



QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN EUROPE 2017 DEVELOPMENTS

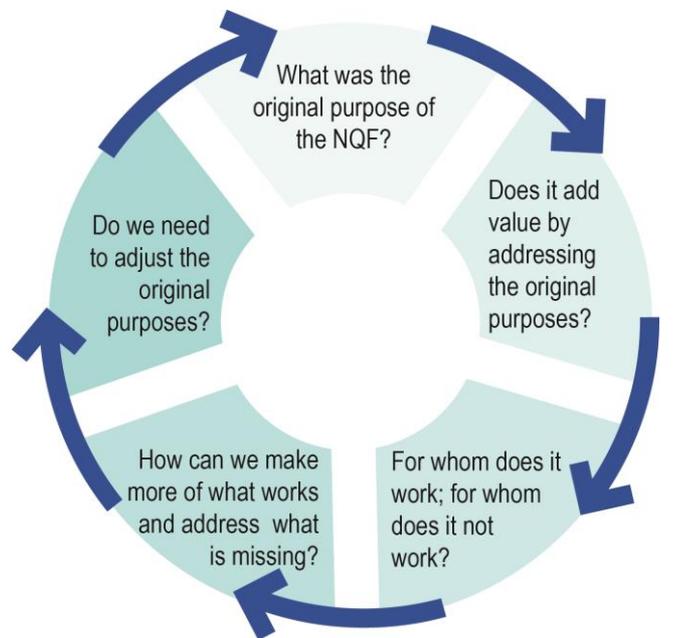
‘When you change the way you look at things,
the things you look at change’ (Max Planck)

As countries across Europe are pushing ahead with their national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) ⁽¹⁾, the question of the frameworks’ added value and contribution to policies and practices is taking centre stage. While every NQF is unique, being organically woven into the fabric of a country’s education and training system, the frameworks share many features. They are based on learning outcomes, support consistency of qualifications, and bring together stakeholders from across the board.

Since its inception in 2008, the European qualifications framework (EQF) has been the common reference tool bringing European countries’ NQFs together. The recently revised EQF Council recommendation ⁽²⁾ encourages the trend towards comprehensive frameworks which include qualifications of all types and levels, awarded by different bodies and subsystems. It also addresses the question of their impact, stressing the need to make their contribution to lifelong learning, employability, mobility and social integration more visible to end-users.

Thanks to the dynamic progress of NQF development, several national frameworks now provide comprehensive ‘maps’ of national qualifications and the relationships between them. This increased transparency across systems and borders helps promote mainstreaming and comparability of

qualifications at European level. The time has come to assess the frameworks’ impact from a European perspective and to look at their potential as facilitators of change.



National qualifications frameworks:
a never-ending story

How do we systematically gather evidence to inform the continuous development of NQFs?

NQF development: status

A total of 39 European countries are currently developing and implementing 43 NQFs ⁽³⁾, which have reached different stages. Of these, 35 countries have formally adopted their NQFs (most recently

⁽¹⁾ Countries participating in the implementation of the European qualifications framework (EQF) comprise the 28 EU Member States, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey.

⁽²⁾ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/search.html?qid=1466080531500&PROC_NUM=0180&DB_INTER_CODE_TYPE=NLE&type=advanced&PROC_ANN=2016&lang=en

⁽³⁾ Some countries, such as Belgium with its communities and the UK with its nations, have more than one NQF.

Austria, Finland, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland and Slovenia). By the end of 2017, 34 countries had referenced their NQFs to the EQF ⁽⁴⁾; the remaining countries are expected to follow in the near future. Further, 29 countries have linked their NQFs to the framework for qualifications in the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) ⁽⁵⁾.

It is expected that countries will regularly update their frameworks to take into account system changes and new qualifications. Estonia updated its NQF in 2015 and Malta presented four updates of its NQF between 2009 and 2015. The revised EQF Council recommendation confirms this ongoing nature of the EQF process and the need for continuous updates.

