

## Other countries' practices in the implementation of qualification frameworks

This review is based on the Cedefop's 2015 publication<sup>1</sup>, the fifth since Cedefop started its regular monitoring of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) development. The report is based on evidence collected through NQF inventory consisting of 42 national chapters<sup>2</sup>. Increasingly, countries see NQFs as a tool to reform not only qualifications, but also education and training more widely.

Qualifications frameworks across Europe are coming of age: following a period of initial development and formal adoption they are now becoming increasingly operational. Promoting the principle of learning outcomes, qualifications frameworks are, in some countries, evolving from a tool to describe qualifications systems into a means to reform and modernise them. Except the Irish, French and UK frameworks, European NQFs are still young, having been developed over the past decade, spurred by the EQF recommendation of 2008. The future impact of these young frameworks depends on their ability to make a difference to end-users, be these learners, parents, education and training providers, employers or others.

Political commitment to the developing and implementing NQFs was strengthened. This is demonstrated not only by the fact that more qualifications frameworks have been formally adopted but also that more frameworks have entered an operational stage and have been populated with qualifications. A sufficient formal basis, successful implementation of a learning outcomes approach, and support from broader groups of stakeholders, including social partners, seem to be the most critical factors.

Although evidence on the added value of NQFs to end-users (individual learners and employers) is most apparent in some of the earlier frameworks, like the Scottish one, the new comprehensive NQFs – covering all levels and types of qualifications – are having a positive impact in a number of areas across countries. NQFs are widely recognised to be an important tool in supporting lifelong learning strategies, notably by opening up to qualifications awarded in non-formal learning contexts and by promoting validation of non-formal and informal learning.

While important, these achievements cannot hide the fact that the new NQFs being developed across Europe are still vulnerable and their long-term impact is by no means guaranteed. First, their existence is still not well known to ordinary citizens. Second, the shift to learning outcomes promoted by the NQFs is viewed with scepticism by some groups, arguing that the focus on learning outcomes draws attention and resources away from pedagogies and learning contexts. Third, there is a challenge that frameworks might not be seen within a sufficiently long time horizon at national level but as a short-term and formal response to European initiatives.

### NQF development overview and main tendencies

An increasing number of frameworks have become operational and are now starting to make a modest but detectable impact on education, training and (to some extent) employment policies and practices. Most countries (34 out of 38) are working towards comprehensive NQFs and cover all types and levels of qualifications. They can be seen as important components of national lifelong learning strategies. Together with their systematic support for a shift to learning outcomes, frameworks are now moving into a position where they can contribute to reducing barriers to learning and promoting more

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<sup>1</sup> Cedefop (2015). *Analysis and overview of national qualifications framework developments in European countries: annual report 2014*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Cedefop working paper; No 27.

<sup>2</sup> Cedefop. *European inventory on NQF*.

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/countryreports/european-inventory-on-nqf>

permeable education and training systems. For this to happen, however, long-term implementation strategies have to be put in place, allowing frameworks to become fully integrated and trusted instruments at national level.

Currently, 38 countries are developing 42 NQFs. The following figures reflect the situation in November 2014:

- 34 countries are working towards comprehensive NQFs covering all types and levels of qualifications (30 in 2013);
- four countries have introduced partial NQFs covering a limited range of qualification types and levels or consisting of individual frameworks operating separately from each other;
- 29 NQFs have been formally adopted (24 in 2013);
- 29 countries have proposed/adopted eight-level frameworks (28 in 2013);
- 18 countries have reached operational stage (16 in 2013): in seven of these – Belgium (fl), Denmark, Ireland, France, Malta, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom – NQFs are fully operational (five in 2013);
- 26 countries presented referencing reports showing how their national frameworks relate to the European qualifications framework (EQF);
- 24 NQFs are linked to the Bologna framework, 14 jointly with EQF referencing;
- nine countries indicate EQF levels on certificates, diplomas or Europass documents (six in 2013).

The European qualifications framework for lifelong learning (EQF) has been the main catalyst for the rapid developments and implementation of learning-outcomes-based NQFs in Europe. All countries see national frameworks as necessary for relating national qualifications levels to the EQF transparently and in a manner that inspires trust. By December 2014, 23 countries had referenced their national qualifications levels to the EQF: Austria, Belgium (fl and fr), Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and the United Kingdom. In addition, Greece, Cyprus and Romania, were still in dialogue with the EQF advisory group on finalising their reports. The remaining countries are expected to follow in 2015. It is worth noting that the number of countries cooperating on EQF increased during 2014 from 36 to 38.

While failing to meet the original targets of the EQF recommendation (referencing NQFs to the EQF by 2010), the process has been politically successful in the sense that participating countries actively support the overall objectives. Delays have been caused by the time and resource-consuming combination of NQF developments and EQF referencing.

The development of NQFs in Europe also reflects the Bologna process and the agreement to implement qualifications frameworks in the European higher education area (QF-EHEA). A total of 24 countries had formally 'self-certified' their higher education qualifications to the QF-EHEA by December 2014. Countries are increasingly combining referencing to the EQF and self-certification to the QF-EHEA; Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Norway, Poland, Portugal and Slovenia have all produced joint reports on both processes, reflecting the priority given to developing and adopting comprehensive NQFs covering all levels and types of qualification. It is expected that this approach will be chosen by most countries preparing to reference to the EQF. This development reflects the increasingly close cooperation between the two European framework initiatives, also illustrated by regular meetings between EQF national coordination points and Bologna framework coordinators.

