

National Qualifications Frameworks in Ireland and Scotland: A Comparative Analysis

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Paper presented at the European Conference on Educational Research, Vienna, 28-30 September 2009

Overview

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) are two of the longest established comprehensive National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) in Europe. Both are outcomes-based frameworks of the kind which the European Commission is encouraging countries to adopt, and both have been influential in the development of the European meta-frameworks, the (Bologna) Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area and the European Qualifications Framework. Both have been seen as models, or at least as sources of lessons, for other European countries (eg Sellin 2007-08). This paper compares the two frameworks and asks what lessons other countries may draw from their experience.

Methods

The paper draws on the author's participation in studies of the two frameworks. He was a member of the study team invited by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) to conduct the *Framework Implementation and Impact Study* of the Irish NFQ in 2008-09 (Collins *et al.* 2009). The study was based on a background paper prepared by the NQAI, reports from the bodies responsible for implementing the Framework in four main sectors of education and training (ET), case studies of nursing and guidance, submissions from the public and a consultative forum with stakeholders. These inputs are published, alongside the study team's final report, on the NQAI web site (http://www.nqai.ie/framework_study.html).

The paper draws on a series of studies of the SCQF, including an interview- and document-based analysis of its origins and introduction (Raffe 2003), a government-commissioned evaluation based on interviews with providers, users and policy-makers, subject case studies and documentary analysis (Gallacher *et al.* 2005) and a recent review of progress for the International Labour Office (ILO) project on *NQFs: Implementation and Impact* (Raffe, 2009a). This project, led by the ILO in collaboration with the European Training Foundation (ETF), aims to develop a framework for analysing the introduction of NQFs in different countries, to provide an up-to-date account of NQF developments across the globe and to draw together such information as is available about their implementation and impact. It aims to provide guidance for national and international policy-makers, introduction of NQFs, but in the context of policy learning rather than policy borrowing. That is, the international experience should not be trawled for models of transferable 'best practice' to be copied

elsewhere; it is rather a source of the analytical frameworks, ideal types and contextual understandings that may help policy-makers and researchers to investigate the policy options for their own country (Grootings 2007, ETF 2008). The project is based on 18 case studies of NQFs in different continents and at different stages of development, and on the international literature on NQFs. Its first two Working Papers will be published later in 2009. The first (Allais *et al.* 2009) will contain reports on what Tuck (2007) has termed the five 'first-generation' frameworks: Australia, England, Ireland, New Zealand, Scotland and South Africa. The second (Young *et al.* 2009) will explore conceptual frameworks for analysing NQFs. Much of the argument in this presentation is presented in more detail in the author's contribution to the latter paper, which uses the experience of South African and other 'first-generation' frameworks, in addition to those of Ireland and Scotland, to explore conceptual frameworks for analysing NQFs as dynamic entities (Raffe 2009b).

The Irish and Scottish frameworks

Ireland and Scotland are small countries (with populations of 4m and 5m) with relatively cohesive and consensual political structures, a tradition of partnership, and well-organised stakeholder groups especially among education providers. Both have open, liberal-market economies with large, formal but weakly-regulated labour markets. Both have mature education and training (ET) systems with 'anglophone' educational traditions and relatively uniform and transparent institutions. Both have the resources and expertise needed to develop an NQF. At the time their frameworks were launched both countries had already introduced a number of reforms to change qualifications, to develop vocational education and training, and to promote lifelong learning.

