The development of national Qualifications frameworks in the European union; main tendencies and challenges

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Introduction

Comprehensive\(^1\) national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) have, during the last five years, turned into key instruments for the reform of education, training and qualifications systems in the European Union\(^2\). While very few of the Member States had considered this approach prior to 2005, the situation today is very different. As this chapter will show, all EU countries are currently working actively on the development and implementation of national frameworks. While the number of countries having fully implemented a NQF is still\(^3\) low (UK, France, Ireland, Malta), all EU countries are now signalling that they will introduce comprehensive NQFs covering all parts and levels of their education, training and qualifications systems.

The European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) has acted as a catalyst for these developments. Adopted in 2008 by the European Parliament and Council, the Recommendation invites countries to relate their qualifications systems to the EQF by 2010 by:

- referencing, in transparent manner, their qualification levels to the levels set out by EQF and, where appropriate,
- by developing national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) in accordance with national legislation and practice.

The rapid development of NQFs confirms that countries see the EQF as relevant and important instrument for European cooperation. The majority of countries are actively pursuing the 2010 deadline and give priority to the formal referencing to the EQF

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\(^{2}\) They are comprehensive in the sense that they cover qualifications awarded at all levels and in all sub-sectors of education and training (including general, VET and higher education).

\(^{3}\) This also applies to Iceland and Norway, members of the European Economic Area (EEA).

\(^{4}\) September 2009.
within the set deadlines (5). The impact of the EQF can also be seen in the way countries are structuring their NQFs: The use of a learning outcomes approach is broadly accepted and the majority of countries have chosen to introduce an 8-level reference structure, using the EQF level descriptors as starting point for their national work.

However, while NQFs are important instruments which will ease clear and transparent referencing of national qualifications to the EQF, they are increasingly seen as instruments for addressing national objectives. While given a regulatory role in some countries (for example the UK), frameworks are mainly seen as important communication and transparency tools whose main task it is to clarify the relations – vertically as well as horizontally – between different types of qualifications, certificates and diplomas. This links NQFs firmly into lifelong learning policies - primarily by addressing the permeability of national systems and by addressing the barriers to access to and progression in learning.

The overview and analysis presented in this chapter reflects the situation mid 2009 and is divided into two main parts.

- The first part summarises the main characteristics of NQF developments in the European Union (6) according to stages of development, main objectives, their design in terms of levels and descriptors, the use of learning outcomes as well as the involvement of stakeholders.

- The second and concluding part addresses some of the main challenges faced by EU countries in developing and implementing NQFs.

This chapter is based on the mapping carried out by Cedefop in 2009 The development of national qualifications frameworks in Europe. The main conclusions of this mapping have been presented to and discussed in the EQF Advisory Group (7).

The development of NQFs in the European Union; main characteristics

The rapid development of comprehensive NQFs in the last few years may be interpreted (and ignored) as a passing ‘fashion’ – an approach which will be forgotten as quickly as it was introduced. While it is too early to exclude such a turn of events, the close integration of NQFs into existing policy developments, in particular related to lifelong learning, indicates that qualifications frameworks may play an important role.

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(5) According to the latest feedback to the European Commission, 26 out of 31 countries have stated that they will complete their referencing at latest by 2011.

(6) The complete report, presenting developments in each country, will be updated twice a year by Cedefop, and is available on [http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/default.asp](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/default.asp)

role in contributing to lifelong learning objectives. Many countries emphasise the added value of frameworks for improving coordination and for strengthening the dialogue between relevant stakeholders.

Most of all, the current level of activity, engagement and mutual learning indicates that we are speaking of a process not easily reversed.

**The stages of NQF development**

Due to the speed of current developments any categorisation of NQF developments in the EU needs to be treated with some care. While the EQF to a certain extent has influenced the timing of the work, the following overview illustrates that countries have indeed reached different stages of development and implementation.

*The conceptualisation stage:* Countries like Greece, Hungary, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovakia and Sweden have stated their intention to go ahead with developments but have still to decide on the precise scope and structure of their frameworks. Working groups involving stakeholders from all the different parts of education and training as well as employment have been (or are, in the Dutch context, being) put in place. Some variation can be observed within this group of countries; the Netherlands, Sweden, Hungary and Poland, for example, operate with clear dead-lines for when to come up with a proposal (2010). Other countries have still to come up with a definitive time table. The degree of preparation in the different countries varies, in particular as regards the extent to which a learning outcomes approach have been introduced and accepted. Countries like the Netherlands and Sweden seems to be in a particularly good starting position as learning outcomes (or competence) are reasonably well integrated into their systems.

