



WORKING PAPER

No 8

The development of national qualifications frameworks in Europe

(August 2010)



The development of national qualifications frameworks in Europe

(August 2010)

A great deal of additional information on the European Union is available on the Internet.

It can be accessed through the Europa server (<http://europa.eu>).

Cataloguing data can be found at the end of this publication.

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2010

ISBN 978-92-896-0661-5

ISSN 1831-2403

doi:10.2801/3239

Copyright © European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), 2010

All rights reserved.

The **European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training** (Cedefop) is the European Union's reference centre for vocational education and training. We provide information on and analyses of vocational education and training systems, policies, research and practice. Cedefop was established in 1975 by Council Regulation (EEC) No 337/75.

Europe 123, 570 01 Thessaloniki (Pylea), GREECE
PO Box 22427, 551 02 Thessaloniki, GREECE
Tel. +30 2310490111, Fax +30 2310490020
E-mail: info@cedefop.europa.eu
www.cedefop.europa.eu

Aviana Bulgarelli, *Director*
Christian Lettmayr, *Deputy Director*
Peter Kreiml, *Chair of the Governing Board*

Foreword

This Cedefop report covers the development of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) in the 27 members of the European Union, in two candidate countries to the EU (Croatia and Turkey) and in Iceland and Norway.

It confirms ⁽¹⁾ the importance and priority attributed to NQFs across Europe. While this can be explained partly by the EQF and set deadlines ⁽²⁾, countries increasingly tend to see NQFs as key instruments influencing national policies and reforms in education, training and employment.

All the 31 countries ⁽³⁾ covered by the report aim to develop and introduce a national qualifications framework for lifelong learning responding to the EQF. The majority of these countries aim for comprehensive frameworks covering all levels and types of qualifications and seeking a stronger integration between them. This is a significant result as it shows an increased attention to the overall coherence and permeability of education and training systems and their ability to promote lifelong and lifewide learning.

The emerging NQFs reflect the national systems they are supposed operate within. While we can observe differences in specific objectives and in design features, it is generally accepted that frameworks should introduce an explicit set of qualifications levels and level descriptors, that they must reflect the learning outcomes approach and that a broad range of stakeholders – from education, training and employment – must be involved.

The analysis shows that countries have reached different stages of development and implementation. More countries are now moving from early conceptualisation and design to stakeholder consultations and advanced testing of their frameworks. In some cases (for example Belgium Flanders, Estonia, Lithuania, Malta and Portugal) formal adoption has been achieved. Those countries with already established frameworks (UK, Ireland, France) have carried out or are in the process

⁽¹⁾ Cedefop (2009). *Development of national qualifications frameworks in Europe (September 2009)*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Available from Internet: http://cedefop.europa.eu/en/files/6104_en.pdf [cited 25.05.2010].

⁽²⁾ Countries are invited to refer their national qualifications levels to the EQF by 2010 and to introduce an explicit reference to EQF levels in their certificates and diploma by 2012.

⁽³⁾ Of the 32 countries having signed up to the EQF, Lichtenstein is the only one not developing a NQF for LLL. Lichtenstein is, however, developing a framework for HE in line with the Bologna process. A total of 34 NQFs are covered by the analysis, reflecting that the UK has separate NQFs for England/Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland and that Belgium is developing separate frameworks for Flanders and the French speaking community respectively.

of carrying out reviews. The recent external evaluation of the Irish Framework ⁽⁴⁾ draws attention to the long-term challenges of the practical implementation of frameworks.

This report pays particular attention to the relationships between the NQFs for lifelong learning (developed in response to the EQF) and the qualifications frameworks for higher education (developed in response to the qualifications framework for European higher education area in the Bologna process). This relationship is at the core of the development of comprehensive frameworks and requires clarification and sometimes redefinition of the borderlines between existing education and training sub-systems (and stakeholders).

The sometimes tense discussions on the relationship between VET and HE remind us that the success of NQFs depends on their ability to involve stakeholders and to address conflicts of interest openly. The analysis shows that the involvement of stakeholders varies significantly between countries. If a significant number of countries establish 'pro forma' frameworks only loosely connected to the existing systems and practices this could undermine the overall positive developments which currently can be observed.

Overall there is strong national momentum in developing NQFs. Whether this momentum can be sustained and strengthened depends on the involvement of stakeholders and the extent to which they see the added value of the NQFs.

It is our hope that this second report will contribute to a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of NQFs, actively support the rich and intense dialogue currently taking place at national level in this field as well as inform national policy developments and reforms.

The conclusions drawn in this report are based on analysis and interpretation by Cedefop and do not reflect the points of view of those who have generously shared their knowledge and expertise with us ⁽⁵⁾.

As developments in this field are constant and rapid, Cedefop will continue to publish regular overviews of NQF developments in the coming period.

Aviana Bulgarelli
Director of Cedefop

⁽⁴⁾ Collins, Tom et al. (2009). *Framework implementation and impact study 2009. National Qualifications Authority of Ireland*. Available from Internet: http://www.nqai.ie/framework_study.html [cited 24.06.2010].

⁽⁵⁾ See Annex 2.

Acknowledgements

This working document represents a team effort, reflecting valuable contribution and input of individuals from different institutions:

- project managers Jens Bjørnåvold and Slava Pevec Grm, Cedefop, who coordinated the work and wrote the report and undertook the analysis on which it is based;
- the national representatives in the EQF advisory group and the national qualifications frameworks correspondents in the Bologna process (see in Annex the complete list of interviewees).

Thanks are due to Yvonne Noutsia (Cedefop) for her technical support in preparing this publication.

Table of contents

Foreword.....	1
Table of contents	4
Introduction.....	5
Austria.....	21
Belgium.....	27
Bulgaria.....	37
Croatia	41
Cyprus	46
Czech Republic.....	48
Denmark	53
Estonia.....	59
Finland	64
France.....	69
Germany	74
Greece	79
Hungary	82
Iceland	86
Ireland.....	90
Italy	96
Latvia	101
Lithuania	103
Luxembourg.....	109
Malta.....	113
The Netherlands	117
Norway.....	121
Poland.....	126
Portugal	130
Romania	134
Slovakia	139
Slovenia	142
Spain.....	147
Sweden.....	151
Turkey.....	156
United Kingdom	160
ANNEX 1 List of interviewees.....	170
ANNEX 2 Short overview of the NQF developments.....	172
ANNEX 3 Examples of level descriptor in EQF and NQFs.....	187

Introduction

National qualifications frameworks (NQFs) have, over a short period of time, developed into key instruments influencing national education, training and qualifications systems. While this phenomenon can be observed world-wide ⁽⁶⁾, European developments ⁽⁷⁾ are now particularly consistent and strong. The main reason for this is the development (since 2004) of the European qualifications framework (EQF). Formally adopted by the European Parliament and Council in 2008, the EQF Recommendation introduced a strict timeframe ⁽⁸⁾ for countries to link their national qualifications systems to the European meta-framework. As this report shows, the majority of countries ⁽⁹⁾ consider the setting up of an NQF as the best way to address the agreed EQF objectives and target dates.

It would be wrong, however, to see European NQF developments as exclusively about aiding recognition of foreign qualifications and promoting cross-border mobility. European NQFs are increasingly taking on a national reform function aiming at making national qualifications systems more transparent, coherent and permeable. In some cases they try to redefine the way the different sub-systems of education and training and their qualifications are related to each other. Designing and implementing an NQF implies something more than agreeing on a set of technical features, for example a hierarchy of levels of learning or a register of certificates and diploma. Setting up an NQF is about creating a platform for dialogue involving as broad a group of stakeholders as possible. The breadth and depth of these (new) dialogues is an important first indicator of the importance attributed to the NQF in different countries. High level of involvement (including disagreement and controversy) signals that the framework is taken seriously and will probably influence existing structures, practices and interests; a lack of dialogue, involvement and ownership may indicate a potentially limited future impact of the framework.

⁽⁶⁾ The European Training Foundation (ETF) lists 120 countries with current NQF developments.

⁽⁷⁾ Distinct from developments in other parts of the world, NQF developments in Europe focus on comprehensive NQFs, including qualifications awarded in general education, VET, HE and adult learning.

⁽⁸⁾ Countries are invited to refer their national qualifications levels to the EQF by 2010 and to introduce a reference to the EQF levels in certificates and diploma by 2012.

⁽⁹⁾ Of the 32 countries having signed up to the EQF, Lichtenstein is the only not developing an NQF for lifelong learning. Lichtenstein is, however, developing a framework for higher education in line with the Bologna process.

Covering developments in 31 countries (and 34 NQFs) ⁽¹⁰⁾ this report shows that most European countries are at an early stage of NQF development. Only developments in the next few years will fully demonstrate the reform potential of the national frameworks and the extent to which they can improve existing education, training and qualifications structures and practices. This introductory chapter aims to draw together the main findings and observations from the national chapters and thereby identify some of the main challenges and opportunities.

The objectives of NQFs

NQFs play a key role in linking national qualifications systems to the EQF (and the qualifications frameworks for the European higher education area) reference levels and descriptors. International comparability and the need for a common qualifications language is of key importance to the countries covered by this report but the potential role of NQFs in improving national education, training and qualifications systems is increasingly acknowledged. The following objectives are presented by almost all countries, irrespective of the stage of NQF development. NQFs aim to:

- (a) make national qualifications systems easier to understand and overview, both nationally and internationally;
- (b) strengthen coherence of qualifications systems by connecting different parts of education and training and making it easier to understand;
- (c) improving permeability of education and training by clarifying and strengthening the horizontal and vertical links within existing systems;
- (d) support lifelong learning by making learning pathways visible and by aiding access, participation and progression;
- (e) aid recognition of a broader range of learning outcomes (including those acquired through non-formal and informal learning);
- (f) strengthen the link and improve the communication between education and training and the labour market;
- (g) open up national qualification systems to qualifications awarded outside formal education and training (for example awarded by sectors);
- (h) create a platform for cooperation and dialogue with a broad range of stakeholders;
- (i) provide a reference point for quality assurance.

⁽¹⁰⁾ This reflects that the UK has separate NQFs for England/Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland and that Belgium is developing separate frameworks for Flanders and the French speaking community respectively.

Almost all these objectives are closely connected with the shift to learning outcomes taking place in most European countries. Without this systematic shift in the way we define and describe qualifications it is difficult to see how the NQF will be able to meet the above objectives. Alternatively the NQFs can be seen as a main instrument for systematically promoting the learning outcomes perspective and approach. As this report shows, the majority of countries give high priority to the learning outcomes approach, confirming its central role in reforming education, training and learning.

While many of the referred objectives are shared between countries, certain specific national objectives can be identified. In Germany, the new national framework is seen by some stakeholders as an instrument able to reduce traditional barriers within education and training, for example by addressing the lack of equivalence between vocationally and academically oriented qualifications. In many of the newer Member States the perceived problem is that education and training do not meet labour market needs: the frameworks may provide a common language enabling a better dialogue. In Denmark, Austria, Finland and Sweden, frameworks are being designed to include qualifications acquired outside the traditional formal system and training (e.g. originating from professional training in occupations or awarded by sectors). An important objective in many countries (e.g. the Czech Republic, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia) is to use the framework developments to strengthen and better integrate validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Roles and functions of NQFs

David Raffe (2009) ⁽¹¹⁾ distinguishes between three types of frameworks. His main distinction is between communication and reforming frameworks. The main role of the communication frameworks is to improve the description of existing qualifications systems and thereby clarify available options for stakeholders, be these learners or policy makers. The communication framework is thus about making better use of what is already there. The reforming framework aims (explicitly) to improve the existing system by strengthening its coherence, relevance and quality. Part of this reform may imply the development of new pathways and programmes or to change the division of roles and responsibilities of stakeholders. The third type of framework identified by Raffe is the transformational framework. The first generation South African framework (1994) is frequently used as an

⁽¹¹⁾ Raffe, D. (2009). National Qualifications Frameworks in Ireland and Scotland: A Comparative Analysis. Available from Internet: http://www.ces.ed.ac.uk/PDF%20Files/NQF_ECER_2009.pdf [cited 25.05.2010].

example of this, radically breaking away from previously existing institutional arrangements and practices. While the last category is unlikely in the European situation, the main distinction between communication and reform frameworks can be further explained by the extent to which legal and administrative regulation is used and whether frameworks can be described as tight or loose.

Most NQFs in Europe have been presented as communication frameworks aiming to make education, training and qualification systems visible and more understandable to different stakeholders (students, employers, providers, and teachers) and to clarify the vertical and horizontal links between different types of qualifications. Increasing transparency of education, training and qualification systems and singular qualifications in terms of learning outcomes is seen as a prerequisite for addressing the objectives listed previously.

Some countries explicitly point to the reforming role of the new frameworks (for example Croatia, Iceland and Poland). These countries see the NQFs as an opportunity to change the existing education and training, using the frameworks as reference point for reform. This can imply that the NQF is given a regulatory role where it will directly influence the design, provision and award of qualifications. The qualifications and credit framework (QCF) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is an example of such a regulatory framework which set very clear criteria for qualifications and thereby directly influences design of qualifications and recognition⁽¹²⁾. The same can be said for the French framework, where the national certification committee operates as a gatekeeper and regulates not only which qualifications should form part of the framework, but also how they should be described and according to which criteria.

The rules on design, provision and award of qualifications are traditionally the responsibility of each education and training sub-system⁽¹³⁾. NQFs can change this by serving as an external and shared reference point. Whether the emerging European NQFs should be understood as communication or reforming frameworks will depend on whether they actively inform and influence the definition and description of qualifications. It will also depend on whether they take on the role of national gatekeepers, thus defining the scope and character of the overall national qualification system.

⁽¹²⁾ See Regulatory Arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework, August 2008. Available from Internet: www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/regulation/reform_of_vocational_qualifications/qcf_regulations.asp [cited 25.05.2010].

⁽¹³⁾ Cedefop (2010). Linking credit systems and qualifications frameworks. An international comparative analysis. Available from Internet: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/15974.aspx> [cited 10.06.2010].

NQFs may have different functions and goals for different education and training systems. In Ireland, the national framework of qualifications (NFQ) has a stronger reforming and regulatory role in some subsystems (vocational and further education and non-university higher education) than in others (notably general education and universities) ⁽¹⁴⁾. The coming years will show what roles and functions the emerging NQFs will have in relation to different education and training subsystems.

