

Amalgamation of Qualifications and  
Quality Assurance Bodies

Consultation Paper on Implementation

Department of Education and Science  
May 2009

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## Foreword

The amalgamation of the bodies working in the area of qualifications and quality assurance is an important step in enhancing Ireland's reputation in this field. All of the bodies involved have had considerable success in developing and enhancing work in the area of qualifications and quality assurance in both vocational education and training and in higher education. There is some overlap in their responsibilities, so the organisational changes proposed in this paper represent the next logical step in ensuring that further and higher education and training institutions continue to deliver a quality service to all learners. Further progress can now be most efficiently and effectively achieved through the establishment of a strong single organisation prioritising the needs of learners and delivering a quality service to providers.

The amalgamation will lead to a coherent approach in further and higher education and training. Ireland, in line with other EU Member States, has adopted a lifelong learning approach to education and training. Seamless transfer and progression for all learners, with accreditation through the National Framework of Qualifications, is a key feature of this comprehensive approach. The establishment of a single organisation is consistent with the lifelong learning approach and will streamline and improve services for institutions, learners and other stakeholders.

The issue of quality assurance is widely accepted as being at the cornerstone of education and training. Considerable practice and expertise in quality assurance in both the vocational education and training and the higher education sectors has been built up by the bodies over the years. The new amalgamated body will have a common pool of expertise and operations, and will deliver even better outcomes with greater efficiency.

I urge you to consider carefully the issues raised in the paper and to submit your views on the approach outlined.

Batt O'Keeffe TD  
Minister for Education and Science

# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1 Budget Announcement**

The rationalisation of a number of state bodies was announced in Budget 2009 on 14 October, 2008. This included the following statement on qualifications and quality assurance bodies:

Amalgamation of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Further Education and Training Awards Council. The new organisation will also take responsibility for the external quality assurance review of the universities, a function which is currently performed by the Irish Universities Quality Board and the Higher Education Authority. In seeking to ensure a coherent approach to qualifications and quality assurance, there will also be discussions with the National University of Ireland around the possibility of including some of the related functions of the NUI in the new organisation.

The existing bodies concerned were established on a statutory basis and therefore legislation is required to give effect to the Government decision.

## **1.2 Purpose and Content of the Consultation Paper**

The amalgamation will bring an enhanced coherence and efficiency to qualifications and quality assurance in further and higher education and training. The existing bodies have built up practices, experience and expertise and it is now opportune that organisational arrangements are harmonised in the interests of learners and to provide a joined up and more effective service for providers/institutions.

The purpose of this paper is to invite the views of the organisations themselves, the providers/institutions availing of their services and other stakeholders involved in their work on the implementation issues arising from the Government's announcement. The paper outlines the background and functions of the organisations concerned and presents the policy context and rationale for change. The paper includes an exploration of how these functions will be brought together in the new organisation and the implications for the shape of legislation and also covers a number of new functions. The nature of the board of the body is considered, as is the relationship of

the body with the Minister for Education and Science, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and wider education and training stakeholders. Some initial consideration of the organisational shape of the new organisation is included, although responsibility for finally determining this will rest with the board and management of the body itself, working within funding and staffing resources agreed with the Department of Education and Science. This paper signals potential interim structures so that work in this area may proceed in parallel with the drafting and passage of legislation.

This paper and the submissions and views received during the consultation process will inform both the content of legislation and the process of administrative planning required to establish the new organisation. Other developments such as the emerging shape of the new national strategy for higher education and the recommendations of the Study on the Implementation and Impact of the National Framework of Qualifications may also influence the approach.

### **1.3 Timetable**

A timetable for the establishment of the new body is below.

May 2009 to June 2009	Stakeholder Consultation
September 2009	Production of a Regulatory Impact Analysis and draft heads of a bill for submission to Cabinet.
Autumn 2009 to Summer 2010	Drafting and completion of passage of Bill
Winter 2010	Establishment of the new organisation

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 Establishment of Bodies**

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) were established in 2001 under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999. Their establishment was intended to bring greater coherence to qualifications awarded in Ireland and to encourage a greater focus on the diverse needs of learners. Prior to the establishment of the new agencies, there was little shared understanding of how the various awards in the State related to one another. The relationship between university awards and those awarded elsewhere in higher education was sometimes unclear, while in further education and training, more than fifty awards bodies were operating.

There was a strong rationale for separating the role of the Authority from that of the awards Councils and other awarding bodies. This was to enable the Authority to have the key policy development role in establishing the Framework and ensuring that it is implemented while concerning itself as appropriate with all awards made in the State.

The rationale for having two Councils was very much to build upon the nature of the previous arrangements that were in place and to recognise that there is a wide diversity in learning outcomes, from basic literacy to doctorate level, which could appropriately be recognised by two Councils co-operating effectively together.

The universities decided in 2002 to establish the Irish Universities Quality Board. They considered it important that the reviews of the effectiveness of their quality assurance arrangements, which they have a statutory responsibility to undertake (under the Universities Act, 1997), should be executed by an external body. The Board met for the first time in 2003 and was formally established as a company in 2006. Through the establishment of the Irish Universities Quality Board universities were acknowledging that they themselves were not solely responsible for reviewing the effectiveness of their own arrangements. In so doing, they were recognising the trend in European policy, as part of the Bologna process, which, while stressing institutional ownership of their own quality assurance processes, also required an external review dimension. The HEA under the Universities Act 1997 also has a

statutory function to review and report on quality assurance procedures established by the universities.

## **2.2 Existing Functions**

The existing bodies perform a wide range of functions. Some relationships between the functions of the bodies are immediately apparent. For example, parallel quality assurance and awarding functions are performed by FETAC and HETAC for their respective sectors and analogous external quality assurance functions are performed by IUQB, HEA and NQAI in respect of other higher education institutions. In addition, in order to effectively carry out their functions, the agencies undertake a range of common activities such as stakeholder consultation, tracking international developments and keeping pace with the changing requirements of industry and the economy. The key functions are outlined below:

### **2.2.1 National Qualifications Authority of Ireland**

The Authority's three principal tasks are as follows:

- To establish and maintain a National Framework of Qualifications
- To promote and facilitate access, transfer and progression for learners
- To ensure the appropriate recognition of international qualifications in Ireland and promote the appropriate recognition of Irish awards abroad.

The Authority has a particularly detailed relationship with the Awards Councils (HETAC and FETAC). It sets procedures for the performance by them of their functions, reviews their performance, approves their strategic plans and has an appeals function in relation to certain of their decisions. It also allocates an annual grant to them from the funding it receives from the Department of Education and Science and reviews the fees charged by them. An additional function of the Authority is to act as the quality assurance agency for the Dublin Institute of Technology.

