

Case Study – Guidance - Summary

This case study was commissioned by the Study Team for the Framework Implementation and Impact Study as an independent input into the Study. It was completed in December 2008.

Introduction

The case study aimed to explore the level of awareness, understanding and impact of the Framework within the broad guidance community. The Framework Implementation and Impact Study Team identified a number of stakeholders to be consulted, including those with a professional role in advising, in relation to education, training and employment, learners in schools, in further and higher education and training, adults and those in employment. A representative each from the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), FÁS, the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) and the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) was also included. A structured interview was conducted with each stakeholder based around a series of questions prepared by the Study Team. The questions related to knowledge and understanding of the Framework, its implementation and use, its impact on guidance and learner client groups. The case study is the distillation of the written records of the interviews

Awareness and Understanding

While all the sectors within the guidance community are aware of the Framework, the depth and breadth of understanding varies within the different sectors depending on engagement with the Framework in their day-to-day activities. Those in post primary schools with responsibility for helping Leaving Certificate students progress into further and higher education know about levels 5 -8 as they guide learners through the range of programmes in further education (FE) colleges, institutes of technology, universities and their associated colleges or HETAC approved private providers.

On the other hand, the Vocational Education Committee adult education guidance service has contact with a more heterogeneous group of clients ranging from those with literacy problems to learners who had previously completed some level of education and now wish to progress further. Adult guidance saw its task as initially identifying where the client's previous learning fitted on the Framework and then

mapping an education plan from that point and for this they understood levels 1 -8 of the Framework.

FÁS faced similar issues with clients coming from the labour market in placing their learning on the Framework and finding matching employment opportunities or appropriate training programmes. In this work FÁS tended to focus on awards up to FETAC levels 5 and 6.

Guidance in FE colleges was concentrated around FETAC levels 4, 5 and 6 and progression to levels 7 and 8 while the higher education careers advisory service dealt with levels 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10.

The adult guidance sector believed that its clients were familiar with the Framework in terms of where they were and whither they wanted to progress while it was clear from the consultation with Leaving Certificate students that they engaged with the Framework in the context of their CAO application. They were familiar with levels 6 - 8 as proximate goals and level 9 as a longer term aspiration and while they were aware of the meaning of and progression along the different levels, they did not specifically know about the Framework nor had they heard of NQAI. However it appeared that there was an acceptance among the Leaving Certificate students of the level of an award irrespective of the provider. They described the programmes they intended to pursue in terms of structure and content rather learning outcomes and this seemed to reflect the guidance they received.

Uses of the Framework in guidance

Post primary guidance counsellors said they included the Framework in their classroom curriculum and they expressed a general view that the Framework had simplified the process of evaluating further and higher education programmes by referring to their levels on the Framework. Previously comparisons were based on length and title of programmes and on whether there was an add-on to permit progression. A secondary school guidance counsellor added that one of the big advantages of the Framework had been to make transferability between further and higher education more transparent and easier. However progression was not uniform across fields of study. Business Studies, Science and Engineering were cited as examples where there were few barriers to progression from further to higher education whereas similar progression in nursing was problematic.

Adult guidance believed that the Framework had been very useful for its clients because, once it was established what qualification they had and where this fitted on the Framework, it was relatively easy to plan an educational programme for them. Adult guidance saw that qualifications had become recognisable and transferable.

The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NGCE), which has a remit for both post primary and adult guidance, saw the Framework as user friendly and something

that could be understood by clients without the need for detailed explanation and this permitted more self management of learning by clients. They could map out their learning path identifying the potential for mobility because there was more awareness around qualifications and entitlements through the information set out by the providers of learning opportunities and this could be a source of confidence for those returning to learning. Access, transfer and progression were highlighted through the Framework and its associated publications and these encouraged learners to think about progressing through the education system.

Actions taken with respect to implementation of the Framework

FETAC had placed a range of both Irish and non Irish awards on the Framework - converting them into FETAC awards, and the FETAC brand was now widely accepted in the marketplace. Respondents from both the adult education guidance service and a private further education provider were complimentary of the progress made by FETAC in this regard.

FÁS had ensured that the majority of its programmes had been placed on the Framework and have been accredited up to FETAC level 6. In addition, FÁS as an organisation had produced in conjunction with NQAI a comprehensive guide to the Framework and also had briefings for all members of the organisation on the Framework. The Framework was now included on all FÁS Registration forms and, in the Careers Advisory database descriptions of the various careers specify educational and training requirements in Framework terms.

