

Governing education and training; the case of qualifications frameworks

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SUMMARY

The EQF is a meta-framework that forms a translation device between different national qualification systems. Each qualification system needs to link to the EQF levels if the translation is to be made easier across all countries. The move towards NQFs has been rapid and seems to some extent to have been triggered by the EQF proposal. It also reflects a general acceptance that lifelong learning requires a focus on learning outcomes rather than learning inputs and that the links between different subsystems of education and training need to be strengthened. Thus, development of NQFs cannot exclusively be explained by the emergence of the EQF. This article emphasises the distinction between national qualifications systems and national qualifications framework. It reviews the development of NQFs in the EU, EEA and candidate countries up to April 2007 and addresses the issue of European cooperation in education and training and its future.

Key words

EQF,
NQF,
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open method of
coordination,
transparency

This article discusses the potential impact of the European qualifications framework (EQF) on national education and training policies. Particular focus will be on the rapid and widespread development of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) across Europe. Pioneered by countries like Ireland, France and the UK, NQFs have moved into the forefront of the debate on how to realise lifelong learning and how to promote access to and progress in education, training and learning. While being pursued both nationally and internationally (for example by the OECD) for some years, development of EQF (from February 2004) significantly increased interest in NQFs. Both the original EQF consultation document (July 2005) and the Commission recommendation (European Commission, 2006b) state that countries need to 'speak with one voice' when relating their national qualifications to the EQF and it is suggested that each country set up a NQF to make this easier. A NQF is considered to be the most appropriate way to solve this coordination challenge and is argued to be a precondition for referencing to a European meta-framework. It is argued that NQFs are necessary to overcome the barriers between different national subsystems of education and training, notably between vocational education and training and higher education and between initial and continuing education and training.

Development of NQFs has not been the most visible part of the EQF development and debate. Most attention has been paid so far to the overarching European objectives to promote transparency, enable comparisons and ease transfer of qualifications (1) between countries. However this cross-border function can only become a reality if countries change the way their education and training systems are coordinated and governed. The 2005 EQF consultation document included the objective for the EQF to be a 'force for change at European, national and sector levels'. We can thus speak of two distinct but interrelated functions of the EQF, one at European and one at national level. The European function (translation, comparison) is visible and broadly accepted; the national function (increased coordination and permeability) is less visible and potentially more controversial. The purpose of this article is to address these developments and to give a first interpretation of this interchange of European and national education and training policies. The following main questions will be discussed:

(1) According to the EQF recommendation (September 2006) a 'qualification' is achieved when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards. A qualification is a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process.

- How can the concept of a qualifications framework be defined? What are the significant differences between a meta-framework like the EQF and existing and emerging national qualification frameworks? How can we distinguish the term qualification framework from the broader concept of qualification system? And why is this distinction important?
- What is the state of play regarding national qualifications frameworks in Europe? What kind of commitment can be observed at national level and is it possible to identify common objectives, strategies and solutions?
- What are the main lessons – in terms of governance – to be drawn from EQF and NQF developments? These lessons can be addressed from two main angles. First, in relation to the EU ‘open method of coordination’ underpinning the development and implementation of the EQF and second, from a national perspective, as part of the internationalisation and modernisation of education and training systems in the context of life-long learning.

Development of the EQF – and its correspondence with NQFs – cannot be discussed without considering the shift to a learning outcomes approach ⁽²⁾. While use of learning outcomes is seen as the only way to compare and translate national qualifications, this learning outcomes approach is also important for the governance of national education and training systems in the future. A shift towards learning outcomes significantly changes the way objectives are formulated, standards are set and curricula are described and thus influences teaching and learning directly (Adam, 2004).

Qualifications framework; a deepening concept

The idea of a qualifications framework that shows how qualifications relate to one another is not new. For many centuries trade organisations in many countries have exercised control over the right to practise a trade and defined a hierarchy of skills within the trade. These hierarchies were the forerunners of sectoral and national qualifications frameworks. The universities had also set down common patterns of recognising progress within higher academic learning, thus defining another hierarchy of qualifications. What is new about the modern national qualification framework is the interest of governments in

⁽²⁾ In the EQF these are defined as ‘statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process’.

developing overarching frameworks that incorporate qualifications that represent the learning outcomes from school, work, higher education and other adult learning. The new frameworks are thus often linked to lifelong learning strategies and are intended also to capture informal learning, or experience, that the learner wishes to have recognised (Cedefop, Colardyn and Bjørnåvold, 2005).

A qualifications framework is a classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved. This set of criteria may be an implicit characteristic of the qualifications themselves or made explicit in the form of a set of level descriptors. The 2006 EQF recommendation defines the concept in the following way:

'a national qualifications framework is an instrument for the classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved. It aims at the integration and coordination of national qualifications subsystems and the improvement of transparency, access, progression and quality of qualification in relation to the labour market and civil society'.

In the simplest form of classification the qualifications themselves are arranged in a hierarchy of demand or standard, the lowest level of qualifications rises through a series of steps to the highest level ⁽³⁾. The qualifications in these hierarchies are sometimes further classified into qualification types (higher education qualifications, school qualifications, work-based qualifications). The second type of classification uses explicit levels that are each defined by criteria – these are often termed level descriptors or level indicators ⁽⁴⁾. It is this second type that is attracting the interest of many countries since this offers more than the first type in coordinating power across educational sectors and work-based qualifications. However, all qualifications frameworks aim to establish a basis for improving the links between qualifications and the quality, accessibility, and public or labour market recognition of qualifications within a country and internationally.

NQFs have various forms and functions (Coles, 2006) but it is reasonable to conclude that all have four generic aims:

- establishing national standards for learning outcomes (competences);
- promoting through regulation the quality of education and training provision;
- acting as a way of relating qualifications to one another;

⁽³⁾ The Australian qualifications framework serves as an example (www.aqf.edu.au).

⁽⁴⁾ The Irish framework of qualifications serves as an example (www.nqai.ie).

- promoting access to learning, transfer of learning and progression in learning.

NQFs can have policy purposes that go beyond these four aims. Developing an NQF can be used to integrate parts of the qualifications system (for example professional education delivered in further and higher education) or to provoke modernisation of parts of the education and training system, for example to change the regulation of the quality of qualification processes or to change the way public funds are used to support education and training. This additional factor of using a national qualifications framework as a tool for reform is becoming more common and this suggests it should become a fifth aim; however some frameworks are developed through strong consensus of stakeholders and it is more difficult to assign these frameworks the explicit aim of becoming a tool for reform. Additionally, some NQFs are used to allow target setting and planning of public investment in education and training and they support the measurement of performance of the education and training system.

