



EUROPEAN COMMISSION  
Directorate-General for Education and Culture

# PEER LEARNING ACTIVITY ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

8-10 October 2007, Budapest, Hungary

## SUMMARY REPORT

### 1 INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 PLA Objectives

The main objective of the PLA was to support peer learning across the participating countries in terms of:

- understanding the underlying rationale for the development of learning outcomes-based NQFs;
- fostering the exchange of views, and methodologies, in relation to participating countries developing systems and NQFs.

The two main themes that were explored within these objectives were:

- the relationship between NQFs and sub-sectoral qualifications systems (for example, general education, vocational education and training, and higher education);
- the potential of NQFs and other instruments in promoting learning outcomes-based approaches in the work of educational institutions.

These themes were addressed by a series of presentations, workshops and discussions which provided:

- information and insight into the ongoing transformation of the qualifications system in Hungary and other countries;
- opportunities for reflection and exchange of basic NQF concepts from countries that have been engaged in its development;
- the opportunity to generate discussion about the potential role of NQFs in serving country-specific goals, and the implementation of the EQF;

- the opportunity to develop recommendations for the continuation of the work of the cluster in this area, including identifying objectives for future PLAs (Krakow and London).

## **1.2 Purpose of this report**

The Budapest PLA represented an important stage in a wider debate, and information exchange, around the development of NQFs and learning outcomes across the participating countries. The aim of this summary report, therefore, is to outline and summarise the key issues and discussion points that were raised during the PLA in order to support wider national discussions about the development of NQFs and learning outcomes. It provides an outline of the structure of the PLA and the key themes and questions that were presented as part of the formal presentations and discussed through the workshops and plenary sessions.

It is intended that this report be used to support the work of the Commission in disseminating the results of the activities of the RLO Cluster and PLA to Member States and other stakeholders.

## **2 PLA STRUCTURE AND PROCESS**

The PLA took place over three days.

### **Day 1**

The first day focused on a series of presentations from participants about recent developments of NQFs in their respective countries; the experiences of four countries were presented (Hungary, Austria, Lithuania, and Turkey). The presentations identified issues experienced by the Member States and their responses to them, which provided the foundation for discussion for the rest of the PLA.

### **Day 2**

During the second day participants were divided into smaller workshop groups. Each workshop was moderated and followed the format of: a short introductory presentation by the Hungarian hosts, an expert panel discussion, and open discussion.

The first three parallel workshop sessions examined the different sub-sectoral qualifications systems and the way these are affected by the development of learning outcomes-based NQFs. The two parallel workshop sessions in the afternoon examined how the development of learning outcomes-based NQFs may facilitate the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

### **Day 3**

The last day focused on a preliminary discussion of the main concepts linked to NQFs and also the links with the EQF. Participants attended two parallel workshop sessions and plenary discussions were followed, which focused on identifying future challenges, existing information gaps, and other implementation issues related to NQF developments such as: levels, descriptors, linking qualification sub-systems, institutional structures and procedures. In plenary session representatives identified areas where peer learning activities would help with national developments.

### **3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NQFS AND SUB-SECTORAL QUALIFICATIONS SYSTEMS**

While a few countries (FR, IE, MT, UK) already have learning outcomes-based qualifications frameworks, many more are in the process of developing or reflecting on the development of such frameworks. In addition, the European Qualification Framework (EQF), as a European meta-framework based on learning outcomes, is expected to be adopted by the European Parliament and the Council in 2007 and to be launched at the end of the year. These developments represent a significant challenge for participating countries among which the use of learning outcomes is very different. While a few countries have a relatively longstanding experience with learning outcomes for many it is a new development.

#### **3.1 The Development and Implementation of NQFs in Hungary and Other Countries**

The PLA, while supporting information exchange across all of the participating countries, included presentations of examples of NQF developments and the relationship of these with sub-sectoral qualification systems. The following countries were used as case studies for the PLA:

- Hungary
- Austria
- Lithuania
- Turkey

A variety of terms are used by different countries when discussing NQFs, for example, 'umbrella' framework or 'overarching' framework. These terms, however, are not very clear in expressing both the type of sub-sectoral arrangements and qualification systems they represent, and the relationship of these with NQFs. The PLA explored the different terminology used by Member States to describe their NQFs, and critically, the different types of sub-sectoral qualification systems and arrangements these referred to.

