



EUROPEAN COMMISSION  
Directorate-General for Education and Culture

# **NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS - BRIDGES BETWEEN HE & VET IN TERMS OF LEARNING OUTCOMES**

15-16 June 2009, Berlin, Germany

## **SUMMARY REPORT**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The fourth Peer Learning Activity (PLA) on the theme of national qualifications frameworks (NQF) organised by the Cluster on Recognition of Learning Outcomes took place on the 15-16 June 2009 in Berlin. The PLA was hosted by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. It brought together 39 representatives from 23 countries. Several experts from national administrations came accompanied by social partners or by stakeholders from higher education. In addition to national delegates, representatives of the European Commission, Cedefop, the European Training Foundation and external experts to the Commission attended.

The PLA in Berlin was organised by the Cluster on Recognition of Learning Outcomes (referred to as the 'RLO Cluster' forthwith), in the context of the Education and Training 2010 work programme. The RLO Cluster brings together interested countries around the theme of recognition of learning outcomes, particularly, in relation to validation of non-formal and informal learning and the development of NQFs. PLAs are one of the tools that enable cluster members to engage in in-depth discussions and exchanges about topics of importance to participating countries with the objective to inform policy-making at national level about developments in other countries.

This PLA was building on the previous work of the cluster namely the three PLAs in Budapest, Niepolmice and London as well as the note on the added value of NQFs produced on basis of inputs from cluster activities and endorsed by the EQF Advisory Group. These activities of the cluster identified the development of closer links between the different sectors of education and training, namely VET and higher education, as one of the objectives that NQFs contribute to. The main outcomes of the cluster work on this topic were summarised in a background note for the PLA (see Annex A of this report). The discussion note on the added value of NQFs<sup>1</sup> highlights that:

*Modern NQFs can ... be described as 'instruments with a vision' questioning current education and training practises and challenging existing professional and sectoral interests. Designing a NQF is thus something more than agreeing on a set of technical features (a hierarchy of levels of learning) it is about creating a platform for (cross-institutional and cross-sectoral) dialogue and – eventually – mutual trust.*

The Berlin PLA examined more closely how the use of learning outcomes descriptors may promote understanding the similarity and distinctiveness between VET and HE qualifications that are on the same level, support the referencing of both VET and HE qualifications to NQFs. and the permeability of systems.

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<sup>1</sup> Forthcoming

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## **1.1 PLA Objectives**

The PLA explored the use of NQFs in creating better understanding of qualifications from the VET and HE sectors as well as in promoting dialogue between these sectors in view of greater permeability. The use of levels, level descriptors, qualifications described using learning outcomes as well as stakeholder engagement in the NQF development and implementation process were the core issues examined. The discussions during the PLA were stimulated by presentations from participating countries, namely Austria, Belgium French speaking community, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland and the UK, as well as examples of national and European pilot projects.

## **1.2 Purpose of this report**

This report summarises the discussions that took place during the PLA. It is written to enable a wider audience to benefit from the information exchanged and to inform national and European developments in the area of qualifications frameworks.

This report will 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 two days. This section briefly outlines the proceedings of the PLA before synthesising the discussion outcomes in sections three to five.

### Day 1

Day one was opened by a welcome by Dr. Susanna Schmidt from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research setting the development of the German Qualifications Framework (DQR) in the national and European context. Carlo Scatoli from the European Commission also welcomed the participants to the PLA highlighting that the bridging function of NQFs which the PLA addressed was an intrinsic element of qualifications frameworks. The welcome speeches were followed by a presentation of the German Qualifications Framework and its development process. This is summarised in the Box 1 below. Afterwards Jens Bjornavold from Cedefop outlined certain key findings from an ongoing survey Cedefop is undertaking on the development of NQFs in Member States, these are briefly presented in the Box 2. The morning session of presentations was closed by the overview of the higher education modernisation agenda, and the role of NQFs in this development, as developed through the Bologna process. Certain key messages from the presentation are highlighted in the Box 3. The afternoon discussions focused on approaches for NQFs to express the equivalence of VET and HE. This was a mixture of plenary and workshop discussions stimulated by inputs from several national perspectives. These outcomes of discussions are summarised in the core of this report.

### Day 2

The second day discussions concentrated on whether and how the concepts of qualifications and qualifications descriptors (in terms of learning outcomes) in VET and HE are converging. It also explored the way qualifications frameworks may support permeability. The debate started in a plenary session and continued in two workshops. National and project presentations, as well as a broader reflection on the differences and similarities between the two sectors fed into this debate. The key topics discussed are also synthesised in the core of this report.

### Box 1 – DQR key features and the development process

**Context:** The development of DQR should be considered in the broader context of reforms to strengthen outcome-based orientation of German education and training. It is also convergent with initiatives to support permeability between VET and HE (in parallel to initiatives such as ANKOM – see also presentation during the PLA). Another important motivation for developing an NQF in Germany is the willingness to make German qualifications better understood across Europe through the referencing of DQR to EQF.

**Key features of the DQR:** The DQR is based on a comprehensive vision of

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competence (knowledge and skills are elements of competence). This approach to competence enables the framework to identify equivalence<sup>2</sup> between VET and HE qualifications.

As proposed, the DQR is not a regulatory framework. It is rather conceived as a quality assurance tool. It does not change existing access criteria or collective agreements.

