

ADDED VALUE OF  
NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS  
FRAMEWORKS IN  
IMPLEMENTING THE **EQF**



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Note 2.

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Note 2.

# ADDED VALUE OF NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN IMPLEMENTING THE **EQF**

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February 2010



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# Foreword

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This EQF note is written for those policy makers and qualifications experts at European and national level who are involved in implementing the EQF. The note is the second in a series of EQF notes and is focusing on the challenges involved in taking forward the objectives of the EQF at national level.

An important purpose of the note is to support the design and implementation of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) as tools for implementing the EQF at national level. According to the EQF Recommendation<sup>1</sup> countries are invited (by 2010) to relate their qualifications systems to the EQF by

- » referencing, in a transparent manner, their qualifications levels to the levels set out by the EQF, and, where appropriate,
- » by developing national qualifications frameworks in accordance with national legislation and practise.

Almost all European countries involved in the ‘Education and Training 2010’ work programme have seen it as beneficial to develop national qualifications frameworks that reflect the objectives and the scope of the EQF. This reflects a broad agreement on the potential benefits of such frameworks for facilitating European mobility and for promoting lifelong learning. However, the rapid pace of developments - along with the fact that only 4 countries<sup>2</sup> actually had established an NQF at the time of the adoption of the EQF Recommendation - suggest advantages for national experts to engage in a systematic dialogue and exchange of experiences on the design and development of NQFs.

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<sup>1</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning. *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 111, 6.5.2008

<sup>2</sup> Ireland, France, Malta and UK.



This need for systematic exchange of experiences has been recognised by the EQF Advisory Group set up in 2008 and has in particular been followed up in a series of peer learning activities (in Budapest in 2007, Krakow and London in 2008 and Berlin and Valletta in 2009) organised by the 26 countries that participate in the Cluster on Recognition of Learning Outcomes. This note has been endorsed by the EQF Advisory Group as well as by the Cluster as helpful in supporting the development of NQFs in Member States and contributing to a sharing of experiences that will help policy development at national level.


The discussions in the peer learning activities have increasingly focused on the types of added value that NQFs can bring to countries. This note is based on the systematic exchange of experiences in these peer learning activities and aims to make these available for a broader public. It follows that this note is not written as a full review of NQFs, indeed whilst commentators have speculated on the positive and negative effects of NQFs there has been to date no full scale evaluation of NQFs in a range of different national settings<sup>3</sup>. The national reviews of NQFs have tended, at least until recently<sup>4</sup>, to focus on evaluating the process of implementing an NQF rather than attempting to measure impact on citizens and the labour market<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The International Labour Organisation has recently commissioned such a study. ILO, Allais, S (in press), The impact and implementation of NQFs: Report of a study in 16 countries, Geneva

<sup>4</sup> South Africa has recently published a full scale impact review of the South African Qualifications Framework. See [www.saqa.org.za](http://www.saqa.org.za)

<sup>5</sup> Cedefop will carry out a regular mapping and analysis of NQF developments in the EU and EEA countries. These reports, updated twice a year, are available on the Cedefop web page. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/5030.aspx>



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# 1. Introduction – and why is this the time to consider the added value of NQFs?

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The purpose of this note is to reflect on and summarise national discussions and experiences as regards design, development and implementation of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs). While particular emphasis will be given to the added value of frameworks at national and European level, their potential limitations will also be discussed to some extent, stressing the need for realism and a certain amount of caution. The note takes as its starting point that NQFs are important at two main levels.

- » They are increasingly influencing national reforms of education, training and qualifications systems, in particular in terms of addressing the challenges of lifelong and lifewide learning.
- » They support the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework.

In their most basic sense NQFs can be understood as classifiers specifying the relationship – horizontally and vertically - between different qualifications. This is not a new idea. For many centuries the trade organisations in many countries have exercised control over the right to practice in relation to explicitly defined hierarchies of skills within the trades. Parallel hierarchies were developed by universities and have been widely accepted as regulators of academic progression - within and between countries. These well known arrangements can be seen as forerunners of the national and international qualifications frameworks currently being developed and implemented.





What is new about the modern national qualification framework is the interest of governments in developing comprehensive frameworks<sup>6</sup> that incorporate qualifications from different education and training sectors (general, vocational and academic). The new frameworks are thus often linked to lifelong learning strategies and are also in many cases open to the learning taking place outside formal education and training, at work and in leisure. These modern NQFs potentially go beyond the role of classifiers ('qualification grids') and aim at a redefinition of the way qualifications are related to each other, how they are valued and eventually put into use in our societies. Modern NQFs can thus be described as 'instruments with a vision' questioning current education and training practises and challenging existing professional and sectoral interests. Designing an NQF is thus something more than agreeing on a set of technical features (a hierarchy of levels of learning) it is about creating a platform for (cross-institutional and cross-sectoral) dialogue and – eventually – mutual trust.

<sup>6</sup> In this note we speak of comprehensive National Qualifications Frameworks as something distinct from overarching frameworks. The following definitions of the two terms have been suggested by Sjur Bergan (2009):  
A comprehensive qualifications framework is one that covers all levels and parts of education. Many of the national qualifications frameworks that have been developed so far are comprehensive. The EQF is a comprehensive and overarching framework, since it covers several systems and all levels and kinds of education. The QF-EHEA is overarching, since it covers several education systems, but it is not comprehensive, since it covers only higher education.

Reflecting the above vision of comprehensive NQFs, the last few years have seen a dramatic increase in interest and activity. We can speak of an international 'snowball-effect' - in 2004 there were a handful of countries<sup>7</sup> with frameworks and today there are more than 50 countries around the world<sup>8</sup> with frameworks and at least 20 more countries considering the decision to develop one. These developments have been stimulated by international organisations like the OECD<sup>9</sup>, the ILO<sup>10</sup>,<sup>11</sup> and the ETF<sup>12</sup> discussing NQFs as instruments for the modernisation of education and training systems and their potential for facilitating lifelong learning.