A total of 35 countries are working towards comprehensive frameworks covering all types and levels of qualifications awarded through formal education and training; in some cases ⁽⁶⁾, qualifications awarded outside formal education and training are also included. While the comprehensive frameworks in Europe are primarily being designed as descriptive tools (making national qualifications systems more transparent) rather than normative ones (regulating design and award of qualifications), their potential to trigger reform is emerging.

Cedefop considers 21 NQFs to have reached operational status ⁽⁷⁾. These have become an integrated part of national education and training systems and are fully based on learning outcomes. By involving a broad range of education, training and labour market stakeholders, the frameworks have provided a platform for dialogue and coordination

across traditional institutional and sectoral borders in many countries.

Are qualification frameworks making a difference?

Several countries have evaluated their frameworks in recent years. The results of these assessments suggest that there are three factors determining framework impact ⁽⁸⁾:

- the institutional robustness of a framework is the benchmark for measuring its sustainability: the stronger its political mandate and its integration into mainstream policy processes, the greater its potential as a policy steering and reform tool;
- to be of value to citizens, frameworks need to be visible to them. Many European countries now indicate NQF and EQF levels in qualifications databases and/or on the certificates and diplomas they award ⁽⁹⁾. This is expected to help citizens understand the value of their diploma or certificate across borders and education subsystems, and make it easier for them to pursue working and learning careers across systems and borders;
- comprehensive qualifications frameworks need to be coordinated and backed by a broad group of stakeholders both from education and training and the labour market. This is essential to framework quality and acceptance, contributes to their transparency and coherence, and improves the relevance of qualifications.

Promoting a holistic approach to qualifications

With a comprehensive approach to mapping qualifications (across education and training subsystems) and a common language for describing them (the language of learning outcomes), national frameworks have increased the transparency and consistency of qualifications, shed light on the relationship between them, and aided comparison across systems and countries. Their level descriptors are increasingly used not only for describing but also for reviewing existing and designing new

⁽⁴⁾ Austria, Belgium (fl and fr), Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the UK.

⁽⁵⁾ 29 countries participating in the EQF implementation have also linked their comprehensive framework to the QF-EHEA; 20 of these have done so as part of their EQF referencing process (AT, BG, HR, EE, FI, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, HU, IS, LT, LI, LU, MT, ME, NO, PO, PT, SI, TK).

⁽⁶⁾ Belgium (fl), Estonia, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Sweden and the UK.

⁽⁷⁾ Austria, Belgium (fl), the Czech Republic (partial framework for vocational qualifications – NSK), Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK.

⁽⁸⁾ Cedefop has regularly monitored NQF development since 2009: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/national-qualifications-framework-nqf>

⁽⁹⁾ 23 countries include them in certificates/diplomas (AT, BE (fl), CH, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, FR, HU, IE, IS, IT, LT, LU, LV, ME, MT, NL, NO, PT, SI) and 17 in their national qualifications databases (AT, BE (fl), CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, FR, LT, LV, MT, NL, PT, SI, SK, UK).

qualifications, assessment standards and curricula. In Portugal and Slovakia, for example, EQF descriptors are being used to review the content and outcomes of qualifications. In Estonia, Malta and the UK, the frameworks have helped identify gaps in VET provision and triggered the development and description of new qualifications. Comprehensive and integrated qualifications registers increasingly underpin the NQFs and make information on qualifications accessible to students, employers and guidance staff ⁽¹⁰⁾.

Integrating non-formal (private sector and international) qualifications

There is a huge adult learning sector in Europe, both private and public, with qualifications often awarded outside formal national qualifications systems. In recent years, European countries have started opening up their frameworks to non-formal and private sector qualifications. The objective is for frameworks to provide a more complete overview of existing certificates and diplomas, making possible for better selection and combination of initial and continuing education and training. The Netherlands, for example, have developed quality criteria and procedures and included several such qualifications in their NQF; so have France, Ireland and the UK.

