

## **National Qualifications Frameworks and the European Overarching Frameworks: Supporting Lifelong Learning in European Education and Training**

Creatlacha Cáilíochtaí Náisiúnta agus na Creatlacha  
Uileghabhálacha Eorpacha: Ag Tacú leis an bhFoghlaim  
ar feadh an tSaoil in Oideachas agus in Oiliúint Eorpach

### **A Report on the Bologna Expert Conference**

held at Dublin Castle, Ireland

**15 April 2010**





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*Conference Centre, Dublin Castle*

# 1. Introduction

*“This frameworks project illustrates some of the best features of the overall European project; It provides at a high level a set of ideals and a set of common tools, at a European level, and leaves, in a subsidiary fashion, the really hard work and dialogue to be done at our national discussions” – Dr. Bryan Maguire, Higher Education and Training Awards Council*

On 15 April 2010, over one hundred and fifty participants gathered at the historic Dublin Castle for a conference on *National Qualifications Frameworks and the European Overarching Frameworks: Supporting Lifelong Learning in European Education and Training*. The conference was organised and co-hosted by the Higher Education Authority and National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and supported by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB). Funding for the conference was provided by the European Commission under the Bologna Experts programme<sup>1</sup>, and by the Ireland-Australia Frameworks Project<sup>2</sup>. A one-day conference, it attracted an international audience from countries across the European Union and beyond, including Georgia, Armenia (both members of the European Higher Education Area), Australia, New Zealand and the United States. This gathering of policy makers and specialists reflected the broad range of interests that are engaged with, and affected by, issues relating to qualifications frameworks. Represented were national education and training institutions and agencies; international education and training agencies responsible for developing national qualifications frameworks and verifying compatibility/ referencing against the overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA or Bologna Framework) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) respectively; ENIC/



*Dr. Bryan Maguire, Higher Education and Training Awards Council*

NARIC representatives; European representative and policy bodies; quality assurance agencies; professional bodies and student representatives.

The Dublin Castle conference brought together the various communities involved in the development of national qualifications frameworks (for vocational education and training (VET), higher education (HE) or lifelong learning), sectoral qualifications and training, the recognition community and professional bodies. The event was therefore both significant and necessary. In order for qualifications frameworks to realise their full potential to support individuals' lifelong learning and mobility, mutual trust and understanding is essential. At European and national level, there exists a multiplicity of approaches to the development

<sup>1</sup> Information on the Bologna Experts programme in Ireland can be accessed from: <http://www.bologna.ie>

<sup>2</sup> The objective of the Ireland – Australia Qualifications Project is to explore the possibility of a formal alignment of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) with the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). Within this context, the project has set out to map a range of aspects of each framework in order to achieve a meaningful comparison between the two.



of qualifications frameworks, and though this is desirable in itself, greater cohesion is called for. The Dublin Castle conference represented an important step in this direction, facilitating the kind of effective communication among stakeholders that is, and will be, necessary in addressing issues that cause confusion or difficulty. For all the differences in approach, the conference reinforced the message that all stakeholders are working towards the same objectives—ensuring that individuals have their learning recognised and are able to move with that learning between education and training sectors and between countries.

The programme for the conference was organised around five major themes: why two meta-frameworks?; the role of qualifications frameworks in relation to recognition and mobility; European Directives and qualifications frameworks; sectoral qualifications and the links with national and meta-frameworks; and global frameworks, the international perspective, issues and opportunities/challenges. Each of these themes was explored in an issues paper, prepared by Dr. Bryan Maguire of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and made publicly available in advance of the conference. This paper, in presenting contextual information and analysis in support of the conference themes, effectively set the agenda for the day. While discussions were shaped by reactions to the issues paper, the format of the event, which allowed for informal exchanges between the keynote speakers and the audience, ensured that the conference was enriched by a broad spectrum of perspectives and insights. This report provides a summary of those proceedings and it takes as its basic structure the core themes presented in the pre-conference issues paper.



*Gordon Clark, Directorate for Education and Culture, European Commission*

The conference highlighted the significance of building the mutual trust necessary to create a more flexible qualifications system, one that facilitates learners to participate as citizens in a globalised and changing world. The success of national qualifications frameworks and the European meta-frameworks depends on communication and trust between countries and between stakeholders who must feel involved and who must feel ownership of this project. Such trust will come from dialogue between stakeholders at both a national and a European level, a dialogue facilitated by the learning outcomes approach. As concluded by Gordon Clarke, *Every country which aspires to a comprehensive and effective national qualifications framework needs a vibrant platform or structure for continuous dialogue and interaction between the stakeholders of the different education sectors and the world of work and between higher education and vocational education and training.* The conference set an example in this regard, but this dialogue must be continued within individual countries and between the major stakeholders at European level if the frameworks project is to succeed and our ambitions for lifelong learning and mobility in Europe are to be realised.

## 2. Why two Meta-Frameworks?

### Questions raised by issues paper:

- Can meta-frameworks only yield their benefits when all or many countries have established NQFs?
- When do we know that a framework exists in practice?
- What value can be assigned to draft NQFs or adopted NQFs prior to verification/referencing to meta-frameworks?
- How can we be sure that the NQF implementation is progressing as planned? In short how is trust sustained?
- Can a framework be implemented if the concept of a *learning outcome* is still contested? Can it be implemented meaningfully if the concept is not contested?
- Is self-certification a sufficiently robust mechanism for verification/referencing or do we require supra-national institutional involvement?