In general, and reflecting continuing national developments, the distinction between communication and reforming frameworks is becoming less clear-cut. In some cases we can observe that ambitions change as the process moves on. This is well illustrated in the recently completed evaluation of the Irish framework where the incremental character of the process is underlined, showing that targets and visions will change as stakeholders get involved in the continuous process of framework development and implementation.

Stages of NQF development

The development and implementation of NQFs in the 31 countries covered by this report can be broadly distinguished as follows:

- (a) conceptualisation and design; during this stage countries analyse and define the rationale and main policy objectives of the future NQF, in many cases resulting in an outline providing the basis for wider dissemination and discussion;
- (b) consultation and testing; during this stage the NQF proposal is presented to and discussed within a broader group of stakeholders, normally as part of a public consultation process. Many countries decide to test the proposed NQF level descriptors through projects in selected economic areas;
- (c) official establishment/adoption; at this stage the NQF is adopted and established, normally taking the form of a decree/law or in a formal agreement between stakeholders;
- (d) practical implementation; this stage moves the framework towards full scale applied practice and requires that institutions comply with the new structures and methods and that potential end-users are fully informed about the purposes and benefits of the framework. Eventually the NQFs must deliver benefits to end users, individuals and employers.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Allais, Stephanie.; Raffe, David; Young, Michael (2009). *Researching NQFs: Some conceptual issues*. Geneva: ILO. Employment Working Paper No. 44. Available from Internet: http://www.ilo.org/skills/what/pubs/lang--en/docName--WCMS_119307/index.htm [cited 25.05.2010].

In the Cedefop project *Changing qualifications* (to be published in 2010), the following policy development stages have been identified. Although developed for qualifications systems in general, this approach is also relevant to NQF developments and has informed the stages presented and applied above:

- (a) policy discussions: no concrete implementation, for example discussions about the best approach to recognising the qualifications of immigrants;
- (b) policy: the direction is set but there is no concrete implementation yet, for example a law is passed to develop an NQF;
- (c) implementation: the infrastructure for change is put in place such as funding, management and a communications strategy, for example a body is set up to manage and coordinate the assessment and validation of experience in private companies;
- (d) practice through pilot schemes: people use the new arrangements, for example a learner is taught and assessed according to a new modular programme and qualification;
- (e) full scale applied practice: all old methods are adapted to the new methods;
- (f) effect: the new system delivers benefits to individuals, organisations and society, for example more adult learners are engaged in lifelong learning and skills supply to the labour market is improved.

Compared to the first full review of NQF developments published by Cedefop in September 2009 ⁽¹⁵⁾, countries are making progress. A significant number of countries have moved on, in most cases moving from the early conceptualisation and design stage into consultation/testing (Finland) and official adoption (Lithuania). Norway, the most recent participant, has now decided to develop a comprehensive NQF, reflecting a lengthy national discussion on the strategy in this area.

Conceptualisation and design

Belgium (Wallonia), Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovakia and Sweden have still to decide on the precise scope and structure of their frameworks. In some cases this reflects that work started recently (Netherlands), in other cases debates on how to move forward are continuing: in Italy lack of agreement regarding the relationship between the regions and the federal level has delayed clarification. Working groups of stakeholders from education, training and the labour market have been assembled in all these countries, in the majority of cases working towards clear deadlines for when to come up with a proposal (October-December 2010). –

⁽¹⁵⁾ Cedefop (2009). *Development of national qualifications frameworks in Europe (September 2009)*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Available from Internet: http://cedefop.europa.eu/en/files/6104_en.pdf [cited 25.05.2010].

Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary, Latvia, Iceland, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and Turkey have largely decided on the overall scope and structure of their frameworks and are now focusing on completing (definition and agreement) level descriptors, the division of roles of different stakeholders, the responsibilities of institutions and the relationship between different subsystems (VET and HE in particular). In most of these countries the work on a qualifications framework for higher education has been going on for some time and their links to the remaining parts of the education and training system (general compulsory education and VET) is a common discussion topic. In some countries, notably Belgium (Wallonia), Spain and Romania, HE frameworks are weakly linked to the overall structure, illustrated by the use of separate level descriptors for these qualifications.

We can identify a clear dividing line between countries in the use of learning outcomes or competence based approaches. Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Sweden have already carried out major national reforms based on learning outcomes and are using this for the new NQFs. Belgium, Italy and Romania have carried out some learning outcomes based reforms, but these are in many cases restricted to sub-systems and of limited scope and influence. Other countries, for example Cyprus, Latvia, Slovakia, Poland and Turkey, are relatively new to the learning outcomes approach. These different starting positions may influence the way NQFs move from conceptualisation to full practical implementation. It is interesting to note that the attention given to learning outcomes approaches is becoming stronger; Poland, for example, has initiated a broad programme to promote the use of learning outcomes in higher education, systematically working with institutions and practitioners.

Some countries have registers of qualifications in place (e.g. Hungary, the Netherlands and Romania) and are strengthening the involvement of employers and employees in qualifications developments, for example through sector councils and committees (e.g. Hungary, Romania, Slovenia).

Consultation and testing stage

Several countries, such as Germany, Austria and Finland, have carried out extensive consultation and/or testing. In Austria, extensive consultation was completed at the end of 2008; in Finland this was carried out during the autumn of 2009. Greece is currently carrying out a national consultation and Cyprus has signalled the same intention. By broadening the group of potential stakeholders involved in the discussion, the consultation stage plays a key role in clarifying the purpose and legitimacy of the framework (in both in the Austrian and Finnish cases broad support for the NQF was expressed). The extent to which legitimacy is strengthened depends on the thoroughness of preparatory work carried out in the

first (design and conceptualisation) stage. The degree of debate and involvement observed in Austria and Germany in the early stages of developments contrasts with the relatively limited involvement and engagement observed in some other countries. It is also worth noting that countries differ in terms of the use of research to prepare discussions and developments: the German and Austrian efforts have played an important role in clarifying options.

The German testing of its framework in four selected sectors (IT, metal, health and trade) can both be seen as a way to strengthen the technical design-features of the framework and as a way to strengthen its overall legitimacy among key stakeholders. Now reaching its final stages, this testing has pointed to the challenges involved in strengthening the permeability of education and training systems, notably on how better to link VET and HE. A number of other countries have also entered into extensive testing, for example Italy where learning outcomes based methodology has been applied in tourism and the mechanical sector and is now being further tested in the chemical, food and agriculture sectors.

Official establishment and adoption

Belgium (Flanders), Estonia, Lithuania, Malta and Portugal have formally adopted their frameworks (through decrees or a laws). A number of other countries (Croatia and Finland) expect such a decree or law to be adopted during 2010. It is important to notice that the choice of legal instruments reflects national traditions. While most countries originally started their work by adopting a decree or law (for example the Czech Republic in 2006), others use a more incremental strategy, moving forward on the basis of existing legal arrangements and/or administrative decisions. The Danish and Icelandic frameworks both refer to recent education and training reform but do not propose any independent NQF legislation. The evidence provided by this report, however, shows that NQFs in the next few years are likely to influence the legal basis of national education and training systems. This will normally not take place through the adoption of one single legal act, but by the revision of a broad range of decrees and laws. The Polish case illustrates this; an analysis is currently being carried out to identify how the new NQF will influence the numerous laws and decrees currently in place.

Practical implementation and revision

Ireland, France, and the UK have been working on NQFs for the last decade (or more) and reached an advanced stage of implementation. All these first generation frameworks are currently undergoing (or have recently completed) reform and revision. The existing five-level structure of the French framework is currently being revised, possibly giving way to an eight-level structure. The role of the national

committee administering the framework (CNCP) ⁽¹⁶⁾ has also been strengthened in the last year. The adoption of the qualifications and credit framework (QCF) for England and Northern-Ireland (in 2008) exemplifies how frameworks evolve, in this case by firmly integrating credit transfer into the structure and accompanying practices. The recent external evaluation of the Irish Framework (NQAI September 2009) ⁽¹⁷⁾ draws attention to a number of factors important for practical implementation. The evaluation emphasises the need for time in which to develop familiarity with the framework, the need for an iterative process of development and support from different stakeholders, the need for the framework to be 'loose' enough to accommodate different types of learning and, not least, the need to balance implementation within sub-systems with the need to introduce system-wide approaches. The report also emphasises the importance of further strengthening the visibility of the framework in relation to the labour market (assisting the development of career pathways, certifying learning achievements acquired at work, for guidance purposes). However, the study emphasised the emerging impact of the NQF on learners in terms of new opportunities for progression and impact on teaching and learning processes ⁽¹⁸⁾ ⁽¹⁹⁾.

Overlapping stages

The four main stages described above are partly overlapping. There is, for example, not always a clear-cut distinction between conceptualisation/design and consultation/testing. The German developments illustrate this: the extensive testing plays an important part for technical development and refinement as well as for strengthening the credibility of the new framework among key-stakeholders. This is also the case in Belgium (Wallonia). Based on developments so far it seems clear that the level of 'NQF-preparedness' differs. The following factors seem to be of particular importance:

⁽¹⁶⁾ Commission nationale de la certification professionnelle (CNCP, National committee on vocational qualifications).

⁽¹⁷⁾ Collins, Tom et al. (2009). *Framework Implementation and Impact Study, 2009*. National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. The study concluded with nineteen recommendations concerning the further implementation of the Framework and access, transfer and progression. The study is available on http://www.nqai.ie/framework_study.html [cited 24. 06. 2010].

⁽¹⁸⁾ Even though this impact has been slower than expected.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Collins, Tom et al. (2009). *Framework implementation and impact study 2009*. National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, p. 29. Available from Internet: http://www.nqai.ie/framework_study.html [cited 24.06.2010].

- (a) the extent to which learning outcomes is accepted and used for defining and describing qualifications (in the national system as a whole and in its different subsystems) ⁽²⁰⁾;
- (b) the extent to which countries already have developed national standards (occupational, educational) ⁽²¹⁾;
- (c) the extent to which qualifications registers have been established and clarify the scope of the national qualifications system and the relationship between single qualifications;
- (d) the extent to which cooperation with labour market actors have been formalised (e.g. through sector councils);
- (e) the extent to which validation of non-formal and informal learning is integrated into the national qualifications systems;
- (f) the extent to which pathways have been established between institutions in different subsystems and thus influence access, progression and transfer.

Some countries will be able to 'tick off' almost all the issues listed above. While these countries will be able quickly to put in place a functional NQF, the mid- and long-term impact of an NQF may very well be as big in countries able to use the NQF as an active and consistent instrument to pursue these issues.

Main characteristics of NQF design

Most countries aim at a comprehensive NQF ⁽²²⁾ covering all levels and types of qualifications and based on a single national structure of qualifications levels and descriptors. In a number of cases framework developments have already been initiated in sub-systems and have occasionally developed into sub-frameworks ⁽²³⁾, notably for higher education (as part of the Bologna process) and for VET (frequently accompanied by a strategy for developing standards and setting up registers of VET qualifications).

⁽²⁰⁾ Cedefop (2009). *The shift to learning outcomes: policies and practices in Europe*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. (Cedefop reference series; 72). Available from Internet: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/3054_en.pdf [cited 24.06.2010].

⁽²¹⁾ Cedefop (2009). *The dynamics of qualifications: defining and renewing occupational and educational standards*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. (Cedefop panorama series). Available from Internet: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/5195_en.pdf [cited 24.06.2010].

⁽²²⁾ They are comprehensive in the sense that they cover qualifications awarded at all levels and in all subsystems of education and training (including general, VET and higher education, adult learning).

⁽²³⁾ A sub-framework is a framework which covers only one sub-system (e.g. VET, HE) and is part of a overarching comprehensive framework.

NQFs and integration

The explicit aim of these comprehensive frameworks is to strengthen the coherence of the overall national qualification system and to improve the interaction between sub-systems of education and training. Bjørnåvold and Coles⁽²⁴⁾ touch this issue by focusing on the degree of integration aimed at and achieved by the NQF. The main distinction introduced is between sector, bridging and integrating frameworks. While the first category contains no explicit links between independent sector frameworks (for example VET and HE frameworks), the bridging framework introduces common levels offering minimum formal links but retaining the independence of the sector frameworks. The integrating model will operate with a single set of levels and descriptors and use this for all sub-systems. In this last case separate sector frameworks will not be operational. The challenge of integration can be addressed by the following questions:

- what is gained and what is lost by seeking closer integration of education and training sub-systems and institutions; how should cohesion and specialisation be balanced?
- what is gained and what is lost by developing a common set of levels and descriptors covering all types and levels of qualifications; is there a danger that the particular objectives of sub-systems (VET, HE) is being compromised by a quest for lifelong and lifewide learning?
- which learning outcomes are most critical; what balance should be struck between knowledge, skills, autonomy, responsibility, attitudes etc.?

While concrete solutions reflect highly diverse national structures, cultures and traditions, continuing developments are largely circling around the above questions and we can observe three main tendencies in the design of NQFs for strengthening the integration of education and training sub-systems and institutions.

A first group of NQFs can be identified which are characterised by a coherent set of level descriptors, spanning all levels of education and training and where increased coherence is an explicit vision. These frameworks come close to the integrating (also unitary) national qualifications framework identified above. These frameworks try to clarify the relationship between qualifications and show how they can be accumulated and combined according to the needs of the individual in question (and not only according to the more limited logic of the education and training provider). Based on learning outcomes, this approach can make it possible to judge whether, for example, a VET qualification can form a basis for a HE

⁽²⁴⁾ Bjørnåvold, Jens; Coles, Mike. *Added value of national qualifications frameworks in implementing the EQF*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. (European Qualifications Framework Series: Note 2). Available from Internet: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/note2_en.pdf [cited 10.06.2010].

qualification. These countries emphasise the need for systems to be permeable and for better horizontal and vertical progression (Ireland, France, Malta and UK-Scotland). The draft Croatian, German, Icelandic and Polish frameworks are all building on broad and comprehensive level descriptors and indicate that higher levels may be open to qualifications awarded outside HE institutions.

