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QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS FOR LIFELONG LEARNING CONQUERING THE WORLD?¹

Abstract. The paper reveals the international prospects of developing and spreading the qualifications frameworks across the globe. It introduces the key terms and concepts related to the given issue, and examines both the benefits and challenges of qualifications frameworks implementation. The author looks into the origins and causes of the worldwide interest in qualifications framework application, and gives the overview of related recent publications and their conclusions to reinforce the provided argumentation.

Keywords: qualifications framework, learning outcomes, European qualifications framework.

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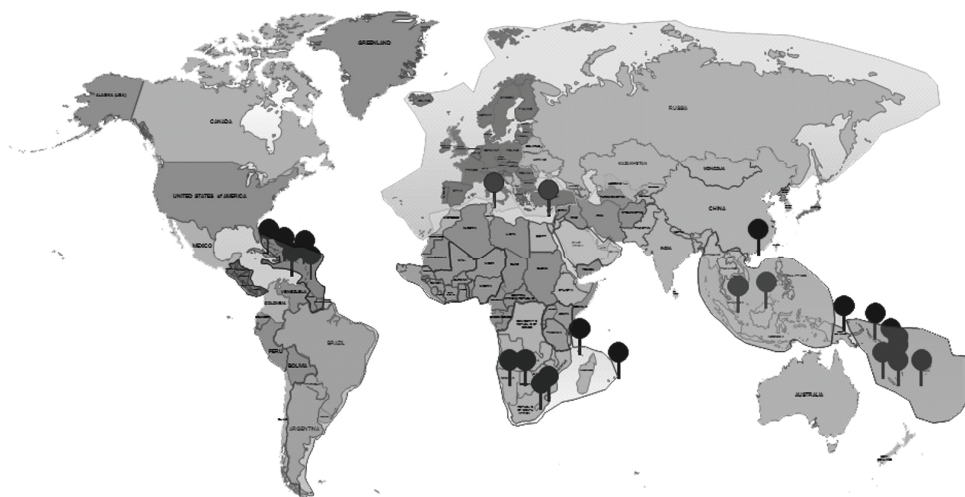
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РАМКИ КВАЛИФИКАЦИЙ ДЛЯ ОБУЧЕНИЯ В ТЕЧЕНИЕ ВСЕЙ ЖИЗНИ ЗАВОЕВЫВАЮТ МИР?

Аннотация. В статье рассмотрены международные подходы к разработке и распространению рамок квалификаций в мире. Дается обзор базовых терминов и понятий в исследуемой области. Проанализированы как преимущества использования рамок квалификаций, так и связанные с ними вызовы. Представлены причины, вызвавшие повсеместный интерес к рамкам квалификаций. Статья содержит указания на последние актуальные публикации по тематике рамок квалификаций и содержащиеся там выводы, что усиливает аргументацию автора.

Ключевые слова: рамки квалификаций, результаты обучения, Европейская рамка квалификаций.

Qualifications frameworks have grown rapidly recently. Before the turn of the century qualifications frameworks could only be found in a handful of countries. Now 155 countries and territories are developing qualifications frameworks. What is the story behind this? What are the countries involved and how will qualifications frameworks change education and training systems? These are the questions that I would like to answer in this short article.



Qualifications frameworks are classification tools for qualifications. They make it possible to compare and link qualifications. Most qualifications frameworks nowadays contain level descriptors that are reference levels for qualifications expressed as learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are statements that describe what a learner is expected to be able to do or to know and understand at the end of a learning process. They indicate different levels of complexity. The lowest levels usually describe learning outcomes for basic literacy and numeracy skills and for being able to carry out routine assignments under supervision. The highest level usually describes the ability to produce know-knowledge in a certain field, to lead and to basically move into new areas, solving highly complex problems.