### Reactions: Mike Coles, Edwin Mernagh and Irish Bologna Experts

#### '... the two things are in a symbiotic relationship' – Edwin Mernagh, Independent Consultant

The development of two meta-frameworks in Europe is a reflection of traditional divides between higher and vocational education and training. The Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (Bologna Framework) was adopted in May 2005 at the Bergen meeting of the ministers for higher education under the Bologna Process. Three years later, in April 2008, the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) was adopted by a joint decision of the European Parliament and Council as an outcome of the European Union's education and training policy co-operation framework.

A fundamental and common feature of both European qualifications frameworks is the emphasis on a learning outcomes approach, which tells you what the holder of a certain qualification knows, understands and is able to do. This approach promotes the transparency of qualifications and underlying quality assurance arrangements, but it is not a panacea. The issues paper prepared for the conference raised a number of critical questions: most fundamentally, it asked whether meta-frameworks could only fulfil their potential (in servicing the aims of lifelong learning and mobility) when all or many countries had established their own national qualifications frameworks (NQFs)?

This key question lay at the heart of much of the reaction to the issues paper on this matter. Led by Edwin Mernagh, an Independent Consultant, Mike Coles, Senior Researcher at the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency in England and the Irish Bologna Experts, the focus of the conference response centred on the respective roles of the meta-frameworks and their relationships with NQFs, but it also broadened to consider the ways in which the confusion created by these multiple frameworks might be addressed by more effective, and targeted communications.

### Meta-frameworks and NQFs: a symbiotic relationship

The co-existence of two meta-frameworks is both a historical legacy and a contemporary requirement. The two frameworks are rooted in different traditions, are intended to serve distinct purposes and are directed at different audiences. Whereas the Bologna Framework was conceived as a reforming entity, an instrument for developing a distinct model of higher education in Europe, the EQF contains no plan for harmonisation. It aims instead to bring about a way of understanding different systems within a common framework. The relationship between these meta-frameworks and NQFs is one of symbiosis: it is the link between the two that delivers the full potential

of each, enabling individual citizens to have their learning recognised and facilitating their movement between education and training sectors and between countries. There is general agreement, nevertheless, that it is the national frameworks which constitute the key instruments, not the meta-frameworks. Indeed, it is increasingly understood that having a NQF is a pre-requisite for connecting a country's qualifications system(s) to either of the meta-frameworks.

Approaches to developing NQFs tend to vary from country to country. The pre-conference issues paper explained that differences in approach had arisen for a combination of reasons: the historic and political circumstances of individual countries; contrasting objectives for the framework initiative; and differing definitions and understanding of learning outcomes. However, these differences in approach at national level were not seen as problematic; rather it was argued that the success of NQFs depends on the extent to which they are embedded in specific national contexts and can address national challenges and the needs of citizens. Throughout, the primacy of NQFs was repeatedly asserted; while some aspects of reform are usefully and necessarily at European level, and while it is very helpful for national governments to have international policy direction and guidance to draw upon, it is at a national level that real change and possibility is manifested through NQFs.

Irish Bologna Experts told of the huge practical benefits that the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) has brought to their own learning institutions. For a start, the single national framework, with its emphasis on learning outcomes, has made it much easier to bring about change to curricula and programmes. But it has also delivered a more transparent qualifications system for the learner, as anyone now preparing a new learning programme must identify the various access routes into and the opportunities to progress from the qualification.

### Two Meta-frameworks: Clearing the Confusion

The real value of national frameworks, one conference participant stressed, is that they don't stand alone—they need to connect with other qualifications frameworks to ensure they deliver mobility and recognition. But the co-existence of two European meta-frameworks is a cause of confusion amongst various stakeholders. This much has been recognised in several evaluations of the Bologna process and it was echoed during the conference discussions. It was acknowledged that countries that are starting to develop a NQF might be justifiably confused as to whether they should be aiming to adopt the structure of the Bologna framework or the EQF nationally. Indeed, it was argued that the tendency to 'base' a NQF on one of the meta-frameworks is counter-productive; such an approach may fail to take sufficient account of the national context and requirements. A further question inevitably arose as to which, if either of the two meta-frameworks, took precedence – should, for instance, the Bologna framework be set aside in favour of the EQF, which is a life-long learning framework?

Mike Coles remarked that the big question is not so much 'Is there confusion?', but rather 'Who is confused?' Conference opinion was divided as to who should know about framework issues, about how much they should be told and about what means should be used to inform them. One viewpoint held that it is the task of people who understand the detail of the system and whose job it is to interface with learners and business – teachers, trainers, tutors and agencies like the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, for example – to mediate the confusions and make the system clear. The confusion should never be allowed to run down to the level of citizens, businesses, workers and recruiters. Another viewpoint held that everybody – especially students and employers – should be required to understand how the system works. The argument ran that in order for students to move from one part of a system

to another, or from one country to another, it is important that they understand how to navigate that system, and that their qualifications are accredited and have a currency in other jurisdictions and labour markets. It was further pointed out that in reaching out to students, information needs to be presented both in a format they require and through media they use.

