Quality Assurance in Qualifications Frameworks

An issues paper to support the Dublin Conference, organised by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), on behalf of the Irish Presidency of the European Council, with the support of the European Commission

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1.   Introduction

The aim of this paper is to outline and raise for consideration some key issues concerning the relationship and interaction between two of the principal instruments now utilised to support the development of European education and training: namely, formal systems of quality assurance and qualifications frameworks.[1] Both instruments have been at the heart of a series of European policy initiatives, some dating back to the 1990s, that have been designed to effect a strong lifelong learning culture within European education and training, that not only seeks to create rich, diverse and on-going learning opportunities for the individual citizen; but which does so in a way that prepares citizens for work in an increasingly knowledge-based and skills-dependent labour market, and that helps to deliver jobs and growth for Europe in the context of rapidly changing and highly competitive global economic environment.[2] Indeed, as Europe endeavours to overcome the lingering effects of the financial crisis of 2007-8, and establish a sound and sustainable basis for economic recovery, the demands and expectations being placed on education and training – and, as a consequence, on the reforming tools and instruments underpinning them – are intensifying. This is particularly evident in the European Commission's recent communication *Rethinking Education: investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes*.[3] The message in the document is stark and urgent: Europe will only resume growth by producing highly skilled workers who can contribute to innovation and entrepreneurship. And this growth, in turn, will be dependent on a renewed effort on the part of Member States to transform their national education and training systems, which – in part at least – is to be achieved by a more coherent utilisation of the existing transparency tools, including quality assurance systems and qualifications frameworks.

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[1]   This text is the responsibility of the author and the opinions expressed do not bind any of the institutions supporting the conference

[2]   For the main policy initiatives and outputs since 2000 in education and training see http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/policy-framework_en.htm

[3]   The Communication is available at http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/rethinking/com669_en.pdf .

It is in this context that this paper is presented. Written to underpin the Irish Presidency conference *Quality Assurance in Qualifications Frameworks*, the paper seeks, in particular, to examine how qualifications frameworks and quality assurance systems can be harnessed, and made to work in tandem, so the overall goals of reforming education and training, whether at national or European level, can be realised. The paper has been constructed around four themes, which will provide a basis for invited reactions and participant discussions during the conference. The four themes are:

- Integrating Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks to improve education and training systems
- Using Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks to improve the labour market relevance of qualifications
- Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks in facilitating the Validation of Non-formal and Informal learning
- Promoting confidence in Europe's qualifications on a global scale

A final report will emerge from the conference based on the discussions that this paper generates. The report will summarise reactions to the issues raised and highlight positive proposals for advancing reforms at national and European level.

2. Theme 1: Integrating quality assurance and qualifications frameworks to improve education and training systems

The widespread introduction of qualifications frameworks, and the growth and development of increasingly sophisticated quality assurance systems in European education and training, have received their impetus over the past decade from the broad policies and strategies initiated by the European Union (e.g., Lisbon 2000, ET 2010 work programme, ET 2020); and from the key modernisation processes associated with the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (the Bologna Process) and European co-operation in Vocational Education and Training (the Copenhagen Process). In addition, the European Agenda for Adult Learning has also formulated a number of priorities to improve the quality and efficiency of the very disparate adult learning sector that are in line with the above strategies.[4] While these policies and initiatives have developed from different sources, there have been significant overlaps throughout, both in terms of the ideas and aspirations that have informed them, and the recurring participation of some key stakeholders. Thus, although they do not share identical origins, the quality assurance and qualifications frameworks movements do share significant common features and objectives; and it is these common features and objectives that provide a basis for their deeper integration in support of education and

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[4] On the policy agenda generally see http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/adult_en.htm.

training reform, including in relation to the provision of the right skills for employability.

Transparency and the building of mutual trust
One such common feature is a shared commitment to transparency, and the building of mutual trust, between national education and training systems. The earliest moves towards European co-operation in the area of quality assurance were, in part, a reflection of the desire of member states – subsequently embedded in the Bologna Process – to increase student mobility through the Erasmus exchange programmes. Only through transparent engagement, and developing a shared understanding of the quality systems of different countries, and by working together to enhance them, would national governments be convinced that the courses studied by their students in other countries were of sufficient quality, to gain the same level of recognition as courses studied in the national system.[5] A similar concern also animated European co-operation in the quality assurance of VET. From its formal initiation in 2002, the Copenhagen Process has sought to promote *inter alia* 'cooperation in quality assurance', with a view to building 'mutual trust, transparency and recognition of ... qualifications' for the purposes of 'increasing mobility and facilitating access to lifelong learning'.[6] To this day, this objective remains a core aim of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQAVET), and of the EQAVET network of quality practitioners who are endeavouring to implement it.[7]

Turning to qualifications frameworks, we again encounter the same concerns with issues of transparency and trust between national systems of education and training, and the same desire to foster mobility.[8] In the 2005 background report underpinning the establishment of the QF-EHEA, for example, it is significant that the words 'trust' and 'mobility' both occurred a total of 25 times each, while the word 'transparency' appeared 50 times.[9] In a similar fashion, the word 'transparency' or 'transparent' appears 12 times in the 2008 Recommendation establishing the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), a document that also reminds us that the EQF was founded on the principles of 'transparency and mutual trust', and was designed to

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[5]   Dorte Kristoffersen, 'From the first pilot projects to the founding of ENQA (1994–2000)' in *ENQA: 10 years (2000-2010). A decade of European co-operation in quality assurance in higher education* (ENQA Publications, Helsinki, 2010), pp. 5-7, available at: http://enqa.eu/files/ENQA%2010th%20Anniversary%20publication.pdf

[6]   Copenhagen Declaration 2002, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/pdf/doc125_en.pdf.

