



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann



Uachtaránacht na hÉireann ar
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Quality Assurance in Qualifications Frameworks

Presidency Conference, Dublin
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Concept Paper

“Europe will only resume growth through higher productivity and the supply of highly skilled workers, and it is the reform of education and training systems which is essential to achieving this.”
– **Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes, European Commission Communication, November 2012**

The past decade has seen the introduction of a range of new policies and instruments to support the modernisation of education and training systems and to reduce any impediments posed by the diversity of European educational and qualifications systems to the mobility of European residents as learners and workers. These include the development of qualifications frameworks based on learning outcomes and the spread of quality assurance systems. These policies have progressed differently in the sectors of higher education (under the Bologna Process) and vocational education and training (under the Copenhagen Process). There is a growing realisation of how important it is that policy and implementation across these sectors are coordinated within national systems as well as at European level.

The urgency of reform in education and training systems highlighted in the Commission’s Communication, *Rethinking Education*, echoes the priorities of the Irish Presidency with its focus on the stability, jobs and growth. The key themes of this conference are tied to these priorities. Both qualifications frameworks and quality assurance arrangements at European and national levels are set up to support and realise efficient, inclusive, high quality education and training processes that provide relevant skills for personal development and the society, including the labour market as well as for facilitating mobility in the single European labour market. Qualifications frameworks are instruments that ensure that education systems have clear targets in relation to the knowledge, skills and competence to be achieved by learners and that these targets relate to the needs of the labour market. Quality assurance procedures ensure that education systems, including their VET and HE subsystems, meet these targets.

The main aim of the conference is to explore how qualifications frameworks and quality assurance arrangements can best work together at national and European levels in order to achieve the overall goals of reforming education.

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Integrating qualifications frameworks and quality assurance.

Qualifications frameworks and quality assurance arrangements have some common objectives as well as some that diverge. The quality assurance movement in VET and HE has sprung from somewhat different impulses to the qualifications systems developments. Qualifications frameworks and associated tools come from a broader set of policy objectives related to for example mobility, employment and system coherence. The concept of learning outcomes is central to qualifications and it is necessary to investigate how quality assurance underpins the implementation of learning outcomes in a consistent manner within national systems. EQF-LLL and QF-EHEA both use learning outcomes and the synergies between these frameworks and the quality assurance institutions and procedures that underpin them, both at national and European level can be further explored.

As qualifications frameworks are implemented and become more comprehensive, including for example private and non-formal qualifications as has already happened in some member states, the existing models of quality assurance can be stretched and may need modification both at European and national levels.

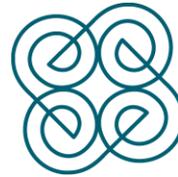
Using quality assurance to promote improve the labour market relevance of qualifications

Quality assurance examines not only whether qualifications reflect achieved learning outcomes but whether those learning outcomes are the ones required to match the needs of the labour market. One of the objectives of qualifications frameworks is to provide a common language between educators and labour market actors, especially through the use of learning outcomes. Quality assurance processes can examine how effectively providers of education and training make use of relevant labour market information in the design of qualifications and the associated programmes.

Labour market intelligence can be used to inform providers of the skills that are in demand so that they can adapt their programmes to meet needs. CEDEFOP has published a number of studies examining current practices across Europe in this domain. In addition to the various tools available at the national level, the EU launched a Skills Panorama in December 2012. Another useful initiative at the EU level that can help in the exchange of information is the European multilingual structured terminology of skills/competences, qualifications and occupations (ESCO).

It is not only the design phase of qualifications that require the active engagement of labour market actors, particularly employers, in quality assurance processes. It is also important that they are engaged in the continuous evaluation of the programmes and qualifications actually delivered. This is particularly true of course of those elements that are delivered in the workplace but employers can also take part in formal evaluations by providing evidence and by taking part as members of review teams.





Quality assurance and qualifications frameworks in facilitating the validation of non-formal and informal learning

The recent Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning adopted in November 2012 highlights the benefits to individuals and the labour force of countries having systems in place for such validation. It is important that this area too be subject to quality assurance. The criteria for the referencing of national qualifications frameworks to the EQF also draw attention to the potential of NQFs to facilitate this important activity. However the methods of quality assurance appropriate for formal provision are not always relevant to such validation. How can qualifications frameworks (NQFs, EQF, QF-EHEA) and quality assurance increase trust towards qualifications obtained by means of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and make them valued nationally and internationally to the same extent as formal qualifications in the national qualifications frameworks that have been referenced to the EQF.

