



# The quality assurance of qualifications

in the integrated  
qualifications system



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## Glossary of terms used in the text<sup>1</sup>

**Awarding a qualification** – to be defined as the result of validation and certification.

**Certification** – the process by which a learner receives a formal document from an authorised institution stating that a qualification has been achieved.

**Integrated qualifications system** – the entirety of measures serving the purpose of establishing, awarding and providing the quality assurance of the qualifications included in the Integrated Qualifications Register.

**Learning outcomes** – a set of knowledge skills and social competence acquired in the learning process.

**National qualifications system** – the entire system of procedures for establishing and awarding qualifications and ensuring their quality.

**Polish Qualifications Framework** – the description of the hierarchy of qualifications' levels entered into the Integrated Qualifications Register in Poland.

**Qualification** – a set of learning outcomes following established standards, whose achievement was formally certified by a competent body.

**Quality of a qualification** – quality of a qualification signifies its usability for individuals who have attained it or strive to attain it as well as for the social environment in which it is functioning.

**Validation** – the multi-stage process of ensuring that the competences required for a given qualification have been attained, regardless of the learning process. Validation leads to certification.

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<sup>1</sup> The definitions are from „A Glossary of Key Terms related to the National Qualifications System” (Sławiński, 2014). A new term not defined in the Glossary is *awarding a qualification*.

## Introduction

The aim of the work on the quality assurance of qualifications carried out in the European Social Fund systemic projects – the National Qualifications Framework Projects<sup>2</sup> and the Integrated Qualifications Register Project<sup>3</sup> – was to develop solutions that strengthen confidence in awarded qualifications primarily for their potential users – learners confirming their competences, employers and career counsellors. In Poland, a sizeable number of qualifications are included in large and well-known subsystems, such as formal general and vocational education, higher education and craft trades, which already meet defined quality standards. At the same time, many qualifications exist that are offered by industry organisations, professional associations and training institutions. These qualifications have diverse quality assurance standards, not always with properly developed and transparent quality assurance mechanisms. In such situations, it is difficult for learners and employers wanting to develop their employees' competences to determine which offered qualifications are reliable and will contribute to personal and professional development, as well as the development of companies and society, and which could be of questionable value.

The intent of establishing the principles of the quality assurance of qualifications is to reduce such uncertainties by defining standards for qualifications, their awarding process and for the institutions involved

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<sup>2</sup> *The development of terms of reference for the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework and the National Qualifications Register for lifelong learning.*

<sup>3</sup> *Developing the national qualifications system – organising and institutionalising the Integrated Qualifications Register and Developing the national qualifications system – pilot implementation of the national qualifications system and its promotional campaign.*

in these activities. The proposed approach is focused less on the process of attaining competences. **Its emphasis is rather on the importance of the quality of a qualification described according to an accepted standard<sup>4</sup> and validation** – the process of verifying whether the competences required for a given qualification have been attained. Therefore, the principles can be applied to both the qualifications awarded at school or university, as well as to those that are the result of training programmes, professional experience, etc. As a result, they contribute to the development of lifelong learning both individually (an increase in the number of persons seeking to attain qualifications), as well as institutionally (an increase in the number of institutions offering reliable qualifications).

This publication summarises the work on ensuring the quality of qualifications and its assurance process, carried out in the NQF Project with the participation of experts in 2011–2013. It also includes the results of subsequent consultations conducted in 2014–2015 in the NQF and IQR projects and the results of the work on the pilot project. As a result, the text has been amended from its original version, especially in the annex „Proposed quality assurance principles for awarding qualifications and the entities involved“. This document presents only one segment of the planned integrated qualifications system (IQS), so broader knowledge of the system may be helpful while reading this text.

The key assumptions concerning the quality assurance of qualifications adopted as part of the work on the integrated

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<sup>4</sup> A standard for describing qualifications was developed during the NQF Project.

qualifications system were defined in the general principles of the quality assurance of qualifications (see Chapter 4.2.).

\* \* \*

To begin, this text presents the approach to the quality assurance of qualifications described in European documents. These guidelines and principles provided a reference point for the measures developed in the NQF Project on the one hand, while on the other, they served as the basis for discussions on the determinants of the quality of qualifications, resulting in the acceptance of a further developed

set of premises. The next chapter is devoted to the factors affecting the quality of qualifications. Then, we present the successive stages of work on the quality of qualifications and discuss the results: a model of a qualifications' quality assurance system, the scope of activities of individual institutions involved in the quality assurance of qualifications, the processes they will be carrying out and the relationships among them. The publication ends with a bibliography and an annex listing the principles of quality assurance for specific institutions and the validation process.

# 1. The quality assurance of qualifications as described in European documents

Quality assurance is perceived as an important mechanism of ensuring the reliability of qualifications in European documents related to the lifelong learning policy, including qualifications frameworks. Its role in supporting the process of developing transparent, comparable, and reliable qualifications systems is also emphasised. The European approach to the quality assurance of qualifications is gradually evolving towards a holistic and systemic approach, including both the development<sup>5</sup> and awarding of qualifications as well as the learning process. Internal and external evaluation, together with continuous quality improvement and monitoring of all levels and areas of the qualifications system, are also indicated as key and commonly applied measures.

The European approach to the quality assurance of qualifications is gradually evolving towards a holistic and systemic approach, including both the development and awarding of qualifications, as well as the learning process.

The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2008/C 111/01 EC) formulated common quality assurance principles for higher education, general education, and vocational education and training. In general terms, the document also refers to the quality of awarding a qualification, indicating that the focus should be on results and learning outcomes. However, in the Recommendation of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQARF, 2009/C 155/01), comprehensive guidelines were proposed for education systems and training organisations. The guidelines for the educational process consist of four stages of a cycle, aiming at constant improvement.<sup>6</sup> The document emphasises that frameworks should also be applied „at the level of awarding qualifications“; and that „standards and guidelines for the recognition, validation and certification of competences of individuals“ should be defined (EQARF, 2009/C 155/01). Neither document directly addresses the issue of the relationship between the quality of a qualification awarded to an individual and the quality of the process of developing a qualification and its result, which is the description of the qualification.

It is worth noting that many provisions in both recommendations have a universal character. This particularly concerns the comprehen-

<sup>5</sup> The process of developing a qualification can be more or less complex. In practice, its integral part in various European qualifications systems is the development of curricula programmes.

<sup>6</sup> The cycle of improvement used to develop EQARF frameworks is compatible with the classic Deming Cycle. It consists of four stages: planning, implementation, evaluation/assessment, review/revision, on the basis of which the next cycle is planned. The direction and scope of the change is based on the results of an evaluation.



sive approach to EQARF, which refers to a classic concept of quality assurance and improvement, using such mechanisms as:

- external and internal evaluation, on the basis of which strategic, tactical and operational changes are made,
- involvement of stakeholders in quality assurance, including all staff of the organisation,
- transparency,
- acquisition and exchange of information and experiences, etc.

This approach can be used not only in relation to the learning process, but also to develop and award qualifications.

The process of defining and describing learning outcomes should be part of quality assurance so that qualifications are understandable and relevant to the needs of learners, employers, and the labour market.

