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European Centre for the Development
of Vocational Training

National Qualifications Frameworks in the global context

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Cedefop is the European Union centre of expertise in the areas of vocational and professional education and training.

Cedefop, through research and documentation, supports

- The European Commission,
- The EU Member States
- European employers and European trade unions



- What would be lost if national qualifications framework did not exist?
- Are these frameworks making a difference to individual citizens;
- How do we evaluate and 'measure' the impact of these frameworks

Qualifications Frameworks - a global trend

The 2017 *Global Inventory of qualifications frameworks* (Cedefop, European Training Foundation and UNESCO) summarises developments as follows:

- Approximately 150 countries, on all continents, have established NQFs
- The majority of frameworks were established between 2005 and 2015; the number seems to have stabilized after 2015
- Demonstrates an extensive policy learning and/or policy borrowing over a short period
- Triggered by the "frontrunners" (Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the UK) as well as by the launching of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)



A strengthened international dimension

- Qualifications frameworks are also increasingly used at regional level.
 - ASEAN qualifications reference framework (AQRF)
 - European Qualifications Framework (EQF)
 - QFs in southern Africa
 - QF of the Caribbean
 - QF of Gulf States
 - QF of Pacific region
 - QFs of the Commonwealth
- The EQF has reached an advanced stage where 32 out of 39 countries have linked their NQFs to the framework
- The ASEAN reference framework became operational in 2017 and is expected to develop further in the near future
- UNESCO is pursuing the idea of 'world reference levels'



North America – an exception to the trend?

- While Canada is using qualifications frameworks, the US stands out as an exception to the general global trend.
- However, a Credentials Framework is now being promoted on a voluntary basis (Lumina Foundation), aiming to increase transparency of US credentials and qualifications.
- The emergence of the credentials framework underlines the need, also in the US, to support citizens in coping with an increasingly complex landscape of qualifications



Some shared elements

- NQFs are all classifications of qualifications according to type and level (of learning outcomes)
- NQFs are all seeking to communicate qualifications, to make complex systems better understandable
- NQFs optimize transparency and trust of qualifications, to varying degrees pursuing broader policy objectives
- NQFs frequently set down quality measures
- NQFs increasingly act as official bridges to international users

Some differences

- NQFs vary in structure, from 4 to 12 levels
- NQFs vary as regards coverage; while a majority are comprehensive; a significant proportion cover a limited area of qualifications
- NQFs vary as regards policy ambitions



A first generation of ‘tight’, regulatory, transformative NQFs

- The first generation of frameworks (1980s and 1990s) were ambitious and set high goals – the South African NQF illustrates this
- Early frameworks emphasised regulation, policy transformation and harmonization of qualifications systems
- Imposing uniform regulations (one-fit-for all) to be applied across diverse institutions and sectors created resistance towards NQFs as such
- All first generation frameworks have evolved and softened these early principles, some quite radically like the new (2015) UK-English framework
- Much research on NQFs seems to relate to these early experiences, overlooking later adjustments and developments



A new generation of 'loose' NQFs focussing on transparency and communication

- Emerging after 2000, these frameworks emphasise transparency and communication rather than regulation
- They seek to embrace diversity of education and training systems, institutions and providers
- They are mostly comprehensive in character, addressing all types and levels of qualifications
- Their purpose is not to harmonize but to relate and bridge and thus need to embrace a broad range of values, interests and traditions.
- A key objective is to use the NQF as a tool for internationalisation; to make own qualifications known and recognised abroad.

Case:

**The new generation of National Qualifications
Framework in Europe**

NQFs in Europe – overall situation November 2015

In the 39 countries working towards the EQF, NQF developments can be summarised as follows:

- A total of 43 NQFs being developed in 39 countries
- 6 countries are still in a development stage
- 32 NQFs have been formally adopted (by Law or Decree)
- + 20 have reached early or full operational stage
- The 3 pre-2005 NQFs (France, Ireland and the UK) are undergoing substantial review and adjustment



NQFs in Europe – common characteristics

- There is a broad agreement on the architecture of the NQFs – 32 countries having 8 levels referring to knowledge, skills and competence
- Comprehensive NQFs dominate - 35 out 39 countries address all qualifications at all levels
- Most NQFs can be described as having limited regulatory functions; their initial focus is mostly on communication and transparency
- Most NQFs seek to include a broad group of stakeholders and use the framework as a platform for dialogue

NQFs in Europe – Impact?

