

Speech - Gordon Clark

Qualifications for lifelong learning

Cedefop conference

5-6 October 2009

Thessaloniki

On behalf of the Commission, I would like firstly to thank Cedefop, its Chairman, Director and staff for its organisation of this timely conference. As, on so many occasions in the past, the Centre is actively supporting policy development in a crucial field for European growth and jobs, which is particularly relevant for economic recovery.

Qualifications have always been a key issue of European cooperation, and this is not surprising: the free movement of people in a European labour market has been a major Community goal since 1957. For this to become a reality, qualifications from many diverse systems need to be adequately understood, valued and recognised throughout Europe.

While the labour market has become Europe-wide, the development, award and recognition of qualifications are, of course, a national competence linked to the provision of education and training. Although there is a well established European mutual recognition system for the regulated professions within the internal market,

for many people who wish to study or work in another European country obtaining adequate recognition or acceptance of their qualifications remains a real challenge. This therefore remains a significant barrier to mobility for both employment and learning purposes.

However, there has been solid progress in recent years, particularly related to the very successful development and implementation of the EQF. What I'd like to do here today is to give my personal view on my experience in this field since 1999 of how European perceptions and attitudes to qualifications have changed radically and to show what a long way we've come and give you some reasons why we can now be optimistic for the future. In order to plan for and predict the future, we need to remember where we have come from.

The early days

In the early days of the EEC, much of the focus was on VET, in line with the emphasis given to the European labour market. Some of you may be surprised to hear that a 1963 decision, laying down general principles for implementing a common vocational training policy, called for "levels of training to be harmonised progressively", "with a view to the mutual recognition of certificates".

Harmonisation was soon found to be impossible and inappropriate, so the focus shifted to comparison. In the eighties, Cedefop undertook a major exercise in which 219 VET occupations in 19 sectors were compared in detail. It became clear that this approach also would not be sustainable given the pace of the development of VET systems and certificates.

The term "mutual recognition" became the preserve of the 1989 Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications for the purpose of access to the labour market linked to the regulated professions.

In the eighties and nineties, the European debate on qualifications also widened to include higher education linked to the appearance and growing success of mobility programmes, as well as to a new awareness of the lifelong learning perspective.

In 1997, 25 European ministers of education signed *The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region*, developed by the Council of Europe and the UNESCO. While some higher education diplomas had been included already in 1989 in the recognition system for the regulated professions, the Convention addressed the recognition of diplomas in a wider perspective, namely for learning purposes.

In 1999, the Convention became part of the Bologna process, which was eventually joined by all EU Member States. Aiming at convergent reforms of higher education systems, the Bologna process and its 3 cycle system clearly make HE degrees more readable and comparable. So through the Bologna process, HE was able to show the way forward.

A specific European Year of LLL in 1997 drew attention to the importance of that perspective in terms of learning pathways and increasing access to further education and training.

And at the same time that the euro was being prepared, there was also a growing awareness of the need to find tools that increased trust in other countries'

qualifications. Thus we have the symbolism of the "currency" that Peter Kreiml highlighted.

This leads us to Lisbon

The Lisbon European Council Conclusions of 2000 mark a significant change in the activities of the EU in the field of education and training. To contribute to the development of a knowledge based economy, the European Council called for the breaking down of barriers to mobility and promotion of lifelong learning - both depending on increased transparency of qualifications. So we had a new focus and impetus on qualifications.

But the word transparency is crucial. We moved in 1999/2000 from talking about the harmonisation and recognition of qualifications to talking about their transparency. Here I must pay tribute to the influential role played by the European Forum on the Transparency of Qualifications, which existed from 1998 to 2000, and in which Cedefop and Jens Bjornavold played a key role. The Transparency Forum was my own first contact with active and open European cooperation in this field involving MS, experts and stakeholders. I have no doubt that this Forum was a valuable model and method of exchanging ideas and practice, which has had a major impact on the subsequent important developments relating to qualifications and competences, including the Copenhagen Process, Europass and the EQF itself.

Following the Lisbon declaration, European Education ministers agreed in 2002 a work programme towards the future objectives of education and training systems (E+T 2010) and a resolution on Lifelong Learning (LLL). These provided a political mandate and set the scene for enhanced European cooperation including

on qualifications. Having personally been closely involved, I will use some time to reflect on this process.

I would start by saying that, since Lisbon, our understanding of qualifications has changed. This is because our understanding of learning itself has changed as we have realised that the LLL perspective is crucial from early childhood education to adult learning. Our Commission communication of 2002 on LLL was instrumental in stressing that all learning should be valued. And in stressing that lifelong learning needs to be accompanied by lifewide learning, meaning that learning takes place in all parts of life whether through formal education and training or through non formal and informal learning. Students and trainees should be able to progress between various levels and types of education regardless of where they have acquired their prior knowledge, skills and competences.