The Irish NFQ is not one of the first-generation NQFs described by Tuck (2007) but it is one of the earliest and most firmly established of the second-generation frameworks. It was launched in 2003 under the terms of an Act of 1999. Its broad aims include supporting lifelong learning and cultural change, promoting access, transfer and progression, promoting quality and standards, rationalising existing provision and extending this provision where necessary. It is led by the NQAI, which oversees the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) which award qualifications in non-university higher education and in other post-school ET respectively. It builds on, and extends, earlier measures to reform and rationalise qualifications in these two sectors (Granville 2003). It is a comprehensive, outcomes-based, qualifications-based framework, with ten levels and a number of 'award types'. The NFQ is a relatively loose framework, in the sense that it does not impose tightly prescriptive conditions for the qualifications within it, although it contains tighter sub-frameworks such as the Common Awards System being introduced by FETAC. However, guidelines for quality assurance and for access, transfer and progression are intended to cover all programmes and qualifications in the framework (NQAI 2003). The approach to implementation has varied across sectors, although the NQAI, HETAC and FETAC are to be amalgamated and the emphasis may shift from development within sectors to integration across them. The impact of the NFQ has also varied across sectors. It is greatest in the sector led by FETAC, which is re-modelling qualifications through its Common Awards System, filling gaps in

provision and creating new pathways and progression routes. The framework also has a regulatory role in the HETAC sector, where more powers are delegated to ET institutions. The NQF has no regulatory role with respect to schools or universities. It has had least impact in the school sector, but its close alignment with the Bologna framework has helped it to become established in universities.

The study team's report was published in September 2009 (Collins *et al.* 2009). It concluded that considerable progress had been made but continued further efforts were required to achieve full implementation and impact. It commended the consultative approach taken by the NQAI. Most major awards were in the framework, although some non-major awards had yet to be included, and the introduction of FETAC's Common Awards System was slower than expected. Existing awards had been placed in the framework on a best-fit basis, pending the development of detailed standards for all types of awards and their revision to meet these standards. This process, and the need to retain stakeholder support, had resulted in apparent anomalies, such as the placement of all craft awards at the same framework level despite differences in their level of demand, which needed to be resolved. Awareness and understanding of the framework tended to vary with the practical need to know about it; they were spreading slowly and unevenly through the different sectors and levels of the ET system and among stakeholders. There was similar variation in the depth of implementation, and in particular in the extent of cultural change and pedagogical innovation in the light of the learning-outcomes approach. The report noted differences across the sectors and called for greater consistency in such matters as nomenclature and award titles, quality assurance, the application of credit and communications strategy. The framework had increased transparency and enhanced progression routes. There was potential for the framework to be used for the recognition of prior learning, in guidance and in employers' recruitment and training but this potential was not yet fully realised. The synergy with European developments had encouraged framework development and implementation, but the framework needed stronger 'drivers', such as closer alignment of public policy and funding with the framework. The report noted tensions between the ideas of learning and progression that underpinned a framework and the operation of the 'points system' for entry to higher education. It noted similar tensions with some uses of qualifications in the labour market.

The SCQF was launched in 2001 on the basis of a blueprint published in 1999. It followed a series of reforms since the 1980s which created what were to become sub-frameworks of the SCQF and introduced features such as learning outcomes, unitisation, credit and a consistent set of levels. The SCQF built on these reforms by bringing the three main sub-frameworks, which included most mainstream qualifications, into a single comprehensive framework, in which all Scottish qualifications could eventually be placed. It aimed to support access to learning, to make the education and training system more transparent, and to become the 'national language' of learning in Scotland. Its architecture reflected its starting point: its 12 levels, concept of credit, learning outcomes and level descriptors all drew on its component sub-frameworks, and its specification was loose enough to enable most existing qualifications to be included with relatively minor changes. The SCQF is a led by a partnership of the main qualifications-awarding bodies (the Scottish Qualifications

Authority and the universities) together with the government and the colleges which provide vocational and general post-school learning.

