



Education and Culture

# Leonardo da Vinci

*Qual-Praxis Partner country:*

*Ireland*

*National Report / Workpackage 2*



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# CONTENTS

## **Section 1                      General Questions**

<i>Introduction</i>	6
1. <i>In general, how is the VET system of the partner country formed?</i>	7
1.1 <i>What are the special characteristics of this system?</i>	7
1.1.2 <i>The Irish Education System</i>	7
<i>Figure.1 (The Irish Education System)</i>	8
1.1.3 <i>Context of VET provision in Ireland</i>	9
1.1.4 <i>VET system in Ireland</i>	10
<i>Figure 2: the Irish VET System</i>	12
1.2 <i>How is the student assessment in VET carried out?</i>	13
1.3 <i>What kinds of problems have been connected to the student assessment in VET and what kinds of new solutions have been created?</i>	13
1.4 <i>Why is assessment needed, what is being assessed and how is assessment carried out?</i>	14
1.4.1 <i>Emergence of Criterion-Based Assessment</i>	15
1.4.2 <i>Competence-based Assessment</i>	16
<i>Figure 3: FETAC Assessment principles</i>	18
1.5 <i>Which parties take part in determining the focus of student assessment?</i>	19
<i>Figure 4: the Irish VET Administrative Structure</i>	20
<i>Figure 5: Validation/Accreditation Process for FETAC accredited Programmes</i>	21

## **Section 2                      Work-based learning**

2.2 <i>How is the work-based learning in VET organised?</i>	23
2.2.1 <i>What kind of role has the workbased learning as a part of the curriculum?</i>	23

## **Section 3      Practice-oriented assessment**

3.1	<i>What does the term “the practice-oriented assessment in VET” mean?</i>	25
3.1.1	<i>Does it refer to a real or a simulated working situation?</i>	25
3.1.2	<i>To what extent does the practice-oriented assessment exist and how much weight does it carry in the national context?</i>	26
3.2	<i>How is the practice-oriented assessment in VET implemented?</i>	26
3.3	<i>What is the focus of the practice-oriented assessment?</i>	29
3.3.1	<i>What is being assessed?</i>	29
3.4	<i>What kinds of practice-oriented assessment methods are used in different contexts?</i>	30
3.4.1	<i>On what grounds are the certain assessment methods chosen?</i>	30
3.5	<i>What is the validity of assessment and examinations?</i>	30
3.6	<i>The influence of assessment on the process of learning and working</i>	31
3.6.1	<i>How is the practice-oriented assessment enhancing the professional development of the students?</i>	31
3.7	<i>What is the relevance of assessment from the viewpoint of the labour market?</i>	32

## **Section 4      Quality Assurance**

4.1	<i>The components of quality assurance in VET</i>	34
4.1.1	<i>FETAC &amp; Quality assurance</i>	35
4.2	<i>What kind of role has the practice-oriented assessment in relation to the quality assurance of VET?</i>	36
4.2.1	<i>FETAC: Implementing Quality Assurance</i>	37
	<i>Figure: 6: Summary of FETAC’s Validation Process</i>	38

## **Section 5      Development of practice-oriented assessment**

5.1	<i>What have been the most essential recent developments in Practice-oriented assessment of VET?</i>	40
	<i>Figure: 7: the National Framework of Qualifications</i>	41
5.2	<i>What kind of added value have these developments been able to give to VET?</i>	42

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5.3	<i>What have been the reasons/needs behind these reforms?</i>	42
5.4	<i>What kinds of new practice-oriented assessment methods are being developed and why?</i>	43
5.5	<i>To what extent have the European controversies and tendencies had an impact on discussions about assessment in the partner country?</i>	43

## **References** 45

### **APPENDIX 1**

<i>Irish Education System</i>	48
-------------------------------	----

### **APPENDIX 2**

<i>FETAC Programme Validation Guidelines and Criteria</i>	52
-----------------------------------------------------------	----

### **APPENDIX 3**

<i>FETAC Work Experience Module descriptor</i>	54
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## ***Introduction***

This report will focus on the current innovations and the future development of the practices and approaches to the assessment of learning in the area of work-based Vocational Education & Training in Ireland. The report will be written from the perspective of the Irish Partner (Dublin City University) of the Leonardo de Vinci QualPraxis Research Project. In Ireland Vocational Education and Training (VET) exists mainly in the further education sector and this report will focus on this area.

This national report aims to examine the current provisions of assessment and quality assurance in relation to practice-oriented assessment. To a lesser degree this paper will also look at standards in relation to assessment in VET. It also aims to provide a theoretical framework from which the current provisions have been drawn and developed by the accreditation bodies and the training providers. The following information has been collected and collated from a wide range of sources including interviews with key stakeholders. The report tries to answer a range of questions, which were drawn from the first meeting in Jyväskylä of the Qual-Praxis partners (*an EU Leonardo de Vinci funded pan European initiative*). However, elements of these questions cannot be fully explored in this paper as the second phase of the Project aims to focus on a range of case studies in the relevant Practice-Oriented Assessment areas. It is from these cases that a further exploration of the questions can be fully developed and presented. It is also important to note that the Irish research team will be examining quality assurance in practice-oriented assessment primarily from a further-education perspective. The Irish education structure outlined in this next section is constructed in such a way that Vocational Education & Training is seen as a further education pursuit even if it sits within various sectors.

## **1. *In general, how is the VET system of the partner country formed?***

### **1.1 *What are the special characteristics of this system?***

This section of the report will outline the overall context of Vocational Education and Training provision in Ireland. Firstly, it will summarise the elements of the Irish education system, which will help show the context in which VET sits both historically and structurally. This section also aims to demonstrate how the EU and economic factors have influenced the development of this sector in recent years. For the purposes of this report it is also significant to note that the Irish Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 does not distinguish between education and training or between students who are full-time and those who are in employment and availing of training. "Learners" is the term used in the Act for all students and workers who are participating in education and training or who want to participate in education and training. This means that learners within the formal and informal education system and learners engaged in assessment as part of training within industry and business are governed by the same 1999 Qualifications act.

#### **1.1.2 *The Irish Education System***

The Education Act 1998 is the key piece of recent legislation governing the operation and development of the Irish education system. Its provisions are gradually being brought into effect by ministerial order. The rights and roles of all the partners in education are laid down in the Act, which places considerable emphasis upon the principle of partnership in the management and operation of the education system. Figure: 1 shows a diagram of the structure of the Irish Education system.

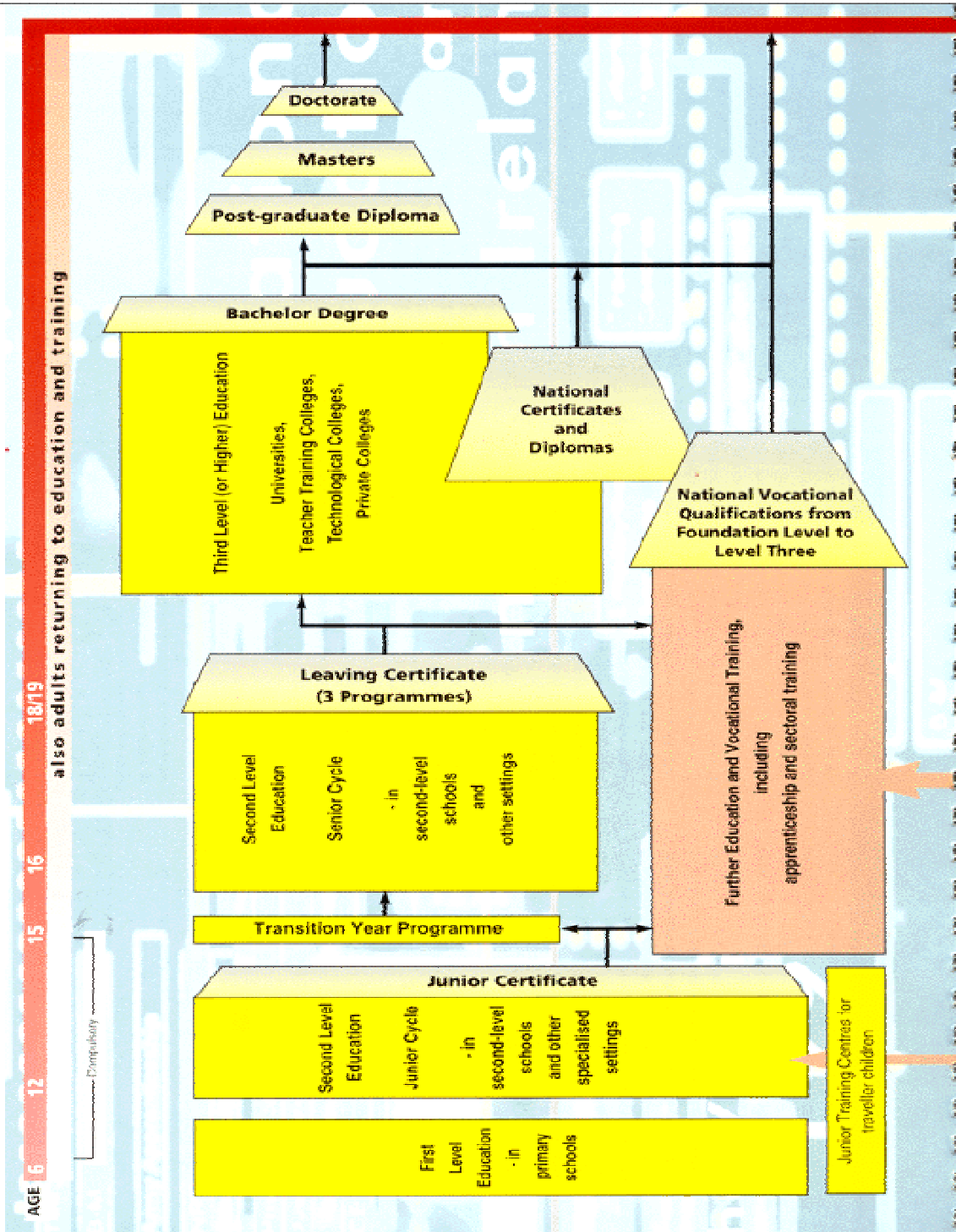


Figure.1 (The Irish Education System)

For additional information on the Irish education system see:

[http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/dept\\_education\\_system04.pdf](http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/dept_education_system04.pdf)



### **1.1.3 Context of VET provision in Ireland**

Since 1987 the Irish economy has been managed by means of national partnership agreements between social partners. In addition to the Government there were three main parties to the first agreement – business and industry; the trade unions; and the farming sector. These have since been joined by the community and voluntary sector, which now constitutes the fifth pillar of the social partnership strategy. As a result of these partnerships, inward international investment and significant support from the ESF and ERDF, Ireland's GDP rose at an average of 4.9% a year compared to an OECD average of 2.4% during 1986-1996. Employment also grew by 1.8% per year compared to the OECD average of 0.3%. Each of the five partnership programmes negotiated to date has included a commitment to focusing resources on the disadvantaged, and providing a range of education and training programmes suited to their abilities and aptitudes, although most of the emphasis has been on pre-vocational education and training in school and non-formal education settings.