*The design stage:* Countries like Cyprus, Belgium (Wallonia), Luxembourg, Iceland, Italia, Portugal have decided to go ahead with NQFs and have to a large extent decided on the overall scope and structure of their frameworks. The work of these countries is currently focussed on the definition and agreement of level descriptors, the division of roles and responsibilities between the different stakeholders and the extent to which qualifications from different subsystems (VET and HE in particular) can be linked together and/or combined. In most of these countries the work on a qualifications framework for higher education has been going on for some time, influencing the discussion on how to develop a comprehensive national framework. In some countries, for example Belgium (Wallonia) a strict line has been drawn between levels 1-5 and 6-8, complicating efforts to build bridges and establish links. Other countries, for example Iceland and Poland, are considering solutions for better bridging VET and higher education.

*Testing and implementation:* Countries like Austria, Germany, Finland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovenia, Belgium (Flanders), Denmark and Estonia have developed detailed proposals on how to structure their frameworks, (for example
Finland and Denmark); they are preparing or have already carried out extensive consultation processes (Austria), are conducting practical testing (Germany) and are putting in place the necessary legal frameworks (Belgium Flanders). All these countries operate with clear deadlines aiming at an establishment of NQFs during 2010 and 2011. The wide involvement of stakeholders from all subsystem of education as well as employment characterises these countries. It is interesting to note that the countries having reached this stage very much emphasise the added value of the frameworks for national reform. While the EQF may have been the original catalyst for the NQF work, the resulting dialogue between national stakeholders (in some cases meeting in ‘the same room’ for the first time) seems to clarify the added value of NQFs for national policy development and reform. Countries at this stage, for example Denmark, underline the pragmatic and long-term character of NQF developments. The detailed proposal presented by Denmark in the spring of 2009 is seen as a first step and an evaluation is foreseen already in 2012. Reaching this testing and (early) implementation stage does not mean that full political clarification has been reached. This is illustrated by Austria where extensive preparations and consultations have been followed by intense discussions on the exact relationship between VET and higher education. This again illustrates the process, dialogue and political character of NQF developments.

Implemented (revision stage): Ireland, UK and France are countries, which have been working on NQFs for the last decade or more. The adoption of the Qualifications and credit framework (QCF) for England and Northern-Ireland in 2008 can be seen as an example of the evolution of NQFs, in this case integrating credit transfer firmly into the framework. The recent external evaluation of the Irish Framework (NQAI September 2009) draws attention to a number of factors important for future developments. The evaluation emphasises the need for time in which to develop familiarity with the framework, the need for an iterative process of development and support from different stakeholders, the need for the framework to be ‘loose’ enough to accommodate different types of learning and, not least the need to balance implementation within sub-systems with the need to introduce system-wide approaches.

Based on the mid-2009 Cedefop mapping, the majority of EU-countries expect to have established NQFs at latest by 2012. This is closely interlinked with the referencing to the EQF where 26 countries now have confirmed that they will complete their work by the end of 2011. While this signals the priority give to NQFs, their actual impact on national and European policies and practises will inevitably

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vary according to the concrete political and practical choices and priorities made in each country.

**The objectives of the NQFs**

Most EU countries refer to the EQF and its learning outcomes based levels and the need for transparent referencing of national qualifications levels to the EQF as the direct reason for developing a NQF. As the level is no longer defined by a particular institution or category of providers, countries see the NQFs as an important instrument for increasing transparency of the national qualifications systems and making it more user-friendly.

While the referencing to the EQF thus is important and has acted as a catalyst for the process, the potential role of the frameworks at national level is increasingly emphasised. The following objectives are presented by almost all countries, irrespective of their stage of development. NQFs can, by promoting the shift to learning outcomes

- make national qualifications systems easier to understand and overview - at national as well as international level (transparency);
- strengthen coherence of qualifications systems;
- support LLL learning by making learning pathways visible and thus facilitate access, participation and progression;
- facilitate the recognition of a broader range of learning (including non-formal and informal learning);
- strengthen the link and improve the communication between education and training and the labour market;
- create a platform for cooperation and dialogue;
- provide a reference point for quality assurance.

