



BRIEFING NOTE

Qualifications frameworks in Europe: modernising education and training

European and national qualifications frameworks are making it clearer how different qualifications, levels and types of learning relate to each other

Qualifications, traditionally, are ordered and ranked according to learning inputs, namely the institution that awarded them and how long the studies took. In Europe this is changing and qualifications frameworks are playing an important role.

Covering all levels and types of qualifications, national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) are based on learning outcomes which explain what the holder of a certificate or diploma is expected to know, understand and be able to do. NQFs, by being linked to the European qualifications framework (EQF) (Box 1), also enable individuals and employers to compare the level of certificates and diplomas awarded at home and by other countries.

A clearer understanding of what qualifications mean will make it easier for people to move from one type or level of learning to another; for example, from general education to vocational education and training (VET), from school-based training to apprenticeships, or from upper-secondary to university and vice-versa. In all cases previous learning can be taken into account, enabling people to pursue the learning they want when they wish either at home or in another European Union Member State without unnecessary obstacles.

France, Ireland and the UK have had NQFs for many years. But the EQF, from 2004, has triggered the voluntary development of NQFs elsewhere in Europe. Cedefop is monitoring development and implementation of some 38 NQFs ⁽¹⁾ in 34 countries ⁽²⁾. Cedefop's latest report ⁽³⁾ shows that nearly all countries decided

that a national framework was the best way to link their qualifications to the European framework.

By the end of 2011 Belgium (Flanders), Czech republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal and the UK (England/Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) will have linked their qualifications levels to the EQF. The remaining countries expect to complete this process by 2012, or at the latest 2013. Inclusion of EQF levels in national certificates and diploma will start in 2012.

Box 1. European and national qualifications frameworks – the rationale

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

The European qualifications framework (EQF) creates a common reference framework to serve as a translation device between different qualifications systems and their levels, whether for general and higher education or for vocational education and training. The EQF aims to support lifelong learning and mobility and was formally adopted after four years of development in 2008⁽⁴⁾.

Different ambitions and purposes

International comparability of qualifications is important to all countries and it is one of the reasons behind the rapid emergence of NQFs. But their development throughout Europe very much reflects national objectives and needs.

⁽¹⁾ The UK has separate NQFs for England/Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. Belgium has one NQF for Flanders and one for the French and German speaking communities.

⁽²⁾ The 34 countries are the 27 EU Member States plus Croatia, Iceland, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway and Turkey. Switzerland is developing an NQF and is likely to join the European process in 2012.

⁽³⁾ Forthcoming at:
http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/6112_en.pdf

⁽⁴⁾ See http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm

Countries, such as Croatia, Iceland and Poland, see their NQFs as reforming frameworks which seek explicitly to improve the coherence, relevance and quality of the existing system. This may imply far-reaching changes such as developing new learning pathways and programmes or changing the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders. Other countries, for example Denmark and the Netherlands, see their NQFs as communication frameworks which aim to improve descriptions of existing qualifications systems and clarify available options for learners and policy makers. In effect, making better use of what is already there.

NQFs in France and the UK (England/Northern Ireland) have a regulatory role. Several other new NQFs will also act as a 'gate-keepers' for certificates and diploma awarded outside the public system. In these cases, as for example in Scandinavian countries, NQFs will play an independent role in defining the scope of national qualifications systems.

NQF design

Some 26 countries have proposed or adopted eight levels for their NQF. This consensus contrasts with the earlier frameworks. For example, Ireland's NQF has 10 levels. The UK (Scotland) NQF has 12. The French NQF is being revised from a 5 to an 8-level structure. Of the newer frameworks, Iceland's and Norway's both have seven levels. Slovenia has proposed 10.

Some countries, for example the Netherlands and the UK (England/Northern Ireland and Wales), have introduced entry (or access) levels in their frameworks to include and reward elementary level learning (below EQF level 1). These entry levels make visible and reward learning which does not add up to a full qualification but might, if combined with other learning, eventually do so. Many users may benefit from this approach, for example those with learning difficulties and early school leavers.

Developing level descriptors based on learning outcomes based for NQFs has been a challenge for all countries. This is illustrated by Germany and the Netherlands where the relationship between theory (knowledge) and practice (skills and competence) has come to the fore, being directly related to the question of whether vocationally and general academically oriented upper secondary education and training should be placed at the same level.

Overall countries have made efforts to adapt the EQF descriptors to their national context and needs. For

example, there is a trend among countries to specify further the 'competence' dimension of the EQF to capture better communication, social and professional competences. A group of countries, notably Germany, the Netherlands and Slovenia, refers to competences rather than learning outcomes in their frameworks. These countries see competence as an overarching concept, addressing a person's ability to use – in a self directed way – knowledge, skills, attitudes and other personal, social and methodological capacities at work or in study situations and for professional and personal development.

Most NQFs cover all officially recognised qualifications (general and higher education and VET) awarded by national authorities. Many countries, such as Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, intend to include in their NQFs certificates and diplomas delivered by enterprises or sectors which are not currently regarded as 'official' qualifications. This is an important development as it enables individual learners to see how learning outcomes from different contexts – public and private – are related and can be combined.

Development and state of play October 2011

Broad agreement on the importance and value of a European reference framework for qualifications has encouraged a coherent development of NQFs across Europe. Differences exist between countries, but there is convergence on basic principles and solutions. NQFs have developed in the following broad stages:

- **Conceptualisation and design;** countries analyse and define their NQF's rationale and policy objectives.
- **Consultation and testing;** the NQF proposal is presented to and discussed with a broad group of stakeholders, normally through public consultation.
- **Official establishment/adoption;** the NQF is adopted and established, usually through a decree, or law or a formal agreement between stakeholders.
- **Practical implementation;** the NQF starts being applied and institutions are required to comply with the new structures and methods. Potential end-users are informed about the NQFs purposes and benefits. Eventually the NQFs must deliver benefits to end users, individuals and employers.