This national drive to invest in VET has also been accelerated by international competition, technological advancements leading to the emergence of skill gaps in certain industries and renewed pressure to provide increased incentives for organisational level training (Zornitski, 1991; Jashapara, 1993; Swigant, 1995; Kabts et al. 1996). These changes, in turn, can be expected to alter not only the skills needed in society, but also the incentives to individual and employers to invest in training. Through ESF & ERDF influenced initiatives in the 1980s and '90s, the Irish State recognised that its European neighbours were investing heavily in lifelong learning in the context of an aging workforce, global technological changes and increased international competitiveness. These developments helped the Irish government recognise that structural unemployment and disadvantage can only be addressed through a holistic approach to education and training (Holden, 1991); Booth & Snower, 1996; Kjellberg 1997; O'Donnell & Garavan, 1997).

#### **1.1.4 VET system in Ireland**

In Ireland, Vocational Education & Training embraces education and training which occurs primarily after second-level schooling but which is not part of the third level system. This includes programmes such as Post-Leaving Certificate<sup>1</sup> courses and Second-Chance Education for the unemployed and early school leavers. A distinctive feature of further and vocational education generally is its diversity and breadth of provision, and its linkages with other services such as employment, training, area partnership, welfare, youth, school, juvenile liaison, justice and community and voluntary sector interests. A wide range of Government Departments, statutory agencies and voluntary and community organisations provide services in this area.

In 1999 the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act was passed. This Act led to the establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI). The main focus of this body is the establishment of a national framework of qualifications for non-university education awards at further and higher level, taking account of education, training, social partner, voluntary organisation and learner interests. Two award councils have been set up under the provisions of the Act: FETAC, the Further Education and Training Awards Council, and HETAC, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council. Their role in their respective areas is to determine the standards of knowledge and skill or competence to be acquired by learners for awards that they make. The role of the awards councils is to develop policies and criteria for the making of further/higher education and training awards and the validation of programmes of further/higher education and training and to implement such policies. The 1999 Act requires that all state-funded providers will have their programmes validated by one of the awarding Councils, FETAC or HETAC. Private providers may also apply for validation. Programme providers represent the interface between the majority of learners and the National Framework of Qualifications initiated by NQAI and is, therefore, critical to its successful implementation.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Leaving Certificate* : The Leaving Certificate examination is held at the end of the *Senior Cycle* in post-primary schools. Students normally sit for the examination at the age of 17 or 18, after 5 or 6 years of post-primary education. Pupils must take at least five subjects, including Irish Language.

In 1993 the government commissioned a report by the National Economic & Social Council (NESC). The report proposed the idea of stronger vocational education and upper secondary level and an overall recognition of a vocational orientation at all levels of the education system to facilitate future employment growth and participation in the rapidly growing labour market (Heraty et al, 2000, p.181). The Vocational Education & Training sector grew primarily out of the change in the Irish economic environment. Finlay et al (1998, p.1) also expanded on the links between the labour market and education services.

Although detailed knowledge of the precise relationship between educational attainment and economic growth remains imperfect, no political system nowadays can maintain itself long without giving due recognition to the notion that the provision of education services enrich the quality and capacity of labour and, in the process, improves the quality and flexibility and thus the rationality of the labour market. (Finlay et al 1998, p.1)

The diagram overleaf (Figure: 2) describes the structure and diversity of the Irish VET system. The diagram outlines give a brief account of each of these elements and a brief description of each of the VET sectors.

<b>The Irish VET system</b>	
<b>1: Upper Secondary level (post compulsory education)</b>	
○	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
○	Leaving Certificate Applied Vocational Programme
<p><i>These Programmes are based on the traditional national Leaving Certificate Programme but have a more diverse range of modular options such as European and International Business, Languages, Work Experience, and Enterprise.</i></p>	
<b>2: Post leaving Certificate VET (Further Education)</b>	
○	<b>Adult &amp; Continuing Education</b>
<p><i>These programmes are very diverse and varied. The range from Childcare Programmes to Travel &amp; Tourism.</i></p>	
○	<b>Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)</b>
<p><i>VTOS offers people an opportunity to return to full-time education if they are an unemployed adult or in receipt of certain benefits. One aim of the scheme is to give unemployed people education and training opportunities which will develop their employability.</i></p>	
○	<b>FÁS Training Courses &amp; FÁS Traineeships</b>
<p><i>FÁS Training courses offer people an opportunity to develop or upgrade their skills in the commercial and industrial sectors if they are unemployed or redundant. Traineeships offer a mixture of on-the-job training with an employer and off-the job training in a FÁS Training Centre if you are either a first time job seeker or unemployed.</i></p>	
○	<b>Youthreach</b>
<p><i>Youthreach is part of a national programme of second-chance education and training in Ireland. The programme includes a considerable amount of personal development and exploration where participants needs, interests and capacities are fully taken into account. The programme is designed to provide young adults with opportunities for basic education, personal development, vocational training and work experience. It is for people between 15 and 20 years of age and who have left school without any formal qualifications.</i></p>	
○	<b>Education and Training (other Government Agencies)</b>
<p><i>State agencies such as Fáilte Ireland, Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM), Teagasc, Coillte and the Crafts Council of Ireland offer you a range of specialist courses in their specific areas of work.</i></p>	
○	<b>Travellers Training Workshop</b>
<p><i>The Travellers are an indigenous minority group who have been part of Irish society for centuries. There are an estimated 25,000 Travellers in Ireland, making up more than 4,485 Traveller families. This constitutes approximately 0.5% of the total national population. Through the Traveller Training Centres they can gain practical skills and improve their literacy and numeracy skills at one of the 28 Senior Traveller Training Centres throughout Ireland, which are run through the VEC (Vocational Education Committee) and supported by FÁS.</i></p>	
○	<b>Department of Justice Workshops</b>
<p><i>Designed for people coming to education and training from the prison system or as an alternative to the prison system, you may find a suitable course under this scheme operated by the Department of Justice, FÁS and the VECs.</i></p>	
○	<b>Night Classes</b>
<p><i>Mainly Self-funded educational opportunities available through a range of night courses organised by local VEC, FÁS Training Centres and many of the colleges and universities throughout Ireland.</i></p>	

Figure 2: the Irish VET System (Source: DES, Government of Ireland, 2004)

For further information on the VET system in Ireland see:

[http://www2.trainingvillage.gr/etv/publication/download/panorama/5145\\_en.pdf](http://www2.trainingvillage.gr/etv/publication/download/panorama/5145_en.pdf)

### **1.2 *How is the student assessment in VET carried out?***

A range of intermediate organisations and training providers carry out student assessment in the VET system in Ireland. FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) was set up because of the need for learners to have a nationally recognised qualification that employers and educators could rely on. Although FETAC is not the only awarding body in Ireland it is the primary awarding body in the VET area. Each certifying organisation or local training provider that uses FETAC for accreditation purposes must use the established assessment systems outlined by FETAC.

The Minister for Education and Science set up FETAC as a statutory body in 2001. FETAC's mission is to make quality assured awards in accordance with national standards within the national framework, creating opportunities for all learners in further education and training to have their achievements recognised and providing access to systematic progression pathways (FETAC, 2003). This report will later outline the impact of the National Framework of Qualifications and also examine the issue of national standards in assessment. Primarily the training providers such as FAS, Further Education Colleges, and Failte Ireland (Irish Tourism Development Authority) carry out the actual assessment within their own training environment with added external moderation from FETAC. Each training provider uses the FETAC module descriptor as the basis for assessing the work of the learner. An example of a full FETAC award is presented in APPENDIX 3. This description of assessment methods is further explored in Section 3.3 page 20.

### **1.3 *What kinds of problems have been connected to the student assessment in VET and what kinds of new solutions have been created?***

At this stage of the research it is difficult to name the specific issues connected with the problems associated with student assessment in VET in Ireland. It is our view that the case studies identified in collaboration with FETAC will help answer these questions and thus also help frame some outline solutions.

#### **1.4 Why is assessment needed, what is being assessed, and how is assessment carried out?**

In order to answer the Qual-Praxis question about why is assessment needed it may be helpful at this stage of the report to look at assessment in a broader sense. From a macro point of view, all human interaction involves some sort of assessment and measuring process, and this may range from the most informal and incidental to the formal and technical process we associate with summative assessment (Ecclestone, 1996). One of the Latin roots of the word “assessment” is *asidere*: to sit down beside someone. The implication is of a process that involves close observation but also involvement, guidance and support. Bateson’s (1994) observation on approaches to assessment is worth noting in this context:

Teachers must see and become part of projects that use a mutually supportive combination of the older, tried-and-true methods and techniques, and the more recently developed methods with which researchers are less secure. It must be demonstrated...that the best decisions will be made if the data on which the decisions are based come from multiple, complementary methods using a variety of data types. (p.238)

It was not until the 1960s and Glaser’s paper (1963) on criterion –referenced testing that any significant critique was conducted on assessment methods based on classical psychometrics. Prior to this the emphasis on norm-referenced testing stemmed from the pre-occupation of test theory with aptitude, selection and prediction. However, as Gipps (1996) observes, the psychometric testing model is essentially one of limitation as it measures the fixed attributes of the individual that cannot be changed. Norm-referenced assessment grades an individual’s performance in relation to that of his or her peers; it assesses learners in terms of their relative performance rather than their absolute

performance. This model of assessment conveys an assumption of the primacy of technical issues, notably standardisation and reliability.

