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National qualifications framework developments in Europe

Analysis and overview 2015-16

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Analysis and overview 2015-16

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Foreword

This synthesis report, the sixth since Cedefop started its regular monitoring of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), looks into NQF developments and progress made in 39 countries ([1]) and 43 NQFs during 2015-16. It points to the impact of NQFs on systems of education and training, and identifies challenges ahead.

Political commitment to the implementation of NQFs in 2015-16 was confirmed and demonstrated: by the growing number of fully operational frameworks; by the almost completed referencing of NQFs to the European qualifications framework (EQF); and by the increasing visibility of national qualifications frameworks (and their levels) in qualifications documents and/or databases.

Building on the progress made at national level, the revised EQF recommendation was adopted in May 2017. The long-term priority of this recommendation is systematically to strengthen transparency and comparability of European qualifications, reducing barriers to lifelong learning and so strengthening citizens' ability to find work and integrate into society.

NQFs add value primarily by promoting the learning outcomes perspective and by adopting a comprehensive approach seeking to cover all levels and types of qualifications. Combination of these two features explains why progress has been made in several areas. First, national frameworks have helped to make national education and qualification systems more readable and easier to understand within and across countries. Second, through NQF implementation we can observe a new type of cooperation and dialogue across education subsystems and between education and labour market; this is creating conditions for more permeable, flexible and responsive education and training systems supporting vertical and horizontal learner progression. Third, NQFs are increasingly used to aid validation of non-formal and informal learning. Fourth, countries increasingly work on procedures to include qualifications awarded outside formal education and training in their NQFs. This is critical for the frameworks to become maps for lifelong learning, including all relevant qualifications. Fifth, comprehensive learning-outcomes-based frameworks have

([1]) The 28 EU Member States plus Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Kosovo, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey. The report is based on evidence collected through an NQF inventory consisting of 43 national chapters.

helped identify gaps in provision (as illustrated in relation to vocationally oriented education and training at EQF levels 5 to 8).

NQFs have so far been used to support labour market policies only to a limited extent. In the world of employment, the use of qualifications frameworks could help transform workplaces also into learning environments; in a context dominated by the use of technology, this is increasingly becoming a need rather than an added aspect of continuous professional development. It will allow learners and workers to be able to combine education and training from different institutions and subsystems in a way which best supports their lifelong learning and working career. The role of NQFs in promoting the learning outcomes approach is also important in this context as it supports systematic dialogue on the match between companies' needs and the qualifications on offer.

Qualifications frameworks have been catalysts for change in education and training systems, particularly in vocational education and training, and continue to serve as a technical point of convergence for stakeholders such as trade union leaders, employers, policy-makers, training providers and practitioners. This eclectic function of qualifications frameworks is truly innovative in the education sector and coincides with the electronic-based trend in learning and training of multiple providers, systems and qualifications. This wide-ranging application of qualifications frameworks is important for the future of education in a globalised context of mobility, information technology and rapid knowledge proliferation.

As developments in this field are constant and rapid, Cedefop will continue to monitor NQF developments and analyse their impact on qualification systems. This will support us in contributing to better understanding of this tool for lifelong learning and the recognition of diverse qualifications.

Joachim James Calleja
Cedefop Director

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Table of contents

Foreword 1

Acknowledgements 3

Table of contents 6

Executive summary 8

1. Introduction 10

1.1. NQFs in 2015-16: overall progress 10

1.2. NQFs and the European qualifications framework 11

1.2.1. Referencing of national qualifications levels to the EQF 12

1.2.2. Indicating NQF and EQF levels on qualifications documents 12

1.2.3. EQF and the framework for qualifications of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) 13

1.3. The 2017 revision of the EQF recommendation 14

2. European national qualifications frameworks: towards operational status 15

2.1. Conceptualisation and design 16

2.2. Formal adoption and official establishment 17

2.3. NQFs are becoming operational 18

2.3.1. Early operational stage 19

2.3.2. Advanced operational stage 22

2.4. Closing the circle: NQF evaluation/review and impact 25

3. NQFs in Europe: common characteristics 29

3.1. Towards comprehensive frameworks 29

3.2. Loose qualifications frameworks 31

3.3. Evolving roles and functions 33

4. Stakeholder engagement and coordination 36

5. Early impact of European national qualifications frameworks 43

5.1. Areas where system level impact have been observed 43

5.1.1. Improved transparency of national qualification systems 43

5.1.2. More consistent implementation of learning outcomes approaches 44

5.1.3. Stronger links between national qualifications frameworks and the validation of non-formal and informal learning 45

5.1.4. Greater stakeholder engagement and coordination.....46
5.1.5. NQFs are opening up to qualifications awarded outside formal education and training.....46
5.1.6. NQFs and higher vocational education and training.....47
5.2. Areas where less impact can be observed.....47
5.2.1. Labour market visibility and use still limited.....47
5.2.2. Articulation between institutions and education and training subsystems – still needs to be addressed.....48
5.2.3. Institutional reform is still a work in progress.....49
5.2.4. Using NQFs to support the recognition of qualifications across countries is still at an early stage of implementation.....49
6. Evolving objectives and emerging working methods.....51
7. Conclusions.....55
7.1. Policy hypes?.....55
7.2. Regulation or communication?.....55
7.3. Conditions for adding value.....56
7.4. The challenge of measuring and monitoring impact.....57
List of abbreviations.....58
References.....59
ANNEX Short overview of NQF developments.....67

List of boxes, tables and figures

Boxes

1. The Federal Act on the national qualifications framework adopted by the Austrian Parliament 18
2. Adopted NQF in Bulgaria is embedded in wider education reforms 18
3. Adoption of the ordinance of the CROQF register 19
4. Strengthening national capacity for effective and efficient functioning of the Macedonian qualifications framework 20
5. More resources needed....21
6. Inclusion of qualifications through qualification types in Greece 21
7. From adoption to operational status of the Belgium-fl NQF....23
8. EstQF informs curriculum reform in VET in Estonia 23
9. Requirements for qualifications to be included in the national register in France 24
10. Belgium-fl: the Flemish qualifications framework (FQF) – a reference for streamlining validation 24
11. The Irish national framework of qualifications (NFQ) helps citizens understand their qualifications 25
12. Range of methods used in evaluating the Scottish qualifications framework (SCQF) 26
13. Outcomes-based framework includes input factors in England and Northern Ireland 27
14. Towards a comprehensive framework in Italy 30
15. From regulatory to descriptive framework in England and Northern Ireland 33
16. The Scottish qualifications framework (SCQF): a reference tool for revising qualifications and for human resource development....33
17. The Council of the Cyprus qualifications framework (CYQF) acts as an advisory body 37
18. Croatia: stakeholders brought together....37
19. Austria: NQF law defines roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and paves the way towards implementation 38
20. The coordination point for the German qualifications framework oversees the consistency of the implementation....38
21. Broad range of stakeholders involved in the implementation of TQF 39
22. Flemish Community of Belgium 40
23. 16 sector qualifications councils in Portugal....41
24. Setting up sector skill units in Malta to support NQF implementation 42

Tables

Table 1. Typology of NQFs based on their roles and strategies for change.....34

Figures

1. Including NQF/EQF levels in qualifications documents and/or databases 13
2. The iterative character of NQF developments.....16
3. The functions of NQFs.....35

Executive summary

During 2015-16, political commitment and technical advancement in developing and implementing national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) have continued. More frameworks have been formally adopted and have reached operational status, becoming an integrated feature of national qualification systems. This has made it possible for more countries to complete their link to the European qualifications framework (EQF); by mid-2017, 32 countries had linked their national qualifications levels to EQF levels. In more than 20 countries, the NQF and EQF levels feature on new qualification documents and/or qualifications databases.

The sixth Cedefop NQF monitoring report confirms that NQFs play a key role in implementation of the EQF and in improving transparency and comparability of qualifications nationally and internationally. They have helped make national education and qualification systems more readable and easier to understand within and across countries. Evidence shows that with their comprehensive nature – covering all levels and types of qualifications and promoting a learning outcomes perspective – NQFs trigger reforms. Increased cooperation and coordination of stakeholders across education subsystems and between education and the labour market can be observed. The connection between NQFs and validation has become stronger. Countries signal or have already implemented procedures to include qualifications awarded outside formal education. Further, comprehensive frameworks have helped identify gaps in provision as illustrated by EQF level 5 qualifications and made visible vocational qualifications at EQF levels 5-8. This puts NQFs at the heart of supporting learners in their lifelong learning and working pathways. However, there has been limited visibility and use of NQFs by labour market actors.

Qualifications frameworks have occasionally been used to support change and reform in education and training. In most cases, however, frameworks are mainly used as tools for communication and for reshaping dialogue between education and training. While rarely used for direct regulation, most NQFs see their key objective as bridging complex and (to some extent) fragmented qualification systems. This function is innovative and can potentially help to address the increasingly complex world of qualifications, as education and training adjust to possibilities offered by the internet and the needs of global technologies and markets.

Cooperation on the implementation of the European qualifications framework (EQF) now includes 39 countries: 28 EU Member States as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Kosovo, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey. The EQF recommendation that provides the basis for this cooperation (adopted in 2008) was revised in 2017, underlining the continuous nature of the EQF implementation and highlighting the need for increased cooperation among stakeholders across institutional, national and sectoral borders.

CHAPTER 1.

Introduction

The development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) in Europe has continued in 2015-16. NQFs are being developed and established in all 39 countries ([2]) involved in the European qualifications framework (EQF). An increasing number of frameworks have become operational. Most countries (35 out of 39) are working towards a comprehensive framework, covering all types and levels of qualifications in formal education and training (general, vocational and higher education). In some cases countries have also included non-formal qualifications, notably those awarded by private providers in continuing education and economic sectors.

Qualifications frameworks are seen as important tools to support national lifelong learning policies and strategies (Halasz, 2013). Playing a key role in strengthening the learning outcomes orientation of national education and training systems, frameworks are increasingly becoming fully integrated instruments at national level. This report, the sixth since Cedefop started its regular analysis of NQF developments in Europe in 2009, summarises developments in the last two years and discusses the extent to which these frameworks are making an impact.

1.1. NQFs in 2015-16: overall progress

The 39 countries participating in the implementation of the EQF are currently developing 43 NQFs ([3]). The following figures reflect the situation by the end of 2016/beginning of 2017:

(a) 35 countries ([4]) are working towards comprehensive NQFs covering all types and levels of qualification in formal education and training (vocational

([2]) These countries are: the 28 EU Member States, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Kosovo, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey.

([3]) A total of 37 national NQF reports, and three reports for the UK (England and Northern Ireland; Scotland; Wales) and three reports for Belgium (Flemish, French and German-speaking Communities) are available at: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/european-inventory-on-nqf?search=&year[value][year]=2016&country=&items_per_page=20

education and training, higher education, general education); most recently (spring 2017) general education certificates, including *Abitur* have been included in the German qualifications framework;

(b) most frameworks have been formally adopted through a legislative procedure; most recently in Luxembourg, Austria and Finland. Four countries are still working on the design and the formal adoption of their NQFs ([5]);

(c) 17 frameworks have reached operational status: Flemish Community of Belgium (Belgium-fl), Czech Republic (a partial framework for vocational qualifications, NSK), Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Liechtenstein, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Switzerland and the UK. Almost the same number of countries has moved into an early operational phase.

(d) 32 countries have referenced (linked) their national frameworks to the EQF;

(e) 28 countries have linked their qualifications framework to the framework for qualifications in the European higher education area (QF-EHEA), 17 as an integrated part of EQF referencing;

(f) 23 countries have introduced level references in their national qualifications documents or databases. Several other countries have indicated their intention to do so in 2017, including Austria, Belgium-fl, Belgium-fr, Bulgaria, Finland and Turkey.

1.2. NQFs and the European qualifications framework

Following a decade of developments, the European qualifications framework (EQF) is the first regional qualifications framework ([6]) to move into an operational stage. Following the adoption of the EQF recommendation in 2008 (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2008) all participating countries have given priority to setting up NQFs, seeing this as a necessary precondition for taking the EQF forward.

([4]) Czech Republic, France, Switzerland and the UK (England and Northern Ireland) have developed partial frameworks.

([5]) Albania, Italy, Serbia and Spain.

([6]) Other regional frameworks are: the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) qualifications reference framework, the CARICOM (Caribbean Community) qualifications framework, the Gulf qualifications framework, the Pacific qualifications framework, the SADC (Southern African Development Community) qualifications framework and transnational qualifications framework for the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth.

1.2.1. Referencing of national qualifications levels to the EQF

The EQF is designed as a 'translation grid' allowing for the comparison of national qualifications levels. For this to happen in practice, each country needs to reference its national qualification levels to the EQF in a way which is transparent to, and trusted by, other countries. The 2008 EQF recommendation (optimistically) asked countries to do this by 2010. Given that only a minority of countries at that stage had established NQFs (and learning outcomes based levels), this initial referencing has taken considerably longer than planned.

