



CEDEFOP

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of Vocational Training



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



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for Lifelong Learning

GLOBAL NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK INVENTORY

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

Cedefop	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ETF	European Training Foundation
HE	Higher Education
LLL	Lifelong learning
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
QF	Qualifications Framework
RVA	Recognition, validation, accreditation
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
TVET	Technical Vocational Education and Training
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VNIFL	Validation of non-formal and informal learning

FOREWORD

This publication is a global, country-by-country, inventory of National Qualifications Frameworks. It is a co-publication, prepared by two EU agencies, the European Training Foundation (ETF) and the Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop); and UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) and the Section for TVET at UNESCO headquarters.

It has been produced at the request of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)¹ Ministers of Education as a contribution to the fourth ASEM Ministers' conference in Kuala Lumpur in May 2013, also called ASEMME 4. Qualifications frameworks will be one of the key items on the ASEMME 4 programme in Kuala Lumpur, reflecting the priority the participating countries attach to QFs and the increasing prominence QFs occupy on the wider international policy agenda.

Beyond the immediate goal of supporting the conference, this survey is also intended to capture the latest trends and developments in the field of Qualifications Frameworks (QFs) worldwide. Each of the four contributing institutions is engaged in the study of qualifications frameworks and in supporting countries in developing NQFs. Collectively, the four bodies cover the great majority of countries where NQFs are emerging and possess a wealth of experience and expertise in this field.

It should be stressed that this overview is essentially a snapshot of current developments; it does not seek to assess impacts of NQFs or argue for or against them as a policy option. It is therefore descriptive and analytical rather than conclusive in its treatment of qualifications frameworks as reform tools. We will not pretend, either, to have captured every significant development in every country, but, rather, have tried to reflect in these pages as best as we can what we have observed and learned. This is very much a "working document".

This inventory comprises two parts: six thematic chapters which analyse the aims, characteristics and uses of QFs; and country chapters. The drafting of both thematic and country chapters has been shared among the contributing institutions. Cedefop has written those chapters on the EU Member States; the ETF the EU's partner countries on the borders of the EU; while UIL has provided those chapters on countries in the rest of the world.

This inventory draws on on-going work - the ETF maintains an online inventory on its Qualifications Platform covering its partner countries; Cedefop produces an annual report and analysis capturing change in NQF developments in the EU Member States; while UIL is currently researching into NQFs worldwide, particularly in developing countries and in those countries that do not fall under the respective mandates of Cedefop and ETF. UIL is also currently establishing an International Observatory on recognition practices world-wide (both recognition of qualifications and the recognition of non-formal and informal learning) linked to NQFs.

This publication is available in print and online - you can access it on the Qualifications Platform, an EU-hosted online community of professionals working in qualifications. Please see it at: www.qualificationsplatform.net

The country chapters will be updated by the ETF, Cedefop and UIL and the Section for TVET at UNESCO Headquarters as new developments in the field occur.

The Section for TVET at UNESCO Headquarters
European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop)
European Training Foundation
UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning

¹ The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is an structured process of dialogue and cooperation bringing together the 27 European Union Member States, 2 other European countries, plus the European Commission, with 20 Asian countries and served by the ASEAN Secretariat. The ASEM dialogue addresses political, economic and cultural issues, with the objective of strengthening the relationship between the two regions.

CHAPTER 1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ETF - Cedefop - UIL

INTRODUCTION

Qualifications frameworks are classification systems for qualifications. Typically, qualifications frameworks classify qualifications according to a hierarchy of levels, the qualifications allocated to a particular level depending on their complexity and challenge. The number of levels in a framework varies according to national, or international, need. Almost all modern qualifications are expressed in learning outcomes, which are statements of the knowledge, skills and competences a learner is expected to acquire in order to obtain a qualification.

The levels in a framework indicate different degrees of complexity of the learning outcomes. The lowest levels often define the basic generic and or vocational skills for people who can work effectively under supervision, the central levels typically define the expected requirements for professionals who can act independently, while the highest levels emphasize the capacity to analyse and innovate processes, create new knowledge and may include the ability to lead and manage people and processes. In some QFs the highest levels are reserved for holders of higher education degrees, but this is increasingly challenged by lifelong learning frameworks with a strong labour market dimension, so that increasingly the higher levels are being opened up to vocational qualifications too.

Qualifications frameworks aim to bring coherence and clarity to qualifications systems. When qualifications are placed in a classification system, they can be more easily compared by individuals, employers and institutions. NQFs go beyond other classification systems by bringing together qualifications issued by different bodies and on the basis of levels of learning outcomes. When different countries' NQFs are linked to each other, directly or via a common reference, qualifications from different countries can be compared, which supports individuals' mobility across borders.

But the purposes of establishing an NQF – and the implications of doing so – are much wider than classification and comparison. What countries use NQFs for and how they use them are explored throughout this publication.

This first, thematic, section examines why countries establish NQFs, what they use them for, and what institutions are established to support and implement them. Some general differences in NQF implementation and use between European and transition and developing countries are outlined. The section also examines technical issues such as descriptors and the role of learning outcomes (the conceptual basis of almost all QFs) in both defining frameworks and in shaping reform of wider education and training systems e.g. in curricula and teaching and learning and assessment approaches. It further looks at systems associated with QFs such as validation of non-formal and informal learning and quality assurance. A clear trend is the growing international cooperation in using NQFs, in particular via transnational frameworks, and for recognition purposes.

This survey addresses the various types of framework in operation - national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), which compare recognised qualifications within a country; transnational and regional qualifications frameworks (TQFs), which compare and link qualifications systems and or qualifications between countries; and sectoral qualifications frameworks, which link and compare qualifications within one economic sector or subsector of the education system (e.g. higher education qualifications).

The second section of this inventory is a series of country chapters, each of which is a summary of a National Qualifications Framework, its origins, aims, structure and implementation arrangements.

NQFS – A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

NQFs are truly global now in their coverage. Our survey shows that the following 142 countries and territories are involved in the development and implementation of qualifications frameworks to date:

Albania; Angola; Antigua and Barbuda; Argentina; Armenia; Australia; Austria; Azerbaijan; Bahamas; Bahrain; Bangladesh; Barbados; Belarus; Belgium; Benin; Belize; Bhutan; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Botswana; Brazil; Brunei Darussalam; Bulgaria; Burkina Faso; Comoros; Caoe Verde; Cambodia; Canada; Chile; China; Colombia; Côte d'Ivoire; Croatia; Cyprus; Czech Republic; Denmark; Dominica; Egypt; Eritrea; Estonia; Ethiopia; Finland; France; Gambia; Georgia; Germany; Ghana; Greece; Grenada; Guinea; Guinea-Bissau; Guyana; Haiti; Hong Kong SAR; Hungary; Iceland; India; Indonesia; Ireland; Israel; Italy; Jamaica; Jordan; Kazakhstan; Kiribati; Korea; Kosovo; Kuwait; Kyrgyzstan; Lao People's Democratic Republic; Latvia; Lebanon; Lesotho; Liberia; Lithuania; Luxembourg; Madagascar; Malawi; Malaysia; Maldives; Mali; Malta; Mauritius; Mexico; Montenegro; Montserrat (UK overseas territory); Morocco; Mozambique; Myanmar; Namibia; Netherlands; Nepal; New Zealand; Niger; Nigeria; Norway; Oman; Pakistan; Palestine; Papua New Guinea; Philippines; Poland; Portugal; Republic of Moldova; Republic of Korea; Romania; Russian Federation; Saint Lucia; Samoa; Serbia; Senegal; Seychelles; Sierra Leone; Singapore; Slovakia; Slovenia; Somalia (Somaliland); South Africa; Spain; Saint Kitts and Nevis; Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; Suriname; Swaziland; Sweden; Switzerland; Tajikistan; Thailand; the Democratic Republic of the Congo; The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; Timor-Leste; Togo; Tonga; Trinidad and Tobago; Tunisia; Turkey; Tuvalu and Vanuatu; Ukraine; United Arab Emirates; United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; United Republic of Tanzania; Viet Nam; Zambia; Zimbabwe.

The study is based on a country-by-country overview of most of these countries, divided between ETF's partner countries, which are

principally states in transition bordering the EU, and the EU Member States, which are covered by Cedefop (in total 59 countries) and an international inventory carried out by UIL (34 countries and territories) and the Section for TVET at UNESCO Headquarters (two countries so far). Care has been taken to include developments in all the relevant ASEM member states in the overview. These country chapters follow a common format, examining the respective NQF's objectives, structure and role in the national qualifications system. That 142 QFs are being developed shows how fast QF concepts have spread across the globe. At the same time, we need to be aware of the time and resources it takes to develop and implement these QFs. The challenges for implementation differ from country to country as QFs interact with existing systems. This is explained to some extent in the thematic chapters, in which we also have tried to distinguish between challenges for industrialised countries, transition countries and developing countries.

Before 2000, only a handful of countries had NQFs. These first frameworks were developed to address specific challenges for linking, regulating or developing qualifications. A second generation of frameworks developed in the early 2000s has been able to draw upon the different national experiences, but it is really over the last five years that we have seen a huge surge in developments of QFs which aim to link qualifications within and between countries. The majority of countries developing national qualifications frameworks today are also involved in "regional" (that is, a cluster of neighbouring countries) or transnational frameworks. However, it should be added that how advanced individual countries are in developing frameworks, and in their moves towards regional frameworks, varies considerably, and many are still in the early stages of conceptualisation and design.

QFs are now part of a wider search for international solutions in education and training. They are also an attempt to support mobility at a time when economies are increasingly integrated and interdependent, where technical specifications of products or services are becoming more unified and where labour migrates across borders.

THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK (EQF)

In the EU Member States and in the European Neighbourhood, much of the impetus has come from the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) adopted by EU Member States in 2008 and the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area, part of the Bologna process, adopted in 2005. EU Member States and countries wanting to join the Union see NQFs as a practicable way to manage their diverse national qualifications systems and to link them to the EQF. Indeed, most ETF partner countries have opted for an 8-level NQF, modelled on the EQF and based on learning outcomes. This applies most strongly to those countries which are candidates or potential candidates to enter the EU but also applies to those which will not be EU States.

The EQF also exercises a particular influence on other regional or transnational frameworks. Regional initiatives such as the Southern African Development Community Framework, the Caribbean Qualifications Framework, the Southern Pacific Register, the Transnational Qualifications Framework of the Small States of the Commonwealth, the GCC initiative for a Qualifications Framework for the Gulf Countries and the debate on the designated the ASEAN Qualifications Framework are influenced by the EQF (a finding of the ETF study published in 2010, "Transnational Qualifications Frameworks"), and some are seeking to link to the EQF. In some cases, individual countries are actively pursuing links with the EQF - New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the United Arab Emirates are examples.

The EQF is an example of a QF whose effect has been to encourage (even if this was not intentional in its design) convergence of systems – many new-generation NQFs resemble each other. They often have 8 levels, are lifelong learning in scope and, fundamentally, based on a foundation of levels descriptors written in learning outcomes. Other TQFs more directly promote harmonisation, and in some, such as the Caribbean Qualifications Framework, common qualifications are developed. We can probably expect greater convergence, partially pushed by globalisation and closer international cooperation. TQFs are both responses

to globalisation and themselves globalising instruments.

In other regions of the world, NQFs are also well-established, especially in the Commonwealth countries and territories like Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Malaysia, Mauritius and Hong Kong and more recently in countries as different as the United Arab Emirates, Colombia, Indonesia, China, Bangladesh, and Bhutan.

As already mentioned, a rapidly emerging development is the cooperation in many world regions to, in turn, link these national frameworks to each other on a transnational basis. The EQF is perhaps the best-known Transnational Qualifications Framework ("TQF"), or regional framework, but not the only one. The dynamic relationship between national and international frameworks – how they influence each other - is also a subject of this inventory.

COMPETENCES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES – CONCEPTS TRANSFORMING PRACTICES

Where countries are reforming their qualifications and are introducing NQFs, these are invariably presented by the countries as learning outcomes-based, and no country is developing an NQF or new qualifications explicitly driven by traditional inputs such as duration.

Learning outcomes say what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do at the end of a course of learning. Outcomes tell us what is inside a qualification – so creating readability. At the same time, by defining a qualification by what the learner needs to achieve rather than by traditional inputs such as duration of the programme, learning outcomes facilitate diverse learning routes – formal or informal - which recognise and encourage lifelong learning.

