Quality: a requirement for generating trust in qualifications

To be of any value, a qualification must be trusted. Whether a certificate or diploma can be used for employment or further education largely depends on the learning outcomes acquired by the individual who has completed a programme and passed the required exams.

Systematic **quality assurance arrangements** underpin trust. Education and training institutions which lack quality assurance arrangements risk finding themselves in the company of fake 'qualifications'.

Trust is also fundamental to ongoing implementation of qualifications frameworks across Europe ([1]). Qualifications frameworks aim to make it easier for individuals to use qualifications across institutional and national borders. This requires describing qualifications as **learning outcomes**.

Systematic quality assurance makes it possible to judge whether there is real value attached to the paper presented by a candidate.

Focus of quality assurance systems

There is broad agreement on the need to connect 'the three Qs' – qualifications, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance. But how, exactly, should this be done? Traditionally, quality assurance systems centre on delivery of education – for example, on quality of teaching and training. The shift to learning outcomes now taking place across European education and training systems, along with rapid implementation of comprehensive qualifications frameworks ([2]) means quality assurance systems must also shift their focus. This becomes clear if we look at the way in which the EQF recommendation defines a qualification.

Box 1 **Links between European qualifications frameworks and quality assurance**

The 2008 European qualifications framework (EQF) recommendation lays out in Annex III the principles of quality assurance that must underpin implementation of the framework. This has been taken forward in the 10 criteria governing referencing of national qualifications frameworks to the EQF ([3]). Criteria 5 and 6 explicitly refer to the need to document existing quality assurance arrangements, underlining the importance of these for ensuring confidence when comparing national qualifications frameworks. The 2009 recommendation on the European quality assurance reference framework for vocational education and training (EQAVET) further states that the framework should 'support the implementation of EQF, in particular the quality of the certification of learning outcomes'.

([1]) The concept paper underpinning EQF (Cedefop 2005) argues that a European 'metaframework' should promote 'zones of mutual trust' referring to common European reference levels defined through learning outcomes.

([2]) In the five years since adoption of the EQF, 29 European Union Member States, candidate countries and members of the European Economic Area have developed comprehensive national qualifications frameworks.

([3]) See criteria 5 and 6 in 'Criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF', available at http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/criteria_en.pdf.

Box 2   Definition of qualification

> A qualification is 'a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards'.

This definition draws attention to elements of certification which determine trust.

These are:

- learning outcomes;
- assessment and validation;
- standards;
- the competent body.

Qualifications frameworks in Europe: an instrument for transparency and change (2012)

http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/20509.aspx

Increased focus on outcomes – and the challenges this raises for quality assurance – does not mean that quality of education input should receive less attention. The message is rather that existing quality assurance arrangements underestimate certification's importance. Of course, quality of all factors – input, processes and outcomes – are equally important.

Ensuring quality of learning outcomes

Use of learning outcomes – what a learner knows, understands and is able to do at the end of a learning process – increasingly shapes

European policy and practice in education and training. Learning outcomes are expected to make qualifications easier to understand, make qualification providers more accountable, and promote active learning. This depends on how learning outcomes are defined and applied. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution. Learning outcomes must be carefully defined and described to be fit for purpose.

Quality assurance arrangements need to monitor critically and improve systematically the way learning outcomes are used.

They need to focus on an appropriate level of detail, the balance between generic and specific skills and the extent to which descriptors of qualifications frameworks can be assessed or not. It is also necessary to assess critically how learning outcome descriptors influence teaching and training, and examine their effect on the learning process itself.

Quality of learning outcomes thus needs to be ensured systematically at several levels: elaborating descriptors of qualifications frameworks; setting qualification standards; writing curricula; and agreeing on assessment standards.

Quality assurance of assessment and validation

As qualification systems increasingly allow qualifications to be acquired through different learning pathways, assessment of learning outcomes becomes more important. Quality of these alternative pathways, such as work-based learning, can only be ensured by developing reliable ways of deciding whether the required/expected learning outcomes have been met or not.