[7]   On EQARF see http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:111:0001:0007:EN:PDF

[8] It is worth noting that the concept of qualifications frameworks had its origins in developments in Anglophone countries in the 1980s and 1990s, notably the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The original policy objectives varied from country to country but trust and transparency figured in these early debates also.

[9]   Available at: http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/Documents/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf

facilitate 'further cooperation' between Member states 'to increase transparency and to promote mobility and lifelong learning'.[10]

There is little doubt, that the systematisation of quality assurance in European education and training, and the widespread introduction of qualifications frameworks, are built upon common foundations. Both are rooted in a common model of European co-operation, the open method of co-ordination, which relies on 'soft law' mechanisms such as peer to peer learning, and the shared use of good practice guidelines and indicators, to bring about change. Both are committed to common agendas in areas such as lifelong learning, skills provision and the employability of learners. Quality assurance and qualifications frameworks are natural partners; their deeper integration should not only be possible, but capable of delivering improvement throughout education and training. Although the decision to initiate the development of qualifications frameworks at the national level is not generally made by quality assurance bodies – it has been the preserve of the different ministries responsible for education and training – and although a range of different bodies, including some quality assurance agencies, have assumed responsibility for their technical construction, it has generally been considered, implicitly if not explicitly, that quality assurance bodies have an important role to play in the on-going implementation of qualifications frameworks. Certainly, this assumption is to be found in the policies underpinning the QF-EHEA and the EQF, the overarching European qualifications frameworks that have driven the development of NQFs in Europe since 2005.

QF-EHEA Self-certification and EQF Referencing: a key interface between quality assurance and qualifications frameworks

The QF-EHEA and EQF were designed to serve as translation devices or reference points between the different levels of NQFs across Europe, and to facilitate qualifications recognition and mobility across national borders. To enable this, national authorities establish a relationship between the NQF levels and the levels of EQF, or the cycle descriptors of QF-EHEA, according to agreed criteria and procedures. Critically, both processes – 'referencing' in the case of EQF and 'verification' or 'self-certification of compatibility' in the case of QF-EHEA – formally acknowledge the centrality of quality assurance in education and training, and the importance of formally linking NQFs to the existing quality processes within those systems. To this end, both sets of criteria and procedures strengthen the link by stipulating that quality assurance systems should be cognisant of the NQFs, and formally 'refer' to them. Both also provide for the involvement of external quality assurance bodies in the self-certification processes.[11] In effect, they imply that NQFs cannot function in any meaningful way,

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[10]   Available at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:111:0001:0007:EN:PDF .

[11]   For the EQF Referencing Criteria and Procedures see http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/criteria_en.pdf ; for the QF-EHEA Referencing Criteria and Procedures see http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/Documents/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf, at pp. 10-11.

unless they are underpinned by systematic and transparent systems of quality assurance. Once they are underpinned by quality systems, NQFs themselves become tools to publicly guarantee quality and act as 'gateways' to or 'registers of', approved, quality assured qualifications.[12]   The relationship between qualifications frameworks and formal quality assurance systems is further strengthened when we consider the role that learning outcomes play in both arenas.

Learning Outcomes, Qualifications Frameworks and Quality Assurance
It is almost a truism to say that the absorption and application of the concept of learning outcomes is the most recognisable feature of the recent Europe-wide growth in qualifications frameworks. The notion of what a qualification now represents has been fundamentally reoriented in this process – the EQF Recommendation, for example, defines a qualification as the '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'. The architecture of qualification frameworks (level descriptors, individual qualifications descriptors etc.), at the national and European levels, are also invariably constructed as generic or specific statements of learning outcomes (knowledge, skill and competence).[13]

And yet learning outcomes are not the preserve of qualifications frameworks alone. The use of learning outcomes to define the expectations of learners and workers predates the recent growth in European NQFs by many years; In the context of the development of the Bologna Process, it is noteworthy that it was a group of quality assurance agencies, known collectively as the Joint Quality Initiative, who undertook much of the groundwork in specifying learning outcomes for higher education qualifications. The group's key output, the so-called 'Dublin Descriptors' – generic learning outcomes descriptors for Bachelor, Masters and Doctoral Qualifications – would eventually become the centrepiece of the QF-EHEA.[14] In tandem with this work, quality assurance agencies also played a key role, through the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education's (ENQA) development of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*, which provided for the development, publication and assessment of

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[12]   These points are well made in *Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF - European Qualifications Framework Series Note 3* (2nd edn., forthcoming 2013).

[13]   On learning outcomes and qualifications frameworks generally see *Using Learning Outcomes - European Qualifications Framework Series Note 4* (2011), especially pp. 28-39, available at http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/note4_en.pdf .

