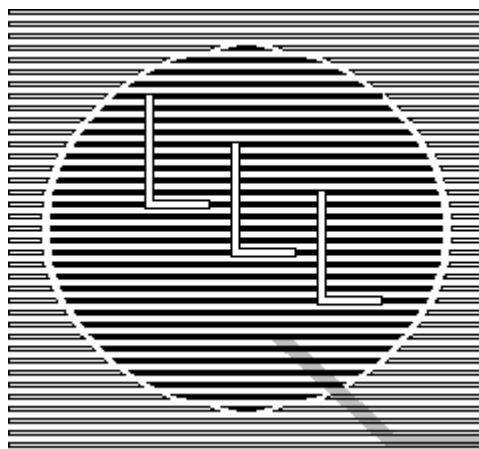


The Role of National Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning

An OECD activity



Report from Thematic Group 1:

The development and use of ‘Qualification Frameworks’ as a means of reforming and managing qualifications systems

*This paper is the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily
reflect the views of the OECD or the governments of its Member countries.*

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1. Introduction

This report forms a contribution to the OECD activity on ‘The Role of National Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning’. The activity, which was begun in 2001, is designed to investigate how different national qualifications systems influence the patterns and quality of lifelong learning within countries, and what actions within qualification systems countries can take to promote lifelong learning. It is examining countries’ experiences in designing and managing qualification systems and will attempt to identify the impact of different approaches and innovations upon lifelong learning and outcomes.

The investigation is being implemented primarily through the preparation and synthesis of Country Background Reports. However, it was realised from an early stage that the process would benefit from additional, thematically-focused inquiry into certain key aspects of the agenda. Three Thematic Groups were established, following the Country Representatives plenary meeting in Paris in November 2002, to explore and develop key themes that have emerged within the activity. The agendas for the three groups are:

- The development and use of ‘Qualification Frameworks’ as a means of reforming and managing qualification systems;
- Recognition of non-formal and informal learning;
- Involvement of stakeholders in qualifications systems.

The activity will result in a final synthesis report on the role of national qualification systems in the promotion of lifelong learning. The synthesis report will be based on the data emerging from the Country Background Reports, and will incorporate outcomes from the work of the Thematic Groups. The final report will be presented to the Education Committee of the OECD at its autumn 2004 meeting, and will be published in 2005.

This report assembles the products and outcomes of the work of Thematic Group 1 on the development and use of ‘Qualifications Frameworks’ as a means of reforming and managing qualification systems. It does not set out to synthesise the detailed work of the group, except in the general terms in this introduction; rather, it provides a compendium of main outputs, which separately and together can contribute to the wider OECD activity as a whole.

Methodology

The Group formed after the November 2002 plenary meeting in Paris. Ireland, with Greece, took the lead role in establishing the Group, beginning a process of document exchange by email that was continued throughout the work of this thematic group. This process was further enhanced by the initiation of a Smartgroups.com website. In this way, a small initial core group of participants gradually expanded (see ‘TG1 participants’ below) and a group agenda began to form. Group participants represented countries with extensive, well-established frameworks as well as those who have recently introduced them or are actively considering them. It also included participants from CEDEFOP, the European Union’s agency for the promotion of vocational education and training (VET) and the International Labour Organisation. This agenda provided the basis for a first meeting of the Group in Dublin in May 2003. A second

meeting of the Group took place in Athens in September 2003. This meeting enabled the Group to gather the results of the activity on the website and by email and to move forward towards this report.

Meetings of the Thematic Group

Two meetings of the Group were arranged, in Dublin (May 2003) and in Athens (September 2003). At the Dublin meeting, the possible rationales for reforming and managing qualification systems and the benefits of having qualification frameworks were explored. This discussion moved forward by seeking answers to a set of key questions:

- what is meant by a “qualification framework”?
- is it considered that reforms are necessary of the national qualifications system(s)?
- if reforms are necessary, what are the main drivers for these?
- is it considered that a framework of qualifications would contribute to the reform of qualifications systems?
- what benefits would a framework bring?
- what needs to be put in place to make the necessary changes possible?

Two approaches to the exploration of these issues were adopted: participating countries were asked to provide short case studies in line with an agreed template, and some members of the Group agreed to develop papers as a basis for further discussion.

