



National Council for Curriculum and Assessment  
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta

---

# The implementation and impact of the National Framework of Qualifications: Report of the school sector

September 2008



## Contents

1. Introducing the framework in the school sector	5
2. The implementation and impact of the framework in the school sector	11
Consulting the school sector	11
Awareness, knowledge and understanding of the framework	13
Using the framework in the school sector	17
Impact of the framework in access, transfer, progression and in developments in curriculum and assessment	19
Appendix 1: The school awards	25
Appendix 2: Placing school awards on the National Framework of Qualifications	29



# 1. Introducing the framework in the school sector

The National Framework of Qualifications was introduced in Ireland in 2003. An extensive account of its introduction and implementation is provided in the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland's (NQAI) *Background paper on the development, implementation and impact of the National Framework of Qualifications and related policies on access, transfer and progression* (2008). This report confines its attention to the implementation and impact of the framework in the school sector. This section of the report considers the initial response of the school sector to its introduction and identifies the main milestones in its implementation in the sector to date.

The introduction of the framework in 2003 was welcomed in the school sector. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), at the request of and in collaboration with the Department of Education and Science (DES) and the State Examinations Commission (SEC) co-ordinated the preparations for and inputs to the introduction of the framework for the school sector. As a statutory body representative of the education partners – teachers, school management bodies, parents – it was uniquely placed to undertake this role. From the outset, the school sector participated in NQAI committees, working groups and conferences where stakeholders were consulted on policy surrounding the introduction and development of the framework.

The NCCA submission *Placing school awards on the National Framework of Qualifications* (2003) set out the value of the framework from the perspective of the school sector

*... the emergence of the National Framework of Qualifications is to be welcomed wholeheartedly. A comprehensive qualifications framework, which gains currency and use in the education and training systems over time, is a pre-requisite to underpinning the principle of lifelong learning for everyone and to improving the learning choices and opportunities of those who currently fail to derive adequate benefit from education and training. The framework can usefully inform and assist the provision of, the development of, and the quality of curriculum, qualifications and certification within the school sector, particularly at post-primary level, into the future.*

The submission proceeded to outline the rationale for and basis on which current school awards would be placed in the framework. Those awards are the Junior Certificate and three Leaving Certificate programmes – the Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). An account of the nature of those programmes and their relationship to each other is presented in Appendix One.

The submission stressed that the placing of school awards in the framework should be predicated on the idea that the development of the framework and associated developments would be viewed a work in progress and subject to rolling review and continued consultation. It was viewed that

*This is particularly important in view of the fact that those working in the school sector are largely unaware of the existence, nature and scope of these developments, lack ownership of the process of developing the framework and, consequently may view with suspicion and concern developments affecting their sector which are 'cast in stone'. It is important that the coming period is viewed as one where the purpose, nature and scope of the National Framework of Qualifications will gradually become known to a wider group of practitioners in different sectors and to the public in general and the key to its gaining currency in this context is that it be viewed, to a reasonable extent, as 'work in progress'.*

So, from the outset, it was recognised from the perspective of the school sector that the challenges associated with implementing the framework, making it known, and having it used, would be significant for the sector.

The submission also reflected on the kind of impact it expected the framework to have on schools. It envisaged that the emergence of a framework would give rise to greater demand by schools for access to a greater number and range of awards and qualifications, especially as there was already some evidence of this demand occurring at the time. It speculated that there might be greater involvement of more schools in the field of adult and continuing education. It suggested that the existence of a framework setting out a full range of learning opportunities would draw into sharp relief the need

for learners, particularly the educationally disadvantaged, to have access to educational and vocational guidance in order to make the right decisions about the learning opportunities and learning paths to pursue.

Some caveats related to the framework were identified by the submission at that time. Chief among these was a reflection on the levels indicators and learning outcomes of the framework

*...there is an overemphasis on functionality in the indicators...it is somewhat utilitarian in nature. That which is easily measurable is more prevalent than those aspects of learning which are less easily measured, witness the relative absence of indicators reflective of the affective domain of learning experience. The framework seems to be very closely modelled on existing awards rather than presenting a view of an ideal educational/training progression for the learner in society.*

*...the Levels Indicators takes a quite traditional view of learning and knowledge and it is a matter of concern that, with the exception of some indicators across the sub-strands 'learning to learn' and 'insight', the affective domain of learning is largely avoided. The creativity, imagination and enjoyment associated with learning and the disposition to learn, are given limited attention.*

It was felt that this issue was of some importance as the emergence and establishment of the framework could give rise to significant 'backwash' effects on future curriculum design and, as a consequence, on teaching and learning practice and the experience of education for learners. It is worth noting this point as the move towards outcomes-based curriculum specifications in the school sector has continued apace in the interim, in parallel with the implementation of the framework, and questions concerned with the potentially reductionist and utilitarian nature of outcomes-based curricula have not gone away.

