

The Implications of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance for Higher Education Institutions – Ireland as a case study

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This paper is heavily grounded in the Irish experience and in particular in the experience of the IOT sector, and while it may not directly relate to your circumstances, the issues it raises may have some resonance with your experience.

First, I would like to put the Irish experience in some context. The past 10 years has seen major change in Irish Higher Education. A rapidly growing economy has seen an increased demand for higher education as well as a growing need for retraining and up-skilling of the workforce. Some key economic indicators are given in Figure 1¹.

See powerpoint presentation for figure 1

Figure 1. Irish Economic Indicators

Despite a fall-off in the Birth rate in the early 1990s, an increase has been noted in recent years and this has been accompanied by a decrease in the number of deaths per year².

See powerpoint presentation for figure 2

Figure 2. Births, deaths and natural increase 1950 to 2005

Accompanying this has been an overall growth in population, partly through some small natural increase but increasingly, as skills become short in supply, through a reliance on immigration.

See powerpoint presentation for figure 3

Figure 3. Changes in population and estimates to 2016

The population, in Ireland, increased by 8.1% in the intercensal period of 2002 – 2006. We are becoming an increasingly multicultural and polyglot country. As the Irish Times of March 2006 put it - “from Acholi (spoken in Uganda and Sudan) to Zulu, over 167 languages are now spoken in Ireland”.³

Non-nationals now make up 8% of our workforce (160,000) compared with an EU average of 7.3%. 400,000 persons enumerated in the 2006 census were non-nationals.

¹ <http://www.enterprise-ireland.com/>

² <http://www.cso.ie/statistics/bthsdthsmarriages.htm>

³ Irish Times 24th March 2006

What is remarkable about this is that we have achieved this population mix in less than a decade.

The increase in population is predicted to result in a continuing and growing demand for higher education.

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Figure 4. Projected growth in Higher Education

Public higher education in Ireland is binary and delivered mainly through a system of 7 universities and 14 Institutes of technology.

Both sectors offer awards at Levels 7 to 10 (Bachelor to PhD) of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications, with the Institutes of Technology, additionally, offering programmes leading to awards at level 6 (i.e. the so-called intermediate awards within the first cycle).

All universities and one institute of technology (the Dublin Institute of Technology) are awarding bodies in their own right (i.e. they have it as a result of legislation). The remaining 13 Institutes of Technology have delegated awarding authority from the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. HETAC is the sole higher education awarding body for the remainder of the non-university/IOT sector viz. private higher education institutions and training organisations of the state within the Department of Defence, the Department of Justice etc.

Quality Assurance agencies in the state include

- The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland which is responsible for agreeing quality assurance procedures with the Dublin Institute of Technology and for commissioning external review of the operation of those procedures
- HETAC which is responsible for agreeing quality assurance procedures with the Institutes of Technology and private providers and for commissioning external review of the operation of those procedures

Both of these agencies were set up by statute.

- Additionally the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) set up by agreement between the seven universities, the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Education and Science, agrees quality assurance procedures with the seven universities and commissions external review of the operation of those procedures

The Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN) was established to provide a forum for the principal national stakeholders involved in the quality assurance of higher education and training to discuss quality in a national and international context, to work towards the development of a common national position on key quality assurance issues and to inform the debate on those same issues at European level. As well as the agencies mentioned, membership of the network includes the Irish Universities Association, The Council of Directors of the Institutes of Technology,

The Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA – the representative body of the private colleges) The Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI)

1999 saw the enactment of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act which, for the first time, put the learner, not the academy, at the centre of the educative process and set a legal underpinning for quality assurance, recognition of learning – whatever its source or location – and the establishment of a National Framework of Qualifications.

Coincidentally, 1999 also saw the publication of the Bologna Declaration. While both of these publications meant significant change for Irish Higher Education, the fact that both of them came about at the same time was not unhelpful. It meant that changes required by national legislation and changes proposed through European agreement could be dovetailed.

In an Irish context, national legislation has seen the following recent changes in Higher Education

1. The establishment of the Regional Technical Colleges (which were first set up under local education authorities in the 1970s) as autonomous higher education institutions in 1992 – these were re-designated as Institutes of Technology from 1994.
2. The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 – the main provisions of which include
 - The establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland – charged, among other things, with establishing, maintaining and developing a framework of qualifications for all awards in the State
 - Establishment of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) as the main quality assurance agency for the technological part of the binary higher education system and also as the validating and quality assurance agency for private providers
3. The Institutes of Technology Act 2006. This Act removed the IOTs from the direct control of the Department of Education and Science and designated them along with the universities under the Higher Education Authority to create (as advised in the 2004 OECD review of Higher Education in Ireland) a unified tertiary education system, but one distinguished by binary provision.

Policy changes that the sector has had to implement included:

1. An outcomes based approach to programme design, delivery and assessment
2. Development of flexible modular based programmes
3. A move towards flexible provision and greater interaction with the world of work
4. Greater ownership of quality assurance and quality improvement procedures

5. Quality review and publication of findings.

Let us look at the main structural provisions of the Bologna Declaration and subsequent developments articulated in the Prague and Berlin Communiqués to see how these affected Irish HE and the changes that were occurring within Irish HE.

- 1. The establishment of a system based on two main cycles – undergraduate and graduate.
This was modified in the Berlin communiqué of September 2003 to three cycles - Bachelor, Master and Doctoral.**

As far as Ireland and the UK were concerned, this was a relatively straightforward proposal as higher education had always been built around these three cycles – which led to our ‘gold standard’ awards.