All FÁS programmes were designed to prepare participants for work and initial progression was into a job. Indeed, one of the major criteria in evaluating any FÁS training programme was the employment of the trainees. Nonetheless, progression was a challenging issue for FÁS to provide opportunities from a very wide range of programmes and mapping progression had yet to be completed

Changes had been made to the role of guidance counsellors in second level schools by the 1998 Education Act and NCGE developed a training programme in coordination and teamwork for guidance counsellors to provide them with the skills required for this new role. NCGE obtained approval from HETAC for this programme as a level 8 special purpose award (Whole School Guidance). This was to serve both as an exemplar and a motivator for participants in taking the programme. In addition, NCGE now evaluated staff training and development on the basis of recognition on the Framework

Issues arising in relation to Framework Implementation

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) surfaced as a major issue for FÁS and while there had been progress, the process was still problematic. Clients who had completed a formal course or programme could be accommodated. However there are “experienced capable people coming to FÁS with good work experience but little or no formal qualifications but they can do tasks. For the Framework to make a real difference to these we need a good robust accessible process under RPL.” The respondent’s view is that the present system was “excessively detailed and bureaucratic”

A private provider of further education had an example of how it dealt with an application for an award through RPL. The College used offer a 90 hour special needs assistant course approved by Froebel College. The programme had been replaced by a FETAC award programme and many of the former graduates had come back seeking a FETAC award. The College developed a bridging programme taken largely through independent study to prepare these students to take the FETAC assignments and thereby gain the FETAC award. There were a large number of students who availed of this opportunity

Some question were raised about the uniformity of quality of FETAC awards across all providers and in relation to the acceptability of FETAC awards as alternatives to the Leaving and Junior Certificates in public service appointments.

Some felt the Framework and its potential were not fully recognised, perhaps due to the complexity of its language and, while the guidance community had a broad overview of the Framework, the focus tended to be on the levels rather than learning outcomes and analysis of learning into knowledge, knowhow and skill and competences. The guidance community, in general, did not yet seem to have moved to exploring further and higher education programmes in outcomes terms. NCGE was an exception in suggesting using learning outcomes to compare programmes but such familiarity may have come from NCGE’s roles a as a provider of a special purpose award.

Finally a number of interviewees raised the issue of equivalences of qualifications in both jurisdictions in Ireland and with the rest of the UK.

Conclusions

The main conclusions of the guidance case study are

- Awareness and understanding of the Framework among the guidance stakeholders tends to be related to the level of their engagement with it in their day-to-day activities

- Leaving Certificate students know about the Framework in the context of their CAO applications while adult learners want to know the current position of their learning on the Framework and whether they might progress
- Guidance at second levels use the Framework to help learners compare and evaluate FE and HE programmes while adult and employment guidance use the Framework to help clients identify their current position and to map a learning path
- FETAC have placed a range of previously established programmes on the Framework and FÁS has ensured that the majority of its programmes are now on the Framework.
- RPL for both certified and experiential learning needs to be made more transparent and accessible

NFQ Study: Case Study on Guidance – Introduction

This case study is one component of the NQAI Framework Implementation and Impact Study and is based on a series of structured interviews conducted during July-September 08 with key stakeholders in the field of guidance. The stakeholders, identified by NQAI, (named individuals and representatives of sectors) comprised professional guidance counsellors or coordinators, actively and directly engaged in providing guidance to learners in all areas of the Irish education system (including adult guidance), those involved with guidance in employment and a small number of representatives of national organisations associated with guidance and a number of learners.

Those professionally engaged in guidance included guidance counsellors working in the post primary sector in secondary schools and community colleges, a guidance counsellor in further education, a careers advisor in an institute of technology, an adult guidance coordinator and adult guidance counsellor both from VEC adult education guidance services and a representative of the employment section at FÁS. National organisations consulted included Irish Vocational Educational Association (IVEA, the representative body for the VECs), the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) and the two awarding councils, HETAC and FETAC. Five students preparing to sit for Leaving Certificate in June 2009 also participated.

Initial contact was made to explain the project and arrange an appointment. In all cases there was a face-to-face meeting with the researcher, question and answer proceedings were recorded and in most case a synopsis was drafted and sent to the contact for comment and correction. What follows is a digest of the notes on all the meetings

Awareness and Knowledge of the Framework amongst the guidance community

There is strong awareness of the Framework in the guidance community. Many claim to be self taught as they saw the Framework as self explanatory while others referred to in-service training organised by NQAI.

Adult Guidance

An adult guidance coordinator knew about the Framework and believed it was very relevant to and extremely important for his work. He dealt mainly with levels 3 -8, with learners coming in at level 3 and progressing to levels 4, 5, 6, 7, and up to 8 as appropriate. He viewed Levels 1 and 2 as relatively new and designed for learners with low ability that would progress slowly and it would take time for these to come through to levels 3 and 4. In his view others employed in the adult guidance service

would be all equally aware of the Framework. He saw learners' knowledge of the Framework as dependent on the length of time they were in the education system. Those who had completed a number of Leaving Certificate subjects through adult education would be quite familiar with the Framework and its levels whereas newcomers to adult education had to be informed about the Framework, its levels and their significance and relevance.