### **2.2.2 Further Education and Training Awards Council**

FETAC provides services to the further education and training sector. This includes VEC colleges, adult and community education and training centres, private further

education and training providers, FÁS, Teagasc, Fáilte Ireland and Bórd Iascaigh Mhara.

FETAC's main functions are as follows:

- To make awards
- To determine standards for awards
- To recognise awards
- To agree and review providers' quality assurance arrangements
- To validate programmes of education and training
- To ensure fair and consistent assessment of learners by providers
- To promote its awards
- To ensure that providers with its awards implement access, transfer and progression procedures.

### 2.2.3 Higher Education and Training Awards Council

HETAC provides services to a large part of the higher education and training sector, outside of universities. This includes institutes of technology, private higher education colleges and professional bodies.

HETAC's main functions parallel those of FETAC, as follows

- To make awards
- To determine standards for awards
- To recognise awards
- To agree and review providers' quality assurance arrangements
- To validate programmes of education and training
- To ensure fair and consistent assessment of learners by providers
- To promote its awards
- To ensure that providers with its awards implement access, transfer and progression procedures.

A further function that has been undertaken extensively by HETAC has been to delegate authority to institutes of technology to make awards.



#### 2.2.4 Higher Education Authority

Sections 35 and 49 of the universities Act, (1997) set out the respective roles of the Universities and the HEA in relation to the development of quality assurance procedures. The statutory responsibility of the HEA is to assist the universities in achieving the objectives set out under the Act in relation to quality assurance, to review the procedures established by the universities and to report thereon. The HEA must consult with the NQAI in performing its review function.

#### 2.2.5 Irish Universities Quality Board

The main functions of the IUQB are as follows:

- To evaluate the effectiveness of the quality assurance activities of Irish universities
- To support the enhancement of quality in Irish universities
- To effectively communicate the outcomes of quality assurance and enhancement activities in Irish universities

### **2.3 Key Developments to Date**

The qualifications and quality assurance landscape has changed dramatically since the bodies were established, not least through the efforts of the agencies themselves, and this enhances the rationale for a single organisation to be established. The bodies have made major progress in bringing coherence and consistency to Irish qualifications, in developing awards standards, in providing quality assurance to educational providers and programmes and in facilitating progression opportunities for learners.

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was launched in 2003. The NFQ is a system of ten levels that incorporates awards made for all kinds of learning, wherever it is gained. The Framework, which is based on learning outcomes, enables learners compare and contrast awards and plan their progression through the Framework. The majority of awards made in Ireland by national awarding bodies, from basic literacy awards right up to doctoral degrees have been included in the Framework. Quality assured qualifications offered by professional bodies and

international awarding bodies operating in Ireland can also be recognised through the NFQ.

The Framework provides the basis for recognising international qualifications and the qualifications recognition service, offered by NQAI, is an important support for migrants, educational providers and employers. In addition, agreements developed on comparability with other national frameworks and the referencing of the Framework to the two European meta-frameworks – the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area ('Bologna' Framework) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) - greatly enhance the portability of Irish awards.

Standards for awards in a wide range of disciplines have been developed by HETAC and FETAC and a large number of individual programmes of education and training offered by a broad spectrum of public and private providers have been validated and quality assured. Through their systems of major, minor, supplemental and special purpose awards, the awards councils and providers are at the forefront of efforts to offer flexible and responsive learning pathways.

The Irish Universities Quality Board has worked with the universities to agree a detailed quality framework in 2003. This framework was substantially revised and updated in 2007 in the light of implementation experience, external review recommendations and a changing international context. The IUQB and HEA have jointly undertaken a full cycle of reviews of quality assurance arrangements in the universities and have provided key supports to the university sector in further embedding effective quality assurance practices. A second cycle of institutional reviews has been agreed and the IUQB will commence this process in 2009.

All four organisations are subject to external review. These reviews have aimed to enable deeper implementation by the organisations and the stakeholders with whom they are working in the performance of their functions. They have confirmed the good level of performance of each of the organisations. The effective work of the four organisations since their establishment will now be of great assistance in ensuring that the new organisation works in a more joined up and effective way.

### **3. Core Objects, Context and Rationale for Amalgamation**

#### **3.1 Core Objects of Amalgamation**

In embarking on the process of amalgamation, certain objects flow from developments to date, the current state of play in the qualifications and quality assurance areas and from the rationale for deciding to establish the new organisation. These objects are set out below:

The new organisation, in implementing the decision of amalgamation, will:

- Seek to promote consistency and coherence, enhance service provision and achieve efficiency,
- Focus on the National Framework of Qualifications and lifelong learning system as a whole while having regard for sectors within that system,
- Focus on the centrality of the learner and on the impact of the system on the learner and the individual citizen,
- Have regard to the needs of providers and groups of providers,
- Seek to facilitate a diversity of providers of education and training,
- Influence and adhere to best international practice,
- Be responsive to the needs of the social partners,
- Seek to support economic, social and cultural development,

It will also be important to ensure that all stakeholders have a clear understanding of the role and responsibilities of the new organisation. With these objects in mind, the following sections consider how the functions of the new organisation will be articulated and organised and how it will be structured and resourced.

### **3.2 Current Context – Some Key Features**

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 was framed with the intention of putting the needs of the learner at the heart of formal and non-formal education and training provision. This theme was strongly taken up in the principles underpinning the development of the National Framework of Qualifications and it is worth re-stating that while the NFQ is about awards, it is learner-centred and values learning. Openness and accessibility of the Framework to all learners is essential, particularly due to the close connection between the acquisition of knowledge and skills and citizens' life opportunities. In the overall context of lifelong learning, a core role of the Framework is to facilitate active citizenship (the cultural, economic, political/democratic and/or social participation of citizens in society as a whole and in their community) by measuring, as appropriate, relevant learning achievements in this regard and relating them to each other.

Lifelong learning is a key contributor to tackling poverty and social marginalisation. The availability of on-going education and training is critical in breaking the cycle of disadvantage and clear onward progression routes to quality assured programmes are important in further supporting efforts in this area. The NFQ provides a national and international context for recognising the outcomes achieved and the work of all four organisations in supporting and assuring quality has lent further credibility to the efforts of the wider education and training sector. The new organisation will re-affirm the core commitment to recognising and valuing all learning, wherever it is gained.

The education and training sector has a central role to play in the re-positioning of the Irish economy and in supporting national competitiveness. World class qualifications and quality assurance systems are vital supports for educational providers and learners as they make their strategic and personal contributions to the national recovery effort.

