



Learning outcomes in Irish Higher Education – Implementing the National Framework of Qualifications

Bryan Maguire
Higher Education and Training Awards Council

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➤ *We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall get a living plant. A national system of education is a living thing, the outcome of forgotten struggles and difficulties, and “battles of long ago”. It has in it some of the secret workings of national life.*

–Ml. Sadler



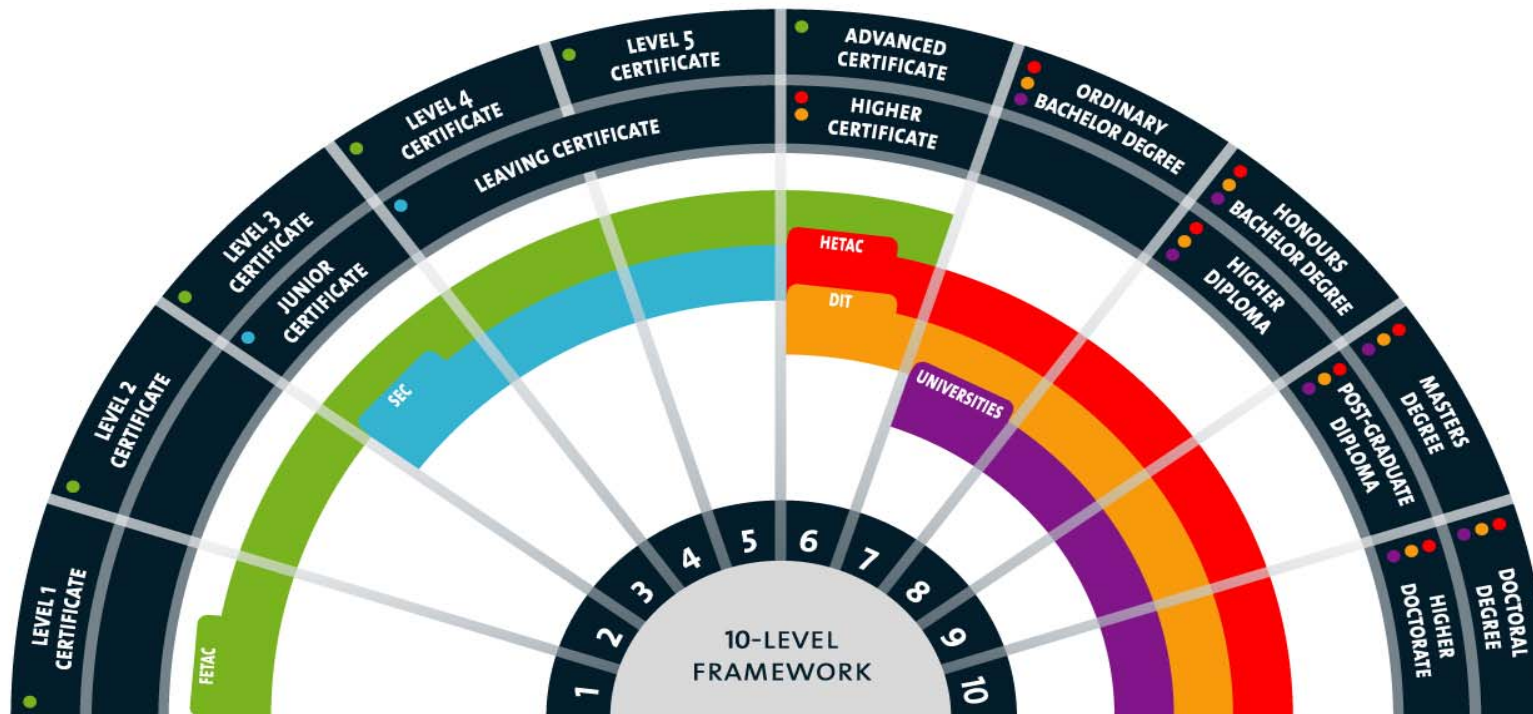
The Framework in outline

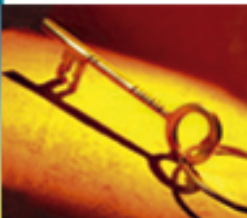
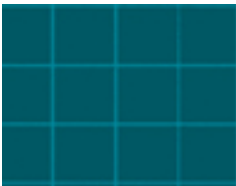
- architecture: Levels, Award-types, Named Awards
- a structure of 10 levels
- level indicators
- 10 level grid of indicators, defined in terms of 8 dimensions of knowledge, know-how & skill and competence ('sub-strands')

AWARDS IN THE FRAMEWORK

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
- new Framework awards





National Framework of Qualifications



EQF levels	EHEA Framework (Bologna)	NFQ Levels	NFQ Major Award-types
1		1	Level 1 Certificate
2		2	Level 2 Certificate
3		3	Level 3 Certificate, Junior Certificate
4		4	Level 4 Certificate, Leaving Certificate
5		5	Level 5 Certificate, Leaving Certificate
6	Short Cycle within First Cycle First Cycle	6	Advanced Certificate (FET award); Higher Certificate (HET award)
7	Second Cycle	7	Ordinary Bachelors Degree
8	Third cycle	8	Honours Bachelor Degree, Higher Diploma
		9	Masters Degree, Post-Graduate Diploma
		10	Doctoral Degree, Higher Doctorate





