for an education or training programme provided by the further education and training (FET) sector — which is defined as not being part of the third level sector.

The Irish education and training system is characterised by late vocational choice. A limited amount of VET takes place through the Senior Cycle within the second level system — and in particular, the LCVP, — and out-of-school programmes for early school leavers. Research published by the UK-based City and Guilds organisation of young people in Ireland found that those surveyed had a poor perception of vocational education and considered vocation training to be a “low status option” and a “route for the less able” (City and Guilds, 2013). The research indicated that there was an apparent lack of awareness among young people of what constituted vocational education and the opportunities it could bring.

The perceived low status of vocational education among young people (and their parents) has to be set in the context of a consistent and successful emphasis in Ireland on the importance, to individual employment careers and to the national economy, of third level education. As an illustration, in 2011, the proportion of 25-34 year olds in Ireland with a tertiary education was among the EU's highest (matched only by the UK and Luxembourg). The corollary of this is that the secondary education system focuses at an early age on preparing young people for entry to third level and is less successful in preparing people for alternative routes through FET to employment. Only one-fifth of students completing second level education advance directly to a form of vocational education or training that is outside the third level sector: in 2010, 19.8 per cent did a Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) course and 1.4 per cent did FÁS training. (Department of Education and Science, 2013).

Another key group within the VET/FET sector are unemployed people seeking to return to the labour market. In 2012, the Government published "Pathways to Work" (Government of Ireland, 2012a), a new strategy to increase the employability of jobseekers. A key principle underpinning the new strategy is to change the social protection system from one of passive income support to a focus on actively enabling unemployed people to get back to employment, training or education as soon as possible. A National Employment and Entitlements Service, Intreo, has been established under the auspices of the Department of Social Protection to engage and assist unemployed people with a view to facilitating their return to the labour market. Additionally, the strategy noted that training and further education options were being reviewed to ensure that the employment opportunities for VET programme participants were maximised.

Forfás (Forfás, 2013), the policy advisory board for Enterprise, Trade, Science, Technology and Innovation, undertook an analysis of qualifications awarded in 2011 by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC/QQI) which indicated that the network of Vocational Education Committees (VECs) accounted for 44% of total FETAC awards (see below). FETAC/QQI awards certification of courses for Levels 1–6 on the National Qualifications Framework.

QQI/FETAC awards 2012 by broad provider type

VECs - 44%
Private providers - 24%
FÁS - 21%
Community/voluntary - 5%
Disability sector - 2%
Teagasc - 1%
Other - 3%

VET access/entry requirements and progression opportunities

Typically, the earliest age at which a young person can start a VET programme is 15 having first completed their Junior Certificate. They can gain entry to the LCVP or the LCA within the senior cycle at second level, both of which have a vocational education component. In theory, a young person can join an apprenticeship programme at age 15 having completed their Junior Certificate but the majority start at age 17/18 when they have completed their Leaving Certificate examination. Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses as their name implies are an important VET option for young people who have completed their Leaving Certificate examinations and who do not wish to attend third level college. The OECD (OECD, 2010) has pointed out that while workplace training was a substantial part of the curriculum in programmes such as apprenticeships and traineeships, a considerable part of the VET provided by the VECs included only a limited amount of work experience. The majority of PLC course have a duration of twelve months but learners typically spend less than three weeks on work placement

The OECD review (2010) was critical of the Irish apprenticeship system as being limited to a narrow set of occupations (26 designated trades) and as being too focused on the construction sector. It also noted that the system had been adversely affected by the economic crisis as employers reduced their employee intake. Following the OECD review and a commitment in the Irish Government Action Plan for Jobs, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) initiated an overhaul of the apprenticeship system in 2013 by establishing a review group tasked with cataloguing the broad spectrum of vocational training provided for apprentice formation and other work-based education/training systems and making recommendations for reform.

The National Competitiveness Council (NCC) in a submission to the Government on the Action Plan for 2014 noted that apprenticeship in Ireland only started at post-secondary level while in other EU Member States apprenticeships are provided at upper secondary level. It noted that a Forfás review of training provision revealed that while the Irish apprenticeship system was valuable it was lengthy, costly and cyclical.

QQI Ten-level Framework

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is a ten-level system (1–10) giving an academic or vocational value to qualifications obtained in Ireland.

NFQ levels help indicate how an award can be used for training, education and employment opportunities (see fan diagram).

Each level is based on nationally agreed standards of what a learner is expected to know and be able to do after receiving an award.

QQI is Ireland's guardian of the NFQ system. They are responsible for the quality assurance of providers of education and training. They also have responsibility for the validation of qualifications and also make some awards themselves.

NFQ serves several purposes.

- It ensures awards obtained in Ireland are quality-assured and recognised internationally.
- It is part of a system for comparing Irish and international awards.
- It supports lifelong learning by recognising knowledge and skills within a comparative framework even if they are not recognised by a formal award.
- It provides a system of establishing eligibility in learning processes for access, transfer and progression.
- It recognises awards made by professional bodies

International

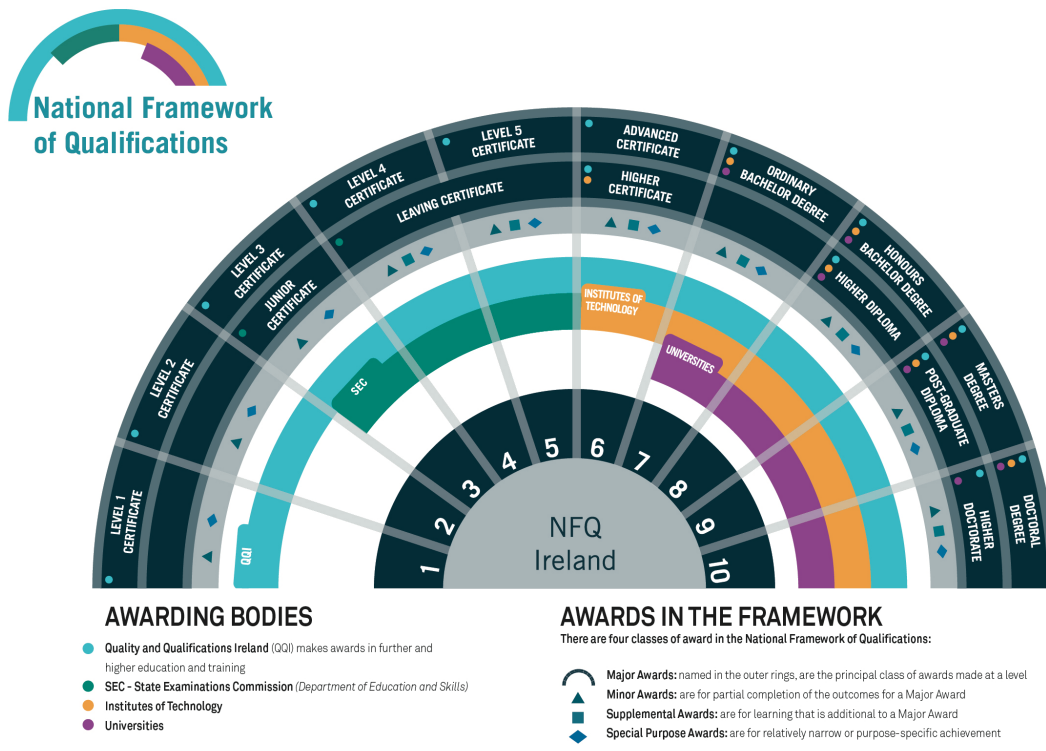
NFQ is linked to similar frameworks in Europe. This helps people considering employment or study opportunities outside Ireland.