Broadly, discussions around NQFs identified four main framework 'types'. These are outlined in the table below.

**Table 1 – Types of NQFs<sup>1</sup>**

<b>Type</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example</b>
<b>Multiple frameworks</b> (no links between sector frameworks)	Levels for one or more sectors (general, vocational education and training (VET), higher education (HE), adult education and training), some with descriptors.	Hungary (today)
<b>Coordinating frameworks</b> (no intention to integrate sectors)	A single set of levels covering all sectors (no descriptors) but each sector has its own sub-range of levels.	Turkey (proposal)
<b>Meta-framework</b> (No intention to integrate pathways)	A set of levels and descriptors covering all sectors which is the basis for relating to each sectoral framework.	Scotland EQF
<b>Integrating framework</b> (Intention to bring pathways together)	A set of levels and descriptors covering all sectors, each sector uses this set of levels and descriptors.	Austria (in the future) Lithuania

The typology identified in Table 1 above is used in the remainder of this section to structure the key findings and discussion points from the PLA. It is important to note that, in applying the typology, there may be overlap between classifications, for example, a meta-framework may have integrating effects.

### **3.1.1 Multiple Frameworks**

Multiple frameworks describe systems where several qualifications frameworks co-exist within a system without any explicit links among the different levels of qualifications. Multiple frameworks exist in many countries where qualifications systems within general education, higher education, and vocational education and training are in place but without any explicit and/or formalised links. The levels within these sub-systems may be explicit or implicit and they may be formalised in a framework or not. Even though we choose the category 'multiple frameworks' in the table as the least developed form of NQFs it is possible that no sectoral qualification frameworks exist in some countries and therefore there is no explicit NQF.

**Hungary has multiple frameworks.** During the PLA presentations outlined the extent to which learning outcomes-based approaches applied in different sub-sectors of education and training in Hungary. Three different sub-sectoral qualification systems were discussed in the context of NQF developments. These related to:

1. General education.
2. Vocational education and training.
3. Higher education.

<sup>1</sup> Source: Budapest PLA: Mike Coles Conclusions of Day 2

### **1. General education: secondary school final examinations and assessment**

The workshop on general education and the use of learning outcomes started with a presentation of the Hungarian secondary education examination reforms. A new examination replaces the previous general education exam and the higher education entrance tests. It can be taken at two different levels (medium or advanced) and, most importantly in the context of learning outcomes, the reform is based on assessing competences rather than curricula content.

The PLA discussions highlighted the impact of moving towards a learning outcomes-based approach for:

- curricula design and teaching methods;
- the assessment of learning;
- incentives for students and teachers;
- training for teaching staff;
- the workload of teaching staff;
- improving the equity of examinations.

The use of learning outcomes implies some radical changes in the conception of education and training systems. Several challenges were discussed as being important in the context of the Hungarian reforms. These included the following.

- Teaching and training practices – if learning outcomes are used for descriptions of qualifications and their components, assessment procedures and the formulation of curricula need to be adapted. Such changes require a shift in methodologies and also staff retraining, and potentially, classroom practices.
- Funding – the state exam is composed of internal and external assessments. These have standard content and procedures. The development and implementation of these is more expensive than the previous system, making failure costly and thus potentially putting pressure on the system.
- Integration of VET related secondary schools because the internal assessment part makes it possible to assess VET knowledge skills and competences.

The future Hungarian NQF will take account of the two levels of secondary school exam.

### **2. Vocational education and training: post-secondary VET and adult learning**

The shift to learning outcomes in post-secondary VET in Hungary is taking place through the introduction of 'competency profiles', which are being used as the basis for qualification and curricula design. These competency profiles are broken down using 'tasks' and 'competency' descriptions, and are at the core of the competency-based examination system.

