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The *European journal of vocational training* is provided for by Article 3 of the founding Regulation of Cedefop of 10 February 1975.

The journal is nevertheless independent. It has an editorial committee that evaluates articles following a double-blind procedure whereby the members of the Editorial Committee, and in particular its rapporteurs, do not know the identity of those they are evaluating and authors do not know the identity of those evaluating them. The committee is chaired by a recognised university researcher and composed of researchers as well as two Cedefop experts, an expert from the European Training Foundation (ETF) and a representative of Cedefop's Governing Board.

The *European journal of vocational training* has an editorial secretariat composed of experienced researchers.

The Journal is included in renowned bibliographical databases
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The 14 articles featured in this special edition on the European Qualifications Framework were written between August 2005 and June 2007, i.e. when the *Recommendation on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF),* proposed by the Commission in September 2006 was still in the drafting and discussion phase; in fact, the European Parliament only adopted the recommendation on 24 October 2007. The text then became the subject of a political agreement at the Council on 15 November 2007, which represented the culmination of three years' preparatory work. The opening of the conference on 'Valuing learning: European experiences in validating non-formal and informal learning', held in Lisbon from 26 to 27 November 2007 under the auspices of the Portuguese Presidency of the EU, provided the ideal platform for Mr Ján Figel', the Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth, to announce the agreement. At the time of going to press (7 January 2008), the EQF had still not been formally adopted but this was expected to happen early in the new year.

The Journal's editorial committee invited one of Europe's foremost experts in the field of transparency and recognition of qualifications in Europe, Mr Burkart Sellin, to be guest editor of this special EQF edition. Mr Sellin, a Cedefop specialist from October 1976 to October 2006, was, together with Jens Bjørnåvold, one of the main exponents of the EQF project. Indeed, Cedefop can legitimately claim to have fathered this project, from inception to implementation.

The 14 articles at the core of this issue were produced by a wide range of authors active in the education and training field who have '*all actively participated in discussions and, in some cases, been involved in work on the project at Member State or European level*'. Some of the contributors have moreover been '*closely associated with the work of development and transposition of the project in their Member States*'.

Please also note that two other journals in the *Réseau européen de dissémination en éducation comparée (Redcom [the European Comparative Education Information Network]) (¹) have also published a dossier on the EQF:*

European Journal of Education, Volume 42, No 4, December 2007
http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/journal.asp?ref=0141-8211
Vocational Training: Research and Realities - Profesinis Rengimas:
Tyrimai Ir Realijos, No 12/2007
http://www.vdu.lt/Leidiniai/ProfRengimas/indexen.html

Éric Fries Guggenheim
Editor in chief

(¹)   For information on the Redcom network, see No 35 of the European Journal of Vocational Training:
      http://www.trainingvillage.gr/etv/Information_resources/Bookshop/publication_de tails.asp?pub_id=420

The proposal for a European Qualifications Framework. Making it a reality – possibilities and limitations

Burkart Sellin
Guest Editor
Senior VET expert at Cedefop from October 1975 to October 2006 ([1])

The whole of this issue of the *European Journal of Vocational Training* is devoted to the subject of the European Qualifications Framework. It sets out to provide a constructive critical evaluation of this 2006 initiative by the European Commission, the Council and the European Parliament, which is of such great importance for European vocational education and training policy. In the run-up to the initiative, Cedefop itself was actively involved in preparations for the proposal, by means of expert opinions, studies, and specialised technical support for meetings of Member State experts. The subject of a qualifications framework as a general reference framework had already been on the European education policy agenda for many years. It was only with the efforts that began in Paris and Bologna towards the end of the last century to create a common framework for university education and higher education in general, and then with the aims and objectives pursued for VET policy in Lisbon and Barcelona at the beginning of this century, later continued in Bruges and Copenhagen, that the subject of how to coordinate education and VET better and more efficiently came to the fore in the minds of the political and social players. The European Qualifications Framework has a key role to play here. A whole series of objectives have been postulated in this connection. This special issue sets out to examine whether and, if so, to what extent, these are realistic and feasible.

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[1]   See '30 years with Cedefop in good times and bad' – Interview with Burkart Sellin, senior Cedefop VET expert. *Cedefop Info – Vocational training in Europe*, 2006, No 2/2006, pp. 1-2. http://www.trainingvillage.gr/etv/Upload/Information_resources/Bookshop/438/Cinfo 22006EN.pdf

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The articles were produced at the end of 2006, and revised and approved by the authors themselves early in 2007, following appraisal. They now reflect the situation at the beginning of 2007. All the authors are respected experts from the worlds of academia and politics, and are actively involved in the debate and, in some cases, in the practical activities in the relevant Member States or at European level. Some of them are also currently playing a major role in developing and implementing the proposal in the individual Member States. Others are providing constructive critical support for the project. They report in their papers on the response in the Member States, put forward suggestions, and make general and specific comments on the implementation of the proposal.

A number of authors also discuss the relationships between the various subsystems of education and VET, such as between higher education and VET. Others discuss the concepts underlying the proposals, such as the results-based descriptors for knowledge, skills and competences/learning outcomes, and how these terms may be (mis)understood in a number of Member States. One contribution discusses the development of a parallel proposal for a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and its connection with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) which has already been in existence for some time in higher education. This is currently under discussion and is likely to lead to a further proposal from the European institutions in the course of 2007. Lastly, the contribution with which we have chosen to end this issue addresses the issue of governance and European policy on coordination and reciprocal harmonisation of policy areas such as education, in which competences are subsidiary to those of the Member States, and hence are unable to be directly effective. How can the fairly abstract and general proposals and assumptions of the EQF be effectively made a reality in the Member States, without contradictions and conflicts once again emerging at European level, or the systems even drifting further apart? These questions are raised against the background of the reactions of all the Member States to the EQF proposal.

Europe alone is not necessarily the general yardstick. – so the authors of the final article include a digression on the global/international scene, on which Europe needs to prove itself. Some countries, such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand, have already made good progress and acquired relevant experience in the field of a comprehensive qualifications framework for lifelong learning and of learning provision geared to outcomes. We can and should learn from them, to improve learning structures and to support learners throughout their (working) lives, improve the quality and attractiveness of training pro-

vision and make it more attractive, and progress towards our goal of social and economic integration.

What is expected of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

In a Europe marked by rapid technological and economic development and by an ageing population, lifelong learning is gaining increasing importance. In order to safeguard and develop competitiveness and social cohesion, Europe's citizens must constantly update their knowledge, skills and competences so that they can obtain and keep a stable job or career with good prospects and lead a life that satisfies them in social and cultural terms.

Lifelong learning is often obstructed by a lack of communication and cooperation between the various education providers and competent bodies in both general and vocational education and training, and at the different levels within and between countries. This results in unnecessary barriers that make it more difficult for people to access training and continuing training. It is almost impossible for them to combine the qualifications and programmes of education or study units of different establishments. Even less often can they rely on their qualifications if they have been obtained outside the national system. This makes it difficult for them to develop further and stands in the way of their capacity to play an active part in shaping their own lives. The lack of provision for transfer of qualifications or learning outcomes from one learning context to another is an unnecessary hurdle. It limits the mobility of workers and students within the European labour market, and makes it difficult for education providers and responsible bodies to cooperate effectively. It is also still difficult for Europe to cooperate at international level with other regions of the world.

The expectations that the European Commission and also the Council of Education Ministers have of the EQF [2] are ambitious and comprehensive (see Helsinki Communiqué, 2006):
- The EQF '…will increase mobility for the purposes of education, training and work' [3].

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[2] The Council debated the proposal in November 2006 and approved it unanimously. It now has to be debated by the European Parliament. The full text can be downloaded on the Internet: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/eqf/com_2006_0479_en.pdf.

[3] Education Commissioner Ján Figel' in September 2006, quoted on http://europa.eu

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- The EQF is an instrument for improving the comparability of qualifications – the EQF sets out to replace the use of learning pathways and paper qualifications to compare vocational qualifications with the use of the outcomes of learning processes for this purpose, irrespective of how, where, when and for how long somebody has studied; it describes what somebody can do.
- It is designed to help improve the implementation of recommendations, decisions and directives already adopted, e.g. on transparency (Europass), lifelong learning and recognition of professional qualifications (regulated occupations).
- It is designed as an aid to translation of national qualifications and systems at bilateral and multilateral level, e.g. to support cooperation between education providers and exchanges of teachers, students, schoolchildren and trainees.
- The EQF is designed to make it possible to improve Eurostat's comparative education statistics and to set targets for investment in education and training, e.g. by intervening with the aid of the EU's Structural Funds.
- And, lastly, the EQF should be seen as a stimulus for portraying national education and qualifications systems themselves more transparently (both internally and externally) and for developing national qualifications frameworks where they do not already exist, in order to make different education programmes more interchangeable, particularly as regards vocational training and higher education, and initial and continuing training.

The EQF is regarded as an important step towards realising the EU's Lisbon objectives, namely towards making Europe more competitive whilst ensuring social cohesion, and underpinning the European employment strategy.

The primary target group consists of the players in policy and management at all levels of decision-making, but also the population at large, i.e. learners of all ages themselves, for whom it is ever more difficult to find their way around the disparate education programmes and qualifications on offer.

Common descriptors for qualifications

In comparison with the Commission's 2005 Staff Working Document, the proposal involves a degree of simplification of the descriptors for the eight levels of qualifications (see Annex). In the third category, 'Competences', in particular, summaries of (personal and professional or other) characteristics are proposed. Fundamentally, however, little has changed in the nature and content of the descriptors – the description begins with qualifications that can be obtained shortly after completing compulsory schooling at Level 1, and which extend up to completion of a doctorate at Level 8.

The basis is still the restricted description of learning outcomes in the form of three categories – knowledge, skills and competences. This means that there is no description of input in the form of type of educational institution and training duration and methods, with the restriction to a definition of outcomes. The categorisation of the former is deliberately left to the competent national bodies at the specific levels concerned. It is believed that only in this way can justice be done to the differing realities of today and of the future. At the insistence of the social partners, the occupational connection was brought out more strongly in the third category in particular. At the same time, however, it is stressed that it is to be left to the players at sectoral and occupational group level themselves to define this in more detail. Qualifications frameworks of this kind should, if appropriate, also be developed at European level to supplement the general EQF, as Cedefop, CEPIS [4] and the European Committee for Standardization (CEN/ISSS) [5] are currently endeavouring to do in the area of ICT qualifications. Occupation or sector-specific reference frameworks of this kind, like the EQF, would subsequently have no binding effect, and, in the same way, would serve only as a translation tool for qualifications of all kinds, irrespective of whether they are obtained through formal, non-formal, informal or commercial (e.g. industry-specific) provision.

Renunciation of a description of the pathways and content of a programme and the institution has consequences for all the Member States – the knowledge, skills and competences (KSC) an educational programme or provider sets out to impart need to be described more clearly and/or relevant quality standards need to be defined and agreed. Academic degrees or job titles alone are no longer enough, as they are insufficiently meaningful. The dissemina-

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[4] Council of European Professional Informatics Societies.
[5] See also the results of the European e-Skills Conference held on 5 and 6 October 2006 in Thessaloniki, at www.e-skills-conference.org.

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tion of the diploma supplement or certificate supplement under Europass can be regarded as a first step along this road. However, this is not enough if national qualifications are to be clearly assigned to the EQF's qualification categories. For example, the relevant examination regulations and accreditation bodies must demonstrate that these results have actually been achieved via the education pathway concerned. Otherwise the necessary mutual trust in the qualifications and training quality in the other country cannot be created. New ways of validating and accrediting formal or non-formal learning outcomes must also be provided for career changers (including those with a background of migration). The Council has been calling for this for years in the process towards recognition of such learning outcomes, and the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education is also partly designed to facilitate this (see the article on this topic in this issue).

Connection between Bologna and Copenhagen processes underpinned by EQF and ECTS/ECVET

Like the Copenhagen process, the Bologna process for cooperation between institutions of higher education and universities, as begun at the end of the 1990s with support from the Council of Europe and the European Commission and since then successfully implemented in most European countries, supports cooperation between education providers, exchanges of teachers and students and, ultimately, the development of a European Higher Education Area and Qualifications Framework. Levels 6 to 8 of the characteristics of the EQF were adapted in line with the descriptors for learning outcomes in higher education in Europe, i.e. the Dublin descriptors. These have been kept very general, but are nonetheless compatible with one another. However, the relevant levels in the EQF do not necessarily presuppose acquisition of the degrees generally customary in higher education, bachelor, master or doctorate, and are not based on a minimum period of study at a recognised institution of higher education or its equivalent. Thus the levels of the EQF do not directly correspond to certain qualifications or degrees in the formal education system. They should also be accessible to career changers, to applicants without formal qualifications, on condition that they have been formally evaluated and accredited by the competent bodies.

Since the beginning of 2000 there has been an enormous increase in the number of students who do parts of their courses in other European countries, e.g. under the Erasmus Programme, and are able to substantiate their learn-

ing outcomes there with the aid of the ECTS ([6]). Incidentally, in addition to the EU Member States this increase in student exchanges has also involved and still involves other European countries, including Russia and the Ukraine. These latter exchanges are also supported by the EU.

Since 2002, the policy-makers in the Council and the European Parliament responsible for the Copenhagen process have also been advocating a comparable development in the areas of VET and lifelong learning. The intention is to achieve comparable numbers of participants in exchanges through the Erasmus Programme. Previous exchanges, on the basis of the Socrates or Leonardo da Vinci Programmes, for example, were relatively disappointing in this respect, and it was established that one obstacle consisted primarily in the fact that often periods of teaching and learning completed in other Member States were not taken into account in the country of origin or considered as part of the qualification aimed at. The ECVET system ([7]), which is currently being developed, should remedy this.

At the end of October 2006, the Commission presented a working document proposing such a system, initially for consultation in the Member States. It was designed by a technical working party set up by the Commission at the end of 2003 in cooperation with VET experts in interested Member States. Cedefop played a major part in its development. Cedefop both investigated starting points in the Member States and commissioned an expert opinion on a typology of knowledge, skills and competences (see Cedefop; Winterton et al., 2006). It should also be stressed that as this working party began its work, another expert opinion addressed the development of reference levels and zones of mutual trust, which were deemed to be essential for progress to be made with the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training. This study, drawn up by the English Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in close cooperation with experts from many Member States, was further developed by the EQF expert group, and enabled the latter to make rapid progress with the EQF concept described here. Thus the ECVET technical working party provided an impetus for the development of the EQF. Without such a reference framework of training/qualification or learning levels, it is difficult to discuss comparable learning units and training periods, on the basis of which exchanges of this kind can be reciprocally accumulated and transferred.

Meanwhile, the EQF can be regarded as a further development of the training-levels structure, as quoted as a reference framework at the time of implementation of the Council Decision of 1985 on the comparability of voca-

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([6]) European Credit Transfer System.

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tional training qualifications between the Member States of the European Community (see Council Decision of 16 July 1985).

The proposed EQF and the ECVET or further developed ECTS proposal are intended to be mutually supportive and, in due course, to be converted into a common credit system. The question of whether it will be possible to integrate the two systems (ECTS and ECVET) in the foreseeable future, in the way postulated by policy-makers, cannot yet be answered. Unlike ECVET, to date ECTS has been primarily based on input categories rather than on outcomes. However, the question of whether ECVET can do without input categories completely will also be answered in the course of the system's implementation.

The development of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs)

Some Member States already have a lengthy tradition of developing qualifications frameworks, while others have developed them only recently. Some of them relate only to initial training, including or excluding higher education. Only a few Member States or non-EU countries currently possess a fully comprehensive NQF. France has a lengthy tradition extending back to the 1970s. It was part of '*planification*' [8] and served to create transparency and comparability or '*homologation*' [9] of qualifications under the aegis of the Ministry of Education with those under the aegis of the Ministry of Employment in the context of further or advanced training.

In the mid-1980s the UK introduced a national qualifications framework, initially for vocational training, which was continually updated and supplemented. Since 2003, Ireland and Scotland have begun working towards providing comprehensive qualifications frameworks; in Ireland, this involves 10 levels after completion of compulsory schooling, and in Scotland it encompasses 12 levels, including outcomes already achieved during compulsory education (see the articles on Ireland in this issue). In Scotland a closer connection is also being established between the qualifications framework and the credit system (Scottish Credits and Qualifications Framework). Early experience of ap-

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[7] European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training.
[8] This term describes the medium-term or annually updated planning customary in France.
[9] Creation of equivalence with initial training qualifications as awarded by the Ministry of Education.

plication of this comprehensive qualifications framework is now available (see Raffe et al. in this issue).

Comprehensive qualifications frameworks of this kind have also been established in other English-speaking regions such as Australia, New Zealand and South Africa; they involve varying goals and objectives, and have differing legal bases. Some serve only for orientation, while others are legally binding for education providers and examination bodies. The article by Bjørnåvold and Coles in this issue contains a discussion of these international trends.

It is already clear that the interim findings and proposals of the working parties and the European Commission on the EQF and the credit system have essentially evoked a positive response in all the Member States, and many have begun taking steps to develop national qualifications frameworks. These proposals have met with a particularly positive response in the new Member States.

The consequences have been under discussion in Germany since 2005. With the support of industry, the German government is considering the first steps towards developing a national qualifications framework. A particular concern in Germany is the preservation and expansion of vocational training, which is primarily organised in business, as an attractive option, to retain the 'vocational' concept and to make both school-based and business-based qualifications more interchangeable, and to combine/interlink VET with higher education and further education/training. 'Existing barriers between the individual areas of education must be eliminated so that qualifications become connections and (learning) time does not have to be repeated on learning content already acquired' (Storm, 2006, p. 8). For Germany the opportunity lies in the fact [...] 'that learning outcomes can be categorised and compared better than before at European level. This means that, in particular, competences imparted under the dual system could be appropriately evaluated in a European comparison – an aspect that, [...] from the German point of view, remains problematic' (Storm, 2006, p. 14).

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Conclusions

The German Presidency has set itself the objective of adopting the proposed European Qualifications Framework and making good progress with the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) in the first six months of 2007. The consultation phase of the credit system will also have been concluded by then, and a decision will be taken as to the form in which it should be implemented. A number of pilot trials and studies on associated issues are already under way. The EU's new Lifelong Learning Programme will begin in 2007, and will be better funded in order to continue to promote mobility and cooperation in education and training in Europe. Particular emphasis is likely to be placed on these two excellent campaigns under the German Presidency.

In the Helsinki Communiqué of 5 December 2006, Education Ministers stressed that in the next few years, work [....] would focus on introducing the EQF and a credit system with a view to achieving greater mobility for trainees in Europe and, by means of closer cooperation in VET, further developing VET systems (Schavan, 2006).

Even today, in many Member States this debate has already developed a dynamic that seems unstoppable. It remains to be seen, however, whether these new tools and declarations of intent will lead to practical action, and whether this dynamic will be maintained and the recommendations will be effectively implemented in the Member States by 2010. The open coordination process that is employed in the EU's education and employment policies ([10]) must be more closely supported and evaluated. Indicators and benchmarks alone are not enough – the necessary conclusions also need to be drawn, and lasting action must be taken to support the players in the Member States.

The education programme is certainly one means of effectively supporting this, and another lies in improving the continuing and further training of teachers and trainers and the quality and quantity of VET programmes on offer, for example with financial support from the European Structural Funds and, in particular, the Social Fund, making them fit for Europe and, in parallel, promoting multilingualism (not just English) in VET also. Ultimately, there will be lasting support for learner mobility only if national labour markets open up further and a European labour market comes into being. We are still a long way

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([10]) And also in the EU's youth and social policies.

away from this at present. In many countries institutions and large sections of the population still display a separatist or even protectionist tendency, particularly with regard to central and eastern European job seekers, although the influx of thousands of workers anticipated in many quarters following accession has not materialised.

However, it is not only geographical but also occupational mobility that leaves something to be desired, as demonstrated in a 2006 Eurobarometer survey in connection with the European Year of Workers' Mobility. According to the survey, only 20 % of German, Austrian and Greek workers are willing to change their occupation in the course of their working lives; Scandinavians (Danes and Swedes) and Czech and Slovakian workers are more inclined to do so, at around 60 %. Even French workers (50 %) are above the EU average of 40 %. There is an urgent need for a change in attitudes to occupations and mobility.

The younger generation, however, seems increasingly prepared to change its attitude. As the latest Shell Youth Study (2006) in Germany showed, subject to a good level of education, most young people are also prepared to do so. Particular attention should also be paid in this connection to young people from ethnic minorities and with a background of migration, particularly since they often bring with them bilingualism, the basis for becoming multilingual. Education and training establishments should stop taking a negative view of them, and should instead take up and build on these bases, while at the same time promoting the local language or the language of the host country. Bilingual literacy should, if possible, be given priority for these target groups from nursery school onwards.

The ability to communicate in both the local language and the original or foreign language plays an ever greater part in the acquisition of higher vocational qualifications. Without this, there is no ongoing formal or non-formal continuing training, and almost no possibility of safeguarding employment in the long term.

This means not only that technical/specialised education and training of impeccable quality and the corresponding skills must be imparted in VET, but also that oral and written language skills must be consolidated, as with other programmes of higher education. This should be done in close conjunction with 'soft skills', the necessary social communication skills. Both abilities/skills are an essential precondition for access to advanced and continuing training and to promotion of both occupational and geographical mobility.

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Annex
Descriptors defining levels in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

Each of the eight levels is defined by a set of descriptors indicating the learning outcomes relevant to qualifications at that level in any system of qualifications.

	Knowledge	Skills	Competence
	In the EQF, knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual knowledge.	In the EQF, skills are described as cognitive skills (use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical skills (involving manual dexterity and use of methods, materials, tools and instruments).	In the EQF, competence is described in the sense of the assumption of responsibility and autonomy.
Level 1 Learning outcomes relevant to Level 1	Basic general knowledge	Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks	Work or study under direct supervision in a structured context
Level 2 Learning outcomes relevant to Level 2	Basic factual knowledge in an area of work or study	Basic cognitive and practical skills required to utilise relevant information, in order to carry out tasks and solve routine problems by using simple rules and tools	Work or study under supervision with a degree of autonomy
Level 3 Learning outcomes relevant to Level 3	Knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts in an area of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems, in which basic methods, tools, materials and information are selected and applied	Take responsibility for completion of tasks of work or study Adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems
Level 4 Learning outcomes relevant to Level 4	Theoretical and factual knowledge in broad contexts in an area of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in an area of work or study	Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change Supervise the routine work of others, involving taking some responsibility for evaluating and improving work or study activities

	Knowledge	Skills	Competence
Level 5* Learning outcomes relevant to Level 5	Comprehensive, specialised theoretical and factual knowledge in an area of work or study, and awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change Review and develop own performance and that of others Level 6**
Learning outcomes relevant to Level 6	Advanced knowledge in an area of work or study, involving utilisation of a critical understanding of theories and principles	Advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, and required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised area of work or study	Exercise management of complex technical or professional activities or projects, and take responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts Take responsibility for the professional development of individuals and groups
Level 7*** Learning outcomes relevant to Level 7	Highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in an area of work or study, as a basis for innovative starting points Critical awareness of knowledge issues in an area and at the interface between different areas	Specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation, in order to obtain new knowledge and develop new procedures, and to integrate knowledge from different areas	Manage and transform complex, changing work or study contexts, which require new strategic approaches Take responsibility for contributing to specialist knowledge and to professional practice, and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams
Level 8**** Learning outcomes relevant to Level 8	Knowledge at the most advanced frontier of an area of work or study and at the interface between different areas	The most highly developed and specialised skills and methods, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in the areas of research and/or innovation, and to extend or redefine existing knowledge or professional practice	Demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes in leading work or study contexts, including research

Compatibility with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area

The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area offers descriptors for cycles. Each cycle descriptor offers a generic statement on typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with qualifications that represent the end of that cycle.

* The descriptor for the higher education short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle), which was developed by the Joint Quality Initiative as part of the Bologna process, corresponds to the learning outcomes for EQF Level 5.

** The descriptor for the first cycle of the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area corresponds to the learning outcomes for EQF Level 6.

*** The descriptor for the second cycle of the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area corresponds to the learning outcomes for EQF Level 7.

**** The descriptor for the third cycle of the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area corresponds to the learning outcomes for EQF Level 8.

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Freedom of movement:
from right to possibility
Recognition of qualifications through
legislation or information

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SUMMARY

**This article seeks to describe briefly various initiatives taken to ease recognition
and comparison of formal qualifications across borders in the EU. It takes a political
angle, from binding legal instruments such as directives and decisions to policy
instruments such as recommendations and voluntary action and covers 27 Member
States with very different education and training systems and labour market structures. What characterises the various initiatives; what premises are they based on;
which problems are they attempting to solve; and where do they possibly fall short?
What is the development potential of the latest initiatives?**

This article seeks to describe policy developments: which initiatives have been taken; which are in the pipeline; which problems they solve; and what remains to be done.

One of the fundamental rights set out in the Treaty of Rome is the 'freedom of movement of workers' – in a free European market for goods, persons, services and capital. That sounds easy! Especially considering the strong impact that the free trade of goods across European borders has had on our everyday lives: we can buy cheese from Denmark in Greece, Swedish crispbread in Spain, Italian olive oil in Ireland, and wine from the Mediterranean area has become almost an everyday pleasure in countries where grapevines do not thrive at all. We travel on holiday to other European countries with relative ease, and if we are taken ill along the way, we can obtain treatment in the host country without too much trouble.

So why is the inter-European mobility on the labour market still relatively poor? ([1]). There are many reasons, such as supply and demand of labour, housing, social insurance, jobs for partners, schooling for children, salaries, taxes and, of course, languages. Most of these issues fall outside the scope of this article. The one that will be dealt with is recognition of qualifications in another context than that in which it was originally acquired. The problem is that we are dealing with overlapping fields: education and labour markets; legal regulation (legislation), collective agreements and free competition; supply and demand; and the cultures of education and training and work. Many different forces are all pulling in their own directions. It is not easy for employers to determine the real value of a foreign or unknown diploma. Despite much effort put into solving the problems, results are poor – although efforts have, at least, led to increased mobility of civil servants!

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[1] See: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. *Mobility in Europe - Analysis of the 2005 Eurobarometer survey on geographical and labour market mobility.* Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2006, p. 71. Available from Internet: http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/pubdocs/2006/59/en/1/ef0659en.pdf [cited: 31.8.2007].

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Legal regulation: directives and legislation

To obtain an overview, we need to simplify matters; first, we need to look at the legal basis and view post-secondary education and vocational education and training (VET) separately. The Treaty of Rome gives no legal basis for cooperation in education and training matters, but does deal with freedom of establishment and therefore stipulates in Article 47 of the consolidated version (²) that 'the Council shall [...] issue directives for the mutual recognition of diplomas, certificates and other evidence of formal qualifications' – however, this can only be done where Member States already regulate the exercise of a profession through legislation.

In the 1960s, this led to liberalisation and a wide range of transitional and industrial, commercial and craft directives (covering several hundred professions) (³). They can be characterised as 'harmonisation directives' – as they lay down common minimum education and training (mainly VET) requirements and levels and/or documentation of professional experience for people working in a profession subject to regulation. These directives are hardly used nowadays.

Common minimum requirements also apply – and as such are more interesting at present – to directives on mutual recognition of diplomas (mainly in higher education) which (with subsequent amendments) were issued from 1975 onwards. The so-called 'sectoral directives' cover a wide range of medical and paramedical professions (doctors, dental practitioners, veterinary surgeons, nurses, midwives, pharmacists, etc.) as well as architects. As these professions involve health and safety, Member States have a justified interest in setting out specific requirements for pursuing such professions in a legal instrument. Both the above-mentioned types of first generation directives primarily (but not exclusively) concern the right of establishment and freedom to exchange services and thereby, to a high degree, target the liberal professions and self-employed enterprises, although the occupations can also be pursued by employees. The architect directive was in the pipeline for an exceedingly long time (18 years as rumours have it!), as all Member States had to reach

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(²) Consolidated version of the Treaty establishing the European Community, *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 321, 29.12.2006, p. 37-186 Available from Internet: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2006:321E:0001:0331:EN:pdf [Cited: 30.8.2007].

(³) See: *European Parliament fact sheets: 3.2.3. Freedom of establishment and provision of services and mutual recognition of diplomas*. Available from Internet: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/3_2_3_en.htm [cited: 30.8.2007].

agreement before the directive could be adopted. This situation was completely untenable and begged for a more rational procedure than the slow convergence of education and training programmes of Member States.

Next came the 'second generation directives', the 'general directives', which were not concerned with direct professional assessment, but set out a general method for dealing with cases involving mutual recognition of qualifications giving access to a regulated profession in another Member State than the one in which the qualification was obtained. In 1989, the first 'Council directive on a general system for the recognition of higher-education diplomas awarded on completion of professional education and training of at least three years' duration' ([4]) was adopted, giving access to a regulated profession. In 1992, the 'second directive', Council directive on a second general system for the recognition of professional education and training to supplement Directive 89/48/EEC ([5]), saw the light of day. They both set out a minimum duration of education at post-secondary level (more than or less than three years' duration, respectively) giving access to a regulated profession, as well as compensatory measures. First, education and training of shorter duration could be replaced by relevant employment for a specified number of years, in an employed or self-employed capacity. Second, a host Member State not immediately recognising a foreign education or training diploma (duration, professional content) as a precondition for pursuing a regulated profession, must give the applicant the chance to take a skills test or complete (practical) training, or adaptation period in instances where the host Member State establishes substantial shortcomings in the applicant's education and training compared with the requirements in the host Member State. In addition, frameworks are set out for how long it should take to process a case, setting up committees and other practical matters.

The sectoral directives and the two general directives were consolidated in 2005 into one directive of 7 September 2005 ([6]) – the extensive annexes

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([4]) Council Directive 89/48/EEC of 21 December 1988 on a general system for the recognition of higher-education diplomas awarded on completion of professional education and training of at least three years' duration. *Official Journal of the European Communities* L 19, 24.1.1989, p. 16-23. Available from Internet: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:31989L0048:EN:HTML [cited: 30.8.2007].

([5]) Council Directive 92/51/EEC of 18 June 1992 on a second general system for the recognition of professional education and training to supplement Directive 89/48/EEC. *Official Journal of the European Communities* L 209, 24.7.1992, p. 25-45. Available from Internet: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:31992L0051:EN:HTML [cited: 30.8.2007].

([6]) Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7.9.2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications. *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 255, 30 9.2005, p 22-68. Available from Internet: http://www.cplol.org/files/official%20journal_25520050930en00220142_pp1-47.pdf [cited: 30.8.2007].

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describe in detail the (common minimum) qualification requirements for individual (Member States') education and training programmes. All concern qualification requirements (education and training plus documented professional experience, if any) to pursue a regulated profession in a Member State. Education and training are viewed as input oriented, based on parameters such as duration and level of education and training, type of institution, etc.

In general terms, the directives form a legal instrument that presupposes a legal basis in the Treaty as well as a legal basis for pursuing a profession in an individual Member State. It constitutes a heavy top-down instrument, which, if it is to be administered properly, requires fulfilment of a range of preconditions, including readily available information on the purpose, goals and content of the education and training programme, the grading system, etc., in a language understood in the host Member State. The fact that this information is rarely available in its entirety in one place and rarely easily accessible, seldom in a foreign language, and certainly not if education and training were completed several years ago, was an obstacle. The recipient Member State often has difficulties acquiring an overview of the education and training qualifications of an applicant and obtaining relevant documentation and having it translated by a sworn interpreter can be both time-consuming and costly for the applicant.

There are also problems of 'asymmetry' with the general directives. Some Member States have a policy of strong State regulation of access to pursuing a profession, while others largely leave this up to the social partners or professional bodies (in such cases, are they covered by the Directive or not?) – and in yet others there is, by and large, no regulation at all. Certain professions such as education and training opticians, require post-secondary education in some Member States, while the same profession requires VET in others. Some Member States have regulated professions which are not regulated in other Member States, such as hairdressing. In cases where the directive deals with regulated education and training leading to regulated professions, some Member States have elected to allow a large part of their VET programmes to be covered by the directive (Germany), while others with a similar VET system have chosen not to do so (Denmark). The main difficulties in administering the directive(s) could be said to be lack of adequate information on qualifications in other languages, 'asymmetry' of professions covered, and the static character of the instrument itself (in a world of constant change).

Information on and comparability of vocational education and training

For VET, which is much more complex than higher education due to the wide range of (ever developing) qualifications covered and the various national systems of education and training and the labour market structures in which they exist, another approach has also been adopted which, in part, supplements the directives. Since its establishment in 1975, one of the top priorities of Cedefop (the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) was to supply information: structured descriptions of Member States' VET systems. This was partly been carried out by publishing and regularly updating a series of Member State monographs and via a 'guide' with brief graphical summaries for all (the then) Member States (now discontinued). Recently, information has been published in 'short descriptions' in conjunction with each new Presidency. However, these describe systems, not programmes. Keeping these publications up to date with the continuous development and adaptation of VET systems is extremely slow and laborious so Cedefop recently set up an Internet-based database: 'eKnowVET', a knowledge management system, which can be updated and in which searches of virtually any kind can be performed. While despite all national differences, university education shares many structural and content-related similarities at European level, VET is highly complex with many different stakeholders and players, and sometimes several different systems in the same Member State. VET programmes are not immediately comparable across national borders – not least because the contexts in which they function are so different.

Another initiative, where Cedefop played a key role ([7]), is implementation of the Council Decision of 1985 on the comparability of vocational training qualifications between Member States of the European Community ([8]) (at skilled level). The decision focuses not on the structure of education and training systems, but on the professional key competences required to perform a specific

([7])   Cedefop. *Certification in the EU Member States* [online]. Available from Internet: http://www2.trainingvillage.gr/etv/library/certification/main.asp [cited 30.8.2007].

([8])   Council Decision of 16 July 1985 on the comparability of vocational training qualifications between the Member States of the European Community 85/368/EEC. *Official Journal of the European Communities*, L 199, 31.7.1985, p. 56-59. Available from Internet: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:31985D0368:EN:HTML [cited: 30.8.2007].

([9])   Cedefop. *EU statutory instruments on the recognition and comparability of qualifications* [online]. Available from: http://www2.trainingvillage.gr/etv/library/certification/bibl.asp [cited 30.8.2007].

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occupation. During the six years of the project, 209 occupations in 19 trades were mapped and described in cooperation with the social partners and relevant national authorities. Results were published in the Official Journal (⁹) in all nine languages of the then 12 Member States. To simplify comparison, VET programmes were divided into five operational levels, and the educational establishments (school/professional practice) and authorities issuing diplomas, certificates and other evidence of formal qualifications were indicated for reference (for reassessment of the 1985 European Communities five-level structure of training and qualification levels, see Cedefop; Westerhuis, 2001) (¹⁰).

Some Member States offer very broad all-round education and training programmes, while programmes in others are narrow – and perhaps highly specialised. A plumber in one Member State handles everything from roofing to heating systems, water installation and drains, while a plumber in another perhaps only handles one of these specialities. Some Member States provide virtually nothing other than school-based training, while others also include a large amount of practical work training/training at the workplace – which means that a newly qualified, skilled worker can immediately function independently. Work on the comparability project brought much useful knowledge to light, but some parties regarded the necessary categorisation of VET programmes as a reduction of programmes to the lowest common denominator, which did not sufficiently consider their specific characteristics. An enormous effort was put into extensive mapping, but it was never really implemented nationally and it is a pity that it has not been possible to maintain the cross-national sectoral networks since work was completed.

Administrative problems

Education and training programmes take place and are described (if at all) in a specific national context. This works as long as a given programme is only used in the context in which it belongs. There is overall legislation at national level; there are special examination rules; there are education and training plans – national, local or perhaps set up by the social partners – and all this in the national language(s). This may be supplemented by a lot of 'silent

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(¹⁰) Cedefop-European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training; Westerhuis, Anneke. *European structures of qualification levels - reports on recent developments in Germany, Spain, France, the Netherlands and in the United Kingdom (England and Wales) Volume 2.* Available from Internet http://trainingvillage.gr/etv/Upload/Information_resources/Bookshop/186/5116en.pdf [cited: 31.8.2007].

knowledge' from employers, educational establishments and other stakeholders. Handling cases of recognising or assessing foreign education and training, whether a completed education and training programme for employment or further education and training, or simply parts of education and training programmes (credit transfer), presupposes that relevant information is available so a third party can form an impression not only of the duration and contents, but also of the 'quality' of an education and training programme. This is not easily done, even with help from the guides published by Eurydice ([11]) and Cedefop ([12]). In the light of the 'knowledge explosion', considerable growth in development and diversification of education and training programmes, and emerging new trades (electronics, IT, biotechnology) – not to mention substantial growth in the number of Member States – the above approach was no longer adequate and, in particular, not sufficiently dynamic and forward-looking to be able to promote mobility in education and training and on the labour market. To be competitive, enterprises are continually updating and thus further development of education and training programmes is required. A static 'subject-to-subject' comparison of qualifications no longer suffices. In 1992 and 1996, the concept of 'transparency' (supplying adequate information for a formal qualification to be understood in another Member State) started to show up in resolutions from meetings of Ministers for Education in the Council. In 1993, the ACVT (the Commission's Advisory Committee on Vocational Training) adopted a resolution on transparency. Small working groups were established and individual pilot projects launched during the following years.

New approach, a paradigm shift

The above initiatives - the directives and the 'comparability project' – make it the responsibility of the 'recipient' to 'recognise' education and training qualifications *de jure* – by allowing pursuit of a profession (for regulated professions) or admission to an educational establishment, or *de facto* – through the applicant getting a job with or without a collective agreement or becoming a member of a trade union. However, the recipient Member State or the 'recog-

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([11]) Eurydice [February 2007]. *Eurybase - The information database on education systems in Europe* [online]. Available from Internet: http://www.eurydice.org/portal/page/portal/Eurydice/DB_Eurybase_Home [cited: 5.11.2007].

([12]) Cedefop. *National VET Systems: Vocational education and training (VET) systems and their development* [online]. Available from Internet: http://www.trainingvillage.gr/etv/Information_resources/NationalVet/ [cited: 5.11.2007].

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nising authority' often has no incentive to recognise, and the necessary information is often not available to a sufficient and accessible degree. A diploma, which may be in a foreign language, does not constitute a sufficient basis for assessing an applicant's qualifications.

With the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 ([13]), general education was also covered by the Treaty (Article 126) ([14]), and, little by little, efforts to continue work on academic recognition of higher education, which the Council of Europe had handled since its creation shortly after the Second World War, started to take shape in an EU context. First with the Lisbon Convention and subsequently with the Sorbonne, Bologna and Berlin Declarations, the three-step structure for post-secondary education was established. With the Lisbon summit in 2000, the ambitious education and training goals and the 'open method of coordination' (OMC), things began to move.

Now, it is no longer necessary to discuss if there is a legal basis in the Treaty for implementing this or that measure. With the budget guaranteed via education and training programmes, there are funds available to propel the process forward, both with working groups and through pilot projects. With the 'Copenhagen-Maastricht-Helsinki process', and the Education and training 2010 work programme, a new dynamic approach has been introduced. Instead of formal legal 'top-down' instruments, the approach has changed into a political one: ministers agree on common objectives and benchmarks, which both respect national autonomy in educational matters and allow for development and dynamism in both education and labour markets – on a voluntary basis. Thematic working groups have been set up, peer learning activities take place, and thematic clusters support and monitor the process. This has also shown results in recognising both formal and informal qualifications. Further, in the process it has turned out that recognition tools have a role to play, not only in transnational mobility on the labour market, but also as a precondition for lifelong learning in the sense that it covers both credit transfer and academic and professional recognition, thus allowing for geographical, sectoral, vertical and horizontal mobility in and between Member States. In other words, instruments regarded as useful for creating international transparency have also proved useful for regional or sector mobility.

([13]) Treaty on European Union. *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 191, 29.7.1992, p. 1. Available from Internet: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/en/treaties/dat/11992M/htm/ 11992M.html#0001000001 [cited: 31.8.2007].

([14]) Article 126 is now Article 150 in the consolidated version of the Treaty.

The individual as 'carrier of information on own qualifications'

New in the transparency approach is that the burden of proof is being moved from the recipient to the sender. The overriding principle is 'transparency': information, education and training programmes must be described so they are immediately understandable and can be compared with similar programmes in other Member States or with job profiles or competence requirements, so recipients (competent authority, employer) can immediately assess whether applicants comply with requirements and whether any shortcomings are immaterial or so substantial that additional education and/or training is required – or that applicants cannot obtain the benefit they are applying for.

Forum for transparency from 1998

In 1998, the Commission and Cedefop jointly set up a working group consisting of government representatives and representatives of the social partners at European level. It soon became evident there was a need for clear and understandable information on individual education and training programmes and for a network of national information centres from which additional information could be obtained – also on educational establishments, etc. This was implemented and further developed in the 2004 decision ([15]) on 'Europass', which, among other things, means that, on completion of an education and training programme, graduates have the right to have an explanatory, multilanguage supplement issued with their diploma, a diploma supplement (for post-secondary education) and a 'certificate supplement' for VET programmes, as a kind of 'informative labelling' of education and training programmes. To this can be added the 'Europass CV', which is a common European CV template. For the information to be understood and 'decoded' in another context, it is necessary to adopt common criteria, just as in any other informative labelling. Accordingly several follow-up initiatives were launched to support the process: quality assurance measures, benchmarks,

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([15]) Decision 2241/2004/EC of the European Parliament and the Council of 15 December 2004 on a single Community framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences (Europass), *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 390, 31.12.2004, p 6-20. Available from Internet: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2004:390:0006:0020:EN:PDF [cited: 30.8.2007].

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and of current interest: EQF, the European qualifications framework. The proposal on EQF divides education and training competences into eight spacious output-oriented level 'boxes', which can form the foundation for comparison and recognition – as opposed to the conventional input-oriented approach (the duration of education and training is an important parameter). The eight levels can be said to be a refinement, a further development, and a combination of the five VET levels from the comparability project with the three levels for post-secondary education from the Bologna Declaration. Further, national Europass centres have been established to handle information and networking tasks. The purpose is, to ease both horizontal and vertical mobility and also assessment of non-formal and informal competence, and to function as a reference framework, or a translation key, between different systems.

Conclusion and perspective

Interesting from a political point of view in this entire process, which for more than 30 years has sought to turn the freedom of movement of workers into practical reality rather than a bureaucratic obstacle course for individual citizens, is that the focus has shifted. From a top-down, cumbersome legal process with directives, national legislation and bureaucracy, and a relatively hard-to-update static system it has become a bottom-up process based on 'soft law', a common (non-binding) agreement between ministers, which Member States can implement on a voluntary basis. Several common and recognisable tools are available, which simplify the work and the procedure: measuring points (eight levels), information tools (Europass instruments ([16]), CV, diploma supplement (DS) and certificate supplement (CS) and national information centres offering additional assistance and information if the 'independent' information is insufficient, as well as general interest in quality management of educational systems. The intention is not to ensure a one-to-one comparison – there is still scope for individual assessment in individual cases. Where previously, during the time of the first directives, there may have been a certain degree of protectionism –Member States were not too eager to recognise foreign education and training certificates and diplomas, but preferred 'their own' well-known labour force – the principle of voluntary action now allows for a far greater dynamic.

([16]) European Commssion. Europass [online]. Available from Internet: http://europass.cedefop
.europa.eu/europass/preview.action?locale_id=1

It has been argued that educational and labour market mobility has hitherto not been important across the EU – so what is all the fuss about? This may have changed in recent years, and may have more to do with market conditions than with formal requirements for recognition. However, we only know about the people who did move – and whose cases were treated, and are accordingly registered in the statistics. We do not know about all those who did not move, because it was too complicated, who did not get the position (or the salary) they were qualified for, who did not use their qualifications – or who had to retrain – because their qualifications were not properly recognised. With the new approach and new instruments we have at least the opportunity to let people use their potential if they want to move, either to another country, another occupational field, or to add to their qualifications.

The new approach does not confer rights on individual citizens (as the directives did in a limited number of professions). But Member States, educational systems and educational establishments which understand the importance of quickly and efficiently establishing and carrying through education and training programmes adapted to the requirements of the labour market for well-educated, well-trained and up-to-date manpower without too many heavy formal consultation procedures, will gain a competitive advantage. By using transparency instruments as 'informative labelling', they can both market themselves and their candidates in an international labour market.

The principle of voluntary action does not necessarily lead to a *laissez-faire* attitude. Those who realise there is now free competition in an open market, the provider who is the first to offer the state-of-the-art and cutting edge and is able to 'market' and describe it in relation to the 'client base' – and sell it – has 'won market share', precisely as with other consumer goods. Turning education and training into a market product like this is already in full swing in post-secondary education; many overseas (and some European) universities are marketing themselves in the East – and in Europe – and satellite universities are being established in many new Member States (WTO negotiations).

As with other consumer goods, education and training also need to be marketed and provided with informative labelling, and companies must comply with quality standards and norms, which can be declared (ISO).

EQF forms part of this process. It does not solve the problem of mutual recognition as a precondition for freedom of movement, but it does make it easier – with the aid of modern information technology – to search for and check information, and understand and interpret it, and better still: it allows

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for development and dynamism; it is proactive instead of reactive as could be said of the previous approaches. Whether the EQF and other recent tools will be implemented on a large scale nationally and whether they will have a substantial positive impact on mobility in all senses of the word still remains to be seen.

A fly in the ointment ... Employers want to hire candidates who can function in the job as quickly as possible, preferably from day one. The academic labour market is believed to be more internationalised, not only in competences, but also in corporate culture, than many (but not all) companies in the manufacturing, commercial and service sectors. After many years of 'co-existence' with recognition/transparency in an EU context, one might be tempted to ask whether EU education and training initiatives are not, after all, locked away in an 'ivory tower', far removed from the real world. As a rule, VET programmes are planned and executed in close collaboration with the social partners as a guarantee that the programmes reflect the business sector's competence needs. Under the Leonardo da Vinci programme, initiatives have been launched in relation to comparability between trades; they are not applicable 'globally', however, but rather constitute 'harmonisation' between participating parties. Does this lend sufficient flexibility and dynamics to keep up with speedy development in the labour market? It is obvious that the principle of the 'sender' or the 'manufacturer' of qualifications providing information on and informative labelling for its 'product' is highly flexible and equips educational establishments, workers and employers with a solid foundation for assessment, decision-making and possibly for supplementary education and training.

We have seen development from a regulated system with a heavy top-down approach covering a limited number of professions conferring a right to a formalised recognition procedure for individuals to a voluntary, flexible, open, bottom-up approach based on various standardised information tools. If the system works according to plan, it will help citizens to use and develop their potential in education and work in their own country or abroad. But it gives them no rights, and depends on the willingness of national systems to supply the necessary infrastructure, and on the Commission for financing. Whether the voluntary framework will be filled in and used overall is still to be seen.

What if another crucial factor determines whether an applicant with a 'foreign' diploma functions in a workplace – not only his 'instrumental' competence or professional knowledge? What if socialisation in the workplace, corporate culture, work organisation, degree of task-solving independence, hi-

erarchy or autonomy, and other tacit and non-education-related norms are just as crucial to employees' job satisfaction and benefits for the company? What do we know about that? What do multinationals do when they recruit globally? Could we get good advice from their personnel/HRD managers? – Have they been asked about their experience?

And then again, in conclusion, maybe it does not matter as long as the market functions. When a shortage of doctors or plumbers arises (both regulated professions), the number of formal recognitions of foreign diplomas is bound to increase!

