

EQF By NQFs Project

Points of View on the Similarities and Differences of the National Reports

EQFs by NQFs: Points of View on the Similarities and Differences of the National Reports

2006 – 239 / 001 – 001 SO2 – 61 - NAR

This project report is published by UK NARIC. The project has been funded with support from the European Community.

Reproduction is authorised provided the source is acknowledged.

Please cite this publication as:

UK NARIC et al, EQFs by NQFs: Points of View on the Similarities and Differences of the National Reports, 2006, Cheltenham, England.

© 2006 UK NARIC

The National Recognition Information Centre for the United Kingdom
Oriel House
Oriel Road
Cheltenham GL50 1XP
e.: projects@naric.org.uk
w.: www.naric.org.uk

Contents

1. Background to Qualification Frameworks at National Level	4
2. Specific Principles and Mechanisms for Qualifications Development.....	5
3. Presentation of the HE Sector	6
4. Correlation between NQFs and EQF	7
5. Future Developments Identified at National Level.....	8

1. Background to Qualification Frameworks at National Level

The countries involved in this project are at varying stages of development or implementation of their own National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF). Although Ireland, France, Romania and the UK, have established NQFs identifying the different levels of learning and reflecting the appropriate learning outcomes, their structure and underpinning descriptors do differ. The Netherlands has a framework in place for HE while Romania is in the process of putting one in place. Spain, however, has no qualifications framework in place at any level but is in the process of developing one, starting with HE and working down the system. Indeed the frameworks for HE in the Netherlands and Romania have been elaborated taking account of developments at European level, facilitating transfer to both Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA) and European Qualifications Framework (EQF) levels and descriptors. Furthermore the Dutch framework incorporates the descriptor developed at European level for the intermediate first cycle qualification, allowing greater transparency for their newly introduced Associate Degree.

Those countries with an established NQF vary greatly in the number of levels adopted. France and Romania currently maintain a five-level system, encompassing all levels of educational achievement, while England, Wales and Northern Ireland have an eight-level framework. Ireland has a greater number of levels still, with ten, while Scotland's framework comprises twelve.

In terms of underpinning descriptors, these vary from generic in nature (the UK and Romania) to more specific, as is the case in the Irish NFQ. All are based on learning outcomes, but the way in which these are expressed is not uniform across all frameworks. For example the Irish descriptors are expressed in terms of the knowledge, know-how and skill, and competence expected of a learner having completed a qualification at a certain level. The Romanian QF for HE however, expresses its descriptors using functional-actional competences and knowledge competences. Nevertheless all countries have developed descriptors for each level of HE.

All NQFs take in to account entry to the labour market and the professional competences of learners at each level. Additionally a Register of Qualifications is not found in all countries, however, in Romania and Spain the development of such a register is a current priority.

2. Specific Principles and Mechanisms for Qualifications Development

A major theme that can be identified in all countries developing qualifications is that programmes should complement each other therefore new qualifications should not duplicate the purpose or content of existing awards. This point is key in building a multi-skilled workforce, and one that can respond to developments in the labour market at a national and international level.

The process of placing a new qualification into an existing structure varies from one country to the next, depending on the National Authorities or Regulatory Bodies charged with the appropriate powers.

Dutch universities build and assess their programmes in terms of attainment targets and/or exit competences, or by the knowledge, insight and skills that they must have attained. In Spain, new qualifications must be described in terms of their objectives, competences to be acquired, learning outcomes, linkages to other qualifications, assessment methods and objectives. The Romanian HE qualification accreditation process requires a dossier to be submitted detailing the learning outcomes of a programme in terms of units of competence, and competence. The subsequent evaluation is based on the novelty of the programme, and the consistency and correctness of the application.

Although the terminology and level of detail may differ between the national systems, it is clear that the focus on output rather than input indicators is in line with developments relating to the Bologna Process and the implementation of the EQF. Certain countries, such as Spain, still place importance on an element of standardised curriculum at national level in order to achieve the learning outcomes, whereas others, such as the UK and Ireland place all content and assessment decisions with HEIs and Awarding Bodies.

Additionally Ireland and the Netherlands focus heavily on access, transfer and progression, for both new qualifications and as part of their national framework. These elements play an important part in the realisation of the Lifelong Learning Programme for citizens of the countries in question.

3. Presentation of the HE Sector

In line with the reforms of the Bologna Process, all countries involved in the project (with the exception of Spain) have implemented a three-tier HE qualification system. However Spain is in the process of moving from the previous to the new system, with recognised second cycle awards available and adapted to the requirements of the EHEA from the 2006/07 academic year. First cycle awards will be introduced progressively from 2008/09. It is envisaged that this new model for HE will provide a different perspective in understanding the sector and its relationships with society. It is also worth noting that for Ireland and the UK, the transition to a three-cycle HE structure has not constituted as great a reform as in the other countries involved in this project. They have continued to offer intermediate and alternative qualifications in the HE sector, as well as maintain the Ordinary-Honours distinction.

