National Qualification Frameworks: from policy borrowing to policy learning

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Introduction

There is a growing international debate on national qualification frameworks (NQF) and their role as vocational education and training (VET) policy reform drivers (International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2009; European Training Foundation (ETF), in press; OECD, 2007). At the heart of this debate are ambitions to transform and modernise VET systems and NQFs are considered to be the means to this end. Part of the educational debate covers the relevance of focusing on qualifications as the main instrument to reform VET; there are, also, growing concerns about the complex issues of the borrowing and lending of vocational training policies in this context (Young, 2005; European Training Foundation (ETF), 2007a).

While several authors (Coles, 2006; Bjørnavold & Coles, 2009; Leney, 2009; Valk, 2009) seek to explain why NQFs are increasingly important for VET reforms and how they can promote access and progression routes, support the recognition of all learning and thus be used as drivers to put VET in a lifelong learning perspective (OECD, 2007), others (Young, 2003; Phillips; 2003; Allais, 2007; Young & Allais, 2009) describe how they are increasingly borrowed and lent and why they are not necessarily useful in satisfying the policy aspirations for which they were adopted in the first place. Drawing on this literature, one can identify elements in the growing debate on modern VET reforms and single out complex interactions that occur within and across local and global levels in this field. However, it should be noted, as pointed out by Johnson and Wolf (2009), that, despite the global spread of NQFs, there are few reliable studies on their impact.

This article draws on the European Training Foundation (ETF) experience with NQFs in European Union (EU) partner countries. It reflects on the way a global discourse on VET reforms can have an impact on national policies. Policy learning is suggested as a way to help to identify alternative VET policy strategies that are better embedded in national contexts. This perspective sees policy learning as a way for governments or systems of governance to inform policy development by drawing lessons from available evidence and experience (Grootings, 2007; Raffe & Spours, 2007). To illustrate this, the article discusses the development and implementation of NQFs in the EU neighbourhood area and the pre-accession countries. The European neighbourhood area covers the former Soviet Republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation and Ukraine and Middle Eastern and North African countries (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Syria and Tunisia). The pre-accession countries are Turkey, Albania, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo and

Montenegro. The relevance of these cases lies in the fact that countries in both regions have been exposed to and have introduced NQFs using very different approaches. For the EU neighbourhood area, the approach was a policy-learning one, whereas, for pre-accession countries, it was based on a more classical technical assistance project-based strategy.

The article first focuses on the NQF and its emergence as a VET policy option on the world scene, examining in particular the main elements of both international debate and EU developments and their influence on both regions. It then introduces the policy-learning concept and explains why and how NQF development processes can be considered as policy learning, with both regions used to illustrate the argument. Finally, some future directions for VET policy reforms are identified and the way in which policy learning can enhance ownership and contextualisation of such reforms is discussed.

National Qualification Frameworks at a Glance

National qualification frameworks are classifiers that specify the relationship and the horizontal and vertical continuum between different forms of qualifications (Coles, 2006). The main features that distinguish NQFs from existing qualification systems can be summarised as follows: a common definition of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes covering in most cases knowledge, skills and wider competences ranked according to a single hierarchy of levels (usually 8–12) and an inclusive set of occupational and/or knowledge fields (usually 12–15) (Young & Allais, 2009).

In most cases (OECD, 2007; Bjørnavold & Coles, 2009; Grootings, 2007; European Training Foundation (ETF), in press), it is argued that NQFs go beyond the role of classifiers and are 'visions' that aim to redefine the way qualifications relate to one another and how they are valued and applied in societies. They are seen as drivers of VET reform (European Training Foundation (ETF), in press). Most government documents introducing NQFs refer to the need to (a) improve the labour market responsiveness of VET; (b) establish pathways between VET, general and higher education, (c) improve the quality and flexibility of VET, and (d) shift from input- to outcome-based VET systems.

While in several 'early starter' countries, such as the UK, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand, NQFs were developed to mainly cover vocational qualifications, more recent NQFs tend to be designed as overarching frameworks embracing all types of education. In this case, they bring all provision, i.e. education, VET and higher education, into a single system. They increasingly contain common 'normative' distinctive features; thus (a) the qualifications are independent of VET institutions; (b) complex quality assurance systems are foreseen to validate qualifications, accredit institutions and ensure quality assurance in assessment leading to the award of qualifications; and (c) they are designed to make it easier to validate prior learning and to put value on learning programmes that allow for credit accumulation and transfer.

A number of articles, studies and policy documents on NQFs have been produced recently, many of which have focused on their potential benefits (Bjørnavold & Coles, 2009; Leney, 2009). Very few offer a more critical perspective (Young, 2003; Allais; 2007). The next section discusses the main elements in this debate. Certain issues at stake that are specific to ETF partner countries will be highlighted when we consider NQFs as drivers for VET reforms.