At the Athens meeting, it was agreed that the Group’s work should provide a comparison of frameworks which would help increase understanding of the different types and purposes of frameworks, and should also provide models that countries might wish to consider when discussing reform of their qualification systems or the introduction of frameworks. An important issue identified was the need to communicate the purpose, benefits and meaning of qualification frameworks to those who do not (yet) have them.

Products

The Group discussed many aspects of frameworks in great detail and this report is a distillation of that detailed discussion. The Group developed a range of products which might assist in developing a general concept of qualification frameworks, provide an overview of current practices in various countries and an understanding of how frameworks can benefit qualification systems’ further development. These products comprise:

1. Definitions of qualification frameworks and qualification systems –developed in order to clarify the distinction between qualification frameworks and qualification systems and to contribute to a common understanding on the meaning of these terms.

2. Conditions for the introduction of qualification frameworks – frameworks have different purposes in various countries. For example, some are designed to bring coherence and simplicity and others to facilitate access for certain types of students and workers. A range of typical conditions for the introduction of frameworks was identified. These are illustrated in a synthesis of **case studies** developed by Group members to examine and clarify how frameworks in different countries compare to one another and a

model of how a **framework** has been introduced into a qualifications system. The emerging national framework of qualifications in Ireland is presented as such a model in Appendix 1.

3. Benefits of Qualification Frameworks - an analysis of the benefits of qualification frameworks to lifelong learning. These centre on increasing participation and promoting the targeting and distribution of learning opportunities.

4. Scenarios for the development of qualifications frameworks– this is a scoping exercise, in which members of the Group sketched out scenarios for the future development of qualifications frameworks in their countries

5. The international dimension of qualification frameworks – a note setting out the international issues that arise when considering qualification frameworks.

2. Products of the Thematic Group

2.1 Definitions: Qualifications Systems and Frameworks

In the course of the work of the Thematic Group, it became necessary to adopt working definitions of certain key concepts to enable discussion and common understanding. The following definitions are those adopted by the Group. They are presented here for further comment in the OECD activity as a whole.

Qualification system

Qualifications systems include all aspects of a country's activity that result in the recognition of learning. These systems include the means of developing and operationalising national or regional policy on qualifications, institutional arrangements, quality assurance processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society. Qualification systems may be more or less integrated and coherent. One feature of a qualification system may be an explicit framework of qualifications

Qualification framework

A qualifications framework is an instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved. This set of criteria may be implicit in the qualifications descriptors themselves or made explicit in the form of a set of level descriptors. The scope of frameworks may be comprehensive of all learning achievement and pathways or may be confined to a particular sector for example initial education, adult education and training or an occupational area. Some frameworks may have more design elements and a tighter structure than others; some may have a legal basis whereas others represent a consensus of views of social partners. All qualifications frameworks, however, establish a basis for improving the quality, accessibility, linkages and public or labour market recognition of qualifications within a country and internationally.

2.2 Purpose and contribution of Qualification Frameworks

In the work of the Group, it emerged that frameworks have different purposes in various countries. Some are designed more to bring coherence and simplicity, others to facilitate access to certain types of students and workers, others to bring a rationalisation in the number of qualifications, others for a combination of objectives etc. It was agreed that the Group could most usefully contribute to the debate, and to the understanding of the role of frameworks, by identifying the objectives, drivers of change, key benefits and conditions for the introduction of frameworks. This was done on the basis of a synthesis of case studies developed by Group members to examine and clarify how frameworks in different countries work and a recent example of the development of a national qualification framework and its introduction into a qualifications system

Members of Thematic Group 1 provided short case studies illustrating the situation in their countries in the matter of reform and management of the qualifications system(s) and the thinking in their countries as to the value of qualification frameworks. To facilitate the process, a template was used (see Appendix 2). Case studies were completed for Spain, Italy, UK (England, Wales, Northern Ireland), the Czech Republic, Japan, Australia, Greece and Ireland.