The issues of the relationships between the quality of developing a qualification and the quality of the result of this process (i.e. the description of the qualification) and between the quality of the qualification awarding process and the quality of the learning process were addressed during the Peer Learning Activity<sup>7</sup> meetings, and described in the report *The Role of Quality Assurance in Defining, Describing and Assessing Learning Outcomes* (European Commission, 2010). This publication draws attention to the fact that an approach based on learning outcomes is crucial to the quality of qualifications and the learning process. The process of defining and describing learning outcomes should be subject to certain rules and be part of quality assurance so that the qualifications are understandable and relevant to the needs of learners, employers and society. This is of fundamental importance for the quality of the learning process as well as for the quality of the process of verifying the learning outcomes attained by learners. This, in turn, is based on comparing what the learner has achieved with the learning outcomes described for the given qualification. The report recommends developing measures to ensure the quality of defining, describing, verifying and reviewing learning outcomes.

A publication entitled *European guidelines on the validation of non-formal and informal learning* of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) includes an important statement about the significance of the quality of the validation process for the quality of a qualification. From this statement, we can conclude that adequately described qualifications, in a professional context, not an educational one, form the basis for the reliable validation of competences acquired outside of formal education. The publication also highlights that the very process of validation should be supported at each stage by measures ensuring its quality and reliability (Cedefop, 2009b, p. 33).

<sup>7</sup> Peer Learning Activity (PLAs) is a tool used by the European Commission to improve the premises of lifelong learning policies and its integral elements.

The European Higher Education Area and strategic documents for the development of the Bologna Process also emphasise the importance of an approach based on learning outcomes for the quality of education (Bucharest Communiqué, 2012).

What is needed is a change in thinking, with the emphasis shifted towards the quality of the description of a qualification and the quality of validation.

Focusing on the quality of the educational process is grounded in European tradition and common in current practice. As is clear from the Cedefop reports, the quality assurance of validation is far less popular and still underdeveloped (Cedefop, 2009a, p. 95). What is needed is a change in thinking, with the emphasis shifted towards the quality of the description of a qualification and the quality of validation. This problem is also openly discussed by experts and practitioners in the field of qualifications. An example is the Qualifications Platform blog, with an entry entitled *Are we on the wrong track with quality assuring qualifications systems?* Its author identifies four key factors, which enable an assessment to be made of whether or not to award a qualification:

1. „You need qualification standards that state clearly when a person is considered competent.
2. You need an assessment process that allows us to measure if the person is competent.
3. To ensure consistency, you need a process to double-check independently whether the assessment has been made correctly.
4. Finally, you need a recognised authority that can deliver the qualification to the right person, so that everybody can acknowledge the value of the certificate.”

(Deij, 2013).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Recently, the problem of the quality of validation was also addressed in a CEDEFOP study „Quality assurance of certification in vocational education and training”, see Luomi-Messerer, Luomi, 2015.

## 2. The process of working on quality assurance

The first stage of the conceptual work on the quality assurance of qualifications was to analyse the problem of the quality of qualifications. Its aim was to formulate the general principles related to the reliability and quality of qualifications. The work was carried out simultaneously by a group of NQF Project staff and experts and a broader team of stakeholders interested in the quality of qualifications, including representatives of employers, educational institutions, public institutions, craft trades, general, vocational and higher education. The materials developed were discussed at joint meetings and then presented to a wider audience at conferences and the public debate.

Two key issues in developing the principles were to determine how the quality of qualifications is understood and to identify the factors affecting the quality of qualifications. It was decided that issues relating to the quality assurance of qualifications would be considered from the point of view of a qualification awarded to a specific person. As a result of discussions among experts and stakeholders, and the public debate, three main factors affecting the quality of qualifications were distinguished: the quality of the description of the qualification (among others, learning outcomes), the quality of validation, and the quality of teaching and learning. These factors are further discussed below.

To ensure the quality of qualifications, it is very important to reduce the risk of irregularities, as well as to constantly strive to improve the processes associated with defining and awarding qualifications. During our work, we identified a number of risks in both key areas and indicated possible actions that should reduce the possibility of their occurrence. An example of such an analysis for the process of verifying learning outcomes (assessment) is presented in Table 1.

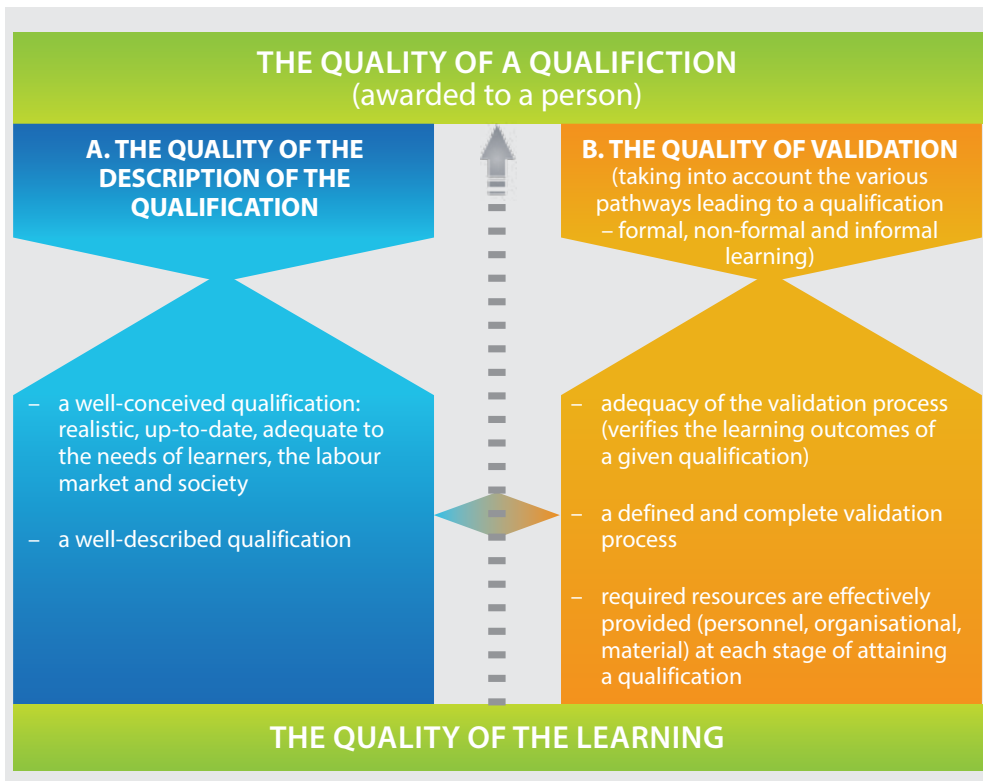
**Table 1. Sample analysis of the risks to the quality of a qualification**

The stage of verifying learning outcomes ( <i>assessment</i> ) during validation	
Risks	Actions / What should be done?
Verification methods are inadequate (inappropriate choice of methods/tools; inadequate exam problems, which do not verify what is supposed to be checked; improper use of established assessment criteria)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ ensure that the proper guidelines on verification are included in the description of the qualification</li> <li>■ oversee compliance with the guidelines</li> <li>■ ensure the relevant organisational and technical conditions required to properly carry out the guidelines</li> </ul>
The scope of verifying the learning outcomes is insufficient for the given qualification during the assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ ensure that proper guidelines on verification are issued in the description of the qualification</li> <li>■ oversee compliance with the guidelines</li> <li>■ ensure the relevant organisational and technical conditions required to properly carry out the guidelines</li> </ul>
The required conditions to carry out verification are not ensured	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ oversee the organisational and technical conditions required to properly carry out the guidelines</li> </ul>
The persons carrying out verification regard their work with a sense of impunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ ensure transparency – introduce procedures and documentation enabling the verification process</li> <li>■ who have proven to be unreliable from carrying out verification</li> </ul>
The wrong persons are chosen for verification – overlapping roles and conflicts of interest exist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ develop guidelines for choosing persons with the relevant competences to validate learning outcomes for the qualification to be awarded</li> </ul>

