



# QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN EUROPE

## Coming of age

Qualifications frameworks across Europe are coming of age: following a period of initial development and formal adoption they are now becoming increasingly operational. Promoting the principle of learning outcomes, qualifications frameworks are, in some countries, evolving from a tool to describe qualifications systems into a means to reform and modernise them.

With the exception of the Irish, French and UK frameworks, European NQFs are still young, having been developed over the past decade, spurred by the EQF recommendation of 2008. The future impact of these young frameworks depends on their ability to make a difference to end-users, be these learners, parents, education and training providers, employers or others. Developments during 2015 <sup>(1)</sup> give us some initial indications on the possible future role frameworks may play.

### Current state of play

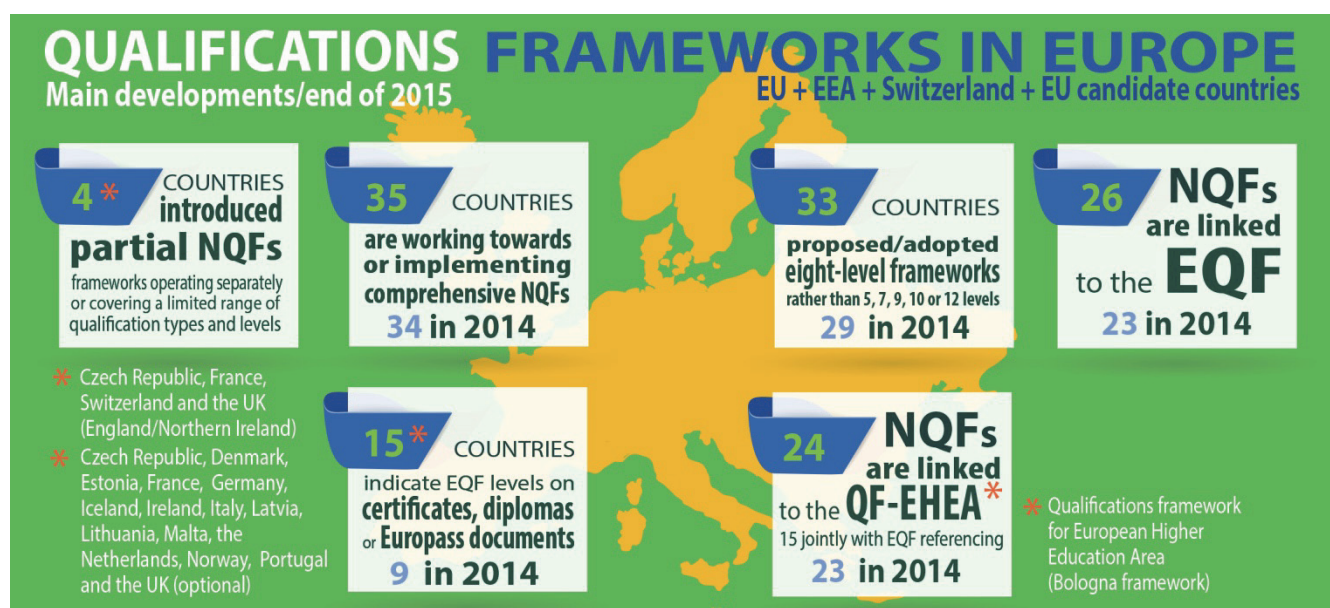
In the 39 countries currently cooperating on the European qualifications framework <sup>(2)</sup>, a total of

43 national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) have been established. In addition to strengthening the transparency and comparability of qualifications at European level, these frameworks are now playing an increasingly important national role. At the end of 2015 the situation was as follows:

- (a) frameworks in 23 countries have reached an operational stage (compared to 18 countries in 2014). These can be divided into two main categories:
  - 17 countries have fully operational frameworks: Belgium, the Czech Republic (partial QF for VET), Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK. This is a significant increase since 2014, when only seven countries belonged to this

<sup>(1)</sup> Cedefop has annually taken stock of the development of NQFs in Europe since 2009.

