

Developing Qualifications Frameworks in EU Partner Countries

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Modernising Education and Training

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvii
<i>Contributors</i>	xix
<i>Foreword</i>	xxi
<i>Preface</i>	xxiii

Section 1. Qualifications Frameworks: Tools for Improvement	1
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Chapter 1 Introduction	3
1.1 A Short History of Country Involvement in the NQF Project	5
1.2 NQF Developments from the Perspective of EU Accession	6
1.3 NQFs in EU Countries	7
1.4 Obstacles to Increasing the Volume and Quality of Learning	8
1.5 The Tourism Sector	9
1.6 Goals for Countries	10
1.7 More and Better Lifelong Learning	11
References	11

Chapter 2 Concepts of Qualification	13
2.1 What Does ‘Qualification’ Mean?	13
2.2 Understandings of the Qualification Process	13
2.2.1 Learning	14
2.2.2 Assessment	15
2.2.3 Validation	16
2.2.4 Certification	16
2.2.5 Recognition	16

2.3	Learning Outcomes and Competence	17
2.4	Competent Bodies and Underpinning Standards	18
2.5	Qualification Levels	19
2.6	How is Qualification Used in Specific Countries?	21
	References	22
Chapter 3	National Qualifications Frameworks	23
3.1	NQFs are Not New	24
3.2	Structures and Associated Functions of NQFs	25
3.3	Typology	26
3.4	The Potential of NQFs to Add Value	29
3.4.1	Increased Consistency of Qualifications	30
3.4.2	Better Transparency for Individuals and Employers	31
3.4.3	Increased Currency of Single Qualifications	31
3.4.4	Broader Range of Learning Forms Recognised	31
3.4.5	A National/External Reference Point for Qualifications Standards	32
3.4.6	Clarification of Learning Pathways and Progression	32
3.4.7	Increased Portability of Qualifications	33
3.4.8	A Platform for Stakeholders for Strengthening Cooperation and Commitment	33
3.4.9	Greater Coherence of National Reform Policies	33
3.4.10	A Stronger Basis for International Cooperation, Understanding and Comparison	34
3.5	Realistic Expectations	34
3.6	Stages in the Development of NQFs	35
3.7	Evidence of Effectiveness	37
	References	38
Chapter 4	Supporting Structures: Laws and Institutions	39
4.1	The Scope of Legal Structures	40
4.1.1	Stages in Developing Laws	41
4.1.2	How Can Legal Frameworks Change the Governance of Qualifications Systems?	41
4.2	NQFs and Legal Documents	42
4.3	The Status of NQF Legislation	43

4.4	Forms of Legal Frameworks that Introduce an NQF	43
4.5	Institutions Involved in the Management of Qualifications Systems	45
4.6	Expectations for a New Qualifications Body	46
4.7	Funding of Qualifications Bodies	47
4.8	Conclusion	47
Chapter 5	Can Qualifications Frameworks Improve the Quality of Learning Provision?	49
5.1	Shaping Quality: Outcome vs. Institutional Approaches	49
5.2	Factors Influencing the Quality of Learning and Quality Indicators for NQFs	51
5.2.1	Improving the Relevance of Learning Outcomes	52
5.2.2	Improving the Acceptance of Learning Outcomes by Different Stakeholders and Institutions	53
5.2.3	Increasing Opportunities in Terms of What Individuals Can Do with What they have Learned	55
5.2.4	Helping Providers and Learners to Decide What and How to Teach and Learn	57
5.2.5	Improving the Efficiency and Equity of Learning	60
5.3	Linking Qualifications Systems Reforms and Quality Enhancement	62
5.4	Conclusions	64
	References	66
Section 2. The International Perspective		67
Chapter 6	The European Qualifications Framework	69
6.1	The Statutory Basis of the EQF	70
6.2	Implementing the EQF	71
6.3	The EQF as a Reform Instrument	72
6.4	Learning by Doing	75
6.5	The EQF in EU Member States	77
6.6	Referencing National Qualification Levels to the EQF	78

