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Analysis and overview of national qualifications framework developments in European countries

Annual report 2014





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Foreword

This synthesis report, the fifth since Cedefop started its regular monitoring of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) development, looks into NQF developments and progress made in 38 countries ⁽¹⁾ and 42 NQFs. It points to the impact of NQFs on systems of education and training and identifies challenges ahead.

The report is based on evidence collected through NQF inventory consisting of 42 national chapters ⁽²⁾. The inventory works as an observatory of progress in NQF implementation and looks at the main policy objectives, stakeholder involvement, framework implementation, the focus on learning outcomes and the use of level descriptors, as well as the way that validation of non-formal and informal learning links to NQFs. The national chapters conclude with important lessons and future plans.

Political commitment to the developing and implementing NQFs was strengthened in 2014. This is demonstrated not only by the fact that more qualifications frameworks have been formally adopted but also that more frameworks have entered an operational stage and have been populated with qualifications. A sufficient formal basis, successful implementation of a learning outcomes approach, and support from broader groups of stakeholders, including social partners, seem to be the most critical factors. The inventory on which the analysis is based demonstrates how the extensive technical and conceptual work being carried out at national level has engaged important national stakeholders. This forms a solid basis for the qualifications frameworks to make a difference to European citizens, education and training providers, and social partners.

Although evidence on the added value of NQFs to end-users (individual learners and employers) is most apparent in some of the earlier frameworks, like the Scottish one, the report demonstrates that the new comprehensive NQFs – covering all levels and types of qualifications – are having a positive impact in a number of areas across countries. Although still uneven across countries and sectors, NQFs have strengthened the implementation of learning outcomes

⁽¹⁾ The 28 EU Member States plus Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey.

⁽²⁾ Cedefop. *European inventory on NQF*.
<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/european-inventory-on-nqf> [accessed 8.5.2015].

approaches and have helped to bring together stakeholders from different sectors of education, training and employment that may have not talked to each other before. NQFs are widely recognised to be an important tool in supporting lifelong learning strategies, notably by opening up to qualifications awarded in non-formal learning contexts and by promoting validation of non-formal and informal learning.

While important, these achievements cannot hide the fact that the new NQFs being developed across Europe are still vulnerable and their long-term impact is by no means guaranteed. First, their existence is still not well known to ordinary citizens. Second, the shift to learning outcomes promoted by the NQFs is viewed with scepticism by some groups, arguing that the focus on learning outcomes draws attention and resources away from pedagogies and learning contexts. Third, there is a challenge that frameworks might not be seen within a sufficiently long time horizon at national level but as a short-term and formal response to European initiatives.

This Cedefop report shows that some of these concerns are ill-founded. The use of learning outcomes is combined with learning inputs and the approach is seen as complementary rather than exclusive. Other concerns, such as the lack of visibility and long-term strategies, are better founded and underline that the issues require further attention. Stronger engagement with labour market actors remains one of the most important challenges in years to come.

As developments in this field are constant and rapid, Cedefop will continue to publish regular overviews and analysis of NQF developments to offer end-users a better understanding of the usefulness of this tool for lifelong learning and working and for supporting the recognition of qualifications.

Joachim James Calleja
Director

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- (b) the national representatives in the European qualifications framework (EQF) advisory group, jointly coordinated by the European Commission and Cedefop, Directorate-General Employment, Social affairs and Inclusion, EQF national coordination points and other national stakeholders.

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Introduction

NQF development overview and main tendencies

The development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) continued in 2014. An increasing number of frameworks have become operational and are now starting to make a modest but detectable impact on education, training and (to some extent) employment policies and practices. Most countries (34 out of 38) are working towards comprehensive NQFs and cover all types and levels of qualifications. They can be seen as important components of national lifelong learning strategies (Halasz, 2013). Together with their systematic support for a shift to learning outcomes, frameworks are now moving into a position where they can contribute to reducing barriers to learning and promoting more permeable education and training systems. For this to happen, however, long-term implementation strategies have to be put in place, allowing frameworks to become fully integrated and trusted instruments at national level. This report, the fifth since Cedefop started its regular analysis of NQF developments in Europe, analyses progress made and points to the main challenges and opportunities ahead. The report builds on 42 national chapters ⁽³⁾.

NQFs in 2014: overall progress

Currently, 38 countries ⁽⁴⁾ are developing 42 NQFs. The following figures reflect the situation in November 2014:

- (a) 34 countries ⁽⁵⁾ are working towards comprehensive NQFs covering all types and levels of qualifications (30 in 2013);

⁽³⁾ A total of 36 national reports, three reports for the UK (England and Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and three reports for Belgium (Flemish, French and German-speaking communities). These chapters can be accessed at: Cedefop. *European inventory on NQF*. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/european-inventory-on-nqf> [accessed 28.4.2015].

⁽⁴⁾ These countries are the 28 EU Member States, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey.

⁽⁵⁾ In the UK, the frameworks of Scotland and Wales are comprehensive; the qualifications and credit framework in England/Northern Ireland includes only vocational/professional qualifications.

- (b) four countries have introduced partial NQFs covering a limited range of qualification types and levels or consisting of individual frameworks operating separately from each other. This is exemplified by the Czech Republic and Switzerland, where separate frameworks for vocational and higher education qualifications have been developed; by France where vocationally and professionally oriented qualifications are included in the framework; and by Italy where frameworks are restricted to qualifications from higher education;
- (c) 29 NQFs have been formally adopted (24 in 2013);
- (d) 29 countries have proposed/adopted eight-level frameworks (28 in 2013);
- (e) 18 countries have reached operational stage (16 in 2013): in seven of these – Belgium (fl), Denmark, Ireland, France, Malta, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom – NQFs are fully operational (five in 2013);
- (f) 26 countries presented referencing reports ⁽⁶⁾ showing how their national frameworks relate to the European qualifications framework (EQF);
- (g) 24 NQFs are linked to the Bologna framework, 14 jointly with EQF referencing;
- (h) nine countries indicate EQF levels on certificates, diplomas or Europass documents (six in 2013).

NQFs in the context of the EQF implementation

The European qualifications framework (EQF) has been the main catalyst for the rapid developments and implementation of learning-outcomes-based NQFs in Europe. All countries ⁽⁷⁾ see national frameworks as necessary for relating national qualifications levels to the EQF transparently and in a manner that inspires trust. By December 2014, 23 countries had referenced their national qualifications levels to the EQF: Austria, Belgium (fl and fr), Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and the United Kingdom. In addition, Greece, Cyprus and Romania, were still in dialogue with the EQF advisory group on finalising

⁽⁶⁾ Greece, Cyprus and Romania still need to complete this process.

⁽⁷⁾ Italy has referenced its major national qualifications from formal education and training directly to the EQF. The Czech Republic has developed an NQF for vocational qualifications and one for higher education and referenced on the basis of national classifications of educational qualifications types and the NQF for vocational qualifications.

their reports. The remaining countries are expected to follow in 2015. It is worth noting that the number of countries cooperating on EQF increased during 2014 from 36 to 38 ⁽⁸⁾.

While failing to meet the original targets of the EQF recommendation set for referencing (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2008), the process has been politically successful in the sense that participating countries actively support the overall objectives. Delays have been caused by the time and resource-consuming combination of NQF developments and EQF referencing.

The development of NQFs in Europe also reflects the Bologna process and the agreement to implement qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area (QF-EHEA). All countries covered by this report are participating in this process. A total of 24 countries had formally 'self-certified' their higher education qualifications to the QF-EHEA by December 2014. Countries are increasingly combining referencing to the EQF and self-certification to the QF-EHEA ⁽⁹⁾; Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Norway, Poland, Portugal and Slovenia have all produced joint reports on both processes, reflecting the priority given to developing and adopting comprehensive NQFs covering all levels and types of qualification. It is expected that this approach will be chosen by most countries preparing to reference to the EQF in 2015. This development reflects the increasingly close cooperation between the two European framework initiatives, also illustrated by regular meetings between EQF national coordination points and Bologna framework coordinators.

Policy rationale and objectives of the NQFs in Europe

Two main drivers explain the rapid development of European NQFs during the past decade. Most NQFs were originally seen as key instruments for improving European and international comparability of qualifications and thus as direct responses to the EQF. Increasingly, however, NQF-developments have been linked to national priorities, in some cases directly supporting education and training system reform. The following objectives – listed according to the frequency they are referred to by countries – illustrate this combination of European 'push' and national 'pull':

⁽⁸⁾ The two new countries are Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

⁽⁹⁾ Self-certification reports verify the compatibility of the national framework for higher education with the QF-EHEA.

- (a) all countries see qualifications frameworks as a key instrument for increasing transparency and comparability of qualification systems and see European cooperation through the EQF as a way to facilitate this;
- (b) most countries see the NQFs as important for strengthening the learning-outcomes-based approach throughout education and training ⁽¹⁰⁾. The introduction of learning-outcomes-based qualifications frameworks is seen by several countries, such as Austria, Belgium (fr), Croatia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway and Turkey, as a condition not only for increasing transparency and comparability of qualifications but also for supporting learner-centred teaching and training practices, notably by changing the way standards, curricula and assessment are defined and used;
- (c) most countries consider NQFs as relevant for strengthening lifelong and life-wide learning policies and practices. Countries such as Germany, Romania and Turkey see NQFs as tools for increasing permeability of their education and training systems, potentially reducing barriers to access and progression in education, training and learning. Learning-outcomes-based levels provide a reference point for formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences and allow countries to put in place comprehensive national approaches for validation. Countries such as Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway and Portugal all pay particular attention to the possible role of NQFs in promoting validation;
- (d) linked to the above is the expectation that NQFs will provide a reference point for quality assurance. While quality assurance arrangements already exist in all countries, the introduction of comprehensive, learning-outcomes-based frameworks allows better comparison of institutions and subsystems and capacity to address overall consistency and quality in education and training. Belgium (fl), Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, and Romania emphasise this policy objective;
- (e) several countries see the NQF as an instrument to strengthen cooperation between stakeholders and establish a closer link to the labour market. While this partly is linked to the shift to learning outcomes (see point (b) above), frameworks offer a new platform for dialogue and cooperation which makes

⁽¹⁰⁾ This was one of the main policy rationales for introducing NQFs in the first generation frameworks in Anglophone countries (Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and UK) in the beginning of the 1990s.

it possible to address cross-sector and cross-institutional issues and challenges. Comprehensive NQFs can play an important role in this respect.