The Programme for National Recovery, *Building Ireland's Smart Economy*, stresses the centrality of human capital, which it defines as the knowledge, skills and creativity of people, in building the next phase of Irish economic development. The Programme envisages a vibrant research and development sector, and a thriving culture of innovation. This requires a major contribution from the education and training institutions to continue to meet learner needs, to further position themselves as hubs of innovation, to foster links with industry and to promote a

commercialisation culture. These will be important considerations in framing the new national strategy on higher education and the quality assurance infrastructure has an important role to play. Central to meeting the challenge are a commitment to quality across all areas of activity and a responsive and targeted approach to programme development. This must continue to be underpinned by external quality assurance mechanisms that are effective, relevant, broadly consistent, challenging and supportive.

The Smart Economy requires a well-skilled and flexible labour force and the education and training sector is critical in meeting that requirement. The National Skills Strategy sets challenging targets for attainment in education and training in the context of the NFQ in the period to 2020. The work of the qualifications and awarding bodies to support the achievement of these targets and the need for well-functioning quality assurance is increasingly important. Recent years have seen a move away from learning systems based almost exclusively on the needs of young people and the inadequacy of approaches assuming only a linear progression from school into further and higher education and training has been recognised. Major efforts are underway in the qualifications bodies and in the further and higher education and training sectors to enable learners have their existing skills and experience recognised, to have awards of various types and sizes available and to have regular opportunities for assessment and certification. It is recognised, however, that there is still a need for further progress in realising access, transfer and progression opportunities for all groups of learners. The new organisation, through a suitable balance of regulation and support, will make a major contribution to enabling learners reach their full potential.

In parallel with the amalgamation process, a new national strategy for higher education is being developed. It is recognised that there are issues which will be considered in the context of the development of the strategy which may have implications for the role of the new organisation and its relationship with providers in a number of areas. Work on amalgamation and on the drafting of legislation will continue in parallel with the strategy and any issues arising will be dealt with as the shape of the strategy becomes clearer.

### **3.3 Rationale**

#### **3.3.1 Background to Decision**

As part of the efficiency review announced with the Budget 2008, Government Departments were asked to review the role and functions of Boards and Agencies operating in their area. In addition, the OECD in their Report *Towards an Integrated Public Service* recommended that attention be given to the number and mandate of state agencies. The Department of Education and Science in response reviewed agencies in the sector and considered options for enhancing effectiveness, organisational cohesion, efficiency and service delivery. This fed into the Budget 2009 decision to amalgamate the qualifications and quality assurance bodies.

#### **3.3.2 Existing Position**

The existing bodies were established as part of a modernisation process which has delivered greater organisational coherence to the sector. Considerable progress has been made in the years since establishment, and reviews of the organisations have shown them to be successful in implementing their functions, in referencing the Framework to other national qualifications systems and the two overarching European Qualifications Frameworks, and in making a major input into the development of new standards and best international practice in quality assurance of vocational and higher education and training. Therefore, the establishment of the new organisation must be seen as the next stage of development in the qualifications and quality assurance area. It will proceed in the full knowledge of the need to protect all that has been achieved by the bodies and by providers and with the needs of learners and award holders at its heart. This also means that the bodies themselves will be key architects of a stronger new agency, delivering a more effective service to all stakeholders.

### **3.4 Key Considerations**

A number of developments and considerations contributed to the decision on amalgamation. These are summarised below.

### 3.4.1 New Challenges

When the Qualifications Act, 1999 was being framed and bodies were being established under its provisions, major challenges existed in providing organisational and structural expression for the concept of lifelong learning and in delivering a mechanism to lead best practice in quality assurance. The response had to be built on the organisational traditions already in place in the higher and further education and training sectors. In addition, the centrality of the National Framework of Qualifications to this process was such that a specific agency, underpinned by legislation, was required to drive its establishment and early implementation.

The basic architecture of the Framework is now well established and quality assurance processes have matured. The challenge is now to deepen implementation, ensuring a wider understanding of the Framework, further facilitating progression through the system, aligning quality assurance practices and delivering a high quality service to learners and providers. The linkages from the Framework to progression and access policies and onwards to awards certification and quality assurance are now such that it is considered that four separate bodies operating in this area is no longer the best organisational response. Progress can now be most efficiently and effectively achieved through the establishment of a strong single organisation prioritising the needs of learners and delivering quality service to providers who will no longer have to work in co-operation with separate quality assurance agencies across further and higher education and training.

### 3.4.2 Related Functions

There is a close relationship between the functions of the existing qualifications and quality assurance bodies. The need for an external dimension to the quality assurance processes of education and training providers is well established and arrangements have been put in place across education and training. FETAC performs this function for the further education and training sector, while HETAC essentially performs the same role in higher education and training, as does the NQAI for the Dublin Institute of Technology. The universities have also recognised that external review is an essential element of their quality assurance activities and have delegated some of their statutory responsibilities in this area to the IUQB, to supplement the statutory role of the HEA. The bodies have built up practices, experience and expertise in this area and it is now necessary to build greater

coherence and coordination of procedure in the interests of learners and to provide a joined up service for providers. Some common quality assurance elements might be developed for qualifications at the same level of the Framework, and for providers that operate across a number of Framework levels. A common pool of expertise and operations would deliver better outcomes with greater efficiency.

The award making functions of HETAC and FETAC are similar in their respective sectors. The Councils make over 160,000 awards per annum and this presents a major administrative challenge. Robust and stable business and IT systems are required to support this activity and to store a large volume of learner and award holder records for significant periods. Greater coherence and efficiency can be brought to this resource-intensive area by developing common systems, bringing business processes closer together and sharing expertise.

The amalgamated body will also be better positioned to more closely monitor and push for the implementation of the progression policies of all providers across further and higher education and training. This will enhance effectiveness in relation to developing standard qualifications for specific sectors or target groups, and more effective pathways for learners through the Framework.

### 3.4.3 Service Delivery

All four agencies deliver a service to providers, learners and award holders. The reduction of the number of bodies will simplify arrangements, particularly for providers who interact with the award making and quality assurance apparatus of more than one of the bodies. Clear statements on functions and commitments on service delivery can be made, enhancing the experience of all customers of the new agency.

A key concern will be to develop and maintain strong public recognition of awards under the Irish national framework of qualifications to ensure the continued mobility and portability of high quality awards for learners. Placing the National Framework of Qualifications more visibly at the heart of our system of awards will provide greater clarity for learners and award holders, deepen the implementation of lifelong learning provision and provide clear pathways for progression through the further and higher education and training sectors.



#### 3.4.4 Better Communications

The nature of the challenges facing the bodies require a significant degree of interaction between them and all four bodies have been cooperating extensively both through formal arrangements and informal communications. This valuable and beneficial approach places significant demands on the time and capacity of the bodies. Wider stakeholders are also required to maintain relationships and good communications with a number of the bodies. The new agency will bring greater agility and ability to more quickly agree positions, while maintaining a strong consultative approach. The new agency will still face a significant communications challenge, internally, with stakeholders, providers, learners and the broader public and indeed internationally but will be much better positioned to meet it as a strong single body.