To enable referencing of both HE and VET qualifications, DQR uses generic formulations that can cover all sectors and, where such generic formulations are not possible, it uses parallel formulations based on consensus<sup>3</sup>.

**DQR development process:** The DQR development is characterised by strong stakeholder involvement from all: federal and Lander ministries, stakeholders from the labour market, stakeholders from the education and training sectors (general education, VET, HE). The strategic orientation of the development work is ensured by the Federal Government/Federal States Coordination Group and the technical work is undertaken by the German Qualifications Framework Working Group run by a temporary secretariat.

A proposal of the framework has been published and it is now going to be tested through referencing of qualifications from four economic sectors: metal and electrical industry, health care, information technologies and trade. All these sectors have both VET and HE qualifications.

Source: presentations of Ms Susana Schmidt (BMBF) and Mr Thomas Reglin (DQR Office) made during the PLA.

### Box 2 – Some findings of Cedefop survey of NQF developments in Europe

Most European countries are currently engaged in developing overarching NQFs covering all sectors of education and training.

These frameworks are mainly conceived as communication or transparency tools not implying new regulations. They often fit into a wider context of lifelong learning reforms. NQFs that are currently being developed are considered as a first step in a longer-term process (implying evaluation and review).

NQF development is used as a platform for stakeholder exchange implying broad consultation and stakeholder involvement.

All are based on learning outcomes which is not perceived as contrary to their non-regulatory character.

The structure of eight levels seems to be prevalent. There are differences in the detail and the nature of level descriptors reflecting national traditions.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that in the DQR context the word ‘equivalence’ does not imply giving equal or new entitlements to qualification holders. It expresses the parity in terms of level of learning outcomes between qualifications.

<sup>3</sup> For example the descriptor of knowledge for level 7 is formulated as follows: *Be in possession of comprehensive, detailed, specialist and state-of-the art knowledge in a scientific subject or be in possession of comprehensive occupational knowledge in a strategically oriented field of occupational activity.*

NQFs are developed in an international context. It is a common feature that countries exchange and collaborate in the NQF development process.

Common challenges are encountered with regard to locating certain qualifications such as: 'meister', nurses, non-academic higher qualifications (e.g. in aeronautics industry), etc.

Source: Jens Bjornavold (Cedefop) presentation during the PLA

### **Box 3 – Modernisation of Higher Education Agenda and NQF development in the Bologna process**

The modernisation agenda has several pillars namely: curricular reform, governance reform and funding reform.

Development of the Bologna Framework fits into the first pillar and aims to establish greater comparability of HE qualifications. Other developments under this pillar are also relevant to the NQF debate namely the emphasis put on increasing HE graduate's employability as well as the strengthening of quality assurance in higher education institutions.

The NQF development in HE is still very much 'work-in-progress'. According to the 2009 Stocktaking report<sup>4</sup> prepared for the Leuven Ministerial Conference, only six countries have implemented their NQFs and self-referenced to Bologna Qualification Framework. Another six countries have started NQF implementation. However most countries (21) are at the stage of proposal.

Source: Lene Oftedal (European Commission) presentation during the PLA

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<sup>4</sup> See the full report :

[http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/Stocktaking\\_report\\_2009\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/Stocktaking_report_2009_FINAL.pdf)

### 3 DEMONSTRATING SIMILARITY AND DISTINCTIVENESS BETWEEN VET AND HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS USING NQFS

There are several reasons for putting in place instruments which clarify the differences and similarities between VET and HE qualifications that are at the same level:

- Facilitating vertical progression by opening up access as well as improving the take up of pathways leading to higher levels of education and training;
- Improving horizontal progression by identifying areas where transfer and recognition are possible;
- Enhancing the attractiveness of VET to learners by eliminating dead-ends in their pathways and enabling pathways for HE students who desire re-orientation, new skills and competences
- Recognising the contribution of the labour market sector to education and training.

These motivations can be found in the DQR development. The DQR descriptors are formulated as general statements of learning outcomes that:

- Either encompass both VET and HE thus showing similarity (e.g. *Assume responsibility in working within expert teams or show responsibility in leading groups or organisations. Instruct the technical development of others and act in an anticipatory manner in dealing with problems within the team...* DQR level 6 descriptor for Social Competence<sup>5</sup>)
- Or use parallel expressions to accommodate for differences (e.g. *Be in possession of broad and integrated knowledge including knowledge of basic scientific principles and up-to-date professional knowledge in subareas of a scientific subject or be in possession of broad and integrated occupational knowledge including current technical developments...* DQR level 6 descriptor for Knowledge<sup>6</sup>)

The point of view of VET and HE sectors on the role of DQR in clarifying the relationship between the two types of qualifications was illustrated by the presentations by representatives from the economic sector (DIHK<sup>7</sup>) and the higher education sector (HRK<sup>8</sup>). The labour market representatives stressed that the added value of DQR (as compared to the classification of qualifications according to the education and training pathways) came from the fact that level descriptors reflect the needs of employers in

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<sup>5</sup> Discussion proposal for a German Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning

<sup>6</sup> Discussion proposal for a German Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning

<sup>7</sup> The German Chamber of Industry and Commerce – presenter Steffen Gunnar Bayer

<sup>8</sup> The German Rectors' Conference – presenter Jan Rathjen

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terms of staff competence. They also appreciated the contribution of the DQR to stimulating VET at higher levels. The higher education sector underlined the context in which HE institutions currently evolve (labour market needs and demography) and the need for diversification of their qualification offer. HE also acknowledged the potential contribution of the DQR to support more systematic and transparent procedures for recognition of VET qualifications. However, the higher education also underlined that in order to stimulate permeability, the general equivalence<sup>9</sup> established by the DQR is only a beginning of the process and more specific measures are required (e.g. development of common modules, creation of regional clusters involving HE and VET institutions). The positions of these two stakeholders are summarised in the Box 4 below.