Given the range of perspectives on how confusion about frameworks might be minimised among the many stakeholders, it is perhaps inevitable that the question would be raised as to whether Europe, and its citizens, would be better served with one, rather than two meta-frameworks. Addressing this point, Mike Coles stated that talk of unification is premature. The two meta-frameworks – Bologna and the EQF – have been set up for entirely different communities and though their purposes overlap, they require time to achieve what they were designed to do.

An important shared feature of both of these meta-frameworks is the focus on learning outcomes, an approach which is widely perceived to have delivered benefits to learners, but around which issues of concern still exist. Learning outcomes are fundamental to the functioning of frameworks, yet a concern was expressed that the idea of learning outcomes is understood differently across countries. A further fear was that a reliance on learning outcomes alone might lead to a diminution of standards. It is not possible, one participant argued, to specify a learning process through a learning outcome: it is only through the description of key elements of the curriculum that a determination of the standard can be made. Mike Coles stated that the design of NQFs was ultimately the responsibility of individual states and relevant authorities and their implementation is now the priority. It is imperative, for the overarching meta-frameworks to have any effect, that national frameworks meet national challenges for the development of education and training systems.

#### Issues identified during the discussion:

- The primacy of NQFs was highlighted and stressed;
- Dissemination of information and targeted communication to key framework audiences of frameworks is essential;
- The importance of the learning outcomes approach as the basis of the frameworks initiative was stressed.



*Michael Kelly, HEA Chairman*



### 3. Role of Qualifications Frameworks in Relation to Recognition and Mobility

#### Questions raised by issues paper:

- How can NQFs be used by recognition authorities?
- What are the barriers to the use of qualifications frameworks in recognition?
- Are NQFs oversold as aids to recognition?

#### Reactions: Wilfried Boomgaert, Bartley Rock and Elisabeth Sonnenschein

***‘The key message is a national qualification framework never stands alone, you need a lot of other instruments connected to that framework...’***

**– Wilfried Boomgaert of the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (Belgium)**

A core mission of the qualifications frameworks is to deliver benefits to citizens in the form of recognition and mobility. An essential part of this process has been the promotion of transparency, the logic being that if qualifications can be understood, recognition will follow. However, the extent to which frameworks have facilitated recognition within countries is still uncertain. Just as there are many approaches to developing NQFs, so too there are variations in the practices of qualifications assessments across countries. In many European countries, for instance, frameworks sit alongside parallel systems of recognition. So what exactly is the role of NQFs in terms of recognition and how, if at all, might it be developed? This was the question which preoccupied the three designated speakers at the conference – Wilfried Boomgaert of the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (Belgium), Bartley Rock, Irish Bologna Expert and a former Education Officer with the Union of Students of Ireland (USI) and Elisabeth Sonnenschein of the German Ministry for Education and Cultural Affairs – but it also sparked valuable contributions from other expert participants. Throughout, there was a widespread sense that, notwithstanding considerable obstacles, frameworks

have the potential to make an increased contribution in terms of recognition and, consequently, mobility.

#### NQFs: Key Tools of Recognition

The issues paper circulated in advance of the conference highlighted the disconnect that exists in many countries between those parts of the system that are responsible for framework development and those engaged in qualifications recognition. The case was made for both closer co-operation between the two and a more formal role for NQFs in recognition, a proposal that found support among conference contributors. The message to emerge was that NQFs constitute vital tools for recognition: they enable qualifications gained outside a particular country to be assessed or compared with national qualifications. In this way, the holder of a qualification can have their learning recognised in a country other than their own and be in a position to take up employment or gain access to education. To illustrate the point, Elisabeth Sonnenschein offered the example of childcare qualifications in the UK. She stated that the title of the qualification alone, though entirely valid, did not necessarily provide sufficient information to identify what might be expected of the holder – did a qualification relate, for example, to early years' childcare, playgroup work, education and childcare, pre-primary education etc.? Before the introduction of the framework it was impossible to gauge what the qualification was worth in terms of learning outcomes and what it meant in terms of that person's ability to work, for instance, with or without supervision. Qualifications frameworks have therefore brought additional clarity to those assessing qualifications for recognition purposes. Indeed, the conference was told that frameworks are as much tools of justification for those working in qualifications recognition as they are tools of recognition. NQFs are also helping guidance practitioners to provide information to students and learners on how to successfully navigate the education and training system based on their prior learning and future education and employment goals.

### Quality Assurance & Learning Outcomes

Both the Bologna and Copenhagen processes and related frameworks share the objective of enhancing the transparency of qualifications and qualifications systems in order to facilitate the recognition of those qualifications and the mobility of their holders. Conference participants concurred that for frameworks to work in this way, they must be underpinned by robust and transparent quality assurance systems so that trust can be established and maintained between partner countries. It was agreed that the elements needed to promote recognition and mobility are a NQF based on learning outcomes and underpinned by quality assurance. In turn, the process by which a NQF is referenced to the meta-frameworks must be transparent. While the emphasis on a learning outcomes approach can facilitate more permeability between the VET and higher education, it was suggested by Wilfried Boomgaert that more work is needed at European-level with regard to quality assurance criteria for school/general education qualifications and with regard to the recognition of prior learning in order to truly support mobility.

