Qualifications Frameworks: Implementation and Impact

Background case study on Lithuania

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Foreword

This report was prepared as one in a series of background studies under an international research project conducted by the ILO Skills and Employability Department in partnership with the European Training Foundation on the implementation of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and their use and impact. The individual country studies and the subsequent cross-country comparative analysis strengthen the empirical foundation for eventual policy advise on whether and, if so, then how to introduce a qualifications framework as part of a strategy to achieve countries' wider skills development and employment goals.

Whether the emphasis is on increasing the relevance and flexibility of education and training programmes, easing recognition of prior learning, enhancing lifelong learning, improving the transparency of qualification systems, creating possibilities for credit accumulation and transfer, or developing quality assurance systems, governments are increasingly turning to qualifications frameworks as a policy tool for reform. Despite the growing international interest, there is very little empirical research about the actual design process, implementation and results of NQFs as an approach to reform skills development systems where it has been attempted.

This report on Lithuania is one of a dozen studies of countries around the world undertaken to examine the extent to which qualifications frameworks are achieving policy objectives and which types of qualifications frameworks seem most appropriate in which contexts. The case studies were conducted through two stages of field work. The first stage generated a description of the qualifications framework, the design process, its objectives and the existing system of qualifications that it was intended to reform. For the second stage, the focus was on implementation, use, and impact of the qualifications framework, including asking employers, training providers, workers, and government agencies about the extent of their use of the qualifications frameworks and the extent to which they felt it was serving their needs.

In addition, five case studies on the early starter qualifications frameworks (Australia, the English NVQs, New Zealand, Scotland, and South Africa) were written on the basis of existing research and documentation only, and published as an Employment Working Paper (Allais, Raffe, Strathdee, Wheelahan, and Young, ILO 2009).

I would like to thank Vidmantas Tūtlys of Vytautas Magnus University for carrying out the research and preparing this case study report. I would also like to acknowledge our gratitude to the practitioners and stakeholders who made time to respond to the questions and share their views. The paper reflects the views of the author and not necessarily those of the ILO.

Dr. Stephanie Allais, as Research Associate in the ILO Skills and Employability Department, supported the group of researchers in preparing the country studies and wrote the synthesis report (*The implementation and impact of National Qualifications Frameworks: Report of a study in 16 countries*, 2010) which also explains the methodology set out for the country studies. I would also like to thank Judy Harris for editing the case study.

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1.   Introduction

This case study has been undertaken according to guidelines provided by the International Labour Office. The design and progress of the Lithuanian National Qualifications Framework (NQF) have been well-documented, nationally and internationally (Laužackas and Tūtlys, 2008; Laužackas and Tūtlys 2006; Tūtlys and Winterton 2006). However, there is a need for a systematic and critical evaluation of the current situation in advance of the actual implementation of the NQF. This is the aim of this case study.

Work on an NQF began in 2005 with a European Social Fund (ESF) project entitled Creation of the National System of Qualifications of Lithuania. The project reviewed the current qualifications system in Lithuania; developed the conceptual framework for a new national system; designed NQF descriptors; developed methodologies for the design of occupational standards, and piloted occupational standards in the construction and hospitality sectors.[1]

The government is in the process of approving the NQF descriptors. The institutional arrangements for the implementation of the NQF are more complicated. A national qualifications agency was established at the end of 2007. The intention was that it would be a governmental institution, independent of the Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and Ministry of Economy. Such independence was deemed necessary for the implementation of an overarching NQF which would include qualifications provided by the initial vocational education and training (VET) system, higher education degrees and continuing vocational training. The new government, which came into power on the end of 2008, made the decision to abolish the authority and to transfer its functions to the Ministry of Education and Science. This decision was made because of the increasing financial difficulties of the state and the need to reduce bureaucracy.

The Ministry of Education delegated the implementation of the NQF to two subsidiary institutions: the Centre for Methodology in VET (Profesinio mokymo metodikos centras) and the Centre for the Evaluation of the Quality of Studies of Higher Education (Studijų kokybės vertinimo centras).[2] These institutions are key role-players in curriculum design, assessment and the awarding of qualifications in VET and higher education and in the supervision and accreditation of VET and higher education providers.

The next step for the NQF in Lithuania is the design of occupational standards. However, the detail is unclear, largely because of two other ambitious and strategic projects that are in the pipeline: the implementation of a national modular VET training system and the introduction of the European Credit Transfer System in higher education.

1.1. Socio-economic and cultural context

Lithuania is a small country with a population of 3,366,400 million in 2008. It is situated in the northern part of the Central and Eastern Europe, on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea, neighbouring Latvia, Belorussia, Poland and Russia (Kaliningrad enclave). Geographically it is located in the centre

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[1] These documents can be accessed (in English) and downloaded from the project website http://www.lnks.lt
[2] The websites for the two institutions are http://www.pmmc.lt and http://www.skvc.lt respectively.

of European continent (the geographical centre of Europe is about 20 kilometres from Vilnius). It has been a member of the European Union (EU) and NATO since 2004. It has a rather homogenous ethnic and cultural composition: 2,837,400 million Lithuanians (84 per cent), 208,300 Poles (6.2 per cent), 168,100 Russians (about 5 per cent), 36,700 Ukrainians (about 0.6 per cent) plus small numbers of Belarusians, Jews, Germans and Tartars (Statistical Yearbook of Lithuania 2008, 2009). The national language is Lithuanian and dominant religion is Roman Catholicism. Around 64 per cent of the population is of working age i.e. aged between 16 and 65. Roughly 20 per cent are of retirement age and 17 per cent are under 16.