The Joint Quality Initiative compiled descriptors, initially to cover the Bachelor and Master’s awards and added a descriptor for the Doctor award in March 2004. These Dublin descriptors were developed by the Joint Quality Initiative in a series of meetings held in Dublin in 2002-2004. They have subsequently been adopted by the Bologna Follow-Up Group in their proposal for a Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area to the ministerial meeting in Bergen in May 2005.

In October 2004 a fourth descriptor was added to allow for short cycle awards within the first cycle.

In the sector of Irish higher education that I represent this aligned almost perfectly with national developments (Table 1).

Institute of Technology Sector (pre 2004)	National Framework of Qualifications (2004)	Bologna Framework (2004)
National Certificate	Higher Certificate	Short cycle within the first cycle
National Diploma	Ordinary Bachelor Degree	Bachelor Degree
Honours Bachelor Degree	Honours Bachelor Degree	
Master’s Degree	Master’s Degree	Master’s Degree
Doctoral Degree	Doctoral Degree	Doctoral Degree

Table 1. Alignment of awards between the NFQ and the Bologna Framework.

There is good correspondence between the Level descriptors of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications and the Dublin Descriptors – we will come back to this later.

Again it was not unhelpful to the changes that were taking place in the Irish higher education system that the elaboration of the level descriptors in our own national framework and the Dublin Descriptors took place simultaneously. As a result, both developments could be, and were, informed by each other.

A major basis of these descriptors was that they were both constructed in terms of learning outcomes.

Changes that occurred in the Institute of Technology sector at that time required that all new programmes submitted for validation be described in terms of learning outcomes and that all existing programmes be redesigned to incorporate learning outcomes. In all over 1000 programmes were fully rewritten and validated in the first six months of 2004 to allow for the new framework awards to be granted for the first time in the autumn of that year. This was a huge task and staff were, initially, apprehensive. Once they engaged with the process and participated in the workshops that were organised at institutional level, staff indicated that they had learned a significant amount from the exercise - as they were challenged as to why anything should be included and if, when something was included whether they could devise appropriate methods to ensure delivery and to determine that a learner had reached the desired level of outcome.

This had the beneficial effect of forcing the sector to look at its teaching and learning strategies and at how best practice could be developed and disseminated. To this end we secured significant funding through our higher education Strategic Innovation Fund to develop a Teaching and Learning innovation network throughout the sector. The role of this network is to identify and disseminate good practice developed in Ireland and globally. In our sector of higher education we feel we have made a good beginning, but much work remains to be done.

The second major proposal from the Bologna Declaration was:

2. Establishment of a system of credits – such as ECTS and that Credits could also be acquired in non-higher education contexts

In 1987, the National Council for Educational Awards (now HETAC) adopted a policy for single subject certification and credit accumulation to facilitate workforce development and to allow transfer between colleges. The system adopted, the so-called ACCS system, was completely transparent with the then nascent European credit Transfer system designed to facilitate European exchange through Erasmus programmes. The Irish system differed from ECTS in that it was both a credit transfer and credit accumulation system and credits could be accumulated from a variety of sources to a full award. The sector also adopted a policy and developed procedures on accrediting experiential learning to provide recognition for learning achieved in non-formal or informal settings. The currency of this recognition was the credit system.

In essence we had policies and procedures in operation in our sector for more than a decade prior to Bologna. We had standardised on a credit unit as one credit being equivalent to 20 notional hours of student effort. Typically, a full-time student would have accumulated 30 credits in a semester and 60 in an academic year. Credits accumulated towards awards as shown in Table 2 below.

Institute of Technology Sector (pre 2004)	ACCS system	Bologna Framework (2004)	ECTS
National Certificate	120	Short cycle within the	120

		first cycle	
National Diploma	180	Bachelor Degree	180 to
Honours Bachelor Degree	240		240
Master's Degree	60 - 90	Master's Degree	60 - 90
Doctoral Degree	n.a.	Doctoral Degree	n.a.

Table 2. Alignment of the Irish higher education credit system with ECTS.

Over the years the recognition and accreditation of prior learning policies and procedures have expanded and developed. In the early years it was seen as a means of gaining access to higher education and of shortening the route through higher education. It was not possible to gain a full award through RPL. However, the 1999 Qualifications Act changed this. It specifically allows learners to present awarding bodies with proof of their learning and seek that it be accredited at the appropriate level. As a result 2005 saw the first full award at Masters level being granted and 2007 saw the first PhD award granted, both solely on the basis of recognition of prior experiential learning.

3. The Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies.

I should preface what I am about to say by emphasising that I am a supporter of European Standards and Guidelines. I believe that they should not engender fear in anyone committed to improvement of the student experience in our institutions and in enhancing the relevance of our awards to the needs of our learners and of society.

That being said, I have some concerns about whether the Standards and Guidelines, as written, can achieve their stated aims or whether, in an attempt to be all things to all men, their bite, in the words of the former UK Chancellor of the Exchequer and Labour politician Dennis Healy, might be akin to being savaged by a dead sheep.