A second group of countries has introduced a distinction between levels 1-5 and levels 6-8, the latter being restricted to qualifications awarded by traditional higher education institutions (in compliance with the three Bologna cycles). This seems to be the case in Belgian (Wallonia), Danish and Romanian frameworks, where the integrating function of the frameworks is relatively modest, limiting accumulation and progression to existing sub-systems of education and training. The approach also implies that higher level qualifications are defined according to institution, not learning outcomes. While there is still a comprehensive framework covering all levels and types of qualifications, the links between the education and training sub-systems is weaker and only partly challenges existing institutional borderlines and divisions of roles and responsibilities.

A third group of countries, including Belgium (Flanders) and Austria has reached a compromise where levels 6-8 have been divided into parallel strands. One covers academic qualifications (Bologna process), the other is for vocationally or professionally higher level qualifications awarded outside the higher education institutions. In some cases the same level descriptors are used for the two strands (Belgium, Flanders), in other cases two strands are using different descriptors. Coming close to what elsewhere has been termed a bridging framework, this approach tries to balance the emphasis on coherence with a clear acknowledgement of the need for and relevance of a sub-framework (e.g. for HE, VET) and the development of more detailed level descriptors for these.

Diverse developments in Member States so far indicate that the following dimensions will influence the degree of coherence between and integration of education and training sub-systems and the implementation of truly comprehensive frameworks:

- (a) existence of an explicit and coherent set of levels spanning all qualifications;
- (b) whether a coherent set of level descriptors has been developed spanning all levels of qualifications;
- (c) the extent to which qualifications are defined in terms of learning outcomes (or compatible conceptual terms);
- (d) the extent to which credit arrangements are used (and whether compatible criteria for awarding credits are used across sub-systems);
- (e) whether common criteria regarding the design and award of qualifications are used;

- (f) the extent to which qualifications will be referenced to the national levels according to the same criteria;
- (g) whether a coherent set of quality assurance procedures will be applied across levels and types of qualifications;
- (h) whether a common register of qualifications is being developed or not;
- (i) the balance between centralised, national coordination and autonomy of sub-systems and their institutions.

These dimensions can be used to monitor and better understand the integrating function of frameworks. This approach will complement and improve existing efforts to categorise NQF developments.

Number of levels

Six countries (Italy, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovakia and Sweden) have still to make a decision on the number of levels to be used in their frameworks. Most other countries have proposed or adopted eight levels. While this is partly inspired by the EQF, countries very much stress that the choice of eight levels has been based on a thorough analysis of existing national qualifications systems. It is interesting to note that France, currently basing its framework on a five-level structure introduced in 1969, is considering the shift to an eight-level structure. The broad consensus on an eight-level structure is contrasted with the frameworks of the UK and Ireland. Scotland now operates with 12 levels, Wales and England/Northern Ireland with nine (including entry level) and Ireland with 10. Iceland also decided to have a 10-level framework (additionally to seven-level structure, three entry levels have been introduced). The Polish draft framework suggests a seven-level structure as the most appropriate for national needs. Croatia and Slovenia have addressed the question of sublevels: Slovenia has introduced sublevels for levels six and eight, Croatia at levels four, five, seven and eight.

The decision of the UK, and also Iceland, to include entry-levels into their frameworks, addresses the challenge of how to include and reward learning elementary achievements, for example below EQF level 1. Entry (or access) levels were initially discussed in Belgium (Flanders) and Hungary, but eventually not included in these frameworks. The reason for this in Belgium was a fear that such a level could have a stigmatising effect. The Hungarian proposal for a 'level zero' would mainly concern the learning taking place before entering primary education, e.g. in kindergarten. Kindergarten (and the testing of school maturity) is seen as an integrated part of a lifelong learning approach and should be made explicit by a comprehensive framework. The entry levels of Iceland and the UK build on a different philosophy as they are supposed to assist a wide group of lifelong learners, such as individuals with learning difficulties, drop-outs from formal education and

adults lacking formal qualifications, to be able to link into the main qualifications ladder.

The profile of level descriptors

Though there is limited controversy regarding the number of levels in the different frameworks, the articulation of level descriptors is more challenging. While the national descriptors have to be sufficiently generic to be linked to the EQF, they also need to be sufficiently specific and precise to be able capture the diversity of national qualifications in existence. Defining the profile of level descriptors also raises a number of questions regarding the overall profile of education, training and qualifications. Should priority be given to theoretical knowledge and academic research, how should knowledge and skills be balanced in qualifications, and what should be expected as regards social competences and personal attitudes? The definition of level descriptors suggests key national debates on the main priorities and profile of national education, training and learning strategies. Based on national level descriptors ⁽²⁵⁾ available May 2010, some main tendencies in the articulation of level descriptors can be identified (see also Annex 1):

Descriptors differ in terms of overarching concept. Most countries use variations of the EQF learning outcomes based approach, distinguished according to knowledge, skills and competence. A few, the Czech Republic, Germany and Lithuania, use competence as an overarching concept. This reflects existing national approaches and traditions and is likely to be used also by some other countries (for example the Netherlands). As illustrated by the examples in Annex 1, these conceptual differences do not significantly reduce the comparability of the different national descriptors (towards the EQF or towards other national descriptors).

Descriptors differ in terms of detail. Those developed for the first generation of Frameworks, for example Scotland and Ireland, are lengthier than those developed after the launching of the EQF. The influence of the EQF descriptors in terms of overall approach at national level, in particular as regards length of descriptions, is clearly seen. An exception is the descriptors of the Czech Republic which stands out from the remaining descriptors with a strong occupational and functional orientation.

⁽²⁵⁾ At the time of writing, 15 complete national level descriptors were available. These included Belgium (Flanders), Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, UK (England-Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland). The sample thus covers descriptors from four already established NQFs (Ireland and the three UK frameworks); those remaining represent the new and emerging frameworks. A number of other national level descriptors are currently being prepared but have not been deemed ready for publication.

This reflects national reforms dating back to 2003-04, thus preceding the EQF developments.

Descriptors are largely consistent as regards the understanding of knowledge. Distinctions like factual/theoretical and concrete/abstract are used to orient the description of knowledge. The German approach also distinguishes between terms like professional knowledge, occupational knowledge and theoretical/professional knowledge.

Descriptors are largely consistent as regards the understanding of skills. A distinction like cognitive/motor skills, cognitive/practical skills, and theoretical/practical skills dominates. We can also observe the use of specialised skills and tools, functional competences, routine skills and techniques etc.

Specifications of context is used (explicitly and implicitly) to distinguish between qualifications levels. Three countries, Belgium (Flanders), Ireland and Lithuania use context as an explicit criterion to be covered by the descriptors. While other countries fail to introduce context as an explicit criterion, it is of crucial importance and is addressed by indicating the complexity, the changeability and the unpredictability of situations where qualifications are to be applied.

The terms autonomy and responsibility, introduced by the EQF as a way to clarify and limit the term competence, are used by all countries to distinguish between levels of qualifications.

Countries have used a number of other additional concepts to be able to tailor the descriptors to their specific national needs. Finland introduces the terms management and entrepreneurship, evaluation and key skills for lifelong learning. The last category is interesting as it draws attention to learning to learn, communication and the command of languages. The German descriptors points in the same direction, not least through the distinction between social competences and self competences. Ireland distinguishes between aspects like learning to learn and insight, Malta between communication, judgement and learning skills and Scotland between generic cognitive skills, communication, ICT, accountability and teamwork.

The level descriptors prepared so far show that countries are not merely copying EQF descriptors. Instead we can see the development of descriptors specific to the national context and therefore varying considerably in terms of conceptual approach and detail. While this is a positive and necessary development, the available cases also include a strong common perspective. Concepts and words differ somewhat but the same basic approach is used when distinguishing between levels of qualifications. This is particularly noticeable in the way the third column of the EQF is interpreted nationally: terms like context, autonomy and responsibility play a key

role in distinguishing between levels and for establishing a common core language to be used at national and European level.

Challenges ahead

- European NQFs are being developed under considerable external pressure. The European initiatives have acted as catalysts and significantly speeded up developments. This is positive as it creates momentum and allows parallel processes to open up for extensive peer learning and cooperation. The speed may prove negative in the sense that countries may be tempted to create 'pro forma' qualifications framework not sufficiently embedded in national structures and practices.
- The success of the NQF depends on the shift to learning outcomes. While being accepted as relevant by most countries and in most sectors, practical implementation is uneven and sometimes slow. Without a consistent implementation of learning outcomes, NQFs will not succeed.
- The success of the NQFs in terms of being able to increase access and promote progression in education and training depends on their ability to aid support functions like validation of non-formal and informal learning and credit transfer arrangements.
- The development of comprehensive frameworks runs the risk of becoming less 'fit for purpose' for sub-systems (general education, VET and higher education). A challenge in the coming period will be to balance the need for overall permeability and the need for sector-wise specialisation and specificity.
- NQF success is directly linked to the success in involving stakeholders and in being willing to discuss existing challenges openly.
- There will be a need to develop systematic monitoring, research and evaluation strategies. Indicators need to be developed to allow for better understanding of conditions for success (and for reaching end-users; individuals, employers).
- The success of the NQFs also requires that the following issues to be addressed:
 - (a) how can frameworks be sustained financially? Many countries are basing their NQF developments on European Social Fund resources: can this be continued? Can cost-benefit analyses be developed?
 - (b) how are NQFs developments embedded in the broader skills developments strategies linked to technological change, skills shortages in Member States?
 - (c) how NQF can better link inputs and outcomes; how can NQFs be used to develop new curricula and assessment procedures?
 - (d) how can NQFs be made visible to end users

AUSTRIA

Introduction

Introduction of the national qualifications framework (NQF) is broadly supported by all main political stakeholders in Austria. According to the government programme (2008-13) ⁽²⁶⁾ it is expected that all Austrian national qualifications will be included in the eight-level national structure by 2013.

The NQF development process started after the EQF consultation process in January 2007. Most Austrian stakeholders involved in the consultation process agreed on the need for developing an NQF. The first 'fact-finding phase' (February to October 2007) aimed to gather and analyse information, to do research work ⁽²⁷⁾ and to prepare a consultation paper.

The work formed the basis for a national consultation process taking place in the period January to June 2008. A total of 270 responses were received and the expert team presented its conclusions and recommendations in November 2008 to the National steering group. The resulting report (*Konsolidierung der Stellungnahme zum Konsultationspapier*) identified a number of open questions ⁽²⁸⁾ and was used by the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and the Federal Ministry of Science and Research to prepare a policy paper (October 2009 ⁽²⁹⁾) outlining the strategy for the implementation of the Austrian NQF.

This strategy in particular clarifies the relationship between qualifications at levels 1-5 and 6-8. Qualifications at levels 1-5 from all sectors of education and training will be referenced according to the same set of level descriptors. At levels 6-8 two sets of level descriptors will be used, allowing academically and vocationally oriented qualifications to coexist ⁽³⁰⁾. Dublin descriptors will be used for allocating qualifications related to Bologna cycles (BA, MA, Doctorate) and awarded by HE institutions (i.e. universities, universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*) and

⁽²⁶⁾ Regierungsprogramm der 24. Gesetzgebungsperiode (2008-2013), available from Internet www.austria.gv.at/DocView.axd?CobId=32965 [cited 16.3. 2010].

⁽²⁷⁾ Markowitsch, Jörg (2009). *Der Nationale Qualifikationsrahmen in Österreich: Beiträge zur Entwicklung*. Vienna: Lit Verlag. (Studies in Lifelong Learning, 3).

⁽²⁸⁾ All documents are available from the Internet of the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, http://www.bmukk.gv.at/europa/eubildung/nqr/nqr_sn.xml [cited, 16.3.2010] or on the website of the Federal Ministry of Science and Research <http://www.bmwf.gv.at/wissenschaft/national/nqr/> [cited, 16.3.2010].

⁽²⁹⁾ *Aufbau eines Nationalen Qualifikationsrahmens in Österreich – Schlussfolgerungen, Grundsatzentscheidungen und Maßnahmen nach Abschluss des NQR-Konsultationsverfahrens*, prepared by the NQF project group of the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and the Federal Ministry of Science and Research. 2009. Unpublished.

⁽³⁰⁾ *Aufbau eines Nationalen Qualifikationsrahmens in Österreich*, p. 7.

university colleges for teacher education (*Pädagogische Hochschulen*). VET qualifications and qualifications from adult learning will be allocated to the NQF based on EQF descriptors and additional criteria.

The explanatory tables with criteria and procedures for referencing qualifications to the level of the NQF are currently being developed. The main principle is to use 'reference qualifications' as an orientation for placing qualifications to the NQF levels.

Rationale and the main policy objectives

The main objective of the Austrian NQF is to map all officially recognised national qualifications and present them in relation to each other and to make implicit levels of the Austrian qualification system explicit, nationally as well as internationally. The specific objectives are to:

- (a) assist referencing of Austrian qualifications to the EQF and thus strengthen the understanding of Austrian qualifications internationally;
- (b) make qualifications easier to understand and compare for Austrian citizens;
- (c) improve permeability between VET and HE by developing new pathways and open new progression possibilities;
- (d) reinforce the use of learning outcomes in standard-setting, curricula and assessment;
- (e) support lifelong learning and enable stronger links between the adult learning sector and formal education and training;
- (f) recognise a broader range of learning forms (including non-formal and informal learning).

The NQF development process is organised into three strands (*Korridore*): formal qualifications, qualifications acquired in non-formal learning (for example in adult education institutions outside the formal education and training system) and informal learning. The policy paper ⁽³¹⁾ suggests some steps for including non-formal qualifications in the NQF. A conceptual paper will be prepared and pilot projects carried out on how to describe these qualifications in the terms of learning outcomes. Discussion will start with all relevant stakeholders on linking validation and allocation of non-formal qualifications to the NQF and on establishing validation and quality assurance procedures.

⁽³¹⁾ *Aufbau eines Nationalen Qualifikationsrahmens in Österreich*, p. 11.

Involvement of stakeholders

The General Directorate for Vocational Education and Training of the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture has initiated and is coordinating NQF development in cooperation with the Federal Ministry of Science and Research which is in charge of higher education.

In 2006, an NQF project group was set up. It included representatives from the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and the Federal Ministry of Science and Research. The group coordinated the NQF agendas within both ministries and is responsible for strategic planning, commissioning research studies and communication with stakeholders. Members of this group were the director general for VET (Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture) as chair, the director general for universities and universities of applied science (Federal Ministry for Science and Research) as joint chair and coordinators of several departments of these two ministries (VET; general education; adult education and lifelong learning; management of staff and school; research; universities and universities of applied sciences).