European NQF developments are currently particularly strong. Countries with very different education and training systems and traditions have

<sup>7</sup> Including the countries of the UK, Ireland, France, SouthAfrica, Australia, New Zealand

<sup>8</sup> The Purpose of the European Qualifications Framework in an International Context, Presentation by Jens Bjornavold and Arjen Deij in the ETF conference 'The European Qualifications Framework. Linking to a Globalised World', 29-30 January 2009, Brussels

<sup>9</sup> OECD (2007); Qualifications systems. Bridges to lifelong learning, Paris

<sup>10</sup> ILO, Allais, S (in press), The impact and implementation of NQFs: Report of a study in 16 countries. Geneva

<sup>11</sup> ILO, Ron Tuck, (2007), An Introductory guide to National Qualifications Frameworks; conceptual; and practical issues for policy makers, Geneva

<sup>12</sup> Developing qualifications frameworks: a tool for modernising education and training? - analysis of the experiences of ETF partner countries in building national qualifications frameworks, ETF, forthcoming (expected in June 2010)



embraced the qualifications framework idea and are pursuing this actively. This is largely due to the development of the European Qualifications Framework from 2004 and onwards. This meta-framework (formally adopted in April 2008) has acted as a strong catalyst for development of NQFs. Of the 32 countries taking part in the 'Education and Training 2010' work programme, 30 have now explicitly stated the objective of developing a comprehensive NQF reflecting the EQF<sup>13</sup>. The Bologna process for higher education has complemented and strengthened this pattern of NQF development by giving priority to the development of NQFs for higher education. A number of countries have furthermore, on their own initiative, started development of qualifications frameworks for vocational education and training.

This situation creates a unique opportunity for systematic sharing of experiences. While focussing on the potential added value, in line with the approach of the peer learning activities in 2007 and 2008, the note also sends a message of warning; NQFs are mainly platforms for cooperation and dialogue between national stakeholders, between users and providers of qualification and certification, their added value very much depends on the quality of this cooperation.

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<sup>13</sup> The rapid development of NQFs can to a certain extent be seen to reflect the timeframe for the implementation of the EQF. According to the EQF Recommendation countries are to refer their national qualifications levels to the EQF by 2010 and to introduce the reference to the EQF levels into new certificates and diplomas by 2012.

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## 2. The basis for National Qualifications Frameworks – key ideas

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The development of NQFs has brought with it discussion and clarification of certain key ideas. The OECD work referred to earlier has already brought clarity to the idea of a national qualifications system as embracing all structures and activities that leads to the award of a qualification. It has also defined a national qualifications framework as one entity within a national qualifications system. The Cedefop (2008) Glossary builds on this understanding and defines a National Qualifications Framework as:

*An instrument for the development and classification of qualifications (e.g. at national or sectoral level) according to a set of criteria (e.g. using descriptors) applicable to specified levels of learning outcomes*

However - this simple definition does not indicate the range of broad functions that classification can support. In practice an NQF is much more than a grid of qualifications levels and they usually signal a political or strategic vision for the qualification system and offer some means of achieving that vision. The

definition gives a hint of this broader understanding when it refers to the development<sup>14</sup> of qualifications, in addition to the classification of them.

### Qualification

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The definition of an NQF is closely dependent of the definition of the term qualification. The EQF recommendation defines qualifications as:

*A formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards.*

This definition of qualifications signals an important limit as regards the function of NQFs. They are not

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<sup>14</sup> In some countries this developmental function of NQFs are seen as problematic. In Denmark the social partners have insisted that the new NQF should have a purely descriptive function and not influence the development of (for example) VET. The decision on whether a NQF should have purely descriptive or more ambitious developmental purposes is a question to be decided at national level among the relevant stakeholders.



addressing learning achievements in general – as competence frameworks would do<sup>15</sup> - but only those learning outcomes which have been assessed and approved by a competent institution according to given standards. While this narrows down the scope of frameworks, it can be seen as a way to focus and concentrate their structure and functions.

### Specified levels of learning outcomes

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The NQF definition makes reference to *specified levels of learning outcomes*. These levels offer a new understanding of the qualifications system. In many countries (if not all) it is possible to say that there are implicit qualifications levels and that these levels are defined by the major national education and training providers. For example, there is in most countries an implicit qualifications level for skilled workers that is defined by apprenticeship. It is not easy to think of a qualification level for skilled workers without thinking of apprenticeship. The same applies to university entrance: this qualification level is defined by the qualification that allows a person to enter a Bachelors degree programme. This implicit understanding suggests that a qualification level is identical to, and therefore defined by, specific

qualifications and their awarding institutions. However, and reflecting the shift to learning outcomes inherent in current NQFs, a qualification level should refer to what a learner is expected to know, understand or be able to do at the end of a learning process, and not assume that a particular provision or teaching will automatically result in learning outcomes at a specified level.

Introducing NQFs based on learning outcomes challenges the traditional, implicit understanding of a qualifications level<sup>16</sup>. The level is no longer defined by a particular institution or category of providers, or the access it provides, but by a descriptor. This new, learning outcome based level descriptor is more or less independent of any one qualification at that level and can accommodate several different types of qualification. The level can therefore be seen as an abstraction introducing a neutral reference point for diverse qualifications and qualifications providers.

This separation of awarding institutions and their specific qualifications from the levels in the NQF is never complete – one reinforces the status of the other, and this is useful. There are however major advantages of creating

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<sup>15</sup> An example of a competence framework is provided by the European ICT sectoral framework adopted 2008. See <http://www.ecompetences.eu/> for details. How this is linked to a qualifications framework in the same sector is illustrated by the I-Lane project which can be consulted at <http://www.ict-lane.eu/1118,The+Framework.html>

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<sup>16</sup> It also challenges the way education and training is measured. The International Classification of Education (ISCED) focus on the number of completed education programmes and it can be questioned, as learning outcomes based frameworks spread, whether this is the optimal way to measure the volume and character of formal learning in countries.

these semi-independent qualifications levels, for example, higher education and VET qualifications can occupy the same level and therefore links between them become more transparent. Progression in learning becomes more than a predetermined path defined and restricted by education and training sectors and institutions. These advantages of qualifications levels are covered in later sections of this note.

### Learning inputs and learning outcomes

The NQF definition also refers to learning outcomes. Here some further interpretation is necessary as obviously the term is used in contradistinction to *learning inputs* and yet it is quite possible to build a 'qualifications' framework based on the stages of completion of education and training – in many countries qualification levels are considered this way. However, evidence suggests<sup>17</sup> that there is a shift away from this learning inputs model to one that is based on learning outcomes and that defines curriculum, assessment and qualifications in terms of what a learner knows, understands and can do as a result of a learning process. This is a critically important shift. It is a shift that is inextricably linked to the emerging new qualifications frameworks and, taken together, the concept of *qualifications levels based on expected learning outcomes* is the foundation concept that

is driving qualifications system reform and it is the basis of this note.

The key to understanding the shift to learning outcomes is the drive for transparency in education and training systems. By making explicit the expected learning outcomes to be achieved through experiencing a curriculum, to be assessed in an examination or to be validated and certified in a qualification, teachers, learners and users of qualifications (such as recruiters) are all clearer about the content and value of the qualification. In this sense the shift to learning outcomes is also about strengthening the accountability of qualifications.