By June 2017, 32 countries had referenced their national qualifications levels to the EQF ([7]). These countries were Austria, Belgium-fl and Belgium-fr, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the UK. In addition to these, Slovakia and Romania were still in dialogue with the EQF advisory group to finalise their reports. The remaining countries are expected to follow in the second part of 2017 and in 2018. Belgium-fl, Estonia and Malta have already presented updates of their referencing reports, reflecting important changes in their national qualification systems and frameworks.

1.2.2. Indicating NQF and EQF levels on qualifications documents

For the EQF to have any use to end-users in education and training, as well as in the labour market, the levels agreed, based on learning outcomes, need to become visible. While the 2008 recommendation (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2008) optimistically set 2012 as a deadline for including levels in qualification documents and databases, the delayed referencing has limited progress towards this goal.

Countries have, however, made important progress. Denmark and Lithuania were the first to include EQF/NQF levels in their VET certificates in 2012. By June 2017, 23 countries had introduced EQF/NQF levels in national qualifications documents and/or databases: Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Norway, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Switzerland and the UK (Figure 1).

([7]) Referencing reports are available at: https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/referencing-reports-and-contacts

Several countries have indicated their intention to do so in 2017: Austria, Belgium-fl and Belgium-fr, Bulgaria, Finland and Turkey. Countries such as Denmark, Estonia, Lithuania and Malta have included references to NQF/EQF levels in all their qualifications documents; Finland is signalling its intention to do so after completing referencing in 2017.

Figure 1. **Including NQF/EQF levels in qualifications documents and/or databases**

Source: Cedefop.

Progress has mainly been made in vocational education and training (VET) (initial and/or continuing) and, to a lesser extent, in general education qualifications. The inclusion of NQF/EQF levels in higher education qualifications has been limited, with the exception of the diploma supplement. This reflects the fact that it is normally up to the (autonomous) awarding institution to determine whether to include NQF/EQF levels. Progress in indicating NQF/EQF levels in qualifications databases, to increase their visibility for end-users, is also important.

1.2.3. EQF and the framework for qualifications of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA)

The development of national qualifications frameworks in Europe also reflects the Bologna process and the agreement to set up a framework for qualifications in the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) (Bologna working group, 2005). All countries involved in the EQF implementation ([8]) are taking part in the Bologna process and most are developing and putting comprehensive frameworks in place. By June 2017, 28 countries had formally 'self-certified' their higher education qualifications to the QF-EHEA. Countries are increasingly

([8]) Except Kosovo.

combining referencing to the EQF and self-certification to the QF-EHEA ([9]); Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Hungary, Iceland, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and Turkey have all produced joint reports on both processes, reflecting the priority given to the development and adoption of comprehensive NQFs covering all levels and types of qualifications (VET, higher education and general education).

1.3. The 2017 revision of the EQF recommendation

In May 2017, the revised EQF recommendation was adopted by the Education Council ([10]). This underlines the continuous nature of the EQF process, highlighting the need to improve the cooperation (and referencing) process further to ensure mutual trust. The comprehensive nature of the EQF is also stressed, particularly by highlighting the need to address qualifications of all types and at all levels, including those awarded by international bodies. There is also agreement that a key priority in the coming period is to make the EQF more visible for end-users and to demonstrate its contribution towards achieving the wider objectives of lifelong learning, employability, mobility and the social integration of workers and learners.

([9]) Self-certification reports verify the compatibility of the national framework for higher education with the QF-EHEA.

([10]) Council of the European Union (2017). One important element of the revision is the change of the headline of the third descriptor pillar from ‘competence’ to ‘autonomy and responsibility’.

CHAPTER 2.

European national qualifications frameworks: towards operational status

During 2015-16 an increasing number of qualifications frameworks have been formally established and become operational. Cedefop uses five stages ([11]) to monitor the national qualifications frameworks' (NQFs) development and implementation:

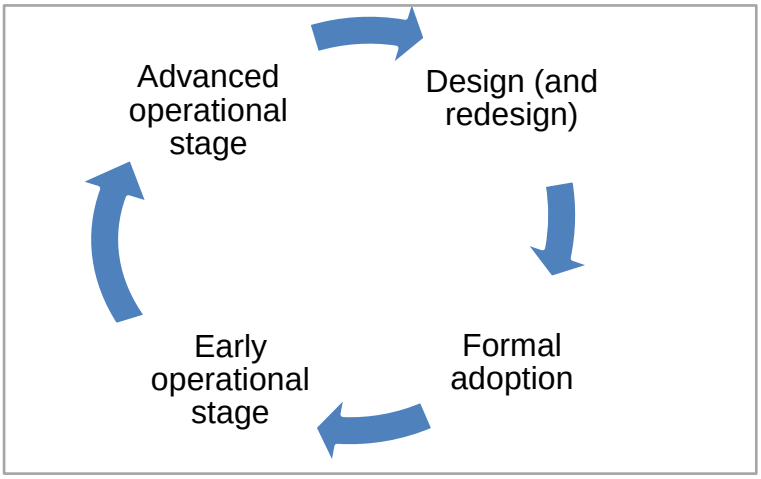
(a) conceptualisation and design ([12]);
(b) formal adoption and official establishment;
(c) early operational stage;
(d) advanced operational stage;
(e) evaluation, impact and (re)design.

([11]) The stages have been informed by Cedefop's study *Changing qualifications* (Cedefop, 2010a, p. 17); the study identifies five stages in the change process:

(a) policy discussions: no concrete implementation; for example, discussions about the best approach to recognising the qualifications of immigrants;
(b) policy: the direction is set but there is not yet any concrete implementation; for example, a law is passed to develop an NQF;
(c) implementation: the infrastructure for change is put in place such as funding, management and a communications strategy; for example, a body is set up to manage and coordinate the assessment and validation of experiential learning;
(d) two practice stages:
(i) practice through pilot schemes: people use the new arrangements; for example, a learner is taught and assessed according to a new modular programme and qualification;
(ii) full-scale applied practice: all old methods are adapted to the new methods;
(e) effects: the new system delivers benefits to individuals, organisations and society; for example, more adults are engaged in lifelong learning; skills supply is improved.

([12]) Consultation and testing is an important part of this stage: an NQF proposal is presented and discussed with key stakeholders.

Figure 2. **The iterative character of NQF developments**



Source: Cedefop.

The stages are presented in the form of a circle, indicating that NQF development and implementation are continuous, iterative developments; their relevance and impact depend on continuous feedback from stakeholders and users.

2.1. Conceptualisation and design

During this stage countries analyse and define the objectives, rationale and architecture of an NQF. The outline developed through this process provides the basis for dissemination, discussion and technical testing. This is also the stage where relevant stakeholders buy-in (or not) to the process. ([13])

Most European countries have completed this stage, laying the conceptual and technical foundation for their frameworks: national levels and level descriptors, qualifications to be included, and clarified roles and responsibilities for different institutions. This stage normally requires a combination of technical development and stakeholder consultation and dialogue; the latter is critical for mobilising commitment and ownership among diverse stakeholders in education

([13]) Progress indicators:

(a) rationale and objectives have been agreed;
(b) the architecture and the conceptual and technical basis have been created;
(c) awareness raising, consultation and buy-in by key relevant stakeholders has occurred;
(d) technical testing through projects in selected economic areas has been carried out.

and employment who, in many cases, have not been accustomed to working together. By the end of 2016 Italy and Spain had still to finalise developments. Italy is making progress towards completing a comprehensive framework, having established its national repertoire of education, training and professional qualifications. Spain is finalising its framework for lifelong learning. Countries that have joined the EQF in the last two years (such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia) are still working on the design and/or the revision of their NQFs.

2.2. Formal adoption and official establishment

During this stage countries formally adopt and/or officially establish an NQF ([14]). Formal adoption means different things in different countries – largely reflecting the national political and legislative context and culture (Raffe, 2012). It can range from the introduction of specific NQF acts or government decisions, by amending existing laws and regulations, to stakeholder agreement. Specific NQF laws have been passed by national parliaments in Austria, the three Belgium Communities (Flemish, French and German-speaking), Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia, France, Ireland, Kosovo, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Poland and Slovenia. Decrees have been adopted in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Norway, Portugal and Sweden. Existing legislation has been amended in Denmark and Iceland and is planned in the Netherlands. A joint resolution on NQF implementation was adopted in Germany by all relevant stakeholders.

While formats vary across European countries, formal adoption is normally necessary for moving towards implementation. Most recently, frameworks have been adopted in Finland (January 2017), Austria (March 2016), and came into force in Poland and Slovenia in January 2016.

([14]) Progress indicators:

(a) NQF policy officially established/formally adopted (NQF Act, government decision, stakeholder agreement;
(b) roles and responsibilities between different stakeholders agreed and described in legal acts or other form;
(c) implementation strategy adopted (including a roadmap, capacity building needs, financing, etc.).

Box 1. **The Federal Act on the national qualifications framework adopted by the Austrian Parliament**

After several years of preparation, with the intensive involvement of stakeholders and experts, the Austrian Parliament approved the Federal Act on the national qualifications framework in March 2016, paving the way towards full implementation. The act defines the responsibilities of institutions and bodies involved in implementation. The Austrian Agency for International Cooperation in Education and Research (*Österreichischer Austauschdienst*) will function as the main implementation coordinating body. The NQF Act also envisages two bodies:

- the NQF advisory board (*NQR-Beirat*), consisting of seven experts; this will advise the NQF coordinating body in scrutinising qualifications put forward for inclusion in the NQF;
- the NQF steering group (*NQR-Steuerungsgruppe*), consisting of 30 members representing all the main stakeholders (all federal ministries, social partners, stakeholders from the different fields of education and *Länder*).

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Austria.

In many European countries, formal adoption of frameworks has required more time than foreseen and delayed implementation. Belgium-fr and Bulgaria have formally adopted their frameworks but implementation is still at an early stage.

Box 2. **Adopted NQF in Bulgaria is embedded in wider education reforms**

The qualifications framework is firmly based on national legislation and was adopted by the Council of Ministers. The Bulgarian qualifications framework (BQF) is embedded in wider education reforms; legislative changes will be introduced to strengthen the BQF. A new pre-school and school education bill was adopted in late 2015 and will lead to the amendment of the BQF at secondary education levels, providing a legal definition of 'learning outcomes'; Two bills amending and supplementing the Law on Vocational Training further support the BQF, with legal arrangements for validating non-formal and informal learning.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Bulgaria.

2.3. NQFs are becoming operational

The most important criterion for deciding whether an NQF has entered an operational stage is whether agreement has been reached on responsibilities and roles between the different stakeholders and an NQF implementation strategy agreed. We can distinguish between an early and a more advanced operational stage: the distinction between them is not clear-cut but can be better understood as a continuum towards full implementation.

2.3.1. Early operational stage

In this stage countries put in place implementation structures such as: fine-tuning governance mechanisms or deciding on a lead NQF organisation or partnership; adopting implementation tools and measures, for example by-laws to develop quality criteria for the inclusion of qualifications in the NQF; continuing and finalising the allocation of qualifications to levels; and using NQF level descriptors to redesign or develop new qualifications based on learning outcomes. Another important task is to set up qualifications databases and to build capacity within the institutions involved in NQF implementation.

The countries still at an early operational stage are Austria, Belgium-de, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Hungary, Iceland, Kosovo, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Poland, Romania and Turkey.

Aligning different processes (current and new, introduced through NQFs) poses a challenge in some countries. The main challenge in setting up the Croatian qualifications framework (CROQF) is how to align current quality procedures with new ones introduced through the CROQF. As stated in the ordinance on the CROQF register, programmes which are included in the register need to be in line with CROQF standards and developed according to CROQF procedures. However, they are currently approved in accordance with existing sectoral legislation. Creating education programmes in line with the CROQF is not mandatory, although it represents a mark of quality. For the CROQF to become mandatory, all existing laws governing different education subsystems would need to be changed. Other challenges are linked to the timely establishment of new sectoral councils and building capacity among their members as well as in the ministries and agencies responsible for the coordination and administration of the CROQF.

Box 3. **Adoption of the ordinance of the CROQF register**

Following adoption of the ordinance on the Croatian qualifications framework (CROQF) register (May, 2014), the CROQF entered the early operational stage. The names of sectoral councils and internal and external quality assurance systems were also included. The ordinance stipulates the content and management of the register and lists procedures for requesting, assessing, and including qualifications in the register. The new CROQF register brings together three sub-registers: a register of occupational standards, a register of qualifications standards, and units/modules of learning outcomes.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Croatia.

In Cyprus a detailed roadmap for setting up the NQF has been prepared in close cooperation with all stakeholders. The roadmap includes the development

of the Cyprus qualifications framework (CYQF) register and a CYQF guidelines handbook, which provides details of the criteria and procedures for the inclusion of qualifications, quality assurance mechanisms, the implementation of learning outcomes and dissemination and evaluation.

