

Can the German Qualifications Framework contribute to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning?

► As a consequence of introducing the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), according to the Recommendation of the European Parliament and Council of April 23, 2008, “access to and participation in lifelong learning ... and the use of qualifications [should] be promoted and improved at national and Community level.” Furthermore, the EQF should build bridges between formal, non-formal and informal learning and contribute to the validation of learning outcomes. This article considers whether, and if so, how the EQF – and particularly the German Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning – can promote and strengthen the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. In addressing this line of inquiry, the authors make reference to two recent expertises on this subject.

The European Qualifications Framework – translating qualification levels

In April 2008, the European Parliament and the Council passed a Recommendation on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF). The EQF is to function as a translation instrument, to make national qualifications comprehensible throughout Europe and thus to enhance the cross-border mobility of employees and learners and foster their lifelong learning. This is to be done by coordinating the different national qualification systems with one common European reference framework, the EQF. The EQF applies across all types of general and vocational education and qualifications, from school-based and vocational education to higher education. It sets out the description of learning outcomes in eight levels. From 2012 onwards, it should be possible to ascertain the corresponding EQF level for any new qualification. Each Member State’s national qualification framework (NQF) or other mechanisms then enable the alignment of the national qualification system with the levels of the EQF. So a qualification from Country A can be made decipherable in Country B by comparing its level on the EQF (cf. Figure).

Figure The EQF as a translation instrument



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The German Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning

Germany is currently developing the German Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (Deutscher Qualifikationsrahmen für lebenslanges Lernen, DQR) which is based on learning outcomes and designed to be compatible with the EQF, with a view to promoting transparency and permeability between sub-sectors of the education system. In February 2009, the German Qualifications Framework Working Group (Arbeitskreis DQR) submitted a first draft of a qualifications framework, the current version dates from March 2011.

Work is currently in progress to arrive at a consensus on the levels of selected formal qualifications from general, higher and vocational education (cf. in more detail www.deutscherqualifikationsrahmen.de; in German). As a matter of principle, every qualification level of the DQR should be attainable by means of different educational pathways. If this principle can be realised successfully, it will represent a major contribution towards parity between academic (general and higher) education and vocational education in Germany.

In the Annex to the EQF Recommendation and in the glossary of the DQR Working Group's discussion proposal, a "qualification" is described as the "formal outcome of an assessment and validation process in which a competent body has determined that an individual's learning outcomes meet specified standards" (Arbeitskreis DQR 2009, p. 15). The EQF Recommendation thus confirms the normal use of the term qualification in Germany, according to which a qualification – understood as "learning outcomes aggregated into competences" – is subject to validation and assessment, but says nothing about the scope of qualifications (i.e. the extent of the learning outcomes and competences aggregated therein). Given the backdrop of Europe's varied education systems, it goes without saying that a wide range of ideas exist concerning the intensity of learning processes and the spectrum of learning outco-

mes that make up a qualification. This means that in Germany, qualifying in a recognised occupation counts as one qualification, whereas in another country the same body of knowledge and competence amounts to several qualifications – possibly even at different levels. This is a good argument for addressing the issue of specifying which aggregated skills might be defined as a qualification within the terms of the DQR.

The main objective in drawing up the DQR is to "achieve an appropriate assignment of levels to qualifications acquired in Germany within the EU" (Arbeitskreis DQR 2009, p. 2). First and foremost, this will increase the transparency and better national and international decipherability of qualifications. Further-reaching modernisation objectives, as mentioned in the EQF Recommendation, particularly with regard to participation and access to lifelong learning and the validation of learning outcomes, have not been taken up so far.

The DQR Working Group's discussion proposal does state that consideration will additionally be given to outcomes of informal learning. Because the recognition of non-formal or informal learning has not become widespread in the German education landscape, this statement remains vague, however. In order to support the process of integrating non-formal and informal learning into the DQR, two expertises were therefore prepared (cf. DEHNBOSTEL/SEIDEL/STAMM-RIEMER 2010 and Gutschow et al. 2010), which form the basis for the following discussion.