Other additional objectives are listed by one or a few countries:

- (a) achieve parity of esteem between vocational education and training and higher education (Germany, Greece, Switzerland);
- (b) aid better monitoring of supply and demand within education and training (Estonia);
- (c) increase the responsiveness of education and training systems to individual needs (United Kingdom);
- (d) promote participation in secondary education (Portugal).

While not complete, this list shows the range of objectives addressed by European NQFs. Though the road from objectives to actual impacts may be long, most frameworks now seem to trigger change. Only a few cases refer to an explicit administrative and legal reform-mandate ⁽¹¹⁾, but frameworks are increasingly acting as a catalysts for the shift to learning outcomes and for a cross-sectoral/cross-institutional dialogue. This is exemplified by a recent study of the shift to learning outcomes in 33 European countries (Cedefop, forthcoming) demonstrating that significant progress has been made in all sectors of education and training during the past five years. This has largely been facilitated and supported by NQFs.

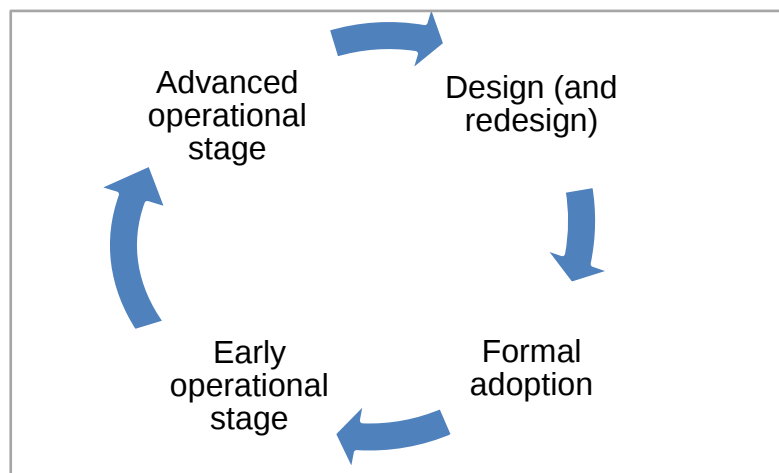
⁽¹¹⁾ Very few regulatory frameworks have been created. The QCF (currently under review) in the United Kingdom and the *répertoire national des certifications professionnelles* (national vocational certification register) in France can be seen as examples of frameworks with regulatory functions.

CHAPTER 1.

Stages of development: towards operational status

During 2014 an increasing number of qualifications frameworks have reached what can be characterised as an early operational stage. While developmental and legislative issues still require attention, implementation of the frameworks as permanent and integrated features of national education and training systems has become a priority. This requires clarifying the roles and responsibilities of implementing agencies, setting up and restructuring databases, and development of information/communication strategies. All these activities signal that developments so far have remained within a limited circle of experts and policy-makers and that there is now a need to move closer to potential end-users. This said, the 38 countries taking part in the EQF process have reached different stages of national qualifications framework (NQF) development and implementation, illustrated by Figure 1.

Figure 1. **Stages of NQF development**



Source: Authors.

Presenting the stages in the form of a circle signals that NQF-developments are continuous and iterative developments; their relevance and impact depend on continuous feedback from stakeholders and users.

1.1. Design and development

This stage is critical for deciding the objectives, rationale and architecture of a NQF. This is also the stage where relevant stakeholders buy-in (or not) to the process. Most European countries have completed this stage, laying the conceptual and technical foundation for their frameworks (notably in the form of national level descriptors, defined levels, and qualification types). This stage normally requires a combination of technical development and stakeholder consultation and dialogue; the latter is critical for mobilising commitment and ownership among diverse stakeholders, in many cases not accustomed to working together. By the end of 2014, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Italy, Liechtenstein, Serbia, Slovakia and Spain could be described as addressing design and development issues, although some were at a more advanced level than others.

1.2. Formal adoption

In many countries formal adoption of frameworks has required more time than foreseen and delayed implementation. Formal adoption means different things in different countries and ranges from the introduction of specific NQF-laws via amendments of existing laws to limited administrative regulations. While formats vary – largely reflecting the national political and legislative context and culture (Raffe, 2012b) – formal adoption is normally necessary for moving towards an operational stage. Compared to 2013, significant progress can be observed in this area: 29 NQFs are now formally adopted (compared to 23 in 2013), most recently in Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Romania and Switzerland. Specific NQF laws have been passed by national parliaments in Belgium (fl), Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Ireland and Montenegro. Decrees have been adopted in Bulgaria, Latvia, Hungary, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal and Romania. Legal processes have been started in Belgium (fr), Finland, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden and Turkey but are still awaiting completion. Existing legislation has been amended in Denmark and Iceland and is planned in Cyprus, the Netherlands and Slovakia. A joint resolution on NQF implementation was adopted in Germany by all relevant stakeholders. A few countries base their NQF implementation on regulations referring to existing legal basis, as is the case in Iceland, Luxembourg and Norway.

1.3. Moving from early to advanced operational stage

Reaching operational stage means that a framework has been introduced as a permanent and visible feature of the national qualification system and that its principles are being actively promoted and applied. The learning-outcomes-based levels of the framework will, at this advanced stage, provide entrance to and reference for all national qualifications. This means that the framework not only provides the overarching map used by learners and parents (supporting transparency and progression), it will also provide a reference point for development and review of standards, programmes and curricula and for consistent implementation of learning outcomes in teaching and training. Increasingly we also see that operational frameworks aid integration of validation of non-formal and informal learning, thus supporting lifelong and life-wide learning. Reaching this advanced stage requires agreement on sharing responsibilities between the different stakeholders and on the role to be played by the framework in the wider education, training and employment context. While this requires clarity on administrative and budgetary arrangement, it will also require agreement on the relative value of different qualifications and how these are to be placed within the hierarchy introduced by the NQF. The case of Austria exemplifies this. The framework was launched in 2009 and was extensively tested. However, as procedures for allocating qualifications to levels have not been agreed between stakeholders, the framework has yet to become operational. Similar problems were experienced in Belgium (Flanders) following its 2009 formal adoption. Lack of agreement between the relevant Ministry and the social partners delayed the process. The process was restarted after successfully concluded negotiations and seems to have strengthened the general standing of the Flemish framework. Approximately 150 professional qualifications have now (end 2014) been included into the framework.

We can distinguish between countries having reached advanced and early operational stages:

- (a) seven frameworks – in Belgium (fl), Denmark, Ireland, France, Malta, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom – have reached advanced operational stage. These NQFs are being used by education and training and labour market authorities to structure information on qualifications and make this visible to end-users (learners, employers, employees, teachers, and guidance and counselling staff) through national databases and other available instruments. Some of these frameworks, such as the English CQF (currently under revision) and the French, play a regulatory role and set requirements for qualification providers, thus operating as gatekeepers to the national system. The operational frameworks provide a reference point

for implementing learning outcomes and reviewing standards, programmes and curricula. Learning-outcomes-based levels are used to strengthen consistency across levels and institutions;

- (b) 11 countries have reached early operational stage, including Belgium (de), Croatia, Estonia, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Norway and Portugal. These countries are currently working on the practical implementation of the framework, notably by fine-tuning governance structures, by continuing and finalising the allocation of qualifications to levels, and by setting up databases. Countries such as Germany have paid particular attention to developing quality assurance criteria to be used by the framework, for example linked to non-formal learning and private qualifications. These frameworks still need to communicate their added value to end-users, notably learners, parents and employers.

1.4. Closing the circle: evaluation and review

NQFs need constantly to evolve to be relevant and to add value. Figure 1 illustrates the circular (and iterative) character of NQF developments, pointing to the need for continuous evaluation and review of technical design, conceptual basis and stakeholder involvement and buy-in. While most European frameworks are still in the process of completing the first circle, some of the early frameworks, notably those in the United Kingdom and Ireland, have entered into a stage of evaluation and review.

Box 1. Ireland

The NFQ has reached advanced operational stage, in particular by promoting more consistent approaches to using learning outcomes across different subsystems, especially in sectors led by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Award Council (HETAC) ^(a). In universities and schools, NFQ implementation was by agreement and the impact has been more gradual and incremental.

The process was strongly supported by major stakeholders in the country. The NFQ has become widely known and is used as a tool for supporting other reforms and policy development in education, training and qualifications. Visibility and currency of the NFQ inside and outside the education and training environment has increased (NQAI, 2009). It is an outward-looking framework with a strong external dimension through interactive research with non-European countries (such as Australia and New Zealand) ^(b).

^(a) The two awarding bodies, FETAC and HETAC, have been replaced by Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

^(b) NQAI and New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2010.

Source: NQF inventory 2014 – Ireland.