This list of objectives are intrinsically linked to the shift to a learning outcomes approach. The new learning outcomes based levels can be seen as introducing a neutral reference point for diverse qualifications and qualifications providers. Progression in learning becomes more than a predetermined path defined and restricted by education and training institutions, but will increasingly be based on an appreciation of the learning outcomes in question, wherever these have been acquired. Some countries also emphasise the role of NQFs, and the learning outcomes approach, to achieve parity of esteem between different education and training subsystems. The introduction of neutral qualifications levels makes it possible to envisage - as indeed countries like France and Belgium (Flanders) do - higher
education and VET qualifications occupying the same (high) levels. This signals that qualifications levels can not be automatically identified on the basis of the institution awarding them – this can only be done on the basis of the knowledge, skills and competences underpinning the qualification and qualifications level in question. It is expected that outcome-based level descriptors will acts as an important source for critical reflection on existing practises in educational and training institutions and an inspiration for further institutional development.

The level structure of the NQFs

Eight countries, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovakia and Sweden, have still to make a decision on the number of levels to be used in their frameworks. Most other countries have proposed or adopted 8 levels. While this is partly inspired by the EQF, countries very much stress that the choice of 8 levels has been based on a thorough analysis of existing national qualifications systems. It is interesting to note that France, currently basing its framework on a 5-level structure introduced in 1969, seriously considers the shift to an 8-level structure.

The broad consensus on an 8-level structure is contrasted with the frameworks of the UK and Ireland. Scotland now operates with 12 levels, Wales and England/Northern Ireland with 9 and Ireland with 10. Iceland also stands out as an exception by suggesting a 7 level structure as the most appropriate for their national needs.

Two countries, Slovenia and Hungary, have addressed the question of sublevels. Slovenia has introduced sublevels for levels 6 and 8, Hungary is considering this possibility but has made no final decision.

Hungary is also considering a possible entrance level leading into the national equivalent of EQF level 1. This parallel the approach of England/Northern Ireland and Wales where an entrance level leads into the main, 8-level structure. Entrance (or access) levels have also been discussed in Belgium (Flanders) but eventually not included in the framework. The reason for this was a fear that such a level could have a stigmatising effect.

The level descriptors

As indicated above, the introduction of learning outcomes based qualifications levels is a key-feature of the NQFs now emerging. For the moment the main challenge lies in the articulation of level descriptors. These must on the one hand be sufficiently generic to be able to link to the EQF, they need to be broad enough to capture the diversity of national qualifications and they must be specific enough to be recognised by the users of qualifications. The current NQF developments will, if they succeed, reinforce the ongoing shift to learning outcomes at institutional level, a shift which is evenly distributed between countries and different parts of the education and training system.
While the EQF level descriptors, along with the descriptors developed in the Bologna process (the so called ‘Dublin descriptors’), provide a starting point for some national frameworks, there is broad agreement that national descriptors need to be sufficiently detailed and contextualised if they are to be of any value. This implies that countries can not transfer the EQF descriptors directly into the national frameworks, a national interpretation and adaptation is a must.

For national qualifications levels equivalent to EQF levels 5-8, the balancing of ‘Dublin’ and EQF descriptors is a direct reflection of the debate on how to better link higher education and the remaining parts of education and training system; should higher levels mainly be defined through an emphasis on theoretical knowledge (and research) or should (vocational) skills and competence elements be given more weight? The decision on national level descriptors are thus of great importance as they signal national priorities in this area. This is illustrated by the French framework where skills come first in their listing of descriptor elements (skills, knowledge and competence). This signals the priority given to labour market relevant qualifications – be these at levels 1 or 8.

Several countries, for example Belgium Flanders further develop the competence category of the EQF (autonomy and responsibility). This is in particular done by introducing the context-element into the descriptors. Other countries (Malta and Finland, Slovenia) try to capture the key competences element in their descriptors (learning to learn, communication and social skills, entrepreneurship, judgment skills).

The Germany NQF\(^9\) differs from other frameworks by using the term ‘competence’ as an overarching concept (instead of learning outcomes). This very much reflects the German tradition, distinguishing between the two main categories of competence, namely ‘professional’ and ‘personal’ competence (Fachkompetenz und personale kompetenz). This approach is likely to be followed by other countries, for example the Netherlands, using a related conceptual approach.

The development of level descriptors is still very much an ongoing and unfinished process. The experiences so far show that the definition of national levels is indeed a very useful exercise as it forces the different stakeholders to articulate their priorities as regards the balancing of key elements like theoretical and practical knowledge, skills, autonomy responsibility, key competences etc.