There are two qualifications frameworks at European level:

- The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area also known as the 'Bologna Framework'. This deals with higher education awards (NFQ 6-10)
- The European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which deals with all NFQ levels including schools, Further Education and Training, and Higher Education

Qualifications Recognition Service

QQI offers a free Qualifications Recognition Advice Service for those seeking guidance on the academic recognition of awards obtained outside the Irish system. They have also developed a system for professional bodies to have their awards recognised in the NFQ.



For further Information consult: www.nfq.ie www.QQI.ie

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Referencing to the European qualifications framework (EQF)

Referencing the Irish NFQ to the EQF was completed in 2009. It built on experiences and conclusions of self-certification of compatibility of the Irish NFQ with the qualifications framework-European higher education area, completed in 2006. In 2014, EQF and NFQ levels are indicated on Europass certificates (8).

Level correspondence established between the Irish NFQ and the EQF

NFQ	EFQ
Level 10	Level 8
Level 9	Level 7
Level 8	Level 6
Level 7	Level 6
Level 6	Level 5
Level 5	Level 4
Level 4	Level 3

Level 3	Level 2
Level 2	Level 1
Level 1	Level 1

1.3 Statistics of Vocational and Adult Education

Education in Ireland is now regarded as a central plank in the economic, social and cultural development of Irish society. Governments and the social partners view it as strategically interlinked with national planning. There is a high level of public interest in educational issues, which has been further developed by the consultative approach adopted by the Government in the formulation of education policy. Irish pupils perform in the top sectors in international studies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) PISA evaluations. Employers, both national and international, affirm the quality of graduates from the Irish education system.

Number of Full-time Students in Institutions Aided by the Department of Education and Skills - 2011/2012, 2012/2013 and 2013/2014

Number of Full-time Students in Institutions Aided by the Department of Education and Skills – 2012/2013 and 2013/2014 Level	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014
First Level	516,458	526,422	536,317
Primary Schools	509,038	518,757	528,562
Special Schools	7,420	7,665	7,755
Second Level (excluding number of PLC students)	359,047	327,323	333,175
Secondary	186,409	187,012	188,791
Vocational	116,839	85,196	88,247
Community and Comprehensive	55,799	55,115	56,137
Second-level Students in PLC Courses	36,528	35,524	34,003
Secondary	858	697	655
Vocational	34,495	33,664	32,226
Community and Comprehensive	1,175	1,163	1,122
Third Level	163,068	164,863	169,254
Universities	89,928	90,341	93,023
Institutes of Technology	63,874	65,039	66,490
Teacher Training Institutions	6,428	6,454	6,703
Other Aided Institutions	2,838	3,029	3,038

Enrolment is growing at all levels of the education system, with the fastest growth in post-secondary education.

Enrolments of Full-time Students in Institutions Aided by the Department of Education and Skills¹ Level	2002/2003	2012/2013	Ten year increase	% growth over 10 years
First Level	443,720	526,422	82,702	18.6
Second Level (includes PLC)	340,365	362,847	22,482	6.6
PLC	28,649	35,524	6,875	24.0
Third Level	129,283	164,863	35,580	27.5
Total	913,368	1,054,132	140,764	15.4

AONTAS, the national adult learning organisation, compiled the following unofficial statistics in April 2012 through Parliamentary Questions, the HEA and other sources, regarding the number of people participating in some form of adult learning in 2012.

They estimated a figure of approximately 304,900 people had participated.

- 180,000 people availed of further education places - these included both part-time and full time options. Part time options included adult literacy schemes, Community Education programmes and the Back to Education Initiative - all of which were organised by local VECs. Full time options included initiatives such as Youthreach, VTOS (Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme) and PLC courses (post leaving cert).

- 75,000 people were registered on FÁS (SOLAS) training courses - these included specific skills training/Local training initiatives/traineeships/return to work programmes.

- 5,900 places were available on over 200 courses through the Springboard initiative. This was the second year that the initiative had been run. A range of free, third level courses were designed to meet the needs of the changing employment market. To be eligible for Springboard, participants must be in receipt of a social welfare payment, but there are no restrictions on the qualifying timeframe. They must however have a history of employment. Springboard is ideally suited to someone who is looking to upskill or retrain into another career. Courses are scheduled to begin in September.

- 25,000 adults were registered as in receipt of the Back to Education Allowance according to latest figures (academic year 2010-2011). This figure was up by 20% on the previous year. BTEA allows people to retain their social welfare payment while pursuing their education at either second or third level.

- 6,500 new places were available as part of a new Labour Market Education and Training Fund. This initiative was co-ordinated by FÁS and offered opportunities mainly for people who were unemployed to train in areas where occupational demand existed. Measures under this initiative also focused on the under 25s. The provision of supports in career guidance and job preparation was a

feature of this initiative as its main objective was to move people off the live register and into employment.

In addition, there was an increase in the number of mature students across third level institutions (Institutes of Technology and Universities)

- Mature students (those over 23) accounted for 15% of full time entrants to college.
- 94% of all part time new entrants in universities were mature students. Some were full time and qualified for the free fees initiative; others were part time paying full fees and combined their studies with work.
- In practice this meant an influx of approximately 6,000 full time mature students each year with roughly 1500 mature students taking up third level education on a part time basis.

There was also an array of evening courses available in private institutions, where participation levels were difficult to quantify. Courses were also offered in the non-formal community sector. Family Resource Centres, Community Groups, Networks such as the Irish Men's Sheds and the ICA (Irish Countrywomen's' Association all offered informal learning opportunities. AONTAS estimated that up to 30,000 adults may avail of this form of educational opportunities on an annual basis.