### 3. Factors determining the quality of a qualification

A qualification is a specific set of learning outcomes that are consistent with set standards, whose achievement is formally confirmed by an authorised institution (Sławiński, 2014, p. 28). Because the essence of a qualification understood in this way refers to the (confirmed) competences of individuals, we must ensure that the required learning outcomes are subject to a reliable validation process and that only persons who have confirmed their competences according to the set of learning outcomes for a given qualification receive a certificate. It should be noted, however, that to achieve this objective, the description of the qualification, primarily consisting of the „specified set of learning outcomes” mentioned earlier in the definition, must be of high quality. This means that the learning outcomes must be 1) relevant to needs, 2) up-to-date, 3) attainable, and 4) verifiable. The learning process is also significant for the quality of the awarded qualification. These dependencies are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Factors determining the quality of a qualification



Source: IBE.

The quality of a qualification's description depends on whether the qualification is well-conceived (up-to-date, adequate to the needs of learners, the labour market and society, and real), and well-described.

A. The quality of an awarded qualification depends on the quality of the description of the qualification, which is determined by whether the qualification:

- is **well-conceived**:

- is adequate to the current or foreseeable needs of learners, the labour market and society,
- is realistic, namely, 1) the learning outcomes are attainable by a specific group of learners in a foreseeable amount of time and in a defined manner; 2) the learning outcomes are verifiable.

- is **well-described**, that is, in accordance with the approved standard for describing a qualification.<sup>9</sup>

The description of a qualification should clearly identify the conditions to be met by a person seeking to attain the given qualification and include, among other things, comprehensive information on its learning outcomes and the assessment criteria enabling the verification process to be properly carried out.

B. The second key factor determining the quality of an awarded qualification is the quality of validation. A properly performed validation process is:

The quality of validation depends on whether it is:

- adequate to the character of the qualification,
- reliable,
- complete,
- supported by quality assurance mechanisms.

- **adequate to the character of the specific qualification**, meaning that the assessment criteria and methods used in this process enable the learning outcomes to be sufficiently verified as attained. For example, the competences required to obtain a driver's license cannot be verified solely by a written test, but also require a practical exam.

- **reliable**, that is, ensuring that the same effect will be achieved should the validation process be repeated, regardless of the validation methods used, time of performing the validation or the persons validating the learning outcomes.

- **complete**, meaning that it consists of all the necessary stages.<sup>10</sup>

- supported at each stage by **appropriate quality assurance mechanisms**, which review the persons involved in the validation process, the places where validation is carried out, the manner in which it is carried out and the methods and tools used.

<sup>9</sup> The standard for describing qualifications was developed in the NQF Project.

<sup>10</sup> The particular stages of validation were defined in the Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01).

Qualifications must be described in such a way as to enable validation to be properly carried out. In turn, validation must be designed and carried out so that the competence requirements of a given qualification are met.

It should be noted that in terms of the quality of qualifications awarded to persons, the relationship between the quality of the qualification's description and the quality of validation is very important. Qualifications must be described in such a way as to enable validation to be properly carried out. In turn, the validation process leading to the awarding of a qualification must be adequately designed and carried out according to the competence requirements described for the given qualification.

The quality of learning is also important for the quality of qualifications. Of particular importance is the connection between learning and the description of the qualification, as well as validation, which is the basis for awarding the qualification. Therefore, the following should be taken into account when designing and carrying out the educational process:

1. the learning outcomes for the given qualification together with their verification criteria,
2. the premises for validating learning outcomes defined for the given qualification (Parts A and B in Figure 1).

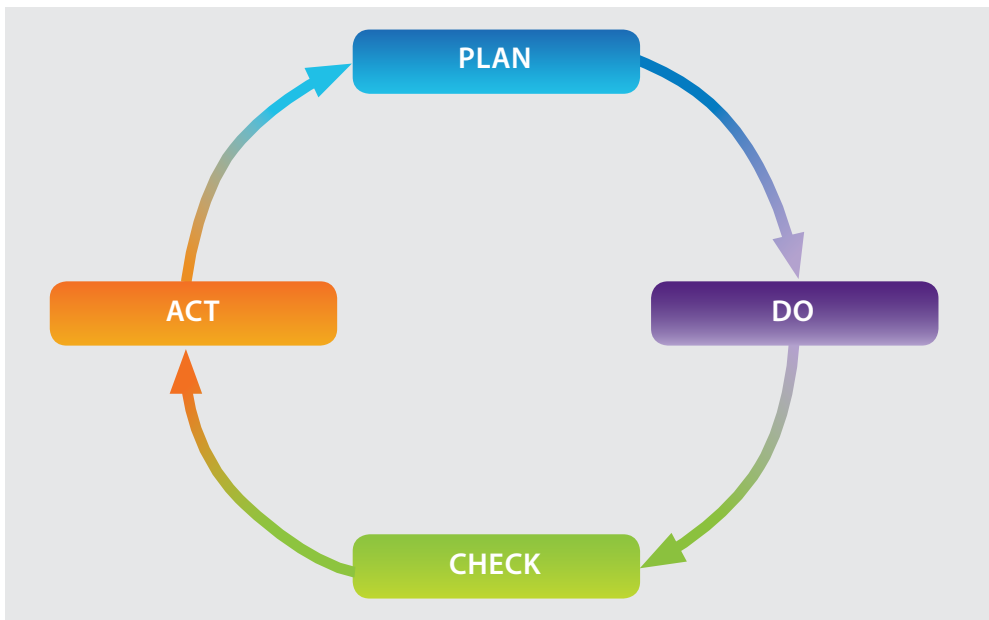
In working on the Polish Qualifications Framework and the integrated qualifications system, we assumed that learning outcomes are the key component of a qualification, rather than the way they are attained. Therefore, in our work on the concept of the quality of qualifications, the quality of the learning process was not deemed the primary issue. This is also a reflection of the fundamental changes occurring both in Poland and Europe in the field of ensuring the quality of the learning process in formal and non-formal education. These measures should be appropriately linked to ensure the quality of the description of qualifications and of validation.

## 4. The quality assurance of qualifications in the integrated qualifications system (IQF)

### 4.1. The premises for the quality assurance of qualifications

In the course of our work, we agreed that the principles of quality assurance must guarantee the proper implementation and constant improvement of the qualifications system, as well as the appropriate functioning of the entities responsible for it. This corresponds to the cycle of improvement developed by William Edward Deming (Fig. 2), which states that quality assurance should be viewed as a cyclical process, starting with planning, through implementation, evaluation, to changing/improving the process. This approach also reveals the dynamic character of quality assurance, which cannot be reduced to a single audit (Travers, 2007, p. 13).

