



# QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN EUROPE

## Developments 2016

European national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) have been developed and implemented over the past decade, spurred by the EQF recommendation of 2008 <sup>(1)</sup>. As they are becoming operational, the question of their impact and added value is being raised. How do these frameworks, operating at sectoral, national and regional levels, contribute to education and training (and employment) policies and practices? Are they of use to individual learners? How? Cedefop's continuing work <sup>(2)</sup> points to several areas where NQFs are starting to make a difference.

The impact of these young frameworks will ultimately depend on their ability to make a difference to end-users, be these learners, employers, education and training providers or others. Developments in 2016 <sup>(3)</sup> attest to the growing attention these frameworks have been receiving from policy-makers.

### NQF development: status

In the 39 countries currently cooperating on the European qualifications framework <sup>(4)</sup>, 43 national

qualifications frameworks (NQFs) have been established. Many are becoming integrated features of national education, training and qualification systems, and their influence on policies and practices is gradually being felt. While all national frameworks seek to increase the transparency of qualifications, notably by using learning outcomes, some have evolved further: they directly support reform, for example by helping document people's lifelong learning experiences and strengthening the links between education and the labour market.

At the end of 2016 the situation was as follows:

- six countries are still working on the design and formal adoption of their NQFs. Of the countries that joined the EQF cooperation in 2008, Spain,

<sup>(1)</sup> Cedefop has annually taken stock of the development of NQFs in Europe since 2009.

<sup>(2)</sup> See bibliography at the end of the text.

<sup>(3)</sup> Cedefop has annually taken stock of the development of NQFs in Europe since 2009. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/national-qualifications-framework-nqf>

<sup>(4)</sup> In addition to the 28 EU Member States, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Kosovo, Lichtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey take part in this cooperation.

CHART: VISIBILITY OF NQFS TO CITIZENS – MENTION OF NQF LEVELS IN NATIONAL DIPLOMAS/QUALIFICATIONS



(\*) On a voluntary basis until 2017. (\*\*) Optional.

Source: Based on Cedefop's overview and analysis of NQFs, 2016. Forthcoming.

Italy and Finland have yet to finalise developments and/or adoption. Finland is expected to adopt its framework in early 2017.

- Italy has established a national repertoire of qualifications, including a national framework of regional qualifications <sup>(5)</sup>. Spain is finalising its framework for lifelong learning. Countries that joined the EQF cooperation in the past two years (such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia) are still working on the design and (partly) the formal adoption or revision of their NQFs;
- 32 countries have formally adopted frameworks. Political and legal adoption was most recently completed in Austria (March 2016), Poland (January 2016), Slovenia (December 2015) and Sweden (October 2015);
- formal adoption has allowed countries to move on to the operational stage where frameworks are put into practice. Quite a few countries, for example Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Hungary, Iceland, Kosovo, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Sweden, Poland and Turkey, are still at an early operational stage. These countries need to strengthen the capacity of the institutions involved, finalise particular tools for instance databases and quality assurance arrangements or adopt by-laws and/or complete the mapping of qualifications to the framework. Belgium (Wallonia) and Bulgaria have formally adopted their frameworks but implementation is still at an early stage. Many other countries, such as Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Switzerland and the UK, have reached a more mature operational stage. Their frameworks have become quite visible and are by now well integrated into their national qualification systems, providing a comprehensive learning-outcomes-based map of national qualifications and acting as a reference point for qualification developments and review;

<sup>(5)</sup> Decree 13/2013 establishes the national repertoire of education, training and professional qualifications that consists of six different sections, including a qualifications framework for higher education and a national framework of regional qualifications. At the moment only three are available. For more information see [http://nrpitalia.isfol.it/sito\\_standard/sito\\_demo/atlante\\_repertori.php](http://nrpitalia.isfol.it/sito_standard/sito_demo/atlante_repertori.php)

- 35 countries <sup>(6)</sup> are working towards comprehensive NQFs covering all types and levels of qualification (similar with 2015);
- 28 countries presented referencing reports showing how national frameworks relate to the European qualifications frameworks (26 in 2015);
- 26 countries linked to the qualifications framework for the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) <sup>(7)</sup>, 17 jointly with the EQF referencing (24 and 15 respectively in 2015).

These figures show that comprehensive NQFs including all types and levels of qualification, dominate throughout Europe. This confirms the role played by the EQF for lifelong learning in orienting and inspiring national developments. The priority given to comprehensive frameworks is also reflected by national authorities' inclination to combine EQF referencing with self-certification of their frameworks' compatibility with the EHEA framework (Bologna process).

## Visibility of national qualifications frameworks

To be of value to individual citizens, frameworks need to become visible. Many countries now systematically indicate NQF and EQF levels on the qualifications documents they award (certificates and diplomas, and also Europass certificate and diploma supplements). It is also important that national (and European) qualifications databases contain this information and ideally structure information on qualifications in line with their framework.