It is possible that, even where no explicit wider reform agenda is acknowledged, there is a power within a simple classification of qualifications to transform aspects of education and qualifications. This arises through the codification of the complex arrangements for qualifications in a country into a relatively simple form. Codification, or modelling, creates a relationship and a language with which stakeholders can readily engage (Cowan et al., 1999). Without the codification of a framework, the hierarchy of qualifications, the knowledge, skills and wider competences they each testify and the horizontal equivalencies between qualifications are often subject to incomplete or tacit knowledge of the qualifications system. The latter reduces confidence in policies aimed at reform and makes innovation difficult.

There is another effect: sometimes modernisation requires multiple actions on different parts of the qualifications system (accreditation, funding, institutional arrangements), these coordinated reforms are challenging. Choosing incremental 'one-at-a-time' approaches is less risky, cheaper and more manageable. It is arguable that the coordinating effects of NQFs, especially in terms of stakeholder engagement and institutional roles and responsibilities, make it more likely that broader, coordinated programmes of reforms can be proposed.

Qualifications frameworks should be seen as a part of a qualifications system (OECD, 2007). The latter is an all-embracing term for all structures and

processes ⁽⁵⁾ that lead to the award of a qualification. Some qualifications systems are so complex and fragmented that they hardly appear to be systematic. Nevertheless, within these systems the public is aware of levels of qualification (such as basic schooling, completion of upper secondary education, apprenticeship, bachelors degree, professional licence, etc.). These implicit levels of qualification come close to resembling a qualifications framework, however they fail to embody some of the power of frameworks simply because the levels are implicit and therefore are subject to differences in interpretation. The relationship between gaining qualification and the requirements for progression from one qualification to another or to a job are often unclear and not reliable. Stakeholder ownership is also not clear and thus reforming different qualification types based on low levels of trust and compatibility is likely to be difficult.

Development of the EQF meta-framework has the potential to formalise some of these implicit levels and tacit appreciations. The EQF sets overarching descriptions of learning outcomes and associates these with levels of qualification. The level descriptors are in fact criteria for aligning national qualification levels (implicit or explicit) to the EQF. The process for carrying out this task requires that each qualification level (including all the different types of qualifications at each level) be matched against the EQF level criteria for alignment. The transformation of these implicit levels requires involvement of and acceptance by all relevant stakeholders. Traditionally the description of these levels would have been focused on duration and location of education and training, on entry requirements to learning or work and on work related licences to practise. Following the EQF, however, the main ingredient to be made explicit will have to be the knowledge, skills and wider competences that this national qualification level testifies to learners and other users of qualifications. Thus it seems likely that linking implicit national qualification levels to the EQF can be a staged process. First, the links can be made by means of the proxies for knowledge, skills and wider competences and then, second and over time, pressure is likely to develop for the actual knowledge skills and competences required at a qualification level to be formally agreed by stakeholders. Thus the implicit levels of national qualification will be transformed into explicit levels that can be the basis for an NQF defined in learning outcomes.

⁽⁵⁾ The *Qualifications systems: bridges to lifelong learning* (OECD, 2007) refers to the substructures of a qualifications system as the means of developing and operationalising national or regional policy on qualifications, institutional arrangements, quality assurance processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society.

A meta-framework such as the EQF has distinct characteristics to NQFs that relate to it and enable relationships to be established between qualifications levels in different countries. The major differences between EQF levels and NQF levels depend on the functions of the frameworks, the method of their development, the influences on the form of the frameworks, the qualification levels they recognise, the quality assurance processes involved and the benchmarks used for establishing levels. Table 1 summarises these differences.

Table 1: Comparing national qualifications levels and levels in the EQF

Differences	National qualifications levels	EQF levels
Main function:	to act as a benchmark for the level, volume and type of learning	to act as a benchmark for the level of any learning recognised in a qualification or defined in an NQF
Developed by:	regional bodies, national agencies and sectoral bodies	Member States acting together
Sensitive to:	local, regional and national priorities (e.g. levels of literacy, labour market needs)	collective priorities across countries (e.g. globalisation of trade)
Recognises learning of individuals by:	assessment/evaluation, validation and certification	[Does not directly recognise learning of individuals]
Currency depends on:	factors within national context	the level of trust between international users
Quality is guaranteed by:	the practices of national bodies and learning institutions	national practices and the robustness of the process linking national and EQF levels
Levels are defined by reference to:	national benchmarks which are embedded in different specific learning contexts, e.g. school education, work or higher education	general progression in learning across all contexts across all countries

If these distinctions are accepted, the form and function of national qualifications levels (or frameworks) will be different to those of a meta-framework such as the EQF (Tuck et al., 2006). Such differences should create a clear space for NQFs to continue to develop distinctively that reflects national social and cultural perspectives. In the EQF proposals and in the emerging meta-framework in southern Africa (SADC, 2005), the intention is to respect and encourage different national perspectives. However, even if the differences are accepted, the existence of each of the meta-framework characteristics in the third column in Table 1 asks questions of each country on the content in the second column. Once again the effect of a classification, in this case the EQF classification, which aims to be neutral, is likely to raise expectations of clearer design features of NQFs. As will be clear in the next section, it is interesting to note that even in the early days of the EQF, many countries are intending to use eight reference levels in their emerging frameworks (for example, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Spain, Lithuania and Slovakia).

National qualifications frameworks in Europe

The number of European countries having implemented national qualifications frameworks is still low. We can observe however an increasing number of European countries taking concrete steps towards implementing NQFs. This process has gained speed significantly during 2005 and 2006 and seems to be linked to the increasing definition of an EQF.

The following section reviews these developments ⁽⁶⁾.

⁽⁶⁾ Reflecting the situation in April 2007 in countries taking part in the Education and training 2010 process as well as in preaccession countries. The country descriptions have been based on the following sources:

- national responses to the EQF consultation, December 2005 to February 2006;
- presentation of national developments to the first meeting of the EQF implementation group in March 2007;
- responses to questions regarding EQF developments submitted by Commission end March 2007 to countries taking part in Education and training 2010 (follow up to meeting 23 March 2007);
- material gathered by ETF regarding development of NQFs in accession countries.