6.7	The EQF Beyond the EU Member States	82
6.8	Conclusions	84
	References	85
Chapter 7	The Development of NQFs in the EU	87
7.1	Introduction	87
7.2	NQF Development in the EU	88
7.2.1	Conceptualisation Stage	88
7.2.2	Design Stage	89
7.2.3	Testing and Implementation Stage	89
7.2.4	Implemented (Review Stage)	90
7.3	The Objectives of NQFs	90
7.4	The Level Structure of NQFs	91
7.5	The Level Descriptors	92
7.6	Ownership of NQFs	93
7.7	Challenges	94
7.7.1	Political Instruments	94
7.7.2	Towards Learning Outcomes	95
7.7.3	Allocating Qualifications to NQF Levels	96
7.7.4	Qualification Types	97
7.7.5	NQFs and Non-formal and Informal Learning	98
7.7.6	Tailoring NQFs to the National Context	99
7.8	Conclusions	99
	References	100
Chapter 8	Trends in the Recognition and Validation of Learning	101
8.1	Background and Context	101
8.2	The Interplay between NQF Development and the Validation of Learning Processes	102
8.3	The Situation in the EU	103
8.3.1	The Link with Formal Education and Training Systems	105
8.3.2	Policy Breadth	106
8.3.3	Incrementalism	106
8.4	The Situation in the ETF Partner Countries	107
8.4.1	The Legal Standing of VNFIL	107
8.4.2	The Expansion of Adult Education to Support Validation	109
8.4.3	Developing Trust and Value in Relation to Validation and Assessment Processes	110

8.4.4 The Critical Role of Standards	110
8.4.5 The Involvement of Social Partners and Other Stakeholders	112
8.4.6 The Need for Credible Assessment Processes	113
8.4.7 Awarding Qualifications that Count	114
8.5 Conclusion	116
References	117
Chapter 9 Qualifications Frameworks in an International Context	121
9.1 A Trio of Changes	122
9.2 Developments in National Frameworks	125
9.3 Developments in Regional Frameworks	127
9.4 Conclusions	129
References	131
Section 3. National Qualifications Frameworks in the ETF Partner Countries	133
Chapter 10 The Potential of Qualifications Systems in ETF Partner Countries	135
10.1 Introduction	135
10.2 NQF Myths and Misunderstandings	136
10.3 NQF as a Lever for Reforms	137
10.4 Implementing NQFs	138
10.5 Conclusion	140
References	140
Chapter 11 Current Developments in the Partner Countries	141
11.1 Regional Characteristics	141
11.2 Reasons for Involvement in the NQF Project	143
11.3 The Response of Countries to the NQF Project	144
11.4 ETF Support	145
Chapter 12 Russia and Ukraine	147
12.1 Russia	147
12.1.1 Introduction	147
12.1.2 Requirements for the Project	149
12.1.3 Initial Stages of the Project	149
12.1.4 Recent Developments	152

12.1.5	Future Actions	154
12.1.6	Relevant Opinions	155
12.2	Ukraine	156
12.2.1	Introduction	156
12.2.2	Challenges for the Qualifications System	157
12.2.3	A New Law on a Ukrainian NQF	158
Chapter 13	Southern Caucasus	161
13.1	Introduction	161
13.2	Armenia	163
13.2.1	Introduction	163
13.2.2	Reforming Education and Training	164
13.2.3	VET Qualifications	166
13.2.4	The ETF NQF Project in Armenia	167
13.2.5	Occupational Profiles	167
13.2.6	Conclusions	169
13.3	Georgia	170
13.3.1	Introduction	171
13.3.2	Management of NQF Development	172
13.3.3	The ETF NQF Project	172
13.3.4	Working with Sectors	173
13.3.5	The Department for VET Development	174
13.3.6	The Georgian National Vocational Qualifications Framework (VET GNQF)	175
13.3.7	Conclusion	179
13.4	Azerbaijan	180
13.4.1	Introduction	180
13.4.2	Aspects of the Current Qualifications System that Require Modernisation	184
13.4.3	Sector Approach	185
13.4.4	Challenges for a Qualification Framework	185
13.4.5	Acknowledgements	189
Chapter 14	Central Asia	191
14.1	Introduction	191
14.2	Kazakhstan	191
14.2.1	Introduction	191
14.2.2	Vocational Education and Training	192
14.2.3	The Modernisation Agenda	193
14.2.4	New Laws, New Institutions and Progress	194

