Qualifications, Quality Assurance and Accountability in Irish higher education

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Some background

- The vast majority of higher education students in Ireland attend public institutions

- "university" is a legally-regulated term in Ireland

- Ireland is a common law jurisdiction (Bologna is 'soft law')

- Irish universities enjoy significant levels of autonomy

Quality Assurance and Qualifications

IUQB
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QUALITY BOARD

Bologna (EHEA) Process involves:

- European Quality Assurance Standards linked to national quality assurance systems (subsidiarity principle)

- 3 cycle degree system

- A Framework of Qualifications compatible with national Qualifications Frameworks (subsidiarity principle)

- Diploma Supplement

Major achievement of the Bologna Process

- *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) – May 2005
  - Standards for Internal QA within HEIs
  - Standards for External QA of HEIs
  - Standards for QA of external QA agencies

- Permitted the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) – March 2008
  - list of quality assured external quality assurance agencies 'operating' in Europe

Quality Assurance by Peer Review in Irish universities

- Internal QA mechanisms (university organised)
  - Annual (Subjects/Programmes) –'External' examiners
  - Periodic (Academic Units) – mandatory review of academic (and support) units

- External QA mechanisms (accreditation body/QA agency)
  - Periodic (Programmes) - Accreditation of study programmes in the practice/regulated professions by private and governmental bodies
  - Periodic (Institutional) – Review (audit) of the effectiveness of QA procedures by IUQB

National Framework of Qualifications

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) shall:

"establish and maintain a framework, being a framework for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State, based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners"

Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999

National Framework of Qualifications

2003

- 10 levels, based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence, which incorporates awards made for all kinds of learning, wherever it is gained

- School, further education and higher education awards all included

- Qualifications in the NFQ are quality assured whereby the programme that a student is undertaking, and the provider offering the qualification, is reviewed internally and externally.

National Framework of Qualifications

'qualitative' learning outcomes
(at the level of the individual student)

- KNOWLEDGE
  - breadth, kind

- KNOW-HOW and SKILL
  - range, selectivity

- COMPETENCE
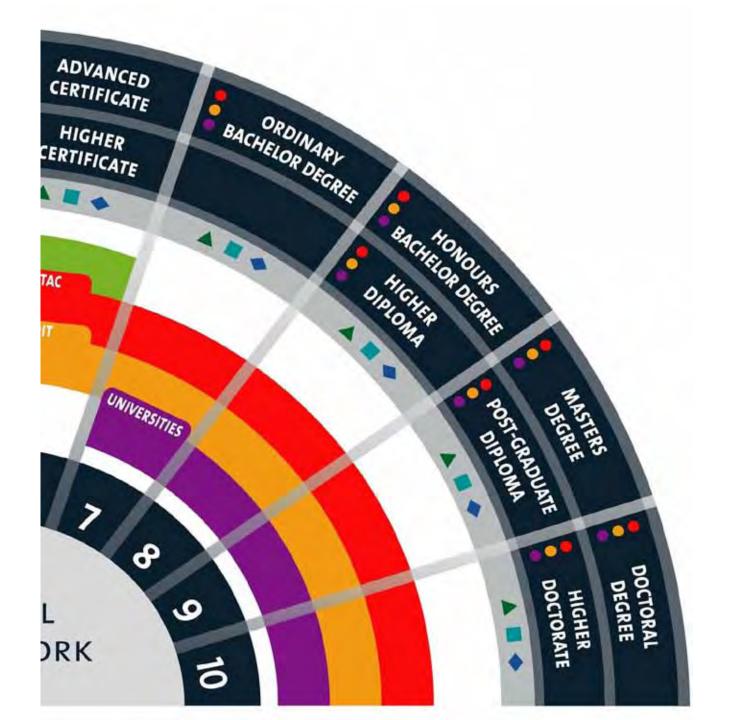 - context, role, learning to learn, insight

National Framework
of Qualifications
Creatoíbre Náisiúnta na gCáilíochtaí

10-LEVEL FRAMEWORK

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

LEVEL 1 CERTIFICATE
LEVEL 2 CERTIFICATE
LEVEL 3 CERTIFICATE
JUNIOR CERTIFICATE
LEVEL 4 CERTIFICATE
LEVEL 5 CERTIFICATE
LEAVING CERTIFICATE
ADVANCED CERTIFICATE
HIGHER CERTIFICATE
ORDINARY BACHELOR DEGREE
HONOURS BACHELOR DEGREE
HIGHER DIPLOMA
MASTERS DEGREE
POST-GRADUATE DIPLOMA
HIGHER DOCTORATE
DOCTORAL DEGREE