Because qualifications frameworks are meant to make qualifications comparable they also can help to create new linkages between them. With the focus on qualifications, learning and on achievement, rather than on programmes, teaching, and subjects, it becomes possible to compare the outcomes of very different learning pathways, making formal education less important, and allowing for the recognition of non-formal and even informal learning.

This emphasis on achievement is not unique to education and training systems, but can be found in many areas of society and the economy, moving e.g. to objective based budgeting. The following statement from the Public Service Agreements in the UK exemplifies that well: In the past, the debate around the public services centered just on how much governments were investing – both in terms of money, and in terms of other resource ‘inputs’, including the number of doctors, nurses, teachers and police officers. Since the introduction of Public Service Agreements, the debate has shifted. Now we can measure how effectively resources are being used and whether services are delivering the outcomes that will really make a difference to people’s lives [3, p. 7].

Although qualifications frameworks share communalities they are often very different in purpose, design and particularly in their institutional set-up. Moreover, existing frameworks often change parameters and implementation arrangements.

The map above is trying to illustrate the on-going international developments. It is based mainly on desk research, but brings together as well feedback and contacts with hundreds of experts from

around the globe. The countries in yellow are either planning, developing or implementing qualifications frameworks.

On the map the 36 countries that are currently part of the EQF process are in Orange. These are 28 EU member states, Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein and Switzerland, and Turkey, Montenegro, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia.

The biggest geographical area is covered by the Qualifications Framework for the European Area of Higher Education, which includes all the countries that are active in the EQF plus Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation, The Holy See, and Ukraine. Kosovo and Belarus are formally outside these processes but are advancing in implementing and developing qualifications frameworks that are fully compatible with the Qualifications Framework for Higher Education and the EQF for lifelong learning.

The three cycle Qualifications Framework for Higher Education was announced by the Ministers of Education of the countries that are involved in the Bologna Process at the Bergen meeting in 2005. The Qualifications Framework for Higher Education aims at establishing compatible three cycle systems across the countries. The first cycle is often referred to as the Bachelor cycle, the second cycle as the Masters cycle and the third cycle as the Doctoral cycle, but these names vary across countries. Many countries also have short cycle higher education degrees that are part of the first cycle. Cycle descriptors exist that describe the qualifications levels and credit values for the main qualifications and short cycle. Outcomes are described as expectations at the end of these cycles, meaning that not all of the learning is expected to be in line with these learning outcome descriptors.

The same applies to EQF that promotes best fit of qualifications through their national systems against eight levels. But in the EQF there is the implicit understanding that most of the learning is at least in accordance with the level descriptors. The EQF was already under development at the time that the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area was created, but formal adoption of the EQF only happened in April 2008 through a Recommendation of the European Parliament and the European Council [4].

The EQF Recommendation invited the countries to reference their qualification systems or framework to the eight EQF levels by

2010. The EQF level would then in turn appear on national qualification from 2012 onwards. Although these tight deadlines have not been achieved yet, progress in Europe has been enormous. All countries decided to develop a qualifications framework in order to reference to the EQF. To date more than 20 countries have referenced. The mentioning of the EQF level on the certificate is still delayed but will soon start as well. An EQF portal brings the systems of the countries that have referenced to the EQF together in a common platform that allows the comparison of systems and the most important qualifications. In the meantime the self-certification processes that countries undertake to prove that their HE qualifications are compatible to the Qualifications Framework of the European Area for Higher Education, have integrated progressively with the referencing of the EQF. The European Commission is launching a new initiative for a European Area of Skills and Qualifications that should bring these developments even closer.

Outside Europe, these developments are closely observed. There are many other regional or transnational qualifications framework developments. The Caribbean Qualifications Framework is a TVET framework, originally inspired by the UK NVQ (National Vocational Qualifications) system that is now becoming also becoming a lifelong learning framework. It includes many Caribbean countries and has been designed to promote mobility between the island states. Unlike the EQF it foresees in developing commonly used Caribbean Qualifications.