Development and interpretation of descriptors of the European Qualifications Framework

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SUMMARY

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) table, with descriptors for the reference levels, is by far the most comprehensively annotated table in Europe. Criticism of the table tends to misinterpret it, by looking at the EQF from only one perspective or, at most, two. In this article, we set out to show that the EQF can be understood only if it is considered from at least three perspectives, namely a hierarchy of education systems, a hierarchy of occupational tasks and functions, and a hierarchy of skills acquisition. In addition to this synchronic view of the descriptors, their development will be analysed in detail, and the reasons for changes in them will be explained. Both the synchronic and diachronic perspectives show that it does not seem to be possible to establish a theoretical basis for the EQF, nor do we claim to achieve this. What we offer is, rather, a hermeneutic approach in order better to understand the meaning of the EQF table.

1. Introduction

This article discusses the genesis and interpretation of the descriptors of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which is described in the Proposal of the European Commission (of 5 September 2006) for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF). We shall make reference in particular to the core item in this text and in the EQF – a table with descriptors for eight reference levels. The EQF is intended as a kind of 'common language' to describe the levels of the various qualifications systems within the EU. This means that it can rightly be assumed that this text makes a major contribution to education in Europe. Consequently, we also proceed from the assumption that readers are already familiar with this text. Such prior knowledge is necessary in order to follow the arguments in this article.

Our article constitutes a critical interpretation based above all on a historical/analytical approach. This means that we approach the text from a particular perspective; while other interpretative approaches are possible, we shall not take account of them here. We wish to examine the text both synchronically and diachronically. For the diachronic perspective, we shall draw on discussions and documents from the Expert Group and the Technical Working Group to develop reference level descriptors (2006), and also on ongoing consultations for the European Commission on the further development of the EQF (2007). For the synchronic perspective, we shall draw on studies and practical work on classifying skills and competences.

Both the synchronic and diachronic perspectives show that it does not seem to be possible to establish a theoretical basis for the EQF, nor do we claim to achieve this. What we offer is, rather, a hermeneutic approach in order better to understand the meaning of the EQF table.

2. A brief history of the EQF ([1])

The development and introduction of the EQF must be seen as being closely associated with the realisation of the EU's Lisbon objectives – namely, to strengthen Europe's position as a shared political and economic area, and hence make it more competitive, while ensuring social cohesion. Here, education and training have a key part to play. Improving the transparency of qualifications, and lifelong learning, are two fundamental elements of efforts to bring training and continuing training systems in the EU into line with both the needs of the knowledge-based society and the need for more and better employment. Finally, the 2004 Maastricht Communiqué included the decision that priority should be given to developing an EQF, which was to cover both general and vocational education and to promote transparency and mobility within and between national education and employment systems (Maastricht Communiqué, 2004).

Many experts in qualifications, qualifications systems and qualifications frameworks were involved in developing the EQF. A draft EQF was presented in July 2005, and the European Commission initiated an extensive EU-wide consultation process to discuss the proposal (European Commission, 2005). The results of this consultation were presented and discussed at a conference in Budapest in February 2006 under the Austrian Presidency of the Council. A small team of experts were then commissioned to revise the reference level descriptors. This revision was subsequently finalised in the summer of 2006 by a Technical Working Group comprising representatives of the Member States and the European social partner organisations. The revised version of the Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning was finally put forward in September 2006.

The EQF's core element is the description of the eight reference levels already mentioned, which, generally speaking, indicate what learners with a qualification at a specific level should know and be capable of doing, irrespective of where or how this knowledge and ability were acquired. The EQF makes it possible to compare qualifications in terms of learning outcomes, in place of a comparison in terms of learning paths and learning content. This means that it resolves, at least in theory, some of the major challenges of European education policy. The eight levels cover the entire range of possible qualifications, from the end of compulsory schooling to the highest level of academic and vocational education. The focus on learning outcomes, irrespective of learn-

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([1]) See also European Commission, 2006a.

ing paths, opens up possibilities for recognising non-formal and informal learning and, finally, the EQF supports the transfer of qualifications between countries, and hence mobility of learners and workers (see also Markowitsch, 2007).

3. The development of the EQF descriptors – diachronic perspective

In this section, we set out to describe briefly the path to the initial EQF proposal, which was then sent out for consultation. We shall, however, analyse in more detail the period between the initial proposal of July 2005 and the version of September 2006.

3.1. Development of the EQF proposal for the consultation process

Studies commissioned by Cedefop, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, and the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) made a substantial contribution to the development of the initial EQF proposal.

An initial draft of a framework covering all levels of qualifications was submitted in the study on 'European reference levels for education and training' (Cedefop, 2004). This draft built on the analysis of experience in those countries that had already developed a national qualifications framework (NQF) or were in the process of doing so. It also included international research papers on the various levels of competence development, with reference to, for example, the work of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) [2].

In March 2004, the BFUG set up a working group to coordinate the development of a qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The report of this working group (Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks, 2004) played an important part in defining more precisely the functions of the future EQF, particularly with reference to the relationship between European and national levels.

The initial draft of the EQF built on this work, and was submitted by an expert group in July 2005 [3]. In seven meetings between autumn 2004 and spring 2005, the group elaborated the aims and functions of the EQF and developed a proposal for the EQF's reference levels, based on learning outcomes. This

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[2] We shall come back to the work of Dreyfus and Dreyfus in section 4.

[3] European Commission, 2005. This group comprised experts from all areas of education and training (general education, adult education, vocational education and training, higher education), from various sectors and social partner organisations. The group was supported by Cedefop and the European Training Foundation (ETF).

draft contained a table of descriptors which already had a total of eight levels, but with six dimensions, the three main dimensions being 'knowledge', 'skills' and 'personal and professional competence'; the 'personal and professional competence' dimension was subdivided into four sub-dimensions, firstly autonomy and responsibility, secondly learning competence, thirdly communication and social competence, and, fourthly, professional and vocational competence.

The paper submitted by the working group formed the basis for a Europewide consultation process, which was initiated by the European Commission and conducted between July and December 2005 ([4]). The first major international debate on the subject took place in Glasgow in September 2005 ([5]). Among other things, there was already a call for the European qualifications framework model to be a simple one, sufficiently general for Member States to be able to relate their systems and NQFs to it, and for it to cover all forms of learning (formal, non-formal and informal). It was also stressed that a pragmatic approach was required in developing the EQF – it did not have to be perfect in order to serve its purpose.

3.2. Conclusion of the consultation process – the Budapest conference

The European consultation process, which gave the EQF proposal a very positive evaluation overall, also raised a series of unanswered questions, criticisms and suggestions for improvements. On the other hand, however, few of these related to the specific formulation of the descriptors ([6]). Nevertheless, the basic tenor of the comments amounted to a call for simplification of the description of the reference levels (hereafter referred to as the table of descriptors or simply 'the table'). In particular, the number of dimensions (columns) appeared to be too large, and the delimitation of the dimensions, or their designations, constantly led to misunderstandings. The third main dimension and its four sub-dimensions were identified as being particularly problematic. During the closing conference of the consultation process (The European Qualifications Framework. Consultation to Recommendation Conference), held in

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([4]) The consultation process involved the 32 countries participating in the 'Education & Training 2010' work programme, European social partner organisations, relevant European associations, NGOs and networks, and European associations in various sectors of industry (e.g. information and communication technology, construction, marketing).

([5]) The main results can be found in the conference proceedings (Raffe, 2005).

([6]) Detailed information on the feedback can be found at http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/eqf/resultsconsult_en.html.

Budapest on 27 and 28 February 2006 ([7]), one workshop with some 100 participants specifically addressed this topic. The discussions held in this workshop produced only a few results that were not contradictory. Consequently these few results were all the more important, and they also gave expression to the request for further amendment:

• The EQF table needs to be redesigned, e.g. by rearranging or combining columns, and by amending the names for the columns. The table should include only those descriptors necessary in order to allocate national qualifications or national qualifications frameworks.

• Learning outcomes should be defined as competences, in the sense of the ability to take action in vocational or social contexts. 'Competences = learning outcomes in context' was used as an approximate definition. Lastly, the existing definitions also needed to be improved.

• The equivalence of vocational and academic competences should be better ensured. To this end, the descriptors in levels 6 to 8, which were perceived as over-academic, should be revised, but without losing the correlation with the Bologna cycles.

With reference to simplifying the table, two possible solutions were already being discussed. One suggestion was to present the descriptors only in a central column, i.e. as a list, under the heading of 'Competence', and simply identify the various sub-dimensions in the text. The second suggestion was to identify only the three main dimensions, and eliminate the sub-dimensions of the third main dimension. Both proposals placed greater emphasis on the concept of 'competence' than the original version had done. For example, the second proposed solution also provided for renaming of the dimensions to 'cognitive competence', 'functional competence' and 'professional and vocational competence', while the first proposed solution aimed to subsume all the descriptors under a general concept of competence. This debate was, incidentally, to continue alongside the further development right up to the final version.

([7]) A summary of the results of the conference can be found at http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/eqf/back_en.html.

3.3. The expert group

Following the conference, the European Commission invited a small group of experts to discuss and implement these changes to the descriptors ([8]). In three meetings between March and May 2006, this group drew up a new overall proposal for the table of descriptors and the associated definitions of the main terms. In the process, they once again discussed very basic issues, such as how competence was to be understood. Only the issue of the number of levels was not raised again, since although this had been called into question on occasion during the consultation process and at the Budapest conference, apparently the doubts had not been expressed with sufficient conviction and emphasis.

The general issues were discussed in the meetings, but in a first stage, the actual work of rewording was carried out independently, column by column. In each case, two experts took responsibility for revising a column. To ensure that this work was as coherent as possible, general revision principles were drawn up. The descriptors were to be written in such a way that ([9])

- all forms of learning outcomes were covered, irrespective of the learning context or institutional context, from basic education via levels of school education or unskilled workers up to doctorate level or the level of senior professionals;
- an adequate distinction was made between the descriptors of lower and higher levels, and the dimension of progress vis-à-vis previous levels was clearly expressed;
- repetitions were avoided, i.e. each level should build on the lower levels and encompass all the previous levels;
- only positive statements were made, avoiding statements on what qualifications were not applicable to the level concerned;
- jargon was avoided and the descriptors could also be understood by people who were not experts;
- clear, specific statements were made (e.g. no terms such as 'appropriate', 'narrow' or 'good', and no references such as 'narrower' or 'broader'), which were at the same time as simple and general as possible.

([8]) In addition to the persons responsible within the Commission and Jens Bjørnåvold of Cedefop, this group included experts from the 'big countries' – Mike Coles (UK), Richard Maniak (FR), Georg Hanf (DE) – together with Edwin Mernagh (IE), as co-designer of a national qualifications framework, and Jörg Markowitsch (AT), who had acted as rapporteur in the workshop mentioned above.

([9]) See also Explanatory Note, 2007.

Table 1: Example of application of the above revision principles

Examples from the 'Knowledge' column (the number refers to the relevant level)	Reasons for the change
2. Recall general knowledge and comprehend basic knowledge of a field, ~~the range of knowledge involved is limited to acts and main ideas~~	Deleted because worded as a restriction (negative); the division into 'recall' and 'comprehend' was also subsequently rejected.
3. Apply knowledge of a field ~~that includes processes, techniques, materials, instruments, equipment, terminology~~ and some theoretical ideas	Deleted because of over-technical terms; was ultimately replaced by 'knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts'.
4. ~~Use a wide range of field-specific practical and theoretical knowledge~~	Deleted in full, because too general and applicable to all levels; no discernible delimitation vis-à-vis lower and higher levels.

Source: Internal records and email correspondence between the above-mentioned experts

Table 1 contains selected examples illustrating how these principles affected the revision in practice.

Naturally a particular challenge arose in the need to make clear both the dimensions of progress and the relevant gradation between the levels. The issue of what comprised these 'dimensions of progress' remained largely implicit during the revision. However, it was at least possible to identify the following dimensions ([10]):
• the complexity and depth of knowledge and understanding;
• the degree of support or instruction required;
• the degree of integration, independence and creativity required;
• the scope and complexity of application/practice;
• the degree of transparency or dynamics of situations.

The experts endeavoured to fulfil the requirement for gradation by using keywords as an introduction or 'label' (e.g. 'factual and theoretical knowledge' in comparison with 'basic knowledge' at lower levels or 'specialised knowledge' at higher levels; as from levels 4 and 5, 'supervision' of the work or learning activities of others is included; this is not relevant at the lower levels). These keywords can also be understood as indicators of 'threshold' levels. In addition to these forms of simplification and clarification, fundamental changes ul-

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([10]) See also Explanatory Note, 2007, and Luomi-Messerer and Markowitsch, 2006.

timately involved more or less complete elimination of the original sub-dimensions 'learning competence' and 'communication and social competence', as well as essentially incorporating the 'professional and vocational competence' sub-dimension into the 'skills' dimension. This is clearly illustrated in the comparison of the versions of 8 July 2005 and 25 April 2006 in Table 2.

The general discussion focused on the following main issues: whether competence was the appropriate umbrella term; what was understood by competence; and what the columns should be called.

It was clear from the results of the Budapest conference that 'competence(s)' was the key term. So at first the various definitions and typologies of competence were once again considered, with a division into three apparently being seen as particularly attractive, such as the division by Katz (1974) into 'technical, human and conceptual skills', or the division customary in France into *savoir*, *savoir-faire* and *savoir-être* (see Cedefop; Winterton et al., 2006). Understandably, the German expert argued in favour of the German division into *Fachkompetenz* (professional competence), *Methodenkompetenz* (methodological competence), *Personalkompetenz* (personal competence) and *Sozialkompetenz* (social competence), while the representatives of the English-speaking countries supported the categorisation customary in their context, namely 'cognitive competence', 'functional competence' and 'social competence' ([11]).

In the course of the discussions, however, this strong focus on competence(s) was again discarded, and the concept of learning outcomes was regarded as more comprehensive. While this virtually amounted to a reversal of the conclusions of the Budapest conference, ultimately it opened up the possibility of putting an end to the discussion, with its irreconcilable views, of the definition or typologies of competences. In any case, learning outcomes are more comprehensive than competences, and hence the term 'learning outcome' can be used as an umbrella term for competence(s), while the reverse is not the case. Learning outcomes can also exist in the form of knowledge, to which no (practical) competence [*(Handlungs-)Kompetenz*] corresponds. This becomes clear when we consider the division into explicit, implicit and inert knowledge developed by Polanyi and taken up much later in the discourse on vocational pedagogics (see, for example, Rauner, 2004; Neuweg, 2006; Markowitsch and Messerer, 2006). According to this distinction, inert knowledge is explicit knowledge to which no (practical) competence (implicit component of knowledge) corresponds. Knowing the height of Mount Everest or

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([11]) See also EQF Explanatory Note, 2007.

who painted 'Girl with a pearl earring' does not lead to corresponding skills or competence(s). This means that the debate on whether the qualifications framework should be based on learning outcomes or competences could actually also be interpreted as a debate on the status of inert knowledge.

The convincing argument, however, was not the relationship between the terms 'learning outcome' and 'competence(s)', but the illuminating fact that the purpose of the EQF was not to classify individual competences. Thus the EQF is not a competence framework, since it makes it possible to classify qualifications levels and systems. It is a framework based on learning outcomes, whose descriptors describe all forms of learning outcomes. Misinterpretation of the EQF as a competence framework is due to the fact that learning outcomes are, among other things, formulated as statements of what learners are capable of doing on completing a learning process; this means that to some extent it is oriented towards competences. If learning outcomes were to be defined, as was sometimes the case, only in terms of what a learner knows, and not what he or she can do, this orientation towards competences would not exist. We can even go further and assert that what has gone under the heading of 'orientation towards competences' in the discourse to date is now coming out, with a few shifts in nuance, as 'orientation towards learning outcomes'.

Ultimately, this approach also opened up the way to less technical names for the columns and to coming closer to the original names, and in the end it was suggested that the columns should be called 'Knowledge', 'Skills' and 'Autonomy and responsibility'. The fact that this meant that the term 'competence(s)', which was originally central, no longer occurred at all eventually proved to be their undoing. For in the course of further discussions demands were made for this to be reintroduced for the third column, which meant that there were ongoing misunderstandings and apparent contradictions.

3.4 The Technical Working Group

After this, the proposal drawn up by the experts was taken to a newly established Technical Working Group (TWG) comprising representatives of Member States. The TWG met three times in Brussels in May and June 2006, welcomed the new proposal in principle, and essentially commented as follows on the new table of descriptors (Cedefop, 2006):

• There is still concern about the balance between vocational and academic qualifications; terms such as 'research' and 'scholarly', which tend to be ascribed to the academic sphere, should be avoided.

• The descriptors should make it clear that an advancing standard does not

necessarily involve specialisation. Thus reaching a higher level does not necessarily mean that the skills and knowledge required are more specialised, although this may be the case in many academic or research-based contexts. In some learning or work contexts, a higher level may mean greater generalisation.

· The designation of the columns should be reconsidered. While the names for the first two columns, 'Knowledge' and 'Skills', met with general approval, some representatives were not happy with 'Autonomy and responsibility'.

Suggestions that went beyond the descriptors involved, for example, advice on clarifying the reference to 'key competences' (European Commission, 2005b), the reference to ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) (UNESCO, 1997) and to ISCO (International Standard Classification of Occupations) (ILO, 1988) and on revising the definitions. This meant that no further structural changes were involved at this stage, and it proved possible to fulfil the first two requirements with relatively minor amendments. For example, the term 'research' at levels 7 and 8 was supplemented by 'and/or innovation', and the phrase 'specialist research and problem-solving skills, including analysis and synthesis' was amended to 'specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation'. The comparison of the version of 25.4.2006 (Proposal of the Expert Group for the Technical Working Group) with the version of 5.9.2006 in Table 2 makes it clear that essentially only minor textual amendments were involved.

However, the discussions on the name of the third column led the whole debate on competences to flare up again. To ensure that the document fitted in with the existing Commission documentation and its general linguistic usage, and to embed the key concept of competence(s), it was agreed to replace the designation 'Autonomy and responsibility' with 'Competence' (in the singular). Until then, the most varied Commission documents had spoken of 'Knowledge, skills and competences' (in the plural) or used the abbreviation 'KSC', because apparently people had been unable to agree on an umbrella term, and hence had defined this sequence of words itself as a new term covering all forms of acquisition of knowledge and experience (see, for example, European Commission, 2005c). At the same time, however, the word 'competences' was still in the plural and intended to mean 'abilities'. Finally, in the EQF Recommendation, the term 'competence' (in the singular) was used to represent a dimension that is really only indirectly concerned with knowledge and ability and, in the narrower sense, means responsibility and autonomy.

In this way, the term 'competence' was invested with a particular meaning which is a long way from the concepts previously discussed, and which is not really compatible with the meaning expressed by 'KSC'. Thus the term 'competences' or 'competence' is used in different ways – the phrase 'knowledge, skills and competences' (KSC) refers to a comprehensive ability to apply knowledge, know-how and social abilities, whereas in the EQF, competence is described in the sense of assumption of responsibility and autonomy ([12]).

Incidentally, this contradiction, which is as yet unresolved and continues to create misunderstandings, is even inherent in the chosen definition of the term 'competence': 'Competence means the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal social and/or methodology abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and/or personal development. In the European Qualifications Framework, competence is described in terms of responsibility and autonomy' (European Commission, 2006a, p. 17). In other words, in the first sentence, competence is defined as ability, and in the second sentence as responsibility and autonomy. One might almost say that this definition succeeds in squaring the circle by equating the two traditional meanings of competence, namely ability and responsibility ([13]). The fact that this is not so simple is demonstrated by the ongoing misunderstandings evident in the use of singular and plural, and which arise even in the Proposal of the European Commission (2006a) for a Recommendation on the establishment of the EQF itself. For example, at several points in this text (European Commission, 2006, pp. 2, 3 and 11) mention is made of 'knowledge, skills and competences', and in subsequent pages 'competence' is used in the singular. Both variants can also be found in the German-language version – for example, the plural form (*Kompetenzen*) is used in the text when all three dimensions of learning outcomes are cited (e.g. p. 6), while the singular form (*Kompetenz*) is used in the definitions (p. 17).

([12]) For further discussion of the term 'competence(s)', see section 4.3.
([13]) Even an etymological approach to the subject of competence shows that these two meanings cannot be unambiguously distinguished from one another. It must also be borne in mind that the meaning of the term has not evolved in the same way in the different European languages (see Ertl and Sloane, 2005, pp. 8 f.; see also Winterton et al., 2006, pp. 29 ff. and Mulder, 2007).

Table 2: Overview of the three versions of the EQF descriptors for level 1

Level 1	Version of 8 July 2005 (initial proposal) ([1])	Version of 4 April 2006 (proposal for the TWG) ([2])	Version of 5 September 2006 (final version) ([3])
Knowledge	*Recall basic general knowledge*	*Basic general knowledge*	*Basic general knowledge*
Skills	*Use basic skills to carry out simple tasks*	*Basic skills to carry out simple tasks*	*Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks*
Personal and professional competence			
(i) Autonomy and responsibility	*Complete work or study tasks under direct supervision and demonstrate personal effectiveness in simple and stable contexts*	*Work and study under direct supervision in a familiar and managed context*	*Work or study under direct supervision in a structured context*
(ii) Learning competence	*Accept guidance on learning*		
(iii) Communication and social competence	*Respond to simple written and oral communication* *Demonstrate social role for self*		
(iv) Professional and vocational competence	*Demonstrate awareness of procedures for solving problems*		

Source: ([1]) European Commission, 2005a; ([2]) European Commission, 2006b;
([3]) European Commission, 2006a

4. The dimensions of the EQF descriptors – synchronic perspective

If we consider the table of EQF descriptors not as it evolved, but as it is presented in its final version, at least three implicit hierarchies can be distinguished within it:
- a hierarchy of education programmes or provision;
- a hierarchy of occupational or organisational tasks and functions; and
- a hierarchy of individual skills acquisition or competence development.

These hierarchies have an ambivalent role: on the one hand, they have made their way into the evolving document here and there, and, on the other, for certain reasons people have kept explicitly distancing themselves from them. They

largely match the three dimensions of the EQF, 'knowledge, skills and competence', even if they cannot be exclusively allocated to these. For the first two hierarchies at least, internationally recognised and binding classifications also exist in the shape of ISCO and ISCED. We shall begin this section by discussing how these implicit hierarchies can be recognised, and shall go on to consider the link with the existing classifications.

4.1. Educational hierarchy

The final version of the EQF Recommendation firmly excludes any reference to any form of hierarchy of education programmes. The original version of the document included a supplementary table to explain the descriptors (European Commission, 2005a), which made specific reference to correspondences with known levels and programmes of education. For example, level 2 is explained as follows: 'Learning at this level is formally acquired during compulsory education'; and level 6 thus: 'Learning for level 6 qualifications usually takes place in higher education institutions' (European Commission, 2005a, p. 22). In the course of the consultation process, a number of objections were raised to this table and this form of explanation, and ultimately they were eliminated without much discussion. Even without this supplementary table, however, this hierarchy is apparent, with reference to levels 5, 6, 7 and 8 and to the explicitly asserted correspondence of these levels to the Bologna cycles (short cycle, bachelor, master, PhD). (European Commission, 2006a, p. 20). Thus for these levels at least, an educational hierarchy is evident, which means that such a hierarchy can also be assumed for the other levels.

A correlation of this kind can also be identified in the descriptors themselves. For example, the first column refers to knowledge that is not formulated in the form of learning outcomes (e.g. no 'can do' statements), and moreover it is strongly reminiscent of the educational goals of various training programmes (training levels). One example is the reference to 'basic general knowledge' at level 1, which is so often seen in the educational goals of elementary schools or basic education. There is also the wording in level 7: 'highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study', which is often found, for example, as a legally defined requirement for an academic degree (*Diplom*) or Master's degree in the form of 'independent academic work'.

ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) (UNESCO, 1997) constitutes an internationally accepted classification of programmes of education that distinguishes six levels, beginning with elementary school (level

1) and extending to a PhD and postgraduate programmes (level 6). Interestingly, the ISCED classification also seeks to cover learning in its entirety, and refers to 'knowledge', 'skills' and 'capabilities':

'The notion of "levels" of education is taken to be broadly related to gradations of learning experiences and the competences which the contents of an educational programme require of participants if they are to have a reasonable expectation of acquiring the knowledge, skills and capabilities that the programme is designed to impart. Broadly speaking, the level is related to the degree of complexity of the content of the programme.' (UNESCO, 2006, p. 17*)*

'The notion of "levels" of education, therefore, is essentially a construct based on the assumption that educational programmes can be grouped, both nationally and cross-nationally, into an ordered series of categories broadly corresponding to the overall knowledge, skills and capabilities required of participants if they are to have a reasonable expectation of successfully completing the programmes in these categories. These categories represent broad steps of educational progression from very elementary to more complex experiences with the more complex the programme, the higher the level of education.' (ibid.)

Thus from the point of view of the requirement, namely to describe learning experiences and competence acquisition in a hierarchical structure, ISCED and the EQF are definitely comparable. Nor does the fact that ISCED serves to classify programmes of education and the EQF sets out to classify qualifications/qualifications systems make much difference at first glance. All the programmes classified by ISCED, without exception, also offer the relevant qualifications. Similarly, the fact that ISCED relates to learning within a framework of formal education programmes and the EQF also includes other forms of learning is not an argument against comparability for the two instruments. If we think, for example, of external examinations (such as the vocational school-leaving examination in Austria or obtaining of school-leaving qualifications later on, outside the traditional education system), the relevant learning outcomes are largely achieved in the non-formal sphere (e.g. in adult education institutions). However, when the qualifications involved correspond to a qualification in the formal system, they too can be classified under the ISCED system. The fundamental difference between ISCED and the EQF lies in the fact that the latter sets out to be broader, also aims to include the informal sphere, and uses only general descrip-

tors relating to learning outcomes, while ISCED uses descriptors such as minimum entrance requirement, minimum age, staff qualification and the like.

4.2. Occupational hierarchy

The third column of the EQF table describes the extent of responsibility and autonomy at the various levels. This means that essentially it also addresses functional and organisational contexts as they can be identified in the world of work. For example, at the higher levels, responsibility for team leadership is mentioned, while at the lower levels, the degree of autonomy is restricted, insofar as it requires supervision of learning or work by others. Descriptors of this kind are often used in occupational classifications, and descriptions of wage groups in collective agreements are also based on them.

ISCO (International Standard Classification of Occupations) (ILO, 1988) also uses the idea of ascending levels of demands:

'The framework necessary for designing and constructing ISCO-88 has been based on two main concepts: the concept of the kind of work performed or job, and the concept of skill. […] Skill – defined as the ability to carry out the tasks and duties of a given job – has, for the purposes of ISCO-88 the two following dimensions: (a) Skill level – which is a function of the complexity and range of the tasks and duties involved; and (b) Skill specialisation – defined by the field of knowledge required, the tools and machinery used, the materials worked on or with, as well as the kinds of goods and services produced.'

Interestingly, however, ISCO does not fall back on an independent description of skill levels, but uses the ISCED descriptors, which are, almost without exception, based on input indicators (see Table 4). In other words, the skill levels in ISCO are ultimately defined by means of a vaguely attributed education programme. 'Vaguely' insofar as ISCO maintains that a person does not necessarily have to participate in this programme to acquire these skills – the skills must only be of equal value in terms of the requirements. In transferring the ISCED descriptors to the world of work, ISCO is also, as it were, opening up access for informally acquired skills and eliminating the correlation with education programmes, but without abandoning the requirement for comparability.

4.3. Hierarchy of skills acquisition or competence development

The preceding analysis of ISCED and ISCO has shown that although the EQF does not set out to classify either education programmes or occupations, nevertheless it has so many affinities with these classification systems that it could also be used for this – unintended – purpose. ISCED and ISCO are classification systems specifically designed to classify education programmes and occupations respectively. An educational hierarchy is inherent in the EQF only to some extent (for example, a qualification at a higher level of the EQF is extremely likely also to correspond to a higher level of ISCED), and the same applies to a hierarchy of occupations (for example, a qualification at a lower level of the EQF is extremely likely to lead to an occupational activity that corresponds to a lower ISCO skill level). However, the EQF focuses on learning outcomes in the form of knowledge, skills and competence, irrespective of education programmes or occupations. Thus the EQF constitutes a new tool that offers the possibility of combining educational and occupational taxonomies; to some extent, it therefore represents a bridge between ISCED and ISCO [14].

Similarly, the EQF could also be used to describe individual skills acquisition or competence development, although it is constantly emphasised that this is not its purpose. The very fact that this has to be constantly pointed out makes it clear how close the EQF comes to being a ladder of skills acquisition or a classification of skills/competences.

At this point, we need to come back to the keywords used here. While so far we have essentially used the words knowledge, skills and competence(s) in accordance with the contexts in which they are used (EQF Recommendations and discussion, ISCED, ISCO, etc.), in what follows we cannot avoid establishing our own interpretation. At the same time, we do not wish to go to the trouble of distinguishing between competences and skills, since in practice such a distinction has no effect. The question of whether we speak here of competences, skills or abilities is a matter of taste. In each case it is their individual development that is involved, and the words are often (and rightly!) used synonymously. For this reason, to avoid misunderstandings as far as we can, we speak even in the heading of this section of 'skills or competences'. To aid understanding, however, we should mention that this usage comes closer to the interpretation in 'knowledge, skills and competences' than to the specific meaning of 'competence' in the EQF.

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[14] See also EQF Explanatory Note, 2007.

Similarly to an occupational classification (see above), a classification of skills/competences, or skills classification, also comprises two main dimensions, the level of skills/competences and specification of the specialised nature or content of competences. To determine the former, a hierarchy such as that proposed by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986), from novice to expert, is conceivable. Owing to the breadth of the world of work, more comprehensive systems are needed to specify the specialised nature or content.

A system of this kind is currently under development for Europe, namely DISCO [Dictionary of skills and competencies, DISCO (n.d.)]. This is a comprehensive collection of terms (totalling some 7000) for competences and skills, as used in CVs, job advertisements, job profiles and the like, which will be available in structured form in seven languages. With the aid of this thesaurus, not only can parts of CVs be automatically translated, but CVs, etc., can also be produced. Although DISCO focuses on (occupation-specific) skills and competences in particular, it also includes terms that cannot be precisely attributed to specific areas, such as values and attitudes or physical characteristics.

O*NET goes even further in this direction. O*NET (n.d.) has been in use in the USA for several years, and is an occupational information system that makes use of, among other things, fully developed taxonomies and scales of general competences and key competences. Unlike DISCO, it also offers levels of requirements for the individual abilities and skills. In addition to skills, which are divided into basic skills and cross-functional skills, the O*NET model also includes knowledge and education as work requirements. In addition to these, and essentially recognised as of equal value, there are work characteristics, divided into values, work style, occupational interests and capabilities, and other characteristics such as occupational requirements and occupation-specific information. The concept of competences does not appear anywhere in the model, and fits in somewhere between skills, capabilities, occupational requirements and occupation-specific information, which are described as tasks and activities (!). O*NET demonstrates impressively that a precise description of occupations and jobs requires more dimensions than knowledge, skills and competence, and makes the EQF's reductionist approach to qualifications clear.

The VQTS model is an example of occupational specification in describing qualifications (see Luomi-Messerer and Markowitsch, 2006; Markowitsch et al., 2006; Markowitsch et al., 2007). In this model, which was developed in the Austrian Leonardo da Vinci project 'Vocational qualification transfer sys-

tem' or VQTS ([15]), which won several awards, competences and their development are determined on the basis of empirically investigated occupational activities. These competences and the stages of their development are formulated with reference to the work process. A 'matrix of competences' presents these competences with reference to core work tasks (areas of competence) in a specific occupational field, and the progress of competence development (stages of competence development) in structured form in a table. With the aid of this matrix of competences, the stages of competence development to be achieved in the context of training or the stages already achieved by a person at a particular time can be depicted as profiles of competences. One of the uses that can be made of this tool is to compare qualifications with one another, and another is to facilitate allocation to qualifications frameworks.

To date, none of these approaches has resulted in an internationally binding classification. However, in view of the ever-increasing importance of informal learning and of general orientation towards competences on the one hand and, on the other, the inadequacy of existing classifications of occupations and education that has been revealed by the EQF, the question arises whether we do not now have an extremely urgent need for a similar international standard classification of skills (ISCS), which at least takes account of these two dimensions.

4.4. The EQF as a whole

The synchronic analysis has shown that the EQF contains three implicit hierarchies, namely an educational hierarchy, an occupational hierarchy and a hierarchy of skills/competences, which means that, even though it was not intended for this purpose, it could definitely provide a practical service in terms of classifying education programmes, occupations and skills (or competences). With the aid of Figure 2, which shows these relationships and their attributes, we can now go on to interpret certain criticisms of the EQF and to show why most of them do not hit the target.

If we examine the interrelationships between the individual hierarchies implicit in the EQF, we inevitably find contradictions. This is also the starting point for the criticism that was expressed prior to and during the consultation process in particular. For example, it is often argued that people with different qualifications (having obtained them by different routes) can practise one and the same occupation and, looked at the other way around, one qualification does

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([15]) For more information on the project and the VQTS model, see the project website: www.vo cationalqualification.net.

not necessarily qualify people for one and the same occupation. In other words, there is no point of precise correspondence on the education-system/occupation axis. Naturally it is also conceivable (and this criticism too is accordingly justified) that one and the same training level (e.g. apprenticeship/equivalent training and a secondary school providing general education, which are both classified as ISCED 3) can lead to completely different skills/competences, and these can on no account be regarded as equivalents. In other words, there is also no direct correspondence between the hierarchy of the education system and the hierarchy of skills/competence development. Lastly (although presumably much more rarely), there is no direct correspondence between the level of skills/competences and occupation and/or responsibility/autonomy. Even people without well-developed skills/competences in a particular area may possibly be entrusted with executive-level responsibilities (for example, a management function).

We shall examine one specific example of criticism of this kind, namely the argumentation and examples put forward by Rauner (2006). Rauner (2006, p. 47) rightly comments that those completing 'purely' academic training courses must first acquire a series of vocational competences through practical work. In other words, in our model these qualifications have a high ranking in the educational hierarchy, but ought to have a low ranking in the hierarchy of skills development. On the other hand, if we look at dual vocational training, especially 'in relation to the activities to be taken on in the work process', this should really have a higher ranking than it would be given on the basis of the hierarchy of education systems. This addresses the lack of correspondence between the educational hierarchy and the hierarchy of skills development. In another example, Rauner (ibid.) points out that a master craftsman who has passed his master craftsman's examination possesses substantial vocational experience and can, for example, take over the management of a modern car dealership without much on-the-job training, while somebody like the holder of a bachelor's degree would need at least a two- to three-year training phase before doing this. This example addresses the lack of correspondence between educational qualification (educational hierarchy) and the hierarchy of occupational tasks and functions (e.g. management).

We could quote many more such examples. The interesting thing about the EQF is that these examples and the associated criticisms always go along these axes, so that they almost always involve only two dimensions. They do not, as it were, involve the EQF as a whole. It is correct to say that qualifications ensuing from dual vocational training are ranked lower than qualifications obtained in academic training in the existing educational hierarchy (e.g.

ISCED), and that they are ranked higher in terms of skills acquisition, owing to the various periods of practical experience involved in their acquisition. However, if we add in the third dimension, namely a comparable occupational task or function, this example suddenly looks different. The contradictions dwindle in the light of the new dimension or, to put it another way, the likelihood of contradictory classification is reduced when the relevant third dimension is included.

These criticisms and the fact that they do not see the EQF as a whole mean that they do not get to the core of the EQF. For the EQF is not based on one or even two of these hierarchies, but includes all three. Against the background of our analysis, the EQF could also be interpreted as a classification of occupations and programmes of education that is supplemented by a skills dimension, and hence as an extension or combination of ISCED and ISCO.

Figure 1: The three dimensions of the EQF and possible attributes
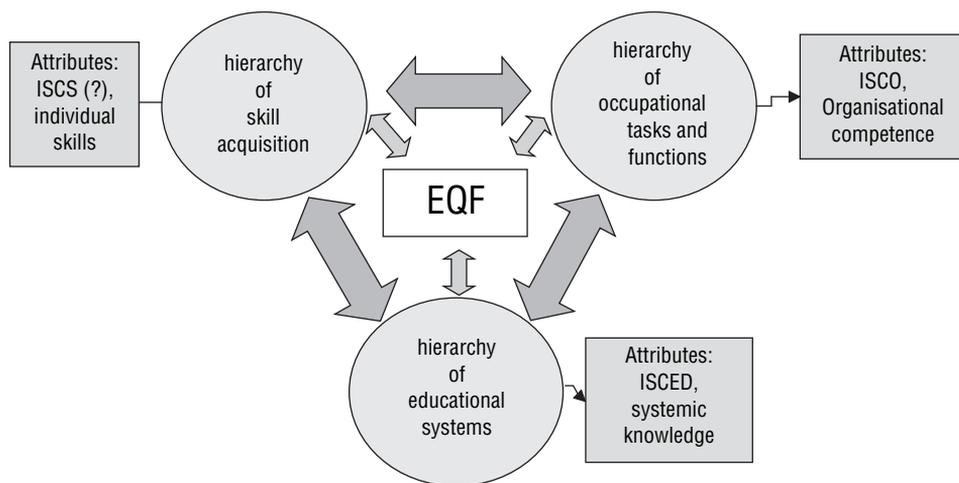
Source: Authors

5. Conclusions and unanswered questions

As we have shown, a detailed ahistorical consideration of the descriptors can reveal the hierarchies implicit in the EQF, which have also formed part of its development, and the relationship of these with classification systems that are already in existence, under development, or yet to be developed. If we can see something in the hypothesis of implicit hierarchies argued here, and if we consider the EQF in terms of its main purpose, namely to classify qualifications, the question obviously arises of whether it actually succeeds in addressing the main components of qualifications. Is it sufficient to describe qualifications in terms of knowledge, skills and competence in the sense of autonomy and responsibility? Or, to put it another way, can qualifications best be described in terms of classifications of occupations, education and competences? If we think this through further, this naturally gives rise to another question, namely whether the theory behind the structuring of the descriptors that could be said to control the EQF is correct.

In fact, such a view would tend to do more justice to a multi-perspective approach to qualifications than the common one- or at most two-dimensional perspective. At the same time, however, it would become apparent that the concept of qualifications would not go on to be replaced by the concept of competences or to be subsumed by the latter, but that competence(s) merely supplement existing dimensions of descriptions of qualifications. If this proves to be the case, in the long term the concept of qualifications will again be at the centre of the debate.

The historical analysis has shown where the struggle to clarify the concept of competences can lead, and has made it clear that the EQF is very much a political/pragmatic tool and not a scientific/empirical tool. Actual use in practice will soon answer the question of how far the fact that the EQF does not have a scientific or at least systematic basis but, on the contrary, bears the marks of many small political compromises makes it less useful. Practice will also show whether the descriptors, with their generality and following their successful simplification, are actually capable of providing reference points linking the various national systems of qualifications.

For the moment, at least, it also remains unclear how the EQF, as a general tool for describing qualifications, fits in with other more specific tools for describing qualifications, such as the DISCO and O*NET systems mentioned earlier or the systems developed in the context of ECVET, such as the VQTS model. Can the EQF be seen as representing zero, as the top level of the sys-

tem, in a new system for classifying qualifications? If so, what will future levels look like and how many will be needed?

There is a need for future projects to address these issues in particular. For example, they could test the possibilities of using DISCO, O*NET or VQTS to describe qualifications, and identify possibilities for linking them to the EQF. If we end up with an international standard classification of skills and competences, not only would the world of science and academe and the political world have learned something, but the EQF itself would also have become much more powerful and would represent a coherent explanatory model.

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The Scottish credit and qualifications framework:
lessons for the EQF

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SUMMARY

The SCQF is one of the longest-established comprehensive qualifications frameworks and is often perceived as one of the most successful. This article describes the main features of the SCQF and outlines its progress, drawing on recent studies and evaluations by the authors. It draws lessons for the EQF and for further development of national frameworks to respond to it. These lessons concern the specific requirements of meta-frameworks and comprehensive frameworks, the need for realistic expectations and time scales, and the value of an incremental and pragmatic strategy for introducing a learning-outcomes approach. The article also identifies issues relating to the architecture of a levels framework and the limitations, as well as strengths, of a voluntary partnership-based approach.

The SCQF

The Scottish credit and qualifications framework (SCQF) was one of the first comprehensive national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), and it is widely perceived as one of the most successful (Young, 2005). In this article we review the SCQF and its progress to date, and we discuss possible lessons for the European qualifications framework and for countries seeking to establish their own qualifications framework in line with it.

In many respects the conditions in Scotland have been favourable for an NQF. It is a small country with a relatively homogenous and cohesive education system and a tradition of partnership and consensual policy-making. A single body, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), awards nearly all school qualifications with most delivered in colleges which, with higher education institutions (HEIs) such as universities, are the main providers of formal learning beyond school. Perhaps most importantly, the process started early. The SCQF builds on a series of reforms to create a more coherent and unified qualifications system. In 1984, a national system of outcomes-based modules replaced much of the vocational education offered in colleges and schools. In 1999, this modular system was merged with academic school qualifications to create a unified system of national qualifications (NQs), which covered most institution-based academic and vocational qualifications below higher education. A framework for higher education, the Scottish credit accumulation and transfer (Scotcat) system, began to be developed in the early 1990s. It rationalised university degree awards and enabled them to be linked with subdegree qualifications (higher national certificates and diplomas) awarded by the SQA. A third framework, Scottish vocational qualifications (SVQs), was introduced in the early 1990s. SVQs are competence-based occupational qualifications, often delivered in the workplace, designed on principles similar to national vocational qualifications (NVQs) used elsewhere in the UK.

The SCQF was formally launched in 2001. It was initially based on the first two subframeworks (NQs and Scotcat) and it aimed to include the third subframework (SVQs) as well as all other qualifications awarded in Scotland. Its formal architecture is much looser – less stringent – than the three subframeworks. The curriculum structure and methods of assessment for NQs and SVQs are quite tightly prescribed, whereas to fit in the SCQF a qualification has only to meet three criteria: it must be credit-rated (with each credit point equivalent to 10 hours' notional learning time); it must be assigned to one of the 12 levels of the framework; and the assessment must be quality-assured. The 12 SCQF levels cover a wide range of learning, from provi-

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sion for learners with severe learning difficulties to study at doctorate level. The published level descriptors show characteristic outcomes for each level under five headings: knowledge and understanding; practice (applied knowledge and understanding); generic cognitive skills; communication, ICT and numeracy skills; and autonomy, accountability and working with others (SCQF, 2003). The SCQF may incorporate whole qualifications or components or units of qualifications. However, credit can only be allocated to learning at a single level, so a qualification which covers learning at more than one level must have identifiable single-level components if it is to be included in the framework.

The SCQF's relatively loose architecture reflects its character as a descriptive or communications framework, rather than a regulatory framework. It has been described as a 'national language' for describing learning in Scotland. Its formal aims are to:

- assist people of all ages and circumstances to access appropriate education and training over their lifetime to fulfil their personal, social and economic potential;
- enable employers, learners and the general public to understand the full range of Scottish qualifications, how they relate to one another and how different types of qualifications can contribute to improving the skills of the workforce.

It developed through a partnership of the main bodies which awarded qualifications - the SQA and HEIs - with the Scottish executive ([1]) (Raffe, 2003). The SQA, the executive and two bodies representing higher education became the four 'development partners' which oversaw the design and implementation of the framework. They were supported by an influential joint advisory committee which represented the main stakeholders. However, as the framework developed, this partnership model proved inadequate. In 2006, the representative organisation for Scottish colleges became a fifth development partner, and it was decided to replace the partnership model with a company limited by guarantee, which would be controlled by the development partners but have more powers to take decisions and act in its own right. This, it is hoped, will maintain the momentum of framework development.

([1]) The devolved Scottish government.

Progress

A recent evaluation of the SCQF recorded slow but steady progress (Gallacher et al., 2005). Nearly all the main qualifications awarded by HEIs and the SQA are now in the framework. HEIs and colleges increasingly refer to the SCQF in their prospectuses and websites, and the Scottish qualifications certificate, which records all SQA awards, refers to SCQF levels and credits. These are important achievements, but they may represent the easier part of implementation as they lie within the sphere of the SCQF's 'owners', the development partners. The challenge is to extend the framework to incorporate other qualifications and other types of learning. Work has been completed with the Police College and with professional bodies such as the Institute of Bankers and the Scottish Childminders Association. Other work is ongoing in social services, in the National Health Service and in community learning and development. It is taking much longer to include work-based and occupational qualifications such as SVQs, partly because it can be harder to credit-rate and assign levels to these qualifications based on current descriptors, and partly because progress depends on parallel qualifications (such as NVQs) being placed in other UK frameworks. Awareness and engagement among the wider lifelong learning community, and among key stakeholders such as employers, have so far been patchy.

Colleges are being given the authority to credit-rate qualifications – an important gate-keeping function for the SCQF – and a pilot project is under way. Professional and statutory bodies which award qualifications have not been given this authority. Guidelines have been established for recognition of prior learning, and some projects are exploring how to use them.

The SCQF is a credit framework as well as a qualifications framework and one of its main objectives is to promote mobility and credit transfer within and between sectors of learning, and especially between colleges and HEIs. Institutions have used the framework to coordinate and link their provision and to design progression pathways. The SCQF's language of credits and levels is being used to map progression opportunities for the benefit of learners. Nevertheless, although the framework assigns credit values to learning, it does not guarantee that the credit will be recognised by another institution. Some HEIs have been more ready than others to recognise college qualifications, and accept that the 'general' credit recognised by the SCQF can count as 'specific' credit towards their own awards. Our evaluation found examples of effective linking and credit transfer but suggested that most might have taken place without the SCQF, although the

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framework undoubtedly provided a useful tool and language to underpin them (Gallacher et al., 2005).

Other UK and Irish frameworks

Other parts of the UK have qualifications frameworks. These frameworks share common features, include a learning outcomes philosophy and a shared definition and measure of credit. Of other UK frameworks, the credit and qualifications framework for Wales (CQFW) is closest to the SCQF; both are comprehensive frameworks with similar objectives, although the CQFW has only nine levels compared with the SCQF's 12 (National Council – ELWa, 2003). The CQFW is being developed in parallel with two partial frameworks which will cover England, Wales and Northern Ireland (that is, all the UK except Scotland). These are the framework for higher education qualifications and the revised national qualifications framework, a regulatory framework which will cover qualifications below higher education. An important aim of these frameworks is to simplify credit transfer between different awarding bodies, especially for vocational qualifications. In this respect they differ from the SCQF, whose main focus has been to improve coherence and links across the different subframeworks and sectors of learning, rather than across different awarding bodies. Where the SCQF has been used to promote credit transfer, this has typically been between sectors such as colleges and HEIs.

The UK frameworks are cooperating on areas of common interest such as the credit-rating of occupational NVQs and SVQs. The need to link the different frameworks is well recognised, especially as many companies and many labour-market institutions cross the UK's internal boundaries. The UK frameworks have collaborated with the national framework of qualifications for Ireland to produce a leaflet, *Qualifications can cross boundaries*, which allows users to read across the 10 levels of the Irish framework, the 12 levels of the SCQF and the nine levels of the frameworks in the rest of the UK.

Lessons for the EQF

In September 2005, the UK Presidency of the EU hosted a conference in Glasgow on 'Qualifications frameworks in Europe: learning across boundaries', to support consultation on the EQF (Raffe, 2005). This showcased the SCQF as a source of lessons for the EQF, and for countries establishing NQFs in line with it. Below, we discuss some of the lessons.