The National Qualification Framework Debate

National qualification frameworks are a global phenomenon (Young, 2003; International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2009; European Training Foundation (ETF), in press). Some 70 countries across the world are developing or planning an NQF. They range from industrialised and economically developed EU member states to fast-developing countries in Asia and developing countries in Africa. A global consensus among policy makers, which Grubb and Lazerson (2006, cited in Young & Allais, 2009, p. 5) refer to as the 'vocational gospel', stresses the need to reform VET with economic goals in mind through the development of outcome-based qualifications as a key policy instrument.

Two broad policy arguments and rationales are put forward in favour of an NQF as a relevant VET policy option, namely, internal systemic policy reform and external international recognition of qualifications in a globalised labour market.

It is claimed that NQFs facilitate system-wide reforms and increase the involvement of stakeholders in the development of qualifications, with the result that VET systems are more responsive to labour market needs. As pointed out by Bjørnavold and Coles (2009) in their discussion on the advantages of NQFs: 'the coordinating effects of NQFs, especially in terms of stakeholder engagement and institutional roles and responsibilities, make it more likely that broader, coordinated programmes of reforms can be proposed with confidence' (p. 4). In this perspective, NQFs are said to give employers' and workers' organisations a more important role in VET reforms, especially in developing agreed learning outcomes for qualifications (Tuck, 2007). It is also claimed that they place singular reform issues, such as standards, curriculum modernisation and assessment, in an overall comprehensive and consistent framework (Grootings, 2007).

National qualification frameworks also relate directly to the need for cross-border recognition of qualifications. Governments that are keen to attract foreign capital to facilitate the mobility of their citizens and, more broadly, to ensure a stake in the global labour market, are increasingly concerned about the transparency and comparability of their national qualifications in relation to those that are produced, awarded and used elsewhere (Leney, 2009; Grootings, 2007).

However, several authors have argued that, irrespective of their increasing appeal, NQFs are not necessarily good policy practice, especially in a developing country context (Young, 2005; Allais, 2007). The key argument is that NQFs may achieve little if they are not fit for purpose and if they are not part of a wider VET strategy (Tuck, 2007). For instance, Raffe (2003) emphasises the need for NQF policy breadth, referring to the extent to which they are directly and explicitly linked to other policy measures. Young (2005, p. 32) takes the view that developing countries should not assume that 'an NQF is any kind of "magic wand" for education reform', that it should be remembered that 'there are no prescriptions or "how to do it" manuals to read from other countries'. In Young's view, international trends in introducing NQFs, driven by international organisations, could have implications on the way early starter models are replicated in developing countries. Discussing the implications of the approaches adopted by donors and international organisations, he argues that 'the indiscriminate employment of foreign consultants is likely to lead to many of the problem related to policy borrowing' (Young, 2005, p. 32).

Concerning the international or external dimension of NQFs, Chakroun and Jimeno Sicilia (2009) discuss the impact of the recognition of qualifications and the prospect of transferring just what qualifications signify and whose point of view or priorities they engage. They stress that recognising qualifications can easily contribute to the brain-drain problem, 'with the EU and other industrialised countries poaching the best available skilled workers from the partner countries, whose contribution is sorely needed in their home countries' (ibid., p. 69).

The debate and divergence of opinions on NQFs can also be viewed from two contradictory perspectives: outcome-based logic and institution-based logic. By reference to the European Qualification Framework (EQF), some authors (Leney, 2009; Bjørnavold & Coles, 2009; Rauhvargers, 2009; Leney *et al.*, 2008) promote the shift to learning outcomes as an option for modernising VET systems in terms of an outcome-based model of functioning. This model, it is argued, would help to loosen the close links between qualifications and VET providers and facilitate the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Other authors, in contrast, point out that the scope for misunderstanding and confusion regarding the concept of learning outcomes is considerable (Johnson & Wolf, 2009; Brockmann *et al.*, 2009). The main argument is that a shift to learning outcomes masks the risk implied by weakening institutions and underestimates the learning process itself. For instance, Young and Allais (2009, p. 5) argue that 'a reform approach which is designed to challenge education institutions and providers is likely to have a dramatically different effect in countries where these institutions are weak or non-existent'. Concerns about the shift to learning outcomes are also related to the risk of neglecting learning processes. Grootings (2007) and Castejon (2007) explored the way NQFs impact on the learning process, with both authors warning about the preoccupation with learning outcomes at the expense of the learning process itself.

Several authors (Grootings, 2007; Castejon, 2007; Raffe, 2009) consider that NQF development establishes a basis for a collaborative model of policymaking that is considered to be less hierarchical, based as it is on networks and partnership between public and private stakeholders (Raffe & Spours, 2007). They highlight the ability of NQFs to engage a wide range of stakeholders from the public sector (including policy-makers and practitioners), the private sector and civil society in general. To varying degrees, they share a view of NQF development as a collective exercise that leads to wider consultation processes and greater ownership. Others (Young & Allais, 2009; Chakroun & Jimeno Sicilia, 2009) consider that, although NQFs have this potential, the situation in developing countries — with social partners who are weak and do not have the capacities to play the role expected of them — keeps the public sector in the driving seat of the process.