But outcomes do not stop with the frameworks or qualifications – they are also being applied to curricula, teaching and learning, assessment and standards. Countries adopting NQFs are seeking to move to outcomes-based curricula in their schools and colleges. Outcomes can be used to identify appropriate assessment criteria.

Occupational standards specify the required work-related competences for an occupation, which in turn inform learning outcomes in vocational qualifications. Outcomes approaches do promote a focus on acquiring specific competencies and skills, and learning is encouraged in a variety of contexts and via a diversity of methods.

While NQFs are almost always outcomes-based or oriented, we should not exaggerate – the move to outcomes approaches is not in most countries a radical switch but rather a more gradual tilting of the balance. Indeed, we see countries adopting more pragmatic approaches in the last 2-3 years, taking account of inputs such as institutional provision and structure and duration of programme.

THE DIFFERENT USES OF QFS

While QFs are a global trend and appear to share common characteristics and aims, in practice the development and - especially - the implementation of frameworks, vary markedly by country.

There are different types of framework, or, put another way, they can have differing purposes. Some are described as communication frameworks, aiming to better coordinate the different sub-sectors of a national education and training system, and make the national qualifications system more transparent. Such frameworks are most commonly found where

the local system is long-settled and sustained by a national consensus. Changes to the national framework or wider system tend to be adjustments, rather than major overhauls. These frameworks essentially add value to the existing system.

Some countries, by contrast, see the NQF as a reform tool, actively improving the national education and training system. They seek to improve the relevance and quality of qualifications and the coherence of the qualifications system. Such frameworks are typically found in either the newer Member States of the EU, for example, or in transition and developing countries.

Newer frameworks, too, are much more influenced by external factors, not least existing QFs and indeed newer frameworks do tend to resemble each other in structure (e.g. number of levels) and scope (lifelong learning, for example).

So in some cases QFs lead reforms, in others they follow them.

In addition to these domestic motivations, countries also seek to use QFs to support recognition of qualifications abroad and so facilitate mobility.

How frameworks achieve these objectives is explored in subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER 2: QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN EUROPE

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While only three European countries had established national qualifications frameworks 10 years ago (Ireland, France and the UK), a total of 36 countries² are currently developing 40 NQFs. At the end of 2012, the situation was as follows³:

- 29 countries⁴ are developing or have developed comprehensive NQFs, covering all types and levels of qualification;
- all countries are using a learning outcomes based approach to define the NQF level descriptors;
- eight countries are developing or have developed partial NQFs covering a limited range of qualifications or consisting of separate frameworks operating alone.
- 27 countries have proposed or decided on an 8-level framework. Other countries have NQFs with either 5, 7, 9, 10 or 12 levels;
- 24 NQFs have been formally adopted;
- 4 countries have fully operational frameworks;
- 10 countries are entering an early operational stage.
- This means that qualifications frameworks are rapidly taking on an important role in European education and training policies.

2.1 TOWARDS EUROPEAN COMPARABILITY OF QUALIFICATIONS

The European qualifications framework, adopted in 2008, has been the main catalyst for the development of NQFs in Europe. Countries emphasise the importance of increasing the international comparability of qualifications and see the EQF as a tool to aid recognition of qualifications and promote mobility. By the end of 2012, 16 countries had completed their formal referencing to the EQF: Austria, Belgium (FL), Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal and the UK. Most of the remaining countries are expected to complete their referencing during 2013. While countries can, in principle, link their national qualifications levels to the EQF without an NQF, almost all see the development of an NQF as necessary to relate national qualification levels to the EQF in a transparent and trustworthy manner.

Referencing to the EQF is behind the original deadline (2010). This is mainly due to the fact that countries apart from France, Ireland and the UK have developed NQFs from scratch. The combination of NQF developments and EQF referencing has been resource and time-consuming and frequently politically challenging. This has been particularly apparent during 2012 when optimistic referencing schedules have been repeatedly adjusted.

The development of national qualifications frameworks in Europe also reflects the Bologna process and the agreement to promote

² This overview covers those countries cooperating according to the 'Education and training 2020' agenda of the European Union. These countries include the 27 EU Member States as well as Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey.

³ For more see Cedefop. Analysis and overview of NQF developments in European countries. Annual report 2012. Working paper 6117, available on http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/6117_en.pdf

⁴ In the UK, frameworks in Scotland and Wales are comprehensive; the qualifications and credit framework (QCF) in England/Northern Ireland covers vocational qualifications.

qualifications frameworks related to the European higher education area (QF-EHEA). All countries included in this report are participating in this process and 12 have now formally self-certified their higher education national qualifications frameworks to the QF-EHEA. There is an increasing tendency to combine referencing to the EQF and self-certification to the QF-EHEA in one single process, preparing a joint report. Austria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Portugal have all produced joint reports reflecting the development and adoption of comprehensive NQFs covering all levels and types of qualification. It is expected that this approach will be chosen by most countries preparing to reference in 2013, further integrating the two European framework initiatives at national level.

2.2 DIFFERING AMBITIONS

As well as the key role of NQFs in promoting international and European comparability of qualifications, there is emphasis on their promotion of better coordination between the different parts of education and training and support to the overall transparency of national qualifications systems. The role of NQFs as communication frameworks is thus broadly confirmed and accepted; it is seen as adding value to – although not changing in any radical fashion - existing qualifications systems.

Some countries, however, see the NQF as a tool for actively changing and improving national education, training and lifelong learning systems and practices. Croatia, Iceland, Poland and Romania are promoting NQFs as reforming frameworks, seeking to improve the coherence, relevance and quality of qualifications.

The further implementation of NQFs in the coming years will show the extent to which countries move from the relatively modest ambition of communication frameworks towards the more challenging role of reforming frameworks. In particular areas, for example related to the introduction of national arrangements for validating non-formal and informal learning, NQFs increasingly take on the role as reference point for reforms in this field. This is exemplified by the German and

Polish qualifications frameworks which see the development of validation as an integrated and important part of framework developments.

Framework developments are already triggering wider institutional reforms in some countries, in particular influencing the way qualification authorities and awarding institutions are set up. Recent developments seem to indicate that most frameworks will combine the roles of communication and reform. In the coming years we need to understand better how these two roles are combined in each country, subsystems and how they change over time.

2.3 COMPREHENSIVE BUT 'LOOSE' FRAMEWORKS

Comprehensive NQFs need to embrace the full range of concepts, values and traditions in the different parts of education and training covered by the framework. This leaves two main options:

- try to form existing systems according to the principles of the framework (in line with the outcome-driven model);
- introduce a 'looser' framework accepting and respecting existing diversity but insisting on a common core of principles to be introduced and shared.

Whether a framework is tight or loose depends on the stringency of conditions a qualification must meet to be included in the framework (Tuck, 2007, Raffe 2011). Loose frameworks introduce a set of comprehensive level descriptors to be applied across sub-systems, but allow substantial variation across sub-frameworks⁵. Tight frameworks are normally regulatory frameworks and define uniform specifications for qualifications to be applied across sectors. Efforts to create tight and 'one-fit-for-all' frameworks, as exemplified by the early South African and New Zealand frameworks, generated resistance and undermined support for the initiatives. These experiences have led to general reassessment of the role of frameworks, pointing to the need to protect diversity (Allais, 2011c, Strathdee, 2011).

⁵ A sub-framework is a framework, which covers only one sub-system (e.g. VET or HE) and is part of an overarching comprehensive framework.

European NQFs can mostly be described as loose, as the inclusion of qualifications is based on sector legislation, not on uniform rules covering the entire framework. Most countries operate with different principles for the inclusion of qualifications from general, vocational and academic sectors. This approach is well illustrated by the proposed Polish framework where generic, national descriptors are supplemented by more detailed descriptors for the sub-systems of general, vocational and higher education. While not so explicitly addressed by other frameworks, the basic principle applies across the continent.

2.4 THE BRIDGING ROLE OF NQFS

Adoption and implementation of comprehensive NQFs across Europe influences the relationship between the sub-systems of education and training. This is in line with the objectives set for most NQFs, aiming at improving the links and bridges between levels and types of qualifications. Abolishing dead-ends and promoting both vertical and horizontal progression is considered a key-task for most new frameworks.

Some of the established frameworks have invested much effort in creating better conditions for progression; Scotland, for example, has made significant progress in defining progression routes for learners in selected areas. Universities are obliged to reserve some of their places to those coming through non-traditional routes, e.g. without a school leaving certificate from general education. While this strategy goes beyond the remit and role of the framework, the SCQF levels are used to position people (and their prior learning) and to map possible learning careers. While few of the emerging frameworks have reached this level of concrete intervention, many countries see dialogue and cooperation across education and training subsystems and with stakeholders outside education as a first step. This is expected to make it easier to identify common challenges and solutions.

In many countries the initial task of designing and developing frameworks has brought together stakeholders not commonly cooperating or speaking to each other. The experiences from this stage have mostly been summarised as positive, with indications that they want to continue and

institutionalise this dialogue and these platforms. Croatia and Germany provide good examples of the new permanent platforms being set up. The Croatian and German cases exemplify how new and broad coordination platforms are being set up permanently. Whether these platforms can be used to improve the overall permeability of national systems remain to be seen, although the relative success of Scotland in this area shows that frameworks have a role to play.

CROATIA

The implementation of the Croatian qualifications framework (CROQF) will rely on the new National Council for Human Resource Development. The National Council will comprise representatives of national ministries, regional structures, social partners, sectoral councils and national agencies involved in developing and awarding qualifications in different education and training subsystems. This body oversees policies in education, training, employment and human resource development and monitors and evaluates the impact of the CROQF. The proposed CROQF act also defines the responsibilities of various ministries (for education, labour and regional development) involved in coordinating and developing CROQF.

GERMANY

A coordination point for the German qualifications framework (DQR) is being set up in a joint initiative of the Federal Government and the Länder. It will have six members, including representatives from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology, and the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder and the Conference of Ministers of Economics of the Länder. Its main role is to monitor the allocation of qualifications to ensure consistency of the overall structure of the DQR. The direct involvement of other ministries, the social partners, representatives of business organisations and interested associations is, if their field of responsibility is concerned, ensured by the DQR coordination point.

2.5 OPENING UP FRAMEWORKS TO PRIVATE AND NON-FORMAL QUALIFICATIONS

Most post-2005 frameworks have limited their coverage to formal qualifications awarded by national authorities or independent bodies accredited by these authorities. This means that frameworks predominantly cover initial qualifications offered by public sector education and training institutions. While there are exceptions to this general picture, most NQFs only partly cover the education and training activities taking place in the non-formal and private sector, thus largely failing to address continuing and further education and training. Increasing attention has been paid to this issue during 2012. A few countries, e.g. the Netherlands and Sweden, have already prepared procedures for including non-formal and private sector qualifications and certificates. In the Swedish case this approach is presented as a key feature of the Swedish NQF, meeting a need expressed by stakeholders in the labour market and in liberal/popular education and training. A key challenge faced by countries wanting to go beyond strictly regulated formal education and training is to ensure that the new qualifications included in the framework can be trusted and that appropriate quality assurance criteria and procedures are put in place.

2.6 OPENING UP FRAMEWORKS TO LEARNERS

Many countries see the framework as an opportunity to acknowledge learning experiences gained outside formal education, at work and in leisure time. The introduction of validation of non-formal and informal learning is seen as a natural continuation of the learning outcomes based approach introduced by the frameworks. The 2012 analysis shows increased focus on validating non-formal and informal learning, with many countries seeing the introduction of the NQF, and learning outcomes, as an opportunity to integrate validation better in qualifications systems. A good example of this is Germany where a working group with the DQR-initiative has come up with a detailed recommendation on how to take forward validation in the German context. The same developments can be observed in Poland where the total lack of

arrangements for validation is seen as a problem for lifelong learning, and where this now is being given priority within the development of the Polish qualifications framework (PQF). A third example is the French-speaking region of Belgium where the development of validation and framework goes hand-in-hand and where significant progress has been made in the last few years. Given the adoption of the European Council recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning in December 2012, the link between frameworks and validation will receive increased attention. Adoption of the recommendation shows that NQFs have a reforming role to play, as reference points for national validation systems potentially open to all.