Meta-frameworks and comprehensive frameworks

The SCQF, like the EQF, is a meta-framework in the sense that it sits above other frameworks. It is not precisely comparable with the EQF: its main function is to link different branches or institutional sectors of learning in the same country, whereas a main purpose of the EQF is to link equivalent branches or sectors of learning in different countries. Nevertheless, the SCQF illustrates several features of a meta-framework. It reminds us that a meta-framework should be 'looser' than the frameworks which sit beneath it, and that a comprehensive framework must be compatible with the diverse contents and methods of learning which it embraces (it may achieve this by being 'loose'). One reason for the perceived success of the SCQF is that it has maintained the support of all institutional sectors of learning, including higher education. This contrasts with the experience of other countries, including New Zealand and South Africa, where comprehensive frameworks have run into difficulties when they have lost the support of higher education or other key sectors.

Speakers at the Glasgow conference noted that current attempts to promote transparency among the UK and Irish frameworks provided a microcosm of the challenge faced by the whole of Europe. For example, the Scottish experience shows that progress may be affected if qualifications need to be placed in several frameworks developing at different speeds. The placing of SVQs in the Scottish framework has been delayed by the need to make this compatible with the placing of related NVQs in other UK frameworks. The sequence in which the EQF, sectoral frameworks (covering occupational fields or economic sectors) and national frameworks are developed and commonly aligned will require careful consideration. For example, should mechanisms for relating sectoral frameworks to the EQF be established before the same frameworks are related to national frameworks?

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Realistic expectations

Another lesson is the need for realistic expectations of the impact of a framework and the speed with which it can be made effective. It takes time to develop and implement an NQF. The SCQF has emerged from a series of policy initiatives which can be traced as far back as 1984, when the national system of modular vocational education was introduced. If Scotland has still not completed its NQF after 22 years, instant results should not be expected in other countries where circumstances may be less favourable. Awareness and understanding of the SCQF have spread slowly, and tend to be confined to those who use the framework and need to know about it.

It is also important to have realistic expectations about the capacity of an NQF to achieve change. Our evaluation of the SCQF concluded that it could be a useful tool: an instrument of change rather than an agent of change (Gallacher et al., 2005). For example, it can supply the tools for credit transfer but it cannot itself ensure that credit is recognised and transferred. To achieve impact a qualification framework needs 'policy breadth' (Raffe, 2003); it must be complemented by other policies which motivate people to use the potential which the framework provides. In this respect, wider lifelong learning policies and strategies are key, for example policies which promote recognition of non-formal learning and links between different institutional sectors and branches of learning.

Incremental strategy

The SCQF and the frameworks it embraces illustrate a pragmatic, incremental approach to developing an outcomes-based qualifications system. Rather than replace an input-based system with an outcomes-based system in one move, they have developed incrementally, starting from a conventional (input-based) understanding of levels and volumes of learning, and progressively reviewing and modifying these in terms of an outcomes-based philosophy. For example, the SCQF had little impact on many colleges and universities in the short term, but whenever the occasion has arisen to restructure provision in or across institutions it has provided a language and a toolkit for doing so. In this way the education and training system has moved step by step towards one defined by the SCQF's notions of outcomes, credit and levels. An outcomes-based language has gradually become more widely accepted and realised in practice.

Defining levels

The SCQF offers lessons for building frameworks elsewhere, especially for the concept of level. The principles for defining levels of adult learning, in which the lower levels typically apply to adults with low initial qualifications and those returning to learning, may differ from the principles for defining levels in childhood education, which tend to reflect the logic of child development. Scotland is currently reforming the school curriculum, from age 3 to 18, around a framework of six levels, but only the highest two of the six levels are aligned with the SCQF. Qualifications frameworks need to develop consistent understandings on whether they relate specifically to formal qualifications, which are rarely achieved before age 15 or 16, or whether they attempt to describe all learning, including learning by young children.

A further issue is the difference between the level of a qualification and the learning that leads to the qualification, which may be at more than one level. For SQA awards the usual rule is that at least half of the credit value of a qualification must be at the level of the qualification. However, for larger qualifications this proportion may be smaller. For example, a Scottish bachelor's degree with honours potentially covers learning at four SCQF levels; as a qualification it sits at level 10 but only 90 of the minimum 480 credit points must be at level 10. In providing a common translation device between different European frameworks, the EQF will need to allow for the differences between (credit) frameworks which recognise that each qualification may include components at different levels, and other frameworks which assign levels only to whole qualifications.

Voluntarism and partnership

The relative success of the Scottish framework is often attributed to it being a descriptive (rather than regulatory) framework which has developed through voluntary partnership. However, the partnership model raises issues which are likely to face the EQF. First, it faces challenges on effective coordination and maintaining the pace of development, because each step requires the agreement of all partners. Just as the SCQF has had to develop a central executive capacity, so is it important that the 'EU-level coordination structure' proposed for the EQF has sufficient autonomy and a mandate to maintain the momentum of development. Second, the distinction between a descriptive or communications framework and a regulatory framework may be-

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come blurred over time. A successful communications framework will, by definition, become part of the language used to describe learning; it will also become part of the language used to regulate, fund and coordinate learning, even if the framework is not itself part of the formal process of regulation or funding. Thus, countries' participation in the EQF may be voluntary, but countries which do not take part may find it harder to benefit from European funding, conceptual support, common learning and coordination, to the extent that these rely on the language of the EQF.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Scottish experience suggests that European and national qualification frameworks should:

- have clear and realistic objectives;
- be as 'loose' in their design as is consistent with their objectives;
- be developed step-by-step over a period of time, especially if an outcomes approach has yet to be widely accepted and embedded in practice;
- recognise the different design implications of credit frameworks and other qualifications frameworks;
- balance the benefits of partnership and voluntarism with the need for central coordination.

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Annex: Some basic data about Scotland

Scotland has a population of five million. It was one of the industrial power-houses of Europe from the time of the Industrial Revolution onwards, being a world leader in manufacturing and shipbuilding-related industries. Like other advanced industrialised economies, it has seen a decline in the importance of manufacturing and primary-based extractive industries. This has, however, been combined with a rise in the service sector of the economy which is now the largest sector in Scotland, with significant rates of growth over the past decade. The Scottish economy is closely linked with the rest of Europe, and Scotland has the third largest GDP per capita of any UK region after London and the south east of England.

School is compulsory to age 16 and two thirds of pupils continue at school for one or two post-compulsory years. Post-school learning is offered by a range of providers, including 20 HEIs (mostly universities) and 43 publicly-funded colleges, as well as private training providers, voluntary organisations, professional bodies and companies. In the 10 years between 1994/95 and 2004/05, the number of higher education (HE) students increased by 36 % from 203 000 to 277 000 [2]. The highest increases occurred at postgraduate level (73 %) and sub-degree level (40 %). Subdegree HE is mainly provided by colleges which represent 20 % of total higher education provision in Scotland. The age participation index (API) – a measure of the proportion of young people who enter a full-time HE course before the age of 21 – reached 51.5 % between 2000 and 2002 but has since fallen to 46.4 % (in 2004/05). Scotland's colleges provide a wide range of full-time and part-time courses, at all levels, for learners across the age range. The number of college enrolments below HE level more than doubled after 1994/95 to reach a peak of 450 790 in 2001/02, since when it has declined by 12 %. Most enrolments (86 %) are in vocational courses.

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[2] Scottish Executive (2006b) High level summary of statistics trends for lifelong learning
http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/933/0046967.pdf

Aligning learning outcomes descriptors in national and meta-frameworks of qualifications – Learning from Irish experience

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Key words

Qualification,
level of qualification,
comparability of
qualifications,
knowledge, skill,
competence

SUMMARY

In this paper, the issues involved in aligning national and meta-frameworks are explored and analysed. The exploration is timely, given that two qualifications meta-frameworks are currently being developed and implemented in Europe: the question is now how relationships should be established between these new reference tools and national qualifications structures and systems. Drawing on recent experiences in Ireland of comparing the national framework of qualifications with the Bologna framework and the emerging European qualifications framework, the paper addresses some of the methodological issues in establishing such alignment and identifies a process that may be useful as a starting-point in developing common approaches to be adopted by other countries in undertaking these tasks.

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In this paper, the processes of aligning learning outcomes descriptors in national and meta-frameworks are explored and analysed, focused through recent experiences in Ireland of comparing the national framework of qualifications with the framework for qualifications of the European higher education area and the emerging structure of the European qualifications framework. This is a report on work in progress, as the development and alignment processes for these two meta-frameworks are still underway at the time of writing. While aligning learning outcomes descriptors is the core of the task of framework alignment, other issues also need to be addressed in a comprehensive alignment – such as award-type profiles, progression routes and quality assurance arrangements. The latter issues are not addressed in this paper.

Context

This paper was initially drafted in September 2006, a key time in the development of qualifications frameworks in Europe. National frameworks of qualifications have been introduced in several countries, and are at varying stages of development in many others. While these frameworks differ widely in their intended purposes and design, they generally share a relational function and structures characterised by levels defined by 'descriptors' based on learning outcomes. Meanwhile, preliminary structures have emerged for two meta-frameworks at European level:

- the *framework for qualifications of the European higher education area* was adopted by European Ministers for Higher Education in Bergen in May 2005. This meta-framework for higher education qualifications was developed as a product of the Bologna process. It is a structure of three cycles, designed to enable national frameworks of higher education qualifications to relate to one another. The three cycles have associated descriptors – the 'Dublin descriptors' – defined as learning outcomes, comprising general statements of the typical achievement of learners who have been awarded a qualification on successful completion of a cycle;

- in July 2005, the European Commission published a document (*Towards a European qualifications framework for lifelong learning*) setting out possible parameters for a European qualifications framework (EQF). Following extensive consultation, the model was refined, leading to a proposal for a 'Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a European qualifications framework for lifelong learn-

ing' in September 2006. EQF is to be a structure of eight levels, defined in terms of learning outcomes. It is intended to provide a common reference framework to serve as a translation device between different qualifications frameworks and systems. EQF is designed to relate to all possible levels of qualifications, relevant to learning achievement from the most basic to the most advanced. The EQF descriptors at levels 5 to 8 correspond to the Bologna cycle descriptors.

In Ireland, a national framework of qualifications (NFQ) has been introduced. The NFQ is a central element in the broad reform of the qualifications system in Ireland which has been under way since 2001. It is a structure of 10 levels, accommodating qualifications achieved in school, further education, vocational education and training and all stages of higher education. NFQ levels are based on learning outcomes, defined in terms of nationally agreed standards of knowledge, skill and competence.

Establishing compatibility between national and European meta-frameworks

It is now apparent that two international meta-frameworks will, in due course, operate in and between the national qualifications systems in Europe. How can national systems interact with these new relational structures? The Bologna framework sets out specific arrangements for verifying the comparison of national frameworks of higher education qualifications with the meta-framework. As for EQF, the 2005 consultation document refers to the need for criteria and procedures for establishing how national frameworks link to EQF, but these are not specified in the 2006 proposal for a recommendation; it must be presumed that appropriate arrangements will be further refined as the development process of EQF continues.

The Bologna framework: building trust

The success and acceptance of the Bologna framework depends on trust and confidence among all stakeholders. The manner in which this trust and confidence is to be developed and improved in linking national frameworks to the Bologna framework is by having a 'self-certification' process in each participating country.

Arrangements for how a 'self-certification' process should be conducted are set out in detail in the Bologna working group report (2005) that introduced

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the framework. The process envisaged requires more than a mere expression of qualifications by the competent national body. National frameworks and their associated quality assurance arrangements must satisfy a series of criteria and procedures, including designation of competent bodies responsible for maintaining the framework by the national ministry or other bodies with responsibility for higher education, clear and demonstrable links between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the Bologna framework, the existence of national quality assurance systems for higher education consistent with the Berlin communiqué and any subsequent communiqué agreed by ministers in the Bologna process. Further, the national framework, and any alignment with the Bologna framework, is to be referenced in diploma supplements.

Following the Bergen Ministerial meeting in 2005, Ireland responded to an invitation to undertake a pilot project on the self-certification of the compatibility of the Irish national framework of qualifications with the Bologna framework. This activity is described in more detail below. A parallel pilot project is being undertaken in Scotland.

Compatibility of national systems with EQF: principles of self-certification and transparency

The recommendation of the European Commission and Council on establishing EQF from September 2006 does not refer to how national frameworks of qualifications should link to the metastructure. However, this issue was explored in initial development of the EQF concept, and specific procedures were proposed in the consultation document (2005), which also indicates an intention that 'the process by which qualifications link with the EQF would be supported by procedures, guidance and examples'. Acknowledging that EQF is being developed and implemented voluntarily, with no legal obligations, the paper notes the need for 'clear commitments from national education and training authorities to a set of agreed objectives, principles and procedures'. An optimal approach is suggested, in which each country would set up a single national framework of qualifications and link this single national framework to EQF. Another guideline proposed each country should identify a single representative body to realise the link with EQF; this guideline is reflected in the recommendation proposal (2006), in which countries are urged to designate national centres to support and coordinate the relationship between national qualifications systems and EQF.

Addressing the technical issue of establishing alignment, the consultation document (2005) identifies self-certification by each country as the most ap-

propriate procedure. This should be overseen by a competent national body, but should involve both national and international experts. Evidence supporting the self-certification process should address set criteria and should be published with a formal record of the decisions and arrangements put in place in relation to the national systems or framework. A further key element in the alignment process suggested is that a public listing of countries completing the self-certification process should be maintained.

These suggested EQF procedures are clearly derived from the corresponding conceptual base as the Bologna self-certification process.

Considering the self-certification approach, two exercises described below have been undertaken in Ireland to compare the Irish national framework of qualifications with EQF.

Establishing compatibility with emerging European meta-frameworks – the Irish experience

As European meta-frameworks of qualifications are emerging, how these new entities should link to national structures is being considered in many countries. In Ireland, some work has already been undertaken to actively explore this link. This is still work-in-progress: verifying the compatibility of the Irish national framework of qualifications with the Bologna framework is not yet complete and the detailed infrastructure of a European qualifications framework remains to be developed. Nevertheless, it may be useful to examine the work undertaken in Ireland to date in aligning the Irish framework with the Bologna framework and with EQF and note some issues and lessons learned. Brief outlines of two processes follow to explore the correspondence between the Irish NFQ and emerging European meta-frameworks of qualifications, the European higher education area (EHEA) and the European qualifications framework (EQF).

Following the Bergen ministerial meeting in 2005, Ireland responded to an invitation to study, as a pilot project, the compatibility of the Irish national framework of qualifications with the EHEA framework. Guidelines were already available, as criteria and procedures for verifying that national frameworks are compatible with the EHEA framework were set out in the report to Ministers in Bergen (2005). Initial technical examination and comparison of the two frameworks has been completed and the results form the basis of a consultative document (the draft 'compatibility report') ([1]) issued by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2006). The authority held a consultative seminar on this

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issue in October 2006 and completed the compatibility verification process in November 2006.

The 'compatibility report' describes a process of analysis of the Irish NFQ in relation to the criteria and procedures set out in the EHEA framework for linking frameworks of qualifications. An example follows of establishing compatibility with criteria:

Criterion 3 – The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS-compatible credits ([2]).

The Irish framework is required by law to be based on learning outcomes (or as the legislation ([3]) states, 'standards of knowledge, skill and competence') – this is set out in the material provided for in relation to Criterion 1 of the EHEA framework.

The Irish framework is a structure of levels and characteristic 'award-types'. The descriptors for the major award-types in the framework are based on strands and substrands of learning outcomes as follows:
- knowledge: breadth and kind;
- know-how and skill: range and selectivity;
- competence: context, role, learning to learn and insight.

The descriptors for the major award-types are included in Appendix 4 of the authority's determinations document: http://www.nqai.ie/determinations.pdf.

Higher education qualifications in the Irish framework are awarded by universities, the Dublin Institute of Technology and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council. All of these 'awarding bodies' have agreed to use the descriptors set out in the framework as the descriptors of the awards they make.

Following establishment of the Irish framework, the authority – in partnership with education and training stakeholders, through its technical advisory group on credit – has been working towards development of a national approach to credit. A twin track approach has been pursued (one

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([1]) Available from Internet: http://www.nqai.ie/en/International/Bologna/#d.en.1664

([2]) ECTS refers to the European credit transfer and accumulation system. This credit system is in widespread use in higher education throughout Europe. The system supports transnational student transfer and is also commonly used to provide a 'metric', a notional calculation of the amount of learning outcomes required for a qualification, expressed in terms of student workload.

([3]) Government of Ireland. Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, Section 7(a).

for further education and training, the other for higher education and train-
ing) because the way forward on credit is more clearly signposted for high-
er education and training within the context of the Bologna process and
the general acceptance and use of ECTS. Adopting a consultative and de-
velopmental approach, and having considered the domestic and interna-
tional contexts of the credit agenda, the authority's technical advisory group
on credit (higher education track) has now produced a set of 'principles and
operational guidelines for implementing a national approach to credit in Irish
higher education and training'. These principles and operational guidelines
have been adopted by the authority. The operational guidelines recommend
that a typical credit volume or credit range be established for each major
award-type from levels 6 to 9 in the framework in line with existing ECTS
conventions and current practice in the Irish higher education system as
follows:

Level 6 higher certificate	=120 credits
Level 7 ordinary bachelor degree	=180 credits
Level 8 honours bachelor degree	=180-240 credits
Level 8 higher diploma	=60 credits
Level 9 masters degree (taught)	=60-120 credits
Level 9 postgraduate diploma	=60 credits

Irish doctoral degrees and masters degrees (by research) do not usu-
ally have credit values assigned. However, masters degrees (by research)
typically have a two year duration which would equate with an appropri-
ate number of credits. Also, emerging practice on professional doctorates
provides for a typical model of 180 credits.

All Irish higher education awarding bodies are operating within these
arrangements.

Alignment analysis

The compatibility report sets out how the EHEA and Irish frameworks align,
providing a detailed technical analysis and comparison of the two frameworks.
The analysis essentially involves two stages: first, the structures and techni-
cal bases of the two frameworks are analysed and compared; then a detailed
comparison is made between the descriptors that define the cycles/levels in
each framework.

A comprehensive comparison is made between the two frameworks, deal-
ing with issues including origins and purposes of the frameworks, scope, struc-
tural similarities and differences, descriptor architecture and methodologies

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for defining learning outcomes. This is followed by an analysis of the strands of learning in each descriptor set, working from the meta (Bologna) to the national (Irish). Two examples follow of the material presented in the report, illustrating the nature of the technical exercise involved:

'The Dublin descriptors might be said to have been derived inductively from the process of identifying common features of graduates across disciplines and countries for the various levels of award. The Irish descriptors were derived rather more deductively from the overarching ambition to provide for the recognition of all learning in the framework. Proceeding from the expression used in the legislation, which defined learning as "knowledge, skill or competence", the Authority developed an understanding of how learning might be further analysed or parsed, first into three strands of knowledge, know-how and skill and competence and then further into eight sub-strands. This analysis drew on a number of different intellectual traditions, ancient and modern, formulating an understanding that was deliberately eclectic and hence as comprehensive as possible. Pragmatically this had the effect of being intelligible and acceptable to a wide variety of stakeholders, which is an essential feature for such a key element of a national framework, while at the same time having coherence. It was only after initially parsing learning in this comprehensive way that the national framework developers attempted to differentiate between levels, developing level indicators. To be sure, there was a measure of iteration, as the understanding of the sub-strands were tweaked, following the development of level indicators. Moreover the sub-strands were devised to cover all levels of learning, not just those associated with higher education and training. Therefore they did not focus in on the distinguishing characteristics of those who have received higher education awards in the way the Dublin descriptors do.

The Dublin descriptors have five strands, labelled: knowledge and understanding; applying knowledge and understanding; making judgements; communications skills; and learning skills. Even these strands were not explicitly identified or labelled during development, and not all strands are represented in the third cycle, in particular. The Irish descriptors have eight sub-strands: knowledge-breadth; knowledge-kind; know-how and skill-range; know-how and skill-selectivity; competence-context; competence-role; competence-learning to learn; and competence-insight. As pointed out above, the Irish framework has positive statements of how the different sub-strands are to be understood whereas the strands in the EHEA

framework have to be inferred from the descriptors themselves.'

Following this general comparison, the compatibility report goes on to analyse descriptor compatibility on a cycle-to-level basis. The actual descriptor statements for the two frameworks are arranged in parallel tabular form to enable clear comparison. An example follows of the outcome of one of these analyses:

'Second cycle – masters degree (level 9)

The Dublin descriptor refers to building on the first cycle. The Irish descriptor affirms the importance of the concept forefront of the field of learning in masters' knowledge. The Dublin descriptor introduces the expression "basis or opportunity for originality" where the Irish descriptor speaks of "critical awareness of … new insights". The two are quite compatible. Indeed, the experience of those drafting the Dublin descriptors was that the masters level was easier to agree on in generic terms than the bachelors, though the Tuning project (Tuning educational structures in Europe, 2003) reported the reverse was the case when attempting to agree outcomes within individual disciplines, as was their task. The agreement on generic level is possible because the continental countries had a history of long cycle programmes with outcomes at approximately this level, already recognised as broadly similar to Anglophone masters degrees in terms of admitting to doctoral studies, whereas they were much less familiar with bachelors level qualifications.

The application of the knowledge and skills at this level is qualified in the Dublin descriptor as taking place "in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study" whereas the Irish descriptor refers to "a wide and often unpredictable variety of professional levels and ill-defined contexts".

Judgments in the Dublin descriptor are made with incomplete or limited information. In the Irish descriptor the skills include "specialised … techniques of enquiry" (presumably to address gaps in information). The requirement of the Dublin descriptor to reflect on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgments is less demanding than the Irish descriptor's call in the insight sub-strand to "scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and act to change them" but it could be said to encompass it.

The Irish masters' descriptor does not contain any explicit reference to communication but they are included in the development of "new skills to

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a high level" and are certainly required to engage in the outcomes called for in the insight sub-strand cited above. In contrast, the Dublin descriptor is quite detailed about the substance of the communication, tying it specifically to the new knowledge acquired or originated by the learner.

While the Dublin descriptor says relatively little about the further development of autonomy at this level, the Irish descriptor places an onus on the learner to self evaluate and take responsibility for their own ongoing learning.

The comparison of outcomes in the second cycle Dublin descriptor and masters' descriptor supports the contention that the Irish masters degree is a second cycle qualification.'

The Irish framework and EQF

As part of the EQF consultation in Ireland, a paper (European Commission, 2005) was developed to introduce the EQF concept to Irish stakeholders; this included a brief comparison of the EQF and the newly-introduced Irish national framework of qualifications (NFQ). Also, the Commission requested examples of comparisons from countries to assist in developing guidance on how national and sectoral bodies should try to reference qualifications and frameworks to EQF levels and descriptors; Ireland responded to this request, analysing two major award-types in the Irish system in relation to the draft EQF descriptors. The same process of analysis and comparison informed both exercises and the overall experience is summarised here. In interpreting this report, it is important to bear in mind that these were experimental activities rather than definitive alignments. Also, the EQF model, against which the Irish framework was compared, was itself a developmental entity. The level descriptors in the recommendation version (September 2006) are quite different, with only three strands (knowledge, skills and competence) defining learning outcomes through short, highly-generalised statements.

The comparison process began with a general analysis of each framework, setting out and contrasting the different approaches to describing learning outcomes:

EQF levels [as set out in the consultation paper (European Commission, 2005)] are defined in three types of learning outcomes:
- knowledge,
- skills,
- wider competences described as personal and professional outcomes:
  – autonomy and responsibility,

- learning competence,
- communication and social competence,
- professional and vocational competence.

These parallel in many ways the Irish strands and substrands which are:
- knowledge: breadth and kind,
- know-how and skill: range and selectivity,
- competence: context, role, learning to learn and insight.

There are some differences in the approaches used in the two frameworks to describe learning outcomes:
- the outcomes captured under the heading 'Professional and vocational competence' in EQF are similar to those categorised as a 'selectivity' substrand of skills in the Irish framework. The Irish statement for 'selectivity' also contributes to the correspondence between the two Irish skills substrands and the skills statement in EQF;
- EQF levels include a statement defining outcomes in communication, under the heading 'Communication and social competence'. The Irish level indicators make no specific reference to communication;
- there are also concepts in some EQF descriptors that are not made explicit in the Irish indicator statements, such as at EQF level 4 the need to 'take account of ethical and social issues', and the supervision and training of others.

Following this, the specific indicators/descriptors at the various levels in the two frameworks need to be compared. The following table illustrates the comparison in relation to EQF level 4 and the EQF 'knowledge', 'skills' and 'autonomy and responsibility' strands of learning outcomes:

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Comparison of level descriptors from EQF and the Irish NFQ

Learning outcome strands in EQF	EQF Level 4 descriptor	NFQ Level 5 descriptor	Learning outcome strands in NFQ (Ireland)	Comment
Knowledge	Use a wide range of field-specific practical and theoretical knowledge	Broad range of knowledge. Some theoretical concepts and abstract thinking, with significant depth in some areas	**Knowledge – breadth** **Knowledge – kind**	Strong correspondence between the Irish award and the EQF descriptor
Skills	Develop strategic approaches to tasks that arise in work or study by applying specialist knowledge and using expert sources of information Evaluate outcomes in terms of strategic approach used	Demonstrate a broad range of specialised skills and tools Evaluate and use information to plan and develop investigative strategies and to determine solutions to varied unfamiliar problems	**Know-how and skill – range** **Know-how and skill – selectivity**	The Irish award demands that the learner be able to plan to address 'varied unfamiliar problems', which is slightly more than the EQF descriptor; however, this is still within the range of outcomes appropriate to a Level 4 (EQF) qualification
Personal and professional competence: *autonomy and responsibility*	Manage role under guidance in work or study contexts that are usually predictable and where there are many factors involved that cause change and where some factors are interrelated Make suggestions for improvement to outcomes Supervise routine work of others and take some responsibility for training of others	Act in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs; identify and apply skill and knowledge to a wide variety of contexts. Exercise some initiative and independence in carrying out defined activities; join and function within multiple, complex and heterogeneous groups	**Competence – context** **Competence – role**	There is good correspondence between the Irish award and this EQF descriptor, but the emphasis on supervision and training of others is not seen in the Irish award. The Irish award does demand that the holder be able to take responsibility for the quality of outputs

Conclusion

Given the importance attached to developing and implementing new in-
ternational meta-frameworks for qualifications in EU policies, it is vital that
common approaches are put in place for establishing how national frame-
works align to these meta-frameworks. This paper has addressed some of
the technical issues arising in establishing such alignment. Drawing from re-
cent Irish experiences, it identifies a process of working from general com-
parison of framework architecture and methodologies for defining levels, on
to analysis of the learning outcomes associated with descriptors and the state-
ments through which these outcomes are expressed. This process may be
useful as a starting-point in developing common approaches to be adopted
by countries in undertaking these tasks. It is significant that the alignment
processes piloted in Ireland were undertaken in relation to a national frame-
work of qualifications that shares several fundamental features with the two
meta-frameworks in question. The task of establishing the compatibility of a
'non-framework' system of qualifications with a meta-framework would un-
doubtedly be more difficult and complex.

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The professional qualification system in Spain and workers with low qualification levels

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SUMMARY

This document examines how the Community strategy for lifelong learning and the role of the assessment, recognition and accreditation of professional competences and knowledge within this strategy have been taken on board in Spain. It looks at the legislation introduced by the national government in the context of the Spanish system of Autonomous Communities. It analyses the redefinition of vocational guidance to ensure the effectiveness of the tools proposed and, lastly, it evaluates the effectiveness of these measures from the viewpoint of workers with low qualifications. To this end the document refers to the main laws and regulations introduced in recent years and the relevant literature, as well as empirical studies and research in which the authors have been involved in the last two years.

How Community policies on professional qualifications have been taken on board in Spain

In the 1990s, the government, employer representatives and the main trade unions in Spain signed three major agreements on continuous training (1992, 1996 and 2000). This period also saw the implementation of two national vocational training plans (1993 and 1998) with the support of political parties and the major trade unions. The end of the second plan saw the introduction of an education law on vocational training which, unlike other education laws, also had the support of parties and trade unions. The law in question was the *Ley Orgánica de Cualificaciones y Formación Profesional* [1] (Law No 5/2002), according to which responsibility for regulating and coordinating the *Sistema Nacional de Cualificaciones y Formación Profesional* [2] lies with the national government, without prejudice to the role of the Autonomous Communities and the involvement of social partners (Article 5.1). Said involvement takes the form of forums such as the General Council for Vocational Training, a consultative body which provides advice on vocational training.

This process initially sought to achieve recognition of three training subsystems – state approved vocational training, occupational training and continuous training – and the need to establish points of contact between them. It was the Community's emphasis on lifelong learning that also led to the identification and recognition of informal learning through professional practice and personal experience.

The SNCFP (National Vocational Training and Qualifications System)

The SNCFP comes under the Ministry of Education and Science. The latter has entrusted the National Qualifications Institute with developing and regulating the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications which serves as the reference for a modular training catalogue. The National Catalogue must also incorporate procedures enabling the qualifications of any individual to be recognised, assessed, accredited and registered, regardless of how they are obtained. Likewise, it must incorporate the corresponding information and registration systems.

This is a complex process which takes time, and one in which training only plays a secondary role, since assessment is the key. It is all about constructing

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[1] Law on Vocational Training and Qualifications.
[2] National Vocational Training and Qualifications System, hereafter SNCFP.

an external assessment system, a new concept in Spain, which has to earn the trust of potential users.

Implementing the SNCFP is further complicated by the system of autonomous government. The Autonomous Communities can assert their own authority in this area – after all, some of them set up their own qualification institutes years before this national law was passed and there are 11 autonomous accreditation bodies already in existence.

There are three aspects to the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications: 1) it aims to identify and define professional qualifications indicating professional level and family ([3]); 2) each professional qualification is made up of competence units which are in turn defined in terms of activities and activity criteria; 3) each competence unit has its own associated training modules.

The training modules must specify, clearly and unambiguously, the title of the occupation to which they lead, the qualification level of the occupation, the associated competence units, the duration of the training, what the training involves (in terms of abilities and content), the assessment criteria and the requirements that have to be met in order to teach these modules.

Regulation is a complex and wide-ranging task which, although it builds on the work done for the professional accreditation certificates introduced by a series of Royal Decrees in the previous decade, must ensure that levels, professions and types of training are integrated, all of which could make it a very slow process. Indeed, only 162 qualifications have been approved since 2004, out of a target of approximately 600.

The professional accreditation certificates are also regulated in terms of requirements for obtaining proof of competences, the assessment committees responsible for their application and the issuing of certificates. The latter aspect seeks to facilitate the process for workers, and it is therefore possible to obtain the certificate by accumulating partial 'occupational credits' with a view to eventually applying for full certification. In short, the model proposed is inclusive – covering learning in a variety of forms, acquired via different routes and from different sources – and universal – aimed at the whole of the working population, whether active or inactive. It is also reliable, transparent and credible.

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[3]   The Spanish system has, until now, been based on five professional levels, and so all work completed to date will need to be adapted to suit the new European Qualifications Framework.

The situation is therefore complex, owing both to the various territorial considerations to be taken into account and to the involvement of different – educational and employment – government parties, and also to the need to involve social partners in the definition of the system. The study carried out by INCUAL (2003) demonstrated the long period of time needed to develop, under the new system, the model for ongoing training and for equivalences between the initial training system, the professional training system and the learning through experience system.

Social partners and accreditation

The parties involved (government, employers and unions) agree that the system has its advantages. These are summarised below, incorporating the opinions of various authors on the subject (CIDEC, 2000; INCUAL, 2003; MEC, 2003; CCOO PV, 2005a; Tejada and Navío, 2005). In the eyes of employers, the system offers the following advantages: it is a source of differentiation and competitiveness; it facilitates the selection of the right personnel; it simplies the definition of jobs; it allows training to be tailored to real needs; it makes it possible to work by 'competence management', leading to a better trained, multi-skilled and motivated staff, reducing the number of levels in the organisational structure, optimising labour costs, filling vacant posts through internal promotion, and simplifying personnel management and administration; it provides basic information on personnel; it promotes employment mobility.

From the trade unions' point of view, the advantages are: the possibility of associating competences with compensation mechanisms; work experience acquires the same status as education; the worker knows what the company expects of him/her; improved worker employability; and employment mobility opportunities can be gauged more accurately when the competences required in other areas of the company are known.

Lastly, from the government's viewpoint, the advantages are: transparency of the labour market; a better qualified working population; enhanced quality and consistency of the professional training system; promotion of mobility of workers within EU Member States; fostering of lifelong training.

All these advantages are potentially offered by the system, but it is a potential that cannot be realised until the system is developed. Moreover, they cannot become a reality without vocational guidance, which in turn will guarantee equality. This is something we will return to later.

Impact on vocational guidance policies

Vocational guidance never used to be central to public employment and training policies but in the last few years it has featured more and more regularly, at least as regards legislation and institutional dialogue. This is noted in the OECD study (2004) which confirms the role of vocational guidance in improving the effectiveness and efficiency of labour markets and educational systems, as well as its contribution to social equality.

However, the contribution of vocational guidance policies to each of these objectives has been limited (CCOO PV, 2006a). Existing vocational guidance policies and mechanisms have proved to be flawed, fragmentary and confined to specific contexts (CCOO PV, 2005b) and have also been described as too rigid, general and inconsistent (CIDEC, 2000: 13), as they have pursued objectives and tasks that tended to be very specific and dictated by the system under which they come (stimulation in the case of active employment policies or vocational and educational guidance in the case of the education system). At the same time, more and more is being expected of vocational guidance, as it must also meet transverse objectives arising from its new role as 'intermediary'. The education and employment systems are inextricably linked, forming a complex landscape and vocational guidance is expected to provide a map for navigating this landscape. Furthermore, vocational guidance now applies to all stages of life. Vocational guidance systems must be both universal – aimed at the whole population – and enduring, focusing on promoting people's ability to manage their career path throughout their lives. There is no doubt that vocational guidance is essential nowadays, especially for vulnerable workers.

Competence recognition and accreditation systems

The comparative analysis of the different competence recognition, assessment and accreditation procedures carried out as part of the experimental project for assessment and recognition of professional qualifications in various Autonomous Communities throughout Spain has identified a number of essential accreditation mechanisms (MECD, 2003):

1. Information, guidance and advice;
2. Assessment planning;
3. Proof of competences;
4. Certification and registration of competences.

Of the main conclusions drawn from the analysis of the project's results, the following are considered most important:

– The applicability and validity of the model in all the Autonomous Communities which took part. The adaptation of the process and its development to the idiosyncrasies of the different territories and sectors of activity played a part in achieving this applicability;

– The importance of having vocational guidance counsellors and assessors involved in, respectively, the candidate placement stage and the assessment planning stage;

– The benefits derived from collaboration in the definition of assessment tools and in the assessment process itself with professionals in different training fields, i.e. occupational training and state-approved training, and with those from the professional sectors, as this brings validation closer to the reality of the workplace;

– The effectiveness of the assessment tools designed: competence reference index, self-assessment questionnaire, competence dossier and proof of competence guide. Emphasis on the need to redefine the competence dossier and the importance of making it easier to obtain direct proof in the workplace;

– The need to adapt the times at which the vocational guidance and assessment services are on offer to times when candidates are available;

– The benefit of enhancing guidance counsellors' and assessors' qualification levels through specific training programmes.

To date, however, very little progress has been made beyond this project, which is still the State benchmark. Owing to the national govenment's failure to implement accreditation systems, some Autonomous Communities are developing their own mechanisms, albeit on a trial basis. The studies referred to in the following section are based on these trials and simulations.

Guidance for persons with low qualification levels for inclusion in the SNCFP

Accreditation of competences and exclusion from the labour market

It is important to highlight the potential of a system like this for people who have only a basic education – compulsory schooling – or no education, since the certification of informal learning attributes public recognition, both official and legal, of knowledge acquired outside of established education and training systems. We believe professional competence accreditation processes offer potential benefits in the following areas (CCOO PV, 2005a):

– getting a job: the formal recognition of competences should facilitate the search for work, since it provides an objective indicator of an individual's professional skills and abilities;

– promotion at work: as an open mechanism this system facilitates the ongoing acquisition of competences and ever greater recognition of qualifications;

– ongoing training: creating a system which incorporates within itself a comprehensive training system fosters, guides and allows workers constantly to be in an active state of ongoing training;

– formal recognition of informal learning: this point is crucial especially for people with low qualification levels, who could be the greatest beneficiaries, as it paves the way for the recognition of competences developed in the workplace and/or via other non-formal and informal routes.

While this system may present a number of benefits, the potential risks cannot be ignored. Thus, possible downsides can be identified (CCOO PV, 2005a):

– first of all, there is the fundamental risk of exacerbating the exclusion of people who, because they have no formal accreditation for their competences, end up not obtaining said recognition, thus creating a new distinction between lowly-qualified persons;

– secondly, steps must be taken to ensure that this system really is accessible to the people who need it most, i.e. people with low qualifications, since if not it could simply become a way of obtaining a 'new' type of recognition (a new certificate) for people with medium to high qualification levels, just one more form of accreditation;

– lastly, there is a danger of creating too much red tape. A system like this needs to be proactive, targeted and accessible to people to encourage participation in a process which is likely to be voluntary and involve a certain cost for applicants in terms of time and effort.

Proposals for the guidance of people with low qualification levels

In this section, we examine a number of areas that require attention to help the new system fulfil its potential and minimise the risks for people with low qualification levels, basing this on work done in the VISUAL Project (CCOO PV, 2006b). In this examination, we must distinguish stages or steps in the accreditation and related guidance process, each of which must be approached differently.

First of all, timing the introduction/awareness of the system is important. People with low qualification levels tend to have greater difficulty in accessing formal processes, such as those involved in the SNCFP. Raising awareness of the new system, 'taking' it to the target population, is essential if these people are to be reached.

Secondly, the whole system needs to be adapted to the wide range of groups with 'special needs': people with various physical and/or mental disabilities, people in socially vulnerable situations, immigrants, etc. These groups can benefit, as regards employment, from the legal recognition of their professional competences and qualifications, but will require special care in the process to prevent the problems that tend to occur when processes are standardised.

Regarding the competence assessment stage, first of all it is considered that wherever possible the best option is assessment by professionals from the sector who are trained as assessors, carried out in the workplace, 'in vivo', with the worker being notified as to when he/she will be assessed and what this will entail. Even so, this option may need to be combined with tests at specially adapted locations, particularly in cases where the individual's job does not make it possible to demonstrate the specific competences for which accreditation is required. Also, in this regard, assessments must take place at different times, and not be performed all at once, to facilitate the correction or repetition of activities if necessary, allowing more information to be collected to ensure the most accurate assessment possible.

Moreover, again as regards assessment, it is felt that the person being assessed must know exactly how he/she will be assessed, what he/she will be assessed on and what is expected of him/her. In other words, he/she must be aware of the professional activities that will be assessed and how. This will help improve the quality and transparency of the competence assessment process.

As regards training within the framework of the SNCFP, we believe this must be a tool which promotes, makes possible and facilitates learning in the workplace as well as the development and acquisition of professional competences at the training facility. This requires a new understanding of a train-

ing model focused on the acquisition of professional competences – in short, focused on the joint acquisition of 'knowledge' and 'know how'. It is also essential to pay particular attention to the practical and applied dimension of training, incorporating specific aspects that make it possible to organise the work experience acquired and develop new professional competences.

Moreover, in the same vein, the training provided under the SNCFP must be organised in the form of a 'training journey'. In other words, training must not be considered as just an isolated event in the worker's professional development as he/she goes through the procedures involved in accrediting competences, but rather as a process that allows a gradual acquisition of tools and resources thereby making it possible for a person to obtain, bit by bit, ever higher professional qualifications on the professional ladder.

Conclusions: problems and challenges posed by the SNCFP

We will begin by highlighting some of the problems that have arisen in the implementation of the SNCFP in Spain to date and which the introduction of the new European Qualifications Framework in September 2006 will probably exacerbate. First of all, the Spanish system has always been based on five levels of qualification and must now be adapted to the recently established eight levels. Secondly, there is the risk that, as has happened to date, it will be the higher qualification levels that will arouse most interest, with the lower levels being developed slowly and less fully, widening the breach within the workforce. Lastly, in terms of content, qualification levels are still oriented exclusively towards occupational considerations, while general competences and knowledge are not reflected in any of the qualifications approved and recognised, despite being considered highly relevant in labour relations.

In any event, as regards the SNCFP what matters most to workers with low qualification levels is its actual benefit: will certification really help individuals in the search for jobs and improve their employment situation? The SNCFP involves workers in a necessarily costly process (in terms of emotion, time and almost certainly money), and it is therefore essential that the outcome be beneficial to the individual concerned, 'beneficial' being understood as improving the employment conditions and/or prospects of the people involved.

With regard to the above, we wonder whether employers will really recognise the certificates issued by the SNCFP as a valid accreditation of a person's competences and know-how. Experience with current qualification and

certification systems has shown that the industrial world has little faith in the accreditations issued by the educational world. The fact that employers from every sector, as well as other employment stakeholders, are involved in the definition and implementation of the SNCFP constitutes an opportunity to reverse this trend. However, there is still work to be done, at least in the definition of professional competences and qualifications at lower levels, where in most cases the extent and diversity of the specific professional activities listed in each of the competence units covered by each qualification appear to be out of the reach of people who hold lowly qualified jobs, since the tasks assigned to them are more uniform, repetitive and limited.

Lastly, let us take a look at the SNCFP's potential for integration. Will the approach represented by the SNCFP reduce or widen the social divide? We have reservations as to whether the certification of competences and their formal recognition will in fact improve the employability of people with low qualifications and their career prospects. It may merely shift the entry threshold to the 'formal' labour market, further distancing, if that were possible, people in the lower social strata, with lower levels of education and fewer formal, demonstrable accreditations – the most vulnerable sections of the working class – from a possible path of social integration via employment. This is one of the most notorious effects of an increase in the educational level of the general population, which upsets the employment pyramid, resulting in workers with higher levels of education doing jobs designed and structured for lower levels. The question is, could something similar happen with the lower levels of the professional ladder, leading to a situation whereby no formal qualification is necessary to do a certain job but we end up using the requirement of a formal accreditation as a means of personnel selection?

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Competences as the core element of the European Qualifications Framework

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SUMMARY

The development and implementation of the EQF, as a meta-framework for the promotion of transparency, quality assurance, mobility and mutual recognition of qualifications, has given rise to some difficulties. These are due partly to different definitions of competences, skills and knowledge. Taking the German-speaking countries as an example, the author outlines the difficulties presented by the development of a common terminology as a basis for the common reference levels and discusses some possible consequential problems of implementing the EQF in these countries.

Qualifications frameworks as engines of innovation

Countries that introduce a qualifications framework are thereby seeking to make their national educational systems more transparent, more innovative and more competitive. They also aim to improve the match between the educational system and the labour market. Thus, qualifications frameworks are seen as engines of innovation: the point of introducing them is to promote a number of fundamental, long-term reforms. These include, for example, wider access to opportunities for education, more ways of acquiring qualifications (other than solely by participation in institutionalised courses), the certification of non-formal and informal learning; and encouraging students to acquire competences that are relevant to the labour market while getting employed people involved in describing and assessing such competences.

These aims are also relevant to the development of the European Quali-
fications Framework. However, the fact that a number of similar difficulties have
emerged in the introduction of national qualifications frameworks suggests that
these might also arise in the development and implementation of the Euro-
pean Qualifications Framework (EQF) (Raffe, 2003; Young 2004; 2005). These
difficulties include the following:

- The credit systems introduced or further developed for the purposes of qual-
  ifications frameworks are based on units and modules, which *may* be in-
  consistent with the all-round character of learning processes and the knowl-
  edge thereby acquired;
- The certification of knowledge, skills and competences (KSC) is inconsistent
  with the established concept of learning as an open-ended, lifelong, nat-
  ural process if certification is seen as the documentation of self-contained
  learning outcomes in the form of qualifications;
- The requirement of competence-oriented recognition may conflict with that
  of all-round education and its certification if competences are seen sole-
  ly as knowledge, skills and abilities relating to *a specific* field of tasks;
- The development of common descriptors for general and vocational edu-
  cation can easily fall between the two stools of arbitrariness and special-
  isation: if the descriptors are to be applicable to both general and voca-
  tional education, they run the risk of being too general to be meaningful,
  but if they are sufficiently specific they will presumably be applicable to only
  one of these two fields.

These difficulties are particularly evident in the development of the com-
mon reference levels for KSC that form the basis of the EQF's emphasis on
learning outcomes. For this reason, this paper begins by outlining the devel-
opment and structure of the EQF in the context of the common reference lev-
els. A brief description of the conception of competence based on the prin-
cipal documents underlying the EQF follows. Finally, on the basis of the pre-
vailing conception of competence in the German-speaking countries, the dif-
ficulties in the way of developing a common terminology for KSC at European
or international level are discussed and possible consequences are identified.

Development and structure of the EQF

The basis of development of the EQF is voluntary. For this reason, unlike national qualifications frameworks it addresses priorities of the European Union (not of individual Member States) and does not include binding mechanisms of recognition addressed to individuals. Its development is based primarily on mutual trust between the relevant actors and on their willingness to cooperate, and is much more complex than that of a national qualifications framework. The Commission describes the EQF as follows: *'A meta-framework can be understood as a means of enabling one framework of qualifications to relate to others and subsequently for one qualification to relate to others that are normally located in another framework. The meta-framework aims to create confidence and trust in relating qualifications across countries and sectors by defining principles for the ways quality assurance processes, guidance and information and mechanisms for credit transfer and accumulation can operate so that the transparency necessary at national and sectoral levels can also be available internationally'* (European Commission, 2005, p. 13).

Development of the EQF began at the end of 2002. Its foundations included the recommendations of the ECVET Technical Working Group and a proposal drawn up on behalf of Cedefop by members of the England and Wales Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (Cedefop; Coles and Oates, 2005).

The core of the EQF comprises learning outcomes, which are seen as a bundle of KSC and can be grouped together to form qualifications. The EQF's structure is characterised by eight reference levels (for all formal qualifications) and by competence levels obtained by informal, non-formal and formal learning. These reference levels are supported by various principles, directives and instruments, including information portals, the Europass and elements of quality assurance.

The reference levels can be distinguished by the relevant competences according to the degree of complexity of the action situations concerned (vertical structure of the EQF) and are supplemented by a horizontal structure of three types of learning outcome (KSC). This yields a 3x8 matrix of 24 cells, in the descriptor-based portrayal of which the following question arises: *'How big is this qualification? To reference this, we need a measurement, and "credit" is the means of measuring volume of learning. EQR therefore needs a credit metric. This is quite separate from the use of a credit system for accumulation and transfer'* (Raffe et al., 2005, p. 14).

The common reference levels not only call for credits as an aid to translation, but also allow for 'vacant' cells within the matrix. Where a cell is 'va-

cant', this means that the option exists, depending on the relevant qualification, for the cell description to be omitted or for only a partial description to be given. For this reason, uniform qualifications for all Member States in terms of standards, learning pathways, learning content or access are not necessary, whereas the development of common descriptors based on a common terminology is.

Competences as the core concept of the reference levels

KSC constitute the core elements of the reference levels. In the Commission's Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council, *competence* is defined as 'the proven ability to use knowledge [and] skills'. It is also described 'in terms of responsibility and autonomy' (European Commission, 2006, p. 16).

Skills 'means the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems' (ibid.). A distinction is made between cognitive and practical skills.

Knowledge 'means the outcome of the assimilation of information through learning. Knowledge is the body of facts, principles, theories and practices that is related to a field of study or work' (ibid.). In the EQF, knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual.