Chapter 2 - Legal obligations/recommendations regarding institutions and courses in vocational and adult education

VET governance and funding

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) is responsible for the general education and training system at all levels in Ireland. Other government departments (e.g. the Departments of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Transport, Tourism and Sport) have responsibility for sectoral training. In January 2012, the training division of FÁS/SOLAS, the National Training and Employment Authority, was transferred from the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation to DES. This development was welcomed by many stakeholders on the grounds that it integrated responsibility for vocational education and training under the same minister and paved the way for greater integration of responsibilities and services at local and regional levels.

Organisational Restructuring

- The Education and Training Boards Act 2013 was passed in May 2013. The Act provides for the dissolution of Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and for the establishment of the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) through a process involving the merger of some of the 33 existing VECs.
- The Further Education and Training Act 2013 was signed into law in July 2013. The Act provides for the establishment of SOLAS and the dissolution of FÁS. The legislation also provides for the gradual transfer of FÁS training centres and training staff to the newly formed Education and Training Boards.

Adult Education and Training

Adult Education is set out in Learning for Life - White Paper on Adult Education, published in 2000. A range of education and training is provided by various organisations aimed at upskilling and reskilling people who are unemployed. Providing skills for work is a priority.

National Framework of Qualifications

Certification in the Further and Higher Education and Training Sector is usually in alignment with the National Framework of Qualifications – an awards framework of 10 levels which is aligned to the European Framework of Qualifications. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) quality assures institutions of further and higher education and training, validates educational programmes and makes awards to learners.

A majority of current and legacy national awards are now included in the NFQ, including those made by the State examinations commission, Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), Higher Education and Training Award Council (HETAC), universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology.

Main policy objectives

A national objective of moving towards a ‘lifelong learning society’, in which learners can benefit from learning opportunities at various stages throughout their lives, was a key factor in the changes that have taken place in Ireland. This led to a need for a more flexible and integrated system of qualifications that could recognise all learning acquired by learners in Ireland. Policy goals of the Irish NFQ were to:

(a) create an open, learner-centred, coherent, transparent and widely understood system of qualifications in Ireland responsive to needs of individual learners and social and economic needs of the country;

(b) ease access, transfer and progression opportunities for learners within and across the different levels and subsystems of education and training;

(c) increase mobility through understanding and recognition of Irish qualifications abroad and fully participate in the Bologna and Copenhagen processes.

It is important to note that NFQ is an inclusive framework, open to qualifications awarded outside the remit of national authorities. Several awards made by professional and international awarding bodies are now included in the framework according to policies and criteria published by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI)

Stakeholder involvement

Development of the NFQ has been coordinated by the NQAI, which was established in 2001 by the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

A new agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, was established on 6 November 2012 under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012. The new authority was created by an amalgamation of four bodies that have both awarding and quality assurance responsibilities: FETAC, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, NQAI and the Irish Universities Quality Board. The new authority assumes all functions of the four legacy bodies while also having responsibility for new or newly-statutory responsibilities in particular areas. This is an important step in consolidating the governance structure for deepening implementation of a comprehensive NFQ. It also shows that Ireland's focus on qualifications has become more systematic with stronger coordination of qualifications and quality assurance policies. The new agency sits at the centre of the qualification system and cooperates with ministries, higher education institutions, employers and the voluntary sector.

Framework implementation

The NFQ has reached an advanced operational stage, in particular by promoting more consistent approaches to use of learning outcomes across different subsystems, especially in sectors led by FETAC and HETAC. In universities and the school sector, NFQ implementation was by agreement and the impact has been more gradual and incremental.

The process was strongly supported by major stakeholders in the country. The NFQ has become widely known and is used as a tool for supporting other reforms and policy development in education, training and qualifications and currency of the NFQ inside and outside the education and training environment has increased. It is an outward-looking framework with a strong external dimension through interactive research with non-European countries (such as Australia, New Zealand).

Level descriptors and learning outcomes

The NFQ uses learning outcomes-based levels. Each level has a specified level descriptor and at each level there are one or more award types also expressed in terms of learning outcomes. For each award type there are a wide range of qualifications which have been developed by awarding bodies. The framework's 10 levels capture all learning, from initial stages to the most advanced;

qualifications achieved in schools, further education and training and higher education and training are included.

Each level of the NFQ is based on nationally-agreed standards of knowledge (breadth, kind), know-how and skills (range, selectivity) and competence. Competence is subdivided into context, role, learning to learn, and insight. Knowledge, skills and competences are defined as expected learning outcomes to be achieved by the qualification holder.

Four classes of award-type have been determined: major, minor, special-purpose and supplemental. This is to ensure that the framework is capable of recognising all types and sizes of learning achieved by a learner.

The learning outcomes approach was central to establishment of the NFQ and associated legislation and system reforms. The outcomes are indicators of what a person knows, can do and understands, rather than time spent on a programme. The determinants for the NFQ state that new framework awards are made using learning outcomes. The NFQ is intended to act as a reference point for curriculum development leading to NFQ-recognised qualifications. The framework implementation and impact study (NQAI, 2009a) concluded that a learning outcomes-based approach has been implemented in all subsystems, but is progressing at variable speeds and that the NFQ had a stronger reform role in sectors led by FETAC and HETAC.

Validating non-formal and informal learning and links to the NFQ

There is currently no single national strategy for validation. NQAI principles and operational guidelines for 'recognition of prior learning (RPL)' (NFQ, 2006) continue to provide the current policy and practice framework. Although theoretically possible for all qualifications, only higher education qualifications and further training qualifications (originally under the HETAC and FETAC remit) can be acquired through validation of non-formal and informal learning. As the qualification framework is based on learning outcomes, qualifications acquired through validation of non-formal or informal learning are based on the same standards as formal qualifications. It is also interesting to note as the OECD (Harold et al., 2008, p. 39) indicated 'RPL arrangements in Ireland that lead to qualifications in the NFQ are fully integrated with existing arrangements for qualifications, e.g. they operate within the overarching funding arrangements, rules and regulations on provision, quality assurance and assessment'.

Through institutional change, the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is now in charge to establish updated policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression, including RPL. QQI has advanced a comprehensive policy development programme and is consulting and reflecting on development of several different policy areas, including RPL. Consultation on RPL (consultation closed in September 2013) (QQI, 2013) raises important issues for debate in terms of the potential for a more coordinated approach and need for a coherent national strategy on RPL, however, it is not yet clear if Ireland will move for a single comprehensive system or not.