Taking account of non-formal and informal learning in the DQR

To lay the foundations for the following line of argument, a brief definition of terms is necessary. Numerous aspects are drawn upon to distinguish formal from non-formal and informal learning. The most important are the intentionality of the learning and the extent of organisation and structure involved in the learning processes (cf. Table).

Participation in formal learning is concentrated in the phase of childhood, youth and early adulthood. Increments in competence in subsequent phases of life are largely based on non-formal and informal learning. A qualifications framework that claims to promote lifelong learning should take this into account. A related question, namely what specifications a set of aggregated skills must fulfil in order to be classified as a "qualification" as defined by the DQR, arises for certificates from continuing education as well as for methods of recognising informal learning.

EXISTING APPROACHES TO RECOGNITION

The starting point for approaches that establish links between formal, non-formal and informal learning with the help of a qualifications framework is their particular ori-

Table Characteristics of formal, non-formal and informal learning

Formal learning	Non-formal learning	Informal learning
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learning in an organised and structured context, 2. structured as regards learning objectives, learning time or learning support, 3. intentional and goal-directed from the learners' point of view 4. generally leads to certification. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning embedded in planned activities, • deliberate, from the learners' point of view. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning in daily life, in the workplace, in the family, in leisure time, also called (learning from) experience, • not organised or structured in relation to learning objectives, learning time or learning support, • not explicitly intended as learning.

Source: based on CEDEFOP (2009), WERQUIN (2010)

entation towards learning outcomes. Neither institutions nor course-lengths nor curricula form the basis of qualification frameworks, but rather descriptors expressing different levels of knowledge, skills and competence.

Existing approaches for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Germany, although not in widespread use, follow the same fundamental principle. The main form of recognition for non-formal and informal learning as well as outcomes of formal learning processes from other segments of the education system in Germany has consisted of admission to courses or examinations: the vocational sector has the “external candidate provision” pursuant to the Vocational Training Act and the Crafts Code (BBiG § 45 (2)/HwO § 37 (2)), while general education has “non-enrolled examinations” for general qualifications and for access to higher education without a university entrance qualification. The prerequisites for admission to these special procedures are generally vocational qualifications and relevant occupational practice, or continuing education leading to formal certification. Interviews, placement or assessment tests, evidence of (normally) several years of occupational experience, or trial courses build the bridges that link non-formal or informal learning with formal education courses. Since the qualifications acquired are state-awarded or state-recognised, these qualifications are included in the DQR.

Approaches exist in Germany for the granting of credit for prior learning towards other courses. These take account of skills acquired in a variety of ways. The accreditation of prior learning presupposes that transferable equivalences can be identified or determined on the basis of the curricula of different courses (cf. HÜNTELMANN/EVERS 2009) or integrated competence descriptors for the prospective course (cf. STANGE et al. 2009). In this case, the qualification pursued can be located within the DQR.

TAKING ACCOUNT OF CONTINUING EDUCATION

The present draft DQR suggests that out of the entire domain of continuing education, certificates from upgrading training are the only formal qualifications that can be assigned to the DQR. Nevertheless, in the continuing education sector there are other forms of provision which certainly meet the listed criteria for formal learning but have never previously been treated as formal learning in Germany. These include, in particular, certificates such as the European Computer Driving Licence, language certificates and other expert certificates from adult education centres. Similarly, the periodically renewable certificates for welders, forklift drivers or hazardous load hauliers, or manufacturers’ certificates in the IT sector, also fit the above criteria for formal learning. There is much to be said for incorporating certificates acquired in such contexts into the DQR, despite the fact that they are not a part of initial vocational training or upgrading training.

In addition, there are many courses in continuing education which cannot originally be ascribed to formal learning and which do not lead to certification as such but, at the most, a certificate of attendance. The response paper to the German Qualifications Framework submitted by the associations, providers and institutions of the continuing education sector (Stellungnahme zum Deutschen Qualifikationsrahmen 21.12.2009) suggests a “pluralistic recognition landscape in which new recognition bodies are integrated into existing structures” (p. 4). The aim is to develop criteria which enable the most diverse courses to be assigned to a level. This approach would broaden the spectrum of qualifications listed in the DQR. The necessary quality assurance could be guaranteed with a system of certification and accreditation. An approach of this kind is currently being pursued in Austria (cf. GUTSCHOW 2010; DEHNBOSTEL/SEIDEL/STAMM-RIEMER 2010) in the implementation of its national qualifications framework.