**Box 4 – Support to DQR developments from the stakeholder perspective**

<b>DIHK support to the DQR development</b>	<b>HRK support to the DQR development</b>
<p>In Germany chambers are responsible for organising as well as for assessment of VET.</p> <p>Like the rest of the EU Germany is facing a demand for highly skilled labour force in conjunction with demographic pressure.</p> <p>The current structure of graduates does not reflect this need.</p> <p>The DQR descriptors reflect the needs of the labour market by referring to occupational activities, work processes, etc.</p> <p>The DQR is also welcomed because it contains no formal specifications regarding the pathways through which the different levels are achieved.</p> <p>The bridges between the different education and training systems can work if what matters is the learning outcomes.</p>	<p>There are currently existing approaches to recognising VET qualifications to shorten HE programmes (based on individual request, existence of specifically designed programmes or where universities need to recruit students).</p> <p>While universities generally welcome the opening up of pathways they also require that this is accompanied by measures such as specific programmes or courses (where necessary) in order to make sure that VET graduates have real chances of completing the programme.</p> <p>The statement of equivalence in the DQR is seen as a step forward in establishing more transparent recognition procedures by mapping qualifications against the descriptors. However it is only a contribution to this process as transfer from VET to HE requires more specific arrangements (e.g. per economic sector or per qualification).</p>

Source: Presentations during the PLA

The clarification of similarities and differences between learning outcomes in VET and HE qualifications was also an objective of the Irish NFQ<sup>10</sup>. The Irish development was part of a broader reform of qualifications including measures such as the creation of a single awarding body for further education (post-eighteen vocationally oriented

<sup>9</sup> Note: the word equivalence is used in the DQR context to describe that qualifications are at the same level it does however not imply mutual recognition or exemption.

<sup>10</sup> Based on the presentation by John O'Connor NQAI, Ireland

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provision not delivered in higher education institutions) supporting rationalisation of training offer and stronger quality assurance. The Irish framework no-longer refers to VET but it rather distinguishes between further education and training and higher education and training. Most training that would elsewhere be understood as VET is in Ireland delivered through post-eighteen training and the provision. The level 6 of the Irish NFQ is crucial for transition between different sectors of education and training because it contains qualifications from both further education and training (advanced certificate) and higher education and training (higher certificate)<sup>11</sup>. The descriptors for these two types of qualifications are different and show that while the advanced certificate is for example characterised by a higher level of contextual competence, the higher certificate has a stronger learning-to-learn competence component. Parity of esteem in terms of progression of both award-types is established NQF determinations and supported by additional policies concerning credit, transfer and progression routes, entry arrangements and information provision. The data shows that the percentage of HE entrants from further education is increasing (from 2.7% in 2002 to 9.9% in 2007).

However, the process of negotiating the referencing of VET and HE qualifications at the same level is a complex one as illustrated both by the Irish and the Belgian (French speaking Community).<sup>12</sup> presentations. The development of a NQF in the French Community of Belgium is at an initial stage and very much characterized by the complex context and institutional arrangements (3 big universities, 25 high schools and 40 schools for adults) Two eight levels frameworks were developed, one for education qualifications and one for VET. The higher education qualifications (Bachelor, Masters and Doctors) are placed at levels 6, 7, and 8. A methodology was prepared for positioning of VET qualifications to NQF levels. Political and negotiating process started aiming at relating these two frameworks and opening up of higher levels also for VET qualifications. Referencing of VET or other qualifications at the same level as these HE qualifications was perceived with a lot of tensions. Therefore the process of negotiating the national level descriptors with all stakeholders concerned as well as discussing what the framework is expected to lead to in the specific country context is crucial. The added value of referencing different types of qualifications at the same level (for progression and motivation of learners for example) needs to be demonstrated and accepted which is likely to take time.

Translating the equivalence as established by the framework into further measures to support permeability is only possible if the referencing of qualifications to the levels of the framework is credible, reliable and valid. In other words, the quality assurance of the referencing process is critical. Furthermore, the quality assurance of how qualifications are awarded also needs to be put in place so that stakeholders involved can trust that qualification holders have achieved the expected standard. This was specifically underlined as crucial for a framework which is not regulated, such as the DQR, which can only achieve its objectives through trust. The DQR does not envisage a single quality assurance framework for all education and training sectors but rather specific ones that reflect the specificity of each of the sectors. The importance in the DQR context is attached to ensuring that the quality assurance processes are transparent and well understood by the stakeholders concerned.

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<sup>11</sup> For the diagram of the Irish NFQ see: <http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/images/FanDec2006.jpg>

<sup>12</sup> See presentation by Jo Léonard, Administration générale de l'Enseignement

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Another relevant issue under this topic is the fact that in the perspective of LLL, HE institutions will be (and many already are) diversifying their qualifications offer<sup>13</sup>. The traditional HE qualifications (those corresponding to the three Bologna cycles) are currently broadly speaking much more homogeneous when it comes to their level (but also size) than VET qualifications. The development of more specialised qualifications designed for specific learners or in cooperation with employers, etc. may enable opening up of the levels that are in certain countries perceived as corresponding to bachelor, masters and PhD degrees to other qualifications.