**The ownership of NQFs**

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\(^9\) Discussion proposal for a German Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, February 2009, available on [www.deutscherqualifikationsrahmen.de](http://www.deutscherqualifikationsrahmen.de)
As already stated above, one of the main strengths of the emerging comprehensive NQFs is that they provide a platform for dialogue between stakeholders not normally interacting with each other. The Cedefop 2009 mapping illustrates that a broad range of stakeholders are involved in the NQF development and implementation processes.

The coordination of the process is in most cases left to the national ministries of education, normally in close cooperation with ministries of higher education and research (where these exist as separate ministries) and ministries of labour. In a few countries, notably Italy and Portugal, ministries of labour coordinate the process. Also other ministries are involved (economy, health, labour, regional development etc.), reflecting that the responsibility for and award of qualifications is widespread.

Social partners are almost without exception involved in the development processes in all countries, as are chambers of commerce and industry and other stakeholders from the labour market. Teachers’, parents’ and students’ associations have been involved (e.g. in Hungary, Finland, Malta).

Many countries use public consultations actively in the development processes and as an instrument for preparing implementation. A very good example of this is provided by Austria where an extensive consultation preceded the presentation of the NQF proposal.

**The challenges ahead**

The introduction of NQFs in EU countries is progressing rapidly but is facing a wide range of challenges. The way these challenges are addressed will to a large extent decide the future impact and success of NQFs.

**NQFs are political instruments**

The fundamental objective pursued by the EQF and the emerging NQFs is to promote lifelong learning by reducing barriers between institutions and subsystems of education and training. To make this vision a reality requires transparent and coherent national qualification systems, which allow horizontal and vertical progression in learning on the basis of learning outcomes achieved. To place qualifications in the framework on the basis of learning outcomes and not inputs (like duration of the programme or institution, where the qualification was awarded) requires renegotiation of the relationships between qualifications and qualification levels. The ongoing discussions on the relationship between vocational education and training and higher education (as defined by the Bologna process) illustrate the political character of framework developments.

The fact that the comprehensive NQFs in many countries have been preceded by qualifications frameworks for higher education, initiated through the Bologna process, has created some tensions. Some representatives of higher education in some cases
see the emerging, comprehensive NQFs as a duplication of efforts and as an interference into ongoing work in their own system. In some countries, for example Denmark and Belgium (Wallonia) this has resulted in strict separations of qualifications at levels 1-5 and levels 6-8. Those qualifications covered by the Bologna process populate the three top levels, other are located to levels 1-5. Other countries, for example France and Belgium (Flanders) have rejected this approach and argues instead that placing of qualifications into a national level structure must be based on their learning outcomes, not on their institutional origin. The discussions on the placing of the ‘Meister’ (master craftsman) qualifications illustrate this dilemma. Why, is it argued, should these qualifications be located to a national level equivalent to EQF level 5 when the actual learning outcomes indicate a higher level? This conflict between what we can call an institutional logic (the universities see levels 5-8 as their levels) and an outcome logic is of key-importance for the future development of NQFs – and the EQF. The same discussion can also be observed in relation to nursing qualifications and to other high level vocationally oriented qualifications operating outside the higher education covered by Bologna.

These discussions, which in many cases still have to find their conclusions, illustrate that NQFs can have an impact on existing interests and divisions of responsibilities. The ability of NQFs to bring these discussions to the surface should be seen as a sign of strength, not as a sign of weakness. Without the platform for dialogue provided by the NQFs, these tensions would not have been articulated as clearly as is the case now.

**The shift to learning outcomes**

The shift to learning outcomes is an important factor which will influence the success and/or failure of NQFs in the EU. The main NQF objectives identified at national level (transparency, coherence, communication between education and labour market, improved access and progression as well as international comparability) all very much depend on a systematic learning outcomes based (re-)definition and description of qualification and qualifications levels and successful implementation at institutional level. Those countries with a tradition in this field are in a good position to move quicker. Other countries, with a weaker learning outcomes or competence tradition, face much bigger hurdles. A worst case scenario is a ‘pro forma’ shift to learning outcomes where countries officially (for example as a part of the EQF referencing) adopt learning outcomes based levels but fail to follow this up in the remaining parts of the education, training and qualification system. Such a ‘quick fix’ is dangerous for a number of reasons. Firstly it could weaken the EQF by undermining the mutual trust between countries. A ‘pro forma’ shift to learning outcomes would reduce rather than increase transparency. Secondly, the extent to which NQFs adds value to national reform processes depends on their ability to increase transparency by introducing a
common, learning outcomes based language. As the 2009 Cedefop study on the shift to learning outcomes describes\textsuperscript{10}, the big challenge is to involve stakeholders at different levels in this shift to learning outcomes. While political decisions are a necessary pre-condition for this shift, these must be followed up by practical work concentrating on the actual writing of learning outcomes based qualifications, the development of curricula taking aboard these principles and the introduction of teaching and assessment forms build. What is clear is that the shift towards a learning outcomes based approach can not be accomplished from one day to another. All evidence points to a gradual and long term process. The NQFs are therefore in the somewhat strange situation that they not only depend on the shift to learning outcomes, they are also important instruments for reinforcing out this shift. This underlines the importance of seeing the development and implementation of NQFs as a long term process. This process must be pragmatic, or as the evaluation of the Irish framework says, it must be an iterative process of development in which the framework and the existing education and training system are progressively aligned with each other.

