

# МЕЖДУНАРОДНОЕ СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВО В ИНТЕРЕСАХ ИНТЕРНАЦИОНАЛИЗАЦИИ ВЫСШЕГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ

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## QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS LEADING TO REFORMS IN EAST EUROPEAN EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** The paper examines the evolution of qualifications frameworks across Europe. Five years ago, it was not clear if the discussions on national qualification frameworks (NQF) in Eastern Europe would lead to the new standards and qualifications development, or initiate the reforms in education and training. Now, there is evidence of more countries using the NQFs to promote a dialogue between the public and private sectors on the expected outcomes of educational process. In some countries, the private sector has even taken the lead in the NQF discussions, being increasingly involved in their implementation. This is a fundamentally new paradigm in education policies and a cornerstone of the demand driven education and training. Each country is following its own patterns while moving to the comparable results. However, this is just the initial stage of NQF implementation. The author regards learning by doing and the local expertise expansion as the key challenges of the coming years. Although the reforms take time, they increasingly tend to become a shared public and private responsibility.

**Keywords:** qualification framework, paradigm, standards.

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## ВЛИЯНИЕ РАМОК КВАЛИФИКАЦИЙ НА РЕФОРМИРОВАНИЕ ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ В ВОСТОЧНОЙ ЕВРОПЕ

**Аннотация.** В статье показана эволюция рамок квалификаций в Восточной Европе. Пять лет назад было неясно, приведут ли дискуссии по поводу необходимости создания национальных рамок квалификаций (НРК) в Восточной Европе к ускоренной разработке стандартов и квалификаций и инициирует ли это процесс реформ в сфере образования и профессионального обучения. Как показала практика, сейчас все страны стараются использовать НРК для развития между государственным и частным секторами диалога о требованиях к качеству подготовки специалистов. В ряде стран в обсуждении вопросов НРК и их реализации инициатива принадлежит именно частному сектору. Это принципиально новая парадигма образовательной политики, которая является краеугольным камнем для развития системы профессиональной подготовки, ориентированной на спрос на рынке труда. Несмотря на то, что во многих странах внедрение НРК находится на начальном этапе и используются собственные ее модели, достигнутые результаты вполне сопоставимы. На ближайшие годы центральная задача заключается в совершенствовании этого процесса исходя из накопленного практического опыта. Реформы в сфере образования не происходят быстро, но вселяет оптимизм, что они все больше становятся совместной ответственностью государственного и частного секторов.

**Ключевые слова:** рамка квалификаций, парадигма, стандарты.

### **Qualification Frameworks move from myth to strategic approach**

From the very start the presentation of the European Qualification Framework (EQF) has triggered debates in Eastern Europe for the development of National Qualification Frameworks (NQF). All countries were attracted by the idea to be able to link NQFs to the EQF. Not only in this region the NQFs were introduced, there are nowadays 155 countries in the world developing their NQF [3].

In one of the first overarching publications 'Developing Qualification Frameworks in EU Partner Countries' in the EU Enlargement region, Neighborhood region and Central Asia, which was drafted in 2009, the motives for the popularity of NQFs were questioned [1]. The first myth was that establishing an NQF will lead to the meeting the

European standards or to recognition of the qualifications throughout Europe and the second one that it will automatically lead to an increase in the quality of education. In the same chapter it was argued that countries could choose for a quick fix and produce en masse standards and qualifications on paper or to consider them as outcomes of an intensive process of dialogue between public and private sectors that would serve education reforms.

Five years later we can conclude that all countries have invested in the design of their NQF, its legislation, the methodologies for the development of standards and qualifications and in structures. If we look at the formulation of the NQF legislation or at concept papers, we see mostly similar objectives presented. The most frequent objective is the transferability of skills and the vertical mobility within the lifelong learning systems [6]. Linking qualifications closer to the needs of the labor market is also a major driver. Aligning national qualifications to European qualifications is more specifically included by Armenia and Azerbaijan. Informing the wider public is an objective of the Georgian and Ukrainian NQFs [1].