However, apart from South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, these debates are based exclusively on evidence from EU member states. In all cases, they are primarily concerned with describing, interpreting or explaining the success or failure of these systems (Raffe, 2003; Coles, 2006). Very few are based on comprehensive and independent evaluations of NQF development and impact (Scottish Executive, 2005). Despite their importance in helping to make sense of the issues at stake, these discussions do not take into consideration the fact that there is still a considerable gap between the reality of VET systems and labour markets in developing countries and the development horizon for VET in these countries.

VET systems in the ETF partner countries are generally characterised by low-quality inputs, processes and outputs, outdated curricula, poor-quality teachers, inefficient funding systems, high dropout rates, and mismatches with labour market needs. Labour markets are characterised by low participation (in particular for women and young people), high unemployment and rigid labour market segmentation along public/private and formal/informal lines (European Training Foundation (ETF), 2007b). At the same time, many countries have embarked on the design and implementation of in-depth reforms aimed at improving VET quality and relevance in line with labour market and individual needs, taking NQFs as the driver and the recurring theme (European Training Foundation (ETF), in press).

Consequently, these issues, together with the tensions highlighted earlier, signal the extensive problems that will be encountered by countries reforming their VET systems through NQFs. One problem is the absence of evidence of NQF development success around the world (Young, 2005; International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2009). Another is the lack of understanding of the interplay between local and global aspects (Young, 2003; Chakroun & Jimeno Sicilia, 2009). This situation, therefore, begs three broad questions. Is NQF development inevitably becoming a VET reform tool? What are the main features of the interplay between the global and local aspects influencing NQF development? And what kind of policy learning is likely to enable countries to develop and implement NQF models that are relevant to their national contexts?

Global and Local Aspects of NQF Development

National qualification frameworks encompass the globalisation and internationalisation of the VET agenda and their international importance is growing (OECD, 2007; CEDEFOP, 2009; International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2009), particularly in the ETF's partner countries (European Training Foundation (ETF), in press). This provides us with a good opportunity to examine the complex interactions across the local and global levels. Many countries are introducing NQFs in order to reform their VET systems and at the same fulfil international obligations (Raffe, 2009).

A key source of policy that is influencing many leading partner countries in terms of seeing NQFs as a solution to challenges in the VET sector are EU policy developments in VET. The fact that the establishment of the EQF is a policy priority in the EU has been particularly influential in most partner countries. The EQF is a meta-framework that aims to facilitate the transparency and portability of qualifications and support lifelong learning. It is one of the central pillars of the EU's efforts to enhance mobility and establish a set of social and economic goals for Europe.

Different authors note the EU member state support for the EQF consultation process and their commitment to the open method of coordination (Bjørnavold & Coles, 2009). The main argument is that the EQF should lead to the establishment of zones of mutual trust, defined as an agreement between individuals, enterprises and other organisations concerning delivery, recognition and evaluation of vocational learning outcomes (Coles & Oates, 2005; Brockmann *et al.*, 2009).

The positive response to the EQF as a translation device has been tempered by the concerns of a number of member states that it should not evolve into an instrument that supplanted national processes and structures (McBride, in press). Although the introduction of NQFs is increasingly seen as inevitable, the link

between the EQF and national processes is viewed as sensitive. Hence, the interplay between EU member states' NQFs and the EQF is a dynamic process. EU member states (except for Greece) are developing NQFs at the national level. In late 2009, Ireland, Malta and the UK started the referencing process that links national qualifications to the EQF on the basis of common criteria and a quality-assured process. However, the whole process is still in an experimental phase and a number of issues remain to be explored, including the timetable for EQF implementation, the referencing process, the use of learning outcomes and the establishment of a zone of mutual trust among member states.

At the same time, there is growing debate on the external repercussions of the EQF (i.e. outside the borders of the EU). It was addressed in a conference which was organised by ETF in cooperation with the European Commission, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) and the European Parliament and entitled 'The European Qualifications Framework: Linking to a Globalised World'. It took place on 29–30 January 2009 at the European Parliament. The aim was to examine interest in the EQF worldwide and to explore relationships for the sharing of knowledge and experience. The conference identified a significant interest in the EQF from outside the EU and acknowledged that there were important lessons to be learned from around the world. More strategically, the debate highlighted the profound implications of the EQF for the establishment and regulation of cross-national recognition of qualifications and, more generally, for domestic developments in ETF partner countries (Leney, 2009; Mc Bride, in press).

The discussion on the external dimension of the EQF is closely related to the external dimension of NQFs in partner countries. Both dimensions are about international recognition of qualifications, mobility and migration. Many partner countries introduce NQFs to enhance and support the migration of their citizens and to help to market their own education and training internationally (Leney, 2009).