#### 3.4.5 The International Dimension

There continues to be a major international focus on quality assurance in further and higher education and training. A rigorous and coherent approach to delivering quality is recognised as being central to attracting top quality international students, researchers and academics, which in turn supports competitiveness. The international recognition and valuing of the National Framework of Qualifications and of Irish qualifications more generally is critical. The articulation of the external quality assurance regime, including its relationship with the Framework, in a coherent and readily comprehensible manner will aid significantly in this area. In turn, a single agency will be better positioned to continue to contribute to the development of international best practice and disseminate it through the further and higher education and training sectors.

#### 3.4.6 Value for Money

The removal of parallel structures at board level, a unified top level management, the development of more closely aligned processes and procedures and a sharing of accommodation as well as corporate, operations and administrative support will result in savings over time. It is also expected that savings will be achieved by providers, especially those who operate in both further and higher education and

training, as they can interact with a single body. It is acknowledged that there may be costs associated with delivering the organisational changes in the short term and that functions are not being abolished.

## **4. Qualifications Ireland – A Functional View**

### **4.1 Overarching Issues**

The amalgamation will bring together a range of services offered up to now by separate agencies to the various sectors of education and training. The new organisation must take every opportunity to improve the quality of its services by making best use of the experience and resources it inherits from its predecessor bodies. It is recognised that the broader education and training system will continue to be organised as before and that the new organisation will be dealing with an enormous diversity of provision, ranging from community groups to large universities and taking place in diverse settings such as classrooms, workplaces and community facilities. The new organisation will need to tailor its services to take account of the requirements of learners and providers in each of the sectors.

A possible title being considered for the new organisation is Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland. It is considered that it is appropriate that both the qualifications and quality assurance related functions of the new organisation be reflected in the title in some way. In the remaining part of this paper, the organisation is referred to in short hand as Qualifications Ireland. However, the aim is to finalise the name of the new organisation in the light of the consultation process.

In setting out the functions of Qualifications Ireland it is necessary, in the first instance, to consolidate the existing functions of the NQAI, HETAC, FETAC, IUQB and the HEA, which are set out in section 2.2 above. As has been pointed out above, the qualifications and quality assurance landscape has changed since the establishment of the existing bodies and further development of those functions is required. There is also an opportunity to consider potential additional statutory functions for the new organisation. In some cases these are functions which the existing bodies are performing in any case but which are not articulated in legislation.

The proposed functions of Qualifications Ireland, and some of the issues which arise with regard to their implementation, are set out below under the main areas of activity and will be dealt with in greater detail in legislation. The transfer of functions will place major administrative demands on existing bodies and a transition plan will be necessary. Some transitional arrangements following the establishment of Qualifications Ireland may require legislative underpinning and this will be explored.

The agencies also carry out a number of activities which help to underpin and inform the performance of the functions, and these are set out below. These include stakeholder consultation, keeping abreast of international developments and being aware of the changing requirements of industry and the economy. All of the bodies develop high level guidelines and codes of practice to support providers and are regarded as supporters of good practice in a number of areas, rather than solely as regulatory agencies. They also disseminate a range of information to customers and providers on their areas of activity and have been active in organising a range of events and seminars. This approach will be continued by Qualifications Ireland.

It is recognised that some providers need a greater level of support to access the services of the agencies. It is unlikely that Qualifications Ireland will be in a position to carry out detailed work with individual providers. There is a requirement to balance the approval, assurance and regulatory functions of the agencies on the one hand with the developmental, advisory and promotional functions on the other. It will be important that Qualifications Ireland will have, and will be seen to have, sufficient independence from the providers for whose programmes it confers awards or for whom it provides external quality assurance. Careful consideration will be given to providing for these issues in legislation and the support from other agencies and services which can be given to providers.

The relationship between the functions of Qualifications Ireland and the responsibilities of funding and other agencies will also be explored. The objectives of the new organisation will not be achieved through its efforts alone, and connections between its work with that of funding and regulatory bodies such as the HEA, FÁS and the Departments of Education and Science and Enterprise, Trade and Employment will be considered. This is relevant to a number of the new organisation's areas of operation, including framework implementation, access transfer and progression and quality assurance.

The legislation will reflect the need to maintain the strong relationship with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment with appropriate provisions on consultation and agreement in the performance of relevant functions.

## 4.2 Functions Currently Performed by the Sector

### 4.2.1 Framework Implementation and Access, Transfer and Progression

The development of the National Framework of Qualifications has been a key role of the NQAI and it undertook this task in consultation with a broad range of stakeholders across education and training. It was always envisaged that the Framework implementation would involve long term cultural change and, in particular, the use of learning outcomes. The review panel in the quality review of the Qualifications Authority concluded that the Authority had performed very effectively its function of establishing the Framework and was continuing to take appropriate action to maintain the Framework.

It is recognised that further work remains to be done and the focus now will be on deepening Framework implementation and associated policies on access, transfer and progression across the education and training sector.

Under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, access, transfer and progression are defined as follows -

- **Access:** the process by which learners may commence a programme of education and training having received recognition for knowledge, skill and competence required;
- **Transfer:** the process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme having received recognition for knowledge, skill and competence acquired;
- **Progression:** the process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme, where each programme is of a higher level than the preceding programme.

One of the key objectives of the NQAI is to promote and facilitate access, transfer and progression, which is of particular relevance as lifelong learning and upskilling become more central to the recovery and growth of the Irish economy. It is also currently a function of the NQAI to 'determine the procedures to be implemented by providers of programmes of education and training for access, transfer and progression', to ensure that access, transfer and progression procedures are implemented by DIT, to facilitate and advise existing universities in implementing

access, transfer and progression policies and, in consultation with the HEA, review their implementation. A function of both HETAC and FETAC, as set out in the Act, is to ensure that procedures for access, transfer and progression are implemented by providers. There is also a requirement (in Part VII of the Act dealing with protection for learners) for providers to inform learners of access, transfer and progression arrangements in advance.

The amalgamation of the existing agencies provides the opportunity for a single agency to drive policy-making and implementation in this area, where a 'whole of education and training' approach is vital. Particular issues arise in moving between sectors of education and training and Qualifications Ireland will be very well placed, as a cross sectoral agency, to lead in developing solutions. It is recognised that this is an area where progress has been uneven and work remains to be done.

The NQAI has commissioned a study on the implementation and impact of the National Framework of Qualifications and the associated policies for access, transfer and progression for learners. The study is ongoing and involves all stakeholders in Framework implementation and focuses on the work of the Authority, awarding bodies and providers of education and training. It will assess the extent to which the National Framework of Qualifications is being implemented and will

- support deeper implementation of the Framework and policies on access, transfer and progression
- identify progress in implementation
- identify gaps and drivers/obstacles in respect of implementation
- assess the initial impact of the Framework.