### **3.1 Conclusions**

The referencing of VET qualifications and HE qualifications at the same level can help to clarify their differences and complementarities through the use of level descriptors (e.g. using common formulations for similarities and parallel formulations for differences). Without implying the right to (vertical or horizontal) progression it can stimulate initiatives for transfer and opening up of access to other forms of learning. Furthermore it has the capacity to shift the way the hierarchy of qualifications is perceived by the different stakeholders in the system (institutions, learners, parents, etc.).

More generally speaking, by shifting the emphasis away from the institutional basis of qualifications (VET/HE) to that of the level of learning outcomes, NQFs can change the dynamics of qualifications – by for example strengthening the learner-centred orientation or the relevance for the labour market (e.g. technological changes bring higher requirements on knowledge, skills and competence – qualifications can be upgraded when they are updated).

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<sup>13</sup> For example the UK presentation highlighted that HE institutions are interested in becoming awarding bodies in the QCF which is a framework that does not cover HE qualifications but where any institution can become an awarding body providing it complies with the required quality assurance and respects the features of the QCF.

## 4 THE ROLE OF NQFS AND LEARNING OUTCOMES IN SUPPORTING PERMEABILITY BETWEEN VET AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The recent study commissioned by the European Commission identified a number of 'supply-side' constraints to the development and take-up of pathways between VET, general education and the more academic streams of higher education. These include amongst others<sup>14</sup>:

- Institutionalisation of certain type of provision in certain type of providers: historically the providers in the different education and training systems were established as separate institutions with their own culture, administration, financing systems, etc.
- Institutional resistance: strongly embedded institutions in academic higher education (those that are selecting) may resist to open-up pathways in order to protect their position;

The PLA presentations and discussions on the theme of permeability between VET and HE also noted that the willingness of institutions to open-up access is in many cases the most difficult obstacle to permeability for citizens. However the PLA also noted that to overcome the institutional logic in creating greater permeability the following issues related to NQF development can support the process:

- First of all the use of levels clarifies where potential overlap between qualifications exists (see the presentation of the German ANKOM initiative<sup>15</sup>).
- Mapping qualifications against the same set of descriptors makes it apparent where two (or more) qualifications lead to comparable learning outcomes and what the learners need to achieve in addition (see also the ANKOM initiative presentation). Current practices in establishment of recognition between VET and HE qualifications are mostly based on comparisons of the content of curricula and of input (see the Austrian presentation during the PLA<sup>16</sup>) to identify overlap. The Austrian presentation also noted that beyond the comparison of programmes the institution that receives VET graduates has trust in the level of their knowledge, skills and competence currently mostly based on aspects such as: success of previous graduates, institutional exchanges of staff, etc. The use of learning outcomes can make this process more systematic and transparent if LO are used as standards for assessment.

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<sup>14</sup> For further details see ECOTEC for the European Commission (2008): Beyond the Maastricht Communiqué: developments in the opening up of VET pathways and the role of VET in labour market integration; [http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/vetreport\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/vetreport_en.pdf) p. 123-133

<sup>15</sup> Ida Stamm-Riemer, HIS

<sup>16</sup> Karin Luomi-Meserrer, 3s

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- The use of learning outcomes as the basis for credit also facilitates permeability. In both examples discussed during the PLA (ANKOM in Germany and the existing cases in Austria) the transfer towards HE is made possible because of the existence of modularised pathways (which are the basis for credit) in HE which make it easier to identify overlap and to exempt learners from the module and its assessment. Modules or units also enable delivery of individualised pathways once the learner has obtained recognition and has been exempted from certain units/modules.

Therefore the use of LO based frameworks will be of clear added value to the process of creating permeability between different education and training sectors even though the latter is a complex process which also concerns aspects of governance, funding, programme design, institutional cooperation, etc. The PLA also noted that there are already good examples of permeability between the sectors. These are based on:

- The existence of demand from the side of learners;
- Institutional cooperation and the fact that certain HE institutions want to recruit more students;
- Qualification development in specific economic sectors where re-qualification or upgrading of qualifications is required.

#### **4.1 Conclusions**

Therefore the PLA showed that NQFs and learning outcomes can make permeability easier in certain aspects (through comparison of learning outcomes and levels, common understanding of certain concepts) but will not address all issues that restrict permeability. At the same time, and this is related to the capacity of frameworks to change the dynamics qualifications as outlined above, the development and implementation process of NQFs has the potential to stimulate dialogue between the stakeholders and thus to overcome, at least partly, also the institutional barriers that exist.

## 5 EXPLORING THE DIFFERENCES IN QUALIFICATIONS BETWEEN VET AND HE?

As a meta-framework to which national qualifications systems/ frameworks will be referenced, EQF descriptors use formulations which are open to any learning process. At the same time the EQF descriptors are broad and their role is to serve as references for national qualifications systems or frameworks and not for qualifications. The Bologna descriptors are specifically designed to describe higher education qualifications with important emphasis being put on knowledge and understanding in a specific field of study. They have a somewhat different application than the EQF descriptors as they express the level of learning outcomes the learners have achieved upon the award of qualification.