The submission provided the basis on which the existing school awards were placed in the framework at its launch and subsequent implementation. This was the first significant engagement of the school sector with the framework. The post-primary Junior Certificate was placed at Level 3 of the framework while the Leaving Certificate, including the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LVCP) and the Leaving

Certificate Applied (LCA), was placed at Levels 4 and 5. The placing of the Leaving Certificate across two levels was reflective of the wide range of learning outcomes associated with the various senior cycle programmes. An account of the rationale for the placing of the school awards at the relevant levels of the framework is provided in Appendix 2.

The next important engagement with the implementation of the framework involved the placing of older 'legacy' school awards in the Framework. These are qualifications that were awarded in the past within the schools sector but which have been discontinued. They included the old Primary Certificate which was placed at Level 2. The Day Vocational (Group) Certificate and the Intermediate Certificate, which were combined in the late 1980s to become the Junior Certificate, were both placed, like the Junior Certificate, at Level 3. The formal placing of these awards in the Framework in 2004 meant that the learning achievements of those who gained these qualifications in the past were clearly recognised.

In 2004 and 2005 the NCCA and the NQAI also collaborated to produce an information bulletin for schools called *Faisnéis*. The purpose of this publication was to communicate with schools directly updating them on all developments related to the framework in the school sector and more generally. Two issues of the bulletin were published. In addition during the period of implementation all publications related to the framework were distributed to schools and to the education partner organisations. The framework was also the subject of regular briefings and updates to the wide range of committees, particularly high-level committees of the NCCA.

Reflecting on the initial implementation of the framework, the first issue of *Faisnéis* (2004) in addition to reviewing progress to date on placing school awards in the framework suggested that, in the future, the framework could provide

*...an important reference point for curriculum developments associated with the ongoing reviews of the primary curriculum, junior cycle and senior cycle. For example, the proposals of the NCCA for the restructuring and rebalancing of the senior cycle curriculum will be developed with reference to the knowledge, skills and competences indicated at relevant levels within the framework.*

It also drew attention to the potential that the development of awards at Levels 1 and 2 of the framework presented, in the school sector, for catering for the diverse needs of a wide range of learners, including those with special educational needs.

More recently, in 2007, the NCCA (with the support of the DES and SEC) produced a joint paper with NQAI reviewing a range of issues arising from the placing of the school awards in the framework, particularly the Leaving Certificate. The issues identified in the paper included

- the use of awards at Levels 3,4 and 5 for progression to employment and recruitment purposes
- the need for improved progression routes for some Leaving Certificate learners, particularly graduates of the Leaving Certificate Applied
- the difficulty of comparing the Leaving Certificate with other awards at the same levels due to marked differences in terms of the volume of awards.

In other words, the issues paper draws attention to the fact that, in the implementation of the framework, issues of comparison of awards from different sectors at the same level of the framework have arisen, particularly in the context of labour market recruitment and of progression. This has led, in 2008, to plans for a study directed by the NQAI, in collaboration with the school sector, which would begin to establish a basis for comparing school awards and FETAC awards. The initial phase of this study will set out the background to the Leaving Certificate and FETAC awards and present a factual account of the uses to which awards at levels 4 and 5 are put. Following this initial phase the question of whether a further phase, involving the detailed comparison and contrasting of learning outcomes across these awards, would be considered.

Over the five years since the implementation of the framework, in general terms, the nature of the engagement of the school sector with the introduction and implementation of the framework could be characterised as enthusiastic and assistive in progressing the plans set out by the NQAI. The implementation of the framework has not been 'driven' by but has received substantial support from the school sector. As suggested in the original NCCA submission of 2003, the sector has viewed the initial five years of the framework as largely about bringing the framework into existence and supporting its initial introduction. There hasn't been a strong consciousness of specific

implementation targets for the sector and the framework for the school sector over this period. However, as the profile of the framework has risen over the period in question the school sector has begun to engage with issues of access, transfer and progression (ATP) in relation to the framework more often and more directly.