Box 2. Portugal

Development of the NQF in Portugal is closely linked to the establishment of the national qualification system. Three steps were taken to put them into practice:

- a new institutional model was developed to support implementation. The National Agency for Qualifications (now National Agency for Qualifications and Vocational Education and Training), under the responsibility of the, at the time, Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity and the Ministry of Education, was established in 2007 to coordinate implementation of education and training policies for young people and to develop the system for recognition, validation and certification of competences. The National Council for Vocational Training (a tripartite body) and 16 sectoral qualifications councils were set up. In higher education, the Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education was established in 2007;
- a national qualifications catalogue was created in 2007 as a strategic management tool for non-higher national qualifications and a central reference tool for VET provision;
- the system for recognising non-formal and informal learning ('RVCC' system) was further integrated into the NQF. Some major changes were introduced in 2013-14, where 214 centres for qualification and vocational training target not only adults, but also young people (of age of 15); they provide guidance, counselling and validation activities to low-skilled adults and guide/orient young people completing nine years of basic education.

Having reached early NQF operational stage, Portuguese VET is already organised in accordance to the principles of the NQF: the database is structured in accordance with the levels of the NQF and the access to financial support also takes the framework into consideration. Further, NQF and EQF levels are indicated on VET qualifications at levels 1, 2 and 4 and on qualifications in adult education at levels 2 and 3, making the framework clearly visible to users. Education and training stakeholders are involved in implementation of the NQF. A remaining challenge is to disseminate further information on the NQF to a wider spectrum of stakeholders, especially in the labour market, where the NQF is not yet known.

Source: NQF inventory 2014 – Portugal.

1.4.1. Ireland

In Ireland – whose national framework of qualifications (NQAI) – was formally adopted in 2003, an implementation and impact study report was drafted in 2009 (NQAI, 2009). The report looked at initial implementation success and used this to outline a strategy to strengthen future impact. The study presented 19 recommendations, in particular addressing its impact on access to, transfer of, and progression in education and training ⁽¹²⁾. The following key features of the NQF were emphasised:

⁽¹²⁾ The *Framework implementation and impact study* (NQAI, 2009) emphasised the importance of further strengthening the visibility of the framework in relation to the labour market (assisting development of career pathways, certifying learning achievements acquired at work, guidance).

- (a) NQFs require time to develop understanding of concepts and to promote cultural change;
- (b) stakeholder involvement is critical throughout the process to ensure commitment and ownership;
- (c) NQF developments are iterative: the existing education and training system and the framework must be gradually and progressively aligned to each other;
- (d) implementation within subsystems must be balanced with overarching and cross-system developments;
- (e) the framework need to be loose enough to accommodate different types of learning;
- (f) qualifications frameworks are enablers rather than drivers of change; alignment with other supporting policies and institutional requirements is needed.

1.4.2. Denmark

The 2013 evaluation of the Danish NQF (EVA, 2013) was carried out to assess the speed and quality of the implementation process, to check how the framework is judged by potential users, and to provide a basis for future improvements. The evaluation report shows that most stakeholders involved with the NQF ⁽¹³⁾ are positive about the role it now plays. A total of 78% of the respondents 'know well' the principles underpinning the framework and 64% are positive about the initiative. The role played by the framework is seen as neutral by 27% of those answering; 83% of the heads of study programmes in higher education indicated that the introduction of the framework had strengthened the efforts to describe learning outcomes for the programmes. The framework is primarily used for the revision of curricula, in discussions concerning the definition of learning outcomes, a description of specific elements of curricula, and adaptation of these for a local context. It should be noted that the general public was not targeted by the evaluation, only representatives of stakeholders directly or indirectly associated with the design and implementation of the framework. Work is now under way, in cooperation between the ministries of education, science and employment, on how to develop the framework further.

1.4.3. Scotland

An independent evaluation of the Scottish credit and qualifications framework (SCQF) was carried out in 2013, looking at the level of awareness, perception

⁽¹³⁾ A total of 848 persons were contacted; 425 persons (51%) responded.

and understanding of the SCQF among learners, parents, teaching staff and management (SCQF partnership, 2013). This evaluation, based on a combination of focus groups (27), online questionnaires (1 444 responses), face-to-face interviews (250) and in-depth interviews (16), gives a valuable insight into the level of implementation of the framework. The results are generally encouraging and demonstrate that the SCQF is widely recognised by learners, parents and educational professionals in Scotland. The evaluation is also important outside Scotland as it provides research-based documentation on the impact of the framework at the level of end-users.

The study addressed the learners, the teaching staff and school management, parents, and outlined areas for future development of the framework:

- (a) the following main findings were reported for the learners:
 - (i) a total of 53% of all learners reported that they are aware of the SCQF. The level of knowledge varied between the different parts of education, with the highest levels found in schools (63%) and the lowest in community adult education. Some learners are aware of the qualifications levels, but do not associate them with the SCQF as such, indicating that the actual level of awareness is higher than 53%;
 - (ii) those learners aware of the framework (66%) have a reasonable understanding of its principles and purposes. Learners are especially aware of the levels, the credit points and the role of the framework in visualising progression and transition throughout education and training;
 - (iii) half of the learners aware of the framework have actively used it. Learners at schools are most likely to use it, supporting them in planning future education and training careers. In further education and in community adult education, use is limited, reflecting low levels of awareness;
- (b) for the teaching staff and school management, the following main findings were reported:
 - (i) there is universal awareness of the SCQF among management and teaching staff. The level of detailed understanding varies, however, being highest among guidance staff and in schools where the framework has been actively presented and promoted;
 - (ii) the level of understanding of the SCQF is lowest among classroom teachers, as is appreciation of the added-value offered by the framework;
 - (iii) overall perception of the framework is positive, with teaching staff in particular pointing to the role of the framework in identifying levels and

signposting progression routes. Several specific benefits are mentioned, notably that the framework helps learners to understand better the qualifications they are working towards and to identify progression. The framework is also perceived as offering a comprehensive picture, including academic, vocational and general qualifications;

- (c) among parents, the following findings were reported:
 - (i) around a third of parents interviewed have heard of the SCQF. Most parents had developed their awareness through an education institution (53%); 47% reported that they had become aware of the framework through their children;
 - (ii) a very limited proportion of parents interviewed have been actively using the framework, only 8%;
 - (iii) virtually everybody participating in the interviews recognised the added-value of the SCQF and believed that parents should be more actively told about the framework and its potential role in supporting their children's educational choices;
- (d) the findings of the evaluation point to a number of areas for future development of the framework. Some of the recommendations are:
 - (i) the role of the SCQF levels in providing a reference for all qualifications must be further promoted;
 - (ii) all members of the SCQF partnership should be involved in raising further awareness of it;
 - (iii) the positive effect of using social media to increase awareness should be further developed;
 - (iv) the brand SCQF should be strengthened;
 - (v) toolkits should be developed for different purposes, supporting the practical use of the different elements of the framework.

The 2013 evaluation confirms that the SCQF has reached an advanced state of implementation and overall awareness of it is relatively high.

1.4.4. Wales

Wales adopted a ten-year implementation plan (2003-13), in setting up the credit and qualifications framework of Wales (CQFW) in 2002. This reflected the view that framework implementation takes time and requires a long-term development perspective. The evaluation (Welsh Government, 2014) carried out in 2013/14 is also of considerable interest outside Wales as it offers a good insight into the challenges – strengths and weaknesses – involved in setting up NQFs:

- (a) the main strengths of the CQFW were summarised as follows:

- (i) stakeholders from all sectors consider the CQFW to have played a main role in allowing for greater validation of non-formal and informal learning (recognition of prior and informal learning). The quality assured lifelong learning (QALL) pillar of the framework is considered to have had an impact on disadvantaged learner groups and so contributed to the implementation of lifelong learning strategies. The framework was generally seen to have raised learner aspirations and contributed to promoting progression. The opportunity to add new units to the QALL pillar of the framework is seen as beneficial to the flexibility of the framework and as a condition for addressing the special-needs groups;
- (ii) stakeholders furthermore considered the CQFW to have aided recognition of non-mainstream provisions, enabling providers to extend their overall offers, to the benefit of learners. The framework, it was stated, made it possible to develop these non-mainstream provisions in a consistent way, referring to the levels and the descriptors of the framework;
- (iii) the CQFW is seen as supporting a 'common currency' of credit that has made it easier to articulate and communicate achievements across sectors, levels and geographic areas. The levels descriptors are considered to support consistency and trust between stakeholders. This consistency, it is argued, allows learners to understand better what their qualifications are worth and to map various progression pathways;
- (iv) a broad range of stakeholders appreciated the flexibility offered by the unit-based approach. These stakeholders, including awarding bodies, sector skills councils, training providers and third sector organisations, pointed to this approach as a major benefit allowing for rapid renewal of provisions and for meeting the needs of diverse groups of learners. The framework, by providing overview, also made it possible to avoid duplication of units and qualifications, thus providing economic benefit;
- (v) several stakeholders point to the role played by the framework in supporting transfer and progression outside Wales, in particular in relation to the rest of the United Kingdom;
- (b) the main weaknesses of the CQFW were considered to be the following:
 - (i) most stakeholders consider that potential of the CQFW has not been used in practice as much as originally hoped. Despite having been used in some sectors, the concept has not taken off significantly. Despite some work carried out by the Welsh government, the framework has yet to reach the general public, employers and learners.

The use of complicated language (written for awarding institutions) and lack of guidance on the benefits of the framework may have contributed to this lack of visibility. Stakeholders highlight the bureaucracy surrounding the framework as one factor preventing its wider use. In particular, employers ask for a framework which is easier to understand and simpler to approach. The arrangements for recognition of prior learning (see also below) are considered by some to be too complicated and run the risk of discouraging potential users;

- (ii) it is generally concluded that too few employers engage in, or are aware of, the framework. While this reflects a general lack of visibility of the CQFW, some stakeholders point to the fact that the English-Northern Irish QCF is the dominant framework in the United Kingdom and that some employers may prefer to relate to this and not limit themselves to Wales;
- (iii) some stakeholders point out that credit accumulation and transfer has not played the role it originally was expected to; learners and employers seem to be more focused on full qualifications than credits in the current situation;
- (iv) the most important criticism of implementation of the framework was directed to the Welsh Government and the lack of 'strategic investment' in the framework. It is noted that recent policy documents and statements do not focus much on the role of the framework in the wider Welsh education and training landscape; for example, it was not prominent in the 2012 review of qualifications ⁽¹⁴⁾. It was pointed out that the recent disbanding of the Credit Common Accord Forum impacted on the role and profile of the CQFW, in particular since this had involved a wide range of key stakeholders, lending credibility to the framework.