This difference between the two European frameworks illustrates the distinction between overarching *qualification level* frameworks covering all sectors of education and training (classifying levels of learning) and *qualification* frameworks (classifying specific qualification types) covering specific sub-sectors of the qualifications system. The first type of frameworks is most likely to be more general in its descriptors and contain no regulatory force (as the different sectors covered are governed in different ways). Sectoral frameworks on the other hand may contain more detailed and specific descriptors and have a regulatory function.

The PLA discussed the differences between VET and HE qualifications and how NQFs (mainly overarching ones) need to take these into account concentrating on the aspects described below.

### ***The emphasis on knowledge versus the orientation towards the labour market***

The accumulation, reproduction and creation of new knowledge are traditionally the core of academic higher education. On the other hand the creation of skilled workforce is traditionally the main focus of VET. While in broad lines these distinctions still apply, important evolutions as well as a large number of intermediary qualifications are making them less appropriate.

First of all a large number of HE qualifications are related to a specific occupational profile (e.g. medical and pharmaceutical qualifications, engineering qualifications) with important emphasis being put not only on knowledge (which remains important) but also on the capacity to combine, use and apply knowledge in concrete situations as well as to make decisions, communicate, interact etc. Furthermore, no HE qualification, even among those strictly focusing on research, is actually built solely on knowledge but the skills to apply knowledge as well as broader competences are also required (though sometimes this is not yet made explicit and taken into account in the teaching process).

Knowledge is also an important component of VET qualifications and this becomes even more obvious for those at higher levels. The focus of VET qualifications is however much more on its application rather than on its accumulation and

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reproduction. In addition, traditionally the knowledge aspect in VET qualifications was narrower than in HE qualifications (specific to an occupation). But again at higher levels of VET this is becoming less true. Furthermore, increasingly employers, especially SMEs, are emphasising the need for polyvalent staff with broad array of knowledge, skills and competence, rather than highly specialised people. VET qualifications need to take these considerations into account.

Employability of higher education graduates is being emphasised in European as well as national policies. While people with higher education qualifications remain the best protected from unemployment, fresh graduates often find it difficult to enter into the labour market<sup>17</sup>. This leads to taking up of positions which require lower qualifications or accumulation of traineeships or other non-permanent contracts before being able to practice at the level of the qualification they hold. Employability in the context of higher education is understood in a broader sense than the practice of one or a few pre-defined occupations. It is defined in the context of the Bologna process<sup>18</sup> as *the ability to gain initial employment, to maintain employment, and to be able to move around within the labour market*. It is characterised by *skills and attributes (knowledge, attitudes and behaviours) that individuals need in the workplace and that employers require, and to ensure that people have the opportunities to maintain or renew those skills and attributes throughout their working lives*. The attention paid to employability implies that HE qualifications need to focus also on other aspect of learning outcomes than only the knowledge component.

Finally, competences that are being more and more emphasised in qualifications such as the capacity to innovate, to learn further, etc. are not specific to any of the education and training sectors.

### ***The differences in the way qualifications are designed***

Qualifications frameworks relate closely to the way qualifications are designed because the design of qualifications has impact on the trust in the framework. In other words, as mentioned by Elizabeth Vidis (QCA) during her presentation in the PLA, if the framework is to translate into greater progression and permeability there has to be trust that the qualifications in the framework are fit for purpose.

VET systems are typically building their qualifications based on occupational standards or otherwise formulated information on needs of the labour market. It is also becoming common that qualifications are expressed in terms of standards, are accompanied by assessment or certification standards as well as the education and training standards (see the Italian presentation during the PLA).

On the other hand HE qualifications remain very closely related to the programme and the use of learning outcomes in HE is often in the context of programme design. Standards (e.g. for assessment) are rarely explicit. At the same time, outcomes based

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<sup>17</sup> While the unemployment rate three years after graduation is 5% within the first two years of graduation it is 13% in the EU-27. See Eurostat: The Bologna Process in Higher Education in Europe Key indicators on the social dimension and mobility; p. 126 [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY\\_OFFPUB/KS-78-09-653/EN/KS-78-09-653-EN.PDF](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-78-09-653/EN/KS-78-09-653-EN.PDF)

<sup>18</sup> For further information on employability in the context of the Bologna process see: <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/actionlines/employability.htm>

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competence profiles of higher education qualifications are becoming a more widespread practice (e.g. Tuning).

The strengthening of quality assurance processes in both VET and Higher Education has an important role to play in overcoming the differences in the way qualifications are designed. It should ensure that despite the differences in design and processes leading to an award of qualifications (assessment, use of standards, etc.) in VET and HE, the stakeholders can trust that the qualifications are meaningful both for the labour market<sup>19</sup> and for future progression in education and training.

### ***The differences in institutional autonomy***

Another difference between the two sectors that NQFs need to take into account is the important autonomy higher education institutions have with regard to designing and awarding their qualifications. Because of this feature of the HE sector it may be difficult to introduce regulatory NQFs that would also cover the HE sector (see the QCF – UK – which is a regulated framework but does not cover higher education). However, the strengthening of links between the two sectors can also be achieved outside a regulated framework through development of common principles and shared concepts. This requires dialogue between institutions and stakeholders concerned and establishment of platforms or fora may stimulate such exchanges (see the UK presentation on the Joint Forum for Higher Levels).

