

WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

The Purposes and Nature of a National Qualifications Framework

The White Paper* proposed that Serbia should develop a National Qualifications Framework for VET qualifications which would “consist of a series of levels and an agreed terminology for describing learning outcomes and qualifications.” (p15). The White Paper noted that such a framework would need to incorporate “agreed quality criteria and procedures”, that it should be agreed by the relevant ministries, agencies and social partners, that it will need to be managed centrally, and that it should be compatible with the emerging European Qualifications Framework. Beyond this, however, the White Paper did not elaborate on the nature of a Serbian NQF.

In the implementation phase, therefore, we need to decide on the nature of an NQF, and the institutions and procedures which will be needed to bring it into reality.

This note uses models from different countries to illustrate a series of options for an NQF.

Definition

National qualifications frameworks are a comparatively recent development. Twenty years ago there were few, if any, countries which claimed to have an NQF. Since then, however, many countries have developed frameworks of one type or another. In a recent survey of different systems of qualifications†, the OECD has adopted the following definition of a qualifications framework:

A qualifications framework is an instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved. This set of criteria may be implicit in the qualifications descriptors themselves or made explicit in the form of a set of level descriptors. The scope of frameworks may be comprehensive of all learning achievement and pathways or may be confined to a particular sector for example initial education, adult education and training or an occupational area. Some frameworks may have more design elements and a tighter structure than others; some may have a legal basis whereas others represent a consensus of views of social partners. All qualifications frameworks, however, establish a basis for improving the quality, accessibility, linkages and public or labour market recognition of qualifications within a country and internationally.

It is immediately apparent that there are many alternative ways of formulating a qualifications framework, and we shall return to these. However, we should note that the purpose of a qualifications framework is principally to:

- help participants and users of education and training navigate their passage through different qualifications;
- confer recognition (whether official or in practice) on qualifications;
- as a result, help improve the quality of qualifications, and therefore of the education and training which leads to them.

We should also note that in the OECD definition there is only one feature of a qualifications framework which is absolutely necessary. This is that it should have “a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved”. One might also add that, in some sense, a qualifications framework must

* *Policy and Strategy for the Development of Vocational Education in Serbia*, 2005

† *The Role of National Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning*, OECD, forthcoming.

have a basic idea of quality; it is hard to conceive a framework which allowed *any* qualification, however spurious, to be admitted. These two essential features are reflected also in the proposals for a European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which otherwise makes no requirements for qualifications.

Features

As noted in the OECD definition qualifications frameworks differ considerably in the features they have beyond the essential ideas of levels and quality. Some have many design features, requiring all qualifications which are admitted to them to have particular characteristics (a 'tight' framework). Others have few required features, allowing a considerable range of different qualifications to be admitted and to be compared one with another (a 'loose' framework). Some countries have frameworks which operate across all of education and training (a 'comprehensive' framework). Others have frameworks operating only in certain sectors of education and training, or in certain parts of their geographical territory ('limited' frameworks). And in some countries the framework is defined by law, while in others it is a less formal description of custom and practice. It will be important for Serbia to determine what kind of framework best suits its needs and its trajectory of development of education and training.

To illustrate these points we may use examples from different countries:

Scotland perhaps has the most extensive qualifications framework in Europe. It started as one for upper and post-secondary VET, but now embraces all secondary education whether academic or vocational. All education and training which is delivered through public schools and colleges is formed from similarly sized units which must be designed in a prescribed way, and there are prescribed means of assessment (*ie.* it is a 'tight' framework). A few years ago its levels were extended to include higher education (*ie.* it is relatively comprehensive), though universities are not required to conform to the requirements for design of units or assessment which apply to the rest of the system. However, even in Scotland, there are exceptions – work-based qualifications used in apprenticeship are rather different, and the framework does not apply to qualifications awarded by professional bodies. The inclusion of universities is not stipulated in law, but is rather a voluntary agreement.

New Zealand has a very similar arrangement to Scotland (and was influenced by Scotland). Indeed it started, through planned laws in the 1980s, by including both universities and upper secondary academic education. It was therefore both tight, comprehensive and legal. However disputes broke out in the 1990s, with the result that the universities now lie outside the framework and secondary academic education has a different set of requirements for both assessment and standards than does VET. Policy makers in New Zealand acknowledge that it has taken fifteen years or more to settle on a complete framework, and even now there are important unresolved questions.