### Frameworks & Recognition Bodies

A central element in the appeal of NQFs is that they never stand alone: they are necessarily linked to other instruments of recognition. This is considered key because in order for frameworks to fulfil their potential to support mobility they must be linked at both a European and national level to such recognition structures as the ENIC/NARIC networks. Frameworks provide a reference point for those involved in the comparison and recognition of qualifications. It is accepted that they will not solve all the problems of the qualifications assessor, but they are an additional tool in the armory. Issues were raised by participants around the differences in treatment of award holders from other countries compared with the progression rights afforded a country's own citizens – a concern was expressed about the difficulties that may arise in affording progression opportunities to award



*Dr. Jim Murray, Acting Chief Executive NQAI*

holders based on the progression rights attached to a qualification in the country of origin when holders of similar awards in the host country do not have such progression rights in the national context. The Lisbon Recognition Convention concerning higher education in the European region, requires that qualifications be assessed fairly i.e. they are adequately positioned in the grid of qualifications of the receiving country and the outcome of the assessment is dependent on the features of both higher education systems. Sjur Bergan of the Council of Europe also warned against a tendency to exaggerate small differences in learning outcomes between countries. This may stem from a form of either protectionism or traditionalism, yet it is important to recognise comparable level qualifications if there are no substantial differences, as per the Lisbon Recognition Convention. In fact, differences should only be considered with a view to purpose.

### Are NQFs oversold as aids to recognition?

Throughout the discussions on recognition and mobility, a concern was expressed that NQFs might give rise to unrealistic expectations, not least the idea that reform of the recognition systems will happen immediately. There is a need to engage with stakeholders and to manage expectations about the pace of change and how fast automatic recognition will become a reality. The conference acknowledged

that NQFs will not resolve all the issues around recognition, but there is equally an appreciation of the role they play as a vital instrument of recognition. There is a need now for increased dialogue within countries, between people in the recognition world and those engaged in developing qualifications frameworks – this would, *inter alia*, allow for a deeper understanding of how frameworks can better support international recognition.

**Issues identified during the discussion:**

- The importance of closer co-operation between those involved in framework development and those involved in qualifications recognition was stressed in order to fully support both recognition and mobility;
- For mutual trust to be established within and between countries, it is necessary for learning-outcomes based NQFs to be underpinned by robust quality assurance and referenced/linked to the meta-frameworks in a transparent way;
- A need for a shared understanding of learning outcomes was identified;
- What is the impact of varied ways of implementing learning outcomes approaches?

## 4. European Directives and Qualifications Frameworks

### Questions raised by issues paper:

- Is the Directive working for mobility?
- Can the soft approach of recognition through NQFs referenced to EQF add anything to the Directives?
- Would this require greater central coordination of the EQF-LLL?
- Is there a tension between the two approaches, or can they be reconciled?
- Do they need to be reconciled?
- Does the lack of relationship between frameworks and directives at European level pose a problem for HE providers/other stakeholders?

requirements of that body – whether that’s continuing professional development, membership fees, or keeping to a code of good conduct. The qualification that might be fundamental to the qualified status can fit into the qualifications frameworks, but the qualified status cannot. By way of example, Anne-Marie Ryan, Chair of the European Council of Nursing Regulators’ Working Group on Education, Training and Competences, noted that nurses and midwives, like doctors, architects, dentists, pharmacists and veterinary surgeons are regulated specifically by Directive 2005/36/EC and that a key element of being in a regulated profession is that if you infringe the code of conduct, you can lose your license, which means you cannot work in your profession. In such circumstances, a qualification is effectively rendered redundant.

### Reactions: Stan Lester and Anne-Marie Ryan

***‘The process needs to really think about not just what’s happening now, but what can happen in the next 10 years and how things can become more flexible.’ – Stan Lester, Independent Consultant***

The European meta-frameworks are not the only instruments designed to facilitate mobility within Europe. The frameworks were predated by important Directives to promote recognition and hence facilitate mobility within the regulated professions of the EU. The interaction between the European frameworks and Directives was set out in the issues paper and developed during the conference discussions. Stan Lester, an Independent Consultant, detailed the difficulty of reconciling the processes in place for the recognition of professional status under the EU Directives with the European qualifications meta-frameworks. A qualification is something that, once earned, is kept for life<sup>3</sup>, whereas qualified status is something conferred by a professional body that requires the holder to comply with the ongoing

### Is the Directive working for mobility?

A core objective of the European Directive has been to facilitate professional mobility within the EU, but the extent to which it has succeeded in delivering on this ambition proved a serious focus of debate. There is general agreement that the Directive in its present format contains much that is useful, but this is balanced by an awareness that certain aspects of the Directive have tended to make mobility and transparency more difficult. A number of expert participants pointed out how useful the Directive has been in allowing properly qualified workers to gain easy access to their profession in other countries, as long as they meet the requirements set out for their profession in the Directive. The Directive is thus seen as playing an important part in enabling mobility for workers in the regulated professions, once they fulfil all of the requirements set out by the Directive. This is particularly true because an EU Directive is such a strong legal instrument, requiring compliance by the member countries.

3 It should be noted, however, that the value of that qualification – not only in the context of regulated professions – may change either because education systems change or because the accumulated body of knowledge and understanding within a field changes and this can make qualifications outdated unless the holder has remained active in the field.