All countries have used NQF as a driver for education reforms. They each have followed their own approach. In general, one can distinguish the top-down legislative approach and the bottom-up process approaches. The top-down approach is followed in most countries. The NQF legislation is the starting point and sets out the main construct of the NQF. The Georgian NQF law of December 2010 has used the existing education structure of general primary and secondary education, vocational education and training and higher education as starting point. It has identified the 8 levels of the framework and the required descriptors at the different levels. A key element is the introduction of learning outcomes. The law includes the list of professions and describes the conditions for quality assurance new programmes by the National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) [1].

In Ukraine the Cabinet of Ministers adopted resolution n°1341 on the approval of the NQF in November 2011. It has identified a 10 level framework with additional levels at the beginning and a post-doctoral level at the end. A working group has elaborated the resolution on the NQF concept. Elements of the NQF have been in-

cluded in the Law on Professional Development of Employees and in the Higher Education Law, which both still await final adoption. The first law gives a role to social partners in the skills needs analysis and introduces the concept of validation of non-formal and informal learning [1].

Armenia adopted by Decree N°332-N the Armenian Qualification Framework in March 2011. It has created 8 levels that coincide with the EQF levels. Also the EQF descriptors of knowledge, skills and competences are used. In Azerbaijan a draft Decree on NQF has been prepared, which identifies 8 levels. The EQF descriptors have been adapted to knowledge and understanding, skills and autonomy and responsibility. In April 2013 «*The Comprehensive Plan for Development of the National Qualifications System of Republic of Belarus for 2013–2015*» was adopted by the Deputy Prime Minister to give framework and guidelines for the development of the NQF system in VET in Belarus [1]. The follow-up process involves several phases and outputs within the frame of the next two years, such as the development of NQF, establishment of pilot Sector Skills Councils, development of occupational and qualification standards and system of certification (recognition of non-formal and informal learning). In 2015 this work should lead to clear recommendations for establishing a Belorussian Qualification framework to the Cabinet of Ministers.

The Republic of Moldova has followed more a bottom-up approach. Pioneering work of two sector committees in agriculture and construction on developing occupational standards for a few occupations has led to the formal government adoption of a methodology for occupational standards in 2011. The social partners played a crucial role in these committees. Since 2011 four more sector committees have been set up by the government and social partners. The occupational standards will form the basis for the qualifications. A common methodology for the qualifications is now under discussion. This institutional and methodological work has created the conditions for initiating the discussion on a Moldovan Qualification Framework. The Ministry of Education has set up a national working group to develop the VET dimension of the NQF, which together with the Higher Education framework should be turned into an overarching Moldovan Qualification Framework [1].

One approach is not per definition better than the other. Eastern European traditions often require that legislation is the starting point for action. Georgia has quickly developed its legislation in order to speed up its implementation. Work in action will lead to adaptations to the legislative and institutional frameworks. In Ukraine and Azerbaijan the legislative process takes longer due to a longer consultation process between ministries and social partners and legislative process.

The crucial debate in the countries is who will steer the NQF process and who will be responsible for what. The link with the Higher Education framework and the earlier start of the discussions in the Bologna process would suggest a lead from the Ministry of Education. The crucial role of labor market demand and the occupational standards would argue for the Ministry of Labor. And what about the social partners? In particular, in the Russian Federation and Ukraine the employers are a key driver for the NQF.

With the absence of a Ministry of Labor for many years the discussion was relatively easy in Georgia, where the lead is with the Ministry of Education. In Azerbaijan the responsibilities have been split. The Work Force Development Agency, which is still to be established, and is supposed to function under the Ministry of Labor, will be responsible for labor market analyses and for occupational standards. The Ministry of Education is responsible for the (register of) qualifications, quality assurance and assessments. In Ukraine the NQF Commission with representatives from several ministries and social partners has suggested a leading role for the Ministry of Education. In Armenia and the Republic of Moldova the Ministry of Education is the coordinating body following their engagement in the Bologna process and the intended integration of the Higher Education framework into an overarching NQF. In the Russian Federation the employers have an institutionalized role through the National Qualifications Development Agency. The Federal Institute for Educational Development (FIRO) of the Ministry of Education has made a first NQF draft, while the Ministry of Labor is in charge of developing occupational standards and has adopted its own classification of qualifications. The Agency for Strategic Initiatives now has the task to bring coherence between the many NQF initiatives. In Belarus it is still undecided who should lead the process.

