

National Qualifications Frameworks: Key Features, Underlying Rationales and Role in International Development Cooperation

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1 The growing importance of National Vocational Qualifications Frameworks

Today, National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) are in the process of being developed and implemented the world over. The issue of formal skill specification and standardisation has been important for a long time for stakeholders in vocational and technical education and training (TVET) systems. In the context of accelerated economic globalisation and increasing international migration, skill standardisation has become one of the key domains of current reforms in the field of vocational skills development (VSD), many of which have also been formulated in order to promote lifelong learning and to thus facilitate the transition towards what has been called the knowledge society.

The first frameworks were developed in Great Britain from the 1980s onwards and then spreading to a number of – mainly Anglo-Saxon – OECD countries in the 1990s. Since 2000, the model has also been promoted in developing and transition countries, particularly in Eastern Europe and in many parts of Asia. Annex 1 provides an overview of European countries implementing NQFs and documents the degrees of implementation.

In the context of the Copenhagen Process, European countries have committed themselves to developing NQFs by 2012. Switzerland, a non-member of the EU, has basically agreed to do likewise, as its authorities are convinced that NQFs promote lifelong learning and positively contribute to the transparency of vocational education and training systems. Until this date, no decisions with regard to the future form of the Swiss NQF have been taken. However, there have been important efforts to validate the acquisition of prior learning, a core aspect of the Copenhagen Process.

Box 1: The Swiss NQF

2 Organisational features of National Vocational Qualifications Frameworks

In general, the frameworks lay out a hierarchical sequence of skill levels (normally between 5 to 10) that are related to the skills intensity of work processes in the labour market. Thus, lower levels in this grid generally relate to working processes which are limited in range and repetitive and familiar; in contrast, the highest skill levels normally relate to work tasks that require a command of highly specialised technical skills that may also include competencies to solve job-related problems by engaging in research and development. Against the backdrop of this grid, occupation-specific skill profiles are being developed, which then serve to allocate the existing TVET programmes to the different skill levels; in many cases, this process is coordinated by public authorities that fall back on the advice by representatives of the world of work. In any event, skill formation programmes generally need to be officially accredited by the public authorities before the respective organisation becomes eligible to impart training that leads to a qualification at a given skill level.

In contrast to traditional skill standards and curricula, the NQFs are focussing on outcomes of training, i.e. on occupation-specific skills, rather than on inputs such as the contents of specific training programmes. Thus, different types of training programmes may lead to the same occupational skill level, and, in many countries, skill acquisition may also be certified when training has exclusively taken place in the workplace.

3 The rationale underlying National Qualifications Frameworks

As NQFs have emerged in a highly heterogeneous group of countries, not only are there differences with regard to organisational features but also with regard to the rationales underlying the frameworks. Nevertheless, there is a consensus among key stakeholders that such frameworks foster broad-based knowledge rather than narrow specialist skills, bring more transparency into the generally very complex skill formation systems and thus increase the flexibility of employees in the labour market. Furthermore, many policy makers regard NQFs as a means to facilitate the mutual recognition of qualifications across country borders, thus stimulating international migration of labour and, through this, economic development both of labour exporting and importing countries. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is the basis for the mutual recognition of diplomas within Europe. The EQF allows comparing the skill levels defined in the various national frameworks (see figure 1 below).

The comprehensiveness of NQFs strongly differs between countries. Whereas some governments have decided to attempt to bring all education and training programmes under the framework, others determined to restrict its range to specific economic sectors or to training programmes that come under the aegis of only one specific ministry or that are being conducted at a specific level of the education system (e.g. only at the tertiary education level).

Box 2: Differing comprehensiveness of NQFs

Policy documents point out that the outcome orientation of the frameworks reflects the requirements of the labour market and thus positively contributes to the relevance of training programmes and increases the employability of trainees. In most countries where NQFs started to be implemented only recently, reference is being made to other countries that have embarked on similar reforms. What generally is lacking, however, are references to successful implementation.