In interpreting the case studies, it was noted that qualification frameworks are associated primarily with vocational education and training (VET) in Spain, Greece, Czech Republic and Japan. In Ireland and the UK, the framework presented covers either all qualifications (Ireland) or all except higher education (UK). It is also noted that the state of play with respect to the introduction of a qualifications framework differs between the countries studied. Of the eight case studies, two (Greece and Japan) illustrate systems where qualifications frameworks have not (yet) been introduced. This country coverage demonstrated the diversity in scope and purpose of qualifications frameworks.

The case studies showed that although different kinds of frameworks exist or may be introduced, they share common features of coherence, integration of qualifications systems (or sub-systems) and common objectives to increase access, progression and flexibility of qualifications as a means to meet socio-economic needs and lifelong learning.

Purpose - why introduce a framework?

The debate on qualification frameworks is set in the context of broader debates and reform of vocational qualifications in most cases. The main concerns are to:

- 1) better match qualifications with knowledge, skills and competences and to better relate qualifications to occupational (and broader labour market) needs. The aim is to address present and future needs. It is clear that in some countries there is a tension between the objectives of facilitating lifelong learning and the labour market needs, at least in the short term;
- 2) bring coherence to sub-systems of qualifications, e.g., higher education, adult learning, school awards, and in particular VET qualifications, by creating an overarching framework for them;
- 3) support life-long learning (by opening up access, targeting investments and recognising non-formal and informal learning);

- 4) facilitate the involvement of political actors and stakeholders in VET, e.g., autonomous communities in Spain and social partners in a number of countries.

Drivers of Change

In general, government ministries with responsibility for Education and Labour appear to be the main drivers of change. In many cases, significant reforms of VET are underway and qualification frameworks are being considered or introduced in this context. In addition, particular groups play key roles depending on the national situation. In some countries, the autonomous communities (Spain) and partners in social dialogue (Spain, Greece) are significant. The involvement of social partners in developing the framework and qualifications is highlighted in the Czech Republic case study as being important to making qualifications more relevant. In Ireland's case, the engagement of statutory agencies and awards Councils charged with qualifications and education is also very important.

The importance of underpinning legislation is underlined in most of the case studies - this gives certainty about the framework and may be used to allocate clear responsibility for the framework to a particular body or bodies.

A number of cases refer to the need to take account of and link with social partnership agreements and to national employment strategies (Greece, Spain). It is possible that this may also be important to other EU countries in particular.

Members of the Group felt that the case studies may not have identified certain underlying key drivers of change that steer developments in many countries – for example, the internationalisation and globalisation of learning and the development of wider regional (European or transnational) labour markets.

Benefits of a qualifications framework

The main benefits identified below stemmed from the case studies and are based on experience to date and a consideration of benefits that might accrue in the future. Frameworks can:

- contribute to a coherent, transparent and more integrated qualification system
- increase and target access to qualifications also for certain disadvantaged groups
- open up progression routes (both to higher and broader skills)
- introduce flexibility for learners, providers and users
- promote recognition and validation of all qualifications (including non-formal/informal learning)
- promote VET and adult learning (in its own right and through opening access to higher education)
- make qualifications more relevant to societal and labour market needs
- promote investment and participation in skill development in the workplace

In addition, frameworks can serve two main functions. First, they can be a tool for communications about qualifications systems by increasing the transparency of qualifications and their relationships to each other; acting as a common reference point for all kinds of qualifications and promoting a culture of life long learning. Second, they

can be used to regulate in which case they create certainty about the value of qualifications, set out key requirements of qualifications (e.g. standards) and provide quality assurance mechanisms for qualifications.

The international dimension of frameworks was highlighted in a number of case studies. They have a potential role to support mutual recognition and the transparency of qualifications across different jurisdictions.

Conditions for the introduction of frameworks

The Group identified a number of general conditions that were deemed to be important to the successful development and implementation of frameworks.

1. The importance of a legislative basis for a qualification framework is underlined in a number of case studies (this is the case for Ireland, Spain and the Czech Republic and is argued to be necessary in the case of Greece).¹ This provides certainty that a framework should be developed and allocates responsibility for developing and ‘guarding’ the framework to a particular body or bodies. This point was deemed to be especially relevant in the context of a wide ownership/engagement of stakeholders in the framework and the evolutionary, dynamic nature of frameworks. However, it was also noted that legislation alone may not be sufficient. The voluntary ‘buy-in’ and commitment of stakeholders are important to a successful implementation – in some cases, the latter may be more important than the existence of specific legislation.