## 2. The implementation and impact of the framework in the school sector

### Consulting the school sector

In 2008/2009 the NQAI is undertaking a study of the implementation of the framework in the education and training systems. The main purpose of the study is to assess the initial impact of the framework and the extent of its implementation over the five years of its existence. The study is also intended to identify particular points of progress that have been made, any gaps in the implementation process, and those elements that have acted as drivers and obstacles to its implementation. In this sense the study is viewed as having a developmental dimension in identifying areas of, and strategies for, action in the future.

There are a number of elements to the study. The NQAI have published a context paper *Background paper on the development, implementation and impact of the National Framework of Qualifications and related policies on access, transfer and progression* (2008) outlining the background to the introduction of the framework, the history of developments since its introduction and the main implementation outcomes to date from the Authority's perspective.

Four reports on the impact of the framework in the various education and training sectors – schools, further education, higher education/ITs and universities will also be published. Cross-sectoral case studies in the areas of Nursing and Guidance will be conducted. Public submissions will be invited and a consultative forum on the outcomes of the various reports will take place in November 2008. The main outcome of the study will be a Synthesis Report and recommendations from the Study Team appointed to oversee the study (April 2009). This report will provide a basis for the NQAI to consider follow-up actions to the study in 2009 and beyond.

NCCA was requested to co-ordinate the report from the school sector. The DES, as the policy making body for the school sector, and the SEC, as the awarding body for school qualifications have had internal discussions on the contents of this report and contributed through feedback to the generation of the report.

In addition, the NCCA has conducted consultations with some of its high level committees. These include the Junior Cycle Review Committee, the Senior Cycle Committee and Council itself. As the NCCA is a representative body, these committees, to varying degrees, comprise representatives of teachers, parents, school management (primary, secondary, community/comprehensive and vocational schools), subject associations and professional support organisations, further and higher education, business, the community/voluntary pillar, the DES and the SEC. The committees therefore provide a useful forum through which to gauge the general reception and impact of the framework.

To assist with its work in the areas of curriculum review and development, the NCCA has, in recent years, established a number of networks of schools, including a network of post-primary schools. In varying combinations, depending on their availability at the time of consultation in May and June 2008, Principals, Deputy Principals, teachers and students from ten of the network schools were consulted on the impact of the framework.

In the case of both the NCCA committees and the network schools, the consultation was based on a series of questions related to the implementation and impact of the framework in the school sector. The intention, within the limited scope of the consultation, was to gain a general understanding of the response of the school sector in relation to six key areas of questioning

1. In what ways has the school sector engaged with the framework?
2. What level of knowledge and understanding of the framework is there in the school sector? How has the advent of the framework been received in schools?
3. Implementation and operation of the framework: How is the framework used in the school sector?
4. Has the school sector been well supported in engaging with the framework? What structures or bodies have helped with that engagement?
5. What factors assist or hinder the use of the framework in the school sector?

6. Impact of the framework in the areas of access, transfer and progression: What influence has the framework had in the school sector in relation to thinking on access, transfer and progression?

The findings of the consultations in the school sector are the subject of this section, which is set out more or less along the lines of the sequence of questions above. While the previous section set out a factual account of how the school sector has formally engaged with the framework, this section outlines what emerged from the consultations about

- The level of awareness, knowledge and understanding of the framework in the school sector
- How and where the framework is being used in schools
- The kind of influence and impact the framework has had in the areas of access, transfer and progression and in developments in areas such as curriculum, assessment and qualifications in the school sector.

## Awareness, knowledge and understanding of the framework

Overall, the framework has been positively received. In general terms, those involved in the school sector see its advent as a positive development in Irish education and one that serves the needs of learners. Where those working in the sector or participating in the sector have the opportunity to engage with the purpose, meaning and detail of the framework they recognise and appreciate its value and importance.

However, these opportunities to engage, especially for those working in schools, have not been plentiful and, as a result, understanding of the purpose and role of the framework is limited. As a member of the NCCA's Junior Cycle Review Committee pointed out awareness is not the same thing as understanding and much work needs to take place to increase understanding of the meaning and implications of having a framework, for example in the areas of access, transfer and progression.

The level of familiarity with the framework in the school sector is directly related to the need to know. So among planners, developers, implementers and managers in education agencies and organisations involved in the school sector awareness of the

framework is reasonably good. Equally, in schools, Principals, Deputy Principals, guidance counsellors and some teachers have an awareness of the framework on a need to know basis.