Also, the recent national skills strategy acknowledges RPL's importance and identifies that the most significant challenge in Ireland for validation relates to upskilling those holding qualifications below levels 4/5. In addition, QQI is exploring (in consultation with providers) that providers are required to submit policies for access, transfer and progression and that this should include arrangements for credit accumulation, credit transfer and identification, and for formal assessment of knowledge, skills and competence previously acquired by learners.

Important lessons and future plans

Implementing the NFQ relies on a broad partnership approach, step-by-step development, and strong support from different stakeholders. The deeper the implementation, the more need for support from different stakeholders.

An international team of experts who prepared the framework implementation and impact study report summarised some key features in developing NFQs (NQAI, 2009a):

- (a) implementation of an NFQ requires time to develop understanding concepts and to promote cultural change;
- (b) importance of stakeholder involvement in all phases of development and implementation to ensure ownership;
- (c) NFQ development is an iterative process, in which the existing education and training system and the framework are progressively aligned with each other;
- (d) it is important to find a balance between implementation within subsystems and cross-system developments;
- (e) need for a framework to be loose enough to accommodate different types of learning;
- (f) qualifications frameworks may be more enablers than drivers of change; alignment with other supporting policies, institutional requirements is needed.

According to the study, awareness among the general public, following a marketing campaign was increased from 18% in 2006 to 32% in 2008.

Irish qualifications framework

NFQ levels	Qualifications	EQF levels
10	Doctoral degree	8
9	Master degree Postgraduate diploma	7
8	Honours bachelor degree Higher diploma	6
7	Ordinary bachelor degree	6
6	Advanced certificate e.g. Level 6 advanced certificate in horticulture Higher certificate	5
5	Level 5 certificate e.g. Level 5 certificate in hospitality operations Leaving certificate	4
4	Level 4 certificate e.g. Level 4 certificate in engineering skills Leaving certificate	3
3	Level 3 certificate e.g. Level 3 certificate in information and communication technology Junior certificate	2
2	Level 2 certificate e.g. Level 2 certificate in general learning	1
1	Level 1 certificate e.g. Level 1 certificate in communications	1

Chapter 3 – Quality Management in the institutions in Ireland

Quality Assurance of QQI

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), which embraces all sectors of education and training, enables qualifications to be compared and recognised, in Ireland and abroad.

The NFQ facilitates individuals in accessing and progressing through education and training programmes including across different fields and disciplines. It also gives assurances that qualifications are robust.

QQI assures quality of further and higher education and training (including English language provision) in Ireland and maintains the National Framework of Qualifications.

QQI operates in accordance with the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 (referred to as The 2012 Act henceforth). Its quality assurance functions are executed and internally quality assured consistently with Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (Part 2). QQI is itself subject to external review in accordance with Part 3 of Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

The following points are indicative of headings which must be addressed in quality assurance documentation:

- Governance
 - Mission
 - Policy and planning
 - Organisational structure
 - Relationships and collaborations
 - Corporate governance
 - Management principles
 - Accountability

- Administration
 - Strategic planning and planning
 - Financial resources and development
 - Human Resources including coordinating performance management and development
 - Facilities and equipment
 - Library and information resources
 - Record management and data protection
 - Management/student information systems
 - Accessibility
 - General learner supports and services
 - Management of legislative and regulatory compliance
 - Communication and cooperation with industry and the public service
 - Communication and cooperation with society
 - Innovation and knowledge transfer services

- Information and Communication
 - Repository of quality assurance policy and procedures
 - Repository of regulations and codes of practice
 - QA-related information on website
 - ICT in the context of programme provision (e.g. Moodle, VLE)

- Institutional Research
 - Supporting institutional review
 - Supporting quality assurance
 - Supporting policy development and planning

- Academic Management
 - Strategic planning
 - Information for students (and prospective students)
 - Coordinating programme development
 - Coordinating programme approval processes
 - Managing assessment and standards
 - Managing validation processes
 - Managing programme re-validation processes (formerly programmatic review)
 - Maintaining and archiving learner records (including awards and diploma/certificate supplement data)
 - External examining

- General Provision, Collaborative Provision, Transnational Provision, Research Provision and for each of these the following should be addressed:
 - Standards
 - Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards
 - Assessment of students
 - Evaluation by students
 - Benchmarking (national and international comparisons)
 - Quality assurance of teaching staff
 - Learning resources and support
 - Information systems
 - Institutional research (analysis of information for QA purposes)
 - Public information
 - Teaching and learning support
 - External examining

In all these areas the aim should be to reflect, observe, plan and act, and then repeat this cycle.

System supports public confidence

The quality assurance system should support public confidence (assuming this is deserved) in the provider (institution) and its capacity to provide programmes to agreed standards.

System ensures that objectives are aligned with mission and strategy

The quality assurance system should focus on how, and whether, the provider achieves its objectives and (periodically) on the suitability of the objectives in light of the provider's mission among other criteria.

Operational objectives should be specified (at every level) and should be aligned with the provider's mission, strategy and obligations to external stakeholders (statutory, regulatory or professional).

System ensures that objectives are measurable

While it is easier to focus on important measurable objectives, particular attention should also be paid to important aspects of quality performance which are less easily amenable to measurement. Important outcomes which cannot be measured directly should be inferred from what can be measured.

Outcomes-related objectives (i.e. product) are especially important but objectives concerning inputs, processes and environments should also be part of any quality assurance system.

Evidence of achievement of objectives

When objectives are set, consideration should be given to the kind of evidence or information required to determine whether or not the objective has been met, and how and where this information will be obtained and by whom etc.

Objectives are worthwhile

Important objectives should be prioritised even where they are difficult to achieve or to quality assure. Quality assurance should not be limited to addressing easily assessed objectives nor committed to addressing inconsequential ones.

Monitoring is included

The quality assurance system monitors key performance indicators and progress against objectives. Some of this information may be required by QQI for its monitoring. HETAC's Provider Monitoring Policy and Procedures indicates that monitoring schedules will be agreed with each provider and will constitute part of the provider's agreed quality assurance procedures.

QA findings are systematically analysed

Any quality assurance system should provide for consideration of the findings of evaluation and monitoring processes and for the development of appropriate responses considering those findings in light of experience (including trends). Systematic formal deliberative and decision-making procedures should be built in to a provider's various evaluative mechanisms, including procedures for oversight of these by the provider's academic committee (or equivalent) and governing body (or equivalent). Layers of moderating and supervisory processes should be in place to enable strategic and coordinated analysis of information at appropriate levels. In all this a balance should be struck between responsibly managing risk and enabling dynamic responsiveness. There should be at least two levels of analysis in any provider.

Quality assurance drives improvement

All provider-owned and external quality evaluations should result in the production of a quality improvement plan which sets out:

- Schedule of actions to be undertaken following internal/external review;
- Identification of persons responsible for actions and follow-up.