2.7 CONVERGENCE AND NATIONAL ADJUSTMENT

A comparison of the frameworks developed in direct response to the EQF shows a remarkable degree of similarity and convergence:

- NQFs have mostly been designed as comprehensive frameworks, covering all levels and types of qualification;
- most countries have introduced eight-level frameworks where learning outcomes are described according to the knowledge, skills and competence (KSC) categories;
- convergence in structure underlines the countries giving priority to international comparability;
- NQFs are frequently seen as a part of national lifelong learning strategies, in many cases acknowledging qualifications awarded outside the formal, public system as well as promoting validation of non-formal and informal learning.

While countries have converged around these features, the new NQFs are not mere copies of the EQF. Countries have put their own mark on the frameworks:

- learning outcomes descriptors have been adjusted according to national traditions and approaches.

- the relationship between the different subsystems of education and training (general, VET and higher education) is addressed differently by countries. While frameworks in most countries can be defined as comprehensive, the bridges connecting the different parts vary in architecture and strength.

2.8 CHALLENGES

Progress in Europe during the last few years provides a good basis for releasing the potential of the NQFs, firmly supported by complementary policies and measures, for example on validating non-formal learning. However, this requires the frameworks to become visible beyond the limited circle of policy makers and experts involved in their creation. The move from design, development and formal adoption to operational stage is critical and urgent. The following steps are important:

- the learning outcomes based levels have to become visible to ordinary citizens. The inclusion of EQF and NQF levels in certificates and qualifications is critical to the future of qualifications frameworks;
- NQFs need to become a national structuring and planning instrument, which means that databases and guidance materials must be produced in a way that reflects the structure of the NQF. This has been done with success by the pre-2005 NQFs and needs to be repeated by the emerging frameworks;
- NQFs need to engage more with the labour market actors and strengthen their visibility in labour markets (assisting development of career pathways, certifying achievements acquired at work, guidance, etc.);
- NQFs need to be receptive to the non-formal and private sectors and enable validation of non-formal and informal learning experiences acquired outside formal schooling or training.

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CHAPTER 3: NQFS IN TRANSITION COUNTRIES

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we look at how NQFs are being developed, implemented and used in transition countries and how they are transforming qualifications systems.

This chapter is primarily concerned with implementation issues in NQFs, rather than their conceptual underpinnings. Transition countries, on the whole, establish NQFs to overhaul their qualifications system, as part of a wider programme of education and training reform. In particular, transition countries are concerned with upgrading the quality of their education and training systems, in terms of strengthening the relevance of the education outcomes and opening up systems to lifelong learning approaches. So here we primarily examine challenges and implications of implementing an NQF such as impacts on qualifications design, curricula, teaching and learning and assessment; the social dimension, in particular engaging stakeholders; associated systems, in particular quality assurance systems; and the establishment of new institutions.

None of the countries examined here is building an NQF to simply mirror, or better define, their existing provision of qualifications. Instead, the starting point for their NQFs is, generally, dissatisfaction with the current qualifications system. So transition countries introduce NQFs fundamentally to improve the relevance and quality of their qualifications. It might be said, then, that the term “framework of qualifications” is more appropriate than “qualifications frameworks”. Although the framework itself is a useful instrument for the overhaul of qualifications development processes and the way qualifications are used, it is the qualifications reform processes and their impact on assessment, certification and learning that are far more important in these countries. Most transition countries are using NQFs for purposes which go well beyond simply classifying and comparing qualifications. These issues will be explored below.

The transition countries are all distinctive, so that while some have a shared history, their redevelopment over the last 20 years or so has often diverged and they face different challenges in reconstructing their education and training systems to support their adaptation to the demands of globalisation.

This chapter is fundamentally concerned with vocational education and training in a lifelong learning perspective, which reflects the European Training Foundation’s (ETF) mandate. Additionally, vocational qualifications are more frequently directly affected by the introduction of NQFs.

The table below shows who are the most common actors in developing, assessing and certifying qualifications within an NQF. The highest degree in variety is in initial VET and adult learning, where many different actors can be involved. The redesign of qualifications within the context of implementing national qualifications frameworks therefore affects these policy areas more than secondary and higher education, which include a relatively small number of standardised qualification types (Matura, bachelor, masters and PhD) with a relatively homogeneous group of actors.

ACTORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF QUALIFICATIONS

	Secondary education	Initial VET	Higher education	Adult learning
develop	MoE*	varies	HEIs*	varies
assess	schools/ MoE*	varies	HEIs*	varies
certify	MoE*	varies	HEIs*	varies, often not certified

The impact of NQFs on VET reform (including continuing vocational education) is therefore particularly important.

In developing and implementing their NQFs, the countries exhibit a pattern of often rapid initial activity – design, legislative adoption – followed by delay in implementation, often for external political reasons unrelated to the NQF as such. So even where the technical components of the NQF are designed and in place, institutional or social issues such as fragmentation or a lack of consensus behind the NQF may slow its implementation. Moreover, the biggest challenge in implementing qualifications frameworks are the capacities and resources available for reform. Many projects receiving initial donor support face the problem of lack of implementation capacities once the project is finished and the aid money spent.

NQFS IN TRANSITION COUNTRIES - CONTEXTS AND CHALLENGES

In general, we define transition countries as those moving from a centrally-planned to a free market economy. As this chapter is authored by ETF, our focus is predominantly on the 27 of our 31 partner countries which are developing NQFs. Our partner countries are the European Neighbourhood state - extending from the southern Mediterranean Maghreb states to the Balkans, to the former Soviet Union.

These countries face the same challenges as EU states do in the modern world – globalisation, demographic change, the shift from manufacturing to knowledge economies and the current economic crisis. But their challenges are still more daunting than in the EU. Some are former war zones – ex-Yugoslavia, some of the former Soviet Republics, for example. Many are relatively newly independent states, struggling to stabilise politically and economically. Almost all have been making the painful transition from planned to free market economies, which has resulted in contracting state sector employment, high unemployment and job security, high levels of migration and so on.

The impact on VET has often been detrimental – often the link between schools and employers has been broken, provision has declined in quantity and quality, equipment and curricula are outdated,

and VET has low social status compared to higher education. But in developing their VET systems to respond to these challenges, our partner countries lack resources, financial and human; they have limited capacities (they often lack the skills to manage reform), and their institutions are ill-adapted to lead reform of the VET sector.

In the Southern Mediterranean, VET provision is historically weak and much employment is informal, that is, it is unregulated and its participants uncertificated. Some of these countries could be classified as developing economies. In these countries, qualifications are few in practice and are often in reality indistinguishable from curricula.

Our partner countries are thus generally dissatisfied with their VET systems and seeking external assistance in reform to make their VET systems high quality and relevant to the learner and labour market. ETF is only one of a range of external actors in our partner countries – USAID, bilateral European donors e.g. GIZ of Germany, the British Council, NGOs, international institutions such as the ILO, World Bank and UNESCO, among others, are also in the same business.

Apart from Turkey - an exception in several ways - which has always had a strong private sector, most partner countries have struggled with transition. The transition from command to free market economies has exerted a profound influence on VET systems, including qualifications. For example, in the former Soviet Union and ex-Yugoslavia, VET systems were often tied to large-scale, state enterprises assigning jobs to VET graduates. One single employer had been predominant in the command economy, the state. However, uncertainty about future prospects of state enterprises after privatisation and the increasing number of small and medium size enterprises diminished employer engagement in VET and distanced it from the labour market. Quality of provision deteriorated, curricula and qualifications became obsolete and opportunities for professional practice and continuing training were reduced.

In order to prepare people for a variety of potential occupations, VET curricula which were traditionally meant for bigger VET systems preparing for specialised jobs in large companies have been broadened, emphasising more academic and

core skills. The weak links in most transition countries between VET provision and labour market needs resulted in employers having little trust in the qualifications usually presented to them by applicants. This has been exacerbated by the comparatively limited availability of high-quality VET graduates due to the fact that VET participation has dropped, while higher education systems have grown rapidly and access to higher education has become much easier. Most talented young people opt now for higher education, leaving VET with a large proportion of poorly-motivated learners or low achievers in academic schooling.

In a response to the uncertainty in the late nineties, early 2000s VET reform in the context of transition countries aimed at broadening VET curricula, strengthening the general education elements and improving access to higher education. The supply of qualification types available to learners is often limited - qualifications systems tend also to offer certification only at upper secondary VET level and there are few opportunities to certify adults. Difficult-to-fill vacancies in growth sectors and the increased burden of in-company training have triggered employers from priority sectors in a number of partner countries to engage in the development of qualifications and in particular in the definition of occupational standards.

VET and adult learning involve many different actors in the development of qualifications, and their use in learning and assessment and certification. The influence of NQFs is therefore particularly felt in these strategically important policy areas for lifelong learning. VET in a lifelong learning context is much broader than formal secondary VET and includes skills development in the informal sector, post-secondary VET, work-based learning in its many forms such as apprenticeships, and the training of professionals. NQFs can promote greater integration between HE and VET, previously often unconnected systems. HE institutions can also provide vocational training, in particular where it concerns post-secondary VET, training of professionals and adult learning.

EUROPEAN DEVELOPMENTS AND THEIR GLOBAL IMPACTS

Two recent European initiatives in this field have had a great influence beyond Europe. The European

Qualifications Framework, or EQF, has been one of the EU's success stories in the last five years. The second key European reform initiative in this field is the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA), within the Bologna Process, often called the Bologna Framework. The Bologna Framework is not an EU initiative, however, but coordinated by the Council of Europe.

It is difficult to overstate the influence of these two instruments in the transition countries. This influence has a number of dimensions. The EQF is the technical model – without exception – for transition countries with which ETF works. The reform of qualifications is almost invariably driven by the local NQF. Additionally, the EQF has become a reference to which countries outside the EU wish to relate their own national systems and frameworks of qualifications.

The relationship transition countries have with the EQF and with the Bologna framework is complex. It should be underlined that transition countries do not implement the EQF directly in their own country as such, as they are not part of the EQF process, although many are part of the Bologna process for higher education. Rather, countries wish to establish a relationship of some sort with the EQF, plus they recognise the reform potential of frameworks of qualifications. It is notable that all ETF partner countries have moved beyond QFs for HE to QFs for lifelong learning.

Indeed, in practice most new QFs are now lifelong learning frameworks. In some cases a QF for HE was designed first (i.e. before initiating work on the VET component) to meet Bologna requirements, but in most transition countries we see efforts to merge these with the VET sector to create an NQF for LLL.

Because of the prospect of tighter integration with the EU, the candidate countries in Southeast Europe are more strongly oriented towards the EQF approach and definitions than others.

Countries outside the EU are already using the EQF to guide their own reforms. One example of the EQF's early impact outside the EU is its use in a project coordinated by the European Training Foundation (ETF). This EU agency is

coordinating a regional project on qualifications to support international cooperation in qualifications development and recognition. Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia are developing qualifications in two economic sectors - construction and tourism. Two occupations were selected for each sector: bricklayer and site supervisor, and waiter and hotel receptionist, respectively.

To compare qualifications, the project is using the EQF as a common reference. Experts from each country were asked to (re)describe the qualifications for the occupations in terms of knowledge, skills and competences against the EQF descriptors, resulting in common profiles. The project demonstrates that a common reference tool, in this case the EQF can support the development of relevant national qualifications.

It should be said that there is a subtle difference between such transition countries bordering the EU and those in Asia, Australasia etc. In the latter, while the EQF is studied closely and has influenced further development of some frameworks e.g. Australia's, NQFs had already been developed before the EQF's adoption.

HOW TRANSITION COUNTRIES ARE USING NQFS TO TRANSFORM QUALIFICATIONS SYSTEMS

Common aims for NQFs in transition countries include bringing education and training closer to the labour market; developing relevant qualifications, creating progression routes linking, for example, vocational education and training (VET) with higher education (HE), and working towards a greater recognition of qualifications within the country and abroad.

So how do NQFs deliver these objectives? Developing and implementing an NQF involves both social and technical dimensions and social/institutional processes.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

As described in the previous chapter, a key characteristic of almost all NQFs is the notion of learning outcomes, which is both conceptual and practical in its implications. All new NQFs start from outcomes-based descriptors. Outcomes tell us what the qualification is about – so creating

readability. At the same time, by defining a qualification by what the learner needs to achieve rather than by traditional inputs such as duration of the programme, learning outcomes can facilitate diverse learning routes – formal or informal - which recognise and encourage lifelong learning.