The outcome of the study will be very important in informing the work of Qualifications Ireland in this area. In addition, the NQAI has recently published a country note, on foot of an OECD study, on the topic of the Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning (RNFIL). The NQAI will use the findings of the study to assist in the framing, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, of a national action plan for the Recognition of Prior Learning. Leading and co-ordinating action on the Recognition of Prior Learning will continue to be an important area of operation for Qualifications Ireland.

Mindful of the importance of developing and maintaining trust in qualifications system, the proposed functions of Qualifications Ireland relating to the Framework and access, transfer and progression can therefore be summarised as follows -

- To maintain the National Framework of Qualifications and to deepen its implementation.
- To promote and assure the linking of Framework implementation, including the assignment of awards to the correct level of the Framework based on learning outcomes, in institutional quality assurance processes.
- To promote the Framework, both in Ireland and abroad, and to raise awareness in the general public about qualifications and how they are organised.
- To review the operation of the Framework and the policies and criteria on which it is based.
- To determine and publish procedures relating to access, transfer and progression and to ensure that those procedures are implemented by providers.
- To ensure that progression pathways operate smoothly across education and training
- To advise the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment on national policy on qualifications and learning outcomes across lifelong learning.
- To have oversight of the coherent implementation of the national policy on the certification of learning outcomes across lifelong learning and within society.
- To advise the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment on national policy on credit accumulation and transfer and on the recognition of prior learning.
- To have oversight of the coherent implementation of national policy on credit accumulation and transfer and on the recognition of prior learning.
- To promote and facilitate good practice in learning outcomes, credit accumulation and transfer and on the recognition of prior learning.
- To utilise the Framework as a tool for the recognition of international qualifications in Ireland.

#### 4.2.2 Quality Assurance

At present, there are two general models of legislative provisions covering quality assurance in further and higher education and training. The two models are set out in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 and the Universities Act,

1997. The complexity of quality assurance arrangements in the State is reflected by the fact that there are four separate sections of the Qualifications Act which deal with quality assurance for various providers or groups of providers. However, the core features of each are broadly similar, with the primary responsibility for quality assurance being with the provider and the involvement of different external quality assurance agents being the main reason for covering the ground in separate sections.

The two existing models diverge legislatively on the focus of providers own quality assurance arrangements, with the Universities Act dealing with faculties and departments and the Qualifications Act covering programmes of education and training. The Universities Act has a specific reference to the quality of teaching and research and related services. In providing a new legislative framework, it is intended to blend the two existing models, combining the broader focus of the Universities Act with an element of review of programmes. Institutional reviews will continue to be undertaken and provision will also be made for cross-institutional reviews of related activities. Again, the quality assurance policies, processes and procedures of Qualifications Ireland would most likely set out an appropriate approach and mix for different sectors.

However, this is not to say that the provision of a single unified legislative model will entail a “one size fits all” approach to quality assurance in the various sectors. While the new organisation will have to balance the promotion of coherence through common service provision across its functions with the need for “fit for purpose” processes and procedures, it would be expected that there would be some degree of variation in this area and whatever system is put in place would continue to address sectoral needs. Even at present, FETAC and HETAC operate differently in the quality assurance area despite having an identical legislative base.

One difference in existing legislation is the extent to which certain providers have to agree their internal quality assurance procedures with an external quality assurance agency. There will be consideration, in drafting the new legislation, of the extent to which a common approach to agreeing procedures will be put in place. Furthermore, an amendment to the Universities Act, 1997 will be made to give the power to review the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures, currently held by the Governing Bodies of universities but assigned to the IUQB, to Qualifications Ireland.



It should also be noted that both systems, in practice and application although not always under legislative cover, are consistent with the three tier process adopted in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and European quality assurance standards for vocational education and training. The three core elements are:

- primary responsibility rests with providers and they must adopt a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards at institutional level and of their programmes and awards,
- the application of this policy and procedures must be reviewed by an external quality assurance agency, and
- the external quality assurance agency must itself be subject to external review.

These principles will continue to underpin the work of Qualifications Ireland.

There is a lack of clarity in existing legislation on the quality assurance relationships in the recognised and linked colleges of universities. It is intended in the new legislation to make explicit the responsibility of all parties and the quality assurance relationships which will exist between them.

The existing four organisations have certain roles in the enhancement of the quality of courses of education and training and awards. Qualifications Ireland will continue to have a function in promoting quality enhancement. Existing legislation relating to quality assurance processes can also be enhanced in relation to the actions required to be made following the issuing of reports. It will be important to ensure that effective follow-up arrangements are provided for.

The quality assurance role currently assigned to the HEA in the Universities Act will rest with Qualifications Ireland. However, as the HEA is responsible for funding the universities, as well as the Institutes of Technology and certain other providers of education and training, it would be appropriate for there to be a process for information relating to quality assurance in all higher education institutions to be provided to the HEA. Whether that process requires legislation is to be determined.

It must be acknowledged that the Irish Higher Education Quality Network have put a substantial amount of work into the development of guidelines and principles relating

to quality assurance, which underpin current quality assurance and enhancement activities and which will continue to inform the work of Qualifications Ireland.

The proposed quality assurance and enhancement functions of Qualifications Ireland can be summarised as follows –

- To set national policy on quality assurance and enhancement in further and higher education and training.
- To ensure that providers have quality assurance in place, agreed as appropriate, including processes for the accurate levelling of awards in the National Framework of Qualifications.
- To review and monitor the effectiveness of providers' quality assurance and enhancement arrangements and publish outcomes.
- To ensure adequate follow-up on the published outcomes of reviews of the effectiveness of providers' quality assurance and enhancement arrangements.
- To facilitate good practice in quality assurance and enhancement including, where appropriate, the provision of support, such as information relating to the implementation of specific functions, to providers.
- To disseminate information on quality assurance to stakeholders and the general public and to promote quality in further and higher education and training.

#### 4.2.3 Programme Validation

The role of validating programmes of education and training in the further and higher education and training sectors currently vested in FETAC and HETAC will be undertaken by Qualifications Ireland. Both Councils have identical legislative provisions underpinning their activities in this area and it is likely that similar provisions will be included in the new legislation.

The current legislation provides for an appeals process, where a provider may appeal a decision of either FETAC or HETAC to the NQAI. It will therefore be necessary for Qualifications Ireland to put in place an adequate appeals process.

The proposed programme validation functions of Qualifications Ireland can be summarised as follows –

- To establish and publish policies and criteria for the validation of programmes in higher and further education and training.
- Upon application from a provider of education or training, to validate a programme of education or training where it meets the criteria set down.
- To withdraw validation where it decides that the programme no longer meets the criteria set down.
- To put in place an appropriate appeals process.

