

Irish Bologna Expert Conference

National Qualifications Frameworks and the European Overarching Frameworks:

Supporting Lifelong Learning in European Education and Training

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Issues arising from qualifications frameworks in Europe

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to outline and raise for consideration a number of issues that arise from the introduction of the two European meta-frameworks and the growing number of national qualifications frameworks in Europe. In particular, this paper was written to underpin the Bologna Expert conference, *National Qualifications Frameworks and the European Overarching Frameworks: Supporting Lifelong Learning in European Education and Training*. It is envisaged that a final report will emerge from the conference based on the discussions that this document generates. While this paper is focused on the technical aspects of frameworks, it is important that beyond the technical, we do not lose sight of the learner.

1.1 Qualifications Frameworks

With the growth of human resource management from the 1960s, policy makers looked to the identification of occupational competences as a means of organising the requirements of enterprises and of employment sectors. This requires the specification of specific behavioural and other attributes required of workers to complete a job. Meanwhile in the domain of pedagogic theory and practice some reformers advocated the use of learning outcomes, also expressed typically in behavioural terms, as a device for organising the development of curricula and assessment.

Qualifications frameworks as a mechanism for describing and relating qualifications to each other originated in the United Kingdom and other English-speaking countries in the 1980s¹. The United Kingdom had a relatively unregulated system of qualifications with a wide variety of awarding bodies, some of them in competition with each other. This led to some confusion on the part of users of qualifications such as learners, providers of

¹ Allais, S., Raffe, D., Strathdee, R., Wheelahan, L., Young, M. (2009). Learning from the first qualifications frameworks. Employment Working Paper No. 45, International Labour Office, Geneva. http://www.ilo.org/skills/what/pubs/lang--en/docName--WCM_041902/index.htm

education and training and employers, and a qualifications framework was proposed as a device to help enhance the comprehensibility and transparency of the system.

Other countries adopted qualifications frameworks, not merely as descriptive instruments but as instruments for the reform of the national qualifications systems. This was notably the case in New Zealand and South Africa. A major OECD report in 2007 identified qualifications frameworks as one of the mechanisms whereby qualifications systems can better serve lifelong learning.² As national qualifications frameworks spread, the question began to arise, particularly in Europe, as to how national qualifications systems could be related to each other. This gave rise to the idea of a meta-framework of qualifications.

1.2 Origins of the two meta-frameworks

The Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (Bologna framework) was adopted in May 2005 at the Bergen meeting of the ministers for higher education under the Bologna Process. The Bologna Process, inaugurated in 1999, has a wide-ranging agenda to create a European Higher Education Area that will be more efficient and dynamic internally and more attractive internationally than the fragmented national systems that preceded it.

The European Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LLL) was adopted in April 2008 by joint decision of the European Parliament and Council as an outcome of the European Union's education and training policy cooperation framework. It builds on developments in the Copenhagen Process and the Bologna Process. The Copenhagen Process was developed from 2002 within the perspective of lifelong learning, and aims to encourage individuals to make use of the wide range of vocational learning opportunities available, for example at school, in higher education, at the workplace, or through private courses. The lifelong learning tools should enable users to link and build on learning acquired at various times, and in both formal and non-formal contexts.

The qualifications frameworks developed under both the Bologna and Copenhagen Processes are policy instruments voluntarily adopted by the political leadership of the countries concerned, rather than having the force of treaty or law.

The three main objectives set out for the Bologna framework are international transparency, international recognition and international mobility. The objectives of the EQF-LLL are to improve the transparency, comparability and portability of citizens' qualifications to enhance international and national mobility. These two sets of objectives are very similar.

Both meta-frameworks had deeper agendas as well. The Bologna Process and the Copenhagen Process had as goals the reform of national systems of higher education and

² Coles, M., Werquin, P. (2007). Qualifications Systems: Bridges to Lifelong Learning. OECD <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/24/63/38465471.pdf>

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vocational education and training (VET) within Europe. These in turn are linked to the goals of labour market development and improved economic competitiveness, as enshrined, for example, in the Lisbon goals of the European Union. The resultant meta-frameworks are tools to facilitate comparisons of qualifications between systems, but the intention is also to reform those national qualifications systems. The introduction of national qualifications frameworks has become, *de facto*, the principal mechanism for bringing about these reforms. NQFs introduced under these initiatives are invariably linked to quality assurance and are based on learning outcomes.

The status of national qualifications frameworks varies from country to country, but in most countries they have statutory or regulatory force. Moreover, some countries now incorporate reference to either the Bologna Framework and/or EQF-LLL into relevant national legislation. The political cooperation at a European level is being translated into legal changes in the national systems. The principal characteristics and progress of the two meta-frameworks are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of the meta-frameworks

	Bologna framework (higher education)	EQF (lifelong learning)
Adopted	May 2005	April 2008
Authority	Political agreement by ministers for higher education	Recommendation of European Parliament and Council
Geographical scope	47 countries, signatory to European Cultural Convention	33 countries, European Economic Area & EU accession states
Architecture and scope	Three cycles of higher education, defined by descriptors for end-of-cycle outcomes (qualification types), and associated credit range guidelines	Eight levels spanning all lifelong learning (compulsory education, VET and higher education), defined in learning outcomes by descriptors of knowledge, skills and competence
Verification/Referencing completed (March 2010)	8 country/system reports published	3 country reports published

2. Theme 1: Why two meta-frameworks?

Many stakeholders are confused about the existence of two meta-frameworks. This comes across in several of the evaluations of the Bologna Process. In one sense, the existence of two meta-frameworks can be accounted for by the historic contingencies of their development, a political accident. However, a closer analysis shows that there is an underlying dynamic that explains not just why two meta-frameworks came into being, but why they continue.