Quality assurance should not produce perverse incentives. For example over reliance on satisfaction surveys in course evaluations might allow falling standards to go unnoticed. Any quality assurance procedure will drive change but effective quality assurance systems drive improvement.

Key findings are published

Key formal provider-owned quality evaluations should result in the production of a written report and where appropriate a quality improvement plan. Key findings should be published on the provider's website. This applies to all quality review processes.

Agreed actions are followed-up

The quality assurance policy and procedures should require that agreed actions are implemented and have their intended effect.

Expert panellists are managed ethically and professionally

The externality principle requires the involvement of external, independent experts in provider-owned quality assurance. The provider's quality assurance policy and procedures should include explicit criteria and procedures for the recruitment and engagement of external, independent experts and the formation of expert panels. Independence and expertise should be reviewed each time a person is engaged because both are subject to change. Ethical guidelines relating to the selection and participation of such external experts should also be provided. These should require a declaration of any interests that could conflict, or might appear to conflict, with their role or responsibilities. HETAC's 'Participating in an evaluation panel as an expert assessor: Guidelines' should be used as a reference when drawing up such guidelines – but it does not address all provider-level issues.

QA is fit-for-purpose

Quality assurance should be fit-for-purpose. It should be seamlessly integrated into the normal academic activities of providers, with a minimum of administrative requirements. The quality assurance system should be organised based on the subsidiarity principle. Ultimate responsibility typically rests with the governing body (or equivalent) but all of a provider's staff should be involved in quality assurance. Specific responsibilities should be assigned based on the subsidiarity principle. The quality assurance policy should include an organogram illustrating the various roles. This should demonstrate reporting lines. It should be supported by detailed specifications of roles and responsibilities. It is desirable that quality assurance policy and procedures are designed in consultation with all those involved in their implementation as well as with key stakeholders.

Policies and procedures are documented, user-friendly and accessible

Procedures should be documented so that they are carried out consistently and their effectiveness can be systematically analysed. Documentation should be precise, succinct, clear, consistent and accessible (i.e. easy to find). The policy and procedures should include illustrations describing and explaining the quality assurance feed-back and feed-forward paths, monitoring and key responsibilities including overall supervisory monitoring. It is important that staff and students with disabilities are able to access the quality assurance policy and procedures. A provider should maintain a repository for quality assurance documentation. It may be helpful to include supporting examples.

Quality assurance and improvement is resourced

The quality assurance policy should include a commitment to the provision of adequate resources to enable monitoring of quality in the first instance, but also to facilitate the implementation of the

quality assurance procedures and quality improvement plans arising from periodic reviews of effectiveness.

Provider-owned quality assurance engages with external quality assurance

A provider-owned quality assurance system is most likely to be effective when it is harmonised with its external QA environment. It should be designed to facilitate reflective self-evaluation.

There is a policy for records maintenance and retention

There should be a policy for establishment and maintenance of quality-related records. It should specify retention periods. Typically, records should include items such as: objectives, plans and targets, performance indicators, evidence used in the evaluation of performance against objectives, monitoring reports, evaluation reports, minutes of QA meetings, actions taken (including changes made to the quality assurance system) and the rationale for these, follow-up reports.

Chapter 3.1 - Current distribution of QM/QA tools in vocational schools.

Primary and Second Level Schools are subject to Quality Assurance Inspections by the Dept of Educations Inspectorate Team:

The Inspectorate is the division of the Department of Education and Skills responsible for the evaluation of primary and post-primary schools and centres for education. Inspectors also provide advice on a range of educational issues to school communities, policy makers in the Department and to the wider educational system.

All inspectors are experienced teachers. Many have also worked as school principals, deputy principals or as advisors with school support services. Others have experience in curriculum design and the implementation of assessment practices, in school management and in educational research.

The Inspectorate:-

- Provides an assurance of quality and public accountability in the education system
- Carries out inspections in schools and centres for education
- Conducts national evaluations
- Promotes best practice and school improvement by advising teachers, principals and boards of management in schools
- Publishes inspection reports on individual schools and centres for education
- Reports on curriculum provision, teaching, learning and assessment generally in the educational system
- Promotes the Irish language
- Provides advice to policy makers in the Department of Education and Skills and to the wider educational system.
- Provides oral feedback to the school community at the end of these inspections and provides a printed report which is published on their website.

School Evaluations

External inspections of schools by the Inspectorate have become more frequent, with half of all primary schools inspected in the period 2010-12 and 93% of post-primary schools inspected in 2011

and 2012. As part of the new School Self Evaluation Model, each year all schools are required to self-evaluate one aspect of teaching and learning, to prepare a report on this and to provide a summary report to the school community. They are also required to prepare a school improvement plan outlining the targets and actions they will take over a three-year period to improve practice in this aspect of teaching and learning. Schools were required to provide the first summary SSE report and School Improvement Plan no later than the end of the 2013/14 school year.

Chapter 3.2 – Case study I: vocational educational school (IVET (Initial VET))

Further Education College, Dublin, Ireland

How is your Q/A evaluated internally? What documents are used?

This college follows the guidelines laid down by the Irish national qualifications authority, QQI, and evaluates quality of its operations regularly using the self-evaluation questionnaire provided by QQI. These evaluations are carried out twice a year by a teacher with special responsibility for standards (not specifically for quality assurance).

Do you have an official Quality Assurance Manual ? If so, what reference documentation is it based on or aligned to?

This college has an official QA Manual, but it was developed under a previous national awarding body criteria and is likely to be out of date. The school management intends to review this and have a new document available for September 2015.

Is the planning of lessons and the evaluation of results monitored ?

In theory, all teachers provide the academic head of each subject area with a scheme of work, with individual lesson plan outlines, but in practice the level of detail is scant. More importantly, teachers of classes sitting state examinations submit a report of content taught and progress through the syllabus for each subject.

Results of state exams are carefully monitored and used as a basis for future planning.

Are there standards documents in place to benchmark teachers' effectiveness?

Teacher effectiveness is benchmarked by student achievement, and performance in exams. Students are not routinely asked for feedback.

External evaluation of teacher and school effectiveness is the responsibility of the Department of Education Inspectorate, who conduct Whole School Evaluations (WSE) every 2-3 years.

What other activities are evaluated at specific times during the school year?

Student practical work, projects, work experience and sporting activities are evaluated periodically, depending on the timetable for the cohort of students.

Do you have an online tool to measure quality assurance?

No

Has your school got a website?

