National Framework of Qualifications

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), launched in 2003, is a single framework designed to aid the development, recognition and awarding of qualifications within Irish Education. All awards made in the State by bodies such as the Department of Education and Science, FETAC, HETAC, DIT and the universities will be included in the framework.

Award Levels

The Framework comprises ten levels (1 - 10). Each level is based on specified standards of knowledge, skill and competence, with standards increasing as a learner progresses through the levels. These standards (expressed in terms of learning outcomes) define the outcomes to be achieved by learners seeking to gain awards at each level.

The levels of the Framework most important for universities are those from 7 – 10, onto which university awards can be mapped. The table below outlines the most common major awards at these levels relevant to universities. There are also non-major awards that may be included at each level.

Level 7	Ordinary Bachelor Degree
Level 8	Honours Bachelor Degree
Level 9	Master's Degree Postgraduate Diploma
Level 10	Doctorate

Award Level Indicators

Each award level on the Framework is described in terms of learning outcomes or award level indicators. There are eight award level indicators overall based on three overarching strands of learning - knowledge, know-how and skill, and competence. Within the Framework, the learning required at each level will be expressed in terms of learning outcomes under each of the award level indicators.

The 8 indicators and questions for which they have been designed to answer are (NQAI, 2003):

Knowledge – breadth;

- How extensive is the learner's knowledge?

Knowledge – kind;

- What nature or quality of knowing has the learner engaged in?

Know-how and skill – range;

- How extensive are the physical, intellectual, social and other skills demonstrated by the learner?

Know-how and skill – selectivity;

- How complicated are the problems that a learner can tackle using the skills acquired and how does a learner tackle them?

Competence – context;

- In what contexts is a learner able to apply his/her knowledge and skills?

Competence – role;

- How much responsibility can the learner take, personally and in groups, for the application of his/her knowledge and skills?

Competence – learning to learn;

- To what extent can the learner identify the gaps in his/her learning and take steps to fill those gaps?

Competence – insight

- How far has the learner integrated the intellectual, emotional, physical and moral aspects of his/her learning into his/her self-identity and interaction with others?

The level of engagement with each of the above level-indicators will differ depending on the nature of programme being described.

Implications

The use of the NFQ has implications in many areas of Higher Education. The NFQ, along with ECTS and learning outcomes, is central to the recognition of prior learning (RPL), the promotion of lifelong learning, and supports mobility, with an overall aim to improving access, transfer and progression within education.

The NFQ is also increasingly used as a reference in course quality reviews, to ensure programmes are appropriately positioned on the Framework. Institutional reviews of universities will, in future, also look for evidence that programmes are adequately designed to demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes appropriate to their award on the Framework.

European Qualifications Frameworks

There are two other qualifications frameworks that are of relevance to the National Framework of Qualifications. Similar to the NFQ, learning in both of these meta-frameworks is described in terms of learning outcomes.

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a framework of 8 levels that seeks to promote lifelong learning, and onto which national frameworks can be mapped.

The Bologna Framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is concerned only with awards at higher education level.

Ireland's NFQ has been confirmed fully compatible with both the EQF and the Bologna Framework, meaning that if a programme of study is appropriately positioned on the NFQ, it is automatically mapped onto both the EQF and the Bologna Framework.

National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) levels	Bologna Framework	European Qualifications Framework (EQF) levels
7 8	First cycle	6
9	Second cycle	7
10	Third cycle	8

Designing Awards within the Framework

When designing new awards, best practice advises that programmes be designed using a top-down approach.

Top-down approach

1. Devise the programme learning outcomes, appropriate to the Framework – what it is a graduate of this programme should be able to do on successful completion of the programme.

2. Design module learning outcomes, which will combine to satisfy the overall programme outcomes.

3. Assign ECTS to modules based on learning outcomes and student workload required

4. Design teaching and learning activities and assessment criteria appropriate to the learning outcomes

Occasionally, it is necessary to redesign programme awards within the Framework, and this will more often than not require a bottom-up approach.

Bottom-up approach

1. Review existing modules, module learning outcomes, and teaching, learning and assessment methods, student workload and ECTS, within the programme.

2. Combine existing modules to create programme outcomes.

3. Ensure compatibility of programme outcomes with associated award on the framework.

References and Resources

NQAI (2003), Policies and Criteria for the Establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications,

FIN (2010), University awards and the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ): Issues around the Design of Programmes and the Use and Assessment of Learning Outcomes, http://www.nfqnetwork.ie.

For further and other relevant information and support, visit the Centre for Excellence in Learning & Teaching website Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching - University of Galway and visit the resources located under the Curricular, Design & Innovation menu link.