For most transition countries this represents a significant change. In many cases a qualification has traditionally been indistinguishable from a curriculum over the last 15 years. Indeed, in many transition countries, for example those of the Maghreb and Middle East, there is no formal definition of qualification. But by defining qualifications by outcomes, their understanding of qualification has been re-defined. This has usually been prompted by the adoption or implementation of an NQF, the NQF in this way acting as a reform tool. The EQF contains a definition of a qualification and this certainly influences national interpretations of qualification – and hence much else of the shape of the NQF. Countries are basing their legal definition of qualification on the EQF. So qualifications and curricula are being defined separately where before they were merged. Curricula are also influenced in another way, and it seems that outcomes promote focus on skills development and transversal key competences, for example.

Countries are also using NQFs to diversify pathways and develop systems to introduce work-based learning or to validate non-formal and informal learning. Traditionally, in most transition countries, a qualification has traditionally been obtainable only by taking a formal training course.

ASSESSMENT AND CERTIFICATION

The ultimate result of a qualification process is not a certificate, a piece of paper, but a formally qualified person. NQFs therefore often establish a link between assessment and standards. NQFs comprise levels of qualifications based on outcomes, which are themselves based on standards against which a learner is assessed. So NQFs through learning outcomes influence assessment approaches. Outcomes approaches do seem to push countries to develop and use more appropriate assessment methods not only for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, but affecting the final assessment in formal learning as well.

The principle of applying the same assessment standards to obtaining a qualification, no matter how the individual acquired his/her learning, is being adopted in many of the new NQFs. It is hoped that NQFs can thus support recognition of skills acquired informally and give a boost to learning beyond formal education, particularly for adults. In most of our countries these systems are in their early stages. Turkey is building a network of sectoral assessment centres to promote this. Romania and Estonia (former ETF partner countries) have also done this. However, the certificates issued for these qualifications have sometimes been different from those issued in the initial VET system.

QUALITY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEMS

Frameworks are also usually associated with quality assurance arrangements. To be included in an NQF and associated qualifications registers, qualifications must be validated against criteria and providers often have to be accredited to award the qualification. Assessments also have to be quality assured, or verified. The focus of quality assurance is often on the qualifications development process (making sure qualifications are good enough to enter the NQF) and on assessment and certification (making sure people who hold the new qualifications are meeting the outcomes defined in the standards).

To take a transition country example in Georgia, the NQF is an instrument for establishing a new approach to quality assurance in VET based on learning outcomes. The National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement is in charge of quality-assuring the development of qualifications and their use in provision and assessment. It works with sectoral bodies as well as public and private providers. The Centre wants to ensure that learning outcomes drive provision and accredited providers must use participatory self-assessment methods involving staff, students and external stakeholders to improve their efficiency. The new Georgian system requires active involvement by the sectors and local companies working with providers. The Centre has also started developing recognition of prior learning through VET providers.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Private sector involvement is of critical importance for relevant qualifications. The social partners traditionally have little formal locus in the education and training system, so governance of VET has often been narrow in its representation, usually dominated by education ministries which typically prioritise general secondary and higher education. But NQFs can provide a platform for social dialogue. They are usually developed by a range of actors, including ministries, employers, trades unions, education authorities, VET agencies and individual experts all working collaboratively on the framework, occupational standards and qualifications, thus supporting labour market relevance.

Indeed, in some cases, notably Russia and Ukraine, employers have initiated the NQF process and in Turkey the sectors play a strong role in developing and awarding vocational qualifications. Many partner countries are developing sectoral councils to support the qualifications development processes. Nevertheless ILO's 2010 16-country study showed that most NQFs are driven by governments and the decision-making role of employers and, in particular, trade unions, in the NQF development and implementation processes is often weak. It is therefore particularly important to provide capacity and institution-building support to social partners in the NQF development processes.

The Turkish NQF provides a platform for cooperation between the government and the sectors, to develop, first, outcomes-based occupational standards and then sectoral qualifications. National occupational standards assure the relevance of qualifications for adult training, which was previously often unrecognised. The Vocational Qualifications Authority coordinates this new system, while the sectors are in charge of developing standards and certification processes.

OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS

This wider stakeholder engagement is beginning to influence the design and content of curricula and qualifications. Traditionally ETF partner countries

have used subject or input-based curricula, but increasingly they are developing occupational standards to make vocational qualifications more relevant. Occupational standards – defining work-related competences for a specific occupation- are normally developed by sectors or professional bodies and involve experts who practice the occupation. Basing qualifications on occupational standards and labour market demand, as well as linking them to higher-level qualifications and allowing for progression, raises their “market value.”

Occupational standards have been welcomed as potential instruments to support demand-led qualifications systems, and they can also offer the basis to certify existing staff. Recognition of Prior Learning (or the validation of non-formal and informal learning) is recognised in many countries as potentially very useful given the weaknesses in the formal sector, the extent of informal employment and training and the high numbers of returning migrants who possess useful skills which are not formally certificated.

Turkey and to some extent Egypt, Tunisia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Georgia and Azerbaijan are examples of countries that have initiated ambitious programmes for the development of occupational standards in order to describe the employment requirements for existing and future workers. However, these developments are too infrequently integrated with vocational qualifications systems, leaving the occupational standards unused, and complicating the translation process into different types of qualifications, and curricula. A clear identification of different qualification types and how they can build on occupational standards can resolve these situations. The competency based qualification types such as NVQs (UK), CQPs (France) or sectoral qualifications in Turkey are based on a single occupational standard, but most initial VET qualifications would integrate information from several occupational standards as well as access and progression requirements.

INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND ROLES

Developing an NQF also deepens institutional capacity, especially in transition or developing countries. New institutional roles are often allocated for the coordination among different

actors in the framework, for the development and approval of qualifications and for quality- assuring the assessment and certification processes. Some states establish new bodies such as qualifications authorities to design, construct and coordinate the framework. Others are starting to build different forms of sectoral organisations, while new quality assurance bodies are also emerging. Indeed, one can identify new types of professional organisations, operating separately from of the national Ministry of Education, which, for example, coordinate the stakeholders cooperating in the framework, develop qualifications, oversee assessment and certification, and quality assurance; and support development of information, counselling and guidance services.

Evidence suggests that building, or appointing, an institutional home for coordinating an NQF, can give the framework an impetus. This observation applies even where staff numbers are quite small e.g. Kosovo’s NQA counts only 6 staff but the Authority has been instrumental in propelling reform of the country’s qualifications system.

SOME FINDINGS

No transition country is establishing an NQF solely with the aim of reflecting the current system and leaving it otherwise unchanged. In some OECD states, NQFs have been created largely to conform to externally-established systems such as the EQF (though there is here of course a tangible benefit in supporting international recognition and so mobility), but in transition countries, the ambitions – and expectations - are very often greater.

Implementing an NQF is more difficult than designing its structures. It implies major reform of a qualifications system and its surrounding education and training system. As most NQFs are based on learning outcomes, this means adopting learning outcomes approaches not only for qualifications, but also for curricula, teaching and learning and assessment. In practice, the shift to learning outcomes is not a linear process solely determined by the NQF’s implementation.

It is a more variable process of outcomes approaches being introduced gradually and integrating them in varying degrees into descriptors and qualifications, and assessment and learning

processes. Further, approaches or types of learning outcomes used differ, for example, between VET and HE.

The paradox of so many diverse countries adopting the same instrument has been mentioned. However, while NQFs are superficially similar, no two NQFs are the same in practice. The relationship between context, challenge and response is complex. Our observation is that while national contexts remain diverse, challenges e.g. making

qualifications understandable, promoting lifelong learning, facilitating recognition etc. are similar, but responses in implementing arrangements and the institutions established, vary markedly.

This is as it should be – NQFs must fit national institutions, and meet national needs. They cannot, either, be built at a speed or level of complexity which exceeds national capacities to sustain their implementation.

CHAPTER 4: NQFS AND THE RECOGNITION, VALIDATION AND ACCREDITATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING: TRENDS FROM 34 COUNTRIES

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INTRODUCTION⁷

This chapter examines how National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) can support the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning and looks at how frameworks are being opened up to include qualifications awarded through RVA. To understand the interaction between RVA practices and NQFs, this chapter will focus on: (1) some definitional and conceptual issues; (2) the link between NQFs and RVA practices and broader country objectives; (3) NQFs as reference points for RVA; (4) the use of outcomes-based approaches in qualifications and recognition reference points; (5) progression pathways for lifelong learning; (6) the lessons learned and ways forward.

The recent UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning reflects the priority given by Member States to establishing RVA mechanisms linked to NQFs and lifelong strategies (UIL, 2012).

SOURCES OF DATA

The chapter is based on country examples of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) in 34 countries prepared by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, Hamburg, Germany. It includes only those countries and territories that are not members of the European Union (Cedefop, 2012) or the European Training Foundation (ETF) partner countries⁸.

The country reports have been prepared through secondary literature and country websites. Designated experts in the selected countries were asked to review, update and validate the information prepared by UIL. The analysis of the country information was conducted on basis of a common structure agreed with Cedefop and ETF:

1. Challenges that the NQF would need to address;
2. Main policy objectives;

⁶The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning is one of the seven Category 1 education institutes of UNESCO.

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⁸Of the 34 countries reported in this study, eight are from South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives), three from East Asia (China, Japan, Hong Kong SAR, and Republic of Korea) and three from South-East Asia (Malaysia, Philippines, Viet Nam). Two countries are from Latin America (Chile and Mexico) and one is from the Caribbean, namely Trinidad and Tobago. The UIL study also includes five East African countries (Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, United Republic of Tanzania, Uganda); five southern African countries (Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, South Africa, Seychelles) and two English-speaking West African countries (Ghana and Gambia). In order to have a broader perspective, the study also covers two developed countries from Oceania, namely New Zealand and Australia, and two North American countries, namely Canada and the United States of America.

3. Involvement of stakeholders;
4. Levels and descriptors and use of learning outcomes;
5. Progression pathways and recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning;
6. Referencing to regional frameworks ;
7. Important lessons and future plans.

The paper starts with a brief overview of the overall progress of NQFs and recognition practices in 34 countries and territories.

OVERALL PROGRESS OF NQFS AND RECOGNITION PRACTICES IN 34 COUNTRIES

- National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) are an important development in education and training reforms in developed, transition and developing countries.
- Of the 34 countries surveyed about 28 have arrived at some kind of overall structure of their framework (with footnote). While some countries and territories have developed frameworks (notably, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Philippines, Hong Kong SAR China) others, for example Republic of Korea, are starting to implement their framework. Japan is giving consideration to a framework, while USA, with a federal system of government where education and training is very largely a state responsibility, it is not contemplating a national framework. However, there are some research organisations in USA that are advocating the development of a NQF (CLASP, 2011). Furthermore, USA has in place ways of achieving several of the outcomes for which a framework is designed (APEC, 2009)⁹.
- The vast majority of the countries are developing or have developed sub-frameworks. Most countries in the developing world are in the process of developing NQFs in the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector¹⁰.
- An increasing number of NQFs or sub-frameworks take on the role of reference points for recognition. In a number of countries, even where there are comprehensive frameworks operational, usually the recognition of non-formal and informal learning focuses on the TVET sub-sector and workplace learning.
- Countries use a learning outcomes-based approach to define NQF level descriptors. Learning outcomes have, however, yet to be introduced across the education and training sectors in a consistent way. In some sectors the introduction of learning outcomes is more advanced than in others.
- In the USA and Canada, Japan and the Republic of Korea, recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning is institutionalised and operates in relation to standards of the existing curricula of educational institutions. There are plans however, to introduce learning-outcomes-based approaches in curricular standards in order to take into account the recognition of competences from non-formal and informal learning settings.
- Most countries regard regional frameworks as an important catalyst for the development of NQFs. The regional communities are: the Southern African Development Community (SADC) the Small States of the Commonwealth; the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN); and the East African Community (EAC) as well as South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

⁸ The levels differ from country to country depending on the nature of a country's education and training system, but also on whether the qualifications framework is comprehensive or sub-sectoral. Some have a five-level structure (Nepal); seven-level structure (Hong Kong, Rwanda, Trinidad and Tobago); others have an eight-level-structure (Afghanistan; Malaysia, Uganda, South Africa, Chile, Mexico, Republic of Korea). India, the Maldives, Tanzania; Mauritius, the Seychelles, Australia, New Zealand have a ten-level structure. Ethiopia has a 5-level NQF in the TVET sector; the Gambia has a 4-level skills qualifications framework. Ghana has proposed a nine-level framework. Canada does not have an NQF, but Ontario has developed the Ontario Qualifications Framework with 13 levels. The level descriptors for Japan and Kenya are not established yet.