2. The case studies point to the general need for all those engaged in education and training and in labour market policy to work together. Co-operation between the bodies and stakeholders responsible for government policy on education and training, those responsible for providing education and training, awarding and accreditation bodies and the social partners is important to establishing and implementing a national framework of qualifications. In some cases, the role of regional governments, sector associations and chambers of commerce is also important. It may be necessary that sectoral bodies and professional bodies who set standards and develop qualifications relate their qualifications to the framework or can include them in it.

3. National frameworks of qualifications need to be communicated to the population in general if they are to be successful. Learners, providers and employers must be aware of the framework and be able to use it. This point was underlined in the case studies, in particular those from Greece, Ireland and the UK. It was also suggested that good practice should be disseminated.

4. It seems from the case studies that it takes some considerable length of time to develop, maintain and successfully introduce frameworks of qualifications. This point links to the need for policy co-ordination and the active engagement of a wide group of stakeholders in this process and to the deeper structural and cultural changes in learning that it may involve or require.

¹ Note that the need for a legal base depends in part on the political culture operating in the country in question.

2.3 Benefits of Qualifications Frameworks

In the work of Thematic Group 1, benefits of qualification frameworks were identified on two levels: on the general level, and on the more specific level of developing Lifelong Learning (LLL).

The Group agreed that all countries have qualification systems which define levels of educational attainment and/or skills and which have more or less relevance to occupational levels and licence to practice. However, these levels are not always explicit, nor do regulated frameworks exist everywhere. Quite a few countries have more than one framework which, for example, may relate to VET or to higher education (as in UK) or serve different information needs of some sectors only e.g. on ICT skills.

The focus of the deliberation in the thematic group was on those frameworks which were made explicit in a number of countries, either for educational purposes or for guidance and orientation purposes or simply for statistical and planning purposes. Levels-based qualifications frameworks were seen primarily as a reference tool for measurement of educational attainment; however, as questions linked to vocational education and training or LLL were explored, the limitations of this approach became obvious and the need to more closely link education levels frameworks to labour market issues or occupations' profiles was identified.

This highlighted problems linked to the often weak relationships between education and labour and between the respective government bodies or agencies, indicating a need to increase their cooperation on the issue and to establish sustainable approaches and reference frameworks relating both areas.

General benefits of qualification frameworks

Qualifications frameworks can bring benefits mainly in four areas:

- qualification systems' development and provision of education and training (supply side);
- career development, guidance and employment placement, information and orientation including occupational mobility (demand side);
- the international and transnational dimension, mutual transparency and cooperation;
- regulation, legislation and institutional arrangements as well as definition of responsibilities of stakeholders or bodies.

1. Benefits for qualification systems and provision

- to reduce complexity and enable coherence, transparency and integration despite increasing regionalisation, decentralisation and individualisation of provision (notably in relation to post-compulsory and continuing provision of education and training)
- to open access and enable progression to further qualifications, independent of whether they are initial, higher or VET/LLL qualifications

- to enable learners and trainers/trainers/teachers to be guided and to facilitate them in identifying appropriate learning pathways
- to set targets, taking into account societal, labour market, companies and citizens' or learners' needs, attitudes and preferences
- to provide support for quality assurance and the development of standards, for systems of credit accumulation and transfer, and to enhance transferability, comparability and compatibility of qualifications.

2. Benefits to career development, guidance and employment placement, information and orientation including occupational mobility (demand side)

- to enable coping with accelerated change of needs and adaptation of learners, providers and enterprises within a sustainable framework;
- to communicate reference points for qualifications and increase their social acceptance and recognition on the labour market and in education and training;
- to enable mapping of provision and qualifications in relation to skills supply, demand and occupational challenges.

3. Benefits to the international and transnational dimension

The international and transnational dimension was regarded as playing an increasingly important role in qualifications systems' developments. The following benefits were identified under this heading:

- to contribute to increasing mobility, cooperation and exchange as well as intercultural understanding and mutual recognition;
- to enable a more in-depth cooperation and the development of mutual trust between providers, teachers and trainers from different countries and world regions (Europe, South-East Asia, North-America Africa etc.);
- to promote recognition, transparency and (credit) transfer of outcomes of (modules) of training, delivered by different countries;
- to enable the development of a common language in the discourse on qualifications (e.g. the concept of 'meta frameworks') despite differences and variations in detail at national, regional or local levels.