The concentration on a competence-based approach to the development of the EQF is based on increased attention being paid to concepts of adaptive and workplace-oriented learning processes, of lifelong learning, of informal and non-formal learning and of the abilities and knowledge necessary for employability in a rapidly changing society (López Baigorri et al., 2006; Rigby and Sanchis, 2006; Schneeberger, 2006). Fundamental importance is attached in this connection to the consideration and accreditation of learning outcomes achieved other than on a formal basis and of implicit knowledge. Hence the underlying principle of the terminology to be developed for vocational KSC in the EQF was *'to establish a typology of qualitative outcomes of VET in terms of knowledge, skills and competences (KSC) that will serve as conceptual underpinning for the horizontal dimension in developing a European Credit System for VET'* (Cedefop; Winterton and Delamare-Le Deist, 2004, p. 1). This concept, originally devised for the ECVET system, was later also used by the Expert Group as the basis for the definition of KSC in the EQF.

In their outline of a typology for KSC, Winterton and Delamare-Le Deist (Cedefop, 2004) and Winterton et al. (Cedefop, 2005) invoke three lines of development that stem from different cultures (including the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and France) and from different fields of practice and scientific disciplines.

The sources on which these authors draw highlight the problems of the debate about competence and demonstrate the difficulty of arriving at a systematisation of approaches and of achieving compatibility between them. At the same time, the simultaneous evolution of further approaches to the development and definition of competence on behalf of Cedefop (e.g. Rychen, 2004; Straka, 2004) clearly show the complexity of the subject, even if relatively little attention has been paid to the notions dating from the same period put forward in these documents.

The documents in question seek to deduce the concept of KSC from the arguments identified by the authors as prevailing in the various nations. Since the relevant concepts are not employed in a uniform sense, a stringent basis for the use of the terms concerned cannot be discerned. An example is the mixing-up of *competences* and *competencies* together with an attempt to apply an unequivocal conceptual distinction between the two terms. In this connection, the analysis is based on the notions of KSC applied mainly in four countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and France) (Cedefop; Winterton et al., 2005, p. 28ff.). With reference to the debate on competence in the United States, for instance, the principal sources cited are in the field of management training, with a concentration on approaches to the development of general abilities, forms of behaviour and activity-related skills. The development of the KSC typology is based mainly on approaches that emphasise the workplace-related component of skills, while other concepts from these countries tend to be disregarded.

Again, the conception of competence in French-speaking countries is characterised chiefly by an all-round approach: the simultaneous emphasis on *savoir*, *savoir-faire* and *savoir-être* seeks to achieve a comprehensive understanding of competence, which, however, is exhibited not in integrated form but in a juxtaposition of categories (Cedefop; Winterton et al., 2005, p. 32ff.). At the same time, it is pointed out that a consideration of further national proposals for classification could lead to modifications of the KSC typology, which the authors cross-reference with the level classification used in the English-speaking countries in the form of a matrix: *'Knowledge (and understanding) is captured by cognitive competence; skills are captured by functional competence and "competence" (behavioural and attitudinal, including meta-competencies)*

is captured by social competence' (Cedefop; Winterton and Delamare-Le Deist, 2004, p. 19).

Coles and Oates (Cedefop, 2005), who also drew up one of the principal documents used to develop the matrix, adopt a different approach. Substantially dispensing with a scientific discourse about KSC, these authors instead – precisely because of the lack of clarity and unanimity concerning the relevant terminology – opt for a further 'concept': that of *zones of mutual trust* (ZMT). The underlying idea here is that the entire EQF, and hence also the cells of the matrix, constitute *'an agreement between individuals, enterprises and other organisations concerning the delivery, recognition and evaluation of vocational learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences)'* (Cedefop; Coles and Oates, 2005, p. 12).

Such an approach substantially dispenses with the need for detailed analysis and definition of the three core concepts of KSC, whose detailed formulation and understanding are left to the individual States; these then ensure recognition and transparency by means of mutual trust.

The concrete form assumed by the detailed formulation and understanding of the KSC concept can be illustrated by the example of the German-speaking countries, which I shall adduce below. Here too, neither uniform terminology nor an independent theoretical tradition exists (Arnold, 1997, p. 256). Nevertheless, some fundamental trends relevant to our subject can be discerned, even if no claim to completeness can be made.

The concept of competence in German-speaking countries

The concept of competence is used in relation to, on the one hand, abilities and activities and, on the other, to matters of juridical competence and of rights and entitlements (Vonken, 2005, p. 16). The latter seem less significant in the debate about competence and in the context of the EQF, as they are after all based not on a given qualification or certification grid but on learning outcomes; in other words, it is concerned more with outcomes than with inputs.

Ability- and activity-related approaches can be divided into the following groups:
• Approaches in which competence is described as the ability to cope with situations. They stem from the field of psychological theory and are used mainly in the development of action-related competence. Here competence is seen partly as an aspect of personality and partly as an action-relat-

ed ability that is supposed to be generated by processes of training and education;
•   Approaches that also take account of the generation of situations or of the creation of the conditions for situations to arise. The principal applicable theories in this case are those of social criticism, in which competence is regarded as a means of enabling individuals to cope with social change.

The origins of the education-related concept of competence lie in Chomsky's theory of competence in the sphere of linguistics and the philosophy of language. Chomsky distinguishes between linguistic *competence*, as the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language, and *performance*, as 'the actual use of language in concrete situations' (Chomsky, 1964, p. 14). The distinction between competence and performance is that performance is a result of competence and a competent speaker has the ability to generate a linguistic utterance. The competent speaker also possesses the creativity needed not only to apply the rules of speech (structure, grammar, vocabulary, etc.) but also to express thoughts with them. This ability at the same time includes the meaningful connection of contents with linguistic rules, understanding of other speakers and reacting to other linguistic utterances. Linguistic competence thereby takes on an interactional and social dimension because its development acquires meaning only in relation to the need to communicate with others. From this point of view, competence must fundamentally be seen as a 'part of the basic genetic endowment of man as a species' (Heydrich, 1995, p. 231), which need not be generated a priori but can be developed.

Invoking speech act theory and the debate on intentionality after Searle (1991; 1996, p. 198ff.), Habermas (1990) develops Chomsky's theory further and supplements the concept with the generation of communication situations themselves; that is to say, Habermas holds that linguistically competent speakers can form and rearrange sentences. The core of this new theory is the question of *how* the construction of a sentence is linked to the element of communication.

Baacke (1980), too, bases his approach on Chomsky, to whose theory he adds a behavioural dimension: *'"Action" is here understood not only as behaviour within pre-existing behavioural patterns acquired in the process of socialisation [...]; the concept at the same time entails, if not arbitrary behaviour, certainly freedom of behaviour. It is asserted that man can also "generate" his behavioural schemata – and that he does so by the exercise in the present of a behavioural competence that is at the disposal of the individual's internal motivational strata'* (Baacke, 1980, p. 261f.).

Competence in this sense is an individual's ability to generate communicative situations (Habermas) and behaviour (Baacke) and hence to generate *interaction*.

In his theory of 'critical competence' for *vocational training* as the foundation of vocational activity, Geissler (1974, p. 34), who also draws on the work of Chomsky, links the ability to criticise, as an interactional element, with knowledge of the methods of criticism. He further distinguishes between the following:
- critical-reflexive competence,
- critical-social competence, and
- critical-instrumental competence.

In so doing, he takes account of knowledge, ability and interaction, while at the same time distinguishing between different types of competence. Other fundamental aspects of his approach are perception of a situation and possible ways of changing it by recognition and criticism of how the individual is anchored in society. This view, as it happens, is very close to the definition of KSC in the EQF – thus perhaps indicating the (indirect) influence of the national debates about competence on the development of the EQF.

Other approaches to the concept of competence invoke, for example, pedagogic or psychological parameters. In this case, competence is seen as an external attribution, a personality trait and an inner disposition associated with particular attitudes (Aebli, 1980; Wienskowski, 1980; Wollersheim, 1993). In the field of VET, a concentration on the relations between competence and qualifications is evident (Erpenbeck and Heyse, 1996; Faulstich, 1998).

More recent approaches also resort to definitions originating from non-German-speaking authors. For instance, the term *competency* is defined as *'a set of behaviour patterns that the incumbent needs to bring to a position in order to perform its tasks and functions with competence'* (Woodruffe, 1992, p. 17), while *competence* is described as the ability to execute or perform something and as the skill to carry out an activity or task; hence the term can equally well signify enabling, practical competence and ability. In the field of education, *competence* is understood primarily as enabling and as ability (Roth, 1971, p. 291; White, 1965). In this context, Arnold and Schüssler (2001, p. 61ff.) distinguish six connotations of the term:

Table 1: Connotations of competence (Arnold and Schüssler 2001).

Connotation	Competence as
Sociology	Juridical competence
Working life	Combination of 'being allowed to' and 'being able to'
Psychology	Combination of declarative and procedural knowledge, meta-knowledge, 'volition' and 'values'
Microeconomics	Behaviour-generating competences
Linguistics	Distinction between linguistic competence and linguistic performance
Education	Action-related vocational competence

In the majority of approaches, then, competence is seen as *action-related ability*, while most authors agree that whereas qualifications define position, competence is a matter of disposition (Arnold, 1997, p. 269ff.; Erpenbeck and Heyse, 1996, p. 36).

The main factor distinguishing qualifications from competence is that qualifications constitute knowledge and skills that can be objectively described, taught and learned, and are functional (Erpenbeck and Heyse, 1996, p. 36), while the concept of competence also embraces individual aspects of personality that are directed towards (vocational) utility. In this connection, the main aim of the development of competence is the 'formation of personality structures with a view to coping with the requirements of change within the process of transformation and the further evolution of economic and social life' (Vonken, 2005, p. 50). Different kinds of competence, such as competence in a specific field or methodological or social competence, are thus seen as a combination of characteristics, knowledge and skills deployed by an individual for the successful solution of a problem involving specific activities or requirements, leading to a specific action-related ability and, in broader terms, to a personality capable of action, as measured by economic criteria, against a background of social, economic and political change.

However, the difficulty of apprehending competence (its definition, development, measurement and assessment) after all lies precisely in the fact that it is an entity that *cannot* necessarily be presented and/or expressed in terms of individual behaviour: 'There is an obvious difference between the demonstration of, say, team spirit in an examination situation and the personal attitudes that belong to such an ability, etc.' (Vonken, 2005, p. 68). Precise-

ly this difference is the second core problem arising in the determination of the content of the EQF (the first being that of the definition of KSC).

It is precisely because of the shortcomings of a notion of KSC involving only the mastery of a specific type of activity or requirement that a 'reduced' definition of competence of this kind was not adopted as the basis of the EQF. Instead, the EQF includes not only the ability to tackle particular tasks and requirements but also, and with equal emphasis, knowledge in both the general and vocationally specific senses.

Kompetenz versus competences?

The concept of competence is surely one of the most variegated notions in the fields of education and educational policy. The results of efforts by educational policymakers to define the term unequivocally have remained relatively unsuccessful even though, or precisely because, an almost infinite variety of topics are addressed under the heading of 'competence' or 'the development of competence' (Cedefop, Descy and Tessaring, 2001; 2005). Whereas this vagueness is only one aspect of the debate about competence, it is of paramount importance because it reflects the remoteness from theoretical considerations that has characterised this debate for decades (Vonken, 2005, p. 11). This is perhaps because the debate has hitherto seldom taken account of the results of research in the fields of the psychology of learning, the psychology of work and/or neurology.

The approaches to the development of competences discussed in the context of the EQF tend to be seen, in the German-speaking countries, mainly in terms of their compatibility with national VET systems. Besides the long tradition of craft training in these countries, the difficulties arising are due mainly to the substantially institutionalised structure of training with its fixed legal framework and to individuals' identification with their occupations (Harney, 1997; Kirpal, 2006; Lipsmeier, 1997). As a result, even if the implementability of a form of development, assessment and testing of competences based on learning outcomes is not rejected out of hand, it is nevertheless seen, as in the past, in a critical light (DGB, 2005; DHKT, 2006; KBW, 2005).

As I have attempted to show, one of the reasons for the critical attitude to an orientation towards competence and the associated notion of outcomes has to do with the specificity of the notion of *Kompetenz* that has come to be accepted in the German-speaking countries, which is (still) in some respects contrary to the connotations of the English term *competences*:

Table 2: Differences between Kompetenz and competences
(based on Clement, 2003)

Competences	*Kompetenz*
Object-related	Subject-related
Self-contained learning units for the purpose of certification	Category for broadly based potential freedom of disposition
Qualification-related	Content-related
Training standards based on vocational tasks and situations	Training standards based on specialised vocational knowledge, reflection and experience
Pathways to acquiring competences tend not to be formalised	Pathways to acquiring competences tend to be highly standardised and formalised
Basic idea: confirmation and certification of personal abilities and skills → orientation towards output	Basic idea: standardisation of a learning process with a view to broadening knowledge and freedom of disposition → orientation towards input

The main difference is that the English term 'competences' describes not the learning process but its outcome, whereas the German word is input-oriented. From the standpoint of the German speaking countries, therefore, although the competence development models of the English-speaking world offer indications as to the development of competences and hence also of curricula, they do not determine these, and this ultimately gives rise, in the world of training, to the forgoing of regulation of the process of learning and training proper and hence of the structure and organisation of training: 'Consideration of international experience shows that didactic reforms often accompany changes in control policy: the redefinition of content is paralleled by a decentralisation of powers for determining the training process; in other words, the question of content is separated from that of methods, and process from outcome' (Clement, 2003, p. 136).

Conversely, an exclusive focus on input may cause the imparting of action-related competence to be lost sight of if the training concentrates on or is confined solely to cognitive abilities and skills.

Precisely because of the high degree of institutionalisation, the solid legal foundations of the examination system and the formalisation of education in German-speaking countries, the matter of the outcomes of learning processes, especially in VET, has for a long time tended to be considered as of only secondary importance. These countries place their trust mainly in the assumption that the regulation of input will almost inevitably lead to the desired output. Accordingly, since the beginning of the Bruges-Copenhagen process and of the discussion of the aims of education and training, the debate on com-

petence – especially in the field of initial vocational training – has assumed vastly increased importance at both *European and international* level.

Notwithstanding this ambivalence and the contradictions of the conceptual and semantic debates on the concepts of competence and qualifications, as well as on the term 'vocation', it must be emphasised that the various concepts of competence featuring in the international discourse have drawn closer together and that a further approximation is likely, owing to increased contacts and cooperation between the actors in this field. There are indications that a common terminology is in the process of adoption. However, the question of the possible consequences for the German speaking countries of a system of recognition of learning outcomes and qualifications based essentially on mutual trust must be addressed first.

Provisional conclusions

In the development of the EQF, the debate about competence is found to be used in many quarters as an important body of scientific knowledge for social and economic policy purposes, the chosen approach being based on pragmatic rather than methodological considerations. This applies particularly to the definition of the KSC concept and hence of the descriptors of learning outcomes in the EQF. This way of seeking consensus attempts to take equal account of political and scientific interests from a variety of points of view and disciplines (including economics, pedagogy and sociology). As the concept is developed further and applied, certain descriptors will no doubt be given more concrete form or where appropriate reviewed. For instance, the application of this meta-framework to particular vocational fields or specific sectors is yet to be finalised.

This being the case, there are indications that, in the course of the development of the EQF and of the parallel development, or further development, and amalgamation of the ECVET and ECTS systems, countries that are not yet familiar with a logic of qualifications frameworks based on learning outcomes might experience difficulty with the application of the EQF and of the credit systems, as additional instruments for facilitating mutual trust and mutual recognition of qualifications, for solving existing fundamental problems. This is because mutual recognition is conditional on voluntary utilisation of the relevant instruments and on trust in the learning outcomes achieved in a foreign educational system and in their equivalence with their counterparts in the national system. Furthermore, regardless of the instrument used

to arrive at them, such correspondences can of course be no more than in-dicators of estimated equivalences, and do not permit the unequivocal trans-ferability of learning outcomes and achievement – because, after all, mutu-al trust cannot be converted into transferable credits on a one-to-one basis. Although the EQF and ECVET simplify mutual recognition by purely quan-titative measurement of learning outcomes, they do not imply the existence of qualitative equivalence between outcomes (Bohlinger, 2005). This rais-es the question of the extent to which national particularities are tolerated and of who is to decide and by what criteria, in order to avoid 'wording rigid-ity' (Le Mouillour et al., 2003, p. 8) – i.e. a recognition of competences ([1]) based on nothing more than similarities between two or more VET systems. Secondly, there is a risk of introducing too broad and generous a system of recognition, which would lack labour market credibility and fail to reflect the real value of the relevant learning outcomes. This risk is most likely to arise if economic policy objectives such as the promotion of mobility, competitiveness and employability take precedence over those of educational policy, although these aims need not be mutually exclusive. At the other extreme would be the highly complex and formalised scrutiny of learning outcomes, as is al-ready becoming evident at tertiary level in some countries under the Bologna Process; however, this would call for appreciably increased resources in terms of personnel, time and funding.

Again, the debate about the certification and standardisation of compe-tences, which presupposes that they are comparable, clearly demonstrates the heterogeneity of the current approaches (Clement et al., 2006) that are to be combined or made compatible with each other by means of the EQF and ECVET.

Notwithstanding the debate concerning all these difficulties, it may be hoped that action-related competence can be accepted as one of the target categories of the learning-outcome orientation of the EQF – if not by a Community-wide definition of terms and approaches, then by mutual trust among the various actors and their jointly elaborated objectives, having regard to the complex-ity of the issues and of the foundations in education law.

It is perfectly possible that the difficulties mentioned will diminish in the course of time, particularly as they will not necessarily arise. That will depend on the political will of the actors, on the further progress of European integration and on the degree of cooperation among the actors on social issues and employment policy.

([1]) and by extension also knowledge and skills.

It may therefore be concluded that the main requirement as regards the position to be assigned to competence, including action-related competence, in the EQF is time – the time needed to implement the principles of the EQF, to establish trust between the various actors and countries and to learn more about the approaches of the countries that already have many years of experience with qualifications frameworks and meta-frameworks.

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European and National Qualifications Frameworks – a challenge for vocational education and training in Germany

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SUMMARY

In the debate on the draft European Qualifications Framework and the possible development of a German Qualifications Framework (GQF) great interest is being shown in Germany in a qualifications framework that promises transparency and permeability and is based on competences. There has also been opposition on the basis of the fundamental principles of the German system, which has had an impact on some public statements about the EQF. The aim is to create a GQF that can be linked to the EQF, and which covers all areas of education and is geared to practical vocational capacities.

The design and implementation of such a tool raises several questions. Are the vocational principle and the acquisition of practical capacities compatible with a qualifications framework based on learning outcomes? What rules should be applied to standard-based certification of learning outcomes obtained non-formally and informally? How can credits function as a precondition for procedures for the transfer, recognition and accumulation of competences acquired? Finally, what consequences ensue for quality assurance in education and training provision?

1. Introduction

In November 2005, two opinions on the proposal for a European Qualifications Framework were delivered to the European Commission in Brussels: an 'initial German opinion' signed by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and by the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the *Länder* (KMK), and an opinion from all the German employers' associations. One month later, the Commission received an opinion from the German trade unions and the Board of the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, in which the Federal Government, the *Länder*, employers and trade unions discuss all important issues of (non-school-based) vocational education and training (VET). Lastly, in February 2006 a second opinion followed from the BMBF. It was obvious – for Germany the EQF constituted a challenge to which there was no quick, simple and common answer. The consultation in Germany was accompanied by several extremely critical voices, which went so far as to warn that skilled workers – the tried-and-tested model and 'showpiece' of German VET – were fundamentally threatened by the EQF (Drexel, 2005; Rauner, 2005).

In our article, we begin by explaining why there is wide-ranging interest in a qualifications framework in Germany (2). We go on to discuss opposition to a qualifications framework, which relates to the change in management mechanisms that it may involve (3); in some cases, this opposition also found expression in the German opinions (4). We then turn to questions of detail and to possible consequences of the development of a national qualifications framework (5). Finally, we list a number of research, development and testing tasks that are required (6).

2. Fundamental agreement of European and national objectives

The EQF essentially met with a positive response even at an early stage (*Überlegungen für die Konstruktion eines integrierten NQF-ECVET-Modells*, 2005) because it is primarily seen as an approach that might allow the value of German qualifications to be portrayed more appropriately than hitherto on an international scale. The German view is that previously developed classification/transparency tools are unsatisfactory or inadequate. In the 1985 European system of equivalences of vocational diplomas, levels were defined using a combination of competence and education levels, which meant that

German skilled workers, at Level 2, ranked below French holders of a school-leaving certificate qualifying them for higher education. The 2005 European Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications defined five levels by means of fields of education, duration of education and type of qualification – here, not only the journeyman or skilled worker, but even the master craftsman, is ranked at Level 2. The 1988 *International Standard Classification of Occupations* (ISCO) classifies jobs. The 1997 *International Standard Classification of Education* (ISCED) classifies levels of and participation in education. The EQF made it possible, for the first time, clearly to position vocational qualifications in relation to academic qualifications. This is also of particular interest with regard to the publications of international organisations such as OECD, which regularly refer to a comparatively low rate of academic qualifications in Germany (OECD, 2005).

Over and above transparency, and in addition to promoting transnational mobility, the EQF promises solutions to a number of problems that have also run through the debate on education in Germany for many years – promotion of participation in education, integration of general and vocational education, permeability and lifelong learning. These objectives already characterised the major debates of the early 1970s, when a strategy for the reform of the entire education system was formed into a structural plan (*Deutscher Bildungsrat*, 1970). A generation later, the concept of the qualifications framework offers a basis that is both simple and logical for – at last – considering 'the whole' and tying the various threads together where they end, at their outcomes. This would seem to be urgently necessary at a time when the education subsystems have become largely autonomous and, even within VET, problems of access and transition for certain target groups or at certain interfaces are being worked on as separate issues.

For example, the 16 *Länder* employ 16 different sets of criteria to regulate the possible accumulation of vocational qualifications or competences at the point of access to courses of higher education.

In one sector/occupational field, a framework was created in the shape of the IT continuing training system that covers four levels of vocational qualifications (one training level and three advanced training levels), and which facilitates access to formal qualifications via vocational experience and includes the accumulation of vocational with academic qualifications (Borch/Weißmann, 2002). The question of the extent to which this model can be transferred to other sectors is currently being examined.

The Vocational Education and Training Act (*Berufsbildungsgesetz*) of 1 April 2005 (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, BMBF, 2005) allows ad-

mission of those completing school-based learning pathways to final examinations before a chamber, thus linking qualification subsystems that have hitherto been kept strictly separate. The new Act also provided for competences acquired at school and elsewhere to be combined into a dual qualification, to avoid 'queuing'. This includes qualification modules that can be obtained prior to training.

The Act's provisions are aimed at addressing a trend that is noteworthy in Europe, namely a falling proportion of 20-24-year-olds who have completed secondary level II; this is an indicator under the Lisbon strategy (objective for 2010: 85 %). Germany now lies below the EU average, and is continuing to fall. 2002: EU 25:76.6 %; D: 73.3 %. 2004: EU 25: 76.4 %, D: 72.5 % (European Commission, 2005). The drama inherent in this trend was underlined by the report *Bildung in Deutschland*, according to which in 2004 over 400 000 young people were in a 'transitional system' between school and training/job, in which they were acquiring no recognised vocational or academic qualification (Konsortium Bildungsberichterstattung, 2006).

Germany also lies below the EU average, well behind the Scandinavia countries, for example, according to another indicator, participation in continuing training, measured as participation in continuing training within the last four weeks and hours of continuing training per 1 000 working hours. However, the demographic trend (ageing population, immigration) makes it necessary to have greater participation and easier access to qualifications, including for career changers.

It might be possible for a national qualifications framework to play a part in facilitating and shortening the process of access to the acquisition of qualifications – firstly by creating the basis for a precise description of learning requirements, learning level and learning provision and for making them reciprocal reference points, and, secondly, by broadly separating learning from particular institutions and particular biographical time points. It is also true to say that more advice on and support for learning is required in order for this actually to lead to increased motivation and, ultimately, to increased learning and acquisition of qualifications.

3. EQF/GQF and management of education systems

In what follows, we explain why European and German Qualifications Frameworks cannot be put in place completely without problems, even if there is general agreement on them in principle. There is general agreement insofar as this involves tools for greater transparency of qualifications. The change of paradigm in the system management which might also be linked to the qualification framework, from input and process based management to output and outcome based management, constitutes a challenge for the German system (Young, 2005; Bjørnåvold and Coles, 2007 – see page 203 of this issue).

Qualifications frameworks can be understood as an element, perhaps even a key element, of a new form of management of the education system. The expansion in education in the 1960s and 1970s led to a heavy burden on national budgets in the 1980s and into the 1990s. In Germany, this came later than elsewhere, since here the majority of training places were financed by enterprises themselves. As the willingness of enterprises to provide training declined, here too more costs were devolved to the State. This trend gradually led to a transfer of efficiency standpoints to the education sector. As a result, the concept of New Public Management (NPM), which had already characterised education policy (and also health policy) in the USA and the UK, also made its appearance in continental Europe and Germany in the 1990s (Allemann-Ghionda, 2004). The concept underlying NPM is that the outcome is all. Responsibilities are redistributed – the State limits itself to stipulating strategic guidelines and to monitoring them, while educational institutions have operational freedom in achieving the objectives. In quantitative terms, state action is aimed at economic efficiency – expenditure (input) is compared with the number of qualifications/integrations achieved (output). In qualitative terms, under the new management regime State action is aimed at learning outcomes in relation to centrally set standards, with the pathways (defined by learning venues and curricular and didactic input) being secondary. In this way, the public education mandate tends to be withdrawn and there is greater scope for free competition of suppliers on the education market.

NPM is representative of neoliberal economic policy. (Hall and Soskice introduced a crucial distinction (Hall and Soskice, 2001) between coordinated market economics and liberal market economies.) The UK is an example of the latter, Germany an example of the former. Typically, these different types of economic management represent alternative qualification strategies: vocational education versus employability (Rauner, 2006). According to this view, VET strategies are rooted in coordinated market economies; on the contrary,

strategies that largely leave it up to individuals to acquire in a qualifications market competences that they believe will increase their employability, are rooted in liberal market economies.

This is where the fundamental criticism of the EQF began, as formulated in an expert opinion for the industrial trade union *Industriegewerkschaft Metall* and the services trade union *ver.di* (Drexel, 2005). In this view, the starting point for the EQF, in combination with ECVET, would be completely at odds with the German system and would compel it to change. Comprehensive vocational training in public/private partnership would be replaced by fragmentation, individualisation and commercialisation of the acquisition of competences.

What are the determining characteristics of the German VET system that are in question here? In the German system, the State and industry share responsibility – anchored in public law – for qualifying basic training of all young people and young adults. Accordingly, the acquisition of qualifications in schools, enterprises, and institutions of higher education is, for the most part, subject to detailed regulation as regards duration, learning venue, content and form. To be admitted to examinations one must normally have completed a formal study programme. In other words, the learning pathway is laid down in law. There is a clear emphasis on initial vocational training. The guiding concept is that of broad qualification for a comprehensive vocational field. Along with the State, the social partners play a key part in standardisation of qualifications; the awarding of qualifications is the responsibility of the decentralised autonomous management of 'competent bodies'.

The problems involved in formulating a German position on the EQF are, above all, based on the principles and structure of German VET, as briefly outlined here. The critical agreement to its implementation and to the development of a national framework is the expression of a gradual blending of traditional and liberal management mechanisms.

4. Key features of the German opinions on the EQF

In its opinion of 15.11.2005 on the first draft of an EQF ([1]), the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), jointly with the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the *Länder* (KMK), informed the European Commission that Germany intended to develop a national framework for vocational and general education. This plan was given concrete shape by Ministry working parties on continuing training/permeability and opening up to Europe. In its opinion on the Commission's draft in its meeting of 14.12.2005, the main committee of the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, Germany's 'VET parliament', also supported the development of a qualifications framework covering all areas of education in Germany, and reaffirmed this in its meeting of 09.03.2006.

Though the emphasis varied, Federal Government, *Länder*, employers and unions were essentially in agreement on a number of key points:

- The EQF objectives of promoting transparency and mobility were welcomed. It was felt that the framework should be equally valuable for education and employment, although the employers emphasised employment.
- The eight levels appeared to be accepted in principle, although the unions would have preferred fewer levels.
- Care would have to be taken in formulating the EQF descriptors to ensure that they could be made congruent with (future) national descriptions of qualifications. This would mean working to ensure that the descriptors can reflect practical vocational ability and that there is room for school-based/academic and vocational qualifications/competences at all levels.
- The descriptors would have to be precise, easy to use, and objectively verifiable in practice, but they should not exclude any national variants.
- The definitive introduction of the EQF would have to be preceded by a phase of testing, evaluation and review in national, regional and sectoral projects.

In addition, the employers urged that the average learning time be introduced as a quantitative descriptor. The unions also wanted learning time to be taken into account, as well as the learning venue; otherwise there was a risk of qualifications being assigned in arbitrary fashion, and consequently of fragmentation.

([1]) *Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung/Kultusministerkonferenz: Erste Stellungnahme zum ersten Entwurf eines EQR*, 2005.

5. Aspects and possible consequences of putting the framework into operation

Following the consultation, preparatory work began on a GQF. In connection with both the implementation of an EQF and the development of a GQF, there are of a number of questions concerning operation that need to be clarified; they are crucial for the functioning of such tools and need to be addressed in further research and development work and in test phases. Here, starting points in German VET that have already been developed on the basis of existing national needs can be used to explore the individual themes.

Competence dimensions and practical vocational capacities

In categorising learning outcomes, the current proposal for an EQF also makes a distinction between the comprehensive category 'competences' and the categories of knowledge and skills. This also corresponds to the wording of the Vocational Education and Training Act (BBiG) as amended in 2005, which lays down the imparting of knowledge, skills and – a new addition – capability of acquiring practical vocational capacities as the aim of VET. Here, the BBiG has taken account of a paradigm shift in VET in Germany, which took place with the reform of major occupational fields such as the metalworking and electrical fields as far back as the late 1980s, with orientation to practical vocational capacities. The basis for this was the concept of complete job handling (see Rauner and Grollmann, 2006).

With a concept of competence established in this way, the preconditions were created for a widespread differentiation in Germany between technical, social and personal [2] dimensions of practical capacities. The technical dimension includes skills and knowledge, while methods and learning competence are imparted across these individual categories (see Sloane, 2004). A corresponding differentiation between the dimensions of practical capacities for the categorisation of learning outcomes emerges from the drafting of the guidelines of the BIBB Board on developing a national qualifications framework (BIBB, 27.09.2006).

Competence levels and professionalism

A number of aspects concerning the issue of the number of competence levels, which should adequately reflect both the education and employment

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[2]   Here, the category 'personal' is used as a synonym of human competence. See Bader, 2000:39.

systems, are still being hotly debated. For example, if eight levels are used in the same way as in the EQF, this could lead to the learning outcomes of German dual skilled-worker qualifications being classified as either Level 3 or Level 4, which would at the very least undermine the consensus hitherto existing that all dual-training qualifications are equal (see BIBB, 01.12.2005).

Professionalism is also regarded as being at risk if it is planned to classify at the lower levels qualification learning outcomes that lie below the level of German skilled-worker qualifications. Ultimately, the classification of part-qualifications or training content in skills relevant to work might no longer relate to relatively broad, integrated job profiles, but instead to small bundles of skills (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, 2005).

This presupposes, however, that a credit system as currently under discussion at European level in the form of ECVET (European Commission, 2006) is a necessary precondition for putting a qualifications framework into operation, which is not currently the case and will probably not be the case in future either. In addition, no legal basis exists in Germany for the categorisation of part-qualifications, nor is any amendment for that purpose under discussion. The debate is, rather, to be regarded as a continuation of the German debate on professionalism versus employability, which led in the 1990s, for example, to the development of open job profiles in the fields of IT and industrial business management services, with optional qualifications (see Ehrke, 2006, p. 20), which facilitate flexible and needs-based qualification.

Descriptors

Within qualifications frameworks, descriptors are general, abstract descriptions of learning outcomes. They serve to create reference points between national and sectoral qualifications and qualifications frameworks.

The German VET system faces the challenge of developing for a GQF descriptors that take account of the imparting of practical vocational capacities acquired in the dual system and which, at the same time, facilitate a comparison with learning outcomes from, for example, full-time and higher-education provision. In the current debate, this is not necessarily seen as an irreconcilable contradiction of domain- or context-specific acquisition of practical capacities, as becomes clear from interdisciplinary and key qualifications (see Ehrke, 2006). Here, it becomes apparent that there is a need for comparative empirical research, e.g. in selected fields of qualifications, as is currently under discussion in the BIBB. Another challenge arises for the development of descriptors with regard to the categorisation of skilled-worker qualifications as already ex-

plained, namely how to understand competence, the dimensions derived from this, and the number of levels involved.

Certification of formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes

The EQF is designed to be a reference framework for national certification systems, and this also has an impact on the debate on reforming certification of qualifications as well as non-formal and informal competences. It remains unclear what rules should be applied to standard-based certification of learning outcomes obtained non-formally and informally.

Attempts have been made for some time using traditional labour-market and education certificates to record, in addition to input aspects, all-round competences (social, personal and learning competences and problem-solving ability) (Clement, 2006). Ultimately, it remains to be seen how, in the development of rules for accumulation, Germany's full qualifications and public-law control of certification of units of recognised qualifications can be preserved (Hanf, 2006).

The German IT continuing training system offers design principles for the development of permeable certification systems, which are also of relevance to qualifications frameworks. For example, it is output-oriented and geared to competences acquired in enterprise and/or in practice (work-process orientation). If appropriate, recognition of informal learning can also take place within the framework of a modularised certification system. In addition, it is designed to record learning outcomes through credits, and hence is also potentially compatible with other sectors of education both within and outside Germany (Tutschner and Wittig, 2006, pp. 217 ff.)

Intersectoral approach

It is not only VET that faces the question of which criteria and procedures should be used to establish equivalences as a precondition for recognition and/or accumulation of competences acquired. The debate between sectors of education on this has taken off, and common trends have become apparent as regards defining the objectives of teaching methods not only in general education, but also in VET and higher education.

For example, in schools providing a general education examinations are application-based, in line with the education standards (*Kultusministerkonferenz*, 2004). Similarly, in addition to knowledge, the higher-education qualifications framework (*Kultusministerkonferenz*, 2005) cites ability in the sense of application of knowledge as a fundamental dimension of competence. Lastly, with reference to higher education, the Federal Ministry of Education and Re-

search (BMBF) speaks of the acquisition of vocational competence as an educational objective, and is currently supporting, in a programme for recognition of vocational competences in programmes of higher education (ANKOM, 2005-7), experiments involving the development of appropriate starting points for tools.

Credits

Credits are deemed to be suitable indicators for describing competences, and are essentially regarded as feasible tools for the recognition or accumulation of qualifications obtained. The European Council's Maastricht Communiqué of December 2004 provides for the development of the EQF and of a European accumulation system for VET (European Credit Transfer System for VET – ECVET). The development and introduction of a credit system across fields of education and national borders would promote the permeability of qualifications between vocational and general education, including higher education, alongside other ways of creating transparency with new quality. German employers (*Kuratorium der Deutschen Wirtschaft für Berufsbildung*, 2005) suggest using credits as quantitative tools for describing learning outcomes.

In work on developing a GQF, however, there must be clarification of how the awarding of credits for segments of programmes of vocational education to be defined can also take full account of the practical vocational capacities acquired as part of the same process. The issue of the compatibility of a VET-based credit system (ECVET) with the version of a European Credit Transfer System (ECTS II) geared to quality and currently under development for the European higher education sector ([3]) also remains to be clarified. Useful findings on this point are also expected from the BMBF programme already mentioned, the programme for recognition of vocational competences in programmes of higher education (ANKOM).

Orientation to competences and quality assurance of qualifications

In order to clarify the starting situation with regard to the degree of orientation to competences in State-regulated VET, in a survey of 24 German job profiles in all areas of dual vocational training, a BMBF expert opinion (Breuer, 2005) comes to the following conclusion. Neither the underlying understanding of competence in each case nor the wording of the learning objectives and

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[3] European Council. Maastricht Communiqué on the Future Priorities of Enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training (Review of the Copenhagen Declaration of 30 November 2002), 2004.

examination requirements is clear or uniform. Reformed occupations such as *Industriekaufmann* [commercial employee in industry] and the occupations in the metalworking and electrical sectors are formulated primarily as competence-related both in the statutory instrument and in the framework curricula. Accordingly, the expert opinion recommends taking the example of recent and reformed occupations as a starting point in further research and development work on competence-based job profiles and competence standards of the kind the BIBB is currently starting up.

Thus the debate on the possible effects of a competence-based qualification structure on quality assurance (e.g. examination/test methods and procedures) is only just beginning in Germany.

In quality assurance, the EQF focuses only on output/outcomes (learning outcomes, examinations and usability). Since Member States retain responsibility for quality assurance systems and tools, in developing the GQF, in addition to learning outcomes (?) greater account must be taken of the two quality fields input (framework conditions) and process (training concept and design) (see Ehrke, 2006).

6. Outlook

The future GQF will primarily fulfil the function of a translation tool for qualifications based on learning outcomes, which are categorised as bundles of learning outcomes via national qualifications frameworks and systems. In this way, it will support transparency, permeability and mobility. An all-embracing national qualifications framework can, in addition, help to promote education policy's macro-objectives of lifelong learning and employability.

Even if, like the EQF, the GQF is conceived in Germany not as a statutory provision but as a tool offered to user groups, its function will go beyond that of a tool for transparency, thanks to its approach alone, which embraces all institutions and sectors. Accordingly, the BIBB Board's working party for a GQF (BIBB, 2006) also included quality assurance and development, which is aimed at optimising and systematising qualifications, in its list of objectives.

In future research and development and in test phases, one aim will be to effect continuous exchanges with experts and players from neighbouring countries with similar dual structures ([4]). Selected occupational fields could

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[4] Under the overall leadership of Germany, these countries have come together with Finland and Bulgaria under the Leonardo programme for a joint project (TransEQRrame) on implementation and testing of an EQF at the level of national education systems.

be taken as models for testing learning-outcomes-based description and classification of qualifications as a tool for communication between Member States' education and employment systems.

Thanks to the above-mentioned approaches which have already been adopted in individual parts of the German education system, the conditions are favourable for the development of a GQF in Germany, as a complementary response to an EQF and also as a tool for taking the national educational debate further, for example on the permeability of qualifications. A GQF could expedite these developments in the interests of all user groups.

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The European qualifications framework:
challenges and implications in the Irish further education and training sector

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SUMMARY

This paper examines recent reforms in the Irish further education and training (FET) sector in response to government commitments to move towards a lifelong learning society. The context is set by tracing development of the Irish FET sector. An outline of legislative change and measures that have been put in place to reform the Irish system in accordance with European developments on learner mobility is provided. The basic architecture of the Irish national framework of qualifications is set out with reference to the proposed EQF. A review of progress in implementation is presented with particular focus on developing quality assurance systems. The paper concludes by exploring the challenges in implementing new qualifications structures. More specifically, it is analysing policy on the one hand and praxis on the other in making lifelong learning a reality for all.

Introduction

The proposed European qualifications framework (EQF), which links the Bologna (1999) and Copenhagen (2002) processes, has promoted much discussion in European countries on VET policies on lifelong learning. In keeping with policies in the EU, the Irish government has focused on putting in place structures that define qualifications according to specific levels. This was much needed in a complex and diffuse system in its provision and progression opportunities for learners. This paper describes the Irish context and documents the progress made in qualification systems and approaches to quality assurance with particular reference to the further education and training (FET) sector. It explores the inherent challenges in successful implementation of reforms within a lifelong learning paradigm. It suggests that the Irish experience in developing a qualifications framework provides several insights into the challenges involved in implementing the proposed EQF elsewhere.

The Republic of Ireland context

Ireland is a small, open and trade-dependent economy with a population of 4.2 million (Central Statistics Office, 2006). The numbers in the labour force reached two million for the first time in the history of the State in the second quarter of 2005. The labour force now accounts for 61.5 % of all persons aged 15 years or over. The female participation rate increased from approximately 49 % to 51 %, while the male participation rate increased from approximately 70 % to 72 % from 2004 to 2005. In 2005, immigration accounted for 36 000 of the increase in the labour force (FAS, 2005). Because of globalisation and the fact that Ireland is an open economy, it is accepted that higher levels of skills, knowledge and competence will be required from the labour force. Sustained economic success has focused on the need to ensure that the education system, particularly the FET sector, is adequately prepared to meet future challenges.

There is currently a lack of clarity on what comprises the FET sector in Ireland (FETAC, 2005, p. 5). Comprehensive data related to FET enrolment numbers are limited, and this is mirrored in a paucity of international data (ibid., p. 5). Equally, FET is difficult to define (ibid., p. 6). Ireland differs from many of its European counterparts in that it only formalised a FET strand within its provision in 2001 with establishment of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). Recent recognition of a FET sector in Ireland could

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be interpreted as reflecting negative perceptions of vocational education in an education system that has historically been classically oriented.

Vocational education was placed on a statutory footing under the 1930 Vocational Education Act, which established vocational education committees (VECs). Since their establishment, vocational schools in the VEC system have faced a struggle against the more academically oriented secondary schools. Analysts have related status and issues of parity of esteem for vocational programmes to the fact that vocational education has become synonymous with manual occupations and lower paid employment (Heraty, Morley, and McCarthy, 2000). Negative perceptions of vocational education particularly impacted on vocational schools when changing demographics in the 1980s brought falling enrolments across the second level education system. In response to this decline, the vocational sector developed vocational preparation and training programmes supported substantially through the European Social Fund (ESF). These courses became known as post leaving certificate (PLC) courses. Many vocational schools are now dedicated to PLC provision and have been renamed as colleges of further education (FE) to reflect the changed nature of provision. Effectively, an FE sector emerged from within the second level vocational school system.

While the VEC system is a key provider of FE, both in terms of PLC and part-time community-based education provision, several other organisations have developed as training providers. The most significant of these is Foras Aiseanna Saothair (FAS), which offers programmes in a range of areas including apprenticeships, training for the unemployed and training in the workplace (FETAC, 2005, p. 9). Other organisations engaged in sectoral training are Teagasc (agriculture) focusing mainly on farm training, Fáilte Ireland (tourism) and Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM) (fisheries). There are in excess of 300 000 enrolments annually in FET programmes in Ireland. This includes those enrolled in publicly funded programmes (approximately 183 000) operated by FE centres, FAS, Fáilte Ireland, Teagasc, and BIM, as well as those (approximately 140 000) enrolled on self-funded adult part-time courses in FE centres (ibid., p. 26). These figures do not include privately funded or work-based learning.

In addition to the range of organisations engaged in providing education and training, a further difficulty in developing FET was the absence of a coherent qualifications structure. The National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) was not established until 1992, seven years after the introduction of PLCs. In the absence of an Irish FET awarding body, PLCs led to awards from United Kingdom bodies (such as City and Guilds of London Institute), Irish pro-

fessional bodies (such as the Institute of Accounting Technicians in Ireland) and local providers such as the City of Dublin VEC (McIver, 2003). While establishing the NCVA brought an Irish system of certification, many FET providers continued to offer courses leading to qualifications from other bodies. This arose mainly because the NCVA did not develop a broad enough range of qualifications to match the diversity in course provision in the FET sector. This caused confusion for learners in relating different awards to one another, and in mapping out progression routes.

As this account has illustrated, development of the Irish FET sector lacked cohesion. By the end of the 20th century, the sector was somewhat weakened by the broad range of organisations engaged in provision, and lack of cohesion in a unified quality assured qualifications system. It is in this context that reforms introduced in the 1990s, particularly the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 were important developments. This legislation provided for establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and FETAC. The NQAI was established in 2001 with responsibility for establishing and maintaining a framework of qualifications, and promoting and simplifying access, transfer and progression (NQAI, 2003a).

National framework of qualifications

Following consultations, the NQAI launched the national framework of qualifications (NFQ) in October 2003. There are many similarities between the philosophy underpinning development of the NFQ and the proposed EQF. The NFQ was developed to bring transparency to the qualifications system and ensure that learners and other stakeholders are able to relate awards to one another thus improving learner mobility at national and international levels. Consultations leading to development of the NFQ emphasised the importance of transparent, fair and consistent entry arrangements for learners, clarity about the awards process, recognition of prior learning, participation in learning in various ways (accumulating credits over time), and information and guidance (NQAI, 2003b). The NFQ is defined as:

'the single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards (ibid., p. 3).'

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Table 1 outlines the basic architecture of the NFQ, and the corresponding awarding bodies. The State Examinations Commission (SEC) has responsibility for two awards in second level schools. The junior certificate, which is completed after three years, is a Level 3 award in the NFQ, while the leaving certificate, which is completed after five years in the second level system, is at Level 5. The leaving certificate is the final examination in the Irish second level system. Since its establishment in 2001, HETAC has become the awarding body for institutes of technology in the Irish third level sector. There are 13 institutes providing courses in engineering, science, business and the humanities. HETAC has responsibility for awards from Levels 6 to 10 in the NFQ and for agreeing quality assurance systems with the institutes of technology. The main task of awarding bodies is to develop and implement the new awards systems, while the remit of the NQAI is to develop and maintain the overall NFQ.

Table 1: Architecture of national framework of qualifications

Level	Award-Type	Awarding body
Level 1	Level 1 certificate	FETAC
Level 2	Level 2 certificate	FETAC
Level 3	Level 3 certificate and junior certificate	FETAC and SEC
Level 4	Level 4 certificate	FETAC and SEC
Level 4/5	Leaving certificate	FETAC and SEC
Level 5	Level 5 certificate	FETAC and SEC
Level 6	Advanced certificate and higher certificate	FETAC, HETAC and DIT
Level 7	Ordinary bachelors degree	HETAC, DIT, universities
Level 8	Honours bachelors degree and higher diploma	HETAC, DIT, universities
Level 9	Masters degree and post-graduate diploma	HETAC, DIT, universities
Level 10	Doctoral degree	HETAC, DIT, universities

Source: NQAI, 2003a.

The NFQ basically comprises three central elements: levels, award-types and named awards. There are 10 levels in the framework and similar to the EQF, it is based on a learning outcomes approach, and embodies a vision for recognition of learning based on an understanding of learning as a lifelong process (NQAI, 2003a). This approach represents a shift from previous systems, which were primarily based on the length of time taken to complete a programme at a given institution. At each level, a set of learning outcomes (packages of knowledge, skill and competence) are defined which a learner would be expected to achieve to get an award at the respective level (ibid.). The 10 levels accommodate a broad range of learning, from Level 1, which recognises ability to undertake basic tasks to Level 10, which recognises ability to discover new knowledge.

Consultation in Ireland on the proposed EQF concluded that eight levels were adequate, however, some concern was expressed that the use of the word 'level' in the EQF may cause confusion with national frameworks, and also that eight levels may be taken as a model structure, whereas in reality some systems would require more or less levels. Irish stakeholders stressed the importance of distinguishing national frameworks from the EQF. Use of colour codes rather than numbers for EQF levels was suggested to help distinguish the EQF from national frameworks (NQAI, 2005). Overall, Irish stakeholders were positive about the proposed EQF, particularly the concept of the EQF as a meta-framework, or overarching structure rather than a replacement for national frameworks. They also welcomed the fact that the EQF was a voluntary entity not involving legal obligations on participating countries (ibid.).