However, the conference also heard evidence from a number of expert participants and representatives of the regulated professions, including nursing and architecture, that the Directive, as it operates now, presents real mobility challenges for the professions in Europe and also for learners within those professions. One problematic area raised was that, under the Directive, learners are not always given the flexibility to achieve the component parts of professional qualified status in separate countries. For example, it is problematic to attain the required qualification in one country and then move to a second country to gain qualifying work experience. This means that limits are being put on mobility for learners and it is felt that greater flexibility in this area would be more in keeping with the European project. The Directive is also seen as producing problems for professional organisations in terms of not being able to recognise people that they see as competent practitioners because they don't fulfil all the requirements, or being compelled to recognise some people who meet the requirements, but would not be seen to have the competences required to actually work in the profession. This was a concern shared by professions represented at the conference.

#### **How are learners reaching qualified status?**

Several speakers also highlighted the contrast between the emphasis of meta-frameworks on encouraging flexibility in terms of people's pathways through education, such as allowing for recognition of prior learning, and the emphasis on set inputs in the Directive. Panellist Stan Lester, noted that a research project he had led in the UK indicated that professionals actually came to qualified status via a wide variety of entry routes, including recognition of prior learning and other lifelong learning aspects,

rather than simply through traditionally defined qualifications. Encouraging that kind of flexibility means you don't have to compel people at a certain stage in their life to go back to college full-time to reach the next stage in their career. The tension between the need to encourage flexible, life-long learning in all professions, and the desire to maintain absolute confidence in the system of mobility of the professions covered by the Directive was a cause for concern for many at the conference.

#### **Regulated Professions and the National Qualifications Frameworks**

The pre-conference issues paper identified the potential for conflict between the traditional means of defining the professions in terms of inputs, and the frameworks' emphasis on learning outcomes. But the conference was also provided with examples of how the two worlds have moved towards one another in recent years. Panellist Anne-Marie Ryan described the successful way in which the nursing qualifications in Ireland have been mapped to the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in 2005, so the qualifications are now understood in terms of competences and learning outcomes. Part of the reason this has proved successful is because it is now possible to look at what the nursing competences are considered to be across the nursing sector. This achievement in mapping the learning outcomes and competences of the nursing profession to the Irish framework, and thus onwards to the European meta-frameworks suggests one possible way forward. However, this raised a related question of whether a much greater coordination of the meta-frameworks would be necessary if this route were used in relation to recognition of professional status.



### Working towards a new Directive

Stan Lester summed up some of the mood of the conference when he noted that it is not surprising that there would be some tension around the Directive, given the speed with which thinking on education, and especially frameworks, has moved in recent years. In many ways, since the Directive was introduced, qualifications frameworks have changed the way that many stakeholders think about education and training in Europe, and now, with the upcoming review of the Directive in 2012, an opportunity exists to re-engage with the Directive in a new context. According to Anne-Marie Ryan, one big change that has taken place since the Directive was formulated is that there is now so much collective expertise in Europe on how to explain professional qualifications in terms of outcomes and competences. That expertise exists within professional sectors like nursing, medicine and architecture, but also in the education sector generally. The job now at hand is to tap into that well of knowledge and develop new ideas on how the meta-frameworks and the Directive can work together for the benefit of Europe's learners. Contributors suggested that greatest benefit could be achieved by different sectors working together to conduct this engagement, rather than endeavouring to do so individually.

#### Issues identified during the discussion:

- Participants expressed their willingness to engage with the review of the Directive and noted the importance of including DG Internal Market in any further discussions on qualifications frameworks.



*Seán Haughey TD, Minister for Lifelong Learning*

## 5. Sectoral Qualifications and the links with National and Meta-Frameworks

### Questions raised by issues paper:

- Do countries, in principle, object to the acceptance of qualifications not located in a particular jurisdiction?
- How is the recognition of international sectoral qualifications achieved?
- Can it be managed/tolerated by national systems? (In some countries, sectoral qualifications are seen as a threat to the national system)
- What is the added value of recognizing sectoral qualifications through national and/or European meta-frameworks?
- Who should have authority to recognise sectoral frameworks at the European level?

### Reactions: Jens Bjornavold and Sjur Bergan

***‘...qualifications frameworks are a system for making sense of diversity.’ – Sjur Bergan, Head of the Department of Higher Education and History Teaching, Council of Europe***

A key development in providing improved lifelong learning opportunities in recent years has been the growth in the importance of sectoral qualifications and sectoral qualifications frameworks in many areas. Improving the connectedness between these sectoral qualifications and the European qualifications frameworks remains a key goal, with the recommendation introducing the EQF specifically mentioning that the meta-framework should enable international sectoral organizations to show how their qualifications systems or frameworks relate to national qualifications systems. The conference heard that improved links can be a win-win situation for the meta-frameworks, NQFs, the sectoral qualifications and, most importantly, the learner, but it is also accepted that there is more work to be done on the linking of sectoral qualifications to national frameworks, and issues to be faced in the area of

links between sectoral qualifications and the meta-frameworks. The conference heard video contributions from two sectors in advance of the main discussion.

### Experience of the Aviation Sector (Irish Aviation Authority)

Aviation is one sector in Ireland which is tackling the challenge of reconciling the international sectoral qualifications of aviation workers with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Brian Joyce of the Irish Aviation Authority spoke of the commitment to ensuring that all training within the sector is accredited and can be mapped to the NFQ. Their aim is to get all of the sectoral qualifications in the aviation industry structured in such a way that they can be mapped on to the NFQ by 2012.