Austria

The aim is to develop a single overarching NQF, based on learning outcomes, which will be linked to the EQF. This framework will open up validation of non-formal and informal learning and will better meet the needs of the labour market than the existing system. Agreement on the need for a NQF was expressed in the national response to the EQF consultation and working groups set up in summer 2006 to prepare a NQF based on in-depth research. In February 2007, a national steering group for developing the Austrian NQF was constituted. All stakeholders will be involved in a bottom-up process of consultation (beginning in autumn 2007) and development which is being coordinated by the General Directorate in the Austrian Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture. The main aims of the Austrian NQF is to support quality, promote access to and permeability of education and training and promote a better balancing of VET and academic qualifications. The Austrian NQF is planned to be ready for 2010.

Belgium (Flanders)

A NQF is seen as a necessary prerequisite for relating Flemish qualifications levels to the EQF. A set of eight draft reference level descriptors was developed during 2005/06 and led to a discussion note published in October 2006. All relevant ministries as well as all official advisory bodies (where social partners are included) in the field of education and training gave an opinion on this document. A formal decision on the establishment of a NQF (through the passing of a Decree) is expected before summer 2008. The development of the NQF has taken more time than the Flemish authorities anticipated. Several unforeseen consequences have been detected, requiring additional work and clarification. Setting up a NQF is expected to improve overall access to education, training and learning, to support the development of quality and to strengthen overall permeability in education and training. There is full agreement that a NQF must be based on learning outcomes – something that is well reflected in the draft reference level descriptors. It is worth noting that the Flemish level descriptors are based on 'knowledge', 'skills', 'context' and 'autonomy-responsibility', thus paying particular attention to the importance of context in describing qualifications levels. A series of pilot projects were finalised in spring 2007 testing the learning outcomes approach and the link to the qualifications framework in a range of sectors (EQF Levels 1 to 5). Similar projects have also been carried out by Bologna promoters for Levels 6 to 8. The general conclusion of these test projects is that the descriptors developed for the Flemish framework are useful for classifying qualifications and only require

minor changes and adaptations. A report on the development of a central qualifications database has been completed and a prototype will be developed by the end of 2007.

Belgium (Wallonia)

A formal decision on setting up a NQF was made in March 2006. In response to the EQF consultation, a NQF is seen as a requirement and precondition for a functioning European framework. A group of experts was set up in autumn 2006 to outline the main features of a future NQF. The result of this work is expected to be presented in 2007 and will form the basis for future developments. As in Flanders, emphasis on learning outcomes is essential to the ongoing work. It is noted that some parts of the education and training system (adult learning, vocational education and training, the new system for validation of non-formal learning) have significant experience in using the learning outcomes approach; other subsectors have less experience. It is likely that an eight-level structure will be chosen for the framework.

Bulgaria

The Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science committed (in 2006) to setting up a NQF which is considered to be of great importance and is expected to be presented to the government for adoption by 2008. A discussion paper on an integrated NQF will be the basis for consultation with stakeholders. The ministry is also working on a complete register of qualifications. Experts are currently working on the relationship between current Bulgarian qualifications levels and the EQF. An important area for further development will be the redefinition and reformulation of education and training standards and curricula based on learning outcomes. The question of how to integrate the framework for higher education (referring to the EHEA) and the EQF and the question of how to develop a single credit system in the framework are being discussed.

Croatia

First steps towards development of an overarching (lifelong learning) Croatian qualifications framework (CROQF) have been taken. During 2006 the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports (MSES) formed a joint working group of experts from VET and HE. The proposal of this group has been discussed (during spring 2007) with all the relevant stakeholders. The framework will have eight levels (with additional four sublevels reflecting the particularities of the Croatian qualifications system). Levels 6, 7 and 8 correspond to the three

'Bologna' cycles. The levels have been described through credit ranges, links to levels in the EQF and types of qualifications gained after completion of studies within a certain level. Elements of key competences are also included in the first four levels. During 2007, a wider working group consisting of experts from all stakeholders will be formed that will define common standards and descriptions for all levels which will serve as a basis for development of detailed descriptions for all qualifications based on measurable learning outcomes and competences. Quality assurance and prior learning recognition, including non-formal and informal learning, will be important considerations. The Croatian framework is expected to be complete by 2009.

Cyprus

Cyprus has, in discussions on the EQF, signalled scepticism towards development of NQFs. Representatives of the country have argued that the principles and structures of a potential NQF have to be the responsibility of each Member State and expressed fear that the EQF recommendation goes too far in standardising one particular NQF solution. It is anticipated that the current qualifications system will eventually be used to develop an NQF. Caution has also been expressed on the use of learning outcomes. The learning outcomes approach promoted by the EQF is considered not in line with the needs of national education and training institutions.

Czech Republic

The Czech Republic started work on a national qualifications framework prior to the launching of the EQF (2003-04). This work formed part of the national reform agenda, partly supported by the EU social funds. An outline of a NQF has been developed and laid down in the 2006 law on recognition of continuing education results. This law came into effect August 2007. The Czech NQF is based on eight levels, including a set of reference level descriptors reflecting the principles promoted by the EQF. The NQF is part of a lifelong learning strategy and it is hoped it will raise qualification levels generally and increase the degree of success of people on the labour market and in so doing improve the response of the educational system to labour market needs. The learning outcomes approach has been firmly embraced and is seen as crucial for reducing barriers between different education and training sectors. It is also hoped it will improve permeability and parity of esteem between vocational education and training and academic education. The main aim of the NQF is thus to promote comparability, transfer and transparency, at national level as well as in a wider European context through the link to the EQF.

The NQF builds on units (complete and partial qualifications) and standards (for qualifications and assessment). The development of the NQF has taken place in close cooperation with all relevant stakeholders, including social partners and education and training providers.

Denmark

Denmark has yet to take a final decision on establishing a NQF. The national framework for higher education (related to the EHEA) is currently being revised and work has been undertaken to develop a qualifications framework that supports stepwise qualifications in VET programmes. In 2007, an inter-ministerial group is considering how to develop a coherent NQF based on the current qualifications system. The goal will be to improve transparency, credit transfer and overall coherence in education and training that will support life-long learning and create a strong basis for implementing EQF in Denmark. The linking of Danish qualifications levels to the EQF will start from 2008 onwards. As an important background for this development, it should be noted that the Danish government's strategy on globalisation *Progress, innovation and cohesion – strategy for Denmark in the global economy* from May 2006, includes goals and measures that targets the needs for increased permeability, allowing for increased transfer and combination of learning outcomes between education and training subsystems, between education and work and also points to the link between the Danish education and training system and the EQF.