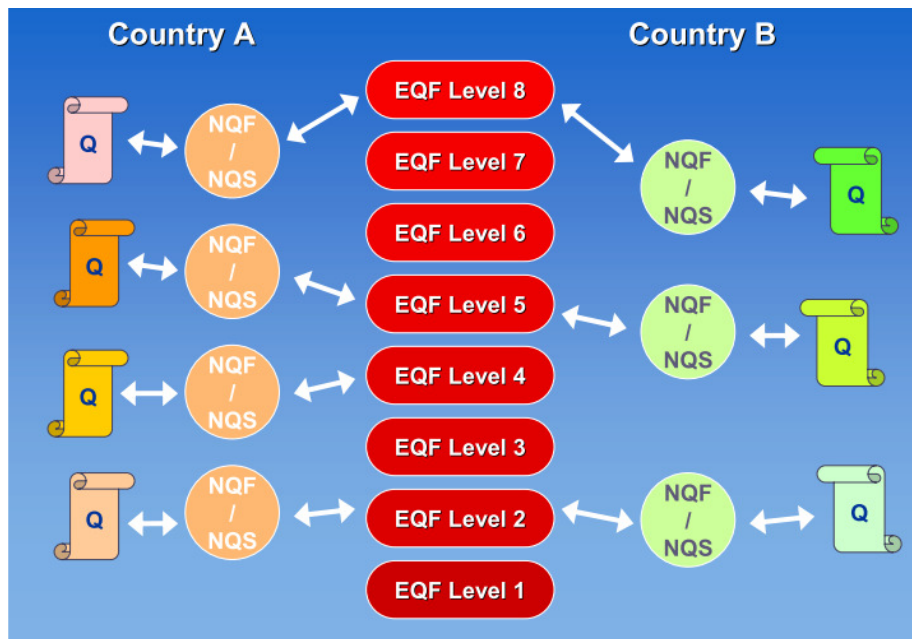


Figure 1: The use of the EQF for mutual recognition of qualifications between countries A and B

Source: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/presentation_eqf_en.pdf (23.6.2010)

4 National Qualifications Frameworks in development aid

Since the international community decided to focus on expanding primary education in the context of the 1990 Education for All conference held in Jomtien, governments in many developing countries and donor organisations alike gave less priority to investments into VSD. In the last few years, however, the development of TVET systems has again become a priority in aid to education. NQFs are considered to improve the linkages between the training system and the labour market and to support mi-

grant labour in accessing overseas labour markets.

Therefore, skill standardisation has become an important ingredient of many current VSD projects. However, the interest of donor organisations in this aspect of TVET is nothing new: the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the World Bank have been engaged in this domain from the 1960s onwards.

Today, one of the most important international organisations promoting NQFs is the European Training Foundation, a technical agency of the European Union. ETF contributes particularly to the development of NQFs in South-Eastern European countries and in the Middle East. It provides technical assistance to governments but also nurtures the development process by producing a high number of manuals and monitoring

SDC belongs to those international development agencies that have given continuous support to vocational skills development (VSD). Particularly important is its contribution to promoting competency-based training (CBT) through which vocational education and training programmes can be better geared towards the needs of labour markets. Today, competency orientation has become the corner-stone of the NQF development in many countries.

Box 3: Competency-based training in the focus of Swiss Development Cooperation

reports. The work of ETF in EU pre-accession and EU candidate countries takes place in the context of strong expectations from the side of existing EU member states that these countries soon implement the frameworks. In other parts of the world, the NQF movement was mainly driven by the multi-lateral development banks and the Commission of the European Union that are often falling back on the technical support by the ILO.

5 The challenges in designing NQFs in developing and transition countries

Even though the development of NQFs has become one of the key features of current reforms in the domain of VSD the world over, there is still very little evidence with regard to the impact of this remarkably rapidly diffusing model. The comparatively few retrospective contributions to the literature point out that, in most cases, the NQF reforms in developing and transition countries are strongly government-led; organisations of the world of work have remained comparatively passive (in this context see also Annex 2 that provides an overview of NQF systems on the implementation of which there exist ILO case studies).