### **1.4.1 Emergence of Criterion-Based Assessment**

Criterion-referencing is a more familiar term to most people than competence-based assessment, having emerged as a powerful influence on educational thinking some 40 years ago. Its proponents put forward the need to move away from norm-referencing and ranking to an emphasis on what learners can actually do. In addition this approach advocates the beneficial effects of clear criteria on the process of teaching and learning (Glaser, 1963; Popham, 1978). In England, the early arguments in favour of what was to become a fully-fledged competence-based system refer explicitly to a “criterion referenced approach” (Jessop, 1991 p.167). Criterion-referencing is concerned with clearly specified outcomes for the learner, and with forms of assessment that address these outcomes separately rather than dealing simply with ‘pass marks’ or ‘norms’. This approach is built around the minute specification of these outcomes; a ‘domain descriptor’ which is intended to be so clear and unambiguous that reliable parallel assessments can be derived from it directly.

Wolf (1995, p.2) outlines three components that competence-based assessment shares with the wider concept of criterion-referenced assessment. These are:

1. The emphasis on outcomes- specifically, multiple outcomes each distinctive and separately considered.
2. The belief that these can and should be specified to the point where they are clear and ‘transparent’ – that assessors, assessees and ‘third parties’ should be able to understand what is being assessed, and what should be achieved.
3. The decoupling of assessment from particular institutions or learning programmes.

Criterion-referenced assessment was influential in the design of the English National Curriculum in the 1980s; this approach was evidenced also in Ireland with the introduction of a revised *Primary School Curriculum* in 1999.

### **1.4.2 Competence-based Assessment**

Criterion-referenced assessment is generally associated with mainstream education with the criteria defined by the school curriculum and the modes of assessment normally involving written reporting of some kind. Competence-based assessment is, on the other hand, essentially non-academic.

It tends... to derive from an analysis of a prospective or actual role in modern society and...attempts to certify student progress on the basis of demonstrated performance in some or all aspects of that role (Grant et al., 1979, p.6)

It is vocational in the broadest sense and bound up with the idea of 'real-life' performance (Wolf, 1995). In its early usage in the United States "performance-based assessment" was the term more often used in the literature (Tuxworth, 1989).

The 1960s and 1970s movement in the United States for greater accountability in education coincided with an increased federal interest in the quality of schooling and the evaluation of teaching competence. One such side-product of this concern was Computer Assisted Learning with its efforts to produce 'teacher-proof' lesson materials based on the principles of behavioural science. Teacher education was under attack and considered a major cause of falling standards in American education. 'Performance-based' or 'competency-based teacher education was seen as presenting a significant promise of reform. The literature published in the US during the 1970s (Grant et al., 1979) generally highlights four prominent features of competency-based assessment:



1. Precise objectives stated in behavioural terms.
2. Explicit and transparent criteria for actual assessment.
3. Rejection of both set times for learning and being assessed.
4. Exit requirements associated with competence being more important than entrance requirements for candidates.

In the reforms introduced in the United States in further and vocational education it was noted also that there were considerable doubts that “formal course work should remain the only pathway to a credential” and that in many cases the traditional course content bore little relevance to the future performance needs of students (Grant et al. 1979, p.10).

According to Ecclestone (1996) there are three main reasons for assessing the learner in a VET context, no matter what type of course or programme they are following:

- To **diagnose** their learning needs;
- To **select** them for the next educational stage or for work;
- To **certify** their achievements#

It is also important to note that the assessment should be made more explicit to the assessor and the assessed, including *what* is being assessed and *how* it is being assessed. In general, assessment is seen as a formal and informal process of measurement. In all assessment models there are some common and important elements to measuring this activity:

### **Evidence**

- This may take many forms such as technical tests, observation etc.

### **Standard**

- These can also take many forms but all must involve measuring the learner against one of three things:
  - An absolute criterion ‘*can this person add 2+2 to make 4?*’
  - A cohort or group ‘*can this person do better than the average of the group?*’
  - The learner’s own previous performance ‘*can this person do better than he/she did last month?*’

In order to determine what is being assessed in any given VET context our research through the case studies will clarify this. At this stage of the report we turn to FETAC once again. FETAC are instrumental in drawing up the assessment policy and weighing this up against the industry requirements. Part of this development process for the Council has been to start from the beginning in a sense and redefine its definitions of assessment. Here it is worth examining the set of assessment principles, which have recently been published by FETAC. See *Figure. 3*:

<i>FETAC Assessment Principles</i>
<i>Assessment by FETAC is regarded as an integral part of the learning process</i>
<i>All assessment is criterion referenced <sup>2</sup>. Each assessment technique has assessment criteria which detail the range of marks to be awarded for specific standards of knowledge, skills and competence demonstrated by candidates</i>
<i>The mode of assessment is generally local i.e. the assessment techniques are devised and implemented by internal assessors in centres</i>
<i>Assessment techniques in FETAC modules are valid in that they test a range of appropriate learning outcomes</i>
<i>The reliability of assessment techniques is facilitated by providing support for assessors</i>
<i>Arising from an extensive consultation process, each FETAC module describes what is considered to be an optimum approach to assessment. When necessary procedures are in place, it will be possible for assessors to use other forms of assessment, provided they are demonstrated to be valid and reliable.</i>
<i>To enable all learners to demonstrate they have reached the required standard, candidate evidence may be submitted in written, oral, visual, multimedia or other format as appropriate to the learning outcomes</i>
<i>Assessment of a number of modules may be integrated, provided the separate criteria for each module are met.</i>
<i>Group or teamwork may form part of the assessment of a module, provided each candidate's achievement is separately assessed.</i>

*Figure 3: FETAC Assessment principles ( FETAC, 2004)*

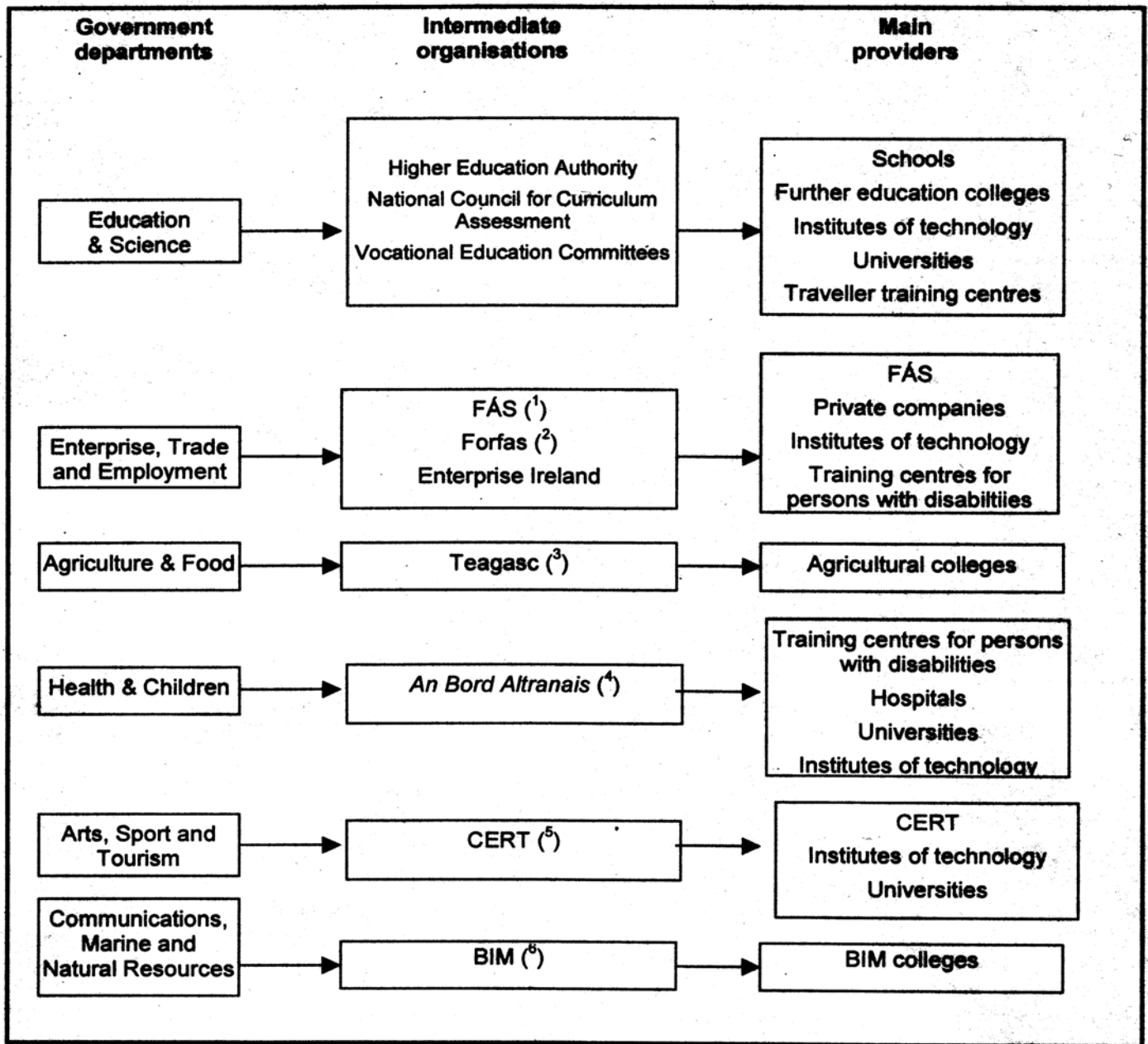
<sup>2</sup>*Criterion Referenced* : An assessment where an individual's performance is compared to a specific learning objective or performance standard and not to the performance of other students

As mentioned earlier in this report the national certifying body FETAC primarily certifies assessment in Vocational Education and Training. Within this FETAC system all assessment tools use a criterion-referenced system.

### **1.5 Which parties take part in determining the focus of student assessment?**

Programmes leading to FETAC awards are offered nationwide by a wide range of providers in diverse settings, including BIM (*the Irish Sea Fisheries Board*), Fáilte Ireland (*the National Tourism Development Authority*), FÁS (*the National Training and Employment Authority*) and Teagasc (*Irish Agriculture & Food Development Authority*), VEC's (*Vocational Education Committees*), adult and community education and training centres, Institutes of Technology and in the workplace. Vocational Education & Training in Ireland is a diverse and broad sector often funded directly or through intermediate bodies. The administrative framework consists of commercial training bodies, sectoral training bodies and local Vocational Education committees. Figure 4 on the next page presents the administrative structure from three levels: Government departments with related responsibility; intermediate organisations; and the main VET service providers.