At first, implementation efforts focused on bringing the three main sub-frameworks together. The process of including other qualifications, including those awarded by employers, professional bodies and voluntary organisations, progressed more slowly, but the pace of change accelerated following changes in 2006 which strengthened the powers of the central SCQF Partnership organisation. Most mainstream qualifications are in the framework and there is now an established process for including other qualifications. An organisation which meets certain criteria, particularly regarding quality assurance procedures, may be recognised as a credit-rating body and credit-rate its own (or other) qualifications and thereby place them in the framework. The SCQF appears to be achieving its principal aim of making the ET system more transparent and coherent. Awareness and understanding are increasing, if slowly: people tend to become familiar with the SCQF when they have a practical need to know about it. It provides a tool, among other things, for mapping and planning provision within and across institutions, for supporting access, transfer and progression, for recognising prior learning, for guidance, for curriculum development and for the recruitment, training and deployment of staff by employers. The extent to which it has been used for these purposes has been variable; as in Ireland, use of the framework is increasing but much of its potential has still to be realised, and its use has depended on other factors, including government policy, funding incentives and local and institutional initiatives. The SCQF provides a tool but does not mandate its use: for example, ET institutions vary in their use of the SCQF to recognise and transfer credit. This causes some disappointment among those who would like a stronger framework - in this example, those who would like credit recognition and transfer to become more automatic. As a result, the management of expectations has been a continuing challenge for the SCQF's leadership.

Both the Irish and Scottish frameworks have included - or are in the process of including - most of their target qualifications, both retain broad-based stakeholder support, both have avoided major changes in strategy and both have achieved most of their shorter-term objectives. On these relatively modest criteria of success the Irish and Scottish NQFs are successful frameworks: they are, at any rate, more successful than the first-generation frameworks of England, New Zealand and South Africa when first introduced (Allais 2009, Strathdee 2009, Young 2009). Can we identify factors that contribute to their relative success? To explore this question, we first consider differences between the frameworks, and then examine their common features.

Understanding differences: a typology of NQFs

There are significant differences between the two frameworks, over and above the more technical differences such as the number of levels and the specification of learning outcomes. Both build incrementally on a sequence of earlier reforms, but this sequence is shorter in Ireland than in Scotland, and this is reflected in the different focus of each framework. The Irish framework aims to deepen and extend the earlier reforms within each sector, especially the HETAC and FETAC sectors, as well as to link the sectors through an

integrated framework; the SCQF adds value to earlier Scottish reforms primarily by bringing the sectoral sub-frameworks together in a comprehensive framework. The Irish NFQ is regulatory, at least within the FETAC and HETAC sectors, whereas the SCQF is a voluntary 'enabling' framework. The NFQ is led by a statutory agency, albeit within a spirit of partnership and consultation, whereas the SCQF is led by institutions which award and deliver qualifications. The Irish framework has broader aims; it aims to promote quality assurance and access, transfer and progression, through the principles which qualifications in the framework must observe, and it aims to stimulate pedagogical change. The Scottish framework aims to make the existing system more transparent and consequently to improve its coherence and coordination; it provides a tool for extending access, transfer and progression but does not insist that it is used for this purpose. Whereas the Irish framework aims to be a driver of change, the Scottish framework is primarily an instrument of change, whose use depends on other drivers.

The literature contains several analyses of how NQFs differ in their purposes, their design and their processes of implementation (eg Young 2005, Coles 2006, Grootings 2007, Tuck 2007). These differences of purpose, design and process tend to be related. Drawing on her study of the South African NQF, Allais (2007) has proposed a typology of NQFs based on their transformational ambitions and the extent to which they take the existing ET system, or a proposed future system, as the starting point. A communications framework takes the existing system as its starting point and aims to make it more transparent as a basis for rationalising it, improving its coherence and developing progression pathways. A transformational framework takes a proposed future ET system as its starting point and defines the qualifications it would like to see in a transformed system, without explicit reference to existing provision. The Scottish framework is an example of a communications framework, the South African NQF (as first introduced) of a transformational framework. However, Scotland and South Africa may represent extreme examples. Allais suggested an intermediate category of NQFs but was not able to elaborate it in her study of South Africa. Figure 1 presents a modified typology of NQFs in which an intermediate type, a reforming framework, combines some of the features of the other two types. Like communications frameworks it takes the existing ET system and its institutions as its starting point. But whereas a communications framework provides a tool to facilitate change driven from elsewhere, a reforming framework has more specific reform objectives of its own - for example, to fill gaps in provision or to make quality standards more consistent. It therefore tends to be statutory, to have tighter requirements and to try to drive change directly as well as to facilitate other change agents. Ireland is an example of a reforming framework.