This challenged our concept and understanding of qualifications – how could they reflect not only formal education and training but also be opened up to other forms of learning, whether in the workplace or in other areas of life? How could an individual's learning outcomes deriving from work, or from for example voluntary work experience be assessed and recorded in a certificate or diploma.

The Education and Training 2010 work programme specifically called for the development of national systems to validate learning that takes place outside formal settings.

The 2002 Copenhagen Declaration on the promotion of enhanced European co-operation in VET then took this further by stressing that priority should be given to developing a set of common principles for the validation of non-formal and

informal learning.

The common principles were adopted by the Education Council in 2004 and since then the development of systems for the validation of non formal and informal learning at national level has been impressive.

Learning outcomes

I have mentioned the importance of "transparency", "LLL" and the "validation of non-formal learning". The most recent and most challenging key concept for qualifications and indeed for education and training systems which I want to stress is that of "learning outcomes".

At the European level, the term learning outcomes was introduced as an approach in the Joint Progress Report 2004 of the E+T 2010 work programme when it called for the development of European Qualifications Framework. With the rapid development of the EQF and its adoption in 2008, and with the development of NQFs linked to the EQF, learning outcomes have rapidly become a key dimension of today's debate on qualifications and learning in general.

This is a fundamental change in how we view education and training. Moving away from the systems and institutional basis of learning towards the achievements of the learner, this learning outcomes based approach gives qualifications the role of validating and valuing knowledge, skills and competences, rather than measuring educational careers and study programmes.

Learning outcomes create a common language between education and training

systems within and between countries as well as between the worlds of education and work. This common language should contribute to a better understanding of qualifications and build trust among stakeholders.

European tools and initiatives

Under the new updated framework for European cooperation in education and training adopted in May 2009 (ET2020) the Member States, together with the Commission and stakeholders, have given top priority to continuing to work on this basis to increase the transparency, recognition and quality of competences and qualifications and facilitate the mobility of learners and workers.

The most important thing we have to do is to promote and support the effective implementation of the common European tools which have been already been developed and agreed, primarily our overarching and comprehensive framework which is the EQF. As you are all aware it provides a common reference to compare and understand qualifications from different education and training systems using the common language of learning outcomes and underpinned by quality assurance principles common to VET and HE. We also have to work for the implementation of various other tools which are closely related to the EQF and to learning outcomes: particularly the Key Competences Recommendation, the Europass instrument, ECVET, ECTS, EQARF.

The EQF has created a considerable momentum for the development of national reforms aimed at making LLL a reality, particularly relating to the governance and opening up of qualifications systems. All countries are developing or implementing national qualifications frameworks for lifelong learning based on learning outcomes. The EQF's implementation is thus progressing well. All participating

countries have committed themselves to reference their national qualification frameworks to the EQF (27 will have completed their referencing by 2010/2011 and Ireland and Malta have already finalised their referencing in 2009).

It is clear, however, that the successful implementation of the EQF in the long term will depend on continuing to build greater trust and transparency between countries and stakeholders. Quality assurance has a key role in this. And the newly adopted EQARF and national quality assurance systems are indispensable in this.

Credit systems such as the ECTS and ECVET are key solutions to supporting individuals' lifelong learning paths: to facilitate validation, recognition and the accumulation of learning outcomes acquired during a stay in another country or in different learning contexts. The ECTS has been implemented for some time, while the official launch conference of ECVET and EQARF will take place on 17-18 November 2009 in Brussels.

For qualifications to be trusted they most of all need to be relevant to skills needs, And this requires a common language between education and the labour market so that learning outcomes based qualifications can be more easily understood- the continuing need for greater "Transparency". The EU's New Skills for New Jobs initiative, in which Cedefop is once again playing a key role, is currently addressing this challenge. This initiative aims to anticipate the skills needs — and also the skills gaps — which are emerging in the European labour market and to improve the matching of knowledge, skills and competences, ie learning outcomes with the needs of society and the economy.

I should also mention a number of other key issues that are important for

qualifications to be trusted and which also need a change of paradigm. They include the development of learning outcomes in curricula and pedagogies, in teacher training, in assessment and standards. However, we are already able to detect a clear shift at the national level to address these needs.

In conclusion

We have come a very long way since 1999 with major progress in the field of qualifications and lifelong learning both at the national and European levels. There is now considerable momentum for change and development. A fundamental shift in thinking, policy and practice has been taking place. Initiatives, frameworks and instruments related to qualifications and learning outcomes are playing a crucial role in making lifelong learning a reality. I am, therefore, optimistic but, if we are to avoid mere bureaucratic mechanisms, the challenge of implementation will always remain work in progress. It will require permanent monitoring and evaluation and the commitment and trust of stakeholders. The instruments we have developed must remain relevant and useful for citizens and the labour market, flexible enough to adapt to their rapidly evolving needs.

Support and evidence for policy development is essential, so your discussions here during this event I'm sure be very useful. I am very much looking forward to your reflections and feedback. Thank you.