Promoting confidence in Europe's qualifications on a global scale

Europe has meta-qualifications frameworks (EQF-LLL and QF-EHEA) and a shared transnational architecture for mutual understanding of quality assurance. These are advantages not yet enjoyed by other regions. They impact on the attractiveness of Europe for educational exports and on the perceptions of the calibre of the European labour force. Moreover the European model for reform in these domains has attracted widespread interest in other regions of the world. A key issue is whether implementation of quality assurance and qualifications frameworks is being carried out in such a way that confidence in the skills available in Europe has been enhanced and indeed whether the emerging European area for skills and qualifications heralded in *Rethinking Education* is being delivered in a way that promote global recognition and mobility.

The initiatives of various agencies both at a global level and an inter-regional level can support these goals. The Shanghai Consensus articulated at UNESCO's conference in May 2012 called for global cooperation on qualifications recognition, including the possibility of global levels. The ILO has done extensive research on the potential of qualifications to reform of vocational education and training in diverse national contexts. The growth of the Bologna Global Forum is an illustration of the desire for mutual learning about the challenges of implementing reform in higher education systems. The European Training Foundation has actively supported many neighbourhood partnership countries in the design and implementation of reform incorporating quality assured qualifications frameworks. The Education Secretariat of the Asia-Europe Meeting has promoted dialogue and cooperation on these topics between these regions. The emergence of so many parallel developments raises questions about whether on the one hand the concepts of qualifications frameworks and quality assurance are in fact being used in a consistent way and on the other hand they are sufficiently flexible to meet the diverse needs of a wide range of societies and labour markets.

The approach of this conference

The inter-related issues raised above prompt a desire for intensive interaction between policy makers from European countries. The designs set out in the EQF Recommendation and the





Bologna Process (notably QF-EHEA and ESG) have now been introduced in many countries. They have been incorporated into national systems, legislation and institutions. Many have completed referencing of national frameworks to the European meta-frameworks and have reviewed the quality assurance systems. However these referencing reports and quality assurance reviews have themselves highlighted the challenges of implementation of the learning outcomes approach and other aspects of the reform. Some of these are particular to national contexts and others are shared. Moreover all countries are struggling with challenges of lack of jobs and weak economic growth that were not so much in evidence when the reforms were initially introduced.

The methodology employed for the conference seeks to concentrate relevant expertise and experience on the implementation and impact of European policy in the area of Qualifications Frameworks and Quality Assurance. By engaging the all of the participants in each of the four thematic areas it is expected that the conference will provide a platform to integrate expertise and opinion across different perspectives. The methodology is intended to promote understanding of overlapping themes associated with frameworks and quality assurance developments. The conference sessions are structured around four thematic areas designed to build a conversation that will address the conference objectives. The outputs of the conference will contribute to a more evidence informed national and European policy making process.

The conference will be held over a day-and-a-half in Dublin Castle. It will be held in English only with no interpretation. An opening plenary on the morning of 12 March will be followed by a plenary keynote presentation addressing each of the conference themes. This keynote paper will be made available in advance to delegates. Other speakers will be invited to frame their interventions as reactions to the issues raised in the keynote paper.

This introduction will be followed by four thematic sessions which will address the topics elaborated above. Each thematic session (75 minutes) will invite conference participants to exchange views and experiences on the themes around their table (cc 10 person per table). Each thematic session will hear the expert reactions to challenges and questions raised in the plenary keynote presentation. Following each thematic session tables will be invited to contribute to the plenary discussion.

Discussions in the conference will provide input into conference conclusions, which will aim to support further collaboration, research and policy development. The conference will conclude with a communication summarising the reactions to the issues raised and highlighting positive proposals for advancing reforms at national and European levels. The preliminary content of the conference conclusions will be shared with participants at the end of the conference. A full report will follow.

The conference closes at lunchtime on 13 March. A reception and dinner will take place on the evening of 12 March.