An adult guidance counsellor in a neighbouring county was also well aware of the Framework and referred to it all the time in her work. She was not sure about how much others working in the VEC might know about the Framework. She mentioned a recent presentation on the Framework she had made to literacy students, which the tutors (admittedly part time) requested to attend and found her talk "interesting and revealing". She added that perhaps those who guide students taking Leaving Certificate would be knowledgeable on the Framework but these might be exceptional among tutors and teachers.

Guidance in Schools

Whether exceptional or not, those responsible for providing guidance to Leaving Certificate students were certainly very conscious of the Framework. A guidance counsellor in a mixed secondary school in a large provincial town was very much aware of the Framework and he said

"there is an emphasis now on most kids progressing to further or higher education and I start to familiarize them with the Framework in third year and follow through with programmes in transition, fifth and sixth years so that all know about the Framework and its ten levels. They focus on levels 5 -8 as the ones relevant to them"

There was a similar response from a counsellor with responsibility for guidance in a number of community colleges who claimed that before the introduction of the Framework he had used the concept of "levels" in guidance counselling to show his students where they were and whither they might aspire to go

Another counsellor engaged in the provision of guidance to Leaving Certificate students, said she was well aware of the Framework and that knowledge of the Framework in the guidance community is detailed because NQAI had provided in-service training at its introduction and NQAI literature was clear, explicit, readily available and regular updated. She was of the opinion that students' knowledge of the Framework was in the context of and tended to be confined to the CAO application. The Framework could also be useful with parents of her students, many of whom might not have completed secondary education and might be considering returning to education.

A guidance counsellor in a college of further education, which has 800 full-time, many of these taking FETAC level 4/5 award programmes, was very familiar with the Framework. She did not recall any direct training on the scope and operation of the Framework and believed she and her guidance colleagues were self taught in this regard.

At third level, a representative of the careers service in institutes of technology said that she and her colleagues were very aware of the Framework which was highly relevant to their work. Programmes in institutes were all on the Framework and students progressing either within an Institute, to other Irish HEIs or a UK College required guidance on the levels of both their current award programmes and of those to which they are progressing.

National Organisations

The National Centre of Guidance in Education (NCGE) responded that its staff had a thorough grounding in the Framework arising from its role in providing CPD to guidance counsellors. The Framework featured strongly in its publications to the guidance community as NCGE disseminated information on the Framework and there had been a number of articles on it in its news bulletins. NCGE believed that the guidance counsellors had a comprehensive knowledge of the Framework and those at second level would have a detailed knowledge of Framework level 5 -9. The adult guidance service, based in VECs (40 in VECS and one in WIT) arising out of the Adult Guidance Initiative, dealt with the all levels of the Framework as its clients undertook programmes from level 1 right through to university. NCGE Director said that “adult guidance counsellors make extensive use of the Framework in the provision of guidance for adults from literacy programmes, VTOS and community education including BTEI.”

In addition, NCGE was a HETAC provider of a Level 8 Special Purpose Award as CPD programme to guidance counsellors. NCGE consulted the Qualifications Act (1999) and the Framework when making the application to HETAC for provider status and when seeking accreditation of its Whole School Guidance Planning Programme. NCGE consulted the Framework on an ongoing basis to fulfil its remit in relation to the CPD of guidance counsellors.

A respondent from a national organisation representing vocational education committees was aware of the Framework, in particular levels in 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 and he believed that those in the adult guidance service, adult education officers and the principals of further education colleges were very well-informed of the Framework and related issues but that principals and teachers in second level schools would be much less informed.

The Employment Services Support Unit at FÁS, the national organisation with responsibility for training and employment services, was very aware of the Framework and had provided “a comprehensive briefing session for employment service managers and local officers who provide the services to job seekers and employers”. The local employment officers would be “well aware of the Framework and especially levels 1 -6”

Learners

A group of five Leaving Certificate students, all in the final year and within four months of making a CAO application, was consulted. Four were focused on honours degrees, which they knew as level 8 and the other planned to go to an institute of technology where he hoped to do an ordinary degree at level 7. While they all knew about levels 7 and 8 they were hesitant when asked about the origin of these levels. However one student volunteered

“I think there are 10 steps -10 levels altogether. If you are at level 8, technically you are more educated than someone at level 7, isn't that right? I think level 9 is a Masters, isn't it? And level 10 is a Doctor, I think.”