Hence, as the global agenda and EU policy developments work their way to partner countries, the prospect for policy influence becomes greater, particularly when a similar set of messages reaches target countries from a whole range of international or regional policy actors (World Bank, 2008; OECD, 2007; CEDEFOP, 2009; European Training Foundation (ETF), in press). In this context, the main challenge for partner countries and for international organisations such as ETF is to move from the policy borrowing and lending model — a feature of NQF development to date — towards a policy learning model (Raffe, 2009). The extent to which this approach can accommodate the above mentioned challenges is the subject of the following sections.

From Policy Borrowing to Policy Learning

Concerns with policy borrowing and lending have led ETF to focus on policy learning as a development strategy (European Training Foundation (ETF), 2007a; 2008a). Policy borrowing and lending concerns the transfer of policies from one political system to another. Ochs and Philips (2004, p. 8) note a continuum in the dynamics of education transfer processes, ranging from reforms that are imposed (policy lending) to those that are more voluntarily sought or accepted (policy borrowing). In contrast, policy learning puts a strong emphasis on the development of national capacities to lead the design and implementation of VET reforms.

It supports processes for looking outwards, particularly through peer learning (Nikolovska & Vos, 2008; Sultana, 2008a), whilst retaining an emphasis on the national context. Policy learning seems to be a more effective way for governments or systems of governance to inform policy development by drawing lessons from available national and international evidence and experience (Grootings, 2004; Raffe & Spours, 2007; Chakroun, 2008).

Recent work (European Training Foundation (ETF), 2008a) suggests that policy learning encourages situated problem solving and reflection and indicates a change in the way policies are elaborated. According to the research, successful policy learning facilitates the involvement of new stakeholders, promotes more collaborative decision making and introduces new tools to support evidence-based policies. The research indicates that a normative model of policy learning that is applicable to all countries and contexts does not exist (European Training Foundation (ETF), 2008a; Raffe & Spours, 2007). It brings a more balanced perspective to the expectations for, and impact of, policy learning on policy goals and educational change (European Training Foundation (ETF), 2008a).

Common to these studies and research are two distinct but related dimensions of policy learning. The first focuses on individual learning. It emphasises participation in peer learning and contribution to policy-making processes (Grootings, 2007; Grootings & Nielsen, 2005). It assumes that policy learning increases the expertise of individual policy makers. The second dimension is more concerned with the structure and mechanisms of policy making and governance and the extent and nature of the learning processes that occur within them (Raffe & Spours, 2007). One specific problem that policy learning does not seem to address is the relationship between individual and organisational learning. In other words, how can individual learning be channelled so as to generate and sustain changes at the wider institutional level? A considerable body of literature has emerged that focuses on organisational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Etheridge, 1985; Kim, 1994). However, it tends to neglect issues such as what is being learned and how this learning fits into the policy cycle (Chakroun, 2007). By gaining a better understanding of how individual learning is used in the decision-making process, we should also gain a better understanding of how institutions inhibit (or facilitate) policy learning.

An important mechanism used by ETF for policy learning is peer learning (Sultana, 2008a; Nikolovska & Vos, 2008). Peer learning is about bringing together policy makers from different countries to discuss approaches to reforming VET systems and analyse policies deemed to deserve wider attention and scrutiny, whether in more industrially advanced countries or in countries at a similar stage of development as their own. Peer learning claims to serve a variety of policy-related purposes including understanding VET systems better by contrasting them with others, identifying common trends and pressures, clarifying alternative policy strategies and identifying issues that could arise from each option (Raffe, 2009; Chakroun, 2008; Grootings, 2004).

Peer learning, as designed by ETF, focuses on capacity building. It proposes policy tools and approaches to producing, sharing and using knowledge that are different from those used in traditional technical assistance. It focuses on the capacity of policy makers in specific countries to learn from their own experience and from that of other countries in ways that strive for a deeper understanding of policy problems and processes than what is provided by simply seeking and implementing best practice.

The National Qualification Framework as a Policy-learning Process

Focusing again on NQFs to illustrate what is at stake, they are not something that can simply be copied from other countries and then quickly implemented at home. NQFs are closely linked to the overall goals of VET systems and are thus firmly related to the specific institutional context of the country — a point that Young and Allais (2009) stressed when drawing a distinction and highlighting the tensions between institution-based and outcome-based logic. For this and other reasons, several authors consider that an NQF that fits all countries does not exist (Grootings, 2007; Raffe, 2009). Other authors (Chakroun & Jimeno Sicilia, 2009), notwithstanding arguments for considering qualification frameworks as situated social constructs, warn that they do not have full independence from global developments, as 'they are put together by people who are themselves caught up in the nexus of global and local demands, opportunities and constraints' (Chakroun & Jimeno Sicilia, 2009, p. 70).

The development of national qualification frameworks can be considered as an opportunity for policy learning. For instance, it is supposed to widen the range of stakeholders involved in VET reforms and so brings together stakeholders who often do not meet. They work together and agree on something they have never done before: they learn how to develop an NQF and then develop it and they also learn new concepts, methods and tools and relate them to national contexts. In doing this, they can call on all available national and international experience.