[14]   On this see Bryan Maguire, 'The Role of Quality Assurance Agencies in the Self-Certification of Compatibility of NQFs with the QF-EHEA' in Carita Blomqvist et al, *Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks: Exchanging Good Practice* (ENQA Workshop Report 21, Brussels, 2012), pp. 9-12.

explicit intended learning outcomes, as a key element of the internal quality assurance of higher education institutions.[15] Since the adoption of the ESG and QF-EHEA some countries, including for example, Denmark[16] and Sweden,[17] have introduced formal implementation systems for their higher education qualification frameworks, in which national quality assurance agencies play a central role in evaluating and assessing the outcomes of study programmes. Reflecting a growing awareness of the increasing role of quality agencies as key contributors to NQF implementation, ENQA has also taken the step of organising a number of seminars on the theme of qualifications frameworks and their relationship to quality assurance.[18]

The recognition of the critical role of quality assurance in the implementation of NQFs is also acknowledged outside higher education. The common principles of quality assurance for higher education and VET, set out in the third annex to the EQF Recommendation, envisages the same approach to implementation being applied in the context of the comprehensive, lifelong learning NQFs aligned to EQF. They stipulate *inter alia* that quality assurance 'should include context, input, process and output dimensions, while giving emphasis to outputs and learning outcomes'.[19] These principles, in turn, have been endorsed by the Recommendation on the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQAVET), which states that EQAVET should 'support the implementation of the EQF, in particular the quality of the certification of learning outcomes'. Progress in implementing these principles and recommendations has been recorded; however, it is generally acknowledged that the EU tools are still at an early stage of implementation within national VET systems. Nevertheless, in some countries the use of learning outcomes in VET dates back to the 1980s. Stimulated by the EQF Referencing process, it has also been reported that learning outcomes-based qualifications frameworks are becoming key reference points for the development and renewal of VET qualifications across Europe, while the EQAVET co-operation processes are also achieving success in improving the transparency and, most importantly, the comprehensibility of national quality assurance

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15   Available at http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20(2).pdf; the references are to standards 1.2 and 1.3.

16   David Metz, 'Qualifications Frameworks and Learning Outcomes in Programme Oriented Quality Assurance – A brief Story of Denmark, and a few international comments' in Blomqvist et al, *Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks: Exchanging Good Practice*, pp. 24-8.

17   Karin Jarplid Linde, 'Role and Meaning of Qualifications Frameworks in External Quality Assurance', in Blomqvist et al, *Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks: Exchanging Good Practice*, pp. 14-18.

18   On the ENQA workshops generally see Blomqvist et al, *Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks: Exchanging Good Practice*, passim.

19   Available at http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:111:0001:0007:EN:PDF

systems in VET.[20] The synergies between qualifications frameworks and quality assurance are becoming clearer and deepening. As NQFs are developed and operationalized across Europe and establish a greater focus on the use of learning outcomes, quality assurance systems are increasingly moving towards ensuring that intended learning outcomes have been assessed and met when qualifications are being awarded. It is in this space, in particular, that the integration of the two domains naturally occurs. It is here, inevitably, that the two domains can combine to improve education and training.

Conclusions and issues for discussion

It is evident, that qualifications frameworks and formal quality assurance systems are now inextricably-linked in European education and training, and that the principal agents for quality assurance in national systems – whether in relation to higher education, VET or general education, have an important role to play in advancing the implementation of learning outcomes-based qualifications frameworks. This conclusion, however, is complex. The national authorities and bodies responsible for the quality assurance of different parts of the national education and training systems across Europe are heterogeneous entities. The extent to which they are willing, or able, to engage with the issue of framework implementation is very much dependent on their status and scope, and the different responsibilities and authority they exercise in the national context, as well as on their own particular sets of priorities. The complexity of the European system is neatly encapsulated in the forthcoming revision to the EQF Note 3 on EQF Referencing, which has classified the diversity of European quality bodies under six headings, namely:

- government ministries
- qualifications bodies, particularly those that oversee the national qualifications system or the major sub-systems (general, vocational, higher education), or which assess learning, issue awards and certificates
- independent quality assurance bodies such as those that set standards for learning in general, vocational and higher education, or those that evaluate institutions
- bodies that set occupational, vocational and educational standards in a country or employment/education sector
- bodies that manage the development and implementation of NQFs, especially the NQFs that regulate standards in sectors and nationally

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[20] *Using Learning Outcomes - European Qualifications Framework Series Note 4*, pp. 9-10; *Assuring the quality of VET qualifications. The contribution of the EU tools (EQAVET, EQF, ECVET) to the definition and re-definition of learning outcomes based standards*, Report of the EQAVET-ECVET-EQF Joint Seminar, 14-15 November 2011,Bonn, Germany, available at: http://www.eqavet.eu/Libraries/Joint_Seminar/EQAVET-ECVET-EQF_Joint_Seminar_Report.sflb.ashx

- bodies that disburse public funds to learning institutions and require compliance with quality criteria.[21]

The impact that such diversity has on the framework implementation process is clearly visible, for example, in the nature of the participation of quality bodies in the QF-EHEA and EQF self-certification processes. A cursory review of the published Referencing[22] and Self-certification[23] Reports reveals that, in some instances, they have played a central, co-ordinating role in the process; in others, they have participated as members of the steering group or other committees established to oversee it; in yet others, they have been marginal figures, who have merely signed off on the final report at the end of the process.[24] One might also hazard a guess, although it needs to be verified by further research, that their role in the quality assurance of learning outcomes, and the levelling of those learning outcomes for the purposes of including qualifications in NQFs, also lacks consistency both within and across national systems; while the EQF Referencing process itself has certainly thrown up inconsistencies across different countries in terms of the proposed alignment of key qualifications, like the higher education short-cycle award and the school leaving certificate, with the EQF levels.