If we accept that Ireland and Scotland are 'successful' NQFs, the implication is that more than one type of NQF can succeed. If we also accept that NQFs in England, New Zealand and South Africa more closely resembled transformational frameworks and were less successful, we may conclude that communications and reforming frameworks share an ingredient of success that is missing from transformational frameworks. Figure 1 suggests that this shared ingredient is that they start from the existing ET system rather than a vision of a future system. In the next section I propose a model of change, based on the Irish and

Scottish experiences, which appears to provide the basis for the successful introduction of an NQF.

Understanding similarities: a normative model of change

The starting point is that the introduction of an effective NQF has to be understood as a dynamic process, and that it is a social and political process as much as (or more than) a technical process. It involves:

- maintaining and/or building trust in qualifications and confidence in their underpinning standards and processes (Young 2002, Coles and Oates 2004);
- aligning the 'intrinsic logic' of an NQF with the 'institutional logics' of the ET system (Raffe 2007);
- a similar alignment with the institutional logic of the labour market: the ways in which employers use qualifications should correspond to the NQF rationale;
- widespread understanding and fluent use of the 'language' of learning represented by an NQF;
- cultural change, for example in basing pedagogies around learning outcomes;
- accommodating the interests of stakeholders, including ET providers, and reconciling differences among them.

To allow these processes to occur, the introduction of an NQF needs to be characterised by:

- *Long time scales.* Long time scales, and experience of using the framework, are needed for confidence and trust to develop and for the framework to become the language of learning and to promote cultural change. In both countries the rate of progress in implementing the framework has been a matter of public concern, and managing expectations is a key challenge for those leading the process. However, the need for long time scales should not become an excuse for inaction, or for weakening the co-ordination function described below.
- *Stakeholder involvement and partnership.* Both frameworks illustrate the importance of engaging stakeholders in order to populate the framework, to change institutional logics and to ensure that implementation goes beyond mere compliance. They also illustrate the need for 'pragmatic compromises' in framework development – for example, in decisions about the levels at which qualifications are placed. And both illustrate the importance of engaging ET institutions, and especially higher education, in a comprehensive framework. In Scotland, universities shared leadership of the framework; in Ireland, their engagement was secured through the careful alignment of the NFQ with the Bologna framework.
- *Effective mechanisms for coordination.* A framework needs mechanisms for coordination, for aggregating the interests of stakeholders, for maintaining the momentum for change, for managing the iterative processes described below and, where necessary, compensating for the weakness of stakeholder organisations. In

Scotland these mechanisms were insufficient before the SCQF Partnership was re-structured in 2006.

- *A loose but variable design.* A framework needs to be sufficiently loose to fit different institutional logics, to secure the engagement of stakeholders and to accommodate different types of learning. There is a tension between the tightness of a framework and its scope (the range of qualifications it covers) which may be resolved, as in Ireland and Scotland, by including tighter sub-frameworks within a loose over-arching framework.
- *Iterative alignment.* Both countries illustrate how an NQF becomes aligned with educational practices and institutional logics through an iterative process of mutual accommodation: for example, as the framework is used as a tool in programme review and re-design, and is in turn modified the light of experience. A similar iterative process is needed to resolve anomalies arising from the ‘pragmatic compromises’ mentioned above.
- *Balance between sub-framework development and framework-wide development.* Both countries illustrate how framework development involves a shifting balance between development processes within sectors (or sub-frameworks) and the development of coherent system-wide arrangements. NQFs may develop initially as unconnected sectoral frameworks but based on common principles which allow for their eventual integration.
- *Policy breadth:* the implementation and impact of a framework will depend on its alignment with national policy, institutional priorities and other contextual pressures. An NQF may provide a new intrinsic logic but other measures may be needed to change the institutional logics which determine its use. Reviews of both frameworks have drawn attention to the need for such measures (Gallacher *et al.* 2005, Collins *et al.* 2009).