This opened up the discussion and all were aware of FETAC level 5 as “between school and college”. They all knew about FETAC because the local FE College offered FETAC level 5 award programmes and they thought Leaving Certificate was at levels 4 or 5. However there was complete silence on direct questions about the National Framework of Qualifications and NQAI. When asked about HETAC, one student said “I definitely heard about it but I forget”

Use of the Framework in guidance

Schools and Colleges

An experienced guidance counsellor in a community college spoke about the difficulties in pre Framework times for Leaving Certificate students in comparing the courses offered by the different providers. He had suggested, in vain, that all Irish universities and colleges standardise both the information on courses and its presentation in their admissions handbooks to enable ease of comparison. He believed that the Framework grid could now facilitate this process. This view is shared by others including another second level school guidance counsellor who said that the Framework had simplified the process of evaluating courses pointing out that before the Framework “you had to explain that a degree lasted longer – you did it in terms of number of years or add-ons. You had to explain that a degree was

higher than a diploma. You did in terms of higher or lower. Now you do it with numbers - what level the programme is at“

NCGE was more explicit

“There is a need for all providers to inform potential applicants on how the course fits into the Framework in terms of levels and the number of credits. The Framework has encouraged guidance counsellors to examine all literature in relation to programme in a new light looking at

- Accreditation
- Course requirements
- Exemptions
- Learning outcomes
- Teaching learning methodologies
- Training and qualification of the deliverers
- Evidence of fair procedures in relation to assessment and course requirements”

The transparency and simplicity of the Framework was mentioned by a member of the guidance service at third level who identified the great advantages of the Framework as its simplicity and transparency (“it does what it says on the tin”).

“There are a clearly defined number of levels relating to the length of each programme”.

A secondary school guidance counsellor was of the opinion that one of the big advantages of the Framework had been to make transferability more apparent and easier and the education system was facilitating such transferability and this meant that if students underperform in the Leaving Certificate they could get an appropriate place in the ladder and progress from there.

A guidance counsellor in a college of further education while confirming the importance of the Framework in terms of educational progression added that she saw it is now used in the labour market.

A guidance counsellor at a community college particularly liked the fan diagram presentation of the Framework because it did not suggest that one level was better than another, rather they were appropriate to the needs of the learner at a particular time. Another second level guidance counsellor was also impressed by the “arc representation rather than a ladder” and was pleased that apprenticeships are on the Framework indicating that it covers training and was not confined to academic learning.

Adult Services

A representative of FÁS remarked in relation to the Framework “ it is still early days in the overall scheme of things - it is a progressive move and is transparent letting clients see the currency of their education and training irrespective of the provider.” The Framework was now included on all FÁS Registration forms and in the Careers Advisory database, descriptions of the various careers specify educational and training requirements in Framework terms.

An adult guidance coordinator in the VEC sector explained that change was part of life with much greater job mobility than previously and some changes prompted people to look to education. “It may be redundancy, the need to get out of a rut, a mother with children moving to a new level of schooling or wanting to get work closer to home to avoid the daily commute - all looking for appropriate up skilling.”

He believed that the Framework had been very useful for all these because once it was established what qualification they had and where this fitted on the Framework it was relatively easy to map an educational programme for them. Qualifications had become recognisable and transferable.

NCGE said that it received many queries about how qualifications could be recognised and these were considered in the context of the Framework. NCGE used the Framework in providing responses to queries from Irish and non Irish about European qualifications. Most of these came through guidance counsellors although there are some from the general public. The Framework provided a clear pathway for giving guidance on, facilitating and supporting access, transfer and progression and was an excellent tool for recognising learning at all levels and encouraging learners to participate and progress in lifelong learning. The Framework had developed a common language on education and training in terms of level of qualification, award type and credits and through promoting the comparability of qualifications across Europe facilitated recognition of learning in the EU and this will benefit learners. From general queries NCGE staff believed that the 10 level Framework was a very useful visual tool for many learners.

The visual depiction was also mentioned by an adult guidance counsellor as very useful in dealing with adults and non Irish clients in helping them see where they were and where they were going. She had used illustrations from NQAI web site in presentations to groups of students. She referred to a recent client who had been in a special needs school

“And did not do the Junior Cert but did a qualification of the National Learning Network and still had it in his head to do the Junior Certificate. So I sat him down and showed him from the Framework that the qualification he had was at level 3 and therefore he had the equivalent of Junior Cert. It made his day”

She added “as you can see we have a poster (NQAI Framework Diagram) here, outside on the notice board, in the information room and in every room I do guidance”

A representative of one of the awarding councils pointed out that the Framework is the backdrop and the context for both FETAC and HETAC and added

“The Framework brought coherence - where qualifications had a place on the Framework and they have a reference point for the learner”.

An experienced guidance counsellor in a community college saw the Framework as a simplification and feared that some of its nuances might be missed. There were grades within each level to provide some measure of flexibility and he could see the danger of the Framework becoming “an inflexible instrument in the hands of a bureaucracy in contrast to a living organic process”. However another respondent was not sure how flexible the Framework could be as it was an instrument to show people where they were in terms of qualifications.

Flexibility was also mentioned by NCGE with a comment that there was “a lack flexibility in that the Framework is quite rigid in places.” The representative from FÁS indicated that the formalised procedures of programme accreditation were slow and did not facilitate the immediate sharp response that a crisis situation might warrant.