#### 4.2.4 Standards, Learner Assessment and Award Making (including Delegation of Authority)

Currently the NQAI sets high-level standards, through the National Framework of Qualifications, for the awards made by HETAC, FETAC and the DIT, while HETAC sets generic standards in a number of disciplinary fields and FETAC sets specific standards for individual awards which build from these high-level standards. Qualifications Ireland will take responsibility for both of these functions. Another function of both HETAC and FETAC is to ensure that providers in their remit put in place assessment procedures which are in line with the relevant standards. Again, Qualifications Ireland will take responsibility for this function.

The delegation by HETAC of awarding powers to the Institutes of Technology has had a significant positive impact on the sector and the opportunity will be taken to examine whether the opportunity to access delegated award making authority should be extended to certain other providers, should they satisfy appropriate criteria. It would seem appropriate for Qualifications Ireland to be in a position to grant this authority to certain providers who provide education and training in both the further and higher education and training sectors (e.g. the Institutes of Technology), in a single process. There will also be consideration, in light of the formal alignment of international awards with the Framework, of whether there should be any change in the requirement for many state-funded providers outside the university sector to only offer programmes leading to awards of Qualifications Ireland, and whether they should have the option, in certain circumstances, of offering programmes leading to awards aligned with the Framework.

An existing function of FETAC and HETAC is to make awards to learners on the basis of prior learning, no matter the context in which that learning occurs.

Experience to date suggests that this is best exercised through collaboration with providers and this approach will continue under Qualifications Ireland.

A major issue arising in award making is the branding of awards. FETAC and HETAC awards enjoy strong brand recognition and are highly regarded domestically and internationally. While the vocabulary of the National Framework of Qualifications has become widely understood and the distinction between further and higher education and training generally is becoming less important, careful consideration of the branding of awards will be undertaken prior to the establishment of Qualifications Ireland. It is envisaged that the new organisation will be given the option to continue to use the existing awarding body titles at least on a transitional basis.

Qualifications Ireland will have responsibility for quality assuring programmes of education and training leading to its own awards as well as reviewing the effectiveness of the quality assurance processes put in place by other awarding bodies/providers (e.g. Universities). It will, therefore, be necessary to strongly separate functions relating to award-making and quality assurance.

The proposed functions of Qualifications Ireland in this area can be summarised as follows –

- To set the overall standards of awards in the NFQ.
- To determine standards of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired by learners before certain awards can be made including, where appropriate, occupational/professional awards.
- To ensure providers establish procedures for assessment which are fair and consistent and ensure compliance with the standards.
- To make national certification available to different providers where authority is not delegated.
- To delegate authority to make awards to providers where appropriate.
- In cooperation with providers, to make awards to individuals based on an assessment of prior learning.

#### 4.2.5 International Aspects

There has been a strong international aspect to much of the work of the existing agencies and it is important that this continues with the establishment of Qualifications Ireland.

Ireland is playing a key role in quality assurance developments, particularly in the Bologna Process through ENQA – the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and in the Copenhagen/Lisbon Process in relation to ENQAVET, the European Network for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training. Irish agencies have also linked into the work of the OECD in terms of qualifications systems and the recognition of prior learning.

The NQAI is currently designated as the Irish ENIC-NARIC (European Network of Information Centres – National Academic Recognition Information Centre) and National Reference Point, the Irish National Europass Centre and the Irish National Coordination Point for the European Qualifications Framework. Qualifications Ireland will assume these roles upon its establishment.

The functions in this area which are proposed for Qualifications Ireland are –

- To engage, on behalf of the state, internationally on qualifications and quality assurance policies and their implementation.
- To continue the work relating to international qualifications recognition agreements and Framework alignments.
- To develop information and make it available nationally on the closest comparable Irish qualifications to international ones.
- To answer queries and process applications concerning the recognition of individual international qualifications.
- To promote the appropriate recognition of international qualifications by education and training institutions and employers.
- To promote the recognition of Framework qualifications outside Ireland.

#### 4.2.6 Information for Learners

A key principle of the work of the existing organisations is that learners considering taking a course should have available to them information about the qualification to

which it will lead, including the correct title, Framework level and award type, the awarding body, the progression opportunities that are associated with the award and the quality assurance procedures that are in place in relation to that award. Qualifax, a national courses database maintained by the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, was identified as a key mechanism through which learners could access such information and, at the request of the Department of Education and Science, the NQAI took responsibility for Qualifax in 2008.

Qualifax holds information on approximately 18,000 courses all of which is collected directly from providers and which highlights education and training opportunities to support lifelong learning. The NQAI continues to work with the Institute and other national stakeholders to further develop the services available to learners, such as information related to employment.

As the NQAI currently performs this role, it is considered appropriate to include it as a function of Qualifications Ireland.

#### 4.2.7 Protection for Learners

The Qualifications Act includes some outline requirements for providers to have arrangements in place to protect learners in the event of a programme being discontinued or a provider ceasing to operate. It is envisaged that these provisions will continue in the new legislation.

#### 4.2.8 Tax Relief on Fees

HETAC currently evaluates, on behalf of the Department of Education and Science, applications for programmes to be eligible for tax relief on fees. The legislative basis for this function is in Finance legislation. It is envisaged that this role will now be undertaken in a more co-ordinated way in line with the inclusion of awards in the Framework and the regulation of international education.

### **4.3 Potential New Functions**

#### **4.3.1 International Education**

Since 18 April 2005, students entering the State who are citizens from outside the European Union, the European Economic Area or Switzerland, registering with the Garda National Immigration Bureau have not been permitted access to employment unless they are attending a full-time programme of at least one year's duration leading to a recognised qualification.

Since that time the Department of Education and Science has compiled a register of approved programmes for this purpose, known as the Internationalisation Register. Upon application by the provider, programmes are assessed and are subsequently subject to monitoring and inspection. There is an opportunity to bind this process more tightly to the question of whether a course leads to an award on, or aligned with, the national framework. In this context, it might be possible to more clearly link the conditions for alignment with the requirements for the inclusion of a programme on the register. It is considered appropriate for Qualifications Ireland take responsibility for the development of approaches in this area, for the maintenance of the Register and for introducing a Quality Mark and a code of practice for international education. This would also involve some responsibilities for the regulation of the English language sector which may require an inspection role for the new organisation (as is currently carried out by the Advisory Council for English Language Schools) as well as the quality assurance role set out in section 4.1.2. In this context, it will be important for a wider range of English language awards to be included on the Framework.

#### **4.3.2 Award Titles**

In the context of the implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications and associated quality assurance activities, the possibility of providing a statutory basis for Qualifications Ireland to deal with the regulation of the use of award titles will be explored.