Countries are making progress in this area. Denmark and Lithuania were the first to include

<sup>(6)</sup> Four countries have introduced partial NQFs covering a limited range of qualification types and levels or consisting of individual frameworks operating separately from one other. This is exemplified by the Czech Republic and Switzerland, where separate frameworks for vocational and higher education qualifications have been developed; by France where vocationally/professionally oriented qualifications are included in the framework; and by Italy, where the national repertoire of qualifications consists of six different sections. In the UK, the frameworks of Scotland and Wales are comprehensive; the qualifications and credit framework in England/Northern Ireland (QCF) includes only vocational/professional qualifications.

<sup>(7)</sup> <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/qf/overarching.asp>

references to EQF/NQF levels in their VET certificates in 2012. By November 2016, 20 countries had introduced level references in national qualifications documents or databases: Denmark, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Switzerland and the UK (see Chart). Several countries have indicated their intention to do so in 2017, for instance Austria, Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland.

No country has yet included reference to NQF/EQF levels in all its qualifications documents. Progress has mainly been made in vocational education and training (IVET and/or CVET), to a lesser extent in general education qualifications. The inclusion of NQF/EQF levels in higher education qualifications has been limited, with the exception of the diploma supplement. This reflects the fact that it is normally up to the (autonomous) awarding institution to decide on inclusion of NQF/EQF levels. The chart on page 1 gives an overview of how qualification framework levels are presented in qualifications awarded by countries cooperating on the EQF.

### Learning outcomes

Recent research on the shift to learning outcomes shows that national qualifications frameworks <sup>(8)</sup> have significantly contributed to more comprehensive use of learning outcomes across education and training sectors. In several countries, such as Austria, Iceland and Poland, the learning outcomes approach now underpins national lifelong learning policies, expressing a clear will to connect initial and continuing education and training in a more efficient and flexible way. Other countries, for example Sweden, use the learning outcomes approach to establish dialogue with stakeholders in the labour market, creating a bridge to the huge variety of learning activities taking place outside formal education and training.

<sup>(8)</sup> Cedefop (2016). *Application of learning outcomes approaches across Europe*.

### Validating non-formal and informal learning

The 2016 update of the European inventory on validation <sup>(9)</sup> confirms that countries now give high priority to linking frameworks and validation arrangements. NQFs, through their focus on learning outcomes, act as a reference point for identifying, documenting, assessing and recognising learning acquired in non-formal and informal settings. The introduction of NQFs allows countries to move from fragmented use of validation to a more coordinated national approach. According to the European inventory, 20 countries are putting in place such national arrangements. However, the Cedefop conference *How to make learning visible* showed that involvement of social partners in the implementation of validation arrangements is still limited.

### Stakeholder involvement

The new generation of European NQFs has helped bring together stakeholders from different education subsystems, and from education and employment, who were not used to cooperating with each other. Experiences so far are considered positive and countries have signalled that they want to move further in this direction. This commitment has been confirmed through the adoption of NQF legal bases defining clearly the involvement and roles of the different stakeholders. This ensures that stakeholder involvement initiated at the development stage is continued during the operational stage. While many countries have given priority to including as broad a group of stakeholders as possible, active engagement of social partners and other labour market actors differs. In one group of countries, including Austria, Germany and Switzerland, social partners and other labour market stakeholders play an important role in placing the qualifications in the frameworks. In other countries, including Bulgaria, Greece and Poland, labour market stakeholders play a weaker role, with frameworks more loosely linked to the labour market.

<sup>(9)</sup> Cedefop; European Commission (forthcoming). *Update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning: synthesis report*.

## Developing and renewing qualifications

Comprehensive NQFs add value by offering a full picture of the qualifications available in a country. Defining levels based on learning outcomes and mapping qualifications to these levels has made it possible to identify gaps in the existing qualifications offer. Cedefop's 2014 study <sup>(10)</sup> shows that EQF level 5 (and the relevant NQF levels) has served as a platform for the development of new qualifications. This can be seen in Estonia, Lithuania, Malta and the UK. As illustrated by the Norwegian Quality Assurance Agency (NOKUT) and a Cedefop study <sup>(11)</sup>, frameworks can also be used as a reference for review and renewal of qualifications and curricula. Experiences suggest that this can help increase the consistency of approaches across education and training institutions.

## Frameworks scope: opening up to the private and non-formal sector

There is a growing trend among countries to open up their frameworks to include qualifications from continuing and further education and training. While this increases the overall transparency of the qualifications landscape, it also strengthens the links between initial education and training (provided by the public sector) and continuing training (mainly offered by non-formal and private providers). Work done by countries like the Netherlands and Sweden reflects this trend towards broadening the scope of national qualifications frameworks.

## The European qualifications framework: status

By December 2016, the following countries had linked their national qualifications frameworks to the EQF: Austria, Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lichtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal,

Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (England, Scotland and Wales). Three additional countries (Cyprus, Slovakia and Romania) are currently discussing their referencing reports with the EQF advisory group.

The remaining countries are expected to follow in 2017-18, which means that the first stage of EQF referencing is nearly finished. Completion of this first stage will be followed by regular updates in the event of major changes by the countries, which shows that EQF implementation is a continuing process. Estonia and Malta presented updates in 2015, starting this phase: for Malta, this was the fourth update since 2009.

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<sup>(10)</sup> See bibliography.

<sup>(11)</sup> Cedefop (2012). *Curriculum reform in Europe: the impact of learning outcomes*. Cedefop research paper; No 29.