



## BRIEFING NOTE

# Qualifications frameworks in Europe: forging the right links

As national qualifications frameworks in Europe move closer to operation, policy integration becomes a key challenge

Introducing qualifications frameworks based on learning outcomes is now a global phenomenon. According to the recent joint publication by Cedefop, ETF and Unesco, frameworks are either established or being developed in 142 countries.

The eight-level European qualifications framework (EQF) makes it possible to compare all types and levels of qualifications from different countries, subsystems, and learning settings. A total of 36 countries are now working together to implement the EQF: the 28 EU Member States plus the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey.

## The EQF as reference point

By the end of 2013, 22 of these countries <sup>(1)</sup> will have formally linked ('referenced') their national qualifications levels to the EQF; the others are expected to do so within the next two years. National certificates, diplomas and Europass documents will eventually include the relevant EQF level. This is already the case in Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, France, Lithuania and Portugal.

The external evaluation carried out in 2012/13 confirmed that the EQF has become accepted as a reference point for national qualifications frameworks. But the key to its success is continuity. Links between European and national

levels need to be regularly reviewed; common trust can only be achieved through a systematic exchange between countries.

### Box 1. Qualifications framework for European higher education area

Countries involved in the EQF also take part in the Bologna process and implement a qualifications framework for the European higher education area (QF-EHEA). Some now combine self-certification to the QF-EHEA (done by 17 countries) with referencing to the EQF; this is made possible by having a **comprehensive** national qualifications framework (NQF). Bulgaria, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Austria, Portugal and Slovenia have all produced joint reports on both frameworks.

## The EQF as catalyst for national developments

Before adoption of the EQF in 2008 <sup>(2)</sup> only three countries – Ireland, France and the UK – had introduced NQFs based on learning outcomes. Today, all 36 countries involved in the EQF are developing and implementing such frameworks.

This means that the EQF is influencing how qualifications are classified and ranked nationally. In most countries this represents a

<sup>(1)</sup> Austria, Belgium (FL, W), Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and the UK.

<sup>(2)</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning (EQF). *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 111, 6.5.2008, p.1.

new departure, sometimes leading to reassessment of the value of and relationship between qualifications. An example is Germany's decision to attribute NQF level 6 to both master craftsman (*meister*) qualifications and bachelor degrees.

#### Box 2. Level 5

Cedefop's study of EQF level 5 qualifications maps these very diverse qualifications from the learning outcomes perspective. As the study reveals, this perspective impacts on career progression (since it links qualifications more closely to the job market), and affects how people move to and from vocational, general and higher education.

### Four phases of developing an NQF

Early experiences of Ireland, France and the UK suggest that developing an NQF can best be seen as a continuous circle of improvement rather than as a linear progression. The four phases described below may overlap.

**Design and development:** decides the NQF's rationale, policy objectives and architecture. By the end of 2013, most of the 36 countries had agreed on the overall structure of their frameworks. **Formal adoption:** involves a formal mandate such as an NQF law, amendment to an existing law, a decree, or other form. So far 24 frameworks have been formally adopted, most recently by Croatia; Spain, Romania, Finland, and Sweden are preparing for formal adoption. **Early operational stage:** institutions are required to comply with the NQF's structures and methods. Following formal adoption, countries work on practical arrangements such as stakeholders' roles and responsibilities, and develop criteria and procedures for allocating qualifications to NQF levels. A total of 11 countries – Belgium (Flanders), Estonia, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland and Portugal – are now in this stage. **Advanced operational stage:** the NQF constitutes an

integral part of the national qualifications system and is used as a reference point by public administration, the private sector and individual citizens. Five countries' frameworks – Denmark, Ireland, France, Malta and the UK – belong to this category.

A total of 28 countries have adopted eight-level frameworks like the EQF's; the rest operate with 5, 7, 9, 10 and 12 levels. Six have introduced partial NQFs covering a limited range of qualifications. Thirty are working on **comprehensive NQFs**, covering all types and levels of qualification.

#### Box 3. One country's progress: Denmark

Denmark adopted a comprehensive NQF (eight levels) in 2009 and completed referencing to the EQF in 2011. The Danish NQF can now be considered operational and is becoming more visible to learners. In January 2013, Denmark started issuing VET qualifications with an explicit reference to national and European levels. The NQF is a reference point for designing qualifications, in both vocational and higher education. NQF levels are also being used to structure national databases on qualifications, making the learning outcomes approach more widely understood. By 2013, national stakeholders were familiar with the framework (70% of respondents to an external evaluation 'know it well').