## Policy rationale and objectives of the NQFs in Europe

Two main drivers explain the rapid development of European NQFs during the past decade. Most NQFs were originally seen as key instruments for improving European and international comparability of qualifications and thus as direct responses to the EQF. Increasingly, however, NQF-developments have

been linked to national priorities, in some cases directly supporting education and training system reform. The following objectives – listed according to the frequency they are referred to by countries – illustrate this combination of European ‘push’ and national ‘pull’:

- all countries see qualifications frameworks as a key instrument for increasing transparency and comparability of qualification systems and see European cooperation through the EQF as a way to facilitate this;
- most countries see the NQFs as important for strengthening the learning-outcomes-based approach throughout education and training. The introduction of learning-outcomes-based qualifications frameworks is seen by several countries, such as Austria, Belgium (fr), Croatia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway and Turkey, as a condition not only for increasing transparency and comparability of qualifications but also for supporting learner-centred teaching and training practices, notably by changing the way standards, curricula and assessment are defined and used;
- most countries consider NQFs as relevant for strengthening lifelong and lifewide learning policies and practices. Countries such as Germany, Romania and Turkey see NQFs as tools for increasing permeability of their education and training systems, potentially reducing barriers to access and progression in education, training and learning. Learning-outcomes-based levels provide a reference point for formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences and allow countries to put in place comprehensive national approaches for validation. Countries such as Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway and Portugal all pay particular attention to the possible role of NQFs in promoting validation;
- linked to the above is the expectation that NQFs will provide a reference point for quality assurance. While quality assurance arrangements already exist in all countries, the introduction of comprehensive, learning-outcomes-based frameworks allows better comparison of institutions and subsystems and capacity to address overall consistency and quality in education and training. Belgium (fl), Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, and Romania emphasise this policy objective;
- several countries see the NQF as an instrument to strengthen cooperation between stakeholders and establish a closer link to the labour market. While this partly is linked to the shift to learning outcomes (see point (b) above), frameworks offer a new platform for dialogue and cooperation which makes it possible to address cross-sector and cross-institutional issues and challenges. Comprehensive NQFs can play an important role in this respect. Other additional objectives are listed by one or a few countries:
  - achieve parity of esteem between vocational education and training and higher education (Germany, Greece, Switzerland);
  - aid better monitoring of supply and demand within education and training (Estonia);
  - increase the responsiveness of education and training systems to individual needs (United Kingdom);
  - promote participation in secondary education (Portugal).

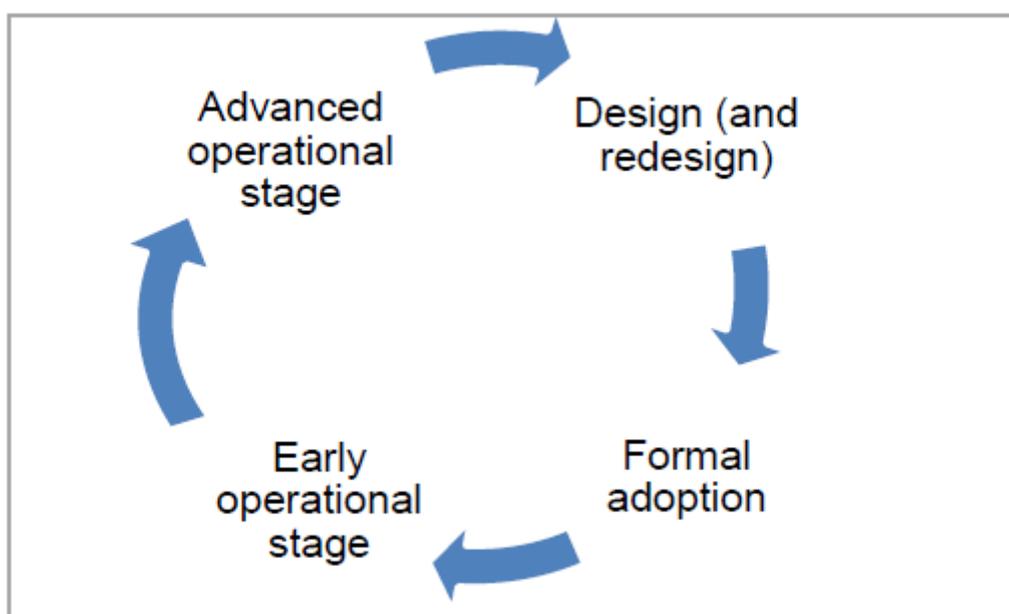
While not complete, this list shows the range of objectives addressed by European NQFs. Though the road from objectives to actual impacts may be long, most frameworks now seem to trigger change. Only a few cases refer to an explicit administrative and legal reform-mandate, but frameworks are increasingly acting as a catalysts for the shift to learning outcomes and for a cross-sectoral/cross-institutional dialogue. This is exemplified by a recent Cedefop study<sup>3</sup> of the shift to learning outcomes in 33 European countries demonstrating that significant progress has been made in all sectors of education and training during the past five years. This has largely been facilitated and supported by NQFs.

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## Stages of development: towards operational status

Countries taking part in the EQF process have reached different stages of NQF development and implementation, illustrated by Figure 1. Presenting the stages in the form of a circle signals that NQF development and implementation are continuous and iterative processes, and their relevance and impact depend on continuous feedback from stakeholders and users.

Figure 1. **Stages of NQF development**



Source: Authors.

### Design and development

This stage is critical for deciding the objectives, rationale and architecture of a NQF. This is also the stage where relevant stakeholders buy-in (or not) to the process. Most European countries have completed this stage, laying the conceptual and technical foundation for their frameworks (notably in the form of national level descriptors, defined levels, and qualification types). This stage normally requires a combination of technical development and stakeholder consultation and dialogue; the latter is critical for mobilising commitment and ownership among diverse stakeholders, in many cases not accustomed to working together. By the end of 2014, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Italy, Liechtenstein, Serbia, Slovakia and Spain could be described as addressing design and development issues, although some were at a more advanced level than others.

### Formal adoption

In many countries formal adoption of frameworks has required more time than foreseen and delayed implementation. Formal adoption means different things in different countries and ranges from the introduction of specific NQF-laws via amendments of existing laws to limited administrative regulations. While formats vary – largely reflecting the national political and legislative context and culture – formal adoption is normally necessary for moving towards an operational stage. Compared to 2013, significant progress can be observed in this area: 29 NQFs are now formally adopted (compared to 23 in 2013).

### Moving from early to advanced operational stage

Reaching operational stage means that a framework has been introduced as a permanent and visible feature of the national qualification system and that its principles are being actively promoted and applied. The learning-outcomes-based levels of the framework will, at this advanced stage, provide entrance to and reference for all national qualifications. This means that the framework not only provides the overarching map used by learners and parents (supporting transparency and progression), it will also provide a reference point for development and review of standards, programmes and curricula and for consistent implementation of learning outcomes in teaching and training.

