

FEATURES OF A SERBIAN NQF

A. Introduction

1. Paper NQF(2)1 argued that a Serbian NQF should focus on the VET system, including both adult and initial training in secondary schools. This paper seeks to outline certain features of an NQF, and to relate them to the Serbian situation, with the intention – so far as possible – of not requiring substantial change in current practice, unless clearly necessary for the establishment of an NQF.* In particular it suggests areas where the features should be similar in the initial and adult components, and areas where they might properly be rather different. In the light of comments from the Working Group further work will be done to refine and adjust the suggested features.

2. A separate paper (NQF(2)3) deals with the question of levels within the framework. The features under consideration in this paper are:

- Jurisdiction. Who should take decisions on whether a qualification should be included in the NQF, and the precise conditions for it doing so?
- Organization. How should qualifications be classified in sectoral terms? Is there any specification about the minimum 'size' of a qualification?
- Standards. What demands should the framework make about the nature and expression of standards?
- Assessment. Should the NQF make particular requirements about assessment, and should these requirements be common across the framework?
- Accreditation and Certification. Who is empowered to issue certificates, and what conditions should they have to comply with?
- Quality Assurance. Who should undertake quality assurance. Are there minimum requirements for the framework, other than the items mentioned above?
- What is the role for co-operation between employers and workers' organizations (social partnership).

B. Jurisdiction

3. An NQF needs some kind of controlling mechanism. Someone needs to determine, at the very minimum, which qualification is assigned to which level, and whether a qualification is of sufficient quality to be included in the framework. As we shall see, this does not mean that this central mechanism needs to conduct on-going monitoring, determine assessment arrangements or develop curricula, though of course it may do these things too.

4. In the Serbian situation the most important thing would seem to be to find a mechanism which fits easily into other structures and does not unnecessarily challenge established responsibilities. The White Paper spoke of "establishing a special body or institution responsible for managing the development of the national qualifications framework" (Section 5.3), though it said little about the nature of this body, or indeed whether the overview of an NQF should be assigned to an existing body.

5. A number of possibilities exist:

* It might be argued that a new NQF should establish a new pattern of qualifications and new institutions to govern them. Given the slowness and difficulty of bringing about institutional change in Serbia it seems likely that such an approach would result in a logjam with each step being dependent on agreement and implementation of an earlier one.

- a) the establishment of a special organization, newly created, with strong powers to authorize qualifications across both initial and adult training and to stimulate their development and improvement. This is the model in England, where the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority performs these functions*. It should be noted, though, that this a relatively new creation. Until 1997 school qualifications and adult and apprenticeship qualifications were handled by separate bodies, one reporting to the ministry of education and the other to the ministry of labour;
- b) to give the responsibilities for the structure and standards of qualifications (but not detailed control of curricula and examinations) to either the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Labour (or their specialist organizations such as the Institute for Educational Improvement or National Employment Service). In a number of countries (Denmark, Germany) the responsibility is exercised by Ministries of Education, while in others (Romania, Slovenia) it is performed by the Ministry of Labour. In either case social partnership arrangements usually highly developed, using committees convened by the responsible Ministry;
- c) to retain the responsibilities of the Serbian Ministries of Labour and Education for schemes of certification within their spheres (the MoL/NES scheme would need to be further developed). Harmonization in terms of levels might be assured either:
 - directly through legislation which specified definitions of the levels, which each Ministry would need to respect;
 - through a small technical committee, perhaps involving social partners, with the role of advising both Ministries on harmonization of levels†;
 - by ensuring that each Ministry involved the same social partners in determining the characteristics of its system, so stimulating convergence and standardization between them, without formally requiring it.

6. No doubt there are variants on these alternatives, which can be worked on further, but the following comments may be relevant:

- option (a) would require an entirely new structure. It would also involve removing powers from the existing Ministries which will, no doubt, be difficult, and requiring each to abide by the rules laid down by a new body, without political direction. This may be a recipe for conflict. Given past experience it must be questioned whether action would be taken to bring such a body into existence;
- option (b) would involve making a firm decision as to which Ministry would be responsible for the structure of a unified qualifications system. There are arguments in favour of each. In all countries, including Serbia, initial VET is more highly developed in terms of qualifications than is adult training. Giving control of standards and certification of VET to the Ministry of Labour, or a body associated with it, might destroy helpful links between initial VET and general education (e.g. the Matura system). On the other hand in many countries, including perhaps Serbia, the Ministry of Labour is in closer touch with the labour market and social partners than is the Ministry of Education, and has control of important regulations which impact on qualifications, such as the nomenclature. Such factors, no doubt, have led Romania and Slovenia to allocate responsibility in the direction of the Ministry of Labour. Whichever Ministry had overall responsibility for an NQF, agreements would need to be developed to make clear the sphere of control of the other (for example that the regulation of school curricula and quality assurance of schools would remain with the Ministry of Education even though the Ministry of Labour was responsible for the NQF; or that the control of the nomenclature and

* similar arrangements exist in Scotland.