*Vocational education and training: administrative structure*



**Legend:**

- (1) The Training & Employment Authority.
- (2) The National Policy Board for Enterprise, Trade, Science, Technology and Innovation.
- (3) Agriculture and Food Development Authority.
- (4) The Nursing Board
- (5) Council for Education, Recruitment, Training (Hotels, Catering and Tourism Industry), now Failte Ireland.
- (6) The Sea Fisheries Board

Figure 4: the Irish VET Administrative Structure (Source: FAS/Cedefop Panorama series;83, 2003), Government of Ireland, 2004)

Training providers such as those listed in the previous paragraph and in the last figure (Fig.4:) liaise with FETAC to develop their own training programmes and determine the level at which these programmes and courses should be pitched. FETAC have local and regional development officers that ensure that the training provider outlines a detailed quality assurance document that includes elements of training, standards, assessment procedures and progression. No FETAC accredited programme can operate without this quality assurance document. To achieve this, a series of measures have been put in place by FETAC and are outlined in Figure 5. Crucial to this negotiated process to decide standards etc within the assessment is the ‘boards of study’. The boards of study are a committee representative of the particular industry or craft and experts in the field.

<i>Validation/Accreditation Process for FETAC accredited Programmes</i>
<b>Step 1</b>
Awards are decided upon in terms of name, content and standards by “Boards of Study”, i.e. a committee representative of the particular industry or craft and experts in the field.
<b>Step 2</b>
Providers of programmes leading to these awards must achieve validation for each programme by demonstrating the quality assurance methods (including assessment) to be applied.
<b>Step 3</b>
Post-validation FETAC, through : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ assistance with curriculum delivery</li> <li>▪ in-service teacher training</li> <li>▪ external monitoring of assessment</li> <li>▪ ongoing evaluation of providers, ensures maintenance of quality.</li> </ul>

*Figure 5: Validation/Accreditation Process for  
FETAC accredited Programmes (FETAC, 2004)*

With regard to assessment, the process outlined in the previous figure (Fig. 5:) develops as follows. In Step 1, the appropriate “Boards of Study” lay down standards for a particular award at a particular level. As part of Step 2, the modes of assessing the particular modules that make up an award are set down at the curriculum development stage. The proposed assessment techniques must be agreed as part of the validation of the programme before it can be offered.

## 2 **Work-based learning**

### 2.2 **How is the work-based learning in VET organised?**

#### 2.2.1 **What kind of role has the work-based learning as a part of the curriculum?**

After the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999) the Irish Government set about a large-scale consultation process, which would help form the basis of the *White Paper on Adult Education – Learning for Life* (2000). Part of this consultation process focused on work-based learning. The White Paper (2000) states that: ‘....a common experience for many learners undergoing APL (accreditation of prior learning) and WBL (Work-Based Learning) is that the process is a complex one with considerable support and guidance needed in assembling a portfolio of evidence to demonstrate to the satisfaction of accreditors...’ The paper further went on to suggest that:

*‘Learning and assessment systems that best enable WBL have the following characteristics:-*

- *they are modular;*
- *they have an outcomes-based approach;*
- *they allow for credit accumulation over a period of time’*

Within all FETAC certificates at Level 2 a modular requirement for the certificate is ‘Work Experience W20008’. This mandatory module incorporates a choice of three modes of undertaking work experience:

1. *Work Placement*
2. *Work Practice*
3. *Work Based Learning*

In the Work Based Learning Mode FETAC (2001) state within the module descriptor:

*This mode is designed to enable learners to gain NCVA Level 2 accreditation for current or prior experience of work in a vocational area directly related to the certificate being sought. The experience of work in either case must be substantial, verifiable and relevant to the vocational certificate area.*

The document goes on to explain the aims and specific learning objectives of the module:

*'General Aims*

*Learners who successfully complete this module will:*

- *develop critical awareness of the changing nature of work*
- *set achievable goals for work experience*
- *utilise learning opportunities presented in the work environment*
- *apply work skills to consolidate learning in the vocational area*
- *understand how work is planned and organised at different levels in a specific vocational area appreciate the importance of safety and welfare in the workplace*
- *develop capabilities, both personal and vocational, to successfully meet challenges in the workplace*
- *review career choices in the light of their own aspirations, experience, abilities and available options*
- *explore future employment opportunities (including opportunities for self employment, contract work, work in the social economy, etc)' (FETAC, 2001)*

In the overall context of work-based learning in Ireland formal, valid, and reliable assessment has been the concern of the employers or training organisation that the learner is employed by or is intended to be employed by. FETAC's Work Experience module is one of 8 modules used to make up a full Award. This module is mandatory (as well as Communications) for any training provider seeking to develop a FETAC Award.

With the introduction of the NQAI in February 2001 and the setting up of FETAC (subsequent to the 2000 White Paper) the whole area of WBL has sparked some major national debate. Areas traditionally seen to be the domain of industry, have had to recognise the need for the introduction of quality assurance mechanisms in a global market place. The White Paper on Adult Education – Learning for Life (2000) also suggested that a bank of Learning Assessors should be appointed to oversee assessment in WBL and also be recognised by FETAC and HETAC (Higher Education & Training Awards Council). In the Irish context there are other professional Awarding bodies such as ECDL<sup>3</sup>, NIOCN<sup>4</sup>, City & Guilds<sup>5</sup>, as well as industry specific Awarding bodies. These other bodies are now in negotiations with NQAI to have their awards placed within the National Framework of Qualifications. In this context the Qual-Praxis project will help us identify key stakeholders in the Work-Based Learning (WBL) field. These will be selected, once again, in collaboration with FETAC, as one or more WBL case studies.

<sup>3</sup> ECDL – European Computer Driving Licence

<sup>4</sup> NIOCN – Northern Ireland Open College Network

<sup>5</sup> City & Guilds - City & Guilds a provider of vocational qualifications in the United Kingdom



### **3. *Practice-oriented assessment***

In this section of the report we will first outline what the term 'practice-oriented assessment' in VET in Ireland means. The section will go on to look at how practice-oriented assessment relates to real or simulated working situations. A further discussion will look at its relevance in a national context and how it is actually implemented. The later part of this section will examine some of the concepts around the elements that are assessed within practice-oriented assessment and what methods if any are currently employed. The section will conclude with a look at the theory and application of validity in assessment as well as examining how this impacts on learning and working.

#### **3.1 *What does the term “the practice-oriented assessment in VET” mean?***

##### **3.1.1 *Does it refer to a real or a simulated working situation?***

Performance assessment is a term that is commonly used in place of, or with, authentic assessment. Performance assessment requires students to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and strategies by creating a response or a product (Rudner & Boston, 1994; Wiggins, 1989).

In the Irish context of VET the term 'practice-oriented assessment' is a relatively new term. However the concept of competence-based assessment and performance-based learning are familiar to a significant number of the stakeholders in the VET sector. The terminology and language around these forms of assessment is often confused. An emerging concept within the work-based sectors is the phrase Practice-Oriented Learning. This implies that the assessment elements of these processes would be practice-oriented assessment. This will be a key question to explore within the context of the case studies. Through our research and interviews we have begun to ascertain that FETAC's approach to assessment focuses on the broadest understanding of the curriculum and attempts to assess a wider and more sophisticated range of skills in a way that reflects learning processes, improves the quality of teaching and ultimately presents a fairer measure of learner achievements. As Wiggins (1994) asserts: *'what is wanted is truly valid*

*assessment. We must keep in mind, then that efficiency is at odds with effectiveness in testing; mere scores are at odds with rich feedback*'. Seeking ways of implementing practice-oriented assessment in areas such as social work, medicine and vocational and technical education has raised significant questions relating to the relative usefulness of traditional modes, methods and conventions of the traditional teaching-learning process.

### **3.1.2 To what extent does the practice-oriented assessment exist and how much weight does it carry in the national context?**

As mentioned earlier in this paper the FETAC approach to assessment is very much based on an *outcomes-based model* that relies on a set of *criteria* and associated *standards* set by the appropriate bodies outlined in Figure 5, page 19. In regard to performance oriented assessment Afferbach (1994), states that:

*the nature of performance assessment is not solely to communicate what the student has learned, but also how the student is able to explain, demonstrate, model, apply an/or reflect upon what she/he has learned. Rather than a 'snapshot' of student learning, a performance assessment serves as a 'scrapbook' illustrating the direction and steps a student has taken in his/her learning.*

With the establishment of the NQAI, FETAC and HETAC the whole area of assessment in vocational education and training has been developed in conjunction with other relevant stakeholders, such as the employers, universities etc. The recent reorganisation and reprioritising of assessment has had the effect of pushing the concept of practice-oriented assessment, work-based learning and skills-based assessment further up the Government's education and employment agenda.

### **3.2 How is the practice-oriented assessment in VET implemented?**

On a general level assessment is implemented by the training providers in their own context as outlined in *Section 1.2*. These assessments may be carried out in a variety of settings. The assessment methods that are employed by the service/training providers are designed and developed by FETAC. The weighting and focus of the assessment tools is a negotiated process between FETAC and the training provider. Special assessment provisions may be set up on a case by case basis, for example for certain learners with

disabilities. The actual techniques or methods of assessment for each module or unit of study must be chosen from a “menu” which is outlined as follows:

### ***FETAC Glossary of Assessment Techniques***

**Assignment** *An exercise carried out in response to a brief, with specific guidelines and usually of short duration.*

Each assignment is based on a brief provided by the internal assessor. The brief includes specific guidelines for candidates. The assignment is carried out over a period of time specified by the internal assessor.

**Collection of Work**

*A collection and /or selection of pieces of work produced by candidates over a period of time that demonstrates the mastery of skills.*

Using guidelines provided by the internal assessor, candidates compile a collection of their own work. The collection of work demonstrates evidence of a range of specific learning outcomes or skills. The evidence may be produced in a range of conditions, such as in the learning environment, in a role-play exercise, or in real-life/work situations.

This body of work may be self-generated rather than carried out in response to a specific assignment e.g. artwork, engineering work etc.

**Examination** *A means of assessing a candidate’s ability to recall and apply skills, knowledge and understanding within a set period of time (time constrained) and under clearly specified conditions.*

Examinations may be:

- Practical, assessing the mastery of specified practical skills demonstrated in a set period of time under restricted conditions
  - Oral, testing ability to speak effectively in the vernacular or other languages
  - Interview-style, assessing learning through verbal questioning, on one-to-one/group basis
  - Aural, testing listening and interpretation skills
  - Theory-based, assessing the candidate’s ability to recall and apply theory, requiring responses to a range of question types, such as objective, short answer, structured, essay. These questions may be answered in different media such as in writing, orally etc.