It is clear that all countries have a clear idea what are the expectations of the NQF. They see it as an opportunity to engage the demand side for education in the process and to use the NQF as a tool for VET reform. The first «battles» have been fought in the design phase, but they have made stakeholders' points of view explicit and have contributed to the growing awareness of the relevance and directions of the NQF. Each country is following its own way. Both top-down and bottom-up approaches will in the end lead to similar constructions of NQF. But how far are the countries in the implementation and what are the key challenges?

### **From the NQF design to implementation**

The implementation of the NQF is a complicated and long, if not a never ending process of learning by doing. What are the countries doing on the development of occupational and qualifications? How is the issue of quality assurance and certification envisaged? How will the qualifications impact on the curriculum development and the teaching and learning process? Which institutional infrastructure is planned supporting the NQF?

In most cases the starting point for developing NQFs are the occupational standards, which are trying to capture what people should be able to do in a specific occupation [3]. Based on an analysis of employment trends and skills needs the relevant occupations are selected. The most common methodologies used are the Developing A Curriculum (DACUM) and the functional analysis. DACUM brings together people who perform the job or occupation and discuss the tasks and competences needed for the job. The functional analysis looks broader at the occupation within a sector and analyses purpose, key functions and requirements of the occupation. Both methodologies are supposed to lead to competency-based standards. DACUM has been used in the Republic of Moldova and initially also in Azerbaijan, where the World Bank supported the development of 200 occupations, while the functional analysis was done in the Russian Federation, Georgia and in a later phase in Azerbaijan. In Georgia 247 occupational standards were created, Ukraine and the Russian Federation have planned 1000 and 800 occupations, respectively, for the coming couple of years, while the Republic of Moldova has identi-

fied 340 occupations for which 90 standards will be developed for secondary education. The differences reflect not so much the size of the labor market, but more how broad or narrow the occupations are defined. The analysis of related occupations often shows that several tasks performed in different occupations are quite similar. There are also generic skills that are similar for many occupations. In the EU there is a tendency to reduce the number of occupations, by bringing several together in a broader formulated occupation [5].

An important element is who have been involved in the development of the occupational standards and who verifies and approves them. It is obvious that people who perform the actual jobs are key players. Sector representatives from employers and employees side have overview of the relations between occupations and about sector skills perspectives [4]. Methodological experts are vital for bringing opinions to structured occupational standards. Many countries have used ad hoc structures for occupational standards, creating groups for certain occupations and dissolving them after the standards were written down. The Republic of Moldova has established tripartite sector committees for developing the occupational standards. These committees in agriculture and construction have piloted from 2008 a few occupational standards, which developed into a common agreed methodology for occupational standards that was adopted by the Prime Minister in 2011. The standards are to be validated by the sector committees and formally approved by the Ministry of Labor.

Once the occupational standards are there, the question is how to use them for educational purposes. Georgia already had included elements of educational standards into the occupational standards and expects that schools would develop new educational curricula directly from the occupational standards. Most other countries have introduced «a bridge» from occupational standards to educational standards or qualifications. This normally is not a direct translation from occupational requirements to educational needs, because qualifications have a broader purpose than just performing one job. Therefore it is important that the format of occupational standards should anticipate its use for qualifications.

The key challenge for qualifications is to shift from input based requirements of curricula to the introduction of the learning out-

comes. It is less relevant to describe what a student needs to do and learn, than to identify what the student should know and be able to do at the end of the educational programme. Learning outcomes are to be formulated as knowledge, skills and competences. The learning outcomes are to be formulated independently from the curriculum or teaching methodology. This would make them relevant for the assessment of students or workers who have developed their skills and competences through formal, non-formal or informal learning, through studying, work or life experience in different phases of the life.