Given the fact that NQFs are designed to contribute to the educational and social mobility of the workforce, there would be reason for labour unions to be interested in the model; however, many of such organisations both in developing and transition countries traditionally have little experience in lobbying in the field of VSD. On the other hand, employers' associations may be considered to be welcoming more transparency in the provision of training but they are generally reluctant to support reforms that increase the opportunities for the mobility of the workforce because they may finally lead to more labour turnover at the firm level. Furthermore, the literature on the political economy of skill formation suggests that employers, particularly those from smaller and medium enterprises (SME) that are lacking internal labour markets, will not be eager to provide training to employees along the lines of qualifications frameworks, as the certified provision of industry-specific skills increases, in their eyes, the risk of newly trained employees being poached by competing firms in the sector.

Evidence from the literature on qualifications frameworks also documents that employers have been involved only half-heartedly into the development of skills standards since these developments were often considered to be mainly driven by the interests of policy makers and development agencies and not by the world of work. In fact, skill standards developed in the context of the development of NQFs often become inflated lists of skills brought together by a heterogeneous group of stakeholders, thus even contributing to training programmes becoming longer and – paradoxically – more academic.

6 Potential emphasis of future aid to the development of NQFs

Despite these reservations, there is scope for NQFs to contribute to TVET systems becoming more related to the requirements and the needs of labour markets and to economies in developing and transition countries becoming more skill-intensive and productive. The focus of aid may be particularly important in the following areas.

Ensuring cooperation with organisations representing the world of work

To make sure that the development of NQFs does not remain solely the objective of public authorities and donors, there is a need to involve organisations representing the world of work.

The first kind of organisations to be involved may be *employers' associations*, potentially those representing economic sectors that are particularly skill-intensive. This sort of cooperation, against the backdrop of very broadly defined overarching national skills levels, may lay the foundation of sector-specific qualifications frameworks that can be implemented by some of the leading firms in the respective economic sectors. Such cooperation needs to be based on a serious analysis of the sector that considers whether the industry leaders are both genuinely committed to skills training and in a position to convince fellow entrepreneurs to similarly promote training.

There may be scope to also involve *foreign investors* into the development of sector-specific qualifications frameworks. Yet, it is absolutely vital to avoid that the development

of such frameworks starts to be viewed as a model only appropriate for foreign firms that are generally more technology and skills intensive. If the industry sector is well chosen and the sector-specific framework starts to be successful, this provides an important starting point for convincing representatives from other sectors as well. In any event, an incremental approach to the implementation of NQFs may be more promising. A further type of organisation may be *labour export agencies* which are, for obvious reasons, highly interested in their employee-clients developing skills in ways that are recognised by overseas employers.

Many agencies involved into developing VSD systems often face the difficulty that sector-specific employers' associations or trade unions are either non-existent or lacking interest in VSD. In some cases, as for instance in the Kosovo banking sector, donor organisations have been involved into setting up respective organisations; in some countries, for instance in Kenya, donor agencies have also attempted at strengthening associations in the informal sector. In other cases, such as in the Bangladesh textile sector, external assistance has been aimed at improving the capacity of existing associations in the field of training. With regard to the development of NQFs, particularly the latter type of support seems to have some potential; donors may, however, be careful enough to make sure that the

Literature suggests that sector-specific qualifications frameworks are likely to be comparatively successful. One notable example in this context is the recent effort by the Sri Lankan authorities and the garment industry of the country to standardise the training programmes catering to this industry at the secondary and at the tertiary level. Key to this reform is a skills manual ("Competence and beyond") that describes in detail the skills needed for virtually all the occupations in the industry (e.g. for sewing machine operators or executives in fashion design departments). This document, an initiative by the umbrella organisation of employers in the garment industry (JAAF), was jointly developed by entrepreneurs, employees and training professionals and today is an international point of reference in HRD for the industry. On the basis of the manual, skill standards were then defined at a national level and adopted by the national training agencies. (http://www.just-style.com/comment/can-garments-without-quilt-raise-the-bar-for-sri-lanka_id100307.aspx)

Box 4: The "Competence and beyond" initiative of the Sri Lankan garment industry

supported organisations do have a genuine interest in human resources development and are not engaging in policy talk only in order to get access to funding from abroad.