Stakeholders responding to the evaluation generally recognise the role played by the CQFW as a unifying framework; there is support for its further development and implementation. Stakeholders point out that the increasing divergences between the Welsh and the English education and training systems actually offer an opportunity for the CQFW to present the Welsh qualification landscape and to inspire its further development and reform. To strengthen the role of the CQFW will, however, require that the Welsh Government contributes

⁽¹⁴⁾ Welsh Government. *Review of qualifications 14-19*.
<http://gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/qualificationsinwales/revofqualen/?lang=en>
[accessed 8.5.2015].

to raising its profile, as an integrated part of the education and training policy landscape.

1.4.5. England and Northern Ireland

The future role of the qualifications and credit framework (QCF) in England and Northern Ireland is currently being discussed. The background document for the evaluation (Ofqual, 2014) refers to practical experiences in implementing the QCF between 2008 and 2014. The following is stated about its strengths (Ofqual, 2014, p. 24):

- (a) the QCF provides a structure within which the relative size and value of qualifications can be expressed using consistent terminology, providing the essential characteristics of a descriptive qualifications framework. Frameworks help learners to make informed decisions and assist in decisions on funding and recruitment;
- (b) the existing level structure seems to work well. The current eight levels and three entry levels are suggested to be retained;
- (c) the qualifications framework makes it possible to explain to learners how qualifications relate to each other and also ensures that awarding institutions design and market their qualifications accurately. This function needs to be continued.

However, while these descriptive functions are seen as important, the consultation document raises fundamental questions regarding the reforming and regulatory role played by the QCF. It is reported (Ofqual, 2014, p. 24): 'Our review of the QCF did not identify any issues with the use of descriptive frameworks, just with the prescriptive design features required by the regulatory arrangements for the QCF'. The main issues raised (Ofqual, 2014, pp. 24-25) are the following:

- (a) while the structure of the QCF was designed to support credit transfer, in practice there have been very low levels of take up for credit transfer and the projected benefits of a credit system has not been realised;
- (b) unit sharing ⁽¹⁵⁾ has not contributed to reducing the number of qualifications; after introduction of the QCF, the number of qualifications has increased by 10 000;

⁽¹⁵⁾ To reduce the overall number of qualifications, the QCF introduced the principle of 'unit sharing' requiring awarding organisations to share units adding up to qualifications. Shared units were supposed to be available in a 'unit bank' to be used as building blocks by awarding organisations. Ofqual reports that organisations are reluctant to engage in the development of these shared units and that this lack of commitment has a negative impact on development and innovation. Whether this

- (c) there is a feeling that the requirement to unit share has damaged innovation and development;
- (d) the regulatory arrangements impose an approach to assessment which requires students to satisfy all assessment criteria, leading to overassessment. The unit level focus is not easily compatible with synoptic and end-point assessment;
- (e) the overall validity of qualifications is not sufficiently addressed; the focus on unit assessment draws attention away from overall validity.

While these are the main points made by Ofqual, the responses to the consultation will show whether other stakeholders share them. Ofqual, in line with what is said above, suggests removing existing regulatory arrangements for the QCF and replacing them with 'general conditions' for qualifications currently administered by Ofqual (Ofqual, 2015).

1.4.6. Main results of evaluations

The results of these five evaluations clearly demonstrate the need for continuous evaluation and review of NQFs. The Scottish and Irish examples are encouraging as they exemplify frameworks starting to reach end-users: learners, parents and educational professionals. The examples of the QCF and the CQFW are more mixed and demonstrate how future implementation and impact require revision of existing strategies. In the Welsh case, weak integration into general education and training systems and policies prevents the framework from fulfilling its potential. In the QCF case, certain elements (credits) of the original design are questioned, requiring more fundamental revision. The QCF also illustrates how shifting policy priorities influence a framework; government priorities have clearly changed since the framework was designed and introduced in the mid-2000s.

point of view is shared by stakeholders remains to be seen in the responses to the ongoing consultation.

CHAPTER 2.

NQFs in Europe: common characteristics and challenges

With the initial technical and conceptual design of NQFs now finalised in most European countries, the following common characteristics can be identified:

- (a) NQFs have primarily (in 34 out of 38 countries) been designed as comprehensive and address all levels and types of qualifications (VET, higher education and general education). The remaining four countries, the Czech Republic, France, Italy and Switzerland, have developed frameworks with limited scope or chosen to develop and implement separate frameworks for vocational and higher education. Some countries, such as Germany and Austria, have agreed on comprehensive NQFs but are taking a step-by-step approach where some qualifications (for example school leaving certificates at upper secondary level) have still to be included;
- (b) comprehensive European NQFs can mostly be described as 'loose frameworks', to be able to embrace the full range of concepts, values and traditions found in the different parts of the education and training covered by the framework. Whether a framework is tight or loose depends on the stringency of conditions a qualification must meet to be included in it (Tuck, 2007, p. 22). Loose frameworks introduce a set of comprehensive level descriptors to be applied across subsystems, but allow substantial 'specialisation' within each subframework⁽¹⁶⁾. Tight frameworks are normally regulatory frameworks and define uniform specifications for qualifications to be applied across sectors. Examples of early versions of frameworks in South Africa or New Zealand show that attempts to create tight and 'one-fit-for-all' variants generated much resistance and undermined the overarching role of the framework. These experiences have led to general reassessment of the role of such frameworks, pointing to the need to protect diversity (Allais, 2011, Strathdee, 2011). In contrast, in most countries, the inclusion of formal qualifications in the NQFs is based on sector-based legislation, not on uniform rules covering the entire framework. This is illustrated by the proposed Polish framework where generic, national descriptors are supplemented by more detailed ones for the subsystems of general,

⁽¹⁶⁾ For example, for VET or higher education.

- vocational and higher education. While not so explicitly addressed by other frameworks, the basic principle applies across the continent;
- (c) NQFs are widely considered to be an important tool in supporting national lifelong learning strategies, notably by opening up to qualifications awarded in non-formal learning contexts, promoting validation of non-formal learning, and reducing barriers to progress in education, training and learning. The overarching perspective of comprehensive frameworks is critical for achieving lifelong learning objectives;
 - (d) most countries have introduced eight-level frameworks. Three exceptions to this can be found in the recently developed frameworks of Iceland and Norway, which have seven levels, and Slovenia, using 10 levels. The seven-level framework in Norway reflects the formal education and training structure, where no qualifications were identified below NQF/EQF level 2. One of the reasons in Slovenia to adopt 10 NQF levels was better to accommodate legacy awards like *magister znanosti*. The similarities in structure among most countries demonstrate that international comparability of the NQF structure is considered a priority;
 - (e) while all countries emphasise that their NQFs are communication and transparency tools designed to improve transparency and comparability of national qualifications systems, many countries also see NQFs as contributing to incremental reform, notably the shift to learning outcomes and improved stakeholder cooperation and dialogue. This would allow the existing education and training system and the learning-outcomes-based framework to be gradually and progressively aligned with each other's and to develop understanding and buy-in of key concepts among key stakeholders;
 - (f) although a broad range of stakeholders participates in designing and developing frameworks, NQFs mainly address the needs of the education and training sector, and, to a lesser extent, those of the labour market (Raffe, 2012a) and are seen as only partly relevant to (for example) employees and employers;
 - (g) all countries have introduced learning-outcomes-based level descriptors, reflecting the EQF level descriptors (knowledge, skills, competence). Evidence shows, however, that many countries combine this with links to inputs and emphasise that these two approaches are complementary rather than mutually exclusive;

- (h) Cedefop evidence ⁽¹⁷⁾ shows that the NQF roles and functions differ between countries and across sectors; ranging from (a limited number of) frameworks with a regulatory function to (a majority of) frameworks of a descriptive and classification character. However, when moving into operational stage, many embrace some elements of reforms.

While countries have converged along these dimensions, NQFs are parts of national systems and so reflect national contexts, values, traditions and objectives. This is especially evident in the way in which countries have adapted and further developed national level descriptors, now adopted by most countries. While the learning outcomes approach is broadly accepted across Europe (Cedefop, forthcoming) it is being interpreted and applied in many different ways. Cedefop's analysis of national level descriptors (Cedefop, 2013) has identified three main approaches:

- (a) one group of countries uses EQF level descriptors directly or has national level descriptors that are closely aligned to those found in the EQF (e.g. in Estonia, Portugal and Romania). Most of the countries in this group, however, have prepared detailed explanatory tables or guides with more in-depth national level descriptors;
- (b) a second group of countries has broadened and partly adjusted their descriptors to reflect better the complexities of national qualifications systems and/or emphasise national priorities, such as representing important social, personal, and transversal competences more effectively. Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Norway, Poland, and Sweden are examples of countries in this group. Several countries seek to go beyond the focus on manual and cognitive skills introduced by the EQF and emphasise social, communication, planning, learning, and judgment skills. Denmark has introduced 'communication, creative, and problem-solving skills', while Hungary has taken a broader approach with 'abilities and learning skills', which are also emphasised in the Dutch, Polish, and Norwegian frameworks. Many countries, such as Finland, Iceland, and Malta, have integrated EU key competences into their NQF level descriptors. In relation to competence, Norway's NQF refers to 'general competence' and Romania's to 'transversal competence'. While countries include 'autonomy' and 'responsibility' in their interpretation of competence, they also tend to broaden their definition and incorporate additional aspects such as 'critical thinking', 'creativity', and

⁽¹⁷⁾ Cedefop. *European inventory on NQF*.
<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/european-inventory-on-nqf> [accessed 8.5.2015].