In February 2007, a national NQF steering group was set up. It is a decision-making body and includes 23 members covering all the main stakeholders (all relevant ministries, social partners and *Länder*). The main task of this group is to coordinate the implementation of the NQF and to make sure that the framework reflects the interests of stakeholders. Since qualifications and validation policies require cross-sector cooperation, ensuring coordination and ownership is of crucial importance for success.

A subgroup of the national steering group has been established. Its task is to prepare the meetings of the national steering group, discuss relevant issues and prepare working papers.

Separate working groups have been set up (2006) to pursue the development of a qualifications framework for higher education. Involved in this work are the different departments within Federal Ministry for Science and Research, the students' union, universities and universities of applied sciences. Self-certification to the QF-EHEA is expected by the end of 2010.

Levels and descriptors

Since 2007 Austrian stakeholders have been involved in intense discussions on the character of a future NQF. Central to this discussion has been the need to clarify the

main concepts and functions, in particular how the new learning outcomes-based level descriptors will influence the relations between qualifications.

There was a broad agreement on using an eight-level structure. The number of levels is sufficiently distinctive and corresponds well to the main characteristics of the Austrian qualifications system.

The EQF descriptors, based on knowledge, skills and competence, are used as national descriptors. 'Explanatory' table(s) including criteria and procedures are currently being developed to ease referencing of national qualifications to the NQF levels. The qualifications framework for higher education uses Dublin descriptors as a starting point for further development.

Use of learning outcomes

Austria is moving to strengthen the learning outcome approach across education and training as it will be central to the positioning of qualifications onto the NQF. Many qualifications are already learning outcome oriented, but the approach has not been applied consistently across all sectors and institutions.

In 2005, the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture launched a project to develop educational standards for core subject areas in general education ⁽³²⁾ and in VET ⁽³³⁾. The educational standards for VET schools and colleges define 'content' (subject and knowledge areas and topics with specified goals), 'action' (cognitive achievements required in the particular subjects) and personal and social competences related to the respective field. Four competences are described:

- (a) subject-matter competence;
- (b) methodological competence;
- (c) social competence (communication competence, competence to cooperate and interact);
- (d) personal competence (being able to steer own actions by self-motivation and self-control).

In March 2009, the General Directorate for VET of the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture started a project (Curriculum design – learning outcomes orientation) which aims to integrate educational standards in VET curricula.

(32) For development of educational standards in Austria see the web site of the BIFIE <http://www.bifie.at/publikationen-0> or Huber et al. *Bildungsstandards in Deutschland, Österreich, England, Australien, Neuseeland und Südostasien*. 2006. Available from the Internet http://www.edudoc.ch/static/web/arbeiten/harmos/lit_analyse_1.pdf [cited 10.5.2010].

(33) See: <http://www.berufsbildendeschulen.at/de/downloads.html> [cited 10.5.2010].

In apprenticeship (dual system), the training regulation is issued for each profile by the Federal Ministry of Economics. It consists of the occupational competence profile (*Berufsprofil*) with related activities and work descriptions, and job profile (*Berufsbild*) with knowledge and skills to be acquired by apprentices.

The *Lehrabschlussprüfung* (final apprenticeship examination) is to assess whether the candidate has acquired the necessary skills and competences for entry to qualified work. It comprises a theoretical and a practical test. Master craftsperson examinations (for manual trade vocations) and examinations to prove the respective competence (for other regulated trades) are organised by the economic chambers in the *Länder*.

In higher education a qualification profile, describing the expected learning outcomes (and definitions of learning outcomes) for each module, was introduced by the University Act (*Universitätsgesetz*) in 2002, but implementation differs between HE institutions.

Referencing to the EQF

The referencing process is expected to start in autumn 2010. The work has been supported by the EQF test and pilot projects, notably the Leonardo da Vinci 'EQF-Ref: Referencing process – Examples and proposals' ⁽³⁴⁾. The draft referencing report is expected to be prepared by the end of 2011. OeAD (Österreichischer Austauschdienst, Austrian agency for international cooperation in education and research) was designated the national coordination point (NCP) in March 2010. It will be responsible for developing a home page on NQF and should become the main information desk for citizens and institutions.

Important lessons and the way forward

An important strength of the Austrian NQF development process lies in its involvement and engagement of a broad range of stakeholders, representing all subsystems of education and training as well as the social partners. This broad process has made it clear that stakeholders hold different and sometimes conflicting views on the role of the NQF.

The consultation paper emphasised that NQFs will have an orientation and communication function to make the existing qualification system visible and help

⁽³⁴⁾ For more information see: <http://www.eqf-ref.eu> [cited 10.5.2010].

individuals to compare their qualifications and engage in further learning activities. While this was broadly supported in the consultation process, subsequent developments have raised the question of whether, and to what extent, the NQF should be used to support national reform. This is perhaps best illustrated by the question of how to use the three highest levels (6-8) of the framework. Should these be exclusively used for those qualifications forming a part of the Bologna framework or should they also be open to other, vocationally and professionally oriented qualifications. As the answer to this question is the latter, a number of questions regarding the equivalence of academically and vocationally oriented higher level qualifications arise.

Another issue being addressed is the allocation of national qualifications to the NQF level. There are still several open questions to be discussed (e.g. the issues of partial qualifications, how to apply the principle of best fit, procedures and operational structures).

Further development is needed to clarify questions relating to the learning outcomes approach in terms of concepts and sound assessment methodologies and tools. How to balance outcome orientation and input factors will be one of the central questions to be answered in the near future, as will be the question of whether learning outcomes are to be implemented in a coherent way across different education and training subsystems (general, VET and HE).

Another issue to be dealt with is the integration of non-formal qualifications and validation of non-formal and informal learning in the NQF developments and equivalences of qualifications.

Experience until now has shown that stakeholder involvement in all phases of the NQF development is both crucial and beneficial. In Austria, a good platform for cooperation between different stakeholders has been created. Further involvement of stakeholders to strengthen ownership and commitment will be needed. To ensure successful NQF implementation implies the need to engage and include education and training providers and universities.

Good cooperation in further development of the NQF for lifelong learning and the QF for HE will be needed to establish conditions for better progression possibilities between different subsystems.

Main sources of information

Information on the consultation paper, the process and the research work is available on the website of the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture: <http://www.bmukk.gv.at/europa/index.xml> [cited 24.06.2010] and on the website of the Federal Ministry of Science and Research: http://www.bmukk.gv.at/europa/eubildung/nqr/nationaler_qualifikationsrah.xml [cited 24.06.2010]

BELGIUM

Belgium is in the same situation as the UK in terms of developing and implementing more than one NQF. This reflects the federal structure of Belgium giving the three communities wide-ranging autonomy in the way they organise their education, training and qualifications systems. While the German speaking community has not taken any initiative to develop an NQF, both the Flemish and the French speaking communities have done so. Though they started basically at the same time (2005-06) different pathways have been followed, reflecting the differences in the two systems. A key question for the coming period is whether, and to what extent, the two emerging frameworks will be linked together: the fact that the Federal level decides on when compulsory education starts and ends, and the number of years required, provides a basic starting point for both frameworks. Such a link and coordination is foreseen by the EQF recommendation and could, arguably, provide added value to Belgian citizens for mobility within in the country. The solution chosen by the UK, to present a joint and coordinated referencing report covering all the different qualifications frameworks and their own referencing to EQF, could be considered by Belgium as well.

Belgium (Flanders)

Introduction

On 30 April 2009 the Flemish Parliament and Government in Belgium adopted an Act on the qualification structure ⁽³⁵⁾ (*kwalificatiestructuur*) introducing a comprehensive qualification framework. This framework, based on an eight-level structure described by the two main categories of knowledge/skills and context/autonomy/responsibility, is now being implemented.

While the Flemish framework is seen as a precondition for referencing to the EQF, it is primarily an instrument for improving the national qualifications system. It

⁽³⁵⁾ The Flemish Government and Parliament Act on the qualification structure, 30 April 2009. The Flemish Community of Belgium is responsible for education and training policy and legislation in the Flemish Region and for Dutch-speaking education institutions within the Brussels-Capital region. The Flemish qualification structure is a classification of Flemish qualifications using an eight-level qualification framework.

is an integrated framework for professional qualifications and educational qualifications at all levels, including educational qualifications of higher education. The overall objective is to strengthen the transparency of qualifications and to clarify the mutual relations, vertically and horizontally, between these, to enhance communication on qualifications between education and the labour market and to strengthen the permeability between the different learning systems. A qualification framework for higher education linked to the Bologna process has been developed and implemented (2003). The relationship between the two framework initiatives has been intensively discussed throughout the development process and the 2009 Act takes this into account in its terminology, framework descriptors and procedures.

Following the 2009 Act the work on implementing the framework has started. A national conference of all main stakeholders was held in November 2009 and discussions are currently being held with social and educational partners on how to implement the Act.

Rationale and main policy objectives

The 2009 Act defines the Flemish qualification structure (FQS) as ‘a systematic classification of recognised qualifications based on a generally adopted qualifications framework (FQF)’. The qualification structure (including the qualification framework) aims at making qualifications and their mutual relations transparent, so that relevant stakeholders in education (students, pupils and providers) and in the labour market (social partners) ‘can communicate unambiguously about qualifications and the associated competences’ (2009 Act, Chapter I, Article 3).

The Act underlines that the qualification structure (including the qualification framework) should act as a reference for quality assurance, for the development and renewal of courses, for the development and alignment of procedures for the recognition of acquired competences, as well as for comparison (nationally and at European levels) of qualifications. The quality assurance of the pathways leading to recognised qualifications is being concretely followed up through the establishment of a new Flemish agency for quality assurance (Agentschap voor Kwaliteitszorg in Onderwijs en Vorming, AKOV). This Agency will cover all types and levels of qualification, except the higher education qualifications at level five to level eight ⁽³⁶⁾,

⁽³⁶⁾ The quality assurance of higher education qualifications from level five to level eight is followed up through the NVAO (Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie). The NVAO is the accreditation organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders for higher education established by an international treaty.

and can thus be seen as key to the overall credibility and success of the overarching framework, domestically as well as at European level (in relation to the EQF).

The Act further emphasises the role of the qualification structure and framework as a reference for validation of non-formal and informal learning and as an orientation point for guidance and counselling.

Involvement of stakeholders

The Flemish NQF process is based on a broad involvement of stakeholders at all stages of the process, coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Training. Other relevant ministries (labour and social economy, and culture, youth, sports and media) have also been involved in the development. From the education and training side the involvement of all relevant sectors (general education, initial vocational education, continuing vocational education and training, higher education, including short cycle higher education) has been important. The link and overlap between professional and higher or general educational qualifications has been a challenge and the active involvement of stakeholders representing the different levels and types of qualifications has been important.

The adoption of the framework in 2009 has moved the work into a new stage. Stakeholders are seeing progress and paying more attention to the details of its implementation. Work in vocational education and training is defining and describing qualifications in term of learning outcomes. These descriptions will be based on the job profiles (occupational standards) defined with the involvement of social partners. In 2009 there was a series of information sessions on the topic for stakeholders. A communication campaign to a broader public will be set up later in collaboration with the stakeholders.

Levels and descriptors

The decision to base the framework on an eight-level structure described by two main categories of knowledge/skills and context/autonomy/responsibility, reflects a development process which started in 2005. A first proposal contained a 10-level structure but – influenced by the discussion on the EQF – was reduced to eight levels. The relationship between professional and higher education qualifications became a focus of discussions. It was acknowledged that while higher education institutes (universities and university colleges) have a ‘monopoly’ on the bachelor, master and doctorate titles, this does not rule out the parallel (at levels six to eight)

placing of vocationally oriented qualifications. Several stakeholders (for example representing the adult education institutions providing higher VET courses for adults) asked explicitly for the placing of particular VET qualifications at levels five or six. The identification of this 'grey zone' between academically and vocationally-oriented higher education qualifications resulted in the adoption of a set of descriptors using the same general logic at all levels.

Representatives from higher education argued that the EHEA (Dublin) descriptors would be the optimal way of describing levels six to eight as it would allow for a direct integration of the HE framework into the new NQF. This was also linked to an argument that the learning outcomes at levels six to eight could best be focused on the category of 'knowledge'. This was not accepted by the majority of stakeholders recognising the need for broad descriptors covering more qualifications: academic, educational and professional.

Another important discussion in the development phase was the question of how to understand the lowest level of the framework. Should there, for example, be an access level leading into level one? Social partners particularly expressed the fear that introducing a 'lowest level' (level one or an access level below level one) could have a negative, stigmatising effect. In the adopted proposal, level one is defined as a starting, not access, level.

Use of learning outcomes

The learning outcomes approach is not new to Flemish education and training: there is broad political support for the approach. Progress on practical implementation varies, in particular when looking at teaching methodologies and assessment practices. The continuing VET sector is probably the most experienced in this field. A competence-based approach is well integrated, referring to professional requirements in the labour market. The use of competences in the Flemish initial VET system has, in recent years, been inspired by Dutch developments (in particular the MBO reform). Learning outcomes are also present in general education, for example by the setting of learning objectives in national core curricula. The developments in higher education have been influenced by the Bologna process, but are mainly dependent on initiatives taken at the level of single institutions or associations of higher education institutes. While reflecting a diverse situation, a clear shift to learning outcomes can be observed in Flanders. The insistence on a learning outcomes approach in the Bologna process has partly influenced university practices. Work continues in vocational education and training to define and describe qualifications in terms of learning outcomes. These

descriptions will be based on the job profiles (professional standards) defined with the involvement of social partners.

The learning outcomes approach is the key to the new Flemish framework. The 2009 Act underlines that the two main types of Flemish qualifications, professional and educational, are 'well defined sets of competences to which a level of the Flemish qualification framework is assigned' (2009 Act, section II, articles 8 and 9). In professional qualifications these sets of competences are to be exercised within a profession; in educational qualifications they indicate what is required to function and participate in society, to exercise professional activities, and to progress in education and training. The Act stresses that both professional and educational qualifications can be found at all eight levels of the framework. This signals an explicit move away from an input-based (provider-based) way of categorising and levelling qualifications.