Higher education has a long history as a transnational undertaking. The community of scholarship was already international before the European project began. There are many commonalities in the institutional form of higher education all over the world. The European dimension of higher education in national systems and within more or less autonomous higher education institutions was stimulated by the Erasmus schemes and the European research programmes from the 1980s onwards. These gave rise to a multi-level community of trust in higher education. It is from this community that the Bologna Qualifications Framework sprung.

Vocational education and training has a much more heterogeneous institutional form across countries. In some countries, large central agencies play a role that is filled by local chambers of commerce in other countries. The various functions that go into an education and training system are carved up quite differently in different national systems. The international dimension is typically less well developed for the system as a whole than in the case of higher education. The preparatory work for the EQF-LLL was very explicit on the challenge of developing “zones of mutual trust” in VET.³ However there are long standing cross-border relationships, for example within economic sectors and specific occupations, that are based on trade and occupational mobility. These have implications for sectoral qualifications frameworks. Diversity in institutional form also exists between the compulsory education systems at national level.

The EQF-LLL can be seen to be built upon and encompass, even “wrapped around”, the Bologna Framework, and is intended to facilitate access and progression between compulsory education, VET and higher education. However, the Bologna Framework benefits from a longer established and more homogeneous community of trust. The higher education community can serve as trailblazers, extending this trust to the wider world of lifelong learning covered by the EQF. This process begins in the development of NQFs and the participation of both VET and higher education stakeholders in the debates that shape these. On the other hand, the higher education community can choose to remain aloof from the progress of lifelong learning frameworks. This will ultimately help neither segment.

³ Coles, M., Oates, T. (2005) European reference levels for education and training promoting credit transfer and mutual trust. Study commissioned to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, England. Cedefop Panorama series; 109
http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/5146_en.pdf

Mutual cooperation in quality assurance may contribute to the development of trust across the segments. To this end, for example, there are plans in Ireland to create a single agency with responsibility for quality assurance processes across the two segments and it will be interesting to see how this will enhance understanding and trust across VET and higher education.

The two meta-frameworks co-exist. There remains the challenging of explaining this fact and the relationship between them to the various stakeholders at a European level and a national level. This responsibility exists both for European actors and for national and institutional actors. However, it is important to identify specific responsibilities and communications strategies if the two frameworks are not to cause further confusion. The Maltese verification/referencing is a very positive example of how linking the processes can help to explain both.

2.1 Meta-frameworks: Stimulus for the design and implementation of national qualifications frameworks

Countries differ in their policy priorities in developing national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). Motivations cited for NQFs include greater participation, more flexible pathways without dead-ends, higher domestic mobility, higher international mobility, clear links with labour market requirements, improved quality, clearer information to stakeholders, better planning of provision, improved recognition of prior learning, more student-centred provision, better recognition of qualifications domestically and internationally, greater focus on lifelong learning, and simplifying the qualifications system. NQFs may or may not be able to achieve all these goals, but the emphases will inevitably differ and colour the form the framework takes.

There are also different approaches to designing national qualifications frameworks. Various commentators have attempted to classify these approaches. One such classification is into unitary, embedded and parallel frameworks. This is similar to the classification made by Bjornavold and Coles into integrating, bridging and sector frameworks.⁴ An appreciation of the different approaches to framework design is important, especially when comparing rates of progression towards the achievement of a framework.

A unitary framework uses the same basic elements to describe all education and training qualifications levels across lifelong learning to facilitate access and progression between all levels. Examples would include the Maltese and Irish frameworks.

An embedded framework uses a common set of levels and methods for describing qualifications levels, but identifies/keeps separate sub-frameworks, for example for different provider segments. An example would be the Scottish Credit and Qualifications

⁴ Bjornavold, J. & Coles, M. (2010). Added value of national qualifications frameworks in implementing the EQF. EQF Notes, No. 2.

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Framework, where there is a sub-framework for SQA qualifications (EQF 1-8) including general and vocational qualifications, another sub-framework for Scottish Vocational Qualifications (EQF 2-7) and a third for higher education qualifications (EQF 5-8).

A parallel system consists largely of levels and sub-frameworks for a specific sector (educational or professional). The sub-frameworks may overlap but the method of describing qualifications is quite different.

Different approaches to framework construction arise both from the historic and political circumstances of individual countries and from contrasting objectives for the framework initiative. The definition and understanding of learning outcomes and other key constructs are a matter of ongoing debate within and between countries.

The major fault-lines in national qualifications systems are between general education and vocational education and training and between vocational education and training and higher education. Sometimes there are further sub-divisions, very often dependent on historic patterns of the institutionalisation of education and training provision in the countries concerned. Qualifications frameworks by their very nature highlight the underlying geometry of their systems. In some countries, particularly those Bologna countries outside the EQF-LLL area, there may not be any initiative to build a NQF that goes beyond higher education.

Another way of comparing national frameworks proposed by David Raffe and colleagues⁵ classifies them as communications frameworks, reforming frameworks or transformational frameworks. Communications frameworks are not really intended to change the underlying qualifications though the very act of defining qualifications and identifying relationships between them may stimulate change in these qualifications. Such frameworks can be devised and implemented on a voluntary basis by relevant stakeholders. Reforming frameworks are intended to change the qualifications contained within them. This may include the setting of standards or the specification of quality assurance regimes. Transformational frameworks are intended to replace the existing system of qualifications entirely. A classic example is that of the South African Qualifications Framework.