Figure 2. The Deming Cycle.



Source: Based on Travers, 2007.



Similarly, the system of the quality assurance of qualifications itself is not a static creature; it must constantly change and improve in order to be able to achieve its expected objectives. A well-functioning quality assurance system increases the reliability of qualifications. Therefore, we proposed that it should be developed on the basis of the following assumptions:

1. The state should be responsible for defining the general principles of the quality assurance of qualifications, the principles of ensuring the quality of the requirements for a qualification, and the principles of the quality assurance of validation.
2. Measures ensuring the quality of qualifications should be improved according to the civilizational changes taking place.
3. The description and awarding of all qualifications included in the integrated qualifications system should be subject to the general principles of the quality assurance of qualifications.
4. In terms of the quality assurance requirements for an integrated qualifications system, equal treatment should be guaranteed for:
  - all fields of activity (economic sectors), and
  - all types of public and private entities involved in the process of awarding qualifications and having them entered into the IQS.
5. The integrated qualifications system should be developed in such a way as to enable the continued functioning of already existing good quality assurance practices within its framework.
6. Quality assurance should be a cooperative process involving all interested parties. It is essential to ensure the ongoing participation of people with practical experience (above all, employers and persons who are professionally active).
7. The requirements for developing and operating the quality assurance system should take into account the criterion of economic efficiency.

A well-functioning quality assurance system increases the credibility of qualifications.

## 4.2. General quality assurance principles for qualifications in the integrated qualifications system

The principles enumerated below are proposed to ensure the quality of qualifications in the integrated qualifications system.

No.	Principle	Definition
1.	The quality of qualifications	The quality assurance principles for qualifications do not set out the specific measures used to ensure quality; the measures should take into account the particular nature of the qualification.
2.	Participation of stakeholders	Quality assurance involves the representatives of all interested parties.
3.	Improving the description of qualifications	The descriptions of the qualifications entered into the integrated qualifications system shall be monitored and regularly updated.
4.	Improving the validation process	Validation processes shall be monitored and modified accordingly.
5.	Improving quality assurance systems	Quality assurance systems shall be monitored and modified accordingly.
6.	Adequacy of validation	The validation process shall be adapted to the specific nature and level of the qualification, as well as to the form of learning used by the person attaining the qualification.
7.	Responsibility for the quality of qualifications	Each entity involved in developing and awarding a qualification is responsible for the quality of qualifications.
8.	Counteracting conflicts of interest	In order to counteract conflicts of interest in developing and awarding qualifications, the processes involved in these activities shall be appropriately separated and organised.
9.	Coherent internal and external solutions	Each process of developing and awarding qualifications shall be subjected to internal and external quality assurance measures, which are appropriately interrelated.
10.	Transparency	The general public shall have access to information about qualifications, their related processes, and the entities involved in developing and awarding qualifications, as well as about the quality assurance of qualifications.

### 4.3. The main decisions regarding the quality assurance system for awarding qualifications

In our current stage of work on the integrated qualifications system, we decided that the process of awarding qualifications will be included in the quality assurance system. As a result, key definitions, a description of the entities involved in quality assurance and their tasks directly relate to the process of awarding qualifications. Proposed quality assurance principles were also developed for particular entities and the validation process (see Appendix 1). These solutions were revised and supplemented as a result of consultations conducted during public debate meetings, and are also based on recommendations from expert reports prepared by representatives of selected sectors, where the proposed principles were compared to the measures currently used in Poland.

As a result of the work carried out in the NQF Project, certain conceptual definitions were accepted for the quality assurance system of qualifications.

No.	Term	Definition
1.	The quality of qualifications	The functionality of a qualification for a person who has attained it and for the community, within which the qualification functions (Sławiński, 2014, p. 72).
2.	The quality assurance system of awarding a qualification	The system relating to the process of awarding qualifications. It is composed of internal and external quality assurance systems. The quality assurance system includes each institution participating in the qualifications' awarding process. Its aim is to ensure that the validation process and the factors affecting it are properly carried out and improved.
3.	Internal quality assurance system for the qualifications' awarding process (IQAS)	The system is integrated within the management system of the institution. Its tasks are: to document the processes, establish procedures, collect information on the functioning of the processes related to awarding qualifications, perform internal evaluations and apply the recommendations from internal and external evaluations, as well as to carry out other activities to ensure that the process of awarding qualifications is properly carried out and improved.
4.	External quality assurance system for the qualifications' awarding process (EQAS)	The system's aim is to collect information on the functioning of the qualifications' awarding process. It is primarily based on an external evaluation, which assesses the process of awarding qualifications from a broader perspective.

5.	Internal evaluation	Collecting, analysing and assessing information based on such principles and criteria as: effectiveness, efficiency, utility, and relevance of the process of awarding qualifications. Internal evaluations are carried out by institutions in order to improve these processes and increase the reliability of qualifications. Internal evaluation is part of the internal quality assurance system.
6.	External evaluation	Collecting, analysing and assessing information based on such principles and criteria as: effectiveness, efficiency, utility, and the relevance of the process of awarding qualifications. External evaluations are carried out by institutions in order to verify whether the awarding process and the institutions that conduct it meet requirements, improve these processes and increase the reliability of qualifications.

## 4.4. Entities responsible for the quality of the awarding process

### 4.4.1. Entity authorising the inclusion of a qualification into the IQS (AE)

According to the accepted premises, qualifications will be entered into an integrated qualifications system by the relevant minister or the head of a central government administrative office (Sławiński and Dębowski, 2013, p. 27). The entity authorising the inclusion of a qualification into the IQS is responsible for the quality of its description and for the quality of its awarding process. This entity cooperates with external quality assurance institutions carrying out the external evaluation of the certifying institution, including the validation process. The results of the external evaluation are one of the important sources of information on the reliability and quality of the qualifications' awarding process.

The tasks of the entity authorising the inclusion of qualifications into the IQS are:

- to grant the authority to award certificates,
- to grant the authority to perform an external evaluation,
- to define the scope of the reports from the certifying institution.

The authorising entity should consult with stakeholders when carrying out these tasks.

### 4.4.2. Certifying institution (CI)

The certifying institution is a public, private or social entity carrying out the certification process – issuing a formal document to a learner

confirming that he/she has attained a qualification. The certifying institution is responsible for the quality of certification and validation. Therefore, it has an internal quality assurance system and carries out periodic internal evaluations, which also includes validation, regardless of whether validation is carried out at the certifying institution or at a separate, cooperating validating institution. The certifying institution shall undergo periodic external evaluations carried out by the external quality assurance institution.

The tasks of the certifying institution are:

- to develop an internal quality assurance system,
- to perform periodic internal evaluations in relation to the quality assurance principles for awarding qualifications and the requirements of the qualifications' awarding process as specified in the description of the qualifications. Internal evaluation includes the validation process, as well as the validating institutions if validation occurs outside of the certifying institution. The CI's periodic internal evaluations are to result in improvements of the institution and the process of awarding qualifications. As a result of the internal evaluation, recommendations are developed to guide the institution in improving the process of awarding qualifications,
- to provide access to the results of the internal evaluation to the external quality assurance institution,
- to undergo an external evaluation carried out by the external quality assurance institution. The evaluation shall include the certifying institution's internal quality assurance system and validation process (the external evaluation refers to the quality assurance principles for qualifications and the requirements specified in the description of the qualifications),
- in cooperation with the external quality assurance institution, to prepare a report (the report of the certifying institution), which includes descriptions of the validation process, the development and operation of the internal quality assurance system and the results of the internal evaluation. Attached to this document is the external evaluation report, which contains evidence (descriptions, documents, sources) confirming compliance with the principles and requirements. All documentation is submitted to the entity authorising the inclusion of qualifications into the IQS.