The Irish aviation sector has managed engagement with the NFQ through partnership with education and training providers. This partnership operates on the basis that the IAA are the industry experts and the providers are the education and training experts most capable of engaging with the framework directly. The IAA, in turn, provides an industry input to programme design; helps providers to evaluate the needs of the sector and evaluates education and training programmes based on those needs. Another key route to success has been educating the relevant people in the aviation sector about how the NFQ actually operates, so that the aviation sector as a whole appreciates the value of the framework.

### Experience of the IT sector (European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) Foundation)

Frank Mockler, Programme Development Manager for the ECDL Foundation, gave the conference a view from the perspective of a major provider of international computer skills certification programmes. Their approach has operated on two levels: engaging with the emergence of the European Qualifications Framework in a general way; and helping their licencees in individual European countries to complete their mapping exercises to national qualifications

frameworks. Sharing best practices and relevant experience learned from other national partners' mapping work is a key part of that process.

Problems can occur with this model, however, if the same ECDL certified programme is mapped in a different way in different countries, potentially ending up mapped to the EQF in an inconsistent way. It was asked whether there is potential to develop quality assurance guidelines and or mechanisms for sharing information between national bodies to avoid this kind of inconsistency. Alternatively, mechanisms to arbitrate or mediate such inconsistencies will be necessary. EQF shows that there is a benefit in the establishment of a shared reference point for a sector like computer training. From their perspective, exploring, through the EQF, the possibilities of establishing a more comprehensive sectoral framework in areas like user IT skills might be a productive approach.

### The 'Parallel Universe'

In responding to video contributions from the sectors, Jens Bjornavold of Cedefop used the concept of a "parallel universe" to explain the relationship between sectoral qualifications and the traditional state-based systems of qualifications. Originally, making a reference point between this parallel universe and the EQF was seen as very important, but the conference heard that there is still much work to do in making usable links between the EQF and sectoral qualifications, which will help learners to make better decisions on how they can combine the two worlds. Sjur Bergan of the Council of Europe agreed with the suggestion from Jim Murray that some education and training providers and public systems may still feel uncomfortable with the concept of these 'stateless qualifications'. He argued that this is short-sighted because sectoral qualifications are an important element within the education and training environment, often with strong links to employment. It is crucial to the learner that such qualifications

be recognised and therefore public authorities have a responsibility to engage with them. This means making it easier for the learner to evaluate the quality of a given qualification, and whether the qualification will be transferable to other contexts. For those reasons, tackling how sectoral qualifications relate to qualifications frameworks has to be a priority.

### How can sectoral qualifications be linked with the qualifications frameworks?

The conference heard that there are two possible ways of linking sectoral qualifications to the frameworks, but that both were in some way problematic. One obvious way is for sectoral qualifications to be linked directly to individual national qualifications frameworks. The assembled experts provided several examples of national systems where sectoral providers have successfully engaged with NQFs in this way<sup>4</sup>, and it was argued that the willingness of the various NQFs to forge links with sectoral qualification providers will be crucial to the choices learners are offered. The advantage of this nationally-based approach is seen to be the clear quality assurance which takes place, but this raises an issue over whether a sectoral qualification has to be separately linked with the national systems in all of the separate countries before it can be considered to be linked to the meta-framework? This places what may be regarded as an undue burden on sectoral qualification providers and, perhaps, national frameworks. It also raises the question posed by the ECDL Foundation of what happens if the placement of sectoral qualifications on different NQFs leads to the same qualifications being mapped to different levels of the EQF. The importance of developing a mediation/arbitration process to consider such issues was highlighted.

Another suggested way to proceed would be to link sectoral qualifications directly with the European meta-frameworks, but this leads to a different set of issues and questions raised: Who would have responsibility for overseeing that these links are valid,

in the way the national systems have responsibility for the quality assurance when the links are made with a NQF? If the links between the sectoral qualifications and the meta-frameworks are 'soft', how will the different claims to compatibility be tracked?

### **Building a better relationship between sectoral qualifications and the traditional qualifications frameworks**

There was an acceptance among many participants that sectoral qualifications have an important role to play in promoting lifelong learning and mobility because they bring diversity to the education and training system and are responsive to learners' needs. The point was also made that there can be a tendency to assume that sectoral ('stateless') qualifications should have to adapt to fit the traditional state-based model of qualifications and quality assurance in order to be fully recognised by the state system. It was argued this assumption may limit the flexibility and responsiveness of these qualifications. It was similarly pointed out that state-based qualifications have their own merits that may not be fully appreciated outside the state system and perhaps what is needed is a system of engagement and quality assurance that avoids simply imposing traditions and cultures from one sector on another.

One suggested way forward in improving the relationship between sectoral qualifications and the qualifications frameworks is to provide clear guidance to sectoral providers about what a qualification should be like, and how it should be described. This would assist those involved in national and meta-frameworks to appreciate the nature and quality of these sectoral qualifications which, in turn, would facilitate the recognition of such qualifications by state-based systems. The Europass documents were suggested as one example of how additional information might be made available in an agreed format to assist understanding of a qualification. This additional description would be a clear step

towards more transparent quality assurance of sectoral qualifications. Jens Bjornavold developed this point to highlight how the EQF is already going beyond the basic idea of providing recognition to sectoral qualifications, as many companies and sectors are now using the framework to locate and contextualise the programmes they provide—using the meta-framework as a reference point—a way to say 'our training fits here'. This reflects the view that meta and national frameworks add value to qualifications.

