



‘We’ve Come a Long Way’

Educating and Inspiring for Over 30yrs

By

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The NCEF celebrated 30 years in business in September 2017. It is with great pleasure that I take the time to recall the growth of the NCEF over the past thirty years and to briefly assess the impact of the organisation and it’s personnel on the development of the health fitness sector in Ireland and further afield.

Early Beginnings

In 1985, the Physical Education Association of Ireland (PEAI) - the representative body for physical education specialists in Ireland, was contacted by a small number of health club owners expressing concern regarding the lack of comprehensive training of fitness instructors in Ireland. At this time, Cospóir (a forerunner of the Irish Sports Council) issued draft guidelines for participation in and organisation of aerobics and fitness classes, and asked the PEA and other organisations for comments. The PEA, subsequently, raised the question of certification and standardisation with Cospóir, and were asked to forward its views on this area. The PEA then contacted the Department of Health, the Department of Education, Thomond College of Education, and all listed health clubs regarding the possibility of setting up a system of certification. The development of a coordinated and quality assured approach to the education and training of fitness instructors was seen as an important step in the creation of a policy and set of actions that would support the involvement of the Irish population in physical activity across the lifespan. In this way the seeds were sown for the modest beginnings of the NCEF, an initiative that was to grow and develop over twenty five years to become the largest and most successful education and training organisation in exercise and health fitness in Ireland with significant links both nationally and internationally.

Health Club Representatives

In 1986 the first consultative meeting with health club representatives was held by the PEAI. The PEAI Executive Committee recognised that a responsible and progressive body of people existed in the fitness area, and felt that a co-operative and consultative approach was important. Pat Duffy held the position of PEAI President with Maura O'Sullivan Ryan as PEAI Vice-President at that time. Ciaran Mac Fadden held the position of PEAI Secretary with Carmel Vekins as a strong influence as PEAI Executive member. Later that year, a draft syllabus was formulated by Dr. Ann Hope, informed by consultation with the industry and international best practice, for the purpose of achieving standardisation of training courses for exercise and fitness instructors. A number of meetings with health club representatives ensued. The process of the development of the National Certificate in Exercise and Fitness was initiated and linked to Thomond College through the School of Graduate and Professional Studies whose Director at that time was Liam Dugdale.

Further Developments

In 1987 an Informal meeting was held with the British Physical Education Association (BPEA) to discuss the inter-relationship between the existing BPEA certification process, part of which was evident in Ireland at that time, and the emerging NCEF. Efforts were made to ensure uniformity in terms of the approach of respective courses and emerging NCEF.

A system of " Open Screening " was developed for already qualified instructors and the first NCEF Level 1 Pilot course was held with the admission of the very first NCEF students. Mr. Michael McDonagh, Physical Education Inspector (Department of Education) joined the NCEF Review Committee on behalf of Cospóir as a means of monitoring the NCEF scheme. The Irish Exercise Teachers Association (IETA) was formed. This association showed strong support for the NCEF certification process. An IETA representative was co-opted onto the NCEF Review committee.

In 1988 the final NCEF Level 1 syllabus was produced. Mr. Frank Fahey TD (Minister of State at the Department of Education) granted financial support to the PEAI, part of which was to be used for the development and implementation of the NCEF scheme. A meeting was held with the Irish Professional Health and Fitness Clubs Association (IPHFCA) who agreed to support the NCEF.

The PEAI then established a Directorate to lead the development of NCEF. During this year the NCEF put in place a process to identify institutions to deliver the core syllabus, with quality assurance and oversight provided at a national level. Litton Lane Training, Dublin became the first certified provider of the NCEF followed by Motions Training which continues to be a NCEF Certified Provider to this day. The work of Philip Phelan, Glenda Chop, Brendan Hackett, Derek Phelan, Mary Hennessy and others on behalf of NCEF Certified Providers deserves acknowledgement here. An agreed position statement of the Sports Section of the Department of Education was issued as follows:

'Practising exercise and fitness instructors ought to hold the National Certificate in Exercise and Fitness (NCEF)'

And

'Any agency wishing to run courses in exercise and fitness instruction should do so within the nationally established framework; namely the National Certificate in Exercise and Fitness.'