*I would know what it is. We had reason to know about it when we had Post-Leaving Certificate courses a couple of years ago. But I'm not familiar with it as in the day-to-day running of the school I wouldn't have a need to use it.*

*School Principal*

*At each start-of-year whole staff meeting we try to raise awareness around professional issues, so we had an in-service on it about three years ago. It's very important as many of the lads we teach don't want to be in school and it's important they know they can come back into education at a later stage. As a guidance counsellor I always used it to show lads where they were and where they could go.*

*Deputy Principal and former Guidance Counsellor*

From the consultations it would appear that those who come in contact with it out of necessity engage with the framework but that for other principals and teachers its relevance to their day-to-day work is not always apparent. It follows that the framework tends to be most commonly engaged with in vocational and community and comprehensive schools where the inclusion of many students who experience educational disadvantage and the branching of the curriculum offered into areas of further education provide a context in which the immediate relevance of the framework becomes more apparent. A Deputy Principal of a Community College made the point that the school was very familiar with the framework because awards (FETAC, VTOS etc.) other than the school awards were offered in the College. As a result, school management, teachers and students were familiar with the framework and particularly with progression routes. The coloured fan diagram of the awards included in the framework, generated by the NQAI, is displayed in the school and in many of its classrooms.

Where there is engagement with the framework it tends to remain at the level of awareness. There seems to be little contextual understanding of the framework, for example the capacity to distinguish clearly between awards and educational programmes, or between assessment and qualifications. An example was provided by

one school of a student who was transferring from a special school to a community college. The student had been taking courses at Level 3 of the framework and the special school involved assumed that the curriculum material being undertaken as part of the Junior Certificate at Level 3 would be the same. The idea that awards at the same level might be quite different in nature and content hadn't been fully realised by the staff involved.

This example also draws attention to the fact that, for most of those who come in contact with it, the thinking behind the framework, the language of the framework and the language of qualifications in general is complex. It takes time to get to grips with the terminology, not to mention the understanding of areas such as indicators, learning outcomes, awards, descriptors, equivalence, credit, fields of learning, access, transfer, progression. Those from the school sector who have been directly involved in engaging with these aspects of the implementation of the framework over a short period of time have experienced difficulty coming to terms with the language and contextual understanding involved. For the majority of those working in the school sector, this language has not been engaged with and certainly not mastered.

The level of awareness, let alone understanding, of the framework among teachers and school students is limited. The engagement of teachers with the framework happens on a need to know basis. Some teachers consulted made the point that their main point of contact with the framework had been as a parent rather than as a teacher, assisting their teenage children to make decisions on further education options following their post-primary schooling. Some teachers had experienced presentations on general aspects of the framework.

*I've no idea what that is! What did you call it again?...No, never heard of it!*

*We had a presentation on it once but I've never come across it in my day-to-day work and I wouldn't be familiar with the various levels etc.*

*Heard about it in relation to making choices with my son but never heard about it in school.*

*Comments of three teachers*

Among students, the level of awareness and understanding was similar. Those completing post-primary education and making further and higher education choices seem to have a closer working knowledge of the framework than students in earlier years. Feedback from NCCA committees indicates that levels of awareness among parents is very limited and constantly needs to be updated. Lack of awareness among employers was also cited as a cause for concern.

In summary, engagement with, and awareness and understanding of, the framework in the school sector is concentrated among those working in education organisations and agencies, in school management and in teaching who 'need to know'. The need to know is often rooted in the context that those involved are working with more marginalised learners, those who may have left school early without gaining qualifications, those who are experiencing educational disadvantage, those with special educational needs. Equally the need to know may relate to diversification of provision within the schools in question into further and continuing education or adult education. Finally, the need to know can also relate to the involvement of the school management or teachers in question in the provision of educational and vocational guidance.

During the consultations, some concern was expressed by those working in the school sector at the tendency to associate the framework and many of its qualifications with those learners who are marginalised in the education system. There is a danger that the framework is being perceived as being relevant for 'some' but not for 'all' and that, for example, a 'good mainstream student' may never need to engage with the framework because their progression route through the education system is viewed as set, the established 'norm', taken and understood clearly by the majority of the general public. The obvious concern here is that the framework will come to be perceived over time, from the perspective of many working in and involved with the school sector, as largely concerned with 'alternative' awards and education provision with all that this potentially gives rise to in terms of *de facto* status and recognition of such awards and provision. This needs to be avoided if the full potential of a comprehensive qualifications framework is to be realised.