## **5.1 Conclusions**

The PLA discussions, as summarised above, hence demonstrated where VET and HE qualifications share common understandings and common orientations such as:

- The emphasis on learners' capacity to use knowledge;
- The importance of competences that are not specific to any of the education and training sectors (key competences);
- Focus on employability and the required knowledge, skills and competence, but understood in higher education in broader terms than just preparation for a specific profession or group of professions;
- Development of outcomes-based qualifications even though differences exist in the benchmarks on which outcomes are formulated (occupational standards in VET qualifications and programmes/ curricula for HE qualifications);

Furthermore the growing numbers and types of VET qualifications, especially qualifications other than those corresponding to the three main higher education cycles, make the distinction between VET and HE even more blurred.

Nevertheless certain differences remain in the way qualifications are conceptualised and designed in the two sectors (which stem from different traditions) but these can be accommodated in NQFs by:

- Using parallel formulations in level descriptors as shown in the example of DQR;

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<sup>19</sup> In a broad sense not necessarily for just one or a group of occupations

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- Putting in place transparent quality assurance processes that ensure the fitness for purpose of qualifications;
- Promoting dialogue and exchange between the two sectors;

The PLA discussions also underlined that the differences within the HE sector (between selecting and recruiting universities, those oriented at research and those oriented at awarding qualifications with direct applications on the labour market, etc.) are at least as big as the differences between VET and HE. Furthermore, an approach by economic sectors is likely to reveal that there is actually good common understanding of concepts and requirements on knowledge, skills and competence between VET and HE qualifications in the same field (e.g. medical industry, business, information technologies, etc.). This debate showed that qualifications at the same level are probably better described by a continuum (with strictly research orientation on one end and single occupation orientation on the other) rather than the categorisation VET and HE which is becoming obsolete especially when speaking of higher levels of qualifications<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> The Polish presentation (Tomasz Saryusz- Wolski, Technical University of Lodz) during the PLA presented a proposal based on the understanding that all qualifications contain vocational and academic learning outcomes what differs is the balance between the two.

## **ANNEX – BACKGROUND NOTE FOR THE PLA**

**Cluster on Recognition of Learning Outcomes - Peer Learning Activity Berlin 15-16 June 2009**

# **National Qualifications Frameworks - bridges between HE & VET in terms of learning outcomes**

### **Introduction**

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) was designed to support lifelong learning and it therefore has for ambition to strengthen, at national level, the links between the different education and training sub-systems in order to facilitate progression and avoid dead-ends in individual learning pathways. The EQF learning outcomes descriptors have, therefore, been designed to enable referencing of levels that concern all types of qualifications: those awarded by general, vocational, higher or adult education sectors. However, the strengthening of links between the different education and training sectors and more specifically higher education and VET will only result in the expected benefits if stimulated at national and possibly even institutional level. National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) are one of a series of policy instruments that can create stronger links between the two sectors. NQFs introduce a set of levels which shows the relationship between qualifications from different sub-systems. They also introduce descriptors for each level and these may serve as a common language across the sectors. Finally, the process of referencing to NQFs and the underlying quality assurance has the potential to strengthen mutual trust among stakeholders concerned.

The cluster on Recognition of Learning Outcomes has worked on development of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) in three peer learning activities (PLAs) in Budapest, Niepolnice and London in 2007-2008. During the discussions the capacity of NQFs to strengthen links between the various educational subsectors has been touched up on several instances. This background note summarises outcomes of previous PLAs on this theme. It was prepared for the Peer Learning Activity in Berlin which will examine more closely the role of NQFs and learning outcomes in the process of creating stronger links between the VET and HE sectors.

## From Budapest to London

The **first Peer Learning Activity** (PLA) on the subject of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) took place on the 8-10 October 2007 in Budapest. Even at that exploratory stage of considering the development of NQFs the subject of the relationship between NQFs and sub-sectoral qualifications systems (for example, general education, vocational education and training, and higher education) was on the agenda. In fact many of the countries represented had taken part in a large OECD study on qualifications systems and lifelong learning<sup>21</sup> and the study indicated subject of closer links between the worlds of VET and higher education was a feature of many national policy intentions. However, even with high levels of significance for this topic, the agenda of the Budapest PLA was wide ranging in its scope and the issue of links between VET and HE was discussed only in general terms. The main outcomes of the discussion was that the topic needed deeper discussion in a later PLA and, that whilst NQFs might encourage approaches to curricula and qualifications based on learning outcomes, the current levels of use of learning outcomes was not considered sufficient to support closer links between the sectors. More work was necessary to allow learning outcomes to be developed and compared across qualification in the two sectors.

The **second Peer Learning Activity** on the theme of national qualifications frameworks took place on the 11-13 June in Niepolmice (Poland). This time a main theme of the PLA was *NQFs as tools to create links among education and training sub-systems*. More specifically how an NQF might make explicit and possibly strengthen links between different sub-sector of education and training within a country and thus facilitating lifelong learning. It was agreed that in the context of implementing the EQF, which is a framework for lifelong learning, more and more countries are trying to strengthen the links between sub-sectors (and more particularly VET and HE) through their NQFs.

It was agreed in Poland that a key challenge was to motivate and engage the different sub-systems to work towards a single qualifications framework that would respect the diversity of different forms of education but at the same time best serve the needs of individuals. Two country case studies were used to illustrate approaches to bridging VET and HE: France and Slovenia.