Other more recent initiatives in the Americas are two regional higher education qualifications frameworks in Central America and the Mercosur countries (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Venezuela, Bolivia – countries that signed the economic and political agreement). The USA is not coloured on this map, although there is a private initiative for a Degree Qualifications Profile (a higher education qualifications framework) that is gradually gaining terrain as a tool for quality assurance (QA). A first review of this framework is underway. All these American initiatives except for the Caribbean Framework are supported by EU projects.

In Africa the South African development Community Regional Qualifications Framework is the most advanced initiative, but the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) and EAC (East African Community) countries in Eastern Africa are also working on frameworks. Not included in the map: ETF has also launched an initiative for a re-

gional qualifications project involving countries on all sides of the Mediterranean. This is linked as well with a French initiative for a Qualifications Framework for the Union of the Mediterranean.

In the Middle East the Gulf Cooperation Community countries are discussing a regional Qualifications Framework to support migration between, to and from the Gulf countries. The ASEAN countries in South East Asia are advancing with developing a ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework. In the Southern Pacific there is the Pacific Register of Qualifications and Standards that also has links to the NQFs of Australia and New Zealand.

Finally the blue balloons are from the members of the Transnational Qualifications Framework of the Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth (which is more than a HE framework).

Here is the full list of countries that we have identified: Albania; Angola; Andorra; Antigua & Barbuda; Argentina; Armenia; Australia; Austria; Azerbaijan; Bahrain; Bangladesh; Barbados; Brazil; Belarus; Belgium; Benin; Belize; Bhutan; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Botswana; Brazil; Brunei Darussalam; Bulgaria; Burkina Faso; Burundi, Cabo Verde; Cambodia; Canada; Chile; Colombia; Costa Rica; Côte d'Ivoire; Croatia; Cyprus (and Northern Part of Cyprus); Czech Republic; Denmark; Dominica; Egypt; El Salvador; Eritrea; Estonia; Ethiopia; Finland; France; Georgia; Germany; Ghana; Greece; Grenada; Guinée; Guinée Bissau; Guyana; Haiti; Hong Kong; Hungary; Honduras; Iceland; India; Indonesia; Ireland; Israel; Italy; Jamaica; Jordan; Kazakhstan; Kenya; Kiribati; Korea; Kosovo; Kuwait; Kyrgyzstan; Lao People's Democratic Republic; Latvia; Lebanon; Lesotho; Liechtenstein; Liberia; Lithuania; Luxembourg; Madagascar; Malawi; Malaysia; Maldives; Mali; Malta; Mauritius; Mexico; Montenegro; Montserrat; Palestine; Morocco; Mozambique; Myanmar; Namibia; Netherlands; Nepal; New Zealand; Nicaragua; Niger; Nigeria; Norway; Oman; Pakistan; Palestine; Panama; Papua New Guinea; Peoples Republic of China; Philippines; Paraguay; Poland; Portugal; Republic of Moldova; Romania; Russian Federation; Rwanda; Saint Lucia; Samoa; Serbia; Senegal; Seychelles; Sierra Leone; Singapore; Slovak Republic; Slovenia; Somalia (Somaliland); South Africa; Spain; St. Kitts & Nevis; St. Lucia; St. Vincent and the Grenadines; Suriname; Swaziland; Sweden; Switzerland; Tajikistan; Thailand; The Bahamas; The Comoros; the Democratic Republic of Congo; The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; The Gambia; The Holy See, Timor-Leste;

Togolese Republic; Tonga; Trinidad & Tobago; Tunisia; Turkey; Tuvalu and Vanuatu; Ukraine; United Arab Emirates; United Kingdom; United Republic of Tanzania; Uruguay; Viet Nam; Zambia; Zimbabwe.

As you can see the development of national qualifications frameworks is mainly driven by regional or transnational qualifications framework developments. Sometimes, these focus only on Higher Education, sometimes on VET, but increasingly on lifelong learning.