Actions taken in respect to implementation of the Framework

The most significant actions with respect to the implementation of the Framework were taken by the two major organisational stakeholders, FETAC and FÁS.

One of the first tasks of FETAC was to ‘place’ all existing awards – those made previously by NCVA, FÁS, Fáilte Ireland etc on the Framework. This was undertaken in the ‘legacy’ awards placement, a rigorous process though which all awards and their corresponding programmes/courses were analysed, and reviewed by the former awarding bodies and placed on the Framework. This ensured that awards were placed at the appropriate level for the end users (learners) and by employers, especially those in the public sector.

The was praised by a VEC adult guidance coordinator who said that FETAC had done a great job in putting all the legacy awards on the Framework, it had promoted “a less stressful and more user friendly form of education which had become a very valuable alternative to traditional education”. However he believed that some non Irish awards such as City and Guilds were well established in the Irish marketplace and he would be sorry to see these replaced. A similar point was made by the respondent from IVEA who claimed that some overseas accrediting bodies were well recognised and accepted in the marketplace whereas the corresponding FETAC qualifications were not.

The head of a private provider was complimentary to FETAC and in her experience FETAC awards were now so well accepted in the market by both students and employers that there was reluctance among learners to enrol on programmes not leading to a FETAC award.

FÁS had also responded significantly by ensuring that the majority of its programmes had been placed on the Framework and have been accredited up to FETAC level 6. In addition FÁS as an organisation had produced in conjunction with NQAI a comprehensive guide to the Framework and also had briefings for all members of the organisation on the Framework. The extent and intensity of these briefings varied as appropriate to the different levels and functions within the organisation.

The work of FETAC and, to a lesser extent, that of FÁS provided a context for the work of VEC adult guidance. One guidance coordinator explained that a range of different people made contact with adult education - those who may have left school at 13, others with Intermediate or Junior Certificate, some available for full time education through social welfare entitlements others with no entitlements who need part time provision. The services were marketed and advertised but some clients learned about them by word-of-mouth or perhaps had been part of a VEC group who had experienced the more users friendly adult education approaches. Until recently, the lowest FETAC award programme offered in his VEC was at level 3. However, clients who would not be capable of entering this level programme and would require one-to-one tuition now participated in Level 1 and Level 2 award programmes in literacy.

Similar developments were reported from a neighbouring VEC where the target groups were adults on VEC programmes including literacy, BTEI and VTOS students and those on community education courses and contact had been made with FÁS and local Social Welfare offices. The main levels were 3, 4 and 5 and while her VEC did not offer level 1 and 2 programmes at the moment, she felt that such programmes would have to be introduced as some clients were not ready to go directly onto level 3 award programmes.

Changes had been made to the role of guidance counsellors in second level schools by the 1998 Education Act and NCGE developed a training programme in coordination and teamwork for guidance counsellors to provide them with the skills required for this new role. NCGE obtained approval from HETAC for this programme as a level 8 special purpose award (Whole School Guidance). This was to serve both as an exemplar and a motivator for participants in taking the programme. In addition, NCGE now evaluated staff training and development on the basis of recognition on the Framework

The second level guidance counsellors said that they had included the Framework in their classroom work. One indicated that his main immediate concern was the destination of the 150 students completing Leaving Certificate in his school and he

aimed to put each student in touch with the level appropriate to their capacity. He added, however, that increasingly students were progressing from level 8 to postgraduate studies and that he made them aware of level 9 and 10 qualifications as a possibility after completing the level 8.

There was a similar response from another guidance counsellor who claimed that the Framework was part of the curriculum she followed with Senior Cycle students and she gave classes on the Framework. In their first year of the Senior Cycle she encouraged students to see where they were on the Framework with the junior certificate and where they can go. This was followed with a full explanation of further and higher education and of the Framework as a tool for comparing qualifications. They used the Framework when researching courses to assess the level and value of each. The relevant levels were 5, 6, 7 and 8 although she encouraged students to become aware of the level they have achieved in Junior Certificate. She said that the Framework “added a new facet to guidance. It helps put in perspective further education and higher education, the differences between the two, what’s one and what’s the other and what you can use each for.”

Impact of the Framework on learners

Discussions with learners indicated that the nature of the work and career opportunities were the major influence on choice of course area and when asked for details of their chosen programmes they described these in terms of structure and content rather than learning outcomes.

One student, planning to study at a college of education, was not aware of what body awarded the degree. However another injected that “it was affiliated to one of the bigger colleges” and identified the awarding university. Another student who had selected a degree at a private provider had not considered the awarding body but was satisfied it was an “honours” degree. In fact all four students had confidence in the “honours” degree and accepted that standard irrespective of where they planned to study.