## Using the framework in the school sector

When it comes to considering the uses to which the framework has been put in the sector, the priority of the DES, SEC and NCCA in this context has been to ensure that staff and the education partners more broadly are as familiar as possible with the role, nature and purpose of the framework, particularly as it applies to the school sector. From an NCCA perspective, the main approach to achieving this has been to promote discussion and to communicate and disseminate information through the representative structure of the NCCA and its committees. In this context, the school sector has been greatly assisted by the general promotional work and information and publicity campaigns undertaken by the NQAI since the introduction of the framework. In general terms, the publications associated with these campaigns – whether booklets, leaflets, bulletins or public advertising, have been well-received and appreciated in the sector. It is probably noteworthy that the two elements of promotional material most frequently mentioned in the consultations in the school sector were the fan diagram of the qualifications included in the framework and the radio and television advertising.

The framework has become a reference point for those involved in curriculum and assessment development. Even at this early stage in the implementation of the framework, it is inconceivable that a new school qualification or curriculum component would be developed and introduced without its alignment to the framework being fully considered and taking place. For example, a major area of the NCCA's work in recent years has involved a range of developments at senior cycle. These have included the development of new and revised outcomes-based subject syllabuses, the embedding of key skills in all curriculum components, the development of a broader range of assessment components for use in the state examinations, the proposal of the introduction of new curriculum components such as short courses and transition units, and the consideration of different education programmes and forms of certification at senior cycle. Each of these areas of work have been progressed with, at the very least, cognisance of the implications that the existence and content of the framework has for outcomes-based curricula, for skills and competence rich curricula, for the breadth of assessment methods to be used, and for the relationship between different curriculum components in an award, among other considerations. So, even at this early stage, the existence of the framework has had an influence and an impact on ongoing developments and further examples of this will be referred to later.

The framework has become an even more critical point of reference for those involved in the provision of educational and vocational guidance. The group of professionals who have probably engaged more with the framework than any other in the school sector are Guidance Counsellors. The framework has become an indispensable tool in the information and guidance offered to students in schools, particularly in senior cycle at the point where thoughts are turning to the completion of post-primary education, further and higher education options and the world of work.

In general terms, the emergence of the framework has also resulted in schools giving greater consideration to, and being more open in general terms to, the idea of accessing further education and adult education awards or introducing new schools awards in junior and senior cycle, particularly in the context of addressing educational disadvantage or in meeting special educational needs. Special Schools, for example, catering for students with the full range of special educational needs have engaged enthusiastically with the framework and the emerging possibilities for recognition of the learning of their students through new awards. In particular, there has been much interest from these schools, and from post-primary schools with a number of students with special educational needs, in the new FETAC awards being offered at levels 1 and 2 of the framework.

However, during the consultations, a note of caution was also sounded around the idea of mixing school and further education awards, in the context of junior cycle and senior cycle schooling. School awards and further education awards sometimes operate and co-exist in a limited number of post-primary schools, usually vocational schools and community colleges, where post-primary school awards and post-Leaving Certificate further education awards are offered to different cohorts of learners in the school. However, the view that emerged in the consultations was that without a policy framework to guide it and resources underpinning it, operating two different systems of awards in a large number of post-primary schools would give rise to many practical issues, for example different assessment modes and systems, different quality assurance and quality control procedures and structures, potentially different status of teachers etc.

There is also concern that, perhaps contrary to expectations associated with the diversification involved, it could also encourage a deeper qualifications fault-line than currently exists, based in disadvantage, where certain qualifications are consistently viewed as appropriate for some but not for others. This echoes the point made in the previous section, in a slightly different context, about the framework ultimately being comprehensive and equitable in including all education and training awards available to learners in Ireland, but being transacted in aspects of access, transfer and progression along twin tracks perceived by the general public and many working in education and training as 'mainstream' and 'alternative'. For some involved in the consultations in the school sector, the 're-positioning' of overall curriculum and education provision on a system-wide basis in the context of inclusion was viewed as a better approach to addressing issues of access, transfer and progression than the introduction, on an ad-hoc selective basis of alternative curriculum options for particular categories of learners.

## **Impact of the framework in access, transfer, progression and in developments in curriculum and assessment**

The NQAI policies on access, transfer and progression are the main vehicles through which the framework is implemented. The task of implementation is inseparable from the task of addressing issues of access, transfer and progression. The values and principles underpinning the framework, such as those of equality and accessibility, comprehensiveness and coherence, transparency and simplicity are most directly addressed through actions in the areas of access, transfer and progression.