FETAC
SEC
HETAC
DIT
UNIVERSITIES

KEY

- FETAC - Further Education and Training Awards Council
- SEC - State Examinations Commission *(Department of Education & Science)*
- HETAC - Higher Education and Training Awards Council
- DIT - Dublin Institute of Technology
- Universities

AWARDS IN THE FRAMEWORK

There are four types of award in the National Framework of Qualifications:

- Major Awards: are the principal class of awards made at a level
- Minor Awards: are for partial completion of the outcomes for a Major Award
- Supplemental Awards: are for learning that is additional to a Major Award
- Special Purpose Awards: are for relatively narrow or purpose-specific achievement

ADVANCED
CERTIFICATE

HIGHER
CERTIFICATE

ORDINARY
BACHELOR DEGREE

HONOURS
BACHELOR DEGREE

HIGHER
DIPLOMA

MASTERS
DEGREE

POST-GRADUATE
DIPLOMA

DOCTORAL
DEGREE

HIGHER
DOCTORATE

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NFQ sub strand

Knowledge - breadth

- **Bachelors**
  - An understanding of the theory, concepts and methods pertaining to a field (or fields) of learning

- **Masters**
  - A systematic understanding of knowledge, at, or informed by, the forefront of a field of learning

- **Doctorate**
  - A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of a field of learning.

How does the Irish NFQ relate to the Bologna (EHEA) Framework?

Irish NFQ	EHEA Framework
Ordinary Bachelors – Level 7 Honours Bachelors – Level 8	Cycle 1
Masters – Level 9	Cycle 2
PhD – level 10	Cycle 3

How is the NFQ 'enforced'?

- All Irish universities have placed their major awards (B, M, D) in the Framework by agreement with the NQAI

- Involved (re-)framing all programmes in terms of learning outcomes

- This must involve an ongoing process of internal and external quality assurance

How is the NFQ 'enforced'?

QA elements

Internal QA (university organised)

- Ex ante accreditation of new programmes
- Annual monitoring (by external examiners)
- Periodic review of programmes at academic unit level

External Review (NQAI)/QA Audit (IUQB)

- Review of Framework Implementation currently taking place
- Will also be considered in IUQB institutional audits

Quality and Accountability in Irish universities

Annual external examiners reports to Institution

- Report on whether stated learning outcomes are being achieved (e.g. by oral examination of a selection of graduands)
- Report on whether programme design and assessment procedure is fit for purpose to achieve intended learning outcomes

Quality and Accountability in Irish universities

- External Examiner Reports are sent to institution, are not published but are made available to reviewers conducting periodic (c. 5 yearly) reviews of academic units (and associated study programmes)

- Reviews of academic (and support) units are public, mandatory, internal QA exercises, resulting in findings and recommendations for improvement

- Review Group Reports are published on university websites and are also made available on IUQB website

Quality and Accountability in Irish universities

IUQB conducts a 5 yearly audit of the effectiveness of (internal) QA procedures in Irish universities

- Compliance with Universities Act (periodic reviews of university academic and support units, including publication of reports and implementation of recommendations)

- Consistency with Part 1 of ESG

- Verification that internal QA procedures take account of the NFQ (verification of intended learning outcomes)

Part 1 of ESG

Internal Quality Assurance within Higher Education Institutions

- Policy and procedures for QA
- Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards
- Assessment of students
- QA of teaching staff
- Learning resources and student support
- Information systems
- Public information

Upcoming Challenges

Merging of

- IUQB (university QA body)
- HETAC (non university higher education QA and awards body)
- FETAC (further education QA and awards body)
- NQAI (Custodian of national framework of qualifications)

Upcoming Challenges

- Avoiding an inappropriate 'one size fits all' QA model
- Reconciling elements of 'mission-based' and 'standards-based' evaluation
- Balancing elements of self- and external regulation
- Recognising different levels of maturity in the HE system
- Making public information on QA more comparable and understandable
- Verification of some learning outcomes can only be ascertained some time after graduation