Development of apprenticeship training

As pointed out above, the literature suggests that employers are not likely to invest into regular employees developing industry-specific skills that will be certified and thus allow workers to move on to other firms. For this reason, policy makers may think about developing specific training schemes that allow firms to pay lower wages to those employees who profit from being imparted skills that can be used elsewhere. If employers realise that employees may become productive already during the training phase and thus contribute to profits, they will, thus, also start to cope with the fact that some of them will leave the firm upon training.

An incremental and flexible approach to the development of NQFs

One of the most important aspects while developing qualifications frameworks is to ensure that the approach to the development of such frameworks needs to be incremental and flexible. NQF reforms have long-term structural implications and thus entail a whole deal of systemic risks. It is only through this type of approach that the quality and relevance of training increases, thus paving the way for higher employability of graduates of training organisations.

7 Further reading

Literature

- Allais, Stephanie (2010), The implementation and impact of National Qualifications Frameworks: Report of a study in 16 countries. Geneva: International Labor Organization.
- Coordination Group for Qualifications Framework (2009), Report on Qualifications Frameworks. Submitted to the BFUG for its meeting on February 12 - 13, 2009 - DGIV/EDU/HE (2009) 2. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- European Training Foundation (2010), Inventory of recent NQF developments in the ETF's partner countries: Working Document for the EQF Advisory Group. Torino: European Training Foundation.
- Fetsi, Anastasia et al. (2007), Labour markets in the Western Balkans: Challenges for the future. Torino: European Training Foundation.
- Masson, Jean-Raymond (2007), "The contribution of European vocational training policy to reforms in the partner countries of the European Union." European journal of vocational training 41 (2), pp. 43-63.
- McBride, Vicent (2005), "Using the Copenhagen Process to Facilitate National Qualification Framework Strategies in South Eastern Europe." European Journal of Education 40 (3), pp. 315-321.
- Shaw, Gisela (1999), "'European Standards' in Vocational Education and Training (VET): What Are They and Who Wants Them?" European Journal of Education 34 (2), pp. 137-152.

Links

Information on portability of skills as promoted by the European Training Foundation (ETF)

http://www.etf.europa.eu/web.nsf/pages/Qualification_frameworks_EN?Opendocument&ta=Qualificati on_frameworks (retrieved June 23, 2010)

Information on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm (retrieved June 23, 2010)

Switzerland and the Copenhagen Process

<http://www.bbt.admin.ch/themen/berufsbildung/00106/00355/index.html?lang=en> (retrieved June 23, 2010)

Links to selected national NQF authorities:

France: <http://www.cncp.gouv.fr/> (retrieved June 23, 2010)

Ireland: <http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/> (retrieved June 23, 2010)

South Africa: <http://www.saga.org.za/> (retrieved June 23, 2010)

Sri Lanka: <http://www.tvec.gov.lk/English/index.htm> (retrieved June 23, 2010)

Sweden: <http://www.hsv.se/2.539a949110f3d5914ec800056285.html> (retrieved June 23, 2010)

8 Annexes

Annex 1: Overview of implementation of NQFs in Council of Europe member countries¹

Country	1.Decision to start	2.Setting the agenda	3.Organizing the process	4.Design Profile	5.Consultation	6.Approval	7.Administrative set-up	8.Implementation	9.Inclusion of qualifications	10.Self-certification	11.NQ web site
ALBANIA	07/2006	07/2006	Done	Done	09-10/2008	12/2008	06/2008	01/2009	06/2009	To be completed in 09/2009	Under construction
ANDORRA	2007	06/2008	Done	Done	To be completed	09/2008	09/2008	06/2009	To be done	To be done	To be done
ARMENIA	2006	2007	2005	2004 To be completed in 2009	2008	2008 To be completed for 2010	2008	2009	2009-2010	2009	Under construction
AUSTRIA	11/06	12/06-01/07	02-07/2007	03/2007	01-12/2008	03/2009-05/2009	01/2009-03/2009	05-12/2009	06/2009-04/2010	06/2009-12/2011	Done
AZERBAIJAN											
BELGIUM (FLEMISH COMMUNITY)	2003	Done?	Done?	Done?	done	In progress	Done?	Pilots projects 12/2007, 2009-2010	?	2008	done
BELGIUM (FRENCH COMMUNITY)	2007										
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	2006-2008	2010	2006-2008	To be completed	ongoing	2007	2007-2010	To be completed by 2010	2009/2010	Ongoing By 2010	2010
BULGARIA	2007	2010	2007-2008	1995-2007 to be completed in 2010	2007-11/2008	2010	2007-2010	In progress?	To be done	2007	To be done
CROATIA	03/2006	07/2007	07/2007-09/2007	07/2007	11/2007-05/2009	To be done in 2009	To be done in 2009	To be done in 2011-2012	To be done in 2012	2010-2012	Done
CYPRUS	2008										
CZECH REPUBLIC	2005-2006	2005-2007	2005-2007	In the phase of suggestion which is being discussed	2008 and will continue during the whole preparation 2009-11*/	2006	Done and more structures, in particular for the tertiary sphere will be introduced – e.g. “sectoral expert groups”*/	2008-2011?/	2008-2011?— mainly in the second half of the project */	2011	Autumn 2008- This will be the present information on the state of art. It will be on the Bologna web page of the Ministry. The “professional” web will be prepared during the project*/ in 2009

