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# Why is Serbia in need of a National Qualifications Framework?

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BFPE Discussion Paper

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*The discussion brings the practical importance of the national qualification framework closer to the wider interested audience in Serbia. In addition to offering terminological clarifications, it gives an overview of the current trends and circumstances in which the endeavours aiming at introducing this strategic tool in the human capital development policies are taking place.*



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## What have we learnt and can it work in practice?

At the beginning of the XXI century in Europe the demands of the common labour market for systematization and comparability of knowledge and skills acquired within various national educational institutions got a suitable response. At the same time, one of the most influential turnovers in understanding what the purpose of education is worked in favour of that same response - the focus shifted from the educational curriculum itself, its content and duration, to the user- the individual who acquires certain knowledge and skills (defined as outcomes of learning), in other words becomes qualified, by attending the program. *The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) rests on both above premises – it consists of 8 different levels defined according to the outcomes of learning (which include least knowledge, skills and competences) which accurately describe the acquired qualification, however not based on the length and content of the educational program but on what the person with the fitting qualification knows and can do.*

EQF, being a basis for the comparison of different systems of qualifications, also offered an appropriate response to the contemporary need for continuous training and flexible career development, emerging from accelerating changes in labour market demands and ever-improving technology trends. More specifically, the understanding of qualifications as a list of learning outcomes one can add to/modify throughout life is the basis of lifelong learning system. From this point, there is only a small

step towards acquiring qualifications at any point in life and in ways that are not just a product of the formal educational system - qualifications are offered through non-formal education (trainings, courses, special skills) but also through informal learning (in practice, self-tutoring). This becomes particularly important in the era of open sources of education, trainings provided by employers to employees, distance learning, and increased awareness (albeit a small percentage of people) that career can be managed independently, flexibly and affordably. This, of course, raises issues of quality assurance, which is again matter of firmly established and transparent criteria of validation of knowledge acquired in alternative ways, which will be further discussed.

Once the EQF was adopted (in March 2008), only a handful of countries had national qualification frameworks developed in a way to be fitting, local equivalent to what this European instrument is. *Up to this day 36 European countries (including Serbia) have developed or are on the way of developing the defined and described levels of the learning outcomes in a way that allows for referencing with the EQF.* According to UNESCO there are 142 world countries that, in this way or another, have a developed qualifications framework. The learning outcome descriptors are there to define what a person having qualification of a specific level should know and be able to perform and understand. Nationally defined descriptors enable the specificity of each national education system to be respected, and included in a system that corresponds to EQF in a suitable way.

The world economic crises and above all the dramatic increase of the unemployment rates that followed have additionally emphasized the

necessity of strengthening the ties between education and the labour market. European strategic documents, including the ET 2020 (education and training strategy directly associated with the EU 2020 development strategy) specifically focus on the knowledge-based economy that is, acquiring skills necessary for economic growth. Additionally, the education reform and modernization are based on the idea that the skills and competencies offered have to be more labour demand driven and leading to employment. Investment in skills needs to be increased; access to education and training must be broadened because this represents a direct way to socio-economic development. All together this additionally emphasizes the importance of the mobility of knowledge, possibilities for upgrade, adjustment and acquiring qualifications throughout the professional life. Mobility, that is the capability to adjust to a new educational and professional environment (often narrowly understood as geographic) is the basis of all European development recommendations regarding employment and education.

### **What is impossible without the National Qualifications Framework?**

*In Serbia the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is mentioned in the official public discourse since 2003.* Up to now the state institutions tried establishing, through several projects (ETF, CARDS II, IPA 07, IPA 08, and IPA 2012), above all a system and structures essential for the development and set up of this instrument. It became a constitutive part of numerous non-implemented strategies tackling the issues the socio-economic development. Visible improvements have been made from 2010 onwards when par-

ticular institutions have been given the jurisdiction to, first, develop specific parts of the national framework, and second, propose it to the Ministry of Education for adopting. Everyone *who was included in the process as well as everyone familiar with the process agree on the fact that Serbia needs a unified qualifications framework which would incorporate all levels and types of qualifications regardless of the means (through formal or informal learning) and age of acquiring and which would additionally represent a backbone for the entire system of qualification acquisition, recognition and employment.*

Besides witnessing the slow paced improvements, particularly owing to personal engagement of individuals who truly understand this process, all of us interested in this topic are also witnesses of how the absence of this systemic instrument is pulling back the development of the country, in many but most prominently in terms of economic growth.