The Ministers of the Bologna Process signatory states in the Berlin communiqué of 19th September 2003 invited the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) to develop *.....an agreed set of **standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance** and to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies,*

Implementation of the standards and guidelines is intended to:-

- **Improve the consistency of quality assurance across the European Higher Education Area**
- **Provide common reference points for quality assurance for institutions and agencies**
- **Aid recognition of qualifications**
- **Assist mutual recognition**
- Create a register that will make it easier to identify professional and credible agencies
- Enhance the credibility of quality assurance agencies in what they do

- Promote trust between agencies and HEIs
- Facilitate exchange of experience and viewpoint amongst agencies(and other key stakeholders including students, HEIs and employers)

I have re-ordered these to highlight the ones most immediately relevant to institutions.

It is important to assess how the standards and guidelines will facilitate these objectives. How compatible are they with the principle of subsidiarity which underpins EU law? How will they support compatibility and comparability while supporting diversity? How can their adoption be facilitated and encouraged, where national standards are already enshrined in member state legislation.

What is of interest to faculty and staff of HEIs are the benefits that might accrue from implementation of these Standards and Guidelines and the costs that this might entail. If the cost-benefit analysis comes down firmly on the side of the benefits, then it is easier to persuade staff that their effort in implementation is worthwhile.

Before anyone can be convinced, however, we need to be sure that we are using the same language. Even countries which use English as their primary language often have difficulty understanding each other – this was brought into focus by George Bernard Shaw, the Irish dramatist and Nobel Laureate who described England and America as ... *two countries separated by a common language*.

It strikes me that, in this debate, there are four words about whose meaning we must have clear agreement if we are all to adopt the Standards and Guidelines in any coherent way.

Let us start with definitions culled from the Collins English Dictionary⁴:

Standard: an accepted or approved example of something against which others are judged or measured; a level of excellence or quality

Guideline: a principle put forward to set standards or determine a course of action (*principle* in this case appears to have the meaning of the origin of, or theory underpinning, the standard)

Quality: Two definitions are available

1. the basic character or nature of something (e.g. the basis for an academic award)
2. a degree or standard of excellence – especially a high degree

In order to have the latter meaning there must be some agreement on the former

Assurance: A statement, assertion etc., intended to inspire confidence

What is the purpose of **Quality Assurance**?

⁴ Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus (1999) HarperCollins ISBN 0 00 470269-7

The most commonly accepted interpretation seems to be to assure the **existence** and **effectiveness** of policies and procedures that attempt to make sure – in advance – that, at worst, the **expected levels of quality** will be reached.

The American Society for Quality defines "quality" as*a **subjective term** for which each person has his or her own definition. In technical usage, quality can have two meanings: 1. the characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs. 2. a product or service free of deficiencies.*⁵

ISO 9000 has a similar utilitarian definition viz. the "degree to which a set of inherent characteristic fulfils requirements"⁶

Indeed the European Standards and Guidelines document provides little comfort in distilling any unique meaning for QA in European higher education. It states 'Quality assurance' is a generic term in higher education which lends itself to many interpretations: It is not possible to use one definition to cover all circumstances.

Similarly the word 'standard' is employed in a variety of ways across Europe. Despite these difficulties the report proposes a set of standards and guidelines that will be applicable to **all** higher education institutions and agencies in Europe.

As a consequence the standards and guidelines are deliberately generic (general), changeable, and non-prescriptive. Given this it is possible to value the document in the context of 'General Principles and Guidelines' as opposed to 'Standards and Guidelines'.

This in my view is a contradiction of what a standard should be. If there is to be any value in applying the Standards and Guidelines then we must have a clear and shared understanding of what we are trying to do. What is the European benchmark of quality against which policies and procedures can be framed and against which achievement can be measured?

Without this we are, in terms of the European Higher Education Area, operating in a vacuum. There is a danger that, in an attempt to bring along the greatest number of stakeholders, the standards and guidelines could become an anodyne menu of things we should consider doing. If we are to provide common reference points, aid mutual recognition and recognition of qualifications, as articulated in the Standards and Guidelines report, then we need to have some agreed benchmarks.

At a minimum we need to know:

- What are the expected levels of quality
- Should the accepted level be defined by a minimum threshold standard or reference standards indicating the normal level of achievement expected of graduates?
- What measurements can we make to show standards have been achieved
- What procedures should we have in place to address deficiencies

⁵ <http://www.asq.org/glossary/q.html>

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quality>

Implications for institutes can be mined from a careful reading of the text:

Section 1.1 Implications for programme design

- realisation of the EHEA depends critically on a commitment at all levels of an institution to ensuring that its **programmes have clear and explicit outcomes**

Implications for staff

- that its **staff** are ready willing and able to provide teaching and learner support that will help its students achieve those outcomes

Section 1.2 Implications for award design

- the quality assurance of programmes and **awards are expected to include ... development and publication of specific learning outcomes;**

Implications for delivery modes

- specific needs of **different delivery modes** full-time, part-time, distance, e-learning:

Section 1.3 Implications for Assessment Procedures

- student assessment procedures are expected to be designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes and other programme objectives
- be appropriate for their purpose, whether diagnostic, formative or summative

Implications for staff deployment

- be undertaken by people who understand the role of assessment in the progression of students towards the achievement of the knowledge and skills associated with their intended qualifications
- where possible not rely on the judgements of a single examiner

Section 1.4 Implications for teaching quality and staff development

- Teaching staff should be given opportunities to develop and extend their teaching capacity
- Poor teachers should be provided with opportunities to improve to an acceptable level
- Demonstrably ineffective teachers should be removed from teaching duties

Section 1.6 Implications for performance metrics

Institutions should, *inter alia*, collect and analyse information on

- student progression and success rates
- Employability of graduates
- Effectiveness of teachers

Section 1.7 Implications for transparency and accountability

- Institutes should publish up to date impartial and objective information, both qualitative and quantitative about the programmes and awards they are offering.