## 4.4 National University of Ireland

The Government announcement on the amalgamation stated that ‘there will also be discussions with the National University of Ireland around the possibility of including some of the related functions of the NUI in the new organisation’. The following section gives an overview of those functions.

### 4.4.1 NUI Role

In relation to the four constituent universities the NUI has the following functions:

- Agreement to the appointment of external examiners (following proposal from a constituent university)
- Determination of basic matriculation arrangements
- Reviewing the content and teaching of courses

In relation to the recognised colleges the principal functions of the NUI are as follows:

- Agreement to quality assurance arrangements of the recognised colleges
- Review of the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures of the recognised colleges
- Making awards
- All of the functions that also relate to the constituent universities

The NUI also has a number of other activities which it undertakes. These include:

- Printing parchment for the making of awards itself and for the making of NUI awards by the constituent universities.
- Bestowing prizes and bursaries across the constituent universities of the recognised colleges
- Maintaining a register of NUI graduates and undertaking the elections for the NUI seats on Seanad Éireann.
- Supporting Convocation of the NUI



#### 4.4.2 Funding of NUI

The funding of the NUI is by the constituent universities, and the recognised colleges. There also can be a small grant from the Higher Education Authority. In addition, the endowments of the NUI give some of the funding to the NUI for its prizes and bursaries.

#### 4.4.3 NUI and Qualifications Ireland – Related Functions

The key issue in relation to implementing the Government Decision is to look at how the functions of the NUI relate to the functions of Qualifications Ireland as proposed in this paper.

It is proposed that the new organisation and a range of diverse further and higher education and training providers will have a quality assurance relationship which involves the implementation of institutional quality assurance procedures by these providers and the review the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures by Qualifications Ireland. In addition with certain providers the new organisation will validate programmes and make awards following the successful completion by learners of such validated programmes.

Thus Qualifications Ireland will review the effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures of the constituent universities of the National University of Ireland. A key issue arising accordingly is whether the new organisation should have the award-making and the quality assurance role of the NUI in relation to their recognised colleges. In this regard, it is of note that there are a number of recognised colleges as follows:

- Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland
- National College of Art and Design
- Shannon College of Hotel Management
- Institute of Public Administration
- Milltown Institute

The agreement of the quality assurance arrangements of the recognised colleges with the NUI is a developing process and the NUI plans to review the effectiveness of

such procedures in due course. It is understood that the NUI had intended that the IUQB would take on the role of reviewing the effectiveness of its quality assurance arrangements. This would mean that, at a minimum, Qualifications Ireland would take on this role. As has already been indicated, the legislation establishing the new organisation will clarify and strengthen its external quality assurance role of Qualifications Ireland in respect of the linked colleges of universities and this would also apply to NUI recognised colleges.

However, the NUI awarding function in relation to the recognised colleges is itself related to the awarding functions of the new organisation. Qualifications Ireland could make awards for the recognised colleges. An alternative open to any of the recognised colleges would be to have a direct relationship with any university and it is understood that some of the existing recognised colleges are already exploring options such as these. In the case of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, legislation is in place which provides a process whereby they could take on their own degree awarding powers.

It is also of note that it is proposed that Qualifications Ireland will have a particular role in relation to access, transfer and progression. In this regard, the role of the new organisation and the role of the NUI in setting matriculation arrangements for both the constituent universities and the recognised colleges are related. The issue arising is whether it is appropriate for the NUI role to continue or whether this role should be subsumed by the institutions involved in the implementation of the procedures set by Qualifications Ireland.

There does not appear to be a very close relationship between the functions of the new organisation and the functions of the NUI in relation to the following four current activities of the NUI:

- Printing parchment for the making of awards itself and for the making of NUI awards by the constituent universities.
- Bestowing prizes and bursaries across the constituent universities of the recognised colleges
- Maintaining a register of NUI graduates and undertaking the elections for the NUI seats on Seanad Éireann.
- Supporting Convocation of the NUI

Therefore, the key issue to be considered in the consultative process is in relation to the existing related functions of the NUI identified above. Following consideration of the possible future of these functions, it might then be appropriate to consider the other functions which are not closely related and whether it is sustainable to have a distinct organisation to undertake them.

## 5. Qualifications Ireland – An Institutional View

This section discusses how Qualifications Ireland might be structured. As well as dealing with the core structure of the organisation itself, this includes an outline of some considerations influencing how a Board might be constituted, how reporting and external review might be handled and some general comments on finance and staffing. Ultimately, finalisation of the range of functions to be carried out will strongly influence how Qualifications Ireland will be organised. However, it must be acknowledged that it is Qualifications Ireland itself that will be ultimately responsible for determining how to organise most effectively to carry out its functions, within overall staffing numbers (and grades) approved by the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Finance.

*Transforming Public Services*, the Report of the Task Force on the Public Service published in November 2008, includes a chapter on State Agencies and its recommendations will influence the governance and reporting arrangements in Qualifications Ireland.

### 5.1 The Board

Arrangements for appointment of the boards of the NQAI, HETAC and FETAC are set out in the Qualifications Act. The Board composition of IUQB is set out in its Articles of Association. The boards are largely comprised of nominees from education and training stakeholders and range from 14 to 18 members. It is considered that the broad range of backgrounds and experience of board members has been a strength and has enabled the business of the bodies be considered from a number of perspectives. However, a number of factors mean that the continuation of this model must be questioned.

Qualifications Ireland will have a very broad reach, both in terms of its functions and the sectors it serves. If the stakeholder nomination model is continued, it would be difficult to maintain the board at an effective size, without leaving some fundamental gaps in representation. A different model of nominations to the board of the new organisation is proposed, which will focus instead on drawing on areas of *functional expertise* from the various sectors, rather than relying on the stakeholder nomination model as currently used in the bodies. Consequently, it is intended that the board of Qualifications Ireland will have a maximum of 6 members. Areas of expertise from

which it would be desirable to have representation will mirror the functions of the new organisation as set out in section 4. It will also be important to include some members with wider business/management community and learner perspectives, as well as international expertise.

In undertaking their duties, the existing bodies consult widely with stakeholders and this practice must be a key feature of Qualifications Ireland. In this way, stakeholders can input into the decision making process without being directly represented on the board. Effective and appropriate stakeholder consultation on all areas of activity will allow for a tight and efficient board, comprised of range of areas of expertise.

The Report of the Task Force on the Public Service has this to say on the issue:

*“We endorse the OECD view that a wider variety of governance arrangements would be appropriate for the diverse range of agency roles, with scope, in particular, for reducing the number of statutorily independent boards of stakeholders in favour of Offices under more immediate Ministerial direction with greater recourse to advisory boards.”*

This will be considered in the framing of legislation. However, it is considered that independence is an important feature of the Qualifications Ireland board. European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education insist that external review agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.