The country was a medieval state from the thirteenth century to the mid-sixteenth century. Some significant dates were: the crowning of the first and only King Mindaugas in 1253; the establishment of the capital Vilnius in 1323; the official Christianisation of the country in 1387, and the defeat of the Teutonic Order in 1410 which marked the end of the crusades. From 1569 to 1795, the country was a Polish-Lithuanian state, a period characterised by wars with the Moscow Duchy and Sweden, the development of European culture and the establishment of Vilnius University (in 1581). Lithuania was part of the Russian Empire between 1795 and 1918, with major revolts in 1831 and 1863, followed by the national revival movement in the second half of the nineteenth century. The modern national state of Lithuania was established in 1918 but was curtailed in 1940 by a period of Soviet occupation that lasted until 1990 and the restitution of the Republic of Lithuania.
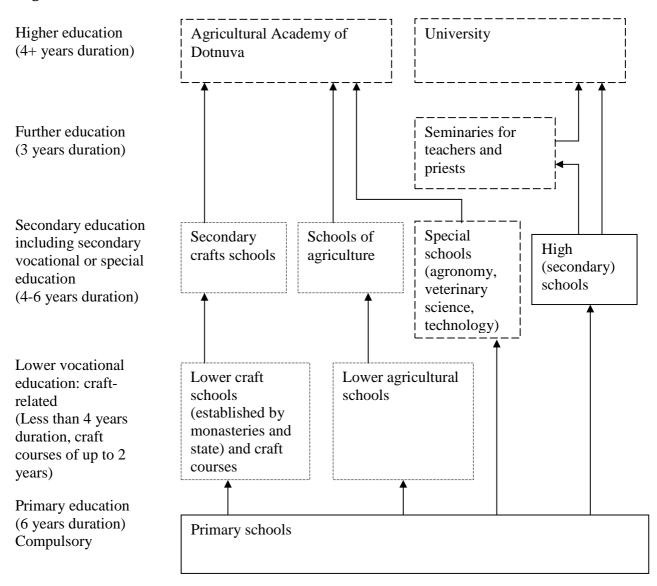
In order to fully understand the design and implementation of the Lithuanian NQF, it is necessary to consider the history and socio-economic context of skills development in the country. Several factors have contributed to discontinuities in qualifications and skills development.

1.2. Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century: The influence of an agrarian economy on the education system

Serfdom was abolished later in Lithuania than in other parts of the Russian Empire. Tsarist governments restricted the sale of land and did not allow agrarian schools. As a result, the development of agricultural technology, and associated economic progress, was limited (Cepenas, 1992). Such a comparatively backward agrarian economy did not create the conditions for skills development and vocational training. Wealthier peasants encouraged their children to progress socially and economically by entering intellectual professions such as the priesthood, medicine, law and pharmacy. There was no shared understanding of the economic and social importance of crafts, industry and related vocational education; although several intellectuals and leaders of the national revival movement did advocate industry and craft apprenticeships and vocational training as the basis for a new national state (Kudirka, 1990). Moreover, repressive policies instituted after the revolt of 1863 further restricted Lithuanians' access to professional roles such as teachers and public servants.

Systematic vocational training in agriculture and crafts only began in 1918 after the formation of the independent state (see figure 1). A reform in 1922 opened possibilities for the development of large numbers of small private farms. The training of smallholders and farmers was seen as a means of economic and social integration. The first national craft schools were established in 1926 and a 'special' education department for the governance of vocational education in 1937.

Figure 1.   Levels of vocational education in Lithuania between 1918 and 1940

Higher education (4+ years duration)	Agricultural Academy of Dotnuva	University
Further education (3 years duration)		Seminaries for teachers and priests
Secondary education including secondary vocational or special education (4-6 years duration)	Secondary crafts schools / Schools of agriculture / Special schools (agronomy, veterinary science, technology)	High (secondary) schools
Lower vocational education: craft-related (Less than 4 years duration, craft courses of up to 2 years)	Lower craft schools (established by monasteries and state) and craft courses / Lower agricultural schools	
Primary education (6 years duration) Compulsory	Primary schools	

Three types of vocational training institution provided young people with skills and qualifications in agriculture and crafts in the period from 1918 to 1940: secondary crafts schools; schools of agriculture; and special secondary vocational schools in agronomy, veterinary science and technology. One of the main objectives of the lower schools was to combat poverty and unemployment. The main providers of higher education were the University of Lithuania, established in 1922, and the Academy of Agriculture, established in 1924.

