

**Box 9. Creating a European higher education area: the Bologna process**

Under the Bologna process countries aim to base their higher education on three cycles (for example, bachelor, master and doctorate). The aim is to make degrees easily readable and comparable, establish a credit transfer system, cooperate in quality assurance, promote a European dimension in their curricula and support mobility for students, teachers and researchers.

The process was launched by the Bologna declaration in 1999. The signatory countries included the then 15 EU Member States, three EEA countries (Iceland, Norway and Switzerland), and 11 EU candidate countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia). International institutions such as the European Commission, the Council of Europe and associations of universities, rectors and European students participated in drafting the declaration.

*Source:* Bologna process secretariat, 2009 <sup>(9)</sup>.

Poland, for example have descriptors spanning all levels of education. These frameworks show how qualifications can be combined and make it possible to judge if, for example a VET qualification can provide a basis for a higher qualification. These NQFs also underline that higher level qualifications may be awarded by bodies other than traditional higher education institutions covered by the Bologna process. NQFs, in France, Ireland, Malta and the UK (Scotland), for example also emphasise the need for people to be able to move easily between different parts and levels of the education and training system.

Countries such as Belgium (Wallonia), Denmark and Romania, have distinguished between qualifications at levels equivalent to 1-5 and 6-8 of the EQF. They restrict the higher levels to qualifications awarded by higher education institutions in accordance with the

Bologna process. In Denmark this distinction has led to the use of different referencing principles to EQF levels 1-5 and 6-8 respectively. While a 'best fit' approach is used for the lower levels, a 'full fit' (meaning full correspondence to Bologna) is used for the higher levels. These NQFs are still comprehensive as they cover all levels and types of qualifications. However, questions may be raised regarding the extent to which these frameworks will ease integration or not.

Other countries have divided levels 6-8 into parallel strands, one covering academic qualifications awarded according to the Bologna process and the other vocational or professional higher level qualifications not awarded by higher education institutions. In Belgium (Flanders), for example, the same level descriptors are used for both strands. In countries such as Austria, the two strands use different descriptors.

Countries recognise that for NQFs and the EQF to work, qualifications and related certification and awarding processes need to become even more transparent and trustworthy. Consequently, countries increasingly reflect on how to assure the quality of learning outcomes and certification processes. Ireland, Malta, and the UK, for instance, refer to the European quality assurance reference framework, discussed below, when considering quality assurance for referencing their NQFs to the EQF.

### 2.3. Quality assurance – Promoting mutual trust

Success of the European VET agenda and of EQF and ECVET in particular depends on trust being in place. At European level, quality assurance mechanisms have been developed to promote that trust.

Some countries have a tradition of quality assurance. However, since the European forum on quality in VET was established in 2001 and agreement on the common principles, guidelines and tools in the Council resolution in 2004, there has been some convergence in Europe. This led to the recommendation establishing a European quality assurance

<sup>(9)</sup> See: <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/>

reference framework for vocational education and training (EQAVET) of June 2009. It invites Member States, by 2011, to develop an approach to improve their quality assurance systems, make best use of the framework and participate fully in the European quality assurance reference framework network <sup>(5)</sup>.

Implementing EQAVET is complex and will take time. The quality model on which the EQAVET recommendation is based has been used in several Member States including Denmark, Hungary, Norway, Romania and Finland to guide development of their national quality systems. EQAVET indicators are under discussion in many countries, including Belgium (Wallonia), Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, Austria, Romania, Slovenia and the UK (Northern Ireland and Scotland). Other countries such as Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, the Netherlands, Slovenia and the UK (England and Wales) have aligned their indicators to EQAVET. In Italy, regulations approved in 2010 for the new system of technical and vocational education encourage establishing indicators aligned with EQAVET for technical and vocational schools.

Countries that have had VET quality mechanisms for many years such as Austria, Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden and the UK tend to apply more comprehensive approaches. For instance, the Austrian VET quality initiative launched in 2005/06 covers all quality dimensions. Denmark and Sweden have introduced more frequent school inspections. Denmark has also made recent changes in self-evaluation systems, quality benchmarking and networking among vocational colleges and added indicator-based inspection to VET quality assurance policy. The Danish approach to quality also refers to reinforcing international cooperation and exchange of experience. Recent years have also seen a shift to measuring the effectiveness of VET delivery in response, in part, to demands for better services of quality. Output standards and targets are

progressively used rather than input and process standards together. Financing is also being linked to results, with incentives for reaching targets. However, countries are increasingly using internal and external evaluation of their VET systems to improve quality (Cedefop, 2009d). Peer review for training organisations is used in Italy, Austria and Romania.