Frameworks vary in the extent to which they are linked to reform of the qualifications systems. The Bologna Process was intended to reform the degree structure in most of the countries in which it was adopted. The introduction of the two-cycle system preceded the development of the framework, which has become an instrument supporting that reform. The EQF-LLL is linked to the Lisbon Process agenda of improving lifelong learning in Europe, through the policy cooperation framework for education and training, but does not explicitly mandate reform of national qualifications structures. It does not oblige countries to have a domestic qualifications framework, envisaging that national systems

⁵ Allais, S., Raffe, D., Young, M. (2009). Researching NQFs: Some conceptual issues. Employment Working Paper No. 44, International Labour Office, Geneva. http://www.ilo.org/skills/what/pubs/lang--en/docName--WCMS_119307/index.htm

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of qualifications might be related to the framework without the mediation of a national framework, though in practice all countries have volunteered to establish national qualification frameworks. Both meta-frameworks adhere to the concept of learning outcomes and call on countries to specify their qualifications in terms of learning outcomes.

Within countries national frameworks vary in the extent to which they are trying to describe or change the existing qualifications system. National frameworks for lifelong learning may have different goals with respect to different parts of the system. For example in Ireland the NQF brought in a quite new system of qualifications in VET, whereas for higher education the changes were more modest adjustments to existing higher education qualifications and the general schools qualifications system was left unchanged, at least at the initial introduction of the framework.⁶ The pace of implementation of the NQF may vary across different sub-systems of education and training, depending on the perceived need for change and the political support for reform.

Both the Bologna and Copenhagen Processes have regular reporting systems to track the pace of implementation of the mandate to establish NQFs. The Bologna Framework is formally monitored on behalf of the Bologna Follow-up Group by a Qualifications Framework Working Group. The latest survey by the group from February 2010 is included as Annexe A.

In addition, the Bologna Process generates reports from a variety of actors, some at periodic intervals. The reports published in March 2010,⁷ to coincide with the formal inauguration of the EHEA, include the Bologna Process Independent Assessment; the Eurydice Focus on Higher Education in Europe 2010: The Impact of the Bologna Process; ESU Report: Bologna at the Finish Line, EUA Trends 2010 Report; and the Education International Report Enhancing Quality: Academics' Perceptions of the Bologna Process. Each of these deals to a greater or lesser extent with the qualifications framework. The very existence of these diverse reports is indicative of the range of stakeholder engagement with this framework. The related survey work constitutes awareness raising in its own right and is itself part of the implementation strategy for the Process.

The coherence and transparency of the implementation of the EQF-LLL is monitored by the EQF Advisory Group composed of all participating countries and relevant stakeholders, supported by the Commission and Cedefop. In order to have an overview of the pace of the implementation of the EQF compared to the deadlines identified in the Recommendation, the EQF Advisory Group members inform the group, the Commission and Cedefop about the key milestones of their national referencing processes. The most

⁶ National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. (2009). Framework Implementation and Impact Study http://www.nqai.ie/framework_study.html

⁷ The reports are published on the Bologna Secretariat website: http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/2010_conference/

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recently presented synthesis comes from January 2010, though an update is expected in April 2010. A short overview of EQF implementation is included as Annexe B.

The introduction of the EQF-LLL has generated serious issues for stakeholders such as professional regulators and sectoral qualifications bodies that have given rise to much comment and are dealt with below. In particular, there is a growing interest in describing and promoting synergies between competence-based LLL instruments arising out of the implementation of EQF.

One concern that has arisen for those observing the implementation of either the Bologna Framework or the EQF-LLL has been the temptation for some countries to simply adopt the meta-framework as the national framework, without adequate consideration of the national context and pre-existing qualifications system. This is an example of what Raffaele and colleagues call policy borrowing rather than policy learning. The temptation is particularly strong with respect to a meta-framework. While this may seem to offer rapid progress to achievement of target dates, it could be at the cost of harnessing the potential of a deeply implemented NQF for genuine reform. Superficial implementation will not contribute in the long run towards the building of mutual trust. Although self-certification has been chosen as a mechanism that is both efficient and compatible with subsidiarity, and the inclusion of international experts serves to increase external confidence, nevertheless it is conceivable that a government intent on circumventing the spirit of the meta-frameworks could do so. If this happens it will be a challenge for peer countries and stakeholders to address.

Related to this is the question of how existing qualifications within a country are included in the new NQFs. The integrity of the NQF relies on the rigour with which the inclusion of individual qualifications is underpinned by detailed consideration of learning outcomes and the application of quality assurance.

The variable pace of adoption and implementation of NQFs poses a problem for the meta-frameworks. A meta-framework adds value when it can show the relationships that exist between national frameworks. It can be considered as a *network good*. Until a significant number of other national frameworks are adopted implemented and referenced, the meta-framework is of little use to the early adopters. This in turn means it is hard to show any return on the effort made, which can act as a disincentive to later countries. The deadlines set within both meta-framework processes are intended to counteract this risk and maintain momentum.

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Questions Raised:

- Can meta-frameworks only yield their benefits when all or many countries have established NQFs?
- When do we know that a framework exists in practice?
- What value can be assigned to draft NQFs or adopted NQFs prior to verification/referencing to meta-frameworks?
- How can we be sure that the NQF implementation is progressing as planned? In short how is trust sustained?
- Can a framework be implemented if the concept of *learning outcome* is still contested? Can it be implemented meaningfully if the concept is *not* contested?
- Is self-certification a sufficiently robust mechanism for verification/referencing or do we require supra-national institutional involvement?