Increasingly we also see that operational frameworks aid integration of validation of non-formal and informal learning, thus supporting lifelong and life-wide learning. Reaching this advanced stage requires agreement on sharing responsibilities between the different stakeholders and on the role to be played by the framework in the wider education, training and employment context. While this requires clarity on administrative and budgetary arrangement, it will also require agreement on the relative value of different qualifications and how these are to be placed within the hierarchy introduced by the NQF.

We can distinguish between countries having reached advanced and early operational stages:

- seven frameworks – in Belgium (fl), Denmark, Ireland, France, Malta, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom – have reached advanced operational stage. These NQFs are being used by education and training and labour market authorities to structure information on qualifications and make this visible to end-users (learners, employers, employees, teachers, and guidance and counselling staff) through national databases and other available instruments. Some of these frameworks, such as the English CQF (currently under revision, cf Annex) and the French, play a regulatory role and set requirements for qualification providers, thus operating as gatekeepers to the national system. The operational frameworks provide a reference point for implementing learning outcomes and reviewing standards, programmes and curricula. Learning-outcomes-based levels are used to strengthen consistency across levels and institutions;
- 11 countries have reached early operational stage, including Belgium (de), Croatia, Estonia, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Norway and Portugal. These countries are currently working on the practical implementation of the framework, notably by fine-tuning governance structures, by continuing and finalising the allocation of qualifications to levels, and by setting up databases. Countries such as Germany have paid particular attention to developing quality assurance criteria to be used by the framework, for example linked to non-formal learning and private qualifications. These frameworks still need to communicate their added value to end-users, notably learners, parents and employers.

## Closing the circle: evaluation and review

NQFs need constantly to evolve to be relevant and to add value. Figure 1 illustrates the circular (and iterative) character of NQF developments, pointing to the need for continuous evaluation and review of technical design, conceptual basis and stakeholder involvement and buy-in. While most European frameworks are still in the process of completing the first circle, some of the early frameworks, notably those in the United Kingdom and Ireland, have entered into a stage of evaluation and review.

The results of these five evaluations clearly demonstrate the need for continuous evaluation and review of NQFs. The Scottish and Irish examples are encouraging as they exemplify frameworks starting to reach end-users: learners, parents and educational professionals. The examples of the QCF and the CQFW are more mixed and demonstrate how future implementation and impact require revision of existing strategies. In the Welsh case, weak integration into general education and training systems and policies prevents the framework from fulfilling its potential. In the QCF case, certain elements (credits) of the original design are questioned, requiring more fundamental revision. The

QCF also illustrates how shifting policy priorities influence a framework; government priorities have clearly changed since the framework was designed and introduced in the mid-2000s.

## NQFs in Europe: common characteristics and challenges

With the initial technical and conceptual design of NQFs now finalised in most European countries, the following common characteristics can be identified:

- NQFs have primarily (in 34 out of 38 countries) been designed as comprehensive and address all levels and types of qualifications (VET, higher education and general education). The remaining four countries, the Czech Republic, France, Italy and Switzerland, have developed frameworks with limited scope or chosen to develop and implement separate frameworks for vocational and higher education. Some countries, such as Germany and Austria, have agreed on comprehensive NQFs but are taking a step-by-step approach where some qualifications (for example school leaving certificates at upper secondary level) have still to be included;
- comprehensive European NQFs can mostly be described as 'loose frameworks', to be able to embrace the full range of concepts, values and traditions found in the different parts of the education and training covered by the framework. Whether a framework is tight or loose depends on the stringency of conditions a qualification must meet to be included in it. Loose frameworks introduce a set of comprehensive level descriptors to be applied across subsystems, but allow substantial 'specialisation' within each subframework. Tight frameworks are normally regulatory frameworks and define uniform specifications for qualifications to be applied across sectors. Examples of early versions of frameworks in South Africa or New Zealand show that attempts to create tight and 'one-fit-for-all' variants generated much resistance and undermined the overarching role of the framework. These experiences have led to general reassessment of the role of such frameworks, pointing to the need to protect diversity. In contrast, in most countries, the inclusion of formal qualifications in the NQFs is based on sector-based legislation, not on uniform rules covering the entire framework. This is illustrated by the proposed Polish framework where generic, national descriptors are supplemented by more detailed ones for the subsystems of general, vocational and higher education. While not so explicitly addressed by other frameworks, the basic principle applies across the continent;
- NQFs are widely considered to be an important tool in supporting national lifelong learning strategies, notably by opening up to qualifications awarded in non-formal learning contexts, promoting validation of non-formal learning, and reducing barriers to progress in education, training and learning. The overarching perspective of comprehensive frameworks is critical for achieving lifelong learning objectives;
- most countries have introduced eight-level frameworks. Three exceptions to this can be found in the recently developed frameworks of Iceland and Norway, which have seven levels, and Slovenia, using 10 levels. The seven level framework in Norway reflects the formal education and training structure, where no qualifications were identified below NQF/EQF level 2. One of the reasons in Slovenia to adopt 10 NQF levels was better to accommodate legacy awards like *magister znanosti*. The similarities in structure among most countries demonstrate that international comparability of the NQF structure is considered a priority;
- while all countries emphasise that their NQFs are communication and transparency tools designed to improve transparency and comparability of national qualifications systems, many countries also see NQFs as contributing to incremental reform, notably the shift to learning outcomes and improved stakeholder cooperation and dialogue. This would allow the existing education and training system and the learning-outcomes-based framework to be gradually and progressively aligned with each other's and to develop understanding and buy-in of key concepts among key stakeholders;

- although a broad range of stakeholders participates in designing and developing frameworks, NQFs mainly address the needs of the education and training sector, and, to a lesser extent, those of the labour market, and are seen as only partly relevant to (for example) employees and employers;
- all countries have introduced learning-outcomes-based level descriptors, reflecting the EQF level descriptors (knowledge, skills, competence). Evidence shows, however, that many countries combine this with links to inputs and emphasise that these two approaches are complementary rather than mutually exclusive;
- Cedefop evidence shows that the NQF roles and functions differ between countries and across sectors; ranging from (a limited number of) frameworks with a regulatory function to (a majority of) frameworks of a descriptive and classification character. However, when moving into operational stage, many embrace some elements of reforms. While countries have converged along these dimensions, NQFs are parts of national systems and so reflect national contexts, values, traditions and objectives. This is especially evident in the way in which countries have adapted and further developed national level descriptors, now adopted by most countries.