Box 4. **Strengthening national capacity for effective and efficient functioning of the Macedonian qualifications framework**

In the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the NQF law was adopted in 2013 and entered into force in September 2015. It defines the principles and goals of the framework, its structure, levels and sublevels, standards, number and types of qualifications, as well as quality assurance aspects and institutional roles.

The aim for 2015-17 is to develop the framework in line with the EQF and to strengthen national capacity for the effective and efficient functioning of the Macedonian qualifications framework. This work is currently being carried out as part of a new twinning project, launched in March 2016, to improve the system for setting up and developing the national qualifications framework.

It has three components:

(a) improving and harmonising relevant legislation in relation to the NQF;

(b) strengthening the institutional capacity for the introduction of the NQF;

(c) strengthening the development of qualifications in the NQF.

The specific aim of the project is to improve the quality and labour market relevance of technical vocational education and training, and collaboration between schools and industry and higher education and the business community.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Countries are including qualifications in their NQFs. In Hungary, the first reference qualifications from higher education and higher vocational qualifications have been assigned NQF levels. A recent government regulation ([15]) made it compulsory for higher education institutions to revisit and adjust the educational and outcome requirements for higher education study programmes in line with NQF descriptors. New higher education programmes will be evaluated and accredited based on the new requirements. Additionally, general education qualifications and VET qualifications included in the national vocational qualifications register have been linked to the levels within the Hungarian qualifications framework.

([15]) Government Regulation No 139/2015 on the qualifications available in higher education and on recording new qualifications in the higher education catalogue.

Box 5. **More resources needed**

The Hungarian qualifications framework currently serves as an instrument for transparency and for communicating the range of qualifications to experts and stakeholders, and plays a role in the lifelong learning narrative. However, its achievements are still limited. Within its limited budgetary and human resources capacity, the national coordination point has conducted information and dissemination activities, and staged workshops aimed at raising awareness of learning outcomes approaches among target groups from the different education subsystems.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Hungary.

Box 6. **Inclusion of qualifications through qualification types in Greece**

In Greece, the inclusion of qualifications in the framework is defined through qualification type specifications. These include a title and qualification level and its awarding body, a summary descriptor, the amount of learning, purpose, education sector, learning outcomes, employment relevance, and progression possibilities. Having already developed qualifications types, which are a key element of the framework, each qualification is now being expressed in terms of learning outcomes. The National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance (EOPPEP) has also established a qualifications register ([a]), which already includes 674 qualifications within the formal education system expressed in learning outcomes. This has been done in cooperation with the respective education institutions.

([a]) EOPPEP, the National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance: *Greek qualification register*: http://proson.eoppep.gr

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Greece.

A secure legal foundation paves the way for successfully setting up an NQF. In Luxembourg, after the referencing of the NQF to the EQF was completed in mid-2012, implementation has slowed down, partly reflecting the lack of a clear legislative basis and an agreed strategy shared by all stakeholders about how to proceed. The lack of a clear legislative basis was considered a draw-back. This weakness has now been partly addressed through the adoption of the 2016 law on the recognition of professional qualifications. It has set up the Luxembourg qualifications framework as the formal reference point for recognising professional qualifications gained abroad, reflecting the particular challenges faced by Luxembourg as a host country to many foreign workers. The further implementation of the Luxembourg qualifications framework will, however, also require clarification of the relationship between the framework and a wider strategy on lifelong learning.

2.3.2. Advanced operational stage

The advanced operational stage is achieved when policy changes are applied in practice. Reaching this advanced stage ([16]) requires agreement between the different stakeholders on sharing responsibilities and on the role to be played by the framework in the wider education, training and employment context.

Several European NQFs have reached an advanced operational stage: Belgium-fl, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK.

These NQFs are increasingly being used by education and training and labour market authorities to structure information on qualifications and make this visible to end-users (learners, employers, employees, teachers, and guidance and counselling staff) through national databases and other available instruments.

([16]) Progress indicators:

(a) The NQF becomes a permanent and visible feature of the national qualification system when:
  (i) it serves as the gateway and reference point for all nationally recognised qualifications;
  (ii) it provides a reference point for developing and reviewing standards and curricula;
  (iii) it provides the reference point for the assessment and validation of non-formal and informal learning;
  (iv) it inspires teachers and trainers;
(b) opening up the NQF, for example, to non-formal qualifications and other types of qualifications;
(c) full implementation of the learning outcomes approach is achieved;
(d) NQF is visible to end-users through qualifications registers/data bases;
(e) NQF levels appear on certificates and diplomas;
(f) Stakeholders from education, training and employment use the NQF to structure information on education, training and employment (e.g. providing information on supply and demand used by labour market stakeholders involved in recruitment, assisting with the development of career pathways, certifying learning achievements acquired at work, and offering guidance).

Box 7. **From adoption to operational status of the Belgium-fl NQF**

The road from formal adoption to implementation proved more time-consuming than originally predicted. Delays were partly caused by the need for further legal instruments (implementation decrees on professional and education qualifications), and partly by negotiations with the social partners on how to allocate levels and link professional qualifications to the framework. This clarification was largely completed by 2013-14, allowing implementation to speed up. The Flemish qualifications framework (FQF) is operational, covering a total of 240 professional (*Beroeps*) and 220 education qualifications (December 2016). The professional qualifications have been allocated levels on an individual basis (as opposed to allocation in 'blocks') in a process involving the main social partners.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Belgium-fl.

The Estonian NQF has, in many respects, reached the full operational stage. However, further streamlining is needed. For instance, the Strategy for lifelong learning 2020 does not refer explicitly to the Estonian qualifications frameworks (EstQF).

Box 8. **EstQF informs curriculum reform in VET in Estonia**

The Ministry of Education and Research and the Estonian Qualifications Authority are the main bodies involved in setting up the EsQF. A legal and institutional framework was set up by an amendment to the Professions Act of 2008 and key responsibilities and roles of different stakeholders have been agreed. Quality criteria for the inclusion and positioning of qualifications in the framework have been adopted. The framework includes all State-recognised qualifications, which have to meet two basic criteria: to be defined in terms of standards (curriculum or professional) based on learning outcomes, and to be awarded by nationally accredited institutions.

The EstQF is well established, especially the sub-frameworks for VET, higher education and occupational qualifications. General education is formally connected to the overarching framework through relevant State programmes but the substantive link between, and common awareness of, learning outcomes and qualification levels is rather weak in this subsystem. The framework has also been used to revisit current provision for professional higher qualifications referenced to EstQF level 6. It informs curriculum reform in VET and the fine-tuning of qualification descriptors from VET and higher education with EstQF level descriptors.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Estonia.

France has one of the oldest qualifications frameworks in Europe, well embedded in national education, training and employment policies. This is an example of an occupational framework where qualifications levels are linked to occupations and work force levels (Allais, 2017).

Box 9. **Requirements for qualifications to be included in the national register in France**

In France, the role of the National committee on vocational qualifications (*Commission nationale de la certification professionnelle*, CNCP) as the 'gatekeeper' of the French framework is important. No qualification can be included in the official register without the approval of the CNCP. For a qualification to be registered in the National register of vocational qualifications (*Repertoire national des certifications professionnelles,* RNCP), several requirements have to be met to ensure national coherence and to strengthen the overall quality and transparency of qualifications. It must be possible for all qualifications registered in the RNCP to be acquired through the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Registration signifies that all stakeholders, as represented in the CNCP, underwrite the validity of a particular qualification. Registration is necessary for:

(a) receiving funding;

(b) financing the validation of non-formal and informal learning;

(c) being employed in certain professions and occupations;

(d) entering apprenticeship schemes.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – France.

It is increasingly clear that operational NQFs help integrate the validation of non-formal and informal learning, opening up opportunities for lifelong learning and the certification and recognition of learning outcomes acquired through work or leisure. The work carried out in setting up the German and Belgium-fl qualifications framework has also strengthened the validation process.

Box 10. **Belgium-fl: the Flemish qualifications framework (FQF) – a reference for streamlining validation**

In Belgium-fl, current developments at policy level aim to achieve an integrated approach to validation. The main change is the increase in cooperation between the various validation providers (inside as well as outside education) and the willingness to create a single framework linking the validation processes to the FQF. The 2009 FQF Act stresses that it should be possible to obtain qualifications through formal, informal and non-formal learning and that the framework should support this. The agreement to use the FQF as a reference for validation procedures is expected to raise the visibility and credibility of validation. In July 2015, the concept of an integrated framework for validation in Flanders was approved by the Flemish Government and a government task force has been set up to develop the integrated policy framework and to draft a decree on validation.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Belgium-fl.

Most qualifications frameworks that have reached the advanced operational stage can be regarded as a permanent and fully integrated part of the education and training system, as is the case in Norway. The next steps for implementing

the NQF include: opening up the framework to 'external' qualifications and further disseminating the framework; raising awareness at institutional level; and using the NQF as a reference point for the development and review of qualifications and curricula. It also requires that agreement is reached on the role of the framework in a broader national competence strategy linking education and training and the labour market.

Box 11. **The Irish national framework of qualifications (NFQ) helps citizens understand their qualifications**

In Ireland, the NFQ and its 10 levels are being used to help all citizens understand where they are in terms of their qualifications. This is a concerted effort not only to use the NFQ for technical support (national policy or curriculum development) but also to promote this as a tool which can be used by the citizens to highlight how their learning has been recognised through the NFQ, regardless of whether they have engaged in formal education and training.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Ireland.

2.4. Closing the circle: NQF evaluation/review and impact

NQFs need constantly to evolve to be relevant and to add value to policies and practices. The NQF policy needs to be reviewed and evaluated in terms of its purpose and objectives, conceptual basis, technical design, implementation procedures, and stakeholder involvement and buy-in. Timing is an important factor that influences the focus of an evaluation or impact study from two perspectives: first, NQFs change over time, and second some authors, such as Taylor (2010) emphasise that the timing of when to evaluate the impact is important. He suggests that in the first two years of setting up an NQF measuring the architecture is possible; two to five years of implementation are needed before its effectiveness can be judged; and five to 10 years before the impact can be assessed.

First generation frameworks, such as in the UK and Ireland, have already been evaluated, and the 2005 evaluation in Scotland has been followed by subsequent evaluations – in 2013 and 2015 – to inform further implementation. It investigated various areas, like the level of awareness, perception and understanding of the framework among the different users: parents, learners, teaching staff and management. The 2015 evaluation focused on the use of the SCQF by higher education institutions and colleges.

Box 12. **Range of methods used in evaluating the Scottish qualifications framework (SCQF)**

The 2013 evaluation was based on a combination of focus groups (27), online questionnaires (1 444 responses), face to face interviews (250) and in-depth interviews (16). It provides a valuable insight into the degree to which the framework has been implemented. Overall, the results demonstrate that the SCQF is widely recognised by learners, parents and education professionals in Scotland. The findings of the evaluation pointed to a number of areas for future framework development. Some of the recommendations were:

- the role of the SCQF levels in providing a reference for all qualifications must be further promoted;
- the SCQF brand should be strengthened;
- toolkits should be developed for different purposes to support the practical use of the different elements of the framework.

The 2015 evaluation (Kerson Associates Ltd, 2015) looked at the use of the SCQF among higher education institutions and colleges. The purpose was to examine whether, and how, higher education institutions are making use of the framework, and how that usage is impacting on their provision and strategic direction, including credit transfer and recognition of prior learning. The evaluation shows that the SCQF is well embedded into course development and quality assurance procedures in colleges and is used as part of internal quality assurance processes to inform course/programme approval and course/curriculum reviews.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – UK-Scotland.

The SCQF is seen as a success story (Raffe, 2009a, 2013; Coles et al, 2014) with broad stakeholder involvement and collaborative agreements across subsystems. While minimum requirements are in place in terms of the size of a qualification, quality assurance and learning outcomes ensure coherence across the framework. Stakeholders in each of the sectors have full autonomy to initiate reforms in their sectors. The SCQF is seen as a tool to support change, cooperation and communication across subsystems. Additionally, the Scottish case is an interesting one as a range of tools has been developed to support employers in using the framework ([17]).

In Wales, an evaluation of the Welsh framework, focused on the strengths, challenges and weaknesses of implementation was carried out in 2013-14 (Welsh Government, 2014). In 2015, based on the findings of the evaluation, a number of recommendations were made: to support the credit and qualifications framework for Wales (CQFW) as a meta-framework that underpins future qualification strategies; to revise its aims and objectives so that it evolves into a

([17]) Scottish credit and qualifications framework: *Employer guides:* http://scqf.org.uk/employers/employer-guides/

'functional' national qualifications framework, which acts as a vehicle for describing the qualifications system in Wales; to simplify and raise the levels of understanding and profile of the CQFW; and to move ownership of the quality assured lifelong learning pillar from government back to the sector, with a view to making formal and non-formal learning less bureaucratic and more accessible.