Yes

Do you have an online Forum for teachers at your school

No

Do you have a Forum for students, parents, employers

No

Do you keep in contact with former pupils and follow their career progress

This college prides itself in the excellent relationship it has with students and they return regularly to report on their further education, training, employment etc, so in the absence of a formal procedure, the college is generally aware of the activities of its former students.

Do you liaise with other schools on Q/A experience

Yes, because ICS Skills is the national licensee for a network of 800 ECDL training centres, and is responsible for QA in these centres.

Chapter 3.3 – Case study II: VET provider (CVET (Continuing VET))

ICS Skills Training Centre

How is your Q/A evaluated internally? What documents are used?

ICS Skills has established a robust QA procedure, and internal audits are carried out by the Training Centre Manager, according to a self-assessment questionnaire, see below, covering all aspects of the QA policy. Audit results are reported to the senior management team, and if requested, to the Board of Directors.

This is a manual process and the questionnaire is completed in a spreadsheet and saved on the organisation server.

In the event of an audit by the Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI), these internal audit forms must be produced.

Do you have an official Quality Assurance Manual ? If so, what reference documentation is it based on or aligned to?

ICS Skills has created an official QA Manual, based on the QA guidelines produced by QQI, the ECDL Foundation and referencing other certification bodies' standards from time to time. Senior staff are responsible for maintaining the QA Manual.

Is the planning of lessons and the evaluation of results monitored ?

ICS Skills trainers and tutors are contract staff, drawn from a bank of experienced, highly qualified training professionals. Lesson planning is their responsibility and they submit lesson plans and student materials for approval in advance of the start of a course. Inspection of classes is routine, and recorded.

Are there standards documents in place to benchmark teachers' effectiveness?

Trainer effectiveness is benchmarked by student achievement, performance in assessments and feedback form data. Where necessary, trainers are provided with additional professional development, mentoring etc.

What other activities are evaluated at specific times during the school year?

ICS Skills Training Centre operates a year round programme, and is not constrained by the academic year.

Do you have an online tool to measure quality assurance?

No

Has your school got a website?

Yes, www.ics-skills.ie



Do you have an online Forum for teachers at your school

No

Do you have a Forum for students, parents, employers

No

Do you keep in contact with former pupils and follow their career progress

Not directly, but much of the ICS Skills training is on contract to government agencies who do track student progression.

Do you liaise with other schools on Q/A experience

Yes, because ICS Skills is the national licensee for a network of 800 ECDL training centres, and is responsible for QA in these centres.

Internal Audit Checklist

GRADING SCALE	
3 = Strength	There is plentiful evidence to indicate that achievement in this area is above average. This is an example of good practice which should be disseminated.
2 = Acceptable	There is evidence that achievement in this area meets expectations. With further development, this could become an area of strength
1 = For Improvement	There is little or no evidence that achievement in this area meets expectations. Improvement is needed.

COMMUNICATIONS	Comment/Evidence Type(s)	Grade
Are learners able to give feedback on their individual and collective experiences? Are there any barriers to communication?		
Is information relevant to programmes and services consistently available to the staff involved in their delivery?		
Are staff able to contribute feedback and suggestions for the improvement of the programme(s) and associated services?		
Are communications media for supplying information to and receiving feedback from the local community, employers and other external agencies effective?		
Communications – Average Grade		

EQUALITY	Comment/Evidence Type(s)	Grade
Is there an Equality Plan in place? Are staff trained to implement it?		

Is it known if any person has experienced discrimination in access to the programme or services? Is there a mechanism in place for this to be known by the provider?		
Equality – Average Grade		

STAFF RECRUITMENT AND DEVELOPMENT	Comment/Evidence Type(s)	Grade
Are the staff involved in programme delivery well matched to their role and clear about their job specifications?		
Have new staff had access to effective induction process?		
What percentage of staff have availed of staff development over the past two years?		
Are staff development issues regularly reviewed by management?		
Staff Recruitment and Development – Average Grade		

ACCESS, TRANSFER AND PROGRESSION	Comment/Evidence Type(s)	Grade
Do learners feel that they have adequate information about the programmes and its associated services to enable them to successfully participate in it?		
Are the following available to prospective learners on entry to the programme(s)? Clear administration arrangements. Statements of entry requirements and selection criteria. Appeals mechanism.		
Have learners gained exemption from all or parts of a programme/assessment for an award on the basis of recognition of prior learning?		

<p>Have current learner supports/programme adaptations been successful in addressing the needs of learners? Have additional supports been requested?</p>		
Access, Transfer and Progression – Average Grade		
PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT, DELIVERY AND REVIEW	Comment/Evidence Type(s)	Grade
<p>Does the need which led to the development of this programme exist?</p>		
<p>Is there a document which sets out the programme structure, delivery and assessment methodologies? Is this available to learners and other interested parties?</p>		
<p>Have such programme documents been checked and approved by management as being in accordance with Mission, demand, assessment policy and resource availability?</p>		
<p>Are delivery styles used on the programme(s) appropriate to the needs of learners?</p>		
<p>Does the programme team meet to review programme delivery and other issues? Is the information acquired used effectively?</p>		
<p>Are timetables adhered to?</p>		
<p>Are up to date records of learner participation and progress readily available to staff and learners?</p>		
<p>Are the resources necessary for successful achievement by learners of the programme objectives allocated to and maintained on the programme(s)?</p>		
<p>What is the programme completion rate for this programme i.e. what percentage of those who began the programme have attained the target award?</p>		

Are the requirements of Health & Safety legislation being complied with?		
Has this programme been reviewed on a regular basis and the findings considered by management?		
Is there clarity as to who has the overall responsibility for delivery and assessment of programmes leading to FETAC awards?		
Programme Development, Delivery and Review – Average Grade		

FAIR AND CONSISTENT ASSESSMENT OF LEARNERS	Comment/Evidence Type(s)	Grade
Are learners satisfied with the level of information and feedback they have received on their assessments?		
Are learners and staff satisfied with the security and integrity of assessment processes and materials?		
How successful has the reasonable accommodations procedure been in facilitating participation in assessment by those who otherwise, due to personal circumstances, may have been unable to do so? Is there data available on this?		
Are assessors consistent in their marking of learner assessments?		
Has the assessment carried out by external parties been fair, consistent and contributing to learner achievement?		
Are the standards being achieved by learners consistent with the national standards for the award(s) available on this programme?		
Has the results approval process for certification purposes been found to be accurate and reliable?		
Has the procedure for Corrective Action been useful? Has it been effective in addressing non conformances in assessment practice?		