The new qualification structure strengthens the position of qualifications standards in the Flemish qualification system. These standards are seen as essential for describing and defining the sets of competences referred to above and as necessary for increasing the coherence of the system. Without such coherence, introducing a certain common core of competences across institutions, transfer of qualifications will be difficult, creating dead-ends and slowing down progression.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is identified as one of the objectives to be aided and pursued by the NQF. Some progress has already been made, both in vocational and higher education. There are regulations, agreements and arrangements in place and there is clearly a system but these are currently piecemeal and somewhat fragmented. Therefore implementation remains not systematic and results remain limited in terms of mobilisation of institutions and impact on the population. An interministerial working group will outline an integrated validation approach addressing adults over 18 years of age based on the Flemish qualifications structure. Compared to other countries, notably neighbouring countries like France and the Netherlands, the Flemish system has still some way to go for validation to become generally accessible and recognised as credible by the general public.

Referencing to the EQF

The referencing report is expected to be prepared in 2010-11. The EQF coordination point was designated in February 2010: it is the new Flemish agency for quality assurance (Agentschap voor Kwaliteitszorg in Onderwijs en Vorming, AKOV), The committee for the referencing will be set up during 2010.

Important lessons and the way forward

Although in Flanders and Belgium there is a long tradition of involving stakeholders and social partners in education and training policy and legislation, the development and maintenance of an overarching classification of qualifications (like the FQS) requires continuous dialogue with all relevant stakeholders and delivery of suitable information to the different subgroups. This is a continual and very delicate task for policy-makers and qualification agencies.

Another challenge encountered in the development of the overarching Flemish framework was to find acceptable solutions to linking the existing higher education framework and procedures and the other parts of the qualifications structure: VET and general non-higher education. This discussion can be generally interpreted as a clash between a traditional input-based (institute-based) approach and the new learning outcomes approach. A learning outcomes approach (exemplified by the 2009 Act) will argue that qualifications should be attributed to levels according to the sets of competences, not according to its institutional origin. The input-based approach would argue for the opposite; because a qualification is located outside a particular institutional context (e.g. outside a higher education institute) the assignment of a level should be restricted to a certain level (e.g. not higher than level five of EQF). The Flemish experiences in this field are highly relevant both inside and outside Belgium and should be carefully examined in the time to come.

Main sources of information

The Act of 30 April 2009 is downloadable in English on
http://www.evcvlaanderen.be/files/DecreetVKS_ENG.pdf [cited 24.06.2010]

Belgium (Wallonia)

Introduction

The French Community of Belgium (the Walloon region and the French Community of Brussels) has been working on a national qualifications framework linked to the EQF since 2006. The work on a qualifications framework for higher education, linked to the Bologna process, has been going on in parallel. Although there is broad agreement on the need for an NQF as well as for the need to link Belgian qualifications to the European framework(s), the question of how to combine the

overarching perspective of the EQF with the more limited, sector approach of the EHEA has still to be fully solved.

Following the change in government in autumn 2009 some progress can now be observed. A national coordination point for the EQF referencing will be established from September 2010. This NCP, under the responsibility of the *Service francophone des métiers et des qualifications* (SFMQ), will also be responsible for coordinating issues related to validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Suggestions have now been made, following the change of government, to build a framework on the principles outlined in Flemish qualifications framework (see above). This could possibly help to address and strengthen the links between the increasingly diverse education and training systems of the Belgian communities and give citizens a better understanding of how they relate to each other. A clarification of this is expected before mid-2010.

Rationale and the main policy objectives

The main rationale for pursuing a comprehensive NQF is to increase the transparency of the existing education and training system. The framework is not, at least at this stage, seen as an instrument for reform of existing institutions and structures.

The work on a comprehensive NQF responding to the EQF was initiated by the joint government of the Belgian French Communities and Region (Wallonia and Brussels) in March 2006. The high level intergovernmental group (GIHN) was entrusted with the task of analysing the implications of the EQF, how to involve stakeholders and how to take forward testing and piloting. GIHN presented a report to the joint government in October 2006 outlining the main principles and objectives of an NQF. This report emphasised that the framework is mainly an instrument for transparency; it should not have any direct/automatic influence on decisions regarding recognition of individual certificates or diploma. The report further emphasised that the framework should aid the development of other tools and instruments for transparency, notably validation of non-formal and informal learning and credit transfer. Importantly, the proposal outlined a staged approach to the positioning of qualifications according to a learning outcomes-based reference structure.

The Belgian NQF for LLL (W) and higher education

The French speaking community of Belgium has been developing a qualifications framework for higher education since 2007. This work is still in progress and is expected to lead to self-certification to the EHEA by 2010-11. The work on the QF for HE has been going on in parallel to the work on the qualifications framework for LLL and there is a reluctance in the higher education sector to associate itself with a comprehensive, EQF-related framework. The approval in May 2008 of a separate decree binding levels six-to eight to the bachelor, master and doctorate cycles of the EHEA confirmed this. Higher qualifications awarded outside the university sector were effectively prevented from being placed at one of these levels, even in cases where their profile and content would recommend such a levelling. In the period following 2008 the discussion on the link between higher education and the remaining parts of education and training has continued. Although still not formally expressed, a common view seems to be that levels six to eight need to be opened up to non-academic qualifications, for example advanced vocationally or professionally oriented qualifications. It is emphasised, and in line with the original 2006 proposal, that such a levelling is for transparency purposes only, it will not imply an automatic recognition of equivalences. Still to be formally confirmed, the change of government in autumn 2009 led to a reconsideration of the issue, possibly leading to stronger link between the two framework initiatives, using the approach of the Flemish framework allowing both academic and professional qualifications to be awarded at levels six to eight.

Involvement of stakeholders

The NQF initiative was undertaken by the joint government of the French region and initially followed up by a high level intergovernmental group. This somewhat centralised approach has been balanced in the practical follow up to the proposal throughout 2007-10. Although not approved in 2006, the original proposal from the GIHN has been followed up and further elaborated in a technical working group (FOREM ⁽³⁷⁾, IFAPME ⁽³⁸⁾, Brussels Formation and Ministry of Education). Their proposal has resulted in broad testing of an 'NQF methodology' involving stakeholders (teachers, social partners) from approximately 50 areas of trade and vocation. In spite of the lack of political clarification, the testing and piloting phases

⁽³⁷⁾ Le service public wallon de l'emploi et de la formation.

⁽³⁸⁾ Institut wallon de formation en alternance et des indépendants et des petites et moyennes entreprises.

have resulted in a wide involvement of stakeholders. This testing now forms an important base for the further development of the framework.

The involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in the development of a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning may prove to be beneficial for the development of the NQF. Since 2006 a growing number of individuals have had their work experiences validated (more than 2000 last year) for a title of competences. This title is not the same as a qualification. While it can form part of a qualification, it is supposed to carry an independent value in the labour market, making visible prior learning and achievement of the individual in question. Due to their recent introduction, these titles are still relatively new to employers. Their future value will depend on the extent to which they are integrated into the NQF and how they are linked to (the better known) certificates and diploma.

Levels and descriptors

An eight-level structure is envisaged, largely reflecting the EQF descriptors. It is not clear at this stage whether the Flemish proposal to distinguish between knowledge and skills on the one hand and context, autonomy and responsibility on the other hand will be taken into account when taking the NQF structure forward.

The question of entry levels, as raised by the UK and Iceland, has not been addressed by the French region. It is acknowledged, however, that the future framework needs to take into account the reintegration of drop-outs (in particular from VET) and to articulate a strategy for access and progression.

Use of learning outcomes

In the French-speaking region of Belgium, learning outcomes are integral to a range of recent and continuing reforms⁽³⁹⁾. These outcomes are, however, described in various ways and the extent to which they influence education and training practices differs. In compulsory education and training, learning outcomes are described in terms of *socles de compétences* and *compétences terminales*. For adult and higher education the term used is *capacités terminales*. In vocational education and training work continues to define and describe qualifications in terms of learning outcomes. These descriptions will be based on the job profiles (professional

⁽³⁹⁾ Cedefop (2009). *The shift to learning outcomes: policies and practices in Europe*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. (Cedefop reference series; 72). Available from Internet: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/3054_en.pdf [cited 24.06.2010].

standards) defined with the involvement of social partners. The insistence on a learning outcomes approach in the Bologna process has also influenced university practices. The autonomy of universities means that the decision to apply learning outcomes has to be made by the institution itself, resulting in varying practices.

An interesting part of the NQF developments in this region of Belgium is the methodology for placing qualifications at learning outcomes-based NQF levels. This methodology is relevant also for other countries and can illustrate the challenges – and opportunities – inherent in applying a ‘best fit’ approach. The methodology is based on the following four steps (and questions):

- (a) is it possible to position the qualification? In answering this it must be considered whether the qualification in question is relevant (to the labour market or as part of education and training progression), whether it is defined and awarded by an appropriate and authorised authority, whether there is a clear assessment procedure, and whether there is a title delivered at the end of the learning process?
- (b) how is the qualification positioned to the levels and descriptors of the NQF and the EQF? In answering this, the following are considered: the type of activity, the context of the activity and as the expected level of responsibility and autonomy;
- (c) how does this qualification relate to other (equivalent) qualifications and to regulations in the labour market (and elsewhere)?
- (d) at what level should the qualification be positioned? Based on the three steps described above a recommendation will be made. The decision on the positioning of the qualification is seen as important not only for transparency reasons, but also as a reference point for quality assurance and reform.

Referencing to the EQF

The referencing to the EQF is seen as an integrated part of the overall work on the NQF. An EQF national coordination point will be established September 2010. As the development of the framework itself has been considerably delayed, a referencing to the EQF will probably not take place until the end of 2011 or the beginning of 2012.

Important lessons and the way forward

The experiences of the French-speaking region of Belgium show the importance of finding a workable link between higher education and the remaining parts of the education and training system. The Belgian experiences demonstrate the highly politicised character of NQF developments, warning against treating them as purely technical or administrative arrangements.

BULGARIA

Introduction

Bulgaria is currently developing a comprehensive, learning outcomes based national qualifications framework (NQF) covering all levels of the education and training system and their corresponding qualifications/degrees. The new Bulgarian government, acting since July 2009, see the NQF as a precondition for implementing the EQF and an important national priority ⁽⁴⁰⁾.

The development of an NQF is given high priority in the programme of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science (2009–13) ⁽⁴¹⁾. According to the 2010 action plan, a NQF draft is to be ready by 15 December 2010.

In April 2008, a task force was set up by order of the Minister of Education to develop proposals on how to relate the national qualification degrees to the EQF, to prepare a plan for sectoral qualifications development, and to submit a proposal for changes in the national legislation.

A separate task force prepared a draft qualifications framework for HE, based on Dublin descriptors. It also aligned the national descriptors of the existing higher education structure (BA, MA and Doctorate) introduced by the Higher Education Act (1995) with the cycles and descriptors introduced in the context of the European higher education area (EHEA). A draft set of national HE-descriptors has been elaborated as well.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Programme for the European Development of Bulgaria (2009 – 2013). Available from Internet: <http://www.mlsp.government.bg/bg/03.11.2009FINAL-ednostranen%20pechat1.pdf> [cited 10.5.2010].

⁽⁴¹⁾ *Programme for Development of Education, Science and Youth Policies (2009 – 2013)*. Ministry of Education, Youth and Science). Available from Internet: www.minedu.government.bg [cited 10.5.2010].

A draft set of descriptors for VET levels of the NQF were designed in January 2010. They are based on learning outcomes and are constructed by degrees of vocational qualification.

The work on the general education levels is forthcoming, taking into account the new secondary education structure to be set by a Law on school and pre-school education development to be adopted. This new educational structure will reflect onto the NQF levels.

The broad policy framework for NQF development includes:

- (a) the national programme for school and pre-school education development (2006–15), which sets out the new structure of secondary education;
- (b) the national lifelong learning strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria (2008–13);
- (c) the national strategy for continuing vocational training (2005–10);
- (d) acts governing different subsystems of education and training (in school education, VET, HE).

It is planned that a decree on the introduction of the NQF will be adopted by the Council of Ministers.

The rationale and main policy objectives

The overall objective of developing and introducing a comprehensive NQF compatible with the EQF and the QF-EHEA is to make the levels of the Bulgarian educational system clearer and easier to understand by describing them in terms of learning outcomes. This will improve the extent to which all target groups and stakeholders are informed about the national qualifications. It is hoped that this will raise trust in the education and training system and make mobility and recognition of qualifications easier. More specific aims addressed by NQF development are to:

- (a) develop a device with translation and bridging function;
- (b) promote mobility within the education system and in the labour market;
- (c) promote learning outcomes orientation of qualifications;
- (d) support validation of prior learning, including non-formal and informal learning;
- (e) strengthen orientation towards a lifelong learning approach;
- (f) strengthen cooperation between stakeholders.

Having a single NQF document which includes all qualifications that can be acquired in formal education and training is expected to make designing sectoral qualifications frameworks easier. These will make qualifications in the different economic sectors more transparent and aid recognition of qualifications.

Involvement of stakeholders

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Science has a leading role in drafting the NQF and coordinating its implementation. The European Integration and International Cooperation Directorate in the Ministry of Education and Science is responsible for coordinating the development work in which a broad range of stakeholders is involved.

The task force responsible for drafting the NQF includes experts from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science, including the Bulgarian representative in the Bologna Follow Up Group, the National Agency for VET, and the National Information and Documentation Centre.

In January 2010 the task force was enlarged with the representatives from Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, employers' organisations, trade unions, representatives from the Rectors' Conference and representatives from the other national quality assurance bodies in education and training (National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency and the Quality Evaluation and Control in Education Centre to the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science).

The draft NQF will be submitted to the working group on Education, mutual recognition of professional qualifications, youth, science and research (working group 16), where representatives of the responsible ministries and other institutions and stakeholders including social partners participate. The Council of European Affairs will also be involved in commenting on the NQF draft.

A broad national consultation process is planned to take place between January and April 2011. It is foreseen that the proposal will be officially approved and adopted by the Council of Ministers in form of a decree in October 2011.

Levels and descriptors

The NQF draft comprises eight levels and takes into account the specific features of the national education system.