An impact evaluation of the NFQ in Ireland was carried out in 2009. This examined the extent to which implementation had progressed and the impact of the framework on education and training. It was a five-year investigation, which included a background paper prepared by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), reports from key stakeholders, engagement with stakeholders, case studies and a public consultation. Findings focused on distinct areas: the implementation of the framework; its impact on learners; learning outcomes and cultural change; and the visibility and currency of the framework. A new policy impact assessment of the NFQ is under way (2016-17). A survey is being carried out to obtain views about the NQF's impact on qualifications transparency, quality related issues, lifelong learning and qualifications, employability, teaching, learning and assessment practices, and views on the development and governance of the NFQ. It is also seeking views on future policy priorities for the NFQ (such as communication function, quality assurance function, regulatory function, progression function, recognition function and design function).

Box 13. **Outcomes-based framework includes input factors in England and Northern Ireland**

England has a long tradition of qualifications frameworks dating back to the late 1980s. Since then the frameworks have been reviewed many times. A significant change took place in 2015 when the regulatory qualifications and credit framework (QCF) was withdrawn and replaced by a new regulated qualifications framework (RQF), drawing on the results of the evaluation carried out in 2013-14. The new framework retains the key transparency functions of the QCF as they were seen as positive; its regulatory role, however, was criticised. The RQF provides a transparent description of existing qualifications but does not regulate them. It has the following key characteristics:

- all qualifications have a level;
- the level descriptors are simplified;
- all qualifications registered in the framework will indicate the size of the qualification, expressed in total qualification time (TQT) and guided learning hours (GLH);
- if recognition of prior learning (RPL) is allowed, awarding organisations should be required to have and to publish a RPL policy.

The concepts of 'guided learning hours' and 'total qualification time' are important for the new framework (RQF) and will be applied to all qualifications. A strong outcomes-based framework will be supplemented by input factors. Guided learning hours (GLH)

is made up of activities completed by the learner under the direct instruction or supervision of a lecturer, supervisor or tutor, whether face-to-face or online. Total qualification time is made up of the GLH plus all the other time needed for preparation, study or any other form of participation in education or training, but not under the direct supervision of a lecturer, supervisor or tutor.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – UK-England and Northern Ireland.

Few of the new qualification frameworks established after 2005/06 have been subject to systematic evaluation. The 2013 evaluation of the Danish NQF was carried out to assess the speed and quality of the implementation process, to check how the framework was regarded by potential users, and to provide a basis for future improvements. A recent study carried out in Germany on the potential use of the German qualifications framework (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2016) identified a number of areas where the German qualifications framework (*Deutsche Qualifikationsrahmen*, DQR) could add value. As it stands, the framework can be used to support human resource development, for example in recruitment and employee development. This applies in particular to small and medium-sized enterprises with limited human resource capacity, but it will require capacity building and awareness raising. An evaluation is currently taking place in the Netherlands. In other countries, priority has been given to initial development, pushing impact issues into the future. In the last two years, however, some countries (such as Latvia and Norway) have signalled an interest in developing a more systematic approach to measuring the impact of NQFs.

CHAPTER 3.

NQFs in Europe: common characteristics

Even though developed and implemented in different contexts, the new generation of NQFs in Europe share many common features.

3.1. Towards comprehensive frameworks

Most countries, 35 out of 39, are developing comprehensive national qualifications frameworks ([18]) intended to include all types of qualifications at all levels.

The Czech Republic, France, and Switzerland are currently operating with national frameworks covering a more limited part of the qualification landscape, excluding general education or consisting of frameworks operating separately from each other. For most comprehensive frameworks in Europe, coverage is at present limited to formal qualifications in general, vocational and higher education. As set out below, a few countries have moved beyond this and started to include non-formal qualifications in their frameworks, such as qualifications gained through continuing vocational training or through sectors. A majority, however, have indicated that they will move in this direction in the future, seeing this as necessary for increasing the overall transparency and comprehensiveness of the qualifications landscape.

While having agreed, on a longer-term basis, to develop a comprehensive framework, Austria illustrates how NQFs are developed through a step-by-step approach. In Germany, while initially only including vocational and higher education qualifications, an agreement was reached in 2017 to include general

([18]) Three countries have introduced partial NQFs covering a limited range of qualification types and levels, or consisting of individual frameworks operating separately from each other: the Czech Republic and Switzerland, where separate frameworks for vocational and higher education qualifications have been developed; France, where vocationally and professionally oriented qualifications are included in the framework; and England and Northern Ireland where the new regulated framework (RQF) is broader in scope compared to the previous framework (QCF). It covers all academic and vocational qualifications regulated by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) and by the Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment Regulation (CCEA). Levels 5 to 8 are comparable to the levels of the framework of higher education qualifications (FHEQ) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

education qualifications in the German qualifications framework (DQR), including *Abitur* (*Allgemeine Hochschulreife*), professionally oriented *Abitur* (*Fachgebundene Hochschulreife*) as well as the *Fachhochschulreife,* to level 4 of the DQR and EQF.

The same step-by-step approach can be observed in Italy where important progress has been made towards setting up a comprehensive framework.

Box 14. **Towards a comprehensive framework in Italy**

Developing an Italian national qualifications framework is still a work in progress and has been carried out alongside wider reforms of the education and training system. An important milestone towards the development of an NQF occurred as part of wider labour market reform. Law 92/2012 and the ensuing Decree 13/2013 support the work on a comprehensive validation system and on further developments towards an NQF. A national repertory of education, training and professional qualifications ([19]) has been established. It is a comprehensive collection of existing national, regional and sectoral repertories, under the responsibility of the competent authorities. In January 2015 the State and the regions agreed on setting up the national framework of regional qualifications. The operational common framework for national recognition of regional qualifications and related skills was subsequently established through a decree in June 2015. In 2016, a technical proposal for a comprehensive framework was elaborated, along with guidelines for its management. The proposal was submitted to the institutional stakeholders and a decree for establishing the NQF is currently underway.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Italy.

A fully comprehensive NQF will map the whole range of qualifications, including those awarded by sectors, companies and international bodies. Some countries have already included in the framework regulated systems of qualifications awarded outside the formal education and training. This includes the system of vocational qualifications in Cyprus, the system of occupational qualifications in Estonia, Montenegro and Slovakia and the system of national vocational qualifications in Slovenia.

In Slovenia, the qualifications awarded by a national vocational qualifications certificate form an important, but clearly separated, strand of the comprehensive national qualifications framework. National vocational qualifications are defined as the work-related vocational or professional capacity to perform an occupation

([19]) The national repertory of qualifications (*Repertorio nazionale dei titoli di istruzione e formazione e delle qualificazioni professionali*): http://nrpitalia.isfol.it/sito_standard/sito_demo/atlante_repertori.php#repertori_SR

at a certain level of complexity; it is based on national occupational and assessment standards defined by labour market stakeholders.

In the same vein, the occupational qualifications sub-frameworks in Estonia and Slovakia are distinct parts of the comprehensive national qualifications frameworks. In Slovakia, occupational qualifications are acquired and awarded outside the formal education system – in adult education, further education or learning outcomes achieved in other ways. Based on occupational standards they are usually 'tailored' to labour market needs.

Another important trend observed in Europe is the opening up of national qualifications frameworks towards so called 'non-formal', 'non-traditional' qualifications or qualifications not regulated by public authorities. Some well-established frameworks, such as in France and the UK, have put in place procedures allowing 'non-traditional' qualifications to be included in the frameworks. The Scottish framework now contains qualifications awarded by international companies, for example in the ICT sector, and other private providers.

Only some of the newly developed NQFs have developed procedures and criteria for including non-formal and private sector qualifications and certificates in the NQF. The Netherlands has already included more than 30 non-formal qualifications awarded outside public regulation and developed by stakeholders (mainly) in the labour market. This emphasis on the double character of the national qualifications system – where private and public providers interact and supplement each other – is an important defining feature of the Dutch NQF. In Sweden, the added value of an NQF has been seen from the start as a tool for opening up to qualifications awarded outside the public system – in particular by adult education and labour market actors. Guidelines have been drafted by the national authorities, but no qualifications have yet been arranged into levels. In Slovenia, including supplementary qualifications acquired in further and supplementary training in the labour market into the Slovenian qualifications framework is seen as bringing added value to employees and employers, making it easier to choose qualifications and to select candidates.

3.2. Loose qualifications frameworks

Comprehensive frameworks are intended to make visible the whole national qualification landscape. Both the frameworks and their descriptors have to reflect a huge diversity of purposes, institutions, traditions and cultures. One of the fundamental challenges faced by comprehensive frameworks, as stated by Young and Allais (Young and Allais, 2009; 2011), is to take into account the

epistemological differences in knowledge and learning that exist in different parts of education and training. Comprehensive frameworks in Europe are mostly 'loose' in their design ([20]), not regulatory and not prescriptive frameworks. 'Loose' frameworks introduce a set of comprehensive levels descriptors to be applied across subsystems, but allow each sub-framework to retain its own principles and regulations. 'Tight' frameworks differ from this by defining uniform specifications for qualifications to be applied across sectors. Frameworks introduced in South Africa and New Zealand, which aimed to transform the national education and training systems, are examples of early attempts to create tight and 'one-fit-for-all' solutions for qualifications across sectors. This created a lot of resistance and led to a reassessment of the role of these frameworks. However, comprehensive and loose frameworks generally integrate regulatory sub-frameworks based on sectoral legislation (VET, higher education, general education), and sometimes other sub-frameworks, such as the occupational sub-frameworks in Estonia, Slovakia and Slovenia.

In recent years the most significant change took place in the UK-England where the Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF) was abolished in 2015 and replaced by a new, non-regulatory framework. Also the scope of the new framework has been broadened. As Raffe (2003) noted, all NQFs have to compromise between their scope and their prescriptiveness. The new regulated qualifications framework (RQF) was introduced for England and Northern Ireland, replacing the QCF and the NQF. Compared to the QCF, which comprised only vocational qualifications, the RQF covers all academic and vocational qualifications regulated by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) and by the Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) Regulation. The most significant change introduced by the RQF is the lifting of standardised requirements for the design of qualifications. The RQF uses the same eight levels (plus three entry levels) as the QCF but introduces some changes in the way qualification size is calculated.

([20]) Whether a qualifications frameworks is loose or tight depends on the stringency of concisions a qualification must meet to be included in the framework (Tuck, 2007, p. 22).

Box 15. **From regulatory to descriptive framework in England and Northern Ireland**

The new regulated qualifications framework (RQF) should provide an overview of qualifications and show how they relate to each other. Transparency will be achieved by setting consistent measures of size and level of difficulty. It reflects experiences gained with the QCF following its formal adoption in 2008 and takes into account the evaluation carried out in 2013-14. While the transparency functions of the QCF were seen as positive, its regulatory role was criticised; the structure of the QCF was designed to support credit transfer, but in practice there have been very low levels of take-up for credit transfer and the projected benefits of a credit system have not been realised. The overall validity of qualifications has not been sufficiently addressed.

The introduction of the RQF in England and Northern Ireland could be interpreted as a change in approach in line with the trends in NQF development in other European countries: a move towards more comprehensive frameworks, less prescriptive in nature, and with a strong role of communication, as opposed to regulation.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – UK-England and Northern Ireland.

Box 16. **The Scottish qualifications framework (SCQF): a reference tool for revising qualifications and for human resource development**

Compared to England and Northern Ireland the SCQF has, from the outset, been an inclusive and comprehensive framework. It has gradually evolved from an instrument for transparency and the communication of qualifications, to a reference tool for revising qualifications and for human resource development. Given the government's focus on articulating progression pathways, its interest in promoting, valuing and recognising all types of learning, and the full buy-in of stakeholders, the SCQF has a secure position as a permanent feature of the national qualifications system. Its success factors include regular evaluations of the framework, helping to ensure its relevance, and its governance, based on a partnership, collaborative model with good links to the government and other networks. The SCQF Partnership is seen as a completely neutral organisation, allowing the engagement of a wide range of stakeholders.

All qualifications have to comply with three criteria to be applied across the comprehensive framework:

- all qualifications must be credit rated and have to indicate the volume of learning;
- qualifications and their components must be assigned a level;
- assessment must be quality assured.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – UK- Scotland.

3.3. Evolving roles and functions

Research (Raffe, 2009a,c; 2011a,b: 2013; Young and Allais, 2013) distinguishes between different types of frameworks: communication, reforming and transformational frameworks. The main role of the communication or descriptive

frameworks is to improve how existing qualifications systems and qualifications are described and how they relate to each other.

Table 1. **Typology of NQFs based on their roles and strategies for change**

	Starts from existing system	Starts from proposed future system
Tool for change	Communication framework	Developmental framework
Agent of change	Reforming framework	Transformational framework

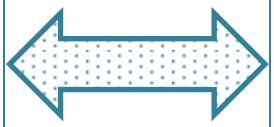
Source: Raffe (2013, p. 148).