All of this may be summarised into three broad areas which may expose institutes to significant work, resource and publicity costs. These areas are:

1. The standards and guidelines clearly envision a **learning outcomes approach** to programme and award design. This is not a trivial task where curricula are currently designed on the basis of input or content.
2. **Staff development** is a key element of quality provision as are policies and procedures for retraining and/or redeployment of poor and ineffectual staff. There are significant IR/HR, as well as budgetary, implications that will need to be identified and addressed.
3. **Measurement and publication of performance indicators** is a key transparency and accountability tool, which can be beneficial when results are good but can have serious negative implications for institutions and learners if results are average or bad.

In order to see how institutions might implement the Standards and Guidelines we need to see if there is any commonality of understanding in each of the areas indicated above.

Let us first look at the Learning Outcomes Approach.

Within the EHEA a number of broad expectations in relation to the attributes we would expect to see in graduates have been articulated. These include

1. Descriptors in National Qualifications Frameworks

2. The Dublin Descriptors as used in the 'Bologna' (EHEA) Framework for Qualifications
3. The draft EQF outcome descriptors at Levels 5 to 8

The outcomes referred to in these frameworks are broadly similar and it is relatively easy to relate the level outcomes in them to each other.

For institutions and programme designers, the descriptors function to structure thinking towards defining aims of programmes and awards in terms of learning outcomes.

As a response to the objectives of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, the National Framework of Qualifications was introduced in 2003 by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, as a system of ten levels, based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence and incorporating awards made for all kinds of learning, wherever it is gained. This is illustrated in Table 3. and is based on generic standards of knowledge, skill and competence at each level in the framework and independent of fields of learning – which are addressed in the context of award standards

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8	Level 9	Level 10
Knowledge Breadth	Elementary knowledge	Knowledge that is narrow in range	Knowledge moderately broad in range	Broad range of knowledge	Broad range of knowledge	Specialised knowledge of a broad area.	Specialised knowledge across a variety of areas	An understanding of the theory, concepts and methods pertaining to a field (or fields) of learning	A systematic understanding of knowledge, at, or informed by, the forefront of a field of learning	A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of a field of learning
Knowledge Kind	Demonstrable by recognition or recall	Concrete in reference and basic in comprehension	Mainly concrete in reference and with some comprehension of relationship between knowledge elements	Mainly concrete in reference and with some elements of abstraction or theory	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant underpinning in some areas	Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant underpinning in theory	Recognition of limitations of current knowledge and familiarity with sources of new knowledge; integration of concepts across a variety of areas	Detailed knowledge and understanding in one or more specialised areas, some of it at the current boundaries of the field(s)	A critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, generally informed by the forefront of a field of learning	The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy review by peers
Know-how and skill Range	Demonstrate basic practical skills, and carry out directed activity using basic tools	Demonstrate a limited range of basic practical skills, including the use of relevant tools	Demonstrate a limited range of practical and cognitive skills and tools	Demonstrate a moderate range of practical and cognitive skills and tools	Demonstrate a broad range of specialised skills and tools	Demonstrate a comprehensive range of specialised skills and tools	Demonstrate specialised technical, creative or conceptual skills and tools across an area of study	Demonstrate mastery of a complex and specialised area of skills and tools; use and modify advanced skills and tools to conduct closely guided research, professional or advanced technical activity	Demonstrate a range of standard and specialised research practices and/or materials which are associated with a field of learning; develop new skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials	Demonstrate a significant range of the principal skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials which are associated with a field of learning; develop new skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials
Know-how and skill Selectivity	Perform processes that are repetitive and predictable	Perform a sequence of routine tasks given clear direction	Select from a limited range of varied procedures and apply known solutions to a limited range of predictable problems	Select from a range of procedures and apply known solutions to a variety of predictable problems	Evaluate and use information to plan and develop investigative strategies and to determine solutions to varied unfamiliar problems	Formulate responses to well-defined abstract problems	Exercise appropriate judgement in planning, design, technical and/or supervisory functions related to products, services, operations or processes, including resourcing	Exercise appropriate judgement in a number of complex planning, design, technical and/or management functions related to products, services, operations or processes, including resourcing	Select from complex and advanced skills across a field of learning; develop new skills to a high level, including novel and emerging techniques	Respond to abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge
Competence Context	Act in closely defined and highly structured contexts	Act in a limited range of predictable and structured contexts	Act within a limited range of contexts	Act in familiar and unfamiliar contexts	Act in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs; identify and apply skill and knowledge to a wide variety of contexts	Act in a range of varied and specific contexts involving creative and non-routine activities; transfer and apply theoretical concepts and/or technical or creative skills to a range of contexts	Utilise diagnostic and creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts	Use advanced skills to conduct research, or advanced technical or professional activity, accepting accountability for all related decision making; transfer and apply diagnostic and creative skills in a range of contexts	Act in a wide and often unpredictable variety of professional levels and ill defined contexts	Exercise personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent contexts
Competence Role	Act in a limited range of roles	Act in a range of roles under direction	Act under direction with limited autonomy; function within familiar, homogeneous groups	Act with considerable responsibility and autonomy	Exercise some initiative and independence in carrying out defined activities; join and function within multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups	Exercise substantial personal autonomy and often take responsibility for the work of others and/or for the allocation of resources; form, and function within, heterogeneous groups	Accept accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes; take significant or supervisory responsibility for the work of others in defined areas of work	Act effectively under guidance in a peer relationship with qualified practitioners; lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups	Take significant responsibility for the work of individuals and groups; lead and initiate activity	Communicate results of research and innovation to peers; engage in critical dialogue; lead and originate complex social processes
Competence Learning to Learn	Learn to sequence learning tasks; learn to access and use a range of learning resources	Learn to learn in a disciplined manner in a well-structured and supervised environment	Learn to learn within a managed environment	Learn to take responsibility for own learning within a supervised environment	Learn to take responsibility for own learning within a managed environment	Learn to evaluate own learning and identify needs within a structured learning environment; assist others in identifying learning needs	Take initiative to identify and address learning needs and interact effectively in a learning group	Learn to act in variable and unfamiliar learning contexts; learn to manage learning tasks independently, professionally and ethically	Learn to self-evaluate and take responsibility for continuing academic/professional development	Learn to critique the broader implications of applying knowledge to particular contexts
Competence Insight	Begin to demonstrate awareness of independent role for self	Demonstrate awareness of independent role for self	Assume limited responsibility for consistency of self-understanding and behaviour	Assume partial responsibility for consistency of self-understanding and behaviour	Assume full responsibility for consistency of self-understanding and behaviour	Express an internalised, personal world view, reflecting engagement with others	Express an internalised, personal world view, manifesting solidarity with others	Express a comprehensive, internalised, personal world view, manifesting solidarity with others	Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and act to change them	Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and act to change them

