



**CEDEFOP**

European Centre for the Development  
of Vocational Training



# **National qualifications frameworks in Europe – the challenges at levels 5-8**

**Jens Bjornavold**

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## Cedefop mapping of NQF-developments 2012

- Covers a total of 41 frameworks (3 in Belgium, 3 in the UK)
- 27 EU member states
- 3 EEA countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway)
- 5 candidate countries (Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, FYROM and Turkey)
- Switzerland (joined EQF cooperation in 2012)



## Design of NQFs - October 2012

- 29 countries are developing/have designed NQFs for lifelong learning, covering all levels and types of qualifications;
- Frameworks in the Czech Republic, France, Italy, Switzerland, UK (England/Northern Ireland) cover limited range of qualifications or consist of a range of various frameworks for parts of E&T;
- 21 NQFs have been formally adopted (by decrees, laws, formal agreements and/or amendments to existing legislation);
- A limited number of countries have still to decide on the scope of their frameworks



## Design and implementation of NQFs October 2012

- 26 countries have proposed an 8-level framework, others with 5, 7, 9, 10 or 12 levels;
- All countries have introduced learning outcomes-based level descriptors;
- France, Ireland, Malta, UK, Czech Republic (vocational qualifications) have fully implemented NQFs;
- 8-10 NQFs have reached early operational stage (e.g. Denmark, Belgium (FL), Netherlands, Portugal....);



## Common objectives – different ambitions

- NQFs are seen as key instruments to achieve the link to EQF (15 countries have completed referencing to EQF so far);
- NQFs are accepted by all countries as communication and transparency tools - making the existing qualifications system more transparent, clarify relationships between qualifications;
- Some countries, e.g. Croatia, Iceland, Poland, Romania – see their frameworks as tools to support reform;
- The objectives of the frameworks change as they mature; ambitions tend to increase over time.



## The higher levels of the NQFs

- Higher levels of education and training are sometimes seen as the ‘territory’ of universities and academic education and training
- The existence of two European qualifications frameworks, the EQF and the qualifications frameworks for the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) demonstrates this
- While universities play a key role, higher levels of education and training are characterised by an increasing multitude of providers and qualifications
  - A first distinction between qualifications with an academic orientation and qualifications with a professional/vocational orientation
  - A second distinction between qualifications facilitating further education and learning and qualifications with a direct labour market orientation



## Level 5

Level 5 lies at the cross-roads of general, vocational and academic education and training

- A few cases of general upper secondary qualifications at level 5
- Vocational upper secondary qualifications are quite common at NQF level 5
- Post secondary VET – organised outside the higher education sector - is a significant qualification in many countries
- Short cycle higher education – organised by higher education institutions - are normally conceived as building blocks for degree studies, exists in a majority of European countries.

Precise statistics lack, but the number of students in ISCED 5a and 5b programmes (EU + candidate countries) was in 2009 approximately 26 million, of which 6 million followed the vocationally oriented 5b programmes



## The balancing of academic and vocational profiles at levels 5-8

- Policy emphasis on academic tertiary education and lack of focus on vocational orientation at this level (Greece and Portugal);
- Integrated qualifications systems seeking to strengthen overall labour market relevance: France;
- Vocationally oriented tertiary education and integrated part of higher education policies:
  - higher professional education and university education increasingly integrated: Norway;
  - higher professional education and university education kept separate (Czech Republic, Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland);
- Limited introduction of dual system principles, Germany, Sweden;





## **New stakeholders and cooperation modes at levels 5-8**

- Employer involvement in curriculum development (Denmark)
- Work based assignments and company based thesis work (Finland, UK)
- Apprenticeships (France, Netherlands, Norway)
- Private, corporate education and training (Germany, Ireland)
- Courses tailored to company needs (Netherlands)
- Fully work-based learning (Germany)

Resistance towards this opening up of tertiary education and training to the labour market is strong in some countries (Greece, Portugal, Romania...)



## The added value of NQFs

NQFs can play an important role in increasing the transparency of qualifications at higher levels, notably by demonstrating

- the different profiles – knowledge, skills and/or competences
- the mix of purposes - for further learning or employment
- the vertical and horizontal linkages between qualifications - and implications for access, transfer and progress

NQFs can be developed into platforms for dialogue and participation, suitable for addressing

- imbalances between qualifications types and levels
- missing qualifications
- the overall balance of education and training



## NQFs – possible shortcomings

Different designs influence the ability of NQFs to promote transparency of qualifications at levels 5-8:

- Some national frameworks cover only a part of national qualifications (for example the Czech NQF addressing VET)
- Some countries operate with a multitude of partly related sub-frameworks (like England/Northern Ireland)
- Some NQFs draw a line between levels 1-5 and 6-8, leaving higher levels to the university sector (Denmark, Greece, Iceland)
- Some use separate descriptors for levels 6-8, distinguishing between academically and vocationally oriented qualifications (Austria and Belgium)
- Some use sub-levels (for example Norway for 5 and 6)
- **A majority of countries uses the same descriptors for all levels - explicitly avoiding borderlines (Germany, Finland, Sweden....)**



## European comparability?

15 countries have now completed the referencing to the EQF. All countries (apart from England, Northern Ireland and Wales) have included higher level qualifications.

Apart from the 'automatic' referencing of Bachelors, Masters and Doctorates to 6-8, the following issues can be identified:

- The suggestion from countries to place general upper secondary qualifications at EQF level 5 (German 'Abitur' and Dutch VWO) has been opposed and so far not carried out
- The Meister is mostly placed at level 5, in Germany at level 6
- Some countries place a limited number of upper secondary VET qualifications at level 5
- Short cycle tertiary qualifications are located to both 5 and 6
- Several countries refer vocationally/professionally oriented qualifications to level 7 (for example military, police, agriculture etc.)
- We find a few examples of professionally oriented qualifications referred to level 8, these are commonly specialisations rather than full qualifications.



## How can NQFs make a difference

- The use of learning outcomes for referencing qualifications to levels 5-8 is still in its infancy, there's a need for more systematic comparison of how learning outcomes are applied in countries and across borders;
- The use of learning outcomes in frameworks must be linked to the use of learning outcomes in curricula, for teaching and training and for assessment ;
- If frameworks are to influence access to and progression in learning, the learning outcomes must be trusted;
- If parity of esteem between academic and vocationally oriented qualifications is to be achieved, learning outcomes must be trusted across institutions, sectors and countries.....