The success of a framework, therefore, depends on its model of change, together with key features of its design. There is a tension between the radical *aims* of many NQFs and their need for a *process* of implementation that is the opposite of radical: that starts from the existing ET system and proceeds incrementally, relying on the engagement of institutions with a stake in that system. A reforming framework, such as the Irish NQF, is an attempt to reconcile this tension: to achieve substantial change in ET through an evolutionary process of the kind outlined above.

Applying the model to other countries

The normative model of change outlined above is expressed in general terms; it describes the conditions for success in terms of processes of change that are believed to apply across different national contexts. Nevertheless, it represents a model of ‘best practice’, albeit stated in generic terms, and is therefore open to the criticism that what constitutes best practice in one country may not easily transfer to another. Does this model represent best practice for other countries introducing NQFs?

As noted earlier, Ireland and Scotland share contextual features, some of which (such as their size and political culture) facilitate the introduction and impact of an NQF. Like other first-generation frameworks they share liberal, anglophone educational traditions and socio-economic contexts which contrast with other countries introducing NQFs. And the fact that they conceived their frameworks before NQFs became the must-have accessory of international policy fashion and without the spur of European meta-frameworks also makes them atypical. The process of introducing an NQF, and the factors that make it successful, may vary across countries with different traditions of ET, and especially of vocational training (Clarke and Winch 2007, Hanf and Rein 2007-08). They may vary according to the nature of national labour markets and the level of exposure to international capital and labour markets. They may vary across countries with different political histories, different traditions of civil society and whose stakeholder groups differ in their strength and their capacity to engage in framework development. They may vary according to the capacity of the political system to achieve 'policy breadth'. The model applies primarily to comprehensive NQFs: the process of introducing a sectoral framework for higher education or vocational education and training may differ, to some extent, because it involves (for example) a smaller range of stakeholders and ET sectors with distinct structures of autonomy and control.

In other words, the model of change outlined above could need some modifications if it is to apply to all countries. However, such modifications are unlikely to change the basic message: that introducing an NQF has to be understood as a social and political process which is incremental, iterative and typically slow, and which needs to start from existing institutions and practices. The model of change illuminates this process but it does not capture all its ramifications. It is best understood as an ideal type to support policy learning, to help each country to shape its own dynamic for introducing an NQF rather to provide a detailed blueprint for policy borrowing.

However, an incremental model of change assumes an appropriate starting point. The Irish and Scottish NQFs were introduced to rationalise qualifications, to improve their coherence and transparency and in certain respects to reform them, but there was no fundamental lack of confidence in qualifications. Some countries introduce NQFs precisely because of a lack of confidence in existing qualifications (Young and Allais 2009). They do not start with a basis for mutual trust, or with effective institutions and practices, or with a labour market in which qualifications play a recognised role; in other words they do not have the starting point assumed by the incremental model. The question therefore arises: do such countries need an alternative model of change for introducing an NQF, or should they reject NQFs as inappropriate and ineffective instruments for achieving the necessary changes in education and training?

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Figure 1: A typology of NQFs

Type of NQF:	Communications	Reforming	Transformational
<i>Starting point</i>	Existing ET system	Existing ET system	Future ET system
<i>Purpose:</i>	To increase transparency; To provide tool for rationalising system, increasing coherence, facilitating access transfer and progression	To achieve specific reforms eg fill gaps, enhance quality, extend access transfer and progression; To provide tool for rationalising system, increasing coherence	To transform ET and lead development of new system
<i>Design</i>	Loose, varies across sub-frameworks	Tighter, but varies across sub-frameworks	Tight, central specification imposed more uniformly
<i>Leadership and control</i>	Voluntary 'Bottom up' ET institutions share leadership Substantial decision-making at level of sub-framework	Compulsory 'Top-down': led by central agency/govt ET institutions as key partners Control may vary across sub-frameworks	Compulsory 'Top down': led by central agency/govt ET institutions among partners Centralised control
<i>Expected role in change</i>	Tool for change: requires complementary drivers to ensure tool is used	Drives specific changes; requires complementary drivers for other impacts	Expected to drive transformation of system

Source: Raffe (2009b), adapted from Raffe (2009a)