**Comment:**

The report of the certifying institution should also contain recommendations and guidance on improving the descriptions of qualifications resulting from previously conducted validation and certification processes.

#### 4.4.3. Validating institution (VI)

A validating institution is a public, private or social entity that carries out validation, which is a multi-step process of verifying whether or not the required competences of the qualification have been attained – regardless of how the learning took place. A validating institution is responsible for the quality of the validation it performs. The validation process of a validating institution is externally evaluated by the certifying institution. The validation process is also subject to periodic external evaluations carried out by the external quality assurance institution.

**Comment:**

The processes of certification, validation, and training/education can take place within one institution. This is currently the case for a number of qualifications. In accordance with the principles of the quality assurance of qualifications, regardless of the institutional context, these processes must be appropriately separated so that their credibility is not questioned and there is no conflict of interest.

#### **Examples of joining and separating the processes of certification, validation and training/education:**

The following cases present examples of various configurations of certification, validation, and training/education processes:

1. In higher education, all these processes are carried out by universities, which educate, validate competences during examination sessions and diploma examinations, certify, and award licentiate and master's degrees.
2. Formal vocational education and training employs hybrid solutions. Education takes place in school. Validation of general education competences is also carried out by the school, which issues a certificate of graduation. Vocational examinations are

provided externally and carried out by regional examination boards. The certificate confirming a qualification in an occupation and the diploma confirming a vocational qualification are issued by regional examination boards.

There are also qualifications that have all of the processes under discussion carried out separately. An example of this is the driver's license. Driving courses are offered by driving schools. Regional road traffic centres carry out driving tests, whereas the document itself is issued by the county administration.

#### 4.4.4. External quality assurance institution (EQAI)

The external quality assurance institution is a public, private or social entity, which performs an independent, periodic external evaluation of the certifying institution, the functioning of its internal quality assurance system, and validation process, regardless of whether the validation is carried out in the certifying institution or in a separate, cooperating validating institution. The EQAI should have a strong background / experience in the sector. The EQAI must meet certain requirements consistent with the principles of quality assurance to be a reliable partner for the entity authorising the inclusion of qualifications into the IQS. It is also periodically reviewed by this authorising entity.

The tasks of the external quality assurance institution are:

- to cooperate with the certification institution and support its quality assurance activities,
- to determine, after consultation with the certifying institution, areas of special interest and the scope of the external evaluation, as well as the actions and procedures required to perform an external evaluation of the certifying institution,
- to perform the external evaluation of the certifying institution, its internal quality assurance system and validation process with respect to the quality assurance principles for qualifications and requirements related to the awarding of qualifications as set out in the description of the qualifications,
- to prepare the external evaluation report for the certifying institution.

**Comment:**

In view of the function fulfilled by the EQAI in the qualifications' quality assurance system, it is important to ensure the conditions for performing the most independent and objective external evaluation of the certifying institution, the certification process and validation, as is possible. Therefore, the EQAI and the certifying institution must be separate entities, and not be personally or financially dependent on each other in any way. There should also be a guarantee that the authorising entity has no influence on the external evaluation performed by the EQAI. This means, for example, that if the external evaluation is carried out by a separate organisational unit of the authorising entity, rather than by an independent EQAI, the unit must be effectively separated from the responsibilities carried out by the authorising entity in overseeing the certifying institution.

The external evaluation of the certifying institution is an essential element of the quality assurance of qualifications carried out by external quality assurance institutions. These institutions must be independent to be able to perform an objective evaluation, as well as credible to the authorising entity, other institutions involved in the process of awarding qualifications, and users of qualifications. Therefore, the entity authorising the inclusion of qualifications into the IQS provides accreditation to the external quality assurance institutions. External quality assurance institutions shall:

- act in accordance with the principles of qualifications' quality assurance and the ensuing general requirements for external quality assurance institutions in the national qualifications system,
- meet additional requirements as specified by the entity authorising the inclusion of qualifications into the IQS resulting from the specific (sectoral) nature and level of the qualification.

External quality assurance institutions must be independent, but also credible to the entity authorising the inclusion of qualifications into the IQS and users of qualifications.

The entity authorising the inclusion of a qualification into the IQS:

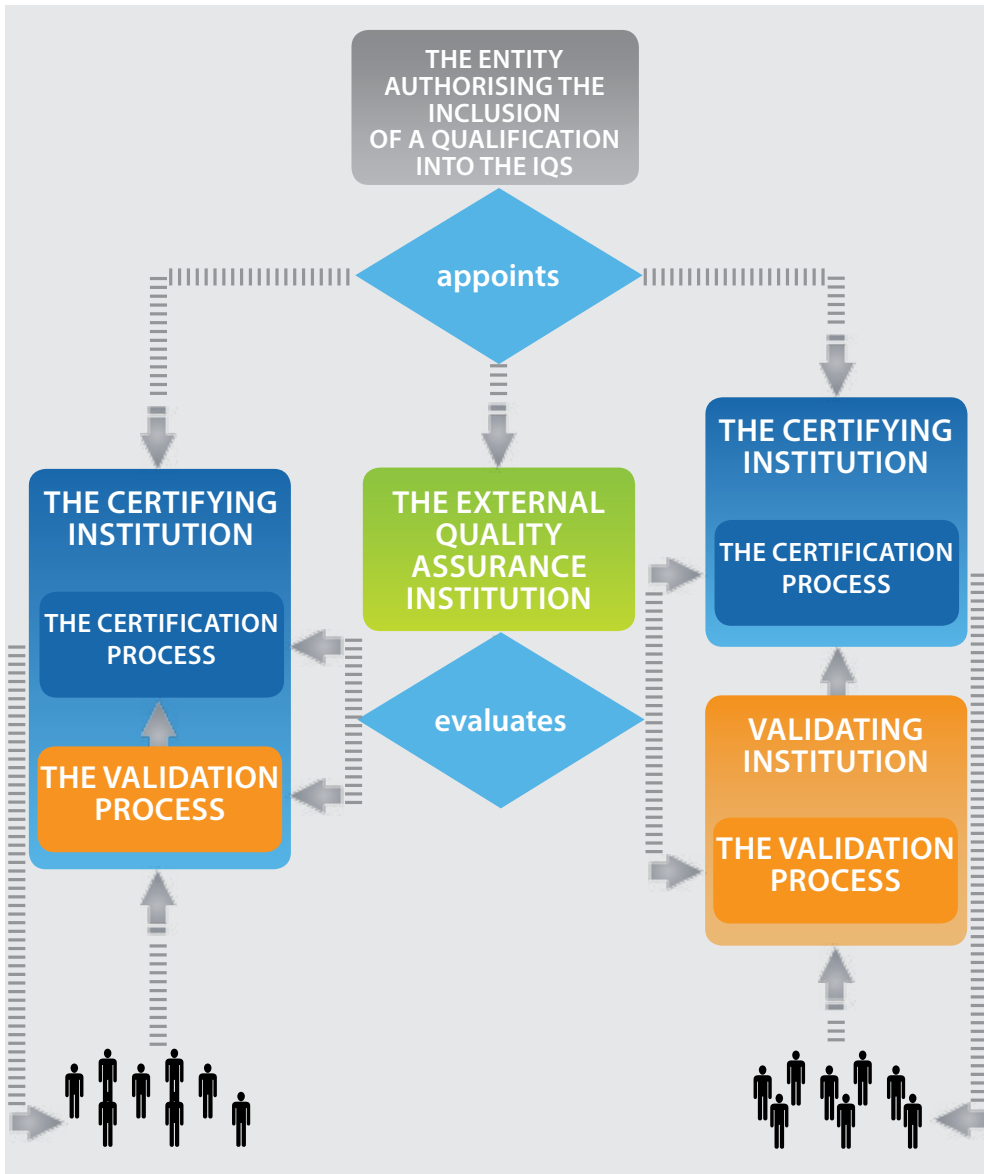
- determines, after consultation with stakeholders, additional requirements for the external quality assurance institution as a result of the specific (sectoral) nature and level of the qualification,
- decides whether to grant accreditation to the EQAI.