While the learning outcomes approach is broadly accepted across Europe it is being interpreted and applied in many different ways. Cedefop's analysis of national level descriptors has identified three main approaches:

- one group of countries uses EQF level descriptors directly or has national level descriptors that are closely aligned to those found in the EQF (e.g. in Estonia, Portugal and Romania). Most of the countries in this group, however, have prepared detailed explanatory tables or guides with more in-depth national level descriptors;
- a second group of countries has broadened and partly adjusted their descriptors to reflect better the complexities of national qualifications systems and/or emphasise national priorities, such as representing important social, personal, and transversal competences more effectively. Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Norway, Poland, and Sweden are examples of countries in this group. Several countries seek to go beyond the focus on manual and cognitive skills introduced by the EQF and emphasise social, communication, planning, learning, and judgment skills. Denmark has introduced 'communication, creative, and problem-solving skills', while Hungary has taken a broader approach with 'abilities and learning skills', which are also emphasised in the Dutch, Polish, and Norwegian frameworks. Many countries, such as Finland, Iceland, and Malta, have integrated EU key competences into their NQF level descriptors. In relation to competence, Norway's NQF refers to 'general competence' and Romania's to 'transversal competence'. While countries include 'autonomy' and 'responsibility' in their interpretation of competence, they also tend to broaden their definition and incorporate additional aspects such as 'critical thinking', 'creativity', and 'cooperation'. Poland's NQF uses 'social competence' rather than 'competence'. This is understood as a combination of 'identity' (participation, responsibility, models of conduct), 'cooperation' (including teamwork, leadership, and conditions), and 'responsibility' (which includes individual and team actions, consequences, and evaluation);
- an emphasis on competence as an overarching and holistic concept can be found in a third group of countries, such as Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, Hungary and the Netherlands. This approach emphasises the integrative nature of competence as an individual's ability to apply knowledge, skills, attitudes and other personal, social and/or methodological abilities – in a self-directed way, at work and during studies. The practical application of this perspective is reflected in the German qualifications framework, in which the term *Handlungskompetenz* (action competence) is understood as the 'readiness of the individuals to use knowledge, skills and personal, social, and methodological competences and conduct themselves in a considered and individually and socially responsible manner'.

The above analysis mainly focuses on the ‘horizontal dimension’ of learning outcomes descriptors, basically on how different dimensions of learning are captured and expressed. In the coming period, and reflecting the experiences gained through the EQF referencing process, increased attention will have to be paid to the ‘vertical dimension’ of these descriptors and their ability to distinguish between levels of qualifications and degrees of complexity characterising learning outcomes. This is closely linked to how progression in different learning domains has been captured by learning outcomes. Cedefop’s analysis of experiences from the EQF-referencing process points to the following important issues, directly relevant to the technical/conceptual design and the implementation of the frameworks:

- the information on how concrete qualifications and qualifications types are assigned to and placed at the NQF levels is often vague, missing or incomplete. Several reports lack a transparent presentation of which qualifications have actually been included in the framework. This lack of transparency (such as whether school leaving qualifications are included or not) weakens the role of the EQF as a tool for transparency;
- many countries refer exclusively to the legal basis for allocating qualifications to levels. While this is important information, outsiders need to understand how this legal basis is translated into actual levelling decisions. For the EQF to work, and for trust to develop, mutual understanding of the criteria and procedures for assigning qualification to a NQF level is needed. Very often it is not clear how the relationship between qualifications and NQF levels has been established and whether a particular methodology has been used. Evidence on how decisions were made is presented only in a few cases;
- the referencing reports demonstrate that two main approaches are used when assigning qualifications to levels. First, countries tend to include qualifications (developed prior to the NQF) as blocks (types) of qualifications. While some countries refer to extensive testing as a basis for this (for example Germany and Austria), most provide limited evidence on how this block levelling is done. A problem encountered when assigning blocks of qualifications is that individual qualifications can vary considerably in the level of learning outcomes. Second, countries are increasingly assigning individual qualifications to NQF levels, so the learning outcomes of each separate qualification are analysed and compared with the level descriptors of the NQFs. This approach is particularly relevant for new qualifications, as well as for the inclusion of private and external ones awarded outside formal education and training;
- countries base the assignment of qualifications (blocks as well as single qualifications) on a combination of technical (linguistic/conceptual) and social/political principles. Technical/linguistic matching is found in many reports and seems to be the core of the procedures for classifying qualifications in the NQF. This approach is easier in those cases where qualifications are sufficiently described in terms of learning outcomes or are based on occupational standards that specify the requirements to perform specific roles or tasks in the labour market. This technical/linguistic matching, however, is not fully possible: qualifications are frequently allocated to NQF levels based on stakeholder judgements of their social standing (such as importance of the qualification in the labour market, their traditional status, and position in society and among citizens). For example, in Austria, the currently discussed procedure for classifying qualifications in the NQF suggests not only to take learning outcomes of the qualification into account but also to include other information, which can be used as indicators for justifying the assignment (e.g. importance of the qualification in the labour market or results of graduate surveys, such as job positions of graduates).

The weakness observed in relation to the EQF referencing can be partly explained by the fact that NQFs are still developing and thus can only gradually be ‘filled’ with qualifications. It is clear, however, that a strengthening of the information related to criterion 4 is necessary and should be addressed in a second stage of the referencing process. A strengthening of criterion 4 will directly influence the ability of the EQF to act as a trusted instrument for comparing qualifications across Europe. Further

work, for example cooperating on the design of a common template for gathering and presenting information, seems necessary.