For example, credibility of validation systems for non-formal learning depends on how reliably learning outcomes can be assessed. The European Council addresses these issues in its recommendation on the validation of non-formal

and informal learning (⁴) adopted in December 2012. It invites Member States to set up validation arrangements for non-formal and informal learning, and to link them to national qualifications frameworks and quality assurance arrangements. Attention to assessment and reliance on standards based on learning outcomes is reflected in the quality assurance arrangements for validation introduced across Europe (such as in France, Portugal and Finland).

Awarding qualifications: what is a 'competent body'?

Traditionally, a body awarding qualifications has been an educational institution, such as a university, or a public authority, such as a ministry of education. But we see more and more private companies (especially multinationals), sectoral bodies and international organisations awarding their own qualifications. To avoid a risk of producing flawed qualifications which could threaten credibility of a system, quality assurance arrangements must look beyond public sector institutions. This challenging new situation must be faced head-on.

International qualifications (2012)

http://www.cedefop.europa.eu /EN/publications/20265.aspx

Some Member States are already doing so. The Netherlands and Sweden have set quality criteria and procedures allowing them to include qualifications awarded outside the formal education and training sector in their national qualifications framework. To take the Dutch example, for a private company to have its qualification included in the national qualifications framework it needs first to be accredited for a duration of five years, indicate the qualifications framework level it sees as most appropriate, define the learning outcomes in accordance with the main elements of the Dutch qualifications framework level descriptors, specify the workload, define the assessment approaches applied, and provide a link to relevant occupational profiles.

Regulating and accepting such qualifications is expected to become a growing trend. About half the countries currently implementing national qualifications frameworks indicate (⁵) that they intend to open them to private and non-formal bodies in the coming period.

Quality of outcomes 'to given standards'

Quality assurance arrangements must pay particular attention to (re)defining and renewing education, training and occupational standards. Getting the standards right largely depends on cooperation between the labour market and education and training (as in Austria, Germany, Finland and Sweden). This is important for boosting relevance and credibility of these qualifications.

Policy options: different possibilities, a common objective

Rapid development of learning outcome-based frameworks indicates where Europe's priorities lie: to make qualifications easily understandable ('transparent') and comparable between countries, and to increase opportunities of moving between education and training institutions and different learning pathways ('permeability').

(⁴) Available at http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF.

(⁵) Cedefop/DG EAC survey accompanying peer-learning activity on 'Opening up national qualification frameworks', Sweden 28.2.2013.

To achieve this, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance mechanisms must work together systematically to guarantee confidence in qualifications. This interaction must focus on certification and seek to ensure quality of learning outcomes, assessment, awarding/ competent authorities and standards.
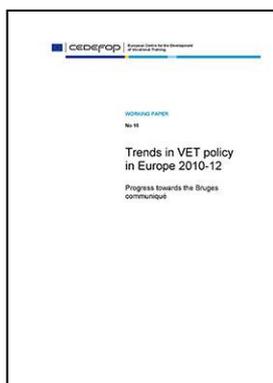
Trends in VET policy in Europe (2012)

http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/ EN/publications/20814.aspx

A broad range of education and training stakeholders (across general, vocational and higher education) and qualification providers (in the public as well as the private domain) must cooperate. The Irish decision to establish a single body for qualifications and quality assurance ([6]) shows that quality assurance should not only pertain to all levels and types of qualifications but also ensure that the certification process effectively generates credibility and trust.

Developments of European governance of education and training could strengthen the link between quality assurance and qualifications frameworks by adjusting the common quality principles of the EQF recommendation. Dialogue with all actors involved could improve quality assurance by considering the four dimensions outlined above: quality of learning outcomes, assessment and validation, standards, and competence of the awarding institution.

([6]) Amalgamating responsibilities of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and the Irish Universities Quality Board.

Forthcoming:

- **Analysis and overview of NQF developments in European countries**

Cedefop carries out research and comparative analysis of VET and lifelong learning and supports directly implementation of EQF and national qualifications frameworks addressing challenges such as the interaction between quality assurance and qualifications frameworks.

We invite you to address any queries to our 'Ask a VET expert' service:

http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Information -services/ask-a-vet-expert.aspx