TAKING ACCOUNT OF INFORMAL LEARNING

Informal learning, in the sense of managing situations and solving problems to meet the demands of work in practice, is characteristically highly individual and context-dependent. However, the DQR is geared towards reflecting “qualifications and not individual learning and career biographies” (Arbeitskreis DQR 2009, p. 3). As an instrument of transparency for use as a means of establishing the compatibility of learning outcomes, it cannot adequately communicate individual, personalised learning outcomes. The prerequisite for the inclusion of non-formal and informal learning in the DQR is therefore that the learning outcomes are identified, assessed, aggregated, and correlated with qualifications.

Often learners are not consciously aware of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning, particularly in the form of experiential learning, and these need to be made visible before they can be recognised. Validation procedures, as used in some European countries for the certification of competence but mainly confined to advisory settings in Germany, therefore need to be multi-stepped in design. The essential prerequisites for validation are standards for the bodies of knowledge, skills and competences to be assessed, and for the assessment itself. If validation standards refer to existing qualifications, validation can lead directly to an educational qualification and hence to a recognised certificate assigned to a qualifications framework level. But it can also be applied to parts of a course or to obtaining credit for prior learning. Accordingly, it facilitates transition routes or access to courses, and can contribute to permeability between courses or, equally, to the shortening of learning periods. Hence it can build the desired bridge to formal learning.

Options and perspectives for validating non-formal and informal learning

Validation procedures can be integrated into the education system in different ways: the inclusion of non-formal and informal learning in the DQR can be treated as system-immanent, allowing for selective use. Every sector of education retains its established procedures or continues to develop them separately from the others. The bridges between formal, non-formal and informal learning are then effectively one-way streets, and their heterogeneity frequently renders them opaque to applicants. Non-formal and informal learning can be taken into account where it corresponds to the contents of existing formal qualifications without broadening the scope of qualifications taken into account by the DQR.

A second alternative is the establishment of a validation system that develops in parallel with the formal education system. This validation system would be more uniform and systematic in its methods than the system-immanent alternative, and would relate partly to the same content-based standards and partly to certificates that have not hitherto been admissible within the DQR. This development would lead to a separate assessment procedure and raise questions concerning the parity of the qualifications thereby awarded.

The third option is to aim for a uniform, competence-based system, which would capture and assess all the qualifications and skills acquired according to uniform standards (cf. DEHNBOSTEL/SEIDEL/STAMM-RIEMER 2010). This would mean the competence-oriented reformulation of existing standards, taking account of non-formal and informal learning. In this connection, the inclusion of non-formal and informal learning calls for an extension of the concept of competence, since the descriptors of the draft DQR could only capture the special dimensions of informal learning in a limited way or with undue emphasis on cognitive aspects (cf. *ibid.*; Stellungnahme der Weiterbildung zum DQR 21.12.2009).

With its aims of establishing the comparability of qualifications in order to foster cross-border mobility and lifelong learning, and with its emphasis on competences or learning outcomes, the DQR can pave the way for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. In a similar vein, the DQR Working Group combines with its implementation the opportunity to move closer to the principle that, in Germany, "what is important is what you are capable of and not where you learnt it" (Arbeitskreis DQR 2009, p. 5). Even if this is only realised to a limited extent in the present draft DQR, a learning-outcome-based DQR can be expected to have long-term repercussions for the edu-

cation system. In vocational education, it can be assumed that the drafting of training regulations will begin to take account of the DQR classification system. And even if little is known as yet about the implementation of the DQR, it is likely that in future not only reports and certificates will contain references to DQR levels, but in the long term, procedures for determining competence will become established which refer to its competence categories and levels. These changes can only develop step by step over a longer period of time, however. One important step would be to implement options within the DQR process which permit ongoing evaluations of the DQR, to ensure that it continues to evolve in parallel with the changes in the education system and accommodates both experiential and knowledge-based learning. ■

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