Levels 6 to 8 in the draft are described according to the descriptors of the QF-EHEA and levels 1 to 5 in terms of knowledge, skills and competence. The expected learning outcomes of qualifications reflect the legal acts governing different subsystems of education and training (see below). The draft also takes into account the ISCED 97 approach to provide correspondence between the NQF levels and ISCED, thus seeking to combine the outcomes based approach with input-factors.

Use of learning outcomes

For the general education part and VET, standards are defined by the State educational requirements on the educational contents and the State educational requirements on acquisition of qualification by professions.

The state educational requirements are developed by expert groups, evaluated by tripartite committees (state institutions, employers, employees' representatives) and approved by the Minister of Education, Youth and Science.

In general education, the State educational requirements are related to the curriculum and the syllabus for each subject, as well as the knowledge and skills expected after the completion of the respective educational level.

The State educational requirements in VET include access requirements, a brief description of the profession, learning objectives, learning outcomes, requirements about facilities, and required qualifications of teachers and trainers. Learning outcomes are defined as knowledge, skills and personal capabilities.

For higher education, there are State educational requirements for acquisition of higher education at educational and qualification degrees of bachelor, master, and specialist (2003); they set the expected learning outcomes for each of these degrees. The specialist degree was replaced by the professional bachelor degree in 2007 by amendments and supplements of the Higher Education Act. At institution level there are qualification descriptions for each specialty (by educational and qualification degrees). These describe the knowledge, skills and competences to be acquired by the graduates.

Referencing to the EQF

The referencing to the EQF is seen an integrated part of the overall work on the NQF. Both the NQF draft and the first draft of the referencing report will be prepared by 15 December 2010.

A task force for NQF development was set up in April 2008 to develop a table of concordance of the national qualifications degrees to EQF by 2010.

The alignment of HE qualifications to the QF-EHEA was completed in 2007, but a self-certification report was not provided. Bulgaria decided to prepare one comprehensive referencing report to reference its NQF to the EQF and the QF-EHEA.

Main lessons and the way forward

One of the aims of the NQF is to provide greater system transparency. While the Bulgarian developments seek a comprehensive NQF addressing all levels and types of qualifications, the extent to which the framework will facilitate increased and simplified vertical and horizontal progression and transfer between education and training subsystems is not clear. The use of separate level descriptors for different parts of the framework may weaken the ability of the framework to influence existing borderlines between institutions and learning environments.

The development of sectoral qualifications frameworks (SQF) is considered very important. By SQFs the sectoral qualifications in economic sectors will be described in a more clear and transparent way for all target groups and stakeholders, using a learning outcomes approach and linking them to the credit system where applicable. It will also commit all the stakeholders and social partners by sectors to joining the process.

Main sources of information

The European Integration and International Cooperation Directorate in the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science is designated as the EQF national coordination point (NCP), <http://www.mon.bg> [cited 24.06.2010]

CROATIA

Introduction

Croatia is developing a comprehensive, learning outcomes based NQF (the Croatian qualifications framework for lifelong learning, CROQF). It will link and coordinate different education and training subsystems. The main outline of the framework, reflecting the proposal of a national, high level committee, was adopted by the government in 2009. The report ⁽⁴²⁾ lays down the theoretical basis for the CROQF (key concepts, number of levels, level descriptors, criteria for defining learning outcomes and volume and further steps to be taken). A decree regulating

⁽⁴²⁾ *Hrvatski kvalifikacijski okvir, Uvod u kvalifikacije/ Croatian Qualifications Framework, Introduction into Qualifications*. 2009. Available from Internet: http://personal.unizd.hr/~mdzela/hko/HKO_Prirucnik.pdf [cited 18.3. 2010].

the implementation of the CROQF will be adopted in 2010. Qualifications in the HE area will constitute integral part of the proposed NQF for LLL.

The work on the CROQF started in 2006 and was given its current direction through the adoption, in 2007, of a five-year action plan and programme for 2008–12. The following steps were outlined:

- agree on a theoretical basis and instructions for the CROQF development with examples of qualifications (2009);
- develop guidelines for curricula development, proposal for legislative changes (2010);
- initiate a curriculum development process (2011–12).

The time-schedule indicated by the action plan has largely been held and continues to form the basis of the process.

Rationale and the main policy objectives

Apart from its transparency function, the CROQF is seen as an important tool for reforming the national education and training system. It is a generally held view that the CROQF would be able to address and respond to some of the current needs of Croatian society and education and training. Besides helping the link to the EQF, and thus making Croatian qualifications better understood abroad, the framework is seen as reflecting national needs and priorities and as an instrument making it possible to develop and implement new education and training solutions specific to the Croatian context. There is a need to:

- (a) better link education and training with labour market needs;
- (b) improve social inclusion and equity;
- (c) improve pathways between subsystem and between sectors;
- (d) make qualifications transparent and more consistent;
- (e) support lifelong learning and offer a good basis for validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- (f) support quality assurance arrangements.

The short-term objective is to make the different types of qualifications more transparent and learning achievements and the system more understandable for individuals and employers. The framework platform allows partnership and commitment to develop.

In the medium and longer term it is expected that CROQF will contribute to making the qualification system and qualifications more coherent and consistent, thus improving access and progression possibilities. This should also make it easier to develop procedures and standards for validating and recognising non-formal and

informal learning, help to improve responsibility and accountability of institutions and promote lifelong learning.

Involvement of stakeholders

There is a strong political commitment to the new NQF developments, including in the Government.

The work was initiated in 2006 by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports. The High Level Committee for the CROQF development was established in September 2007, was chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and comprised 27 members, representing different ministries, social partners, schools, universities and agencies. The committee cooperated closely with the Bologna follow-up group and lately also with the National Curricula Committee.

In April 2008, an operational team, composed of members of different ministries, social partners, and agencies, was established by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports to support the High Level Committee. Its main tasks are to prepare documents for adoption by the committee and conduct research.

In February 2010 a new High Level Committee for putting the CROQF in place was formally established with 20 members, representing different ministries and all stakeholders, from students to employers. It is chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister. At the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports a new operational team has been established. It consists of members from the ministry (management), of all relevant national agencies and centres (implementation), and national and international experts (advice).

Levels and descriptors

The CROQF is a qualifications and credit framework. It has eight reference levels, in line with the EQF, but with additional four sublevels at levels 4 (4.1, 4.2), 5 (5.1, 5.2), 7 (7.1, 7.2) and 8 (8.1, 8.2), reflecting the particularities of the Croatian qualification system. Each qualification will be defined in terms of profile, reference level and the volume (measured as credit points). For example, a qualification with the volume of minimum 180 ECVET points (from which a minimum 120 ECVET points are acquired on the fourth reference level or higher) will be referenced to the level 4.1. For a qualification at level 4.2 min. 240 ECVET points are required (of them a minimum 180 ECVET points on the fourth reference level).

Level descriptors are defined in terms of knowledge (theoretical and factual) and skills (cognitive and practical and social skills are included). A third column is defined as responsibility and autonomy. It is emphasised that key competences should be included in each qualification ⁽⁴³⁾.

The CROQF introduces two classes of qualifications, 'full' and 'partial'.

Use of learning outcomes

The shift to learning outcomes is seen as an essential part of the CROQF development and is supported by all relevant stakeholders.

A wider committee of experts from all stakeholders was nominated in September 2007, whose role has been to define common standards. They have served as a base for development of more concrete descriptions for all qualifications, using measurable learning outcomes and competences. A methodology has been prepared.

The VET reform agenda includes a move towards an outcome-based approach in standards and curricula. Pilot occupational standards and outcomes-based curricula are being developed in adult education. A new approach to evaluation of schools outputs introduces a system of common final exams for grammar schools and other four-year secondary schools in Croatian language, mathematics, the first foreign language, and the mother tongue for ethnic minority pupils.

Higher education has been subject to extensive changes. The decision (in 2001) to take part in the Bologna process has made it necessary for Croatia to adjust significantly its higher education system. Setting up of undergraduate (first cycle) and integrated (second cycle) programmes started in 2005. The change of curricula is aiming at development of competences needed on the labour market, but the functional link between higher education institutions and the labour market, and social community in particular, has not yet been well established.

Croatia is considering the introduction of arrangements for validating non-formal and informal learning, largely in response to the requirements of the European integration process and more specifically to the requirements for participation in the Integrated Lifelong Learning European Community programmes. A government agency for adult education was recently established. It will be in charge of accrediting non-formal education providers.

⁽⁴³⁾ *Hrvatski kvalifikacijski okvir, Uvod u kvalifikacije/ Croatian Qualifications Framework, Introduction into Qualifications*. 2009. p. 47. available on Internet http://personal.unizd.hr/~mdzela/hko/HKO_Prirucnik.pdf [cited 18.3. 2010].

Referencing to the EQF

Referencing process of the CROQF to the EQF is planned to start in 2010 and expected to be completed in 2011. International experts and representatives of the main national and international partners will be involved. The second stage of the EQF implementation, introducing a reference to the EQF in all new qualifications, should be completed by 2012.

Lessons learned and the way forward

The relatively rapid and successful development of the CROQF illustrates the importance of stimulating active and broad participation throughout the entire process. If complemented by targeted support to and training of stakeholders, this can point towards genuine partnerships. The involvement of the deputy prime-minister in the initial process may also have contributed to the success as it signals the priority attributed to the initiative. Active collaboration at international level can also provide new insights, help develop adequate expertise and mirror broader national development.

How to engage institutions and groups of interests have proved challenging tasks. However, some effects are already visible: strong demand for information from different groups signal increased awareness and interest in the CROQF and its potential benefits; cooperation among different stakeholders has been strengthened. A progressive, step-by-step development is emphasised.

Main sources of information

The EQF national coordination point (NCP) for Croatia is the High Level National Committee for the CROQF Implementation, Croatian Government, <http://hko.vlada.hr> [cited 24.06.2010].

CYPRUS

Introduction

Cyprus is developing a comprehensive national qualifications framework (NQF), which will include all levels and types of qualifications in line with the qualification framework for the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) and the EQF for lifelong learning.

The system of vocational qualifications is under way and will constitute an integral part of the proposed NQF.

A decision to create a comprehensive NQF was taken by the Council of Ministers in 2009. In line with this decision, a committee for design, implementation and monitoring of the NQF development was set up. A first NQF draft with timetable for implementation was prepared in April 2010 and consultation is planned to take place in autumn 2010.

A law on NQF implementation is expected to be adopted by the end of 2010.

Rationale and the main policy objectives

Main policy objectives to be realised through NQF development are:

- (a) aiding the comparability of national qualifications in Europe;
- (b) improving transparency, quality and relevance of qualifications;
- (c) enabling increased progression and mobility;
- (d) strengthening the link with the labour market;
- (e) strengthening the partnerships between different subsystems of education and training.

Involvement of stakeholders

The General Directorate for Vocational and Technical Education of the Ministry of Education and Culture has initiated and coordinates the NQF developments.

The committee in charge comprises representatives from the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance and the Human Resources Development Authority.

Levels and descriptors

An eight-level reference structure is proposed to cover the main characteristics of the national qualification system and will be compatible with EQF principles and categories. EQF level descriptors are taken as a starting point for further developments. The discussion on the inclusion of partial qualifications with relevance for the labour market will be part of the national consultation process.

Use of learning outcomes

While more emphasis will be put on learning outcomes, input aspects will also remain important.

The gradual development taking into account different practices and expectations of different stakeholders is acknowledged.

A competence-based vocational qualifications system has been set up under the responsibility of the Human Resources Development Authority. It will support validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Assessment of VET courses is related to occupational standards.

Learning outcomes are being expressed as part of a subject and stage-based general education system. In the curriculum, learning outcomes are described as knowledge, skills and attitudes and awareness learners are expected to achieve at the end of each stage. There are level descriptors indicating the standards a learner should achieve, when awarded certificates at different levels of education.

Lessons learned and the way forward

Broad involvement of different stakeholders taking into account the specifics of the national situation and learning from good practices in other countries are important.

Main sources of information

Ministry of Education and Culture: <http://www.moec.gov.cy> [cited 24.06.2010]

CZECH REPUBLIC

Introduction

The Czech Republic is currently developing a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) for lifelong learning. The aim is to produce a comprehensive NQF covering all types of qualifications in all subsystems of education and training.

Work on an NQF started in 2005. Eight levels were proposed and level descriptors drafted mainly by VET stakeholders. In 2009, the project Q-Ram started. The goal of this project is to develop a QF for HE. Whether this framework will be a sub-framework of a comprehensive NQF or a parallel framework remains to be discussed and decided.

Soon after drafting the NQF, work started on a new national qualifications system (NQS). The core of the new NQS is a publicly accessible register of all complete and partial qualifications and their qualification and assessment standards. The objective is to create a transparent overview providing comprehensive information on qualifications to pupils and students, parents, employers, schools and those interested in education.

The Act on the Verification and Recognition of Further Education Results (2006) ⁽⁴⁴⁾ is of fundamental importance to these developments as it establishes the legislative basis on which the NQS is built. The NQF and the NQS together form important elements of the overall lifelong learning strategy of the Czech Republic.

From 2005 to 2008, two projects (the NSK project on the development of NQS, and UNIV project on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning) run by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports sought to develop and partially implement the NQF and the NQS. They were funded with support from the European Social Fund (ESF). Both significantly reinforced the role and influence of the social partners (especially employers) on the qualifications structure as well as the contents and implementation of educational programmes leading to qualifications.

In 2009, a new ESF-funded project of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports called The development and implementation of the NQF and NQS (NSK2) was started. It will complete and support further NQF and NQS development. The part of the NQF concerned with the tertiary subsystem will be designed under the Q-RAM project.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ The Act No. 179 of 30 March 2006 on Verification and Recognition of Further Education Results is available on the <http://www.msmt.cz/areas-of-work/the-act-on-the-recognition-of-further-education-results> [cited 24. 06. 2010].

Both projects, as they link to VET and HE respectively, will address qualifications at levels five and six. These levels present a special challenge and discussions continue. There are plans to reform higher professional schools (implemented since 1995) which offer tertiary professional programmes (lasting from 3 to 3.5 years) to correspond better to the level five.

