Implementing a learning outcomes and credit-based curriculum in Ireland:
A case study of UCD Dublin

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Implementing Learning Outcomes & Credit Based Curriculum at UCD

1. National Framework of Qualifications in Ireland
2. Implementing a learning outcomes and credit-based approach to programme delivery at undergraduate, graduate and doctoral level at UCD Dublin
3. Implications in terms of:
   1. Academic practice
   2. Academic policy
   3. Administrative practice
4. Areas of development arising from learning outcomes and credit-based curricula
5. Perceived benefits of the approach

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1. The National Framework of Qualifications

National Qualifications Authority

(a) to establish and maintain a framework, being a framework for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State (in this Act referred to as a "framework of qualifications"), based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners;

– Qualifications Act Section 7 (a) (1999)

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1. The National Framework of Qualifications

- The Framework: a blueprint for change
  - a new concept of an 'award':

    an award is a recognition of learning outcomes
    (rather than a recognition of participation in a programme or in any particular learning process)
  - many new awards, new titles, new terminology
  - no distinction made between 'education' and 'training'
  - more flexible and integrated system of qualifications

1: The National Framework of Qualifications

- Basis of new, Learner centred framework: focuses on the needs of learners
    - Coherence and comparability
    - Opportunities for progression
    - Recognition of prior learning
- A framework for learning in all settings: Schools, Further Education Centres, Training Centres, Institutes of Technology, Universities, the workplace, the community, the home, On-line

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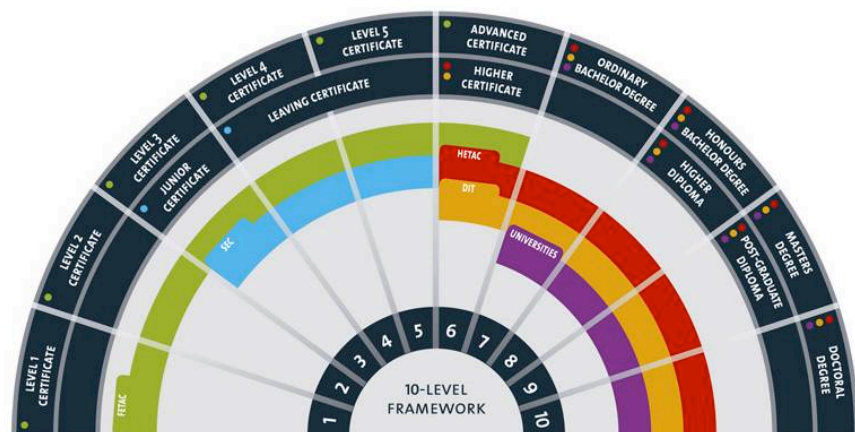## 1. The National Framework of Qualifications

How is all this to be achieved?
- By means of *learning outcomes*

The Framework
- defines and describes the outcomes, in terms of knowledge, skill and competence, which characterise awards at different levels
- defines the relationship between the levels through these learning outcomes
- positions certain key qualifications at the appropriate level on the basis of the learning outcomes associated with them

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The National Framework of Qualifications – levels, major award-types and awarding bodies

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1. The National Framework of Qualifications

- Key concept: Learning outcomes - packages of knowledge, skill and competence
- Elaborated as eight sub-strands of knowledge, skill and competence:
    - Knowledge
        - Breadth
        - Kind
    - Know-how and skill
        - Range
        - Selectivity
    - Competence
        - Context
        - Role
        - Learning to learn
        - Insight

Slide 1

Bologna Cycles	National Framework of Qualifications	
	Awards	*Levels*
Three	**Doctoral Degree**	**10**
Two	**Masters Degree, Post-graduate Diploma**	**9**
One	**Honours Bachelor Degree, Higher Diploma**	**8**
	Ordinary Bachelor Degree	**7**
	Higher Certificate	**6**

Slide 2

1. The National Framework of Qualifications & Credit

'Principles and operational guidelines for a national approach to credit in Irish Higher Education and Training'

Aims to:

- guide institutions and awarding bodies in developing their credit systems to complement the National Framework of Qualifications

- establish a common currency of credit in higher education and training

- provide a basis for development of credit in further education and training

Slide 3

1. National Framework of Qualifications: Credit Principles

- Be compatible with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)& Bologna Commitment
- Encourage learner participation and mobility by facilitating access, transfer and progression
- Unitisation – innovative programme design and delivery
- Clearly understood national currency in learning

Slide 4

2. Learning outcomes & credit at UCD Dublin

- The largest university in Ireland
- Founded in 1855 by Cardinal Newman
- Strong tradition of educating students who contribute to Irish society, politics and economy
- Student population of 22,500 students