In reality, then, the role of quality bodies as key contributors to the implementation of qualifications frameworks is still imprecise, and far from consistent, especially with regard to the approaches taken across the different sectors of education and training. It is an issue that needs to be considered and debated by policy makers as we move out of the 'Referencing' and 'Verification' phases of NQF implementation, and more clearly into the operational phase, particularly in a context where more and more demands are being made of NQFs in terms of delivering broader educational and training reforms. The reality is that it often falls to this diverse set of bodies to be the conduits through which developing policy and practice on qualifications frameworks, or on the use, assessment and certification of learning outcomes, are communicated to education and training providers, or to other bodies associated with curriculum development. Often, too, they are best placed to facilitate or co-ordinate engagement between labour market actors and education and training providers in these areas. They can also play a key role in identifying and supporting champions of reform in provider institutions, so that the reforms are internalised at the point at which education and training is delivered, and not seen to be imposed externally.

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[21] *Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF - European Qualifications Framework Series Note 3* (2nd edn., forthcoming 2013), chapter 6, dealing with EQF referencing criterion 6.

[22] Available at http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/documentation_en.htm

[23] Available at http://www.enic-naric.net/

[24] This is an area worthy of further analysis; in the meantime, the issue is best approached through Bryan Maguire's suggestive analysis of agency involvement in the QF-EHEA self-certification process in Blomqvist et al, *Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks: Exchanging Good Practice*, pp. 9-12.

In terms of delivering tangible improvements to education and training, it is vital that the co-operation that has underpinned the development of quality assurance systems and qualifications frameworks in Europe hitherto should not only continue, but should be increased. New areas should be explored to ensure closer integration and more co-ordinated and effective actions across education and training systems. One key area that might be examined in this continuing co-operation is the manner in which qualification frameworks and quality assurance systems are institutionalised across the different sub-systems of education and training within national systems, and whether the existing models are effective in terms of delivering national and European objectives. What are the current models of best practice, and how well are they equipped to deliver whole system change and reform envisaged in *Rethinking Education*? In a similar vein, the manner of the engagement between qualifications and quality assurance bodies at the national and European levels might also be given further consideration, to explore how the synergies that have developed in the context of NQF development, EQF Referencing and QF-EHEA Self-certification may be further developed. Finally, there is the critical issue of how partner stakeholders may be engaged to fully participate in this process of reform, whether these are education and training providers, labour market actors or other social partners. Future co-operative activities in the quality assurance and qualifications domains might not only usefully explore what the best models are for such engagement, but also endeavour to explore it in the context of meeting the new challenges identified for education and training in the Commission's communication. The following questions are posed as a means of prompting an initial discussion on this topic.

Theme 1 Questions – **Integrating quality assurance and qualifications frameworks to improve education and training systems**

- *How do NQFs affect the balance between accountability and enhancement that lie at the heart of quality assurance activities?*
- *What in your view are the main QA methods that promote NQF implementation – e.g. standard setting, certification, inspection regimes, institutional review, programme approval and monitoring, validation - and how do we assess their effectiveness?*
- *What can the VET and HE sectors learn from each other both in relation to quality assurance practice generally and its role in the implementation of NQFs?*
- *What role(s) do or should national quality assurance bodies play in the implementation of NQFs?*
- *Should quality co-ordinating bodies at the European level, i.e. ENQA and EQAVET, work more closely together in the interests of promoting consistent implementation of learning outcomes-based NQFs and improving education and training? Should they also work more closely with the QF-EHEA and EQF co-*

ordinating bodies (EQF Advisory Group, BFUG and ENIC-NARIC) in the same pursuit?

3. Theme 2: Using quality assurance to promote the labour market relevance of qualifications

'Rethinking Education': an inevitable outcome of existing reforms?

In its recent communication *Rethinking Education* the European Commission issued a clarion call to national education and training systems to increase the scope and pace of the current reform agenda, with a particular emphasis on delivering high quality skills in support of growth and employment, and fostering greater collaboration with all relevant stakeholders, including the labour market actors. The Commission highlighted, in particular, that efforts need to be concentrated on developing transversal skills, especially entrepreneurial skills, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) -related skills and language skills, all of which are to be grounded on the achievement of foundation or basic skills by all. To implement this broad and challenging reform agenda, Member states have been invited to promote excellence in VET: to improve the performance of student groups at high risk of exiting school early and with low skills, and reduce the number of low-skilled adults; to scale-up the use of ICT-supported learning and access to high quality Open Educational Resources and to revise and strengthen the professional profile of all teaching professions. In calling for this 'rethinking' of education and training, the Commission has re-emphasised the importance of the learning outcomes approach as a driver of change   and the roles of the European tools for qualifications, credits and quality assurance in facilitating the mobility of a skilled labour force. It has also suggested that there is a need for the 'fundamental shift' to learning outcomes to 'percolate' more fully into teaching and assessment and that the European tools would be more effective if there was more 'coherence' between them.[25]

It is arguable that the Commission's communication, though undoubtedly urgent in tone, does not represent any fundamental or radical policy departure in relation to qualifications frameworks and quality assurance. Rather, it represents a call for a swifter and deeper follow-through on reforms, particularly in relation to the provision of the right skills for employability, that have already been initiated and which are already embedded conceptually in existing qualifications and quality assurance policy. The EQF, for example, has always been considered as a tool that would contribute to meeting the requirements of supply and demand in, access to and integration of the European labour market.[26] The need to better prepare higher education students for the labour market has also been one of the driving forces behind the Bologna Process, and

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[25]   The Communication is available at http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/rethinking/com669_en.pdf .