- ‘cooperation’. Poland’s NQF uses ‘social competence’ rather than ‘competence’. This is understood as a combination of ‘identity’ (participation, responsibility, models of conduct), ‘cooperation’ (including teamwork, leadership, and conditions), and ‘responsibility’ (which includes individual and team actions, consequences, and evaluation);
- (c) an emphasis on competence as an overarching and holistic concept can be found in a third group of countries, such as Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, Hungary and the Netherlands. This approach emphasises the integrative nature of competence as an individual’s ability to apply knowledge, skills, attitudes and other personal, social and/or methodological abilities – in a self-directed way, at work and during studies. The practical application of this perspective is reflected in the German qualifications framework, in which the term *Handlungskompetenz* (action competence) is understood as the ‘readiness of the individuals to use knowledge, skills and personal, social, and methodological competences and conduct themselves in a considered and individually and socially responsible manner’ (the German qualifications framework for lifelong learning).

The above analysis mainly focuses on the ‘horizontal dimension’ of learning outcomes descriptors, basically on how different dimensions of learning are captured and expressed. In the coming period, and reflecting the experiences gained through the EQF referencing process, increased attention will have to be paid to the ‘vertical dimension’ of these descriptors and their ability to distinguish between levels of qualifications and degrees of complexity characterising learning outcomes. This is closely linked to how progression in different learning domains has been captured by learning outcomes. Cedefop’s analysis of experiences from the EQF-referencing process (Cedefop, 2014c, unpublished) points to the following important issues, directly relevant to the technical/conceptual design and the implementation of the frameworks:

- (a) the information on how concrete qualifications and qualifications types are assigned to and placed at the NQF levels is often vague, missing or incomplete. Several reports lack a transparent presentation of which qualifications have actually been included in the framework. This lack of transparency (such as whether school leaving qualifications are included or not) weakens the role of the EQF as a tool for transparency;
- (b) many countries refer exclusively to the legal basis for allocating qualifications to levels. While this is important information, outsiders need to understand how this legal basis is translated into actual levelling decisions. For the EQF to work, and for trust to develop, mutual understanding of the criteria and procedures for assigning qualification to a NQF level is needed.

Very often it is not clear how the relationship between qualifications and NQF levels has been established and whether a particular methodology has been used. Evidence on how decisions were made is presented only in a few cases;

- (c) the referencing reports demonstrate that two main approaches are used when assigning qualifications to levels. First, countries tend to include qualifications (developed prior to the NQF) as blocks (types) of qualifications. While some countries refer to extensive testing as a basis for this (for example Germany and Austria), most provide limited evidence on how this block levelling is done. A problem encountered when assigning blocks of qualifications is that individual qualifications can vary considerably in the level of learning outcomes. Second, countries are increasingly assigning individual qualifications to NQF levels, so the learning outcomes of each separate qualification are analysed and compared with the level descriptors of the NQFs. This approach is particularly relevant for new qualifications, as well as for the inclusion of private and external ones awarded outside formal education and training;
- (d) countries base the assignment of qualifications (blocks as well as single qualifications) on a combination of technical (linguistic/conceptual) and social/political principles. Technical/linguistic matching is found in many reports and seems to be the core of the procedures for classifying qualifications in the NQF. This approach is easier in those cases where qualifications are sufficiently described in terms of learning outcomes or are based on occupational standards that specify the requirements to perform specific roles or tasks in the labour market. This technical/linguistic matching, however, is not fully possible: qualifications are frequently allocated to NQF levels based on stakeholder judgements of their social standing (such as importance of the qualification in the labour market, their traditional status, and position in society and among citizens). For example, in Austria, the currently discussed procedure for classifying qualifications in the NQF suggests not only to take learning outcomes of the qualification into account but also to include other information, which can be used as indicators for justifying the assignment (e.g. importance of the qualification in the labour market or results of graduate surveys, such as job positions of graduates).

The weakness observed in relation to the EQF referencing can be partly explained by the fact that NQFs are still developing and thus can only gradually be 'filled' with qualifications. It is clear, however, that a strengthening of the information related to criterion 4 (European Commission and Cedefop, 2014) is

necessary and should be addressed in a second stage of the referencing process. A strengthening of criterion 4 will directly influence the ability of the EQF to act as a trusted instrument for comparing qualifications across Europe. Further work, for example cooperating on the design of a common template for gathering and presenting information, seems necessary.

CHAPTER 3.

Conditions for NQF implementation and impact

Several basic conditions have to be met for national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) to make an impact. Apart from the need to create a sufficiently strong formal basis (through laws, decrees and regulations), a successful shift to learning outcomes along with broad involvement of stakeholders seems to be most critical.

3.1. NQFs and the shift to learning outcomes

The new generation of European NQFs are mainly connected through their emphasis on learning outcomes. Recent research (Cedefop, forthcoming) shows that the principle of learning outcomes has been broadly accepted among European policy-makers and that the NQFs have contributed to this shift. This research, building on similar work carried out in 2007-08 (Cedefop, 2009) demonstrates that the introduction of NQFs is the most important factor influencing policies in this area. While the approach was previously taken forward in a fragmented way in subsystems, evidence shows that the emergence of comprehensive frameworks has made it possible (at least partly) to approach the shift to learning outcomes in a more systematic and – to some extent – more consistent way. In countries such as Belgium, Croatia, Iceland, Lithuania, Norway and Poland the introduction of frameworks has led to the identification of areas where learning outcomes have not been previously applied or where these have been used in an inconsistent way even within one education sector. The Norwegian NQF pointed to the lack of learning-outcomes-based descriptions and standards for advanced vocational training (*Fagskole*), resulting in work to remedy this weakness.

The NQFs developed after 2005 differ from the first generation frameworks developed in England, South Africa and New Zealand. While differences in number of levels and coverage immediately catch the eye, the main difference lies in the interpretation and application of learning outcomes. The early frameworks used what may be described as a radical learning-outcomes-based approach (Raffe, 2011). Inspired by the English system of national vocational qualifications (NVQ) introduced in the late 1980s, these frameworks tended to specify learning outcomes independently from curriculum and pedagogy and tried

to define qualifications in isolation from delivery mode, learning approach and provider. The countries in question have moved partly away from this radical approach but much of the scepticism towards NQFs expressed in academic literature (Allais et al., 2009; Brown, 2011; Young, Allais, 2011; Wheelahan, 2011) tends to reflect this early, radical version of learning-outcomes-based frameworks and ignore the way the new frameworks are defining and applying learning outcomes.

According to the material collected and analysed for this report, countries in Europe have adopted a more pragmatic approach to learning outcomes. While the principle is seen as crucial for increasing transparency and comparability, there is general understanding that learning outcomes must be put into a wider context of education and training inputs to make sense. When placing existing qualifications into a new framework structure, the focus on learning outcomes is frequently combined with consideration of institutions and programme structures, accepting that mode and volume of learning varies and matters. The development of the German qualifications framework (DQR) illustrates this combination of input- and outcome-based considerations (BMBF and KMK, 2013).

Box 3. Allocating qualifications to DQR levels

The starting point for allocating qualifications to the levels of the DQR was the relevant regulatory instruments. These included federal and regional laws, framework agreements and curricula., Examination regulations and those issued by accreditation agencies were also taken into account. As these descriptions were only partly oriented towards learning outcomes, identifying the learning outcomes 'core' of the qualifications was based on extensive testing and piloting in selected sectors and on systematic dialogue within the DQR coordination groups. In cases where no consensus could be reached, further analysis was carried out by experts, providing the basis on which consensus then was sought.

Source: BMBF and KMK (2013).

What is important, and is well illustrated by the German process, is that the learning outcomes approach adds a new important element to the 'old picture', making it possible to take a fresh look at the ordering and valuing of qualifications. This pragmatic use of learning outcomes – combining it with a careful consideration of input elements – has been important for redefining the relationship between vocational and academic qualifications. Reviewing this relationship in terms of what a candidate is expected to know, be able to do or understand – instead of looking at the type of institutions – has challenged accustomed ways of valuing qualifications. Placing the German master craftsman

at the same level as the academic and professional bachelor is a good example. The same combination of input- and outcome-based approaches can be identified in most other countries.

While consideration of learning outcomes is critical for allocating qualifications to NQF levels, factors such as delivery mode and volume of learning activities, will inevitably play a role. The mix of these two main factors, outcomes and inputs, varies significantly between countries and subsystems. Raffe (2011, pp. 87-104) distinguishes frameworks as follows:

- (a) learning-outcomes-referenced frameworks;
- (b) learning-outcomes-led frameworks.

In our interpretation this distinction can be understood in the following way:

Outcomes-referenced frameworks	Outcomes-led frameworks
• are seen as part of a strategy aiming for incremental change in qualifications systems; • see the shift to learning outcomes as a step towards informing and improving teaching, training and assessment; • aid communication and transparency across institutions, sectors and countries; • link to programmes and delivery modes but use learning outcomes to clarify expectations and increase accountability; • are seen as critical to dialogue between qualifications providers and users; • are education- and training-driven.	• treat the learning outcomes principle as an instrument for transforming education and training systems; • have weak or no references to existing programmes, institutions and processes; • aim explicitly to break the links between input and outcomes by defining qualifications independently of providing institutions and mode of delivery; • shift power from providers of education and training to users of qualifications (employers, individuals); • promote a market for learning by encouraging new providers and the free choice of learners; flexibility is a main objective; • are labour-market-driven.