The number of countries that join this development is still growing and even Michael Young who has been very skeptical about NQFs writes in the NORRAG¹ NEWS article «Mobility and transparency: Some cautionary thoughts on Qualifications Frameworks» that within twenty years virtually all countries will have NQFs and there will be a growing number of regional frameworks [7, p. 87].

This brings us to the **why** of these developments. Ron Tuck in his excellent Introductory Guide to National Qualifications Frameworks mentions that the drivers for developing frameworks have changed and the international drivers for NQFs have become stronger over time as is reflected in the diagram below describing first, second and third generation frameworks [6].

1 st GENERATION QFs	2 nd GENERATION QFs	3 rd GENERATION QFs
Developed from national perceptions, mainly determined by internal drivers, and often using experimental approaches	Have tried to learn from 1 st generation experiences, in terms of design and processes. Seeking more communication with other NQFs on a bilateral basis, but influence of external drivers is limited	Internal drivers remain important, but external drivers have a significant impact on the technical design of frameworks and the QA arrangements

It seems that countries internationally are adopting the idea of NQFs because others are doing it, and because it allows them to link their qualifications systems to the others.

The ILO study «The implementation and impact of National Qualifications Frameworks: Report of a study in 16 countries»^{HYPERLINK} «http://www.ilo.org/skills/projects/WCMS_126589/lang-en/index.htm» in which the European Training Foundation (ETF) was a partner shows

¹ NORRAG – Network for international policies and cooperation in education and training.

the difficulties of demonstrating the impact of NQFs and shows that the development and implementation of NQFs take a very long time [1]. ETF was not happy with the conclusions that the study made that the lack of evidence from impact should be interpreted as negative evidence. We actually see a lot of impact on VET reform processes about which more later.

In 2010 ETF studied the development of other regional and transnational frameworks in the world and compared them to the EQF in the report «Transnational Qualifications Frameworks» published on our website. One of the conclusions of the report was that although harmonization is not an explicit purpose of transnational qualifications frameworks, with some exceptions, it appears inevitable that some form of convergence will take place over time [5].

Harmonization is a term that you will not find easily in any document on education and training policies in Europe, with the exception of the regulated professions. But outside the EU context the attempts to promote a convergence of education and training systems is much stronger. Especially small countries see clear benefits in sharing common qualifications, curricula, quality assurance models and modes of delivery. This can be seen in both the Caribbean Qualifications Framework as well as in the Transnational Qualifications Framework for the Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth and the Pacific Qualifications Register. In Africa moreover there are huge differences between countries and a general need to develop all education systems against the background that by 2050 the continent will have doubled its population.

Global developments – More migration?

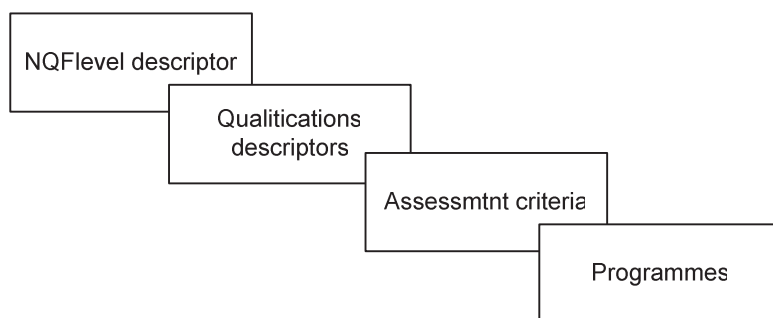
	World		Asia		Africa		Europe	
2010								
population 0-14	1,842,237	27	1,060,076	25	424,072	41	114,050	15
population 15-64	4,543,439	66	2,821,198	68	571,630	55	505,284	68
population >65	530,507	8	284,166	7	35,381	3	120,975	16
total	6,916,183		4,165,440		1,031,083		740,309	
share world population	100		60		15		11	
2050								
population 0-14	2,034,447	21	925,669	18	771,113	32	109,036	15
population 15-64	6,026,928	63	3,337,993	65	1,481,951	62	409,378	58
population >65	1,489,570	16	901,000	17	140,111	6	190,653	27
total	9,550,945		5,164,662		2,393,175		709,067	
share world population	100		54		25		7	
change 2050/2010%		38		24		132		-4