Has the learner appeal system been effective in addressing concerns of individual learners regarding their assessments?		
Fair and Consistent Assessment of Learners – Average Grade		
PROTECTION FOR LEARNERS	Comment/Evidence Type(s)	Grade
Are learners aware of their position in the event of a programme ending prematurely?		
Protection for Learners – Average Grade		
SUB-CONTRACTING/PROCURING PROGRAMME DELIVERY	Comment/Evidence Type(s)	Grade
When programme delivery has been procured through the use of another provider, have consistent criteria been applied and formal agreements arrived at?		
Have the reports submitted by contracted providers and our monitoring arrangements been sufficient to maintain confidence in the quality of procured programmes?		
Sub-contracting/Procuring Programme Delivery – Average Grade		

Chapter 3.4 – ICT tools and/or structured toolkits in managing QAs

SOLAS Results Capture and Certification Request System/Tool

SOLAS, the new Further Education and Training Authority in Ireland, have devised a generic quality assurance system which meets QQI requirements. The Education and Training Boards (ETBs) can also use this system subject to agreement and approval with QQI. To facilitate access to the generic system a web portal was set up and made available to all training centres. The web portal and associated links require on-going maintenance and this is provided by SOLAS.

The Results Capture and Certification Request System (RCCRS) supports the TQAS (Transition Quality Assurance System) assessment processes, QA implementation and the management of risks associated with assessments and certifications. The RCCRS has linkages with a number of other key systems, eg Client Service System, Trainee Apprentice Payroll System, Trainee Apprentice Clocking System and the Card Management System.

The RCCRS certificate request functions are currently integrated with the QQI business system. The integration of RCCRS with City & Guilds certificate requesting system is at an advanced stage. The certification data in the management information system is extracted from RCCRS.

The RCCRS is a browser-based system and can be accessed by all system users including internal Training Centre (Training Standards Office Personnel and Instructors) and external second provider/contracted training personnel and allows users to directly input results into the RCCRS.

A number of manual tasks related to assessment and results processing are in the process of being automated. This automation will impact on RCCRS. The system development work associated with the automation of these tasks is nearing completion.

Assessments and assessments results processing is a high risk activity, therefore a range of supports will be made available during and after roll-out phases.

External Authenticators Panel

External authentication is an independent, authoritative confirmation of fair and consistent assessment of learners, in line with national standards. The requirement to carry out External Authentication forms part of the Quality Assurance Agreement with QQI. The existing pool of trained External Authenticators will continue to be maintained by SOLAS as part of the transition supports.

Chapter 4 – Relationships between the Ntl. QM system and EQAVET

Under QQI's guidelines, Irish Providers are directed to the EQAVET Framework, the European initiative for quality assurance in VET, designed to provide tools for the management of quality in vocational education and training. QQI is an active contributor to EQAVET's work on a European level and their QQI guidelines are designed to be complementary with it.

The EQAVET framework is supplemented by the experiences of providers in the EU who have already implemented quality frameworks aligned to EQAVET to establish and strengthen quality assurance processes. There are common themes, listed below, emerging from the work of these providers which are gathered and disseminated by the EQAVET secretariat:

- Management Culture
- Approaches reflect the provider's circumstances
- A culture of self-assessment i.e. review
- Support for staff training
- Use data and feedback for improvement
- Involvement of stakeholders.

It is expected that providers' quality systems submitted for QQI approval will reflect the EQAVET framework.

Chapter 5 – Summary in Native Language (if not English)

Chapter 6 – Summary in English

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) is responsible for the general education and training system at all levels in Ireland. Other government departments (e.g. the Departments of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Transport, Tourism and Sport) have responsibility for sectoral training. In January 2012, the training division of FÁS, the National Training and Employment Authority, was transferred from the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation to DES. This development was welcomed by many stakeholders on the grounds that it integrated responsibility for vocational education and training under the same minister and paved the way for greater integration of responsibilities and services at local and regional levels.

Vocational education and training in Ireland is seen both in policy and structural terms as being one of the main pillars essential to the building and maintaining of a highly skilled work force operating within a knowledge society. VET policy falls within the remit of several Government Departments (Ministries).

However, it has to be said, that while vocational education and training is a key instrument of social inclusion; in Ireland it can sometimes suffer from the perception that is somewhat inferior to academic education. Stereotypical images of programmes and training are visible in Ireland - yet vocational training and education is often the route through which individuals enter and progress through the education system, change careers or gain promotion through the workplace.

Typically, the earliest age at which a young person can start a VET programme is 15 having first completed their Junior Certificate. They can gain entry to the Leaving Cert Vocational Programme or the Leaving Certificate Applied within the senior cycle at second level, both of which have a vocational education component. In theory, a young person can join an apprenticeship programme at age 15 having completed their Junior Certificate but the majority start at age 17/18 when they have completed their Leaving Certificate examination. Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses as their name implies are an important VET option for young people who have completed their Leaving Certificate examinations and who do not wish to attend third level college. The OECD (OECD, 2010) has pointed out that while workplace training was a substantial part of the curriculum in programmes such as apprenticeships and traineeships, a considerable part of the VET provided by the VECs (now Education Training Boards) included only a limited amount of work experience. The majority of PLC course have a duration of twelve months but learners typically spend less than three weeks on work placement.

Adult Education and Training

Adult Education is set out in Learning for Life - White Paper on Adult Education, published in 2000. A range of education and training is provided by various organisations aimed at upskilling and reskilling people who are unemployed. Providing skills for work is a priority.

In 2013 the Government enacted legislation to establish SOLAS, a new policy advisory, policy-implementation, funding and monitoring body for the further education and training sector. Formally established in October 2013, this new organisation took over the training responsibilities from FÁS (the former national training and employment authority) which has been disbanded (its other functions have been transferred to the Department of Social Protection). SOLAS is not itself

responsible for the delivery of further education and training programmes — its focus is on providing strategic oversight and funding to the providers of further education and training programmes.

In particular, SOLAS has responsibility for funding, developing and monitoring the VET provided by the new network of Education and Training Boards (ETBs) which was formerly provided by the VEC sector, by FÁS training centres and by sub-contractors engaged by FÁS.

In February 2014, SOLAS initiated the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS) project, which aims to establish a comprehensive database on publically funded FET programmes, courses and learner characteristics, including course outcomes (e.g. transition to labour market, where relevant). Although initiated, these data systems are still in development, and data issues relevant to the FET system remain for the moment.

