European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

BRIEFING NOTE

Qualifications frameworks in Europe: an instrument for transparency and change

National qualifications frameworks are central to European objectives, but are becoming equally important for achieving national aims

Qualifications are increasingly important for finding a job and essential for building a career. How qualifications are classified and ranked is going through some major changes influenced by rapid development of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) across Europe.

Currently, 35 countries ([1]) are developing 39 NQFs ([2]). Ireland, France and the UK used NQFs prior to 2005, but their development in other countries was stimulated by the European qualifications framework (EQF) as a way to compare qualifications between different countries (Box 1). Although NQFs remain central to achieving this European objective, they are becoming increasingly important for countries to achieve their national aims.

Box 1. **National qualifications frameworks (NQFs) and the European qualifications framework (EQFs)**

NQFs classify qualifications according to a set of levels based on learning outcomes. NQF levels reflect what the holder of a certificate or diploma is expected to know, understand and be able to do.

The EQF creates a common reference framework to serve as a translation device between different qualifications systems and their levels. The EQF addresses all levels and types of qualifications (general, vocational and higher education and training). The EQF supports lifelong learning and mobility and was adopted in 2008.

In most countries, qualifications have traditionally been ranked, implicitly or explicitly, according to 'learning inputs', namely the institution awarding them and how long the studies took. NQFs are changing this approach by introducing 'learning outcomes' as the main principle for deciding the level of qualifications.

By linking ('referencing') NQFs to the EQF, learners and employers will be able to compare the levels of qualifications awarded at home and by other countries. Greater transparency about what qualifications mean will make it easier for individuals and employers to use them both for employment and further learning.

Progress to date

Almost all countries decided to develop NQFs as a way of linking to the EQF. General agreement on the importance and value of a European reference framework for qualifications has encouraged coherent development of NQFs across Europe, according to the following broad stages.

- **Design and development.** This stage is critical for deciding an NQF's rationale, policy objectives and architecture. It is even more important for involving key stakeholders in the process.
- **Formal adoption**. Forms of adoption vary between countries. It can be a law, a decree, an administrative decision, or a formal agreement, but formal adoption is important. Lack of a clear mandate has led to significant delays in implementing NQFs and referencing them to the EQF in several countries.
- **Early operational stage**. The NQF starts being applied and institutions are required to comply with its structures and methods. Potential end-users are informed about NQFs' purposes and benefits.
- **Advanced operational stage**. The NQF constitutes an important and integral part of the national education and training system. It is used by public administration and the private sector and

([1]) The 27 EU Member States, plus Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia and Turkey.

([2]) The UK has separate frameworks for England/Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. Belgium is developing separate frameworks for Flanders, and its French and German speaking communities.

delivers benefits to end-users, individuals and employers.

Due to their different starting points, countries are at different stages and progress to date varies (Box 2).

Box 2. **NQFs in Europe – making progress**

- 29 countries are developing or have designed comprehensive NQFs – covering all types and levels of qualifications.
- Other countries have partial NQFs that cover a limited range of qualifications types and levels or consist of various frameworks for different parts of the education and training system.
- 26 countries have proposed or decided on an 8-level framework. Other countries have NQFs with either 5, 7, 9, 10 or 12 levels.
- All countries use a learning outcomes-based approach to define the NQF level descriptors.
- 21 NQFs have been formally adopted.
- Four countries have fully implemented their NQFs.
- Seven countries are entering the early operational stage.

The Czech Republic, Italy, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Liechtenstein and Serbia have still to decide on the scope and architecture of their frameworks. Other countries, such as Germany and Austria, have agreed the scope and architecture of their NQFs, but are taking a step-by-step approach to including qualifications in their frameworks. Finland and Sweden are close to adopting formally their NQFs. In seven countries (Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, Estonia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, the Netherlands and Portugal), NQFs are in the early operational stage.

With the exception of Malta, only pre-2005 NQFs in Ireland, France and the UK (England/Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) are at an advanced operational stage. In some cases, as in France and the UK (England/Northern Ireland) they have a regulatory role, deciding which qualifications to admit into the framework.

Various stages and rates of progress capture the dynamic character of NQF development, but NQFs are never really complete. They require continual development and renewal. Even well-established NQFs are constantly adapted and improved.