In order to overcome the differences between the countries, to promote access and quality development qualifications frameworks are seen as a reforming and harmonizing tool. But with the huge differences existing between the countries harmonization is more to be understood here as a process of moving together towards developing their own education systems.

This brings us to the question whether qualifications frameworks are tools for managing or for diminishing diversity? I have borrowed the term tools for managing diversity from Sjur Bergan from the Council of Europe and it is an excellent way of describing the translation and communication functions of NQFs [2]. In my view, this does not imply making diversity more manageable ...by reducing some of the complexity. However, the massive move towards the Bachelor and Master degree structures do show a degree of harmonization in higher education.

Learning outcomes as a common language?

Is this also true for VET? The EQF has had a strong impact on the language used to describe learning outcomes between countries. While there are still very different perceptions of competence between European countries and between sub-sectors of the education systems, academic schools and economic sectors there seems to be some evidence of a global shift towards learning outcomes. This runs right across from levels to education programmes as reflected in the diagramme below.



At least in theory the concepts of learning outcomes are getting more similar. Many EU countries are adopting the EQF terminology and levels in their NQFs. Hence one would expect as well that these influences will filter down toward the qualifications, the assessment approaches and the delivery. In spite of the existing diversity of VET systems with their own interpretations of what competence is and

what a qualification is, there seems to be a clear trend towards a common rhetoric and language, supporting the claim of convergence.

But reality is always much more complex than qualifications framework grids show. Although we may instinctively associate learning outcomes with standards, and therefore with clear measurable statements, learning outcomes are not always so easy to pin down. There is diversity in the use of learning outcomes at different levels. Sometimes these are linked to political traditions and historic influences. But also the «social» processes behind the development and use of learning outcomes that involve many different stakeholders produce a variety of practices. In essence there has to be space for teachers and trainers to interpret and apply learning outcomes in teaching and assessment in different ways. Current experience shows that learning outcomes are widely used, but also that there is still no clear link between curriculum innovation and assessment. It is important to find the right balance between stakeholders and interests in the definition and use of learning outcomes, considering the diversity of working environments, top down and bottom up initiatives, and clarity on how they can be used for steering, for empowering autonomy of providers and how they can be monitored.

There is clearly a very concrete impact from learning outcomes on policies, qualifications, assessment practices, stakeholder involvement, quality assurance, curriculum innovation and assessment. But it is complex. Therefore it seems that learners and employers are more likely to be interested in qualifications than in the learning outcomes in the qualifications. It is like buying a car. The technology under the bonnet is making a huge difference in performance, but few drivers really want to know about that. They just want better performance.

Conclusions

Qualifications Frameworks have become a truly global phenomenon. However, this does not mean that national qualifications and education systems are threatened with extinction. In theory NQFs clearly lead to more convergence, but in practice we cannot find much evidence for this and the diversity of frameworks is only increasing with more countries starting implementation. In the end we need to understand better what makes NQFs fit for purpose so that they can really enable individuals to do more with their qualification in education and on the labour market, at home or abroad.

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THE FINNISH EDUCATION AND QUALIFICATIONS SYSTEMS (ФИНСКАЯ СИСТЕМА ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ И СИСТЕМЫ КВАЛИФИКАЦИЙ)¹

Abstract. The paper describes the Finnish perspective on introducing the national qualifications framework based on learning outcomes and competences. The issue is analyzed in a broader context of successful history of Finnish education and realization of lifelong training strategy. The author

¹ Статья печатается в авторской редакции.