¹⁰ These countries are: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Ethiopia, Viet Nam, Uganda, Ghana, and Gambia. Two countries also have labour competency frameworks (Mexico, India).

- In a number of countries¹¹ NQFs as well as RVA mechanisms are informed by donor agencies international organisations¹².

THE TWO-WAY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIFELONG LEARNING AND NQFS

Lifelong learning has become the key organising principle for education and training. There is an overall shift from education to learning, stressing the importance of learning both within and beyond educational provision: learning in the family, in the community, at work, with friends, through the mass media, learning through observing and doing and by participating. Formal, non-formal and informal learning have become core concepts within lifelong learning.

According to the definitions in the UNESCO Guidelines (UIL, 2012):

- Formal learning takes place in education and training institutions, and is recognised by relevant national authorities, leading to diplomas and qualifications. Formal learning is structured according to educational arrangements such as curricula, qualifications and teaching/learning requirements.
- Non-formal learning is learning that is in addition or alternative to formal learning and is also structured according to educational arrangements, but is more flexible. It is provided through organisations and services that have been set up to complement formal education systems, but it also takes place in community-based settings, the workplace, or through the activities of civil society organisations. Through the RVA process, non-formal learning can also lead to qualifications and other recognitions.
- Informal learning is unintentional learning that occurs in daily life, in the family, in the workplace, in communities, and through the interests and activities of individuals. Through the RVA process, competences gained in informal learning can be made visible, and can contribute to qualifications and other recognitions. The term experiential learning

is also used to refer to informal learning that focuses on learning from experience.

While, for definitional purposes, ‘formal’, ‘non-formal’ and ‘informal’ are used as discrete terms, they are interrelated in practice. When considering this terminology within a global scope, key differences can be distinguished between developed and developing countries with regard to non-formal and informal education. For example, the size of the non-formal and informal learning sectors varies; countries in the global North tend to focus resources at upper secondary vocational levels or above and non-formal learning is predominantly concerned with continuing vocational education and training. By contrast, in the South non-formal education programmes can be highly organised and national, filling in the substantial gap left by weak or inadequate and poor quality mainstream education and training provision.

While lifelong and life-wide learning are and can be an important inspiration for NQFs, NQFs have also been shown to support lifelong learning. For example, since qualifications are awarded on the basis of the assessment of competences in an NQF, gaining a qualification is not bound by a place of learning. This opens up a system of learning to those who acquired skills in the workplace and through other activities. A number of countries have either proposed or started to introduce mechanisms for the recognition, validation and accreditation of the outcomes from non-formal and informal learning.

THE LINK BETWEEN NQFS AND RVA PRACTICES AND BROADER COUNTRY OBJECTIVES

Overall, country studies show that countries’ broader policy objectives are accommodated with the national qualifications framework and recognition practices. These objectives can be educational, but they can also be broader economic, social and cultural aims. The following objectives of National Qualifications Frameworks and recognition practices are of particular importance:

¹¹ These include Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Mauritius, Seychelles, Tanzania

¹² Some of these are the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC); the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), Dutch Expertise Centre on Education (CINOP), International Labour Organisation (ILO), European Union (EU), Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the World Bank (WB).

- a. To contribute to the socio-economic development through the provision of a TVET system that is responsive to labour market needs and provides people with knowledge and skills (e.g. Afghanistan).
- b. To reform TVET and to introduce a competence-based education and training that will include the existing workforce, and those entering the workforce, including recognition of the skills workers have acquired in the informal sector (e.g. Bangladesh).
- c. To expand TVET opportunities at post-primary level (e.g. Bangladesh).
- d. To provide a greater choice of VET programmes, specifically in labour-intensive sectors such as the service, construction, manufacturing, agro-processing industries and the arts and crafts (e.g. Bhutan).
- e. To allow people to gain knowledge, skills and competences and convert these skills through testing and certification to higher diplomas and degrees (e.g. India).
- f. To assure the quality of skills development, to promote transparency, progression and comparison of qualifications, and to determine learning outcomes (e.g. Pakistan).
- g. To bring coherence through a single set of standards and curricula, and to establish a set of agencies overseeing technical vocational education and training (e.g. Sri Lanka).
- h. To develop a more coherent qualifications framework that improves linkages between academic education and vocational qualifications standards, and also to develop a pre-employment certification in partnership with VET schools and colleges (e.g. China).
- i. To provide a transparent and easily accessible platform, to promote lifelong learning and enhance the capability and competitiveness of the local workforce (e.g. Hong Kong, SAR, China).
- j. To support the national and international mobility of workers (e.g. the Philippines).
- k. To address skill deficit, support international recognition of national qualifications, and facilitation of labour and student mobility (e.g. Viet Nam).
- l. To address the learning needs of adult and elderly population (e.g. Japan).
- m. To build ladders of occupational as well as educational progression so that, for example, dental mechanics could become dentists, and legal and accounting clerks could become lawyers and accounts (e.g. Republic of Korea).
- n. To ensure accuracy and consistency of nomenclature of qualifications (e.g. Malaysia).
- o. To cope with the increasing complexity and diversity of education and training offered and to enable transfer between different sectors (e.g. Ethiopia).
- p. To integrate formal and informal learning of skills, post-school college or centre based and on-the-job learning, full-time and part-time learning into a framework (e.g. The Gambia).
- q. To bring all post-basic occupation-oriented qualifications into a unified qualifications framework and to improve product and service quality by ensuring uniform standards of practice in the trades and professions (e.g. Ghana).
- r. To compare qualifications across systems and ensure that they are quality assured and recognised locally and internationally (e.g. Australia, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania).
- s. To integrate education and training systems (e.g. Mauritius, Namibia, Chile).
- t. To create employable skills and competences relevant in the labour market but nevertheless facilitating progression in the educational system (e.g. Uganda).
- u. To provide a contemporary and flexible framework that supports the development and maintenance of pathways for accessing qualifications and assisting people to move

easily between different education and training sectors and between different sectors of the labour market (e.g. Australia).

- v. To move post-secondary and employment training fields toward a qualifications framework for awarding educational credit for occupation and training based on demonstrated competences regardless of where and how training has occurred (e.g. USA).
- w. To provide quality assurance so that new programmes and new institutions of higher learning meet appropriate standards; to improve international recognition of the quality of credentials; to improve student access to further study at the post-secondary level (e.g. Canada).

NQFS AS REFERENCE POINTS FOR RVA

NQFs focused on explicit learning outcomes-based standards and references for qualifications can accommodate outcomes of learning in non-formal and informal learning settings. National qualifications frameworks are therefore considered critical for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. The UIL study has looked at the following approaches in Member States. The typology is, however, not necessarily mutually exclusive. A comprehensive framework, for example, may exist, but recognition practices still could occur only within the TVET sub-sector framework.

Only further research can tell if NQFs are driving RVA, or whether RVA is causing NQFs to be established. In any case, there are “parallel” tendencies in several countries (India, Bangladesh, Ghana, and The Gambia) for NQFs in TVET to serve the labour market with skilled labour, to provide a means to recognise learning that takes place outside the formal education sector, and to help those who have dropped out of the general education system to receive a more vocationally oriented training. The NQF in this sense is a parallel pathway. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning thus becomes a key issue in NQF developments.

THE USES OF OUTCOMES-BASED APPROACHES IN QUALIFICATIONS AND RECOGNITION REFERENCE POINTS

The paradigm shift from education based on inputs towards qualifications based on learning outcomes has important implications for lifelong learning, particularly the recognition of learning outcomes and competences from non-formal and informal learning. However, the different uses/formulations of learning outcomes need to be noted depending on the level at which they are discussed:

- The first use of ‘learning outcomes’ is their definition or understanding at the level of overarching goals or the vision of education and training policies in a country. Not many developing countries have a shared national understanding of the notion of learning outcomes.
- The second use of ‘learning outcomes’ refers to their application in national qualifications frameworks. The influence of competence understood in narrowly behavioural terms is most visible in the recent NQF developments in the TVET sector in an increasing number of developing countries (See Singh, 2013; Singh and Duvekot, 2013). This could have negative repercussions for the quality of learning and education. With respect to developing learning outcomes based qualifications in developing countries, Young and Allais (2011) warn us that competence-based outcomes must be complemented by inputs, i.e. the knowledge that a learner needs to acquire if he or she is to be capable of moving beyond existing performance.
- The third use of ‘learning outcomes’ is as learning objectives for an education or learning programme or institution. These can be related to learning inputs and have a more pedagogical purpose with programmes of study (prescribed content) and attainment targets at stages of the learning programme. Assessment instruments are devised to ascertain whether and how well the standard has been reached. There is thus

REFERENCE POINTS FOR THE RECOGNITION OF LEARNING OUTCOMES FROM NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN SELECTED COUNTRIES

Recognition based on standards in a comprehensive NQF	<i>Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Mauritius, Seychelles, Malaysia, Philippines, Rwanda, Hong Kong SAR, India, Maldives, Republic of Korea (proposed), United Republic of Tanzania, Mexico</i>
Recognition related to NQFs in the TVET sector	<i>Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Botswana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Namibia, Rwanda, Uganda, Ghana, and Gambia</i>
Recognition based on labour competence frameworks	<i>China, Mexico, Chile, Hong Kong SAR, India, Viet Nam</i>
No NQFs but recognition occurs in the context of standards within existing education and training institutions	<i>United States of America, Canada, Japan</i>
Equivalency frameworks for basic education	<i>Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Malaysia, Ethiopia, Kenya, United Republic of Tanzania, Uganda, Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, South Africa, Seychelles, Ghana, Gambia, Mexico</i>

an internal or conceptual relationship between the prescribed content (which aims to satisfy the learning outcome descriptor) and the assessment of whether the learning outcome has been achieved. In North America, USA and Canada, some institutions design degree programmes around student learning outcomes, or competences, rather than academic content for college credits. The institutions grant degrees based on what students have demonstrated that they know and can do.

In a number of developing countries, while the methodology and tools of RVA fit within proposed NQFs, there is still need to adopt methodology and planning tools that can become standards for determining assessment requirements. In these countries, NQFs and recognition practices still need to be understood for their role in improving the quality of assessment as opposed to access to skills.

PROGRESSION PATHWAYS FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Country reports show that one of the primary aims of NQFs is to harmonise general, vocational, higher education and adult and continuing education with the workplace and volunteer work. This section discusses how people are progressing through the education

and training system seen from the holistic perspective of lifelong and life-wide learning, and from the perspective of the involvement of stakeholders from different sectors – education, work and the voluntary sector. Within the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF), all qualifications contain outcome statements that indicate graduate profiles, education pathways and employment pathways (See Box)

Youth (secondary level): In a number of countries, NQFs put emphasis on the vocationalisation of secondary education for youth who are not academically-oriented and are at risk of dropping out, thus giving them an opportunity to progress to higher levels of the general or vocational stream (Australia, India, Hong Kong SAR).

Horizontal and vertical mobility between general education and TVET and vice-versa: In several countries, frameworks for higher education are addressing the demand for continuing and post-secondary education, and for horizontal and vertical mobility between general education and TVET and vice versa. In India the proposed NVEQF has started a trend for the private sector to enter into agreements with State governments to set up Vocational Education Universities, comprising community colleges, which will confer credits recognised by degree programmes.

IN NEW ZEALAND OUTCOME STATEMENTS CONTAIN PROGRESSION PATHWAYS

The NZQF comprises all nationally-endorsed and quality-assured qualifications. All qualifications listed on the NZQF contain outcome statements that are used by prospective employers and other tertiary education organisations (TEOs)*, and for comparing qualifications. Different learners achieve the outcomes in different ways, so outcome statements indicate the minimum achievement expected of a graduate with that qualification. Each outcome statement must include the following information:

- Graduate profiles, which identify the expected learning outcomes of a qualification. This describes what a learner will know and understand and be able to do when they achieve the qualification.
- Education pathways, which identify further qualifications that a graduate might attain after completing this qualification. Where qualifications are stand-alone, and do not prepare graduates for further study, the outcome statement should make this clear.
- Employment pathways or contributions to the community that identify the areas in which a graduate may be qualified to work, or the contribution they may make to their community.

Source: Keller 2013

* Tertiary Education Organisations include universities, institutes of technology, polytechnics, registered private training establishments and wānanga. Wānanga are tertiary institutions characterised by teaching and research that maintains, advances, and disseminates knowledge, develops intellectual independence, and supports the application of ahuatanga Māori (Māori tradition) according to tikanga Māori (Māori custom).