## Conditions for NQF implementation and impact

Several basic conditions have to be met for national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) to make an impact. Apart from the need to create a sufficiently strong formal basis (through laws, decrees and regulations), a successful shift to learning outcomes along with broad involvement of stakeholders seems to be most critical.

### NQFs and the shift to learning outcomes

The new generation of European NQFs are mainly connected through their emphasis on learning outcomes. Recent research shows that the principle of learning outcomes has been broadly accepted among European policy-makers and that the NQFs have contributed to this shift. This research demonstrates that the introduction of NQFs is the most important factor influencing policies in this area. While the approach was previously taken forward in a fragmented way in subsystems, evidence shows that the emergence of comprehensive frameworks has made it possible (at least partly) to approach the shift to learning outcomes in a more systematic and – to some extent – more consistent way. In countries such as Belgium, Croatia, Iceland, Lithuania, Norway and Poland the introduction of frameworks has led to the identification of areas where learning outcomes have not been previously applied or where these have been used in an inconsistent way even within one education sector. The Norwegian NQF pointed to the lack of learning-outcomes-based descriptions and standards for advanced vocational training (*Fagskole*), resulting in work to remedy this weakness.

The NQFs developed after 2005 differ from the first generation frameworks developed in England, South Africa and New Zealand. While differences in number of levels and coverage immediately catch the eye, the main difference lies in the interpretation and application of learning outcomes. The early frameworks used what may be described as a radical learning-outcomes-based approach. Inspired by the English system of national vocational qualifications (NVQs) introduced in the late 1980s, these frameworks tended to specify learning outcomes independently from curriculum and pedagogy and tried to define qualifications in isolation from delivery mode, learning approach and provider. The countries in question have moved partly away from this radical approach but much of the scepticism towards NQFs expressed in academic literature tends to reflect this early, radical version of learning-outcomes-based frameworks and ignore the way the new frameworks are defining and applying learning outcomes.

Countries in Europe have adopted a more pragmatic approach to learning outcomes. While the principle is seen as crucial for increasing transparency and comparability, there is general understanding that learning outcomes must be put into a wider context of education and training inputs to make sense. When placing existing qualifications into a new framework structure, the focus on learning outcomes is frequently combined with consideration of institutions and programme structures, accepting that mode and volume of learning varies and matters. The development of the German qualifications framework illustrates this combination of input- and outcome-based considerations.

What is important, and is well illustrated by the German process, is that the learning outcomes approach adds a new important element to the 'old picture', making it possible to take a fresh look at the ordering and valuing of qualifications. This pragmatic use of learning outcomes – combining it with a careful consideration of input elements – has been important for redefining the relationship between vocational and academic qualifications. Reviewing this relationship in terms of what a candidate is expected to know, be able to do or understand – instead of looking at the type of institutions – has challenged accustomed ways of valuing qualifications. Placing the German master

craftsman at the same level as the academic and professional bachelor is a good example. The same combination of input- and outcome-based approaches can be identified in most other countries.

While consideration of learning outcomes is critical for allocating qualifications to NQF levels, factors such as delivery mode and volume of learning activities, will inevitably play a role. The mix of these two main factors, outcomes and inputs, varies significantly between countries and subsystems. Raffe<sup>4</sup> distinguishes frameworks as follows:

- learning-outcomes-referenced frameworks;
- learning-outcomes-led frameworks.

This distinction can be understood in the following way:

<b>Outcomes-referenced frameworks</b>	<b>Outcomes-led frameworks</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• are seen as part of a strategy aiming for incremental change in qualifications systems;</li> <li>• see the shift to learning outcomes as a step towards informing and improving teaching, training and assessment;</li> <li>• aid communication and transparency across institutions, sectors and countries;</li> <li>• link to programmes and delivery modes but use learning outcomes to clarify expectations and increase accountability;</li> <li>• are seen as critical to dialogue between qualifications providers and users;</li> <li>• are education- and training-driven.</li> <li>• treat the learning outcomes principle as an instrument for transforming education and training systems;</li> <li>• have weak or no references to existing programmes, institutions and processes;</li> <li>• aim explicitly to break the links between input and outcomes by defining qualifications independently of providing institutions and mode of delivery;</li> <li>• shift power from providers of education and training to users of qualifications (employers, individuals);</li> <li>• promote a market for learning by encouraging new providers and the free choice of learners; flexibility is a main objective;</li> <li>• are labour-market-driven.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• treat the learning outcomes principle as an instrument for transforming education and training systems;</li> <li>• have weak or no references to existing programmes, institutions and processes;</li> <li>• aim explicitly to break the links between input and outcomes by defining qualifications independently of providing institutions and mode of delivery;</li> <li>• shift power from providers of education and training to users of qualifications (employers, individuals);</li> <li>• promote a market for learning by encouraging new providers and the free choice of learners; flexibility is a main objective;</li> <li>• are labour-market-driven.</li> </ul>

This dichotomy is helpful in drawing attention to different roles and functions of qualifications frameworks as exemplified by the distinction between communication, reforming and transformational frameworks. Most European comprehensive frameworks are predominantly placed within the outcomes-referenced category outlined above. In this sense they confirm the observation

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<sup>4</sup> (2011, pp. 87-104)

that the process of determining the level of a qualifications based on its outcomes needs to be supplemented by contextual information and benchmarks are required when cross-referencing different frameworks.

However, many frameworks contain elements of the 'outcomes-driven' model, influencing the overall mix between outcome and input factors. The influence of the outcomes-driven model is most visible in some of the subframeworks for professional qualifications developed since the 1990s, now forming an integrated part of comprehensive frameworks. The Estonian and Slovenian subframeworks of professional/occupational qualifications are typical cases where qualifications are strictly defined on the basis of occupational standards and can be acquired through different routes: there is no required or obligatory link to a specific programme or institution. Some of the objectives set for emerging national frameworks in Europe, such as increasing overall flexibility of qualifications systems, refer to principles inherent to the outcomes-driven typology. The same can be said of the focus on 'reclaiming power' from education and training providers by involving new stakeholders in designing and defining qualifications.