*In Serbia, the communication string between education and labour market still rests on the idea of qualifications acquired in a formal way. This way the qualification information available is limited to the academic field and length of education, but no information whatsoever on competencies and specific tasks one is capable of performing.* Based on this, a limited number of people can possibly find themselves in the National professional classification of the 1990s. According to this classification system the National Employment Service (NES) mediates

employment in Serbia. Regardless of the fact that the existing classification system does not match the basic recognition of formal education acquired in Serbia (sometimes not even the formal education acquired at accredited private education institutions) it is, furthermore, useless for the employers too since they might be seeking for specific knowledge and skills which in this case, cannot be identified.

*Thus, it is no wonder that most employment in Serbia, that is private sector employment, is not mediated by the NES, but performed in other ways through which more-or-less the additionally acquired qualifications especially the ones acquired through the work practice and experience might be identified.* The new Law on Adult Education proposes the possibility of validating the informal and non-formal knowledge but the operationalization of necessary by-laws has not been pursued so far. Informal education is additionally gaining value in this context since it allows for the quicker response to the real demands of the employer for a certain kind of work force or new technological demands of the work place. Moreover, the functional system of qualification, based on the National Qualifications Framework would enable easier implementation of the educational standards as well as the quality control of the offered programs.

*Therefore, the know-what and can-dos on the labour market fully depend on the individual's ability to convince the potential employer who, importantly, defines and describes the demand for a specific job in the way he/she believes it is the best, it is in fashion or will sound right.*

It is more than obvious that the existing system's tools do not facilitate planning of education in harmony with the labour market demands, statistical tracking, retraining and additional training offers which fit the labour demand (skills match), accrediting qualifications acquired through lifelong learning, human resource management, career services and counselling, professional orientation, managing the enrolment quotas, in short: there is no communication between the worlds of education and labour.

When talking about different kinds of mobility, the one of the transition from education to the labour market as well as the retraining to new professions and new educational level and even the geographic mobility, it is clear that in Serbia this issue is left adrift. Additionally there is a problem of not recognizing the foreign degrees, which is mainly of concern to nationals who pursued their education abroad and then returned to Serbia, or those planning to return. Since so far no other way of defining our degrees is known but to base it on the length and the name of the study program, all other or (to our system) unknown school certificates, which do not fully match the domestic formulation of qualifications, are seldom fulfilling the national system's expectations. When we add the fact that the "eligibility" of the acquired degree is evaluated by the local, competitor educational institution inclined to give its own study programs the advantage, we come to a situation where our professionals who work abroad see the difficulty of recognition of their degrees and qualifications as the main obstacle in considering a possible return to Serbia.

Similar experiences have been reported by some of the graduates of certain study programs from accredited local private educational

institutions, especially the ones that have introduced the multidisciplinary courses. These are not included in the national classification of professions, thus graduates of these degrees hardly manage to find their ways to the labour market. Large number of newly established educational institutions together with a certain number of new degree profiles completely falls out of the range of the existing system.

*In order to enable the mobility but also to make new educational courses functional, we need the qualifications system, namely the National Qualifications Framework. Once it is made clear for what certain school certificates (degrees) enable the students to do, regardless of the institution that issued the degree, those students will automatically become workers, and that is, they cross on to the labor market.* Right now, we are in a situation whereby a qualified, employable workforce is left over on the "education" side with a valid degree in their hands, however without the possibility to transfer to the work and employment sphere. In the same manner, once we identify qualifications necessary for successful performance of work assignments in a specific work place and once we uniformly define them, we will be able to plan both the educational curricula and personal career development easier.