14.2.5 Stakeholder Involvement	195
14.2.6 The Impact of the NQF Project	196
14.2.7 Future Work	197
14.3 Kyrgyzstan	198
14.3.1 Introduction	199
14.3.2 The National Strategy and International Developments	201
14.3.3 Problems	202
14.3.4 Achievements	204
14.4 Tajikistan	207
14.4.1 Introduction	207
14.4.2 Changes in Education and Vocational Training	208
14.4.3 Perspectives of Policy-makers and the Government on the Development of Education, and Driving Forces for Change	209
14.4.4 Parts of the Qualifications System Requiring Modernisation	210
14.4.5 The ETF NQF Project	212
14.4.6 Outcomes of the Project	213
Chapter 15 The Mediterranean Partners	217
15.1 Introduction	217
15.2 Egypt	219
15.2.1 Introduction	219
15.2.2 The Egyptian Qualifications Systems	219
15.2.3 Existing Qualification Levels	220
15.2.4 Qualifications and the Labour Market	222
15.2.5 Education and Training Reform	223
15.2.6 Current Developments in Qualifications	223
15.2.7 An NQF for Egypt	225
15.2.8 Design of NQF	225
15.2.9 Governance of the NQF	226
15.3 Jordan	227
15.3.1 Introduction	227
15.3.2 Challenges Faced by the Qualifications System	228
15.3.3 Plans for Modernisation	229
15.3.4 The Jordanian NQF	229
15.3.5 Political Endorsement and Ownership	230

15.4	Morocco	232
15.4.1	Introduction	232
15.4.2	Recent Developments in the Education and Training System	232
15.4.3	The Main Actors in Education and Training	233
15.4.4	The National Leaders' Perspective and the Drivers for Change	235
15.4.5	Development of an NQF	236
15.4.6	Conclusion and Main Issues	238
15.5	Tunisia	239
15.5.1	Introduction	239
15.5.2	Current Reforms in the Education and Training System	240
15.5.3	New Legal Instruments	241
15.5.4	The NQF Project	244
15.5.5	Remaining Challenges and Next Steps	246
Chapter 16	South Eastern Europe	249
16.1	Introduction	249
16.2	Albania	251
16.2.1	Reforms in Vocational Education	251
16.2.2	Developments in Higher Education	254
16.2.3	NQF Development	255
16.3	Bosnia and Herzegovina	256
16.3.1	Introduction	256
16.3.2	The Strategic Framework	257
16.3.3	The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications	258
16.3.4	Progress on NQF Development in the Context of the EU VET Projects	259
16.3.5	Remaining Questions and Challenges	261
16.4	Croatia	263
16.4.1	Introduction	263
16.4.2	The Legal Basis	264
16.4.3	Higher Education	265
16.4.4	Adult Education	266
16.4.5	NQF – A Tool for Modernising Education and Training	267

16.5	The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	270
16.5.1	Introduction	270
16.5.2	Progress to Date	270
16.5.3	NQF Levels	271
16.5.4	NQF Quality Assurance	272
16.5.5	Next Stages	274
16.6	Kosovo (under UNSCR 1244)	274
16.6.1	Introduction	274
16.6.2	The Education and Training System in Kosovo	277
16.6.3	The NQF: Origins, Influences and Purpose	278
16.6.4	The Higher Education Framework and its Relationship to VET	281
16.6.5	Achievements and Problems	282
16.7	Montenegro	283
16.7.1	Background	283
16.7.2	Changes in VET	283
16.7.3	Progress to Date	285
16.8	Serbia	287
16.8.1	Introduction	287
16.8.2	Education and Training	289
16.8.3	VET Reform	290
16.8.4	Approaching the NQF	291
16.8.5	Conclusions	295
16.9	Turkey	296
16.9.1	Introduction	296
16.9.2	Occupational Standards	297
16.9.3	Testing and Certification	298
	References	300

Chapter 17 Concluding Remarks 301

<i>Annex: A Summary of National Legal Arrangements and New Institutions Associated with NQF Reforms</i>	307
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LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 2.1	The Qualifications Process	15
Figure 2.2	The Holistic Nature of Competence	17
Figure 3.1	Distribution of the First National Qualifications Frameworks	24
Figure 3.2	Stages in National Qualification Framework Development	35
Figure 5.1	Stages at which Learning Outcomes Can be Defined	57
Figure 11.1	ETF Partner Countries	142
Figure 14.1	Number of Tourists Visiting Kyrgyzstan (in Thousands of People)	200
Figure 14.2	Number of Registered Enterprises Providing Recreational and Restaurant Services in Kyrgyzstan	200
Figure 14.3	Tourism as a Proportion of GDP (%) in Kyrgyzstan	200
Figure 15.1	Comparison of Egyptian Qualifications Aligned to Eight Provisional Levels	226
Figure 15.2	Proposed Structure of TVET System in Tunisia	241
Figure 15.3	Proportion of High-, Medium- and Low-Skilled Workers in Tunisia and Europe	243
Figure 15.4	Coherence of the Various Reforms in Progress in Tunisia	246
Figure 16.1	The New VET Structure in Albania	253
Figure 16.2	The Education and Training System in Kosovo	277