TVET - Post-Primary: NQFs are also opening up post-primary education and training pathways for students, allowing them to acquire specific skills within a short period of time and move directly into an entry-level job or advance to a higher-level of certification. In Nepal, for example, the first major exit point from the general education system is

after primary education. Thus, the bottom layer of the TVET certification system is to be designed accordingly at the post-primary level.

Pathways for Adult Upskilling: In a number of countries, NQFs are being developed with the aim of focussing on pathways for low-skilled and skilled workers in the labour market (formal and informal economies). These frameworks help to integrate formal, non-formal and informal learning, notably learning in the workplace and in some cases, offer vertical mobility within the education and training system. In some of these countries, a large proportion of the workforce has only primary education or levels below primary education and work in the informal sector or as casual workers in the organised sector (India). In other countries workers seek re-employment and are trying to improve their future career prospects as in Japan.

Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) pathways linked to NQFs build bridges and ladders that enable vertical and horizontal movements to the general education system. Examples of such bridges are the distance education modes of non-formal education and training (Ethiopia, Botswana, Tanzania, and South Africa)

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RVA

A significant number of countries are recognising the critical need for the recognition of all forms of learning towards some level of award. The purpose of this section is to look at the implementation of recognition, validation, and accreditation of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning in terms of some of the Key areas of Action underlined in the UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (UIL, 2012), and to highlight some practices in the countries.

Establishing standards and methods of assessment

With regard to standards and methods of recognising learning outcomes from formal, non-formal, informal learning, the following observations can be noted.

- Several countries underline the importance of different stages in the RVA process. These are identification, documentation, validation and certification (Australia). Profiling, facilitation and assessment is used in New Zealand to find out the qualifications, or parts of qualifications, that best reflect the understandings that individuals have;
- In some countries a higher standard of proof is required in giving recognition to higher levels of qualifications (QF Level 4) (Hong Kong SAR). If workers have no intention of pursuing further education, then it is not regarded as urgent to go for RVA.
- In New Zealand, the outcome statement of qualifications provides students and prospective employers with an idea of what the qualification holder should have achieved.
- There are formalised and less formalised ways of assessment, which may or may not cross-cut with summative and formative assessment. These are also referred to as summative or formative. In the USA, less formalised ways of assessing are developed in a number of higher education institutions that have been serving the adult learner population for many years. The Republic of Korea has two closely related systems for recognising non-formal and informal learning; the formalised Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS), and the less formalised Lifelong Learning Account System (LLAS).
- In a growing number of developing countries the methodology for the assessment of skills is based on competency-based training approaches (CBT) (Afghanistan, Uganda, Gambia).
- Japan does not have an NQF but its system of RVA is of a broader scope than being restricted to only labour competences and TVET. Recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning is related to: (1) school education; (2) social education; and (3) vocational and workplace training.
- While RVA continues to be a part of assessment against all accredited qualifications,

in more and more countries it now also includes assessment that is oriented towards credit processes along with credit transfer and programme articulation arrangements (Australia, Canada). In South Africa, recognition of non-formal and informal learning for credit is usually associated with general and further education and training, whereas RVA for access is usually associated with access to higher education (South Africa) and has a developmental rather than a summative focus. In New Zealand, the RPL procedure may be determined by the provider's entry requirements, or for validation purposes for employment skills.

- Accountability is only one narrow aspect of outcome and assessment, but somehow it has been overemphasised by many labour organisations. Thus the need to make assessment both a holistic and reliable tool for educational improvement has been emphasised in a number of countries. The future of the NVQ model for Viet Nam, it has been argued, will depend on whether the government wants it to be an instrument of accountability or an educational instrument that improves the quality of the workforce by promoting authentic learning.

Building capacities for RVA personnel for delivering recognition

Often the introduction of learning outcomes-based standards and assessment criteria is not supported with the necessary investment in the training of educational staff for the development and implementation of new and diversified assessment methodologies. The delivery of RVA is important. Country reports show the following tendencies:

1. In some countries each training provider and employer has a trained and accredited assessor-trainer to carry out the continuous assessment based on the unit standards. For developing assessors' skills, several levels of training for assessors have been proposed in Bangladesh.
2. In Australia and New Zealand, one of the critical issues in the development of an RVA system has been allowing public and publicly-financed training institutions greater autonomy

in deciding on training and assessment programmes, hiring assessors, and generating revenues by selling these services. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) has a policy that education providers (TEOs) use (NZQA 2002).

3. Some countries have reported that at the tertiary level only few providers are delivering RVA and the award of credit for these experiences (Trinidad and Tobago and Namibia). In other countries such as in Canada, most public colleges and some universities recognise prior learning often in programmes offered through adult and continuing education. Prior Learning Assessment and recognition (PLAR) is used in their adult education programmes for admission and advanced standing. Universities provide information; provide support in terms of portfolio development courses, individual guidance, written information and personal guidance.
4. In Malaysia only accredited institutions i.e. those that meet the requirements of the qualifications frameworks and are registered in the qualifications register are able to deliver recognition programmes.

Improving accessibility to RVA

1. Mauritius and Hong Kong SAR are widening the use of recognition across economic sectors.
2. In New Zealand, in practice, the assessment of prior learning is mainly applied to groups for entry to further education and training or due to policy changes in professional qualifications.
3. In South Africa, there are three main target groups for RPL: the access group, the redress group and candidates who leave formal education prematurely and who have, over a number of years, built up learning through short programmes.
4. In Canada, while progression through access to academic qualifications still remains the key aspect of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), opening up access and progress in skilled and professional occupations

in the labour market is now reported as the key issue everywhere in Canada.

Quality assurance and ensuring trust

Quality management systems nowadays emphasise the causal connection between input, process, output and outcome. So, the first thing to do is to make explicit the interplay between quality resources, processes and outcomes.

1. Gaining understanding of the interplay of the diversity of interests between state, market and agencies of civil society is important in the context of quality assurance. A single body responsible for coordinating the overall recognition, validation and accreditation system linked to NQFs, providing oversight, financing of training, curriculum development, supervising skills tests, RVA certification and accreditation has been proposed in several countries.
2. Accreditation Councils play an important role in quality assurance (Trinidad and Tobago). In the USA accreditation is granted to institutions of higher education through non-profit agencies that are structured and operate independently from federal or state governing bodies. There is a growing trend in the USA to have comparable quality assurance for Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), as prior learning assessment programmes are considered to have unique qualities compared to other academic programmes.

The scope and the involvement of all stakeholders

Recognition is a tool addressing both lifelong learning and employment purposes. Recognition therefore involves many stakeholders.

1. In Afghanistan, non-formal education and training is offered by a variety of Ministries and NGOs. In such a case, the updating of standards with a focus on occupational skills standards is undertaken by all these ministries.
2. In the majority of countries in this study, the key to the overall success of recognition practices linked to overarching NQFs or sub-sectoral frameworks will be the incorporating of not

only government and NGOs but also industry advisory groups in the development process. In South Africa too, given the skills shortage, and given the history of discrimination, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has been largely focused on workplaces, public and private education and training institutions.

3. In the occupational sectors, a major purpose of setting up a recognition mechanism under the QF is to enable employees of various backgrounds to receive formal recognition of the knowledge, skills and experience already acquired. In the academic sector, the Republic of Korea has the academic credit bank system (ACBS) which recognises learning experiences gained in school but also those gained outside school. In Chile, it is possible for foreign, early school leavers, or those that for some reason are not in formal schooling, to sit the end-of-year school exams based on the national curricular framework, either for primary, secondary, technical or adult education.
4. Not only must all stakeholders be involved in recognition practices linked to NQF, but it must be accepted by all stakeholders. For instance, in Mauritius RPL has been accepted by employers since it provides them with qualified and well-motivated personnel. On the other hand, in Hong Kong SAR, it appears that the government overestimated workers' interest, at least as presented by the labour union representatives, in further education, and underestimated their insistence on using the QF for job security and improving wage levels. It also lacked foresight in anticipating employers' strong opposition to the use of potentially unverified work experience rather than assessed skills and competences.
5. Many countries have indicated a lack of cross-sectoral confidence and trust in NQFs and the recognition of non-formal learning. Policy-makers often fail to see that qualifications recognised by a trusted framework benefit both the stakeholders in the labour market as well as those in the lifelong learning system.
6. Mexico refers to awareness-raising and understanding of RVA as a crucial demand-side issue.

7. Bhutan has raised the question of whether stakeholders understand how NQFs are to be used to improve lifelong learning.
8. Advocacy raising awareness for making the transition from system level to the user level or training provider level is another issue.

LESSONS LEARNED

There is little doubt that a strategic approach to NQFs linked to recognition and validation issues is essential. Recognition linked to NQFs must be calibrated with broader policy objectives. A significant point concerns the value of expanding the recognition process as part of efforts to fight inequality, poverty and social exclusion in both the education system and broader society.

There are several approaches to NQFs as reference points for the recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning. A predominant approach is the sub-sectoral or parallel approach. There are "parallel" tendencies in several countries (India, Bangladesh, Ghana, and The Gambia) for NQFs to serve the labour market with skilled labour, to provide a means to recognise learning that takes place outside the formal education sector, and to help those who have dropped out of the academic system to receive a more vocationally oriented training.

A further issue is that NQFs do not in and of themselves promote the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. This needs to occur through closer action at the workplace, individual level and provider level.

There are also issues concerning the reduction of recognition and validation issues to a narrow behavioural understanding of competences and learning outcomes in terms of concrete tasks and skills. This could have negative repercussions for the quality of learning and education.

In many countries quality assurance of recognition practices are subsumed under NQFs. An important element of quality is the issue of quality of outcomes and impacts in RVA.

Country cases reveal that the potential for recognition practices linked to NQFs is not fully realised. The challenges include: (i) the lack of sufficient data

about RVA outcomes; (ii) the costs for the individual and the system of information and guidance, assessors, facilitators, auditors and awarding bodies; (iii) difficulties due to the absence of regulatory frameworks; (iv) the separation of RVA occurring in the different qualifications domains – general or vocational ; (v) resistance to the use of RVA from higher education institutions and from society in general; (vi) low level of awareness and understanding of RVA; (vii) convincing training providers to incorporate RVA into their training; (viii) creating cross-sectoral confidence and trust in RVA systems through the involvement of all stakeholders; (ix) encouraging companies and individuals to access RVA opportunities as a means of advancing their learning and human resource management.

There are challenges specific to developing countries. (1) As cross-border migration is growing

in the world, recognition across national borders becomes necessary. Many countries call for supporting migrant workers through the recognition of their competences for better integration into global labour markets, as well as supporting the recognition of learning gained outside a country's higher education sector. (2) The role of the informal sector is in itself a challenge for any national education system, but meeting this challenge is all the more important in countries where the majority of people are employed and trained in the informal economy. (3) The countries with a well-developed system of non-formal basic education have reported a need to shift from supply-oriented education to a more demand oriented non-formal education and training system led by economic stakeholders.

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CHAPTER 5: EUROPEAN NQFS AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

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Learning outcomes are important in the creation of national and regional qualifications frameworks¹³. Their main role is to provide transparent level descriptors, able to capture the complexities of the qualifications covered by the framework. Level descriptors need to address the following challenges:

- they need to be sufficiently detailed and multifaceted to capture the complexities of the national qualification system;
- they need to be sufficiently detailed and multifaceted to be of relevance to the labour market;
- they must be able to distinguish systematically between levels and to reflect how knowledge, skills and competences increase in breadth, depth and complexity as learners progress;
- they must (increasingly) act as a reference point for international comparison.

Entering into 2013, almost all the 36 countries taking part in EQF cooperation have finalised their national level descriptors. This gives us for the first time the opportunity to analyse the profile and orientation of level descriptors in the European countries cooperating on the European qualifications framework (EQF).

5.1 LEVEL DESCRIPTORS - DIFFERENTIATION AND CONVERGENCE

The descriptors defining the levels of the EQF were developed between 2003 and 2008 in an extensive process building on research¹⁴ and widespread

consultation involving experts and policy makers from all countries involved¹⁵. While agreement on the categories of knowledge and skills were reached at an early stage, the most challenging part of the exercise was related to the definition and description of 'competence'. Several countries stressed that 'competence' is an overarching category referring to the ability of individuals to apply knowledge and skills in a self-directed way. Treating 'competence' as a subcategory would, it was claimed, send the wrong signal. The compromise reached in 2008 was to operate with a general definition of competence, stressing the overarching character of the concept, but operate with descriptors limited to autonomy and responsibility. These discussions on the character of 'competence' have continued in the years following the adoption of the EQF and point to differences in the way learning outcomes are perceived in different countries. The basic structure of the EQF descriptors is shown in Table 1 below¹⁶.