### Competence – contextualised learning outcomes

Some people prefer to use the term competence-based qualifications when referring to qualifications that are described in terms of learning outcomes. The concept of competence has wide application in defining performance and certainly in vocational education and training it is a critically important and central concept. Competence based qualifications take into account the influence of the learning (or working) context when learning outcomes are defined and assessed. This context has a strong influence on the range of learning outcomes that are considered important, the interaction between them, the way the learner learns, how the outcomes are assessed and, most

<sup>17</sup> Cedefop, 2008, The shift to learning outcomes in European education and training policies and practises, Thessaloniki



importantly, the value attached to qualifications in the field. Competence based qualifications are fundamentally a statement that a person is qualified to work in the field. Some formulations of learning outcomes may not be able to satisfy this requirement for contextual specification. For this reason it is important that in qualifications frameworks we can define levels in terms of expected learning outcomes when these outcomes are achieved by a person in certain conditions. The NQF has to enable learning outcomes to be contextualised and represent competence. Once this competence is validated and certificated a person is considered qualified.

An important issue in incorporating competence-based qualifications into NQFs concerns the limits to the way that types of competence (for example, knowledge, skills, social and personal competence) can be accommodated in level descriptors. Many qualifications place emphasis on generic skills, such as those involved in managing people and organisations, language skills and to ethical approaches to solving problems. The level descriptors in NQFs need to be written so that these wider aspects of competence are included where it is intended that competence based qualifications are to be part of the framework.

### **The approximations within NQFs – a strength, not a weakness**

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Frameworks are abstract constructions. They are built on the (often implicit) norms of qualifications levels in a country and aim to reflect a reality of a qualifications system by making these qualifications levels explicit. However NQFs always remain a codification and simplification of complex qualifications systems and it is perhaps not surprising that they are never able to perfectly reflect the reality of the systems they represent. This abstraction – and thus simplification - is necessary if highly diverse qualifications are to be understood in relation to each other and compared and combined in any sensible way.

Designing qualification levels is a task that requires experts to appreciate the spectrum of understandings of levels within a country – from the labour market view through to the most theoretical and scholarly of perspectives. The ways qualifications recognise all learning in the drive towards lifelong learning have to be accommodated in a simple structure if transparency is to be achievable. Designers and users of NQFs therefore need to be tolerant of some of the approximations that are necessary in the ways NQFs accommodate

qualifications. These tolerances need to be based on a shared understanding that they enable decisions about accommodation of qualifications in an NQF represent the best fit taking into account the available evidence. In this way best fit can help to build consensus amongst stakeholders around the important core qualities of a qualification level.

### **Frameworks – instruments with a vision**

The EQF Recommendation uses the same NQF definition as Cedefop but introduces an important addition:

*(An NQF means an instrument) which aims to integrate and coordinate national qualifications subsystems and improve the transparency, access, progression and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society.*

This additional point, reflecting the agreement of the countries involved in the EQF development process, confirms that NQFs are seen as something more than classifiers. It signals that NQFs should be a force for change and they should be used to question existing interests and promote discussion and development of better qualifications systems. The success of an NQF is

therefore very much dependent on its ability to bring together relevant stakeholders and create a platform for cooperation and for addressing common or conflicting challenges. For this reason country representatives (in the EQF Advisory Group as well as the peer learning cluster) have underlined many times that the development of an NQF is a substantial political undertaking and a long term project for improvement rather than a short term means of better referencing to the EQF.

One of the ways an NQF acts as a force for change is through the concept of associated functions of NQFs. The EQF has associated functions in that it goes beyond its formulation as a grid and recommends that countries look closely at encouraging the use of validation of non formal and informal learning and adopting the European principles for quality assurance. These functions are strengthened by the introduction of NQFs and countries often seek to use the NQF implementation to adjust the ways governance of qualifications operates.

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### 3. What added value do NQFs offer?

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There is broad confidence that National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) can support reforms in national education and training systems and enhance lifelong learning<sup>18</sup>. Discussions in peer learning activities (Budapest, Krakow, London, Berlin, Valletta) have focussed on the possibility of some concrete outcomes from introducing NQFs; for example building bridges between stakeholder groups in the countries, linking vocational education and training (VET) and higher education, bringing VET closer to the labour market and the use of frameworks in supporting the recognition of qualifications of migrants. It is possible, however, that the most important contribution of NQFs will be the promotion of the use of learning outcomes as this will improve

transparency and clarify progression for individuals and other users of qualifications.

The capacity of an NQF to bring added value depends on the national context and the design of an NQF and the form of the implementation process. There are many variables that determine outcomes of reforms and, whilst there are good and long lived examples NQFs on which to draw, the national contextual influence is so strong that it is not possible to make a definitive list of areas of added value for all NQFs. It follows that in some national settings an NQF may not add value at all. This view has been expressed in Finland and Norway where coordination between stakeholders and different qualifications routes are well established. In these two cases stakeholders have argued that NQF developments could draw attention and resources away from more urgent tasks. Following lengthy and intense discussions, concluding that frameworks would add value to the existing systems, both countries are now moving in the direction of comprehensive approaches. There

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<sup>18</sup> Discussions in the Cluster on Recognition of Learning Outcomes and in the EQF Advisory Group confirm this, see summaries of these discussions at <http://www.kslll.net/PeerLearningClusters/clusterDetails.cfm?id=13>

Countries with national qualifications frameworks have also made it clear that their NQFs are intended to support improvements in qualifications systems, for example the NFQ in Ireland, the QCF in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the SAQF in South Africa, the NZQF in New Zealand)





is another reason to be realistic about expectations of NQFs. Whilst they can support many policies, the benefits do not appear automatically simply because an NQF has been developed. For example the creation of an NQF does not itself improve progression for individuals – it is the

social partners, the learning providers and the qualifications agencies that make the benefits of an NQF available to individuals. The most important contribution of the NQF may thus be to strengthen mutual trust by promoting dialogue and coordination between the partners in the qualifications system.

### **In general terms and in most national settings it is probably reasonable to expect benefits in some or all of the following ten areas:**

- Increased consistency of qualifications
- Better transparency for individuals and employers
- Increased currency of single qualifications
- A broader range of learning forms are recognised
- A national/external reference point for qualifications standards
- Clarification of learning pathways and progression
- Increased portability of qualifications
- Acting as a platform for stakeholders for strengthening cooperation and commitment
- Greater coherence of national reform policies
- A stronger basis for international co-operation, understanding and comparison

The following sections will examine in more detail these aspects of added value.

