

The Use of Embedded Awards in the Irish National Framework of Qualifications to Promote Lifelong Learning

Mark Glynn and Richard Thorn, Institutes of Technology, Ireland

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Institutes of Technology and Lifelong Learning in Ireland

The Institutes of Technology (IoT's) were established in the early 1970's with a specific mission to provide vocational, third level education whilst also meeting the developmental needs of the regions in which they were located. From a low of 10% of school leavers participating in full time higher education in the early 1970's, Ireland now has one of the highest participation rates in the world with almost 60% of the school leaving cohort progressing to higher education, (O'Connell, *et al*, 2006). At present about half of the undergraduate (Level 5 and 6 on the EFQ) students registered in higher education institutions in Ireland are registered in Institutes of Technology.

Notwithstanding the success of Irish higher education in respect of full time, school leavers, the IoTs are currently strategically focusing on the needs of adult and part time learners. This emphasis has arisen as a result of a reappraisal of mission and strategy in the light of Ireland's poor performance in part time education, compared to the benchmark Northern European countries (see EU, 2008) by attempting to increase the provision of flexible learning opportunities in line with the IoT's long standing mission to provide vocational, higher education. To help achieve this aspect of their mission the IoTs have established a major flexible learning initiative to help build capacity within the IoTs to deliver flexible learning and externally to jointly promote part time learning opportunities .

The project 'Supported Flexible Learning' is funded jointly under the Higher Education Authority's Strategic Innovation Fund and the Institutes themselves. It consists of two main components *viz* the building of capacity within the IoT's to deliver flexible learning and the development of collaborative approaches to promoting lifelong learning.

Measurement of 'Supported Flexible Learning' Project Success

A key component of the project has been the establishment of a performance measurement system to determine to what extent, if any, the project results in a system wide change in delivery from fixed delivery methods (teaching aimed primarily at direct entry school leavers) to flexible delivery methods (teaching that meets the needs of adult, part time and lifelong learners). The indicators chosen are

1. The number of part time and occasional higher education students in the Institutes of Technology

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2. The number of Special Purpose and Minor Awards registered for the Institutes of Technology
3. The number of educational offerings on www.BlueBrick.ie; a portal designed specifically for the needs of lifelong and part time learners and
4. The number of staff trained in flexible delivery methods.

The performance measurement aspects of the project are described fully in Glynn *et al* (2010). Of particular relevance here is the use of Special Purpose and Minor awards from the National Framework of Qualifications.

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications and Embedded Awards

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications was established by an Act of Government in 1999. The framework was brought into effect between 2000 and 2003 (NQAI, 2003). The Irish framework is a 10 level framework with levels 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 being levels associated with higher education. Specifically level 6 equates to EQF level 5 while levels 7 and 8 relate to EFQ level 6. Irish NFQ levels 9 and 10 equate to Levels 7 and 8 respectively of the EFQ. For the purpose of this case study we are concerned with Level 6 on the Irish NFQ which equates to Level 5 on the EFQ and thus is defined for the purposes of the L5 project as SCHE.

The Irish NFQ consists of Major, Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental Awards that can be made at levels 6 through 9. At Level 6 the Major Award is 'Higher Certificate' and requires the completion of 120 ECTS credits worth of study. Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental Awards will always attract fewer credits than a Major Award subject to there being a minimum of 10 ECTS credits available in the award.

- **Minor** awards provide recognition for learners who achieve a range of learning outcomes, but not the specific combination of learning outcomes required for a major award. This recognition will have relevance in its own right. A Minor award will have learning outcomes that form part of those of a major award.
- **Special Purpose** awards are made for specific, relatively narrow, purposes — for example, the Safe Pass certification of competence in health and safety in the construction industry. A Special Purpose award may form part of a major, minor or supplemental award.
- **Supplemental** awards are for learning which is additional to a previous award. They could, for example, relate to updating and refreshing knowledge or skills, or to continuing professional development.

There has been relatively little use made of supplemental awards but, as will be shown below, the use of minor and special purpose awards has been significant.

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The significance of Minor and Special Purpose Awards is that they were designed specifically with the needs of learners, rather than providers, in mind. Their use, therefore, by providers represents market awareness and a focus on the needs of learners.

Use of Special Purpose and Minor Awards

Figures 1a and 1b show the number of Special Purpose and Minor Awards registered with HETAC (Higher Education Training and Awards Council). For purposes of completeness Minor and Special Purposes awards at Levels 6 through to 9 have been included. In relation to SCHE it is the use of those awards at Level 6 that is of interest in this paper. It should be noted that a large Institute of Technology (Dublin Institute of Technology) makes awards in its own right and does not return information to HETAC. Whilst the Irish framework of qualifications was launched in 2003 it was not until 2007 that policy and criteria for the development of Special Purpose and Minor Awards became available to the IoTs as a result of the approval processes delegated from HETAC. The data shown therefore show the growth of the use of these awards from the beginning of their availability.

In summary, it is clear that there is growth in the system in the use of these awards. This suggests strongly that there is greater awareness of the potential of these awards to meet the needs of learners as originally envisaged when these awards were embedded in the framework as described above.