Validating non-formal and informal learning

As learning outcomes increase the transparency of national systems and clarify the relationships between qualifications, frameworks are increasingly aiding validation of learning acquired outside formal education and training; for example at work and during leisure time. 17 countries have put in place validation arrangements which make it possible to assess non-formally or informally acquired skills and competences against standards used in formal education. This allows citizens to obtain (part of) a qualification included in their country's NQF ⁽¹¹⁾. Linking validation arrangements to their NQF enables countries to move from fragmented use of validation

to a more systematic approach. Established NQFs have mainstreamed validation systems in France and Scotland.

Promoting stakeholder cooperation

Broad stakeholder buy-in is instrumental in building consensus on a framework, creating a sense of ownership and promoting its actual use. In European countries without a tradition of social dialogue, such as Estonia, Malta or Slovakia, developing a national framework has been instrumental in opening the door to social partner involvement in education and training.

Many countries have established NQF steering groups, national qualifications councils or other bodies to support the coherent implementation and maintenance of their NQF across sectors and institutions. For example, the Croatian National Council for the Development of Human Potential, set up in 2014, comprises 24 representatives of national ministries, regional bodies, social partners, education providers and various bodies developing and awarding qualifications. It oversees policies in education, training, employment and HR development, and monitors the development of the NQF, ensuring a broad consensus on all related matters.

Triggering institutional reforms

Ireland, Greece, Malta, Portugal and Romania have merged multiple qualifications bodies into single entities covering all qualification types and levels. It remains to be seen, however, if these reforms will lead to increased synergies.

Making higher VET visible

NQFs have played a role in making visible vocationally oriented education and training at higher, 'academic' levels. For example, Germany has placed its master craftsman qualification at level 6 of its framework, firmly underlining that vocationally oriented education and training can take place 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 programmes and policies in many countries is partly owed to their

⁽¹⁰⁾ See for example the German qualifications database: <https://www.dqr.de/content/2316.php>

⁽¹¹⁾ European inventory on validation 2016 update: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>

comprehensive NQFs as they bring to light the diversity of qualifications designed for different purposes and the way they relate to one another. This opens the door to new pathways and horizontal and vertical progression options.

Supporting VET cross-border mobility

Better European (and international) comparability of qualifications, one of the declared aims of European NQFs, can support cross-border mobility of learners and workers, which aligns European NQF development with the EU skills agenda goals⁽¹²⁾. It is becoming easier for learners and workers to take up employment, education or training abroad. In recent years, VET providers in Europe have been increasing cooperation and exchange of students and teachers, sometimes through the Erasmus+ programme, and establishing mutual recognition of skills and qualifications obtained by their students abroad. NQFs have aided cross-border dialogue, comparison of training courses, and design of international programmes. In Luxembourg, a 2016 law establishes the national qualifications framework as the formal reference point for the recognition of professional qualifications acquired abroad.

Reaching end-users

In spite of these positive developments, NQF labour market use has been limited in most European countries; many employers are still not aware of their existence. For example, a 2009 impact study of the Irish NFQ 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. Similarly, a recent study carried out in Germany (2017) on the potential use of the German qualifications framework identified several areas where it could add value, for instance supporting human resource development (recruitment and career development). The study highlighted that this could especially benefit SMEs but this potential has been little tapped since.

⁽¹²⁾ Making skills more visible and comparable, improving the quality and relevance of training, and understanding trends in demand for skills and jobs to enable people to make better career choices and find quality jobs.

There are some exceptions, however. A national framework with labour market visibility is the French NQF⁽¹³⁾, which links qualifications levels to levels of occupation, work and pay. First generation frameworks in the UK have also reached a high degree of visibility. Scottish policy-makers have developed and promoted a range of widely used tools in connection with the national credit and qualifications framework, supporting employers in staff selection, recruitment and development. Also, the Scottish framework is successfully used to promote social inclusion and other broad government goals. In Wales, the NQF has also become very popular; all education and labour market stakeholders know it and use it in their daily work. In Malta, MQF levels have become an essential feature of job vacancy advertisements in both the public and the private sectors.

