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QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS AS TOOLS TO FURTHER RECOGNITION

Qualifications frameworks they may be described as instruments providing a description of the full set of qualifications that make up an education system and the way in which these qualifications interlink to make up a whole. Qualifications describe how learners can move within and between education systems. Hence, they describe various learning paths, since a given qualification may be obtained in different ways, including through non-traditional paths.

Qualifications frameworks have several functions but for recognition purposes the most important function is that of transparency instruments. Put simply, qualifications frameworks should make it easier even for someone who is not intimately familiar with a given education system to understand where a specific qualification is placed within that system¹. To the extent national qualifications frameworks are described in similar terms, comparison across systems should be greatly facilitated. In the context of the European Higher Education Area as well as that of the Europe Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF), this comparison is further facilitated by the existence of overarching frameworks. Put simply, these provide the outer frames within which national frameworks are developed.

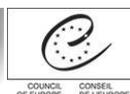
Once developed, national frameworks are self certified as being compatible with the overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) and/or the EQF. For the national frameworks concerned, the self certification² therefore establishes a relationship between national qualifications by describing and justifying their linkage to the overarching framework. Even where no overarching frameworks exist, however, national frameworks described in similar terms provide very helpful indications for recognition purposes, and this is important for recognition of qualifications between systems of the EHEA and other parts of the world. It should also be of interest to note that an exercise comparing a national qualifications framework of a

¹ The arguments and partly the text in this part of the report are based on Sjur Bergan: "Qualifications Frameworks: an Instrument to Resolve Substantial Differences?", in E. Stephen Hunt and Sjur Bergan (eds.): *Developing Attitudes to Recognition: Substantial Differences in an Age of Globalisation* (Strasbourg 2010: Council of Europe Publishing. Council of Europe Higher Education Series No. 13), pp. 123 - 137

² Called referencing in the case of the EQF.



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country of the EHEA (Ireland) and one outside of the EHEA (New Zealand)³ has already been conducted and further exercises of this kind may be expected in the years to come.

From a recognition point of view, it is also important to note that qualifications frameworks emphasize learning outcomes ó what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on the basis of a qualification ó more than the formal procedure that leads to the qualifications. This is not to say that learning outcomes are yet a common currency or perfectly described nor that procedural or formal aspects of qualifications are irrelevant. However, processes and structures cannot substitute learning outcomes, which is to say that if a learner has demonstrably acquired the learning outcomes expected for a given qualification, it should not matter how (s)he has acquired these learning outcomes.

Broadly, a qualification may be said to be made up of five main components⁴:

- quality
- workload
- level
- profile
- learning outcomes.

All of these relate to qualifications frameworks and all are important in determining whether there are substantial differences between qualifications. It is recalled that 'substantial differences' is the key recognition criterion in terms of the Council of Europe/UNESCO (Lisbon) Recognition Convention, which is the only legally binding text of the EHEA.

Quality is a *sine qua non* for a qualification to be viable, and that is why provision for quality assurance is an important part of a national qualifications frameworks, to the point where the criteria for self certification specify that the self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies in the country in question.

Workload and *level* are perhaps the two elements of qualifications where the link to qualifications frameworks is most obvious. If a qualification is assigned a given *level* in a national framework, that is a very strong indication that there is no substantial difference if the similar qualification in the country where recognition is sought is assigned a similar level. In cases where the national frameworks concerned do not have the same number of levels, or where the levels are defined differently, the reference of

³ <http://www.nqai.ie/documents/nzqaandnqaiframeworks06.09.10.pdf>

⁴ See Sjur Bergan: *Qualifications. Introduction to a Concept* (Strasbourg 2007: Council of Europe Publishing, Council of Europe Higher Education Series No. 6)

these frameworks to the QF-EHEA and/or the EQF will provide a good indication of comparability.