EQF LEVEL DESCRIPTORS: MAIN ELEMENTS

Level descriptor elements		
<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Skills</i>	<i>Competence</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ factual ■ theoretical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ cognitive ■ practical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ autonomy ■ responsibility

Only three European countries, Ireland, France and UK, had developed NQFs prior to the EQF. This means that 32 countries have developed NQF level descriptors in response to this approach. According to our analysis, these countries can be divided into three different categories.

¹³ EQF Guidance note 4 – Using learning outcomes. http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/documentation_en.htm [accessed 21.3.2013].

¹⁴ Cedefop, 2005, European reference levels for education and training: promoting credit transfer and mutual trust; http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/Files/5146_EN.PDF [accessed 21.3.2013].

¹⁵ See responses to the EQF consultation on http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/eqf/resultsconsult_en.html [accessed 21.3.2013].

¹⁶ Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council on the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning (EQF), 2008/ C 111. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:111:0001:0007:EN:PDF> [accessed 21.3.2013].

5.1.1 Alignment to EQF descriptors

A first group of countries use the EQF descriptors directly or align closely to them: Estonia, Austria and Portugal are examples of this. Most of these countries have, however, prepared additional explanatory tables or guides with more detailed level descriptors in order to be able to use the frameworks. Estonia has prepared detailed level descriptors for four sub-frameworks (higher education, general education, vocational education and training and occupational qualifications). Portugal has drafted guidelines ('Understanding the NQF') in which a more detailed and fine-tuned description of knowledge, skills, attitudes and context is provided. The approach is exemplified by 'knowledge' where a distinction is made between 'depth of knowledge'¹⁷, 'understanding and critical thinking'¹⁸. The skills and know-how domain is characterised by depth, breadth and purpose. The third column covers attitudes (defined as autonomy and responsibility). The context column (defining context of application, predictability and complexity) has been added. The frameworks of Croatia, Greece, Malta, and Slovakia are also closely aligned to the EQF descriptors, starting from the three main pillars of knowledge, skills and competence and only introducing limited changes to the detailed descriptors. For instance, Croatia has emphasised social skills besides cognitive and practical skills.

5.1.2 Broadening of the EQF descriptors

A second group of countries is influenced by the EQF descriptors, but has broaden and (partly) reprofiled the 'skills' and the 'competence' columns. Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Poland, Romania and Sweden are examples. All the countries in this category refer to 'knowledge' and 'skills' but have mostly renamed the third 'competence' column. The Netherlands refers to 'responsibility and independence', Norway to 'general competence', Poland to 'social competence' and Romania to 'transversal competences'. While all these countries include autonomy and responsibility in

their interpretation of 'competence', they generally tend to incorporate additional transversal skills and competences like critical thinking, creativity and entrepreneurship, learning to learn, communication and cooperation. Many countries, for instance Finland and Iceland, have made an effort to integrate the EU key competences¹⁹ in their level descriptors: the same is true of the Maltese and Norwegian NQFs. The inclusion of the term 'evaluation' in the Finnish and Polish frameworks underlines that individuals must be able to reflect on own knowledge, skills and competences and also be able to judge how to improve. In Latvia the terms 'analysis', 'synthesis' and 'assessment' point in the same direction. Poland uses the term 'social competences' instead of 'competence': this is understood as 'identity' (participation, responsibility, models of conduct), 'cooperation' (including team work, leadership, and conditions) and 'responsibility' (which includes individual and team actions, consequences and evaluation). It is interesting to note that Ireland, having defined level descriptors prior to the EQF, uses four substrands to define competence: context, role, learning to learn and insight.

This redefinition of the competence descriptors can be interpreted as an implicit criticism of weaknesses in the original EQF design, as described above. However, the redefinition must also be seen as an effort to reflect national objectives and priorities.

5.1.3 Challenging the EQF descriptors

The second group of countries has paid particular attention to the concept of 'competence' and the question of how to translate this into operational level descriptors. This focus is even stronger in a third group where 'competence' is used as an overarching concept, significantly influencing the way learning outcomes are defined and described²⁰. Examples of countries in this group are Belgium (Dutch, French as well as German speaking regions), Germany, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Switzerland. All these countries emphasise

17 Considered to increase progressively from the lowest to the highest level.

18 Critical thinking is considered at a lower level to be interpretation of information and application in the context and, at the highest, critical awareness of knowledge related issues in the field and at the interface with other fields.

19 Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning. OJ, L 394. http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/oj/2006/l_394/l_39420061230en00100018.pdf [accessed 21.3.2013].

20 The distinction between the second and third groups of countries is not always clear-cut. Some countries, e.g. Iceland and Slovenia, use competence as a headline for the third column, but emphasise the integrative and holistic nature of the concept. In the Icelandic qualifications framework, competence involves responsibility, broadmindedness, creativity, moral values, tolerance, and the students' appreciation of their own abilities. Competence furthermore involves the students' analysis of their own knowledge and skill by comparing, finding connections, simplifying, drawing conclusions, reflecting, and reasoning. In the Slovenian qualifications framework, competence relates 'to the ability to use and integrate knowledge and skills in educational, work, personal and/or professional situations. Competences vary in their complexity, independence and responsibility for action.' (Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for vocational education and training, 2011, p. 12)

the holistic character of the term 'competence'. Knowledge, skills and attitudes are not 'atomised' entities which can be judged in isolation from each other; individuals have to combine and apply them in the concrete contexts provided by work and learning. The ability of an individual to act in a self-directed way is seen as crucial to the understanding of 'competence' and allows differentiation between levels of competence. Méhaut and Winch (2012, p. 376)²¹ state that competence '... entails a capacity for independent action that goes far beyond positioning in a managerial hierarchy.' It focuses on the ability of a person to use knowledge, skills, attitudes and other personal, social and/or methodological abilities – in a self-directed way – in work and study situations and to deal with complexity, unpredictability and change.

The practical implication of this perspective is well illustrated by the German qualification framework where the term 'Handlungskompetenz' (action competence) is understood as 'the ability and readiness of the individual to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and methodological competences and conduct himself or herself in a considered and individually and socially responsible manner.' (Bundesministeriums für Bildung und Forschung und der Kultusministerkonferenz, 2011, p. 3)²². Consequently, the German level descriptors differentiate between professional and personal competence and show how knowledge (of varying depth and breadth), skills (instrumental and systematic, linked to judgement), social competence (communication, teamwork, leadership and involvement) and autonomy (autonomous responsibility, learning and reflectiveness) come together in defining the overall competence of the individual.

In the Netherlands the competence concept is also understood as integrative, aiming to cover a wide range of human abilities to cope with complex tasks. According to Westerhuis (2011, p. 76)²³, (the term) 'Integrative stands for the fact that (a) competences are multidimensional and (b) competent performance is only possible if all

dimensions are addressed accordingly to a set of standards.' The Belgian-Flemish framework defines competence as 'the ability to apply knowledge, skills and attitudes when performing social activities, and integrate these into one's actions'²⁴. The Flemish descriptors introduce context as separate, underlining that knowledge and skills have to be applied in life, work or study to count as competence.

5.2 NATIONAL RELEVANCE AND EUROPEAN COMPARABILITY

The level descriptors of the early national qualifications frameworks were designed to serve national purposes. Their task was to show how qualifications can be differentiated in terms of complexity and expected outcomes, as well as how they relate to each other. In contrast, the level descriptors of the new NQFs have, from the outset, been designed to combine national relevance with international comparability; the three approaches outlined signal different ways to approach this balancing act. The first group of countries, aligning their national level descriptors to the EQF, emphasises international comparability as an ultimate goal, but runs the risk of limited national relevance. The EQF descriptors – on purpose using a general language – may not be able to capture the complexities of a national qualification system. This limitation is illustrated by the fact that countries like Portugal and Croatia have developed lengthy guidelines to support the use and interpretation of the national levels. The second group of countries, broadening descriptors to include transversal skills and competences, does this to strengthen the national relevance of descriptors and to promote particular policies; the inclusion of key competences in the Finnish and Icelandic descriptors exemplifies this last aspect. The third group of countries insisting on a holistic approach, largely expresses national traditions, concepts and values and may fear that the current use of learning outcomes - in particular the distinction between knowledge, skills and competence - may be applied in a way which leads to a 'narrowing down' of education and training

21 European qualifications framework: skills, competences or knowledge? Educational research journal, Vo. 11, No. 3.

22 The German qualifications framework for lifelong learning adopted by the 'German qualifications framework working group' (AK DQR), 22 March 2011.

23 The meaning of competence. In: Brockman et al. (eds) (2011). Knowledge, skills and competence in the European labour market. London; New York: Routledge.

24 Flemish Act of 30 April 2009 on the qualifications structure. http://www.evcvlaanderen.be/files/DecreetVKS_ENG.pdf [accessed 21.3.2013].

and lifelong learning strategies. This is an important point as it underlines that learning outcomes and qualifications are not merely technical constructs but must be understood in a social and political context as well.

Countries from all three groups are represented in the 16 countries having referenced to the EQF so far (end of 2012). Overall, this process has been running smoothly, illustrating that countries have taken on board the key elements of the EQF descriptors. So, while the German level descriptors, for example, are based on a different concept of competence from the EQF descriptors, it is still possible to identify linkages and compare levels. It is interesting to note that no country has argued that the use of 'responsibility' and 'autonomy' by the EQF is irrelevant or wrong; the argument is rather that these categories are insufficient to reflect fully national and international reality.

5.3 LEVEL DESCRIPTORS AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO THE LABOUR MARKET

An important function of learning outcomes-based level descriptors is to increase the transparency of qualifications in the labour market. This was one of the objectives pursued by the EQF, and is also visible in work at national level. It is possible to see the emphasis on transversal skills and competences and a holistic competence approach as linked to this need. One of the sector-based EQF pilot projects²⁵ argues that the EQF level descriptors have a number of weaknesses, reducing their ability to act as 'mirror of the world of work'. Particular concern is expressed over the ability of the descriptors to differentiate between levels of competence, pointing to inconsistencies in the use of terms (how to express a degree of complexity, the articulation of change and predictability/unpredictability, the role of context, etc.). The project suggests further developing the competence descriptor by more systematically addressing the 'character of actions' (in relation to context, objects and others). The arguments raised in favour of more employment-relevant descriptors shows that level descriptors need to be systematically reviewed and developed.

The continuing evaluation of the EQF (2013) provides a first opportunity to address and discuss some of the points made nationally, in particular over the concept of competence and the relevance of the descriptors to the labour market.

5.4 PRAGMATIC INTERPRETATION OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

The NQFs developed after 2005 differ in important respects from some of the first generation frameworks developed e.g. in England or South Africa. While differences in the number of levels and coverage immediately catch the eye, the main difference seems rather to lie in the interpretation and application of learning outcomes. Some of the early frameworks were based on what may be described as a radical learning outcomes based approach²⁶. Inspired by the English system of national vocational qualifications (NVQ) introduced in the late 1980s, these frameworks tended to specify learning outcomes independently from curriculum and pedagogy and tried to define qualifications in isolation from delivery mode, learning approach and provider. The countries in question have partly moved away from this radical approach²⁷.

Developments of national qualifications frameworks in Europe²⁸ show that countries have adopted a more pragmatic approach to learning outcomes. While the principle is seen as crucial for increasing transparency and comparability, there is general understanding that learning outcomes must be put into a wider context of education and training inputs to make sense. When placing existing qualifications into a new framework structure, the focus on learning outcomes is frequently combined with consideration of national institutions and programme structures, accepting that mode and volume of learning vary and matter. The development of the German qualifications framework (DQR) illustrates this combination of input and outcome based considerations²⁹:

The starting point for allocating selected qualifications to the levels of the DQR was the relevant regulatory instruments. These included federal and regional laws, framework agreements

25 DEKRA (2012). NQF-SQF project – The employability grid. www.project-nqf-sqf.eu [accessed 21.3.2013].

26 Raffé, 2011 differentiates between outcomes-led (like the English VNO framework) and outcomes-referenced NQFs.

27 See for example Allais (2011c).

28 Cedefop (2013) Analysis and overview of NQF developments in European countries. Annual report 2012. Working paper No 17 http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/6117_en.pdf

29 See Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF); Kultusministerkonferenz (KMK) (2012). German EQF Referencing report [unpublished], p. 67.

and curricula and study regulations. Examination regulations and those issued by the accreditation agencies were also taken into account. As these descriptions were only partly oriented towards learning outcomes, the identification of the learning outcomes 'core' of the qualifications was based on extensive testing and piloting in selected sectors and on systematic dialogue within the DQR coordination groups. In cases where no consensus could be reached, further analysis was carried out by experts, providing the basis on which consensus then was sought.