This dichotomy is helpful in drawing attention to different roles and functions of qualifications frameworks as exemplified by the distinction between communication, reforming and transformational frameworks introduced by Raffe (2009; 2012b). Based on the evidence provided by this report, most European comprehensive frameworks are predominantly placed within the outcomes-referenced category outlined above. In this sense they confirm the observation of Hart (2009) that ‘...the process of determining the level of a qualifications based on its outcomes needs to be supplemented by contextual information and benchmarks are required when cross-referencing different frameworks.’ However, many frameworks contain elements of the ‘outcomes-driven’ model,

influencing the overall mix between outcome and input factors. The influence of the outcomes-driven model is most visible in some of the subframeworks for professional qualifications developed since the 1990s, now forming an integrated part of comprehensive frameworks. The Estonian and Slovenian subframeworks of professional/occupational qualifications are typical cases where qualifications are strictly defined on the basis of occupational standards and can be acquired through different routes: there is no required or obligatory link to a specific programme or institution. Some of the objectives set for emerging national frameworks in Europe, such as increasing overall flexibility of qualifications systems, refer to principles inherent to the outcomes-driven typology. The same can be said of the focus on 'reclaiming power' from education and training providers by involving new stakeholders in designing and defining qualifications. While it is difficult to find examples of purely outcomes-driven frameworks in Europe today, some of the principles of this model influence their orientation and their priorities. Raffe (2011, p. 97) argues that outcomes-referenced frameworks have generally been more successful than outcomes-led frameworks; they are less ambitious and more focused on gradual, incremental change. Cedefop evidence indicates that, while this dichotomy is too simple for classifying European NQFs, it is helpful in identifying how countries tend to mix the principles from the outcomes-referenced and the outcomes-driven in the same comprehensive framework. During recent years, as implementation of frameworks has progressed, some NQFs have taken on a reforming role positioned between communication and transformation. Comprehensive NQFs, starting with a limited communication mandate, can be seen in several cases to extend and deepen their roles and functions. In contrast, we can observe that the English QCF is about to lose some of its regulatory powers, placing it closer to other European NQFs. These adjustments show that NQFs are dynamic tools and their functions and objectives may shift as they develop and are implemented also in line with short- and long-term policy agendas.

3.2. Stakeholder involvement and commitment

Previous NQF reports (Cedefop, 2009; 2013) show that cross-sectoral working groups and task forces have played an important role during initial NQF design and development. Comprehensive frameworks have taken on the function of platforms for dialogue and cooperation and have helped to bring together stakeholders from different subsystems not commonly cooperating or speaking to each other. Countries signal that they want to continue and, if possible, institutionalise these processes. A key question now is whether this initial

success can be turned into a permanent feature of the frameworks? While the initial development stage has been limited in time and scope, the long-term implementation of a framework will require a different and stronger commitment.

Establishment of permanent 'national qualifications councils' largely responds to this challenge. Countries such as Belgium (fr), Croatia, Hungary, Montenegro and Sweden have all set up, or stated the intention to set up, such bodies.

Box 4. Croatia

The Croatian Qualifications Framework (CROQF) Act (2013) set up the institutional and legislative framework for CROQF implementation and defined involvement, roles and responsibilities of key bodies and stakeholders. According to the CROQF Act, the national council for development of human potential (established in 2014), national coordination group and sectoral councils take on particular responsibilities for putting the framework in place. The national council comprises 24 representatives of national ministries, regional structures, social partners and national agencies involved in development and award of qualifications in different subsystems of education and training. This body oversees policies in education, training, employment and human resource development and monitors and evaluates CROQF's impact.

Source: NQF inventory 2014 – Croatia.

Box 5. Germany

A coordination point for the DQR was set up in a joint initiative of the Federal Government and the *Länder* in 2013. It has six members, including representatives from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology, the standing conference of the ministers for education and cultural affairs of the *Länder*, and the conference of ministers for economics of the *Länder*. Its main role is to monitor the allocation of qualifications with to ensure consistency of the overall structure of the DQR. The direct involvement of other ministries, social partners, representatives of business organisations and interested associations is, if their field of responsibility is concerned, ensured by the Federal Government/*Länder* coordination point for the German qualifications framework. The German qualifications framework working group (*Arbeitskreis DQR*) remains active as an advisory body retaining its former composition.

Source: NQF inventory 2014 – Germany.

In several countries dialogue across education and training subsystems has been weak or, in some cases, even missing. The platforms provided by the comprehensive frameworks can potentially play an important role, helping to clarify barriers to transition and progression. The work of the national qualifications councils needs to be followed closely in the coming period. Their

ability (and willingness) to intervene in education and training policies will largely decide whether NQFs will contribute to the objectives of lifelong learning and permeability.

While many countries have given priority to including as broad a group of education and training stakeholders as possible, the extent to which social partners and other labour market stakeholders are actively engaged is more varied. One group of countries, exemplified by Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany and Switzerland, see the link to the labour market as essential and as a precondition for future implementation. Social partners and other labour market stakeholders play an important role in these frameworks and are directly involved in their development and implementation. In these countries social partners are directly involved in the placing of qualifications and in continuous review of this levelling.

Box 6. Belgium (Flanders)

The Flemish NQF (FQF) illustrates the strong involvement of labour market stakeholders in NQF developments and implementation. The FQF is designed to support broader reform to raise transparency of qualifications and to improve the connection of education and training to the labour market. The development of the FQF was taken forward as a joint initiative of the Ministry of Education and Training and the Ministry of Work and Social Economy with the objective to improve the connection between education/training and the labour market. Including two main types of qualification, educational and professional, the FQF is fundamentally dependent on the permanent involvement of both education and training and labour market stakeholders. The inclusion of professional qualifications into the framework is based on direct negotiations with social partners and provides a strong link to existing occupational standards. This approach institutionalises the involvement of social partners and aids direct dialogue on the content, profile and levelling of the relevant qualifications.

Source: NQF inventory 2014 – Belgium (Flanders).

In contrast to the above group of countries, Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Poland and Romania have chosen approaches where labour market stakeholders play weaker and less integrated roles. In these countries the NQFs can be described as loosely linked to the labour market, and less oriented to the bridging of education and the world of work. It should be noted that these issues are being discussed in the countries mentioned and it is possible that a stronger link to the labour market may be introduced as the frameworks develop.

CHAPTER 4.

Early impact of national qualifications frameworks

The previous chapters show that important progress has been made in preparing the national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) for full operational status: initial design and development is now mostly finished; a formal basis has been agreed in many countries; the involvement and commitment of stakeholders is progressing; and the shift to learning outcomes is underway. By the end of 2014 we can conclude that some of the most important conditions for the implementation of the NQFs had been met. This does not mean, however, that success is guaranteed. The impact of a qualifications framework depends on many factors, not always easy to identify and separate. The following sections will look into some areas where NQF currently are seen to make a difference.

4.1. NQFs and institutional reform

NQFs are contributing directly to institutional reform in some countries. Ireland, Malta, Portugal and Romania exemplify this through their decisions to merge existing and multiple qualification bodies into one, covering different types and levels of qualifications. A number of other countries have aired plans to merge qualifications authorities or to establish new institutions (a proposal for a national qualifications council has been suggested in Sweden). This shows that NQFs, even in cases where their main role is perceived as promoting transparency, can trigger institutional reform. The following examples show how institutional reforms and framework developments can be closely related.

4.2. NQFs and the bridging subsystems

Several countries see the NQF as tools for strengthening the links between education and training subsystems. This is considered to be essential for strengthening permeability and for reducing barriers to progression in education, training and learning. The new generation of European NQFs overwhelmingly consists of comprehensive frameworks, addressing all types of qualifications at all levels. This means that they, and their level descriptors, have to reflect a huge diversity of purposes, institutions, traditions and cultures. One of the fundamental challenges faced by comprehensive frameworks, Young and Allais state (Young

and Allais, 2009 and 2011), is to take into account the epistemological differences in knowledge and learning that exist in different parts of education and training.

Box 7. Ireland

The national framework of qualifications has been developed and monitored by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), set up in 2001. The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Award Council (HETAC) were set up as awarding bodies in further education and higher education, outside universities.

A new agency – Quality and Qualifications Ireland – was established in November 2012 under the qualifications and quality assurance (education and training) act 2012. The new authority has been created by an amalgamation of four bodies that have both awarding and quality assurance responsibilities: FETAC, HETAC, NQAI and the Irish Universities Quality Board. The new authority assumes all the functions of the four legacy bodies while also having responsibility for new statutory responsibilities in particular areas.

This is an important step in consolidating the governance structure for deepening implementation of a comprehensive NFQ. It also shows that Ireland's focus on qualifications has become more systematic, with stronger coordination of qualifications and quality assurance policies. The new agency sits at the centre of the qualification system and cooperates with ministries, higher education institutions, employers and the voluntary sector.

Source: NQF inventory 2014 – Ireland.

Education and training in most countries is organised in separate and distinct tracks (Tuck, 2007, p. 21). This is especially so in the subsystems of general education, vocationally oriented education and training, and higher education: academically and professionally oriented higher education is sometimes organised as separate tracks, sometimes integrated. Framework developments have focused on links between general education and VET (for example, the introduction of bridging courses in Portugal and Slovenia) and the links between VET and higher education (exemplified by Norway and Scotland).