**Learner Record**

*A self-reported record by an individual, in which he/she describes specific learning experiences, activities, responses, skills acquired.*

Candidates compile a personal logbook/journal/diary/daily diary/record/laboratory notebook/sketch book  
The logbook/journal/diary/daily diary/record/laboratory/

---

notebook/sketch book should cover specified aspects of the learner's experience

**Project** *A substantial individual or group response to a brief with guidelines, usually carried out over a period of time.*

Project may involve:

Research – requiring individual/group investigation of a topic.

Process – e.g., design, performance, production of an artifact/event.

Projects will be based on a brief provided by the internal assessor or negotiated by the candidate with the internal assessor. The brief will include broad guidelines for the candidate. The work will be carried out over a specified period of time.

Project may be undertaken as a group or collaborative project, however the individual contribution of each candidate must be clearly identified.

The project will enable the candidate to demonstrate: *(some of these, about 2-4)*

- Understanding and application of concepts in (specify area)
- Use/selection of relevant research/survey techniques, sources of information, referencing, bibliography
- Ability to analyse, evaluate, draw conclusions, make recommendations
- Understanding of process/planning implementation and review skills/planning and time management skills
- Ability to implement/produce/make/construct/perform
- Mastery of tools and techniques
- Design/creativity/problem-solving/evaluation skills
- Presentation/display skills
- Team working/co-operation/participation skills

**Skills  
Demon-  
stration**

*Assessment of mastery of specified practical, organisational and/ or interpersonal skills.*

These skills are assessed at any time throughout the learning process by the Internal assessor/another qualified person in the centre for whom the candidate undertakes relevant tasks.

The skills may be demonstrated in a range of conditions, such as in the learning environment, in a role-play exercise, or in a real-life/work situation.

The candidate may submit a written report/supporting documentation as part of the assessment.

Examples of skills: laboratory skills, computer skills, coaching skills, and interpersonal skills.

(FETAC Module Descriptor, 2004)

### **3.3 What is the focus of the practice-oriented assessment?**

#### **3.3.1 What is being assessed (theoretical, practical or integrated competencies, process or outcome, tacit knowledge)?**

Without exploring the case studies in detail it is very difficult to articulate the training providers focus in the assessment process. Each training provider will undoubtedly have an emphasis towards a particular form of learning outcome and will match the appropriate assessment tool with each of these. Further investigations through the Qual-Praxis Case Studies will help pinpoint these in more detail. However, the NQAI in a recent document (2004) whilst discussing the inclusion of other Professional Awards said that:

*The Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council play a key role in validating programmes of education and training for the purposes of making awards. The services of the Councils are available to all providers of education and training. The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 sets out a very broad definition of a programme of education and training. Essentially, a programme is defined as any process by which learners may acquire knowledge, skill or competence and includes courses of study or instruction, apprenticeships, training and employment. This has significant implications for other awarding bodies as they can enter into cooperation with the awards Councils to develop suitably named awards to meet their needs and to validate programmes as required.*

Whilst the focus is on the student's learning outcome, thus being performance-oriented, this does not mean that theoretical, practical or integrated competencies, process or outcome and tacit knowledge are mutually exclusive. The individual case studies should help us come to a more specific understanding of this question.

### **3.4 What kinds of practice-oriented assessment methods are used in different contexts?**

#### **3.4.1 On what grounds are the certain assessment methods chosen?**

These assessment tools selected by each training providers will be examined further in the case studies. As indicated earlier in this report many of FETAC's modules have strong elements of practice oriented assessment methods especially the Work Experience module discussed in *Section 2.2.1*. To a certain extent the choice of assessment methods are predefined by the module descriptor (see **APPENDIX 3** for FETAC Module Descriptor). However at a local level, the training provider can select from this assessment tool menu an appropriate set of methods that they feel will suit the learning needs of the student. Each training provider through their training needs analysis selects assessment tools that they and the boards of study deem appropriate to their learners needs. For example, an oral presentation as an assessment tools may be selected as part of one assessment menu for a learner that was motor-impaired and could not demonstrate their learning in a written format.

### **3.5 What is the validity of assessment and examinations?**

Rowntree (1987) reminds us that an overlooked and important feature of validity in assessment is that it is also 'an attempt to *know* a person, in this light assessment can be seen as a human encounter'. This question can be answered from a range of perspectives. The notion of validity in assessment is a broad one. However in the context of practice-oriented assessment the question of validity is undoubtedly linked to a quality assurance process that sets up the initial assessment mechanism and also evaluates the learner's success through the whole learning process. In general a valid form of assessment is one that measures what it is supposed to measure (Atherton, 2003).

Atherton also went on to say:

It does not assess memory, when it is supposed to be assessing problem solving (and vice versa). It does not grade someone on the quality of their writing, when writing skills are not relevant to the topic being assessed, but it does when they are. It does seek to cover as much of the assessable material as practicable, not relying on inference from a small and arbitrary sample.

In the quality assurance process (which is discussed later in this report) the concept of validity is of great importance. But different people often interpret the concept of validity differently. In FETAC's case and in the whole area of adult education and further education an interesting interpretation of validity is offered by Lacity and Jansen (1994) who define validity as making common sense, and being persuasive and seeming right to the reader. For Polkinghorne (1988), '*validity ..... refers to results that have the appearance of truth or reality.*'

In FETAC's case the concept of Standards has been a key to developing nationally transparent qualifications that has industry recognisable standards. Over the past thirty years or so, there has been a significant paradigm shift from the traditionally accepted psychometric, objective, standardised and mechanically-scored methods and instruments of assessment to more subjective, naturalistic, authentic approaches incorporating both the processes and products of assessment. There has been a change in emphasis in the relative importance and value of process-based formative assessment over summative, end-focused means. Furthermore, this conceptual movement in understanding assessment has led logically to the involvement of learners themselves in the assessment process.

### ***3.6 What is the influence of assessment on the process of learning and working?***

#### ***3.6.1 How is the practice-oriented assessment enhancing the professional development of the students?***

The key objective of the research by the Irish partner organisation through the Qual-Praxis project is to discover if practice-oriented assessment is enhancing the professional development of students. The overall rationale for assessment in VET is answered in Section 1.4. It will not be until the case studies have been examined and analysed that we can answer this question. However the business and industry sectors who have a first hand knowledge of competing in a world wide market have started to reiterate this idea of continued professional development in the context of lifelong learning. Waterford Glass in its publication, "Learning With Europe" sums up the workplace context for Lifelong Learning as follows:

As work changes from manual, standardised production to knowledge based processes, workers are required to be flexible, multi-skilled, IT literate, business literate and lifelong learners. Enterprises are being transformed from hierarchical and complex organisations with simple jobs, to less hierarchical more customer oriented, more decentralised network oriented organisations with more complex jobs. [In the current work environment], every employee has become an important link in the supply chain. All jobs have a strong skill element included. The function of general operative, traditionally the least qualified employee, has been transformed. The role has changed from one of passive, repetitive work subject to direction, to one of a more active, interventionist team role requiring high personal initiative. General operatives in the new work environment require a clear understanding of business, plant and department objectives. Their input and contribution is critical to the smooth management of the process of running the enterprise

This suggests that Waterford Crystal and presumably other Irish businesses acknowledge the fact that long-term competitiveness will only be assured if workers at all levels in business and industry see the future jobs market as having strong focus skills and practice oriented processes. In Ireland if the distribution of formal educational attainment in the workforce and the changing skills mix is of concern to the business sector then upgrading the skills of people at the lower paid end of the spectrum must be a key priority (Government of Ireland, 2002).

### ***3.7 What is the relevance of assessment from the viewpoint of the labour market?***

Part of our research, through the case studies, will be to examine this link between the labour market and the assessment mechanisms in place, especially in relation to practice-oriented assessment. From the Irish Government's perspective the State has been seeking advice from a range of professional sectors in the area of skills and assessment needs. The Expert Group on Future Skill Needs was established in 1998 by the Government in the context of increasing concerns about labour and skill shortages in Ireland. The Expert Group provides a research and coordination mechanism at national level and reports jointly to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Minister for Education and Science. It contains representatives of the social partners, government departments, industrial development organisations and education/training bodies. It has undertaken research on a wide range of skill areas including ICT, engineering, biotechnology, construction, pharmaceuticals, e-business, research and the



labour market as a whole. Its recommendations have been influential in increasing public investment in ICT and other scientific fields. In 2004 FORFÁS (*the national policy advisory board for enterprise, trade, science, technology and innovation*) and the National Competitive Committee published its annual competitive report. This report not only looked at Ireland's global and European competitiveness but looked at the added value to investment in Lifelong learning and VET. The report states:

the productivity effects of continued education are dependent on the form of training undertaken, there is general consensus that the returns from life long learning are similar in magnitude to the returns from traditional schooling. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimate that 80 per cent of the global workforce of 2015 is already in the labour force but that many of their skills will have been rendered obsolete by that time due to changes in technology and process innovation. In Ireland's case, demographic changes (an ageing society) will mean that employers and employees alike will increasingly depend on life long learning and skills acquired outside of the traditional forums in order to remain competitive.

There has been a significant amount of calls in recent years by economic, employment and education advisory committees for an increase in training provision, especially in the skills sector.

There has been a significant shift in enterprise training policy in recent years. An increased emphasis on training of the employed has been a feature of policy documents such as the White Paper on Human Resource Development (Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment, 1997), the White Paper on Adult Education (Department of Education & Science, 2000, p.16), and the Report of the Task Force on Lifelong Learning (2002 p.8). The strand of the Employment and Human Resources Development Operational Programme (EHRD-OP) 2000-2006 focusing on promoting a skilled, trained and adaptable workforce with the ability to respond successfully to changes in labour market needs emphasises further training, re-skilling, lifelong learning, and increased investment in education and training. (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2004)

The real knowledge generated by the research will come from our in-depth analysis of the views and aspirations of the training providers selected for the case studies. It is not until then that we can make these direct links between industry standards, labour market forces and assessment needs and methods.

## **4. Quality Assurance**

This section will look at the whole area of quality assurance from a theoretical perspective and a practical one. We will then go on to look at how the quality assurance processes impact on assessment in VET in Ireland and specifically examine its relationship to FETAC. The last part of this section will examine how FETAC's quality assurance system, in regard particularly to training providers and assessment, is implemented.