They do not impose a 'new interpretation', philosophy or design of the system or qualifications in a country or sector (Winch, 2014). The reforming framework looks into different aspects of the qualification system and qualifications (such as standards of expected achievements, programmes, new pathways) and aims to strengthen the coherence, relevance and quality of qualifications. Part of this reform may involve developing new pathways and programmes or broadening the stakeholder involvement.

Having been developed as a response to the EQF and containing a strong element of comparability, European NQFs are tools to support the readability and comparability of qualifications nationally and internationally. NQFs based on learning outcomes offer tools for communication and cooperation across institutions, sectors and borders. This more modest ambition is at variance with the first generation of transformational qualifications frameworks developed and implemented in New Zealand, South Africa and UK-England. The evidence shows that they all struggled to fulfil their aims and needed to be changed considerably (Brown, 2011; Allais, 2011c; Strathdee, 2011; Young and Allais, 2013). Few transformational qualifications frameworks exist in Europe. While the strong communication function is shared among all European NQFs, some of them have also had a strong focus on reforms from the beginning. This is exemplified by at least one third of countries implementing the EQF: Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Malta, Montenegro, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Turkey. The evidence shows that ambitions, roles and objectives might differ across subsystems but there is a strong reform role in VET and higher education sectors and, to a lesser extent, in general education.

Evidence collected for this report, however, shows that as countries move towards implementation, communication frameworks trigger reforms and incremental change, depending on the subsystems and policy area.

Figure 3. **The functions of NQFs**

Communication		Transformation
Starts from existing education and training system		Starts from a vision of the future education and training system
Incremental change		Reform and transformation
Tool for change		Driver of change
'Bottom-up'		'Top-down'
Voluntary		Statutory/regulatory
Providers have central role		Providers included among stakeholders
Loose		Tight

Source: Adapted from Raffe, 2009b.

Countries use NQFs in different ways, reflecting the particular national situation, context and policy priorities. Implementation strategies are becoming more apparent as frameworks mature and become operational. In some policy areas and subsystems NQFs are used as tools for reform and as communication tools in other areas. Evidence seems to suggest that overarching comprehensive frameworks exercise strong communication functions, while reform roles differ according to subsystems and policy areas. The impact will differ accordingly. For instance, in Ireland the framework had a strong reform and regulatory function in further education led by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) sector; qualifications were redesigned through Common Award Systems and new qualifications were developed. In the sector led by HETAC ([21]) the framework also had regulatory powers. The framework had no regulatory powers in universities and the school sector; setting up NFQs in this sector was by agreement and the impact has been more gradual and incremental (Raffe, 2009a).

([21]) HETAC is the qualifications awarding body for higher education and training institutions outside the university sector.

CHAPTER 4.

Stakeholder engagement and coordination

Stakeholder involvement is crucial for developing and implementing a national qualifications framework. For a framework to become operational, institutional arrangements need to be put in place to allow the relevant stakeholders to meet on a regular, planned basis to address issues and policies about qualifications and skills. Comprehensive frameworks require the involvement of a broad group of stakeholders from both education and training and the labour market, in effect creating a new meeting place and, potentially, a new dialogue. This helps create systems that are transparent and coherent and improves the relevance of qualifications (Raffe, 2013).

Framework developments in Europe have required, and have mobilised, a broad range of stakeholders from education and the labour market. Whereas the governance of education and training is normally carried out within subsystems (VET, higher education, general education), the concept of a comprehensive framework – covering all levels and types of qualifications – has forced countries to broaden their approach. Comprehensive frameworks have acted as platforms for dialogue and brought together stakeholders from different subsystems of education (VET, general education, higher education) and employment to discuss and agree on major elements of the design and structure of the NQF.

Cedefop's NQF monitoring reports (Cedefop, 2009a; 2010b; 2012a; 2013a; 2015a) show that cross-sectoral working groups and task forces have been established in all countries participating in EQF implementation. They have played an important role during the design and development phase.

As countries move towards implementation they increasingly institutionalise their processes and their collaborative arrangements. We can observe different models being set up to oversee the setting up of NQF frameworks. Legally underpinned governance structures are being set up. While the policy, design and implementation functions for qualifications included in the NQF have not changed in most countries, we can observe the establishment of permanent, cross-sectoral 'national qualifications councils' involving a broad range of stakeholders. Albania, Belgium-fl, Cyprus, Croatia, Estonia, Slovakia, Poland, Montenegro, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey have all set up such bodies.

Box 17. **The Council of the Cyprus qualifications framework (CYQF) acts as an advisory body**

The CYQF is implemented under the coordination of the Ministry of Education and Culture. Stakeholders responsible for the design, implementation and award of qualifications will continue to work according to the existing legislative framework, but new legislation is required for CYQF to clarify how stakeholders will work together on cross-sectoral issues.

A new permanent body – Council of the Cyprus qualifications framework (CyQF) – has been established, which incorporates representatives of all relevant public services, ministries and all subsystems of education (general education, VET, higher education), employers' organisations, trade unions, professional associations and the academic community. It acts as an advisory body to the Ministry of Education and Culture and has the following responsibilities:

- consulting with stakeholders on CYQF development and implementation and establishing mutual trust between them;
- developing, implementing and reviewing CYQF procedures;
- disseminating public information on CYQF;
- advising the Ministry of Education and Culture on policy and resource implications.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Cyprus.

Setting up a broad stakeholder platform has advantages as well as weaknesses, as the Croatian case shows.

Box 18. **Croatia: stakeholders brought together**

The Croatia Qualifications Framework (CROQF) Act (2013) set up the institutional and legislative framework for CROQF implementation and defined the involvement, roles and responsibilities of key bodies and stakeholders. The National Council for Development of Human Potential was appointed by the Croatian Parliament in June 2014 as the strategic body for developing and implementing the CROQF. It comprises 24 representatives of national ministries, regional structures, social partners, education providers and national agencies involved in developing and awarding qualifications in different subsystems of education and training. This body oversees policies in education, training, employment and human resource development and monitors and evaluates the CROQF's impact. The variety of stakeholders actively involved in the National Council is both a strength of the current governance arrangement, as it ensures a wide consensus for establishing a comprehensive NQF, and also a weakness, as the decision-making process may take a long time and may slow down implementation.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Croatia.

Similarly an NQF steering group has been established in Austria, and a *Bund-Länder Koordinierungsstelle* in Germany, to monitor the allocation of qualifications and to ensure the consistency of the comprehensive framework.

Both of these countries, through the strong involvement of a broad range of stakeholders in the qualification systems, have strengthened cross-sector cooperation though the implementation of the national framework.

Box 19. **Austria: NQF law defines roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and paves the way towards implementation**

The NQF Act establishes the governance structure and processes. It defines the responsibilities of institutions and bodies involved in NQF implementation. The NQF Act also establishes two bodies:

- the NQF advisory board (*NQR-Beirat*), consisting of seven experts; this body advises the NQF coordinating body when considering proposals for the allocation of qualifications to the NQF;
- the NQF steering group (*NQR-Steuerungsgruppe*), consisting of 30 members representing all the main stakeholders (all federal ministries, social partners, stakeholders from the different fields of education and *Länder*). The key task of the NQF steering group is to provide advice to public authorities responsible for education and training and qualifications at all levels, particularly the two coordinating ministries: the Federal Ministry of Education and the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy. Further tasks include the approval of operational and appeal procedures and content-related issues (such as the adoption of the NQF manual). This broad representation is meant to reflect stakeholder interests.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Austria.

Box 20. **The coordination point for the German qualifications framework oversees the consistency of the implementation**

The development and implementation of the German qualifications framework (DQR) is characterised by a bottom-up and consensus-seeking approach. A national steering group (*Bund-Länder-Koordinierungs-gruppe*) was jointly established by the Federal Ministry of Education and the *Länder* at the beginning of 2007 to develop the DQR. After it was given official status in May 2013, the body in charge of its implementation was set up. The coordination point for the DQR (*Bund-Länder Koordinierungsstelle (B-L-KS)*), was set up by a joint initiative of the federal government and the *Länder*. The B-L-KS, which emerged from the former *Bund-Länder-Koordinierungsgruppe,* also assumes the function of the national coordination point for the EQF. It has six members, including representatives from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, the Federal Ministry of Economics and Energy, the Standing Conference of the Ministers for Education and Cultural Affairs of the *Länder* and the Conference of Ministers for Economics of the *Länder*. Its main role is to monitor the allocation of qualifications and to ensure consistency in the overall DQR structure and implementation.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Germany.

The 2016 Slovenian Qualifications Framework (SQF) Act summarises the main responsibilities of stakeholders in designing and awarding qualifications at different levels, and defines the tasks of the EQF national coordination point. The act refers to procedures and methods for allocating qualifications from formal education and training and national vocational qualifications, as defined in sectoral legislation. One important development resulting from the SQF Act is the definition of procedures for including supplementary qualifications in the SQF. The 2016 SQF Act stipulated the creation of the SQF-EQF expert committee, coordinated by the national coordination point, to implement the system of supplementary qualifications. This comprises seven members, appointed by the Minister for Labour on a four-year basis: three members proposed by the Ministry of Labour, one member proposed by the Ministry of Education, one member proposed by the Ministry of Economy, and two members proposed by the Economic and Social Council (one representing the employers and the other representing the trade unions). Its responsibilities are to set out the criteria and to prepare proposals for the inclusion of supplementary qualifications in the SQF, to monitor developments related to the SQF, EQF and QF-EHEA and to carry out other tasks necessary for placing qualifications in the framework.

Box 21. **Broad range of stakeholders involved in the implementation of TQF**

A comprehensive qualifications framework – the Turkish qualifications framework (TQF) – is being implemented in Turkey. The three-member TQF Coordination Council is the decision-making body of the TQF. It is assisted by the 22-member TQF Council, representing the Ministry of national education, the Council of higher education, the Vocational qualifications authority and social partner organisations. According to the TQF Regulation, the main duties and responsibilities of the TQF Coordination Council are to:

- evaluate and approve procedures, principles, decisions, suggestions and opinions submitted by the TQF Council;
- collaborate with responsible bodies and institutions, international organisations and the bodies and institutions of other countries.

Members of the Coordination Council are responsible for collaboration and coordination within their bodies when implementing council decisions. The TQF regulation anticipates the establishment of a consultation committee, with broad stakeholder participation, to evaluate issues and to submit opinions on the framework.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Turkey.

While many countries have prioritised the inclusion of as broad a group of education and training stakeholders as possible, the extent to which social partners and other labour market stakeholders are actively engaged is more varied. One group of countries – Austria, Belgium, France, Denmark, the Czech

Republic, Germany, Switzerland and Turkey – consider labour market links as essential for the implementation of the national framework. Social partners and other labour market stakeholders play an important role in these frameworks and are directly involved in their development and implementation. Social partners in this group of countries are directly involved in allocating qualifications and in the continuous review of matching levels to qualifications.

Box 22. **Flemish Community of Belgium**

The Flemish NQF (FQF) illustrates the strong involvement of labour market stakeholders in NQF developments and in its implementation. The FQF is designed to support broader reform to raise the transparency of qualifications and to improve education and training links to the labour market.

The development of the FQF was taken forward as a joint initiative of the Ministry of Education and Training and the Ministry of Work and Social Economy. Other relevant ministries – the Ministry of Labour and Social Economy and the Ministry of Culture, Youth, Sports and Media – have also been involved. From the education and training aspect, the participation of relevant sectors (general education, initial vocational education, continuing vocational education and training, higher education, including short cycle higher education) has been important. The overall objective is to improve the links between education and training and the labour market. As it includes both of the main qualification types, educational and professional, the FQF is fundamentally dependent on the permanent involvement of both education and training and labour market stakeholders. The inclusion of professional qualifications into the framework is based on direct negotiations with social partners and provides a strong link to occupational standards. This approach institutionalises the involvement of social partners and supports direct dialogue on the content, profile and levelling of qualifications.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Belgium-fl.

In contrast to the former group, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Romania have a weaker tradition of involving labour market stakeholders in qualification developments, which is reflected in the development and implementation of their NQFs. However, while earlier research found limited evidence that qualifications frameworks and the engagement of labour market stakeholders impacted on labour market outcomes (Allais, 2017; 2011a; Raffe, 2012; Young and Allais, 2013), Cedefop's evidence shows an increasing engagement of labour market stakeholders in developing qualifications through the NQF. As part of NQF development, sectoral councils or committees have been established in a number of countries where they did not exist before, bringing together employers' organisations, trade unions and providers. This is the case, for instance, in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Malta, Montenegro, Portugal and Slovakia, and is planned in Albania.