† this may seem a curious notion, but it is worth remembering that the entire scheme of internet URLs is governed by a non-governmental technical committee with no formal powers (ICANN).

quality assurance of training for unemployed people remained with the Ministry of Labour if the Ministry of Education was responsible for the NQF);

- Option (c) appears rather weak, but may be suitable if neither of the other two options is considered suitable. Certainly there are examples of countries where the formation of an NQF started in this manner. It gives scope for voluntary co-operation, without taking final decisions on responsibility. Such an arrangement could develop into a more formal institutions and responsibilities as capacity and confidence is increased.

C. Organization

7. Should a Serbian NQF require any particular form of organization of qualifications other than by level? Two dimensions are considered: sectoral organization and organization in terms of modular structure.

Sectoral organization

8. It will probably be helpful to incorporate a sectoral structure within the NQF for VET. This is for a number of reasons:

- the curricula of vocational schools is already organized in sectoral clusters. This is a pattern that people are used to;
- progression in the labour market is generally within sectoral groupings. The idea of levels often makes more sense when applied to a particular sector;
- labour market information is expressed in sectoral terms;
- if social partnership arrangements are developed to accompany the NQF they are likely to be organized in sectoral terms (on the lines perhaps of the ISOR committees which have helped in developing new school curricula). A sectoral structure to the NQF will help indicate which committees are responsible for advising on which qualifications.

9. If this is accepted, we shall need to suggest sectoral categories. This is likely to be a 'best fit' between current educational categories, classifications used in statistical analysis, and established industry organizations. Patterns in other countries may help. In rough terms it may be expected that between 15-30 sectoral classifications could be useful.

Size

10. The idea of 'size' for qualifications is a problematic one. How should we measure size?

- a. by the length of time required to study for the qualification?
- b. by the amount of content in a qualification?
- c. by the outcomes expected for someone who gains a qualification?

11. The length of time needed (a) is the traditional approach for initial and University qualifications. This, however, has a number of disadvantages:

- some people learn faster than others. Do all need to serve a minimum time – surely this is inefficient?
- are informal approaches to learning – open learning, work experience, independent study – to be counted on the same scale as formal education? Does 10 hours of work experience count the same as 10 hours of classroom education, and if it does not, what time does it count as?

12. Defining the 'size' of content is clearly difficult and tends to come back to specifying time of study (a). However some parameters of content can be used to provide some 'weight' to a qualification – for example that specified core skills are included.

13. A different approach is to define the size of qualifications quite differently, by what they lead to. For example, as in Dual System countries, or England's NVQs, the definition of what

makes a 'full' qualification is that it should give the competences necessary for a recognized occupation. The length of training then is, in a sense, immaterial – if some can meet the standards faster than others, then they still receive the full award. One could define general education qualifications in a similar manner, by referring to the next stage of education to which they lead (e.g. qualifications which give access to University).

14. This approach, however, also carries certain disadvantages:

- it cannot readily be applied to qualifications which do not lead to an well-defined external outcome (for example certificates in health and safety, foreign languages or ICT skills);
- VET programmes in a school setting cannot always fully meet the requirements of an occupation;
- is it right to treat as equal, qualifications which take very different amounts of time and effort (cf. in England an engineering apprenticeship at Level 3 takes twice as long as one in business administration)?

15. These difficulties are real; it would be difficult to point to any country which had solved them in a wholly rational way. There seem to be three alternatives, in practice:

- i. not to make any requirements about the size of qualifications, saving perhaps a very small minimum time in order to rule out very short programmes;
- ii. to use different measures in different educational sectors (e.g. school based training would adopt a scale of time, while adult and work-based training would adopt an occupational scale);
- iii. to adopt a common 'translation device' to convert one type of training to another. One approach is to use the idea of 'notional learning hours' – the time taken by the average student to complete a certain activity. This is the approach of the European credit system for higher education (ECTS), but is evidently still largely time-based. A rather different approach is that which appears to be taken in the work on a European credit system (ECVET) which is to take all occupational profiles as a standard number of 'credits' and then to express smaller programmes as a proportion of these. This work, though has yet to be fully articulated or exemplified, and has clearly encountered difficulties (it is over a year behind schedule).

16. The danger of not making any requirements for size (i) is that there could be a proliferation of small programmes with little currency in the labour or educational markets, leading to public confusion and lack of credibility. Designing a common translation device (iii) may be both ambitious (few countries have this approach outside University) and confusing for students. For the time being, therefore, it is suggested that the 'dual' approach at (iii) be followed. To be recognized, a full qualification should either be of a programme which lasts a minimum length of time, or be recognized as leading to an occupation. If the ECVET system is introduced, then Serbia could consider following this.

D. Standards

17. VET qualifications seek to develop abilities of students which will bring them advantage in the labour market. There needs to be some kind of match therefore between the demands of the labour market and the aims of a VET programme. That match may not be perfect – there are things which training, particularly within a school environment, cannot easily or cost-effectively teach (examples would be bringing students to full working speed, having experience on the most modern equipment, etc.).