The countries in Eastern Europe are gradually shifting to the use of learning outcomes. In Armenia national curricula should formulate learning outcomes, and competency-based qualifications in initial VET are under development. Georgia has included learning outcomes explicitly in the legislation. They are now systematically introduced in the occupational standards and in the new curricula, although schools find the learning outcomes too general for their use. The Republic of Moldova has introduced learning outcomes in higher education. At the moment a concept for learning outcomes-based qualifications is under discussion for the lower qualification levels and 75 qualifications are expected by 2016. The Russian Federation has already since 2007 been introducing learning outcomes first in primary and secondary education and later on also in VET and higher education. In Ukraine learning outcomes have been introduced in pilot qualifications.

Also, for the qualifications it is crucial that they are the outcome of a structured process with involvement of ministries, social partners, schools and intermediate educational institutions. Consensus between stakeholders is vital for making qualification trustworthy. Qualifications also need to be useful and relatively easy accessible for a wide range of users. In some cases the NQFs are built in particular for bringing the formal education system into the reference framework. In other countries the NQF is on the contrary focusing on adults that want to requalify or have non-formal and informal learning validated. ETF provides support to almost all countries to develop either a concept (Republic of Moldova and Georgia) or pilot projects (Armenia and Ukraine) for validation of non-formal and informal learning [7]. Initially activities in the Republic of Moldova and Armenia were inspired

by the category of returning migrants, who may be interested to have their work or learning experience abroad validated in the national system. Validation of non-formal and informal learning will depend on the development of standards against which to validate and the assessment mechanisms. It will also help the countries to fine-tune the orientation of the NQF and to develop independent assessments and to decide on the certification process.

School-based assessments are the most common used in Eastern Europe. They are the easiest to implement and do not require the involvement of external stakeholders. They normally fit to the provided teaching methodologies. In some cases there are also practical examinations with involvement of an independent committee with employers. Probably Ukraine has the clearest ideas how to organize the assessment process. The Ukrainian Attestation Committee established a State Welders Qualification Committee with a strong role of employers, which developed assessment criteria very different from the normal ones. The example is followed by several other sectors. The Law on the Professional Development also foresees the establishment of recognition centers by the State Employment Service, which should also play a role in validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The implementation of NQFs is still in an early phase. All countries have developed or are developing occupational standards. The translation towards qualifications is mostly done on a pilot basis, trying to develop and agree on a methodology. Georgia has so far chosen for combined occupational and educational standards, but the methodology is under revision due to problems with their use for curriculum development. The issue of quality assurance, examination and certification need to crystallize further.

### **Institutional support structures for NQF**

The NQFs require a complicated process of coordination between the different actors in the implementation of the framework. Ministries of Education or Labor do not have the capacity, nor is it part of their core tasks of policy making. So far implementation has been largely sponsored and organized by donors. Pilots have helped in elaborating methodologies and lessons, but need dissemination and mainstreaming.

Some countries have set up or identified support structures in an early stage. The Russian Federation has setup the National Qualification Development Agency already in 2007 for the development of occupational standards. The Agency is linked to the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs. The Agency for Strategic Initiatives became later responsible for bringing coherence in the NQF. In Georgia the National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement of the Ministry of Education manages the Registry of occupational standards and is supporting VET schools in the translation into educational programmes. In Azerbaijan the planned Workforce Development Agency under the Ministry of Labor is expected to identify skills needs, develop occupational standards, certify individuals and accredit training providers and assessment centers. The Ministry of Education in Ukraine has asked ETF to draft the potential role and responsibilities of a National Qualifications Agency to coordinate the development and quality assurance process for qualifications. In the Republic of Moldova the process of identifying the most relevant institutions for NQF implementation is ongoing.