**How to allocate qualification to NQF levels; the challenges of simplification and tolerance**

An issue faced by all countries developing an NQF is the level of detail introduced into the level descriptors. There are different factors influencing this. On the one hand countries see the need to develop descriptors which are sufficiently general to be understood by other countries and thus makes a referencing to the EQF possible. On the other hand national frameworks must be able to capture and represent the national qualifications reality in a valid and precise way.

This dilemma is discussed in the second EQF Discussion and guidance note on ‘The added value of NQFs’ (DG EAC, Bjornavold and Coles, 2009, p 8). This note makes the point that frameworks are abstract constructions: They are built on ‘the (often implicit) norms of qualifications levels in a country and aim to reflect a reality of a qualifications system by making these qualifications levels explicit. NQFs therefore always remain a codification and simplification of complex qualifications systems and it is perhaps not surprising that they are never able to perfectly reflect the reality of the systems they represent. This abstraction – and thus simplification - is necessary if


highly diverse qualifications are to be understood in relation to each other and compared and combined in any sensible way.

Designing qualification levels is, following this, a task that requires experts to appreciate the spectrum of understandings of levels within a country – from the labour market view through to the most theoretical and scholarly of perspectives. The ways qualifications recognise all learning in the drive towards lifelong learning have to be accommodated in a simple structure for transparency to be achievable. Designers and users of NQFs therefore need to be tolerant of some of the approximations that are necessary in the ways NQFs accommodate qualifications. These tolerances need to be based on a shared understanding which makes it possible to place a qualification into a level based on the available evidence.

‘Best fit’ is thus about building consensus amongst stakeholders around the important core qualities of qualifications and their placing into a particular qualification level. This illustrates that the question of best fit is not a purely technical question, it is again an illustration of the need to see NQFs as platforms for dialogue and negotiation.

**The question of qualification types and their allocation to a NQF**

There’s are many types of qualifications – also within national systems. It is not always obvious how NQFs will include these different types of qualifications.

According to Jorg Markowitch (2009) the most common way to structure qualifications in addition to the level structure seems to be by their ‘size’ (i.e. the notional workload involved to achieve the qualification). This approach is followed in the new English and Irish qualifications frameworks. The Irish qualifications framework also explicitly refers to size when structuring its qualifications and defines ‘major’ and ‘minor award types’ as well as ‘special-purpose’ and ‘supplemental award-types’. The two latter types are however not only characterized by their sizes, but by their relation to other awards. ‘Special-purpose award-types will for example comprise learning outcomes that form part of major awards’. Thus, according to Markowitch, the relation of qualifications to each other is a further way of structuring the qualifications in a NQF. In other cases qualifications are structured according to (educational) sector. The Scottish credit and qualifications framework (SCQF) distinguishes between the so called SQA qualifications, qualifications of Higher Education Institutions and Scottish Vocational Qualifications.

The above overview shows that size, relation and sectoral origin normally will have to be taken into account – in addition to learning outcomes - when placing qualifications
into a NQF\textsuperscript{11}. This becomes particularly clear when considering the lifelong learning challenge: If the aim is to make it possible for individuals to make progress on the basis of learning in different settings and institutions, a framework needs to include the full range of existing qualifications types, not only what the Irish describe as major awards. So far this discussion has been raised in few of the countries now developing NQFs. The implications of such an inclusive and comprehensive approach may be wide ranging and are closely linked to ongoing debates on whether NQFs will be able to facilitate and integrate credit transfer systems at national and European levels. The question is whether the comprehensive approach underpinning the new NQFs, including all types of qualifications, is compatible with a tendency towards more uniformity of qualifications design (an important characteristic of the Bologna process for higher education and its three cycles).

