

European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning Seminar

Minister Batt O’Keeffe, T.D.

I am delighted to open this seminar which marks a significant milestone in the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF). By linking national qualifications systems together to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems in Europe, the EQF process represents an excellent example of how European co-operation in the field of education can enhance the mobility of students, workers and other citizens, opening up exciting opportunities for them to study or work in other EU countries.

Today’s event is being organised jointly by the Irish national authorities and the European Commission. I am therefore very pleased to welcome Ms Odile Quintin, Director General of Education, Training, Culture and Youth with the European Commission, to join me this morning for this opening address. I also welcome the other speakers and participants from the Commission, European agencies, other Member States and, of course, Ireland and trust that you will find this seminar a useful and informative contribution to your own work in this important area.

While responsibility for education and training remains firmly with national governments, the European Union’s role in encouraging co-operation between Member States and, if necessary, supporting and supplementing their action has been of immense value for Ireland and all Member States. I was very pleased to have the opportunity to attend the Council of Education Ministers in Brussels in May of this year where, under the Czech Presidency, a new strategic framework for European co-operation in education and training until 2020 was

unanimously adopted. As the lifetime of the existing “Education and Training 2010” programme of co-operation draws to a close, the new framework will ensure that we can further enhance the efficiency of co-operation arrangements and exchanges of good practice, with continuing benefits and support for Member States’ education and training systems up to the year 2020.

Some of the benefits which the Irish education sector has gained from our EU membership include participation by 25,000 higher education students in Erasmus educational exchanges since 1987 and the support provided through the Leonardo da Vinci programme for 6,000 Irish students and trainees to undertake work experience in companies across Europe over the past 13 years. Under the current Lifelong Learning Programme, which runs until 2013, another 18,500 Irish students and 4,000 trainees will be given the unprecedented opportunity to study and train in other European countries.

European funding has been crucial to the development of Ireland’s education system, with €450 million being provided between 2000 and 2006 under the European Social Fund with a particular focus on supporting students in disadvantaged communities and other vulnerable groups. By 2013, a further €130m will have been made available for similar purpose under the current round of ESF funding. Our membership of the EU has also, of course, played a crucial role in developing Ireland’s research capacity. The EU has been good for Irish education and our place at the heart of Europe has given our students a competitive edge over the past 30 years.

The purpose of today's seminar is to mark the referencing of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF). Ireland is the first country to have completed this referencing process and the publication of the referencing report marks a significant landmark in the implementation of the EQF. I consider this to be an achievement of which Ireland, and the NQAI under the leadership of Dr Jim Murray, can be justifiably proud. It provides an example of the contribution which Irish education experts can make to the process of working with our EU partners to have national awards and qualifications understood and recognised everywhere in Europe.

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland is the Irish National Coordination Point for the EQF. Since its establishment in 2001, the Authority has been working in partnership with awarding bodies and providers to develop a single, coherent and more easily understood qualifications system for all levels of education and training in Ireland. The resulting ten level National Framework of Qualifications was launched by the Authority in 2003 and is now being implemented across the education and training sector. While work remains to be done to achieve full implementation of all aspects of the Framework, it is timely to acknowledge that a great deal has already been achieved since the launch of the NFQ.

As we move towards our aim of realising a society that values and recognises learning undertaken at any point in an individual's lifetime, we need to ensure that people of all ages, and in a range of contexts, can develop their knowledge, skills and competences, whether their purpose is progression within education and training, gaining or advancing in employment, or for personal and social

betterment. The National Framework of Qualifications is designed to facilitate these aspirations in a real and concrete way. It provides the single structure - nationally and internationally accepted - through which all learning can be measured and related to each other in a coherent manner. The Framework defines the relationship between different qualifications. It unveils and highlights possible learning pathways. And it enables and encourages learners to continue their learning on a lifelong basis.

Ireland remains deeply committed to advancing the reform of its qualifications system to meet the lifelong learning needs of its citizens, its economy and its society. It is also committed to ensuring that its qualifications system is firmly linked to, and underpinned by, strong and coherent quality assurance processes. To meet both of these objectives, work is proceeding on the amalgamation of the national bodies working in the area of qualifications and quality assurance. All of the bodies involved in the amalgamation have had considerable success in developing and enhancing work in the area of qualifications and quality assurance in both vocational education and training and higher education. Further progress in this area will now be enabled by the establishment of a strong, single organisation that prioritises the needs of learners and delivers a quality service to providers of education and training programmes. In particular, the new body will work to develop and embed more coherent approaches to qualifications and quality assurance matters across further and higher education and training, and to ensure that learners have seamless transfer and progression opportunities across the ten levels of the National Framework of Qualifications.

Of course, as I already mentioned, the European and international dimensions of Qualifications Frameworks are also very important. Increasingly, learners and workers are travelling to other countries to access further learning or employment. As an overarching qualifications framework which links countries' qualifications together, the EQF will act as an important translation device to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems in Europe, thus supporting citizens' mobility. This is where the key benefits of the EQF will be delivered. In the not too distant future, as more and more European countries develop their own qualifications frameworks and reference them to the EQF, it will become easier to determine and recognise how a qualification awarded in one Member State relates to a particular qualifications level in another Member State. I know that other countries are working on, and advancing, these and related developments and I wish them well. Indeed, as I have mentioned, some of the very people centrally involved in this work are with us here this morning.

Ireland completed the referencing of its National Framework of Qualifications to the EQF in June 2009. The Qualifications Authority convened a National Steering Committee to assist it in this process. We are all grateful for the contributions made by committee members. These included three international experts - Mr Wilfried Boomgaert, from the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, Belgium; Dr Carita Blomqvist, from the Finnish National Board of Education; and Dr Mike Coles, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), England. The different sectors of Irish education and training were also represented on the Committee, through the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the Irish Universities' Association (IUA) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). In particular, the contributions of the

international members helped to ensure that the final document achieved its' key purpose – that of helping international audiences to better understand the Irish education and training system for the benefit of all.

I am pleased that so many of you have made time to participate today and I trust that you will enjoy and benefit from the presentations and discussions that follow. I would now like to again welcome Ms Odile Quintin, Director General of Education, Training, Culture and Youth with the European Commission, who will now also make some opening remarks on behalf of the Commission.

Thank you