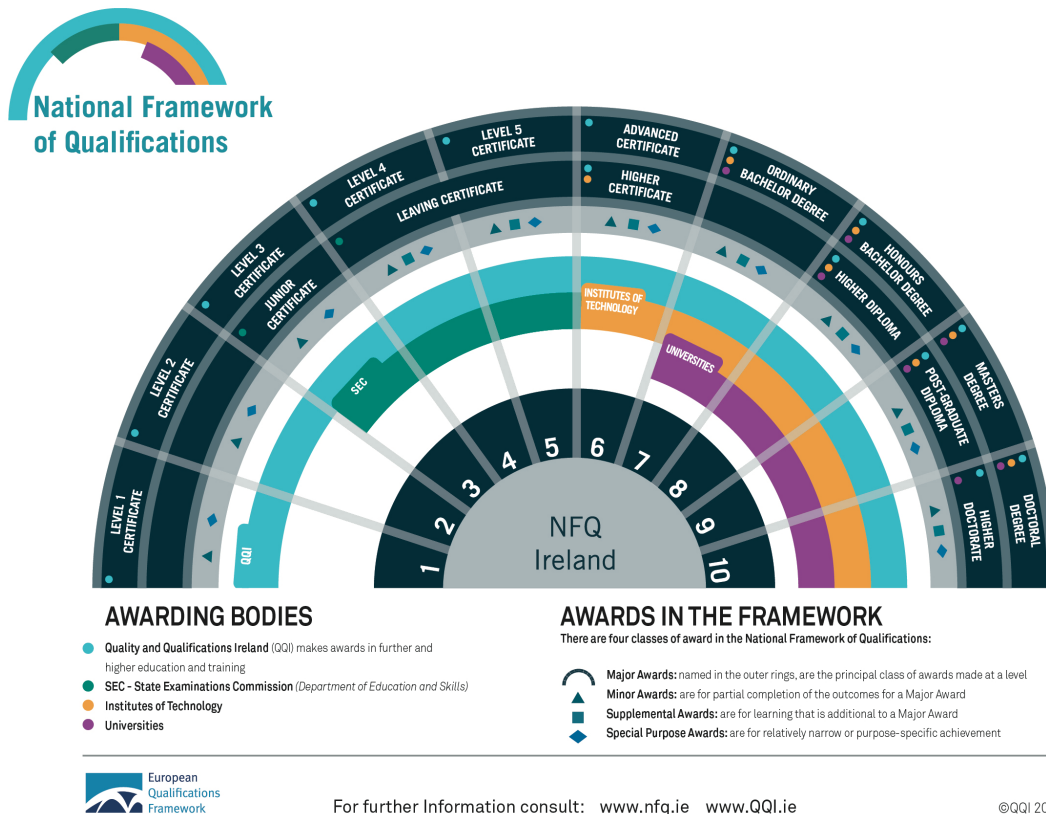
Significant changes have also taken place within the qualifications and quality assurance infrastructure. The Government enacted the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act (2012) to establish Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). This new organisation replaced four bodies that had awarding and quality assurance responsibilities — the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the National Qualifications Authority and the Irish Universities Quality Board. QQI assumed all the functions of the four legacy bodies and is tasked with carrying out a comprehensive range of quality assurance functions across education and training.

The National Framework of Qualifications

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), which embraces all sectors of education and training, enables qualifications to be compared and recognised, in Ireland and abroad.

The NFQ facilitates individuals in accessing and progressing through education and training programmes including across different fields and disciplines. It also gives assurances that qualifications are robust.

QQI assures quality of further and higher education and training (including English language provision) in Ireland and maintains the National Framework of Qualifications.



Ten-level system

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is a ten-level system (1–10) giving an academic or vocational value to qualifications obtained in Ireland.

NFQ levels help indicate how an award can be used for training, education and employment opportunities (see fan diagram).

Each level is based on nationally agreed standards of what a learner is expected to know and be able to do after receiving an award.

QQI is Ireland's guardian of the NFQ system. They are responsible for the quality assurance of providers of education and training. They also have responsibility for the validation of qualifications and also make some awards themselves.

NFQ serves several purposes:-

- It ensures awards obtained in Ireland are quality-assured and recognised internationally
- It is part of a system for comparing Irish and international awards
- It supports lifelong learning by recognising knowledge and skills within a comparative framework even if they are not recognised by a formal award
- It provides a system of establishing eligibility in learning processes for access, transfer and progression
- It recognises awards made by professional bodies

International



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication [communication] reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

NFQ is linked to similar frameworks in Europe. This helps people considering employment or study opportunities outside Ireland.

There are two qualifications frameworks at European level:

- The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area also known as the 'Bologna Framework'. This deals with higher education awards (NFQ 6-10)
- The European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which deals with all NFQ levels including schools, Further Education and Training, and Higher Education

VET training for people in employment

As a general policy, the Government takes the view that the provision of continuing vocational education and training to people at work is primarily the responsibility of employers. Employers are the main source of funds for training for the employed, through their direct funding of in-company training and their financial contributions to the National Training Fund (NTF). The NTF is mainly resourced by a levy on employers of 0.7% of reckonable earnings of employees in certain employment classes and it is collected through the PAYE/PRSI system. Responsibility for the NTF transferred from the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation to the Department of Education and Skills in 2010. NTF expenditure in 2010 was €395m, while the allocation for 2011 was €362m. Some €314m of the 2011 allocation, or close to 87%, was in respect of training provided by FÁS/SOLAS; other bodies which received NTF funding included Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland and Shannon Development. The fund provides for expenditure on training for those seeking employment, training for persons in employment, literacy and numeracy, training for those in the community and voluntary sector and also provides funding for the identification of existing and future skills needs for the economy.

There are a wide variety of non-governmental providers of vocational education and training. Some of this VET provision is Government-funded; as an example, the training division of FÁS/SOLAS utilised private and not-for-profit organisations to deliver publicly-funded vocational training programmes. There are also examples of VET provision with mixed public and private sector funding. Skillnets, founded in 1999, and funded from the National Training Fund (NTF) through the Department of Education and Skills, supports enterprises to address their current and future skills needs. Groups of companies in the same region/sector with similar training needs are funded to form training networks that deliver subsidised training to the businesses.

Resources and supplementary materials

<http://egavet.eu> [external link]

/sites/default/files/partner-files/O1_QA_System_in_European_VET_institutions/O1-A1_Setting_up_a_research_plan/References/challenges-actors.practices_ivet_anc_cvvet.pdf [link into OpenQAsS platform]

/sites/default/files/partner-files/O1_QA_System_in_European_VET_institutions/O1-A1_Setting_up_a_research_plan/References/guidepourelapplicationdecvvetfrench.pdf [link into OpenQAsS platform]

/sites/default/files/partner-files/O1_QA_System_in_European_VET_institutions/O1-A1_Setting_up_a_research_plan/References/lifelonglearningspanish.pdf [link into OpenQAsS platform]