#### **Increased consistency of qualifications**

The number, diversity and complexity of qualifications on offer is increasing. This arises from attempts to respond to the needs of a broader range of learners (for example adults and disengaged young people). Work practices are

also diversifying and becoming more complex – this means that the labour market is calling for different kinds of qualifications. In some countries and areas the introduction of market mechanisms may result in increased competition and diversification. This diversity in qualifications means that it is more likely that inconsistencies between qualifications arise and these can reduce quality, confidence and trust. The bodies that offer the



qualifications are also becoming more diverse and can lead to weaker cooperation between them.

NQFs can address inconsistencies between qualifications by specifying the type of standards that are used and the

different quality assurance approaches that are applied. An approach that is common in many countries is to use regulation as a tool to ensure more coherency/ consistency, making common requirements to all qualifications that are awarded in the framework.

### **NQFs have several features which make it possible for them to be used as tools that lead to more transparency, coherence and consistency of qualifications, for example:**

- A structure of levels which makes it possible for everyone to understand the relationships between different qualifications. When based on learning outcomes, these levels can more accurately represent the content of a qualification than when they are based on the learning pathway. In the latter case, the levels represent the learning process the qualification holder has undergone rather than what s/he has learned.
- A set of learning outcomes that refer to a specific level of knowledge, skills and competence can contribute to improve assessment and hence the consistent quality of the certification process.
- A set of rules regarding how qualifications are constructed and how they are described thus ensuring consistency across the different awarding bodies. For example qualifications frameworks may require that all qualifications be related to an occupational standard, contain an assessment standard and refer to an educational standard.
- Requirements concerning the quality assurance related to acquisition of qualifications in the framework which enhance the credibility of qualifications. For example for qualifications to be admitted to the framework, requirements regarding how assessment, validation and recognition are designed and run can be part of the framework structure.

Finally, the widening of the qualifications market and the broadening of ownership of qualifications requires a more solid currency for qualifications - an NQF that supports wider articulation while maintaining and strengthening the standards and integrity of qualifications.

### **Better transparency for individuals and employers**

Complexities in the qualifications system, in terms of the equivalence and relations between different qualifications at different levels, is regarded as a problem for learners who want to build careers on achievements from different

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levels and sectors. This is exemplified by the sometimes weak relationship between vocational and academic learning routes. Inconsistencies and sector fragmentation makes it difficult for individuals to exploit the possibilities offered by the education and training system. This problem becomes more urgent as people increasingly move between different jobs and occupational sectors. Transfer of qualifications caused by increased occupational mobility requires that they be easily understood and fairly valued in new settings.

The role of NQFs as a classifier and as an instrument for demystifying this jungle of qualifications is important for individual learners, for parents, for counselors, for employers, for providers and for policy makers alike. The NQF should not only indicate where links and pathways exist, but also clarify where these are lacking and whether/how these can be bridged.

An NQF is an instrument for supporting learner guidance. A young person entering vocational training should for example be able to see whether this may provide the basis for future horizontal specialization or vertical progression. Some business sectors observe that lack of transparency as regards future learning careers may prove a disincentive for potential recruits. This transparency is also important for the education and training system as it may illustrate the existence of learning dead-ends.

The role of NQFs in increasing transparency is very much linked to the

issue of accountability. The system must be accountable to individual learners and ‘guarantee’ that it is able to deliver education and training according to set standards and expectations. The system must furthermore be accountable in a wider public policy context.

### **Increased currency of single qualifications**

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A framework shows single qualifications as part of a nationally endorsed system of qualifications. When a single qualification becomes part of a framework it is likely to be made accessible to a broader range of learners. Its location at a specific level, and a clearer relationship to other qualifications and progression routes makes it easier to evaluate the qualification as an option. To gain the additional currency however, this admission to the framework must be endorsed by the national qualifications authorities (and relevant stakeholders), often involving links to quality assurance mechanisms. This too can add currency for users.

The location of single qualifications into a broader framework based on learning outcomes can also be seen as a pre-condition for gaining credit and exemption for previous validated or certificated learning.

### **A broader range of learning forms are recognised**

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Qualifications systems are frequently criticised for excluding important learning achievements; notably the



learning acquired by individuals who fail to complete a learning programme and the learning taking place outside formal education and training - at work and in leisure time. This failure is linked to the rigidity of qualifications systems and the belief that formal learning programmes are the only legitimate context for acquiring qualifications.

By emphasising the importance of learning outcomes, NQFs can open up education and training systems to a more flexible approach that can include modular structures, recognition of prior learning and credit transfer arrangements.

NQFs can facilitate the introduction of a modular structure and means that learning for a qualification is organised by smaller units so that learners have a choice of learning towards a whole, or only a few components of, a qualification. The modular structure also allows individuals to accumulate the units over a long period of time, so it allows, as a principle, individuals to enter and exit the programmes whenever it suits them without 'wasting' the learning they gained.

The introduction of recognition of prior learning (validation of non-formal and informal learning) may be seen as a key factor in the building of an NQF because this signals – in a concrete way - that any learning experience can lead to a qualification (the absolute link to learning programmes is abolished). Skills acquired at work or through other activities can be formally and credibly assessed and certified on the basis of credible standards forming a part of the NQF.

An NQF building on explicit qualifications levels and coherent and credible standards provides a clear reference for individuals who plan to transfer to a different learning and career path. It also offers a reference for education and training institutions who attempt to validate individuals' prior learning as part of the requirements for obtaining a qualification.

Finally NQFs can become the basis for a credit-based system where units of assessment can be combined (accumulated) into whole qualifications or transferred to other qualifications. These units of assessment can recognise learning from different settings, formal, non formal and informal.

### **A national/external reference point for qualifications standards**

Qualifications systems are increasingly becoming demand led; responding to individual needs for lifelong and lifewide learning and to the demands of a globalised labour market. This explains why qualifications systems seems to be more outward facing, looking for reference points outside the institutions providing education and training. The use of external and explicit standards is also about seeking international recognition for the quality of national qualifications and thus the competence of the workforce by adopting an NQF. This is important in attracting, for example, foreign investment and promoting national products and services in the global market.

The setting of external references is an important feature of NQFs. A first step in this direction is to define and describe qualifications levels and their descriptors. Supported by quality assurance arrangements and criteria this introduces an independent reference point which can be used across institutions and sectors. A second step is to establish a transparent and coherent approach to the setting and renewal of standards, including a clear indication of the stakeholders to be included in this process.