3. How are qualifications frameworks supporting mobility?

The fact that there are variations in the structures of NQFs has implications for the achievement of the goals of the meta-frameworks, such as mobility and recognition. It remains to be seen how well frameworks facilitate recognition within countries, especially where embedded or parallel systems are introduced. A recently published analysis of the national action plans for recognition concludes that despite the efforts of many countries to do develop recognition, “the real practices of qualifications assessment are very different in different countries” (p. 91).⁸

Transparency appears to be a lower-hanging fruit of the meta-frameworks initiatives, since they have introduced for the first time common methodology and concepts for describing qualifications in different systems. Already the verification reports from the Bologna Process are proving useful to enable outsiders to understand countries’ qualifications systems. A similar outcome can be expected as more referencing reports are published in EQF-LLL.

The verification/referencing processes and reports deal of course with the national frameworks. However recognition decisions, whether by educational institutions or other competent authorities are very often dealing at a finer grain with the individual subject or field of study. The authorities concerned are only just beginning to accumulate some experience of working with qualifications frameworks and it will take some time before their utility is clear. Initially, it appears that for some purposes (e.g. identifying whether a qualification counts as a bachelors degree for generic employment purposes) the framework is more useful. It is relatively straightforward to use the meta-framework as a translation device between two national frameworks.

For other purposes more detailed analysis of qualifications is required. This too may be facilitated by the work undertaken in the implementation of national frameworks, particularly in the detailed specification of learning outcomes for qualifications.

Convergence in credit systems is also helping to provide at least a rough measure of the volume of learning associated with different elements of a qualification. This has proven to be the case in HE with European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (ECTS). It is still too early in the adoption of European Credit System for VET ECVET to say whether the same will happen in this instance. The relationship between these two systems is also a topic of considerable interest within national systems, as well as between countries. Cedefop has held a series of workshops as part of a project to examine how credit systems support transition and permeability between VET and HE, though there are differences in the purpose and design of ECVET and ECTS. Credit can assist in achieving recognition and can be built into national frameworks. There are a range of

⁸ Rauhvargers, A. & Rusakova, A. (2010). Improving recognition in the European Higher Education Area: an analysis of national action plans (Council of Europe higher education series No.12)

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complex issues in this regard, not least that over-prescriptive definitions of credit ranges may prohibit mobility and the development of joint programmes.

The Europass transparency instruments – especially the Europass Certificate Supplement and Diploma Supplement, but also the Europass CV are becoming more widely used. However as the Bologna Process Independent Assessment noted, “awareness of the existence and meaning of the Diploma Supplement among learners and employers needs to be improved”(p.10). The outcomes of referencing and verification processes are now beginning to appear on the supplements in those countries that have completed the exercise. The Certificate Supplement includes by design a summary of learning outcomes for the qualification. The current guidelines for the Diploma Supplement include the instruction, “[I]f available, provide details of the learning outcomes, skills, competencies and stated aims and objectives associated with the qualification.”⁹ As qualifications frameworks and the associated specification of learning outcomes become more widespread in higher education we expect to see more detail of learning outcomes in the Diploma Supplement and even that they will become a mandatory part of the Supplement. However, the individualized nature of the Diploma Supplement makes this more technically challenging and resource intensive than for the Certificate Supplement.

There is a disjuncture in most countries between the parts of the system responsible for framework development and qualifications recognition (e.g. the NARIC). A greater political and organizational push is required to use frameworks for recognition. The fact that NQFs, whatever the initial intention, now have legal, as opposed to merely informational, status in many countries, suggests that scope exists for their more formal use in recognition. Closer cooperation between those responsible for recognition and the NQF within countries will also promote understanding of the meta-frameworks and their potential to support international recognition.

At a national level, NQFs can promote permeability between VET and HE. For this to happen though there has to be commitment across both segments to use learning outcomes and collaborate to achieve common understanding on how they are implemented. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning is a challenge for both segments and progress in promoting this key dimension of lifelong learning also relies on shared approaches to the conceptual and operational aspects of this activity.¹⁰

Questions Raised:

- How can NQFs be used by recognition authorities?
- What are the barriers to the use of qualifications frameworks in recognition?
- Are NQFs oversold as aids to recognition?
- What are the specific points of difficulty in permeability across VET and HE?

⁹: ec.europa.eu/education/policies/rec_qual/recognition/ds_en.pdf

¹⁰ Coles, M., Werquin, P. (2010). Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning: Country Practices. OECD

4. European Directives on regulation professions and the meta-frameworks

It has been suggested that there are in fact three meta-frameworks where the regulated professions operate within a third system. Certainly the Recommendation introducing EQF-LLL explicitly notes that it is without prejudice to the legal system governing the regulated professions referred to in the Directive 2005/36. In European law a directive has greater force on member states than a recommendation, such as the EQF. The Directive is intended to be an effective instrument to promote recognition and hence professional mobility with the EU.¹¹ There have been delays in implementation of the Directive / transposing the Directive into national legislation and infringements in some member states and subsequent legal action against national governments by the European Commission.

While some of the professions regulated by the Directive, such as architecture, have a fairly extensive set of learning outcomes associated with them and can be accommodated in the system of the other two meta-frameworks, the underlying logic of many of the regulated qualifications relates to inputs and duration of education and training. The emphasis on input measures and processes conflicts with the fundamentals of learning outcomes based national frameworks. In some cases, these national frameworks are being used to open up access to qualifications to learners who have not been able to follow traditional educational paths because of personal circumstances.

The Directive appears to be in conflict with the development of alternative education and training routes and the needs of the workforce. One example is in Belgium (Flanders) where the authorities sought to introduce alternative routes to nursing qualifications, such as part-time study modes.¹² However nursing is a regulated profession and the Directive insists that nursing training be undertaken on a full-time basis for a minimum period of 4600 hours. The European Commission has begun action against Belgium to enforce the Directive. The Commission logic is that in order to maintain professional mobility it is important that member states operate the Directive as agreed: confidence in the regime would be compromised if countries are free to modify the mode of training and there is the associated risk that legally-enforceable recognition would be undermined and international mobility impeded.