Figure 16.3	The NQF in Kosovo	280
Figure 16.4	Number of People Employed in Serbia, by Educational Attainment Level	289
Table 3.1	Types of Qualifications Framework	28
Table 6.1	Irish National Qualification Framework Levels Compared to the European Qualifications Framework	70
Table 12.1	Requirements for the Establishment of a National Qualifications Framework	155
Table 13.1	NPA VET Georgian National Qualification Framework Levels and Level Descriptors	176
Table 15.1	Population Distribution by Education Status	221
Table 16.1	Structure of the Employed Population in Serbia, 2008	288
Table 16.2	Levels of Education in Serbia	293

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Jean-Marc Castejon
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FOREWORD

European Training Foundation involvement in the development of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) dates back to the beginning of this century, when countries that are now EU member states, such as Malta and Romania, pushed the move from narrowly defined sets of qualifications to broader and more flexible frameworks that were more future-proof and involved better education and training.

In all these years, the ETF has treated NQFs not as a means in themselves, but as vehicles for education reform.

The development of NQFs forces the entire array of stakeholders in education and training to rethink the objectives of human capital development in society, the means to achieve these objectives and the ways to be engaged and engage with others in the process of maximising the potential of teachers, trainers and training centres.

In many of the ETF's partner countries, this process of reform constitutes an extremely radical set of changes in an environment – education and training – that has long been considered an almost untouchable part of a national heritage. Such reforms are not easy and any change invariably meets resistance that can only be overcome if the drivers for this change come from within.

National qualifications frameworks also offer a good opportunity for engaging partners that in many countries traditionally have not been part of the education development process, such as social partners, employers and NGOs. Their involvement will in turn impact heavily on the relevance of education and training to the needs of the labour market.

NQFs also have the potential to break barriers between the different education sectors, which is an urgent need in a number of partner countries where pathways, particularly between the vocational and academic sections of the education system, are still poorly developed.

Switching to learning outcomes rather than processes can greatly facilitate access to lifelong learning and increase efficiency by validating prior learning.

But an NQF can also turn out to be a costly and bureaucratic process, with paper outcomes for which there is little demand. For this reason it is crucial to give NQF developments the correct focus and to avoid myths and misunderstandings. Developing an NQF is a long-term process, and all countries are still at an early stage. More strategic discussions and analysis, and learning from other countries, should pave the way to nationally owned and broadly supported frameworks.

This publication is the first of its kind in the way it compares theory and practice in both EU countries and other parts of the world that have worked with national qualification systems with those methods used in the countries of South Eastern and Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean and Central Asia, where EU support to this field has only recently started and NQF development is still in its infancy.

Yet, it marks very clear outlines of the steps and directions different countries have chosen, both within the EU and in the countries surrounding it, and is as such an invaluable document both for EU policy makers that are involved in the enlargement process and for national authorities, experts and practitioners in the partner countries who want to view their own hard work in a broader perspective.

I would like to use this opportunity also to congratulate my ETF colleagues with the way in which they, collectively, have managed to combine a work of reference and a valuable overview of current initiatives and activities in one single document whose publication will be appreciated by a vast number of colleagues the world over.

Madlen Serban
Director, European Training Foundation
Turin, June 2010

PREFACE

National qualifications frameworks (NQFs) have, over the last five years, become key instruments for the restructuring and reform of education, training and qualifications systems in Europe. While very few countries had considered this approach prior to 2005, the situation today is very different. The majority of European countries (as well as candidate countries to the EU and partner countries) are currently working actively on the development and implementation of national frameworks. Even if the number of countries having fully implemented such frameworks is still low (Ireland, France, Malta and the UK), almost all are now signalling that they will introduce comprehensive, overarching qualifications frameworks covering all parts of their education, training and qualifications systems.