<sup>(2)</sup> In addition to the 28 EU Member States, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Kosovo, Lichtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey take part in this cooperation.



category<sup>(3)</sup>. These 17 countries have 21 different frameworks, including three frameworks for Belgium (the Flemish community, the French speaking community and the German speaking community) and three for the United Kingdom (England/Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales);

- in six countries (Croatia, Greece, Latvia, Montenegro, Slovakia and Turkey) national qualifications frameworks have reached an early operational stage. These countries have completed the initial design and adoption of their frameworks. As the frameworks' practical implementation is continuing, their benefits and visibility to end-users are still limited;
- (b) six countries are in the process of formal legal adoption of their frameworks (Spain, Hungary, Austria, Poland, Slovenia and Finland). These countries have completed initial technical and conceptual design; they will embark on implementing their frameworks as soon as the legal and political mandate is in place. Austria Poland and Slovenia adopted the necessary legal provisions in December 2015 and January 2016; Hungary and Spain expect legal adoption in the coming months;
- (c) the remaining countries, mostly those having joined EQF cooperation in the past two years (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia), are still working on the design and formal adoption of their NQFs. Italian stakeholders have agreed on a roadmap for setting up an NQF, including national and regional qualifications, by June 2016.

## Attaining maturity

Compared to 2014, the most striking development is the number of countries with fully operational frameworks, which has more than doubled. The most established and mature frameworks – in France, Ireland and the UK – are now undergoing review, which shows that NQFs need to evolve constantly to prove their relevance and added value. Reaching a fully operation stage means that:

- the conceptual and technical design and development stage has been concluded;
- legal adoption has been successfully completed;

<sup>(3)</sup> Analysis and overview of national qualifications framework developments in European countries, annual report, 2014. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/6127>

- the framework includes qualifications from different parts of education and training;
- the framework is visible and accessible to all main stakeholders and to the general public, for example through qualifications databases and the inclusion of levels in qualifications documents and Europass supplements.

While the overall implementation (for example coverage of qualifications) still varies, all 17 countries with fully operational NQFs now provide a learning-outcomes-based map of national qualifications aiming at increased transparency, comparability and permeability. Some of these frameworks take on a regulatory (France) or reform (Iceland, Portugal) role and directly influence the way standards are set, curricula are designed and teaching and training practices integrate the shift to learning outcomes.

## The future

In a survey carried out by Cedefop in November 2015<sup>(4)</sup>, countries were asked to respond to two key questions on the current and the emerging roles of NQFs in national education, training and employment policies:

- how sustainable are the NQFs? To what extent have qualifications frameworks become permanent features of a national qualifications system and to what extent are they having an impact on policies and practices?
- how visible have the NQFs become? Are learners, parents and employers aware of the frameworks and are they benefitting from them when pursuing learning or employment?

## Sustainability

Attainment of the operational stage by a significant number of NQFs creates new challenges. While initial development of NQFs was triggered by the deadlines set in the EQF recommendation, their future consolidation and impact will depend on the willingness of national authorities and stakeholders to provide continuing, long-term support.

The 2015 survey provides some insight as to the political and practical sustainability of NQFs. Most countries consider their NQF by now to be a permanent feature of their national qualifications

<sup>(4)</sup> All 39 countries taking part in the EQF cooperation were invited to respond to the survey.

system. Many argue that the establishment of a strong legal basis with clear political objectives is essential to guarantee and clarify the future role of the frameworks. Active and committed involvement of stakeholders in and outside the education and training system is also seen as a precondition for and guarantee of sustainability of NQFs.

A few countries (such as Liechtenstein and Hungary) have expressed doubts over the future role of their frameworks, emphasising the need to clarify and/or strengthen the political mandate underpinning them. Other countries, including Greece and Norway, have pointed out that changing national political priorities may affect such new tools as the NQFs.

While most countries are confident that their frameworks will remain in place, some point out that the frameworks' ultimate impact will depend on integration into mainstream policy processes. Politically and institutionally isolated frameworks will be less able to meet expectations.

Around one third of countries <sup>(5)</sup> regard the NQF as a reform tool. They expect it will help to restructure, strengthen and/or regulate their national qualifications systems. While many initially emphasised that NQFs should be used to describe – and not to change – qualifications systems, they now tend to discover their NQFs' reform potential and are interested in combining both functions <sup>(6)</sup>. This trend is linked to the shift to learning outcomes and its impact on qualifications standards, curricula, assessment, and teaching and training methods.

The permanence and sustainability of the frameworks is mirrored by European countries' financial and human investment in them. The survey demonstrates that modest, though non-negligible, resources are being devoted to NQFs. In most countries, NQF implementation is supported by full-time and permanent staff, normally in a secretariat of two to four experts. In some countries, notably those with more mature frameworks, NQF implementation is an integrated function of ministries or qualification and/or quality assurance bodies. Most countries flag the

need for financial and human resources to be stepped up when NQFs reach full operation.