The Task Force Report also recommends the production of a governance framework for state agencies covering, inter alia, appointments to state boards, information sharing between boards and chief executives, models of stakeholder consultation and the role of Departmental nominees. This will be kept under review as the amalgamation proceeds.

The activities of the board will be subject to the external review process discussed in paragraph 5.3.2.

## **5.2 Structure of Organisation**

The organisational structure of Qualifications Ireland will largely be determined by the board and management of the body itself subject to the overall staffing parameters referred to above. As outlined in section 4, the functions of Qualifications Ireland do not have a specific focus on particular education and training sectors. This may mean that the body will be organised along functional rather than sectoral lines. This should make it easier for providers of education and training that currently span both the further and higher education and training sectors. While there is likely to be some tailoring of approaches to specific types of providers, institutions will have a closely matched set of quality assurance arrangements with a single awarding body. The requirement to visibly separate quality assurance activities from award making also suggests this type of organisational structure.

## **5.3 Corporate Planning, Reporting and External Review**

### **5.3.1 Planning and Reporting**

The Task Force on the Public Service recommended that new performance frameworks be developed between Departments and state agencies and the Department of Finance will be leading work on producing a model. Plans for reporting arrangements for Qualifications Ireland will be kept under review as that work takes place but the Task Force Report makes clear that a number of key elements will be included in the frameworks:

- The expectations of Government and Ministers should be defined for agencies;
- Annual and multi-annual targets must be developed, along with suitable performance indicators based on clear outputs including milestones to measure their delivery;
- The greater use of output and outcome indicators should form the basis for a new performance dialogue between Government Departments and State bodies. These indicators should be regarded as the basis for increased delegation to agencies; and for greater operational autonomy and not as an additional form of centralised control;

- Annual Output Statements should be produced by all agencies in line with the new performance framework; and
- The development and widespread use of service level agreements should form part of the wider performance management framework for those agencies involved in service provision.

Qualifications Ireland will also develop multi-annual strategic plans, which would be submitted to the Minister for Education and Science. The Minister for Education and Science will consult with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment on relevant issues.

### 5.3.2 External Review

One of the important dimensions to current policy in relation to the four organisations is that they are subject to external review. HETAC and FETAC are both subject to review by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and were reviewed in 2006 and 2007 respectively. The NQAI was reviewed jointly by the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. Finally, the Irish Universities Quality Board was reviewed by the Higher Education Authority in 2008.

All of the reviews have followed a common template consistent with best national and international practice. This has involved

- Preparation of a self-evaluation report by the organisation, in consultation with stakeholders
- publication of the self-evaluation report
- a review visit by a panel of national and international experts leading to the preparation by the panel of a report
- preparation by the organisation of a response to the panel report, incorporating an action plan to implement its recommendations
- consideration by the agency/Department conducting the review
- publication of the panel's report, the organisation's response and the conclusions of the agency/Department conducting the review.

The primary focus of all the reviews has been on enhancing the quality improvement culture within the organisations through reviewing the performance of their functions.

This review culture is very important in a national context and in an international context, and it is vital that this practice continues. It is of note that the NQAI review was organised by the Departments of Education and Science and Enterprise and Employment. Thus the Departments have the capacity to perform this overarching function effectively themselves, and this is a primary function of Government Departments in relation to agencies.

#### **5.4 Finance – costs and savings**

Savings will arise from efficiencies achieved through economies of scale. There will no longer be a requirement for the current number of CEOs and boards, with their associated support costs. It should be noted that board members do not receive any payments, other than where expenses are incurred. New staffing and grading arrangements will also be approved by the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Finance in the context of amalgamation. The removal of parallel structures and streamlined and shared corporate services, including accommodation, will also give rise to savings. Further savings will be sought through the streamlining of the bodies activities, e.g. savings will be possible where providers interact with the award making and quality assurance apparatus of more than one of the current bodies. Many of these savings will be achievable over time.

While Qualifications Ireland will perform the same broad functions as the existing bodies, it will also have some additional functions (e.g. regulation of the international education sector) which will be more efficiently undertaken in the context of the coherent role of the organisation. Furthermore, it is likely that once-off up-front costs arising from the process of amalgamation will be incurred, e.g. integration of IT systems and breaking of accommodation leases.

#### **5.5 Staffing**

NQAI, HETAC and FETAC between them currently employ approximately 100 staff, with an additional 24 staff employed on a temporary or contract basis. The agencies have committed to reduce numbers to meet the target of a 3% reduction in payroll costs announced by the Minister for Finance in 2008 and to actively seek to further reduce payroll costs. The moratorium on recruitment and promotions in the public sector is now also in place.



The intentions of the university sector in relation to the future of the IUQB when the new organisation is established will need to be formalised and the staffing issues involved will be explored.

It is the intention that the overall staffing numbers and grades will be approved by the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Finance.

## **5.6 Transitional Arrangements**

The bodies concerned are already working together in a range of fora, including an Implementation Advisory Group established to advise the Minister on amalgamation. Arrangements are in place to better align business practices, policies and procedures and other areas of potential convergence such as IT system support and development are under consideration. The scope for greater sharing of administrative support will also be explored by the existing bodies prior to amalgamation.

As the establishment of Qualifications Ireland approaches greater consideration will be given to interim arrangements for governance and top level management. The timing of these arrangements will be important. Subject to the approval of the Department of Finance, it is probable that an interim CEO and an interim board will be appointed. Their role, supported by a unit of staff drawn from the bodies, would be to develop and oversee the detailed approach to the establishment of Qualifications Ireland.

## 6. Conclusion

This Consultation Paper on the Amalgamation of Qualifications and Quality Assurance Bodies has outlined the background and functions of the organisations concerned, presented the policy context and rationale for change, explored how these functions will be brought together in Qualifications Ireland and the implications for the shape of legislation and outlined a number of possible new functions for the new organisation. Your comments and suggestions on the issues raised in this paper are invited. Your comments may be confined to a specific issue of particular interest to you if you so wish. In particular, we would be interested in receiving comments on the issues set out in Chapters 4 and 5.

Submissions should be accompanied by a Respondent's Details form which can be found in the Appendix.

Please submit your comments, not later than Friday, 26<sup>th</sup> June 2009, to [qualifications@education.gov.ie](mailto:qualifications@education.gov.ie) or

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**Consultation on the Amalgamation of Qualifications and Quality Assurance Bodies**

**Respondent's Details**

Name:	
Position (if applicable):	
Organisation (if applicable):	
Address:	
Telephone:	
Email:	
Date:	

**Is this response a personal view or is it made on behalf of your organisation?**

Personal [       ]

On behalf of organisation [       ]

Submissions will be made public on the website of the Department of Education and Science and attributed to the author and/or organisation unless you request otherwise. If you do not wish your submission to be made public please tick the following box [    ].