In the example discussed qualifications were made up of nine modules, which were a mix of 'core' and 'optional' modules. Core modules can be common to several qualifications, which provide the flexibility for students to switch the qualification they are studying for after they have already started learning - by changing or taking 'additional' modules. The Chamber of Commerce is involved in ensuring that competency profiles for modules and qualifications that support traditional labour market occupations meet economic needs and demands. Modules have in themselves no currency on the labour market, only full qualifications.

Discussions about the modular structure, and competency profiles, for VET qualifications in the Hungarian example focused on the implications for further development of learning outcomes-based approaches. Key issues highlighted were:

- the importance of designing assessment and validation processes adapted to this approach;
- developing systems and processes that enable the transfer of credit for achieved modules and therefore support the achievement of full qualifications;
- the need to prepare policy stakeholders and teaching staff for changes in training and assessment methods;
- being clear about the roles of the state and other key stakeholders - how to involve stakeholders in the development of competence profiles and modules.

### **3. Higher Education: the establishment and the implementation of outcomes and qualifications requirements**

The shift to learning outcomes in Hungarian higher education has been triggered by the introduction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) Framework into the national system. The EHEA was introduced through regulatory measures which require higher education institutions to describe qualifications according to a set of descriptors. In addition to the general programme descriptors of EHEA it was planned to use field descriptors (concerning the specific field of study) and specific descriptors for each qualification. However, due to important time pressures, and the complexity of the tasks involved, field descriptors were abandoned and only the general and specific descriptors were used. As a result, at present, all first cycle qualifications in Hungary are described in terms of both: inputs and outcomes criteria according to the following.

- Name of degree.
- Name of qualification to be obtained.
- Length of the course.
- Number of credits to be earned.
- Learning outcomes.
- Profile of the core programme.
- Foreign language skills required.

The discussion during the PLA workshop revealed several challenges faced by this approach in terms of the use of learning outcomes. These included the following.

- Learning outcomes are used to describe higher education qualifications in Hungary but it is not clear what their role within the system is. Currently they are used to describe qualifications but not for the definition of assessment criteria.
- The current descriptions do not take into consideration the fact that the required learning outcomes could be achieved through other forms of learning outside the formal system (i.e. non-formal and informal learning).
- The involvement of stakeholders in the development of qualifications needs to be developed further.
- The lack of support, training and tools for those preparing qualification descriptions was a major obstacle for the design of specific descriptors

### **3.1.2 Coordinating Frameworks**

Coordinating frameworks bring together different sub-frameworks / sub-systems and position them on a single scale of levels. They do this by attributing a range of levels (within the single scale) to each sub-framework / sub-system. This type of framework makes explicit, and ensures the transparency of, levels which exist across multiple frameworks without comparing qualifications from different sub-systems. Each level corresponds to one qualification sub-system, for example, the highest levels would be entirely occupied by Higher Education qualifications whilst lower levels by post-secondary VET qualifications.

A coordinated framework facilitates progression within a particular sub-system (e.g. VET) by making the levels explicit. On the other hand it does not necessarily formulate progression links between the different sub-systems. These may need to be defined elsewhere in the qualification framework.

The current **NQF developments in Turkey can be described as a coordinating framework.**

#### **Turkish NQF**

Turkey is currently reforming its qualification system. Part of this reform is a stronger focus on learning outcomes in terms of qualifications standards. The Turkish National Vocational Qualifications Authority is responsible for developing learning outcomes based standards for vocational qualifications.

The Turkish NQF will systematise all Turkish *qualifications which are acquired by programmes based on the permission to be granted by formal, non-formal and other relevant institutions by all technical and vocational education/training programmes including primary, secondary and higher education.*<sup>2</sup> The envisaged Turkish NQF which was presented during the PLA is based on an eight-level structure where general education occupies level one, VET qualifications occupy levels two to five and

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<sup>2</sup> Definition of the Turkish NQF according to the law 5544.

higher education qualifications are situated at levels six to eight. According to the proposal for the NQF, each level would correspond to one type of leaving certificate/diploma (e.g. vocational school diploma – level 4, post-secondary VET – level 5, etc.). It should be noted though that at the time when this presentation was made no formal decision was taken on the exact structure of the Turkish NQF and the example presented during the PLA was one of the envisaged solutions.