¹ Excerpt from: Coordination Group for Qualifications Framework (2009) Report on Qualifications Frameworks. Submitted to the BFUG for its meeting on February 12 - 13, 2009 - DGIV/EDU/HE (2009) 2. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, pp. 22-24.

DENMARK	Completed in 2002. A revision-process was launched in 2006	Completed in 2003.	Completed in 2002.	Completed in 2003. A revision of the conceptual framework and descriptors were completed in 2008.	Completed in 2003 and again in 2007-2008.	2003 and 2008.	Completed in 2003. The administrative set-up remains after the revision of the framework.	Completed in 2003. Revisions at institutional level as a result of the new framework are ongoing (2009-)	Completed in 2008 and henceforth through cyclical accreditation.	Will be launched in January 2009 and completed in the course of 2009	Completed in 2003.
ESTONIA	done	done	done?	?	?	2007	Done	2009	?	?	Not yet
FINLAND	2004	02/2005	2005	---	08/2008	No decision yet	----	----	----	Not started yet	2009
FRANCE	2002	2002	2002	2002	done	2002	Done	2002	From 2002 to 2008(work still ongoing for HE qualifications)	Done	done
GEORGIA	2006	done	2007	2007	2007-10/2008	12/ /2009	2009	2008-2010	2011	06 /2009 – 2010	done
GERMANY	09/ 2003	09 2003	09 2003	2003-2005	2003-2005	04/ 2005	04/2005	12/2005 (accreditation Council HRK)	04/ 2005	10/ 2008	done
GREECE											
HOLY SEE	2005	2005	2005-2006	Done to be updated	10/2006	To be decided	To be done in 2009	To be done in 2009	In process	To be completed in 2010	To be done in 2009
HUNGARY	06/2008										
ICELAND	2004-2005	2004-2005	2004-2005	2006	2006-2008	2006	2006	Done	done	To be competed in 2009	To be done in 2010
IRELAND	2003	done	Done	Done	Done	Done	Done	done	done	Completed in 2006	Done
ITALY	2007	To be completed in 2008	To be completed in 2008	to be completed in 03/ 2008	to be completed in 2008	To be completed	Partially done in 2008, to be completed in 2010	Partially done in 2008, to be completed in 2010	To be concluded in 2009	To be concluded in 2009	To be concluded in 2010
LATVIA	2004	2004-2006	2004	2004-2005	2005 on QF 2006-2008 on the draft	Starts 2008 For adoption in 2009-2010	Done	2013	done	Not before 2012	To be done in 2009/2010
LIECHTENSTEIN	End 2007	01-02/2008	05/2008	10/2008	05/2009	10/ 2009	From 09/ 2009	Ongoing Until 07/ 2011	08/2009	07/2010	done
LITHUANIA	2005	2005-2008	2007	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	Done
LUXEMBOURG											
MALTA	2005	done?	Done	Done ?	?	06/ 2007	Done	done	?	?	Done
MOLDOVA											
MONTENEGRO	2006	2008	2006?	Done	2008	?	?	2010?	?	By 2010	?