[26]   See, for example, the references to the 'labour market' in the EQF Recommendation: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=oj:c:2008:111:0001:0007:en:pdf

the QF-EHEA which grew out of it.[27] In terms of quality assurance, the EHEA's *Standards and Guidelines* covering the approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes (Standard 1.2), recommend that these processes should provide for 'regular feedback from employers, labour market representatives and other relevant organisations',[28] while the EQA VET proposes as a quality indicator 'mechanisms to identify training needs in the labour market' (no. 9), and identified the purpose of three other indicators (nos. 3, 5, 6) as the improvement of 'the responsiveness of VET to changing demands in the labour market'.

Given the pre-existence of this conceptual base, what practical measures can a coherent and integrated quality assurance and qualifications system, spanning general education, VET and higher education, put in place to ensure that qualifications are responsive to labour market needs? In the first instance, the quality assurance and qualifications authorities can promote the use by providers of education and training of high quality labour market information, from European sources such as CEDEFOP and the EU Skills Panorama and analogous national sources, in the design of qualifications, and then examine how it is applied in practice.[29] They can also test whether qualifications actually reflect the intended learning outcomes and ensure that the specified learning outcomes are those that are needed to match labour market requirements, whether these relate to specialist skills needed for particular sectors, or more basic and transversal skills. They can also work towards including in NQFs, on the basis of agreed quality criteria, those 'sectoral' and 'international' qualifications that originate outside the public education and training system and which are provided by private providers and companies, NGOs and international organisations to address particular labour market needs.[30] They can also promote the learning outcomes approach embedded in qualifications frameworks, and other emerging tools, such as the European Skills/Competences, qualifications and Occupations taxonomy (ESCO), as the basis of a common language between educators and labour market actors, and create fora for engagement between both communities, particularly in such areas as the design of qualifications and the on-going evaluation of their delivery.

While all of the above actions are worth pursuing, they are far from complete solutions to a problem that is intrinsically more complex than is generally acknowledged, and which requires interventions from all the actors involved if real progress is to be made in improving the labour market relevance of qualifications. One of the most difficult aspects of the problem is defining the roles and responsibilities of the different players. In some VET systems, the role of social partners, like employers, in the design of qualifications is well developed, notably in Germany, and they thus play a key role in

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[27]   See the background report to the QF-EHEA, pp. 24-6, 111, 161-2, 184.

[28]   ESG, p. 17 at http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20(2).pdf at p. 17
[29]   For the EU Skills Panorama see http://euskillspanorama.ec.europa.eu/

[30]   For which see Maguire, 'Issues arising from qualifications frameworks in Europe', pp. 13-14.

ensuring the labour market relevance of the qualifications.[31] In other national systems, however, the involvement of employers is less well-developed and organised, even in a VET context, and there can be a great difficulty in articulating clearly the qualifications needs of the labour market, a situation that can sometimes lead to frustration on the part of employers, and a tendency to engage in a negative rhetoric against education and training providers for failing to deliver what they require. In a similar vein, the capacity of employers to develop and maintain occupational standards varies across Member states, so that providers of education and training or qualifications bodies sometimes have to take on the dual role of mobilising the 'demand side', and delivering on the 'supply side', when it comes to developing relevant qualifications for the labour market. The question can also be asked concerning what employers can and should contribute to the education and training of youth, particularly in terms of providing assistance and support in developing their maturity for work and their overall employability.[32]

The quality assurance systems, and the processes used for implementing NQFs, can play a useful part in helping to bridge the gap in understanding, that sometimes exists between the labour market actors and education and training providers. The participation of employers, in different quality assurance activities – for example in the design of programmes and their assessment strategies, in course approvals, and institutional reviews etc., are useful ways of achieving this. National or regional surveys of employers' views on education and training are also helpful.[33] Combining the roles of co-ordinator between the labour market and education, while at the same time being the quality assurer of the outcomes of education and training is a demanding brief, requiring a great level of expertise, sophistication and some conviction on the part of the bodies that would take it on. Nevertheless, if education and training is to be rethought and remodelled along the lines envisaged in the Commission's communication, expert, sophisticated and convincing quality assurance and qualifications bodies will be essential players in such a process. They will need to have the capacity to master the diverse range of instruments and communication tools that are being developed to support the linking of qualifications to the labour market, including the language of learning outcomes, and an ability to communicate them in a persuasive manner. They will also need to possess the diplomatic skills necessary to moderate expectations when these are exaggerated or cannot be delivered, particularly in an environment where some researchers question or doubt some of the fundamental

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[31]   Kathrin Hoeckel and Robert Schwartz, *Learning for Jobs. OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training:* Germany (OECD, 2010), available at http://www.oecd.org/germany/45668296.pdf

[32]   For a critical appraisal of the role of the 'demand side' in fostering employability amongst youth see Ewart Keep, *Youth Transitions, the Labour Market and Entry into Employment: Some Reflections and Questions*, (SKOPE Research Paper No. 108 May 2012), pp. 1-39 passim.

[33]   See, for example, the recent pilot survey of Irish employers' views on Irish higher education outcomes at http://www.hea.ie/files/files/National%20Employer%27s%20Survey%20%28Pilot%29%20Report.pdf;

ideas on which education and training reform is currently founded.[34] The following questions are posed as a means of prompting discussion on the role of qualification frameworks and quality assurance in promoting and improving the labour market relevance of qualifications.