The key explanation to this rapid development of comprehensive, overarching frameworks is probably the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) adopted in 2008 by the European Parliament and Council. The EQF is a device to ‘translate’ and compare qualifications across Europe, so even if NQFs are important for reaching European objectives, they are increasingly seen as instruments for addressing national objectives. It seems clear to most of the education community that effective reform requires agendas and initiatives with strong local roots and the broad participation of those with a stake in outcomes, including not only officials but also students, parents, teachers, and communities. Unless the beneficiaries of the reform become its bearers, it is likely to be stillborn. This is not a case in which reformers select discrete entries from a large menu of reforms. The change agenda is driven by ideas that have only recently entered mainstream policy making.

NQFs are mainly seen as communication or transparency tools whose main tasks are to clarify the relations between the different parts of the national system. The aim is to make national qualifications easier to understand and use both for national citizens and for foreigners. This turns national frameworks into important means for strengthening the permeability of national systems and for facilitating access to and progression in learning. Frameworks provide

a new platform for dialogue – across traditional borderlines of subsystems, sectors and institutions – facilitating discussion on how to improve current practices and how to remove barriers to education, training and learning. While most stakeholders agree on this general objective, experiences so far show that NQF developments are indeed political processes which in some cases trigger conflicting points of view. It is important to keep in mind the political character of the national frameworks; to understand them as neutral, technical instruments seems inappropriate. Developing and transition countries have an understandable desire to accelerate public sector reform by adopting the most advanced innovations devised by industrial countries. Policy documents which describe qualification framework developments point to considerable agreement on both the form that these national frameworks are taking and the policy goals that it is hoped they will achieve. There is also evidence of considerable borrowing of structures and design principles that were originally formulated in industrial countries such as England, Scotland and New Zealand. This suggests that NQFs are being introduced for broader political reasons than mere educational benefits.

Beyond the structures of the frameworks, the focus of reform is really qualifications: what can be done with them and how they are developed, delivered, assessed and certified. Qualifications are a proxy for skills, but often they are a rather poor approximation of the skills that people possess. One part of the reform is to make clearer what people who hold certain qualifications can actually do when they decide to pursue further learning, develop their careers or change their jobs.

One way to look at qualifications is as a consensus between those who provide learning and those who make use of the output of learning. The value of the qualification holds as long as the consensus holds. The consensus broke in Europe in the 80s. The idea of an outcomes-based framework arose because, in the UK at that time, this trust was breaking down and the government as well as some employers felt that vocational qualifications were becoming too institution-led or provider-led. Freed from any link with institutional provision and expressed in terms of standards agreed by employer bodies, it was hoped that qualifications based on an NQF would provide a guarantee of both quality and relevance. This emphasis on employer needs was seen as best expressed by allowing them to define qualifications in terms of workplace performance outcomes. Giving priority to employer definitions of outcomes limited the role of education and training providers which were seen as offering what their staff could teach rather than what employers in the different industrial sectors needed. In practice, outcomes-based approaches have underplayed the extent to which institutions continue to have a role in guaranteeing the quality of a qualification. Outcomes rarely, if ever, stand on their own; new forms of trust

in the outcomes and the standards have to be developed as a result of usage over a period of time; this leads us back to the importance of institutions, especially in a developing country where there may be few traditions of trust to build on, other than those associated with local communities. Institutions have in the past been the primary resources of trust; the problem this raises for those introducing NQFs is to develop a new basis of trust that relates to outcomes and standards.

So qualifications are the result of a consensus and it is this consensus that reflects the bargaining power of various players within an institutional setting and aims at building the credibility of the institutions involved. This fabric of trust is what matters. Consensus or agreement is the bedrock of trust and all qualifications depend on trust. Qualifications inevitably claim to represent more than they can demonstrate and therefore can only work on the basis of trust. Genuine consultation processes are crucial and principled compromises are important. The question will be raised as to whether all countries have the necessary human resources distributed across sectors and institutions to make such an approach viable. It is also understandable that smaller countries follow uncritically the lead given by bigger countries, even though the types of NQF that they copy may not be the most appropriate for their circumstances. It may be that a more incremented approach becomes the victim of political impatience; politicians always want quick results. However, the lessons from the experience, and from those countries that have followed a more directive route in moving towards an outcomes-based framework, are that it is mistaken for policy makers to move too far ahead of current practice. Trust, especially in developing countries is scarce beyond that located in small communities; it has to be created and this cannot be done at a stroke of a pen. Establishing trust is incompatible with a narrow prescription of outcomes, especially where both skills and bodies of knowledge are becoming more fluid and changing faster than ever before. In these new circumstances, establishing trust rather than merely setting and monitoring standards will be the major task of qualification agencies and authorities.