**How can NQFs open up to/include qualifications awarded outside the formal education and training system (for example by sectors and enterprises)?**

Several countries, exemplified by Sweden, states that the development of an NQF covering the existing, public education and training system, is a reasonably straightforward task. The reason for this being that qualifications to a large extent are defined in terms of learning outcomes, that the existing structures and provisions are transparent and that serious efforts have been made to clarify access, transfer and progression issues (for example between VET and higher education). The situation is different, however, when addressing certificates and diplomas awarded outside the existing formal system, for example by enterprises, sectors and professional organisations of various kind. Forming an important part of continuing training and further education, these certificates and diplomas are difficult to overview and it is not obvious that they can be combined with awards from the formal system. The question raised is thus whether and how NQFs can be opened up to and include these non-traditional qualifications? This is an issue closely related to quality assurance and trust. By including a qualification in a framework, it is signalled that a certain level of quality, both as regard input and outcomes, have been ensured. Two key questions arise from this; who will control the quality of certificates and diplomas awarded outside the formal system and how can such a quality assurance approach be introduced without creating too heavy burdens on the involved stakeholders, be these in education and training or in the labour market?

\textsuperscript{11} Qualifications are also structured according to economic sectors (like in VET) or to knowledge disciplines (for example in HE). This is another differentiation of consequence to the NQFS and illustrates that the horizontal ‘clustering’ of qualifications need to be taken into account.
The French experiences may give some indication on how to deal with this challenge. Since 2002 the Comité National de Certification Professionelle (CNCP) has taken on the role as ‘gate-keeper’ for the NQF. To be included in the national repertoire, the CNCP have agreed that the qualification in question fulfils the requirements established at national level. As long as this is the case, the institutional origin of the qualification does not matter. The result is that the French national repertoire no includes qualifications from a wide range of areas, not least from Chambers and other institutions and stakeholders outside the traditional education system. Similar approaches can be identified in other countries, notable in relation to the setting up of qualification registers and repertoires - like in the French case.

The question of the opening up of NQFs towards non-traditional qualifications is also linked to the issue of including certificates and diploma awarded by international organisations (vendor qualifications). While it is difficult to assess the influence and spread of these qualifications, their inclusion into NQFs raise the same kind of quality related questions as listed above; who should approve them and what procedure should be put in place?

The impact of NQFs on lifelong learning, covering awards from all forms of education, training and learning, depends not only on their openness and inclusiveness, but also on their ability to generate trust. Without carefully nurturing this trust NQFs could easily come in a position where the currency of qualifications is negatively affected – this is thus a key challenge for the coming period.

**NQFs must be tailored according to the national context;**

The experiences so shows that frameworks need to be tailored according to national conditions and needs. This must be reflected in the structures adopted (levels, level descriptors, quality assurance arrangements and agreement etc) and in the selection of stakeholders involved in the dialogue. A simple copying of the principles of the EQF, or the approaches of other countries, would not be sufficient – indeed counterproductive. To function, NQFs need to be trusted. Imposing an external model without involving the relevant stakeholders would seriously endanger this trust.

**NQFs need to be based on systematic exchange of experiences and mutual learning**

While NQFs need to be tailored to national conditions and needs, learning from the successes and mistakes of other countries could be very beneficial. The current situation where many countries develop NQFs in parallel thus provides a particularly good opportunity for exchange of experiences and for further clarifying the potential added value of the frameworks.

**Conclusions**
The rapid development of national qualifications frameworks in the EU and EEA confirms the relevance of the EQF and the need for increased comparability of qualifications across national borders. In this sense the NQFs are (paradoxically) reflections of the internationalisation of markets and technology. However, these development reflect increased awareness of stakeholders on the need for more strategic and coherent approach towards mostly fragmented national qualification systems.

The development of NQFs also signals that the traditional - ‘Fordistic’ – approach to education and training is coming to an end. Learning is not only something young people go through as an initiation to their working careers, it is increasingly something that takes place on a lifelong and lifewide and according to individual needs. This requires a more open qualifications system allowing individuals to progress across traditional institutional and sectoral borders.

Even in the few countries where NQFs have been implemented, we are far away from realising these visions of mobility across geographical as well as institutional borders. However, the fact that the new comprehensive frameworks are putting in place platforms for dialogue on these issues, involving a much broader group of stakeholders than before, give some reason for optimism.

The fact that the NQF developments in some cases brings tensions and conflicts to the surface is perhaps the best proof that these frameworks are something more than a passing fashion. Their ability to function as platforms for dialogue and discussions is probably their most important characteristic.