The development of national qualification frameworks is an opportunity to change VET reform development processes. This opportunity, which is also a difficulty, arises from the fact that the responsibility for NQF development is never located within a single government department. In most cases, the department of education, higher education, labour and social partners are likely to be involved and to have different agendas on how the NQF should develop (Young, 2005). Interdepartmental tensions can cause great difficulties, a point made by Allais (2007) in regard to the rise and fall of the NQF in South Africa. Such tensions can also be a case for policy learning and reaching a wider stakeholder consensus (Raffe, 2003). The value of policy learning becomes most evident when the political feasibility and the crucial interplay of local and global aspects of policy-making are recognised.

In what follows, developments around NQFs in two regions are examined. The first group of neighbourhood countries, located in two sub-regions (on the one hand, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia, and on the other, Russia and Ukraine), has been involved in peer learning projects led by ETF in the field of NQFs. The second group of several pre-accession countries (Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH)) has been exposed to and has adopted an NQF policy solution through other more traditional technical assistance processes, mainly funded through EU Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation (CARDS) projects.

The policy learning process, in the case of NQFs, involves a number of activities and initiatives (see Grootings, 2007 and Castejon, 2007 for a detailed account). It first requires building a knowledge base from national and EU experiences in developing qualification frameworks and then disseminating this knowledge to national policy makers. It also involves organising regional workshops and country study visits to facilitate sustainable policy-making decisions through

peer-learning processes (Nikolovska & Vos, 2008; Sultana, 2008b). Finally, it leads to interventions at the national level to facilitate reform processes and actions. These interventions involve stakeholders through the organisation of: (a) one-to-one consultation meetings; (b) seminars and conferences related to NQFs; and (c) working sessions to examine the current system of qualifications and strategies for their development into an NQF.

Southern Mediterranean Region

In the Southern Mediterranean region, the countries that have made the most headway in developing an NQF are Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. They have each played an important role in the South-South exchange of learning and experience, with peer learning overcoming the one-way North-South flows that characterise much of the interaction in traditional technical assistance projects.

The peer learning processes were aimed at facilitating reflection on VET reform, using national qualifications as a framework for discussion and encouraging policy learning about opportunities and risks related to the development of NQFs (Grootings, 2007; Castejon, 2007). Participating countries agreed on the value of qualification frameworks in developing progression routes, improving access to learning opportunities and skills recognition, creating more flexibility, ensuring transparency and quality assurance and increasing the relevance of qualifications for employment (Gordon, 2006; Grootings, 2007).

Following the peer-learning process, each country launched its own NQF development process. Each country is shaping its own NQF for its own reasons, in its own way and at its own pace (for a detailed account see Chakroun & Jimeno Sicilia, 2009). This specificity and embeddedness are reflected in the NQF construct itself and, thus, what is called an NQF has different configurations in different countries: Jordan has a sectoral framework covering only vocational qualifications; the focus in Morocco has been on national frameworks; in Tunisia the preference has been to develop a classification of qualifications; and Egypt is committed to creating a framework to integrate professional and scientific qualifications. Each country is also trying to take into account the reality of its own labour market in developing the qualification grid. For example, Tunisia is developing a seven-level qualifications framework and has defined specific descriptors called CARA (complexity, autonomy, responsibility and adaptability), while other countries are still going through a long but useful process of discussing the levels and descriptors that are relevant for their own contexts. These discussions are part of a policy-learning process where government and social partner representatives are learning to work together using qualifications as their common language.

Each country also takes into account its institutional traditions when establishing the institutional settings that are expected to manage the NQF. Thus, Egypt and Jordan, as two countries mostly, but not exclusively, influenced by Anglo-Saxon traditions, are envisaging the establishment of institutions that will be responsible for developing and implementing the NQF (Egypt) and of quality assurance and accreditation (Jordan). For their part, Morocco and Tunisia, as Francophone countries marked by a traditional institutional inertia, are less eager to set up an overarching entity which would be responsible for regulating all qualifications.

As mentioned earlier, NQF development seeks to involve social partners and other stakeholders (civil society, private VET providers, etc). Contextual specificity comes across very powerfully when we consider this issue. In the EU, where social

partner representation is quite common in the organisation and even delivery of VET, it is clear that any NQF has to have the support and input of employers' and workers' representatives. The limited development of VET in Mediterranean countries is generally mirrored in weak structures supporting the involvement of employers and trade unions in advising on, or helping to manage, a system (Sweet, 2009). This leads to a paradoxical situation: whereas private sector or social partner involvement are presented internationally as a *sine qua non* for NQF development (Bjørnavold & Coles, 2009; Tuck, 2007), in Mediterranean countries involved in NQF peer-learning projects, governments are sometimes reluctant to involve social partners or social partners show no interest in contributing (Feutrie & Bouhafa, 2008). In the report on NQF peer-learning activities in the Mediterranean region, Feutrie and Mghirbi (2007, p. 13) highlighted the difficulties encountered in this regard, noting that 'in Tunisia social partners have been involved at an early stage of the project, although for the moment they are adopting a wait-and-see attitude. The others have not yet reached this point. The social partners are not involved at present in Jordan, and planned participation is restricted to the economic stakeholders. In Egypt, the plan is to involve the social partners at the beginning and end of the project implementation process. In Morocco, their participation is currently regarded as premature'.

