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"Innovation Driven by ICT Users"

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Ireland Implementation Model

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This article provides an overview of the developments which took place in the implementation of EUCIP in Ireland. ICS Skills has driven the deployment of EUCIP by promoting IT as a career through their ChooseIT campaign, resulting in securing part-funding for EUCIP in Ireland from the National Training and Employment Agency. The article also explores how EUCIP is being promoted by third-level educational institutions as a stepping stone to higher level degree and diploma course, and gives an overview of recent collaborations with the Associations of Northern Ireland Colleges and Momentum NI in bringing the EUCIP programme to Northern Ireland.

Keywords: Careers, Certification, Higher Education, Prior Experiential Learning.

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EUCIP caught the attention and the imagination of several potential stakeholders in Ireland as early as 2002, when the programme was first mooted by CEPIS. The Irish Computer Society engaged in a market research campaign which indicated that the EUCIP Core programme could well fill a gap in the market for an entry level professional certification programme [1]. The comprehensive nature of the syllabus placed EUCIP in a unique position, as even degree level programmes failed to provide the broad sweep of IT knowledge which could potentially equip candidates with a very marketable qualification.

However, despite considerable optimism, the level of initial interest among potential learning provider partners was poor, and there was no immediate uptake of EUCIP. Further research revealed an array of factors responsible for this, relating the state of the marketplace, to the certification product itself, and to the identified target groups.

A trend was emerging in Ireland in the early 2000's whereby the numbers of students opting to study Information Technology at Third Level declined, raising the prospect of a skills shortage at a critical period in Ireland's economic development. Interestingly, this trend was being reflected across Europe also.

The Irish Computer Society responded to this decline by instigating a campaign to target students at second level to persuade them of the value and attractiveness of working in the IT industry. Negative perceptions of the sector were actively dispelled, and the focus repositioned on the variety of job roles available, and the opportunities to excel that they presented to students. A key part of this ChooseIT campaign was the promotional website [2].

Another factor which inhibited the initial uptake of EUCIP in Ireland was the timing of its presentation. It was simply brought to market too early. The implications of the decline in numbers of IT graduates were not clear, and the advantages of EUCIP over other IT courses and certifications were not communicated and it suffered the same dismissal by second level students as they did. The time had not come for graduates from other disciplines to see opportunities in the IT field, and take on EUCIP as a conversion programme.

Other difficulties were specific to EUCIP itself. On first reading, most interested parties applauded the breadth of content, but on closer examination they felt that the syllabus was too vague. Lecturers would not be able to assign a standard level for delivery. This was a technical difficulty which could be overcome in time. Alongside that, at the time of presenting EUCIP to the market initially, the Question and Test Base was not complete and finalised, and there was no courseware available to support delivery or to assist interpretation of the syllabus. A bank of diagnostic test questions was planned, but was not ready for distribution.

In 2005, the management of EUCIP was assigned by CEPIS to the ECDL Foundation, and within a short period of time, the outstanding issues were all addressed. A working group was established along the lines of the subject matter expert groups for other ECDL products, and the syllabus was refined. Arrangements were made to have courseware produced, and the first publication was delivered in Italy within a few months. The ECDL Foundation made arrangements for this to be translated into English, and a modified version was made available to EUCIP licensees.

With things looking more favourable, ICS Skills was determined to provide a complete EUCIP Core product to the market, and embarked on the creation of an automated test system. Three years on, the local market was also more

receptive to the new IT certification, due in no small part to the impact of the ChooseIT campaign. EUCIP was attracting school leavers, but more importantly, it was starting to appeal to a more mature audience, people working in IT already but without any formal IT qualifications. EUCIP was placed on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications at Level 6 (of a 10 Level National Qualifications Framework) which gave it the credibility to allow it to qualify for funding from Fás, the national training and employment agency. People working in the private sector, or the self-employed could have 60% of the cost of their EUCIP training paid by Fás. This was a great boost for the programme, and made it attractive to the Institutes of Technology to deliver to their corporate clients. These colleges also saw EUCIP as a stepping stone into their higher level degree courses, and offered credits, albeit on an ad hoc basis to students who had completed the EUCIP certification. Examples of this approach included the BSc in IT Management offered by IT Tallaght [3] and more recently a Graduate Diploma in Information Technology offered by Dublin City University [4].

For Tony Hopkins of the Department of Agriculture and Food, EUCIP provided a flexible, non-traditional pathway to formal professional qualification. Mr Hopkins commented that: "*I have worked in the IT area of the Department of Agriculture and Food for about 6 years. I had no formal professional qualification but I have acquired a tremendous amount of knowledge while working in this area. I successfully completed the EUCIP course in December and therefore now hold a recognised IT qualification. I would recommend this course to anyone in a similar situation or to anybody who wishes to broaden their knowledge base. Several of my fellow students have gone on to a Degree Course and I hope to do so in September using the EUCIP as my foundation.*"

Another positive development for EUCIP in Ireland was the attraction it held for students from abroad, with many Indian and Chinese students enrolling on courses. The international recognition of the certification was attractive to them, as was the professional reputation of the Irish Computer Society abroad. These factors allowed successful candidates of the programme to benefit from increased job mobility options across Europe.

In the last 12 months ICS Skills embarked on an advertising campaign to promote EUCIP as a gateway into exciting and lucrative careers. A series of advertisements aimed at young workers who might be tempted by a change of career, focussing on opportunity and advancement were run in daily "freesheet" newspapers, and yielded a good response in Dublin. In addition, ICS has begun to collaborate with Momentum Northern Ireland and the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges to certify candidates of their software professional course with EUCIP. Successful candidates of this particular programme have been highly successful in finding employment in the IT Sector [5]. "*We've been using EUCIP on a course which takes non-IT graduates and converts them to software engineers. It gives those*

graduating from the course a European qualification which is recognised by employers and professional bodies and helps set them up for a career in the IT industry." says Gary Burnett of the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges.

ICS Skills plan to offer a more stream-lined delivery option beginning in autumn 2008 to meet the needs of candidates with more experience in the IT field. This type of candidate has a desire to compete the certification, but would not require the suggested 330-400 study hours, due to their level of experience. This approach will involve the use of new courseware, web-delivered content and a series of one-day workshops.

By the end of 2007, 232 enrolments had taken place, and 152 certificates had been issued in Ireland.

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