### **3.1.3 *Meta-framework***

A meta-framework through a set of levels and level descriptors develops links between different existing sub-frameworks. A meta-framework does not intend to integrate all frameworks into a single framework but rather establish relationships between them. Examples of **meta-frameworks include the EQF and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)**. These were not discussed in detail in this PLA, however some useful observations were raised on EQF as a meta-framework - see below for discussion of EQF coordination points.

### **3.1.4 *Integrating framework***

An integrating framework introduces a single set of levels and descriptors which act as a single reference for all education sub-sectors. The integrating framework replaces any previous sub-frameworks. It integrates the different progression routes of a learning pathway into one structure, which should enable smooth progression among the different education sub-systems (general, VET, higher education).

Examples of NQF developments discussed at the PLA, which could be characterised as **integrating frameworks included Austria and Lithuania**.

#### **Lithuania**

Lithuania is engaged in the development of a comprehensive eight-level qualifications framework based on learning outcomes. This framework will cover all recognised qualifications acquired through any of type of learning (formal, non-formal, informal) and belonging to any education sub-sector (general, vocational, higher or adult education and training). This NQF integrates the five levels of the previous VET framework and the three levels of Higher Education framework. The NQF will use two types of descriptors to define the level of a qualification. These are “criteria for an activity” (complexity, autonomy, variability) and “criteria of competences” (functional, cognitive, general).

In terms of implementation, the main challenges highlighted included the:

- *involvement* of social partners (both employers and trade unions);
- *integration* of higher education qualifications into a common framework using the descriptors proposed;
- *institutional improvement of transition pathways* - from initial VET to higher education and from initial VET to continuous VET.
- *development of an optimal institutional framework* which would minimise the level of bureaucracy involved in administration terms.

### Austria

NQF developments in Austria are also taking the direction of a common learning outcomes-based framework with a single set of levels, and common descriptors, for all qualifications. Developments in Austria are currently in the initial stages of development and will undergo a consultation process in late 2007 - early 2008. The presentation of the Austrian NQF developments focused on the challenges the different national authorities are currently facing and the way in which these are being considered and reflected within the design process.

The table below provides a summary of the challenges and design features outlined.

**Table 2 – Options being considered for designing the Austrian NQF<sup>3</sup>**

<b>Options for designing a NQF</b>	<b>Preference of Austrian stakeholders</b>
A <b>partial framework</b> covering only parts of qualifications system OR A <b>comprehensive framework</b> covering all qualifications within the system	Comprehensive
A framework which inventories <b>units</b> OR A framework which inventories <b>qualifications</b>	Position not yet decided – but leaning towards qualifications
A framework which <b>regulates</b> the system (a “strong” framework) OR A framework which <b>guides</b> the system (a “weak” framework)	Not very clear position for the moment – but apparent slight preference for a “weak” system
<b>Outcomes</b> OR <b>Input</b> oriented framework	Outcomes
The number of levels: <b>Eight</b> as in EQF OR <b>More or less than eight</b>	Eight
<b>Progressive</b> OR <b>Radical</b> implementation	Progressive
<b>Centralised</b> OR <b>Decentralised</b>	Rather centralised
<b>New quality assurance</b> OR <b>existing quality assurance</b> procedures and criteria	Not a clear position for the moment

The presentation of the Austrian system also raised issues of what type of qualifications / certificates will be available through the NQF. Under consideration is the extent to which qualifications which are not part of the formal education and training system should be included, such as legally regulated qualifications (e.g. pilots and taxi drivers), or those that are not regulated but well known (e.g. Yoga trainer or a Cisco network manager).