Theme 2 Questions – Using quality assurance to promote the labour market relevance of qualifications

- *Are the reforms envisaged in Rethinking Education, particularly in relation to the provision of the right skills for employability, sufficiently embedded conceptually in existing European qualifications and quality assurance policy or are further concepts and structures required?*
- *What roles can national qualifications and quality assurance bodies play in coordinating engagement between labour market actors and education and training providers?*
- *How can the social partners contribute to the QA of education and training and the implementation of NQFs?*

4. Theme 3: Quality assurance and qualifications frameworks in facilitating the validation of non-formal and informal learning

One of the key areas – perhaps, in the medium term, the most significant one – where the combined forces of quality assurance and qualifications frameworks can make a real difference to improving the labour market relevance of qualifications is in the area of the validation of non-formal and informal learning. In the past ten, or more, years, an impressive body of work has been undertaken at the European level on developing principles[35] and guidelines[36] for validation; embedding the concept of validation in NQFs through the EQF Recommendation and EQF referencing criteria and procedures; and surveying and producing inventories of good practice.[37] As a result, a strong and still growing consensus has emerged which has been given formal expression in the

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[34] For suggestive analyses that the 'knowledge driven economy' has failed to materialise in the manner predicted , and that strategic Human Resource management has failed to maximise human capital and productivity see Keep, *Youth Transitions*, pp. 2-4; for an appraisal of the limitations of learning outcomes in VET see Tim Oates, 'Why 'outcomes' aren't enough - qualifications policy should not be the only game in town', paper presented at SKOPE conference on the future of Vocation Qualifications, 7 February 2013.

[35] Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/informal/validation2004_en.pdf

[36] Available at: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/5059.aspx

[37] Available at: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/about-cedefop/projects/validation-of-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory-scope.aspx

recent Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning[38], on the importance of making visible the knowledge, skills and competences that individuals acquire through their life and work experiences. The validation of this experiential learning can contribute significantly to

- enhancing employability and mobility, by promoting better transferability of skills between companies and sectors across the EU
- increasing motivation for lifelong learning (especially for the socio-economically disadvantaged and low-qualified)
- improving the functioning of the labour market by facilitating a better match between skills and labour demand and
- enhancing competiveness and economic growth by addressing skills shortages in growing sectors.

Validating non-formal or informal learning is a complex process which, if is to succeed systemically, requires significant inputs from a broad range of stakeholders, both at the national and European level. Those who have been classified as key stakeholders in validation include employers, trade unions, chambers of industry, commerce and skilled crafts, national entities involved in the process of recognition of professional qualifications, employment services, youth organisations, youth workers, education and training providers, and civil society organisations. The contributions of these different entities to emerging validation processes will be many and various, but will relate in the main to one or more of the four key elements that have been identified in the Council Recommendation as constituting the essential arrangements for validation, namely:

- *Identification* of an individual's learning outcomes gained through non-formal or informal learning
- *Documentation* of an individual's learning outcomes gained through non-formal or informal learning
- *Assessment* of an individual's learning outcomes gained through non-formal or informal learning
- *Certification* of the results of the assessment of an individual's learning outcomes gained through non-formal or informal learning in the form of a qualification, or credits, leading to a qualification.

Qualifications Frameworks and the quality assurance systems of education and training, as developed within the existing European co-operation processes, are generally considered to strengthen trust towards validation processes, giving them credibility and providing them with an established, respected and stable organising principle. Building on the already strong connection between validation and qualifications frameworks, as set out in the EQF Recommendation, the Council Recommendation on validation restated the principle that validation arrangements should be linked to NQFs referenced to EQF. The learning outcomes approach and defined national qualifications levels can provide a supporting methodology and reference points for the validation of skills and

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[38]   Recommendation available at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF

competences. In addition, it has acknowledged the connection of validation with efforts, under the Bologna Process (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué 2009), to deepen lifelong learning through the establishment of 'basic principles and procedures for recognition of prior learning on the basis of learning outcomes ... through formal, non-formal, or informal learning paths'. Finally, it has affirmed that validation arrangements should be underpinned by transparent quality assurance measures 'in line with existing quality assurance frameworks ... that support reliable, valid and credible assessment tools'.[39] Overall, it is not the case that qualifications frameworks and quality assurance structures *may or can* contribute to the advancement of validation. Rather, the entire enterprise, as it has been conceived and developed over the past decade, is entirely dependent on their mobilisation, if the assessment of learning outcomes acquired through validation is to be trusted within and across national boundaries, and the qualifications awarded on foot of this certification are to achieve the same level of recognition and currency, as those achieved through formal processes of learning.

How, then, can such mobilisation take place? At a European level, the EQF advisory group has been formally identified as an agent in co-ordinating follow-up on the Recommendation on validation, and has been asked to involve relevant youth organisations and representatives of the voluntary sector in its activities. As suggested above, however, it is also arguable that this kind of engagement should also be extended to encompass a deeper and more sustained engagement between the EQF Advisory Group, the QF-EHEA authorities and the quality assurance co-ordinating bodies, ENQA and EQAVET. This is not suggested simply for administrative tidy-mindedness or to establish another European network. Rather, the validation of non-formal and informal learning has been placed firmly in a space that is jointly occupied by quality assurance professionals and qualifications specialists from across VET and higher education. Validation presents many significant challenges, and the solutions to these are more likely to be found by drawing on the combined experience and expertise of the qualifications and quality assurance communities across VET and higher education, operating in the tradition of European co-operation. Moreover, such an approach would provide a template for co-operation at the national level, especially in those countries where sectoral fragmentation may be impeding progress on validation, and the implementation of NQFs more generally.