## Visibility

Most European NQFs have so far stayed out of general public view. While this is easy to explain – their initial development required time – it now needs to change. Visibility can be achieved in different ways, for example through national databases and information campaigns. What will make a difference is including NQF (and EQF) levels in the actual qualification documents (certificates and diplomas) <sup>(7)</sup>. This is what will make the frameworks visible, not only to learners but also to employers.

The survey shows that countries are increasingly moving towards including NQF levels in certificates and diplomas. While 15 countries <sup>(8)</sup> have already done this, another 10 <sup>(9)</sup> have flagged their intention to do so in the near future. Denmark, Germany, Estonia, France, Ireland, Lithuania and Malta are among the countries which have started to award large numbers of qualifications with clear indication of their NQF and EQF levels. Uneven implementation partly reflects a need to adjust existing legal provisions.

## Outlook

The 2015 survey points to some of the challenges European NQFs will have to face:

- NQFs need to integrate arrangements better for validating non-formal and informal learning. This is critical for the frameworks to make a difference to lifelong learning and to add value to career progression;
- NQFs need to promote the use of learning outcomes for the development and review of qualification standards, curricula and assessment;
- countries need to make their NQFs more visible to the general public and broaden stakeholder involvement, both from education/training and the labour market;

<sup>(5)</sup> Examples are Belgium (FI), Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, FYROM, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Malta, Montenegro, Portugal, Slovakia and Turkey.

<sup>(6)</sup> Examples are, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria and Poland.

<sup>(7)</sup> This is why the EQF recommendation invites countries to include a reference to levels in qualification and certification documents.

<sup>(8)</sup> Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, France, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Norway and UK (optional).

<sup>(9)</sup> Examples include Austria, Belgium, Greece, Hungary, Croatia, Montenegro, Slovenia, Sweden and Turkey.

- countries need to integrate their NQFs better into mainstream education, training and employment policies to benefit fully from their potential;
- NQFs need to be closely interlinked with quality assurance policies and practices.

It seems NQFs are here to stay. They have been growing and changing; many have reached maturity. Now is the time to demonstrate their impact and continue to look for ways to release their potential.

### The European qualifications framework: progress to date

By December 2015, 26 countries had linked their national qualifications frameworks to the EQF: Austria, Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (England, Scotland and Wales). Three additional countries (Cyprus, Slovakia and Romania) are currently in dialogue with the EQF advisory group on their referencing reports.

The remaining countries are expected to follow in the near future, which means that the first stage of the EQF referencing is reaching completion. This will be followed by regular updates from the countries, underlining that EQF implementation is a continuing process (Estonia and Malta presented updates in 2015, starting this phase).

The information gathered through referencing reports contributes to increased transparency of qualifications at all levels and creates mutual trust.

### The global dimension of qualifications frameworks

Qualifications frameworks – national and regional – are rapidly emerging around the world. The updated *Global inventory on regional and national qualifications frameworks*, published jointly by Cedefop, Unesco and the European Training Foundation (ETF) in 2014/15 <sup>(10)</sup> shows that in 2014, there were more than 150 countries and territories involved in developing and implementing qualifications frameworks. International cooperation on using NQFs via transnational frameworks and supporting recognition has intensified. The same is true for regional qualifications frameworks to

which NQFs of that region are referenced <sup>(11)</sup>. Taking the progress achieved in the development of national and regional qualifications frameworks as a starting point, Unesco is investigating the technical and conceptual feasibility of world reference levels for qualifications as well as the conditions for increased cooperation between regional frameworks.

### Cedefop and international work on qualifications frameworks

To help open up European education and training to international developments and requirements, Cedefop supports international work on qualifications frameworks. In 2015 it jointly drafted three technical studies exploring the relationship between the EQF and the Australian (AQF), the New Zealand (NZQF) and the Hong Kong (HKQF) qualifications frameworks. Lessons learned from the three pilot projects will inform policy-makers on the possible future alignment of the EQF with non-European regional and national frameworks.

Cedefop contributes to dialogue and cooperation between regional qualifications frameworks, promoting global transparency of qualifications.

<sup>(10)</sup> Volume I: Thematic chapters.  
<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/2213>;  
 Volume II: National and regional cases.  
<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/2213-0>

<sup>(11)</sup> EQF, ASEAN qualifications reference framework, the Caribbean qualifications framework, the Gulf qualifications framework, the Pacific qualifications framework, the Southern African Development Community qualifications framework and the transnational qualifications framework for the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth.



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P.O. Box 22427, 55102 Thessaloniki, Greece  
 Europe 123, 57001 Thessaloniki, Greece  
 Tel. +30 2310490111, Fax +30 2310490020  
 Email: [info@cedefop.europa.eu](mailto:info@cedefop.europa.eu)

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