Estonia

There is a proposal in Estonia for an eight-level lifelong learning NQF. The legal basis for the education and training system is currently under review incrementally considering one sector at a time. It is intended that in the long term a new qualification system will cover the spectrum of lifelong learning. A set of new, learning outcome-based national curricula for VET, is expected to be in place by 2008. To these will be added a new model of professional standards to be gradually developed from 2008-13. Estonia noted, in the EQF consultation, that the development of a NQF requires substantial resources as it implies development of study programmes based on learning outcomes. Nevertheless, proposals for a NQF have been made and discussions on the appropriate number of levels are taking place. The five years of experience with a competence framework for VET is being used to consider a widening of the use of learning outcomes in general education and higher education.

Finland

Finland started work on a (three cycles) framework for higher education (EHEA) in 2004. A proposal was ready in 2005 and a formal decision is expected during 2007. A parallel development is not foreseen for VET – an overarching NQF covering all qualifications levels is therefore not seen as an option. Finland will therefore relate to the EQF without an overarching framework and has set up two expert groups to consider how best to do this. The main reservation about developing an overarching Finnish NQF is the development would require extensive work that could distract from other necessary developments in education and training. Finland has extensive experience in applying a learning outcomes approach to its education and training system. This applies in particular to VET but increasingly in general and higher education. This is seen as a fundamental precondition for linking Finnish qualifications levels to the EQF without setting up an overarching NQF.

France

National qualifications classifications have been established in France for 40 years. There is a legal basis (since 2002) to bring these various classifications together in a French NQF. The eight-level EQF has been a positive influence on this process of integration. However, the EQF level descriptors for knowledge, skills and competences have created problems for creating a single French qualifications framework. The key element of the French framework is the national repertoire of professional qualifications. These qualifications consist of three main types; those delivered by the Ministry of Education, those delivered by sectors and branches and those delivered by other ministries, chambers of commerce as well as various public or private institutions. The purpose of this repertoire is to increase the transparency of qualifications, both for employers and for individual citizens. For a qualification to be registered, a particular procedure has to be followed, guaranteeing that the relevant quality criteria have been met. A national committee consisting of 16 representatives of the State and 12 representatives of the social partners has been set for this particular purpose. An important aspect of the French approach has been implementation of a system for validating learning gained through experience (non-formally and informally acquired learning outcomes). This system provides an important bridge between different segments of the education, training and learning system and underlines that qualifications can be achieved by different routes and pathways, which include formal routes as well as non-formal and informal ones. The French approach can thus be seen as an illustration of the practical implementation of a learning outcomes approach.

Germany

Germany has declared its intention to create a NQF covering all areas and levels of education and training. Studies and technical preparations were initiated autumn 2006 and a first outline of a German NQF is expected during 2007. A pilot project has been set up to formulate competence-based vocational training regulations in a few selected occupations. Other projects test the recognition of learning outcomes of VET for access to higher education. German debate on the EQF has focused explicitly on its possible impact on the national education and training system and to what extent and in which form it would support national reforms. Some stakeholders see the EQF, and notably a German NQF, as an opportunity to reduce barriers between subsystems of education and training and promote a more flexible form of recognition (for example, non-formal and informal learning). The shift to learning outcomes (in the German context formulated as 'competence') is supported by major stakeholders (Federal Ministry, employers organisations). Other stakeholders (some trade unions) emphasise the need to protect the German vocational training model (*Berufsmodell*) and warns against a modularised model watering down the existing dual model combining school and work practice. A NQF for the higher education sector (EHEA) was implemented in May 2005.

Greece

Greek reactions to the EQF have been positive. However, it has reserved its national position regarding developing a NQF. Initial discussions on a NQF were started in September 2006. These discussions are linked to the ESSEE-KA Law (on the relationship education-employment) and cover several aspects, for example development of national VET standards and validation of non-formal and informal learning. No decision has been taken on development of a NQF so far. In general, the learning outcomes perspective has not been embraced in Greece (an exception is two competence-based VET profiles developed under a new common ministerial decision that defines EKEPIS – Ministry of Employment as the responsible authority for developing profiles). A certain reluctance can be detected in higher education, expressed in scepticism/opposition to credit transfer and diploma supplements.

Hungary

There is a clear commitment to develop a NQF in Hungary. As stated in the response to the EQF consultation, '[...] the lack of such a framework has become one of the major factors impeding lifelong learning'. The NQF work

is part of the national development plan 2007-13. An NQF is seen as necessary for strengthening political commitment and for increasing the efficiency of policy coordination at national level. Stakeholders see the need for a framework that promotes lifelong learning and a policy coordination tool that simplifies communication between education and training sectors and the labour market. Hungary has begun gathering information on the experiences of other countries with NQFs. The learning outcomes based approach is seen as a prerequisite for success. Reforms have already been carried out in segments of the education and training system, in particular in VET and adult education. Some reforms have also been carried out in general secondary education and higher education.

Iceland

Iceland has committed itself to developing a national qualifications framework for higher education (EHEA) but has yet to address the question of an overarching NQF. Iceland has made substantial progress on using learning outcomes in describing curricula. This applies in particular to VET and adult education but is increasingly influencing general and higher education. There is an ongoing restructuring of the upper secondary education system in Iceland, which aims to demonstrate the attractiveness of VET and bridge the gap between VET and academic studies at this level. It is also an Icelandic goal to increase participation in formal education and establish a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning. Establishing an NQF is being considered, but as yet no final proposals have been made.

Ireland

Ireland set up a national qualifications framework in 2003. The 10 levels of the Irish national framework capture all learning, from the initial stages to the most advanced; qualifications achieved in schools, further education and training and higher education and training are all included. Each level of the framework is based on nationally agreed standards of knowledge, skills and competence that are expressed as learning outcomes. In addition, each qualification included in the framework is quality assured, as is every provider delivering programmes that lead to qualifications. The current stage of development is described as one of deepening implementation where more consistent approaches to learning outcomes, credit transfer and recognition of non-formal learning are being pursued. Work on linking the Irish framework to the EQF will start in the near future.

Italy

An NQF is a widely shared priority and initial work has started. In September 2006 the Ministry of Labour presented a 'national table' that aimed to begin the process of defining and implementing a NQF. Stakeholders in such a framework would be, in addition to the Labour Ministry, the Ministry of Education, universities, regions and social partners. The aim will be to integrate the different titles, qualifications and diplomas delivered by these stakeholders (and employment services) into one framework. This framework may eventually lead to a definition of national criteria and methodologies improving the transparency and visibility of knowledge, skills and competences, irrespective of where they were acquired. Learning outcomes play an important role in this development, in particular VET and higher technical education have adopted this approach and other segments of the system are also working in this direction.