2. Learning outcomes & credit at UCD Dublin

- UCD had engaged with credit based curricula in the mid 90's
- However the uptake was voluntary
- A number of Schools who had international connections, in the areas of Business and Agriculture adopted credit-rated provision
- BA Modular – evening programme on a part-time basis

2. Learning outcomes & credit at UCD Dublin

- 2004 University appointed a new management team, President and Registrar
- Strategic decision to develop UCD as an internationally recognised centre of educational excellence
- Agreement that reform of the curriculum towards a learning outcomes focussed, credit-based modular curriculum was required
- Initial focus was undergraduate, but this broadened to include graduate taught and doctoral studies also

2. Learning outcomes & credit at UCD Dublin
Strategic objectives of credit-based programmes

- Provide greater flexibility and a wider choice of modules, programmes and outcomes for students
- Create an inclusive University where more flexible programmes and credit accumulation systems provide "ladders of opportunity"
- Adopt a learner-centred approach that allows varying rates of progression and different levels of attainment
- Enable the dynamic development of new programmes, especially inter-School, inter-College and interdisciplinary programmes

2. Learning outcomes & credit at UCD Dublin
Strategic objectives of credit-based programmes

- Create pathways from taught undergraduate programmes into graduate programmes
- Allow for a positive articulation between graduate taught and research programmes
- Stimulate continuous curricular reform at the level of individual modules and overall programmes
- Enable full participation in the European Higher Education Area in alignment with the Bologna process

2. Learning outcomes & credit at UCD Dublin

- Agreement to adopt a modular, credit-based, semesterised, learning outcomes approach to programme delivery (undergraduate)
- Work began in August 2004 for implementation in September 2005
- Key steering committee set up to develop the regulatory framework and to make decisions on the format of the credit-based curriculum
- Significant change from year-long courses to semesterised courses (modules)

2. Learning outcomes & credit at UCD Dublin

- Decision to change the academic year to 2 X 15 week semesters
- Decision to adopt ECTS compatible credit structure – 1 credit = 20-25 student workload hours
- Modules defined in terms of learning outcomes in 5 credit blocks
- Programme structure 60 credits per academic year including 10 elective credits
- 30 credits per semester

2. Learning outcomes & credit at UCD

- Programme structures used the concept of:
  - Single Major
  - Joint Major
  - Major with minor

- Single major= 100 credits
- Joint major = 50/50 credits
- Major/minor = 60/40 credits
- More flexible progression

Policy & Regulatory Framework

- All modules defined by level, the difficulty of the learning outcomes
- Levels descriptors based on the Dublin Descriptors & NQF
- Linked to Grading Scale and Grading Descriptors
- Grade: "a formal certification of competence and achievement of learning outcomes"
- Teaching, Learning & Assessment Guides: Writing Module Outcomes/Assessment

UCD Level 0	NQF Level 6
UCD Level 1	NQF Level 7
UCD Level 2	NQF Level 8
UCD Level 3	NQF Level 8
UCD Level 4	NQF Level 9
UCD Level 5	NQF Level 10

2. Learning outcomes & credit at UCD
Credit volumes for major awards

AWARD	NQAI level	PROGRAMME CREDIT STRUCTURE
Honours Bachelor Degree	8	180 to 240 credits with a minimum of 40 ECTS credits at level 3 or above for 180 credit degrees, and a minimum of 90 ECTS credits at level 3 or above for 240 credit degrees
Honours Bachelor Degree (Professional)	8	240 to 360 ECTS credits with a minimum of 90 ECTS at level 3 or above
Higher Diploma	8	a minimum of 60 ECTS credits, with at least 30 ECTS credits at level 3 or above
Graduate Certificate	9	30 to 40 ECTS credits, with at least 20 ECTS credits at level 4 or above
Graduate Diploma	9	60 to 80 ECTS credits, with at least 45 ECTS credits at level 4 or above
Masters Degree (taught)	9	a minimum of 90 ECTS credits, with at least 70 ECTS credits at level 4 or above
Masters Degree (research)	9	a minimum of 90 ECTS credits, with at least 70 ECTS credits at level 4 or above and a minimum of 90 ECTS credits of original research activity
Doctoral degree (research)	10	between 270 and 360 ECTS credits, with at least 240 credits dedicated to original research activity and at least 180 ECTS credits at level 5
Doctoral degree (professional)	10	a minimum of 270 ECTS credits, with at least 180 ECTS credits at level 5

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2. Learning Outcomes & Credit at UCD

- To fulfil the original objectives for learning outcomes and credit

- Taught Graduate Provision was credit-rated and redesigned in a learning outcomes model February 06 for September 06 implementation

- Doctoral Provision was credit-rated and redesigned in a learning outcomes model July 06 – September 06