The fact that companies and sectors are seeking to locate their qualifications in this way is a positive step, but given the importance the conference placed on sectoral qualifications in encouraging lifelong learning, it is clear that further effort is required in clarifying and improving the relationship between these sectoral qualifications and the national and meta-frameworks.

#### **Issues identified during the discussion:**

- Further consideration needs to be given to how sectoral qualifications can engage with national and meta-frameworks. It may be too unwieldy to expect sectoral qualifications to engage with every national framework individually. If this is so, how many links to NQFs are sufficient for broader acceptance of linkage to EQF?
- Whilst avoiding the expectation that stateless qualifications should adapt to become 'state-like', it would be beneficial to provide additional guidance on how such qualifications could be described in order to increase understanding e.g. based on learning outcomes, quality assurance arrangements etc

## 6. Global Frameworks and the International Perspective: Issues, Opportunities and Challenges

### Questions raised by issues paper:

- If the New Zealand NQF has been linked to the Irish NQF and the Irish NQF has been referenced to the EQF, does that mean that the New Zealand NQF can be considered referenced to the EQF, at least informally, as a soft linkage?
- Will such second-hand linkages have any effect on recognition practice in Europe or in the non-European countries concerned?
- What further networking or agreements are desirable to develop articulation between NQFs inside and outside Europe?
- What potential exists, if any, to link the various meta-framework initiatives?

### Reactions: Arjen Deij, John Dawkins, Meredith Edwards and Cliff Adelman

***'Nations which learn from other nations grow. Those who don't, don't'* – Cliff Adelman, Institute for Higher Education Policy, United States of America.**

The rapid expansion of qualification frameworks worldwide in the last decade was a recurring theme at the conference. Arjen Deij of the European Training Foundation noted that more than 100 countries worldwide were in the process of developing qualifications frameworks and very many of these national frameworks are linked to at least one transnational framework. Regional qualifications frameworks have also been discussed in a number of regions worldwide, including *inter alia* the Southern Africa Development Community, the Gulf Cooperation Community and the ASEAN community. John Dawkins, Chair of the Australian Qualifications Framework Council emphasised that work on national qualifications frameworks seems by its very nature to lead to greater linkages between different nations. The Bologna and EQF processes were seen by conference experts, from Europe and beyond, as a major influence on the way in which qualifications frameworks are developing worldwide. Productive relationships with these various international frameworks will be crucial

in enabling meaningful recognition and mobility, helping Europe to welcome learners from other countries and enabling Europe's learners to expand their educational experiences internationally.

### Learning from each other

The development of the qualifications frameworks around the world has been characterised by a process of ongoing learning. The Bologna Process learned a great deal from the pioneering national frameworks in Australia, South Africa, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Within Europe, the development of the EQF was profoundly influenced by the previous experience of Bologna. In turn, both these meta-frameworks have influenced developments within the EU and in countries beyond. Many countries not within the Bologna or EQF processes are using or adapting Bologna and the EQF as a tool to design their own frameworks, so that they are comparable with the EU. In turn, Europe can now learn from other countries' experiences, and get perspectives on what they think Europe can do better. The Bologna Forum, established in 2009, indicates that competitiveness, mobility and recognition are shared international concerns.

### Australia and New Zealand

Within Australia, it is considered crucial to have a qualifications framework that both encourages foreign students to visit Australia and facilitates the many Australians who travel overseas for education and work. For this to work, it is important that the various international frameworks relate to each other as effectively as possible – this will facilitate learners in developing their skills through flexible lifelong learning. It was stated that for Australia, increased alignment with their neighbours and with Europe is a priority, but the process for achieving that alignment is not yet clear. The recent project between the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) to undertake a mapping exercise of the Irish and Australian qualifications frameworks suggests one way forward for developing quality-assured links between



frameworks at opposite ends of the world. The objective of the project is to explore the possibility of a formal alignment of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Australian Qualifications Framework. Similarly, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority has recently undertaken a joint project with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland to reference their frameworks to each other. The project methodology draws heavily on that used for the verification and referencing of NQFs with the European meta-frameworks. The effective linking of these frameworks with the Irish NFQ, which is in turn linked to the European meta-frameworks, raises a question of whether this creates a transitive link between the Australian and New Zealand systems and the European overarching frameworks, and what effect this would have on recognition practices in Europe or in the non-European countries concerned.

### The American experience

In a good example of how different educational systems can learn from each other's experience, the system in the United States has looked more to the sectoral and Tuning models<sup>5</sup> from Europe for ideas. This focus was regarded as most appropriate because the U.S. system is decentralized: it is comprised of providers from the public, private-not-for-profit, and for-profit sectors, and incorporates a system of encouraging progression pathways throughout the education system. Cliff Adelman of the U.S. Institute for Higher Education Policy argued that qualifications frameworks in America will emerge over a longer period from developments based around an expanding experience with Tuning, and are unlikely to be government driven. However, one key similarity with the European approach is that within these Tuning efforts, the focus is on getting teams within the disciplines to develop student learning outcomes and learning objectives and thereby building a qualifications framework from the ground up based on these outcomes. From the American perspective, Europe still has work to do in refining the language of learning outcomes, so that they are sufficiently

detailed to be of assistance to programme designers, but remain user friendly for students. The U.S. is also facing up to the problem of improving the relationship between academic and occupationally-orientated systems and investigating how the two can be best designed to develop individuals with both types of skills, and to ensure these skills can be acquired at various points along the lifelong-learning continuum.