Rationale and the main policy objectives

The NQF and NQS developments can be seen as key instruments in a national strategy aiming at an open area of lifelong learning and a more permeable education and training system. The main elements of this strategy, reflecting identified and agreed needs, are as follows:

- (a) linking the subsystems in the national education system and improving its permeability;
- (b) making the whole system more readable for all stakeholders, namely learners and employers;
- (c) linking initial and continuing education and learning;
- (d) building the base for recognising learning outcomes irrespective of the way they were achieved;
- (e) systematic involvement of all stakeholders in vocational education and training and in the development of national qualifications;
- (f) response to European initiatives such as making qualifications more transparent and supporting the mobility of learners and workers;
- (g) support for disadvantaged groups and people with low qualification levels.

Involvement of stakeholders

The Act on the verification and recognition of results of further education, which came into force in 2007, sets out the basic responsibilities, powers and rights of all stakeholders.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports coordinates the activities of the central administrative authorities (ministries) and approves, modifies, removes and issues the list of partial and complete qualifications. It funds the activities of the National Qualification Council.

Authorising bodies (other ministries) grant authorisation to individuals or legal entities upon verification that they meet the requirements stipulated by the law. They monitor the fulfilment of requirements for assessment, collect data as set out in the

law and submit them to the National Institute of Technical and Vocational Education (NUOV) for central record keeping. They also participate in preparing and updating qualifications and assessment standards.

Authorised bodies (schools, associations, companies, public or private providers of further education, etc.) assess applicant learning outcomes regardless of the way they were achieved.

Social partners (chambers of employers, professional organisations, schools, representatives of universities) participate in the development of qualification and assessment standards.

The National Qualifications Council acts as an advisory body to the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS) in the area of qualifications.

NUOV manages and administers the NQS and, in cooperation with the National Qualifications Council, the MEYS, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and other stakeholders, prepares proposals of qualification and assessment standards and submits them for approval to MEYS, publishes qualifications and assessment standards, and includes them in the NQS.

The inclusion of social partners is voluntary and mostly consultative. Sectoral councils have been set up from 1998. Labour market involvement has been more systematic at upper secondary level and the aim of the project NSK2 and QRAM is to involve social partners in a more systematic manner at all levels.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports entrusted to NUOV, which is also the EQF national coordination point, the practical development and operational coordination of the NQF and NQS. The functions of the Czech NCP consist of:

- (a) the NUOV work group, which develops documents and proposals, provides the operational agenda, coordinates communication with all relevant national and international parties;
- (b) the advisory group, which focuses on consultation, the dissemination of information and evaluation of methodology and NCP outputs;
- (c) the work group of the National Qualifications Council, which will relate Czech qualifications levels to the EQF.

Levels and descriptors

In January 2010, the governing committee of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS) approved the document Qualification Levels in the National Qualification System with an eight-level qualification structure and the level descriptors.

The qualifications levels are differentiated by levels of competence. A conversion table refers to the EQF levels and includes references to the national system of occupations and the current education levels.

In the tertiary education system, the framework will consist of two layers. The general layer will be the national descriptors, based on the Dublin descriptors and partly incorporating the EQF descriptors. These descriptors will cover levels five to eight and address tertiary professional qualifications, bachelor, master and doctorate degrees. Drafting of these structured descriptors is at the final stage of development and approval of descriptors is expected in spring 2010.

The next layer will be based on subject specific benchmarks, i.e. the descriptors which cover specificities for a certain cluster of disciplines. These descriptors will be developed in cooperation with all stakeholders (see below); they will also reflect the needs of the labour market, will underline specificities of a respective cluster and will serve as contours for institutions to define the professional profile of their degree programmes.

Use of learning outcomes

A competence-based and learning outcomes oriented approach is common to VET and HE. It has broad political support. This is documented and confirmed by the curricular reform of vocational education (including relevant methodologies) and by the act on the verification and recognition of results of further education. It is embedded in the Czech lifelong learning strategy.

The competence model is the fundamental principle that links occupation, qualification, learning and educational programmes, examination, recognition and certification. It is not only applied in the NQS development, but also in the national system of occupations, allowing for better matching and mapping skill needs and supply.

Each competence has both a skill and a knowledge component. This implies that competences have not only a 'knowledge' dimension, i.e. field or discipline, but also an 'activity' dimension. The activity dimension is considered primary. The classification, therefore, starts from a two-level numerical code for the type of work activity, which was developed on the basis of detailed investigation and abstraction of work activities. To that, subject or discipline category is added, taking into account particular specialisations.

The qualifications and assessment standards represent the starting point for the development of comprehensive educational programmes. Students learn key competences and expand their general and vocational (professional) education. The

NQS consists of qualifications and assessment standards for complete and partial qualifications. Arrangements for the recognition of learning outcomes, including non-formal and informal learning, are currently being developed and the aim is to establish this as an integrated part of the NQS and NQF.

The School Act, which came into force in 2005, legally regulates curricular reform at secondary school level, emphasising learning outcomes and strengthening the influence of the social partners, especially employers. Key competences (ICT skills, learn to learn, problem solving) have become very important. Modularisation of courses was introduced to improve transferability between various pathways and initial and continuous education (ReferNet, 2008).

In the Q-RAM project (on the development of qualifications framework for the HE), the learning outcomes approach has been crucial in the development of generic descriptors and subject benchmarks and will be further promoted in specific study programmes.

Referencing to the EQF

The NCP (NUOV) will play a key role in the process (see above). A steering committee for referencing was set up in 2009. A draft report is expected to be prepared by 2010 and the final report by 2011. The MEYS is the responsible body that approves all proposals, decisions and documents prepared by the NCP.

Lessons learned and the way forward

The present situation in the development of the NQF and the NQS in the Czech Republic is the result of a targeted effort to create a system that will build on the good starting situation in vocational education and qualifications, will maintain the advantages related to this and will add new opportunities and the necessary European dimension. This development has been confirmed for a long time by activities that are directly connected to the description of qualifications and broad involvement of different stakeholders.

The new MEYS's project NSK2 and Q-RAM will build on the achievement and experience gained. They aim to address some current challenges, e.g. how to strengthen the vertical and horizontal permeability of the education and qualification system and to overcome the divide between pre-university and university education and better link VET and HE. This is exemplified by the current discussions and planned reform of higher professional schools. Both projects also aim to involve

labour market stakeholders in a more systematic manner in the qualifications development, not only at lower levels but also at levels five to eight.

The choice to link together the NQS/NQF approach with information systems developed for the labour market is interesting and shows the importance of agreeing on a conceptual approach (in this case competences) able to bridge qualifications and occupations.

In HE, there is the specific challenge for institutions of how to bridge the 'traditional' approach based on the curricula and courses into the 'modern' learning outcomes methodology. This work is just beginning, but there are some emerging interesting examples of the initiatives from within the HEIs which the Q-RAM project will use.

Main sources of information

The National Institute of Technical and Vocational Education (NUOV) is the EQF NCP, which manages the operational agenda and creates proposals of the NCP for the referencing qualifications levels to the EQF: <http://www.nuov.cz> [cited 24.06.2010]

Register on all approved qualification and assessment standards is available from <http://www.narodni-kvalifikace.cz/> [cited 24.06.2010]

Q-RAM project: <http://www.msmt.cz/european-union/ipn-in-the-field-of-tertiary-education-research-and-development/qualification-framework-for-tertiary-education> [cited 24.06.2010]

DENMARK

Introduction

A comprehensive Danish national qualifications framework for lifelong learning is currently being put in place. A detailed outline of the framework was agreed by all the main stakeholders and published by the Ministry of Education in June 2009. It provides the basis for an implementation stage to be finalised mid/end 2010.

The work on the framework was initiated in 2006 when an inter-ministerial group consisting of representatives from the ministries of education, research, technology and development, culture as well as economy was set up. The Danish NQF work is closely linked to continuing reforms of the education and training system, particularly in vocational education and training. The current proposal also builds on the

qualification framework for higher education established in 2006-07 and integrates this into the comprehensive framework. The idea of a comprehensive qualifications framework was first raised in the context of the 2005-06 work on a national strategy on globalisation (A Government strategy for Denmark in the global economy) where a coherent qualifications system aiming at permeability and transparency was emphasised. European developments also played a significant role and the setting up of the inter-ministerial group in 2006 was triggered by the preparatory work on the EQF launched by the European Commission and the Council in 2004-05.

Rationale and the main policy objectives

The main purpose of the Danish NQF is to provide a better overview over all officially recognised public qualifications in the Danish system ⁽⁴⁵⁾ and to support mutual recognition of Danish and foreign qualifications. This overview is supposed to make visible the pathways leading to a qualification, how they can be acquired and what they can be used for. Being fully based on a learning outcomes approach, the framework aims to make it easier to compare different degrees and certificates and to see how they relate to each other. The framework can also be a reference point for new qualifications, making it easier to identify their level and profile. The framework can thus be seen as an effort to realise an education, training and learning system always making it possible for individuals to progress, be this vertically or horizontally and irrespective of their prior learning, age or employment situation.

The following concrete purposes are listed. The Framework should

- (a) support lifelong learning by making visible the different pathways inherent in the education system;
- (b) create a basis for comparison and recognition within the Danish system and thus facilitate validation of non-formal and informal learning (*Realkompetanse*);
- (c) support mutual recognition of Danish and foreign qualifications by establishing a reference between the Danish NQF and the EQF;
- (d) through a focus on learning outcomes clarify the relationship between education and training and the labour market.

The main objective of the Danish NQF is to increase transparency and facilitate comparison and translation (domestically as well as internationally); it has limited regulatory functions for qualifications at levels one to five. The qualification framework for higher education, however, forms a part of the legal basis for Danish

⁽⁴⁵⁾ A qualification is defined as the 'outcomes of learning processes having been assessed and documented through the issuing of a publicly/officially recognised degree or certificate'.

higher education and has a regulatory function by law on accreditation of higher education.

A separate framework for VET was considered as part of work on reforming VET. However, it was decided, as part of the setting up the inter-ministerial working group, to adopt an approach including all public qualifications from compulsory school certificates to university degrees, emphasising overview, permeability and mutual recognition of qualifications (reference to EQF). Following lengthy discussions (mostly between the ministries involved) a solution was reached on an eight-level structure covering all existing levels and types of officially recognised public qualifications.

Involvement of stakeholders

In the proposal the following main stakeholders have been identified:

- (a) Danish and foreign pupils and students (who need a comprehensive overview over the system);
- (b) employers and employees (who need a framework for judging and comparing qualifications);
- (c) guidance and counselling services (who need a comprehensive overview);
- (d) Danish and foreign education and training institutions and authorities (who need a framework for overview, guidance and for aiding recognition);
- (e) political authorities and institutions (to describe, develop and evaluate education and training).

The inter-ministerial group set up in 2006 reflects this broad range of stakeholders and consisted of representatives from the ministries of education, research, technology and development, culture, and economy. The social partners have been systematically consulted and involved throughout the process by means of seminars, national consultation and involvement of relevant education councils and training committees, as have representatives of the different education and training institutions. The role of the social partners is being described as both positive and critical and their positive support to developments is seen as a precondition for moving towards implementation in 2010. Some social partners have seen the NQF as an instrument for national reform, but its European and international implications have been less emphasised. Other social partner representatives, notably employers, have questioned the direct added value for companies. Some concerns have been expressed by the social partners as regards the possible impact on curriculum development and existing governance structures and practices.

Levels and descriptors

The eight-level structure referred to above is defined by knowledge (*Viden*), skills (*Færdigheder*) and competences ⁽⁴⁶⁾ (*Kompetenser*). The Danish level descriptors have been based on a number of different sources, notably existing descriptions of learning outcomes in curricula and programmes, the EQF descriptors, and the Bologna descriptors. They have been designed to be relevant to different types of qualifications, theoretically as well as practically oriented. Knowledge descriptors emphasise the different types of *viden* involved, their complexity and the extent of understanding/comprehension required at a particular level. Skills descriptors focus on the types of *færdigheder* involved, the complexity of tasks to be solved and the communicative challenges. Competences are described by emphasising the context, the aspects of cooperation and responsibility and the aspect of learning (to learn).

These descriptors are currently being used to place national qualifications at their relevant levels. The placing of VET qualifications, in particular, has posed some challenges. While these qualifications were previously seen as belonging to one level, the introduction of staged qualifications in VET and the use of the learning outcomes approach has led to a more differentiated structure having VET qualification at more levels. This is presented as a positive development, promoting new flexible learning opportunities and making VET qualifications more attractive.

The Danish NQF for LLL and its link to higher education

Denmark approved its qualifications framework for higher education in 2008-09. This approval reflected a long preparatory period dating back to 2003. Denmark has played a very active role in promoting the framework concept in the Bologna cooperation. The first comprehensive report on the framework for qualifications in the EHEA was published by the Danish Ministry of science, technology and innovation in 2005.

Although applying the general descriptor approach outlined above at all levels, the new Danish NQF draws a clear distinction between levels 1-5 and levels 6-8 in the framework. Levels 6-8 are identical with the levels descriptors in the Danish QF for HE (Bologna) at bachelor, master and doctoral-level, and contain explicit references to research related outcomes. The difference is illustrated by the use of two different principles for referring qualifications to the framework. A qualification at

⁽⁴⁶⁾ Note that the Danish NQF, as opposed to the EQF, uses the plural 'competences'.

levels 1-5 are referred according to a 'best fit' principle where the final decision is based on an overall judgement of knowledge, skills and competences. A principle of 'full fit' is used for levels 6-8, as is the case for the Danish QF for HE, implying that qualifications at this level have to be fully accredited as meeting the legal requirements set by national authorities and according to the QF for HE for qualifications at these levels.

This distinction, which is not used by any other EU or EEA country, implies that all qualifications at levels 6-8 need to be defined and accredited according to the QF for HE. For the moment there are no publicly recognised qualifications in the Danish education system at level 6-8 that are not included in the higher education area (QF for HE), and a number of non-university qualifications have been or are expected to be accredited as bachelors and masters (for example related to arts, the armed services and police) and thus included in the qualifications framework for higher education.

The discussions on the best/full fit principle were quite intensive in period leading up to the 2009 proposal. While the distinction between best and full fit makes it clear that the Danish NQF consists of two clearly distinct elements, and thus will avoid any confusion, it may also be argued that the distinction will prevent development of higher level qualifications outside the strict cycle approach, for example in the form of part-qualifications addressing particular, knowledge, skills or competence dimensions.