The Framework: blueprint for change

- a new concept of an ‘award’:
an award is a recognition of learning outcomes (rather than a recognition of participation in a programme or in any particular learning process)
- many new awards, new titles, new terminology
- not a compendium of existing awards
- not just a mapping of relationships between existing awards
- no distinction made between ‘education’ and ‘training’
- one system shared by all sectors of education and training – schools, VET, further education, higher education



Developing the Framework

- consultation, research and development, 2001-2003
- National Framework of Qualifications launched in October 2003
- new system of awards in higher education and training, introduced July 2004
- new system of awards for Further Education and Training (VET), introduced summer 2006
- alignment of Irish framework (HE) with EHEA Bologna framework, 2006
- referencing of Irish framework to EQF, June 2009
- study on Implementation and Impact of the Framework, 2009



Implementation and Impact

- **Framework implementation and impact study September 2009**
- **Broad satisfaction with framework**
 - No demand for revision or abandonment - It's a "keeper"
- **Growing awareness of framework but significant gaps**
 - Educators, policy makers, learners, employers, general public
- **Use as policy tool**
 - Planning, legislation, regulation
- **Use as guidance tool for learners**
- **Use as curriculum development tool**
 - Very varied across sectors, institutions, fields of learning



Implementation and Impact

- “Chapter 4 concerns learning outcomes and cultural change in education and training. This chapter reinforces the point that the introduction of learning outcomes underpins a radical shift in teaching and learning from inputs to outputs. The extent to which this shift has occurred is unclear. Although different strategic approaches have been and are being taken to the introduction of learning outcomes, there appears to be a common lag in implementation between the administrative centres within awarding bodies and institutions and those engaged in teaching, training and assessment. This is not unexpected given the short period since the Framework was introduced. The key issues emerging from the Study inputs concern the contested nature of learning outcomes, the need for on-going debate within and across sectors, raising awareness and the need to work through the implications for and alignment with assessment practice.”



Implementation and Impact - recommendations

- 12. The Framework underpins a deep, long-term cultural shift in teaching and learning from an inputs-based approach to an outcomes-based one. The Qualifications Authority, awarding bodies, institutions and providers should continuously support and monitor this process. The alignment of assessment processes with teaching and learning will similarly take time and requires continued attention and support by the relevant bodies.
- 13. As the concepts and use of learning outcomes are contested and subject to differing interpretations, the Qualifications Authority should facilitate on-going debate on them. This debate should be cognisant of the different interpretations and applications of learning outcomes internationally. All constructive contributions to this debate should be welcomed.



HEI response

- **Technological sector**
 - Implemented quickly – HETAC as regulator
 - Accepted, and ultimately welcomed, as addressing a range of issues in a comprehensive fashion – e.g. Bologna, flexibility, curriculum reform, learner centeredness, recognition
- **University sector**
 - Slower implementation
 - More decentralised structures & stronger impacts from other factors
 - Little or no active resistance – benefits welcomed



Technological sector response

- Tradition of external accreditation of programmes (HETAC) and considerable standardisation of methodology and documentation
- Transition mandated in short timeframe - three months
- Every programme team expressed its programme outcomes in terms of the substrands of knowledge skills and competence required in the national framework and compared these to the generic descriptor for the award
- Defects were reemdiied by programme modifications
- Each institution carried out its own validation exercise
- National review teams audited institutional procedures for validation
- 976 programmes validated



The novelty of Learning Outcomes

- In Molière's play *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, Monsieur Jourdain asks something to be written in neither verse nor prose. A philosophy master says to him, "Sir, there is no other way to express oneself than with prose or verse". Jourdain replies, "By my faith! For more than forty years I have been speaking prose without knowing anything about it, and I am much obliged to you for having taught me that."



Reaction on the ground in technology sector

- Top-down national mandate to institutions
- Building on local programme-level disciplinary understanding and pedagogy
- Has Prof Jourdain been using learning outcomes all his teaching life without knowing it?
- There is a community of practice in each of these programmes which has implicit learning outcomes
- Various levels of resistance - ideological, industrial relations, pedagogical, busyness, ambivalence of institutional leaders
- Engagement widespread - sense of urgency
- Made the framework very tangible, very quickly



National
Framework
of Qualifications

Creaitoire Náisiúnta na gCáilíochtaí

Further steps - technology sector

- Programmatic review and revalidation
- Seeping down into modular level
- National standards for 6 broad fields of study e.g. science, business
- Associated with greater institutional autonomy
- Pedagogical change slower
- More formal staff development on writing learning outcomes
- Assessment and standards - 2009



Assessment & Standards - 2009

- “Learner assessment (specifically the assessment of learning) means inference (e.g. judgement or estimation or evaluation) of a learner’s knowledge, skill or competence by comparison with a standard based on appropriate evidence. Self-assessment is included in this.”