There are one or more award-types at each level in the NFQ and an initial set of 15 award-types were determined in the framework as set out in Table 1. An award-type is defined as 'a class of named award that shares common features and levels' (NQAI, 2003b, p. 6). Each award-type has an award-type descriptor, which sets out the key features, profile and standards of an award-type. Within the framework, four classes of award-types have been identified:

- major (main class of award-type, all 15 initial award-types are classified as major);
- minor (awarded where learners achieve several learning outcomes but not a combination required to achieve a major award);
- special purpose (awards for specific narrow purposes);
- supplemental (awarded for learning additional to a previous award) (ibid.).

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All award-types are independent from fields of learning.

A named-award is the award received by a learner in a particular field of learning. For example, an 'ordinary bachelors degree' is an award-type at Level 7, while an 'ordinary bachelors degree in science' is a named-award. Named-awards are developed at specific levels by awarding bodies as shown in Table 1. For FET providers, the fact that there are two award-types at Level 6 (advanced certificate awarded by FETAC and a higher certificate awarded by HETAC/DIT) is a contentious issue. While both are Level 6 awards, it is considered that the distinction between advanced and higher certificates may place learners with a FETAC advanced certificate at a disadvantage from their counterparts with a higher certificate. In the current environment where FET providers are competing with higher education providers to attract learners, the fact that FET providers are not permitted to offer the Level 6 higher certificate is a source of tension. The NQAI is committed to reviewing operation of the framework, including differentiation between further and higher education and training, in implementation (NQAI, 2003a).

Implementation of the national framework of qualifications

Launching the NFQ marked a major milestone for future Irish qualifications. Since 2003, implementation of the framework has progressed gradually with specific roles for the NQAI and awards councils. Much of the NQAI's work has focused on NFQ recognition/alignment of awards from professional, international and other awarding bodies. In September 2006, the NQAI produced *Guidelines for awarding bodies in accessing the national framework of qualifications* (NQAI, 2006). The process of recognition/alignment of awards from the above categories is ongoing, the outcome of which will be of particular significance to the Irish FET sector given that historically many courses were certified by UK awarding bodies and a range of Irish awarding bodies.

Establishing FETAC was important groundwork for implementing the NFQ in that it simplified the system of FET qualifications by reducing the number of organisations making FET awards. FETAC assumed responsibility for awards previously made by FAS, NCVA, Fáilte Ireland and Teagasc. Implementing the framework means that many existing awards will no longer be made, and learners who hold awards from former awarding bodies (legacy awards) will have to have their awards placed or 'mapped' into the new framework. This

was one of the first tasks undertaken by FETAC, in conjunction with the former awarding bodies, and was completed in 2004 (FETAC, 2005). This process is important to ensure that learners' previous qualifications are recognised and that learners are in a position to progress in line with the ethos of lifelong learning and learner mobility. It is also imperative from the perspective of employers seeking to understand where qualifications presented by job applicants are placed on the framework. Developing the EQF will further improve learner mobility in that it will simplify referencing of national qualifications with qualifications from other EU countries.

FETAC has responsibility for making awards from Levels 1 to 6 on the NFQ. It is also responsible for agreeing and monitoring providers quality assurance, validating programmes, ensuring fair and consistent assessment of learners and determining standards for named-awards (NQAI, 2003b). Between 2004 and 2005, FETAC finalised policies on quality assurance, recognition of other awards, recognition of prior learning, access, transfer and progression, standards, a common awards system and Level 1 and 2 awards. Work on developing Level 1 and 2 awards was imperative, as it emerged there were no awards at these levels when the process of placement of awards was completed in 2004. This year, FETAC finalised policies on validation, assessment and monitoring and now commences a period where focus is on the phased-implementation of all its policies (FETAC, 2006).

In terms of implementation, considerable progress has already been made in quality assurance. Under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, providers of programmes of education and training are required to establish and agree quality assurance procedures with FETAC. FETAC policy on quality assurance, published in 2004, identified providers as having a primary role in establishing and operating quality assurance, and it set out a common framework for all providers, including self-evaluation of programmes and services with emphasis on improvement (FETAC, 2004). Under this common framework, providers are required to establish policies and procedures in nine policy areas: communications, equality, staff recruitment and development, access, transfer and progression, programme development, delivery and review, fair and consistent assessment of learners, protection for learners, subcontracting/procuring programme delivery, and self-evaluation of programmes and services. Existing providers had until December 2006 to agree their quality assurance in order to be permitted to offer programmes leading to FETAC awards (FETAC, 2004). Implementation of quality assurance has been highlighted as a challenge for many providers, particularly, within the VEC system, where FE colleges are essentially funded as second level schools. This

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challenge will be compounded with the phasing in of other FETAC policies, particularly in validation and assessment.

Challenges in implementing the Irish NFQ

Much progress has been made through legislation and structural initiatives that have simplified a complicated qualifications system. However, there are challenges ahead in ensuring that the vision of lifelong learning embodied in the framework becomes a reality. Quality assurance poses significant challenges, specifically, meaningful support for lifelong learning approaches for all learners in the system including structures to allow learners gain recognition for prior learning, and to simplify accreditation of work-based learning. There is also the issue of support for FET teachers and trainers.

While the EQF seeks to promote the concept of lifelong learning, challenges remain in a European context. According to the European Commission, there is still some way to go before all EU countries have a well-developed lifelong learning culture with wide public acceptance and participation. There appears to be little or no legislation specifically on lifelong learning. Policy documents and published strategies on lifelong learning are more frequent (European Commission, 2003, p. 5). In the Irish context, while the Universities Act (1997), the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999), and the white paper on adult education *Learning for life* (2000) make specific reference to lifelong learning, issues remain that hinder a lifelong learning approach in the education system. Traditionally, there has been a focus on the needs of young learners in the initial stages of compulsory education, there has been a lack of opportunities to learn on a part-time basis, and there has been no integration between non-formal learning and informal learning in the system of qualifications (OECD, 2003, p. 69). Equally the OECD (ibid., p. 67) has suggested that:

> *'structural arrangements established under the 1999 legislation can be interpreted as a compromise between the need to create a system that would meet future needs in the lifelong learning context, and the need to maintain the confidence of users, both learners and employers, in the value of the awards and their underpinning structures in the existing system.'*

While work is ongoing in Ireland to address these lifelong learning issues, there are other challenges which must also be considered.

As already indicated, Ireland's workforce has changed dramatically in recent years due to high levels of immigration. The needs and cultural diversities presented by the presence of foreign nationals must be supported in a framework that emphasises a learner-centred approach. The needs of learners with learning difficulties and special educational needs must also be supported more effectively, so their educational experiences become meaningful in a quality assurance system which promotes equality, access, transfer and progression, and fair and consistent assessment of learners. To date, at all levels in the Irish education system, the needs of those with learning difficulties and special educational needs have not been fully addressed. In the FET sector, these concerns are of utmost importance. Addressing these concerns is very much linked to the support available to those working in the sector.

VET teachers and trainers are facing many challenges and demands. These relate to their roles as tutors and mentors, working with learners of different age groups and diverse backgrounds, administrative work, curricular design and working closely with employers and other agencies. In a European context, the entry requirements for a vocational subject teacher position typically include a vocational qualification, work experience and a teaching qualification, while a general subject teacher has a university degree with a teaching qualification (Kultanen-Mahlamaki, Susimetsa, and Ilsely, 2006). Initial vocational education trainers have, in general, no formal qualification requirement as compared for instance with Austria, Germany and Iceland. The entry requirements into a continuous vocational education trainer position are even more varied and the field is totally unregulated. Continuous training of VET teachers and trainers is across Europe very heterogeneous (Baur, 2006). In the Irish context, the complexity of FET provision has already been outlined. This complexity is equally present in the backgrounds of teachers, trainers and tutors working in the FET sector. They include post-primary teachers with a degree and teaching qualification, those with subject specialist degrees such as ICT, skilled professionals and craftspeople with professional qualifications and experience and volunteer tutors who may have no teaching experience or qualifications (Magee, 2006). To ensure this range of personnel are equipped to implement the framework and provide quality assured programmes and services, initial and continuous professional development is essential in areas such as programme development, delivery and review, assessment of learners and programme/self-evaluation.

The taskforce on lifelong learning (Government of Ireland, 2002, p. 17) made the point that effective and timely resourcing and operation of new qualifica-

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tions structures was of vital importance. However, question marks remain over government commitment to the FET sector as recommendations in a government commissioned report, published in 2003, have so far not been implemented. The McIver report called for establishing FE as a distinct sector from second level provision. It recommended several changes to reflect the distinction between the needs of staff and learners in FE and second level education. This report called for an increase in funding to provide the type of resources required by FET providers. The measures recommended included a revised organisational structure, addressing the teaching workload, upgrading buildings, facilities and learner support services, and addressing issues relating to teacher qualifications, induction and development (McIver, 2003). These issues must be addressed to ensure framework implementation and delivery of a quality assured service to all learners.

Conclusion

The Irish experience in developing qualifications structures, their implementation and supporting quality assurance mechanisms provides interesting insights into the challenges facing the proposed EQF. Ireland, despite recent emergence of a more unified FET sector, has developed structures that could promote and support the proposed EQF. In both contexts, there is recognition of the need for transparency, learner progression and mobility in a lifelong learning paradigm. However, as pointed out in the Irish submission on the proposed EQF, potential for confusion exists in award levels and specifically the terminology and number of levels appropriate to national contexts. The Irish context also illustrates the imperative of having a structured national framework underpinned by quality assurance mechanisms to gain maximum benefit from the proposed EQF. Equally, there are several challenges to address in creating conditions that provide learners with meaningful educational experiences, teachers with opportunities for continuing professional development and adequately resourced quality assurance systems.

Acronyms

BIM	*Bord Iascaigh Mhara* (Fisheries Board)
DIT	Dublin Institute of Technology
EC	European Commission
EQF	European qualifications framework
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
FAS	*Foras Aiseann Saothair*
FE	Further education
FET	Further education and training
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
ICT	Information and communications technology
NCVA	National Council for Vocational Awards
NFQ	National framework of qualifications
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PLC	Post leaving certificate
SEC	State Examinations Commission
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
VET	Vocational education and training

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European qualifications framework influences on a national framework: the case of Slovenia

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SUMMARY

Until now, developing and evaluating qualifications in the European Union have been dictated primarily by the principle of subsidiarity. Homogenisation of education in the European Union can no longer be based on a partial approach to recognising and evaluating qualifications, but requires synthesis of international and sectoral evaluation and development of qualifications. This is reflected in the desire to design a European qualifications framework. At the same time, designing a European qualifications framework implies creating and developing national qualifications frameworks. This article presents the Slovenian method of designing, with particular reference to the influence of the European qualifications framework on the national qualifications framework. Although the European qualifications framework encouraged Slovenia to design a national qualifications framework, the negative side of using an open method of coordination in designing the European qualifications framework, led to consideration of the following possible problems: (horizontal and vertical) complexity, unpredictability, slowness, and the phenomena of the 'Trojan horse' and the 'emperor's new clothes'. In the national debate on the draft European qualifications framework and designing the Slovenian qualifications framework, it emerged that all the aforementioned problems are closely interconnected, and taking attention away from one could lead to the outbreak of another. As a solution, the national debate on the European qualifications framework saw the rise of transparency and partnership.

Key words

Certification of competences, European Union, government policy, social dialogue, Slovenia and transparency of qualifications

Introduction

Following the European Union document *Lisbon strategy for growth and employment* (European Commission, 2004), the need for designing a European qualifications framework was presented as an important precondition for linking sectoral and national labour markets. The framework should enable communication at European and international levels between different systems and segments of education and training, and link non-formal and formal education, while considering the wider aspect of lifelong learning. Individuals were to be able to combine and accumulate learning and outcomes obtained in different institutions and organisational forms and to establish the basis for their appreciation and recognition. Barriers to and lack of common trust in recognising qualifications in the European Union were to be eliminated. However, the key problem now arises: how to coordinate instruments of appreciation and recognition of learning outcomes strongly influenced by the principle of subsidiarity. At the same time, it is impossible to deny that in the European space not enough attempts have yet been made to establish an effective instrument for pan-European recognition and appreciation of qualifications. Given the situation, the decision to use an open method of coordination was appropriate, since this method is sufficiently flexible for all partners to agree on a common instrument for appreciating and recognising learning outcomes without having major concerns on subsidiarity.

The open coordination method is based on four basic principles:

(a) subsidiarity (the common goals to be achieved are determined in the communication-negotiation process. The method of achieving these goals is the domain of Member States);

(b) convergence (emphasis in the convergence principle is on achieving certain common results through coordinated work, in which each partner contributes to development of joint performance);

(c) monitoring countries (ongoing reporting leads to evaluating and comparing progress and identifying weak points and positive examples in individual countries);

(d) integrated approach (the integrated approach method emphasises overcoming partial interests and considering the maximum number of different possible dimensions and consequences) (Kohl and Vahlpahl, 2003).

We focus on how the European qualifications framework influences the design of national qualifications frameworks in content and particularly methodology: how designers of national qualifications frameworks dealt and deal with

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several difficulties arising from using the open methods of coordination and implementing the EQF approach at national level. Five major elements will be analysed:

(a) (horizontal and vertical) complexity ([1]);
(b) unpredictability ([2]);
(c) slow pace ([3]);
(d) the 'Trojan horse' phenomenon ([4]);
(e) the 'emperor's new clothes' phenomenon ([5]) (Kohl and Vahlpahl, 2003).

The road to a Slovenian qualifications framework

In Slovenia, there is no national qualifications framework, but there are some historical elements of a classification system. Historical development of the Slovenian classification system, linked to both education and labour market systems goes back to 1980, when the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia adopted a social agreement on basics for standards for classifying occupations and education. At the time, the social agreement introduced the concept of completely harmonised entities – work (occupation) performed by an individual and professional education – and consequently a uniform classification of the complexity of work and related levels of professional education. In line with the social agreement, professional education and labour were arranged into eight groups and 10 categories, as two of the eight groups comprised two categories (the codes for difficulty groups for work and levels of professional education were: I.; II., III., IV., V., VI./1, VI./2; VII./1.; VII./2; VIII.).

Individual categories of work complexity were described with attributes such as: difficulty –composition of tasks and procedures, repetition or variety, pre-

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[1] This is a question of partnership which emerges when many actors enter the process at different levels.

[2] Unpredictability in this case is linked to implementing the European qualifications framework, which will be the exclusive domain of Member States of the European Union.

[3] Using an "open method of coordination" at international level has shown that it takes a long time, although results are suitable, since they are effective and are valid for a long time (Kohl and Vahlpahl, 2003).

[4] Although the European qualifications framework is defined as a "voluntary" meta-framework for developing confidence between different actors, there remains a danger that it encroaches, despite the subsidiarity principle, on policy areas which are primarily the domain of Member States.

[5] Using the open method of coordination means there is a serious risk that States will adopt the European qualifications framework only formally, while, in practical terms (in the framework of national systems) they will not introduce substantive changes to enable mobility, recognition of non-formal and informal learning, etc.

dictability and certainty of tasks and procedures, responsibility, management, etc. At the same time, these attributes were part of the criteria for classifying occupations – the work an individual had to perform – into categories of complexity of work. The second set of criteria comprised a description of the required knowledge, skills and competences to perform the work. These descriptions constituted the characteristics of the purposes and content of education, which were also taken as the criteria for classification of professional education into different levels ([6]). At the time this tool was 'development'-oriented, since it was intended to support coordination of the needs of both labour and education, and for preparing and developing education and training programmes. This uniform classification was, in the socioeconomic system of the time, also a statistical-analytical tool to observe the educational structure of the population, and for employment services also a central supporting tool for labour agencies and representation of the occupational structure (Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia, 1980).

Following Slovenian independence in 1991, the 1980 social agreement was not formally adopted into the new legal order; however, its contents were preserved in collective agreements, administrative and other records ([7]) and partly even in new legislation ([8]). Still today, the scale of levels of education set out in the social agreement is used in registration-deregistration forms for health and pensions insurance and in forms for communicating job vacancies. In addition to the current scale of 'levels of professional education', there are several other codes and scales of educational programmes, training, schools, etc., which are mostly outdated, not mutually compatible, and cover a limited range of areas of education and training.

The initiative to design a system linking all current provision and levels was taken by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia which, with help from an intersectoral working group, began designing a standard classification of education, the main goal of which is 'to replace the outdated classification and coding, and to prepare the foundations for greater uniformity and connectivity of official and/or administrative and other records containing data on the level, type and area of education' (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2006, p. 13). The main element of the education and training classification sys-

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[6] In the social agreement, the term professional education was understood to mean general and professional knowledge and skills essential for performing certain tasks and for successful 'self-management'. Acquisition of a level of professional education was possible through successful mastery of socially accredited educational programmes or under special procedures demonstrating mastery of knowledge and training for work through self-education.

[7] In personnel records based on the Labour Records Act.

[8] For instance, the salary system in the Public Sector Act.

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tem today is 'the level of educational activity or outcomes'. And this was de-
scribed on a trial basis by descriptors of knowledge, skills and competences.
It was expected that this concept should allow to classify on the same level
all kinds of national vocational qualifications obtained in one certification sys-
tem and where necessary also other activities and outcomes outside the for-
mal or initial system of education.

Although clear from the outset that the objectives described in the Euro-
pean qualifications framework were merely to assist Member States in de-
veloping national qualifications frameworks, and were in no way obligatory,
the idea of a European qualifications framework in Slovenia made the need
to design a national framework obvious. Designing a Slovenian national quali-
fications framework emerged from national discussions on the proposed Eu-
ropean qualifications framework and a draft of the standard classification of
education (Klasius) ([9]). This raised in particular the relationship between the
(former) standard classification and the Slovenian qualifications framework.
A desire emerged for the standard classification to form the basis for the na-
tional qualifications framework. The Decree on the introduction and use of a
classification system for education and training, passed in April 2006, enacted
the Klasius standard classification of education as the basic foundation for the
Slovenian qualifications framework (Government of the Republic of Slovenia,
2006). Nevertheless, the basic issue remained unresolved, and will have to
be considered by the Slovenian qualifications framework: national qualifica-
tion frameworks are intended to develop and not merely classify qualifications.

The impact of the European qualifications framework on the Slovenian qualifications framework

Two issues are of fundamental importance in understanding the impact of
the European qualifications framework on designing the Slovenian qualifica-
tions framework: (a) national discussion on the proposed European qualifi-
cations framework; (b) designing the Klasius standard classification of edu-
cation. Both initiatives followed directly from the European qualifications frame-
work and explore ways of implementing it in Slovenia.

National discussion and deliberations on the proposed European qualifi-
cations framework, which ran from July to December 2005, were controlled

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([9]) Klasius comes from the Slovenian words **KLA**sifikacijski **S**istem **I**zobraževanja in **Us**posabljanja,
which means classification system of education.

by three ministries: the Ministry of Education and Sport; the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs; and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, which together formed an intersectoral project group. The project group decided that the Republic of Slovenia would lead national discussion on the European qualifications framework in three stages:

(a) prepare professional starting points for national discussion and identify key topics ([10]);

(b) sectoral discussions with specific social partners ([11]);

(c) wider public discussion and formulation of conclusions ([12]) (Ministry of Education and Sport, Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs, and Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, 2006).

The leading role in implementing the first phases, preparing professional starting points for national discussion and identifying key topics, was given by the Minister for Education and Sport to an expert group ([13]). This group considered national discussion to have a dual purpose. Its aim should be both to obtain feedback from the public on the basic principles of the European qualifications framework, and to disseminate information on what the European qualifications framework represents, how it will operate and how it will affect national realities. As a result, the whole discussion and issues were divided into four areas:

(a) the purpose and objectives of the European qualifications framework;

(b) theoretical basis (understanding the terms: learning outcomes, competences; qualifications);

(c) basis for a national qualifications framework;

(d) reinforcing common trust (op. cit.)

([10]) Preparing professional starting points and key topics involved more than 30 experts from the three ministries, relevant public institutions (National Institute for Vocational Education and Training, Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, Employment Service, Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, etc.) and social-partner associations (trade unions and chambers).

([11]) The second phase of implementation of national discussion, sectoral discussions with individual categories of social partners, involved a total of almost 2 000 participants, particularly representatives of social partners and individual parts of the education system (universities).

([12]) The plenary discussion, to which representatives were invited from all ministries, public institutions and social partners, involved more than 200 participants who – based on results of the second phase – gave final answers to the initial questions.

([13]) The expert group for preparing starting points for national discussion comprised one representative each from the Ministry of Education and Sport, the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs, and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training, the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, the Employment Service and the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia.

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It is clear from these areas that the basic purpose of discussion on the European qualifications framework was not merely to obtain relevant information for preparing reports but rather to make the framework better known and to seek points of contact with the forthcoming Slovenian qualifications framework.

Several sectoral discussions were held ([14]). Each sector discussion had one representative of each thematic group as defined by the expert group. A brief presentation of each area was followed by practical sessions for participants to seek responses to specific questions on the aforementioned individual thematic areas. After all sectoral discussions had been held, a plenary discussion took place, which led to a synthesis of the findings of the individual sectoral discussions into general conclusions; participants again, this time in mixed groups (employers, social partners, teachers and headmasters) in workshops, dealt with similar practical tasks identified earlier in the sectoral discussions. A system was thus established of cross-searching for answers to individual issues not defined by the sectoral discussions (op. cit. p. 2).

The main emphasis of the plenary discussion clearly showed that participants agreed with the objectives and reasoning, and accepted the urgency of establishing qualifications frameworks at both European and Slovenian levels. At the same time, the point was raised that the European qualifications framework is practically useless unless it incorporates or relates clearly to the contents of the national qualifications framework, which requires an exceptional degree of compatibility of the two frameworks (op. cit. p. 8). The search for possibilities for further development of Slovenian non-formal and formal education can be understood in this sense. A large part of the plenary discussion was aimed at finding systemic solutions to standardise the system of appreciation or assessment and recognition of learning outcomes at European and national levels ([15]). One interesting aspect mentioned is the desire for more accurately defined contents of individual levels of the European qualifications framework, and more specific advice on designing additional guidelines for preparing national European frameworks by the European Commission (op. cit. p. 10). This also confirmed the desire to implement the European qualifications framework in Slovenia.

The answer to 'How do you see the development of the Slovenian qualifications framework in terms of reflecting the basic principles of the European qualifications framework?' is undoubtedly of key importance to understand-

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([14]) Sectoral discussions involved employers, trade unions, teachers and head teachers of secondary schools, further professional colleges, higher-education colleges and universities.

ing the influence of the European qualifications framework on the Slovenian framework. A summary of responses at the plenary discussion reveals two key ideas. The first is closely linked to the role of social partners in implementing the European and national qualifications frameworks. It particularly applies to two groups:

(a) employers, as direct users of everything that arises in formal, non-formal and informal education, should be actively involved in developing the national qualifications framework;

(b) the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs, should take on a coordinating role for all partners involved in developing the Slovenian qualifications framework (op. cit. p. 13).

On the other hand, some responses directly concerned the objectives and contents of the European and Slovenian qualifications frameworks. 'The starting point for the Slovenian qualifications framework should be emphasis on learning outcomes as understood in the European qualifications framework, in such a way that the Slovenian qualifications framework will in turn influence development of policy in education and training' (op. cit. p. 13). In this way the distinguishing function of the Slovenian qualifications framework – developing policy in the areas of education and training – was clearly set out, which was not the case with the Klasius standard classification of education.

Although the plenary discussion on the draft European qualifications framework revealed a distinction between the Slovenian qualifications framework and the Klasius standard classification of education, this was the first time an

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(15) At present there are at least four subsystems in Slovenia, which are insufficiently linked. The first is the subsystem of regular vocational and professional education, where programmes are created based on adopted vocational standards, but are not updated regularly enough. Also unresolved is the issue of practical training in companies – companies are not particularly interested in providing it, as it primarily represents a cost. Then there is the subsystem of regular general education, including academic education. All the outcomes of this system, which are recorded in publicly certified documents (certificates and degrees, or educational profiles that the system provides), are still not linked to the system of vocational standards, which renders it all the more difficult to determine the vocations for which this system provides full training, and those for which it only provides partial training (and to what extent). The third subsystem is the system of determining knowledge and competences gained through experience and training – national vocational qualifications. Recognition of individual qualifications under this system is adequately regulated and standardised; it is also fully based on existing vocational standards and catalogues of standards of professional knowledge and skills. However, the question of transferability from this system to the system of formal education is systemically indicated, but difficult in practice. Finally, there is a wide range of training provided in companies not linked to any existing systems, providing certificates on qualification with only limited validity.

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intention was expressed to use the standard classification as the starting document for preparing the Slovenian qualifications framework. This is shown in the final version of the draft standard classification, which is fundamentally based on the European qualifications framework; this is clear in the characteristics of the key terms and descriptors of levels, and at least in part in the number of levels. In particular, the standard classification adopted interpretations of the terms learning, learning activities, learning outcomes, qualification, competence, qualifications framework and level identical to those proposed by the European qualifications framework (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2006). Likewise, individual levels of the standard classification are identical to the descriptors of the European qualifications framework, set out in tables 'Learning outcomes; progression from Level 1 to 8' and 'Supporting information on levels in the EQF' ([16]). Indirect links between the standard classification and the European qualifications framework are mainly reflected in the number of levels. Although at first glance the number of levels appears the same in both cases, the standard classification divides Levels 6 and 8 into two sublevels (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2006). This means that the actual number of levels in the standard classification of education is 10, which matches the Slovenian education system and specifically the 1980 social agreement on standard bases for classifying occupations and education.

Risks of using the open method of coordination in creating the Slovenian qualifications framework

Given that both the European qualifications framework and the concept of the Slovenian qualifications framework used the open method of coordination, the risks inherent in the open method of coordination cannot be overlooked: horizontal and vertical complexity, unpredictability, slow pace, the 'Trojan horse' and 'emperor's new clothes' phenomena.

Horizontal and vertical complexity
Horizontal and vertical complexity is closely linked to the question of partnership and the large number of actors involved at various levels in the process of designing the European and national qualifications frameworks. However, we must distinguish between two forms of complexity. While vertical complexity is closely linked to the partnership of sectoral organisations in developing qualifications frameworks at European level, horizontal complexity is conditioned by partnership in designing national qualifications frameworks.

Horizontal complexity is particularly important for the analysis, since it requires integration of chambers, trade unions, university faculties, schools, ministries, etc. Precisely this type of complexity can prevent creation and development of national and European qualifications frameworks. It is essential to understand the complex links between education and employment policies, which promote access to progression in education and employment, and the qualifications frameworks. Particularly important are policy instruments and the administrative support systems for realising these instruments, and involving all relevant partners in decisions.

The plenary discussion in Slovenia clearly underlined the difficulties of horizontal complexity due to differing interpretations of the objectives and use of the European qualifications framework, basic terms, etc. Employers, employees and educators were all inclined to solve the issue through strictly normative regulation of comparison, assessment and recognition of qualifications. The problem arose of dividing responsibilities among the various actors and the incompatibility of acts in various sectoral areas directly or indirectly concerning qualifications. However, more precise understanding of statutory regulation of comparison, assessment and recognition of qualifications reveals an ambiguity of interests arising from different roles in the process of developing qualifications. A potential solution is common trust, both among institutions that develop qualifications and institutions that award or certify qualifications and ensure their credibility. Such a solution is already found in the material for discussion on the European qualifications framework, which is understood as a meta-framework that will strengthen mutual trust among the various actors involved in education and employment and implementing lifelong learning both between and in countries, between the different competent bodies such as the Ministry of Education and Sport, Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs and Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, 2006.

Unpredictability

Undoubtedly, unpredictability represents a significant problem in designing European and Slovenian national qualifications frameworks. It must be borne in mind that the European and Slovenian qualifications frameworks are new, and it is practically impossible to predict their future sustainability and effectiveness. In this sense the designers of the Slovenian qualifications framework are trying to learn from countries with examples of good practice, such as Australia, Ireland, Denmark and Scotland. However, account must be taken of na-

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([16]) European Commission, 2005, p. 12.

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tionally specific systems of development of qualifications and cultural attitudes towards them, which can reduce the value of general good practice.

Slow pace

The open method of coordination, even if basically effective, does require protracted coordination. For the European qualifications framework, a series of discussions had to be held – defining the descriptors of learning outcomes, coordination of the contents of individual levels, etc. The same can be said of the Slovenian qualifications framework. Although discussion on the standard classification of education began in 2001, it was only adopted just a few months ago, and implementation of the Slovenian qualifications framework is still someway off. This should not be seen as something negative, however, quite the contrary. Effectiveness of the results of the open method of coordination depends primarily on the time allocated and on the kind of coordination: medium or longer term, clear mandate of expert groups, actors involved, etc.

The 'Trojan horse' phenomenon

The 'Trojan horse' phenomenon is a problem hard to link directly to designing the Slovenian qualifications framework, since it was mainly found in former national qualifications frameworks. Integrating elements of the European qualifications framework into a specific national framework can start to undermine national specifics of qualifications frameworks. Since the 'Trojan horse' is closely linked to the principle of harmonising European space, the designers of the European qualifications framework included mechanisms that prevent excessive homogenisation, such as the non-obligatory role of the European qualifications framework and the 'rough' or general definition of the contents of individual levels of qualifications. However, attention must be drawn to the 'Trojan horse' regarding systemic development of qualifications in individual countries. As qualifications frameworks have a development role, intensive integration of the European qualifications framework at national level could represent an indirect attempt at harmonising qualifications and respective development systems in Europe.

The 'emperor's new clothes' phenomenon

The 'emperor's new clothes' is a problem closely linked to applying the European and Slovenian qualifications frameworks. Although enormous energy is invested in their design and development, in practice nothing may change, and both frameworks could become ends in themselves. It is even more important to ensure in practice the transparency of the European qualifications framework and to allow access to all interested parties, while at the same time creating a national framework in accordance with agreed objectives of the European qualifications framework and using the same or at least similar tools for establishing transparency of qualifications, for assessment and recognition.

Conclusion

The European qualifications framework encouraged numerous European countries – including Slovenia – to develop further and design their own specific national qualifications frameworks. Although Slovenia had a historical instrument for statistical analysis of education levels, this was no longer adequate for changing understanding of lifelong learning and labour-market mobility. National discussion on the European qualifications framework encouraged various actors simultaneously to consider designing a Slovenian qualifications framework. Since during this period design of the Klasius standard classification of education as a statistical instrument was completed, this instrument became the statutory basis for developing the national qualifications framework. Further development of this framework will require consideration of all the risks that could question implementation, use and efficient application of the national qualifications framework.

Although the European qualifications framework gave rise to the explicit desire to design a national qualifications framework in Slovenia, using the open method of coordination in designing the European qualifications framework does not in itself avoid possible future difficulties: (horizontal and vertical) complexity, unpredictability, slow pace, the 'Trojan horse' and the 'emperor's new clothes' phenomena. All the foregoing problems are closely interconnected, and reducing attention on one could lead to another emerging. Solutions which emerged from national discussion on the European qualifications framework were transparency and common trust and partnership.

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Linking VET and higher education. Is the EQF contributing to this issue?

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Key words

Qualifications
framework,
vocational education,
higher education,
system of education
in Malta,
parity of esteem,
social cohesion

SUMMARY

This paper focuses on the relationship between vocational education and higher education in the EQF. The labour market demands greater synergy between the two sectors of education. Through a historical review, the author examines some challenges to education and training systems in the level descriptors of the EQF and the divide between vocational and higher education. The paper proposes a combined qualification which connects the strengths of vocational education with those of higher education. Finally, the paper focuses on the system of education in Malta to illustrate the importance of laying the foundations for a connection between vocational and higher education at EQF Levels 3, 4 and 5. This is the fundamental breakthrough in bridging academic and vocational education to achieve not only parity of esteem but also social cohesion, progression and transferability in the system.

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Introduction

One of the issues the EQF ([1]) attempts to resolve is the adequate linking of the distinct worlds of vocational education and training and higher education. This is critical, as many policy-makers and curriculum developers want to establish bridges which would eliminate the divide between these two diverse yet complementary sectors of education.

This paper focuses on the relationship between vocational education and higher education and argues that today's labour market demands greater synergy between the two sectors of education. The paper begins with a general historical review of education in an enlarged European Union. The article then examines some challenges to education and training systems in the EQF level descriptors and the divide between vocational and higher education. The paper then proposes a combined qualification which would connect tangibly, the strengths of vocational education with higher education and vice-versa. Finally, the paper focuses on an example taken from the education system in Malta to illustrate the importance of laying the foundations for synergy between vocational and higher education at EQF Levels 3, 4 and 5. This is the fundamental breakthrough in bridging academic and vocational education in a bid to achieve not only parity of esteem but also greater social cohesion and transferability in the system and beyond.

The historical context

Historically speaking, education systems have followed the physiological and psychological patterns of human development. Hence at an early age, young people are taught basic knowledge, skills and competences needed for their initial socialisation and integration into a world far larger and complex than that of their parents. As children successfully integrate into new social and cultural contexts, the knowledge-skills-competence (KSC) dimension develops in specific areas of learning which prepare young people to enter the world of work. Secondary level education was traditionally seen as the sector which prepares students to start work in a specific context and which would have given individuals the basic knowledge, skills and competences to sustain their quality of life.

([1]) All references to EQF are taken from European Commission (2005).

Due to developments in science and technology, changing patterns or modes of preparation for work, such as practical experience in real or simulated workplaces, and embedded cultural and social contexts in which societies in developed countries were achieving their quality of life, education systems and contents needed comprehensive reform and innovation. Industrialisation and later globalisation, made it necessary for people to remain in education for as long as possible and to gain experiences in different cultural and labour contexts. Further training provided alternative job opportunities and opened up the possibility for specialised training. This heralded a new phenomenon: most individuals today look at continuing education and training and especially higher education as the solution for securing stable employment and avoiding unemployment. At the same time, colleges of education and polytechnics, particularly in northern and central Europe, were gaining a strong reputation of hands-on education providing a more direct, relevant and attractive link to the labour market compared to universities.

Education soon emerged as not necessarily being the solution to all employment opportunities. Hence today, many unemployed, particularly in Europe, fall under two main categories: the unskilled and graduates who terminate their studies after the first cycle of higher education in the framework designed under the Bologna process.

Traditionally, vocational colleges and universities were seen as two distinct and rather unrelated educational worlds. Those who opted for VET were persons with an inclination towards practical, down-to-earth and technical and/or manual learning. Scholarly research referred to this group as the blue-collar workers characterised by an average salary, critical conditions of work with a preference for secure, often public, employment. Students who opted for university aimed to achieve qualifications which would earn them the title of medical doctor, lawyer, engineer, manager, economist, etc., and label them as 'professionals'. In most countries, teachers with the exception of university 'teachers', earned this status only at a later stage.

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Current challenges for education and training systems

Parallel to these developments, Europe was living a dream; that of enlargement, stability, security and prosperity among its Member and Associated States. Perestroika and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, as well as the dismantling of the Warsaw Pact, brought a massive restructuring process across Europe. It meant that the 'old' continent could reshape its institutional, social and cultural backbone to reflect a new political reality that would sustain such development through education and training. The Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the United Nations, as well as other governmental and non-governmental organisations, kept the doors of a 'common European home' open throughout the difficult period of the cold war and the post-communist era. Enlargement in 2003 was a significant breakthrough in the history of the European Union. Adding 10 (now 12) other European nations, particularly those from behind the iron curtain, was a remarkable achievement. Inevitably, this addition coupled with the prospects of the Lisbon (2000) and Barcelona (2002) targets and the Bologna and Copenhagen processes, meant that Member States embarked on a more delicate and complex issue. The idea of a European qualifications framework (EQF) is an attempt to mould Member States and their citizens into a unified yet diverse whole that intends to provide the institutional mechanism for sustainable education and training, employability and socioeconomic investment. EQF is prevalently an instrument of employability. It is also a benchmark which cuts across all Member States guiding learners towards lifelong learning, career progression and sustained quality of life. It is the Esperanto of education and training and a checklist for industry to measure the achievements of its employees and those yet to be employed. For governments, providers and learners and their parents, it provides reference levels on which to plan education from the lowest to the highest levels and pathways accessible to all. It gives all individuals conscious of the need to embark on lifelong learning the opportunity to structure their education and training according to their needs, inclinations and aspirations.

A new approach to describing levels of learning

Reading the proposed EQF levels ([2]) one notices progression, flexibility and a sense of achievement. Unlike traditional qualification systems, where entry points, accreditation and equivalence are academically, culturally and socially problematic, the EQF is built on a culture of lifelong learning and is not necessarily bound by time or gender, by age group or by kind of institution. In principle, a 40-year old could participate in an EQF Level 1 simultaneously with a five-year old! Similarly, a 17-year old and a 50-year old could work together in a workshop aimed at EQF Level 4. This paradigm shift in providing education is the result of a radically changing context in work places and the essential meaning of life environment and work today. If a job is not for life, then likewise, an educational achievement is not necessarily for life either. People today need to change jobs and also increasingly want to change jobs. They need to change jobs because they are made redundant or their place of work no longer exists. They may want to change jobs for career progression or are challenged by other private, occupational or short-term achievable targets. They may want to experience various kinds of development or they may be given an opportunity to live in a different country. All these factors provoke innovation and change in the way we perceive and provide education and training.

Bridging the divide between vocational education/training and university or higher education and a plea for combined qualifications

The proposed EQF faces two big alternative challenges. First, to bridge the divide between vocational and higher education by making this division completely obsolete. Second, to institutionalise and strengthen this divide by, for instance, a two-way outcome-oriented process enabling individuals to obtain a combined qualification (CQ) encompassing both a higher educational and vocational qualification. A combined qualification is a qualification achieved when VET and HE competent bodies determine that an individual has reached a specified standard of KSC of scholarship and recognised occupational competences. These are fully recognised by established organisations and respective benchmarks in the labour market. It would not necessarily

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([2]) See pp. 15-16.

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be an addition to an existing EQF level but an additional qualifying value which learners may add to one of the EQF levels from 5 to 8. The following scenario shows the advantage that such a CQ could provide. A couple wants to purchase a new house and sell their apartment. The difference between the cost of a new house and the selling price of the old apartment may be obtained through a bridging loan. Once the bank and individuals agree to the conditions of the bridging loan, the couple can obtain the new house and sell their apartment. Since the selling price of the old apartment is less than the cost of the new house, the couple must pay a mortgage over several years before retirement. But the house is theirs!

A CQ works similarly. Individuals register for qualifications at EQF Level 6. At the same time they are attracted by EQF Levels 4 or 5 which they may combine with their degree programme. A system which allows individuals to bridge the two programmes so that scholarship and recognised work capabilities are achieved simultaneously (buying a new house and selling an old apartment) would render a more complete education to individuals and increase their quality of life. The time borrowed from one programme to put into the other has to be paid back to accomplish the bridging process successfully. The course may therefore take longer (mortgage process) but the end result will increase the possibility of employability and the quality of learning and work experience.

As the EQF system stands, bridging between VET and HE is still too vaguely defined, even if the potential clearly exists and is repeatedly expressed. Taking the progress of a child who has successfully completed compulsory education, VET and HE should be two equally valid pathways and options marked by comparable and tangible signs of employability. Although the ways and routes are different, the achievements may be comparable. This implies that entry into EQF Level 3 (for young children) should be signed by a continuous assessment process starting as early as possible. At the end of schooling at EQF Level 2, an assessment should allow students to move either to upper-secondary education or to adult and further education. There should be no failures at entry EQF Level 3; either students who obtain qualifications at upper-secondary level or students who obtain qualifications for further/adult education at a comparable level.

No one should be labeled a failure at the end of EQF Level 2. No one should be given a qualification that classifies the individual as a "social" failure. Every individual should be guided to the next step in a recognised qualifications framework. Entry into EQF Level 3 could also imply reinforcement of EQF Levels 1 and 2 and for students coming from such levels. In this con-

nection, VET institutions should be strengthened and quality improved. They should get better trained teachers and be adequately financed so learners who wish to reenter further learning will be given the opportunity to do so. Every individual who volunteers to remain in the system after completing compulsory education should be given a place under certain conditions. This may become an extremely important development emanating from the proposed EQF.

Connections and transfer between vocational and higher levels

Having completed EQF Level 4 or Level 5, learners should have access to Level 6. This is another challenge for the proposed EQF. There are two fundamental questions needing answers. How can we assess learning so that entry into EQF Level 6 will be equivalent to completion at EQF Level 5? What common knowledge, skills and competences are necessary at EQF Levels 4 and 5 to provide common KSCs at the end of this cycle?

The structures needed to bridge VET and HE can be described as organisational and substantive. Setting up a Vocational and Higher Education Commission (VHEC) at national or branch level will serve to plan policy in both environments so the KSC component is complementary and responsive to industry/outcome-driven approaches. The VHEC should create the necessary organisational structure to ensure that resources are shared between the two providing segments; to ensure that the national qualifications framework responds to the economic and social needs of the country in the context of the EU and to guarantee that learning in both environments is complementary. The VHEC should be composed of people preferably with experience in both educational environments with a strong commitment to implement provisions according to the principles of the proposed EQF for lifelong learning. Further, VHEC should represent the interests of industry and commerce as well as those of general education. If possible, Ministers of Education should chair and moderate such a Commission with the aim of keeping its deliberations on track with government and EU policies and get financial means to develop the necessary expertise.

From a substantive point of view, learners at EQF Levels 4 and 5 must possess common core competences which ease entry into EQF Level 6 and this without essential handicaps. Such core competences could be communication in the mother tongue and in another language, basic competences in mathematics, science and technology, digital competence, learning to learn,

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interpersonal and civic competences, entrepreneurship and cultural 'expression', such as the key and basic KSCs mentioned in the recent resolution from the European Parliament and Council. Whether learning takes place in upper-secondary schools or VET colleges or adult education institutions, such competences should always be provided and compulsory. In this way, learners going on to EQF Level 6 will have an equivalent start-up position whether they come from upper-secondary education or further, vocational or adult education. EQF Level 6 is a crucial threshold in the proposed European qualifications framework. According to Cedefop (policy report and Maastricht synthesis) 50 % of additional jobs will be at higher level, around 40 % at upper secondary level and 10 to 15 % at lower level by 2010 (Leney et al., 2004). The target for most governments is to abolish the traditional gap between compulsory and post-secondary education so that all young learners will have access to a form of education that both the learners and the country needs to support economic growth and ensure social cohesion.

It is expected that actors and practitioners including curriculum developers will design EQF Levels 4 and 5, irrespective of the area of study, as a kind of bridging process taking place before entry into higher education irrespective of the time needed to achieve such a goal. The proposed European credit system for VET (ECVET) (European Commission, 2005), such as ECTS is a credit system which allows providers of education to impart knowledge, skills and competences according to learners' own abilities and their own pace. The assessment procedure will therefore be tailor-made and individualised to achieve desired results while respecting all the different KSC dimensions. Whether one takes the upper-secondary route, or the VET or the adult education route, the qualification (the short-cycle within the first cycle of higher level qualifications) achieved at the end of EQF Level 5 is equivalent and comparable.

This would be a major breakthrough in European education which, if successful, could be exported to other systems around the world. The concept underlying such reform is that no young person finishing compulsory education is considered a failure. The Lisbon strategy in its substantive dimension implies that noone should be marginalised at the end of their formal education and that the concrete objective is to transform every individual into an asset rather than a liability. There are at least four key issues in the Lisbon strategy that point towards this goal: better education and skills; an adaptable workforce, better regulation and more and better jobs. The most important of these is better or quality education and skills. Linking VET and HE is one step towards quality education.

The Maltese example

Taking a general example from the Maltese system of education ([3]) the following table may illustrate a desirable process of parallelism at EQF Levels 3, 4 and 5:

Post-secondary education	EQF levels	Vocational education or adult education
Advanced and intermediate level qualifications in: two subjects at 'A' level standard and four subjects at intermediate level standard	EQF Level 3 EQF Level 4 EQF Level 5	• MCAST foundation certificate (60-90 credit points) • BTEC-MCAST first diploma (90-120 credit points) • BTEC-MCAST national diploma (60 credit points) • BTEC-MCAST higher national diploma (60 credit points)
+ ancillary key competences		+ ancillary key competences
270-330 credit points	**Access to EQF Level 6**	270-330 credit points

What is significant in this example is that the bridging process:
- is outcome-driven;
- is based on accumulation of credit points (which could be designed based on 35 to 40 college/work experience hours per week) and not on time serving and/or calendar years;
- is flexible in qualifications required at the entry position;
- is inclusive in common core competences;
- covers the whole spectrum of the diversity of education and training and includes a thorough assessment process;
- is sufficiently simple, plausible and functional;
- features progression as a form of achievement;

([3]) This example is taken from Malta's system of education in which the learning route in its only vocational college (the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology) can be compared to upper-secondary education where students are expected to take two subjects at advanced level of education, three subjects at intermediate level and a subject, also at intermediate level, entitled Systems of knowledge (which is compulsory). To my knowledge, access to the University of Malta is based on achieving pass marks in subjects taken in upper secondary education; through the Higher Diploma in Hospitality Management offered by the Institute for Tourism Studies, the International Baccalaureate as well as through the 'maturity' clause.

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- accredits all KSCs and transforms such accreditation into the development and implementation of an integrated credit transfer and accumulation mechanism for lifelong learning.

EQF Levels 3, 4 and 5 are crucial to the link between and comparability of VET and HE. More than focusing on subjects such as French, economics, physics, biology, or business studies, computing, industrial electronics, printing or construction, etc., the link should be based on:
- learning outcomes;
- pre-determined credit points and timeframes;
- quality assurance;
- common core competences;
- specific occupational standards expressed as concrete achievements.

An educational system (based on EQF) that manages to produce, by the end of compulsory education, a further opportunity, provision and access to all kinds of further learning, is the ultimate goal and will have a positive impact on the link between vocational education and training and higher education in view of a comprehensive lifelong learning strategy.

Conclusion

There is no fixed formula to bring vocational and higher education to synergise their impact on learning, except for structural and substantive changes in the way learning institutions perceive economic and social challenges.

The Lisbon strategy and the processes that have made Bologna and Copenhagen landmarks in education reform have now come to a stage when vocational and higher education must reformulate the comprehensive provision of post-compulsory education and training. This reformulation must be guided by combined and shared policies that address economic and social issues from different but equally significant perspectives. The traditional divide between vocational and higher education will, in the long run, be seen as a superficial barrier to the interests of the economy, investment and economic growth. By joint statutory initiatives, vocational and higher education institutions across the European Union will deliver more and better learners, more and better workers and more and better jobs.

This is one of the greatest challenges of our times in European education at post-compulsory levels of education and training. It will make or break the

future of a competitive Europe, of a Europe which fosters social cohesion and attracts growth in all sectors of development and in particular those based on information and communication technology, transportation, production, development and leisure activities. Such policies must be backed by Europe-wide research and innovation. It is this platform of research and innovation that will eventually bring VET and HE to invest jointly in combined qualifications that draw serious investment from industry (and the full support of the social partners and other stakeholders) to concrete projects for the future.

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Modelling the national qualifications framework of Lithuania into the European qualifications framework

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SUMMARY

The article analyses modelling the national qualifications framework of Lithuania and its relations with the European qualifications framework. It shows the main methodological parameters and designing approaches of the national qualifications framework, analyses the descriptors of levels of qualifications, compares the model of the national qualifications framework of Lithuania with the European qualifications framework and indicates the main challenges for implementation of both qualifications frameworks in Lithuania.

Key words

Qualification, competence, skills, national qualifications framework, European qualifications framework, qualifications levels

Introduction

Many European countries have recently embarked on developing a national qualifications framework. The need is predetermined by current economic and technological changes, increasingly intense competition and globalisation of markets in goods, services and human resources. An important factor influencing national qualifications frameworks in European Union countries is increasing integration in the labour market, vocational education and training and higher education. Designing and implementing EU measures, such as the European qualifications framework eases these processes. This article aims to clarify the main parameters and characteristics of the current national qualifications framework of Lithuania, analysing them in the context of the European qualifications framework. One of the most important questions

is how the national qualifications framework as an integral part of the national system of qualifications, can be matched with the European qualifications framework as a meta-framework and means for comparing qualifications in different EU countries and defining the main challenges.