NETHERLANDS	March 2005	done	Done	done	To be completed	To be completed	To be completed	To be completed	To be completed	07-11/2008	done
NORWAY	12/2005	12/2005	12/2005	04/2007	07 – 11/2007	In progress. To be completed by end of 2009	To be completed by end of 2009	To be fully implemented in all programmes in all HEIS by 2012	To be done 2009-2012	To be completed by 2013	To be set up By 02/2009
POLAND	2006	2006	2006	01/2008	2008-2009-2010	2009-2010	2010	2010	2011	2012	To be developed
PORTUGAL											
ROMANIA	2005	done	2005-2006	2007	2007	To be approved by government decision	Done in 2008	2008-2010	2010	2010-2012	Done
RUSSIAN FEDERATION											
SERBIA											
SLOVAK REPUBLIC											
SLOVENIA	2007	2008	2007	?	?	?	Under development	?	?	?	?
SPAIN	2007	2007	2007	To be developed in 2008	To be developed in 2008	Not foreseen yet	not foreseen yet	To be developed in 2008	To be developed in 2008	not foreseen yet	not foreseen yet
SWEDEN	Done	Done?	Done?	2007	To be done	To be done	Done	In 2008?	2008?	?	?
SWITZERLAND	09/2005	2005-2006	2005	2006	2007-10/2008	2009-2010	Autumn 2008	Under progress	2010	2009-2010	done
“THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA”	Done	done	Partially completed	To be completed	To be completed	done	To be completed	done	To be completed	To be completed	To be completed
TURKEY	Done 04/2006	Done 2006	Done 2006-2008	To be completed by 11/2008	Partially completed and will be fully completed by 12/2008	To be done by 03/2009	To be done by 05/2009	Pilot implementation in 2010 and full implementation by 12/2012	To be done in 2010-2015	To be done in 2010-2012	To be completed in 2009
UKRAINE	May 2008	July 2008	July 2008								
UNITED KINGDOM	2001	done	Done	done	done	2001	?	done	Done?	11/2008	done
UNITED KINGDOM SCOTLAND	1997	done	Done in 1998	Completed in 1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2003-2004	2003	2001	2006-2007	done

Annex 2: Overview of countries with NQF systems on the implementation of which there exist ILO case studies²



² The ILO case studies include England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Mexico, Chile, Malaysia, Mauritius, Botswana, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Lithuania, Tunisia, Bangladesh, Russia; for a synthesis of these case studies, see Allais, Stephanie (2010) The implementation and impact of National Qualifications Frameworks: Report of a study in 16 countries. Geneva: International Labor Organization.

Annex 3: Tentative Overview of NQFs internationally³

	1. Established	2. Developing and implementing	3. Planning and/or designing	4. Considering	5. Competence framework
Sub-Saharan Africa	Botswana, Namibia, Mauritius, South Africa	Lesotho, Seychelles	Angola, Kenya, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Zambia	DRC, Ghana, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe	
Americas & the Caribbean	OECS	Barbados, Canada, Honduras, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago	Antigua and Barbuda, Chile, Colombia, Grenada, Guyana		Brazil, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama
Asia (South & East) & Pacific	Australia, Hong Kong SAR, Malaysia, New Zealand, Philippines, Samoa, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Vanuatu	Fiji, China, Maldives, Pacific Islands, Papua New Guinea, Thailand, Tonga, Viet Nam	Bangladesh, India, Pakistan	Afghanistan, Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Japan, Laos, Macau, Mongolia, Nepal (has NVQs), Republic of Korea	Indonesia
Europe & Central Asia	England, Ireland, France, Malta, Northern Ireland, Romania, Scotland, Wales	Albania, Lithuania, Belgium Flanders, Bosnia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Portugal, Montenegro, Kosovo, Georgia, Slovenia, Turkey	Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Cyprus, French, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Norway, Poland, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Spain,	Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Switzerland, Ukraine, Uzbekistan	
Middle East & North Africa		Tunisia	Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, United Arab Emirates	Iraq	

³ Allais, Stephanie (2010), The implementation and impact of National Qualifications Frameworks: Report of a study in 16 countries. Geneva: International Labor Organization, p. 23.