Higher education in **France** brings together different providers (Universities but also “Grandes Ecoles” mainly in fields of engineering and business but also humanities) and delivers a wide range of qualifications in addition to the three main degrees (Bachelor – Masters – Doctorate). An important part of these qualifications have a very clear vocational dimension. Furthermore, in France all qualifications (hence also those delivered by higher education institutions) claim to have a vocational aim. This “professionalisation” is considered to be a moral and social duty as well as an economic necessity of higher education. Therefore, the VET/HE divide does not really exist in France and this terminology is more used to designate types of education and training provision than types of qualification. The French National Repertory of Vocational Qualifications, which is the basis for the French NQF, will register all French qualifications<sup>22</sup>. The criteria for HE qualifications to be registered are very similar to those for other qualifications. These are:

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<sup>21</sup> Qualifications systems – Bridges to lifelong learning, 2007, OECD, Paris

<sup>22</sup> In 2008 5506 qualifications were registered of which 1714 were registered by the Ministry for Higher Education. The registration of HE qualifications is only beginning. Currently most HE qualifications registered are very much vocationally oriented (Professional Bachelor Degrees – Licence Pro, DUT – University Diplomas of Technology, etc.). In 2009 more academic HE qualifications should be repertoried (approximately 12 000). Source: CNCP 2008 Report : <http://www.cncp.gouv.fr/CNCP/index.php?cncp=rapport>

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- Qualifications have to be described in terms of learning outcomes
- The type of profession for which these prepare has to be identified
- The role of the qualification in enabling students to join professions has to be documented
- All qualifications have to be accessible by validation of non-formal and informal learning (VAE)

In this context universities have to reflect on the employability of their graduates and their insertion. Therefore this process, which is still very much under way, has the potential to strengthen the learning outcomes approach in HE, ensure better legibility of qualifications, wider access to these as well as renewal and better fit with the labour market.

**Slovenia** comes from a very different perspective. In the past VET used to be only one of the pathways at the level of secondary education. However over the last decade more and more VET has developed at the level of higher education. Now VET is considered an important aspect of lifelong learning where VET qualifications at higher levels are mostly delivered by VET colleges.

In relation to the bridge between VET and HE, the Slovenian education and training system now contains no dead-ends at the level of secondary education. All VET pathways may lead to a qualification that enables access to HE by means of complementary education and training and assessment. The challenge however remains the transfer of credit for VET learning gained in colleges to VET learning gained in universities. More and more credit transfer partnerships are being created between VET colleges and Universities.

The main conclusions of the debate that followed presentation of these case studies were:

- The understanding of VET in the context of EQF should not be limited only to the issue of short cycle in HE. Other types of VET qualifications can occupy the higher levels of the framework.
- There are important differences in the extent to which HE institutions engage in LLL and deliver education leading to qualifications other than the three main degrees of the EHEA. The presentation of the added value of EQF as compared to the EHEA framework has to be able to speak to both: institutions that certify a wide range of learning as well as those that mostly focus on the Bachelor – Masters – Doctorate degrees.
- Clarification of different qualifications using learning outcomes and levels may also contribute to the building of mutual trust between VET and HE providers.
- Credit transfer mechanisms have the potential to facilitate pathways from VET to HE if the learning (and hence the credit) is at the desired level in the NQF.
- It was noted that though the National Coordination Points (NCPs) support the implementation of the EQF, discussions are taking place at national level between the representatives of the different sub-systems. However it may be too early for NCPs to have the role of “mediators” between sub-systems in certain countries.

From an HE perspective the following factors were discussed as potential motivational factors for HE institutions to “buy in” a lifelong learning framework and to facilitate links with VET.

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- Engagement of higher education institutions in more varied forms of learning may encourage the creation of links with VET.
- With fewer students enrolling, higher education institutions are looking more towards adult learners and learners from other backgrounds.
- There are also financial incentives for HEIs to engage in LLL and these may operate a change in the traditional mind set about the role of HEI. The exchanges with employers and sectors provide an opportunity for funding. The European Social Fund is also an opportunity for HEI to engage in LLL.
- There is also need to support and motivate learners to engage in different forms of learning and hence create the link between the systems (for example to support learners to move from VET to HE).
- The involvement of the teaching professionals is crucial in creating link between different sub-systems. The teaching professionals need to be able to understand the opportunities but also the challenges of stronger links between different sectors of learning.
- There is a need to explain the position of EQF as regards the different forms of learning and this should be illustrated by good practice examples.

With this useful discussion in mind the cluster for the recognition of learning outcomes organised a **third peer learning activity** on the 20-21 October 2008 in London. The theme was the added value that NQFs might bring to policy objectives in order to support lifelong learning. Two themes were linked to linking the qualifications outcomes in VET and HE.

- NQFs as tools for integrated reforms and stronger partnerships
- Creating independent references for variable standards of qualifications

Workshop discussions on these two themes concluded that some design aspects of NQFs can support coordination between VET and HE and can strengthen partnerships. For example, for many NQFs the objective is to create a structure of levels that brings together all the sectors of education and training. NQFs, therefore, create an opportunity for the different stakeholders to create a common instrument that will support different objectives in the qualifications system(s). A second element of potentially useful NQF design is level descriptors. Level descriptors can influence qualifications' standards and qualifications' design. The design of descriptors should therefore be closely related to the practice in designing qualifications. This process is an occasion for dialogue not only across the education and training sectors but also with the economic stakeholders. The workshop also concluded that trust and ownership across sectors is critical. It is, therefore, important to associate different stakeholders (from within the qualifications system(s) and from outside – e.g. labour market) to the design process. Stakeholders' involvement was a topic that was in fact addressed through all the discussions during the PLA and the following key messages on this theme emerged:

- Make sure that the process of NQF design is not limited to stakeholders from within the qualifications systems. Representatives of the economic world are crucial for the quality and success of the framework. If they are not involved in the process the NQF will be purely a tool for education and training ministries and providers, jeopardising the potential added values the NQF could bring.