The Directive 2005/36 is currently under evaluation by the EC. This should explore whether the Directive has been effective in facilitating mobility. This is the first stage of a review of the Directive to be completed in 2012 and it is understood that the Commission will be considering whether the learning outcomes approach can be embedded more thoroughly into the regulated professional system. The fact that the EQF-LLL also has a formal basis in EU law, albeit as a recommendation, gives a clearer political and

¹¹ Directive 2005/36/EC http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/qualifications/future_en.htm

¹² Boomgaert, W., De Decker, F. (2010). Tensions between the Bologna process and Directive 2005/36/EC in respect of nursing education: the Flemish case. Bologna Handbook C5.1-9. Raabe/EUA

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institutional basis for negotiating the relationship between it (and the national frameworks referenced to it) and the Directive than is the case for the Bologna Framework.

Questions Raised:

- Is the Directive working for mobility?
- Can the soft approach of recognition through NQFs referenced to EQF add anything to the Directives?
- Would this require greater central coordination of the EQF-LLL?
- Is there a tension between the two approaches, or can they be reconciled?
- Do they need to be reconciled?
- Does the lack of relationship between frameworks and directives at European level pose a problem for HE providers / other stakeholders?

5. The role of sectoral qualifications frameworks

“Sector” is a much-used concept in labour market and vocational educational research, with a variety of definitions.¹³ Sectors can be based primarily on structures of economic activity (e.g. the agricultural sector or the automotive sector) or based on specific occupational profiles or technologies, (e.g. hairdressers or psychologists). The recommendation introducing the EQF-LLL refers to how the meta-framework should enable international sectoral organizations to show how their qualifications systems or frameworks relate to national qualifications systems. Sectoral qualifications operate within some fields of economic activity (e.g. construction, sea transport, sports). A related concept is that of disciplinary framework, seen in higher education in some of the work undertaken in the Tuning project.¹⁴

Many sectors have undertaken work at European level, often with the support of the EC, to examine the qualifications needs of their sector and some have proposed one or more qualifications or frameworks. The EQF Advisory Group has established a sub-group to examine the issues associated with sectoral qualifications, though this group has not yet published its report.

The key issue is how these European sectoral qualifications systems or frameworks are to be linked to national frameworks. At a descriptive level the frameworks are specified in terms of learning outcomes. It is conceivable that the linkage could be made directly to EQF and then onwards to referenced national frameworks. In this case the linkage could be “soft”, that is simply by published assertion, based on EQF claims and methodology, that the sectoral framework is compatible with EQF-LLL. However if a “hard” linkage is required then some formal referencing process and authority may be necessary.

The alternative is to link sectoral qualifications or frameworks to the EQF via NQFs. In this instance the key challenge is to coordinate national linkage activities to ensure that different countries link the sectoral qualifications or frameworks to the same reference level of the EQF. Given the inherent inexactitude in referencing frameworks to EQF on a “best-fit” basis, especially where the national or sectoral frameworks have different numbers of levels to EQF, or where the sectoral qualifications are in fact existing global ones, rather than of more recent, EQF-informed, European design, this may prove difficult. Some conventions are required to establish an arbitration mechanism, or at least an informational clearing house, so that countries can collaborate in this area. Countries have different mechanisms for including qualifications in their NQFs and varied ways of implementing quality assurance for qualifications included. Part of the purpose of international sectoral qualifications is to reduce costs and coordination of

¹³ Spoettl, G. (2008). Sector analyses. In *Handbook of Technical and Vocational Education and Training Research*, pp. 169-175. Springer.

¹⁴ Gehmlich, V. (2010). Discipline-related statements of level-specific learning outcomes. Bologna Handbook C 3.4-2. EUA/Raabe.

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referencing between countries would also require some agreement on quality assurance to avoid undue burden of compliance with multiple countries' QA systems.

One quite conservative route that is already being followed in Ireland is for the national authorities to issue a second, parallel, certificate alongside the international qualification. Technically, it is this second certificate that is subject to the national quality assurance system. The effect is that the international sectoral qualifications will have a reference to a level on the national framework of qualifications, though strictly speaking it is only those qualifications awarded in Ireland that the Irish authorities can assess. An advantage of this approach is that it creates an interface between the quality assurance operated by the international body and the national quality assurance system (which has in turn been demonstrated to be compatible with the European quality assurance standards). The Irish authorities are currently consulting on a model for the further alignment of international sectoral qualifications to the NQF.¹⁵

International sectoral awards typically have their own internal QA systems. These may be bound up in commercially sensitive information about the intellectual property in the qualifications and learning material. They may also be bound up in awarding bodies' trading circumstances, for example, the number of learners and success rates. Such sensitivities may come into conflict with the transparency required under the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area or the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET.

We do not know, certainly at this early stage of EQF-LLL implementation, whether linkage of a sectoral qualification to an NQF would be accepted as transitive. By transitive is meant that linking to a certain level in a national framework implies linking to an EQF level via the referencing of that framework.

Would the inclusion of sectoral qualifications in the NQF of one country undermine the recognition afforded to that country's NQF as a whole? Is there scope for a consortium of countries, working on a common understanding of learning outcomes, to jointly review or arbitrate international sectoral qualifications?

¹⁵ Group D – Draft Policies and Criteria for the Alignment with the National Framework of Qualifications (NQF) of the Awards of certain International Sectoral Certifying Bodies
http://www.nqai.ie/framework_consultation.html

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Questions Raised:

- Do countries, in principle, object to the acceptance of qualifications not located in a particular jurisdiction?
- How is the recognition of international sectoral qualifications achieved?
- Can it be managed / tolerated by national systems? (In some countries, sectoral qualifications seen as a threat to the national system)
- What is the added value of recognizing sectoral qualifications through national and / or European meta-frameworks?
- Who should have authority to recognise sectoral frameworks at the European level?