It is important to acknowledge, at this point, the work of the early NCEF Directors, Dr. Pat Duffy, Louise Kelly, Mary Cowman and Ciara Greenwood.

Positive Change

In 1991 Thomond College of Education became integrated with the University of Limerick. Up to this time, NCEF certificates had been jointly awarded by Thomond college and the PEAI. Following the integration, a jointly awarded certificate of attendance was awarded by UL & the PEAI until 1997.

In 1997, UL Registrar Leo Colgan and John O' Brien, Associate Vice President and Registrar invited the NCEF to apply for full academic approval of its programmes through UL. Their belief in the potential of the NCEF as an academic provider paved the way for eventual academic affiliation with UL.

Thus began the formal process of developing a comprehensive framework for NCEF academic affiliation with UL - a process which was to ebb and flow over the following eight years.

Significant Involvements

During 1997 and 1999 the NCEF became involved in negotiations with relevant bodies with regard to agreement on National Minimum Standards of Operation in the training of Fitness Instructors both in Ireland and in Europe. During this time the NCEF also became a founder member of the European Network Fitness Association (ENFA), an association representing 'not for profit organisations' in EU countries that were dedicated to the promotion of physical activity across Europe. ENFA was later renamed the European Health Fitness Association & is now known as Europe Active. The NCEF retains its strong association with Europe Active to this day.

The NCEF National Register was set up in 1997 in order to give industry recognition to NCEF qualifications and to provide benefits and services to graduates and members.

In 2000, the NCEF became a partner in a Leonardo funded project led by the European Health Fitness Association (EHFA), which aimed to harmonise the qualifications of Health and Fitness Professionals across Europe. The NCEF supported the Education Act of 1999, and the subsequent establishment of the National Qualifications Authority. Around this time the organisation also contributed

to a proposal to the Irish Sports Council regarding the harmonising of Health & Fitness Qualifications in Ireland. These discussions involved all relevant parties.

Academic Affiliation with UL

By 2005, mainly through the work of Alan Donnelly and Carmel Vekins, UL PESS Department, together with NCEF Directors Maura O'Sullivan Ryan, Aine Ni Chonaill and Damien Jackson in discussion with John O'Connor and John Fox, Dept of Finance UL and Don Barry, Registrar & Vice President Academic UL, the UL/NCEF academic affiliation process was coming to fruition.

In early 2006, the NCEF Level 1 programme was passed at all formal stages within UL for academic accreditation as a Certificate in Exercise and Health Fitness.

The NCEF/PEAI became an academic affiliate of UL in June 2006 through the signing of a Memorandum of Affiliation and Accreditation. Signatories were Professor Don Barry, Registrar and Vice President Academic, University of Limerick, Con Moynihan, President, Physical Education Association of Ireland, Maura O'Sullivan Ryan, Director, NCEF

The first NCEF/UL graduates are conferred with the Certificate in Exercise and Health Fitness (CEHF) in January 2007.

The Diploma and BSc. Degree in Exercise & Health Fitness were passed at all stages within UL for academic accreditation subsequently.

A comprehensive system of NCEF/UL Recognition of Prior Learning was developed.

National Council for Exercise and Fitness

For twenty years (1987–2007) the National Certificate in Exercise and Fitness operated successfully as part of the PEA. Whilst the invaluable work of the PEA in initiating and nurturing the NCEF scheme must be acknowledged here, the time had come for the organisation to establish its own independent status and to build on its own unique identity.

The re-named and re-branded National Council for Exercise & Fitness became an independent registered company limited by guarantee and overseen by a Board of Trustees on Oct 1st 2007. The new NCEF became an official academic affiliate of UL in Dec 2007. The National Council for Exercise & Fitness retained all legal rights to the trade name National Certificate in Exercise & Fitness.

NCEF Board of Trustees held its inaugural meeting with Leo Colgan as Chairman. The NCEF also became a FAS Registered Trainer in 2007.

New company directors were appointed: Maura O Sullivan, Managing Director, Áine Ní Chonaill, Director of Business, Operations and Finance and Damien Jackson, Director of Education and Training.