Use of learning outcomes

The learning outcomes approach is widely accepted in all segments of the education and training system and is increasingly being used to define and describe curricula and programmes. VET, in particular, has a strong tradition in defining qualifications in terms of competence, but higher education and the different parts of general education are also making progress. It is being admitted, however, that it will be necessary to deepen the understanding of the learning outcomes approach at all levels, for example by developing guidelines.

Referencing to the EQF

The referencing to the EQF is treated as an integrated part of the overall implementation of the NQF. The Danish referencing report is planned for the beginning of 2011. The referencing of VET qualifications levels to the EQF may

prove a challenge. A coherent use of learning outcomes will make it necessary, according to a 'best fit' principle, to place existing VET qualifications at different levels of the national framework. Such a development is already in progress with introduction of staged qualifications in the Danish VET system.

A NCP has been established (Danish Agency for International Education).

Important lessons and the way forward

Denmark has made rapid progress in developing the qualifications framework for lifelong learning. Based on the roadmap presented in June 2009, Denmark will have a fully developed NQF by end 2010 and will also have completed the referencing to the EQF by early 2011. This success has largely been achieved by accepting that not all problems can be solved immediately and a NQF will need to develop also beyond 2012.

The distinction between levels 1-5 and levels 6-8 is seen as a compromise solution to establish an overall coherent qualification framework, also including the levels and the qualifications of the Danish 'Bologna' qualification framework.

Another issue which raised, but not solved, is the potential inclusion of certificates and diploma awarded outside the public domain. This issue will be considered on the basis of the evaluation of the framework and further work on how inclusion of non-public certificates and diplomas can be included in the future development of the framework. An important lesson to be drawn from the Danish case is the need for a pragmatic, step-by-step approach.

Main sources of information

An information web-tool on the Danish qualification framework is to be developed and expected to be finalised by mid-2010.

The web page of the Danish NCP (IU) – Agency for International Education is: <http://en.iu.dk/> [cited 5.07.2010]

ESTONIA

Introduction

A comprehensive national qualifications framework for lifelong learning (NQF) is currently being developed in Estonia. ⁽⁴⁷⁾ It will encompass all qualifications from general, vocational, professional as well as higher education and training. The framework builds on a learning outcomes (competence) approach and supports validation of non-formal and informal learning in VET and HE.

The framework-initiative is based on the amended Professions Act which came into force in September 2008 ⁽⁴⁸⁾ and supports the transition from the present competence-based five-level qualification system to a new eight-level framework.

The qualifications framework for higher education, reflecting the principles of the European higher education area, was adopted in August 2007 and described by the higher education standard. It has three levels. The first level contains two qualification types assigned to the sixth level of the NQF: a bachelor's degree and applied higher education diploma. The second level contains a master's degree and is referenced to the seventh level, while the third level contains a doctorate degree assigned to the eighth level of the NQF. General descriptors follow the logic of Dublin descriptors, but are adjusted to the national needs. ⁽⁴⁹⁾

Qualifications at level 5 of the NQF are subject to intensive discussion in the country. The main question asked is whether VET or HE legislation should govern these types of curricula and qualifications (there are differences in theory/practice proportions, teacher's qualifications, financing mechanisms). Some post secondary technical education programmes have been upgraded into applied higher education programmes according to the needs of the labour market. ⁽⁵⁰⁾

The Estonian Qualification Authority (QA) (Kutsekoda) was established in 2001 with the aim of developing the professional qualifications system. Besides the

⁽⁴⁷⁾ The implementation of the EQF and the NQF has a broad political support. The Government of the Republic adopted a Development Plan for Estonian Vocational Education and Training System 2009-13, with focus on the implementation of the EQF, raising quality updating, curricula and recognition of prior learning. Available on http://www.jkhk.ee/orb.aw/class=file/action=preview/id=6092/EN_KH_arengukava_181109.pdf [cited 19.04.2010].

⁽⁴⁸⁾ Amended Professions Act (English version) is available on the website of the Estonian Qualifications Authority <http://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/kutsesysteem/oigusaktidkutseseadus> [cited 19.04.2010].

⁽⁴⁹⁾ VET Policy Report Estonia 2010. ReferNet.

⁽⁵⁰⁾ Reet Neudorf. 1996. *Survey on Tertiary Professional/Vocational Education*, available http://www.innove.ee/orb.aw/class=file/action=preview/id=5644/Tertiary_education_1997.pdf [cited 23. 03. 2010].

Ministry of Education and Research, this qualifications authority is the main institution involved in the implementation of the NQF however, other ministries, institutions (National Examination and Qualification Centre, employers, agencies, etc.) are involved. The Estonian QA has been organising the activities of professional councils as well as the development, amendment and improvement of the professional standards, and establishment of assessment criteria. The Estonian Qualification Authority is designated to act as EQF national coordination point since 2009.

These developments are supported by a number of European Social Fund (ESF) projects such as Development of the qualification system, Developing VET system, and Developing HE systems quality – Primus.

Rationale and the main policy objectives

The goal of the eight-level NQF is to improve the comparability between formal school-leaving certificates/diplomas and work-based (professional) competences and qualifications, which open the entrance to the labour market. In Estonia, the graduation certificate from a VET or HE institution alone does not give the graduate a professional qualification. The primary professional award (qualification) can be obtained by passing a professional examination by awarding bodies in the professions. Currently, only one third of VET graduates take this exam. According to the Professions Act, from 2011, VET and HE institutions, which have curricula based on professional standards and are accredited for the quality, could apply to become an awarding body of the professional qualifications together with the school leaving diploma or certificate.

In the past years, different sectoral approaches to understanding and using the previous five-level qualifications framework were developed, reflecting that occupational standards and educational programmes were relatively weakly linked.

The policy objectives addressed by NQF are:

- (a) improve the link between education/training and labour market;
- (b) increase consistency of educational offer and qualification system;
- (c) provide transparency for employers and individuals;
- (d) increase the understanding of Estonian qualifications;
- (e) introduce common quality assurance criteria;
- (f) support validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- (g) monitor the supply and demand for learning.

It is expected that development of the NQF will increase the coherence of the education and training system and help to introduce coherent methods for standard-

setting. The NQF is also seen as an instrument for broader involvement of stakeholders in education and training, thus potentially strengthening ownership and mutual trust.

Involvement of stakeholders

The main institutions involved in the development of the NQF are: the Ministry of Education and Research (coordinating body); the Ministry of Social Affairs; the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications; the Chamber of Commerce and Industry; the National Examinations and Qualifications Centre (REKK); the Qualifications Authority; the Confederation of Estonian Trade Unions; the Estonian Employers' Confederation; and the Estonian Employees' Unions' Confederation.

The Ministry of Education and Research coordinates and performs national monitoring on qualification preparation and development. The Qualifications Authority coordinates 16 professional councils and provides technical support to the Board (see below); it cooperates with other institutions e.g. The National Examinations and Qualifications Centre, The Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency (EKKA).

The Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Estonian Employers' Confederation and Central Federation of Trade Unions participate in professional councils which are responsible for preparing, amending, renewing or validating professional standards. The National Examination and Qualification Centre is responsible for preparing, registering and developing national VET curricula.

A Board of chairmen of professional councils has been introduced by the amended Professions Act to improve cross-sectoral cooperation and coherence in the qualification system.

The representatives of public affairs, employers and employees are represented in the Board of the Estonian QA, which makes strategic decisions for the authority. Technical support is provided by QA, which cooperates with other institutions, e.g. the National Examination Centre, Agency for Quality in HE.

Close cooperation with the Bologna implementation is ensured through the National Commission, which monitors the implementation of the ESF programme. Financial support is provided through ESF and national budget (financing of QA).

Levels and descriptors

The NQF is based on eight levels. Level descriptors of the NQF for LLL are identical to the EQF level descriptors. They are defined as knowledge (theoretical and factual), skills (cognitive skills – use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking – and practical skills, i.e. manual dexterity and use of methods, materials, tools and instruments) and scope of responsibility and autonomy. ⁽⁵¹⁾

As Estonian QF level descriptors are identical to the EQF level descriptors it is very important to develop quality criteria and procedures to assign qualifications types to NQF levels.

There is currently a discussion about including also partial qualifications in the NQF, which should have value on the labour market; and using units in the qualifications design.

Use of learning outcomes

There is strong will and support for introducing the learning outcomes approach as a part of the national reform programme for general education, VET and HE. Linked to this is an increased focus on recognition of prior learning. Teacher training is seen as a necessary part in realising this strategy, which also is supported by research projects.

The learning outcomes of different types of VET are described in the vocational education standard, which came into force in November 2009. Learning outcomes of vocational education correspond to levels II to IV of the NQS and are described at the level of minimum. The learning outcome approach describes professional knowledge and skills as well as transversal skills (communicative, social and self-awareness competence, independence and responsibility). All types of VET will be formally linked with NQF levels by the end of 2013.

The programmes in VET (currently 48 national programmes) are modularised and outcome-based. All the programmes will be reassessed in the future taking into consideration possible changes in the occupational (professional) standards, aiming at increased compatibility of educational and professional (occupational) qualifications. This will be step-by-step development in each sector. All initial VET study programmes will be learning outcomes based by 2014.

⁽⁵¹⁾ *Amended Professions Act* (English version) is available on the web site of the Estonian Qualifications Authority. Available from Internet:
<http://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/kutsesysteem/oigusaktidkutseseadus> [cited 24.06.2004].

As a result of a previous project, 700 professional standards (defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence) have been elaborated. A new model of occupational standards is to be gradually developed in the period 2008-13 as an obligatory basis for curriculum development. Estonia aims at integrating occupational and educational standards as a foundation for qualification standards.

Learning outcome based programmes have been implemented in HE institutions as from September 2009. The Universities Act and Applied Higher Education Institutions Act now allow for accreditation of prior and experiential learning in HE curricula. Similar amendments to the VET Institutions Act came into force in November 2009.

The adopted Estonian lifelong learning strategy emphasises the principle that all strategic national, regional and local documents should pay attention to the development of the lifelong learning system, including the recognition of prior learning and work experience.

Referencing to the EQF

The referencing report is expected to be prepared in 2010 and is planned to be presented to the EQF AG in June 2011.

Lessons learned and the way forward

A specific challenge in the last few years has been to improve methodological coherence across different sectors in standard-setting (700 standards followed different concepts). This experience has been important for the overall implementation of the learning outcomes approach in VET (and beyond) and crucial for improving communication between education and training and the labour market.

The five years of experience with a competence framework for VET will be used for further development of NQF and supporting more coherent national policies for lifelong learning. The NQF will act as a common reference point for education and the labour market and thus support mutual trust between education and the labour market; and recognition of learning outcomes acquired in different settings.

Main sources of information

The Estonian Qualification Authority is designated as EQF national coordination point (NCP) www.kutsekoda.ee [cited 24.06.2010]

Information on NQF development is available from Internet: <http://www.valew.eu/project-valew/project-partners/6-estonian-qualification-authority> [cited 24.06.2010]

The information about national VET curricula is available from Internet: <http://www.ekk.edu.ee/valdkonnad/kutseharidus/kutseoppe-riiklikud-oppekavad> [cited 24.06.2010] Information about accreditation of HE institutions is available from Internet: <http://www.ekak.archimedes.ee/en> [cited 24.06.2010]

FINLAND

Introduction

Finland is currently working on a comprehensive national qualifications framework (NQF) covering all officially recognised qualifications (general, vocational education and training and higher education). This work is based on the national development plan for education and research for the period 2007-12⁽⁵²⁾. According to the plan, the functioning and clarity of the Finnish qualifications system will be enhanced by preparing a national framework by 2010. A proposal for this framework (a National framework for qualifications and other competences), a basis for a wide-ranging consultation among all relevant stakeholders, was finalised on 30 June 2009. A public consultation was organised in the period August-October 2009. Approximately 90 statements from stakeholders were received.

The work on the Finnish framework started as late as August 2008 but has progressed rapidly since then. A qualification framework for higher education, in line with the Bologna process, has been developed since 2005 and will form an integrated part of the comprehensive framework for lifelong learning. According to the proposal which was finalised in June 2009, a new Decree regulating the framework should be prepared and it would be presented to the Finnish Parliament for adoption in 2010. This Decree will present the Finnish national framework for qualifications and other competence, including descriptors for each level.

⁽⁵²⁾ See: <http://www.minedu.fi/export/sites/default/OPM/Julkaisut/2008/liitteet/opm11.pdf> [cited 10.5.2010].

Rationale and the main policy objectives

The work on the Finnish NQF was directly triggered by the debate on the EQF. While Finnish stakeholders supported the idea of a European reference framework, they originally saw little added value of an NQF in Finland. The Finnish system, it was argued, was already transparent, it was already to a large extent based on a learning outcomes approach and it allowed users to build on and combine qualifications in a flexible way. Finland, therefore, expressed the opinion, for example in the 2006 response to the EQF consultation, that a referencing could be accomplished without an NQF. Now, reflecting the changes made to the 2006 EQF proposal from the Commission and following extensive national discussions, there is agreement that a NQF has a role to play and can add value. This is particularly related to the need to increase national and international transparency and to aid the comparability of qualifications. This can be done by improving the functioning and clarity of the national qualifications system, unifying and increasing recognition of prior learning and specifying the principle of lifelong learning, and emphasising a perspective focusing on a learning orientation and learning outcomes. The framework also provides a reference for future national developments. The introduction of a coherent set of learning outcomes based on levels is also seen as a way to aid the referencing to the EQF.

In the mandate given to the August 2008 working group it is emphasised that the NQF should include qualifications defined in the legislation of the Ministry of Education and other branches of the administration. It is further stated that the NQF will not include practices/requirements linked to the regulation of the labour market (regulating professional practices etc.). The mandate emphasises, however, the role of the framework for promoting validation of non-formal and informal learning (prior learning).

An issue which has been discussed but not concluded is how to open the framework up to 'qualifications' acquired outside the traditional, formal education and training system (for example originating from professional training in occupations or sectors). While such an opening is being stressed as an ambition, it is seen as a long term challenge requiring concrete solutions, not least as regards quality assurance arrangements.

Involvement of stakeholders

The Finnish NQF process has been organised to include as broad a range of stakeholders as possible. While initiated and coordinated by the Ministry of