<sup>3</sup> Source: Budapest PLA – Based on the Austrian NQF presentation given by Jörg Markowitsch

Another important issue relates to the criteria for determining whether a system is outcomes oriented or not. In other words, at what points should learning outcomes be described? What are the implications for: curriculum design, assessment criteria and validation processes, teaching and training practices?

In summary: when developing qualifications frameworks, countries pursue different objectives. They also have various approaches to the relation between NQF and the existing sub-frameworks.

## **3.2 Level descriptors**

Level descriptors contain criteria which correspond to the level ascribed to qualifications. They are crucial for the articulation of the relationship between qualifications from different sub-sectors (VET, HE) as they enable the expression of common features, or differences, in terms of the level of learning outcomes across qualifications frameworks.

The discussions about level descriptors during the PLA revolved around two key issues.

- The function of descriptors.
- The characteristics of descriptors.

### **3.2.1 *The function of descriptors***

It was accepted that descriptors based on learning outcomes improve the transparency of qualifications systems and have functions that go beyond the classification of qualifications. For example they can be used to elaborate curricula and assess programmes. However, no examples were given to demonstrate that learning outcomes based descriptors are actually useful for elaboration of curricula and it was accepted that this is a potentially useful area for exploration.

It was also claimed that descriptors are not useful to assess individual learners but this was contested and it was generally agreed that when learning outcomes-based descriptors were accompanied by more detailed assessment criteria, assessment of learners and programmes becomes possible.

### **3.2.2 *Characteristics of level descriptors***

While all NQFs discussed propose to use learning outcomes-based descriptors, different countries and different education sub-sectors have developed descriptors based on different criteria. While some are more oriented towards professional tasks (e.g. Lithuania) others put stress on the social/personal aspect of learning outcomes (e.g. attitudes in the Hungarian case).

It appeared from the discussion that sometimes there was a need for different 'levels' of descriptors e.g. 'general' descriptors for the proposed Hungarian NQF meta-framework and 'specific' descriptors within sub-frameworks

It was noted that whilst national working groups develop different sets of level descriptors these tend to be general making it difficult to recognise country-specific features in the structure of NQFs.

Learning outcomes based descriptors have multiple functions. They are used to classify levels of learning and qualifications. Additionally, they are a communication tool that contributes to transparency of qualifications systems. They can also form the basis of curriculum design and assessment processes.

### 3.3 Structures of NQFs

The discussion during the workshop dedicated to this topic revealed that there is a need for more information and exchanges on the impact NQFs have on national structures. The PLA discussions highlighted the features outlined below as influencing NQF structures: it was stressed that the manner in which these features influence structures should be further explored.

- ***The rationale for developing an NQF***

Countries which are pursuing reforms through establishing an NQF will not put in place the same type of arrangements as those that are restructuring the existing landscape.

Also countries where an integrating framework is being put in place will have different instruments to reference qualifications than those where the NQF is a coordination tool.

- ***The roles of authorities designing and recognising qualifications***

Referencing qualifications in a centralised system will involve different procedures than in a decentralised one. Countries with decentralised systems, or where only a particular sub-system is decentralised (typically adult learning), will need to make choices in terms of delegating responsibilities or creating centralised bodies.

- ***The type of qualifications being referenced in an NQF***

Countries need to choose which types of qualifications will be referenced in an NQF. This choice will also influence structures and the procedures that need to be put in place.

- ***The role of the NQF***

The typical role of an NQF is to make transparent and readable the structure of qualifications to different types of actors: learners, employers, but also authorities in other countries. In order to truly fulfil this objective, the structures and procedures put in place to reference qualifications also have to be transparent and quality assured.

- ***Decisions about the range of functions an NQF might facilitate***

Countries where an NQF and the related processes are a quality assurance instrument will have different procedures than those where quality assurance is undertaken independently on an NQF.

Also countries where an NQF is an instrument to allocate public funding will operate in a different manner than those where being referred in an NQF has no impact on funding possibilities.