6. Qualifications frameworks on the global stage

The reforms that have taken place in Europe in qualifications policy have been partly inspired by earlier qualifications frameworks in other parts of the world. In turn the development of European qualifications meta-frameworks and the associated NQFs have been watched with interest in other parts of the globe. The global interest in the Bologna Process has been formally acknowledged through the inauguration of the Bologna Policy Forum in 2009. Competitiveness, recognition and mobility are three of the shared global concerns. Moreover there is also an element of policy learning through sharing experience of NQFs and regional frameworks.

Some 70 countries are now in the process of developing or implementing an NQF. Various international agencies have demonstrated an interest in qualifications frameworks. The OECD identified the establishment of an NQF as a strong policy mechanism for the promotion of lifelong learning.¹⁶ The ILO is currently engaged in a major project to study the impact and implementation of NQFs in developing countries and has already produced important papers on the concept and history of NQFs.

Regional qualifications frameworks have been discussed in the Southern Africa Development Community¹⁷, the Gulf Cooperation Community¹⁸, Central Asia¹⁹, and the ASEAN community²⁰. Another development is the 10-level Transnational Qualifications Framework for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, to which the Maltese Qualifications Framework is linked.²¹ These frameworks illustrate that other parts of the world have also recognised the potential for linking up NQFs or for using the inauguration of a regional framework or meta-framework to stimulate NQFs. For many of these emergent or proposed meta-frameworks the technical possibility of devising a framework may be running ahead of the zone of trust required for successful promotion of framework objectives.

The Antipodean pioneers of NQFs, Australia and New Zealand, have both noted the flowering of qualifications frameworks in Europe. There is no formal provision for the linkage of NQFs from outside respective European areas of the Bologna Process and the EEA with the European meta-frameworks. However we can anticipate that *de facto*

¹⁶ Werquin, P. (2007). Qualifications Systems: Bridges to Lifelong Learning. OECD
<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/24/63/38465471.pdf>

¹⁷ <http://www.saga.org.za/show.asp?include=focus/sadc/sadcqf.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.qualifications.ae/2009gccconference/>

¹⁹

http://www.etf.europa.eu/web.nsf/opennews/526DC579E0DBFE70C12570D200595DD7_EN?OpenDocument&VER=TEXT

²⁰ http://www.qsapple.org/SFP4c_Zita.pdf

²¹ <http://www.mqc.gov.mt/referencingreport?l=1>

Issues arising from qualifications frameworks in Europe

alignments will be made, particularly with HE qualifications, building on previous and current patterns of qualifications recognition.

A project was recently initiated between the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) to undertake a mapping exercise of the Irish and Australian qualifications frameworks. The objective of the Ireland – Australia Qualifications Project is to explore the possibility of a formal alignment of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NQF) with the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). Within this context the project has set out to map a range of aspects of each framework in order to achieve a meaningful comparison between them.

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority has recently undertaken a joint project with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland to reference their frameworks to each other. This is intended to underpin the mutual recognition of qualifications as, in addition to having responsibility for their respective NQFs, the two authorities are the recognition agencies for their countries. The project methodology draws heavily on that used for verification/referencing with the European meta-frameworks. This work has recently been completed and a report will be published shortly. No policy decisions have been made; however, the prospect of such a bi-lateral linkage raises again the question of transitivity.

As qualifications frameworks and meta-frameworks become more widely used around the globe there is a considerable likelihood that they will become increasingly diverse. Framework concepts may be used and interpreted in different ways. To the extent that this meets the diverse needs of different countries and different parts of the world this is understandable and desirable. This diversity is held in tension though with the desire for global mobility and recognition. Achieving the network good of qualifications frameworks requires increased dialogue and collaboration between policy makers and practitioners all over the world.

Questions Raised:

- If the New Zealand NQF has been linked to the Irish NQF and the Irish NQF has been referenced to the EQF, does that mean that the New Zealand NQF can be considered referenced to the EQF, at least informally, as a soft linkage?
- Will such second-hand linkages have any effect on recognition practice in Europe or in the non-European countries concerned?
- What further networking or agreements are desirable to develop articulation between NQFs inside and outside Europe?
- What potential exists, if any, to link the various meta-framework initiatives?



DGIV/EDU/HE (2010))
Orig. Eng.
Strasbourg, February 08,2008

BOLOGNA PROCESS
Coordination Group for Qualifications Framework

Second Synthesis of the replies received from national QF correspondents February 2010

Directorate General IV: Education, Culture and Heritage, Youth and Sport (Directorate of
Education and Languages – Higher Education and Research Division)

Distribution: BFUG
Working Group

Introduction

The present document provides a synthesis of the reports submitted by national QF correspondents to the Council of Europe in January 2010. It follows the one issued one year ago on the same subject. Individual answer are not published but this document

Countries/systems ²² that sent their answers	40
Countries/systems that appointed a NQF correspondent	47

presents some challenges and questions related to the actual stage of development of National Qualifications Framework

SUMMARY OVERVIEW OF COUNTRIES AND STEPS

- 11 steps:

Action/step	Step completed	Step indicated as planned with an indication of timing	No of answers
1. Decision to start	40 countries/systems;	0	40
2. Setting the agenda	35 countries;	4 countries which indicate step to be completed in 2010 1 country indicates that no formal agenda has been set	40
3. Organizing the process	35 countries;	4 countries, which indicate step to be completed end 2010	40
4. Design Profile	35 countries	5 countries in different stages of development	40

²² Because of the location of the competent public authorities in higher education matters, there are separate reports from the Flemish and French Communities of Belgium as well as from Scotland on the one hand and the rest of the United Kingdom on the other.