Main methodological parameters of designing the national qualifications framework and the national system of qualifications in Lithuania

The national qualifications framework of Lithuania is currently an integral and central part of the national system of qualifications. According to the designed model, the national system of qualifications consists of the qualifications framework and the processes of designing, providing, evaluating and the recognising qualifications. The national qualifications framework plays a structuring role in the national system of qualifications because the qualifications are designed, issued, assessed and recognised according to the qualifications levels defined by the framework (Fig. 1). Currently, the concepts of the national system of qualifications and national qualifications framework have been drafted. These documents have been developed jointly by researchers, education and training institutions and the social partners. They have been widely presented and discussed by stakeholders in education, business and the labour market. Currently, there are occupational standards and a register of qualifications. Implementation of the national system of qualifications and the national qualifications framework will start in 2008.

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Figure 1: Model of the national system of qualifications in Lithuania
(*Lietuvos nacionalinės kvalifikacijų sistemos koncepcija*, 2006)
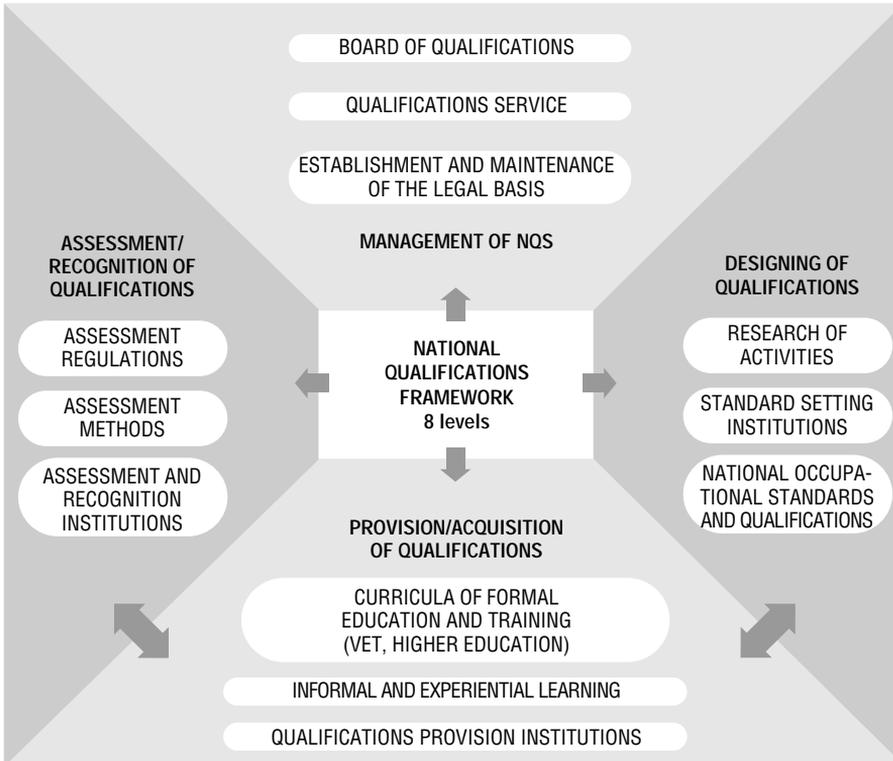
The concept of the national system of qualifications of Lithuania defines the national framework of qualifications as a system of different levels of qualifications according to qualification criteria, indicating the competences needed for a particular activity (*Lietuvos nacionalinės kvalifikacijų sistemos koncepcija*, 2006). The specific characteristics of qualification levels are shaped by the national education system and the national labour market. The national framework of qualifications shows the character and principles for grouping competences at the level of qualifications. The aim of the national framework of qualifications is to support and foster lifelong learning development by satisfying the needs of individuals, social groups and activities related to education, professional development and social welfare.

This aim is achieved by carrying out the following tasks:

(a) coordination. The national qualifications framework creates the preconditions for compatibility of acquired qualifications with labour market needs and establishes the reference system for the partnership between the world

of work and education and training. It fosters development of human resources and eases coordination of economical, social and employment policies;

(b) fostering transparency of and access to qualifications design, provision, assessment and certification processes;

(c) information and guidance for persons entering the labour market or changing their professional activity. The national qualifications framework provides information on the content of qualifications, requirements for competences and qualifications, ways of progression from one level to another, learning possibilities and other important issues;

(d) quality assurance of acquired and recognised competences and qualifications referring to requirements of the system of professional activities at national and European levels;

(e) promoting development of lifelong learning and continuing vocational training by supporting all forms and ways of learning, creating conditions for assessing and recognising all learning outcomes independent of the ways they are acquired;

(f) fostering workforce mobility by setting qualification and learning preconditions for developing the vocational and geographical mobility of the workforce.

The main approach to designing the national qualifications framework and defining qualifications levels is reference to the specifications and needs of the system of activities (Fig. 2).

The national qualifications framework of Lithuania will play an important role in all processes of the national system of qualifications. It shall:

(a) form the basis of reference for designing the qualifications. It will help to define the level of qualifications for designing occupational standards and mapping existing and new qualifications in the national register of qualifications. These functions confirm the necessity of a competence-based approach;

(b) help foster equity between the different forms and ways of provision and acquisition of qualifications by setting a clear basis of information on the levels of qualifications and the ways of progression between these levels. Implementation and development of the national qualifications framework shall also help improve continuity and transition between initial VET and higher education, as well as initial and continuing VET;

(c) serve as the instrument for assessing and certifying competences and qualifications by indicating the level of acquired qualifications and ways of progression between levels. It will also be an important guidance instrument for assessing and recognising informal and non-formal learning.

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Figure 2: Influences of the systems of activities and education and training
in the processes of the national system of qualifications
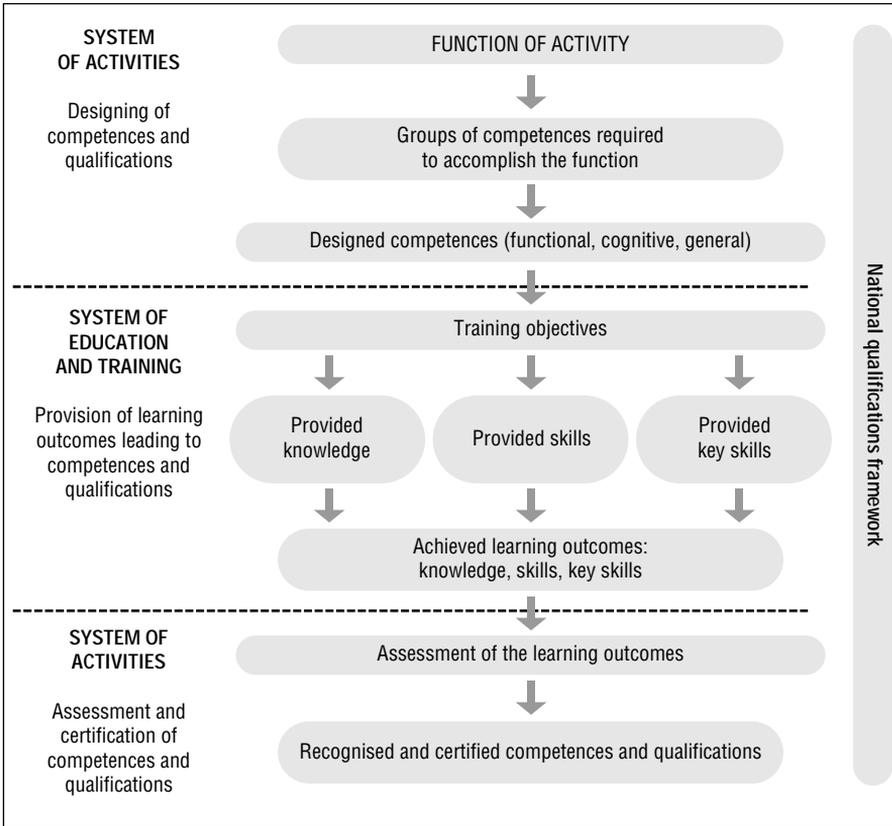
The descriptors of qualifications levels are based on two main parameters:
(a) competences, as the abilities to perform certain tasks and operations in the real or imitated context of activity. Competences are defined by the knowledge, skills, attitudes and approaches acquired during learning at a training institution or at the workplace. The concept of competence is derived from the world of work, or, more precisely, from the interface of the fields of work and learning. Competences are understood as learning outcomes applied in carrying out a professional activity. Therefore competences can also be defined as learning outcomes that refer to the requirements and specifications of the system of activities. According to this definition, a qualification is defined as the entirety of acquired competences required by a certain professional activity and recognised by the relevant State institutions. Recognition of qualifications is confirmed by a nationally approved diploma or certificate. In analysing the competences necessary for performing

activities, developers of the qualifications framework identified three main types of competences: functional, cognitive and general. It is not always easy to establish a clear limit distinguishing these types of competences. It is the general and cognitive competences that tend to be awkward to distinguish. It is not quite clear, for example, which competence type should cover issues such as general education knowledge, knowledge of methods of operational performance and capacities to apply such knowledge in practice, etc. The concept of competence in the national qualifications framework is based on the functional approach applied in many current qualifications frameworks – NVQ (national vocational qualifications) in the UK, qualifications frameworks of Australia and New Zealand and others (Delamare Le Deist and Winterton, 2005). Different to the NVQ of the UK which is criticised for lack of attention to systematic acquisition of knowledge and skills in vocational education and training institutions (Warhurst, Grugulis and Keep, 2004), the concept of competence in the national qualifications system of Lithuania attributes an important role to integrating systematically provided knowledge and skills in designing and providing competences and qualifications. For example, general education plays a crucial role in progressing from one qualification level to another (especially in the first level of qualifications). The role of general education in the qualifications structure presented significant problems for experts in the working group for developing the national qualifications framework. The question was whether general education can be assessed as a certain qualification and, if so, what place this qualification occupies in the national qualifications framework. Intense discussions led to the conclusion that general education cannot be identified with professional qualifications. However, it constitutes a significant background and condition for qualification acquisition and qualification growth;

(b) Characteristics of the activity – autonomy, complexity and changeability. Describing each level of qualification the following questions are answered:

- How do characteristics of activity specific to the level of qualifications influence the needs of functional, cognitive and general competences required to accomplish functions of activities? In other words, what functional, cognitive and general competences are needed to accomplish a task with certain characteristics of autonomy, complexity and changeability?

- How do characteristics of activity influence acquisition and development of functional, cognitive and general competences? For example, absence of autonomy and simplicity of monotonous tasks in the lowest levels of qualifications do not provide enough possibilities to develop competences for performers of work at these levels. Therefore, descrip-

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tors of these levels indicate that additional measures and initiatives are needed from employers and VET institutions to improve lifelong learning and skills development at these levels.

Levels of qualifications in the national qualifications framework of Lithuania are structured hierarchically and encompass a comprehensive range of qualifications acquired at secondary schools, vocational education and training schools, as well as qualifications acquired at employment training centres, continuing vocational training courses and institutions of higher education. These levels of qualifications also encompass qualifications acquired by informal learning or other possibilities provided by lifelong learning.

The first five levels of qualifications include qualifications acquired in initial vocational education and training institutions and continuing vocational training or at the workplace. Levels 6 to 8 encompass qualifications acquired at higher education institutions.

Analysing characteristics of activities specific to the levels of qualifications, three types of activities can be discerned:

(a) elementary activities composed of simple actions and operations. Such activity is usually appropriate for the first level of qualifications;

(b) activity typical for the second, third, fourth and fifth levels of qualifications is composed of specialised actions and their combinations. The number of these actions and combinations is growing from the lower to the higher level. Although the content of actions and operations in these combinations are similar for all three mentioned levels of qualifications, a growing number of these actions, operations and their combinations increase the complexity of activity and lead to handling a wider range of technologies and ways of work organisation. Such complexity of activity inherent in the levels of qualifications provide good preconditions for further training and development of qualifications through credit accumulation and other mechanisms;

(c) beginning with the sixth level of qualifications the complexity of activities depends not only on more actions and combinations, but also on changes of the content of work. These changes are determined by application of higher and more complex technologies, higher responsibility for work organisation, requirements to make decisions based on analysis and research.

Data from the labour market and labour force analysis indicate that the structure of the national qualifications framework consisting of eight levels corresponds to the current structure of qualifications in the labour market (see Table 1).

Table 1: Structure of the workforce in Lithuania according to levels of qualifications

Level of qualifications	Composition and number of workers having the corresponding level of qualifications
Level 1	Unskilled workers in elementary occupations. Data show that from 2001 to 2004 the number of people with primary and general lower secondary education without vocational qualifications slightly decreased from 897 000 to 859 000 (*Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis* 2005, 2006). The number of unskilled workers in elementary occupations from 2000 to 2004 increased from 143 100 in 2000 to 154 700 in 2004 (*Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis* 2005, 2006).
Level 2	Low-skilled workers, graduates of labour market training programmes. Data show the number of people with low level vocational qualifications not completing lower secondary education decreased from 20 300 in 2001 to 14 900 in 2004 (*Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis* 2005, 2006).
Level 3	Skilled workers with vocational qualifications and lower secondary education. According to statistics, in the last years the number of people with vocational lower secondary education decreased from 102 200 in 2001 to 77 200 in 2004 (*Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis* 2005, 2006).
Level 4	High-skilled workers with vocational upper secondary or post secondary education (craft and related trades workers, plant and machine operators, assemblers, etc.). Data show the number of these employees significantly increased from 366 300 in 2000 to 394 600 in 2004 (*Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis* 2005, 2006). Today this category of the workforce with the employees in the fifth level of qualifications has highest demand on the labour market.
Level 5	Skilled and experienced employees (technicians, foremen and associate professionals, younger clerks), former graduates of special secondary schools (technikums) and higher vocational schools. It is complicated to estimate the number of people with these qualifications due to reform of higher education and transforming former higher vocational schools to colleges – (non-university higher education institutions) since 2001. There is also scant data on skilled workers participating in continuing vocational training. However, the people with special secondary education (graduates of former technikums) with graduates of former higher vocational schools in 2001 numbered 574 400 (*Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis* 2005, 2006). This category of the workforce with high-skilled workers of the fourth level has the highest demand on the labour market.
Level 6	Those with bachelors or corresponding degree of higher education (graduates of colleges and university bachelor and professional programmes). Data show an important increase in the population with higher education (all degrees): from 348 400 in 2001 to 408 500 in 2004 (*Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis* 2005, 2006). The number of graduates of colleges and universities in bachelor and professional programmes in the last years has also increased: college graduates from 4 602 in 2003 to 8 750 in 2004, university graduates of bachelor and professional programmes from 14 654 in 2003 to 15 758 in 2004 (*Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis* 2005, 2006).
Level 7	Those with master degrees or corresponding degrees of higher education. The number of graduates of masters programmes in 2004 was 7 435 (*Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis* 2005, 2006).
Level 8	Employees with a doctoral degree (researchers, R&D specialists). According to data, the number of researchers with a title and scientific degree in the public sector slightly increased from 5 333 in 2000 to 5 706 in 2004 (*Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis* 2005, 2006).

Further analysis of the contents of level descriptors shows the relationship between the characteristics of activities and competences.

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Level 1

Activity specifications

This level of qualifications is composed of elementary, auxiliary and simple actions and operations specific to many simple activities. The activity is performed under direct supervision. Elementary actions and operations are constant and repetitive.

Content of qualifications and ways of acquisition

Simple and continuously repetitive operations and tasks demand functional competences, which are simple, stable and easily acquired while practising the work. Tasks sometimes require adapting some knowledge acquired in general education. The simplicity and stability of activity do not favour acquiring new cognitive competences. Minimal requirement is initial education acquired through formal education and elementary functional, cognitive and core competences acquired informally or through work experience (informal learning at the workplace). Upgrading qualifications depends on acquired general education. By acquiring initial education and graduating from any adult vocational training programme or module, a second level qualification can be achieved. By acquiring general basic education (nine years) and vocational qualification at a vocational training school, a third level qualification can be achieved. By acquiring secondary education at vocational training school, a sixth level qualification can be achieved. Secondary education provides the possibility to enter colleges and universities to seek higher education qualifications.

Level 2

Activity specifications

This level of qualifications is composed of few or more specialised actions and operations. The context of activity is structured and activity is performed according to detailed instructions. In many cases, such activity demands intensive supervision and control from higher-qualified persons.

Content of qualifications and ways of acquisition

A few simple functional competences as well as cognitive and general competences corresponding to the level of initial education are required. Functional competences are oriented to narrowly specialised tasks to accomplish simple and repetitive actions and operations in a stable work environment. Activity demands application of basic knowledge in the field. Simplicity and stability of activity do not favour acquisition of new cognitive competences.

These qualifications are acquired at vocational education and training schools and centres of vocational training for adults. Functional competences are acquired through practical training in the work environment (simulated workplace) or at the workplace. Cognitive competences are acquired through theoretical learning and core competences – through learning the activity. After compulsory education, third and fourth level qualifications can be pursued by entering initial vocational education and training institutions, or informally or non-formally.

Level 3
Activity specifications

This level can encompass few or more specialised tasks of professional activity demanding application of well-known and well-tried decisions. Tasks are performed under partial supervision of higher-qualified employees. The work context is relatively stable, but there may be some momentary and minor changes of work technology and organisation. Some activities foster learning at the workplace.

Content of qualifications and ways of acquisition

Functional competences are needed to carry out specialised tasks in one or several narrow fields of activity by choosing one or several ways and methods of execution, selecting materials, tools, etc. Additional functional competences can be relatively easily acquired by learning at the workplace supervised by skilled employees. Employees of this qualification level understand the factual knowledge and processes of a concrete professional activity, combining this understanding with knowledge from general education they apply in carrying out their work. Tasks are performed autonomously with external quality control. Employees are able to take an optimal decision from a range of several standard decisions. This level of qualification is acquired at institutions of secondary vocational education and training (VET schools and centres of adult vocational training) or informally or non-formally.

Level 4
Activity specifications

This level is composed of actions and operations from a comparatively wide field of technologies and work organisation. Activities are performed by carrying out several or more specialised functions and tasks which are sometimes new and not previously experienced. They are performed autonomously and employees refer to provided instructions. Employees must ensure quality of

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performance procedures and results of activity. This activity is characterised by relatively fast changes influencing specific technologies of performance and work organisation.

Content of qualifications and ways of acquisition

Functional competences permit carrying out combinations of specialised actions and operations in wide fields of activities. The sets and combinations of functional competences and updating these competences allow making simple decisions and adaptation to the changing context of tasks. This level of qualifications includes understanding and applying factual knowledge from wide fields of activities, as well as applying general knowledge in carrying out tasks. Increasing complexity of work organisation demands developing communication skills. Employees must be able to evaluate the quality of work procedures and results. The minimal required level of education is secondary education (12 years). This level of qualification is acquired at institutions of secondary vocational education and training (VET schools and centres of adult vocational training) or informally or non-formally.

Level 5
Activity specifications

Activity is complicated and consists of a comparatively wide variety of specialised actions and operations different in their content and volume. Employees at this level accomplish their work autonomously, organise and supervise the work of employees with qualifications at Levels 1 to 4. Activity includes managing and regulating different processes referring to instructions and recommendations of experts, organising work in groups and training other employees. The technological and organisational specifications of the activity are often subject to change and rarely predictable.

Content of qualifications and ways of acquisition

Qualification is composed of comparatively universal competences transcending the limits of one specific workplace to understanding and organising effectively activities in different workplaces. Functional competences permit autonomous accomplishment of the complex actions and operations in one or several wide fields of activities. Complexity and changeability of activity demand ability to design and apply new combinations of functional competences in concrete fields of activity. Deep understanding of the context of activity is based on comprehensive theoretical knowledge. The qualifications of this level include ability to assess the limits of acquired knowledge and to

transfer this knowledge to others. Employees are able to analyse tasks and forecast problems in their execution, as well as assess and ensure the quality of the activity in constantly changing contexts of activities. Qualification in the fifth level is acquired through continuing vocational training after graduation from VET schools or centres of vocational training. In future it will be possible to acquire these qualifications studying in a short study cycle (two years) at colleges.

Level 6

Activity specifications

Activity is complex and composed of miscellaneous and multiple actions accomplished at different workplaces or in different work contexts. Activity is performed autonomously. Sometimes it is initiated by the employee. This activity includes team-working and - managing and supervising the activities of other employees. In many cases, such activity demands a high level of responsibility for the quality of work processes and results. The technological and organisational context of the activity is continuously changing and unpredictable.

Content of qualifications and ways of acquisition

Functional competences encompass ability to carry out the applied research in the field of activity. Complexity and changeability of activity demand ability to plan ways and methods of carrying out activities and evaluating new elements and changing content of activities. Knowledge is the basis of functional competences. Complexity and changeability of activities demand constant upgrading and development of cognitive competences (by acquiring new knowledge and deepening existing knowledge). Working autonomously demands analytical thinking and problem-solving skills, decision-making, as well as the ability to concentrate on the essence of problems. This level of qualifications is acquired at higher education institutions: universities and colleges. University studies are aimed at providing mainly cognitive competences and studies at colleges concentrate more on providing functional competences required for specific fields of activity. The qualifications in this level are divided into two sublevels: qualifications acquired at university (bachelor degree) and colleges (vocational bachelor degree). When passing from studies at college to university additional study programmes to obtain missing competences can be foreseen.

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Level 7

Activity specifications

Activity is complex and demands application of specific knowledge at the forefront of the field, as well as highly developed skills of work process management, leadership and creative problem-solving. In many cases, employees have to use results and data from scientific research or conduct research to obtain the required information. It is also necessary to estimate and analyse many various interrelated and quickly changing factors influencing the activity. Activity is accomplished autonomously and requires taking responsibility for managing and leading groups of other employees, as well as motivating them and developing their competences. The context of activity is constantly and quickly changing and is unusual. It demands well developed skills of creative problem-solving.

Content of qualifications and ways of acquisition

This level of qualification is dominated by cognitive competences based on scientific research and encompassing forefront knowledge in the specialised field of activity. These cognitive competences are combined with skills of organisation and management of sophisticated work processes, optimal decision-making skills and ability to analyse miscellaneous interrelated and changeable factors of the work context. The complexity and changeability of activity demand ability to take innovative decisions based on results of applied research and analysis of activities. These characteristics of activities also demand expertise in assessing forefront knowledge in the field of activities and discovering new facts by carrying out applied research. Also required are well developed work organisation and management skills, teamwork management skills and the ability to foster development of human resources inside groups. This level of qualification requires a master degree of higher education. The qualification is acquired through studies according to programmes of continuous studies at university or informally, through informal learning at the workplace or place of collaborating with employees with the same or higher level of qualification.

Level 8

Activity specifications

Activity is sophisticated and related to creating and developing new ideas and processes in a constantly changing environment. This activity encompasses original scientific research of natural and social phenomena, processes and objects and initiating, managing and accomplishing highly im-

portant and complex projects fostering social, economical and cultural de-velopment.

Content of qualifications and ways of acquisition:

This level of qualification is dominated by competences related to creat-ing and applying scientific research methodology and methods, as well as the ability to discover new phenomena and generate new ideas. Training, con-sulting and strategic management competences are required. This level of qualification demands a PhD providing the possibility to conduct independ-ent scientific research and solve scientific problems, as well as initiate strate-gic change to social systems. This level of qualification is acquired through doctoral studies at university or informally. Preparing and defending a doc-toral dissertation is the most important element of acquiring and recognising the qualification at this level.

Comparing the model of the national qualifications framework of Lithuania with the European qualifica-tions framework

The main similarities are the same number of levels, basic coherence of the contents of the level descriptions of qualifications and use of the charac-teristics of activities (autonomy, responsibility) in describing the levels of qual-ifications.

However, the following differences can be discerned:

(a) the reference for the European qualifications framework is the system of education and vocational training and the national qualifications framework of Lithuania basically refers to the needs of the system of activities. There-fore, the essential element in describing the qualifications levels in the Eu-ropean qualifications framework is learning outcomes. In Lithuania, lev-els are described by analysing competences and the characteristics of ac-tivities. The concept of the national system of qualifications in Lithuania regards competence as the essential element for designing qualifications and the national qualifications framework is regarded as one of the main instruments for designing them. Describing the levels of qualifications based on analysis of competences and characteristics of activities make the na-tional qualifications framework more convenient for designing qualifications. The national qualifications framework of Lithuania is oriented to the needs of the system of activities and competence-based approach because the

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national qualifications framework is an integral part and structuring element of the national system of qualifications;

(b) the descriptors of the European qualifications framework levels define learning outcomes describing knowledge, practical skills and competences related to autonomy and responsibility (European Commission, 2006). Descriptors of the national qualifications framework of Lithuania define competences demanded by autonomous, complex and changing activities, as well as the stimulating or restraining impact of these characteristics of activities for developing competences;

(b) the role of general education in progressing from the first level of qualifications to higher levels is a distinctive characteristic of the national qualifications framework of Lithuania. Such wide contents of general education on the first level of qualifications is influenced by the methodological consideration that only vocational qualification and not general education defines the level of qualification in the framework.

Main challenges for implementing the national qualifications framework and the European qualifications framework in Lithuania

The following challenges can be discerned:

(a) harmonising vocational education and higher education qualifications has proved the most acute problem in designing the Lithuanian national qualifications framework. Describing qualifications acquired in vocational education leads to a much simpler indication and definition of functional, cognitive and general competences. In higher education qualifications, excessively complex operating characteristics, dominance of cognitive competences and close links of functional competences with intellectual activities render the competences in this field far more abstract and more difficult to concretise and generalise. The higher the level of qualifications, the more abstract and not easily definable are the competences constituting the qualifications of this level;

(b) in estimating the preparedness of the education system to implement the national qualifications framework related to the European qualifications framework, today only the non-university higher education sector (colleges) is more or less ready. These institutions have adopted a system for assessing learning outcomes based on competences and a fully integrated ECVET approach. Vocational education institutions also base their curricula and assessment on competences. However, they still have no system

of credit transfer, because ECVET was introduced only recently. The university sector is rather reluctant towards the competence-based approach of the national qualifications framework, as well as towards integrating VET and higher education systems in one framework of qualifications. Therefore universities demonstrate a rather passive and indifferent attitude both towards the national qualifications framework and the European qualifications framework;

(c) employers' attitudes and their position on the national qualifications framework and the European qualifications framework can also pose difficulties in their implementation. The close relationship between the national qualifications framework and the European qualifications framework can be regarded by employers as a source of risk, because they can cause a drain of the skilled workforce to other EU countries;

(d) there is a shortage of attention and interest in the national qualifications framework and the European qualifications framework from policy-designers and makers;

(e) other important challenges relate to the necessity to implement and develop a system of assessment and certification of informally and non-formally acquired competences and qualifications, as well as to ensure coherence between the national qualifications framework and sector qualifications frameworks.

Conclusions

1. Integrating the national qualifications framework into the national system of qualifications and the role of the framework in structuring the processes of design, provision and certification of qualifications are the most important determinants of orienting the national qualifications framework to the needs of the system of activities.

2. Describing the levels of qualifications analysing the requirements of the competences posed by specifying activities and the impact of these specifications on acquiring and developing competences makes the national qualifications framework more convenient for designing, providing and assessing qualifications.

3. The national qualifications framework of Lithuania is close to the European qualifications framework in the number of levels and contents of the levels descriptors and different from it through the competence-based approach

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and consideration of interrelations between specifications of activities and competences.

4. the current national qualifications framework of Lithuania will be compatible with the European qualifications framework and at the same time will correspond to the needs of the system of activities. The main factors influencing such compatibility and flexibility of the national qualifications framework are:
   - the current structure of qualifications corresponding to the eight levels of qualifications;
   - integrating the national qualifications framework into the national system of qualifications and orienting the framework to the needs of the system of activities;
   - considering the compatibility of the national qualifications framework with the European qualifications framework in designing and implementing the national qualifications framework.

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Qualifications frameworks and credit systems: a toolkit for education in Europe

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SUMMARY

Europe should become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010, while at the same time safeguarding social cohesion. In the field of education policy, this aim is being pursued by means of a comprehensive programme for the creation of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as part of the Bologna Process, and in the VET sector through the so-called Copenhagen Process. On the way towards an integrated European Higher Education Area in 2010, the European Commission's proposal for a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) offers opportunities on the one hand for increased mobility within the higher education sector, especially at European level and, on the other, for mobility or enhanced permeability between education sectors. Further development of the ECTS and ECVET credit systems from a function of transfer to one of accumulation, and from an input-based to an outcome-related orientation, should promote enhanced mobility of students, trainees, graduates and workers through the accreditation and recognition of acquired knowledge, skills and competences; it should also facilitate access to education and VET and the development of comprehensive continuing training which lasts an entire (working) year. It is against this background that the characteristics of, and interactions between, these instruments will be explored.

Introduction

Barriers to mobility are falling in Europe. For students, trainees, graduates and workers wishing to find employment elsewhere, as well as for their employers, this means that qualifications and experience acquired somewhere else need to be properly assessed in the new place of work or at the start (or resumption) of learning activity in another education system. Transparency and recognition of acquired competences and qualifications are required to this end.

The Lisbon Agenda of 2000, with its goal of making Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010, constituted the political (and economic) starting-point for the EU in this respect. This goal is being put into practice, on the one hand thanks to the Sorbonne Declaration (1998), the Bologna Declaration (1999) and their follow-up conferences in Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005) and London (2007) – the so-called Bologna Process – and, on the other, in respect of vocational education and training (VET), through the Copenhagen Declaration (2002) and the Communiqués of Maastricht (2004) and Helsinki (2006) – the so-called Copenhagen Process. Various instruments, mechanisms and principles to promote lifelong learning have been developed in the context of the Copenhagen Process. These include the European Credit Transfer System for VET (ECVET) and the Common Quality Assurance Framework for VET in Europe (CQAF). In parallel, instruments and principles to promote lifelong learning, the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and mobility have been adopted in the higher education sector, mainly in the context of the Bologna Process. These include the introduction of three study cycles (bachelor, master and doctorate) in higher education and the implementation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Some new or redeveloped instruments have been adopted in order to make vocational training more attractive in Europe, to reinforce the link between VET and the labour market, and to enhance opportunities for progressing into higher education (Maastricht Communiqué, 2004): these instruments, in addition to the European credit systems ECVET and ECTS, are the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Europass Mobility and its Diploma Supplement. All formally and informally acquired competences, as well as every diploma acquired by an individual, are entered in the Europass, which thus documents that person's entire educational background. The Diploma Supplement is an additional sheet in the Europass listing the competences associated with a diploma. This simpli-

fies its transfer to National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) or other national systems.

The purpose of both processes (Bologna and Copenhagen) is to ensure permeability, transparency and mobility in the education sector (Dunkel, 2007). Although the two processes are being coordinated, there is little congruence between them so far. This is particularly apparent when one considers the issue of progression between VET and higher education or the development of the European Qualifications Framework. What are the characteristic features of ECVET, ECTS and EQF, and how are these instruments coordinated with one another? To answer these questions, their objectives and functions are compared methodically in section 1. Section 2 then analyses their individual elements and components. Section 3 discusses the role and significance of credits, and a number of conclusions are drawn in the fourth and final section.

Objectives and functions

The objectives of EQF, ECVET and ECTS combine educational and socio-economic arguments, as illustrated by the following table. It is a matter both of promoting the competitiveness of Europe as a location (growth and employment are EU aims laid down by the Lisbon Strategy) and of fostering the personal and occupational development of individuals in Europe. ECTS was first devised in 1984 as an instrument for the recognition of short-term study visits within the ERASMUS programme (student mobility in Europe) and was subsequently taken up by the Bologna Declaration as an 'instrumental objective' at the initiative of the Ministries of Education. Only in 2002, in the context of the Copenhagen Declaration, was ECVET advocated as an instrument for the recognition of competences and qualifications at the initiative of the Ministries responsible for VET and of the European Commission. Both ECTS and ECVET are European credit transfer and accumulation systems, one for the higher education sector and the other for VET. ECVET does not determine a credit system for qualifications at national or sectoral level; rather it serves as an international framework of reference. ECTS has, over the years, been incorporated into the higher education legislation and regulations of almost all the countries participating in the Bologna Process (European Commission, 2006c). The EQF is a framework of reference intended, *inter alia*, to facilitate the allocation of similar qualifications or parts of qualifications at the appropriate level and consequently to ensure cooperation and comparabili-

ty. The connection between ECTS and EQF can be clarified by examining EQF levels 5-8. These levels are set in accordance with the Bologna indicators for higher education as part of the qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area, the so called 'Dublin descriptors'. These descriptors were devised by an informal group of European experts, the so-called Joint Quality Initiative, with a view to defining the interdisciplinary and subject-specific competences to be acquired by students Europe wide in the course of a bachelor's, master's or doctoral study programme (JQI, 2007). Taking these into account in the EQF context should contribute to permeability between VET and higher education.

Table 1: Objectives of all three instruments

instruments Goals	EQF	ECVET	ECTS
Transparency	Improving the transparency of qualifications and lifelong learning (Lisbon goals)		Improving the transparency of higher education diplomas
Promotion of Europe as a location	Making Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economic area by the year 2010 (Lisbon goals)		International attractiveness of European higher education (2)
Mobility	No direct explicit link in the documents analysed	Promoting the international mobility of learners (4)	Promoting student mobility (1) Developing international curricula (1)
Comparability	Comparability of qualifications	Comparability of qualifications	Comparability of study programmes
Transferability (transfer, accumulation)	Transferability of qualifications	Transferability of qualifications or partial qualifications	Transferability of credit points
Recognition Validation	Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning	Improving the quality of VET recognition and validation procedures (4)	Facilitates academic recognition (2)
Cooperation	Promoting cooperation and strengthening trust among all concerned (3)	Promoting cooperation and trust among all concerned	Promoting cooperation and trust among universities

Source: This table is based on official European Commission documents describing and explaining EQF, ECVET and ECTS: 1 = 'Berlin Communiqué, 2003'; 2 = European Commission, 2004, p. 1; 3 = European Commission, 2006a, pp. 2-3; 4 = European Commission, 2006b.

This table needs to be complemented by a more nuanced consideration. The European Qualifications Framework serves as a reference point to make the individual National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) or qualifications comparable with one another (bilaterally and multilaterally). The NQFs or qualifications of different systems are compared with each other by means of the EQF meta-framework, which facilitates their transfer to other systems. The EQF operates as a passive instrument in this sense. The key role of the EQF in the implementation of the European Union's overall education strategy finds expression in particular through its links with other instruments of transparency (the European Higher Education Area Qualifications Framework, Europass, ECTS, ECVET, principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Schneeberger, 2006)).

Credit systems are devised as instruments which are broadly and directly applicable in a mobility context, by way of 'all-in-one' or 'ready-made' solutions, even though they may develop further over the years, as ECTS has done. Credit systems serve a number of general purposes:

- transfer of learning outcomes within and between education systems, or of learning outcomes acquired in formal and informal settings;
- accumulation and mutual recognition of learning activities or partial qualifications until the qualifications are completed;
- cooperation between VET providers across national borders;
- transparency of learning processes and learning outcomes through joint adherence to the EQF;
- flexible accreditation of study periods, study programmes and curricula by independent decision of the competent (national) bodies;
- as far as possible, simplification and activation of certification and validation procedures at all levels (Cedefop; Le Mouillour, 2005).

ECTS relates to the higher education sector, while ECVET is intended for VET (in particular initial training) in the first instance; both will also be applied in the field of lifelong learning at a later stage (European Commission, 2004; European Commission, 2006b). For the time being, ECTS and ECVET differ in scope and coverage. This becomes clear when one examines their respective definitions:

- The ECTS was conceived on the basis of the following definition: 'A credit system is a systematic way of describing an educational programme by attaching credits to its components' (European Commission, 2004, p. 1);
- ECVET is 'a mechanism designed to facilitate learners' mobility by supporting cooperation among partner organisations in the international ac-

cumulation and transfer of credit for learning outcomes in VET' (European Commission, 2006d, p. 11).

Each programme has its own specific objectives in addition to the above educational goals:

*   ECTS in relation to students: 'ECTS makes study programmes easy to read and compare for all students, local and foreign'; and in relation to universities: 'ECTS helps universities to organise and revise their study programmes' (European Commission, 2004, p. 1);
*   ECVET in relation to learners: '(…) a way of enabling people to pursue their learning pathway by building on their learning outcomes when moving from one learning context to another, in particular in the framework of mobility. (...) to improve access to qualifications for all, throughout their lives' (European Commission, 2006b, p. 8); and in relation to the bodies responsible for national VET systems: 'proposes a common approach to describing qualifications in order to make them easier to understand from one system to another, and to describing the procedures for validating learning outcomes' (European Commission, 2006b, p. 8).

ECTS and ECVET can therefore be distinguished in two areas: the target groups (students vs. learners) and the role of credits. Students constitute a specific group of learners, who are attending university in a particular phase of their learning trajectory and receive credits in the context of ECTS. In the case of ECVET, the learner is in a vocational training phase. ECTS credits are regarded as a tool for managing study programmes (for both higher education establishments and students). ECTS credits correspond to a certain student workload for a year of full-time study. Both universities and students can allocate their resources accordingly. ECTS credits likewise help universities to organise and revise their curricula. In the case of ECVET, credits serve to make learning outcomes more transparent and transferable, the basic dimension here being the all-round occupational profile of the person concerned. Most VET systems have standard occupational profiles which can be used to define learning outcomes for ECVET (Cedefop; Le Mouillour, 2005).

Both credit systems achieve their respective objectives by means of 'transfer' and 'accumulation'. The purpose and ultimate aims of these two functions can be distinguished as follows:

*   in ECTS, credits are transferred in the context of international mobility agreements (cf. European Commission, 2004, p. 2). This means that the learn-

ing effort expended abroad by the student is transferred and integrated into the study programme at home;
*   in ECVET, the learner must have passed the examination abroad or possess evidence of the additional learning outcomes acquired. The 'learning outcomes' acquired by the learner abroad are what is transferred under ECVET. This likewise occurs in the context of international mobility agreements;
*   accumulation is a new and as yet incomplete development in the case of ECTS, which is 'developing into an accumulation system to be implemented at institutional, regional, national and European level' (European Commission, 2004, p. 1);
*   accumulation is regarded as an important aspect of ECVET from the outset: learning outcomes are accumulated, and this accumulation takes place with a view to the learner's acquisition of a particular qualification. That qualification is normally awarded in the learner's country of origin.

According to the 'Trends V' report of the European University Association (EUA), 75 % of the 908 universities surveyed, which had implemented ECTS, stated that they used ECTS as a transfer instrument; 66 % used ECTS as an accumulation instrument (Purser, Crosier, 2007b). The change in the function of credit systems from transfer alone to accumulation, or from an input-led approach (in the sense of student workload or learning effort) to an approach driven by learning outcomes, corresponds to the concept of lifelong learning and the new notion of learning and working phases in individual biographies. In this sense there is a need for procedures and rules on the accreditation and validation of learning outcomes between different components of education systems (higher education; initial, further and continuing vocational training) and between different modes of learning. The consideration of learning outcomes in connection with credit systems offers an opportunity to validate learning outcomes acquired formally, non-formally and informally for VET or university study programmes, thereby facilitating permeability and progression between educational systems.

From learning outcomes to qualifications

Learning outcomes, competences and qualifications form a common semantic basis for EQF, ECVET and ECTS. We shall discuss below their application and embodiment in the respective educational systems. Table 2 compares the respective definitions of 'learning outcome' and 'qualification'.

Table 2: Bases of EQF, ECVET and ECTS

Basis	EQF	ECVET	ECTS
The following elements are applied in EQF, ECVET and ECTS	Descriptors 8 levels	–	The three cycles of the qualifications framework in the European Higher Education Area set out descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges in the first and second cycles (3)
	Knowledge, skills and competence		
	Learning/teaching/instruction methods or method of communicating knowledge		
	–	Different approaches to the calculation of credits	Calculation of credits on the basis of student workload
Learning outcomes	'Statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process (…) defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence' (2, p. 16).		The objectives of a learning programme are preferably specified in terms of learning outcomes and competences (1) Learning outcomes are sets of competences, expressing what the student will know, understand or be able to do after completion of a process of learning, long or short (1)
Qualification	'A formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards' (2, p. 16)		Information on the qualification is a component of the checklist (a key document for ECTS) (1)

Source: (1) = European Commission, 2004, p. 1; (2) = European Commission, 2006a; (3) Bergen Communiqué, 2005

Differences between ECVET and ECTS derive from the fact that the former, unlike the latter, does not have many years of experience behind it. ECTS was first introduced in 1989 in the context of the ERASMUS European mobility programme, while the first meeting of the European technical group on the development of a credit system for VET in Europe was held only in late 2003. Mutual trust and understanding among universities themselves and with other tertiary-level institutions grew during that period. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the European University Association (EUA) and the European Association of Institutes in Higher Education (EURASHE) pursued common aims. At European level, furthermore, the Council of Europe, the European Students' Union (ESIB) and UNESCO's European Centre for Higher Education (UNESCO - CEPES) are involved as observers. The Bologna Process provides a framework for the introduction of a system of easily understandable and comparable higher education diplomas in all participating countries. The Bologna member countries have committed themselves to the process itself and exercise self control over the implementation of the Bologna priorities by means of stocktaking activities and follow-up groups.

In VET, there is so far no common procedure and no NGO operating in the field. It is more difficult to develop a credit system for VET because, for example, in some countries, the holders of certain diplomas issued by VET colleges are awarded qualifications at levels typically achieved by university graduates at bachelor level in other countries. The advantage of ECTS over ECVET is that readily comparable institutional and curricular conditions and courses (including the time input) apparently make it easier to find a benchmark for learning outcomes in relation to study disciplines and curricula. The VET sector, by contrast, comprises a large number and variety of institutions, traditions, statutory regulations and forms of social recognition in each individual Member State. ECTS, in fact, says nothing about the content, composition or equivalence of study programmes. It has much more to do with quality issues, which universities must settle by means of bilateral or multilateral cooperation agreements. The starting-point for ECVET qualifications, on the other hand, is technical specifications (e.g. for knowledge and skills) and quality assurance procedures, as well as the assessment and validation of outcomes. In practical terms, ECVET is based on the one hand on the description of qualifications in the form of learning outcomes or knowledge, skills and competences and, on the other, on the award of credits for qualifications and units or modules. Credits will be discussed in the next section. Learning outcomes (see Table 3) are the main common element of ECVET, ECTS and EQF. However, the 'learning outcomes' for

each of the three instruments are defined differently and specified to differing degrees.

Table 3: Learning outcomes

Instrument	Definition	Interpretation
EQF	A combination of knowledge, skills and competence (1, p. 10). Competence is described in terms of responsibility and autonomy.	They make it possible to compare qualifications according to criteria such as content and profile (1, p. 10).
ECVET	Descriptions of what the learner knows, understands and is able to do, after completion of the learning process. They are defined as knowledge, skills and competence (2, p. 10).	These are elements which are collected, transferred and accumulated as units. Learning outcomes are inferred from the target vocational or qualifications profile (2).
ECTS	These outcomes are sets of competences, expressing what the student will know, understand or be able to do after completion of a process of learning, long or short (3).	The objectives of a learning programme are preferably specified in terms of learning outcomes and competences (3). Learning outcomes are precisely defined for each course or module depending on the study discipline.

Source: (1) = European Commission, 2006a; (2) = European Commission, 2006b; (3) European Commission, 2004, p. 1.

The implementation of a credit system requires the definition of small, manageable and transparent units which can be transferred relatively easily in a mobility context. Caution is needed, however, when using the terms 'units' and 'modules', since both terms translate into German as '*Modul*'. In ECVET, learning outcomes are grouped together in 'units', and a distinction can be drawn between units in the sense of 'units of assessment' and 'modules' in the sense of 'modules of learning'. 'Units' are parts of a qualification and are based on a concentration of knowledge, skills and competences. 'Modules' represent a pedagogical/didactic view of the qualification and are defined as part of the educational programme (Le Mouillour, 2006; p. 26). In ECTS, modules are defined as 'educational components of a study programme' (European Commission, 2004; p. 1), i.e. in the sense of 'modules of learning'.

Given the specific characteristics of VET in Europe, learning outcomes were deliberately made the cornerstone of ECVET. The problem of classifying learning outcomes according to vocational proficiency levels has been addressed in this connection. In 2004, Coles and Oates devised the basis for, and an

initial draft of, a reference framework structure for VET. This study (Cedefop; Coles and Oates, 2005) is regarded as a blueprint for the development of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Nowadays, 'the emerging European Qualifications Framework and its learning outcomes-based grid of reference levels is regarded as an important support instrument for the effective implementation of the ECVET system' (European Commission, 2006d; p. 12). The differences in the definition and role of learning outcomes in ECTS and ECVET (see table 3) are crucial in the development of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is not a continuum without any disruptions or frictional losses. The first 'threshold' comes with the transition from general to vocational education. Secondly, the gap between the education system and the labour market often has to be bridged (the second 'threshold'), and thirdly there are the crossovers between general, vocational and higher education. Questions arise here about continuity in the vertical conception of the EQF levels and, hence, about the role of the credit points relevant to credit systems. No such credit points appear in the European reference framework (EQF), which focuses on learning outcomes.

Significance and role of credits

Analysis of the subject of credit systems and qualifications frameworks shows that, sooner or later, a sensitive issue comes up in the discussion: namely credits, or how to calculate them in specific, quantifiable figures. In other words, the crucial question as to the role of credit points.

The Bologna Agreement among universities defines credits as components of study programmes, and the numerical value of such credits - so-called credit points - is transferred. Agreements on the calculation and allocation of ECTS credit points serve as a general context for organising student mobility (see Table 4). In ECVET, credits – or 'learning credits' – are the certified results of an examination of learning outcomes, taken abroad. ECVET credits are transferred (European Commission, 2006b). It falls to the competent authorities in the respective countries to establish the numerical value of ECVET credits. These competent bodies vary from one VET system to another and may be either ministries, chambers of industry and commerce, sectoral organisations or training providers.

Table 4: Calculation and allocation of credits in ECTS and ECVET

	ECTS	ECVET
Value	Numerical value	Numerical value
Assignment to	Any type of course of study	Units of learning outcomes
Calculation	The amount of work required of the student for each course of study must be described ⇒ workload	Left open, not specified
Allocation	Per course of study, in relation to the total learning effort required for successful completion of an entire academic year	Per unit. Qualifications to be grouped into units as appropriate.
Responsible for assignment and award	Universities	Body/bodies responsible for national VET system
Assessment	Abroad: local grading The ECTS grading scale (from A to F*) ranks the students on a statistical basis	Abroad: local grading –

Source: European Commission, 2006b; European Commission, 2004.
* A = excellent – the best 10 % of the student cohort; F = fail – considerable further work required

A convention concluded between the main national players in the relevant educational sectors generally lies behind a credit system. In the field of higher education, institutional and organisational aspects of the educational programmes underpin the calculation of ECTS credits. ECTS is based on the principle, enshrined in a European convention, that 60 credits measure the workload of a full-time student during one academic year. The student workload of a full-time study programme in Europe amounts in most cases to around 1 500-1 800 hours per year, and in those cases one credit stands for around 25-30 working hours (European Commission, 2004). Student workload in ECTS consists of the time required to complete all planned learning activities such as attending lectures, seminars, independent and private study, preparation of projects, examinations, and so forth (European Commission 2004, p. 1). Two main calculation bases are used in the higher education sector: workload and notional learning time. 'Notional learning time' means the time needed by an 'average' learner to achieve the learning outcomes of a qualification or study programme. This period of time is only intended as a guide, how-

ever, and credit points are not deducted or added if more time or less is taken (see SCQF 2003).