- All provision at UCD fully credit-rated and based on learning outcomes by September 07

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3. Implications: Academic, policy & administrative

- Academic Practice implications

- Academic Policy implications

- Administrative Practice implications

3.1 Academic Implications

- Curriculum re-design using learning outcomes approach a shift in focus

- Student workload hours and credit highlighted areas of over-teaching

- Creating space within the programmes for free choice modules

- More flexible progression rules based on credit accumulation

- Re-thinking assessment to align with learning outcomes

3.2 Academic Policy implications

- A University wide approach to ensure equity and comparability of programmes and modules:
  - Working with academic staff to review proposed programme structures
  - Creating a University approvals process
- Developing guide documents: Learning Outcomes; Constructive Alignment
- Building a policy infrastructure to support new curriculum model:
  - Policy on assessment to include formative and summative aspects
  - Accreditation of Prior Learning; External Examiners; Extenuating Circumstances; Plagiarism

3.3 Administrative Practice

- Developing the systems to record the new programme structures
- Data-handling : significant number of modules
- Transformation of enrolment process from paper to on-line with dynamic timetable
- Orientation and advising for new incoming students
- Publication of electronic module catalogue with search functions for all students to guide module choice

4. Areas of development

- Increased emphasis on planning of module capacity at School level
- Need to review the range and volume of assessment across modules
- Need to review content coverage and student workload of modules
- Developing an enhanced alignment between programme outcomes and module outcomes towards Graduate Attributes
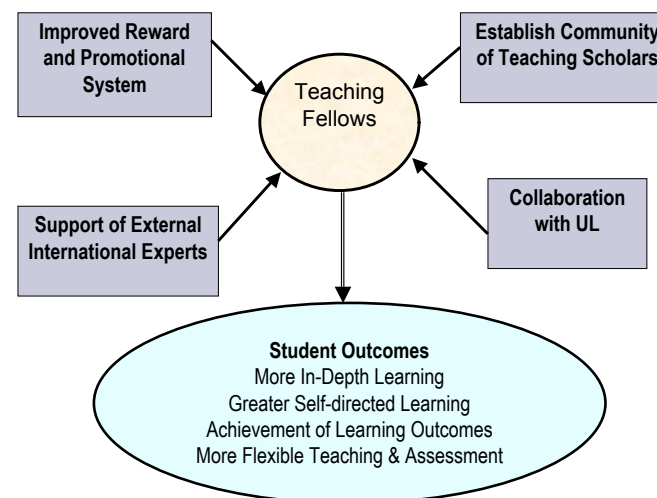- Emphasis on student engagement, particularly First Year

5. Perceived Benefits

- Students like the semesterised, credit-based approach
- Students are more engaged/ considered in module choices
- Greater clarity about the curriculum, how much work, what the endpoint is
- Opportunities for innovative programmes: Archaeology &Geology; Law & Politics; Law & Economics;
- Stronger emphasis on the professionalism of teaching & learning activities
- 2 examples of new initiatives

5.1 Teaching Fellowships

- Identification and appointment of key teaching and learning scholars in the university.
- Support for scholars through training from external experts, encouraging T&L research and partnership with another Irish University
- Thematic focus: Assessment and First Year Experience
- Spread of teaching excellence from scholars into Colleges and individual schools
- Excellence in teaching fostered and rewarded by staff development and promotional opportunities.

5.1 Teaching Fellowships

Improved Reward and Promotional System

Establish Community of Teaching Scholars

Teaching Fellows

Support of External International Experts

Collaboration with UL

Student Outcomes
More In-Depth Learning
Greater Self-directed Learning
Achievement of Learning Outcomes
More Flexible Teaching & Assessment

5.2 Integrated BA/MA Programme

- Co-ordinated programme spanning level 8 & level 9
- To fast-track highly motivated undergraduates through the BA programme to aligned masters work
- Create an innovative and intensive 4-year degree that draws on the wide range of subjects and modules within the existing BA programme.
- To facilitate academic curiosity and creativity by emphasising core skills (research, oral presentation)
- To build peer learning into the curriculum

5.2 Integrated BA/MA Programme

- Flexible Programme design
  - Students may exit to regular BA at any Stage (including final stage)
- Development of research skills prior to masters' level
  - Students will complete a Stage 3 dissertation under individual supervision
- Encouragement to work at more advanced levels if desired
  - Students will be encouraged to take Level 4 modules where appropriate

Concluding Remarks & Further Information

Academic Policy & Programme Development Unit
Aonad Forbartha Polasaí agus Clár Acadúil

- Further information on the National Framework of Qualifications at: www.nqai.ie

- Further information about UCD programmes and academic policies at:
  http://www.ucd.ie/registry/academicpolicy/