By mid-2012, 15 countries (Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal and the UK) had formally referenced their national frameworks to the EQF. The remaining countries are expected to complete this process by 2013.

European convergence and national diversity

NQFs developed after 2005 reflect principles and concepts introduced by the EQF and so share some important features such as:

- being designed as comprehensive frameworks for lifelong learning, covering all levels and types of qualifications;
- proposing or having eight level structures. Exceptions among post-2005 frameworks are Norway and Iceland whose NQFs have seven levels and Slovenia which has 10;
- adopting learning outcomes-based descriptors reflecting the three tiers in the EQF that distinguish between knowledge, skills and competence.

Convergence between NQFs developed after 2005, contrasts with differences in pre-2005 frameworks. For example, two NQFs in the UK (those for Scotland and Wales) are comprehensive, but the third (for England/Northern Ireland) is partial and, like the NQF in France, mainly covers professional and vocational qualifications. They also have different numbers of levels. France's NQF has five, the UK (England/ Northern Ireland) has nine, the UK (Scotland) 12 and Ireland's NQF has 10. Differences also exist in using learning outcomes, with the content and profile of earlier frameworks being more diverse.

Apart from using NQFs to promote European and international comparability of qualifications, all countries stress how NQFs can improve coordination between different parts of the education and training system and help increase transparency of national qualifications. This role of NQFs as communication frameworks is broadly seen as adding value to existing qualifications systems without radically changing them.

Some countries, such as Croatia, Iceland, Poland and Romania promote their NQFs as reforming frameworks that provide a tool to improve the coherence, relevance and quality of their education, training and lifelong learning systems. Acting as a learning outcomes-based reference point, NQF developments may trigger other reforms such as new learning pathways, programmes, qualification standards or procedures to validate non-formal learning. Germany sees developing validation of non-formal and informal learning as integral to developing its NQF, which may

change how the existing national qualifications system works.

NQFs also reflect national, political and cultural contexts. For example, there are three main models for operating a comprehensive NQF covering all types of qualifications.

In the first model, NQFs have comprehensive and coherent level descriptors spanning all levels of education and training. As descriptors refer to levels and learning outcomes, similarities and differences between, for example vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (HE) qualifications are more easily visible. NQFs in Germany, Belgium (Flanders), UK (Scotland), Ireland, Estonia, Slovenia and Lithuania take this approach. In the second model, used in countries such as Denmark and Bulgaria, NQFs distinguish between levels 1-5 and 6-8, restricting the higher levels for qualifications awarded by HE institutions (under the Bologna process ([3])). In the third model, for example in Austria, NQFs divide levels 6-8 into two parallel strands. One strand covers qualifications awarded by HE institutions (Bologna process) and the other, professionally or vocationally-oriented qualifications awarded outside HE institutions.

The three models offer different solutions to bridge different parts of the education and training system, notably vocational and academic qualifications. An important lifelong learning objective is to make it easier for people to move from one type or level of learning to another, such as, from VET, from school-based training to apprenticeships, or from upper-secondary to university and vice versa, taking previous learning into account. It is uncertain to what extent NQFs with learning outcomes-based levels will influence relationships between different parts of national education and training systems. Most countries embed rules for designing and awarding qualifications in the respective part of the system.

NQFs: making a difference?

There are concerns in research literature that, rather than adding value to education and training systems, NQFs distract attention and resources. This criticism sometimes stems from some of the earliest attempts to implement frameworks based on learning outcomes. It is based mainly on experiences, inside and outside Europe, of pre-2005 NQFs, notably in New Zealand, South Africa and the UK (England/Northern Ireland).

([3]) See: http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/bologna_en.htm

The new generation of NQFs inspired by the EQF makes it possible to revisit the question of impact. Developments are still at an early stage, but in several areas the impact of NQFs can be observed, notably on institutional structures, use of learning outcomes and developing lifelong learning.

Across Europe, adoption and implementation of NQFs is influencing structures of institutions and coordination between them. European NQFs are supported by EQF national coordination points in each country, with responsibility for communication, information and dissemination and, specifically, links between national and European levels. In some countries, they are also in charge of NQF registers and support national stakeholder coordination to help implement NQFs.