On the ground, the making of qualifications is the result of the interaction between institutional frameworks, organized economic activity and stock of knowledge. The effect of educational quality on economic growth seems to be significantly larger in countries with a strong institutional framework so that good institutional quality and good educational quality reinforce each other. Qualifications frameworks take their share in building institutional capacities by shaping the kind of knowledge and skills that pay off. The role and structure of the State and the strength of sectoral employer organisations in a particular country, as well as the increasingly central role of qualifications as measures of educational productivity, raise the question of balance between prescription

and consensus. Over-prescription that has no basis on how qualifications are actually used is unlikely to be effective. On the other hand, framework criteria can lead to negotiations between designers and users of qualifications which can assist them in achieving greater portability.

Recent European developments have added urgency to international coordination in this field. With the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in mind, stimulating the debate on qualifications frameworks in countries neighbouring the EU is a logical extension of the EU's internal activities. The ETF helps partner countries to become acquainted with European discussions on and experiences with NQFs, including the different approaches to these frameworks and the practical implications of developing and implementing an NQF. Experience shows that frameworks have the potential to improve the formal recognition of knowledge and skills that individuals have acquired. Furthermore, because of the functions that can be attached to them, they may also act as a driving force for broader education and training reform. However, NQFs cannot by themselves guarantee that high-quality vocational education and training (VET) is being offered.

Awareness of the possible advantages of NQFs and an understanding of the risks involved in committing resources to developing an NQF will contribute to well-founded policy decisions. NQFs can be a powerful lever for VET reform within countries, but such frameworks are not easy to develop, nor are they in themselves a solution to all the problems that countries might experience with their vocational education systems.

For European countries with well functioning and well-established education and training systems, the NQF is seen mainly as a transparency and communications tool, making it easier to compare existing qualifications.

The situation in the transition countries neighbouring the European Union is rather different as will be seen in this study and other ETF publications. Countries are working on the reform of their VET systems that were originally developed for rather different economic and social circumstances. When overcoming the legacy of the past, it is important to identify what the VET systems are for and how they can be reorganized accordingly. It is through the process more than through the instruments that are associated with the NQF that actual systemic change processes for VET reform evolve. The long time that the development of an NQF requires strengthens the opportunities for incremental reforms that are home grown. Such reforms cannot succeed without learning and capacity development. The NQF process can be a useful tool for policy learning, but experience also shows that the instruments and structures have often been overemphasised, under the influence of examples from abroad leading to policy borrowing.

This insight of the importance of the NQF processes has helped us to develop our own understanding of what is known in the literature as policy breadth. Our view of the NQF as a lever for VET reform however, calls for a reinterpretation of this concept whereby the focus is on how the NQF can support wider policies, rather than the other way around. In the book, those links are explored in various contributions.

Based on our view of the potential of qualifications frameworks development processes, set against the reality of the difficulties of improving the quality of learning, the ETF embarked on a number of different regional (multi-country) or country projects and activities with a focus on NQF development. Not all countries and territories¹ began working on the project at the same time, nor did they work according to a single project model. For some countries the development of an NQF was part of a long-term strategy that had much more important short-term goals, for example the development of occupational standards in tourism. The project has evolved to incorporate initiatives relating to qualifications framework development, for example to give more prominence to learning outcomes than programme delivery. The book is organised in three interrelated sections: the first section unfolds the basic concepts at work in the rationale, design and implementation of qualifications frameworks. The second section looks into the European and international initiatives on national and regional frameworks as well as related trends such as the recognition of learning and experience. The third section is a description and an analysis of the NQF projects in EU partner countries. This book tells the story of why countries engage in national qualifications frameworks projects and especially why they believe it is a step towards better and more equitable learning.

1 Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Egypt, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Georgia, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo (under UNSCR 1244 – hereinafter ‘Kosovo’), Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, Morocco, Russia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Turkey and Ukraine.

Section 1

QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS: TOOLS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

The EU's interest in qualifications and in the national infrastructure that supports qualifications has focused on transparency. The complexity of national qualifications systems and the different ways of recognising learning mean that work on transparency is necessary if European unity is to mean something more than the sum of the national systems. A clearer understanding of the qualifications of the citizens of other countries can ease barriers to cross-border mobility for both students and workers.