Figure 1a

(Data provided by Higher Education and Training Awards Council)

Cumulative Special Purpose Awards from all IoT's 2007-10 (July' 10) (excepting DIT)

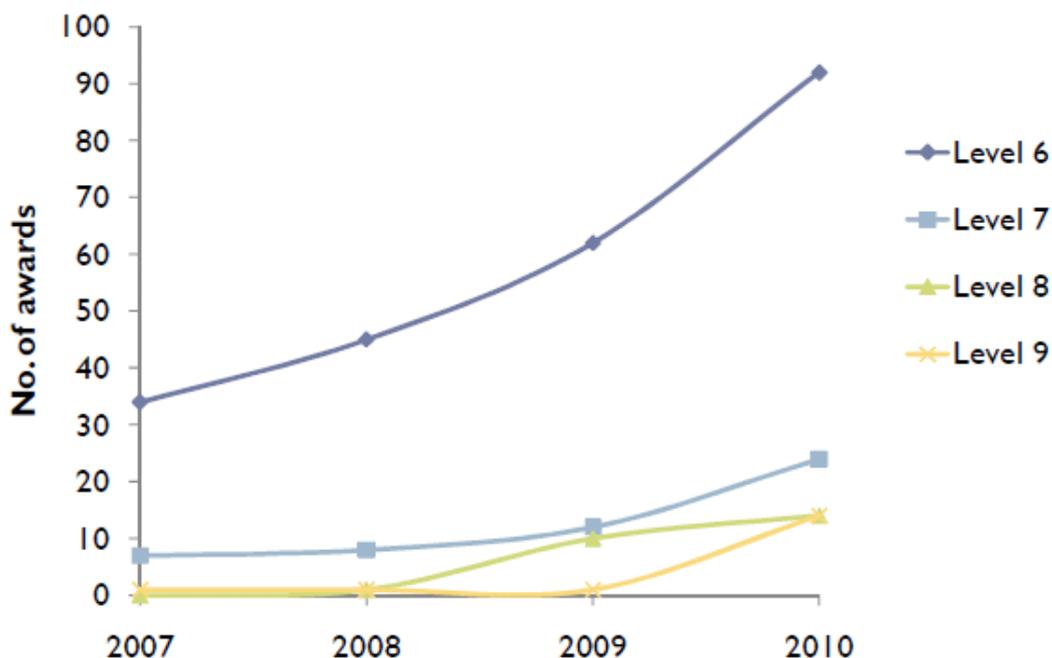
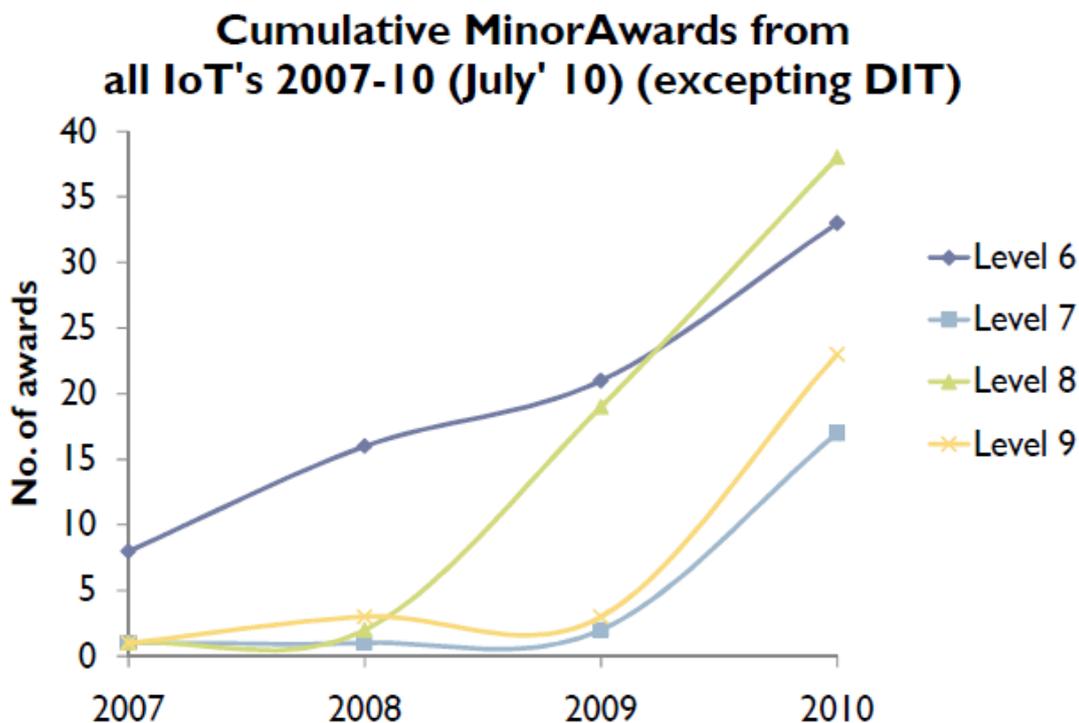


Figure 1b

(Data provided by Higher Education and Training Awards Council)



Conclusion

The question arises – does the increased use of embedded short course awards (in particular in SCHE) also coincide with an increase in the numbers of part time students and students studying by flexible learning methods? Yes is the answer. The Institutes of Technology have recorded a c. 5% increase in students registered as part time in the last year alone while numbers registered on distance and e-learning categories has increased by over 30% in the last year. The authors do not suggest that the use of embedded awards for short courses alone is responsible but the availability of these awards has undoubtedly increased the attractiveness of studying part time and pursuing lifelong learning. There are a great number of other factors relating to the economy, funding, student fees and organisational culture dictating uptake of lifelong learning opportunities (see Thorn *et al*, 2010) but it is clear that the framework of qualifications and the embedded awards has made it possible to conceive of a different approach to lifelong learning

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