Eastern Neighbourhood Countries

In these countries, given the importance of education classifiers for the existing VET systems and the urgent desire to modernise existing classifiers, the policy-learning cycle has evolved around an attempt to relate existing work on modernising classifiers to the international discourse on NQFs (Grootings, 2007). By helping national stakeholders through key phases of developing an experimental NQF in a specific sector (tourism), the policy-learning process has helped to shift national policy discussions from a focus on modernising a VET input-based system characterised by unconnected VET sub-systems towards an awareness of the need for a more systemic reform of the overall education system with balanced attention to inputs, processes and learning outcomes (Grootings, 2007).

Contrasting with most Mediterranean countries, a major employers' federation was active in the peer-learning process and has become involved in NQF development in Russia. There are several reasons behind this. The most salient was an interest in improving qualifications in the restaurant and hotel sectors. The Russian employers' organisation took the initiative to establish a National Agency for Qualifications. In 2007, the Russian Federal Ministry of Education and Science and the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs entered into an Interaction Agreement (25 June 2007) whereby the Ministry of Education and Science would be responsible for organising the development of the NQF and the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs would take the lead in the development of occupational standards and the corresponding systems of sectoral (industrial) occupational qualifications, involving employers' associations from different sectors (industries) and professional communities (Vasina, 2009). In Ukraine, progress has been less positive due to political turbulence. However, there is close cooperation between the Ministries of Education and Labour and the employers' federation, with the employers clearly taking the initiative. Assistance from Russian partners involved in the peer-learning process has helped to facilitate discussion and initial proposals for a National Qualification Agency.

Pre-accession Countries

Recent experiences in pre-accession countries and, more precisely in South Eastern Europe demonstrate the risks of borrowing and introducing normative models of NQF. Goodin *et al.* (2006) consider that policy is made in response to a problem. Thinking about the way issues become policy problems takes us to the heart of the policy-learning process and its links with policy change. Making an issue of NQFs is certainly not a mistake. The question is: who makes it an issue and in what terms? Understanding the genesis can give insights about how issues become, or fail to become, policy problems and how this links up with policy making. This raises a question about the sorts of policy problems that are preferred or supported and by whom.

A recent ETF report (European Training Foundation (ETF), 2008b) synthesises the key issues that VET systems need to address in the region. They are:

— A need to improve capacity for policy analysis and to address the disparities between a declaration of intent, actual implementation and appropriate institutional settings and capacities
— Difficulties in building vertical and horizontal partnerships with stakeholders and weak social partner funding and co-funding of VET initiatives
— A need for heavy investment in educational infrastructure, school buildings, workshops, learning and teaching equipment and better teacher pay
— An extensive and unregulated informal labour market that employs workers without formal skills certification and weakens VET efforts.

This diagnosis points to major problems related to national capacities to lead complex reforms and to deal with substantial problems linked to infrastructure and staffing. In this context, the NQF has been considered as a policy solution and has been pushed as a policy priority for VET reform.

The desire of most South Eastern Europe countries to participate in EU processes and to appear enthusiastic in their implementation of EU-driven reforms is understandable. However, the 'quick-fix' introduction of the NQF without proper discussion at the national and institutional levels leads to hasty copying-and-pasting of EQF level descriptors and learning outcomes which do not correspond to the reality of the labour markets and education and training systems of these countries.

Although reference to the EQF might be seen as pragmatic — so as to avoid reinventing the wheel — there are several drawbacks to this approach. The first is a need for all countries to carefully consider the extent to which they can preserve the coherence and integrity of their national education systems in a globalising world (Holmes, 2003; Chakroun & Jimeno Sicilia, 2009). The second is that the borrowing of EQF descriptors limits opportunities for stakeholders to discuss and truly understand specific national contexts and problems. This reduces the understanding, leadership and ownership of the NQF itself. The third is intrinsic to the EQF descriptors themselves, which are considered by experts to be quite generic and general; the EQF, as pointed out by Brockmann *et al.* (2009, p. 99), is 'an umbrella for all "outcomes" at all levels, and necessarily consists of broad descriptors of knowledge, skills and competences at each level'. The authors insisted that the EQF 'is framed in extremely broad terms that transcend the academic/vocational divide' (p. 99). Hence, by definition, NQF descriptors need to be far more precise and context-related than EQF descriptors.