### ***EQF coordination points***

Part of the discussion on structures and procedures was dedicated to the establishment of EQF coordination points. The EQF recommendation states that countries should designate national coordination points and among their tasks they should:

- *ensure that a transparent methodology is used to refer national qualifications levels to the European Qualifications Framework in order to facilitate comparisons between them, and ensuring that the resulting decisions are published;*

In relation to this task for member states, the PLA participants raised the following issues:

- what is meant by **transparent** methodology? There is a need for clear criteria of what are transparent procedures;
- there is equally a need for reflection on **methodologies** which could be used by the countries;
- are countries the only actors to be able to reference qualifications to the EQF? What are the channels for referencing transnational sectoral qualifications to the EQF?

### **3.4 The potential of NQFs to support the validation of non-formal and informal learning**

The discussion on this topic was stimulated by presentations of two Hungarian examples of validating non-formal and informal learning for the purposes of entering formal education. Both examples were using existing transnational frameworks of required competences rather than going through the whole process of defining the learning outcomes themselves. One example was based on the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) and another one on the levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Both the presentations and subsequent discussions revealed that though training providers are interested in using learning outcomes for validation of non-formal and informal learning, they found that:

- the impact of the planned NQF development in Hungary on teaching and training methods was for the moment limited - and therefore it was not possible to fully assess the value of a framework in validating non-formal and informal learning;
- it was difficult to formulate assessment criteria and methods on basis of frameworks descriptions which are too general – e.g. the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages proved difficult to use as the basis for testing learners' level in languages;
- given that validation processes for non-formal and informal learning often use self-evaluation and that is not well accepted in some countries, particularly in those countries where there is no tradition of doing so. It is the lack of trust in validation of non-formal and informal learning that remains a major barrier for development.

Discussions highlighted that, even where regulation is in place to support the validation of non-formal and informal learning, key issues for the development of such practices relate to:

- implementing appropriate structures to support validation processes;
- lack of awareness among all actors (employers, providers, learners) on credible methods;
- exploring the means of communicating with and engaging individuals in the validation process;
- finding about the position of businesses, and SMEs in particular, on validation and how could these be better engaged in validation procedures;
- looking at the possible impact of validation in order to address future skills supply gaps, given national demographic trends;
- discussing the impact of European developments (EQF and Europass, maybe ECVET later) on validation procedures.

### **3.5 Use of learning outcomes for other purposes**

The PLA also tackled the topic of use of learning outcomes for other purposes, such as assessment and curricula design, however these were not discussed in detail.

Learning outcomes are used mainly in four different ways: articulation of learning outcomes in curricula, design of validation and assessment procedures and support for learning and/or teaching methods. For each of these areas decisions need to be made about the extent to which learning outcomes are to be used. In some cases it may be considered not appropriate for learning outcomes to form the basis of a procedure, for example in describing the structure of a curriculum or programme.

It was also noted that there is a need for criteria which enable to distinguish among approaches which are truly learning outcomes based and those that are not.

NQFs have the potential to support validation of non-formal and informal learning; however there are other conditions for success and wide use of such procedures.
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## 4 CONCLUSIONS

The goal of each PLA is to enable discussion and to reflect on countries' practices. The structure of the PLA should provide enough scope for participants to develop themes and issues they are presented with. A PLA is equally an opportunity for countries to discuss recent developments in an international expert forum..

At the same time, a PLA should trigger a discussion in countries beyond the PLA itself, both within each participant's "home" institution, and with other relevant external stakeholders. The Budapest PLA succeeded in stimulating a good level of discussion in reviewing Hungary's and other countries' practices, and it is now up to participants to decide how to take this forward in their own countries.

The following sections sum up the key issues arising from the PLA and also suggestions for future activities of the cluster.

### 4.1 Key issues and discussion points from the PLA

The PLA succeeded in taking forward the discussion on NQFs. However, in the future there is a need to focus on particular issues and narrow down on particular questions.

An important outcome of the PLA was a first draft taxonomy of NQFs which can be further examined by the cluster. This taxonomy may help to structure and focus future work. The four main categories outlined (multiple, coordinating, meta and integrating frameworks) should not be treated as static categories; they may to a certain extent be seen as points on a continuum, some countries are moving towards an integrating framework.