### Challenges and Opportunities of increased global linkage

The influence of the Bologna and EQF models worldwide means that many countries outside Europe are designing their qualifications frameworks informed by the European meta-frameworks. One key question addressed by the conference was how much linkage there should be globally, and how trust and quality assurance can be maintained in such global linkages, given the diversity of systems involved. The expansion of international qualifications frameworks should not outstrip the creation of trust, which has been the basis for success to date in projects like the linking of the New Zealand and Irish qualifications frameworks, but it will be difficult to build up numerous quality-assured linkages that do not require inordinate amounts of work for all participants. The idea of linking meta-frameworks suggests one possible way forward, but much work remains to be done in this area. The diversity that is the natural, and in many ways desirable, outcome of the expansion of qualifications frameworks worldwide should result in better learning outcomes for learners, but will present challenges for creating reliable systems for recognition and mobility. Dialogue focused around the common area of learning outcomes, and collaboration between policy makers and practitioners, will be the basis for creating increased mobility for learners worldwide.

#### Issues identified during the discussion:

- The importance of accountability was highlighted – to policy makers and to students;
- The importance of the 'bigger picture' – we must remember what are we trying to achieve

5 TUNING Educational Structures in Europe started in 2000 and is an approach to (re-)designing, developing, implementing, evaluating and enhancing quality first, second and third cycle degree programmes. The Tuning outcomes, as well as its tools, are presented in a range of Tuning publications, which institutions and their academics are invited to test and use in their own setting. The Tuning approach has been developed by and is meant for higher education institutions. For further information, please see: <http://tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/>

## 7. Conclusion

The conference closed with a summing up of the day's proceedings, delivered by Howard Davies of the European University Association. Drawing together the various strands of opinion expressed across each of the thematic sessions, this short plenary session set out both broad statements of principle and a roadmap of what lies ahead for stakeholders involved in building qualifications frameworks at national and international level. Published already online in the form of a Conference Statement, it is reproduced here as a summary of key conference outcomes.

### Vision

If qualifications frameworks are to achieve their full potential to support individuals' lifelong learning and mobility, mutual trust and understanding is essential. Discussions to date on qualifications frameworks and related reforms have tended to take place separately amongst stakeholders of different parts of the education and training system. For qualifications frameworks to realise their full potential, there is a need for greater cohesion. To achieve this, opportunities should be harnessed to bring together the communities involved in national qualifications frameworks (for vocational education and training (VET), higher education (HE) or lifelong learning), sectoral qualifications and recognition. Ultimately, we are all trying to achieve the same objectives, but in different ways: we want individuals to have their learning recognised and be able to move with that learning between education and training sectors and between countries. The multiplicity of ways we are going about this, both at a European and a national level, whilst in itself desirable, requires effective communication and measures to address any difficulties and confusions that arise.

### Two Meta- frameworks

Coherence between the two meta-frameworks should be ensured at national level, including through coordinated self-certifications. Individual states and the relevant authorities have a prerogative to decide the manner of implementing the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area ('Bologna Framework') and associated reforms and European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LLL). It is imperative, however, if frameworks are to have any effect, that national frameworks meet national challenges for the development of education and training systems.

### Recognition and Mobility

Real recognition and mobility need to be achieved in order to deliver benefits to individual citizens. Frameworks offer potential to enhance the possibilities for recognition and mobility. We acknowledge that this is a difficult task given the diversity of the education and training systems involved. Nevertheless, there is significant potential in enabling recognition services/bodies to make greater use of qualifications frameworks to support the recognition of qualifications, and in using the experience of recognition practitioners to inform the design and implementation of frameworks.

### Professional Directives

The 2012 review of European Directive 2005/36/EC gives a timely opportunity for an update, in line with recent competence-based developments in education and qualifications systems, to clarify the interplay between the Directive and European meta-frameworks.

### **Sectoral Qualifications and Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks**

The level of understanding that exists within and between sectors adds value to overall cohesiveness at national and European level. The relationship of sectoral qualifications to national qualifications frameworks and the two meta-frameworks needs to be clarified in order to realise lifelong learning and to facilitate permeability between vocational education & training (VET) and higher education (HE). Further clarity should be sought on appropriate ways to achieve such recognition through national and meta-frameworks.

### **Global perspective**

Mobility and recognition of learning are global issues and European developments are contributing to work in this area. Further consideration of how to articulate European developments with global developments is required since, if successful, this can genuinely provide enhanced mobility and recognition. Robust quality assurance, firmly based on learning outcomes, is key to success in this area. Examples of activities in this area include the Ireland-Australia project which explores formal alignment between the Irish National Framework of Qualifications and the Australian Qualifications Framework, and the completed project to explore the compatibility of qualifications in Ireland and New Zealand.

### **Weblink to Report**

**<http://www.nqai.ie/QualificationsFrameworksConference2010.html>**

# Appendix 1

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