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- The process should be open and stakeholders should be able to join at any stage. Not all parties will be interested from the start though it is important that the crucial stakeholders are involved. It is important to maintain the possibility of bringing in stakeholders at a later stage.
- The coordinators should remain sensitive to the different interests of parties involved. NQFs raise different expectations from different parties. While a compromise has to be sought it is also important that the interests of all parties are taken on board in one way or another. It is only if the NQF fits the different needs of parties concerned that ownership will be developed.
- Stakeholders must be convinced that there is a need for the system to change and that the NQF will provide benefits. The development of an NQF should not be perceived as a top-down process (because the Ministry or because the European Union requires it). The difficulties in the qualifications system should be revealed and a demonstration of how an NQF can address these should be available. These benefits have to be formulated from the point of view of the different stakeholders.
- Stakeholders' participation has to be voluntary and motivated by their perception of the added value that an NQF can provide.

The second objective for the London PLA is also relevant to the discussions in Berlin - creating independent reference for variable standards of qualifications. It was agreed that NQFs can overcome the complexity of qualifications systems structures as well as the variability of learning environments within a country. This is possible if the following features of NQFs are designed effectively:

- Neutral level descriptors that are able to accommodate differences across regional and sectoral approaches to qualifications but that are also formulated with clarity so as to enable the distinction between one level or another.
- While the education and training pathways, conditions and requirements may be extremely variable, the learning outcomes and standards based on these can become the common language for different stakeholders. Learning outcomes approaches are open to the fact that there are various ways to learn and that individuals have different leaning styles.
- Existence of quality assurance requirements regarding how qualifications are designed and how they are awarded (assessment, validation and recognition) supports the credibility of qualifications in the framework. This does not mean that an NQF should prescribe specific QA processes (this may be regulated elsewhere in the system) but that all qualifications in an NQF should be quality assured.
- The development of trust among the different stakeholders makes it possible for NQFs to be open to other forms of learning while maintaining credibility and ownership.

### **To summarise**

In relation to the topic of creating bridges between VET and HE, the previous three PLAs identified the following ways in which NQFs could strengthen links between these sectors:

- Creation of a common forum for discussion and exchange: the process of designing NQFs should involve consensus building among a variety of stakeholders, obviously including HE and VET. In longer term it may result in improved progression opportunities for learners.

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- Use of a common language: the common language created by the set of levels of NQFs as well as the learning outcomes descriptors may improve understanding of qualifications from other education and training sectors.
- Importance of parallel policies: NQFs create a structure of levels that is neutral with regard to distinctions such as length of programmes or qualifications' 'institutional origin' (i.e. VET, HE) and thus facilitate communication among these sectors. However, depending on the national policy objectives, other instruments/ policies may be necessary to make sure that: learners have the possibility to progress from VET to HE;

### **Some general points on NQF development**

We can usefully conclude this review of how the discussions in the PLAs have helped understanding of the issues arising from attempting to link VET and HE with some more general conclusions about NQFs.

It became clear through the discussions that NQFs require **strong political commitment**. Development of a NQF is a long term process, from the moment it is first discussed, through the consensus building, to the moment it provides benefits a certain time will pass by. It is a challenge for policy-makers and those involved in the design to maintain the momentum. It is of course also important to maintain the funding.

Development of **consensus** across the variety of actors concerned is crucial for trust and openness of NQFs.

Development of NQFs should be progressive but on the other hand NQFs **evolve**. Therefore it may be necessary to have more modest expectations in the beginning and improve the framework over the years.

NQFs have to **suit their national contexts**. The added value they can bring in is relative to the existing situation. Each system is facing different challenges (e.g. coherence may be a problem in some systems but not in others). The technical features of NQFs also have to be based on the national context (e.g. the number of levels in an NQF).

There is a need to be **realistic** about expectations from NQFs. While they can support many policy objectives, these will not appear automatically because of an NQF. Other related policies and practices have to be related to the NQF in order to create added value. Therefore challenges related to NQF are not so much related to the technical aspects but to all the peripheral requirements (e.g. involvement of stakeholders, quality assurance, etc.).

Finally it is important to highlight that it is impossible to differentiate, in the context of NQFs as discussed in the PLAs, the added value that occurs because of a NQF or because of the use of learning outcomes within the system.

### **The next steps**

The Berlin PLA now takes the discussions a stage further and is more concrete in the way it addresses the question:

*How can vocational training and higher education use learning outcomes to fulfil the need for transparency and transfer opportunities of qualifications with the help of a National Qualifications Framework while taking the differences in the educational perspectives of the different sub-systems into account in an appropriate way?*

Concentrating strongly on the perspectives and educational structures of the two educational sectors, the PLA participants will explore ways in which similarities, overlaps and differences in learning outcome orientation can be depicted. In this way, it will contribute towards developing a joint understanding across different educational sectors and towards building trust in the development, trial and implementation processes of National Qualifications Frameworks in EU Member States. There will be two distinct aspects of discussions – the notion of equivalence between qualifications emerging from the sectors and how the outcome orientation of an NQF might facilitate closer linkage between them.