NQFs can strengthen the credibility of qualifications by putting in place visible, predictable and coherent national systems for setting standards, for assessing learning outcomes and for awarding qualifications. Opening up this 'black box of qualifications' and introducing a national coherent approach to certification may help to reduce uncertainties about the relative value of different certificates and diplomas.

### **NQFs can act as an independent reference point when:**

- They use level descriptors that are able to accommodate differences across regional and sectoral approaches to qualifications but that are also formulated with clarity so as to enable the distinction between one level or another.
- They use descriptors that are seen as relevant not only in education and training but also by labour market stakeholders.
- They use learning outcomes as the common language for different stakeholders. While the education and training pathways, conditions and requirements may be extremely variable across a country (even regarding very similar qualifications).
- They use learning outcomes that define the standard of learning required but not the content of the qualification (in terms of the exact learning outcomes required, which are defined within qualifications), NQFs can be open to a large variety of learning while maintaining the quality and trust.
- They require quality assurance requirements regarding how qualifications are designed and how they are awarded (assessment, validation and recognition) supports the credibility of qualifications in the framework. This does not mean that an NQF prescribes specific quality assurance processes (this may be regulated elsewhere in the system) but that all qualifications in an NQF should be quality assured.
- The development of trust among the different stakeholders makes it possible for NQFs to be open to other forms of learning while maintaining credibility and ownership.



## Clarification of learning pathways and progression

From the learner point of view the range of qualifications on offer and how they relate to each other can be confusing. Some learning pathways can lead to dead ends for learners that then weakens commitment to learning. Guidance and information is crucial to make NQFs realise this added value of creating permeability. Learners have to be informed about the possibilities for building up their training pathways and this information has to be accessible and understandable to them. Learners

do not necessarily need to know the framework itself.

Trust within the parties involved is essential for enabling transfer and progression using the NQF. If the providers/ qualifications authorities look for equivalence or perfect-fit when it comes to recognising learning from other sectors, transfer will be problematic. While maintaining the quality of qualifications, the providers or awarding bodies need to accept certain tolerance regarding, for example, access and transfer requirements.

### NQFs can help make things clear by:

- Making explicit the relationships between qualifications. Through the use of levels and descriptors, NQFs improve the legibility of progression routes for individuals and for training providers.
- Focusing on learning outcomes. Qualifications structures focused on education and training pathways hinder possibilities of progression and transfer and restrict access by privileging formal learning. The use of learning outcomes for formulation of qualifications standards creates possibilities for individuals to achieve these outcomes in different ways. Furthermore, the use of learning outcomes facilitates communication between education and training institutions (within the same sector but also across the sectors – e.g. VET and HE).
- Using units and credits. Some qualifications frameworks incorporate the use of units and/ or credits to break down qualifications into smaller components and to describe these. As transferable parts of qualifications, units and credits enable progressive achievement of qualifications and facilitate access.

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## Increased portability of qualifications

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Qualifications can sometimes be restricted in the access they give to further learning or jobs. This is sometimes due to the narrow and job specific nature of the qualification. It can also be due to the narrow range of stakeholders involved in the design and awarding of the qualification.

NQFs can broaden the knowledge of the content and currency of qualifications and allow learners to use it in different settings. Once again the use of learning outcomes helps with the portability of qualifications as does the quality assurance environment the NQF creates around a qualification.

There is increasing importance attached to international mobility and the transparency of an NQF (and its associated functions) to foreign interests can help with mobility. Some qualifications designed by international bodies and assessed and awarded according to specification already enable international mobility. The valuing of these international qualifications can be enhanced if they meet the requirements of the NQF and are admitted to the framework.

Credit transfer is an important part of the way some frameworks facilitate portability. By ensuring units are admitted to a framework these can be combined in different ways to allow the building of a qualification which is suited to the learners future needs.

## Acting as a platform for stakeholders for strengthening cooperation and commitment

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The range of stakeholders that can be involved in NQFs is wide. Stakeholders involve the full range of providing institutions, certifying and awarding institutions and qualifications users inside and outside the labour market. Some key stakeholders may not be involved in the design and management of qualifications. Thus there is a need for a tool to maintain cooperation and enhance trust and to carry this beyond the traditional communities. A main challenge is to bring together all relevant stakeholders ‘in one room’ and NQFs are increasingly seen as having an important role in this process. The critical importance of creating ownership through involvement is linked to the need to create mutual trust. If NQFs are to succeed in bridging different levels and sectors of education, training and learning, mutual trust is a pre-condition.

Particular attention has to be paid to the involvement of representatives of the labour market when setting up NQFs. Not only must social partners be included, attention must also be paid to the role played by education and training providers in the private sector, nationally as well as internationally. Stakeholders must be convinced that there is a need for the system to change and that the NQF will provide benefits.



## **Greater coherence of national reform policies**

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Reform programmes for lifelong learning are so large and diverse that they can seem fragmented in the way they make use of the qualifications system. In some countries the reform programmes need to engage regional interests as well as the broader national ones.

NQFs can provide a focus for management of a reform programme and act as a coordinating function with a new arrangement for governance of reforms. For many NQFs the objective is to create a structure of levels that brings together all the sectors of education and training. NQFs therefore create an opportunity for the different stakeholders to create a common instrument that will support different objectives in the qualifications system(s).

In order to create the added value described above the requirement for trust and ownership has been mentioned many times. It is therefore important to associate different

stakeholders (from within the qualifications system(s) and from outside – e.g. labour market) to the design process. NQF design is an occasion for dialogue not only across the education and training sectors but also with the economic stakeholders.

## **A stronger basis for international co-operation, understanding and comparison**

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Policy learning requires an understanding of the national system as well as other systems that might lead to developments in the national system. NQFs can be a key to understanding the types of learning that are recognised in a country, how these are valued and how the qualifications system works to award these qualifications. Thus NQFs have the potential to lead to increased international understanding of national qualifications systems. It will be important to explore how emerging NQFs can support and facilitate the work already done by existing bodies like ENIC and NARIC (in the field of higher education qualifications).



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The EQF is a tool for encouraging such understanding – by creating learning outcomes based levels the EQF acts as a translation device for international understanding. However it is increasingly clear that in addition to the EQF the national qualifications systems need to have a clear and accepted basis in levels in order to reference to the EQF and allow translation to be built on good understanding.

Governments are also interested to know if the levels of qualifications achievements in the country are comparable to those in other countries, competitiveness of economies may depend on good comparisons.

### **Materialising benefits for individual learners**

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In addition to the benefits that NQFs can bring in terms of increased consistency, transparency, currency, portability and progression for individuals, it is worth repeating that NQFs do not

offer benefits to learners directly, it is the stakeholders: recruiters, trainers and counsellors; that materialise the benefits of NQFs for individuals.