4. Benefits to regulation, legislation and institutional arrangements

In the work of the Thematic Group, it was suggested that despite the need for a certain flexibility and difference in the binding character of legislation and regulation, the following benefits of a certain regulation could be identified:

- a regulatory framework would allow for the building of mutual trust, reliability and sustainability of quality of provision within national qualification systems
- frameworks can establish reference points for standards for and between sectors
- frameworks can include regulatory elements for, and facilitate, quality assurance
- frameworks can provide for stability of qualifications while at the same time allowing for flexibility and adaptation frameworks can allow for flexibility with respect to institutional autonomy and also provide for continuing feedback, maintenance and revision of provision without regulating details of curricula, organisation and programme content

- frameworks can allow for decentralising and increasing the autonomy of providers of education/training
- frameworks can provide the basis for establishing minimum requirements for standards of qualifications and skills as well as their accreditation; this could apply by sector and across sectors.

Benefits of qualification frameworks to lifelong learning

Given the focus of the OECD activity on national qualifications systems and lifelong learning, the Thematic Group 1 discussed the potential benefits of frameworks for lifelong learning. These can be summarised as follows:

1. to promote a culture of LLL to a wider set of learners in the context of demographic developments and trends in most OECD countries: ageing of working population and skill supply and mismatch problems
2. to allow for the integration of LLL provision into a coherent system and framework of delivery and awards, certificates and diplomas (qualifications) in order to ease the transferability and transportability of skills and competencies from one area to another
3. to enable non-standard forms of access, including accreditation of prior learning and recognition of non-formal and informal learning
4. to enable a further improvement of basic skills, e.g. language and social-communicative skills and basic (ICT) skills for different target groups of adult learners with different backgrounds of education attainment level and work experience
5. to relate and compare qualifications to each other on the basis of common reference points: this would support the development of guidance materials, which could be more easily developed, produced and disseminated if they referred to largely accepted frameworks
6. in the context of qualification frameworks, learning can be more easily focused on both individual and company learning needs (enabled by equivalences between qualifications provided by different segments of education)
7. frameworks can reduce incidences of time spent by learners re-learning to reach outcomes already achieved in other contexts.
8. frameworks provide clarity and simplicity about skills and qualifications needed to policy makers, stakeholders and companies preparing new measures and reforms.

2.4 Scenarios for future development

Members of Thematic Group 1 outlined anticipated future developments in relation to qualifications frameworks in their countries.

Ireland - The next step is to implement the recently-developed framework, which involves communicating it to people, setting out steps for implementation with awarding bodies, which will set standards for awards. Ireland's framework is about setting standards as well as measuring and relating awards to each other. They will also develop an approach to credit (transfer) arrangements. Associated with the Framework are a matrix of policies and procedures to promote access, transfer and progression, which also have to be implemented.

Spain – The situation in Spain is at a crucial stage, as there are currently four legislative instruments working on developing and consolidating qualifications frameworks. A national catalogue of vocational qualifications has been established recently. There is concern over continuing training and developing a credit system and certification arrangements for the accreditation of prior non formal learning.

England, Wales and Northern Ireland – These countries within the UK are moving to a concept of a credit framework in close relation to qualification frameworks. In cooperation with their partners in Scotland and Ireland, and increasingly in the European Union, they are looking into how a meta-framework could be developed, which could be linked to their qualification systems and proposed zones of mutual recognition.

Greece – The inexistence of qualification framework arrangements gives rise to the problem of certifying prior learning. The introduction of a new Law links initial and continuing vocational training and will put administrators and policy makers from the two Ministries (Ministry of Labour & Ministry of Education) to work together in order to facilitate this reform. The development of the Second Chance Schools for adults who have not completed compulsory education, and the Institutes of Lifelong Learning in universities will further promote lifelong learning policies in Greece.

The Czech Republic – Political changes after 1989 have brought the need for a new education system to be developed by the Ministry of Education, and for new fields of training provision and occupational profiles by the Ministry of Labour. There is also strong discussion about lifelong learning and a modularisation of curricula.