The problem of defining credit points nevertheless becomes apparent when one examines the implementation of ECTS in the higher education sector. Reichert and Tauch (2005) point out in their survey that higher education establishments still have difficulty with workload-based calculations. Furthermore, the calculation of credits on the basis of study programmes can in some cases lead to a variation in the number of credit points for one and the same course of study. The proposed method of calculating credits in the ECVET context states that '120 ECVET credit points on average could be associated to the learning outcomes achieved by an individual in a year in a formal full time VET context' (European Commission, 2006b, p. 14). However, several methods are possible at national level for determining the number of credit points to be allocated: 'the number of credit points allocated to a qualification and units can be determined on the base of the following criteria:

- the contents of a qualification in terms of range and/or volume of knowledge, skills and wider competences to be acquired;
- with reference to a notional average length of programme leading to such a qualification;
- by the amount of notional learning activities and workload necessary for a learner to attain the set of learning outcomes corresponding to a part or whole qualification (e.g. regarding a typical training programme or a training programme of reference)' (European Commission, 2005a, p. 14).

The difficulty of making the two credit systems compatible becomes palpable with respect to the composition, calculation and allocation of credits. The fundamental difference between ECTS and ECVET lies in their primary orientation: ECVET units and credits are defined in relation to qualifications and the associated learning outcomes; ECTS on the other hand is oriented according to study programmes. Concerning their secondary orientation, ECVET relies for example on training regulations or overall curricula, whereas in ECTS learning outcomes are associated with the definition of learning objectives. This distinction is clarified in the following diagram.

Table 5: Positioning of the different calculation elements
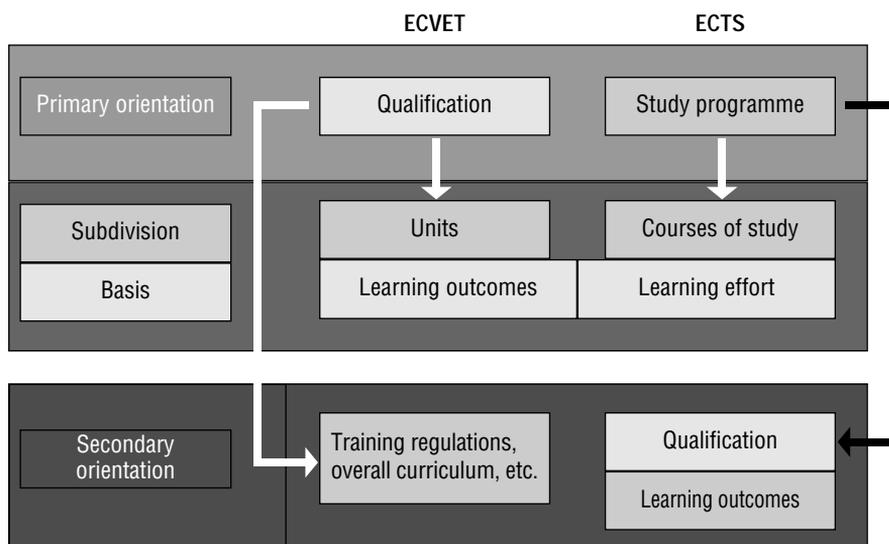
Source: the authors

Behind the different positioning of learning outcomes in the two procedures lies the fact that VET and higher education providers, or their competent authorities, are responsible for awarding and allocating credit points. Credits in ECTS can only be obtained after 'successful completion of the work required and appropriate assessment of the learning outcomes achieved' (European Commission, 2004, p. 1) and provide information about the related workload. They are therefore dependent on the achievement of a certain outcome, which implies that qualitative factors are to be taken into account. In relation to the – already largely completed – introduction of uniform academic degrees (bachelor/master), this means in principle that credits count throughout Europe as a standard for measuring academic learning effort or workload, and for the award of degree certificates (BA/MA). They likewise simplify the management of mobility. Credits therefore play a central role in ECTS.

In ECVET, credit points are defined as 'simple and broad indicators. They have no intrinsic meaning of their own' (European Commission, 2006d, p. 14). However, a good deal still needs to be done if, by 2010, there really is to be an integrated European Higher Education Area with comparable academic structures and compatible diplomas as well as significantly improved mechanisms for academic validation. And for the time being there is no answer to the question of whether, and to what extent, it will be possible to allocate and transfer ECVET and ECTS credits reciprocally, or whether - as often postu-

lated - it will be possible to devise an integrated system of credit points within the foreseeable future, because otherwise two credit systems would coexist within a single qualifications framework.

Over and above such technical questions concerning the composition and allocation of credits, questions need to be asked about the role of credit points. ECTS is not as coherent in its application as it is on paper. So far there is no empirical basis for the award of credit points. We shall now present a few incongruities in order to illustrate the difficulties:

- for example, some German universities still use weekly hours per semester rather than student workload as a basis for calculating credits; weighting is still applied in certain cases. Other universities conduct extra intermediate and final tests in addition to academic examinations (DAAD, 2004). They award more credit points for labour-intensive courses than for courses merely requiring attendance. Matters become problematical when no common yardstick exists even within one institute or discipline (Rehburg, 2005);
- ECTS is an intricate system with credit points but also necessitates considerable administrative effort, red tape and an increased tutor workload; this impinges on the quality of teaching and, for students, means fewer choices and less autonomy during their studies;
- credit points provide no guarantee that credits obtained abroad will be fully recognised. There is no automatic administrative procedure for students to follow; examinations are held in individual cases (Rehburg, 2005);
- difficulties persist over the recognition of credits (for about 50 % of mobile students) and the dual testing of learning outcomes (in the form of credits and of the customary examination procedures). There is incorrect use of ECTS: 'misunderstanding of student workload and diverse concepts of "modules"' (Purser, Crosier, 2007b).

Experience and difficulties with ECTS must be taken into account when applying ECVET, above all in terms of awarding and calculating credit points. Moreover, it is doubtful whether the ECTS system as it stands is transferable to VET and lifelong learning. The approach based on workload and learning outcomes has its justifications, but the compatibility of both parts of the system must be ensured: a credit certifies nothing other than the fulfilment of a requirement, which is only meaningful in connection with both the level of the anticipated learning outcomes (in relation to qualifications frameworks or systems) and the period of time within which these learning outcomes are expected (credit points). This would argue in favour of ECVET and ECTS

consistently being geared towards learning outcomes (with reference to the EQF) and of credit points being interpreted as quantitative indicators in the sense of notional learning time.

Other issues needing clarification are whether it should be possible to accumulate credit points at different qualification levels and whether ECVET points should be put on a par with ECTS points or may be credited to them. It is also unclear whether a range of credit points per qualification level is appropriate and at what level (European, national and/or provider) the relevant agreements should be reached. Finally, clarification is required as to who should examine the outcomes, and in what form, until such time as clear standards have been devised for learning outcomes (Sellin, 2005).

Conclusions

Europe's education systems are changing. There are certain general trends, occasioned by the tertiarisation of the economy (i.e. increasing employment in knowledge-intensive and also personal-service occupations) and a growing need for mobility. These trends are reflected in a wide acceptance of the fact that it is important from a social and economic point of view to focus on adult education, as well as to modularise initial and in particular further training to a greater extent.

VET and higher education systems must develop more rapidly into open, diverse networks of educational facilities and practice. In order to bring about the necessary change and institutional transformation, it is essential to bridge the institutionalised and cultural gulf between the higher education and VET sectors, pathways and qualifications. Enhanced permeability of education systems means moving away from a discussion centring on diplomas to a clear definition of learning outcomes and the associated curriculum content, its organisation and the reciprocal accreditation of existing competence, i.e. the awarding of credits according to universally valid criteria. It is not currently known with any certainty which potential solutions are more successful and under what conditions, or whether a variety of solutions in Europe would be preferable to a one-size-fits-all approach.

There is an 18-year disparity in experience between ECTS and ECVET, during which period the Bologna Process has become institutionalised. What lessons can be learned from the development of ECTS about organising credit systems and qualifications frameworks? ECTS, ECVET and EQF are three instruments all with similar objectives (including transparency and permeabil-

ity), yet they differ in terms of their fields of application. Neither the design phase nor the final implementation is complete in any one of them: this aspect is undoubtedly novel. We are dealing here with evolutionary elements of a European education area, which is itself in the process of taking shape and must hold its ground against other education areas. The Bologna Process, with its extensive strategy of development and recruitment of new members, is evidently pursuing the goal of international coexistence and taking up a clear position in the context of the GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) negotiations. The Copenhagen Process, for its part, is following more of an intensive line of development: individual instruments (including ECVET, CQAF, Europass and EQF) are being finetuned and harmonised with one another.

It would furthermore appear sensible and necessary in the long term for the ECVET system to be merged with the ECTS system into an integrated, coherent overall system with a clear connection to the proposed European Qualifications Framework. The current challenge lies not so much in extending the credit system from a function of transfer to one of accumulation, or in firming up the calculation basis for credits, as might appear to be the case at first sight from a comparison of ECTS and ECVET. Rather, it lies in the related issue of how to apply credit systems in conjunction with procedures for the accreditation and validation of formally, non-formally and informally acquired learning outcomes and in particular occupational competence. The consequent permeability between education sectors requires a rethink of access to, and accreditation or validation of, VET and higher education study programmes. One key goal in terms of accreditation is to make lifelong learning a reality between and within national educational and labour markets. Further integrated development of credit systems from a transfer to an accumulation function, as well as from an input-based to an outcome related orientation, could help to build bridges in this area, so that the European Qualifications Framework can serve as a medium for the integration of general, higher and vocational education.

Over and above these long-term aims of ECVET, ECTS and EQF, and indeed of the European education area, attention should be paid to devising precise and consistent terminology at the level of discourse, because the somewhat Babylonian linguistic confusion of the official documents tends to lose sight of the end user, i.e. the learner. We nevertheless have every hope that, as has been said, 'the difference in wording is not expected to lead to differences in implementation' (European Commission, 2006c, p. 3).

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Governing education and training; the case of qualifications frameworks

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SUMMARY

The EQF is a meta-framework that forms a translation device between different national qualification systems. Each qualification system needs to link to the EQF levels if the translation is to be made easier across all countries. The move towards NQFs has been rapid and seems to some extent to have been triggered by the EQF proposal. It also reflects a general acceptance that lifelong learning requires a focus on learning outcomes rather than learning inputs and that the links between different subsystems of education and training need to be strengthened. Thus, development of NQFs cannot exclusively be explained by the emergence of the EQF. This article emphasises the distinction between national qualifications systems and national qualifications framework. It reviews the development of NQFs in the EU, EEA and candidate countries up to April 2007 and addresses the issue of European cooperation in education and training and its future.

This article discusses the potential impact of the European qualifications framework (EQF) on national education and training policies. Particular focus will be on the rapid and widespread development of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) across Europe. Pioneered by countries like Ireland, France and the UK, NQFs have moved into the forefront of the debate on how to realise lifelong learning and how to promote access to and progress in education, training and learning. While being pursued both nationally and internationally (for example by the OECD) for some years, development of EQF (from February 2004) significantly increased interest in NQFs. Both the original EQF consultation document (July 2005) and the Commission recommendation (European Commission, 2006b) state that countries need to 'speak with one voice' when relating their national qualifications to the EQF and it is suggested that each country set up a NQF to make this easier. A NQF is considered to be the most appropriate way to solve this coordination challenge and is argued to be a precondition for referencing to a European meta-framework. It is argued that NQFs are necessary to overcome the barriers between different national subsystems of education and training, notably between vocational education and training and higher education and between initial and continuing education and training.

Development of NQFs has not been the most visible part of the EQF development and debate. Most attention has been paid so far to the overarching European objectives to promote transparency, enable comparisons and ease transfer of qualifications ([1]) between countries. However this cross-border function can only become a reality if countries change the way their education and training systems are coordinated and governed. The 2005 EQF consultation document included the objective for the EQF to be a 'force for change at European, national and sector levels'. We can thus speak of two distinct but interrelated functions of the EQF, one at European and one at national level. The European function (translation, comparison) is visible and broadly accepted; the national function (increased coordination and permeability) is less visible and potentially more controversial. The purpose of this article is to address these developments and to give a first interpretation of this interchange of European and national education and training policies. The following main questions will be discussed:

([1]) According to the EQF recommendation (September 2006) a 'qualification' is achieved when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards. A qualification is a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process.

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- How can the concept of a qualifications framework be defined? What are the significant differences between a meta-framework like the EQF and existing and emerging national qualification frameworks? How can we distinguish the term qualification framework from the broader concept of qualification system? And why is this distinction important?
- What is the state of play regarding national qualifications frameworks in Europe? What kind of commitment can be observed at national level and is it possible to identify common objectives, strategies and solutions?
- What are the main lessons – in terms of governance – to be drawn from EQF and NQF developments? These lessons can be addressed from two main angles. First, in relation to the EU 'open method of coordination' underpinning the development and implementation of the EQF and second, from a national perspective, as part of the internationalisation and modernisation of education and training systems in the context of life-long learning.

Development of the EQF – and its correspondence with NQFs – cannot be discussed without considering the shift to a learning outcomes approach [2]. While use of learning outcomes is seen as the only way to compare and translate national qualifications, this learning outcomes approach is also important for the governance of national education and training systems in the future. A shift towards learning outcomes significantly changes the way objectives are formulated, standards are set and curricula are described and thus influences teaching and learning directly (Adam, 2004).

Qualifications framework; a deepening concept

The idea of a qualifications framework that shows how qualifications relate to one another is not new. For many centuries trade organisations in many countries have exercised control over the right to practise a trade and defined a hierarchy of skills within the trade. These hierarchies were the forerunners of sectoral and national qualifications frameworks. The universities had also set down common patterns of recognising progress within higher academic learning, thus defining another hierarchy of qualifications. What is new about the modern national qualification framework is the interest of governments in

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[2] In the EQF these are defined as 'statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process'.

developing overarching frameworks that incorporate qualifications that represent the learning outcomes from school, work, higher education and other adult learning. The new frameworks are thus often linked to lifelong learning strategies and are intended also to capture informal learning, or experience, that the learner wishes to have recognised (Cedefop, Colardyn and Bjørnåvold, 2005).

A qualifications framework is a classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved. This set of criteria may be an implicit characteristic of the qualifications themselves or made explicit in the form of a set of level descriptors. The 2006 EQF recommendation defines the concept in the following way:

> 'a national qualifications framework is an instrument for the classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved. It aims at the integration and coordination of national qualifications subsystems and the improvement of transparency, access, progression and quality of qualification in relation to the labour market and civil society'.

In the simplest form of classification the qualifications themselves are arranged in a hierarchy of demand or standard, the lowest level of qualifications rises through a series of steps to the highest level [3]. The qualifications in these hierarchies are sometimes further classified into qualification types (higher education qualifications, school qualifications, work-based qualifications). The second type of classification uses explicit levels that are each defined by criteria – these are often termed level descriptors or level indicators [4]. It is this second type that is attracting the interest of many countries since this offers more than the first type in coordinating power across educational sectors and work-based qualifications. However, all qualifications frameworks aim to establish a basis for improving the links between qualifications and the quality, accessibility, and public or labour market recognition of qualifications within a country and internationally.

NQFs have various forms and functions (Coles, 2006) but it is reasonable to conclude that all have four generic aims:
- establishing national standards for learning outcomes (competences);
- promoting through regulation the quality of education and training provision;
- acting as a way of relating qualifications to one another;

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[3] The Australian qualifications framework serves as an example (www.aqf.edu.au).
[4] The Irish framework of qualifications serves as an example (www.nqai.ie).

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• promoting access to learning, transfer of learning and progression in learn-
ing.

NQFs can have policy purposes that go beyond these four aims. Devel-
oping an NQF can be used to integrate parts of the qualifications system (for
example professional education delivered in further and higher education) or
to provoke modernisation of parts of the education and training system, for
example to change the regulation of the quality of qualification processes or
to change the way public funds are used to support education and training.
This additional factor of using a national qualifications framework as a tool for
reform is becoming more common and this suggests it should become a fifth
aim; however some frameworks are developed through strong consensus of
stakeholders and it is more difficult to assign these frameworks the explicit
aim of becoming a tool for reform. Additionally, some NQFs are used to al-
low target setting and planning of public investment in education and train-
ing and they support the measurement of performance of the education and
training system.

It is possible that, even where no explicit wider reform agenda is acknowl-
edged, there is a power within a simple classification of qualifications to trans-
form aspects of education and qualifications. This arises through the codifi-
cation of the complex arrangements for qualifications in a country into a rel-
atively simple form. Codification, or modelling, creates a relationship and a
language with which stakeholders can readily engage (Cowan et al., 1999).
Without the codification of a framework, the hierarchy of qualifications, the know-
ledge, skills and wider competences they each testify and the horizontal
equivalencies between qualifications are often subject to incomplete or tac-
it knowledge of the qualifications system. The latter reduces confidence in poli-
cies aimed at reform and makes innovation difficult.

There is another effect: sometimes modernisation requires multiple ac-
tions on different parts of the qualifications system (accreditation, funding,
institutional arrangements), these coordinated reforms are challenging. Choos-
ing incremental 'one-at-a-time' approaches is less risky, cheaper and more
manageable. It is arguable that the coordinating effects of NQFs, especial-
ly in terms of stakeholder engagement and institutional roles and responsi-
bilities, make it more likely that broader, coordinated programmes of reforms
can be proposed.

Qualifications frameworks should be seen as a part of a qualifications sys-
tem (OECD, 2007). The latter is an all-embracing term for all structures and

processes (⁵) that lead to the award of a qualification. Some qualifications systems are so complex and fragmented that they hardly appear to be systematic. Nevertheless, within these systems the public is aware of levels of qualification (such as basic schooling, completion of upper secondary education, apprenticeship, bachelors degree, professional licence, etc.). These implicit levels of qualification come close to resembling a qualifications framework, however they fail to embody some of the power of frameworks simply because the levels are implicit and therefore are subject to differences in interpretation. The relationship between gaining qualification and the requirements for progression from one qualification to another or to a job are often unclear and not reliable. Stakeholder ownership is also not clear and thus reforming different qualification types based on low levels of trust and compatibility is likely to be difficult.

Development of the EQF meta-framework has the potential to formalise some of these implicit levels and tacit appreciations. The EQF sets overarching descriptions of learning outcomes and associates these with levels of qualification. The level descriptors are in fact criteria for aligning national qualification levels (implicit or explicit) to the EQF. The process for carrying out this task requires that each qualification level (including all the different types of qualifications at each level) be matched against the EQF level criteria for alignment. The transformation of these implicit levels requires involvement of and acceptance by all relevant stakeholders. Traditionally the description of these levels would have been focused on duration and location of education and training, on entry requirements to learning or work and on work related licences to practise. Following the EQF, however, the main ingredient to be made explicit will have to be the knowledge, skills and wider competences that this national qualification level testifies to learners and other users of qualifications. Thus it seems likely that linking implicit national qualification levels to the EQF can be a staged process. First, the links can be made by means of the proxies for knowledge, skills and wider competences and then, second and over time, pressure is likely to develop for the actual knowledge skills and competences required at a qualification level to be formally agreed by stakeholders. Thus the implicit levels of national qualification will be transformed into explicit levels that can be the basis for an NQF defined in learning outcomes.

(⁵) The *Qualifications systems: bridges to lifelong learning* (OECD, 2007) refers to the substructures of a qualifications system as the means of developing and operationalising national or regional policy on qualifications, institutional arrangements, quality assurance processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society.

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   A meta-framework such as the EQF has distinct characteristics to NQFs that relate to it and enable relationships to be established between qualifications levels in different countries. The major differences between EQF levels and NQF levels depend on the functions of the frameworks, the method of their development, the influences on the form of the frameworks, the qualification levels they recognise, the quality assurance processes involved and the benchmarks used for establishing levels. Table 1 summarises these differences.

Table 1: Comparing national qualifications levels and levels in the EQF

Differences	National qualifications levels	EQF levels
Main function:	to act as a benchmark for the level, volume and type of learning	to act as a benchmark for the level of any learning recognised in a qualification or defined in an NQF
Developed by:	regional bodies, national agencies and sectoral bodies	Member States acting together
Sensitive to:	local, regional and national priorities (e.g. levels of literacy, labour market needs)	collective priorities across countries (e.g. globalisation of trade)
Recognises learning of individuals by:	assessment/evaluation, validation and certification	[Does not directly recognise learning of individuals]
Currency depends on:	factors within national context	the level of trust between international users
Quality is guaranteed by:	the practices of national bodies and learning institutions	national practices and the robustness of the process linking national and EQF levels
Levels are defined by reference to:	national benchmarks which are embedded in different specific learning contexts, e.g. school education, work or higher education	general progression in learning across all contexts across all countries

If these distinctions are accepted, the form and function of national qualifications levels (or frameworks) will be different to those of a meta-framework such as the EQF (Tuck et al., 2006). Such differences should create a clear space for NQFs to continue to develop distinctively that reflects national social and cultural perspectives. In the EQF proposals and in the emerging meta-framework in southern Africa (SADC, 2005), the intention is to respect and encourage different national perspectives. However, even if the differences are accepted, the existence of each of the meta-framework characteristics in the third column in Table 1 asks questions of each country on the content in the second column. Once again the effect of a classification, in this case the EQF classification, which aims to be neutral, is likely to raise expectations of clearer design features of NQFs. As will be clear in the next section, it is interesting to note that even in the early days of the EQF, many countries are intending to use eight reference levels in their emerging frameworks (for example, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Spain, Lithuania and Slovakia).

National qualifications frameworks in Europe

The number of European countries having implemented national qualifications frameworks is still low. We can observe however an increasing number of European countries taking concrete steps towards implementing NQFs. This process has gained speed significantly during 2005 and 2006 and seems to be linked to the increasing definition of an EQF.

The following section reviews these developments ([6]).

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[6] Reflecting the situation in April 2007 in countries taking part in the Education and training 2010 process as well as in preaccession countries. The country descriptions have been based on the following sources:
- national responses to the EQF consultation, December 2005 to February 2006;
- presentation of national developments to the first meeting of the EQF implementation group in March 2007;
- responses to questions regarding EQF developments submitted by Commission end March 2007 to countries taking part in Education and training 2010 (follow up to meeting 23 March 2007);
- material gathered by ETF regarding development of NQFs in accession countries.

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Austria

The aim is to develop a single overarching NQF, based on learning outcomes, which will be linked to the EQF. This framework will open up validation of non-formal and informal learning and will better meet the needs of the labour market than the existing system. Agreement on the need for a NQF was expressed in the national response to the EQF consultation and working groups set up in summer 2006 to prepare a NQF based on in-depth research. In February 2007, a national steering group for developing the Austrian NQF was constituted. All stakeholders will be involved in a bottom-up process of consultation (beginning in autumn 2007) and development which is being coordinated by the General Directorate in the Austrian Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture. The main aims of the Austrian NQF is to support quality, promote access to and permeability of education and training and promote a better balancing of VET and academic qualifications. The Austrian NQF is planned to be ready for 2010.

Belgium (Flanders)

A NQF is seen as a necessary prerequisite for relating Flemish qualifications levels to the EQF. A set of eight draft reference level descriptors was developed during 2005/06 and led to a discussion note published in October 2006. All relevant ministries as well as all official advisory bodies (where social partners are included) in the field of education and training gave an opinion on this document. A formal decision on the establishment of a NQF (through the passing of a Decree) is expected before summer 2008. The development of the NQF has taken more time than the Flemish authorities anticipated. Several unforeseen consequences have been detected, requiring additional work and clarification. Setting up a NQF is expected to improve overall access to education, training and learning, to support the development of quality and to strengthen overall permeability in education and training. There is full agreement that a NQF must be based on learning outcomes – something that is well reflected in the draft reference level descriptors. It is worth noting that the Flemish level descriptors are based on 'knowledge', 'skills', 'context' and 'autonomy-responsibility', thus paying particular attention to the importance of context in describing qualifications levels. A series of pilot projects were finalised in spring 2007 testing the learning outcomes approach and the link to the qualifications framework in a range of sectors (EQF Levels 1 to 5). Similar projects have also been carried out by Bologna promoters for Levels 6 to 8. The general conclusion of these test projects is that the descriptors developed for the Flemish framework are useful for classifying qualifications and only require

minor changes and adaptations. A report on the development of a central qualifications database has been completed and a prototype will be developed by the end of 2007.

Belgium (Wallonia)

A formal decision on setting up a NQF was made in March 2006. In response to the EQF consultation, a NQF is seen as a requirement and precondition for a functioning European framework. A group of experts was set up in autumn 2006 to outline the main features of a future NQF. The result of this work is expected to be presented in 2007 and will form the basis for future developments. As in Flanders, emphasis on learning outcomes is essential to the ongoing work. It is noted that some parts of the education and training system (adult learning, vocational education and training, the new system for validation of non-formal learning) have significant experience in using the learning outcomes approach; other subsectors have less experience. It is likely that an eight-level structure will be chosen for the framework.

Bulgaria

The Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science committed (in 2006) to setting up a NQF which is considered to be of great importance and is expected to be presented to the government for adoption by 2008. A discussion paper on an integrated NQF will be the basis for consultation with stakeholders. The ministry is also working on a complete register of qualifications. Experts are currently working on the relationship between current Bulgarian qualifications levels and the EQF. An important area for further development will be the redefinition and reformulation of education and training standards and curricula based on learning outcomes. The question of how to integrate the framework for higher education (referring to the EHEA) and the EQF and the question of how to develop a single credit system in the framework are being discussed.

Croatia

First steps towards development of an overarching (lifelong learning) Croatian qualifications framework (CROQF) have been taken. During 2006 the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports (MSES) formed a joint working group of experts from VET and HE. The proposal of this group has been discussed (during spring 2007) with all the relevant stakeholders. The framework will have eight levels (with additional four sublevels reflecting the particularities of the Croatian qualifications system). Levels 6, 7 and 8 correspond to the three

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'Bologna' cycles. The levels have been described through credit ranges, links to levels in the EQF and types of qualifications gained after completion of studies within a certain level. Elements of key competences are also included in the first four levels. During 2007, a wider working group consisting of experts from all stakeholders will be formed that will define common standards and descriptions for all levels which will serve as a basis for development of detailed descriptions for all qualifications based on measurable learning outcomes and competences. Quality assurance and prior learning recognition, including non-formal and informal learning, will be important considerations. The Croatian framework is expected to be complete by 2009.

Cyprus

Cyprus has, in discussions on the EQF, signalled scepticism towards development of NQFs. Representatives of the country have argued that the principles and structures of a potential NQF have to be the responsibility of each Member State and expressed fear that the EQF recommendation goes too far in standardising one particular NQF solution. It is anticipated that the current qualifications system will eventually be used to develop an NQF. Caution has also been expressed on the use of learning outcomes. The learning outcomes approach promoted by the EQF is considered not in line with the needs of national education and training institutions.

Czech Republic

The Czech Republic started work on a national qualifications framework prior to the launching of the EQF (2003-04). This work formed part of the national reform agenda, partly supported by the EU social funds. An outline of a NQF has been developed and laid down in the 2006 law on recognition of continuing education results. This law came into effect August 2007. The Czech NQF is based on eight levels, including a set of reference level descriptors reflecting the principles promoted by the EQF. The NQF is part of a lifelong learning strategy and it is hoped it will raise qualification levels generally and increase the degree of success of people on the labour market and in so doing improve the response of the educational system to labour market needs. The learning outcomes approach has been firmly embraced and is seen as crucial for reducing barriers between different education and training sectors. It is also hoped it will improve permeability and parity of esteem between vocational education and training and academic education. The main aim of the NQF is thus to promote comparability, transfer and transparency, at national level as well is in a wider European context through the link to the EQF.

The NQF builds on units (complete and partial qualifications) and standards (for qualifications and assessment). The development of the NQF has taken place in close cooperation with all relevant stakeholders, including social partners and education and training providers.

Denmark

Denmark has yet to take a final decision on establishing a NQF. The national framework for higher education (related to the EHEA) is currently being revised and work has been undertaken to develop a qualifications framework that supports stepwise qualifications in VET programmes. In 2007, an interministerial group is considering how to develop a coherent NQF based on the current qualifications system. The goal will be to improve transparency, credit transfer and overall coherence in education and training that will support lifelong learning and create a strong basis for implementing EQF in Denmark. The linking of Danish qualifications levels to the EQF will start from 2008 onwards. As an important background for this development, it should be noted that the Danish government's strategy on globalisation *Progress, innovation and cohesion – strategy for Denmark in the global economy* from May 2006, includes goals and measures that targets the needs for increased permeability, allowing for increased transfer and combination of learning outcomes between education and training subsystems, between education and work and also points to the link between the Danish education and training system and the EQF.

Estonia

There is a proposal in Estonia for an eight-level lifelong learning NQF. The legal basis for the education and training system is currently under review incrementally considering one sector at a time. It is intended that in the long term a new qualification system will cover the spectrum of lifelong learning. A set of new, learning outcome-based national curricula for VET, is expected to be in place by 2008. To these will be added a new model of professional standards to be gradually developed from 2008-13. Estonia noted, in the EQF consultation, that the development of a NQF requires substantial resources as it implies development of study programmes based on learning outcomes. Nevertheless, proposals for a NQF have been made and discussions on the appropriate number of levels are taking place. The five years of experience with a competence framework for VET is being used to consider a widening of the use of learning outcomes in general education and higher education.

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Finland

Finland started work on a (three cycles) framework for higher education (EHEA) in 2004. A proposal was ready in 2005 and a formal decision is expected during 2007. A parallel development is not foreseen for VET – an overarching NQF covering all qualifications levels is therefore not seen as an option. Finland will therefore relate to the EQF without an overarching framework and has set up two expert groups to consider how best to do this. The main reservation about developing an overarching Finnish NQF is the development would require extensive work that could distract from other necessary developments in education and training. Finland has extensive experience in applying a learning outcomes approach to its education and training system. This applies in particular to VET but increasingly in general and higher education. This is seen as a fundamental precondition for linking Finnish qualifications levels to the EQF without setting up an overarching NQF.

France

National qualifications classifications have been established in France for 40 years. There is a legal basis (since 2002) to bring these various classifications together in a French NQF. The eight-level EQF has been a positive influence on this process of integration. However, the EQF level descriptors for knowledge, skills and competences have created problems for creating a single French qualifications framework. The key element of the French framework is the national repertoire of professional qualifications. These qualifications consist of three main types; those delivered by the Ministry of Education, those delivered by sectors and branches and those delivered by other ministries, chambers of commerce as well as various public or private institutions. The purpose of this repertoire is to increase the transparency of qualifications, both for employers and for individual citizens. For a qualification to be registered, a particular procedure has to be followed, guaranteeing that the relevant quality criteria have been met. A national committee consisting of 16 representatives of the State and 12 representatives of the social partners has been set for this particular purpose. An important aspect of the French approach has been implementation of a system for validating learning gained through experience (non-formally and informally acquired learning outcomes). This system provides an important bridge between different segments of the education, training and learning system and underlines that qualifications can be achieved by different routes and pathways, which include formal routes as well as non-formal and informal ones. The French approach can thus be seen as an illustration of the practical implementation of a learning outcomes approach.

Germany

Germany has declared its intention to create a NQF covering all areas and levels of education and training. Studies and technical preparations were initiated autumn 2006 and a first outline of a German NQF is expected during 2007. A pilot project has been set up to formulate competence-based vocational training regulations in a few selected occupations. Other projects test the recognition of leaning outcomes of VET for access to higher education. German debate on the EQF has focused explicitly on its possible impact on the national education and training system and to what extent and in which form it would support national reforms. Some stakeholders see the EQF, and notably a German NQF, as an opportunity to reduce barriers between subsystems of education and training and promote a more flexible form of recognition (for example, non-formal and informal learning). The shift to learning outcomes (in the German context formulated as 'competence') is supported by major stakeholders (Federal Ministry, employers organisations). Other stakeholders (some trade unions) emphasise the need to protect the German vocational training model (*Berufsmodell*) and warns against a modularised model watering down the existing dual model combining school and work practice. A NQF for the higher education sector (EHEA) was implemented in May 2005.

Greece

Greek reactions to the EQF have been positive. However, it has reserved its national position regarding developing a NQF. Initial discussions on a NQF were started in September 2006. These discussions are linked to the ESSEE-KA Law (on the relationship education-employment) and cover several aspects, for example development of national VET standards and validation of non-formal and informal learning. No decision has been taken on development of a NQF so far. In general, the learning outcomes perspective has not been embraced in Greece (an exception is two competence-based VET profiles developed under a new common ministerial decision that defines EKEPIS – Ministry of Employment as the responsible authority for developing profiles). A certain reluctance can be detected in higher education, expressed in scepticism/opposition to credit transfer and diploma supplements.

Hungary

There is a clear commitment to develop a NQF in Hungary. As stated in the response to the EQF consultation, '[...] the lack of such a framework has become one of the major factors impeding lifelong learning'. The NQF work

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is part of the national development plan 2007-13. An NQF is seen as neces-
sary for strengthening political commitment and for increasing the efficiency
of policy coordination at national level. Stakeholders see the need for a frame-
work that promotes lifelong learning and a policy coordination tool that sim-
plifies communication between education and training sectors and the
labour market. Hungary has begun gathering information on the experiences
of other countries with NQFs. The learning outcomes based approach is seen
as a prerequisite for success. Reforms have already been carried out in seg-
ments of the education and training system, in particular in VET and adult edu-
cation. Some reforms have also been carried out in general secondary edu-
cation and higher education.

Iceland

Iceland has committed itself to developing a national qualifications frame-
work for higher education (EHEA) but has yet to address the question of an
overarching NQF. Iceland has made substantial progress on using learning
outcomes in describing curricula. This applies in particular to VET and adult
education but is increasingly influencing general and higher education. There
is an ongoing restructuring of the upper secondary education system in Ice-
land, which aims to demonstrate the attractiveness of VET and bridge the gap
between VET and academic studies at this level. It is also an Icelandic goal
to increase participation in formal education and establish a system for vali-
dation of non-formal and informal learning. Establishing an NQF is being con-
sidered, but as yet no final proposals have been made.

Ireland

Ireland set up a national qualifications framework in 2003. The 10 levels
of the Irish national framework capture all learning, from the initial stages to
the most advanced; qualifications achieved in schools, further education and
training and higher education and training are all included. Each level of the
framework is based on nationally agreed standards of knowledge, skills and
competence that are expressed as learning outcomes. In addition, each qual-
ification included in the framework is quality assured, as is every provider de-
livering programmes that lead to qualifications. The current stage of devel-
opment is described as one of deepening implementation where more con-
sistent approaches to learning outcomes, credit transfer and recognition of
non-formal learning are being pursued. Work on linking the Irish framework
to the EQF will start in the near future.

Italy

An NQF is a widely shared priority and initial work has started. In September 2006 the Ministry of Labour presented a 'national table' that aimed to begin the process of defining and implementing a NQF. Stakeholders in such a framework would be, in addition to the Labour Ministry, the Ministry of Education, universities, regions and social partners. The aim will be to integrate the different titles, qualifications and diplomas delivered by these stakeholders (and employment services) into one framework. This framework may eventually lead to a definition of national criteria and methodologies improving the transparency and visibility of knowledge, skills and competences, irrespective of where they were acquired. Learning outcomes play an important role in this development, in particular VET and higher technical education have adopted this approach and other segments of the system are also working in this direction.

Latvia

Latvia will develop a NQF by building on the existing five-level structure in VET and the three-level structure for higher education. Work on a national framework for higher education – in the context of EHEA – has started and is covered by a draft law on higher education. The term learning outcomes is not widely used in Latvia. We can however observe growing emphasis on learning outcomes (and competences) in recent years, partly in developing a framework for higher education, partly in developing occupational standards (based on Ministerial Regulation February 2007). The link between Latvian qualifications levels and the EQF will be the responsibility of a tripartite committee working on a new law on vocational education and training.

Lithuania

Lithuania is currently developing an overarching eight-level national qualifications framework, based on competences/learning outcomes. The characteristics of the level descriptors will follow the pattern of the EQF. This framework of qualifications is the integral part of the national system of qualifications being designed at the moment. The qualifications system consists of the qualifications framework and the processes of designing, providing, evaluating and recognising qualifications. The project was started in 2006 and the plan is to finalise work by 2009 (a new law on qualifications will be issued to provide a basis for the framework and the NQF will also be covered by the new law on vocational education and training). The expert group responsible for developing the NQF included all relevant national stakeholders; edu-

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cation and training providers (VET and HE), social partner organisations and representatives of research. An even broader set of stakeholders will comment on the expert group's proposal, involving universities, chambers, industry and trades, non-governmental organisations, etc. Implementation of the NQF, including establishing a link to the EQF, will involve the setting up of a national register of qualifications and a representative national coordination body. The university sector is rather reluctant towards the competence-based approach of the NQF and employers are worried that transparency of qualification levels may lead to increased migration of skilled people from Lithuania. There is also the challenge of implementation and development of the system of assessment and certification of informally and non-formally acquired competences and qualifications, as well as inclusion of sector qualifications.

Luxembourg

A working group, coordinated by the Ministry of Education, was set up in 2006 to prepare a NQF proposal to be submitted to relevant stakeholders during 2007. As Luxemburg is preparing a reform of the VET system focused on the learning outcomes approach, the group's work has been delayed. Discussion on the law proposal will bring some clarification to the link between the VET system and the labour market as well as learning outcomes. This will influence the results of the proposal for the NQF.

Malta

Basic elements of a NQF have been put in place by establishing a National Qualifications Council (legal notice 1 October 2005) and a proposal for preparing an eight-level framework. This proposal has been generally accepted by the main stakeholders (employers, trade unions, major public and private education and training providers) in a broad consultation process ending in April 2007. The learning outcomes approach is seen as fundamental to these developments. Many existing VET courses are already designed based on this approach and will be extended to other qualifications. In May 2007 four working documents on Malta's NQF were published. They will focus on the conceptual framework of Malta's NQF; a reform strategy for a VET system in a NQF; a quality assurance policy for a VET system and level descriptors for key competences at Levels 1, 2 and 3 of the NQF. Malta's NQF encompasses all levels of formal, informal and non-formal education and training.

The Netherlands

In e response to EQF consultation, the Netherlands will strengthen coordination between the different education and training subsystems and pursue a policy increasingly referring to learning outcomes. A national steering committee has been set up to consider a national qualifications framework and a proposal is expected within one year. Also the Dutch Education Committee, where all relevant stakeholders are represented, has produced a report on the impact of the EQF on the Dutch qualifications system and raised the question of a NQF. Focus on learning outcomes and validating non-formal and informal learning is strong in the Netherlands, in particular in VET and adult education and training, and may prove important for developing a NQF. On linking Dutch qualifications levels to the EQF, work will not start until formal adoption of the EQF has taken place.

Norway

In response to EQF consultation, Norway did not commit itself to developing a NQF. Emphasis was on developing and implementing a framework for higher education (related to the EHEA framework). It was however noted that the higher education framework would have to be compatible with a potential future, overarching framework. This position was further developed during 2006 with the setting up (June 2006) of a working group consisting of representatives of some main learning arenas (VET, HE, adult learning). This group has produced (October 2006) a preliminary report on a possible overarching NQF. The working group suggested developing a framework for part of the VET system and use experiences from this and other pilots before developing a framework for lifelong learning. The learning outcomes approach is fundamental to this work, and is extensively used in several segments of the education and training system, in particular in VET but also increasingly in higher education.

Poland

Poland is ready to develop an NQF but acknowledges that this would be a substantial development as such a framework would have to be built from scratch. Work will be linked to the operational programme human capital 2007-13, which started in 2006. In this programme a set of projects related to a NQF and the EQF will be carried out. The aim is to gather information and data on all qualifications (learning outcomes) in education, training, labour market and other sectors. The next step will be to arrange this information in a NQF. It is envisaged that this new framework will make it possible to introduce a mechanism for validating non-formal and informal learning.

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Portugal

The Portuguese response to the EQF acknowledges the necessity of establishing a NQF. A decision on setting up a NQF was taken in 2006, the aim being to integrate and coordinate national qualifications subsystems and improve access, progression and quality of qualifications in relation to both the labour market and society in general. An agreement was signed between the government and the social partners in March 2007 agreeing on the following key elements to form part of the NQF: a national agency for qualifications under the responsibility of the Ministries of Education and Employment, a national catalogue of qualifications based on learning outcomes and, finally, further development of a system for recognition of non-formal and informal learning (taking forward the existing RVCC system). The validation system will refer to the qualifications standards in the national catalogue. The linking of Portuguese qualifications levels to the EQF is seen as fundamental and the overall development of a NQF is expected to take from three to five years.

Romania

Development of an overarching Romanian NQF has yet to be decided. If this happens, it will have to build on the national qualifications framework for VET recently agreed between government and the social partners. This framework introduces a five-level structure and gives priority to a learning outcomes approach which has been in development since 1995. A series of draft policy documents have already been elaborated, for example related to the nature and scope of standards (occupational standards and training standards). A system for validating non-formal learning has been developed in relation to the VET framework. The emerging three-level qualifications framework for higher education (EHEA related) will also have to be considered by an overarching NQF.

Slovakia

Positive steps have been taken towards developing a NQF. This framework will be based on eight levels and refer to learning outcomes. Slovakia estimates a time schedule of three to four years to develop this. The process is led by the Ministry of Education but involves other relevant stakeholders.

Slovenia

There is a positive attitude towards developing a NQF. In the EQF consultation response, it states 'the Slovene qualifications framework will have to clarify criteria for transferring between educational programmes, institutions

and systems'. It is agreed that the learning outcomes approach is important for a future NQF. Redefining curricula according to a learning outcomes approach has been in progress since 2003, but work is facing some scepticism from general education. A first concrete step towards a NQF was taken in 2006 by adopting a national classification (repertoire) of qualifications. This classification is an important first step towards recognition of non-formal and informal learning. An eight-level NQF structure is proposed covering the main types of qualifications.

Spain

Spain has started on the road towards an overarching NQF. Currently, the national qualifications and vocational training system and the national catalogue of occupational qualifications provide instruments which can be used to create the basis of an NQF for VET. A qualifications framework for higher education is currently being developed (three levels, EHEA related) and will, as soon as it is completed, be linked to the remaining qualifications categories and levels, for example in VET where a five-level structure exists. This would result in an eight-level structure covering all Spanish qualifications. The legal basis for these developments has been established through the 2002 Law on Qualifications and Vocational Training and the 2006 Law on Education, both underlining the importance of recognising learning outcomes irrespective of how, when or where they were acquired. The standards that characterise the five VET levels have, in line with this, already been written in terms of learning outcomes and are defined considering professional competences demanded by employment sectors using criteria such as knowledge, initiative, autonomy, responsibility and complexity.

Sweden

No overarching NQF has been set up in Sweden and a political decision on linking qualifications levels to the EQF and a possible NQF is still pending. A working group has been set up in the Ministry of Education and Research to discuss and analyse different options and the objective of this group is to start a more in-depth analysis before the summer of 2007. This depends on political clarification and therefore no designs have been developed so far, although an international project is underway to explore how qualifications levels might be linked to the EQF without a formal NQF structure. A NQF for higher education is being established (EHEA related).

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Turkey

The main elements of a NQF are in place in Turkey and further developments will involve drawing the various elements together. Estimated time for development of the NQF is three to five years. Learning outcomes is seen as an essential part of development of a NQF, and much work has already been done in VET and HE. A national project is supporting development of a NQF, for example by introducing assessment and certification at all levels based on national standards. The NQF will consist of eight qualifications levels defined through learning outcomes and will cover general, vocational and higher education and training. A new Law on an Occupational Qualifications Institution was adopted on 21 September 2006 and will simplify preparation of a NQF.

United Kingdom

There are four national frameworks in the UK: (a) the national qualifications framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland (NQF), (b) the Scottish credit and qualifications framework (SCQF), (c) the credit and qualifications framework for Wales (CQFW) and (d) the framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The NQF for England, Wales and Northern Ireland has been established since 2000 and covers all qualifications except those in higher education (the latter are accommodated in the FHEQ). The NQF has eight levels plus a lower level, entry level, aimed at easing access to the qualifications system. Since 2003, Wales has been developing a separate qualifications framework that has the capacity to accommodate credit accumulation and transfer and recognise all learning outcomes. Recently England, Wales and Northern Ireland have begun testing an eight-level (plus entry level) qualifications and credit framework designed to be fully operational in 2010. The Scottish credit and qualifications framework has existed for 20 years in various forms and has recently become a public company. It is an overarching framework made up of 12 levels. All the UK frameworks are based on learning outcomes.

NQF developments in the wider Europe; preaccession ([7]) countries following European developments

All preaccession countries have started to work on NQFs; action plans to establish NQFs exist in most countries, however these do not reveal a pattern for what kind of NQF is planned in these countries. Development of the labour market is a key driver that leads to pressure to develop qualifications frameworks for VET and to recognise the skills of adults without formal qualifications. Together with Bologna developments (all these countries engage with the Bologna process) this has often led to development of two qualifications frameworks (for VET and HE) in each country.

Validating non-formal and informal learning is a long-term goal for most of these countries, and most do not have alternative pathways to the same qualifications level. Therefore recognising lifelong learning through the qualifications system remains some way off.

VET reforms in most countries have seen experimentation with outcome-based approaches and, with the influence of the EQF, it is possible to see focus on learning outcomes in developing NQFs. The EQF and the Bologna process are important drivers of change in all countries, and NQFs are being developed to align qualifications systems to the EQF.

Summarising current trends

The evidence presented above documents that the EQF and NQF concepts influence the policy formulation processes in many countries. How this eventually will influence and change individual citizens' education, training and learning is still, in most cases, too early to assess. It may be argued, however, that development and implementation of NQFs in Ireland, France and the UK has increased transparency and simplified access, transfer and progression.

The review of progress towards NQFs illustrates that relatively few countries – Ireland, France, Malta and the UK (England, Scotland and Wales) – have actually adopted and/or implemented NQFs. All these frameworks, apart from Malta, were developed prior to launching the EQF and are therefore initiatives responding primarily to national policy agendas. The remaining countries can be divided into three main groups ([8]):

([7]) Preaccession countries are: Croatia, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey (candidate countries), and Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia (precandidate countries).

([8]) This summary is based on the situation in April 2007.

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- the first group (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Turkey) are those countries having committed themselves, politically and/or legally, to developing an overarching NQF explicitly linking into the EQF;
- the second group (Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania and Sweden) are those countries where preparation for a NQF is under way but where a formal commitment has yet to be made. This second group covers countries at different stages of development, from those at an early reflection stage to those close to final commitment and implementation;
- the third group (Cyprus, Finland, Greece and Iceland) are countries who are either sceptical to developing an overarching NQF or where no preparations have been made so far.

The learning outcomes approach seems, irrespective of the position towards an overarching NQF, to be widely accepted. Several countries giving low priority to developing a NQF may thus be well prepared to relate their qualifications to the EQF – Finland is a good example. This focus on learning outcomes, sometimes expressed as a competence-based approach, is closely linked to the need to increase transparency and accountability of qualifications. These are critical conditions for transferring and combining learning outcomes from different settings and may be seen as necessary for achieving more, better and more equitably distributed lifelong learning. It is also worth noting that while the learning outcomes approach is firmly embedded in vocational education and training, this is less so in general and higher education. Further, it is worth noting that a significant number of countries want to develop their NQFs according to an eight-level structure. This may, in some cases, be seen as an effort to bring national frameworks as close up to the EQF structure as possible.

Given the significant NQF developments presented above, it is likely that launching the EQF has contributed significantly to these developments.