Table 3. Irish National Framework of Qualifications level descriptors.

The architecture of the Irish national Framework is given in Figure 5 .

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Figure 5. The Irish National Framework of Qualifications

A major challenge that has to be faced when a new framework of qualifications is constructed is where to position existing and legacy awards. This is best accomplished by determining ‘best fit’ equivalencies in terms of placement and by deciding that legacy awards cannot, and will not, be exchanged for new framework awards. The positioning of Legacy awards in Ireland is given in Figure 6.

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Figure 6. Placement of legacy awards on the Irish NFQ.

The award-type descriptors for the Irish National Framework of Qualifications were developed by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and published in October 2003. These descriptors are intimately related to the level indicators devised for the Framework. They refer to typical rather than threshold (or indeed maximal) achievement.

A general distinction can be made between generic outcomes associated with all holders of a qualification and specific outcomes associated with disciplines and fields of learning. Both the Tuning project, and the shared qualification descriptors (Dublin descriptors), include generic competences (skills and knowledge) and include attributes such as the capacity to learn, the capacity for analysis and synthesis etc. The Tuning project identified a list of 30 generic competences and has also identified specific outcomes in each of the fields of learning that it has examined⁷.

The outcomes and standards **for individual disciplines** were further elaborated by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council for awards⁸ at each level in the Framework. These form the basis against which programmes are designed. As you move from Framework levels to award outcomes to discipline outcomes and finally to programme outcomes the learning outcomes become more and more specific. An example of this approach is given in Table 4 below.

Level 8 Bachelor (Hons) Degree	Award Outcomes (NQAI)	HETAC Discipline Outcomes (e.g. Business)
Knowledge-breadth	An understanding of the theory, concepts and methods pertaining to a field (or fields) of learning.	An in-depth understanding of the theories, concepts and methods pertaining to the field of business and/or the particular subfield of business, for example: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Management and Organisation; 2. Business and the Economic Environment; 3. Information and Communication

⁷ http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf

⁸ <http://www.hetac.ie/publications.cfm?sID=10>

		<p>Systems.</p> <p>Understanding should be one of emergent critical appraisal. An appreciation of the inter-relationships between business functions and processes.</p>
Knowledge-kind	Detailed knowledge and understanding in one or more specialised areas, some of it at the current boundaries of the field(s).	<p>Extensive up-to-date knowledge and understanding of one or more of the core sub-fields of business, with a developed awareness of the received business environment, social responsibilities and the need for adaptation and change. Demonstrate a knowledge that is integrated across a number of the core sub-fields, in general business degrees.</p>
Know-how skill & range	Demonstrate mastery of a complex and specialised area of skills and tools; use and modify advanced skills and tools to conduct closely guided research, professional or advanced technical activity.	<p>Mastery of specialised business skills in one or more of the core sub-fields of business.</p> <p>Ability to review the literature in a specified field or sub-field of business, to access business data from a variety of sources and to use appropriate qualitative and quantitative methodological techniques for the purposes of primary and secondary research.</p> <p>Ability to write, present and defend material that articulates ideas, insights and analysis, using a variety of business media.</p> <p>Engage in debate in an organisational context, mindful of position.</p> <p>Have a comprehensive awareness and understanding of core recognised professional and technical standards in the particular field of business.</p> <p>Ability to use the current technical language to describe practices in business, or a particular sub-field of business and apply them to structured problems.</p> <p>Demonstrate interpersonal skills of effective listening, negotiation, persuasion and presentation.</p>
Know-how & skill selectivity	Exercise appropriate judgement in a number of complex planning, design, technical and/or management functions related to products, services, operations or processes, including resourcing.	<p>Ability to exercise judgement, to facilitate informed decisions on complex management, technical and functional areas relating to organisations, products, processes and services.</p>