Significant Milestones

2009: NCEF student intake peaked at 713 students with programmes operating in over 28 locations nationwide with 50 active Tutors/Course Leaders.

2010: Funding received through the government operated Labour Market Activation (LMA 2)

2011: The Bachelor of Science in Exercise and Health Fitness was approved by the UL Academic Council. The first cohort of students was registered in September 2011. This programme marked a significant development in the evolution of the flexible learning pathway from certificate to degree level.

Fitness Professionals Ireland (FPI) was set up as a development onwards from the National Register providing a new, more dynamic register of exercise professionals and more comprehensive benefits and services to members. Membership of FPI provides for greater compatibility and portability of NCEF qualifications.

2012: The Higher Certificate in Exercise and Health Fitness (HCEHF) is academically approved at Year 2 of the pathway to the B.Sc. Degree in Exercise and Health Fitness.

We've come a Long Way

The NCEF organisation has developed over thirty years from offering one course of 25 – 50 students in one location to offering courses nationwide. Over 13,000 fitness professionals have qualified through the NCEF scheme since 1987.

Over the years, strong links have been forged with Industry Certified Providers, Educational Institutions, Depts of Defence and Justice, the Irish Heart Foundation, FAS, the Irish Sports Council and many more. NCEF approved Certified Providers now offer the CEHF nationwide annually.

A comprehensive, flexible learning pathway leading from Certificate at Level 6 through to Honours Bachelors at Level 8 with clear further progression

pathways has evolved to become a combined vocational, further education and higher education initiative – a unique and innovative approach to 21st century education and training of fitness professionals, based on international best practice.

From a teaching and learning point of view, the NCEF has always placed a strong emphasis on providing comprehensive and user friendly resources for both students and tutors. Student manuals and Tutor resources are now provided for all NCEF certificate and higher certificate specialist modules. An e-learning centre has been established within the NCEF that has developed learning support websites forums and electronic resources for all its programmes. E-learning modules have been developed allowing students to study from anywhere in the world and blended learning modules have helped to reduce travel time and expense for students. Audio and video learning tools have been developed to assist students with learning difficulties and those who learn better through alternative channels to text based materials. Work based learning has been given consistent emphasis in NCEF programmes of study and reflection and self – assessment forms part and parcel of this.

30 Years and Going Strong

The NCEF is a vibrant, multi-dimensional organisation with significant potential for future development. The development of the NCEF has resulted from the dedicated early work of the PEAI, from the work of the various NCEF Advisory Boards, Review Committees, Examinations Boards, Boards of Trustees and Management and Administration Teams. Most significantly, the University of Limerick must be acknowledged, as must be the unerring support of Prof Mary O Sullivan, Faculty of Education and Health Sciences, the Dept. of PESS under Heads of Department Giles Warrington and the Course Directorship of Dr. Dr. Tom Comyns. The support of Fiona Roberts in the UL Continuing Professional Development (CPE), the staff in Student Academic Administration, from the academic staff at the Kemmy Business School and the Department of Education and Professional Studies must also be identified here.

The NCEF Management and Administration Team is the 'hub' of the NCEF organisation. The work of various personnel who have served on this team over the years must be noted.

The grassroots development of the NCEF must ultimately be attributed to the passion and dedication of NCEF Course Leaders and Tutors who over the years have shown immeasurable passion and dedication to the organisation, and in doing so have contributed significantly to the education, training and inspiration of competent and confident fitness professionals in Ireland.

My sincere thanks to all those who have worked for and contributed to the NCEF over the years, often with minimal resources, driven at times only by the belief that fitness professionals can have a major positive influence on people's lives. Now, in an era of rising health care costs and health epidemics, it is more important than ever for our graduates to use their expertise and experience to get more Irish people, more active, more often as they work and volunteer alongside their colleagues in the medical field, in physical education, in sports science, in recreation and other related areas.

We have indeed come a long way! Going forward together we can be very proud of our past achievements and move forward with the same strong and passionate spirit that has been the cornerstone of the NCEF for over thirty years.

Onwards and Upwards!!