### **4.1 What are the components of quality assurance in VET?**

Evaluation and quality assurance are closely connected concepts. The process of evaluation, i.e. measuring outcomes against standards or targets, ideally provides the mechanism to assure policy makers, managers, governing authorities, and the general public that quality is being achieved. Hoyle defines quality as: *'a degree of excellence, conformance with requirements, the totality of product or service features that satisfy given needs, fitness for use, freedom from defects, imperfections or contaminations and delighting customers'* (Hoyle, 1994, p.3).

A recurring theme in the "quality" literature in education and training is the need to achieve consistency of judgement within diverse or complex systems. For example, the New Zealand Quality Authority (NZQA 1997) asserts that quality in VET is:

...generally understood to be an attribute that is particularly effective in achieving goals or meeting needs or producing high levels of performance. The evaluation of quality inevitably requires a judgement, which depends on the purpose for or standards against which the judgement is made. The evaluation may change over time...but the key is to set criteria for quality to enable consistent judgements to be made.

In the education and training context in Ireland, quality assurance can be defined as those systems, procedures, processes and actions intended to lead to the achievement, maintenance, monitoring and enhancement of quality. A quality system enables one to achieve, maintain and improve quality. Within the vast literature relating to quality, differing aspects of the design of a quality system can be identified as follows:

Quality control encompasses the operational techniques and activities that are used to fulfil requirements for quality by regulating performance. It is a process for maintaining standards, not creating them.

Quality assurance is all of the planned and systematic actions necessary to provide adequate confidence that a product or a service will satisfy the specified requirements for quality. Quality assurance activities do not directly control quality. They establish the extent to which quality will be, is being, or has been controlled. They serve to build confidence in results. Quality assurance processes, in general, involve assessing the organisation or system, which supplies the product/service against prescribed standards to establish its capability to produce products/services to a certain standard. Depending on the circumstances, the standards required may be determined within the organisation or externally.

Quality improvement is anything that causes a beneficial change in quality performance. It is a process for changing standards by a process of selection, analysis and corrective action on the standards or process.

The Qual-Praxis project is primarily concerned with the evaluation of the assessment procedures, particularly the practice-oriented assessment procedures, used to establish quality and certify standards. To explore the quality assurance arrangements, systems and procedures in VET in Ireland it is important to put this in an overall national context. The concept of Quality Assurance is currently high on the agenda of educators and political decision makers in Ireland. As practice oriented assessment is only one of the elements in the quality assurance framework we will now examine quality assurance from FETAC's perspective.

#### **4.1.1 FETAC & Quality assurance**

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 assigns specific and separate roles to the trainer provider and to FETAC in relation to the quality assurance of programmes i.e.:

A provider shall ... establish procedures for quality assurance for the purpose of further improving and maintaining the quality of education and training provided,

organised or procured by that provider... and shall agree those procedures with the Council (Government of Ireland, 1999 - S 18 (1)).

FETAC, in consultation with the broad further education and training sector have developed guidelines to assist training providers in establishing consistent quality assurance procedures which can be agreed. FETAC has also developed criteria to ensure a transparent, fair and consistent process of agreement.

As mentioned previously the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) has statutory responsibility for evaluation and quality assurance in Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Ireland. The mechanisms which have been put in place to implement this role are designed to monitor the planning, delivery and assessment of vocational education and training programmes through involvement in all of the stages of the curriculum cycle, namely, inputs, process and outputs.

At the inputs stage, FETAC provide some common, centrally produced modules for the development of local learning centre developed modules and module accreditation procedures. At the process stage FETAC provide curriculum advisors to support teachers in the delivery of modules, and at the output stage it provides a framework for assessment. Each of these steps is key to the evaluation of quality and therefore to the credibility of the standards certified.

#### **4.2 *What kind of role has the practice-oriented assessment in relation to the quality assurance of VET?***

There is no way of separating the role of practice-oriented assessment on the QA process from any other element on the quality assurance process. The need to strike a balance between measures that control, assure and improve quality is evident in the quality debate within industry and more recently in the field of education. The thriving ISO 9000 industry standard and the development of Total Quality Management (TQM) are evidence of the effort that is being expended on the development of models for quality assurance. In the specific context of vocational education and training, consideration must be given to the balance between quality assurance of the product (e.g. the module developed and delivered by a provider) and quality assurance of the organisation which provides the

accrediting and assessment service (i.e. the awarding body). While much of the literature on quality assurance relates to practice within providing institutions, the issues apply equally to procedures and strategies within the organisations charged with providing the quality assurance processes necessary to underpin the credibility of the system as a whole.

The other balance to be struck is between internal and external quality assurance processes. In VET in Ireland, models for internal self-evaluation and quality assurance within the institutions providing programmes have emerged in recent years. As in most VET systems internationally, these internal quality assurance mechanisms are reinforced by external quality assurance measures. In the context of this report, it is to the external modes of quality assurance employed by FETAC to monitor and evaluate quality in the training providers that we now turn.

#### **4.2.1 FETAC: Implementing Quality Assurance**

As indicated in Section 1 of this paper, FETAC is responsible for the development of vocational awards in the Irish VET system. Among the principal functions of FETAC, the following are of particular importance to the present paper:

- *to validate programmes and to make awards*
- *to monitor and evaluate the quality of programmes in respect of which awards are made.*

In order to achieve these functions, FETAC (2003) sees as priorities the following steps:

- agreeing quality assurance arrangements with providers
- ensuring that providers use fair and consistent procedures for assessment

Under the (Education and Training) Act 1999, all VET course providers under the remit of FETAC, ranging from FÁS, the National Training Agency with responsibility for apprenticeships, to individual FE colleges and workplaces providing training programmes, must comply with strict quality assurance procedures and seek validation from FETAC in order to run their programmes.

The quality assurance process begins with the provision of detailed information concerning the design, content, delivery and assessment of the programmes. A summary of FETAC's Validation process is outlined here in Figure 6:

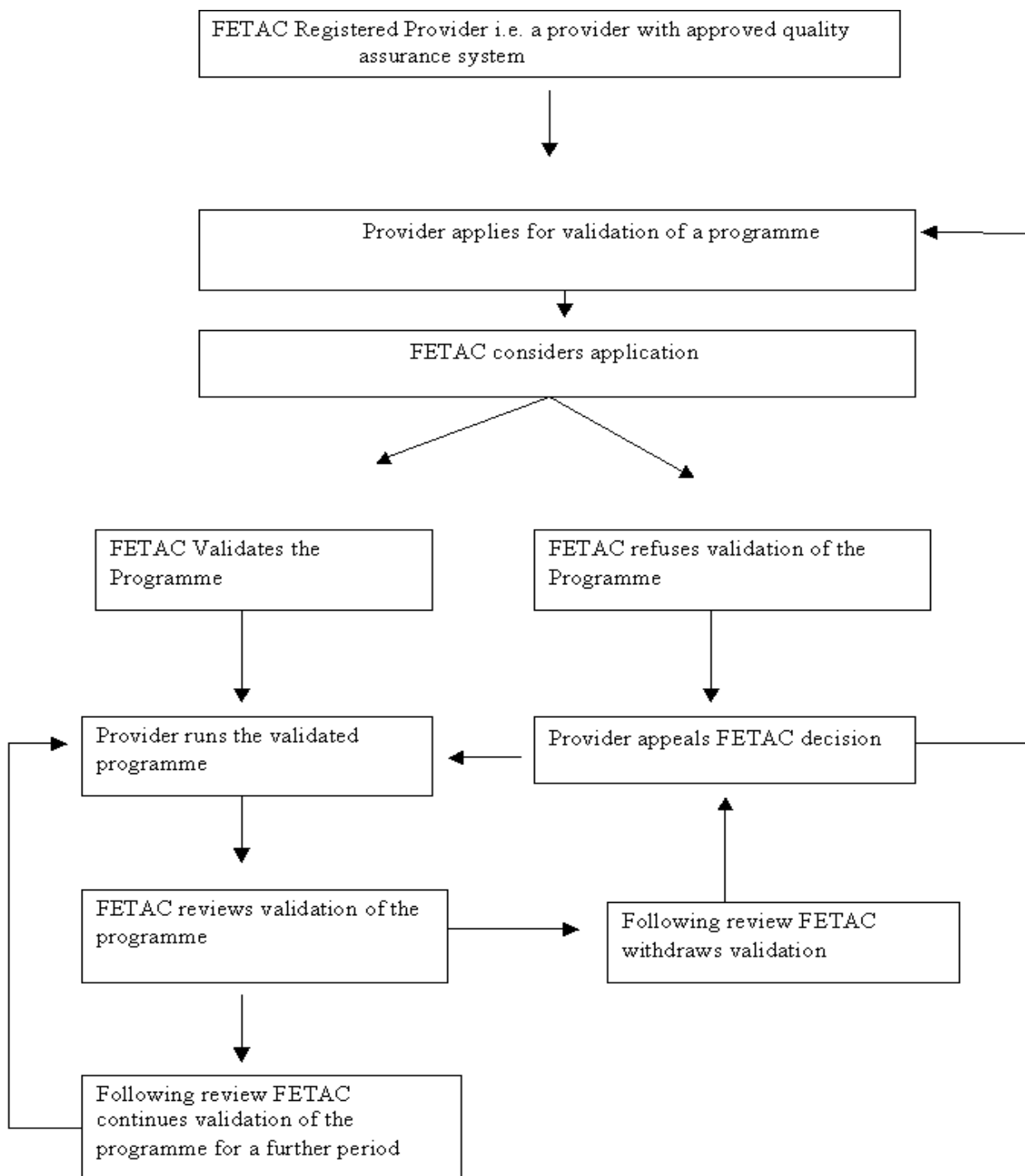


Figure: 6: Summary of FETAC's Validation Process ( Source: FETAC 2003)

The FETAC Programme Validation Guidelines and Criteria are contained in **APPENDIX 2**. Under the Act, FETAC must *'agree the provider's QA system before the validation of its programme can take place'* (FETAC, 2004, p.2). FETAC has adopted the following definition of validation as: *'The quality assurance processes by which FETAC will ensure that the proposed programme provides the learner with the opportunity to reach the standards pre-determined by FETAC for a particular award (FETAC 2004)*. To achieve this, each provider must develop a 'Provider Quality Assurance System Descriptor' and then show through the validation procedure that the application of the QA policies and procedures to each programme justifies the validation of that specific programme. The QA policy and procedures descriptor and the Validation Application Form must address six key elements, as follows:

- (1) Programme rationale and aims*
- (2) Access*
- (3) Transfer and Progression*
- (4) Content Development and Review*
- (5) Programme Content, Delivery and Assessment*
- (6) Accreditation and Services.*

Each of these elements contains sub-elements, and for each sub-element a set of guidelines is provided indicating the steps which the provider must take and the evaluation criteria to be applied in deciding whether or not validation will be granted.