In addition to these NQF support agencies all countries are discussing the establishment and use of sector skills councils. The sector skills councils are in first instance set up in the Republic of Moldova to develop occupational standards. After three years of discussions in the sector committees of agriculture and construction a common methodology was agreed and adopted in 2011. This experience has been shared with three new sector committees that have been established in recent years. Following international experience the role of the agriculture committee has been extended to the area of labor market needs analysis in order to inform discussions on occupational standards [4]. Other areas for expansion could be skills anticipation and matching, cooperation between employers and training providers, continuing training provision and funding of training. Their work could be strengthened when they are able to play a role in the negotiations on the collective labor agreements. The attractiveness of the sector approach lies in the potential direct links between employers' interest for well-trained workers and the education provision. It also gives the opportunity to stimulate a skills debate within the overall sector strategy. Sector committees are subject of legislation in the Law on Profes-

sions in the Republic of Moldova, which would strengthen their status and guarantee certain resources.

The other Eastern European countries are also discussing how to establish or strengthen sector committees. In Armenia and Georgia sector committees have supported the development of the occupational standards. A more formalized structure, ensuring the vital role of the social partners, could extend their work towards sector skills councils. In Belarus the government has recently decided to set up three sector committees in energy, IT and public administration as pilots. In Ukraine draft legislation would formalize sector skills councils, but is waiting for its adoption. The metallurgy and chemical sectors have established sector skills councils in 2012 and 2013. In Azerbaijan 7 project-based sectors have supported the development of occupational standards. There is a general interest in sector skills councils, but steps still have to be made to develop the concept.

Now that most of the conceptual work on NQF has been done, the countries in Eastern Europe are shifting the attention to the NQF implementation. Countries are debating whether the implementation could be supported by existing institutions or by establishing a new NQF Agency. An NQF Agency certainly can boost the implementation, but it will require substantial resources. The relevance of sector skills councils gets a more clear support and in some countries is already supported by draft legislation. For certain sectors it seems easier to establish skills councils than in other sectors. Where there is a clear employers' interest or labor market need, sector skills councils may be more successful.

### **Conclusions**

The interest in NQFs has been high from the very start. The objectives of NQF have shifted in the last five years from international comparability to national educational reforms. The discussion has strongly supported the engagement of employers in the dialogue on education and in particular on vocational education and training. In Ukraine and the Russian Federation the employers are even key drivers of the development of NQFs.

Legislation and NQF strategies are well under way. Most countries want to bridge the gap between the higher education frameworks

and the frameworks for the other education sectors into integrated NQFs. However, much work has to be done. Except Belarus, the countries are part of the Bologna process and thus have started the discussions on the higher education frameworks much earlier. Not all countries are clear on the target audience for the NQF, be it the formal education system or if it is mainly for the ones that have left formal education.

The focus has shifted to the NQF implementation. The motto is: use what can be used from the past and develop new methodologies where needed. Occupational standards are under development in all countries. The translation of these standards into qualifications is not in all countries clear. The introduction of learning outcomes is an essential step and follows a new paradigm. The implementation will require a multiplication of expertise and stakeholder involvement in the countries. It will be interesting to follow the experience in Georgia where the elaboration of new curricula on the basis of the occupational standards has already taken place. It may give lessons for the methodological development of occupational standards and qualifications. It is too early to assess what impact the NQF or the shift to learning outcomes will have on the actual learning process and on the teachers.

To support implementation the countries are debating which institutions should be involved in the implementation and the coordination. Should they be existing institutions from the ministries of education and labor or is it better to establish an NQF Agency? The establishment of sector skills councils has been useful for the development of occupational standards and in few cases for the labor market needs analysis. The potential to expand the mandate of these councils will broaden the discussions on sector skills needs within broader defined economic sector strategies. Legislation would strengthen the sector skills councils and would facilitate the capacity development by «learning by doing».

The countries have just started the NQF process. There are many decisions still to be made and much implementation work to be done. International experience shows that it will take decades to build up the system and to make it function [2]. The Eastern European countries have made important steps forward!

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