Tension between countries as regards the future role of NQFs at national level. Two main positions:

- NQFs are there to better describe existing systems (Transparency)
- NQFs should become a tool for modernising education and training systems (Reform)

As NQFs have become operational they tend to take on a mix of these roles; in some cases triggering and promoting reform



Impact of European NQFs – existing Cedefop evidence

- Annual studies of NQF developments since 2009
- Systematic studies of the implementation and application of learning outcomes in Europe (2009 and 2016)
- Systematic studies of RPL (validation of non formal and informal learning) in 2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016
- Studies on international qualifications in 2010 and 2015
- Study of VET-qualifications at level 5 of the EQF (2013), EQF 3 and 4 in 2017/2018
- Study of the review and renewal of qualifications in 2013 and 2017



Impact - NQFs and the shift to learning outcomes

- Cedefop studies in 2009 and 2016 demonstrate a major shift to learning outcomes in all European countries
- The NQFs are the single most important factor contributing to this shift – in many countries enabling a consistent national approach
- The long term effect of this shift to learning outcomes is important
 - For education and training as qualifications standards, curricula, assessment forms and teaching methods are influenced
 - For the dialogue education-training and the labour market as the learning outcomes can be seen as a common language



Impact - NQFs and stakeholder involvement

- During the development and implementation stages of NQFs we have observed the inclusion of a broad group of stakeholders – notably involving labour market and private stakeholders
- NQFs can become platforms for dialogue and communication between different stakeholders, notably education and training and the labour market
- Depends on the willingness to open to qualifications outside the formal (public) systems
- A key question if this new dialogue can be sustained when the NQFs becomes operational?



Impact - NQFs opening up towards the private sector and 'non-formal' qualifications

- The majority of NQFs have so far limited themselves to the qualifications covered by the formal (public) education and training system
- In the last 2-4 years increasing attention to this area, notably influenced by the Netherlands and Sweden
- On a longer term basis an area where NQFs can make a difference – better integrate continuing education and training and facilitate lifelong learning
- Progress in this area important for the involvement and commitment of stakeholders outside the traditional education and training system



Impact - NQFs and the review and renewal of qualifications

- Comprehensive NQF makes it possible to identify weak points in the national qualification system (as some countries have done for level 5).
- The learning outcomes based level of the NQF is increasingly used as a reference ('calibration') point for qualification developments, allowing stakeholders to
 - Align to the relevant level
 - Cover and balance the different learning domains (knowledge, skills and competence)



Impact - NQFs and vocationally oriented education and training at higher levels

- The learning outcomes based levels have helped to make visible vocationally oriented education at higher levels (EQF 5-8)
- The levelling of the German “Master Craftsman” qualification at level 6, equivalent to University Bachelor, sends an important signal
- The Swiss NQF have levelled vocational and professional qualifications from level 1 to level 8



Impact - NQFs and Validation of non-formal and informal learning

- NQFs and validation are linked through their mutual dependency on learning outcomes
- NQFs promote the independence of qualifications from programmes and delivery modes – paving the way for validation
- The NQFs makes it clear that validation can be a normal way to achieve a qualification; as a parallel and/or alternative to following traditional courses



Less impact

➤ **Visibility to the labour market**

Visibility to employers and labour market stakeholders is generally limited, although increasing in some countries

➤ **The bridging of institutions and sectors**

Too early to say if QFs will be able to reduce barriers between institutions and sectors and strengthen permeability

➤ **Institutional reform**

NQFs have only in a few cases led to the establishment of new bodies and/or mergers of existing institutions.

➤ **Recognition of qualifications**

Frameworks facilitate recognition - they do not automatically trigger recognition

How to assess and measure impact:

Some initial reflections reflecting the European situation

The challenge of assessing and measuring impact of qualifications frameworks

- Limited causality: QFs operate with multiple goals in a complex political, institutional and social setting
- Change: QFs evolve and change their functions over time
- Continuity: QFs need time to evolve and to make a difference, (most European QFs, for example, have only recently become operational)
- The role of NQFs depend on the maturity of the education and training system it operates within



The importance of South African experiences

- With the possible exception of UK-Scotland, no European NQF have undergone the same kind of systematic and long term evaluation as the South African NQF.
- Evaluations have been carried out in UK England and UK Wales, as well as Denmark and Ireland, but not as extensive as in South Africa.
- The EQF went through a formal evaluation in 2013, but this was only five years after adoption and too early to identify impact at national or European level.
- The annual Cedefop reviews of European NQFs have to a limited extent addressed impact, although gradually deepening focus on this
- The South African analytical model of high relevance and interest



Towards a more systematic monitoring and measuring of QFs – a European base-line

A proposal for a European base-line has been discussed but not yet adopted. This would help to show how NQFs contribute to shared objectives:

- A horizontal axis containing the broad objectives addressed by the 2008 and 2017 EQF Recommendations
- A vertical axis containing the key (innovative) elements of QFs
 - Explicit level descriptors,
 - the learning outcomes principle;
 - the introduction of frameworks covering all types and levels of qualifications;
 - stakeholders involvement

Towards a more systematic monitoring and measuring of QFs – Base-line example 1

Strategic EQF-objectives	Increase transparency
Key elements of QFs	
Level descriptors and the extent to which they are known and used	The extent to which the EQF/NQF learning outcomes based levels are referred to and integrated in certificates and diplomas, in national education, training and employment databases

Towards a more systematic monitoring and measuring of QFs – Base line example 2

Strategic EQF-objectives	Modernising education and training
Key elements of QFs	
The learning outcomes principle and the extent to which it is implemented	The extent to which the learning outcomes approach informs the articulation of standards, programmes, curricula, assessment and teaching methods.



- Are these frameworks making a difference to education and employment policies and practises?

Yes.....

- Are they make a difference to citizens?

Still only to a limited extent....

- Can they be evaluated?

Yes, but only by specifying context, change and relationships....



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