While it is difficult to find examples of purely outcomes-driven frameworks in Europe today, some of the principles of this model influence their orientation and their priorities. Outcomes-referenced frameworks have generally been more successful than outcomes-led frameworks; they are less ambitious and more focused on gradual, incremental change. Cedefop evidence indicates that, while this dichotomy is too simple for classifying European NQFs, it is helpful in identifying how countries tend to mix the principles from the outcomes-referenced and the outcomes-driven in the same comprehensive framework. During recent years, as implementation of frameworks has progressed, some NQFs have taken on a reforming role positioned between communication and transformation. Comprehensive NQFs, starting with a limited communication mandate, can be seen in several cases to extend and deepen their roles and functions. In contrast, we can observe that the English QCF is about to lose some of its regulatory powers, placing it closer to other European NQFs. These adjustments show that NQFs are dynamic tools and their functions and objectives may shift as they develop and are implemented also in line with short- and long-term policy agendas.

## Stakeholder involvement and commitment

Previous NQF reports (Cedefop, 2009; 2013) show that cross-sectoral working groups and task forces have played an important role during initial NQF design and development. Comprehensive frameworks have taken on the function of platforms for dialogue and cooperation and have helped to bring together stakeholders from different subsystems not commonly cooperating or speaking to each other. Countries signal that they want to continue and, if possible, institutionalise these processes. A key question now is whether this initial success can be turned into a permanent feature of the frameworks? While the initial development stage has been limited in time and scope, the long-term implementation of a framework will require a different and stronger commitment.

Establishment of permanent 'national qualifications councils' largely responds to this challenge. Countries such as Belgium (fr), Croatia, Hungary, Montenegro and Sweden have all set up, or stated the intention to set up, such bodies.

In several countries dialogue across education and training subsystems has been weak or, in some cases, even missing. The platforms provided by the comprehensive frameworks can potentially play an important role, helping to clarify barriers to transition and progression. The work of the national qualifications councils needs to be followed closely in the coming period. Their ability (and willingness) to intervene in education and training policies will largely decide whether NQFs will contribute to the objectives of lifelong learning and permeability.

While many countries have given priority to including as broad a group of education and training stakeholders as possible, the extent to which social partners and other labour market stakeholders are actively engaged is more varied. One group of countries, exemplified by Austria, Belgium, the

Czech Republic, Germany and Switzerland, see the link to the labour market as essential and as a precondition for future implementation. Social partners and other labour market stakeholders play an important role in these frameworks and are directly involved in their development and implementation. In these countries social partners are directly involved in the placing of qualifications and in continuous review of this levelling.

In contrast to the above group of countries, Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Poland and Romania have chosen approaches where labour market stakeholders play weaker and less integrated roles. In these countries the NQFs can be described as loosely linked to the labour market, and less oriented to the bridging of education and the world of work. It should be noted that these issues are being discussed in the countries mentioned and it is possible that a stronger link to the labour market may be introduced as the frameworks develop.

## Early impact of national qualifications frameworks

Important progress has been made in preparing the NQFs for full operational status: initial design and development is now mostly finished; a formal basis has been agreed in many countries; the involvement and commitment of stakeholders is progressing; and the shift to learning outcomes is underway. By the end of 2014 we can conclude that some of the most important conditions for the implementation of the NQFs had been met. This does not mean, however, that success is guaranteed. The impact of a qualifications framework depends on many factors, not always easy to identify and separate.

### NQFs and institutional reform

NQFs are contributing directly to institutional reform in some countries. Ireland, Malta, Portugal and Romania exemplify this through their decisions to merge existing and multiple qualification bodies into one, covering different types and levels of qualifications. A number of other countries have aired plans to merge qualifications authorities or to establish new institutions (a proposal for a national qualifications council has been suggested in Sweden). This shows that NQFs, even in cases where their main role is perceived as promoting transparency, can trigger institutional reform.

### NQFs and the bridging subsystems

Several countries see the NQF as tools for strengthening the links between education and training subsystems. This is considered to be essential for strengthening permeability and for reducing barriers to progression in education, training and learning. The new generation of European NQFs overwhelmingly consists of comprehensive frameworks, addressing all types of qualifications at all levels. This means that they, and their level descriptors, have to reflect a huge diversity of purposes, institutions, traditions and cultures. One of the fundamental challenges faced by comprehensive frameworks is to take into account the epistemological differences in knowledge and learning that exist in different parts of education and training.

Education and training in most countries is organised in separate and distinct tracks. This is especially so in the subsystems of general education, vocationally oriented education and training, and higher education: academically and professionally oriented higher education is sometimes organised as separate tracks, sometimes integrated. Framework developments have focused on links between general education and VET (for example, the introduction of bridging courses in Portugal and Slovenia) and the links between VET and higher education (exemplified by Norway and Scotland).

Experiences from 'first generation' frameworks underline the need to balance the overall implementation of the framework with developments in subsystems. The overarching framework in Scotland was built step-wise over more than two decades, combining implementation of the overarching framework with the gradual development of subframeworks. The Polish NQF (PQF) has

paid particular attention to this bridging role by defining level descriptors at (three) different levels of generality; for the overall national level; for each subsystem (general, VET and higher education); and for specific sectors. This approach acknowledges that each subsystem/sector must be fit for purpose and be able to reflect the specific needs and requirements of its stakeholders. The PQF insists, however, that these subsystems/sectors must develop consistently and share a common core; which in this case is provided by the level descriptors of the comprehensive, national framework. The PQF exemplifies a concrete effort to build conceptual bridges between the different subsystems.