Workload can give a similar indication, but the workload underpinning a qualification needs to be assessed with some caution. That not all credit systems are similar to the ECTS, so that e.g. US credits are measured differently, is an obvious caveat. Within the EHEA, however, ECTS is now to all intents and purposes the only 'common currency' and where countries have different national credit systems, they may be expected to specify and justify how these relate to the ECTS. Perhaps less obviously, workload is an expression of the effort required by an average student starting from a stipulated basis. For learners who have followed alternative learning paths, e.g. through experiential learning, or whose prior knowledge is significantly different from that of the 'average' student, an individual assessment may be needed to determine the workload required. Workload is therefore a helpful indicator, but it should be assessed with caution. An insufficient number of credits may be an indicator of a substantial difference, and workload should be controlled against level and learning outcomes.

Profile is an indication of the specific areas in which a qualification has been obtained. This can be a broad area, like history, or a more narrowly defined area, like medieval Russian history. The higher the level of the qualification, the more likely it is that the profile will be a narrow one. At first sight, profile would seem like an obvious criterion for assessing whether a difference is substantial or not. However, in many cases the extent to which the profile of a qualification indicates a substantial difference will be less obvious. It is worth keeping in mind that the difference should be substantial in relation to the purpose for which recognition is sought. Regardless of the academic specialty, higher education at a given level gives learners a number of generic competences, such as communication skills, analytical ability and aptitude for teamwork⁵. For some purposes, generic competences may be as important as subject specific ones, and in this case it would be difficult to argue that a difference in profile is in itself a substantial difference. More frequently, however, the issue may be whether a difference in profile is important enough to be substantial. Unlike for quality, workload and level, profile is a factor for which qualifications frameworks are unlikely to provide most of the answers credentials evaluators may seek in order to recognize a given qualification.

⁵ The issue of generic and subject specific competences has been explored in detail by the Tuning Project <http://tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/>, see also González, Julia and Wagenaar, Robert (eds.): *Tuning Educational Structures in Europe: Universities' Contribution to the Bologna process. Final Report Pilot Project Phase 2* (Bilbao and Groningen 2005: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Deusto).

The fifth element, learning outcomes⁶, is ultimately what qualifications are about. What do learners know and understand, and what are they able to do? If their learning outcomes are compatible with those stipulated for the corresponding qualification in the country in which they seek recognition, it would be very difficult to argue there is a substantial difference even if there were considerable differences in one or more of the other elements that make up a qualification. The caveat is that learning outcomes are relatively difficult to describe and to verify and that we are still quite far from a situation in which recognition practice can be based on learning outcomes alone. When learning outcomes will be described more fully, qualifications frameworks should be of considerable help in identifying generic the learning outcomes associated with a given qualification, and these again relate to quality, workload and level. To identify subject specific learning outcomes, however, which relate to profile, credentials evaluators will most likely need to go beyond the nation qualifications framework and look at the description of the study program in question. Learning outcomes as described in study programs should, however, be phrased in ways that are consistent with the national qualifications framework.

In conclusion, qualifications frameworks will be important tools to facilitate the recognition of qualifications. They will provide clear indications as concerns quality, level and workload whereas the exact profile of a qualification will normally not be extensively described in a national qualifications frameworks. In terms of learning outcomes, national qualifications frameworks will most likely give firm indications of generic learning outcomes whereas subject specific learning outcomes will be better described in study programs.

A final caveat is that while qualifications frameworks should facilitate recognition, this should not be taken to mean imply it is more difficult or even impossible to assess qualifications from systems that do not have national qualifications frameworks. This is the situation with which credentials evaluators have been faced in almost all cases until now, and it is a situation with which they will be faced in many cases in the future. Qualifications frameworks should be seen as helpful instruments, and they should be used with common sense where they exist, but where they do not exist, the situation will be no different than it has been so far.

⁶ For good introductions to learning outcomes, see Adam, Stephen: "An introduction to learning outcomes: A consideration of the nature, function and position of learning outcomes in the creation of the European Higher Education Area", article B.2.3-1 in Eric Froment, Jürgen Kohler, Lewis Purser and Lesley Wilson (eds.): *EUA Bologna Handbook – Making Bologna Work* (Berlin 2006: Raabe Verlag) and Kennedy, Declan: *Writing and Using Learning Outcomes: A Practical Guide* (Cork 2007: University College Cork)