The head of a private provider of further education believed that the Framework had great advantages for learners because they could see their programmes in context and applicants now ask about the level of a programme and the progression route on completion. She added that a number of students who had completed a programme before the introduction of the Framework have returned to the College asking about the level of the award on the Framework.

NCGE saw the Framework as user friendly and something that could be understood by clients without the need for detailed explanation and this permitted more self management of learning by clients. They could map out their learning path identifying the potential for mobility because there was more awareness around

qualifications and entitlements through the information set out by the providers of learning opportunities and this could be a source of confidence for those returning to learning. Access, transfer and progression are highlighted through the Framework and its associated publications and this encourages learners to think about progressing through the education system

This was also the view of a VEC adult guidance coordinator who said “the beauty of the Framework is that it provides progression plans that can be measured according to the needs and abilities of the learner”

A guidance counsellor in a college of further education said that in her college the majority of students were preparing to go directly to the labour market but approximately 25% progressed to a higher level education award programme. The Link scheme with FETAC / HETAC programmes had been crucial in this regard. However she referred to the problem where the Framework emphasised the scope for progression and students did not realise that on particular programmes there may be a limited number of places relative to demand and in such cases many students, especially from the FE sector, lose out. This applied in nursing, social care and childcare. She added that students who did not achieve the (Leaving Certificate) points level for entry to the pre registration nursing degree might have been better to repeat the Leaving Certificate as HEIs operated a quota system for FETAC award applicants and places available are limited relative to the numbers of qualified applicants. However some students preferred to take a programme relevant to their career choice rather than repeating a general education programme.

An adult guidance coordinator had a different opinion on this. While second level guidance was not his main area of work he was often consulted in the second half of August immediately after the issuing of Leaving Certificate results when the adult guidance service was the only available service and disappointed students approached for advice often with their parents. In his view for someone completing second level education there was no substitute for a good Leaving Certificate and he would almost always advise the student to repeat.

This approach was not shared by the adult guidance counsellor in a neighbouring VEC. In terms of guidance to students disappointed with Leaving Certificate, she did not necessarily recommend repeating Leaving Certificate in an attempt to get better results and higher points. She was influenced by her own experience of going to an FE College immediately after Leaving Certificate and completing a two year social care programme which was ideal preparation for university

A guidance counsellor in a secondary school was aware that students “taking FETAC level 5 awards in Business, Science, Engineering and IT progress satisfactorily to third level there is a big problem in nursing which is attracting large numbers of applicants and hence the points are quite high.” He knew that there was quota applying to FETAC award candidates and that many more students achieved

the required standard on FETAC award programmes than were accepted into the pre registration nursing degree programmes. He said that an FE college in his area offered the FETAC foundation nursing award and students, from this programme that did not succeed in getting into pre registration nursing degree in an Irish HEI, could go to the UK. The FE College had a link with a London College which accepted many of its foundation nursing FETAC graduates. He also cited a student currently repeating Leaving Certificate in his school because she had not the required points for entry to pre registration nursing degree. She had taken Leaving Certificate two years earlier and had been “out” a year before returning to repeat Leaving Certificate in an attempt to get the extra points.

A guidance counsellor from a different part of the country had similar examples. She believed that students took FETAC courses for different reasons, some because of interest in the subject area, others with the aim of progressing in education and another group to experience “college life.” Progression was easier in some areas of study than others. Last year in her school two students, who did not get the points for entry to the pre registration nursing degree, researched the FETAC nursing foundation award. When they found out about the quota of places applying to FETAC award applicants, they decided to repeat Leaving Certificate.

Progression is viewed differently in FÁS. Most of FÁS clients came through the Employment Service and required initial support. The employment officers could register them for a training programme if they met the specified entry requirement. All programmes were designed to prepare participants for work and the initial progression was into a job. Indeed, one of the major criteria in evaluating any FÁS training programme was the employment of the trainees. Nonetheless, progression was a challenging issue for FÁS to provide opportunities from a very wide range of programmes. Progression to another institution might be more difficult although through time the Framework should facilitate this process. Mapping progression had yet to be completed

Issues arising in relation to Framework implementation

In the course of the interviews a number of issues surfaced.

1. RPL

For guidance counsellors in secondary schools dealing with full time students, prior learning was not normally an issue. However they maintain contact with many former students and one guidance counsellor cited an example of how an Irish university dealt with an application for RPL from one of her past pupils. The particular student, who “had a good Leaving Certificate”, completed a FETAC sports and leisure award programme and went to the UK to undertake a three year PE degree. She

successfully completed the first two years but wanted to return home. She applied to an Irish HEI for advanced entry to the degree in sports and biology and while she was offered exemptions from some of the sports modules, the HE insisted that she take Biology from year 1 and that she take the full three years to complete the degree.

A guidance counsellor in a college of FE indicated.