The extent to which countries are actually using the NQFs as a tool to bridge subsystems and improve linkages between qualifications varies. As noted in previous reports<sup>5</sup> the following patterns can be observed:

- (a) countries are accommodating all subsystems in one framework, but some have introduced a clear distinction between levels 1 to 5 and levels 6 to 8; the latter are restricted to qualifications awarded by traditional higher education institutions (in line with the Bologna cycles). Visible in the Danish framework, the division can also be found in Bulgarian, Greek, Icelandic, Latvian and Romanian frameworks;
- (b) another group of countries, including Austria, Belgium (fl), Cyprus, Estonia, Slovenia and Turkey have introduced different 'strands' within the NQF, sometimes with different sets of level descriptors. In Austria a compromise was reached to divide levels 6 to 8 into parallel strands. One strand covers traditional higher education qualifications, the other vocationally/professionally oriented higher level qualifications awarded outside the 'Bologna cycles'. In some cases, similar descriptors can be used for the two strands (Belgium (fl), Cyprus or Slovenia). Parallel level descriptors can also be found at lower levels. In the Norwegian NQF, parallel descriptors are proposed at level 4 (distinguishing between the general and vocational strand of upper secondary education) and level 5 (capturing diversity of postsecondary VET programmes);
- (c) in Germany, one of the key principles of the NQF – that each qualification level can be accessible via various education and training pathways – is also reflected in broad and inclusive level descriptors.

Since 2012, work on higher education frameworks has been more closely integrated with that on comprehensive (EQF inspired) frameworks. Most EQF referencing reports are now presented as combined EQF/EHEA referencing/'self-certification' reports. This signals a willingness of countries to pursue comprehensive frameworks and to give priority to a stronger linking of subsystems. The strict distinction between VET and higher education is being challenged in several countries by introduction of VET qualifications at levels 5 to 8. As demonstrated by countries such as Austria, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland, these 'new' VET qualifications can be seen as a direct challenge to the higher education monopoly of the Bologna process.

The 2014 Swiss NQF explicitly stresses the point that VET qualifications operate at levels 2 to 8 and that traditional borderlines between education and training sectors need to be reviewed. The same observation was made in Cedefop's study on qualifications at level 5 of the EQF. These qualifications, it was pointed out, operate at the interface between education and training subsystems and are important for making progress within education and training and for getting access to the labour market.

Comprehensive European NQFs can mostly be described as 'loose' frameworks which share a common core but, at the same time, accept and respect existing diversity. This loose character is important for facilitating the bridging function of frameworks. If designed in too rigid and inflexible a manner, frameworks risk coming into conflict with the needs and requirements of subsystems and institutions.

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<sup>5</sup> Cedefop 2011, pp. 87-104

## Using the NQF to develop and renew qualifications

The introduction of comprehensive NQFs adds value by creating overview. The introduction of learning-outcomes-based levels, and the placing of qualifications according to these, makes it possible to identify gaps in the existing provision of qualifications. Cedefop's 2014 study shows that EQF level 5 (and the relevant NQF level(s)) has been used as a platform for the development of new qualifications in the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta and the United Kingdom.

Some of these new qualifications might be initial vocational qualifications, as is the case in Estonia. In other cases, as is currently being discussed in the Czech Republic, they may be higher education qualifications. Lithuania exemplifies a country where there are currently no qualifications linked to this level, although there had been qualifications of this level awarded in vocational colleges until 2004. The demand for qualifications at this level has now been documented and both VET and higher education are considering responses: initial VET schools seek to revise part of their qualifications and to upgrade them to the level 5. Colleges of higher vocational education, on their side, seek to introduce short study cycle programmes and to link these qualifications to level 5.

The example from the United Kingdom shows that countries with 'mature' frameworks are using the levels referenced to EQF level 5 for developing new qualifications. According to current discussions, additional qualifications might be linked to EQF level 5 in the future. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, apprenticeship is not considered a qualification: it is a package of components that testify competence. According to a recent review of apprenticeship, the Government seeks to review this and transform the arrangement into a single comprehensive qualification. This may lead to the award of new qualifications at EQF level 5. A higher apprenticeship is also being considered, potentially embracing qualifications offered at CQF levels that correspond to EQF levels 5 and 6.

## Opening up to non-formal and private sector

Most new NQFs have limited their coverage to formal qualifications awarded by national authorities or independent bodies accredited by these authorities. This means that frameworks predominantly cover initial qualifications offered by public education and training institutions. While there are exceptions to this general picture, most NQFs fail to cover qualifications resulting from education, training and learning taking place in the non-formal and private sectors; important qualifications linked to continuing and further education and training are left out of the picture.

Since 2011-12, attention has increasingly been paid to this. Some countries, such as Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, have started working on procedures for including non-formal and private sector qualifications and certificates: this approach is presented as a key feature of the new Swedish NQFs, meeting a need expressed by stakeholders in the labour market and in liberal/popular education and training. A key challenge faced by countries wanting to go beyond strictly regulated formal education and training is to ensure that the new qualifications in the framework can be trusted and meet basic quality requirements. The Dutch draft criteria illustrate how this can be approached. Several other countries (including Denmark, Latvia, Slovenia and Finland) have indicated that this opening up towards the non-formal sector will be addressed in a second stage of their framework developments.

Some established frameworks, for example in France and the United Kingdom, have put in place procedures allowing 'non-traditional' qualifications to be included in the frameworks. The Scottish framework now includes qualifications awarded by international companies (for example in the ICT sector) and other private providers. This is seen as a precondition for supporting lifelong learning and allowing learners to combine initial qualifications with those for continuing training and for specialisation. The French framework is also open to qualifications awarded by non-public bodies and institutions.

## Qualifications frameworks and recognition of qualification

The effect of the qualifications frameworks on learner and worker mobility is still uncertain; full implementation has yet to be achieved and referencing to the EQF has yet to be finalised. However, evidence gathered on (potential) role of qualifications frameworks in supporting worker and learner mobility shows great expectations of improved mobility arising from better recognition of qualifications. NQFs provide an important link to detailed information on qualifications, notably on learning outcomes but also on workload and the type of qualification in question. These are all essential elements required for recognition of qualifications. The potential role to be played by qualifications frameworks in this context is expressed in the new (2013) subsidiary text to the Lisbon recognition convention. This text underlines that frameworks should be used systematically as a source of information supporting decisions on recognition.

NQFs can be seen as 'gate-keeper' signalling whether a qualification fulfils minimum quality criteria/standards. Quality assurance underpinning qualifications frameworks is therefore essential to improve trust in qualifications and hence recognition of qualifications. Implementation of frameworks in Europe is also closely associated with the development of databases and registers of qualifications, which have been or are being developed in many countries. One of the key elements in the implementation of the EQF is the design of the EQF portal, which is already operational (18). In the *Compare qualifications frameworks* page, it is possible to see how national qualifications levels in countries that have already finalised their referencing process have been linked to the EQF. It shows level-to-level relationship between the frameworks and carries information on the typical qualifications of a given country at each level. For example, it shows that level 6 of the Irish 10-level framework relates to EQF level 5 and that the higher certificate and advanced certificate are two typical qualifications types at this level.