In general terms, the achievement of equality of access and opportunity, the enabling of ease of transfer from one educational programme to another and the establishment of clear and meaningful routes of progression in the context of continual, lifelong learning are ideas to which those working in the school sector have subscribed for a long time. So, it can be concluded that in these broad terms the school sector and the policies in this area associated with the framework are at one. However, some of the more specific policies related to access, transfer and progression generated by the Authority – such as those concerned with, for example credit, accreditation of prior learning, specific transfer arrangements - have yet to be actively promoted in the

school sector. It is fair to say that in the areas of access, transfer and progression the school sector has been influenced more by general education policy, by the funding of education and by equality legislation than by NQAI policy.

In part this has had to do with the relatively recent introduction of the framework. The main focus of the school sector during this period has been on establishing school awards within the framework and raising the level of general awareness related to the framework. In this sense, it is probably more realistic to think in terms of the coming years as ones where specific policies on access, transfer and progression will become the focus of discussion and action.

In equal part, the limited engagement in the school sector with NQAI policy on access, transfer and progression is reflective of the fact that the implementation of the kinds of policies enunciated in these areas would have very significant policy implications and resource implications for a sector as large as the school sector. The lack of a policy framework and resources in this area can hinder the flexible implementation of the framework in the context of access, transfer and progression. For example, the school sector contains many schools of widely varying sizes, and flexible access to a range of educational and training qualifications, ease of transfer between them and the establishment of a range of progression routes open to all learners would involve significant levels of additional resources being applied to schools if the principle of equality of opportunity were to prevail. The scale of the resources involved may go some way to explaining why, when thinking within the school sector and schools turns to the opportunity presented by the introduction of the framework for increased diversification of curriculum and qualifications, it tends towards targeting provision at those 'most in need'. This, in turn, can give rise to the potential creation of the twin track within the framework which concerns was a subject of concern in previous sections.

Turning to more specific aspects of access, transfer and progression, the existence of the framework and the range of qualifications placed on the framework has drawn attention to similarities and disparities between the school awards and others. A comprehensive framework facilitates easy comparison at the level, for example, of

course descriptors. When these kinds of comparisons were made during the consultations with the school sector, school awards were often viewed as less flexible than other awards and greater flexibility was viewed as desirable. Furthermore, school awards have also been perceived by some sectors (particularly those working in further and continuing education) as being less clear in the terms under which they were placed in framework than other awards, and this has given rise to some issues of access, transfer and progression.

Chief among these issues relates to those learners transferring from senior cycle courses into FETAC courses. There is concern here about a perceived lack of clarity surrounding the relative value of the senior cycle qualifications and the FETAC qualifications. The question of the relative volumes of school awards and further education awards at these levels is a key area for clarification in the future.

At present, the completion of a single subject (or, indeed, of seven subjects) in the Leaving Certificate qualifies the learner for the award of a Leaving Certificate at Levels 4 and 5 of the framework. Other awards available to learners at these levels typically involve more specific volumes of learning. Where an effort is being made to compare other qualifications with the Leaving Certificate, the matter of the volume of learning involved proves an obstacle to clear understanding of the qualifications. The central question for consideration here is whether a particular volume of learning should be associated with the award of a Leaving Certificate. For example, there is a public perception, based in part on the role of the CAO Points System in selection for study in higher education, that a Leaving Certificate comprises at least 5-6 subjects. Public service recruitment, where it specifies a requirement for the Leaving Certificate, requires at least five subjects. Study in each Leaving Certificate subject is based on syllabuses designed for teaching in approximately 180 hours. A combination of a number of subjects and time spent on subjects (perhaps class contact and study time) might provide a basis for considering the question of volume.

In this context, plans are underway for a study commencing in 2008 that will compare Leaving Certificate outcomes with awards being made by FETAC at levels 4 and 5. This is with a view, ultimately, to facilitating greater understanding, transparency and ease of comparison of the relative awards at this level.

The most significant progression issue for school qualifications relates to the limited range of progression opportunities available to graduates of the Leaving Certificate Applied. The limited progression opportunities available to LCA graduates, as compared with other Leaving Certificate learners, is viewed as a cause of concern. LCA graduates cannot progress directly to programmes leading to higher education awards. Currently, the progression route is circuitous involving study in continuing and further education before proceeding eventually, through this 'bridging', to higher education. This variation is considered to be anomalous, as both variants of the Leaving Certificate share the same award-type descriptor. This issue is one of several highlighted in a *Leaving Certificate Applied: Issues Paper* in preparation by the NCCA in 2008. The issue will also be the subject of attention in research commissioned by the NCCA and being undertaken by the ESRI on participation in and progression from the LCA. The first findings of this research are beginning to emerge and throw considerable light on, among other things, the progression routes availed of by students of the LCA and their experience of work and education beyond the programme. The latter element of the research involves interviewing young people who have completed the programme and have moved into further education and training or working life. This research, alongside other research being undertaken by the ESRI on the general experience of senior cycle education across the wider cohort of students, will provide a rich evidence base for the review of access, transfer and progression opportunities for students of the Leaving Certificate Applied.