Box 23. **16 sector qualifications councils in Portugal**

In Portugal, a new institutional structure was set up to support the national qualifications system, framework development and implementation. The National Agency for Qualifications and VET (ANQEP), under the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity and the Ministry of Education, was established to coordinate the setting up of education and training policies for young people and adults and to develop the system for the recognition, validation and certification of competences. The National Council for Vocational Training was set up as a tripartite body. Additionally, 16 sector qualifications councils were set up and are involved in defining qualifications and competences, as well as in including new qualifications in the national qualifications catalogue and updating existing ones. The councils are composed of social partners, training providers from the national qualifications system, organisations responsible for regulating professions, public structures that oversee business sectors, technology and innovation centres, and companies.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Portugal.

Slovakia recently set up 24 sector councils as part of the process of developing its NQF infrastructure. These councils have a broad range of responsibilities and competences including: developing and monitoring the national occupations register and the national qualifications register, communicating between the labour market and the world of education, and establishing partnerships for validating and recognising non-formal and informal learning. They are composed of representatives of all stakeholders (national and regional authorities, employers, representatives of trade unions, and educators). The sector councils also have a key role in developing, monitoring and updating national occupations and qualifications standards. Their role is defined in the Act No 5/2014 on employment services.

The Vocational Qualifications Authority in Turkey has promoted the involvement of industry, through sectoral committees, as one of the cornerstones for ensuring the sustainability of the national vocational qualification system. Sector committees are tripartite structures with State, employer and employee representatives; their establishment, duties and operation are regulated by law. By 2016, the Vocational Qualifications Authority had defined 26 sectors; 23 sector committees are operational. Sectoral committees perform tasks related to the development and maintenance of occupational standards and qualifications for their sectors.

Box 24. **Setting up sector skill units in Malta to support NQF implementation**

In line with legislation, the National Commission for Further and Higher Education, has been responsible for setting up sector skills units. Much work has already been undertaken to develop these formal structures in priority sectors and seven sector skills units are currently in operation. The objectives of the sector skills units are: to ensure the consistency and relevance of the occupational standards within the sector; to reduce skills gaps and skills shortages and to improve the skills and productivity of the sector's workforce; to improve learning supply; and ensure the recognition and certification of skills and competences within the sector. Each sector skills unit is responsible for developing occupational standards relevant to the sector it represents, for proposing regulations and mechanisms for validating informal and non-formal learning for all skills within the sector, and for ensuring that the sectoral qualifications framework is developed in line with the Malta Qualifications Framework. The sector skills units are made up of members representing the economic sector, a government authority or a board associated with the specific sector and a member appointed by workers' representatives within the sector.

Source: NQF inventory 2016 – Malta.

The evidence collected for this report seems to suggest that stakeholder engagement and coordination, ownership of the process, capacity and stakeholder buy-in are the critical factors for an effective NQF implementation and for the legitimacy of the frameworks. The national chapters also demonstrate that arrangements for maintaining and supporting the NQF implementation have improved cross-sectoral stakeholder engagement and coordination; this engagement has increasingly been institutionalised. It is expected that this will have positive impact on the system coordination (Raffe, 2012). There is evidence, at least in some sub-frameworks, that employers in countries with a weak tradition of involving labour market stakeholders have become more engaged in the process of qualification development. One important trend is the opening up of qualifications frameworks to non-formal qualifications awarded by labour market stakeholders and adult providers. This shows the increased interest of these stakeholders in being involved in setting up frameworks, and is seen as a precondition for supporting lifelong learning and allowing learners to combine initial qualifications with those for continuing training and for specialisation.

CHAPTER 5.

Early impact of European national qualifications frameworks

The monitoring of European national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) carried out by Cedefop since 2009, supported by a variety of comparative studies ([22]), points to a number of areas where NQFs are starting to make a difference. The key questions to be asked are:

(a) for whom do they make a difference;

(b) how do they make a difference;

(c) under which conditions do they make a difference?

The impact of NQFs is varied across countries, education subsystems and sectors.

5.1. Areas where system level impact have been observed

5.1.1. Improved transparency of national qualification systems

The introduction of NQFs with explicit learning outcomes-based levels has helped to make the national education and qualification systems more readable and easier to understand within and across European countries (Cedefop, 2016a, b). In a few cases where multiple qualifications frameworks have been operating in parallel and partly in competition, as in England, the impact on transparency is less clear. By introducing a common learning, outcomes-based language for describing qualifications across education and training subsystems, the national frameworks provide a comprehensive map of national qualifications and the relationships between them ([23]). Although varying from country to country,

([22]) The following NQF/EQF-relevant studies have been carried out by Cedefop since the initiation of the EQF process in 2005): Cedefop, Coles and Oates, 2005; Cedefop, 2009b; 2010a; 2014a; 2015c; 2016a. Also Cedefop annual NQF monitoring reports analysing national developments (Cedefop, 2009a; 2010b; 2012a; 2013a; 2015a), including country chapters (2012, 2014 and 2016); and Cedefop briefing notes on NQFs (Cedefop 2011; 2012a; 2013b; 2014b; 2015b; 2016b).

([23]) For more information see Cedefop, 2015c.

important progress has been achieved in the last nine years ([24]). In some countries we can observe how the increased transparency facilitates further systemic reforms, as exemplified by Estonia where a lack of initial qualification at NQF level 5 was identified through the development of an overarching framework. The main discussion centred on the fact that there were no initial education and training qualifications identified at this level. Steps have been taken to fill this gap. Following consultation with all stakeholders, a new VET Act came into force in mid-2013, introducing qualifications at level 5 (both in initial and continuing VET).

This illustrates that by introducing learning-outcomes-based levels, and placing qualifications according to these levels, it is possible to identify gaps in existing qualifications provision. Cedefop's 2014 study shows that EQF level 5 (and the relevant NQF levels) has been used as a platform for the development of new qualifications. This is exemplified by Estonia, Malta and the UK. In many countries (including Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Portugal, Slovakia) NQF level descriptors are used to review and renew the content of qualifications. Increasingly, comprehensive and integrated qualification registers underpin the NQFs and make information on qualifications accessible for students, employers and guidance staff ([25]).

5.1.2. More consistent implementation of learning outcomes approaches

European NQFs share a common conceptual basis with their focus on learning outcomes. Recent research on the shift to learning outcomes (Cedefop, 2016a) shows that the outcomes principle has been broadly accepted among national policy-makers and that the NQFs have contributed significantly to strengthening this dimension. While the approach was previously introduced in a fragmented way in separate institutions and subsystems, the emergence of comprehensive frameworks has made it possible to implement learning outcomes in a more system-wide and – to some extent – more consistent way. In countries such as Belgium, Croatia, Greece, Iceland, Lithuania, Norway and Poland the introduction of frameworks has led to the identification of areas where learning outcomes have not been previously applied, or where these have been used in an inconsistent way. The level descriptors within the frameworks are increasingly

([24]) See the EQF referencing reports: https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/referencing-reports-and-contacts

([25]) See, for example,, Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung [Federal Ministry of Education and Research]: *Qualifikationsuche [qualifications database]* (in German) https://www.dqr.de/content/2316.php or the Slovenian qualification database http://www.nok.si/en/

used as reference points for describing writing (and thus levelling) qualification and assessment standards as well as curricula. This is an important use of frameworks as it can strengthen the consistency of programmes and allow qualifications at different levels to be delivered according to similar requirements. The frameworks emerging after 2005 differ from the first generation frameworks developed, for instance, in England or South Africa. Comprehensive NQFs in Europe can be categorised as outcomes-referenced frameworks ([26]) rather than outcomes-led (Raffe, 2011b; Cedefop, 2015a) where the learning outcomes approach – considered essential for levelling and for increasing the transparency of national qualifications – is linked to national curricula or programmes and to accredited providers accepting that the mode and volume of learning matters. However, many comprehensive frameworks contain elements of the outcomes-led model where learning outcomes are specified independently of the curriculum and provider (Raffe, 2011b). This is most apparent in some sub-frameworks, such as in the sub-framework of occupational/professional qualifications in Belgium-fl, Estonia, Slovenia, Slovakia and Turkey. For instance in Slovenia, in the sub-framework of national vocational qualifications only qualifications and assessment standards are regulated at national level. There are no formally accredited programmes leading to these qualifications. These qualifications can be awarded by validating relevant work experience.

The evidence shows that the objectives and the role of learning outcomes differ across sub-frameworks (VET, higher education, general education), whereas a comprehensive framework will increase the consistency of use of learning outcomes across sub-frameworks.

5.1.3. Stronger links between national qualifications frameworks and the validation of non-formal and informal learning

The 2016 update of the European inventory on validation (Cedefop, European Commission and ICF, 2017) confirms that countries ([27]) now give a high priority to linking frameworks and validation arrangements. NQFs, through their focus on

([26]) Raffe (2011b) explores different types of NQFs and examines the role of learning outcomes within them. He elaborates on two contrasting NQF types: outcomes-led and outcomes- referenced; he suggests that these are associated with different roles for learning outcomes in pursuing the objectives of NQFs. A communication framework is typically outcomes-referenced. Learning outcomes-based level descriptors provide common reference points for diverse qualifications from different sectors and institutions and help coordinate education and training provision and improve the coherence and integration of the system.

([27]) EU-28, EEA-EFTA countries, Switzerland and Turkey are included in the inventory.

learning outcomes, act as a reference point for identifying, documenting, assessing and recognising learning acquired in non-formal and informal settings. The introduction of comprehensive NQFs allows countries to move from fragmented validation procedures to a more coordinated national approach. According to the European inventory, there is a link in the NQF between validation arrangements and formal education qualifications in at least one education sector in 28 countries, making it possible to acquire a full or part of a qualification through the NQF. Links between validation and NQFs are more common in initial VET and higher education than in general education or adult education; adult education is in many countries not yet included in the NQF. Validation of non-formally and informally acquired competences and skills is possible in 17 countries. Around 75% of countries use the same standards in formal education and validation in at least one sector.

5.1.4. Greater stakeholder engagement and coordination

As described in Chapter 4, the new generation of comprehensive NQFs has helped bring together stakeholders from different subsystems of education who do not routinely cooperate (VET, higher education, general education), and stakeholders from education and employment. In some countries comprehensive NQF development has brought together stakeholders from different sectors for the first time. Evidence shows that this cooperation is increasingly being formalised and institutionalised. This is important for supporting the coherent implementation and maintenance of the NQF across sectors and institutions. There is scattered evidence, in countries with a weak tradition of engaging labour market stakeholders in qualifications development, that their involvement in this area has increased as a result of their participation in the NQF and its supporting structures (e.g. sector skills councils).

5.1.5. NQFs are opening up to qualifications awarded outside formal education and training

Most European NQFs currently include qualifications from formal education and training (VET, higher education, general education). These are qualifications that are regulated by national authorities. However, there is a growing trend among countries to open up their frameworks to include qualifications awarded outside the formalised and regulated national qualification system. Some countries, such as the Netherlands, have already developed quality criteria and procedures and included a number of these qualifications in the NQF. This is important for describing and making manifest the whole national qualifications landscape, and for promoting NQFs as comprehensive qualification maps for lifelong learning and human resource development.

5.1.6. NQFs and higher vocational education and training

In many countries higher level vocationally oriented education and training has been operating in 'the shadow' of universities. This lack of visibility partly reflects the high esteem attributed to academic and research oriented education, in some cases undermining the role of vocationally oriented and practise-based education and training. The learning-outcomes-based levels of the NQFs have played a role in raising awareness of the existence, and increasing the importance, of vocationally oriented education and training, now placed at levels 5 to 8 of the EQF. As a result, there is now an intensive debate on the future of vocational education and training at EQF level 5 to 8 ([28]). The increased visibility of higher VET qualifications can be illustrated by the German master craftsman qualification being placed at level 6 of the German qualifications framework (DQR), firmly underlining the conviction that vocationally oriented education and training can be placed at all levels. The Swiss national qualifications framework is explicitly designed to support this principle, showing how vocational and professional qualifications operate from level 3 to level 8 of the framework. The rapid development of higher VET policies in many countries can, therefore, be partly attributed to the direct impact of the outcomes-based perspective provided by the NQFs and their learning outcomes based levels. This example shows that NQFs can make vocational qualifications at these levels more visible and contribute to the increased diversity of qualifications designed for different purposes.

5.2. Areas where less impact can be observed

5.2.1. Labour market visibility and use still limited

Several evaluation studies have pointed to the limited visibility and use of the NQFs by labour market actors (Allais, 2017; NQAI, 2009). The most successful example of good framework visibility on the labour market is the French NQF (the national register of vocational qualifications, RNCP, in which qualification levels are linked to levels of occupation, work and pay (Allais, 2017).