Figure 3 presents a static picture of the institutions influencing the quality of qualifications in the process of awarding qualifications and the relationships among them. Two institutional configurations of certification and validation are shown: (1) when certification and



validation are carried out by a single institution; (2) when certification and validation are carried out by two separate institutions.

Figure 3. Entities responsible for the quality of qualifications in the process of awarding qualifications and the relationships among them



Source: IBE.

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# Proposed quality assurance principles for awarding qualifications and the entities involved<sup>1</sup>

## Annex

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<sup>1</sup> Status as of November 2014.

# I. The quality assurance principles of awarding qualifications

## A. Validation

No.	Principle	Comments and guidelines  (Comments and guidelines take into consideration the premises of the integrated qualifications system.)
1.	The validation process shall be valid and reliable.	<p>Validity means that the validation process verifies the learning outcomes of the given qualification defined in the description of the qualification.</p> <p>Reliability means that the result of the assessment process is the same regardless of the location, methods used or persons carrying out validation.</p>
2.	Adequate criteria, methods and tools are used to verify the learning outcomes for a given qualification.	<p>The assessment criteria – the specified/detailed learning outcomes – are defined in the description of the qualification.</p> <p>The learning outcomes of a given qualification are assessed in the validation process by using the assessment criteria defined in the description of the qualification.</p> <p>The methods and tools of verifying the learning outcomes of a given qualification must adequately confirm a person's actual attainment of these learning outcomes.</p> <p>The choice of assessment methods should derive both from the learning outcomes of the given qualification and their assessment criteria, as well as from the possible methods used to attain and document the learning outcomes (formal and non-formal education, informal learning).</p> <p>The assessment methods and tools shall be consistent with the requirements for validation defined in the description of the qualification.</p>

3.	The criteria and methods of verifying the learning outcomes for a given qualification are clearly defined and accessible to all interested parties.	<p>The assessment criteria are defined in the description of the qualification.</p> <p>The description of the qualification includes general information on the assessment methods in the section on validation requirements. More detailed information on assessment methods is available from the certifying institution.</p> <p>The level of descriptive detail and access to information on assessment criteria and methods depends on the function they serve. It may be that one set of information is made available to persons undergoing validation, while another set is available to persons carrying out validation or to institutions ensuring the quality of validation.</p>
4.	Validation is described clearly and in detail. This description is available to the public.	<p>The description of the validation process is a formal document presenting, among other information, the conditions to be fulfilled in order to undergo validation, specific stages of validation, assessment methods, competence requirements of the persons carrying out validation and the conditions under which validation is organised.</p> <p>The description of validation is made available both digitally (Internet sites of the certifying and validating institutions) and in paper form.</p>
5.	The validation process is designed by persons who have the competences of the specific field of the given qualification, as well as the competence to design a validation process.	The team designing the validation process should together possess the competences of the qualification's specific field, of carrying out validation and of ensuring the quality of validation.
6.	Validation is carried out by persons with the competences of the specific field of the given qualification and the validation process. These competences are periodically verified.	<p>The team carrying out validation should together possess the competences of the qualification's specific field and of carrying out validation.</p> <p>These competences are periodically verified.</p> <p>Staff competences are updated and developed, e.g. through training.</p> <p>Staff competences are periodically monitored.</p>
7.	The material and organisational resources required for the proper validation of a given qualification are ensured.	Material and organisational resources are understood as: equipment, technical and facility conditions, financial conditions and other conditions required to carry out validation.

8.	The principles of documenting learning outcomes and the formal and subject-related assessment criteria of the submitted documentation are clearly defined and accessible to all interested parties.	<p>Clear guidelines are needed on the form and scope of required documentation and on the assessment criteria of evidence of prior learning provided by a candidate or another person (i.e. advisor) during the process of validating learning outcomes.</p> <p>The level of descriptive detail and access to information depend on the function they serve. It may be that one set of information is made available to persons undergoing validation, while another set is available to persons carrying out validation or to institutions ensuring the quality of validation.</p>
9.	Each stage of the validation process shall be appropriately documented.	<p>The documentation shall allow all elements and stages of the process to be reviewed, enabling the course of the process and its outcomes to be reliably reconstructed, for example, in case of complaints or objections.</p> <p>The time period of storing documentation shall be correlated with the cycle of external evaluations.</p> <p>The time period of storing documentation shall also take into account the regulations in force for particular qualifications.</p>
10.	Responsibility is clearly defined and assigned to specific persons or collegial bodies for the course of the validation process and for the decisions made as it is being carried out.	
11.	The possibility of conflicts of interest in the validation process among the involved parties is prevented.	<p>The validation process shall include provisions to exclude the possibility of conflicts of interest. This primarily applies to the persons carrying out validation.</p> <p>Ways to counteract conflicts of interest may, for example, exclude persons from carrying out the assessment process who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have trained the candidate,</li> <li>• are a relative or friend of the candidate,</li> <li>• have a business interest with or are a member of the same political party as the candidate.</li> </ul> <p>Prohibiting persons from carrying out validation does not mean excluding trainers or advisors, for example, from observing the process.</p>
12.	The validation process has procedures in place to respond to appeals, as well as to other information from any interested party about the quality of the process.	The appeals procedure is the same for all validating institutions working with a given certifying institution.

13.	The quality assurance system of the certifying institution includes the validation process.	Regardless of whether validation is performed by the certifying institution or delegated to one or more validating institutions, the certifying institution's internal quality assurance system always includes the validation process.
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## B. Certification

No.	Principle	Comments and guidelines (Comments and guidelines take into consideration the premises of the integrated qualifications system.)
1.	Certificates are issued only to those persons who have confirmed the attainment of a qualification's learning outcomes through a validation process and have also fulfilled other defined requirements of the qualification.	Mechanisms shall be used to ensure that certificates are issued to the proper persons, that is, only to those who have confirmed the attainment of a qualification's learning outcomes through validation (those persons who have achieved a positive validation decision) and have also fulfilled other defined requirements of the qualification (e.g. requirements related to age, health status, citizenship, etc.).
2.	The principles and criteria of issuing certificates shall be clearly defined and made available to the public.	The principles and criteria of issuing certificates shall be clearly defined. These principles shall be made available to the public at the certifying institution.
3.	Certificates shall be prepared according to the guidelines of the IQS related to content and labelling.	The certificate shall include the name of the issuing certifying institution.
4.	Certificates shall be labelled in such a way as to enable them to be identified and registered.	
5.	All forms of certificates shall be consistent (paper, digital and others).	
6.	Certificates shall be issued as soon as possible after the validation decision has been made.	
7.	The principles of circulating certification documents within the institution shall be defined.	
8.	The appeals process for a decision on awarding a qualification shall be clearly defined and include the ability of reviewing the documentation of the certification and validation processes.	