“RPL is not a major issue as adults come to the college through a partnership or a community education scheme where they have been prepared for college entry”

FETAC believed that recognition of prior learning was possible in the context of access and exemptions within programmes and for access to full and minor awards. Providers were responsible to facilitate learners for RPL for access and exemptions. Generally individual applications for awards through RPL were referred by FETAC to the appropriate provider such as FÁS or Fáilte Ireland, who could assess them. The process was rigorous and not easy to get through. It was a process of assessment of the skills and knowledge that applicants have and few rather than many succeed. FETAC believed that RPL had not been well promoted because the resources were not there to undertake the process.

A private provider of further education had an example of how it dealt with an application for an award through RPL. The College used offer a 90 hour special needs assistant course approved by Froebel College. The programme had been replaced by a FETAC award programme and many of the former graduates had come back seeking FETAC award. The College developed a bridging programme taken largely through independent study to prepare these students to take the FETAC assignments and thereby gain the FETAC award. There were a large number of students who availed of this opportunity

RPL was also a major issue for FÁS and while there had been progress, the process was still problematic. Clients who had completed a formal course or programme could be accommodated relatively easily. However there are “experienced capable people coming to FÁS with good work experience but little or no formal qualifications but they can do tasks. For the Framework to make a real difference to these we need a good robust accessible process under RPL.” The respondent’s view is that the present system as “excessively detailed and bureaucratic”

A related issue is non Irish candidates. While it had not been the practice to record the nationality of those who register with it, FÁS has taken an annual nationality census on a specified day in November each year and the percentages for non Irish registrations are

2006	51%
2007	43%

There was an example of a non Irish person coming to an employment officer claiming “to be an electrician with nothing but a letter from an employer “

Assessing the qualification level of such callers “is fraught with difficulty and can often end up as a judgement call by the individual employment officer.”

2. Quality

Quality surfaced as an issue in a number of the interviews. FÁS saw the Framework as a formalised process with quality assurance as the main driver and while this was seen as a great advantage it presented particular challenges for FÁS in dealing with training in the community and voluntary sector. The community and voluntary sector traditionally combined training with aspects of community service in a work based training approach. Despite the difficulties and challenges for both FÁS and the community and voluntary sector in undertaking the formalised quality assurance processes, these programmes have now been placed on the Framework with training receiving appropriate attention. However there was still an issue of bringing the marginalised under the ambit of the framework.

There was a perception on the part of a guidance counsellor from the FE college sector that there was not a common standard across all centres offering FETAC awards and class groups drawn from different feeder centres appeared to have students with different levels of knowledge, skills and competences even though they have all completed the same FETAC award. She felt that variations in standards might have arisen from different interpretations of what achieving learning outcomes meant and it created problems for students who did not complete the programme within the allotted time and faced fees and lack of support during the additional time necessary to pass the remaining modules.

NCGE Feedback from guidance counsellors also suggested that standards vary across providers at levels 1 -5 on the Framework. There was a belief that VECs and other providers developed modules without reference to each other and it might have been better if there had been more coordination and regulation of standards.

FETAC explained how it quality assured providers to offer award programme as part of a model of continuous improvement. With regard to assuring standards FETAC was implementing its new quality assessment procedures of internal verification, external authentication with providers and was moving on from the NCVA procedures of appointing external examiners to monitor both the process and the standards for those providers.

The head of a private provider gave her perceptions of the FETAC programme development process:

“FETAC have published a bank of modules from which providers can select 8 to constitute an award programme. There are core compulsory modules and electives. In the past colleges could develop a new module and submit it to FETAC for approval. Once approved, FETAC would add this module to its published bank. As a private establishment, we were not happy with this since we had paid to have a module developed and other colleges, while getting it free, would not be aware of the philosophy and methodology we had in mind in developing the module”.

The IVEA representative had reservations about this approach and viewed it as imposing a third level model on a system largely staffed by personnel whose background was in second level schools. Both schools and teachers in the second level system were accustomed to being provided with syllabi and teaching guidelines while retaining complete ownership of any teaching material which they have developed and would not be open to sharing it. Teachers with such a background find the FETAC approach challenging particularly in relation to programme development, assessment (including feedback to students) and management and also in making material available to others. He saw a need for a cultural change in the sector with major up skilling to deal appropriately with adult learners. He also had reservations about the operation of the FETAC external moderation system and its capacity to ensure comparability of standards.

It seems that FETAC has changed its approach somewhat and the private provider indicated a problem with the new system

“There are six FETAC approved modules in Montessori, entitling learners to six minor awards but not a full award which requires completion of 8 modules. FETAC has set up a childcare standards committee and will no longer approve locally developed modules but have not yet developed the additional modules to constitute a full award for Montessori despite a request from a group of public and private providers who were willing to share their modules to produce a single programme to be offered in all centres.”

She accepted the need for high quality standardised modules and recognised that some locally developed modules may not have been of the required standard but believed that delays in producing national modules were preventing her College and others from providing a service to the public.