In less regulated labour markets, the visibility of and use of the framework by employers is more challenging. For instance, the evaluation of the Welsh framework concluded that too few employers engage with, or are aware of, the framework. While this reflects a general lack of visibility of the credit and

([28]) A number of research and development projects are currently exploring this area. A good example is the 'Beehives-project': https://www.eurashe.eu/projects/beehives/

qualifications framework for Wales, some stakeholders point to the fact that the qualification and credit framework (QCF) ([29]) in England-Northern Ireland is the dominant framework in the UK, and that some employers may prefer to relate to this and not limit themselves to Wales (Welsh Government, 2014, p. 45). The impact study of the Irish national qualifications framework (NFQ) has demonstrated that it has considerable potential to be used in recruitment, in developing career pathways, in planning work-based learning and training and in recognising transferable skills (NQA Ireland, 2009). However, its actual use by employers is limited, reflecting low awareness and visibility. A recent study carried out in Germany on the potential use of the German qualifications framework (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2016) identifies a number of areas where the DQR can add value (such as employee recruitment and development). This applies in particular to small and medium-sized enterprises with limited human resource capacity, but capacity building and awareness raising will be required. Scotland stands out as an exception in this area, having developed and promoted a range of tools that support employers in using the framework (the SCQF provides guides to support: recruitment and staff selection; identifying skills and planning staff development; and gaining recognition for in-house training programmes ([30])). There are some examples of employer-led sub-frameworks of vocational/occupational qualifications, for instance in Estonia, Slovenia or Turkey, which are well used and visible in the labour market (providing support for access to regulated occupations, certification of skills acquired at the workplace, recruitment, workforce development, and guidance).

5.2.2. Articulation between institutions and education and training subsystems – still needs to be addressed

Several countries see their NQFs as tools for strengthening the links between education and training subsystems. This is considered to be essential for reducing barriers to progression in education, training and learning and for strengthening the overall permeability of education and training systems. As previously stated, the new generation of European NQFs overwhelmingly consists of comprehensive frameworks, addressing all types of qualifications at all levels of formal education and training. This means that they – through their descriptors – must be relevant to a diversity of institutions pursuing a wide variety of tasks according to different traditions and cultures. According to Young and

([29]) Now replaced by the new regulated qualifications framework (RQF).

([30]) SCQF: *What are the benefits*: http://scqf.org.uk/employers/what-are-the-benefits

Allais (2009; 2011), one of the fundamental challenges comprehensive frameworks face is to take account of the epistemological differences in knowledge and learning that exist in different parts of education. It is generally too early to say whether the NQFs are making a difference in this area – any future impact study needs to address this 'bridging function' of the frameworks carefully to assess whether individual learners are becoming more able to move horizontally and vertically and whether they can combine education and training from different institutions and subsystems in a way which benefits their lifelong learning careers.

5.2.3. Institutional reform is still a work in progress

NQFs have contributed to institutional reform in a limited number of cases. Greece, Ireland, Malta, Portugal and Romania exemplify this through their decision to merge multiple qualification bodies into single entities covering all types and levels of qualifications. The synergies gained in bringing together functions under one roof can speed up the implementation of a comprehensive framework. This shows that comprehensive NQFs, even in cases where their main role is perceived as promoting transparency, can trigger institutional reform.

5.2.4. Using NQFs to support the recognition of qualifications across countries is still at an early stage of implementation

The effect of the qualifications frameworks on the mobility of learners and workers is still uncertain at present as the implementation of the EQF – and of many NQFs – is at an early stage. However, there are great expectations that qualifications frameworks will support recognition of qualifications. NQFs give important information about the level of a qualification and its link to other qualifications, and about what the holder of a qualification is expected to know, understand and can do. The information about learning outcomes, workload, qualification type and quality assurance are important elements of the formal recognition of qualifications. The subsidiarity text to the Lisbon recognition convention (Unesco and Council of Europe, 2013) underlines that frameworks should be used systematically as a source of information supporting decisions on recognition. Recent studies of the European Commission explore obstacles to recognition of skills and qualifications ([31]) and reflect on the potential role of the

([31]) https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/156689fd-e922-11e6-ad7c-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

EQF in supporting recognition of international sectoral qualifications and related initiatives ([32]).

([32]) http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=7937&furtherPubs=yes

CHAPTER 6.

Evolving objectives and emerging working methods

National qualifications frameworks (NQFs) in Europe have largely developed in response to the European qualifications framework (EQF) and its call for increased European and international transparency and comparability of qualifications. This emphasis on transparency, seeing the national frameworks as tools for describing, and communicating about the qualifications systems more effectively, is shared by countries and clearly expressed in national policy documents. A number of countries have seen this transparency and communication role as too limiting and therefore expressed their intention to use frameworks as tools for reform. In other cases, countries have (*de facto*) broadened the objectives of their frameworks, making use of the opportunities created by an evolving framework. Being closely linked to national lifelong learning policies, NQFs are, to some extent, becoming embedded in broader human resource development strategies, and in some ways contradicting the (heavily criticised) link between NQFs and neo-liberal economic policies. (Allais, 2011a; 2011b; 2014; 2017; Lassnigg, 2012; Young, 2011). The evidence collected for this report shows that NQFs increasingly are seen as relevant tools for supporting lifelong learning policies and practices. The following five examples illustrate this.

First, NQFs are increasingly being used to facilitate the validation of non-formal and informal learning. In Austria, Belgium-fl, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Kosovo, Malta, Montenegro, Poland, Slovakia and Turkey, it is clear that NQF developments provide platforms and tools for taking forward validation policies and practices.

Second, countries such as Germany, Greece, Romania and Turkey see NQFs as tools to improve the permeability of their education and training systems. For this to happen, qualifications need to be transparent in terms of learning outcomes.

Third, strengthening the learning outcomes dimension of national qualification systems and qualifications ([33]) is seen as critical by countries such

([33]) This was the main policy rationale for introducing the first generation NQFs in Anglophone countries (Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the UK) in the late

as Austria, the three Belgium Communities (Flemish, French and German-speaking), Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Malta, Montenegro, Norway, Slovakia and Turkey. NQFs with explicit learning outcomes-based levels are also used as reference points for the renewal and development of new qualifications, for developing standards and curricula and for improving the consistency of qualifications.

Fourth, several NQFs have been given a strong quality assurance role. This is the case in Belgium-fl, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden and Turkey. While all countries have quality assurance systems in place, the introduction of NQFs has increased the focus on learning outcomes and what this approach means for the inclusion and levelling of qualifications. This has become particularly evident in cases where countries are looking to integrate non-formal qualifications.

Fifth, NQFs are seen as important for engaging a broader range of stakeholders in formulating education, training and qualifications policies. This objective is, interestingly, emphasised by countries with a traditionally narrow or weak involvement of stakeholders. This is exemplified by Croatia, Estonia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Malta, Greece and Romania, where the NQFs have supported a broadening of stakeholder involvement from the labour market as well as society in general. Additionally, comprehensive NQFs play an important role in bringing together stakeholders from different education subsystems to address cross-sector and cross-institutional issues and challenges ([34]).

As illustrated by these examples, frameworks are used to support reforms. Compared to the first generation of frameworks, the regulatory role of the new frameworks is much more limited and their impact more indirect. This means that frameworks have to develop new and alternative forms of intervention, not working against but adding value to the structured and regulated subsystems of education and training they rely on. A recent analysis of the changing nature of vocational education and training (VET) in Europe (Cedefop, 2017) illustrates

1980s and 1990s. A radical learning outcomes approach, which broke the links to inputs in the first generation NQFs, cannot be observed in most new European NQFs.

([34]) Other more specific objectives include improved monitoring of supply and demand for learning (Estonia), promoting participation in upper secondary education (Portugal); achieving parity of esteem between VET and higher education qualifications (Germany, Greece, Switzerland, Ireland), improving social inclusion and equity (Croatia) and improving employment opportunities and learning for individuals (Albania).

why comprehensive NQFs can potentially come to play a key role in the future: 'Operating on the basis of a too narrow definition of VET, as observed in some countries, policy-makers risk overlooking the need for vocationally oriented education outside the traditional VET-sector, for example at tertiary levels. This is why future policy cooperation at European level should consider how education and training systems as a whole can promote and facilitate the practical, and work related learning, typical of VET. To achieve this, education and training providers at all levels need to strengthen dialogue and cooperation with labour market actors and society as a whole. While signalling a necessary expansion of vocationally oriented education and training, fragmentation and loss of transparency may also be experienced, making it more difficult for groups at risk to benefit from VET. Increasing the transparency and permeability of education and training systems, as supported for example by the EQF and exemplified by most NQFs, is thus of key importance.'

This emerging reality – positive by creating new opportunities; negative by potentially increasing complexity and reducing transparency – cries out for coordination mechanisms not exclusively building on the existing structures (and borderlines) of traditional subsystems. The comprehensive nature of the NQFs, in particular by promoting the learning outcomes perspective, is thus of key importance. The potential impact of the NQFs in the years to come depends on their ability to make better sense of this new (complex) reality of lifelong learning. While the new generation of NQFs can be seen as a step in this direction by promoting overall transparency, their ability actively to promote and facilitate learner progression has yet to be put fully into practice, and needs to be supported by complementary policies.

Frameworks need, first, to become visible to end-users, not only by introducing references to levels in qualification documents, but also by promoting them as comprehensive maps for lifelong learning and human resource development. These maps should be supported by national (and other relevant) databases ([35]) and give access to in-depth information on education and training provision and related qualifications.

Second, frameworks need to show explicitly how qualifications relate to each other, how dead-ends can be avoided and what a lifelong learning career may look like. A learner in VET, for example, should be able to identify future opportunities arising from completing an apprenticeship. This means that a qualifications framework is not only about levelling single qualifications, it is as

([35]) Qualifications databases are being established in most countries cooperating with EQF implementation.

much about demonstrating the relationship between them. It is essential that these relationships are not only described within education and training sectors, but also show how learning careers can take place across institutions, sectors and countries. While this is the implicit aim of NQFs, there is now a need to consider how this can be achieved in practice.

Third, to become maps for lifelong learning, frameworks need to open up to all qualifications relevant to this goal. While some countries have made progress in this area, much work remains to be done. The challenge is to turn the frameworks into what the US Lumina Foundation ([36]) calls a credential framework, which aims to include as broad a range and variety of qualifications as possible, including 'badges' acquired online. A key question is whether the existing qualifications frameworks are designed for this task and what would be required for them to become fully inclusive in the sense indicated above.

As indicated in Chapter 2, NQFs are continuously evolving. It will be important in the next few years to consider how, for example with the help of digital technologies, to turn the NQFs into maps for lifelong learning, actively supporting learner progression through increasingly complex education and training systems.

([36]) Lumina Foundation 2017: http://connectingcredentials.org/framework/

CHAPTER 7.

Conclusions

Analysis of developments during 2015-16 indicates that European national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) now are at a crossroads. While a number of frameworks have reached full operational status and are starting to deliver according to the original objectives, others struggle to define a clear role in the national education, training and employment landscape. The following points summarise some of the main trends, challenges and opportunities.

7.1. Policy hypes?

Most European NQFs were set up during the last decade. This indicates extensive policy learning and/or policy borrowing over a relatively short period of time. A key question is whether these new frameworks are mere 'policy hypes', destined to fade away, or whether they are being turned into integrated parts of national and regional qualifications policies and systems. The overview presented in this analysis shows that while the formal and legal basis of the frameworks is now firmly established, their impact on policies and practices is modest and has yet to be fully realised. While a number of NQFs now have found their place in the overall education, training and employment policy landscape, others are at risk of remaining formal (paper) initiatives with limited impact on policies and practices. It will be essential to monitor carefully the impact of the frameworks in the coming period, in order to clarify their potential and if possible adjust their design and orientation.

7.2. Regulation or communication?

As regards the first generation of qualifications frameworks (Ireland, France and the UK), these are fully integrated into national systems but are undergoing continuous change and adaptation. The most significant change took place in the UK-England where the qualification and credit framework (QCF) was abolished and replaced by a new, non-regulatory framework. The new generation of frameworks in Europe differs from the first generation frameworks (developed worldwide) by stressing communication and transparency rather than regulation and harmonisation. These frameworks are 'loose' in the sense that they have been designed to embrace the multiplicity of education and training subsystems,

institutions and provisions, reflecting a broad range of concepts, traditions, values and interests. Loose frameworks introduce a set of comprehensive level descriptors to be applied across subsystems, but allow each sub-framework to retain its own principles and regulations. Tight frameworks differ from this by defining uniform specifications for qualifications to be applied across sectors. Examples of early versions of frameworks outside Europe, for example in South Africa and New Zealand, which aimed to transform national education and training systems, illustrate the attempts to create tight and one-fit-for-all solutions. This created a lot of resistance and failed to deliver. This eventually led to a reassessment of the role of these frameworks. In general, there is a need for more evidence on how lessons learned from the first generation frameworks have been taken on board in the development of the new generation frameworks. Evidence from the development and implementation of European frameworks shows that 'loose' frameworks, emphasising communication and transparency, are able to support and trigger reform. This mirrors the ability to mobilise and commit stakeholders rather than the ability to impose 'one-fit-for-all' rules and regulations.