Overall developments concerning NQFs, based on Cedefop's latest findings, are summarised in Box 2.

Box 2: NQFs in Europe – the numbers

- 28 countries are developing or have developed comprehensive NQFs – covering all types and levels of qualifications. The Czech Republic, Italy the Former Yugoslavia Republic of Macedonia and Liechtenstein, have still to decide on the scope and architecture of their frameworks;
- NQFs in the Czech Republic, France, Italy and the UK (England/Northern Ireland), cover a limited range of qualifications types and levels or consist of various frameworks for different parts of the education and training system, without clearly defined links;
- 26 countries have proposed or decided on an 8-level framework. The other eight countries have NQFs with either 5, 7, 9, 10 or 12 levels;
- All countries use a learning outcomes based approach to define the level descriptors;
- 14 NQFs have been formally adopted in their countries;
- France, Ireland, Malta and the UK have fully implemented their NQF. Around 10 more countries are entering the early implementation stage.

One concern is that frameworks are promoted on the basis of too little evidence and insufficiently tailored to national conditions and needs.

NQF design seems to address this concern. Basic principles are shared to allow for comparison and dialogue, but countries are putting their own mark on their national frameworks.

Development of NQFs has been characterised from the start by intensive debate in many countries, for example on how to understand learning outcomes and how to apply these principles to today's education and training systems. The debate has been about working towards a shared understanding on the values and future of education and training rather than a technical discussion about adopting a particular structure or number of levels. Valuable lessons have also been learned that will support further NQF development and implementation (Box 3).

NQFs – the impact

While it is true that qualifications frameworks still are emerging, there is already evidence of their impact. At European level, there is strong support for a common European reference framework and most countries will have joined by the end of 2012.

At national level, too, NQFs are providing impetus for reforms. Different parts of the education and training system – general and higher education and VET – are usually governed independently. The concept of a comprehensive framework has encouraged countries to seek more systematically stronger connections between these sub-systems, notably between vocational and academically oriented education and training. Strengthening these connections may potentially reduce barriers to access to learning and make it easier for learners to progress to and from different levels and types of learning.

Box 3: Developing and implementing NQFs: some lessons

- NQF Implementation requires time to develop understanding of the key concepts and promote cultural change;
- Stakeholder involvement is important at all stages to ensure ownership;
- NQF development is an iterative process, in which the existing education and training system and the NQF are progressively aligned with each other;
- A balance is needed between implementation within as well as between different parts of the education and training system (for example between different types of VET as well as between VET and general and higher education);
- NQFs need to be flexible enough to accommodate different types of learning;
- NQFs may be more enablers than drivers of change; they must be aligned with other supporting policies and institutional requirements

Developing NQFs has required involvement from a broader set of stakeholders – from public and private sectors of education and training and the labour market – than usual. This may influence the nature and direction of the debate on education and training by forcing stakeholders to look beyond their own position and to consider the interaction and relationship, for example, between different sectors and institutions.

Many countries are using their NQFs to promote the use of learning outcomes. Progress in introducing learning outcomes can be mainly observed in initial vocational and higher education. General education is

lagging behind in some countries, but developments are also taking place there.

NQFs add value by providing an independent reference point not only to compare existing qualifications, but also to improve them. In Finland, the higher education community see their new NQF and its descriptors as a neutral reference point for promoting dialogue and improving quality.

Many new NQFs are only just beginning to have an impact on end users – individuals and employers – but there are some positive signs ⁽⁵⁾.

NQFs - the challenges

As more and more NQFs enter the implementation stage, several challenges must be addressed to ensure their success.

Critically, countries must be clear on their rationale for allocating qualifications to the levels in both the European and national frameworks. Decisions on national levels must reflect the real learning outcomes of the qualifications and be accepted. This is essential to guarantee trust between countries. Given the key role NQFs play in linking national qualifications systems to the EQF, without this trust the impact of the EQF in promoting European mobility will be severely hampered. Quality assurance is central to building acceptance and trust.

Descriptors should be closely linked to issues concerning the learning outcomes on which they are based. The success and impact of NQFs very much depends on the shift to learning outcomes. Completion of national level descriptors, in most countries, should reflect that learning outcomes are applied, systematically addressing standards, curricula, assessment and learning methods. Exchanges of experience at European and national levels support mutual learning on how best to define and describe learning outcomes.

Another key challenge is the need to deepen participation and involvement of educational institutions in the discussion on how to align NQF developments with education and training systems and practice.

If NQFs are to play a bridging or integrating role, the interaction between different levels and parts of the education and training system needs to be clearly addressed by the frameworks. The efforts in Poland to define coherent level descriptors at national level and also for the different sub-systems (general, VET and academic education and training) should enable the NQF to reduce barriers within the education and training system. The validation of non-formal and informal learning as reflected in the NQFs is a way to improve the links between levels and types of qualifications and will make it easier for people to understand, choose and move between different types and levels of learning.

Whether countries see their NQFs as reforming frameworks, or as communication frameworks, European and national qualifications frameworks are changing the way that people see education and training.

By requiring people to take a broader perspective and to consider the education and training system as a whole, qualifications frameworks are promoting the case for lifelong learning.

⁽⁵⁾ <http://en.iu.dk/transparency/qualifications-frameworks>