Experiences from 'first generation' frameworks underline the need to balance the overall implementation of the framework with developments in subsystems. The overarching framework in Scotland was built step-wise over more than two decades, combining implementation of the overarching framework with the gradual development of subframeworks. The Polish NQF (PQF) has paid particular attention to this bridging role by defining level descriptors at (three) different levels of generality; for the overall national level; for each subsystem (general, VET and higher education); and for specific sectors. This approach acknowledges that each subsystem/sector must be fit for purpose and be able to

reflect the specific needs and requirements of its stakeholders. The PQF insists, however, that these subsystems/sectors must develop consistently and share a common core; which in this case is provided by the level descriptors of the comprehensive, national framework. The PQF exemplifies a concrete effort to build conceptual bridges between the different subsystems.

Box 8. Malta, Portugal, Romania and Sweden

A new national qualifications authority was established in Romania (June 2011), merging the National Council for Adult Training, in charge of continuing vocational education and training (CVET) qualifications, and the National Agency for Qualifications in Higher Education, responsible for higher education qualifications.

In Malta, the qualification council and the national commission for higher education were merged to the National Commission for Further and Higher education. This agency provides strategic policies for further and higher education, promotes and maintains the Malta qualifications framework, accredits and licenses all further (post-secondary) and higher education institutions and programmes, and assists training providers in designing qualifications, assessment and certification.

Portugal also illustrates this coordination tendency by institutionalising cooperation between ministries of education and employment and the setting up of a new agency for qualifications and VET.

A similar proposal has also been made in Sweden by establishing a National Council for Qualifications to act as the 'gatekeeper' of the NQF. The council – and stakeholders – make sure that qualifications aspiring to be included in the framework meet nationally established quality criteria and requirements, to take responsibility for overlooking the inclusion of new qualifications into the framework.

Source: NQF inventory 2014 – Malta, Portugal, Romania and Sweden.

The extent to which countries are actually using the NQFs as a tool to bridge subsystems and improve linkages between qualifications varies. As noted in previous reports (Cedefop, 2013) the following patterns can be observed:

- (a) countries are accommodating all subsystems in one framework, but some have introduced a clear distinction between levels 1 to 5 and levels 6 to 8; the latter are restricted to qualifications awarded by traditional higher education institutions (in line with the Bologna cycles). Visible in the Danish framework, the division can also be found in Bulgarian, Greek, Icelandic, Latvian and Romanian frameworks;
- (b) another group of countries, including Austria, Belgium (fl), Cyprus, Estonia, Slovenia and Turkey have introduced different 'strands' within the NQF, sometimes with different sets of level descriptors. In Austria a compromise was reached to divide levels 6 to 8 into parallel strands. One strand covers traditional higher education qualifications, the other vocationally/professionally oriented higher level qualifications awarded outside the

- ‘Bologna cycles’. In some cases, similar descriptors can be used for the two strands (Belgium (fl), Cyprus or Slovenia). Parallel level descriptors can also be found at lower levels. In the Norwegian NQF, parallel descriptors are proposed at level 4 (distinguishing between the general and vocational strand of upper secondary education) and level 5 (capturing diversity of post-secondary VET programmes);
- (c) in Germany, one of the key principles of the NQF - that each qualification level can be accessible via various education and training pathways – is also reflected in broad and inclusive level descriptors.

Since 2012, when the above analysis was made, work on higher education frameworks has been more closely integrated with that on comprehensive (EQF inspired) frameworks. Most EQF referencing reports are now presented as combined EQF/EHEA referencing/‘self-certification’ reports. This signals a willingness of countries to pursue comprehensive frameworks and to give priority to a stronger linking of subsystems. The strict distinction between VET and higher education is being challenged in several countries by introduction of VET qualifications at levels 5 to 8. As demonstrated by countries such as Austria, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland, these ‘new’ VET qualifications can be seen as a direct challenge to the higher education monopoly of the Bologna process. The 2014 Swiss NQF explicitly stresses the point that VET qualifications operate at levels 2 to 8 and that traditional borderlines between education and training sectors need to be reviewed. The same observation was made in Cedefop’s study on qualifications at level 5 of the EQF (Cedefop, 2014a). These qualifications, it was pointed out, operate at the interface between education and training subsystems and are important for making progress within education and training and for getting access to the labour market.

Comprehensive European NQFs can mostly be described as ‘loose’ frameworks which share a common core but, at the same time, accept and respect existing diversity. This loose character is important for facilitating the bridging function of frameworks. If designed in too rigid and inflexible a manner, frameworks risk coming into conflict with the needs and requirements of subsystems and institutions.

Box 9. Portugal

A comprehensive NQF has been in force in Portugal since October 2010 as a single reference for classifying all qualifications obtainable in education and training. Higher education qualifications have been included in a more detailed framework of higher education qualifications (FHEQ-Portugal), which is part of the comprehensive NQF. Level 5 plays an important role in bridging VET and higher education: the diploma in technological specialisation is considered a 'post-secondary, non-higher level qualification' and is obtained based on a combination of technological specialised courses offered by non-higher education as well as by higher education institutions. The diploma provides access to the first cycle of higher education programmes and also allows for credit transfer or exemption from first cycle (*Licenciatura*) degrees (Ministry of STHE, 2011, p. 25). Non-higher education institutions should have a signed agreement with higher education institutions that allow the students to continue their studies in the first cycle courses.

Source: NQF inventory 2014 – Portugal.

4.3. Using the NQF to develop and renew qualifications

The introduction of comprehensive NQFs adds value by creating overview. The introduction of learning-outcomes-based levels, and the placing of qualifications according to these, makes it possible to identify gaps in the existing provision of qualifications.

Cedefop's 2014 study shows that EQF level 5 (and the relevant NQF level(s)) has been used as a platform for the development of new qualifications. in the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta and the United Kingdom. Some of these new qualifications might be initial vocational qualifications, as is the case in Estonia. In other cases, as is currently being discussed in the Czech Republic, they may be higher education qualifications. Lithuania exemplifies a country where there are currently no qualifications linked to this level, although there had been qualifications of this level awarded in vocational colleges until 2004. The demand for qualifications at this level has now been documented and both VET and higher education are considering responses: initial VET schools seek to revise part of their qualifications and to upgrade them to the level 5. Colleges of higher vocational education, on their side, seek to introduce short study cycle programmes and to link these qualifications to level 5.

The example from the United Kingdom (Cedefop, 2014b, unpublished) shows that countries with 'mature' frameworks are using the levels referenced to EQF level 5 for developing new qualifications. According to current discussions, additional qualifications might be linked to EQF level 5 in the future. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, apprenticeship is not considered a qualification: it is

a package of components that testify competence. According to a recent high-level review of apprenticeship (Richard, 2012), the Government seeks to review this and transform the arrangement into a single comprehensive qualification (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2013). This may lead to the award of new qualifications at EQF level 5. A higher apprenticeship (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012) is also being considered, potentially embracing qualifications offered at CQF levels that correspond to EQF levels 5 and 6.

4.4. Opening up to non-formal and private sector

Most new NQFs have limited their coverage to formal qualifications awarded by national authorities or independent bodies accredited by these authorities. This means that frameworks predominantly cover initial qualifications offered by public education and training institutions. While there are exceptions to this general picture, most NQFs fail to cover qualifications resulting from education, training and learning taking place in the non-formal and private sectors; important qualifications linked to continuing and further education and training are left out of the picture.

Since 2011-12, attention has increasingly been paid to this. Some countries, such as Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, have started working on procedures for including non-formal and private sector qualifications and certificates: this approach is presented as a key feature of the new Swedish NQFs, meeting a need expressed by stakeholders in the labour market and in liberal/popular education and training. A key challenge faced by countries wanting to go beyond strictly regulated formal education and training is to ensure that the new qualifications in the framework can be trusted and meet basic quality requirements. The Dutch draft criteria illustrate how this can be approached.

Several other countries (including Denmark, Latvia, Slovenia and Finland) have indicated that this opening up towards the non-formal sector will be addressed in a second stage of their framework developments.

Some established frameworks, for example in France and the United Kingdom, have put in place procedures allowing 'non-traditional' qualifications to be included in the frameworks. The Scottish framework now includes qualifications awarded by international companies (for example in the ICT sector) and other private providers. This is seen as a precondition for supporting lifelong learning and allowing learners to combine initial qualifications with those for continuing training and for specialisation. The French framework is also open to

qualifications awarded by non-public bodies and institutions, as illustrated in the box below.

Box 10. The Netherlands

The Dutch NQF (NLQF) makes it possible for private or non-formal qualification to be included in and levelled to the framework. This allows providers to achieve better overall visibility, to strengthen comparability with other qualifications at national and European level, to be able to apply the learning outcomes approach and to strengthen links to the labour market.

When a provider, such as a private company, wants to submit a qualification for inclusion, an accreditation (in this context known as 'validation') has to take place.

When this accreditation has been given (for five years) the organisation in question can submit qualifications for inclusion and levelling. The organisation will indicate the level it sees as most appropriate and this will provide the starting point for the assessment on which a final decision will be made. When requesting inclusion, the organisation will have to indicate the learning outcomes in accordance with the main elements of the NLQF level descriptors, the workload (no qualifications with less than 400 hours nominal workload will be considered), the assessment approaches to be applied, and the link to relevant occupational profile.

Source: NQF Inventory 2014 – the Netherlands.

4.5. Qualifications frameworks and recognition of qualification

The effect of the qualifications frameworks on learner and worker mobility is still uncertain (European Commission and GHK, 2013); full implementation has yet to be achieved and referencing to the EQF has yet to be finalised. However, evidence gathered by a study on (potential) role of qualifications frameworks in supporting worker and learner mobility (European Commission and DEEWR, 2011) shows great expectations of improved mobility arising from better recognition of qualifications. NQFs provide an important link to detailed information on qualifications, notably on learning outcomes but also on workload and the type of qualification in question. These are all essential elements required for recognition of qualifications (Unesco; Council of Europe, 2013). The potential role to be played by qualifications frameworks in this context is expressed in the new (2013) subsidiary text to the Lisbon recognition convention. This text underlines that frameworks should be used systematically as a source of information supporting decisions on recognition.