Despite the harmonisation of HE systems across European countries, variations still exist in the nomenclature of qualifications within the first cycle. Spain, for example, will use the title *Grado* and France *Licence*. A further interesting example is the way in which the Dutch system can differentiate between different types of HE qualification through use of titles. Indeed the suffix 'of Arts/Science' can only be used for awards in the traditional academic stream of HE, with Bachelor (or Master) alone reserved for professional education awards. It is important that this distinction is made as awards from the different systems do not necessarily facilitate the same progression pathways. Nevertheless, these differences should not present any great difficulty in terms of recognition, as all qualifications will be expressed in terms of ECTS points and should be accompanied by a Diploma Supplement (and in the future possibly also a Competence Profile) to clarify the orientation and content of the programme.

A degree of variation between countries also exists in the duration of programmes within cycles. All first cycle awards in Romania and France are set at 180 ECTS, or three years, as is the Dutch academic Bachelor degree. Many first cycle courses in Ireland and the UK also have a duration of three years, with the notable exception of the Scottish Bachelor Honours degree, which typically lasts four. The Dutch professional Bachelor and the Spanish *Grado* are set at 240 ECTS, with first cycle awards for professions (such as Doctor, Vet) in all countries lasting considerably longer. Master's courses in the Netherlands and Spain comprise between 60 and 120 ECTS. In the UK, 60-90 ECTS is the norm, whereas in France 120 are required. The difference between research and professional orientation at Master's level can be found in most countries, presenting more choice for learners and more appropriate qualifications for appropriate progression.

4. Correlation between NQFs and EQF

The three-cycle structure that is operating, or will operate, in the Netherlands, Spain, Romania and Ireland corresponds to that drawn up in the FQ-EHEA. The former three countries have paid particular attention to the Dublin Descriptors when developing their own framework level descriptors, rendering the qualifications more easily understood internationally. Additionally Ireland has been able to compare its NQF with the FQ-EHEA by undertaking a pilot project of self-certification in 2005. Through highlighting clear and demonstrable links between its national qualifications and cycle descriptors, as well as demonstrating the clear use of learning outcomes, the main HE qualifications in the Irish HE system have been mapped to EQF levels. This raised an interesting paradox, which many countries with multiple HE qualifications will face when correlating their qualifications to the EQF or FQ-EHEA. Qualifications that sit at different levels on the Irish NQF have all been judged to be in line with the learning outcomes for completion of the first cycle. In this case, and other similar situations, it will be important that the qualifications in question are contextualised nationally, notably through the use of the Diploma Supplement.

The FQ for HE to be implemented by Spain and Romania will also correspond to levels six to eight of the EQF. Indeed the proposed Spanish system will be adapted such that all types of learning will be incorporated at all levels of the framework. However the current Romanian five-level framework would be problematic to correlate to the EQF, which would further support a new eight-level system that has already been proposed. Equally the five-level framework in place in France has not been mapped to the EQF, but its outcome-based approach and general indicators should allow for an easier correspondence. Nevertheless, the most important element in developing an NQF is to take national priorities into account above all others, in order to develop an appropriate and relevant framework.

5. Future Developments Identified at National Level

The future developments of each country involved in the project depend for the most part on the state of implementation or development of its NQF. Both Spain and Romania have prioritised the introduction of a National Register of Qualifications, while the former also needs to fully introduce the 'Bologna' framework for HE and develop an NQF in order to reach the 2010 goal of a fully functioning and competitive EHEA.

The three-cycle system is well established in the Netherlands, therefore their main priority currently is to elaborate on the Dublin Descriptors used in their NQF for HE and formulate programme-specific level descriptors. These will provide greater guidance on the competences of graduates in particular disciplines for both HEIs and employers. Work has begun to this end through the Tuning project, in which the Netherlands has been closely involved. Similar guidance is offered by the QAA in the UK and serves to advise universities when developing their course offerings.

Despite both countries having well-established NQFs, Ireland and the UK have differing priorities. The NQAI will review how the NQF and its related policies on access, transfer and progression have been implemented. While it accepts that the overall impact of the framework on the learning culture will not yet be particularly tangible, it is important to identify gaps in implementation and operation as well as assess awareness levels amongst key stakeholders. It is possible that this review could be used by other countries who are less developed in the area of qualifications frameworks as a reference resource.

The UK, on the other hand, is exploring the possibility of introducing a new unit-based credit framework, which would be underpinned by a system of credit accumulation and transfer. This would be viewed as being more responsive to employers' needs as well as being able to encompass all elements of Lifelong Learning. However it would be important in the consultation process to take into account ECVET and ECTS, to ensure compatibility at a European level.

Finally, a development that concerns all countries is how to forge stronger links with the economic and social environment in order to identify skills gaps and shortages in the labour market. Working with these partners to develop more appropriate qualifications or to increase the relevance of current qualifications would serve to make the workforce more competitive and ultimately move towards the target of the Lisbon 2010 target.