The EQF does not address recognition of qualification in the legal terms. It intends to '... improve transparency, comparability and portability ...' of qualifications. It is based on a recommendation, which is not binding, as distinguished from the directive on recognition of professional qualifications, for instance, which has recently been amended.

## NQFs and validation of non-formal and informal learning

The 2012 *Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning* sees the link to NQFs as important for the further implementation of validation arrangements across Europe. NQFs and validation are bound together through their shared emphasis on learning outcomes. The 2012 recommendation states, that 'the same or equivalent (learning-outcomes-based) standards to those used in formal education' should be used for validation of non-formal and informal learning. NQFs provide a common reference point for learning acquired inside as well as outside formal education and training.

The 2014 update of the European Inventory on validation confirms the priority given to the linking of frameworks and validation arrangements. A limited number of countries have already integrated validation into their NQF, and see this as an important feature of their overall national approach to qualifications.

This is the case in France (from 2002) where all registered qualifications in the NQF can be acquired either through formal education or through validation. Similar close links can be observed in countries such as Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and (parts of) the United Kingdom. For several countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Ireland, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Turkey) developing validation arrangements is embedded in the creation of NQFs. In some cases the NQF is seen as an opportunity to coordinate existing, possibly fragmented, arrangements; for others it is a question of developing validation practically from scratch.

A key condition for linking NQFs and validation is use of the same or equivalent learning-outcomes-based standards. The 2014 inventory demonstrates that most countries now use the same/equivalent standards for validation as for formal education (Austria, Belgium (fl), Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland,

France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK-England, UK-Scotland and UK-Wales). The use of similar standards does not always, however, lead to the same qualification. In the French-speaking community of Belgium, validation leads to the award of a skills certificate (*titre de compétence*) which is not equivalent to VET degrees, although it uses the same agreed standards developed by the French-speaking service for jobs and qualifications (*service francophone des métiers et des qualifications*). In Spain, the *certificados de profesionalidad* use the same standards as VET qualifications but certificates are not the same and the individual needs to go through an extra step if s/he wants these certificates to grant exemptions in the formal VET system. There is still some resistance to opening up formal qualifications to be acquired through validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The inventory shows, however, that progress has been made in allowing for exemptions from part(s) of courses. In 2010, 15 countries declared such exemptions, increasing to 23 countries in 2014. This corresponds with an increasing number of universities allowing individuals access on the basis of validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Quality assurance is another aspect crucial to an adequate link between NQFs and validation. Few countries have established targeted quality assurance arrangements for validation (Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom); others seek instead to build on the general mechanisms already in place for the education system and the NQF (Belgium (fl), Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary, Ireland, Austria, Finland for further education and higher education, Italy, Iceland, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Slovakia, Switzerland, the United Kingdom). This sends the important signal that validation is subject to the same quality requirements as any other assessment and certification process. The link to the NQF allows validation to become an integrated and normal path to qualifications.

## Conclusions

A frequently repeated criticism of European NQFs is that they are 'empty frameworks' without a link to 'real' qualifications. While this still is true in a few countries, for example Austria, Finland and the French-speaking community of Belgium (due to lack of formal agreement and adoption of the frameworks), most NQFs are now linked to actual qualifications. The gradual 'filling' of frameworks with qualifications demonstrates that NQFs are becoming a reality and can start to make a difference. The approach of the Flemish-speaking community of Belgium and Hungary (to mention just two examples) to aligning single qualifications (as opposed to 'blocks' of qualifications) to their frameworks signals that the learning outcomes principle is taken seriously and is starting directly to impact the way qualifications are levelled and valued in different countries. The 2014 analysis shows that NQFs are starting to make impact in the countries where they are being implemented. This modest start tells us two things:

- NQF developments and implementation take time and need to be seen as a long-term and iterative process, where existing education and training systems and the frameworks are gradually and progressively aligned with each other; common understanding of concepts and deeper cultural change are developed;
- NQF developments are as much about facilitating participation and commitment of stakeholders as they are about introducing technical and conceptual solutions.

### **A New Qualifications Framework (England, North-Ireland, Wales)**

In December 2014, following a consultation, we announced that we would withdraw the Qualifications Credit Framework (QCF). The QCF contained rules that many vocational qualifications awarded in England and Northern Ireland have been designed to meet. These qualifications are unitised and credit-bearing. When we withdraw these rules awarding organisations will have greater freedom to design their qualifications so they meet users' needs. Awarding organisations will have to comply with the General Conditions of Recognition (the General Conditions), as they do now, but the QCF rules will no longer exist in addition.

Among other things, the QCF rules require awarding organisations to adopt a consistent approach to describing the level of their qualifications. In this consultation we set out our proposals for new Conditions and guidance that will introduce similar requirements about the way the level of a qualification is described once the QCF rules are withdrawn.

During 2014 we also consulted on proposals arising from our statutory obligations and those on awarding organisations under the Raising the Participation Age (RPA) policy. We proposed that awarding organisations offering qualifications which were relevant for RPA purposes should allocate a guided learning hours value to those qualifications. We took that opportunity to propose additional ways of describing a qualification's size which we considered would be useful for students, teachers and other users of qualifications.

Following on from our consideration of responses to that consultation, we set out below the new Conditions and guidance that we propose to introduce to require all qualifications to have a measure of size (Total Qualification Time – TQT).

Taken together, the above proposals will enable us to introduce a new descriptive qualifications framework, the key requirements of which will be that the size and the level of all regulated qualifications are described in a consistent way.

We also set out the new Conditions and guidance that will apply if awarding organisations choose to assign credit to their qualifications, or components of qualifications, and/or recognise learners' prior learning (including where their qualifications accept credit awarded by another awarding organisation), and on guidance on qualification titles.