What is important, and is well illustrated by the German process, is that the learning outcomes approach adds a new important element to the 'old picture', making it possible to have a fresh look at the ordering and valuing of qualifications. This pragmatic use of learning outcomes – combining it with careful consideration of input elements - has been important for redefining the relationship between vocational and academic qualifications. Reviewing this relationship in terms of what a candidate is expected to know, be able to do or understand – instead of looking at type of institutions – has challenged accepted ways of valuing qualifications. The placing of the German master craftsman at the same level as the academic Bachelor is a good example of this approach. The same combination of input- and outcome-based approaches can be identified in most other countries. Level descriptors for national qualifications frameworks have been derived from existing curricular requirements, training regulations and other inputs.

5.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The number of European countries introducing NQFs with learning outcomes based level descriptors has increased rapidly the last decade. A key conclusion in this chapter is that learning outcomes should not be treated as merely technical constructs, but need to reflect and respect the social and institutional contexts they are operating within. The following general points can be made:

- if learning outcomes are formulated in too narrow and restricted ways, they can limit rather than broaden expectations towards learners;
- if learning outcomes are used differently between institutions, sectors and countries, their ability to strengthen transparency and aid comparison is weakened³⁰.

All these points are valid for the design and implementation of level descriptors. The extensive discussion of the third, 'competence' pillar of the EQF illustrates the need to reflect on the expectations signalled by the descriptors and the frameworks they are embedded in; are we broadening or narrowing down our education and training and lifelong learning strategies? The increasing diversification of level descriptors, reflecting the need of countries to strengthen the national relevance of frameworks, raises questions of comparability. This is a concern to be addressed in the further implementation of the EQF.

³⁰ Acknowledging that learning outcomes are shaped by contexts, their communication role to facilitate cooperation and dialogues across subsystems and countries is increasingly important.

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CHAPTER 6: GLOBAL CONVERSATIONS ON THE RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS - THE ROLE OF QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

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SUMMARY

This chapter examines the role national and transnational qualifications frameworks play in supporting the international recognition of qualifications. The issues of transparency, portability and recognition of skills and qualifications are increasing in importance as economies become ever more integrated, products and services become more harmonised and mobile, and above all, as people seek to migrate across borders to work and study.

We consider the different meanings of recognition in a qualifications context and summarise some developments towards international recognition. Then we examine how the recognition issue is positioned in the education global agenda, and identify recent trends. We conclude by discussing what initiatives are required to advance the global conversation on the recognition of qualifications.

INTRODUCTION - RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS GLOBALLY

Recognition of qualifications is at the crossroads as new challenges are emerging. The most important challenge is the mobility of people and jobs in an increasingly globalised labour market.

According to the International Organisation on Migration (IOM), the number of international migrants rose from 150 million in 2000 to 214 million in 2010. If current trends continue, there could be 405 million international migrants in 2050. These trends combined with changes in the nature

of jobs and technology – both now and in the future – provide for an increasing focus on the recognition of skills and qualifications.

IOM World Migration Report (WMR, 2008) summarizes three key causal factors that stimulate international migration: demographic and economic differences between nation states, globalization or trade liberalization, and demand-pull in aging industrial countries matched by supply-push in youthful developing countries.

Currently, there is no global system of vocational qualifications recognition allowing a learner or worker to take his/her qualifications to another country and have them recognised. Instead, where recognition is practised, there are a series of arrangements and structures of varying types. This often, but not always, includes the use of qualifications frameworks. Examples of cooperation for recognition include systems of recognition, whether unilateral, bilateral (or mutual) or multilateral, and various legal obligations and voluntary commitments between countries and systems.

While this gives a complex picture, there is nonetheless a gathering momentum of cooperation and communication in this field, and a widespread acknowledgement among governments and international bodies that the recognition of qualifications and use of Qualifications Frameworks (QFs) to support this end is necessary. Frameworks and qualifications recognition form part of a wider cooperation in both academic and vocational education.

As noted by Leeny (2009), qualifications in this context are a form of currency that signals both national and international value. As a consequence, the development of relevant guidelines and international standards for cross-border recognition of qualifications according to fair, transparent, coherent, and reliable procedures is increasingly urgent and is increasingly debated.

Here, UNESCO and other international bodies and systems can facilitate these processes of global cooperation by positioning recognition of qualifications as a full part of a global education agenda, as well as by arguing powerfully that it is an investment with significant economic, social and individual returns.

First, however, we should establish some understanding of the implications of recognition.

RECOGNITION, TRANSPARENCY COMPARISON, AND PORTABILITY

Recognition means a number of different things in the context of qualifications and qualifications frameworks. In a general sense it can mean the process of granting official status to skills and competences (or learning outcomes) and attested formally through the awarding of a qualification. It can also mean transparency or readability – a holder's certificates should be understood when presented to employers or institutions. Qualifications can also be recognised in terms of its value on the labour market or for academic entry or progression – sometimes called currency. Finally, qualifications can also be recognised as being accepted or trusted when the holder changes jobs or country – sometimes known as portability.

Formally, the most established and well-known transnational framework, the European Qualifications Framework, does not address recognition in the legal meaning of the word. It is intended, instead to improve the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications. In fact, the key dimension of the EQF's implementation is countries' NQFs being related to it so that their respective qualifications systems can be understood and compared. This alignment is likely to increase over time, which will facilitate recognition. But there is also recognition in the legal sense. For example, the EC Directive on

Recognition of Professional Qualifications confers legal obligations and rights on Member States of the EU and on migrants seeking work. The Directive is legally binding but applies to only specific professions. Its purpose is primarily to support free movement of labour within the EU labour market. It does not use a qualifications framework.

In an important review of international trends in recognition of qualifications, Keevy & al. (2010) distinguish between transparency, equivalency and recognition:

- Transparency is the degree to which the value of qualifications can be identified and compared in education, training, the workplace and more. It is the degree of explicitness about the meaning of a qualification (outcomes, content, levels, standards, awards). It implies the exchange of information about qualifications in an accessible way within and outside the country of award. When transparency is achieved, it is possible to compare the value and content of qualifications at the national and international level.
- Comparability is the comparison of one qualification with another, based most often on a common format or instrument - such as comparability tables - that enables the 'face value' of a qualification to be established. The act of comparing enables judgments to be made about the equivalence (sameness) of qualifications.
- Recognition is the formal or legal specifications that a qualification must meet in order to be accepted (recognized) as fulfilling the (transparently) set standards, as are often defined for the professions. Such recognition can be mutual and automatic where two or more states agree upon, for example, qualifications achieved or the minimum conditions of training being met, as is often the case for doctors and nurses.

Hence, the greater the transparency with which a qualification is presented, the easier it is to compare one qualification with another, and the more reliable the system of recognition is by which a qualification is accepted by the state, professions or an individual.

When different NQFs are linked via a common international framework, qualifications can be compared, which supports mobility. It is particularly the learning outcomes basis of NQFs which allows this. Because they are neutral of pathway and other input factors such as type of institution and duration of study, outcomes facilitate comparison – and so recognition – of qualifications internationally. Indeed, the key concept which distinguishes frameworks from other systems for recognition is learning outcomes.

So while recognition arrangements are not always linked to QFs, frameworks do serve in some cases to promote common qualifications and move systems to harmonise qualifications systems, or promote their convergence.

International normative instruments concerning recognition of qualifications

Initiatives to support recognition of qualifications date back to the post-World War 2 years. Much of this activity concerned university qualifications, and was often led by UNESCO.

At present, UNESCO has adopted the following legal instruments, which set forth the principles and norms concerning the recognition of higher education qualifications at the regional and interregional levels:

1. Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (1974);
2. International Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab and European States bordering on the Mediterranean (1976);
3. Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab States (1978);
4. Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in the African States (1981);

5. Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific (1983);
6. The Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (1997; known as the 'Lisbon Convention');
7. Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education (2011; will enter into force one month after the 5th ratification instrument is deposited); and,
8. Recommendation on the Recognition of Studies and Qualifications in Higher Education (1993).
9. UNESCO chaired a joint meeting of its five regional committees, as well as one intergovernmental committee in 1992 in Paris, to explore the feasibility of adopting a Universal Convention on the Recognition of Studies and Degrees in Higher Education. At that time, consensus could not be reached and it was decided to continue to pursue the process at the regional level. Instead, the aspirations for a world-wide instrument resulted in a voluntary instrument: the International Recommendation on the Recognition of Studies and Qualifications in Higher Education adopted by the 27th session of the General Conference of UNESCO (November 1993).

More recently, at a global level, the feasibility of a Global (Universal) Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications was again raised at the Intergovernmental Conference of States (ICS) in Tokyo in November 2012, when the revised 1983 Asia-Pacific Convention was adopted. The debate during the Conference supported the idea of a global convention, with the understanding that regional specificities would continue to be respected. There was also a proposal to continue implementing regional conventions alongside the development of a global convention. The discussion concluded with a proposal that a feasibility study be carried out to examine the desirability of a global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications.

In the field of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), UNESCO's 1989 convention on Technical and Vocational Education (TVE) considers that one element of international co-operation should be that "the Contracting States agree...to promote approaches to achieving the recognition of equivalences of qualifications acquired through technical and vocational education" (p.59); In addition, UNESCO's 2001 Recommendation on TVE also called on Member States for "establishing a system of equivalencies whereby credit is given for completion of any approved programme, and recognition is granted to educational and/or professional qualifications and work experience" (p.45).

The Third International Congress on TVET organized by UNESCO in Shanghai (China) in May 2012, recommended that the Director General of UNESCO explore the possibility of setting up an international task force to develop international guidelines on quality assurance for the recognition of qualifications based on learning outcomes, and identify a set of world reference levels, in order to facilitate the international comparison and recognition of TVET qualifications. Congress participants also agreed that adapting qualifications and developing pathways are key for effective learning and are at the heart of lifelong learning.

PRIORITIES IN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

There is a growing international consensus that mechanisms and systems for the recognition of qualifications need to be developed in cooperation, in order to ensure fair and transparent recognition decisions.

It is significant that national developments in the field of QFs are both paralleled and supported by the emergence of regional frameworks. The latter aims at improving transparency and recognitions of qualifications across-countries. In this context, the referencing of national qualifications frameworks to a regional qualifications framework constitutes an important mechanism through which cross-border transparency, currency and portability of qualifications can be facilitated. The understanding of regional qualifications frameworks as "meta-

frameworks" is also increasingly supported as a pragmatic mechanism to achieve regional objectives in the field of recognition of qualifications (Keevy, Chakroun & Deij, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, at least six major world regions have embarked on the development of regional qualifications frameworks, which on this level embody the promises of increased regional mobility and integration into international labour market schemes. The regions are: the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the European Union (EU), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Small States of the Commonwealth.

The review conducted by the European Training Foundation (Keevy, Chakroun & Deij, 2010) suggests that regional qualifications frameworks have moved beyond the initial conceptual stages in a relatively short period (mainly since 2005).

While these initiatives often aim to support the ambitious goals set out to promote the recognition and transparency of qualifications across borders, there remain several challenges. One challenge is the issue of unresolved tension between input approaches, such as the EC Directive on Recognition of professional qualifications or the ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) for qualifications and the learning outcomes basis of QFs. Another challenge is moving from the design phase to implementation, for example in the case of SADC region.

But the trend seems clear – there is an ever-increasing number of NQFs being developed and these will be bolstered (not replaced) by the development of regional or transnational QFs.

In this context, there are several initiatives that can be considered to advance the global conversation on recognition of qualifications:

1. Developing an observatory for collecting and disseminating promising practices on recognition of qualifications;

2. Facilitating policy dialogue, networking, and sharing of experiences between Member States and between regions through peer-learning activities and cooperation among key stakeholders involved in developing national and regional frameworks;
3. Facilitating studies on different systems, mechanisms, instruments, and tools through collaborative international research in the field of recognition of qualifications; and
4. Responding to the request of Member States to work on international reference levels for quality assurance and recognition of qualifications.

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