Units and credit as elements of NQFs are tools that make it possible to recognise learning more frequently and in a way which is less costly in money and time. Thus maintaining motivation but also flexibility. Units and credits as features of NQFs also make progression for individuals less abstract and hence again create motivation and flexibility.

In terms of achieving the main goal of more and better lifelong and lifewide learning the individual citizen is the key stakeholder. Yet surprisingly the individual that is motivated to learn may not appreciate the NQF – or even know of it. The NQF is the means by which the whole qualifications system might become more responsive to the needs of individuals and the labour market - this responsiveness is possibly the true measure of added value.



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## 4. Building an NQF – questions and choices

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The process of defining and implementing an NQF can be seen as going through a series of more or less distinctive stages. A better understanding of these stages can help national stakeholders to organise the process and to meet the relevant policy objectives. Focussing on these stages also clarifies that NQFs are dynamic and developing instruments which needs to be revisited from time to time. ILO (op.cit. 2007) distinguishes between three main stages:

- » Purpose and scope: Decisions on what goals will the NQF help to achieve and on which education or occupational sectors are to be included.

- » Strategy: Decisions on how unified or centrally controlled should the NQF be, on what additional policy measures might be necessary and on what must be done to establish an NQF?
- » Design and implementation: Decisions on how the NQF will be designed and implemented and on how it will be governed and managed.

ILO presents a series of key messages filling in and expanding the different stages, a selection of which is listed in the box below.



## Key messages as regards developing NQFs

- While the final goal may be to build a comprehensive NQF, this doesn't need to be a one stage process.
- Use a model that allows for sector differences within the single framework in ways which suit the national circumstances.
- The key to a successful NQF implementation is to develop a broad strategy that takes account of all factors influencing success. Above all – develop communities of trust.
- Develop a basic framework quickly – and then take a pragmatic approach to implementation based on national priorities.
- Each country should work out a solution that suits its size, traditions and existing structures. NQF quality assurance should focus on the essentials – sometimes 'less is more'.
- Outcomes are helpful – if implemented flexibly.
- The challenge is to deal with the perception of stakeholders and generating confidence in and acceptance of the new system.

Source: ILO, 2007

Arjen Deij<sup>19</sup> takes into account the analysis of Tuck but suggests a slightly different, 6-stage approach. This approach, which reflects the experiences of the European Training Foundation in cooperating on NQFs with a range of countries in Eastern Europe, North-Africa and Central Asia, emphasises the dynamic character of the NQF instrument, underlining that success depends on systematic testing and review (ETF, op.cit.). This is also a point well illustrated by the experiences of the UK where the original NQFs established in the 1990s have been systematically reviewed resulting in major changes and adjustments.

- » The exploratory stage, during which there is no agreement yet on whether the country would need a NQF, which is used to discuss the pros and cons of an NQF as a policy tool and alternatives.
- » The conceptual stage during which countries discuss, develop and define the rational and the main outline of a future framework.
- » The design stage that is used to design the national framework and to agree between stakeholders on how it should be implemented.
- » The testing phase that is used to test and develop the tools for implementation and support the operational planning for implementation.
- » The implementation stage which normally starts with capacity and

<sup>19</sup> Towards a common understanding of the development stages of NQFs, ETF Working Paper, forthcoming (<http://etf.europa.eu/>)



institution building, populating the framework with qualifications, followed by more attention on quality assurance linked to assessment, certification and delivery processes and the coordination, regulation and or management of the framework, including ensuring sustainable funding and ICT systems.

- » The review stage to review progress and the impact of the framework, often followed by re-conceptualisation, redesign, testing, implementation etc.

These stages illustrate current NQF developments in Europe<sup>20</sup>. Of the 32 countries taking part in the 'Education and Training 2010' work programme the majority can currently be categorised according to the orientation, conceptual and design stages. However, during 2009 and 2010 a growing number of countries will be ready to move into testing and implementation. This distribution according to stages of development can be illustrated by the following examples:

- » Norway and the Netherlands are currently pursuing discussions on the advantages and disadvantages of comprehensive NQFs.
- » Sweden and Finland have during the last two years moved from the orientation to the conceptual and design phase.
- » Austria and Germany are close to move from conceptualisation and design to testing.
- » Belgium (VL) has now moved towards actual implementation of their framework.
- » In Ireland a review is nearing completion. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland re-conceptualisation of the existing NQF is complete and a new qualifications and credit framework has been launched.

This confirms the point made earlier that NQF development must be seen as dynamic and continuous developments. This also illustrates that the technical features of the frameworks are important, but less important than the cooperation processes they facilitate.

<sup>20</sup>Also relevant is the 10 step approach developed for the Qualifications Frameworks within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

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## 5. Models of NQFs

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Developments of NQFs in Europe and beyond illustrate that the visions and ambitions for NQFs in countries differ greatly. As a starting point some countries will look at reflecting the existing implicit national qualifications levels in a diagrammatic form – usually a grid. This classification acts as a representation of the national qualification system and a powerful communication tool. It is not intended to change anything<sup>21</sup> and is built on the consensus existing in the current system. This kind of ‘status quo’ NQF is rare, it is much more likely that a proposed NQF is designed to achieve some or all of the aspects of added value described in the previous section.

NQFs achieve added value by means of structure or by having functions

associated to them. The latter are commonly such procedures as additional quality assurance, additional validation procedures (such as for non formal and informal learning) or new qualifications for disadvantaged groups. Adding value through the structure of an NQF is now examined in a little more detail<sup>22</sup>.

The first structural element that might be considered is how broad the scope of the NQF will be: will it cover all national qualifications (inclusive) or cover those arising from specific parts of the education and training system such as higher education or vocational education and trainings? A second structural element is the extent to which the NQF will be designed to link the different parts (sectors) of education

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<sup>21</sup> But it is worth noting that experience shows that codifying qualifications in any way leads to changes in the underlying parts of the NQF, the SCQF in Scotland is a good example here.

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<sup>22</sup> There are other kinds of factors that have to be considered in the design of an NQF, for example its possible use as a regulatory tool which requires additional quality assurance procedures, or whether the framework is imposed by government (possibly by law) or is built on the basis of voluntary engagement of stakeholders.



and training<sup>23</sup> – will it attempt to demonstrate some common levels for these different parts of education and training systems or will it attempt to bring them together so that learning outcomes, units of assessment, credits and qualifications can be shared across the existing boundaries? These two structural elements (coverage and linkage) are powerful and important for a range of reasons, not least because they enable a qualifications system to be seen and understood as a whole and to promote access, facilitate the transfer of learning and enable improved progression in lifelong learning. For these reasons it is useful to look at a typology of different kinds of frameworks.