Germany has separate frameworks for school qualifications (mainly academic) and for VET (through its well developed apprenticeship system). In law the school system is the responsibility of individual states (*Länder*), though these co-operate to produce a common national system of school qualifications. A separate law governs apprenticeship VET, giving sectoral organizations, through social partnership, the responsibility for defining curriculum and the principles of assessment. Accreditation of both training bodies (largely firms) and examinations is undertaken by local 'competent bodies' (chambers of commerce). The university system is separate again with its own framework for qualifications. There are few requirements for qualifications taken by adults, this being left largely to individual trade bodies, though there are some attempts to link these with the apprenticeship system. The Germans do not consider that they have an overarching qualifications framework. Their system, therefore, is one of a

series of limited frameworks, though with fairly detailed (but different) requirements within each.

Denmark has a similar VET system to Germany. It has a more regulated set of qualifications for adults, though these are very different (much shorter) than the qualifications offered to young people.

England is perhaps a middle case. It has a national qualifications framework for secondary academic education and all of VET (whether privately or publicly delivered). University education has a separate framework, and the two are not formally linked. There are quite tight requirements for academic secondary education, but despite attempts (which continue) to impose common requirements for VET qualifications there are a wide range of sizes of VET courses, of assessment arrangements and of involvement of the social partners. Most VET qualifications are therefore included in the national framework, though the criteria for admission are 'loose'. An attempt in the early 1990s to impose a common system of VET qualifications (National Vocational Qualifications – NVQs) failed; though used in apprenticeship only around 10 per cent of English upper secondary students take NVQs, with 26 per cent taking other forms of vocational qualifications. The various frameworks in England are not directly laid down in law, but a legally established national qualifications authority is empowered to set criteria for the various qualifications that it recognizes, and it presents the qualifications it approves in the form of a framework of levels.

France has both a school-based and an apprenticeship system for VET. However both share the same set of qualifications (CAP, BEP and the *Baccalauréat Professionnel*). Though not usually described as a qualifications framework, this system is well understood and this series of qualifications correspond to distinct levels. The *Bac Pro* was a deliberate attempt to upgrade vocational qualifications through giving them equivalence to the other two French *Baccalauréats* (General and Technical). This was done through incorporating significant academic content and lengthening the duration of training. It has been partially successful, though many VET students still only take the BEP and CAP, and the *Bac Pro* is still seen as inferior to the other two *Baccalauréats*. Adult VET qualifications are entirely different from these qualifications taken by young people and largely governed by requirements from the Education Ministry. France is therefore an example of using qualifications structures to adapt patterns of schooling in an evolutionary manner, though it has done this through changes to curriculum and individual qualifications rather than through a comprehensive framework.

Sweden reformed its upper secondary education in a comprehensive manner in the mid 1990s. There is a common duration for all upper secondary VET programmes (to age 19) and the number of individual profiles is severely restricted with 14 main VET programmes, involving a small number (around 30 in all) specializations within them. There are common requirements for general education within each. However this framework is restricted to upper secondary education. Adult qualifications and university education have their own separate systems.

Implications for Serbia

This brief review illustrates a number of points:

- it is not the case that any country has a truly comprehensive framework for VET, still less for all qualifications. In most qualifications for adults are separate from those for young people, though there are common understandings about access to the labour market for both groups gaining the different types of qualification;

- attempts to impose a comprehensive framework with tight requirements are difficult. Few countries have even tried to do this, and where this has been attempted it has either been a process of gradual evolution over a number of years (Scotland), or painful stopping and starting (English NVQs, New Zealand);
- the European Qualifications Framework will need to be adaptable to many different types of national system if it is to be accepted. Its designers seem to realize this, as its requirements are confined to essential quality requirements and to levels;
- most qualifications systems are 'mixed', with strong requirements in parts (*cf.* upper secondary education) and far looser requirements in others (*cf.* adult training). In some parts of the system there is a firm legal basis in some detail, but in others there are only the broadest legal definitions. Indeed a number of countries consciously limit the legal basis, relying on custom, the 'market' or social partnership to evolve qualifications within a very broad (and sometimes weakly defined) general framework.

It follows that there are real decisions for Serbia in developing a qualifications framework. It could at one extreme decide to have a comprehensive, tight, and legally based framework. The advantages, if successful, would be that such a framework would be readily understandable to all, and transform all qualifications to a truly 'modern' and common format. However, if the experience of other countries is to be noted, it would certainly result in serious disputes and be difficult to explain to a public accustomed to a well known pattern of qualifications. The danger is that such a framework would either become the basis of political dispute (as in New Zealand) or be confined to a very small section of education and training (as NVQs in England), or both.

An alternative approach is to start with a broadly based framework, observing only the minimum necessary to assure some assurance of common quality and to be consistent with the EQF levels which seem likely to be adopted in many EU countries, and Serbia's neighbours. Within such a broad framework individual qualifications can of course be progressively modernized, either with features in common or in different ways which appeal to the social partners and evolving educational policy.