### Putting learning outcomes into practice

Describing NQF levels based on learning outcomes is not the same everywhere. A recent Cedefop study <sup>(3)</sup> shows a range of strategies.

Some countries, such as Estonia and Portugal, use EQF level descriptors directly. Both countries also prepare exploratory tables or guides with more detailed level descriptors.

<sup>(3)</sup> Cedefop (2013). *Analysis and overview of NQF level descriptors in European countries.*

A second group of countries (Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Norway, Poland, Romania and Sweden) broadened the EQF descriptors to mirror better complexities of the national system or emphasise national priorities. ‘Competence’, for instance, is a term interpreted in many different ways: from general competence (Norway) to social competence (Poland) to competence as a holistic concept embracing an entire range of knowledge, skills and attitudes (Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands). Other countries (Finland, Iceland and Malta) have integrated EU key competences into their level descriptors.

### Opening the door to external qualifications

Most NQFs take as their point of departure qualifications regulated and awarded by national authorities. Recently, however, the external qualifications issue – those awarded by other bodies – has become prominent.

According to a recent survey, one third of the 36 European countries cooperating on the EQF intend to open up their NQFs to a wider range of certificates, diplomas and qualifications. Taking this step leads to a more accurate overview of existing qualifications, and can strengthen links between initial education and training, usually provided by the public sector, and continuing training offered by the labour market. All countries emphasise the need for strong quality assurance; some of them, including the Netherlands, Austria and Sweden, are already elaborating quality assurance criteria.

#### Box 4. International qualifications

A particular issue concerns the inclusion of qualifications developed and awarded by international/multinational organisations, associations and companies. Because national authorities do not directly guarantee such qualifications, there is uncertainty about their value in the labour market and in society.

### Rising importance of validation

Many countries see emerging NQFs as an opportunity to integrate better validation of non-formal and informal learning into their qualification systems. Validation allows learners to acquire qualifications over time and in different settings and builds flexibility into the national system. There are two conditions for achieving this integration: using the same standards for validation as in ‘normal’ qualifications; and defining these standards as learning outcomes.

Some countries (including Spain and the Netherlands) have introduced common standards for vocational education and training and professional qualifications; higher education is also becoming more receptive to validation.

While validation is a matter of national policy, individual learners are assessed within programme objectives set by single institutions. This results in highly variable practices, making it difficult for an individual to judge whether non-formal and informal learning will be taken into account by higher education institutions.

Most of the 36 countries cooperating on the EQF have yet to establish a clearly defined link between their NQFs and validation arrangements. The 2012 Council recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning will provide countries with the impetus to forge stronger links between qualifications frameworks and validation.

### Policy challenges

Implementation of NQFs is still at an early stage, and their long-term impact is uncertain. To make sure that countries and individual learners enjoy their full benefits, policy-makers should focus on three major issues: **visibility, integration and engagement with the labour market.**

- Ordinary citizens – pupils, students, parents, workers and employers – are not always aware of the existence of NQFs. But some countries (such as the Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Portugal and the UK) are taking steps to raise awareness – for

example, by making sure NQF and EQF levels feature on new certificates, diplomas, Europass documents or in qualification databases.

- If NQFs are to improve access to education and training, break down barriers between subsystems and lead to renewed curricula and assessment methods, they need to be closely integrated with other policies, such as validation, guidance, curriculum reform and credit transfer arrangements.
- Though most NQFs have been education-driven, to become widely accepted they need to involve labour market actors. Opening frameworks to external qualifications, including from the private sector, can encourage dialogue between employment and education.
- Decisions on NQF levels should involve the social partners at all stages. At the development phase, they should take part in defining level descriptors; during implementation, they can help determine which qualifications should be allocated to the various levels. In practical terms, policy integration and labour market involvement also require close cooperation between different ministries and services.

As always, the greater challenge is to bring together policies and tools into an integrated whole. Qualifications can never be an issue for education alone.

## Further information and services

Cedefop (2013): Analysis and overview of NQF level descriptors in European countries

Cedefop (2013): Qualifications at level 5: benefits for career and higher education

Bibliographic database of the Cedefop Library:  
<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Information-services/vet-bib-bibliographic-database.aspx>

Cedefop webpages: Understanding qualifications.



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