Another issue arising from the PLA concerns the relation between NQFs and the EQF. As NQFs pursue different objectives and, hence, will use different structures and procedures, how can they link up to the EQF in a way which can be trusted? The PLA indicated that different NQF approaches can be used to relate to the EQF. While a coherent application of the learning outcomes approach is necessary, this can be achieved in different ways and by using different NQF models. This was contrasted with the lifelong learning challenge where an integrating framework, emphasising learning pathways and permeability, was seen as important.

The PLA agreed that the learning outcomes approach is fundamental to the development of NQFs. The next step consists of making the learning outcomes perspective 'fit for purpose'. NQF development requires that this perspective is used in a number of areas and for very different purposes, exemplified by the following:

- as a basis for reformulation of national qualifications strategies
- for curriculum design
- for development of assessment procedures
- as a basis for validation of non-formal and informal learning, for example in the setting of standards.

It was noted that as individuals (learners) are the final beneficiaries of NQFs their interests should be borne in mind while designing these frameworks. Therefore, learning outcomes-based descriptors should be written in a way which allows for a range of specific functions such as assessment or curriculum design. These can also become more transparent to learners

The buy-in of different stakeholders and the development of mutual trust (among actors but also countries) in NQF development was put forward as one of the challenges to be considered by those designing NQFs. It also appeared that integration of some education and training sectors, namely of adult learning which is often unregulated and outside the formal system, will require further reflection.

Finally, it was observed that the role of NQFs might be overestimated in some aspects and that NQFs tend to be considered as the general remedy for qualifications systems while their impact on many areas is still to be examined.

#### **4.2 The main outcomes of the PLA**

The PLA revealed that the attention given to the topic of building NQFs is important and that these issues are high on many national agendas. It also showed that the basic concepts linked to NQFs, in particular the importance of the learning outcomes perspective and the need to pursue links and stronger integration between different sub-systems, are becoming widely accepted.

Some of the examples studied, and the following discussions, pointed to increasing impacts of NQFs on national education and training policies and practices. The fact that NQF development in the majority of countries taking part in the PLA is of quite recent origin seems to confirm the importance of NQFs as an instrument for reforming national qualifications systems and for strengthening European comparability of qualifications.

For the purposes of future activities of the cluster, participants formulated a series of suggestions that the cluster could develop either through PLAs or by means of smaller and shorter seminars/ exchanges. The cluster should, according to these proposals:

- develop and keep up to date an overview of NQF developments;
- respond to issues raised by the EQF Implementation Preparatory Group (from 2008: Advisory). The cluster should be seen as an important platform for taking forward issues raised by the advisory group; this also implies taking into account the conclusions of the EQF pilot projects;
- formulate a policy brief which could support the development of and dialogue on NQFs; this brief should inform the various stakeholders involved and it should be seen as an instrument supporting coordination and progress. There is a need to further clarify the purpose of this brief;
- develop guidelines on the use of learning outcomes;
- run a PLA dedicated to the issue of building of mutual trust in relation to NQF design;
- explore the roles of NQFs in quality assurance processes;

- explore the link between implementing NQFs/EQF and lifelong learning; a separate PLA could be relevant on this issue (is an integrating framework the appropriate response to this objective?)
- need to pay particular attention to the link between the EQF and higher education. Agreement that the link to HE is important. A possibility would be to plan a joint PLA involving stakeholders from the EHEA, for example experts involved in the EHEA;
- explore how learning outcomes can help to integrate general education (including subjects and basic skills) into frameworks.

The possibility of having a PLA on credit-related issues was also presented but it was agreed that the time has not yet come with most countries in the early stages of developing their NQFs.

In conclusion, the PLA was considered an important stage in a European exchange on NQF issues. While NQFs share general recognisable features, they take on particular characteristics in each country and sector. The role of the cluster on recognition of learning outcomes in generating understanding about the forces that shape NQFs is clearly extremely important.