Push and pull – main lessons in terms of governance

Many European policy initiatives in education and training – following the 2000 Lisbon Declaration ([9]) – have been criticised for having limited impact on national policies and practices. The evidence above seems to show the EQF is different and has created a strong pull effect for formulating national frameworks. But as already indicated, development of NQFs cannot exclusively be explained by emergence of the EQF. There is a strong push from within countries and framework development is closely linked to national reform agendas. Where NQFs already exist it is possible to identify the issues that have led to their creation. This combination of European pull and national push provides us with an interesting picture of how contemporary education and training systems are governed.

Pursuing a European agenda; the open method of coordination

Development of the EQF and corresponding NQFs should be seen in relation to the changes in political climate triggered by the 2000 Lisbon declaration. This declaration represents a watershed in European education and training policies. Before 2000 the situation can be described as one of reluctance towards European cooperation. Member States emphasised, with reference to the EU treaty ([10]), the need to resist efforts to 'harmonise and standardise' education and training. The main question was thus whether policies should be coordinated – not how they could be coordinated. Cooperation through programmes such as Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci were accepted, initiatives going beyond this treated with scepticism. This perspective changed significantly following Lisbon. A range of initiatives have addressed how to define and pursue a common European education and training strategy – the most important being the 2001 communication on lifelong learning, the 2001 objectives process, the 2002 Copenhagen process and, eventually from 2004, Education and training 2010. Without this shift in attitude and these initiatives, current EQF/NQF developments would be unlikely.

Several authors have looked into the emergence of this shift (Corbett, 2005; Laffan and Shaw, 2005). Gornitzka (2006) has described these developments as creation of 'a novel political space' reflecting the limitations of a strictly national policy approach. The European level, she states, has surfaced as a separate governance level introducing an increasingly important European dimen-

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([9]) "[...] develop the most competitive, knowledge-based society in the world".
([10]) Articles 149 and 150.

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sion. This applies in particular to vocational education and training (the Copen-
hagen process) and higher education (the Bologna process). A significant fea-
ture of European developments is use of the open method of coordination
(OMC). Originally developed in the field of employment, this method is used
in areas where 'hard law' is excluded and where voluntary policy cooperation
has to be pursued. Development of the EQF, which is a voluntary initiative,
is based on this open method of coordination. An EQF cannot be implement-
ed based on top-down legal measures but has to build on common trust and
recognition of overall usefulness and functionality. OMC is normally described
according to four main features (Gornitzka, ibid.). It consists of:

• identifying and defining common goals;
• establishing indicators and/or benchmarks for assessing progress towards
  goals;
• translating common objectives into national and regional policies consid-
  ering the particular conditions at these levels;
• periodic monitoring.

Developing the EQF is following this scheme. The ongoing political process
is focused on the need to identify and define common goals and functions.
The positive feedback from the 2005 consultation process provided a basis
for further development as countries gave clear signals on the main objec-
tives to be pursued. One objective was developing NQFs (or referencing qual-
ification levels to EQF descriptors); another was increasing the focus on learn-
ing outcomes. Both objectives provide benchmarks for measuring progress.
The previous section of this paper is a stocktake of progress towards these
objectives. The proposal to establish national coordination centres (see the
EQF recommendation) to oversee referencing of national qualifications sys-
tems to the EQF is a means of monitoring developments in transparency and
coordination of European qualifications systems.

Developing NQFs responds to the need to translate these objectives into
national and regional policies, considering the country context. This is gen-
erally the most critical point in European policy developments and where the
threshold of success or failure is most obvious. The following points may ex-
plain why the EQF seems to be successful in moving from European level pol-
icy formulation to national level implementation.

Structuring the focus and agenda setting

Academic literature on OMC points to structuring focus and agenda setting as a potentially important mechanism for coordination. This may be seen as part of a process leading to the convergence of ideas (Dehousse, 2002; Radaellei, 2004). Several factors may influence this structuring of focus; main examples are regular reporting, monitoring, defining tasks (for example, launching the EQF consultation) and setting deadlines (for example, the end of 2005 as for the EQF).

Launching the EQF consultation in 2005 had a direct impact on national education and training policy agendas. Most countries identified the EQF as a key policy initiative and organised systematic national consultation processes. Since the EQF was defined as a meta-framework, covering all levels and segments of education and training, a wide range of stakeholders were involved. The challenge 'to speak with one voice' required dialogue between stakeholders not normally speaking to one another. In many countries (for example Austria), this was summarised as a positive effect of consultation that contributed to greater coordination. The deadline set for consultation was contested by some Member States that claimed there would be no time for proper involvement of stakeholders. Based on experiences and responses it may be argued that the limited available time (six months) successfully focused attention and left no time for discussions to drift and become weak and inconclusive.

A potential problem for the EQF (as well as for other initiatives) is how to sustain the political momentum over time. The risk is that attention – and the ability to influence national agendas – will be lost as soon as the highly visible, formal process is finished.

Peer pressure

The open method of coordination has been described as potentially representing a podium where badges of honour and shame are awarded (Gornitzka, op.cit.). The normative pressure stemming from a desire to look good or fear of being embarrassed may be seen as a potential coordination mechanism (Gornitzka, op.cit.). Normally this naming and shaming function has been linked to developing and agreeing quantitative indicators. This is obviously not the case for EQF where the performance of countries must be assessed according to more complex and ambiguous references.

However, presentation of the results from the EQF consultation process (February 2006) triggered a certain amount of peer pressure. Publishing and comparing responses made it clear that while countries are moving at different speeds, most countries are in favour of setting up NQFs. Somewhat

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taken by surprise, several countries adjusted their original messages to become more positive and in some cases decided to change direction and speed at national level (for example Norway). Attention was also given to challenging the extent of progress in NQF development claimed by some countries.

Coordination of the framework will take place through a European advisory body. This body will consist of national stakeholders from national coordination centres functioning as a group of peers. The future success of the EQF will heavily depend on the ability of this group, supported by the Commission, to exert peer pressure to maintain the quality of link between national qualifications systems. While this is not an explicit and official objective, insistence on transparency and publishing results as core principles for coordination points in this direction.

Common learning

Another core aspect of the OMC is common learning or peer learning. The process makes it possible for national level stakeholders to be informed about developments in other countries. It draws on discourse of policy learning that is a strong practical concept for looking outwards while retaining a premium value on the national context (ETF, 2004). Potentially the OMC promises to establish 'institutionalised learning capabilities' (Olsen and Peters, 1996, p. 13-14). In principle there is a strong conviction in the OMC that despite different traditions and lack of legal means, Member States do learn from one another and improve their policies for reaching common goals (Gornitzka, op.cit.). This perspective is firmly integrated in Education and training 2010 (European Commission, 2006a) and further developed through launching peer learning activities since 2005.

Developing NQFs – and adopting a learning outcomes-based approach – can be seen as an example of extensive common learning in and beyond Europe. OECD work on this topic has played an important role (OECD, 2007), first by organising systematic comparative research, but also by bringing together regularly key persons from different countries. In some cases we can observe that development of NQFs (for example the Czech Republic) is directly influenced by OECD work. The research initiated by Cedefop in 2003 (Cedefop, Coles and Oates, 2004) on reference level descriptors ([11]) has provided a strong basis for comparison of national approaches in this field. This compilation of qualitative data, by the OECD, Cedefop and others, has established a sound basis for common learning and has proactively supported

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([11]) Undertaken in relation to the technical working group established by the European Commission on a credit transfer system for VET (ECVET).

both European and international policy developments. In Cologne in 2004 and in Moscow in 2006, conferences were organised on qualifications frameworks by G7 and G8 summits.

Limitations of the OMC

The EQF case demonstrates clearly that a novel European space has been established in education and training. The ability to set the political agenda, the impact of peer pressure and common learning are real factors that go some way to explaining the rapid developments in recent years.

The discussion also illustrates some of the weaknesses and limitations of the approach. Lack of legal or economic sanctions/rewards makes it challenging to maintain the political momentum over time. Exchange of expertise and joint research will be needed to influence national agendas, which is necessary to ensure continuity and cohesion at European level.

Pursuing a national reform agenda

While the number of countries proposing a NQF suggests the 'pull' of the EQF for formulating NQFs is a strong one, the pace of development suggests there is also a strong 'push' from within countries. NQF development is likely to support a range of national reform programmes. Where NQFs already exist, it is possible to identify the issues that have led to their development. Most common is a modernisation agenda, especially for VET but also for general qualifications often perceived not to meet the needs of users. High on the reform agenda is institutional reform prompted by inflexibility of the education and training system to produce relevant programmes of learning. Links between VET and general qualifications are not as strong as some countries would like and low public esteem for VET qualifications is also a problem. Another issue is the detachment of social partners, especially employers, from the qualifications system, particularly in skills needs analysis. *The role of qualifications systems in promoting lifelong learning* (OECD, 2006) investigated the pressures on national policy-makers to develop qualifications systems. While the kind of international pressure (or pull) was one of these, others were identified, notably demographic pressures associated with low population growth and immigration flows; social and cultural pressures are increasing to broaden current provision of education to include such aspects as values, behaviour and citizenship. There is pressure to develop more flexible vocational education and training systems for people in disadvantaged situations as a means of improving social inclusion through education and, subsequently, work. Pressure from technological change brings with it a need for improved training and

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retraining in using new technologies. Qualifications systems must allow for recognition of new knowledge, skills and wider competences. These pressures stemmed from the call for qualifications systems to be more demand-led and therefore user-oriented in structure, presentation, management and functioning. In response to these pressures countries wanted the qualifications system to:

• increase flexibility and responsiveness;
• motivate young people to learn;
• link education and work;
• promote open access to qualifications;
• diversify assessment processes;
• make qualifications progressive;
• make the qualifications system transparent;
• review funding and increase efficiency;
• improve system management.

It is clear there is an agenda for change that is national in nature and responds to different pressures than those arising from the OMC and EQF. NQFs can be used as part of the reform strategy to address pressures to modernise education and training provision as well as qualifications systems, in a review of NQFs around the world (Coles, 2006) a series of wider reforms are linked to policies for NQF development.

Introducing NQFs based on learning outcomes alters the point of equilibrium of governance in education and training systems. Additionally we propose there are general shifts of position of the key actors where consumers of qualifications, mainly individuals and businesses, are likely to be empowered at the cost of providers. It is clear that learning programmes and qualifications based on inputs, such as teaching programmes and course duration, are impenetrable by end users. They are asked to trust the system and feel confident they will have their needs met. Transforming a teachers/institutional intention into a measurable aspect of learning brings great clarity. This process of transformation of teaching specifications to learning outcomes is a process of codification or modelling and allows reexamination of programmes and a profoundly revised pedagogy and evaluation process. Stakeholders are able to intervene and discuss purposes, content and methods and there is the opportunity for peer learning and cross fertilisation of ideas about best practices. Some inputs will arise from learners and other users of qualification where direct intervention can occur though seeking to recognise existing competences. Thus the 'secret garden' of learning programmes is exposed to external scrutiny.

Just as the learning targets of learners are clarified through use of learning outcomes, so is expression of need from businesses and other employers. Systematic definition of occupational standards has been common practice in many countries for many years and continues to grow into more countries and new sectors. These occupational standards are invariably written as learning outcomes although it is possible to combine learning outcomes with definitions of learning programmes. It is likely that employers favour the transparency associated with learning outcomes and are able to use them in on-the-job training and recruitment.

With learners, teachers and employers involved in identifying and scrutinising learning outcomes, there is an opportunity for greater links between different sectors and pressure to develop better coordination and eliminate unnecessary repetition. It is also likely that social partnership can be strengthened.

Conclusions

NQFs are established in more and more countries. They are increasingly seen as an instrument for reform and change. Translating implicit qualifications levels into formal and explicit classifications based on learning outcomes allows qualifications frameworks to offer a coordinating and planning power across education and training sectors and the labour market. The EQF has become a catalyst offering stakeholders at national level a starting point and a benchmark for codifying (and thus making more explicit and accountable) qualifications levels and areas.

Many European countries are using the EQF already even though its formal adoption will probably not take place until the end of 2007. There are several lessons to be drawn from this:

- we can observe an internationalisation of education and training policies. The idea that education and training policies can be seen as something belonging exclusively to the national domain seems to be in conflict with current realities;
- developing national qualifications frameworks – interaction between European and national policies – illustrates a multilayer policy development involving diverse stakeholders from various levels, including national and European business interests;
- European-level stakeholders are able to set the agenda and structure the focus of education and training policies. However agenda setting brings

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with it the need to stabilise and make European policies more sustainable. Shifts in political focus, where stakeholders move from issue to issue, threatens long-term implementation of initiatives. Therefore a major challenge, where 'hard' legal and economic sanctions and incentives are not available, is to assure continuity and permanence. This will be crucial for future implementation of the EQF.

Independently of the EQF, there has been a policy intention to use learning outcomes for employment needs analysis, to define learning programmes and to validate learning (formal and informal). Transforming teaching specifications into learning outcomes is a process of codification or modelling and allows reexamination of programmes and a profoundly revised pedagogy and evaluation process. Employment interests favour the clarity of learning outcomes and scope is provided for increased engagement of stakeholders.

The EQF, NQFs and learning outcomes are creating a shift in governance in education and training provision at all levels. In general terms, it empowers learners and other users of the systems and favours demand-led reforms.

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Reading

**Section prepared by Bettina Brenner of the Documentation Service with the
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European Union: policies, programmes

Towards a European qualifications framework for lifelong learning: Commission staff working document.
Brussels: European Commission, 2005, 48 p. (SEC(2005) 957 of 08.07.2005).

This paper outlines the main features of a possible future European Qualifications Framework (EQF). EU Heads of Government at their meeting in Brussels in March 2005 requested the creation of an EQF, thus supporting and strengthening previous recommendations (February and December 2004) made by the Ministers of Education and Training. The paper constitutes the basis on which a wide ranging consultation took place in the period July-December 2005 of policy makers, social partners, stakeholders and experts in qualifications systems throughout Europe. Important support has been provided by the European Center for Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and the European Training Foundation (ETF).
http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/consultation_eqf_en.pdf

Thematic group on transparency of qualifications, validation of non-formal and informal learning, credit transfer: background report.
Leonardo da Vinci National Agency of Italy - ISFOL; Agence Europe Education Formation France; European Commission, Directorate General for Education and Culture.
Brussels: European Commission, 2007, 31 p.

The background report aims to present the members, the objectives, the planned activities, the relevant policy issues of the Thematic Group on Transparency of qualifications, Validation of non-formal and informal learning and Credit transfer, in the framework of the Leonardo da Vinci Programme 2000-2006 and the Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-2013. A relevant bibliography, some interesting Websites, the contact details of the Thematic Group

members and some examples of relevant Leonardo da Vinci projects under the themes complete the document.
http://www.tg4transparency.com/Background_report.pdf

Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning: implementing the Community Lisbon Programme.
Brussels: European Commission, 2006, 21 p. (COM (2006) 479 of 5.9.2006).

This European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) will provide a common language to describe qualifications which will help Member States, employers and individuals compare qualifications across the EU's diverse education and training systems. The adoption of the proposal follows almost 2 years of consultation across Europe. The core element of the EQF is a set of eight reference levels describing what a learner knows, understands and is able to do – their 'learning outcomes' – regardless of the system where a particular qualification was acquired. The EQF reference levels therefore shift the focus away from the traditional approach, which emphasises learning inputs (length of a learning experience, type of institution). Shifting the focus to learning outcomes. The draft recommendation foresees that Member States relate their national qualifications systems to the EQF by 2009.
http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2006/com2006_0479en01.pdf

Summary of responses received to the Commission's consultation on the EQF [European qualification framework] during the 2nd half of 2005.
European Commission, Directorate General for Education and Culture. Brussels: European Commission, 2006, 26 p.

This paper summarising the responses to the EQF consultation process is based on a preliminary report prepared for the Commission by the Pôle Universitaire Européen de Lorraine and an analysis by Cedefop . The Commission consulted the 32 countries participating in the work programme Education & Training 2010, the European social partner organisations (employers and trade unions), European associations and NGOs in the area of education and training, European industry sector associations and DG Education and Culture committees and networks. In general, the EQF is seen as a constructive initiative which should contribute significantly to the transparency,

transfer and recognition of qualifications within the European labour market. The EQF is also seen as an initiative which should stimulate national and sectoral reform processes.
http://libserver.cedefop.eu.int/vetelib/eu/pub/commission/dgeac/2006_0002_en.pdf

A framework for qualifications of the European higher education area / Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks.
Copenhagen: Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, 2005, 197 p. ISBN 87-91469-53-8

This report concerns the elaboration of qualifications frameworks as called for by ministers in the Berlin Communiqué; it makes recommendations and proposals for an overarching Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and offers advice on good practice in the elaboration of national qualifications frameworks for higher education qualifications. The report includes six chapters: The context – higher education qualifications in Europe; National frameworks of qualifications in higher education; The framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area; Linking frameworks of qualifications in higher education; Frameworks for higher education and for other educational areas; Conclusions.
http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf

The development of qualifications frameworks in European countries based on responses to the EQF consultation process.
Commission of the European Communities. The European Qualifications Framework: Consultation to Recommendation Conference, Budapest, 2006.

This information note discusses the following issues: What is the difference between a national qualifications system and a national qualifications framework? How can we distinguish roles and functions of systems/frameworks at national and European level? What is important if a country wants to move towards a NQF? What is the state of play in Europe as regards the development of NQFs?.
http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/eqf/develeqf.pdf

Summary of responses received to the Commission's consultation on the EQF during the 2nd half of 2005.
Commission of the European Communities. The European Qualifications Framework: Consultation to Recommendation Conference, Budapest, 2006.

This paper summarising the responses to the EQF consultation process. In general, the EQF is seen as a constructive initiative which should contribute significantly to the transparency, transfer and recognition of qualifications within the European labour market. The EQF is also seen as an initiative which should stimulate national and sectoral reform processes.
http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/eqf/results/summary.pdf

ES politikos ir atskirų salių patirties, kuriant nacionalines kvalifikacijų sistemas, analizė.
[Analysis of EU policy and countries' experience in the development of national qualification systems.]
Vilnius: Lietuvos darbo rinkos mokymo tarnyba, 2006, 172 p.

The publication presents findings of the research on national qualification system development experience in Ireland, Scotland, Finland, France, Australia, South Africa and USA. The main principles for development of qualification systems are outlined and comparative analysis of national qualification systems is presented. In addition, the publication outlines recommendations for development of national qualification system in Lithuania.
http://www.lnks.lt/index.php?option=com_remository&Itemid=22&func=download&filecatid=13&chk=41c7aa9e6bda92f5266159813b4ba240

Europäischer Qualifikationsrahmen: EQF im Kontext der tertiären Bildung: Analyse auf der Grundlage eines ausgewählten Ländervergleichs
[European Qualifications Framework - EQF in the context of tertiary edu-cation: analysis based on a comparison of selected countries].
Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur – BMBWK. Vienna: BMBWK, 2006, 60 p.

The present study analyses the implications for tertiary education of the proposed European Qualifications Framework (EQF). It starts from the national consultation process on the EQF in Austria, in which the options for implementation and action on the part of existing institutions were to be exam-

ined. The process was intended to throw light, in particular, on the correlations between the approaches to the introduction of qualifications frameworks within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and the experience gained with the new approaches to setting up the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF).

Qualifications frameworks in Europe: learning across boundaries: report of the Glasgow Conference, 22-23 September 2005 / David Raffe.
Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework - SCQF; UK Presidency of the EU. Edinburgh: SCQF, 2005, 70 p.

This report summarises issues raised in the conference on Qualifications Frameworks in Europe: Learning across Boundaries, held in Glasgow on 22-23 September 2005. The conference was designed to inform the consultation on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). It aimed to discuss the vision and shape of the emerging EQF in the context of existing and proposed qualifications frameworks, to demonstrate the challenges and opportunities that the EQF presented for existing frameworks, to showcase existing frameworks and to share experience in framework developments. Delegates attended from all EU member states and a wide range of stakeholders were represented. The conference provided extensive opportunities for participation by delegates, including workshops, a panel discussion, written inputs and an interactive voting session.
http://www.scqf.org.uk/downloads/EQF%20Conference%20-%20Conference%20Report.pdf

Transparency of qualifications: a European process: a challenge for citizenship and social cohesion / Simone Barthel et al.
Brussels: European Network of Education Councils, 2005, 205 p.

This publication is the result of the EUNEC conferences in Riga and Brussels organised with the support of the Leonardo da Vinci programme. It gives an overview of the recent European developments regarding transparency of qualifications and reflects on their impact on European citizenship and social cohesion. It is intended to help policymakers, teachers, trainers, social partners and citizens to understand how European educational policy is evolving.
http://www.vlor.be/webEUNEC/10Reports%20and%20publications/A%20transparency%20of%20qualifications%20(book).pdf

Four years on - stay focused: from Copenhagen to Helsinki: progress in modernising vocational education and training.
European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training – Cedefop.
Luxembourg: EUR-OP, 2006, 8 p.

    The Lisbon European Council in 2000 called on Member States to modernise their education and training systems, to make Europe more competitive and help create more and better jobs. The joint effort of Member States, EEA/EFTA and candidate countries, European social partners and the European Commission to develop their vocational education and training (VET) policies started in Copenhagen in 2002. The Maastricht communiqué (2004) defined priorities for VET at national and European level. Despite substantial progress, the vision of a Europe with highly skilled people, flexible and adaptable workforce, with a high degree of social inclusion, is far from being realised. However, all are working closer than ever to a shared European VET policy agenda, which is inspiring policies, reforms, strategic approaches and common European tools for VET.
http://www.trainingvillage.gr/etv/Upload/Information_resources/Bookshop/444/8020_en.pdf

Fostering mobility through competence development: the role of competence and qualification development in fostering workforce mobility: Conference summary, Thessaloniki, November 2006
European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions - EFILWC;
European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training - Cedefop;
Luxembourg: EUR-OP, 2007

    This report is the outcome of the first EMCC Company Network Seminar organised jointly by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions and the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training. This seminar report summarises the seminar conclusions and highlights how individuals, companies and policymakers can act to develop schemes that simultaneously promote workers' mobility and develop their skills. Among the contents are: Geographical mobility within the EU - Public attitudes to labour mobility in an enlarged Europe; Policy initiatives to facilitate greater mobility; Benefits of changing jobs; Transferability of competences and qualifications; The European Qualification Framework (EQF).
http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/pubdocs/2007/13/en/1/ef0713en.pdf

International: information, comparative studies

Qualifications systems: bridges to lifelong learning.
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – OECD.
Paris: OECD, 2007, 237 p. (Education and training policy)

In the quest for more and better lifelong learning, there is a growing awareness that qualifications systems must play a part. Some countries have started to realise that isolated developments in qualifications standards lead to uncoordinated, piecemeal systems. Countries are now interested in developing broad systemic approaches to qualifications. These broad national approaches and their positive consequences are examined in this book. The authors present nine broad policy responses to the lifelong learning agenda that countries have adopted and that relate directly to their national qualifications system.

National qualifications frameworks: an international and comparative approach.
Special issue of Journal of Education and Work, Vol.16, no 3, Routledge, 2003. ISSN 1363-9080

Contains eight articles describing the implementation and outcomes of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) in Scotland, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and France. Topics include NQF as a global phenomenon, neoliberal influences, and epistemological issues.

A review of international and national developments in the use of qualifications frameworks.
European Training Foundation. Turin: ETF, 2006.

National Qualification Frameworks (NQF) offer common sets of principles and references. They provide the opportunity to make informed decisions on the relevance and value of qualifications. They make it possible for users to decide whether or not a qualification opens up opportunities both in the labour market and for further learning.
Approaches to achieving coherence and clarity through NQF vary from country to country. In some, they are mainly vocational frameworks aimed at fa-

cilitating links between the labour market and vocational education. In others, they are more encompassing and attempt to provide a set of principles that embrace qualifications from all sectors of education.

This report reviews the most recent international experiences with developing National Qualification Frameworks. The review shows how pervasive the issue has become all over the world. Many countries have realised that they need to do more than just work on the updating of standards of individual programmes or occupational profiles.

http://www.etf.europa.eu/pubmgmt.nsf/4B4A9080175821D1C12571540054B4AF/\$File/SCAO6NYL38.pdf

An introductory guide to national qualifications frameworks: conceptual and practical issues for policy makers / Ron Tuck.
International Labour Office, Skills and Employability Department. Geneva: ILO, 2007.
ISBN 978-92-2-118611-3

The development of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) has been a major international trend in reforming national education and training systems since the late 1990s. A number of studies and policy documents on NQFs have been produced, most of which have focused on the potential benefits of such frameworks. The uniqueness of this Guide is that it brings a more balanced perspective to this subject. While there are a number of potential benefits, the international experience suggests that the development of an NQF can also be technically, institutionally and financially demanding, in particular for developing countries.

The Guide highlights that while an NQF can be a useful tool in addressing a number of the skills challenges, there is no single or universal form of NQF which can solve all skills problems. Its implementation needs to be fit-for-purpose with clear objectives in mind. An NQF can assist but is not a quick solution to the many skills challenges that a country faces. Without clear objectives and an understanding of how an NQF can best be developed, NQF implementation can be a lengthy and costly investment, which many developing countries may not be able to afford.

http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/skills/download/nqfframe.pdf

The role of national qualification systems in promoting lifelong learning.
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development - OECD; Department of Education, Science and Training – DEST. Paris: OECD, 2004

During the OECD Education Committee's discussion of the 2001-2002 Programme of Work, 17 countries initially expressed interest in the proposed activity on The Role of National Qualification Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning. An expert meeting in September 2000 helped to explore underlying issues and to gain an initial view of reforms and policy approaches in different countries. Drawing on the results of this meeting, a proposal was issued for the activity to examine the effects that qualifications and qualification policies can have upon various aspects of lifelong learning. The proposal suggests a fact-finding approach, as well as a series of international meetings on particular aspects of the relationship between qualifications and lifelong learning. As a consequence, the OECD activity on The Role of National Qualification Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning is composed of three main activities. Initially, some countries volunteered to prepare a background report based on a set of guidelines prepared by the OECD Secretariat. The background reports are not comparative in themselves nor intended as the basis for comparisons as they are describing and analysing issues only from a domestic point of view. They are made up of four components and a set of conclusions. To complement the background reports, it was also proposed to adopt a more comparative approach based on international workshops. Three topics were identified by countries for these international workshops. A final activity consisted of gathering data on lifelong learning in order to provide a more quantitative approach to the analysis.
http://www.oecd.org/document/16/0,2340,en_2649_34509_32165840_1_1_1_1,00.html

National qualifications frameworks: an international and comparative approach: special issue / Michael F.D: Young.
Journal of Education and Work, Vol 16, No 3 (2003), p. 219-347. Oxford: Carfax Publishing Company, 2003. ISSN 1363-9080

The idea of qualifications defined in terms of outcomes that is discussed in the articles in this Special Issue of Journal of Education and Work has its origins in early developments in occupational psychology in the United States and the attempts to measure teacher competence that followed. However, the more recent development of the idea of a national qualifications framework

(NQF) owes much of its inspiration to the 16+ Action Plan launched in 1984 in Scotland and the NVQ framework for vocational qualifications that was introduced across the whole of the UK in 1986. Since the mid-1980s, national qualifications frameworks have been developed by a growing number of countries, which suggests that they are responses to global rather than just country-specific pressures. However, apart from a number of country-specific analyses, there has been relatively little debate about qualification frameworks as a global phenomenon in either the policy or the research literature. NQFs are a relatively new phenomenon that have yet to touch most of those concerned with education and training. What this issue of Journal of Education and Work shows is that NQFs are far from being a marginal issue. Not only are they driven by powerful political and economic forces, but they go to the heart of debates about the nature and purposes of education and training.

From the Member States

CZ   National qualifications framework in the Czech Republic
Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport. Prague: National Institute of Technical and Vocational Education, 2007.

In April 2005 the Ministry of Education started the project 'The development of the National qualifications framework supporting links between initial and further education' (NQF) in cooperation with the National Institute of Technical and Vocational Education. This system project is co-financed by the state budget of the Czech Republic and the European Social Fund. National qualifications framework, whose creation is a core activity of the project, is embedded in a bill on verification and recognition of further education outcomes. The file offered here to download includes information about objectives, current development and outcomes of the project. All existing outcomes are preliminary and of a working nature
http://www.nsk.nuov.cz/index.php?r=63

DK **The role of national qualification systems in promoting lifelong learning: country background report - Denmark.**
Danish Ministry of Education; Danish Technological Institute. Paris: OECD, 2004, 90 p.

Lifelong learning for all is the guiding framework for OECD's work on learning,both formal and informal. Systemic considerations include foundations; outcomes; access and equity; resources; pathways; visibility and recognition; and policy co-ordination. The report falls in three main sections following a common guideline provided by the OECD. Section I deals with a description of the Danish qualification system, participation and outcomes. Section II deals with the impact of qualification systems. Section III deals with current pressures and initiatives. http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/33/40/34259829.pdf

DE **Europäischer und Deutscher Qualifikationsrahmen: eine Herausforderung für Berufsbildung und Bildungspolitik**
[European and German qualifications framework: a challenge for vocational education and educational policy.]
Berufsbildung in Wissenschaft und Praxis (BWP), No 3, p. 7-13. Bonn, BIBB, 2007.

Within the debate surrounding the drafting of a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the possible development of a German Qualifications Framework (referred to by its German abbreviation of DQR), a broad consensus exists in Germany that education should be structured along the lines of lifelong learning and employability of citizens in pursuit of the macro-objectives of transparency, permeability and competence orientation of qualifications. Within this process, the aim is to achieve a DQR which overarches educational sectors and possesses connectivity in European terms and which is oriented towards competences and occupational employability skills rather than limiting its goals to the mapping of knowledge and educational qualifications. The areas of policymaking, vocational education and training and academic research are faced with a series of challenges, each of which is capable of generating different responses according to the perspective adopted.

Europäische Herausforderungen und Potenziale der Qualifikations-forschung in derberuflichen Bildung / von Günter Pätzold, Anne Busian, Julia von der Burg.
[European challenges and potentials regarding qualification research in vocational education.]
Paderborn: Eusl-Verlags-Gesellschaft, 2007, 166 p. (Wirtschaftspädagogisches Forum, 35). ISBN 978-3-933436-77-1

The aim of the Lisbon Agenda is for Europe to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. The development of a uniform qualifications framework in vocational education and training at European level (EQF) and its implementation through national qualifications frameworks – making qualifications and competences transparent and easier to recognise outside the individual country - represent an important step in this direction. This system is linked with the credit points system for vocational education and training (ECVET). The introduction of the EQF will fundamentally change the national vocational education and training systems and open them up to European-wide developments. It must be remembered that in many European countries, vocational education and training takes place mostly in vocational colleges. The questions which need to be answered are: to what extent should the German dual system of vocational training, full-time vocational education and continuing training, be reorganised in line with European developments? And how can the transition from vocational education and training to higher education become more flexible? In this context, research on early recognition of skill needs and on curriculum development is gaining in importance as a result of shifts in the structure of the economy, the change from an industrial to a knowledge-based society, and demographic changes.

Qualifikationsentwicklung und -forschung für die berufliche Bildung.
[Qualification development and research for vocational education and training.]
bwp@ Berufs- und Wirtschaftspädagogik, No 11. Hamburg: Universität Hamburg, 2006.

This 11th edition of *bwp@* presents various aspects of qualification development and research in different parts. Part 1: Objectives and approaches of vocational and economic pedagogical qualification research; Part 2: National and international concepts for the structuring of qualifications – Demands on qualification research; Part 3: Aspects and perspectives of vocational and economic pedagogical qualification development and research.
http://www.bwpat.de/ausgabe11/

IE　**Review of qualifications frameworks - international practice.**
National Qualifications Authority of Ireland – NQAI. Dublin: NQAI, 2006. 34 p.

This paper presents an overview of international practice concerning the review of national qualifications frameworks in five jurisdictions, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Scotland and England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This is the first step for the National Qualifications Authority in developing an approach to the review of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The paper finds that reviews are recent and few in number. They mainly concern impact, implementation, fitness for purpose and/or fundamental objectives of frameworks. The Authority says that the reviews that have been undertaken raise important questions and considerations that can inform the approach to be taken to the Irish NFQ.
http://www.nqai.ie/en/LatestNews/File,1759,en.doc

Policies and criteria for the establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications.
National Qualifications Authority of Ireland – NQAI. Dublin: NQAI, 2003. 28 p.

This publication brings together in a single document all of the policies and criteria relating to the outline National Framework of Qualifications that have been determined by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland under section 8 (2)(a) of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, over the period April 2002 – March 2003.
http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/public_resources/documents/PoliciesandCriteriafor theEstablishmentoftheNFQ.pdf

ES **Sistema Nacional de Cualificaciones y Formación Profesional.**
[National System of Qualifications and Professional Training].
Instituto Nacional de las Cualificaciones – INCUAL. Madrid: INCUAL, 2007, CD-ROM.

This CD-ROM produced by the National Institute of Qualifications contains all the relevant legislation starting with Organic Law 5/2002 of 19th June on Qualifications and Professional Training and going up to the end of 2006, as well as the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications dated January 2007. The CD-ROM contains the structure of the Catalogue organised by families and levels of qualification, the structure of a qualification, the Unit of Competence, the modular Catalogue of Professional Training and the Training Module, etc. After this, it focuses on the qualifications in the Catalogue corresponding to the 26 existing professional families.

FR **Les diplômes de l'Education nationale dans l'univers des certifications professionnelles: nouvelles normes et nouveaux enjeux / Fabienne Maillard [et al.]**
[National diplomas in the world of professional certifications: new standards and new risks.]
Paris: CEREQ. Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur les Qualifications, 2007, 321 p. (RELIEF; 20).

This study combines a series of seminars organised between 2004 and 2006 by DGESCO (Directorate-General for Schools of the French Ministry of Education) and CEREQ (Centre for Study and Research on Qualifications). After a brief history of the evolution of diplomas, a second part places national diplomas in the new socio-economic and legislative context of access to certification. A number of examples are given of the structure of certification in the health care and social welfare sector (DEAVS), the use of CQPs (Professional Qualification Certificates), and a new European certification for aeronautical maintenance workers is outlined. The fourth part touches on the strategies of the social partners with regard to certification (sport and telephony sectors) and the reforms in vocational education and training, in particular the VAE (Validation of the Acquisition of Experience).

The conclusion opens up prospects for a new nomenclature for the classification of certification.
http://www.cereq.fr/pdf/relief20.pdf

Construction des qualifications européennes: actes du symposium Strasbourg 30 septembre -1er octobre 2004.
[The construction of European qualifications: proceedings of a Symposium, Strasbourg, 30 September to 1st October 2004.]
Paris: Haut Comité éducation-économie-emploi, 2005, 247 p.

This symposium, organised in Strasbourg by the HCEEE (High Committee for Education-Economy-Employment) in partnership with Louis Pasteur University/BETA Céreq, provided the opportunity to collate the points of view of more than 220 participants, members of the HCEEE, national and international administrators and experts from the participating countries, representatives of the national and European social partners, representatives of companies and vocational sectors, academics and researchers, on the central question of European qualifications and their construction. The conclusions of the symposium, drawn up by the Scientific Committee in charge of its organisation, were sent to the Dutch Presidency of the European Union. This publication brings together the proceedings, putting forward contributions in English, German and French, some with a translation into English. The introduction is followed by four speeches on the construction of qualifications at European level; the first dealing with the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), and the other three describing the vocational qualification systems of the United Kingdom, Germany and France. Four workshops are then illustrated. Workshop 1 – The proposals of the European Commission. Workshop 2 - Identification of the requirements for new qualifications, a long-term approach. Workshop 3 – Different approaches to the links between national systems and European qualifications. Workshop 4 - Alternatives in the area of European certification and the guarantee of quality. The publication ends with the closure and conclusions of the symposium, the agenda, and the list of participants.
http://cisad.adc.education.fr/hce3/HC/Symposium/default.htm

Le point sur...la formation professionnelle et la mobilité en Europe: dossier / Jean-Michel Joubier [et al.]
[Update on vocational training and mobility in Europe: special report.]
Paris: Ministère de l'Education Nationale, 2005 (CPC INFO: bulletin d'information des commissions professionnelles consultatives, No 40)

The concept of a diploma/certificate is not interpreted or perceived in the same way throughout the European Union. The EU aims to promote transparency in the area of professional qualifications, ensuring the necessary conditions for mobility to become a reality. This is quite a challenge given that the relationship between training and employment varies widely from one Member State to another. This paper contains the following contributions: The viewpoint of the CGT [a major French labour union]; The viewpoint of the CGPME [a confederation of small- and medium-sized enterprises]; The viewpoint of UNSA Education [national confederation of independent unions]; The viewpoint of the CGI [French inter-company business confederation]; The creation of European qualifications; Diplomas and vocational certificates; Transparency in the area of qualifications and how it applies to the creation of diplomas in France and Europe; A list of the various levels of certification; Placements in Europe for vocational/technical students; The technical school certificate and the European reference system; Euroguidance, guidance with a European dimension.

IT **L'*European Qualifications Framework:* una proposta per la trasparenza e la trasferibilità delle competenze in Europa / Gabriella Di Francesco.**
[The European Qualifications Framework: a proposal for the skill transparency and transferability in Europe.]
Professionalità, 26 (2006), no 91, p. 30-40. Florence: La Scuola, 2006

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is defined as a metastructure enabling education and training systems on the various levels (national, regional and sectoral) to relate and communicate with others. The main function is to strengthen the mutual recognition of the various stakeholders involved in education, training and learning. According to the European Commission, the EQF covers the following functions: to provide a shared reference framework by simplifying commu-

nications between those who supply and receive education and training; to provide a 'translation' tool for classifying and comparing the different learning outcomes and as a common point of reference for the quality and development of education and training; to provide a point of reference for qualified development on the sectoral level.

LT   **Parametrisation of content of the national framework of qualifications / Vidmantas Tūtlys; Rimantas Laužackas.**
Vocational Education: Research and Reality, 2006, no 12, p. 10-21. Vilnius: Vytauto Didžiojo Universitetas, 2006.

The article analyses theoretical aspects of parameters that determine the development of the Framework of Qualifications, on the basis of the development of Lithuanian National Framework of qualifications. The purpose and aims of National Framework of Qualifications are defined, activity specifications and their manifestation in different qualification framework levels are described and the distribution of functional, cognitive and general competencies and the meaning of these competencies in qualification framework levels are analysed.

In addition, this journal issue of 'Vocational Education: Research and Reality' provides other articles on the subject, such as: qualifications of higher education in the national qualifications framework; career designing: important precondition for efficient functioning of national qualification system; social partnership in the field of qualification recognition; assessment and validation of non-formal and informal learning achievements in the national qualification system; models of national qualifications systems; impact of human resource development structure upon the creation of the national qualification system in Lithuania.

Analysis of the current state of qualifications in Lithuania.
Lietuvos darbo rinkos mokymo tarnyba - LDRMT; Vytauto Didziojo Universitetas - VDU, Profesinio rengimo studiju centras. Vilnius: LDRMT, 2006, 144 p. ISBN 9955-647-22-1.

The goal of the study is the examination of prerequisites for Lithuania's national system of qualifications. The main aims are the overview

of the development of the processes which had influence on the system on qualifications before 2005; analysis of development of processes in Lithuania's system of qualifications till 2005; analysis of policies, influencing the prerequisites for the system of qualifications; analysis of the activities and experience of the institutions of the system; analysis of related laws and legal acts and strategic documents; preparation of scheme, reflecting the processes of the system of qualifications in Lithuania in 2005. The study was prepared as one of the results of the project 'Development of National System of Qualifications'.
http://www.lnks.lt/english/images/stories/dokumentai/dabartine_kvalifikacijj_bukle___engl_pask.var._[1].doc

MT **Towards a national qualifications framework for lifelong learning.**
Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, Malta Qualifications Council.
2006. 18 p.

This is the first time that Malta defined its National Qualifications Framework. It will provide learners with a clear map of all available levels of qualifications; of entry and exit points at every level of qualifications as well as levels of qualifications by sector and by occupation. The National Qualifications Framework is structured on eight levels as defined in Legal Notice 347 of October 2005. The eight levels are comparable to the eight levels of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) which the European Commission adopted on the 5th of September 2006.
http://www.mqc.gov.mt/pdfs/nqf_outline.pdf

NL **The role of national qualification systems in promoting lifelong learning: country report: the Netherlands / Ben Hövels.**
Nijmegen: Kenniscentrum Beroepsonderwijs Arbeidsmarkt, 2004,
64 p. ISBN 90-77202-05-6

Lifelong learning for all is the guiding framework for OECD's work on learning,both formal and informal. Systemic considerations include foundations; outcomes; access and equity; resources; pathways; visibility and recognition; and policy co-ordination. The present report contains the country background report for the Netherlands as a contribu-

tion to the OECD-project 'The role of national qualifications systems in promoting lifelong learning'.. In the next chapters of this background country report, these guidelines of the OECD-secretariat are followed as much as possible and appropriated for the Dutch situation. The central question in the background country report is to identify aspects of the Dutch qualifications system that have an impact both upon formal learning and upon non-formal and informal learning. According to the OECD-guidelines and following the recent paper by Mike Coles, 'qualifications systems include all aspects of a country's activity that result in the delivery or recognition of learning. These systems include the means of developing and operationalising national or regional policy on qualifications, institutional arrangements, quality assurance processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition and other mechanisms that link the labour market to education and training. Qualifications systems may be more or less integrated and coherent. One feature of a qualification system may be an explicit framework of qualifications.

http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/17/15/33777767.pdf

AT   Europäischer und nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen: Stellungnahmen zum Arbeitsdokument der Europäischen Kommission sowie erste Befunde für Österreich / Jörg Markowitsch, Peter Schlögl, Arthur Schneeberger.
[European and national qualifications framework: Statements on the Commission working paper as well as first findings for Austria.]
Vienna: 3s, 2006, 51 p.

This final report, which has been commissioned by the Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture (BMBWK) documents work conducted in connection with the Austrian consultation process on the working paper by the European Commission concerning a possible future European Qualifications Framework (EQF). This process was held by the BMBWK following publication of the consultation document.

PT   **The role of national qualifications systems in promoting lifelong learning: background report for Portugal.**
Ministério da Educação; Ministério da Segurança Social e do Trabalho. Paris: OECD, 2004, 63 p.

    The study of qualifications systems and their impact on Lifelong Learning is a relevant activity carried out by OECD. It integrates several issues – plenary sittings coordinated by the OECD, three thematic workshops led by different countries, national reports prepared by countries that adhered to this measure and final synthesis report to be prepared by the OECD. This document represents the Portuguese contribution, presented in the form of a national report, since Portugal is one of the countries that have adhered to this activity of the OECD. Several services of the Ministry of Social Security and Labour have contributed to issuing this document, among which, Department of Studies, Forecasting and Planning (DSFP), the Directorate General for Employment and Labour Relations (DGELR) and the Institute for Innovation in Training (INOFOR).It also has the contributions from the services of the Ministry of Education, namely the Directorate General for Vocational Training, that took over ANEFA's tasks and competencies. We would like to refer the participation, as chief consultant, of Prof. Roberto Carneiro from the Portuguese Catholic University.
http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/17/21/33776801.pdf

RO   **Tripartite agreement on the national framework of qualifications.**
Bucharest: National Council for Adult Vocational Training; National Authority for Qualifications, 2007

The Tripartite Agreement on the National Framework of Qualifications was signed on 23.02.2005, by the following Romanian Government representatives, employers and trade unions confederations representative at national level: Prime Minister of the Government of Romania, Employers Confederations; Trade unions Confederations.
http://www.cnfpa.ro/Files_en/acord%20cnc.pdf

SI   The role of national qualification systems in promoting lifelong learning: country background report – Slovenia / prepared by: Miroljub Ignjatovic, Angelca Ivancic, Ivan Svetlik.
Department of Education, Science and Training - DEST
Paris: OECD, 2004, 86 p.

Lifelong learning for all is the guiding framework for OECD's work on learning, both formal and informal. Systemic considerations include foundations; outcomes; access and equity; resources; pathways; visibility and recognition; and policy co-ordination. This country background report on Slovenia was written for the OECD project, 'The role of national qualifications systems in promoting lifelong learning'. Until the beginning of the 1980's , the educational system in Slovenia was organised in two parallel ways. On one hand there was a school-based education, for which practical training was provided partially in the schools' workshops and partially in the enterprises. On the other there was an apprenticeship system similar to the German dual model.
http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/33/28/34258475.pdf

UK   Evaluation of the Impact of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) / Scottish Executive - Enterprise and Lifelong Learning.
Scottish Executive; Glasgow Caledonian University, Centre For Research In Lifelong Learning; University Of Stirling; University Of Edinburgh, School Of Education
Glasgow: Scottish Executive, 2005, 101 p.

This study is an evaluation of the initial impact of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). A key focus of the project launched in December 2001 was the gathering of views from a wide range of stakeholders, interest groups and practitioners. The general aims of the SCQF are to: assist people of all ages and circumstances to access appropriate education and training over their lifetime and to enable employers, learners and the general public to understand the full range of Scottish qualifications, how they relate to each other and how different types of qualifications can contribute to improving the skills of the workforce. The SCQF is also intended to provide a national vocabulary for describing learning opportunities and to make the relation-

ships between qualifications clearer, clarify entry and exit points, and routes for progression, maximise the opportunities for credit transfer and assist learners to plan their progress and learning. The SCQF includes higher education and academic and vocational qualifications and aims to include informal learning.

The National Qualifications Framework in England: a summary outline / Dave Brockington.
Oxford: Nuffield 2005. 10 p. (Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training briefing paper; 6).

As has been identified throughout the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training, qualifications and the framework in which they are articulated, grouped, defined and regulated, play a very significant role in the English education system. This is the case not only for recognising individual learner achievement, but for the purposes of setting government targets, publicising the performance of schools and colleges in league tables, and also providing a vehicle for outcomes measurement through which funding to schools and colleges, especially post 16, is triggered through the funding mechanisms of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). An interrogation of the various Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and Department for Education and Skills (DfES) websites and official publications yields the following picture of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). I am indebted also to the paper [indexed at TD/TNC 88.113] by Geoff Hayward, Vocationalism and the decline of vocational learning in England (2004), for a clarifying description of the current NQF.
http://www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk/files/documents110-1.pdf

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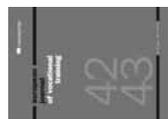
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Articles submitted to the journal must be precise, yet accessible to a wide and diverse readership. They must be clear in order to be understood by readers from different backgrounds and cultures, not necessarily familiar with the vocational education and training systems of different countries. Readers should be able to understand clearly the context and consider the arguments put forward in the light of their own traditions and experience.

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Authors can write either in a personal capacity, or as the representative of an organisation. Articles should be around 15 000 to 35 000 characters in length and can be written in any of the official languages of the EU, of the candidate countries or of the countries of the European Economic Area.

Articles should be sent to Cedefop as a Word attachment by e-mail, accompanied by brief biographical details of the author outlining the current position held, an abstract for the table of contents (45 words maximum), a summary (100 to 150 words) and 6 key words non-present in the title, in English and in the language of the article.

All articles are reviewed by the Journal's Editorial Committee which reserves the right to decide on publication. Authors will be informed of its decision. Articles do not have to reflect the position of Cedefop. Rather, the Journal provides the opportunity to present different analyses and various – even contradictory – points of view.

If you would like to submit an article, the editor Éric Fries Guggenheim can be contacted by e-mail on: eric.friesguggenheim@cedefop.europa.eu, or by telephone on (30) 23 10 49 01 11 or fax on (30) 23 10 49 01 17.

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