It is clear from the above, therefore, that assessment is seen as one part of one of the six elements that make up the requirements for quality assurance and validation. It might be argued that this limited role for assessment in the overall structure diminishes the importance of assessment. Thus the credibility, validity and reliability of the emerging VET system is based on a wide range of criteria of which assessment is but one.

## **5 Development of practice-oriented assessment**

### **5.1 What have been the most essential recent developments in practice-oriented assessment of VET?**

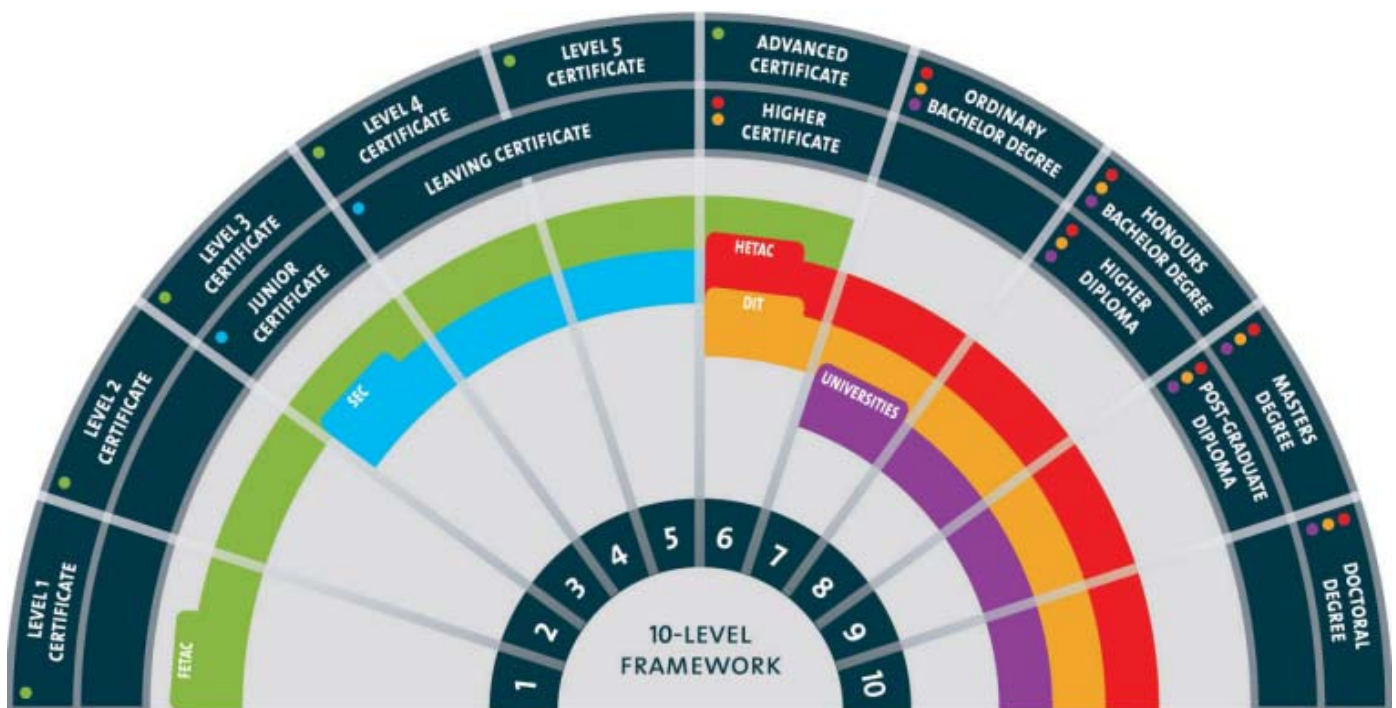
There have been numerous developments within the State that have had an influence on the provision of skills oriented work-based training. This section will outline two of the most relevant and important factors.

The first major development in the VET assessment landscape has been the introduction of a new Framework of National Qualifications by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI). Under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, three new organisations were established in 2001 – the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and two new awards Councils, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). The main task of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has been to develop a national framework of qualifications. The National Framework of Qualifications is defined as:

The single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training. (NQAI, 2003)

The framework will bring an increased clarity to the meaning of each type of qualification allowing qualifications to be compared easily. In terms of pathways, VET has often found itself competing with the mainstream system and thus the qualification systems were somewhat ambiguous from the learners as well as the providers points of view. The new Framework of Qualifications will help add clarity and transparency within the whole Irish education system, Figure 7 shows a visual representation of the new Framework. Without these new organisations, fulfilling dedicated roles (uncomplicated by curriculum or examination matters), it is hard to imagine how an initiative such as the development of a national framework of qualifications could be carried through. These recent developments will have a great impact on the modes and methods used in work-based learning and performance-oriented assessment.





## KEY

- **FETAC - Further Education and Training Awards Council**
- **SEC - State Examinations Commission (Department of Education & Science)**
- **HETAC - Higher Education and Training Awards Council**
- **DIT - Dublin Institute of Technology**
- **Universities**

*Figure, 7 a visual representation of the National Framework of Qualifications*

A second significant recent development in Ireland has been how the economic landscape in Ireland has altered considerably over the past number of years. This is one of the reasons that the concept of skills assessment has moved into the public arena. FÁS (the Training & Employment Authority) have recently issued a new statement of strategy. One of the priority goals that FÁS has established is the promotion of investment in training by employers and to accelerate the development and delivery of a comprehensive range of

programmes and services for employers and those in employment, based on identified labour market needs. The strategy statement goes on to say: '*FÁS will make a significant increase in the level of activity it provides in this area, and in particular, for targeted sectors of the labour market. This will be done in cooperation with other relevant organisations and groups*' (FAS, 2001).

### **5.2 What kind of added value have these developments been able to give to VET?**

It is difficult at this early stage of the research to comment on the 'added value' within these assessment developments in VET. The Irish partners aim, through the case studies, is to investigate this further. The introduction of the new National Framework of Qualifications is generally agreed to be a positive move in the right direction. The need for a more flexible and integrated system of qualifications arises from the national objective of moving towards a 'lifelong learning society', in which learners will avail of learning opportunities at various stages throughout their lives (NQAI, 2003). In the document the NQAI also go on to say:

The diffuse nature of the existing qualifications systems does not easily support portability of recognition for learning. The strong separation of responsibility for education and training across a range of government Departments has been reflected in the separation of qualifications systems, with linked but separate arrangements for schools, further education, institutes of technology, universities and a variety of training organisations.

### **5.3 What have been the reasons/needs behind these reforms?**

The needs and reasons behind these developments are outlined in detail in the Irish partners first Qual-Praxis report (January 2004). However there are other national reasons for streamlining these sectors and their associate qualification and assessment systems. A significant reason for change is the need for learners, employers and others to be able to compare Irish qualifications more easily and accurately with those from other countries. This is particularly important in the European context, where the Bologna and Copenhagen Declarations signal a move towards greater compatibility and comparability of qualifications. These Declarations concern European cooperation in higher education and in vocational education and training.

#### **5.4 What kinds of new practice-oriented assessment methods are being developed and why?**

The case studies will help show us specific example of new practice-oriented methods. Currently, many occupations have no formal qualifications attaching to them or any formal statement of the knowledge, skills and competencies, which are required to perform the tasks associated with the occupation (IBEC/CHIU, 2001). However, there are examples of good practice in this area that can be built upon. FÁS Traineeship programme is a training initiative based on specified skills required for particular jobs. The curricula for Traineeship courses are drawn up in close collaboration with employers.

#### **5.5 To what extent have the European controversies and tendencies an impact on discussions about assessment in the partner country?**

Ireland's economic success over last decade has certainly been influenced by its membership of the EU. The European Commission's recent publication '*A European Area of Lifelong Learning*', (2001) stresses the importance of education and training systems becoming more responsive to labour market needs, particularly given the growing importance of work-based training. In 1995 the European Commission's White Paper on Teaching and Learning proposes the following support measures at European level:

- Community support for the introduction of assessment systems (including elaboration of quality indicators) and quality guarantee systems, covering the methods and materials used to teach.
- Definition of a "European quality label" and its award to schools meeting certain criteria regarding promotion of Community language learning.

In regard to vocational education and training the EU's Leonardo da Vinci programme has helped policy makers in the sector mould a coherent system that will encourage movement of its citizens between the EU member states. According to the European Commission (2003):

Europe is facing a twofold challenge. First, there is a need to prepare European citizens better for entering the labour market, thereby reducing the number of unemployed. Second, companies need a skilled workforce to cope with rapid scientific and technological changes in an increasingly competitive world.

The Leonardo Programme serves as a platform for member states to share information in the whole area of VET, or as the Commission put it: '*serve as a laboratory of innovation in the field of lifelong learning*' (2003). The European Community's Leonardo da Vinci vocational training programme is now in its second phase, covering the seven-year period from 2000 to 2006. The programme promotes transnational projects based on co-operation between the various players in vocational training - training bodies, vocational schools, universities, businesses, chambers of commerce, etc. - in an effort to increase mobility, to foster innovation and to improve the quality of training. The Leonardo da Vinci programme aims at helping people improve their skills throughout their lives. (EU, 2003). The Qual-praxis project is one of these 'laboratories' where we can explore, analyse, share and compare models of good practice, and disseminate the final product to our European neighbours to help fulfil our European mandates.

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accessed 15 Sept 2004

# APPENDIX 1

## The Irish Education System

The Department of Education and Science provides for the education of children, including children with special needs, in primary and second-level schools and at third-level. Traditionally, education provision has concentrated on primary education, second-level education and third-level education. In recent years this focus has expanded to include pre-school education and further and adult education.

Education provision now spans from early childhood education through adulthood as the concept of lifelong learning is being reflected in courses and programmes available in the education system. There are now over 900,000 students in full-time education in schools and colleges in Ireland and an additional 180,000 in further and adult education programmes.