To date, the school sector has not engaged with specific policies of credit accumulation and transfer or accreditation of prior learning. For example, while the idea of moving towards a modularised curriculum, particularly at senior cycle, has been discussed in recent years as part of the senior cycle developments referred to earlier in this report, it has not found support among the education partners. The dangers of the curriculum becoming too fragmented at this stage of education as well as the significant resource implications of such a change are two reasons that have been cited in this context.

However, the provision of clear and accessible information to learners and parents on school qualifications, entry arrangements etc is an area of action highlighted as important within the consultations and one which is currently receiving much attention within both the Junior Cycle Review and the senior cycle developments. New

approaches towards the provision of information for students, parents and the general public are in the process of being introduced in these contexts. For example, a range of information fact sheets outlining the nature and content of junior cycle subjects have been prepared for online and hard copy publication in the short term and for inclusion, in the medium term in a *Junior Cycle Handbook* for parents and students. Within the context of the senior cycle developments a *Curriculum Overview* which outlines the values, vision, principles, curriculum, teaching and learning and progression opportunities associated with senior cycle education has been drafted for consultation in late 2008. So the importance attached to the provision of information about qualifications in the policies on access, transfer and progression linked to the implementation of the framework are increasingly recognised and being acted upon within the school sector.

In summary, the implementation of the framework has not had a major impact on the school sector in the associated areas of access, transfer and progression. Many aspects or elements of access, transfer and progression were already under consideration or were being addressed in parallel with, but separate from, the development and implementation of the framework. Examples of this are the move towards specifying the curriculum in terms of learning outcomes, the introduction of more diverse approaches to educational assessment, the focus in senior cycle education on the identification and embedding of key skills in the curriculum, the provision of improved information on the education programmes and qualifications offered by schools. These parallel developments were already underway during the period in question and the simultaneous implementation of the framework lent support to their introduction. Other more specific elements of NQAI policy in the areas of access, transfer and progression, such as those related to unitisation/modularisation, credit accumulation and transfer, and recognition of prior learning are viewed as ones for future discussion as part of ongoing developments.

## Appendix 1: The school awards

The first stage of post-primary schooling that learners encounter is junior cycle, a three-year programme that they usually commence at age 12. Junior cycle is designed to build on the young person's educational experience at primary school by offering a broad, balanced and coherent programme of study across a wide range of curriculum areas. A State Examination, the Junior Certificate, is taken at the end of the three years of junior cycle.

Learners in senior cycle can currently follow a two or three-year programme of study, following which they take the Leaving Certificate examination. They can take an initial Transition Year programme and proceed to choose one of three Leaving Certificate programmes – the Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied. Alternatively, they can proceed directly to one of these Leaving Certificate options and take the examination after two years. Performance in the Leaving Certificate examination is the main basis on which places in universities, institutes of technology and other further and higher education colleges are allocated. The allocation of places is on the basis of points (the 'Points System') gained in the Leaving Certificate examinations by learners, these points, in turn, being based on the grades achieved in individual subject or course examinations.

### Senior cycle programmes

#### **Transition Year**

The Transition Year (TY) is a one-year programme that forms the first year of a three-year senior cycle in many schools. Individual schools decide whether it is offered on an optional or required basis to learners. It is designed to act as a bridge between the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate. Transition Year offers learners an opportunity to mature and develop without the pressure of a formal examination. Its flexible structure allows for a broad range of learning experiences to be included, such as those related to personal and social awareness and development. It also provides an opportunity for learners to reflect on, and develop an appreciation of the value of education and training in preparing them for the ever-changing demands of the adult world of work and relationships.

Each school designs its own programme, within guidelines, to suit the needs and interests of its learners. In establishing its own distinctive programme content, the school takes into account its own resources and the possibilities offered by local community interests.