Many of the validation issues that need to be examined and addressed by policy makers in the upcoming period have been raised in various guises in different European fora over the last number of years, including in Peer Learning Activities associated with the

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[39]   Council Recommendation on validation at http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=oj:c:2008:111:0001:0007:en:pdf ; Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué at http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/leuven_louvain-la-neuve_communiqu%C3%A9_april_2009.pdf

implementation of EQF.[40] However, there are new, emerging issues that might also be considered in this area including the validation of the learning that is now being acquired by learners through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and other digital open education resources. There is also the persistent issue of the recognition of those 'non-formal', 'sectoral' and 'private qualifications', that exist outside the public education and training system, and which potentially could be addressed either by direct inclusion in NQFs, or through validation processes. The following, far from exhaustive, list of questions is designed to invoke discussion during the conference, in light of the renewed and more urgent commitment to implementing validation arrangements across Europe by 2018.

Theme 3 Questions: Quality assurance and qualifications frameworks in facilitating the validation of non-formal and informal learning

- Could the European level actors such as the EQF Advisory group, the BFUG working group, and European QA groups, identify, while making allowance for national specificities, the optimal approaches to documenting, identifying, assessing and certifying learning outcomes in validation? Or is this an unrealistic ambition?
- What are the risks and barriers to opening up NQFs to validation of non-formal and informal learning?
- Does validation of non-formal and informal learning transfer from VET to HE? Are there ways in which QA can promote such transfer?
- Are national or centralised public quality assurance and qualifications bodies too closely-linked to the formal education and training systems, and does this diminish their capacity to operate validation systems in a sufficiently flexible manner?

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5.   Theme 4: Promoting confidence in Europe's qualifications on a global scale

The impact of European co-operation in the areas of quality assurance and qualifications frameworks has not just been felt within and across the national education and training systems in Europe. The European model of reform in these domains has sparked an interest among a large number of countries internationally in engaging with the European Union and its member states, and with the members of the European Higher Education Area, with a view to strengthening education and training policy dialogues, enhancing mutual co-operation, furthering the recognition of qualifications, and learning about Europe's transnational architecture for quality assurance and qualifications. Europe is also committed to being open internationally, with a view to achieving the same objectives of enhanced co-operation and deeper policy dialogues, and on foot of its reformed qualifications and quality assurance

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[40]   See, for example, the Summary Report on the PLA, 15-16 November 2010, Västerås, Sweden, available at http://kslll.net/documents/Report%20V%C3%A4ster%C3%A5s%20PLA.pdf

systems, better and more widespread recognition of European qualifications globally, and the promotion of European education and training as a world class destination for international learners.

This increased European engagement with the international education and training community is evident in a range of different processes and activities, spanning VET and higher education. The European Union is heavily involved in international engagements across the entire spectrum of education and training. [41] Of particular note in the VET sphere is the work of the European Training Foundation in assisting partner countries develop – in the EU Enlargement Area, in the neighbouring areas and in Central Asia – their vocational education and training policies in a lifelong learning context, using the approaches to qualifications and quality assurance now in place in Europe.[42] In the field of higher education, there has been considerable international interest in many aspects of the Bologna Process. The TUNING Educational Structures in Europe project, for example, which commenced in 2000 as a project to link the political objectives of the Bologna Process to European higher education institutions, has developed into a process concerned with the design, development, implementation, evaluation and enhancement of the quality of first, second and third cycle degree programmes and has now extended its reach internationally. There are Tuning developments in Latin America, the Sand Africa.[43] In addition, formal engagement between the member countries of the EHEA and their international partners now takes place (since 2009) in the context of the Bologna Policy Forum, which is 'focused on creating and connecting national, regional and global higher education spaces'.[44]

Europe's approach to transnational qualifications frameworks has been particularly influential globally. The EQF and QF-EHEA are generally viewed as effective and successful models of good practice in this area. Some countries, including New Zealand and Australia, have engaged on a bilateral basis with a member state with a view to establishing an informal referencing of their own qualifications frameworks to the European frameworks. [45] In addition, and in varying degrees, the EQF and QF-

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[41]   For EU activity generally see the DGEAC report *External Education Policies and Tools. Developments, trends and opportunities in the internationalisation of education in the EU and its Member states* (2011) available at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/external-relation-programmes/doc/mapping_en.pdf ; B. Maguire, 'Issues arising from qualifications frameworks in Europe', pp. 15-6, conference paper for Irish Bologna Expert Conference 'National Qualifications Frameworks and the European Overarching Frameworks: Supporting Lifelong Learning in European Education and Training', 15 April 2010, available at: http://www.nqai.ie/documents/QualificationsFrameworksConf-April2010.pdf

[42]   For which see http://www.etf.europa.eu/web.nsf/pages/home

[43]   On which see http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/

[44]   For links to the Bologna Policy Forum statements of 2009, 2010 and 2012 see http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=44

[45]   On the Ireland-Australia Qualifications project see http://www.nqai.ie/documents/Irel-Auspublishedreport.pdf ; on the compatibility of qualifications in Ireland and New Zealand see http://www.nqai.ie/TheCompatibilityofQualificationsinIrelandandNewZealand.html

