Learning Outcomes and the Irish National Framework of Qualifications

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The presentation

• The National Framework of Qualifications in context
• How the Framework’s ‘outcomes’ structure was developed and elaborated
• Framework Architecture
• Learning Outcomes Implementation
• Meta-Frameworks and Learning Outcomes
A Framework of Qualifications – why?

- To establish a national policy approach to qualifications
  - Promotion of coherence, comparability and transparency across the entire education and training system
- ‘The single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards’
- An ambitious undertaking: the Framework seeks to encompass the entire spectrum of learning achievements
The Framework – Who benefits?

- **Learners**
  - The Framework clarifies the status of awards and how to progress from one to another

- **Education and Training Providers**
  - The Framework defines the overall standards of awards; it supports the development of education and training programmes leading to those awards

- **Employers**
  - The Framework describes the level of attainment of qualification holders, i.e., what they can be expected to know or do having achieved particular awards
The Mechanism: Learning Outcomes

How is all this to be achieved?
• By means of *learning outcomes*

The Framework
• defines and describes the outcomes, in terms of knowledge, skill and competence, which characterise awards at different levels
• defines the relationship between the levels through these learning outcomes
• positions certain key qualifications at the appropriate level on the basis of the learning outcomes associated with them
The Framework: a blueprint for change

Introduces a new concept of what an award is

- **an award is a recognition of learning outcomes**
- **not a recognition of participation in a programme or in any particular learning process**
Developing Learning Outcomes for the Framework: a dual approach

1. Strong legislative base: Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999:
   • legitimisation

2. Stakeholder approach:
   • consensus-building and consultation

*Dual approach has enabled*

• comparatively rapid development
• implementation across all elements of the education and training system
Learning outcomes: the legislative dimension

Qualifications Authority

(a) to establish and maintain a framework, being a framework for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State (in this Act referred to as a “framework of qualifications”), based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners;

– Qualifications Act Section 7 (a)
Stakeholder Dimension

- To elaborate and develop statutory requirement
- Involved research and development/consultation 2001-2003
- Led to elaboration of 8 Sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence: generic learning outcomes
  - Knowledge – *Breadth*; Knowledge – *Kind*
  - Know-how and skill – *Range*; Know-how and skill – *Selectivity*
  - Competence – *Context*; Competence – *Role*; Competence – *Learning to Learn*; Competence – *Insight*
Sub-strands

• Deliberately eclectic in terms of their intellectual origins
  • Aristotle to other Qualifications Frameworks
  • Enlightenment rationalism to modern psychology
• Had to be acceptable to and usable by stakeholders with diverse philosophies of learning
Knowledge sub-strands

Breadth

• How extensive is the learner’s knowledge?

Kind

• What nature or quality of knowing has the learner engaged in?
Know-how and skills sub-strands

Range

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

Selectivity

– How complicated are the problems that a learner can tackle using the skills acquired and how does a learner tackle them?
Competence sub-strands I

**Context**

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

**Role**

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

Learning to learn

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

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?
Outcomes and Framework Architecture

- Learning outcomes (the 8 sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence) are the essential building blocks upon which the Framework is constructed.
- Do not provide a blueprint for curriculum development or the planning of learning.
- Are a tool for the recognition of learning that has already been achieved.
The Framework in outline

• a structure of 10 levels

• each level based on a range of standards of knowledge, skill and competence

• set out in level indicators

• Grid of 10 level indicators, defined in terms of the 8 sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence
Framework structure – levels
Award-types

• a central element in the Framework concept
• a class of named awards – e.g. Honours Bachelor Degree, or Masters Degree
• one or more award-types at each level in the Framework
• a set of 16 major award-types defined
• each has a descriptor which sets out the associated learning outcomes, again utilising the 8 sub-strands
Classes of award-type

- award-types are defined in four classes
  - major award-types: for a typical range of outcomes at a level
  - also minor, supplemental and special-purpose award-types
- all 16 award-types in the outline Framework are ‘major’
- the Framework will eventually have a variety of award-types at each level
Framework structure – levels and award-types
Named awards

- a ‘named award’ is what a learner receives
- a named award is for achievement in a specific field of learning – e.g. Honours Bachelor Degree in Electrical Engineering, or National Craft Certificate: Electrician (pre-Framework award)
- a named award is associated with a level in the Framework through the award-type to which it belongs
- named awards are developed by the awarding bodies i.e., the awards councils (FETAC and HETAC), the universities, DIT, the State Examinations Commission
Framework structure – levels, award-types and named awards
The National Framework of Qualifications – award-types and awarding bodies
Awards in the Framework

- Included in the Framework
  - Awards made by the awards Councils (FETAC and HETAC, including under delegated authority), Universities, DIT, State Examination Commission (school awards)
  - To be included/aligned
    - Professional and international awards
Use of Framework outcomes by Awarding Bodies: HETAC

- Award-type descriptors adopted as standards on an interim basis
- New standards now developed in certain disciplines
  - Elaborate Framework outcomes for 5 fields of learning
    - Art and Design, Business, Engineering, Nursing, Science
  - HETAC standards used as a basis for delegation of authority to make awards for Institutes of Technology
Use of Framework outcomes by Awarding Bodies: Dublin Institute of Technology and Universities

- Framework outcomes are now incorporated in DIT programme validation processes
- Universities increasingly engaging with Framework outcomes
  - being used in some module descriptors for major awards
  - will be used to facilitate inclusion of minor/special purpose awards
  - will assist in clarification of the positioning of the Level 8 and Level 9 major diploma awards
Bologna Process

Irish Framework does not stand alone or in a vacuum

*Berlin Communiqué, 2003*

- All countries to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile.

- an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area to be developed
**Bologna Process contd.**

*Bergen Communiqué, 2005*

- a framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area established
- Commitment to elaborating national frameworks of qualifications compatible with the overarching framework for 2010, and to have started work on this by 2007.
- Bologna Follow-up Group charged with the maintenance and further development of the framework
- Progress in establishing national frameworks to be reviewed in 2007.
Bologna Framework and Learning Outcomes

- **Main features of Bologna Framework**
  - 3 Cycles
  - Descriptors of qualifications and learning outcomes (Dublin Descriptors)
  - Credit ranges in ECTS for typical qualifications

- **Bologna Framework Descriptors/NFQ descriptors**
  - Verification process underway to align National Framework with Bologna Framework
  - ‘Dublin Descriptors’ compatible with NFQ descriptors
  - Have developed in tandem – similar language and concepts
  - Use of ECTS across Irish higher education system also growing – linked to use of learning outcomes: National Principles and Operational Guidelines for use of credit in Irish Higher Education and Training
Other European Meta-Framework Developments

- European Commission consultation paper on a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning
European Meta-Framework Summary

- In both cases
  - Primacy of the National Framework of Qualifications
  - Quality assurance required in national arrangements
  - Qualifications relate to national frameworks and frameworks talk to each other through meta-frameworks
    - a dialogue based on commonly understood notions of learning outcomes
  - Countries self-certify the link of their national frameworks to European frameworks following established criteria and procedures
  - Process for verifying the compatibility of Irish Framework with Bologna Framework underway
Further Information

• All developments are featured on the website of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland: www.nqai.ie

• Framework website: www.nfq.ie

See also

• www.hetac.ie
• www.fetac.ie