18. However there does need to be the possibility of some kind of *dialogue* between the labour market and trainers so that the match between curricula and labour market needs can be as close as reasonably possible. How else can we determine whether a curriculum needs to be updated? The method used is to express curricula in terms of *standards* – a specification of the abilities that courses seek to establish in students who complete them. These can then be

compared, either formally through analysis, or informally through dialogue with the labour market.

19. There is a case, therefore, for being explicit about the aims (or *outcomes*) of VET qualifications. Without clarity about outcomes:

- it will be difficult to assign a level to a qualification within the NQF (or within the EQF);
- it will be difficult to have any discussion about whether qualifications are suited to the labour market, and – if not – how they can be improved.

20. It should be noted that requiring that VET qualifications should state their standards in terms of outcomes, does not necessarily imply that there should be an exact match with labour market requirements, that any particular methodology should be used (*cf.* expression in terms of occupational standards) or that students should be assessed against each and every outcome.

21. At the time that an NQF was introduced, of course, not all curricula would be expressed in terms of outcomes. Initially, therefore, this condition would not be fulfilled. One suggestion would be that a certain timescale (say, three years) might be given for the drawing up of curriculum outcomes. Alternatively it could be a requirement that outcomes were expressed as curricula were revised.

E. Student assessment

22. There are many different forms of student assessment: written examinations, practical tests, assessment of projects, observation of work *etc.* Some are more suitable for certain types of knowledge and skill than others. Ideally a mixture of assessment methods would be used, but it seems unrealistic for an NQF to specify any particular type, or mix, which would apply to all qualifications.

23. However it seems reasonable, at least, that each qualification should include a specification of how students are to be assessed. Again this gives scope for dialogue about assessment methods.

24. Some people consider that assessment should be *external*, for example examinations which are marked by people other than those who teach the students, or third parties being involved in the judging of practical work. Some qualifications systems make requirements of this nature, or of the inspection of students' work by external people on a sample basis. It is for consideration whether any such requirements should be made in the case of a Serbian NQF.

F. Accreditation and Certification

25. It seems a minimum requirement of any qualification included in an NQF that:

- the organizations (for example schools) accredited to issue certificates should be specified, with the ability to withdraw this accreditation;
- there is reasonable surety that all students who successfully complete the qualification should be able to claim a certificate;
- that a record is kept of each student who has gained the certificate, with a means of their claiming a replacement if the certificate they have been given is lost or damaged;
- that a student should be able to appeal to the accredited organization if they consider that they were unjustly refused a certificate, and that such an appeal should be properly considered.

G. Quality assurance

26. Much of the earlier sections have to do with quality. Beyond these items we should note the following points which are included in the *Common Principles for Quality Assurance* in the draft EQF:

- QA should be an integral part of the internal management of education and training institutions;
- Quality Assurance should include regular evaluation of institutions or programmes by external monitoring bodies or agencies;
- QA external monitoring bodies or agencies should themselves be subject to regular review.

27. Evidently decisions on responsibility for these aspects will depend on decisions for overall responsibility for the system (Section B above).

H. Social Partnership

28. It is not a requirement of the EQF that any particular forms of social partnership should be a feature of participating national frameworks. Arrangements vary considerably within Europe, with social partners becoming involved at different levels of qualification design, validation and quality assurance. In England social partners are involved in the design of qualifications and the expression of standards, but play no formal part in their accreditation or certification. In Denmark sectoral bodies specify the form of examinations. In France the role of social partners in the formation of school-based vocational education is consultative only.

29. It is suggested that the main focus for involvement of social partners in a Serbian NQF might be through sectoral committees to advise on the structure of qualifications (*ie.* the extent to which educational profiles should be broad or specific), and to review relevant standards. If a system of this kind developed successfully, it might be appropriate to give them more powers (for example in accrediting organizations concerned with adult training, and validation of qualifications).

Summary

- Decisions will be needed on the institutions responsible for a national framework, the alternatives being to focus them on an entirely new body, to select one of the existing ministries (or their agencies), or to divide responsibilities between them, with some co-ordinating mechanism;
- A Serbian NQF should probably be organized on a sectoral basis;
- There should be minimum sizes of qualifications, expressed either in the time of the programmes which lead to them, or in terms of occupations to which they lead;
- All eligible qualifications should contain explicit learning outcomes, to allow judgements to be made about relevance to the labour market. This provision should be introduced progressively;
- All eligible qualifications should specify the way that students are assessed;
- There needs to be clarity, in the case of each qualification, about who should be permitted to issue certificates, that records should be kept of certificates issued, and how students' appeals should be handled;
- Organizations accrediting qualifications should have a declared policy of monitoring and review of the practices of those that issue certificates on their behalf. Responsibilities in this area will depend on decisions about overall responsibilities within the NQF;
- Social partnership arrangements should initially focus on collaboration at the sectoral level.