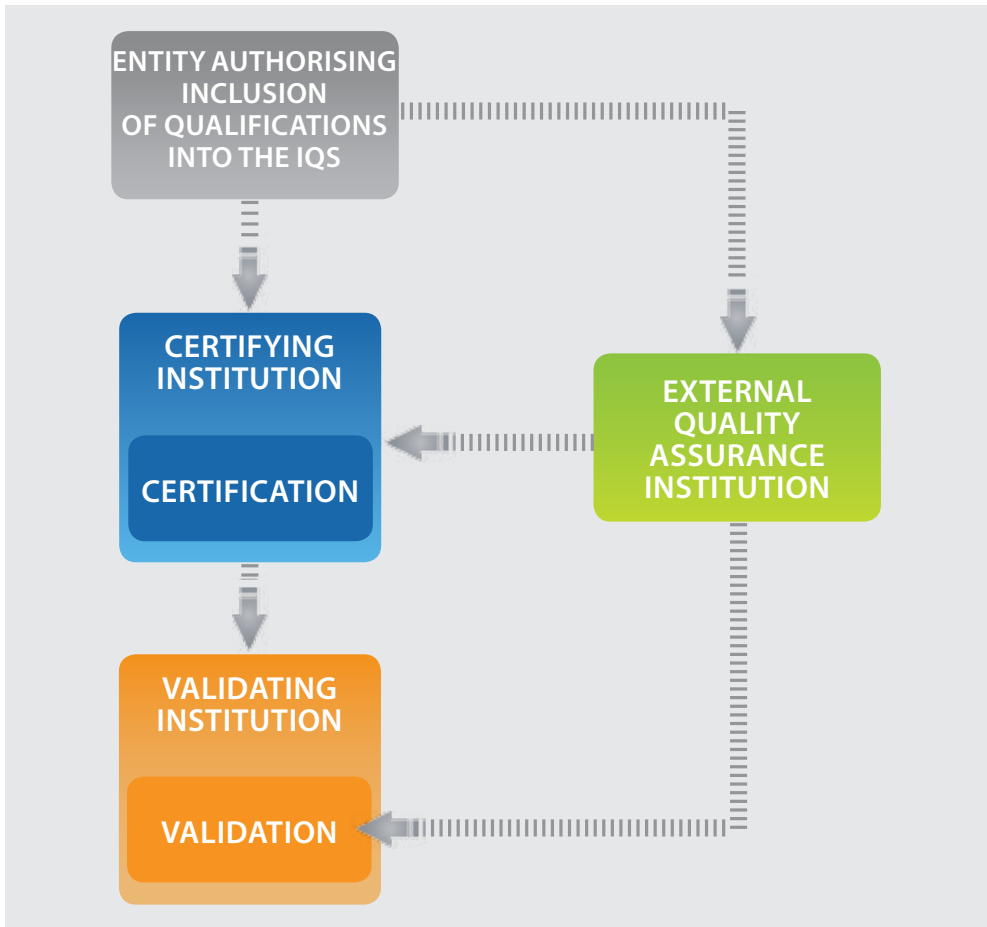
9.	The quality assurance system of the certifying institution includes the certification process.	
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## C. Services to candidates

No.	Principle	Comments and guidelines (Comments and guidelines take into consideration the premises of the integrated qualifications system.)
1.	At the time of registration, a candidate should know all the requirements of attaining a qualification.	At the time of registration, a candidate should know which preceding qualifications are required for the qualification being attained, as well as any required conditions other than having learning outcomes validated. Examples of these might be the principles for linking sets of required learning outcomes with optional ones; the time within which a qualification's required learning outcomes should be validated; requirements related to age, health status, citizenship, etc.  At the time of registration, a candidate should have full knowledge of the validation process, especially about the learning outcomes, its verification criteria and requirements.
2.	Candidates shall be able to have questions and doubts answered about validation and certification at each stage of the qualification's awarding process.	
3.	Candidates shall be informed appropriately beforehand about the organisational details of validation (i.e. time, place, cost).	
4.	Candidates shall obtain unambiguous and full information about the results of their validation and certification.	Candidates shall obtain full and unambiguous information about the results of their validation and certification. The time within which an institution is obliged to provide such information shall be clearly defined. The consequences of a given result shall be clearly indicated (i.e. the next stage of the process, the possibility of repeating a specific stage or the entire verification process, the appeals process, etc.).

5.	Validation shall have a formative character. Candidates shall receive full feedback about the outcome of each stage of the qualification's awarding process, not only about the results, but also information about which competences need to be supplemented.	
6.	All information about awarding a qualification provided to candidates shall be formulated and conveyed in a manner that is adapted to the needs of the recipients.	
7.	The institution shall adhere to ethical conduct during the validation process.	Candidates shall not be made to feel uncomfortable because of personal characteristics that have no bearing on the validation process and its results.
8.	The validation process shall respect the privacy of a candidate and maintain confidentiality about his/her information. Access shall be limited to information about a candidate, especially the results of the qualification's awarding process.	
9.	The appeals process for a decision on awarding a qualification shall be clearly defined and include the ability of reviewing the documentation of the process.	The appeals process for a decision on awarding a qualification shall be available in writing and provided to candidates.
10.	The internal quality assurance system includes the services provided to candidates.	

# The quality assurance principles of the integrated qualifications system for entities ensuring the quality of awarding qualifications



## A. Certifying institution

No.	Principle	Comments and guidelines  (Comments and guidelines take into consideration the premises of the integrated qualifications system.)
1.	The certifying institution is responsible for the quality assurance of certification and validation.	<p>The certifying institution guarantees that it awards certificates based on a validation process that has been properly carried out. Certificates are awarded to persons who have attained the competences defined for the given qualification.</p> <p>In cases when certification authority is granted to more than one institution, a given certifying institution is responsible only for the quality of the validation and certification processes of the certificates it issues.</p>
2.	The certifying institution is responsible for ensuring the minimal staff resources to properly carry out certification and validation.	<p>The certifying institution has at least the minimal staff resources required to properly carry out certification and validation.</p> <p>The certifying institution monitors the competences of its staff.</p> <p>The certifying institution carries out periodic assessments of the competences of its staff.</p> <p>The certifying institution develops staff training programmes that take into consideration the results of its staff monitoring and periodic assessments. Staff are trained.</p> <p>In cases when validation is delegated to one or more validating institutions, the certifying institution guarantees that the validating institution ensures the appropriate staff resources required to properly carry out validation.</p>
3.	The certifying institution is responsible for ensuring the minimal organisational and material resources required to properly carry out certification and validation.	<p>The certifying institution has the organisational and material resources required to properly carry out certification.</p> <p>The certifying institution monitors its existing organisational and material resources to ensure their adequacy to properly carry out certification.</p> <p>In cases when validation is delegated to one or more validating institutions, the certifying institution guarantees that the validating institution ensures the appropriate organisational and material resources required to properly carry out validation.</p>