		Ability to analyse business environments and to prepare options and scenarios to aid decision making in a business context.
Competence-context	Use advanced skills to conduct research, or advanced technical or professional activity, accepting accountability for all related decision making; transfer and apply diagnostic and creative skills in a range of contexts.	<p>Ability to analyse, interpret and manipulate data in pursuit of solutions to complex business problems.</p> <p>Ability to apply problem solving and creative thinking across a range of business sub-fields.</p> <p>Capacity to contribute creatively to the process of business development.</p> <p>Ability to integrate knowledge from a range of subject areas and analyse information from a variety of contexts.</p> <p>Critical understanding of the general ethical implications of job roles and responsibilities in a business and wider social context.</p>
Competence-role	Act effectively under guidance in a peer relationship with qualified practitioners; lead multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups.	<p>Capacity to participate constructively, (contribute, collaborate and direct, if so charged), in complex team environments across the core business areas.</p> <p>Capacity to reflect on own practice and to develop an understanding of the pressure of organisational roles.</p>
Competence-learning to learn	Learn to act in variable and unfamiliar learning contexts; learn to manage learning tasks independently, professionally and ethically.	<p>Ability to function effectively in differing business contexts.</p> <p>Ability to act on own initiative to address own learning needs.</p> <p>Have a developed awareness of the need for the continued enhancement of business competencies.</p> <p>Ability to train others in a supervised environment, in an aspect of a specialised or general sub-field of business.</p>
Competence-insight	Express a comprehensive, internalised, personal world view manifesting solidarity with others.	<p>Capacity to be socially responsible and develop a sense of own value system.</p> <p>Capacity to draw complex information together and draw out policy implications.</p> <p>Capacity to reflect on own practice and reorganise skills set in order to produce something new.</p>

Table 4. Relationship between NQAI award level Descriptors and HETAC Discipline Standards.

Unsurprisingly, there are many similarities between the Dublin descriptors and the Irish NFQ award-type descriptors. However, as the Irish descriptors are intended for the recognition of all learning, their scope and purpose is broader than that of the EHEA framework.

In an attempt to verify the compatibility of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area a study was undertaken in 2005, which resulted in Ireland becoming the first European country to verify the compatibility of its National Framework of Qualifications with the Bologna Framework on 8th November 2006.

The coherence of the Irish NFQ award descriptors with the Dublin descriptors can be seen in the Table 5.

<i>Bologna</i>	<i>Irish framework</i>	<i>Dublin descriptor</i>	<i>Irish award-type descriptor</i>
First cycle	Ordinary bachelors Level 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study;</i> • can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study; • HAVE THE ABILITY TO GATHER AND INTERPRET RELEVANT DATA (USUALLY WITHIN THEIR FIELD OF STUDY) TO INFORM JUDGEMENTS THAT INCLUDE REFLECTION ON RELEVANT SOCIAL, SCIENTIFIC OR ETHICAL ISSUES; • can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences; • <i>have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Specialised knowledge across a variety of areas.</i> • <i>Recognition of limitations of current knowledge and familiarity with sources of new knowledge; integration of concepts across a variety of areas.</i> • Demonstrate specialised technical, creative or conceptual skills and tools across an area of study. • EXERCISE APPROPRIATE JUDGEMENT IN PLANNING, DESIGN, TECHNICAL AND/OR SUPERVISORY FUNCTIONS RELATED TO PRODUCTS, SERVICES, OPERATIONS OR PROCESSES. • Utilise diagnostic and creative skills in a range of functions in a wide variety of contexts. • Accept accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes; take significant or supervisory responsibility for the work of others in defined areas of work. • Take initiative to identify and

			<p><i>address learning needs and interact effectively in a learning group.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Express an internalised, personal world view, manifesting solidarity with others.
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Table 5. Relationship between the Irish NFQ Descriptors and the Dublin Descriptors of the European Higher Education Area.

In an attempt to link the Irish Framework of Qualifications with the developing EQF the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland noted ⁹:

- The EQF common reference would also make it possible to link sector initiatives to national qualifications and thus facilitate transfer and compatibility. Linking a sectoral framework to the EQF furthermore implies an acceptance of, and a commitment to, a set of criteria regarding quality and transparency.
- Ireland is one of very few European countries that has introduced a national framework of qualifications. Many issues that other countries will now be considering, such as whether all qualifications can be in a single national framework and thus related to the European one and whether it is possible for higher education and vocational education and training qualification to be at the same level or both to be defined in terms of learning outcomes, have been addressed in Ireland.
- The ‘Dublin descriptors’, adopted within the Bologna process for coordination of higher education, have been used extensively to reflect the 4 highest levels of an EQF.

Annex 3¹⁰ to the Commission proposal presents the overlap between the Dublin descriptors and the descriptors of the EQF.), this is illustrated in Table 6 Below.

⁹ <http://www.nqai.ie/en/International/EQFConsultation/File,942,en.doc>

¹⁰ http://bologna.hrdc.bg/pdf/sem/01_06/supporting/DUBLIN%20DESCRIPTORS.pdf

Qualifications that signify completion of the first cycle are awarded to students who:	EQF-level 6
have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education ²⁷ , and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study;	Use detailed theoretical and practical knowledge of a field. Some knowledge is at the forefront of the field and will involve a critical understanding of theories and principles Demonstrate mastery of methods and tools in a complex and specialised field and demonstrate innovation in terms of methods used Devise and sustain arguments to solve problems
can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional ² approach to their work or vocation, and have competences ³ typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study;	Demonstrate administrative design, resource and team management responsibilities in work and study contexts that are unpredictable and require that complex problems are solved where there are many interacting factors Show creativity in developing projects and show initiative in management processes that includes the training of others to develop team performance
have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues;	Consistently evaluate own learning and identify learning needs
can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences;	Communicate ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences using a range of techniques involving qualitative and quantitative information
have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.	Express a comprehensive internalised personal world view manifesting solidarity with others Gather and interpret relevant data in a field to solve problems Demonstrate experience of operational interaction within a complex environment Make judgements based on social and ethical issues that arise in work or study

Table 6. Relationship between the Dublin Descriptors and the draft EFQ descriptors.