Accrediting training providers is more frequent in continuing than initial training. National accreditation of VET providers helps assess compliance with national standards and training regulations. Sectoral accreditation frameworks concentrate mainly on examination and testing procedures and certification of individuals.

Germany is moving from local, internal self-evaluation of training providers towards national external output-monitoring. In the UK, a central body approves awarding bodies to deliver qualifications through centres of learning including colleges, employers, and private training providers. Ireland has a similar approach (Box 10). In Latvia and Romania, VET providers can only offer programmes that meet educational and occupational standards and lead to State-recognised certification. In Hungary and Portugal accreditation is not obligatory, but only accredited VET providers

#### Box 10. Ireland's FETAC's quality assurance process

All VET providers offering FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) awards are required to meet its standards. Providers must demonstrate their capacity to monitor, evaluate and improve programme and service quality to learners. Successful providers register with FETAC and may offer awards from the national qualifications framework (levels 1 to 6). The validation process examines how programmes meet the specifications for an award. This involves evaluation and review by FETAC of VET providers' published quality assessment criteria and procedures. Providers must implement evaluation findings. FETAC reviews provider registration agreements within five years of the agreement.

Source: Ireland ReferNet, 2010.

<sup>(5)</sup> If they do not have one, Member States are recommended to set up a quality assurance national reference point for VET linked to their particular structures and requirements to bring together relevant bodies, social partners and national and regional stakeholders.  
See <http://www.eqavet.eu/gns/home.aspx>

are eligible for European and national funding. In Greece, accreditation is only required for vocational training centres, trainers and programmes providing continuing training. Slovakia has left quality control to market forces and feedback from clients.

There is increasing awareness that quality assurance is more than accreditation procedures which by themselves do not guarantee quality of provision. Almost all countries have produced strategic documents or specific regulations to introduce or improve quality assurance in VET and to promote a quality culture. Malta, Romania and Slovenia are among the countries pointing out that this is not easy given the wide range of institutions involved. Legislation to improve VET quality has been adopted in Slovenia (2006), Lithuania (2007) and France (2009). Tripartite VET agreements on quality were introduced in Portugal (2007) and Bulgaria (2009).

Some countries, for example Italy and Luxembourg have restructured VET institutions to achieve higher standards. New institutions were set up to deal with quality issues. For instance, in Belgium (Flanders), a new agency took responsibility for quality issues from other services and departments. In Germany quality-related tasks were transferred to the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training in 2008. Ireland is merging the three bodies responsible for quality for a more coherent approach to quality assurance across all areas of further, higher education, and training.

Countries such as Belgium (Flanders), Estonia and Cyprus have made considerable investment in infrastructure to improve. The Belgian view is that students' competences will improve in better learning environments. Other issues related to quality such as curricula, teaching and links with the labour market are discussed in Chapter 4.

Promoting VET quality through skill competitions and awards has a long tradition in most countries, usually at VET upper secondary level. Worldskills' competitions started in the middle of the last century. EuroSkills were organised for the first time in 2008. In countries like the Czech Republic, skill competitions are important for increasing interest in VET in recent years. Estonia developed its vocational

competitions in 2008. Finland's annual national skills competition also includes a competition for students with disabilities and special needs. Austria, in 2008, introduced a prize for the best enterprises providing apprenticeships. The UK recognises further education institutions through the award of 'Learning and skills beacon status'. Slovenia has a national award for excellent education professionals.

## 2.4. Validation of non-formal and informal learning – Addressing the individual learner

Interest in validation of non-formal and informal learning is growing because it can make a real difference to someone's learning and employment prospects. It is seen as a way to make institutions and systems more flexible and to increase the value of learning at work.

The economic crisis revealed a need for validation measures to be put in place to enable people to demonstrate the value of their skills and competences so that they can transfer them to jobs in other enterprises or sectors, or both. Validation is also seen as a way to help groups with particular needs (such as migrants, early school leavers and people returning to the labour market) to progress to further education and training or find jobs based on their actual, but uncertified, skills and competences. Cost-efficient validation arrangements for career and human development in enterprises and sectors to complement national qualification systems may become increasingly important.

The shift to learning outcomes and implementing NQFs has encouraged validation of non-formal and informal learning which now is a priority for around half of the countries in the Copenhagen process. The 2004 European principles on identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning along with the European inventory and guidelines on validation (Cedefop, 2009e) were used by several countries, for example Denmark, Ireland and Portugal as a reference point for national developments. The EU lifelong learning programme (Council of the EU, 2006b) has also supported experimentation and