As mentioned earlier, EU member states are concerned that the EQF should not evolve into a normative instrument that could supplant national processes (Mc Bride, in press). However, the systematic alignment and use of the main features of the EQF (descriptors, levels, etc) are claimed by international technical assistance consortia to improve benchmarking and the recognition of qualifications in Balkan countries. For example, a report prepared by international technical assistance (European Profiles, 2009) on the BiH State Qualifications Framework (SQF) mentions that 'the SQF is in line with the EQF adopted by the European Parliament and Council in April 2008. This facilitates the benchmarking of education and training system in BiH against other countries. This comparison implies the recognition of BiH certificates in Europe, in a time of positive reforming of national qualifications frameworks across Europe'. (p. 4). The report argues that NQF development naturally brings a structured framework to VET and gives 'the education and training system the necessary draft structural frame to build a modern and up-to-date education and training system which is urgently needed for the further development of BiH' (p. 5).

The stance is identical in similar reports on Kosovo (PEM GmbH and Aarhus Technical College, 2008a) and Albania: 'The Albanian qualifications framework draft is designed to be fully in line with the EQF adopted by the European Parliament in September 2007. This leads to the benchmarking of the Albanian education and training system to the more developed countries in Europe. The possibility for this comparison implies the recognition of Albanian certificates in Europe, at a time of positive reform of national qualification frameworks across Europe' (cited from Albania case study in ETF, in press, p. 138).

In all countries, technical assistance, through EU- and other donor-funded projects, leads to the provision and development of handbooks and literature that are not embedded in national contexts and are so generic that they can be applicable to any country in the region. The Kosovo report mentioned above, for example, states that 'the wording comes from a number of sources, but mainly from the descriptors of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework for the levels which are assumed to equate to EQF levels' (PEM GmbH and Aarhus Technical College, 2008a, p. 14).

The options presented in these handbooks are no less than a radical change of the education/VET system, far from the situation of the systems today in the countries in question. NQFs are designed to cover almost all the features of an ideal and normative NQF in terms of an overarching framework, quality assurance, a credits system and validation of prior learning. NQFs envisage establishing new institutions and complex processes for qualifications development and validation. In Kosovo, Albania and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, notwithstanding the lack of resources and capacities, new national qualifications authorities have been envisaged and/or set up but are barely operational due to a lack of resources, expertise and policy capacities. All this is taking place in a situation where, according to the World Bank (2007), 'Western Balkan countries need to start developing coherent and *affordable* lifelong learning strategies' (p. 23); in other words, reforms need to take into account significant resource constraints and the fact that 'financing is a major concern' (p. 22). The same report calls for a process where 'the progress of reforms should follow different stages that are linked to stages of economic development' (p. 16).

The gap between the desired and the present system is wide and an incremental approach should be taken into consideration (Young, 2005). For instance, Tuck (2005), discussing policy borrowing in the design and implementation of NQFs, argues that 'it is important to be clear about priorities' and that, even if the final goal may be to build a comprehensive NQF, 'it does not need to be one-stage process' (p. vi). This approach 'should enable policy makers to get beyond general NQF rhetoric and focus on the specific needs of the country'. The key message is that NQFs should lay the foundation for 'fit for purpose and context solutions' and avoid 'imposed policy solutions' (Tuck, 2007).

Underlying this analysis, therefore, is the question as to what kinds of policy learning have the countries of South Eastern Europe missed out on. Earlier in this article it was stressed that a single model of NQF that fits all contexts and purposes does not exist. Following several authors (Grootings, 2007; Raffe, 2009; Chakroun & Jimeno Sicilia, 2009), instead of policy borrowing based on the assumption that best practices can be transferred across national contexts, we argue for a broader notion of policy learning which recognises the importance of 'clarifying policy options and the issues that they typically raise and helping to understand the process of educational change' (Raffe, 2009, p. 21). Although the conclusion is tentative and needs to be tested against forthcoming developments in these countries, it is the normative model of an NQF influenced by EQF developments that has led to a policy push for change that is applicable to several South Eastern European countries. I would argue that most of the problems faced by these countries relate to a point made earlier, i.e. that governments fail to recognise the radical implications of the changes that they seek to introduce. Problems also lie in the policy focus and the technical assistance used, with more policy emphasis on designing controls (accreditation, assessment, validation, etc) intended to direct VET systems than on developing capacities that support VET institutions, teachers and trainers.

In discourses about NQFs in the South Eastern Europe countries, technical issues like level descriptors, occupational standards, student assessment standards and accreditation of VET training providers dominate discussions. Too often these discourses overlook the relationships between politics and policy. Policy choices should be politically feasible. The question is to what extent ETF partner countries pay attention to political feasibility in the reform of their VET systems using NQFs as the main instrument. The role of international aid in these countries is important. For example, Kosovo relies on donors' grants to cover 100% of its funding for the NQF. One consequence of donor funding is that it has shifted the focus of policy from urgent priorities to more fashionable and globally favoured VET reform initiatives. Infrastructure, teacher training and other urgent matters are all treated as separate and distinct policy initiatives. A second consequence is concerned with the gap between expectations of donors' projects management in terms of time, resources and deliverables and the realities of the policy process. Policy making schedules are different from projects imperatives. This inevitably creates a tension between the process and the end result, between time needed for policy learning and policy making and the urgent need to deliver according to projects planning and technical assistance contracts management.