Latvia

Latvia will develop a NQF by building on the existing five-level structure in VET and the three-level structure for higher education. Work on a national framework for higher education – in the context of EHEA – has started and is covered by a draft law on higher education. The term learning outcomes is not widely used in Latvia. We can however observe growing emphasis on learning outcomes (and competences) in recent years, partly in developing a framework for higher education, partly in developing occupational standards (based on Ministerial Regulation February 2007). The link between Latvian qualifications levels and the EQF will be the responsibility of a tripartite committee working on a new law on vocational education and training.

Lithuania

Lithuania is currently developing an overarching eight-level national qualifications framework, based on competences/learning outcomes. The characteristics of the level descriptors will follow the pattern of the EQF. This framework of qualifications is the integral part of the national system of qualifications being designed at the moment. The qualifications system consists of the qualifications framework and the processes of designing, providing, evaluating and recognising qualifications. The project was started in 2006 and the plan is to finalise work by 2009 (a new law on qualifications will be issued to provide a basis for the framework and the NQF will also be covered by the new law on vocational education and training). The expert group responsible for developing the NQF included all relevant national stakeholders; edu-

cation and training providers (VET and HE), social partner organisations and representatives of research. An even broader set of stakeholders will comment on the expert group's proposal, involving universities, chambers, industry and trades, non-governmental organisations, etc. Implementation of the NQF, including establishing a link to the EQF, will involve the setting up of a national register of qualifications and a representative national coordination body. The university sector is rather reluctant towards the competence-based approach of the NQF and employers are worried that transparency of qualification levels may lead to increased migration of skilled people from Lithuania. There is also the challenge of implementation and development of the system of assessment and certification of informally and non-formally acquired competences and qualifications, as well as inclusion of sector qualifications.

Luxembourg

A working group, coordinated by the Ministry of Education, was set up in 2006 to prepare a NQF proposal to be submitted to relevant stakeholders during 2007. As Luxembourg is preparing a reform of the VET system focused on the learning outcomes approach, the group's work has been delayed. Discussion on the law proposal will bring some clarification to the link between the VET system and the labour market as well as learning outcomes. This will influence the results of the proposal for the NQF.

Malta

Basic elements of a NQF have been put in place by establishing a National Qualifications Council (legal notice 1 October 2005) and a proposal for preparing an eight-level framework. This proposal has been generally accepted by the main stakeholders (employers, trade unions, major public and private education and training providers) in a broad consultation process ending in April 2007. The learning outcomes approach is seen as fundamental to these developments. Many existing VET courses are already designed based on this approach and will be extended to other qualifications. In May 2007 four working documents on Malta's NQF were published. They will focus on the conceptual framework of Malta's NQF; a reform strategy for a VET system in a NQF; a quality assurance policy for a VET system and level descriptors for key competences at Levels 1, 2 and 3 of the NQF. Malta's NQF encompasses all levels of formal, informal and non-formal education and training.

The Netherlands

In response to EQF consultation, the Netherlands will strengthen coordination between the different education and training subsystems and pursue a policy increasingly referring to learning outcomes. A national steering committee has been set up to consider a national qualifications framework and a proposal is expected within one year. Also the Dutch Education Committee, where all relevant stakeholders are represented, has produced a report on the impact of the EQF on the Dutch qualifications system and raised the question of a NQF. Focus on learning outcomes and validating non-formal and informal learning is strong in the Netherlands, in particular in VET and adult education and training, and may prove important for developing a NQF. On linking Dutch qualifications levels to the EQF, work will not start until formal adoption of the EQF has taken place.

Norway

In response to EQF consultation, Norway did not commit itself to developing a NQF. Emphasis was on developing and implementing a framework for higher education (related to the EHEA framework). It was however noted that the higher education framework would have to be compatible with a potential future, overarching framework. This position was further developed during 2006 with the setting up (June 2006) of a working group consisting of representatives of some main learning arenas (VET, HE, adult learning). This group has produced (October 2006) a preliminary report on a possible overarching NQF. The working group suggested developing a framework for part of the VET system and use experiences from this and other pilots before developing a framework for lifelong learning. The learning outcomes approach is fundamental to this work, and is extensively used in several segments of the education and training system, in particular in VET but also increasingly in higher education.

Poland

Poland is ready to develop an NQF but acknowledges that this would be a substantial development as such a framework would have to be built from scratch. Work will be linked to the operational programme human capital 2007-13, which started in 2006. In this programme a set of projects related to a NQF and the EQF will be carried out. The aim is to gather information and data on all qualifications (learning outcomes) in education, training, labour market and other sectors. The next step will be to arrange this information in a NQF. It is envisaged that this new framework will make it possible to introduce a mechanism for validating non-formal and informal learning.

Portugal

The Portuguese response to the EQF acknowledges the necessity of establishing a NQF. A decision on setting up a NQF was taken in 2006, the aim being to integrate and coordinate national qualifications subsystems and improve access, progression and quality of qualifications in relation to both the labour market and society in general. An agreement was signed between the government and the social partners in March 2007 agreeing on the following key elements to form part of the NQF: a national agency for qualifications under the responsibility of the Ministries of Education and Employment, a national catalogue of qualifications based on learning outcomes and, finally, further development of a system for recognition of non-formal and informal learning (taking forward the existing RVCC system). The validation system will refer to the qualifications standards in the national catalogue. The linking of Portuguese qualifications levels to the EQF is seen as fundamental and the overall development of a NQF is expected to take from three to five years.

Romania

Development of an overarching Romanian NQF has yet to be decided. If this happens, it will have to build on the national qualifications framework for VET recently agreed between government and the social partners. This framework introduces a five-level structure and gives priority to a learning outcomes approach which has been in development since 1995. A series of draft policy documents have already been elaborated, for example related to the nature and scope of standards (occupational standards and training standards). A system for validating non-formal learning has been developed in relation to the VET framework. The emerging three-level qualifications framework for higher education (EHEA related) will also have to be considered by an overarching NQF.

Slovakia

Positive steps have been taken towards developing a NQF. This framework will be based on eight levels and refer to learning outcomes. Slovakia estimates a time schedule of three to four years to develop this. The process is led by the Ministry of Education but involves other relevant stakeholders.

Slovenia

There is a positive attitude towards developing a NQF. In the EQF consultation response, it states 'the Slovene qualifications framework will have to clarify criteria for transferring between educational programmes, institutions

and systems'. It is agreed that the learning outcomes approach is important for a future NQF. Redefining curricula according to a learning outcomes approach has been in progress since 2003, but work is facing some scepticism from general education. A first concrete step towards a NQF was taken in 2006 by adopting a national classification (repertoire) of qualifications. This classification is an important first step towards recognition of non-formal and informal learning. An eight-level NQF structure is proposed covering the main types of qualifications.