3. Recognition of FETAC Awards

Perhaps it was not surprising that recognition of FETAC awards also surfaced as an issue. NCGE have an advisory group on Adult education and feedback from this group suggested that FETAC awards did not get recognition appropriate to the Framework where state employers such as VECs, CCs and the HSE advertised for administrative posts requiring Leaving Certificate but did not accept FETAC level 5

awards as equivalent alternatives. It was also alleged that the Garda Síochána, while stipulating Leaving Certificate mathematics as the entry standard do not recognise FETAC level 5 mathematics which was at the same level on the Framework. According to NCGE the adult guidance counsellors would like to see non traditional awards getting employer recognition with traditional awards at the same level on the Framework.

Similar points were made by a VEC adult guidance coordinator who perceived a problem in the recognition of FETAC awards in the marketplace especially in the state sector such as an apprenticeship in the defence forces where junior certificate mathematics is a requirement but FETAC level 3 mathematics qualification is not accepted as an alternative (nor FETAC level 4, some suggest). He also cited the Garda Síochána where the entry requirement is Leaving Certificate mathematics but FETAC mathematics level 5 is not accepted as an alternative and administrative post in VECs and similar bodies specify Leaving Certificate but do not accept FETAC level 5 as an alternative. He claimed that these issues led guidance staff to question the value of recommending learners to take FEATC programmes as an alternative to taking or repeating the Leaving Certificate.

(For the record in answer to a phone call the Public Appointment Service said that for recruitment to Garda Síochána, that while minimum mathematics entry requirement was a grade not lower than B3 at Foundation Level or D3 at another level in Leaving Certificate mathematics, FETAC mathematics level 5 was an accepted alternative.)

4. Language of the Framework

Many of the respondents talked of the simplicity and clarity of the Framework but at another level some saw its language complex. NCGE referred to the complexity of the Framework. There were two issues. The first was the fact that the higher diploma was at level 8, the same level as an honours degree. “This greatly undermines the value of a higher diploma (to which an honours degree may be an entry requirement)”. The second issue of complexity for NCGE related to “the detail and levels required for outlining programmes aims and objectives etc. At present too much detail is required.” However NCGE is an award programme provider in addition to its role in guidance.

Representatives of the award councils (both of whom worked closely and in some depth with the Framework) commented on this.

The view at HETAC was that the language of the Framework was complex and necessarily so and it was difficult to work through its different layers. However, if learners are to benefit from it as intended it was essential for parties who can engage with it to do so actively.

While FETAC believed that, while its staff working with the Framework all the time had mastered it, the language of the Framework can be difficult for providers, the learners, their parents and employers.

5. Cross Border recognition

Two of the guidance counsellors in secondary schools worked in a border region, the one in the northwest and the other in the northeast and both have colleges on their doorstep across the border. They both raised the issue of a mechanism for establishing equivalences between qualifications on both sides of the border. A similar point was mentioned by the head of a private provider who talked about the Irish, UK and Scottish systems being different. She also mentioned a problem with lack of recognition by FÁS for trainers with UK qualifications. FÁS recognition was important in terms of grant support to employers sponsoring staff on programmes.

Conclusions

The Framework had a big and positive impact on guidance through setting out a number of levels to which programmes of study can be assigned. This facilitated the guidance community in helping second level students compare different programmes of the various higher and further education providers. The framework has also great advantages for the VECs adult education services in helping their clients assess where they are in terms of level of qualification and how they wish to progress. FÁS the National Training and Employment Authority has fitted its range of training programme in the Framework and its employment officers use the Framework in determining which training programme they suit its client callers.

However, it appears that the guidance community in general tended to see the Framework in “two dimensions” or linearly as a series of levels through which learners progress. The outcomes based approach of the Framework and the analysis of learning outcomes into knowledge, knowhow and competence were not yet seen as relevant in guidance. There was little response on learning outcomes from the guidance counsellors and the FÁS respondent, who was from the employment section of the organisation, saw learning outcomes as issues for the “curriculum development unit”. While NCGE did refer to the need to examine learning outcomes when comparing award programmes, learners seem to focus on structure and content in researching higher and further education award programmes. NCGE is an award programme provider and the curriculum development process associated with that award programme may have given its staff an insight into learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, knowhow and competence not shared by guidance community in general.

FETAC had placed a range of existing awards on the Framework and coordinated the work of the sector providing awards at levels 1 -5 and some at level 6. The sector is quite fragmented with over 600 providers in up to 1300 centres of varying size and structure and, while most of the respondents were complimentary to FETAC for its work in this area, it is hardly surprising that some issues of a varying quality surfaced. The issue of recognition of FETAC awards was also mentioned although one of the examples does not appear to be factually correct.

RPL was also identified as problematic in relation to certified learning and more particularly in the area of experiential learning