NQFs are, to a degree, starting to influence institutions awarding qualifications. Ireland, Malta and Romania have merged different organisations responsible for different parts of their education and training systems into single national authorities to improve coordination. Portugal has set up a national agency to strengthen cooperation between its education and employment ministries. The proposed Croatian law on the NQF suggests setting up a national strategic body to implement, monitor and evaluate the NQF. The future impact of NQFs depends on whether these institutional developments continue.

The principle of learning outcomes is broadly accepted across Europe. NQFs and the EQF have encouraged use of learning outcomes to define and describe qualifications and allocate them to their levels in national and European frameworks. In several countries, as in Croatia and Poland, NQF developments helped identify areas where learning outcomes were either not applied or applied inconsistently. In Norway, work on the NQF showed that advanced VET qualifications awarded by *Fagskole* were only partly based on learning outcomes. This was remedied.

Germany's intense debate on equivalence of the general upper-secondary *Abitur* qualification and the vocational *Fachabeiter* qualification and the relationship between vocational and general education and training shows how using learning outcomes has challenged implicitly established hierarchies.

While the learning outcomes approach is generally accepted across Europe, its interpretation and application is a significant challenge. Design of national level descriptors shows how countries understand learning outcomes differently.

One group comprising countries such as Estonia, Cyprus, Austria and Portugal, has taken EQF level descriptors as a starting point and developed them further to guide national processes. A second group, for example, Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Poland, has changed the third 'competence' column of the EQF, to capture more effectively important social, personal and transversal competences. A third group, including Belgium, Germany, France, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Slovenia use 'competence' as an overarching concept reflecting existing national traditions and values. This emphasises the holistic and integrative nature of competence as someone's ability to apply knowledge, skills, and other personal, social and methodological competences at work and in studying.

An explicit aim of the EQF – and most comprehensive NQFs – is to encourage lifelong learning. In the past year, countries have started to take more coherent action in this area. Using NQFs to promote lifelong learning has followed three strands.

First, establishing a comprehensive, learning outcomes-based NQF can, in itself, promote learning careers. Second, stronger links between NQFs and validation systems enables people to have their prior (formal, non-formal and informal) learning assessed and recognised according to qualifications in the NQF. Pioneered by France, many countries see this as an important way that NQFs can promote lifelong learning. Third, some countries, notably Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden are working on criteria and procedures to include certificates and qualifications awarded outside initial (public) education and training, mostly for continuing education and training provided by the labour market or voluntary sector. Quality is a concern as it is important to ensure that very diverse provision meets minimum criteria and can be combined with traditional initial education and training. These developments are progressing rapidly in several countries, potentially turning NQFs into maps giving a broad view of learning opportunities and awards.

Challenges ahead

Progress over the past few years provides a good basis for realising NQFs' potential, but they need to be visible beyond the limited circle of policy-makers and experts involved in creating them. The following steps are crucial for NQFs to succeed.

- Learning outcomes-based levels need to become visible to people. Including EQF and NQF levels in certificates and qualifications is a key step.
- NQFs are increasingly becoming national structuring and planning instruments. This requires producing databases and guidance materials reflecting NQFs' structures. This has been done with pre-2005 NQFs, but not yet with later ones.
- NQFs must increasingly engage with and be more visible in the labour market (through assisting development of career pathways, certifying achievements acquired at work, guidance and links to sectoral frameworks).

Although NQFs use learning outcomes, there are other current practices that use learning inputs to recognise qualifications. Networks of academic recognition centres (the European network of information centres (ENIC) and the National academic recognition information centres (NARIC) ([4]) which support learners and institutions on access to and progression in higher education. The EU's directive (2005/36) which addresses relationships between professional qualifications and occupations in the labour market is also based on learning inputs. The links between NQFs and these other approaches must be clarified and strengthened.

This illustrates the need for systematic monitoring and evaluation of NQF implementation, both qualitative and quantitative. Only a few countries have baseline data or are tracking destinations of qualification holders.

If treated as an isolated initiative, outside mainstream policies and practices, NQFs will fail. The biggest danger is that countries 'forget' their NQFs once they are referenced to the EQF, seriously undermining the EQF as a trusted European reference framework.

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([4]) See: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/naric_en.htm.