Spain

Spain has started on the road towards an overarching NQF. Currently, the national qualifications and vocational training system and the national catalogue of occupational qualifications provide instruments which can be used to create the basis of an NQF for VET. A qualifications framework for higher education is currently being developed (three levels, EHEA related) and will, as soon as it is completed, be linked to the remaining qualifications categories and levels, for example in VET where a five-level structure exists. This would result in an eight-level structure covering all Spanish qualifications. The legal basis for these developments has been established through the 2002 Law on Qualifications and Vocational Training and the 2006 Law on Education, both underlining the importance of recognising learning outcomes irrespective of how, when or where they were acquired. The standards that characterise the five VET levels have, in line with this, already been written in terms of learning outcomes and are defined considering professional competences demanded by employment sectors using criteria such as knowledge, initiative, autonomy, responsibility and complexity.

Sweden

No overarching NQF has been set up in Sweden and a political decision on linking qualifications levels to the EQF and a possible NQF is still pending. A working group has been set up in the Ministry of Education and Research to discuss and analyse different options and the objective of this group is to start a more in-depth analysis before the summer of 2007. This depends on political clarification and therefore no designs have been developed so far, although an international project is underway to explore how qualifications levels might be linked to the EQF without a formal NQF structure. A NQF for higher education is being established (EHEA related).

Turkey

The main elements of a NQF are in place in Turkey and further developments will involve drawing the various elements together. Estimated time for development of the NQF is three to five years. Learning outcomes is seen as an essential part of development of a NQF, and much work has already been done in VET and HE. A national project is supporting development of a NQF, for example by introducing assessment and certification at all levels based on national standards. The NQF will consist of eight qualifications levels defined through learning outcomes and will cover general, vocational and higher education and training. A new Law on an Occupational Qualifications Institution was adopted on 21 September 2006 and will simplify preparation of a NQF.

United Kingdom

There are four national frameworks in the UK: (a) the national qualifications framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland (NQF), (b) the Scottish credit and qualifications framework (SCQF), (c) the credit and qualifications framework for Wales (CQFW) and (d) the framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The NQF for England, Wales and Northern Ireland has been established since 2000 and covers all qualifications except those in higher education (the latter are accommodated in the FHEQ). The NQF has eight levels plus a lower level, entry level, aimed at easing access to the qualifications system. Since 2003, Wales has been developing a separate qualifications framework that has the capacity to accommodate credit accumulation and transfer and recognise all learning outcomes. Recently England, Wales and Northern Ireland have begun testing an eight-level (plus entry level) qualifications and credit framework designed to be fully operational in 2010. The Scottish credit and qualifications framework has existed for 20 years in various forms and has recently become a public company. It is an overarching framework made up of 12 levels. All the UK frameworks are based on learning outcomes.

NQF developments in the wider Europe; preaccession (7) countries following European developments

All preaccession countries have started to work on NQFs; action plans to establish NQFs exist in most countries, however these do not reveal a pattern for what kind of NQF is planned in these countries. Development of the labour market is a key driver that leads to pressure to develop qualifications frameworks for VET and to recognise the skills of adults without formal qualifications. Together with Bologna developments (all these countries engage with the Bologna process) this has often led to development of two qualifications frameworks (for VET and HE) in each country.

Validating non-formal and informal learning is a long-term goal for most of these countries, and most do not have alternative pathways to the same qualifications level. Therefore recognising lifelong learning through the qualifications system remains some way off.

VET reforms in most countries have seen experimentation with outcome-based approaches and, with the influence of the EQF, it is possible to see focus on learning outcomes in developing NQFs. The EQF and the Bologna process are important drivers of change in all countries, and NQFs are being developed to align qualifications systems to the EQF.

Summarising current trends

The evidence presented above documents that the EQF and NQF concepts influence the policy formulation processes in many countries. How this eventually will influence and change individual citizens' education, training and learning is still, in most cases, too early to assess. It may be argued, however, that development and implementation of NQFs in Ireland, France and the UK has increased transparency and simplified access, transfer and progression.

The review of progress towards NQFs illustrates that relatively few countries – Ireland, France, Malta and the UK (England, Scotland and Wales) – have actually adopted and/or implemented NQFs. All these frameworks, apart from Malta, were developed prior to launching the EQF and are therefore initiatives responding primarily to national policy agendas. The remaining countries can be divided into three main groups (8):

(7) Preaccession countries are: Croatia, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey (candidate countries), and Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia (precandidate countries).

(8) This summary is based on the situation in April 2007.

- the first group (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Turkey) are those countries having committed themselves, politically and/or legally, to developing an overarching NQF explicitly linking into the EQF;
- the second group (Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania and Sweden) are those countries where preparation for a NQF is under way but where a formal commitment has yet to be made. This second group covers countries at different stages of development, from those at an early reflection stage to those close to final commitment and implementation;
- the third group (Cyprus, Finland, Greece and Iceland) are countries who are either sceptical to developing an overarching NQF or where no preparations have been made so far.

The learning outcomes approach seems, irrespective of the position towards an overarching NQF, to be widely accepted. Several countries giving low priority to developing a NQF may thus be well prepared to relate their qualifications to the EQF – Finland is a good example. This focus on learning outcomes, sometimes expressed as a competence-based approach, is closely linked to the need to increase transparency and accountability of qualifications. These are critical conditions for transferring and combining learning outcomes from different settings and may be seen as necessary for achieving more, better and more equitably distributed lifelong learning. It is also worth noting that while the learning outcomes approach is firmly embedded in vocational education and training, this is less so in general and higher education. Further, it is worth noting that a significant number of countries want to develop their NQFs according to an eight-level structure. This may, in some cases, be seen as an effort to bring national frameworks as close up to the EQF structure as possible.

Given the significant NQF developments presented above, it is likely that launching the EQF has contributed significantly to these developments.

Push and pull – main lessons in terms of governance

Many European policy initiatives in education and training – following the 2000 Lisbon Declaration ⁽⁹⁾ – have been criticised for having limited impact on national policies and practices. The evidence above seems to show the EQF is different and has created a strong pull effect for formulating national frameworks. But as already indicated, development of NQFs cannot exclusively be explained by emergence of the EQF. There is a strong push from within countries and framework development is closely linked to national reform agendas. Where NQFs already exist it is possible to identify the issues that have led to their creation. This combination of European pull and national push provides us with an interesting picture of how contemporary education and training systems are governed.