Australia – The existing framework is under development especially in regard to qualifications equivalencies. They are working towards recognition of prior learning, which they consider very important for encouraging lifelong and adult learning.

2.5 The international dimension of the debate on qualifications frameworks

In the work of Thematic Group 1, a number of increasingly important elements and points were identified about the international dimension of framework development. This section summarises contributions from papers and meetings. Sources referred to in this debate include studies implemented and published by Cedefop and the National

Qualifications Authority of Ireland on European developments linked to qualification frameworks and their comparison, and also a more recent study undertaken by Jack Keating, published by the Australian authorities.

In the European Union, there is increasing cooperation in education and training in pursuit of the objectives of strengthening competitiveness and social cohesion (see Lisbon Declaration of Heads of States and Governments from 2000). Major efforts are being made to enable real progress on mutual recognition and transparency of qualifications as well as on the development of credit transfer systems and qualifications frameworks. Credit and qualification systems need to be made more compatible and comparable and common reference levels and frameworks could make important contributions to this as well as to the increasing mobility of learners and labour in the Union².

Work on Credit Transfer in VET is proceeding, building on learning from the development of ECTS, and will be delivering results by end of 2004. A Virtual Community was set up by Cedefop via the Internet and is reporting on developments and outcomes. A progress report of the Credit Transfer Technical Working Group was made available in October 2003, outlining the issues and intermediate results achieved³. A new study was launched by Cedefop in September 2003 on reference levels for frameworks and other zones of mutual trust to be built in order to enable progress to be made in relation to transparency and credit transfer.

On the wider, global stage, there is increasing evidence that countries realise that their qualifications systems need to be able to change and evolve to meet rapidly-changing needs in the world of learning and in the labour market. Significant undercurrents identified are the changing profiles of learners (e.g. the proportion of adult learners, episodic participation in learning etc.), and the challenges to typical lifelong careers as stable employment diminishes. In addition to issues particular to a given country, these common concerns are contributing to encouraging many countries to examine their systems of qualifications and consider what changes are required. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is engaged in research to clarify these trends and developments notably in developing countries. The work includes: the establishment of a database of frameworks with a view to identifying good practices; a study investigating the feasibility and effective implementation of national qualification frameworks in developing countries; and, an investigation into initiatives and practices of the recognition of prior learning. With increased international interest in qualification frameworks, ILO is also planning to develop an introductory guide to explain the complexities and potential difficulties of developing such frameworks.

There is evidence that the concept of qualification frameworks⁴ is gaining broader and global currency. Also, within Europe, in both higher education and VET, there is increased interest and commitment to the development of a meta framework to which all countries could relate their qualifications systems or frameworks. However, doubts exist about the usefulness of current classifications, such as ISCO or ISCED, as a basis for

² This agenda was recently addressed at the Irish Presidency conference on Common Themes and Approaches across Higher Education and Vocational Education and training in Europe (March 2004). The conference Background Research paper explores these common themes, and can be accessed at www.nqai.ie

³ See <http://cedefop.communityzero.com/credittransfer>

⁴ France was probably the first one introducing such a framework in the beginning of the 70's of the last century.

establishing such frameworks or relating national frameworks to each others and, more importantly, as a means of enabling EU Member states to clearly allocate qualifications to any wider international or European reference framework.

The identification of and an increasing use of international (world-wide or regional) frameworks could assist:

- to facilitate the increasing international mobility of labour, students and trainees;
- to assist training providers in the search for cooperating partners not only on bilateral but also on multilateral and international level;
- to identify more effectively issues for a sustainable cooperation and exchange;
- to promote understanding of the context in which education and training is delivered and to enable comparison and discussion despite geographic and linguistic distance or difficulties;
- to contribute to mutual recognition or transparency of qualifications and skills.