### ***Present situation and structure***

#### ***Primary Education***

There are now over 450,000 children in primary education. Attendance at full-time education is compulsory for all children between 6 and 15 years of age. Although children in Ireland are not obliged to attend school until the age of 6, almost all children begin school in the September following their fourth birthday. Thus, a great percentage of 4 year-olds and almost all 5 year-olds are enrolled in the infant classes in primary schools. In this way, much of what is considered pre-school education in other countries (from age 4 to 6) is provided, free of charge, for all children in Ireland.

#### ***Education and Related Expenditure on Primary Level in 1999 (estimated)***

***Total Expenditure - £935.6M (€1.19 Billion Euro)***



## **Secondary Education**

The second-level education sector comprises of secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools. Secondary schools are privately owned and managed. The trustees of the majority of these schools are religious communities or Boards of Governors. Vocational schools are administered by Vocational Education Committees (VECs) while community and comprehensive schools are managed by Boards of Management of differing compositions.

Second-level education consists of a *three-year junior cycle* followed by a two or *three-year senior cycle*. The Junior Certificate examination is taken after three years.

The Senior Cycle has undergone significant restructuring in recent years. Transition-Year, which has been one of the major innovations in Irish education, is an option, which is now firmly embedded in our system. It provides an opportunity for students to experience a wide range of educational inputs and work experience at a remove from the examination focus

### *The Leaving Certificate*

The Leaving Certificate examination is held at the end of the *Senior Cycle* in post-primary schools. It is the terminal examination of post primary education. The Senior Cycle caters for pupils in the 15 to 18 year old age group. Students normally sit for the examination at the age of 17 or 18, after 5 or 6 years of post-primary education. Pupils following the established Leaving Certificate Programme must take at least five subjects, including Irish Language.

### **The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme**

The *Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP)* is the normal Leaving Certificate Programme with a concentration on technical subjects and some additions. Because of its high vocational content, it attracts funding from the European Social Fund. It was first introduced in 1989. In 1994, it was expanded to broaden the choice of subjects and to

strengthen the vocational content of the programme by including three link modules on Enterprise Education, Preparation for Work and Work Experience.

*Education and Related Expenditure on Second-level in 1999 (estimated)*

*Total expenditure- £1,126.6M (€1.4 Billion Euro)*

### ***Higher Education***

Traditionally the higher education system in Ireland has comprised the university sector, the technological sector and the colleges of education, all of which is substantially funded by the State and are autonomous and self-governing. In recent years, a number of independent private colleges have developed and these offer a range of courses that complement the existing provision in the sector. Numbers in higher education have grown from 18,200 in 1965 to more than 108,000 in 2000. These rapidly growing numbers reflect growing retention rates at second-level, demographic trends and increasing transfer rates into higher education.

*Education and Related Expenditure on Higher Education in 1999 (estimated)*

*Total expenditure £752.2M (€955 Million Euro)*

### ***University Sector***

There are seven universities in the Republic of Ireland:

- *University College Cork - National University of Ireland, Cork*
- *University College Dublin, National University of Ireland, Dublin*
- *National University of Ireland, Galway*
- *National University of Ireland, Maynooth*
- *The University of Dublin (Trinity College)*
- *The University of Limerick, and*
- *Dublin City University. (Qual-Praxis Partner)*

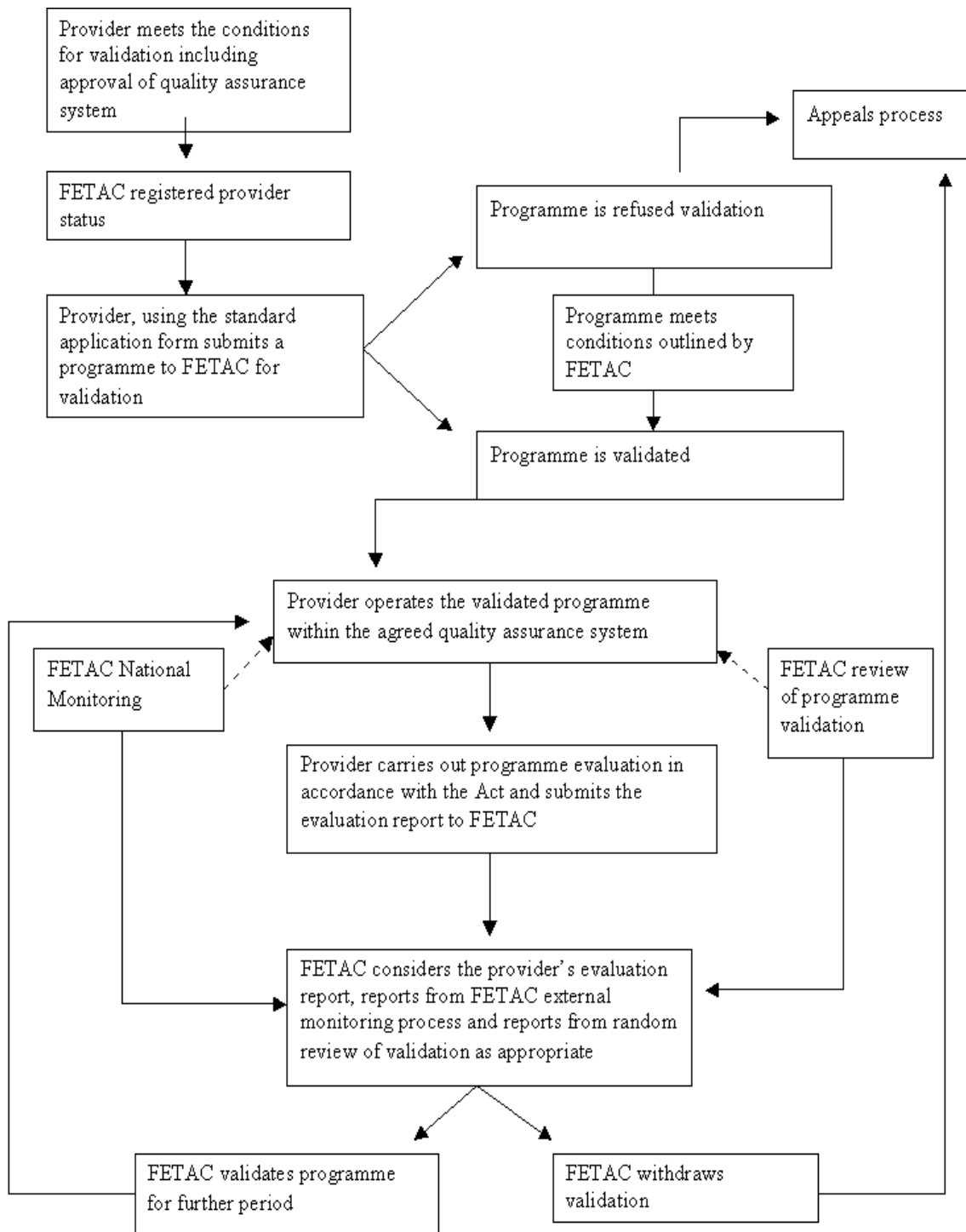
The Irish university system offers degree programmes – at Bachelor, Masters and Doctorate level.

### ***Further Education (Vocational Education & Training)***

The term “Further Education” embraces education and training which occurs after second-level schooling but which is not part of the third level system. This includes programmes such as Post Leaving Certificate courses, second chance education for the unemployed (the Vocational Training Opportunity Scheme), and for early school leavers (in Youthreach and Senior Traveler Training Centres), adult literacy and basic education, and self-funded nighttime adult programmes in second-level schools. A distinctive feature of further and vocational education generally is its diversity and breadth of provision, and its linkages with other services such as employment, training, area partnership, welfare, youth, school, juvenile liaison, justice and community and voluntary sector interests.

# APPENDIX 2

## FETAC Programme Validation Guidelines and Criteria



(Note: this is a draft model of the Validation Process (2003))

### Element 5: Programme Content, Delivery and Assessment

Element and Sub-element Question on Application Form	Guidelines	Evaluation Criteria
2.5.7 Assessment Assessment Techniques and Weightings “Summarise the assessment techniques and relative weightings for this programme”	Provide a summary of the assessment techniques to be applied per module/unit leading to an award including a record of achievement or unit credit. Where more than one assessment technique is planned indicate its relative weighting. Indicate where assessment is linked across modules/units	Assessment is suitable and matches the proposed aims and objectives of the programme and outcomes of the award. Assessment adequately tests the learning outcomes or statements of standard for the award
2.5.7 Assessment Contd. Schedule of Assessment “Outline the schedule of Assessment of the programme”	State at what points during the programme the assessment will take place. State whether assessment is formative or summative	Scheduling is fair and consistent and offers learners sufficient opportunities to succeed. Scheduling of assessment is appropriate and enables transfer and progression as appropriate
Location of Assessment “Where will the assessment take place?”	State where the assessment will take place - at site of delivery (main provider) - in the work place - other (please specify)	Where assessment is taking place in sites other than that of the main provider these arrangements must be included in the providers quality assurance agreement with FETAC
Recognition of prior learning for Assessment “What arrangements are in place (if any) for the Recognition of prior learning (RPL) for exemptions from elements of scheduled assessment?”	Summarise arrangements in place (if any) for the use of RPL as a method of assessment. State whether RPL relates to exemption or credit within the programme or completion of an award. Fetac is currently developing a policy and guidelines on RPL Providers are not required to have RPL arrangements in place prior to the implementation of this policy, however where a provider has arrangements in place they are asked to state them	There is no statement of the arrangements in place (if any) for the recognition of prior learning as it applies to assessment of candidates for awards in relation to: - exemption or credit within the programme - completion of an award
Profile of Assessors “Provide a detailed profile of the assessor(s) who will be involved in assessment of the programme. Explain why this assessor profile is appropriate for this programme”	Profile the assessors for this programme. Where the tutor normally acts as the assessor, only the profile of the appropriate assessment experience need to be outlined here This should be a statement of the assessor suitability rather than the curriculum vitae of individual assessor. The statement should indicate - assessor qualifications/experience - academic qualifications - professional qualifications - commercial/industrial/sectoral or field related experience which are considered by the provider to be appropriate to the delivery of this programme . The statements should include a rationale for the profile (why this profile is appropriate for this programme).	Assessor profiles indicate that the assessor/s are occupationally competent (in the subject/field of vocational areas) to assess the standards of the programme.  Profiles are appropriate to the content and level of the programme. Profiles include sufficient assessor Qualifications/experience to ensure fair and consistent assessment of learners

## APPENDIX 3

**<http://www.fetac.ie/modules/w20008.pdf>**