EHEA have also stimulated or influenced discussions on the development of regional qualifications frameworks in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.[46] These global qualification framework developments, in which Europe has been centre stage, have raised not only the prospect of cooperation and communication between different regions of the world via a system of connected transnational frameworks ,[47] but also the possibility, as set out in the recent recommendations of the Third International Congress on Technical and Vocational Education and Training, the 'Shanghai Consensus', of developing 'a set of world reference levels, to facilitate the international comparison and recognition of TVET qualifications'.[48]

Yet, as interesting as these global framework developments are, they also present some serious challenges. In Europe, NQF development and implementation is grounded upon democratic principles that promote the involvement of a large range of stakeholders in these processes, including employer and employee representatives and other social partners. Likewise, autonomous qualifications and quality assurance bodies are responsible for the construction and implementation of NQFs, while the NQFs themselves are constructs that are intended at all times to reflect the values and serve the broad interests of the communities in which they are rooted. The EHEA in particular relies on the contribution of autonomous higher education institutions. Independent student representatives are key contributors to the operation of quality assurance systems. These aspects of the European experience, which may be taken for granted in the European context, are of particular relevance for emerging democracies engaged in the development of NQFs. However, they may not be easily translatable or transferable to such countries, due to the absence of comparable institutional infrastructures, or the prevalence of political cultures that have yet to reach the level of maturity that will allow for extensive stakeholder engagement in education and training processes, including in relation to NQF development. It is inevitable that questions will arise as to whether the NQFs that emanate in such circumstances will create sufficient levels of trust in Europe and elsewhere or whether, and how, such deficiencies can be remedied over time. Furthermore, there will also be questions as to whether such NQFs will undermine the credibility of the regional frameworks to which they are affiliated,

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[46]   On which see J. Keevy, B. Chakroun and A. Deij, *Transnational Qualifications Frameworks* (ETF, 2011) , available at: http://www.etf.europa.eu/webatt.nsf/0/720E67F5F1CC3E1DC125791A0038E688/$file/Transnational%20qualifications%20frameworks.pdf ; B. Maguire, 'Issues arising from qualifications frameworks in Europe', conference paper for Irish Bologna Expert Conference 'National Qualifications Frameworks and the European Overarching Frameworks: Supporting Lifelong Learning in European Education and Training', pp. 15-6, available at: http://www.nqai.ie/documents/QualificationsFrameworksConf-April2010.pdf

[47]   Findings from the Conference "Qualifications Frameworks, from concepts to implementation", European Parliament, Brussels, 6-7 October 2011, available at http://www.etf.europa.eu/eventsmgmt.nsf/0/7E95EA165BEC4DBEC125792E0046E2AE/$file/NQF%20conference%20-%20findings%20and%20next%20steps.pdf

[48]   http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/pdf/concensus-en.pdf

or the future prospects of developing transnational framework connections or global levels.

The already successful establishment in Europe of a transnational architecture for mutual understanding of quality assurance and qualifications is an advantage not enjoyed by most other regions and ostensibly, should mean that Europe is well placed to benefit from future global developments in these arenas. That said, the benefits that might accrue from Europe's internal reforms – increasing the attractiveness of Europe for educational exports and enhancing international perceptions of the calibre of European labour force – will not follow automatically from the mere existence of the new qualifications and quality assurance structures. As already argued, it is the real world implementation of learning outcomes based frameworks, frameworks that contribute to and demonstrate the acquisition by learners of the high quality skills envisaged in *Rethinking Education*, that will really count. Although valuable, it will not be through the marketing of the 'tools' of European education and training reform, whether these be qualifications frameworks, credit systems and quality assurance arrangements, that European education and training will prosper in the global competitive economy. These tools must make a real impact and deliver real internal change, in a way that will not only generate global confidence in the skills and competences that exist in Europe, also ensuring that the tools themselves are tested to the full, in terms of meeting the expectations of the European labour market and wider society. Only having succeeded in this, will Europe be in a position to engage positively and effectively in the global dialogue on quality assurance and qualifications frameworks. Only then will Europe be able to contribute authoritatively and creatively to addressing the complex issues, especially around diversity and consistency, that will arise as the tools and instruments of educational reform are applied in a global context.

For policy-makers, qualifications authorities and quality assurance agencies, absorbed by the daily work of implementing qualifications and quality assurance reform at the national level, it can be difficult to focus on large, sometimes abstract, discussions on the global dimensions of education and training reform. The following questions are posed as a means of stimulating reflection and discussion on this topic ahead of the conference.

Theme 4 Questions: Promoting confidence in Europe's qualifications on a global scale
- Has the implementation of quality assurance arrangements and qualifications frameworks generated more confidence internationally in the skills available in European countries? If so, what particular factors have contributed to this?
- Is the emerging European area for skills and qualifications, heralded in *Rethinking Education*, being delivered in a way that promotes global recognition and mobility?
- How should Europe respond to the global developments in qualifications frameworks and quality assurance? Should it insist on a consistent approach or

recognise the inevitability of diversity? Do you think that global levels are a good idea?
- How can countries external to the EU/EEA or EHEA signal their affinity with EQF and QF-EHEA? Does formal alignment of an external NQF to an EQF-referenced European NQF, or to a European NQF self-certified as compatible to the QF-EHEA, establish a de facto alignment between the international NQF and EQF or QF-EHEA?
- How relevant is the European experience in terms of supporting NQF developments in emergent democracies?