### A typology of NQFs

The starting point for an NQF is the tacit understandings of citizens of what qualifications stand for and how they open doors to new learning, new jobs or higher salaries. People know what qualification is needed for university or to enter the labour market as a skilled worker. This tacit knowledge of qualifications levels is deeply embedded in national cultures and

<sup>23</sup>Concern has been raised that comprehensive frameworks covering all parts of a national qualification system will provide too general a reference point potentially undermining the (positive) diversity of traditions and approaches existing in education and training. While this is a concern that has to be taken seriously, it will be up to the stakeholders in each country to decide on the balance between specificity and general coverage. In some frameworks the general level description is accompanied by more specific, sector based, descriptions.

is surprisingly consistent within each sector of the education and training system. There are no formal links between the sectors and no diagram, grid or classifier is necessary or evident. It could be said that every country has an implicit NQF based on these tacit understandings.

Sectors often make explicit the structure their qualifications levels and the types of learning programme that commonly leads to the different qualifications levels. Here we see the first use of structure as a way of allowing NQFs to add value to that offered by implicit NQFs. These hierarchies of qualifications levels are **sectoral frameworks** and are accepted by the stakeholders within the sector. Higher education classifies its main qualifications into levels and school leaving qualifications are often characterised into a kind of basic achievement and a more advanced achievement secured by staying in school beyond the school leaving age. In vocational education and training the situation is often more complex but it is possible to see a pattern of competence in basic skills, semi skilled competence, skilled worker competence and advanced specialist competence. In some countries the separate sectoral qualifications levels are made explicit in the form of level descriptors – the Bologna process has developed model level descriptors for higher education. These national sector frameworks tend to stand alone from other sector frameworks, however it is likely that informal links between the sectors are used.

There are examples of NQFs that seek to use the second means of adding value – linkage between sectoral NQFs – as a means of adding value for users of qualifications. These links form a **bridging NQF** that has an existence alongside the sectoral frameworks. Indeed the bridging NQF will incorporate the levels of the sectoral frameworks and will often include level descriptors that accommodate the characteristics in the separate sectoral frameworks. The linkage is intended to bring transparency and permeability across the zones between sectoral NQFs and enable new progression routes to develop. They bring coherence to the national qualifications system.

Bridging frameworks depend on the existence of separate sectoral frameworks which are governed by

sectoral interests. There is a stronger form of linkage which gives an NQF the role of bringing together the sectoral frameworks into a new **integrating framework**. These frameworks are a formal link between different education and training sectors and are represented by a single set of levels and descriptors covering all education and training sectors. Each sector uses this common set of levels and descriptors as its own framework. No separate sector frameworks exist.

In summary the peer learning activities have suggested there are possibly three distinct kinds of NQF – each with a capacity to add value to a qualifications system where qualifications levels remain implicit and sectors are more or less independent of each other. The three types are summarised in the table that follows.

Type of framework	Characteristics
Sector	<p>A defined series of qualification levels for one or more education and training sectors (general, VET, HE, Adult). Some sector frameworks could have level descriptors</p> <p>There are no explicit NQF links between the sector frameworks for different education or training sectors.</p>
Bridging	<p>There is a set of common qualification levels that cover all education sectors. Some of these common levels can have a set of descriptors. Separate sector frameworks exist as a basis to this bridging framework.</p> <p>The bridging framework forms an formal link between different education or training sectors</p>
Integrating	<p>A single set of levels and descriptors covering all education and training sectors, each sector uses this set of levels and descriptors as its own framework. No separate sector frameworks exist.</p> <p>The integrating framework forms a formal link between different education and training sectors.</p>



As stated earlier bridging and integrating frameworks can be regarded as comprehensive frameworks if they embrace all learning sectors.

### The typology and adding value

All NQFs can be classified according to this typology and examples of all types can be found across Europe. The typology represents a graduation from a neutral NQF, reflecting the existing implicit national qualifications levels in a diagrammatic form, to a strong tool for shaping qualifications systems so that they can facilitate lifelong learning. Clearly the more powerful integrating framework has the potential to produce more aspects of added value than separate sectoral NQFs. However such integrating frameworks are likely to demand more time for design and implementation, new infrastructure and greater stakeholder involvement than other ('status quo') types of frameworks. As already stated frameworks should be seen as classifications with 'vision' and for this reason policymakers in


most countries aspire to ambitious frameworks that are likely to yield maximum added value.

It is possible to achieve integrating NQFs through a series of stages and there are examples today of frameworks that have evolved from modest sectoral frameworks into integrating frameworks. The typology itself represents stages in achieving the added value associated with an integrating framework – where through a vision – resources and stakeholder groups can be mobilised to establish the kinds of infrastructures of governance and trust that an integrating framework demands.

Integrating frameworks are clearly attractive but there are features of sectoral frameworks that support specialisation and qualification development within sectors. It is argued that the coherent and integrated framework is too generalised a model that does not reflect the reality of qualifications in a country. Clearly in the process of framework development







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this view of the limitations of integrating frameworks has to be accommodated and stakeholders with a strong sectoral view should see the process of framework development as one where the sectoral interest and the special knowledge of how qualifications meet the needs of their sector are not relegated in importance. Qualification design and development needs to remain specialised, this is the essence of quality for sectoral interests, at the same time these qualifications need to fit comfortably within a national framework if sectors are to benefit from enhanced coherence and transparency of the system as a whole.

There are other considerations that can be applied when classifying frameworks and they often go beyond the approach described above. For example the differences in frameworks might include the extent to which they are top-down national developments or organic evolutions from work of the stakeholders to link qualifications. Another difference in frameworks is the extent to which they are defined as tight models requiring

precise characteristics of qualifications or as looser arrangements where the criteria for allocating qualifications to levels are more general and can be flexibly interpreted.

### **The EQF as a lifelong learning framework**

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The EQF is a lifelong learning framework and sets out to be inclusive of learning outcomes arising from any learning context. It is thus an integrating framework and can be a common reference point for general education and training, vocational education and training and higher education. It is also able to accommodate learning achieved by the validation of non formal and informal learning. However the EQF can only achieve this integration if the separate national systems that are referenced to it can also integrate these different learning contexts. It follows therefore that the EQF, as a lifelong learning framework, is encouraging NQFs to take the form of integrating frameworks.