Pursuing a European agenda; the open method of coordination

Development of the EQF and corresponding NQFs should be seen in relation to the changes in political climate triggered by the 2000 Lisbon declaration. This declaration represents a watershed in European education and training policies. Before 2000 the situation can be described as one of reluctance towards European cooperation. Member States emphasised, with reference to the EU treaty ⁽¹⁰⁾, the need to resist efforts to ‘harmonise and standardise’ education and training. The main question was thus whether policies should be coordinated – not how they could be coordinated. Cooperation through programmes such as Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci were accepted, initiatives going beyond this treated with scepticism. This perspective changed significantly following Lisbon. A range of initiatives have addressed how to define and pursue a common European education and training strategy – the most important being the 2001 communication on lifelong learning, the 2001 objectives process, the 2002 Copenhagen process and, eventually from 2004, Education and training 2010. Without this shift in attitude and these initiatives, current EQF/NQF developments would be unlikely.

Several authors have looked into the emergence of this shift (Corbett, 2005; Laffan and Shaw, 2005). Gornitzka (2006) has described these developments as creation of ‘a novel political space’ reflecting the limitations of a strictly national policy approach. The European level, she states, has surfaced as a separate governance level introducing an increasingly important European dimen-

⁽⁹⁾ “[...] develop the most competitive, knowledge-based society in the world”.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Articles 149 and 150.

sion. This applies in particular to vocational education and training (the Copenhagen process) and higher education (the Bologna process). A significant feature of European developments is use of the open method of coordination (OMC). Originally developed in the field of employment, this method is used in areas where 'hard law' is excluded and where voluntary policy cooperation has to be pursued. Development of the EQF, which is a voluntary initiative, is based on this open method of coordination. An EQF cannot be implemented based on top-down legal measures but has to build on common trust and recognition of overall usefulness and functionality. OMC is normally described according to four main features (Gornitzka, *ibid.*). It consists of:

- identifying and defining common goals;
- establishing indicators and/or benchmarks for assessing progress towards goals;
- translating common objectives into national and regional policies considering the particular conditions at these levels;
- periodic monitoring.

Developing the EQF is following this scheme. The ongoing political process is focused on the need to identify and define common goals and functions. The positive feedback from the 2005 consultation process provided a basis for further development as countries gave clear signals on the main objectives to be pursued. One objective was developing NQFs (or referencing qualification levels to EQF descriptors); another was increasing the focus on learning outcomes. Both objectives provide benchmarks for measuring progress. The previous section of this paper is a stocktake of progress towards these objectives. The proposal to establish national coordination centres (see the EQF recommendation) to oversee referencing of national qualifications systems to the EQF is a means of monitoring developments in transparency and coordination of European qualifications systems.

Developing NQFs responds to the need to translate these objectives into national and regional policies, considering the country context. This is generally the most critical point in European policy developments and where the threshold of success or failure is most obvious. The following points may explain why the EQF seems to be successful in moving from European level policy formulation to national level implementation.

Structuring the focus and agenda setting

Academic literature on OMC points to structuring focus and agenda setting as a potentially important mechanism for coordination. This may be seen as part of a process leading to the convergence of ideas (Dehousse, 2002; Radaellei, 2004). Several factors may influence this structuring of focus; main examples are regular reporting, monitoring, defining tasks (for example, launching the EQF consultation) and setting deadlines (for example, the end of 2005 as for the EQF).

Launching the EQF consultation in 2005 had a direct impact on national education and training policy agendas. Most countries identified the EQF as a key policy initiative and organised systematic national consultation processes. Since the EQF was defined as a meta-framework, covering all levels and segments of education and training, a wide range of stakeholders were involved. The challenge 'to speak with one voice' required dialogue between stakeholders not normally speaking to one another. In many countries (for example Austria), this was summarised as a positive effect of consultation that contributed to greater coordination. The deadline set for consultation was contested by some Member States that claimed there would be no time for proper involvement of stakeholders. Based on experiences and responses it may be argued that the limited available time (six months) successfully focused attention and left no time for discussions to drift and become weak and inconclusive.

A potential problem for the EQF (as well as for other initiatives) is how to sustain the political momentum over time. The risk is that attention – and the ability to influence national agendas – will be lost as soon as the highly visible, formal process is finished.

Peer pressure

The open method of coordination has been described as potentially representing a podium where badges of honour and shame are awarded (Gornitzka, op.cit.). The normative pressure stemming from a desire to look good or fear of being embarrassed may be seen as a potential coordination mechanism (Gornitzka, op.cit.). Normally this naming and shaming function has been linked to developing and agreeing quantitative indicators. This is obviously not the case for EQF where the performance of countries must be assessed according to more complex and ambiguous references.

However, presentation of the results from the EQF consultation process (February 2006) triggered a certain amount of peer pressure. Publishing and comparing responses made it clear that while countries are moving at different speeds, most countries are in favour of setting up NQFs. Somewhat

taken by surprise, several countries adjusted their original messages to become more positive and in some cases decided to change direction and speed at national level (for example Norway). Attention was also given to challenging the extent of progress in NQF development claimed by some countries.

Coordination of the framework will take place through a European advisory body. This body will consist of national stakeholders from national coordination centres functioning as a group of peers. The future success of the EQF will heavily depend on the ability of this group, supported by the Commission, to exert peer pressure to maintain the quality of link between national qualifications systems. While this is not an explicit and official objective, insistence on transparency and publishing results as core principles for coordination points in this direction.

Common learning

Another core aspect of the OMC is common learning or peer learning. The process makes it possible for national level stakeholders to be informed about developments in other countries. It draws on discourse of policy learning that is a strong practical concept for looking outwards while retaining a premium value on the national context (ETF, 2004). Potentially the OMC promises to establish 'institutionalised learning capabilities' (Olsen and Peters, 1996, p. 13-14). In principle there is a strong conviction in the OMC that despite different traditions and lack of legal means, Member States do learn from one another and improve their policies for reaching common goals (Gornitzka, op.cit.). This perspective is firmly integrated in Education and training 2010 (European Commission, 2006a) and further developed through launching peer learning activities since 2005.