Finally, NQF development requires commitment and depends on stakeholder direct involvement and ownership. Such commitment is possible through their intensive involvement in the different stages of NQF development. Direct

stakeholder contributions can help establish trust and a rapport between different organisations. In the case of the Balkan countries, notwithstanding the fact that stakeholders are said to participate in the process, there are, in fact, no concrete results arising from this cooperation. The benefit of this participation has not led to extending the sense of ownership in the new framework. As pointed out by a report on the potential for level 5 qualifications in Kosovo: 'it does not mean just having a few representatives (social partners) on a panel, it means ensuring that they are equal partners' (PEM GmbH and Aarhus Technical College, 2008b, p. 70).

Conclusion

Some 70 countries around the world are developing NQFs, a figure which is likely to increase in the coming years. NQFs are responding to global rather than just local dynamics. So, in the end, NQF development comes back to power and interest, i.e. politics (Goodin *et al.*, 2006). NQFs are increasingly seen as inevitable drivers to reform VET systems. In deciding to develop an NQF, countries are assuming and hoping that they will be supported by international organisations and that they will be able to address issues in a systemic way and achieve a number of goals that they could not achieve through previous reforms.

In a recent ILO/ETF global workshop on NQFs, experts from different countries and regions expressed their views on the real objectives that an NQF can achieve. Among the many broad goals that NQFs are claimed to achieve, the experts referred only to one: supporting access, transferability and learner progression. When contrasted with the overall ambition of making NQFs drivers for reform, this conclusion has far-reaching implications, some of which have been mentioned above. First, NQFs, if positively considered as drivers for reform, should be combined with other policy measures and thus should be embedded in a wider reform vision and national priorities. Second, NQFs are not pedagogical reforms in that they do not directly change the teaching and learning processes and they tend to focus only on learning outcomes. I suspect that reforms in both these areas are necessary; VET reform that specifies nothing about teaching and learning processes is blind to the course of human development and VET reform that specifies only what happens in the classroom is blind to the increasingly complex socioeconomic environment.

National qualification frameworks will be ineffective in driving VET reforms if they are not complemented by policy measures to change the learning process and institutional arrangements, e.g. vocational institution leadership, teacher training, governance and social partner roles and responsibilities. In this perspective, a social, context-specific view is more relevant than a technical view. Taking this perspective gives qualifications a value that goes beyond the accreditation of quality assurance systems and the validity and reliability of learning outcomes assessment. Its value lies in social factors such as partnership and the power and influence of stakeholders and organisations that produce, allocate and use qualifications.

This article presented the international debate on NQFs. It introduced the points of view of both engaged international practioners and critical international academics and argued that developing NQFs is a policy process. It also suggested that developing NQFs through policy learning held much promise in taking the reform debate beyond what are immediate and internal VET concerns by bringing

new stakeholders to the process. This helps policy makers and other stakeholders deepen their understanding of the complexity of VET system reforms.

Policy learning builds on the assumption that policy options lie in each country's own political, institutional and cultural context. We have highlighted the apparent conflict with traditional technical-assistance and project-management approaches. As noted by Grootings (2007), the international donor community and partner countries have become accustomed to the technical assistance approach and may find it difficult to move away from it for the purpose of policy learning. The main messages can be summed up this way. NQFs are part of the solution but may produce new problems. In order to work better and to help countries help themselves in reforming their VET systems, the nature and the approaches of development aid and the way related technical assistance is provided should be radically reviewed. As a minimum, it is necessary to disaggregate technical assistance input from the policy cycle. This comes with the recognition that policymaking schedules should not be driven by donors projects management but should reflect the needs of policy learning as well as national political and administrative imperatives. For instance, sector-wide approaches that require realistic sector strategies, involvement of national stakeholders and coordination of external support by national governments could be the right instrument for supporting home-grown policies.

In this context, ETF can develop its own contribution to VET reforms in a number of ways, three of which are suggested here. First, ETF should further work on developing institutional and stakeholders' capability in partner countries. Second, despite the growing international interest for NQFs, there is very little research about their impact. ETF should make first steps in filling this gap. Third, an important theme of this article and of ETF work in recent years has been the discussion on strategies to enable policy learning. But the concept, methodology and practical guidelines of policy learning are still at a pilot stage and need further elucidation and operationalisation. Clarifying conceptual, methodological and operational dimensions of policy learning and distinguishing these from related concepts and forms of interventions (policy advice, policy analysis, etc.) are major tasks for ETF.

NOTE

The content of this article is the sole responsibility of the author and does not necessarily reflect the views of the European Training Foundation (ETF) or the European Union.

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