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## 6. Creating support for NQFs

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NQFs provide an opportunity for cooperation and for strengthening partnerships. They do not, however, guarantee that such cooperation will happen and that new partnerships will emerge. Quite to the contrary, a poorly planned and weakly implemented NQF may put existing relationships and cooperation arrangements at risk. The experiences from those countries having developed NQFs - along with input from countries currently developing frameworks - point to the following key issues to be addressed in order to mobilise support.

### **Is there a need for an NQF?**

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Stakeholders must be convinced that there is a need for the system to change and that the NQF will provide benefits. The development of an NQF should obviously add value and offer solutions to clearly defined problems. The ILO (Tuck, op.cit.) formulates this as three distinct questions:

*Is there a problem? What exactly is this problem? How can the NQF help in addressing this problem?*

The areas of potential added value presented above provide a concrete starting point for stakeholders to decide on the need for an NQF. To be of any value, however, all involved stakeholders have to answer this question from their specific point of view. The discussions in the peer learning cluster show strong support for independent coordinators that remain sensitive to the different interests of parties involved. NQFs raise different expectations from different parties. While a compromise has to be sought it is also important that the interests of all parties are taken on board in one way or another. Agreement will of course not always be possible (or indeed sought after) – in these cases NQFs can help to clarify positions and options. It is only if the NQF fits the different needs of parties concerned that ownership will be developed.

An interesting example of how to organise such a process is provided by the Austrian national consultation on the creation of an NQF (2008) where all relevant stakeholders were invited to respond to the need for and potential scope of an NQF. The preparation of the



Irish NQF from 2003 may also be seen as an example of this, underlining that the mobilisation of support is a continuous process which have to be broadened and deepened as the implementation of the framework goes on.

### The need for broad involvement

The vision of comprehensive NQFs outlined in this note will inevitably require broad involvement - by stakeholders outside as well as inside the formal education and training system.

The need for such involvement is underlined by the broad range of functions currently fulfilled by qualifications. Qualifications (among other things) communicate the character and profile of specific learning experiences and learning outcomes and they signal the level and value of specific learning experiences and learning outcomes (currency). They are furthermore used for the selection of individuals (to education and training, the labour market), they play a significant role in regulating labour markets (signalling rights to access, pay and status) and they regulate supply and demand in education and training. Their role in monitoring education and training systems (for accountability purposes) can not be ignored.

This underlines that while learning providers are key players in designing and implementing qualification frameworks, a wide range of qualifications users also need to be

involved and claim ownership. This applies in particular to actors in the labour market, notably employers, trade unions, sector organisations and professional associations.

### The need to deepen involvement in the process

An NQF may easily be conceived as top-down initiatives of limited relevance to institutions and individuals at regional, institutional and local level. The areas of added value presented in section 3 can not be realised without deepening the implementation process and by involving additional layers of stakeholders.

This need is well exemplified by the challenges involved in using a learning outcomes based approach in the design of NQFs. While it is important to agree on a set of learning outcomes descriptors defining the overall NQF, the added value of this will only be realised the moment learning outcomes are used to define the actual qualifications, thus requiring consistent strategies for the definition and design of standards, curricula and assessment methods and approaches.

The above illustrates the limitations of seeing an NQF as a simple classifier presenting existing qualifications in a more transparent and accessible form. Whilst this is important, issues like increased currency, recognition of broader learning forms and increased portability, can only be achieved through this deepening of involvement.



## **The need for an open process**

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The process of defining and developing an NQF should be open and stakeholders should be able to join at any stage. Not all parties will be interested from the start though it is important that the crucial stakeholders are involved. It is important to maintain the possibility of bringing in stakeholders at a later stage. While some countries may choose to start developing limited frameworks covering a part of the qualifications system (VET, HE), this does not exclude a gradual broadening of the process. The same applies to the gradual enlargement of frameworks to include professional sectors and stakeholders in the voluntary and private sector.

## **The need for ‘neutral’ coordination and management of the framework**

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A comprehensive NQF addressing the fragmented character of qualifications systems can not be realised without clear and credible coordination. The lack of such coordination is a key problem in many countries currently developing NQFs. Key transversal issues like access, progression, transfer and portability are not properly addressed due to a lack of coordination between sectors and interests. The broader the coverage of the framework the more urgent this problem of coordination becomes. Creating support for a comprehensive NQF therefore requires the definition and implementation of national management mechanisms

representing something more than partial interests of providers and users.

## **The need for accountability**

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Creating support for an NQF will inevitably have to take into account the national situation and context. Common to all countries, however, is the need for a transparent and accountable management of education, training and qualifications systems. NQFs offer the chance to review and strengthen this accountability – not least supported by the shift to learning outcomes.

Introducing NQFs based on learning outcomes alters the point of equilibrium of governance in education and training systems. A shift may take place where the position of key actors change and where users of qualifications, mainly individuals and businesses, are likely to be empowered at the cost of providers. Learning programmes and qualifications based on inputs, such as teaching programmes and course duration, are to a certain extent impenetrable by end users (‘the black box of qualifications’). These users are normally asked to trust the system and they will have their needs met. This process of transformation of teaching specifications to learning outcomes is a process of codification or modelling and allows re-examination 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 fertilization of ideas about best practices.



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## 7. Conclusions

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This note summarises the discussions of the four peer learning activities on National Qualifications Frameworks held between 2007 and 2009. It also draws on discussion and suggestions from the EQF Advisory Group and the meetings of the Cluster on recognition of learning outcomes.

While not pretending to cover all aspects of NQF developments, the note provides an updated picture of ongoing discussions in EU and EEA Member States. The main focus of the note is on the potential added value of the NQFs – reflecting the overwhelmingly positive attitude to NQFs expressed by national stakeholders. It is important to underline, however, that releasing this added value requires national processes involving all relevant stakeholders

from day one. Three messages are of particular importance: The first is that an NQF with qualification levels based on learning outcomes is likely to encourage the broader use of learning outcomes and it is this shift that will create much of the added value for NQFs. A second main message is that NQFs should be seen as platforms for new visions, cooperation and dialogue, without this their added value will be limited. A third message is that NQFs can only deliver added value when the contextual conditions are right; in some countries this is not the case.

It is our hope that the note will inform discussions among stakeholders at all levels and thus contribute to the modernisation of education and training and to the realisation of lifelong learning.



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EQF Note 1: Explaining the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning was published in June 2008 at the event of the launching of the implementation of the EQF. EQF Note 1 informed stakeholders about the general context of the establishment of the EQF in the form of questions and answers.

This note, EQF Note 2: Added Value of National Qualifications Frameworks in Implementing the EQF addresses policy makers and qualifications experts and aims to support the design and implementation of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) as tools for implementing the EQF at national level.