BELGIUM (FLEMISH COMMUNITY)	2000	2000	2001	04/2003	2001-2002	4/2003	4/2003	2004-2005	4/2003	2009	Done
BELGIUM (FRENCH COMMUNITY)	3/2007		03/2007	04/2008	03/2007	05/2008		Under progress		2010-2011	Done
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	2006-2008	2010	To be done	To be completed	ongoing	2007	2007-2010	Under progress	End of 2010	2010/2011	2010
BULGARIA											
CROATIA	03/2006	07/2007	07/2007-04/2008	07/2007-12/2008	11/2007-2009	Done in 2009	2010	To be done in 2010-2012	2012	2011	Done 12/2008
CYPRUS											
CZECH REPUBLIC	2005-2009		2009	2009	2010	2010	2010	2011	After 2011	After 2012	
DENMARK	2002	2003	2002	2003-2008/2009	2003-2007/2009	2008-2009	2003	2003	2008	2009	2003
ESTONIA	11/2006	11/2006	11/2006	Winter 2007	2007	2007		2007-2009	09/2009	2010-2011	2011
FINLAND	HE 2004 NQF 2008	HE 02/2005 NQF 2008	HE 2004 NQF 2008	HE 2005 NQF 2008	EQF 2005 NQF on going	NQF: 2010	NQF 2008	Ongoing	NQF 06/2008	For 210	2009
FRANCE	2002	2002	2002	2002	Done	2002	Done	2002	2006	The process starts on 12/2006	done
GEORGIA	2006	2007	2007	2007	2007-2009	NQF 2010	To be done	2007-2010	2009/2013-2014	2010	done
GERMANY	2003	2003	2003	2003-2005		04/2005	04/2005	12/2005 (accreditation Council HRK)		10/2008	done
GREECE											
HOLY SEE	2005	2005	2005-2006	2009	10/2006	To be decided	To be done in 10/2010	10/2010	10/2010	To be completed in 2011	10/2010
HUNGARY	06/2008	2008	2006-2009	2003-2006	To be done 2010	End of 2010	2010	Since 2006		2012	Done
ICELAND	2004-2005	2004-2005	2004-2005	2006	2006-2008	2006	2006	Done	done	07/2010	2010
IRELAND	1999	1999	2003	Done	Done	10/2003	2008	done	done	Completed in 2006	Done
ITALY	2008	To be completed in 2008	2008	03/2008	First part of 2010		Partially done in 2008, to be completed in 2010	Partially done in 2008, to be completed in 2010	To be concluded in 2009	2010	To be concluded in 2010
LATVIA	2004	2004-2006	2004	2004-2005	2005 on QF 2006-2008 on	Starts 2008 For adoption	Done	Starts in 2009 EQF 2013	done	Probably 2011	To be done in 2010

					the draft	in 2009-2010						
LIECHTENSTEIN	End 2007	01-02/2008	05/2008	05/2008-08/2010	12/2008-07/2010	10/2010	From 09/2010	Ongoing Until 07/2011	10/2010	Fully in 2011	done	
LITHUANIA												
LUXEMBOURG	10/2007	10/2007	done	On going	On going	Spring 2010	No	Spring 2010	Ongoing	2012		
MALTA	2005	2008	Done	2008-2009	11/2006-06/2007	10/2005	Done 2008-2009	Done 2007	06/2007	Nov 2009	Done	
MOLDOVA	2006	2006-2008/2010	10/2006	10/2006 2008-2009 for the NQF for HE	10/2009			2005-2006	07/2005	To be done	Done	
MONTENEGRO	2008-2010	2008	Done	WG establish	2008-2010	2008-2010					Not yet	
NETHERLANDS	March 2005	done	Done	done						01/2009		
NORWAY	12/2005	12/2005	12/2005	04/2007	07 – 11/2007	03/2009	03/2010	To be fully implemented in all HEIS by 2012	To be done 2009-2012	To be completed by 2013	Under construction	
POLAND	2006	2006	2006	01/2008	2008-2009-2010	2009-2010	2010	2010	2011	2012	2009	
PORTUGAL												
ROMANIA	2005	done	2005-2006	2007	2007	approved by government decision in 2009	Done in 2008	2008-2010	2010	Q1 2011	Done	
RUSSIAN FEDERATION	06/2007	27/2007	07/2007	07/2007-03/2008	04-06/2008	2008-2010	2008-2011	2008-2011	07/2007-03/2008	2011-2012	Done	
SERBIA	Summer 2008	Summer 2008	Autumn 2008	Spring 2009	Autumn 2009	Spring 2010	Autumn 2010		Done	Summer 2011	Done	
SLOVAK REPUBLIC												
SLOVENIA	2004	2009	01/2010	03-09/2010	09-12/2010	2011	2011	2012	2012	To be started in 2012	March 2010	
SPAIN												
SWEDEN	2009	Under progress 2010	Under progress 2010	Under progress 2010	Under progress 2010	Autumn 2010	2010-2011	2011	2011	2011-2012	2012	
SWITZERLAND	09/2005	2005-2006	2005	2006-2008	07-10/2008	2009-2010	2010	2010-2012	2010-2012	2012	done	

“THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA”	2008	2008	completed	Completed Will continue till 2012	To be completed in 2010	2010	June 2010	June 2011	To be completed 2011	2011-2012	Done
TURKEY	Done 04/2006	2008	Done 2006-2008	Done 2009	Done 2009	05/2009	01/2010	Pilot implementation in 2010 and full implementation by 12/2012	To be done in 2010-2015	To be done in 2010-2012	To be completed in 2010
UKRAINE	July 2008	July 2008	July 2008	2008	04/2009	10-11/2009					
UNITED KINGDOM	2001	done	Done	done	done	2001	?	done	Done?	11/2008	done
UNITED KINGDOM SCOTLAND	1997	done	Done in 1998	Completed in 1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2003-2004	2003	2001	2006-2007	done

Since 2008, countries have continued to develop their Qualifications Frameworks, something which is reflected in the previous table. It must be noted that the ways chosen can vary quite significantly from one country to another. In some countries, the developments of NQF is clearly perceived as part of the Bologna “reform package”. The timetables presented seem more realistic than the ones transmitted in 2008 and they have been readjusted to take into account the difficulties of the process, including the challenge of having national experts to be able to lead it.