4.	The certifying institution is responsible for ensuring the continuity of certification and validation.	<p>Learners who have begun validation/qualification attainment are guaranteed the ability to complete this process regardless of any changes in the situation of the certifying institution or validating institution.</p> <p>Learners who have begun validation/qualification attainment are guaranteed the ability to complete this process even if they had to interrupt it due to unexpected circumstances (e.g. illness).</p>
5.	The certifying institution is responsible for properly separating the processes of certification, validation and education.	<p>The possibility of conflicts of interest among the involved parties is eliminated.</p> <p>Responsibility for specific processes is clearly defined.</p> <p>The assignment of tasks among institutions or institutional units and persons involved in implementing the processes are clearly defined.</p> <p>The certifying institution is responsible for determining the division of tasks and principles of cooperation among itself and other entities engaged in validation. The principles and tasks are clearly defined.</p>
6.	The certifying institution issues documents confirming the attainment of a qualification formulated in such a way as to enable them to be identified and registered.	<p>Information about qualifications in existing registers is fully consistent with the information in documents confirming the attainment of a qualification; this consistency is checked and verified.</p>
7.	The certifying institution has an internal quality assurance system (IQAS).	<p>The internal quality assurance system includes validation, regardless of whether validation is carried out at the certifying institution or at a separate, cooperating validating institution.</p> <p>The aims of the internal quality assurance system are to ensure that the process of awarding qualifications is properly carried out and improved.</p> <p>Persons preparing and carrying out certification and validation, learners and representatives of relevant stakeholders are involved in the development and implementation of the internal quality assurance system.</p>
8.	The certifying institution has systemic solutions in place to identify and eliminate irregularities. Among others, this pertains to filed appeals and complaints.	

9.	The certifying institution is required to undergo periodic external evaluation.	<p>The external evaluation is linked to the internal quality assurance system of the certifying institution. The external quality assurance institution works with the certifying institution, specifying the areas and scope of the external evaluation, as well as the activities and procedures of performing the evaluation.</p> <p>The external evaluation is periodic and planned.</p> <p>The views of the persons carrying out certification and validation, the persons undergoing validation and receiving certificates, as well as the representatives of relevant stakeholders are taken into account during the external evaluation.</p>
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## B. Validating institution

No.	Principle	Comments and guidelines (Comments and guidelines take into consideration the premises of the integrated qualifications system.)
1.	The validating institution ensures the minimal staff resources required to properly carry out validation.	<p>The validating institution has at least the minimal staff resources required to properly carry out validation.</p> <p>The validating institution monitors the competences of its staff.</p> <p>The validating institution carries out periodic assessments of the competences of its staff.</p> <p>The validating institution develops staff training programmes that take into consideration the results of its staff monitoring and periodic assessments. Staff are trained.</p>
2.	The validating institution is responsible for ensuring the minimal organisational and material resources required to properly carry out validation.	<p>The validating institution has the organisational and material resources required to properly carry out validation.</p> <p>The validating institution monitors its existing organisational and material resources to ensure their adequacy to properly carry out validation.</p>

3.	The validating institution has an internal quality assurance system (IQAS).	<p>The aims of the internal quality assurance system are to ensure that the process of awarding qualifications is properly carried out and improved.</p> <p>Persons preparing and carrying out validation, learners and representatives of relevant stakeholders are involved in the development and implementation of the internal quality assurance system.</p>
4.	The validation process carried out by the validating institution is subject to a periodic evaluation by the certifying institution.	<p>The evaluation is conducted as part of the certifying institution's internal evaluation.</p> <p>The aim of the evaluation is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to verify that quality assurance requirements are fulfilled,</li> <li>• to improve the validation process.</li> </ul> <p>During each evaluation, the CI:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• analyses the changes that have occurred in the validation process,</li> <li>• identifies areas requiring change/improvement and proposes ways to implement the changes.</li> </ul> <p>The opinions of persons carrying out validation, the persons undergoing validation and representatives of relevant stakeholders are taken into consideration during the evaluation performed by the CI.</p>

## C. External quality assurance institution

No.	Principle	Comments and guidelines (Comments and guidelines take into consideration the premises of the integrated qualifications system.)
1.	The designated external quality assurance institution, the certifying institution and the validating institution cannot be dependent on each other in any way.	<p>The external quality assurance institution and the certifying institution are two different entities, and their owners are not related in a way that could harm the integrity of the external evaluation.</p> <p>The external quality assurance institution and the validating institution are two different entities, and their owners are not related in a way that could harm the integrity of the external evaluation.</p>

2.	The external quality assurance institution is independent of the entity authorising the entry of a qualification into the IQS.	<p>The entity authorising the entry of a qualification into the IQS ensures that the evaluation of the certifying institution carried out by the external quality assurance institution is independent.</p> <p>It is assumed that the external quality assurance institution and the entity authorising the entry of a qualification into the IQS are different entities. In other cases, the external evaluation must be appropriately separated from the process of overseeing the certifying institution.</p>
3.	The external quality assurance institution must have the authority (sectoral scope, qualifications level) to conduct the external evaluation of the certifying institution and its certification and validation processes.	
4.	The external quality assurance institution has the appropriate staff resources required to properly evaluate the certifying institution and its certification and validation processes.	<p>The team performing the evaluation shall include persons with relevant competences related to the specificity of the qualification, validation, evaluation and quality assurance.</p> <p>The external quality assurance institution monitors the competences of its staff.</p> <p>The external quality assurance institution carries out periodic assessments of the competences of its staff.</p> <p>The external quality assurance institution develops staff training programmes that take into consideration the results of its staff monitoring and periodic assessments. Staff are trained.</p>
5.	The external quality assurance institution has adequate organisational and material resources required to properly evaluate the certifying institution and its certification and validation processes.	<p>The external quality assurance institution monitors its existing organisational and material resources.</p> <p>The external quality assurance institution carries out periodic assessments of its existing organisational and material resources.</p>
6.	The external quality assurance institution has a documented description of the solutions used to ensure the quality of external evaluations.	The description of the quality assurance solutions shall include, among others, the selection of staff and other resources, principles of cooperation with the certifying institution and mechanisms to counteract conflicts of interest.
7.	The entity authorising the entry of a qualification into the IQS oversees the external quality assurance institution.	The minimum requirements for the external quality assurance institution are determined by the entity authorising the entry of a qualification into the IQS in consultation with stakeholders.





## **The quality assurance of qualifications in the integrated qualifications system**

This publication summarises the work carried out on the issue of quality assurance and the principles of ensuring quality assurance. Among the issues addressed are the model of ensuring quality assurance and the scope of activities of specific institutions involved in quality assurance.

This publication was developed for experts in the field. However, the principles presented here are also significant for learners and employers, as our aim is to promote the greater reliability of qualifications, which in turn will facilitate the recognition of dependable and trustworthy qualifications in the market. Work on the quality assurance of qualifications is being continued.

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