A 2017 survey of national stakeholders in Ireland, carried out in the framework of a policy impact assessment of the Irish NQF, showed that 72% of Irish stakeholders considered that vocational qualifications included in the NQF signal relevant skills and competences required for particular occupations, while 51% believed that the NQF has enabled better matching between people's skills and job vacancies. The survey also sought stakeholders' views in relation to NQF governance and future priorities. 76% of respondents said that the framework played a role in ensuring that qualifications are reliable and valid. Apart from quality assurance, many stakeholders also highlighted the framework's importance for individual career progression and the recognition of qualifications (60%).

Source: QQI (2017). *Policy impact assessment of the Irish national framework of qualifications*.

What next?

After a decade of intense NQF engineering across Europe, many frameworks have been evolving into multi-purpose tools which would be missed if they were not around⁽¹⁴⁾. There is growing consensus that it is now time to bring the frameworks to life for employers and other labour market actors and, more

⁽¹³⁾ Known as national register of vocational qualifications, *Repertoire national des certifications professionnelles*.

⁽¹⁴⁾ This was stated by many of the participants in Cedefop's peer learning conference of 9 and 10 November 2017.

generally, European citizens. To secure the NQFs' future relevance, several conditions must be met ⁽¹⁵⁾.

- Political commitment. NQFs need to be backed by politicians at national and regional levels who can secure institutional stability, appropriate funding and the necessary human resources.
- A clear vision of NQFs' usefulness for different beneficiaries. Communication efforts need to be stepped up; NQFs need stronger 'branding' to raise end-user awareness.
- Continuous stakeholder cooperation, bridging education and employment and including clear attribution of roles.
- Systematic inclusion of non-formal and informal learning.
- Mutual trust between institutions and systems. This requires efforts to maintain the NQFs' role in ensuring quality, and is a precondition for cooperation across subsystems and borders.
- Strong social dialogue.
- Time to allow for mentality adjustment. Learning outcomes are still a relatively new approach, which requires teachers, learners, policy-makers and institutions to change their way of thinking.
- Strengthening the European dimension of NQFs.
- Implementation of all European tools in parallel.
- Monitoring and evaluation of NQF added value and impact: this should be planned from the beginning to inform policy developments and allow stakeholders to revisit, revise and change.
- Closer European research cooperation on NQFs. This could include partnerships of experts, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners to obtain a better picture of NQF implications on access, mobility, pathways, and skills formation as well as global changes in the economy, labour market and society.

While more robust evidence on NQFs' evolving role and areas of impact is needed at this stage, stakeholder and user experiences, stories and views are equally important. An NQF is, above all, a social construct which changes over time; it is important to look at it as a process and take into account its multidimensional character. Expectations are high both for the frameworks' ability to support a shift to a more student-centred approach to learning, teaching and guidance and, ultimately, to enable recognition of qualifications.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Conclusions of the participants of Cedefop's peer learning conference (see Footnote 14).

Box 1. QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS ACROSS THE WORLD

In recent years, qualifications frameworks around the globe have developed dynamically, boosted by the establishment of regional frameworks. The European skills agenda ^(a) and UNESCO's Education 2030 agenda ^(b) have been instrumental in this process. More than 150 countries worldwide are currently working on national frameworks ^(c). Various groups of countries share regional frameworks: the EQF is the most advanced regional framework, with a number of fully operational frameworks linked to it. Other regional frameworks have been developed by the Association of Southeast Asian countries (ASEAN), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the transnational qualifications framework (TQF) of the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth which covers 29 small states, and some Arab, Pacific and South American countries. These regional frameworks promote international cooperation and capacity-building on qualifications.

^(a) <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0381>. The skills agenda, adopted in June 2016, highlights the importance of the frameworks for educational and professional pathways.

^(b) <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002456/245656E.pdf>

^(c) Cedefop; ETF; Unesco (2017). *Global inventory of national and regional qualifications frameworks*. Vol. 1, Vol. 2. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/sl/publications-and-resources/publications/2222>