Based on the coherence between these different outcomes descriptors it is possible to align Irish awards with both the Bologna Framework and the draft European Framework as shown in Table 6 below.

Draft EQF Levels	Bologna Framework	Irish Framework Levels	Irish Major Award-Types	ECTS
1		1	Level 1 Certificate	
2		2	Level 2 Certificate	
		3	Level 3 Certificate, Junior Certificate	
3		4	Level 4 Certificate, Leaving Certificate	
4		5	Level 5 Certificate, Leaving Certificate	
5	Short Cycle within First Cycle	6	Advanced Certificate*, Higher Certificate	60
6	First Cycle	7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree	180
		8	Honours Bachelor Degree, Higher Diploma	180 - 240, 60
7	Second Cycle	9	Masters Degree, Post-Graduate Diploma	60 - 120 (t), 60
8	Third Cycle	10	Doctoral Degree, Higher Doctorate	

*The Advanced Certificate is a further education and training award at level 6 and is not to be aligned with the EFQ

Table 7. Relationship between the Irish NFQ, the EHEA framework and the draft EQF.

In theory, this exercise is possible where countries have introduced national frameworks and benchmarked their programmes against that framework. It is important to realise that this type of change is not insignificant. At an Institutional level, designers are faced with very real challenges. Instead of describing what they will teach, they must switch to a mindset that describes what a learner will know, what they will be able to do and how well they know something or can do something. In reviewing a curriculum or in designing new curricula, staff are forced to ask not why they have excluded something but why they have included something.

This, however, is not a mere exercise in description. As well as describing curricula in terms of learning outcomes students are expected to achieve, staff are also faced with the need to revisit the pedagogy they apply.

Recasting programmes in terms of learning outcomes is not a skill that staff can just pick up, but something in which they need to be trained.

This brings me neatly to the second major implication of the Standards and Guidelines i.e. the need for **staff development and staff evaluation**.

Implicit in the Standards and Guidelines is the fact that staff will have to be capable of delivering a learning outcomes based curriculum and will be able and willing to provide the type of support students will need to derive maximum benefit from this type of learning and assessment of learning.

For many staff this will mean re-training and for new staff it will involve significant induction training.

It is instructive to note that conflicting definitions of a pedagogue include both educator and dogmatist. The latter, to some extent, underscores an approach to higher education that saw the academy as pre-eminent and those who worked in it as close to infallible. Concepts of autonomy and academic freedom were frequently used as a cloak that could be drawn over a less than satisfactory student experience.

The world has changed. The learner is now, rightly, at the heart of the educative process. Internationalisation and globalisation of educational opportunities mean that the learner is no longer limited to a singular local or national choice of provider.

Staff no longer occupy a singular role in which they tell learners what they think they need to know. Staff now need to see themselves in roles which facilitate learning in their students – the definition of education has moved from imparting knowledge to its true meaning of leading or drawing out learning from students. This requires an entirely new skill set.

Higher education staff are generally employed for their specialised subject knowledge and/or research ability. They are, less frequently, only employed for their teaching skills. This is at the root of many of the less than satisfactory teaching and learning models embedded, but fortunately changing, in our HE establishments. If we are to have staff who are ready, willing and able to support students achieve the learning outcomes we require of

them – as outlined in the Standards and Guidelines document – then we must provide appropriate and effective training and development opportunities for them.

Teaching as they were taught, learning by ‘sitting next to Nellie’, or ‘picking it up as you go along’ will no longer suffice. The ‘it never did me any harm’ attitude is all very well for those who survived the experience, but is of cold comfort to those the system failed. It is instructive that a measure of the value of a programme used to be how many people failed it – a high failure rate was synonymous with a good but difficult programme. Such a high failure rate was never taken as a measure of poor teaching – which, in many cases, it was.

Allied to this is the fact that if staff are to be trained or retrained, we must have in place a system that allows them or their employer identify and address deficiencies. This has significant Industrial Relations implications.

In Ireland, Section 28 of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act requires

(a) evaluation at regular intervals and as directed from time to time by the Council (HETAC) of the programme of education and training concerned, including evaluation by persons who are competent to make national and international comparisons in that respect,

(b) evaluation by learners of that programme, and

(c) evaluation of services related to that programme,

and shall provide for the publication in such form and manner as the Council thinks fit of findings arising out of the application of those procedures.