Principles

- Learners are responsible for demonstrating their own learning achievement
- Assessment supports standards based on learning outcomes
- Assessment promotes and supports both effective learning and teaching
- Assessment procedures are credible
- Assessment methods are reviewed and renewed as necessary to adopt to evolving requirements
- Learners should be well informed about how and why they are assessed



Guidelines

- **Programme assessment strategies should be produced for each programme and module assessment strategies for each of its constituent modules**
 - Link a programme's assessment instruments (summative and formative, including continuous assessment and repeat assessment) to the minimum intended programme learning outcomes as well as any intended module and stage learning outcomes
 - Describe and provide a rationale for the choice of assessment tasks, criteria and procedures. It should also address their fairness and consistency, specifically their validity, reliability and authenticity
 - Describe any special regulations
 - Regulate, build upon and integrate the module assessment strategies and (where used) stage assessment strategies)



Assessment strategies

- Provide contingent strategy for cases where learners claim exemption from modules, including for the recognition of prior learning
- Match the programme's assessment instruments to the requirement of the institutional grading system
- Ensure that the programme's continuous assessment workload is appropriately balanced
- Relate to the programme's teaching and learning strategy
- Should be plainly written and communicated at the start of a programme to learners and all those involved with teaching and assessment
- A clear assessment strategy can complement a statement of intended learning outcomes and aid its interpretation



University sector implementation

- Gradual, initially bottom-up
- Institutional and unit variation
- Learning outcomes as pedagogic innovation by lecturers in modules
- Some professional schools driven by external requirements
- Little general tradition of external accreditation in many departments - organic programme growth
- Bologna influential



Framework Implementation Network

- **Irish Universities Association (rectors' conference) and NQAI jointly organised**
- **7 universities & 12 linked institutions**
- **Report 2009 - Three parts**
 - Technical aspects of designing and redesigning programmes/awards for inclusion in the NFQ
 - Discipline specific learning outcomes: Some case studies, reference points issues and insights
 - The assessment of learning outcomes



Programme design

- Programme learning outcomes articulated and mapped to appropriate award-type descriptor
- Module learning outcomes designed to collectively deliver the programme learning outcomes
- Credit allocated to award (and modules) within range agreed for award-type
- Appropriate teaching, learning and assessment methodology designed
- Name of award reflects appropriate award-type



Programme design - questions

- When constructing major award, which should be designed first, the programme or module learning outcomes?
- Do all 8 sub-stands of knowledge skill and competence have to feature in the programme outcomes of a major award?
- Do all eight sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence have to feature in every module of a major award?
- Do all 8 sub-stands of knowledge skill and competence have to feature in the programme outcomes of a non-major award?
- Is a programme designed using the Bologna Framework's cycle descriptors the same as using the NFQ level indicators for reference?



Programme design: more questions

- If a programme is designed for inclusion at level X do all the outcomes associated with the programme have to be at that level?
- How are exit points built into a programme designed to be included at a given level in the framework?
- Are the framework level indicators designed to be threshold level indicators?
- How is the ordinary bachelors degree with 180 credits differentiated from an honours bachelors degree with 180 credits?



Sources for learning outcomes

- **Discipline specific**
 - Tuning project
 - QAA Benchmark Statements
 - Professional and regulatory bodies



Sample learning outcomes (Source Kennedy et al.)

- **MODULE IN RESTORATIVE DENTISTRY: (2/7)**
 - examine a patient extra-orally and intra-orally
 - Formulate an appropriate treatment plan based on an understanding of the disease process present and a prediction of the likely success
- **MODULE IN ECONOMICS: (3/9)**
 - Interpret national income and expenditure accounts
 - Differentiate between monetary and fiscal policy
 - Criticise budgetary decisions using economic criteria
- **PROGRAMME LEARNING OUTCOME FOR A SECOND CYCLE COMPUTER SCIENCE DEGREE: (3/8)**
 - Use, create and manipulate large computational systems
 - Work effectively as a team member



Further Information

- University Awards and the National Framework of Qualifications: Issues around the Design of Programmes and the Use of Learning Outcomes. (December 2009)(www.nqai.ie)
- Declan Kennedy (2007) Writing and using learning outcomes: a practical guide. University College Cork (See also EUA Bologna Handbook C3.4-1)
- Jenny Moon (2002) The module and programme development handbook: A practical guide to linking levels outcomes and assessment criteria. London: Routledge
- Assessment and Standards (2009) Higher Education and Training Awards Council. www.hetac.ie



Further contact points

- Framework website: www.nfq.ie
- National Qualifications Authority of Ireland: www.nqai.ie
- Higher Education and Training Awards Council: www.hetac.ie
- bmaguire@hetac.ie