3. Thematic Group 1 Participants

Representatives of several countries and organisations participated in the work of Thematic Group 1:

AUSTRALIA	Judy Forsyth	Australian Qualifications Framework - Advisory Board to MCEETYA (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs)
CZECH REPUBLIC	Miroslav Kadlec	National Institute of Technical & Vocational Education
GERMANY	Georg Hanf	BiBB (Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training)
GREECE	Vasso Papadiamanti Tina Simota	EKEPIS (National Accreditation Centre)
IRELAND	Anna Murphy Edwin Mernagh	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
ITALY	Gabriella Di Francesco	ISFOL (Institute for workers' training development)
SPAIN	Jose Luis Garcia Molina	INCUAL (National Institute of Qualifications)
UNITED KINGDOM	Mandy Hobart	QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority)
CEDEFOP	Burkart Sellin	The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
ILO	Akiko Sakamoto	International Labour Organization – Training Policies and Programmes Department
OECD	Patrick Werquin Mike Coles	Directorate for Education QCA, and Research consultant to the OECD's activity on National Qualifications Systems

4. Appendices

Appendix 1

Introducing a framework into a qualifications system – the emerging National Framework of Qualifications in Ireland

The Irish national framework of qualifications, which currently is at an early stage of implementation⁵, is presented as a potential model for the introduction of a framework into a qualifications system. It may be considered to provide a useful example to other countries because of several key features: a) clarity of purpose, b) comprehensive scope, c) the detail in the level descriptors, d) the fact that in developing the framework, account was taken of European and international developments, and e) the framework is intended to have a credit dimension.

The Irish experience of developing a national framework of qualifications

Since 1999, far-reaching reforms of the qualifications system in Ireland have been under way. A central element of these reforms is the development of a national framework of qualifications. Other countries may find that aspects of the Irish experience are of interest in their own contexts, particularly if they are envisaging the reform of their own qualification systems and the establishment of such a framework. It may be useful to consider why the Irish reform was undertaken, what was done, and also how it was done. Details about the framework are available on the website of the National qualifications Authority of Ireland at www.nqai.ie.

Purpose - the need for change

Key drivers for reform of the qualifications system in Ireland were

- the need to address the lifelong learning objective;
- the need to bring coherence to a diffuse (and, to the learner, confusing) set of qualifications arrangements;
- the need to eliminate the artificial distinctions between education and training, VET and Higher education; and
- the need to bring Irish qualifications into closer alignment with international developments and trends.

Comprehensive scope of change - new awards, new system

The changes in the Irish system are underpinned in legislation, in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999. Three new organisations were established under the

⁵ Following legislation in 1999, the National Framework of Qualifications was launched in October 2003. At this time (2003/04), implementation is ongoing, and it is planned that all programmes beginning in Autumn 2006 will lead to qualifications in the Framework and that some of those beginning in Autumn 2004 will also do so. Further details are available at: www.nqai.ie

Act in 2001 – the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and two new awards Councils (one each for further and higher education and training). While their main task is the development and implementation of new awards systems, the Councils are maintaining existing awards systems in a transitional phase, pending the full implementation of the Framework. The establishment of the Councils has already removed some of the complexity in the existing system – they now incorporate, in two bodies, awarding functions that were previously the responsibility of seven organisations. The creation of the Further Education and Training Awards Council brought together the awarding functions of a wide range of awarding bodies in the field of Vocational Education and Training (‘VET’). This Council will also make awards for learning in the community and adult education sectors (in Ireland, the term ‘Further Education and Training’ refers to a wider range of learning than that commonly understood as ‘VET’ in most European countries)

The main work of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has been to develop the national national framework of qualifications. It was launched in October 2003. It is defined as:

“The single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards.”

The Framework is based on a coherent rationale, explicitly stated in a vision for the recognition of learning focussing on lifelong learning. It is comprehensive of qualifications from all segments and sectors of education and training, including the initial school system, VET, adult learning and higher education. It is noteworthy that the framework will not just provide a frame of reference for existing awards: the awards Councils will develop new awards for the National Framework. These new awards will be made on the basis of clearly described ‘learning outcomes’ defined in terms of standards of knowledge, skills and competencies. The outcome-based nature of these new awards is a significant change from the practice of basing awards on inputs, or on time spent in programmes.