### **Leaving Certificate**

The Leaving Certificate is studied over two years and aims to provide learners with a broad, balanced education while also offering some potential for specialisation towards a particular career option. The programme is taken in almost all schools and students are required to study at least five subjects, one of which must be Irish. In general, students take five or more subjects (usually seven) for examination. All subjects are offered at two levels, Ordinary and Higher. Irish and Mathematics are also available at Foundation level. Over 30 Leaving Certificate subjects are available to schools. In addition to the subjects for which syllabuses are available, the State Examinations Commission (SEC) provide 'non-curricular' examinations in any of the recognised languages of the European Union, where the status of the candidate is seen as appropriate. Candidates taking this option can only take one non-curricular subject. The Leaving Certificate, sometimes called the Leaving Certificate (established) to distinguish it from the other Leaving Certificate programmes, is taken by approximately 60% of senior cycle learners. When you include those students taking the LCVP (a variation of the Leaving Certificate with mostly the same syllabuses and examinations) that figure rises to over 90% of senior cycle learners and all post-primary schools.

### **Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme**

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is a variation of, and intervention in, the Leaving Certificate designed to enhance its vocational dimension. This two-year programme combines the academic strengths of the Leaving Certificate with a dynamic focus on self-directed learning, enterprise, work and the community. The defining features of the LCVP are that learners take

- some of their Leaving Certificate subjects from a specified set of vocational subjects
- a recognised course in a modern European language
- two additional courses, known as Link Modules, in the areas of Preparation for the World of Work and Enterprise Education.

The subject syllabuses followed are the same as for the Leaving Certificate, as are the examinations taken in those subjects. The LCVP is taken by approximately 30% of senior cycle learners and offered in around 70% of post-primary schools.

### **Leaving Certificate Applied**

The Leaving Certificate Applied is a discrete programme designed for those learners who do not wish to proceed directly to higher education or for those whose needs, aptitudes and learning styles are not fully catered for by the other two Leaving Certificate programmes. Participants in the Leaving Certificate Applied engage in work and study of an active, practical and task-centred nature that prepares participants for transition from the world of the school/centre to that of adult and working life. The Leaving Certificate Applied is a two-year programme made up of a range of courses that are structured round three elements:

- Vocational Preparation
- Vocational Education
- General Education.

The curriculum specifications/subject syllabuses followed by LCA learners differ from those of the Leaving Certificate/LCVP. The assessment arrangements and examinations also differ substantially. The Leaving Certificate Applied is taken by approximately 8% of senior cycle learners and offered in around 38% of post-primary schools.



## Appendix 2: Placing school awards on the National Framework of Qualifications

The rationale for inclusion of the school awards on the National Framework of Qualifications is summarised here.

The placing of the Junior Certificate at Level 3 in the Framework was viewed as relatively straightforward at the time. From the perspective of the school sector, the issues related to placing the Leaving Certificate and its various programmes at Levels 4 and 5 were more complex. This complexity was only in part related to the task of matching learning aims, objectives and outcomes associated with the Leaving Certificate options with the level indicators of the framework.

At the time, the view from the school sector was that when it comes to the Leaving Certificate, additional factors come into play. The Leaving Certificate is a high profile, and, in the context of its selection function for higher education and training, a high stakes qualification. It is taken in almost all schools and by an annual cohort of around 60,000 learners. It enjoys public confidence in its standards, status and currency. It is the terminal qualification for the vast majority of school leavers and a reference point for agencies and individuals involved in employment and training. As a consequence, it was felt that the placing of the Leaving Certificate would be subject to greater scrutiny than that associated with most other awards on the Framework.

For this reason, the NCCA advised

- That the Leaving Certificate should be treated as a single award incorporating the Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
- That it should be defined on the basis of the published general aims, objectives and outcomes associated with its various options
- That these were consistent with the level indicators at Levels 4 and 5 of the framework so the award should be viewed as including learning outcomes and standards spanning these levels.

At the time, the NCCA recognised that while the Leaving Certificate would be considered to extend across Level 4 and Level 5, the ultimate achievements of each individual learner would do so in varying proportions. The achievements of some learners would be reflective of indicators largely associated with Level 4 in the framework while learners who take 'higher level' courses in their Leaving Certificate programme and achieve well are likely to acquire learning outcomes more akin to the indicators associated with Level 5 than 4. However, on balance it was felt that regardless of the option taken, all learners would be engaged in attaining learning outcomes consistent with framework indicators spanning *in some measure* Levels 4 and 5 rather than being exclusive to either one of these levels.

The main criticisms of this placing then and now are that it is not definitive enough and that it doesn't address the question of the volume of learning associated with the award. However, the approach adopted by those involved in the NCCA discussions at the time was that the Leaving Certificate is viewed by the public as a single award and that the aims, objectives and learning outcomes associated with the various options, in each case, are consistent with indicators at both levels 4 and 5.