In practical terms and in terms of developing a collective agreement with our main teachers’ union, duties of teaching staff in respect of Quality assurance are listed as follows

- All staff will participate in a professional manner, appropriate to their individual and collective responsibilities in the quality assurance activities of the higher education institutions.
- Duties of Academic Staff in Relation to Quality Assurance and Enhancement in addition to Lecturing, include the following:-
 - Course Development
 - Course Promotion
 - Course Committee Meetings
 - Course Operation
 - Examination Boards
 - Periodic Course Review
 - Facilitation and Interpretation of Academic Reviews
 - Facilitation and Interpretation of Student Review and Feedback
 - Institutional Review

Allied to this, under the National Sustaining Progress Agreement, the Institutes implement a structured performance management and development system (PMDS). Its aim is to ensure alignment of individual and group performance and effort with each Institute’s goals and

strategies. This involves individual annual performance targets being set, reviewed and then individual development needs agreed and addressed through a programme of development.

Marrying institutional obligations under quality review with collective agreements on quality and performance has provided us with tools which will enable improvement in programme design and delivery and an enhancement of the learning experience of the student. All, however, is not sweetness and light. The constraints of the current teaching contracts and national agreements on the nature of the academic year curtail the freedom of institutional managers in identifying, redeploying or radically retraining underperforming or supernumerary staff. While we are looking in the right direction, we have, as yet, only taken the first few faltering steps.

The third major implication I mentioned earlier is the measurement and publication of performance indicators.

I see this as a key transparency and accountability tool.

It is still very difficult to get meaningful data on the performance of individual higher education institutions. This appears to be generated largely as a result of a fear of ‘league tables’ of HEIs that would show some institutions in a bad light. Nobody wants to be at the bottom of the list or deemed so insignificant that they don’t even make the list.

In Ireland and the UK all higher education institutions are ranked each year in the Sunday Times list – and, while there would be some disquiet at the metrics used, those who appear at the top of the list rapidly lose their antipathy as they exploit, to the full, the title of being the best in the country. For example, as part of its marketing strategy one of our bigger Institutes of Technology proclaims in publicity material and on its web site that “Cork Institute of Technology is one of Ireland's major higher education institutions and was named as Institute of Technology of the Year in The Sunday Times University Guide 2006”. Winners of the title in previous years similarly exploited its marketing potential but remain silent about their slippage down the list in subsequent years.

As it is difficult to gain meaningful information, both nationally and internationally, through which institutions can be compared, quite a number of international league tables have sprung up which attempt to rank higher education institutions. These include the Newsweek top 100 Global Universities, The Times Higher World University Rankings and the famous, or infamous – depending on your position or even appearance in the rankings –Shanghai Jao Tong University Ranking.

All of these rankings are heavily weighted on the side of research output and international standing of researchers on the faculty. Unsurprisingly, given the nature of the metrics American universities dominate the top places.

None of them seem overly concerned with undergraduate students or the fitness for purpose of the type of education they receive. As a result, application of the Standards and Guidelines will have little effect on the international standing of institutions that apply them.

Times Higher Education Supplement	Newsweek	Shanghai Jao Tong University Ranking
1. Research quality (60%)	1. The number of highly-cited researchers in various academic fields	1. Alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals (10%)

2. Graduate employability (10%)	2. The number of articles published in Nature and Science	2. Staff of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals (20%)
3. "International outlook" (10%)	3. The number of articles listed in the ISI Social Sciences and Arts & Humanities indices (Total for 1 -3 = 50%)	3. Highly cited researchers in 21 broad subject categories (20%)
4. Student/faculty ratio (20%)	4. The percentage of international faculty	4. Articles published in Nature and Science (20%)
	5. The percentage of international students	5. Articles in Science Citation Index-expanded, Social Science Citation Index, and Arts & Humanities Citation Index (20%)
	6. Citations per faculty member (using ISI data)	6. Academic performance with respect to the size of an institution (10%)
	7. The ratio of faculty to students (Total for 4 -7 = 40%)	
	8. Library holdings (number of volumes) (Total = 10%)	

Table 8: Criteria used for international rankings of universities

A criticism that may be levelled at the Standards and Guidelines is that - in their mechanistic approach – particularly in their clear requirement for articulating learning outcomes – that they are prescribing the nature of a university. The emphasis is more clearly aligned to the John Henry Newman concept of a university as the educator, providing students with a solid foundation for their future professional work and development than in with the less utilitarian Humboldtian concept of a university that places research at the forefront and has little truck with the type of applied knowledge and technical skills that are required for certain trades and professions.

I am not precious about these distinctions. I see a role for both philosophies in a binary tertiary education system – such as that of Ireland.

In my sector of Higher Education, we are used to publication of reports on, and public scrutiny of, our performance. Among these are:

- 1) Publication of Strategic plans (against which we can be measured)
- 2) Publication of Annual Reports (of key performance indicators)
- 3) Public scrutiny of accounts by the Comptroller and Auditor General's Office
- 4) Accountability through hearings of the Public Accounts Committee of the State (Rectors are obliged to attend public hearings every two years)
- 5) Publication of Institutional evaluation in relation to delegated authority to make awards
- 6) Publication of Quality Reviews
- 7) Publication of First Destinations reports of graduates
- 8) Publication of Retention and Completion reports

We are also governed by the Freedom of Information Act, so prior publication by us of both the positive and negative aspects of our performance gives us some control of the narrative and emphasis. Left to their own devices the Irish media would spin such information to the benefit of their circulation, but in many cases, to the detriment of the standing of the institution. Openness, in such circumstances is a powerful defence – publicising that we have identified a

problem and how we are going to solve it takes the sting out of any further media exploitation of the issue.

For the Irish Institutes of Technology, therefore, this recommendation in the Standards and Guidelines holds no fear. We welcome its inclusion as such publication would give all higher education institutions some chance to benchmark their performance against that of their peers.