Box 11. France

The French NQF covers three main types of qualification:

- those awarded by French ministries, in cooperation with the social partners through a consultative vocational committee (commission professionnelle consultative, CPC);
- those awarded by training providers, chambers and ministries but where no CPC is in place;
- those set up and awarded by social partners under their own responsibility.

For entry into the national register of vocational qualifications, a qualification should meet a number of requirements, aiming at national coherence and strengthening the overall quality and transparency of qualifications. All qualifications registered in the national register of qualifications must be accessible through validation of non-formal and informal learning. Registration signals that all stakeholders, as represented in the national committee on vocational qualification (commission nationale de la certification professionnelle, CNCP) underwrite the validity of a particular qualification. Registration is necessary for receiving funding, financing validation of non-formal and informal learning, exercising certain professions and occupations, and entering apprenticeship schemes.

Source: NQF inventory 2014 – France.

NQFs can be seen as ‘gate-keeper’ signalling whether a qualification fulfils minimum quality criteria/standards. Quality assurance underpinning qualifications frameworks is therefore essential to improve trust in qualifications and hence recognition of qualifications. Implementation of frameworks in Europe is also closely associated with the development of databases and registers of qualifications, which have been or are being developed in many countries. One of the key elements in the implementation of the EQF is the design of the EQF portal, which is already operational ⁽¹⁸⁾. In the *Compare qualifications frameworks* page, it is possible to see how national qualifications levels in countries that have already finalised their referencing process have been linked to the EQF. It shows level-to-level relationship between the frameworks and carries information on the typical qualifications of a given country at each level. For example, it shows that level 6 of the Irish 10-level framework relates to EQF level 5 and that the higher certificate and advanced certificate are two typical qualifications types at this level.

The EQF does not address recognition of qualification in the legal terms. It intends to ‘... improve transparency, comparability and portability ...’ of qualifications. It is based on a recommendation, which is not binding, as

⁽¹⁸⁾ European Commission. *Learning opportunities and qualifications in Europe*.
http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/compare_en.htm [accessed 8.5.2015].

distinguished from the directive on recognition of professional qualifications ⁽¹⁹⁾, for instance, which has recently been amended.

4.6. NQFs and validation of non-formal and informal learning

The 2012 *Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning* sees the link to NQFs as important for the further implementation of validation arrangements across Europe. NQFs and validation are bound together through their shared emphasis on learning outcomes. The 2012 recommendation states, that ‘the same or equivalent (learning-outcomes-based) standards to those used in formal education’ should be used for validation of non-formal and informal learning. NQFs provide a common reference point for learning acquired inside as well as outside formal education and training.

The 2014 update of the European Inventory on validation confirms the priority given to the linking of frameworks and validation arrangements. A limited number of countries have already integrated validation into their NQF, and see this as an important feature of their overall national approach to qualifications. This is the case in France (from 2002) where all registered qualifications in the NQF can be acquired either through formal education or through validation. Similar close links can be observed in countries such as Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and (parts of) the United Kingdom. For several countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Ireland, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Turkey) developing validation arrangements is embedded in the creation of NQFs. In some cases the NQF is seen as an opportunity to coordinate existing, possibly fragmented, arrangements; for others it is a question of developing validation practically from scratch.

A key condition for linking NQFs and validation is use of the same or equivalent learning-outcomes-based standards. The 2014 inventory demonstrates that most countries now use the same/equivalent standards for validation as for formal education (Austria, Belgium (fl), Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK-England, UK-Scotland and UK-Wales). The use of

⁽¹⁹⁾ European Commission. *Growth: single market and standards: legislation (free movement of professionals)*.
http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/qualifications/policy_developments/legislation/index_en.htm [accessed 8.5.2015].

similar standards does not always, however, lead to the same qualification. In the French-speaking community of Belgium, validation leads to the award of a skills certificate (*titre de compétence*) which is not equivalent to VET degrees, although it uses the same agreed standards developed by the French-speaking service for jobs and qualifications (*service francophone des métiers et des qualifications*). In Spain, the *certificados de profesionalidad* use the same standards as VET qualifications but certificates are not the same and the individual needs to go through an extra step if s/he wants these certificates to grant exemptions in the formal VET system. There is still some resistance to opening up formal qualifications to be acquired through validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The inventory shows, however, that progress has been made in allowing for exemptions from part(s) of courses. In 2010, 15 countries declared such exemptions, increasing to 23 countries in 2014. This corresponds with an increasing number of universities allowing individuals access on the basis of validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Quality assurance is another aspect crucial to an adequate link between NQFs and validation. Few countries have established targeted quality assurance arrangements for validation (Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom); others seek instead to build on the general mechanisms already in place for the education system and the NQF (Belgium (fl), Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary, Ireland, Austria, Finland for further education and higher education, Italy, Iceland, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Slovakia, Switzerland, the United Kingdom). This sends the important signal that validation is subject to the same quality requirements as any other assessment and certification process. The link to the NQF allows validation to become an integrated and normal path to qualifications.

CHAPTER 5.

Conclusions

A frequently repeated criticism of European NQFs is that they are 'empty frameworks' without a link to 'real' qualifications. While this still is true in a few countries, for example Austria, Finland and the French-speaking community of Belgium (due to lack of formal agreement and adoption of the frameworks), most NQFs are now linked to actual qualifications. The gradual 'filling' of frameworks with qualifications demonstrates that NQFs are becoming a reality and can start to make a difference. The approach of the Flemish-speaking community of Belgium and Hungary (to mention just two examples) to aligning single qualifications (as opposed to 'blocks' of qualifications) to their frameworks signals that the learning outcomes principle is taken seriously and is starting directly to impact the way qualifications are levelled and valued in different countries. The 2014 analysis shows that NQFs are starting to make impact in the countries where they are being implemented. This modest start tells us two things:

- (a) NQF developments and implementation take time and need to be seen as a long-term and iterative process, where existing education and training systems and the frameworks are gradually and progressively aligned with each other; common understanding of concepts and deeper cultural change are developed;
- (b) NQF developments are as much about facilitating participation and commitment of stakeholders as they are about introducing technical and conceptual solutions.

List of abbreviations

Belgium (de)	German-speaking community of Belgium
Belgium (fl)	Dutch-speaking community of Belgium (Flanders)
Belgium (fr)	French-speaking community of Belgium (Wallonia)
CNCP	Commission nationale de la certification professionnelle (National committee on vocational qualifications)
CQF	credit and qualifications framework
CQFW	credit and qualifications framework of Wales
CROQF	Croatian qualifications framework
DQR	German qualifications framework
EQF	European qualifications framework
EQF AG	European qualifications framework advisory group
ETF	European Training Foundation
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
FQF	Flemish national qualifications framework
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Award Council
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
NQF	national qualifications framework
NVQ	national vocational qualifications
QALL	quality assured lifelong learning
QCF	qualifications and credit frameworks
QF-EHEA	qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area
SCQF	Scottish credit and qualifications framework
VET	vocational education and training

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Annex

List of informants

Country	Name and Surname	Institution
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Belgium (Flanders)	Rita Dunon Wilfried Boomgarten	Flemish Ministry of Education
	Ingrid Vanhoren	EQF-NCP – Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training
Belgium (Wallonia)	Jo Leonard	Ministry of Education, French-speaking region of Brussels
	Alain Kock	Formation Belgium
Bulgaria	Mimi Daneva	Ministry of Education, Youth and Science
Croatia	Ana Tecilazić- Goršić	Ministry of Science, Education and Sports
	Daria Arlavi	Ministry of Science, Education and Sports
Cyprus	Kyriacos Kyriacou	Ministry of Education and Culture
Czech Republic	Milada Stalker	National Institute for Education (NUV)
Denmark	Jan Jørgensen	Ministry of Education
Estonia	Küllil All	Ministry of Education and Research
Finland	Carita Blomquist Kärki Sirkka-Liisa	National Board of Education
France	Brigitte Bouquet	Commission Nationale de Certification Professionnelle (national committee on vocational qualifications) (CNCP)
Germany	Sabine Schüller	Federal Ministry of Education and Research
Greece	Ioanna Dede	National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance (Eoppep)
Hungary	Szlamka Erzsébet	Education Authority
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Ireland	John O' Connor	Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)
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Sweden	Carina Linden	Ministry of Education
	Stefan Skimutis	EQF NCP – Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education
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UK – England and Northern Ireland	Mike Coles	Consultant
UK – Scotland	Aileen Ponton	EQF NCP – Scottish credit and qualifications framework partnership
UK – Wales	Trevor Clark	Welsh assembly government

Analysis and overview of national qualifications framework developments in European countries

Annual report 2014

In 2014, political commitment and technical work towards developing and implementing national qualifications frameworks across Europe was strengthened. Cedefop's fifth annual report and analysis on European NQF developments confirms that qualifications frameworks are a key tool for improving transparency and comparability of qualifications at national and international levels. Evidence shows that frameworks increasingly trigger reforms and are used to support incremental changes in education and training. Although still uneven across countries and sectors, NQFs have strengthened the implementation of learning outcomes approaches and have brought together stakeholders from different sectors of education, training and employment in renewal and development of new qualifications, for example at EQF level 5. More countries are opening up their NQFs to qualifications outside the formal, public system of qualifications, such as those awarded by non-formal and private institutions, and strengthening the links to arrangements for validating non-formal and informal learning.

The progress made on NQFs has made it possible for more countries to complete their linking to the EQF; 23 countries had linked their national qualifications levels to EQF levels by December 2014.

**CEDEFOP**

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