Developing NQFs – and adopting a learning outcomes-based approach – can be seen as an example of extensive common learning in and beyond Europe. OECD work on this topic has played an important role (OECD, 2007), first by organising systematic comparative research, but also by bringing together regularly key persons from different countries. In some cases we can observe that development of NQFs (for example the Czech Republic) is directly influenced by OECD work. The research initiated by Cedefop in 2003 (Cedefop, Coles and Oates, 2004) on reference level descriptors ⁽¹⁾ has provided a strong basis for comparison of national approaches in this field. This compilation of qualitative data, by the OECD, Cedefop and others, has established a sound basis for common learning and has proactively supported

⁽¹⁾ Undertaken in relation to the technical working group established by the European Commission on a credit transfer system for VET (ECVET).

both European and international policy developments. In Cologne in 2004 and in Moscow in 2006, conferences were organised on qualifications frameworks by G7 and G8 summits.

Limitations of the OMC

The EQF case demonstrates clearly that a novel European space has been established in education and training. The ability to set the political agenda, the impact of peer pressure and common learning are real factors that go some way to explaining the rapid developments in recent years.

The discussion also illustrates some of the weaknesses and limitations of the approach. Lack of legal or economic sanctions/rewards makes it challenging to maintain the political momentum over time. Exchange of expertise and joint research will be needed to influence national agendas, which is necessary to ensure continuity and cohesion at European level.

Pursuing a national reform agenda

While the number of countries proposing a NQF suggests the 'pull' of the EQF for formulating NQFs is a strong one, the pace of development suggests there is also a strong 'push' from within countries. NQF development is likely to support a range of national reform programmes. Where NQFs already exist, it is possible to identify the issues that have led to their development. Most common is a modernisation agenda, especially for VET but also for general qualifications often perceived not to meet the needs of users. High on the reform agenda is institutional reform prompted by inflexibility of the education and training system to produce relevant programmes of learning. Links between VET and general qualifications are not as strong as some countries would like and low public esteem for VET qualifications is also a problem. Another issue is the detachment of social partners, especially employers, from the qualifications system, particularly in skills needs analysis. *The role of qualifications systems in promoting lifelong learning* (OECD, 2006) investigated the pressures on national policy-makers to develop qualifications systems. While the kind of international pressure (or pull) was one of these, others were identified, notably demographic pressures associated with low population growth and immigration flows; social and cultural pressures are increasing to broaden current provision of education to include such aspects as values, behaviour and citizenship. There is pressure to develop more flexible vocational education and training systems for people in disadvantaged situations as a means of improving social inclusion through education and, subsequently, work. Pressure from technological change brings with it a need for improved training and

retraining in using new technologies. Qualifications systems must allow for recognition of new knowledge, skills and wider competences. These pressures stemmed from the call for qualifications systems to be more demand-led and therefore user-oriented in structure, presentation, management and functioning. In response to these pressures countries wanted the qualifications system to:

- increase flexibility and responsiveness;
- motivate young people to learn;
- link education and work;
- promote open access to qualifications;
- diversify assessment processes;
- make qualifications progressive;
- make the qualifications system transparent;
- review funding and increase efficiency;
- improve system management.

It is clear there is an agenda for change that is national in nature and responds to different pressures than those arising from the OMC and EQF. NQFs can be used as part of the reform strategy to address pressures to modernise education and training provision as well as qualifications systems, in a review of NQFs around the world (Coles, 2006) a series of wider reforms are linked to policies for NQF development.

Introducing NQFs based on learning outcomes alters the point of equilibrium of governance in education and training systems. Additionally we propose there are general shifts of position of the key actors where consumers of qualifications, mainly individuals and businesses, are likely to be empowered at the cost of providers. It is clear that learning programmes and qualifications based on inputs, such as teaching programmes and course duration, are impenetrable by end users. They are asked to trust the system and feel confident they will have their needs met. Transforming a teachers/institutional intention into a measurable aspect of learning brings great clarity. This process of transformation of teaching specifications to learning outcomes is a process of codification or modelling and allows reexamination of programmes and a profoundly revised pedagogy and evaluation process. Stakeholders are able to intervene and discuss purposes, content and methods and there is the opportunity for peer learning and cross fertilisation of ideas about best practices. Some inputs will arise from learners and other users of qualification where direct intervention can occur though seeking to recognise existing competences. Thus the 'secret garden' of learning programmes is exposed to external scrutiny.

Just as the learning targets of learners are clarified through use of learning outcomes, so is expression of need from businesses and other employers. Systematic definition of occupational standards has been common practice in many countries for many years and continues to grow into more countries and new sectors. These occupational standards are invariably written as learning outcomes although it is possible to combine learning outcomes with definitions of learning programmes. It is likely that employers favour the transparency associated with learning outcomes and are able to use them in on-the-job training and recruitment.

With learners, teachers and employers involved in identifying and scrutinising learning outcomes, there is an opportunity for greater links between different sectors and pressure to develop better coordination and eliminate unnecessary repetition. It is also likely that social partnership can be strengthened.

Conclusions

NQFs are established in more and more countries. They are increasingly seen as an instrument for reform and change. Translating implicit qualifications levels into formal and explicit classifications based on learning outcomes allows qualifications frameworks to offer a coordinating and planning power across education and training sectors and the labour market. The EQF has become a catalyst offering stakeholders at national level a starting point and a benchmark for codifying (and thus making more explicit and accountable) qualifications levels and areas.

Many European countries are using the EQF already even though its formal adoption will probably not take place until the end of 2007. There are several lessons to be drawn from this:

- we can observe an internationalisation of education and training policies. The idea that education and training policies can be seen as something belonging exclusively to the national domain seems to be in conflict with current realities;
- developing national qualifications frameworks – interaction between European and national policies – illustrates a multilayer policy development involving diverse stakeholders from various levels, including national and European business interests;
- European-level stakeholders are able to set the agenda and structure the focus of education and training policies. However agenda setting brings

with it the need to stabilise and make European policies more sustainable. Shifts in political focus, where stakeholders move from issue to issue, threatens long-term implementation of initiatives. Therefore a major challenge, where 'hard' legal and economic sanctions and incentives are not available, is to assure continuity and permanence. This will be crucial for future implementation of the EQF.

Independently of the EQF, there has been a policy intention to use learning outcomes for employment needs analysis, to define learning programmes and to validate learning (formal and informal). Transforming teaching specifications into learning outcomes is a process of codification or modelling and allows reexamination of programmes and a profoundly revised pedagogy and evaluation process. Employment interests favour the clarity of learning outcomes and scope is provided for increased engagement of stakeholders.

The EQF, NQFs and learning outcomes are creating a shift in governance in education and training provision at all levels. In general terms, it empowers learners and other users of the systems and favours demand-led reforms.

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