The first step in developing this understanding and creating transparency was to publish large catalogues of qualifications for each country with explanatory text and references. The need for a simpler international classification of qualifications eventually led through a series of steps to the reference levels of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (European Parliament, 2008) and the Qualifications Framework for the Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). Other tools, such as the Europass Portfolio and frameworks for quality assurance (European Commission, 2008), have been useful in communicating and developing trust regarding different national approaches to qualifications.

For many centuries trade organisations (guilds or professional associations) have exercised some control over the right to practise a trade and have defined hierarchies of skills within the trade (e.g. assistant, apprentice, qualified worker, master craftsperson). These hierarchies were the forerunners of sectoral and national qualifications frameworks (see Chapter 2). The universities also set down common patterns of recognising progress within higher academic learning, thus defining another hierarchy of qualifications. Hence, within all national qualifications systems there is a set of implicit qualifications structures that aim to ensure that the supply of skilled labour is available for the trades and to promote advances in human knowledge.

Working and learning play a significant role in defining national and regional cultures and the social identities of individuals and communities. Within the EU the dual processes of Bologna (for harmonising higher education qualifications structures) and Copenhagen (for increasing

cooperation in vocational education and training (VET)) have been strong influences on the creation of a European dimension for national social and economic development. Countries neighbouring the EU have a clear interest in relating their national qualifications structures to these European models (Coles and Leney, 2009). It is therefore logical that when priorities for cooperation with the EU are discussed, education and training is high on the agenda.

The European Training Foundation (ETF) has been supporting education and training in many ways since it began its work in 1994. Its mission is to help countries that aspire to join the EU and other transition countries to harness the potential of their human resources through the reform of education, training and labour market systems, since these systems can make a fundamental contribution to increasing prosperity, creating sustainable growth and encouraging social inclusion.

The Copenhagen process, and the way in which it strives to increase the portability of qualifications, has pushed the issue of qualifications frameworks up European education policy agendas. Recent European developments have added urgency to international coordination in this field. With the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in mind, stimulating the debate on qualifications frameworks in countries neighbouring the EU is a logical extension of the EU's internal activities. The ETF helps partner countries to become acquainted with European discussions on and experiences with national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), including the different approaches to these frameworks and the practical implications of developing and implementing them.

Experience shows that frameworks have the potential to improve the formal recognition of knowledge and skills that individuals have acquired. Furthermore, because of the functions that can be attached to them, they may also act as a driving force for broader education and training reform. However, NQFs cannot by themselves guarantee that high-quality VET is being offered. Awareness of the possible advantages of NQFs and an understanding of the risks involved in committing resources to developing an NQF will contribute to well-founded policy decisions. NQFs can be a powerful lever for VET reform within countries, but such frameworks are not easy to develop, nor are they in themselves a solution to all the problems that countries might experience with their vocational education systems.

It was with this balanced view of the potential of qualifications frameworks, set against the reality of the difficulties of improving both the quality and the recognition of learning, that the ETF embarked on a number of different regional (multi-country) or country projects and activities with a

focus on NQF development. Not all countries and territories began working on the project at the same time, nor did they work according to a single project model. For some countries the development of an NQF was part of a long-term strategy that had much more important short-term goals, for example the development of occupational standards in tourism. The project has evolved to incorporate initiatives relating to qualifications framework development, for example to give more prominence to learning outcomes than programme delivery.

1.1 A Short History of Country Involvement in the NQF Project

The partner countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus have participated in the NQF project since 2005. The objectives were to support the national education and training reform debate using national qualifications as a strategic framework for discussion, and to facilitate policy learning about the opportunities and risks relating to the development of NQFs. The results achieved have included awareness of the international debate on qualifications frameworks; an understanding of the context-specific nature of framework design; the creation of platforms for regional cooperation and the exchange of experience; the provision of initial technical and professional capacities for NQF design; and the development of a basic consensus among key stakeholders within individual countries on the policy to be adopted towards the development of qualifications frameworks.