The (heavily criticised) link between NQFs and neo-liberal economic policies is hard to detect in current NQF developments in Europe. We see, rather, the emergence of a broader perspective where NQFs, sometimes in a modest way, address a combination of economic, social, equity and sustainable development goals.

7.3. Conditions for adding value

For an NQF to contribute to these wider policy objectives it must be embedded in the relevant (national or regional) policy context. Standing alone and isolated, NQFs are too weak as tools to drive reform and change. For frameworks to make a difference, they must interact with and add to other policies. A comprehensive NQF can be seen as a tool and platform for stakeholder communication, coordination and cooperation across policy areas, levels and institutions.

The new frameworks aim to achieve an overview and to support learning across institutional, sectoral and (sometimes) national borders. This brings NQFs close to attaining their objectives of lifelong and life-wide learning, establishing themselves as instruments encouraging and promoting learning careers throughout life and linking formal, non-formal and informal learning. The NQFs and the regional frameworks can support this lifelong learning agenda by addressing (through a learning outcomes focus) the problems related to the lack of transparency and fragmentation of learning provision. The potential of NQFs

can only be released the moment they start directly to serve individual learners and facilitate their lifelong learning pathways. The success of the qualifications frameworks in the future thus very much relies on their ability to make qualifications frameworks visible and relevant to end-users, as indicated in Chapter 7 above.

Learning outcomes are at the core of NQFs, giving stakeholders tools for communication, cooperation and coordination across institutions, levels, sectors and between education and the labour market and across national borders.

The analysis shows that NQFs are multilevel and dynamic tools that evolve over time. They are a part of the country's historical, political, institutional and cultural context and its national qualification and education system and labour market. There is a need for more research and understanding about how NQFs interact with the national qualification systems; about recognising enablers and implementation barriers in particular contexts; and about how tensions are resolved.

7.4. The challenge of measuring and monitoring impact

The majority of NQFs have now completed their initial conceptual and technical developments. The national chapters point to a number of important factors that shape successful implementation. Apart from the solid technical and conceptual foundation, the commitment of key stakeholders to the long-term development of the framework is of key importance. Stakeholders need to buy-in and use the frameworks.

The visibility of the frameworks to end-users, learners and workers is of crucial importance and a condition for achieving a wider impact.

The challenges linked to measuring the impact of qualification frameworks are now at the forefront of discussions. Experiences so far show that impact assessment – challenging from different perspectives – requires agreement on clearly defined baselines for assessment. It has to be understood in relation to the social, political and institutional contexts in which an NQF operates to provide narrative for assessment and reflection on why, under what conditions, how and for whom it works.

List of abbreviations

Belgium-de	German-speaking Community of Belgium
Belgium-fl	Flemish Community of Belgium
Belgium-fr	French Community of Belgium
BQF	Bulgarian qualification framework
CCEA	Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment Regulation
CNCP	*Commission nationale de la certification professionnelle* (National committee on vocational qualifications, France)
CQFW	Credit and qualifications framework for Wales
CROQF	Croatian qualifications framework
CYQF	Cyprus qualifications framework
DQR	*Der Deutsche Qualifikationsrahmen* (German qualifications framework)
EQF	European qualifications framework
EstQF	Estonian qualifications framework
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
FQF	Flemish qualifications framework
GLH	guided learning hours
HE	higher education
NFQ	Irish national framework of qualifications
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
NQF	national qualifications framework
NSK	national register of qualifications (Czech Republic)
Ofqual	Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation
QCF	Qualifications and credit framework
QF-EHEA	Framework for qualifications in the European Higher Education Area
RNCP	*Repertoire national des certifications professionnelles* (National register of vocational qualifications, France)
RPL	recognition of prior learning
RQF	regulated qualifications framework
SAQA	South African Qualification Authority
SCQF	Scottish qualifications framework
SQF	Slovenian qualifications framework
TQF	Turkish qualification framework
TQT	total qualification time
VET	vocational education and training

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ANNEX

Short overview of NQF developments

	Scope of the framework	Number of levels	Level descriptors	Stage of development	NQF linked to EQF
Albania	Comprehensive NQF including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training.	Eight	• theoretical and factual knowledge • cognitive and practical skills • autonomy and responsibility	Formally adopted; under revision	
Austria	Designed as a comprehensive NQF; currently includes qualifications awarded in higher education and VET qualifications at levels 4, 5 and 6 from formal education.	Eight	• knowledge • skills • competences	(Early) operational stage	2012
Belgium-fl	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training and from the professional qualifications system.	Eight	• knowledge/skills • context/autonomy • responsibility	Operational	2011, updated 2014
Belgium-fr	Designed as a comprehensive framework; will include all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training and from the professional qualifications system.	Eight	• knowledge/skills • context/autonomy/responsibility	Formally adopted	2013
Belgium-de	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training.	Eight	• occupational competences (knowledge and skills) • personal competences (social competence and autonomy)	(Early) operational stage	
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Designed as a comprehensive NQF for lifelong learning, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training.	Eight	• knowledge • skills • competences	Formally adopted	

	Scope of the framework	Number of levels	Level descriptors	Stage of development	NQF linked to EQF
Bulgaria	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training.	Eight, and a preparatory level	• knowledge • skills • competences (personal and professional)	Formally adopted	2013
Croatia	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training. It is a qualification and credit framework.	Eight, with sublevels at levels 4 and 8	• knowledge • skills • responsibility and autonomy	(Early) operational stage	2012
Cyprus	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training and from the system of vocational qualifications.	Eight	• knowledge • skills • competences	(Early) operational stage	2017
The Czech Republic	Partial national framework for vocational qualifications (the National Register of Vocational Qualifications (NSK) and a draft of the Higher Education Framework.	Eight in the NSK	• competences (including knowledge and skills)	The national register of vocational qualifications (NSK) is operational	2011
Denmark	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training.	Eight	• knowledge • skills • competences	Operational	2011
Estonia	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training and from the system of occupational qualifications.	Eight	• knowledge • skills • scope of responsibility and autonomy	Operational	2011, updated 2016

	Scope of the framework	Number of levels	Level descriptors	Stage of development	NQF linked to EQF
Finland	Comprehensive framework, including all State-recognised qualifications.	Eight	• knowledge • work method and application (skill) • responsibility, management and entrepreneurship • evaluation • key skills for lifelong learning	Formally adopted	2017
former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training and vocational qualifications.	Eight, with several sublevels	• knowledge • skills • competences	(Early) operational stage	2016
France	NQF covers all levels and types of vocationally or professionally oriented qualifications; general education qualifications are not included.	Five	Integrated learning outcomes, including knowledge, skills, attitudes, autonomy and responsibility	Operational	2010
Germany	Comprehensive NQF for lifelong learning; includes qualifications from general education, VET, higher education and qualifications from regulated further training.	Eight	• professional competences (knowledge and skills) • personal competences (social competence and autonomy)	Operational	2012
Greece	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training	Eight	• knowledge • skills • competences	(Early) operational stage	2015
Hungary	Comprehensive NQF for lifelong learning, encompassing all State-recognised national qualifications acquired in general education and HE, and those vocational qualifications registered in the national vocational qualifications register.	Eight	• knowledge • skills • attitudes • autonomy/responsibility	(Early) operational stage	2015

	Scope of the framework	Number of levels	Level descriptors	Stage of development	NQF linked to EQF
Iceland	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training.	Seven	• knowledge • skills • competences	(Early) operational stage	2013
Ireland	Comprehensive NQF, including all types and levels of qualifications from formal education and training; open to those awarded by professional and international organisations.	10, plus four award types: major, minor, special-purpose and supplemental	• knowledge • skills • competences	Operational	2009
Italy	The development of a comprehensive framework is a work in progress. It will include all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training, regional qualifications and, in the future, professional and private qualifications.	Eight	EQF level descriptors used	National repertoire of education, training and professional qualifications has been established. It consists of four sections, including a qualifications framework for HE and a national framework of regional qualifications. (*)	2013 Major national qualifications from formal education and training linked directly to EQF
Kosovo	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training and non-formal and informal learning.	Eight	• knowledge • skills • wider competences	(Early) operational stage	2016
Latvia	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training.	Eight	• knowledge • skills • competences	(Early) operational stage	2011

	Scope of the framework	Number of levels	Level descriptors	Stage of development	NQF linked to EQF
Lithuania	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training.	Eight	• characteristics of activities (complexity, autonomy, changeability) • types of competences (functional, cognitive and general)	Operational	2011
Liechtenstein	Designed as a comprehensive NQF for lifelong learning; currently includes qualifications from VET and higher education; general education qualifications are not yet included.	Eight	• knowledge • skills • competences	Operational	2016
Luxembourg	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training.	Eight	• knowledge • skills • attitudes	(Early) operational stage	2012
Malta	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training.	Eight	• knowledge • skills • competences	Operational	2009, updated 2012 and 2015
Montenegro	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training and from the professional qualifications system.	Eight, with sublevels at levels 1 and 7	• knowledge • skills • competences	(Early) operational stage	2014
The Netherlands	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training; opens to qualifications offered outside the formal education system.	Eight levels and an entry level	• context, • knowledge, • skills • responsibility and independence	Operational	2011

	Scope of the framework	Number of levels	Level descriptors	Stage of development	NQF linked to EQF
Norway	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training.	Seven; no descriptor or qualification at level 1	• knowledge, • skills, • general competences	Operational	2014
Poland	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training. It is open to qualifications from the private and non-formal sectors.	Eight	• knowledge • skills • social competences	(Early) operational stage	2013
Portugal	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training and from the national system for the recognition, validation and certification of competences.	Eight	• knowledge, • skills, • attitudes	Operational	2011
Romania	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training.	Eight	• knowledge • skills • competences	(Early) operational stage	
Serbia	Comprehensive NQF under construction; aims to bring together frameworks for higher education and VET.	Eight proposed	• knowledge • skills • attitudes and ability (levels of autonomy and responsibility	Design/development stage	
Slovakia	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training. It also includes a sub-framework of occupational qualifications.	Eight	• knowledge • skills • competences	(Early) operational stage	2017

	Scope of the framework	Number of levels	Level descriptors	Stage of development	NQF linked to EQF
Slovenia	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training and from the system of national vocational qualifications.	10	• knowledge • skills • competences	Operational	2013
Spain	Designed as a comprehensive NQF for lifelong learning; will include all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training.	Eight proposed	• knowledge • skills and abilities • competences	Advanced development stage	
Sweden	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training; open to qualifications awarded outside the formal education system.	Eight	• knowledge • skills • competences	(Early) operational stage	2016
Switzerland	NQF for vocational and professional qualifications and NQF for higher education.	Eight	• knowledge • skills • competences	Operational	2015
Turkey	Comprehensive NQF, including all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training and from the national vocational qualification system.	Eight	• knowledge • skills • competences	(Early) operational stage	2017
UK-England and Northern Ireland	Two frameworks: regulated qualifications framework (RQF) covers all regulated academic and vocational qualifications and a higher education framework (FHEQ).	Eight, including entry levels	• knowledge • skills	Operational	2010 joined UK referencing report

	Scope of the framework	Number of levels	Level descriptors	Stage of development	NQF linked to EQF
UK-Scotland	Comprehensive credit and qualifications framework (SCQF), including all levels and types of qualifications.	12, including entry levels	• knowledge and understanding • practice: applied knowledge, skills and understanding • generic cognitive skills, communication numeracy and ICT skills • autonomy, accountability and working with others	Operational	2010 joined UK referencing report
UK-Wales	Comprehensive credit and qualifications framework (CQFW), including all levels and types of qualifications.	CQFW: nine, including entry levels	• knowledge and understanding • application and action • autonomy and accountability	Operational	2010 joined UK referencing report

(*) http://nrpitalia.isfol.it/sito_standard/sito_demo/atlante_repertori.php#repertori_SR

Source: Cedefop.

National qualifications framework developments in Europe

Analysis and overview 2015-16

The sixth Cedefop national qualifications framework (NQF) monitoring report confirms that NQFs play a key role in the European qualifications framework (EQF) implementation and in improving transparency and comparability of qualifications nationally and internationally. The 39 countries monitored (28 EU Member States, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Kosovo, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey) are developing and implementing 43 national qualifications frameworks. Most NQFs are comprehensive – covering all levels and types of formal education and training qualifications and promoting learning outcomes perspectives – and trigger reform. They have contributed to reinforced and more consistent use of learning outcomes in qualifications, made higher VET (EQF levels 5 to 8) more visible, and supported more systematic implementation of validation of non-formal and informal learning. However, their visibility and use by the labour market is still limited. Sustainability, visibility to end-users, stakeholder involvement, ownership of the process, and consensus-building are among the conditions critical to successful NQF use and impact.

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