Amongst other difficulties, some can be mentioned:

- In some countries, the Dublin descriptors are still an abstraction for some stakeholders
- The risk exists that the NQF is perceived as a catalogue of professions and not at all presented in terms of learning outcomes
- The recognition of prior learning within the NQF in terms of learning outcomes still seems problematic
- The relationship and articulation between different parts of the national framework, in particular between a higher education framework and a general one, can still be perceived as difficult mainly due to the challenge of the dialogue between universities and vocational training institutions and perhaps the existence of two overarching frameworks.
- When NQFs are included in law, the legal consequences are sometimes not completely clear both for students and for HEI. The parliamentary debates can be difficult due to the technicality of the subject.

Progress has been made in several aspects, taking into account the difficulties faced:

- In terms of learning outcomes; efforts are made to define and to formulate them, glossaries are developed in several countries. The challenge here is to make them a reality in the way that HEI describe their programmes

- The importance of the involvement of the different stakeholders is more and more recognised, even if students' organisations seem less involved. The challenge is to make QFs a useful tool to the stakeholders, including those in the labour market
- Regarding the web sites, it seems that they are developed to really be a tool both to inform stakeholders and to have a deeper understanding and knowledge of QFs

In terms of possible future challenges, 3 can be mentioned:

- The implementation of QF on the level of the presentation of the different programmes at HEIs, taking into account the institutional autonomy ;
- The practicality and acceptance of NQFs for the national labour market: Is NQF a proper tool for the labour market?
- The acceptance of NQFs by the general public: how to guarantee that societies are well informed of the value and the advantages of NQF ?

Annexe B

Synthesis of national developments related to the implementation of the EQF – January 2010

The present document provides a synthesis of information received from members of the EQF Advisory Group in response to the Commissions survey on national roadmaps for the implementation of the EQF at national level in January 2010. The survey requested information on the following national milestones:

- The designation of the National Coordination Point;
- Agreement on national qualifications levels (including in particular in the form of an NQF);
- Draft report on referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF ready for discussion within the EQF Advisory Group.

Twenty five countries replied. Taking into account countries responses to surveys in September 2009 and January 2010 (cf. Table 2, last column), the following table summarizes results:

Table 1. Estimate date for the presentation of draft referencing report

2010	10 countries – (IE, MT, UK +) CZ, DE, FR, NL, PT, SI, FI, HR
2011	15 countries – BE, BG, DA, EE, ES, IT, LU, LV, AT, PL, SE, IS, NO, TK
2012	1 country – EL
2013	2 countries – HU, SK
=	4 countries: no reply or no estimate - KY, LT, RO, LI,

Table 2. Information on the implementation of the EQF at national level in January 2010 (* indicates data from September 2009)

	EQF National Coordination Point designated	National qualifications levels	Presentation of the draft report on referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF to the EQF Advisory Group -
Belgique/Belgie – BEf			
Belgique/Belgie – BEv	YES	NQF in force	2011 Q3
Bulgaria – BG	YES	2011 Q2 NQF	2011 Q2
Ceska Republika –CZ	YES	Agreement on levels	2011 Q1
Danmark – DK	YES	2010 Q2 NQF	2011 Q2
Deutschland – DE	YES		2010 Q4 *
Ireland – IE	YES	NQF in force	2009 – Q3
Eesti – EE	YES	NQF in force	2011 Q2
Ellas – EL	YES	2011 NQF	2012
Espana –ES	YES		2011 *
France – FR	YES	NQF in force	2010 Q3
Italia – IT	YES	2011 Agreement on level	2011
Kypros – CY			
Latvija – LV	YES	2011 Q2 Agreement on levels	2011 Q2
Lithuania – LT			
Luxembourg – LU	YES	2010 Q3 NQF	2011 Q2
Magyarország – HU	YES	2010 Q2 draft NQF	2013
Malta – MT	YES	NQF in force	2009 09
Nederland – NL	YES	2010 Q3 Agreement on	2010 Q4

		levels	
Oesterreich – AT	YES	No estimate yet	2011
Polska – PL	2010 Q1	<i>Agreement on levels</i>	2011
Portugal – PT	YES	NQF in force	2010 Q4
Romania – RO			2011 Q1
Slovenija –SI	YES		2010 Q3 *
Slovensko –SK	YES	2011 Q3 Agreement on levels	2013 Q1
Suomi – FI	YES	2010 Q4	2010 Q4
Sverige – SE	YES	2010 Q4	2011 Q4
United Kingdom – UK	YES	NQFs in force	2010 Q2
Island – IS	YES	Draft NQF (final 2010 Q3)	2011 Q2
Liechtenstein – LI			
Norway – NO	YES	2011 Q2 Agreement on levels	2011 Q2
Croatia	YES	2010 Q2 NQF	2010 Q4
Turkey - TK	YES	<i>Agreement on levels</i>	2011 Q2