Each country team in the project consisted of officials from the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Labour and employers' representatives from a pilot sector, with one member acting as a national coordinator. The three to four year implementation period has produced a number of developments. For example, Armenia has included NQF development as part of the EU-funded VET sector programme, and Georgia has adopted a VET qualifications law. Kazakhstan has made the NQF a part of its education development plan. Kyrgyzstan has done the same, and has already redesigned its tourism qualifications. In Tajikistan the project initiated the establishment of a national association of employers in tourism and of training provision in the sector. All the country teams drafted NQF policy papers during the period 2007–2008. There were also failures: Uzbekistan withdrew from the NQF project in 2007.

The ETF's activities in Russia accelerated in 2003, with the cooperation of the Centre for VET Studies and the Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Owners. This cooperation led to the development of new occupational

standards and, based on these, new pilot VET curricula. Soon after the success of the initial work, the Union of Employers took steps of its own to establish a national qualifications agency, which now, under government licence, approves all new occupational standards. Another group of Russian experts under the Ministry of Education put forward an NQF development proposal in 2007. In Ukraine the work on new occupational standards started in 2006, in close cooperation with Russian experts, and the ETF also supported the development of an NQF policy paper and a draft qualifications law. During the past two years the Russian experts have been assisting other country teams through the ETF project.

In all of the Mediterranean partner countries, including Turkey, the ETF project started in 2005. The purpose was to raise awareness in these countries of the issues at stake in NQF development and to select a few countries that were ready to embark on a deeper approach to qualifications frameworks. Years 2 and 3 of the project continued in Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. A national coordinator helped to form a national task force made up of the main stakeholders. This task force was in charge of designing a 'vision' and corresponding steps for action.

An initial step was to organise a peer review in each country whereby the national situation was analysed and a review report produced with a number of recommendations. This enabled policy learning between the countries. Study visits were organised to the Netherlands and Estonia (from Central Asia), to Italy and Spain (from the Caucasus), and to Ireland, Hungary and Scotland.

The achievements of the project again have been variable. For example, in Tunisia the NQF is included in the new VET law, while in Jordan the NQF is part of the national strategy and will be supported by the EU from 2010. In Morocco the project has received strong political support, since Morocco has signed an agreement that grants it a 'privileged position' with the EU. The project has been a preparation for planned VET reform that is supported by EU funding in the countries concerned.

1.2 NQF Developments from the Perspective of EU Accession

The NQF project started on a regional basis in the partner countries of South Eastern Europe in 2003. Its aim was to explore the NQF concept in the context of VET reform discussions. This was the first ETF initiative to systematically address the development of qualifications frameworks. The ETF had previously focused its attention on the development of VET qualifications and VET standards.

In view of the specific national needs of the countries of the Western Balkans, the ETF decided to continue on a country-by-country basis. The ETF national NQF projects had four common objectives:

- to raise awareness;
- to build capacity;
- to identify potential recipients of EU assistance;
- to help to develop national strategies.

In most countries the NQF became part of policy discussions that produced diverse achievements. In Croatia work began on implementing the country's own NQF concept, supported by the ETF in a facilitation role. In Albania and Montenegro the ongoing debate contributed to targeted EU assistance for NQF design, and the situation was similar in Serbia, where a group of national experts also published an informative brochure entitled 'NQF for European Serbia'. Turkey has been working towards an NQF system for adults. In September 2006 it adopted a law on its new framework and the ETF has been supporting the newly established Turkish Vocational Qualification Authority in its strategic planning.

In some of the new EU member states the ETF had already contributed to the development of qualifications systems or frameworks for VET prior to their accession. In Malta the ETF provided advice on the process of establishing a national qualifications council in 2002. During the period 2002–2005 in Romania the ETF was involved in setting up the NQF for VET and adult learning. Slovenia's National Qualification System was established in 2000 with the support of a Phare project that was developed and managed by the ETF. Estonia established its national framework for VET qualifications (Kutsekoda) in 2001.

1.3 NQFs in EU Countries

During the same period of time that the NQF project has been running, EU member states have also been advancing their understanding and use of qualifications frameworks. This advancement is discussed in detail in Chapter 7. The start of the NQF project in 2003–2005 coincided with the publication of reference levels for an EQF (Coles and Oates, 2004). In the relatively short period of time since 2003 the European Commission has overseen the rapid development of qualifications frameworks in almost all of the 32 countries that are part of the Education and Training 2010 programme. The coordination of the timescales of ETF activity and EU activity has produced an opportunity for policy learning that has helped ETF partner countries enormously (Grootings and Neilsen, 2008).