Structure of the Framework - detailed level indicators

The National Framework of Qualifications has a simple ‘architecture’, comprising three central elements - levels, award-types and named awards. Essentially, it is a structure of ten levels. Each level is defined by a set of eight statements about the learning outcomes that are expected of a learner who is to receive an award at that level. These statements, or ‘level indicators’, are written in terms of a detailed typology of knowledge, skill and competence, developed specifically for the Framework. The level indicators are assembled into a ‘grid’ that is effectively the foundation of the Framework. Taken as a complete matrix, they can provide recognition for the widest possible range of learning outcomes. Key features of the Framework include:

- the Framework is a structure of ten ‘levels’, ranging from recognition for the most basic learning achievements to Doctoral awards;
- levels are defined by ‘level indicators’, which are broad descriptions of learning outcomes;
- from the level indicators, ‘award-types’ are defined and set out in ‘award-type descriptors’;

- award-types are classes of named awards sharing common features and level – e.g. an Honours Bachelors Degree is an award-type;
- the National Framework of Qualifications, launched in October 2003, contains an initial set of 15 award-types, with at least one at each of the ten levels in the framework. Other award-types will be developed in the future.

It is the responsibility of the various awarding bodies (the two Councils, the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology, and the State Examinations Commission), to develop, as appropriate, named awards within the specification of the award-type descriptors – e.g. an Honours Bachelors Degree in Business.

The European and international dimension

In the development of the National Framework of Qualifications, strong efforts have been made to ensure that the new arrangements take account of practice in other countries, and are in tune with international developments, particularly in the European Union. The development process began with a survey of international approaches, and continues to be closely linked to European developments in relation to qualifications, particularly those arising out of the Bologna and Copenhagen declarations on Higher education and on VET cooperation in Europe. It is also an objective that the Irish framework should be capable of alignment with systems in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

The ‘credit’ dimension

While the framework is not ‘credit-based’ (it is based on levels and award-types), it has been the intention from the beginning that a national approach to credit accumulation and transfer should complement and be closely linked to the framework. The development of credit arrangements is on-going, and is being undertaken in close concert with developments in Europe with regard to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) in higher education, and the emerging European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) in vocational education and training.⁶

The change process – legislation and consensus

The ongoing process of reforming the Irish qualification system has been undertaken through a mix of legislation and consultation.

Legislation, in the form of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, gives thrust to the process, embeds the changes in the qualifications system into wider government policy, provides a channel for funding, sets out the general direction for the changes required and defines overall responsibilities.

The reforming effect of the National Framework of Qualifications is strongly supported by the legislative base underpinning the initiative. However, it is also important to note that the work of developing the framework has been undertaken where possible in a partnership mode, with deep and wide consultation across the world of education and training and the close involvement of key stakeholders. This has led to a high level of

⁶ See the virtual community set up by Cedefop/Thessaloniki on behalf of the European Commission: <http://cedefop.communityzero.com/credittransfer>

consensus about the changes now being implemented. In the Irish context, this mix of legislative and participative legitimisation is a crucial factor in ensuring that the framework is constructed in a comparatively short timeframe, and can be successfully implemented across all segments of the education and training system.

In relating Ireland's experience of developing a framework of qualifications to the situation in other countries, it is important to consider national factors that are important. The small size of population and of the education and training systems enables comparatively easy consultation and accommodation of stakeholder views and interests. It facilitates a kind of consultation and participation that might be more difficult to implement in bigger countries.

Appendix 2 - Case Study Template

In the course of the work of the Thematic Group, it was agreed that members be asked to provide short case studies illustrating the situation in their countries in the matter of reform and management of the qualifications system(s), and in particular illustrating the thinking in their countries as to the value of qualifications frameworks. To facilitate the synthesis of case studies provided, and to ease the process of developing the case studies, a template was used as illustrated below:

Country:

In your country, what is the general understanding of the meaning of a “qualifications framework”?
Is it considered that reforms are necessary in the national qualifications system(s)?
What reforms are considered necessary?
If reforms are necessary, what are the drivers for this change?
Is it considered that a framework of qualifications would contribute to the reform of the system?
From your perspective, what benefits would a framework bring?
What needs to be put in place (e.g. structures, legislation, agreements) to make the necessary changes possible?

Name and Contact Details of Preparing Agent:

Disclaimer This case study is prepared for research purposes, as part of a transnational investigation into the use of “Qualifications Frameworks” as a means of reforming and managing qualifications systems. The data in the study will be synthesised into a composite document. It is understood that data and information in the study may not represent or be interpreted as definitive national or regional policy or position.