*Private employers in Serbia commonly do not recognize their role in the process of identification of the necessary qualifications, and mostly do not regard themselves as a part of this process, all of which can be sensibly explained.* Thus far the practice is that qualifications framework is regarded as the respon-

sibility of the educational institutions solely. Human resources services in companies, given that they do not even possess the classification of professions or the qualification standards for a certain work position, define the portrayal of the work place based on the old systematization or current fashion while the skills and knowledge they are looking for are most commonly spotted in the direct communication with the candidates or through CV screening. Taking into consideration that there is no qualifications catalogue (also a part of the NQF) the employers cannot plan the development of the human resources within their company in harmony with their specific needs and market demands because they do not possess the information about the characteristics of staff available on the Serbian labor market. With that in mind the search for the right human resources and their hiring has less chance of success.

### **NQF- a view from Serbia**

In its analysis of the current state of development and utilization of NQF in 36 European states, the amenable European institution CEDEFOP distinguishes two approaches: some countries see NQF above all as a possibility to make the qualifications more transparent and comparable and in that way ease the process of employment/engagement of existing knowledge and skills for students and employers; on the other hand, other countries see NQF as an instrument of reform which can be used to mediate the introducing of institutional and structured changes in all stages of planning and implementation of the educational and employment processes.

Although Serbia would, naturally, fall within the second group of countries, *one cannot escape the impression that the pace of*

*the process is in fact dictated by the schedule and dynamics of commitments undertaken within the scope of the EU accession process without any fundamental thoughts about realistic, local needs for reforms and the urgency of their implementation.* On the other hand, after having spent too much time without any visible outcomes, every incentive for speeding up the process and dedicated involvement is more than welcome. This is where we come to an important component necessary for further development (of this, and majority of other reform processes in the country) - that is the political will and understanding of the importance and wide influence of the of qualifications' system and NQF. It is therefore necessary for those responsible for developing and institutionalizing the NQF to acknowledge the importance and benefits of the instrument in question. Otherwise, it would be impossible to engage in quality work on any multisectoral and systemic reforming instrument which involves a number of state institutions and social partners. *There is a common conclusion in different analyses of the previous attempts to prepare the NQF- in order to ensure progress it is essential to reach a higher level of understanding of the necessity and advantages which NQF brings, hence the political will crucial for commencement and implementation of the process.*

As to demonstrate that this process is everything but easy, worth mentioning is the common misunderstanding of what NQF is and what type of changes it brings even within the circles of experts in this topic and expected to devise and lead the process. *NQF, specifi-*

*cally, is a catalogue describing the levels of acquired qualifications with descriptors of learning outcomes fitting each and every one of the levels regardless of the field and ways of acquiring the qualification. In relation to this, the NQF solely, that is its levels, are used as a reference list which communicates to the EQF levels and further more readily finds a connection with the existing descriptors of education degrees acquired through the formal education in Serbia.* As such, observed independently, it is a dead letter because it represents a mere outset of a system which needs to be built up with an entire skeleton of input and output data so that all participants in the process, from students and parents, their teachers and career counselors to employers, are clearly aware of education and professional development benchmark they have reached, what are the paths for further advancement as well as where, and in what way they can achieve it. To enable such a process it is necessary to use a single, consistent terminology and comparable formats in order to, firstly, make a list then formulate and finally bind together all the educational profiles, professions and occupations. Moreover it is required to include, in all phases of the process starting from the development of the framework through its institutionalization and reaching its full operability, the representatives from all stakeholders and social partners. It is essential to quit thinking that by adopting the Law of NQF (or any similar legal acts) we "check marked" another item on the road to European integration.

*The national qualifications framework only appears to be an abstract, theo-*

*retical, static form – the moment when it becomes functional, we shall begin to notice it in everyday life: in report cards of our children, in our degrees and language school certificates, in university study programs, in our works cards (or their equivalents), in systematization of the workplace, in employment adds...* We will have an insight in both the supply as well as the demand of qualifications and based on that we shall amend our knowledge and skills. How successful we will be in making use of the system as a society in order to introduce institutional and structural changes, and how much we will be able to enhance control and generate interest in human capital, economic development and update the education system will depend on its capability to respond to the existing state of qualifications in Serbia, as well as flexibility in adapting to new demands and ever changing needs of the modern labor market.