The formation and development of the independent state did not change the fundamentally agrarian character of the economy. The Lithuanian state inherited the legacy of the Russian Empire and the German occupation during the First World War. The new institutions were integrated into the network

of educational institutions inherited from the Russian Empire (primary schools, gymnasia and upper gymnasia, teachers' seminaries) (figure 1). Different external and internal factors resulted in training and skills development that was fragmented, bureaucratic and inconsistent. Therefore, this period did not succeed in creating the conditions for trust-based coordination between institutions, communities, and individuals in the fields of education, training and qualifications.

Ruptures in socio-economic development

Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union in June 1940, by Nazi Germany in June 1941 and by the Soviet Union again in 1944. The main socio-economic changes imposed by occupation were:

- The introduction of a centrally planned economy.
- Industrialisation oriented to strengthening the military power of the Soviet Union.
- The collectivisation of the agriculture through the abolition of private property and private farms and the establishment of so-called collective farms.

Figure 2.   The education system and its institutions in the Soviet period

Higher education	Universities, specialised institutes and academies	
Secondary special (vocational) education. Starts after completion of the 9th or 12th grades (3-5 years duration)	Higher secondary vocational technical schools (technikums)	
Secondary education (12 years duration) Compulsory after 1981	Secondary education in secondary schools	Secondary vocational education in secondary vocational technical schools
Lower secondary education which became compulsory for all children following reforms between 1958 and 1963. This level existed until 1981 (9 years duration)	Lower secondary education in secondary schools	Lower secondary education with vocational training – provided by vocational-technical training schools. Existed until 1984
Basic education (3-4 years duration) Compulsory	Basic schools	

The planning of human resources was formal, inflexible, and highly bureaucratic. Figure 2 shows the institutional structure of the Soviet education system and its strongly vocational orientation. The main function of qualifications, education, and training was to regulate the workforce in line with the requirements of the planned economy. To that end, vocational and higher education were also subjected to centralised planning to ensure the systemic distribution of school leavers to particular sectors and fields of the economy.

A centralised system of vocational education and training had as its main objective the development and rapid deployment of a narrowly specialised, mostly low-skilled workforce, to satisfy the needs of heavy industry. Transition from the one education level to another in the system was regulated by assessment. One of the most important filters was the grade 8 school examinations; pupils with lower grades transferred to vocational schools to acquire the worker qualifications needed for the economy. Higher skilled worker qualifications could only be obtained after completion of secondary education. This segregation of VET caused it to lose social prestige. However, in the 1970s and 1980s plans were undertaken to provide universal secondary general education for all pupils including those in the VET schools.

Individuals were not permitted to be actively involved in choosing a professional career or skills development. Rather, the approach to qualifications was passive and obedient. Qualifications allowed an individual to be treated as 'normal' by the authorities and the surrounding environment. Access to qualifications (especially at higher levels) was very often related to ideological loyalty, membership of the communist party and cooperation with repressive structures (Labour Market Training Authority, 2006).

Levels of qualification were usually indicated on employees' certificates alongside work experience. The continuing vocational education of workers and their professional advancement usually took place within the workplace and was not formally recognised beyond internal remuneration. This discouraged workers from leaving an enterprise or seeking to change it. Promotion was based on practical experience and access to managerial positions without previous work experience at the shop floor level was impossible. Those in managerial positions gained access to the institutionalised and formalised continuing vocational training that was offered to higher level professionals.

Remuneration was based on qualifications and experience and in the most cases it was comparatively favourable for the skilled workers. However, educational advancement had very limited impact on workers' social and economic conditions which acted as a disincentive to learning and skill development.

Higher education, which was provided by universities, specialised institutes (medicine, pedagogy, etc.), art academies, music conservatories, specialised engineering and sciences institutes and polytechnic institutes, was also strongly vocationally oriented, providing qualifications aligned to the requirements of the planned economy. Degree-level study and loyal work experience played a crucial role in securing advancement and an academic career. Higher education studies also served as an important instrument of indoctrination. Those who were not trusted as loyal to the ruling regime or who had any kind of relationship (family, kinship) with such people were excluded.

Transition to democracy and a market economy in 1990

The transition from a planned socialist system to a free market system has been approached in a top-down way. The Soviet political-bureaucratic elite used the privatisation of former state property as an opportunity to convert political capital to economic capital. According to Norkus (2008, p. 577):

> Such privatization did not bring new capital, nor new technologies or managerial competences, causing the processes of economic involution, whose most evident signs are deindustrialization, barter exchanges, delays in the payment of salaries and wages or payment of them with barter, outflow of the capital abroad….

The result was a rather insulated and closed model of the capitalism, dominated by joint-stock companies whose shares are not traded on the stock exchange and therefore not open to outsider acquisition. In this business model the functions of the owner and manager are not separated. There are several implications of this for qualifications.

The closed nature of the economic structure together with the problems of economic restructuring, where many large industrial enterprises (which played a very important role in the Soviet system of qualifications both as users of qualifications and providers of practical training in VET and higher education) collapsed or were restructured into smaller units, has led to the development of many small and medium enterprises in the tertiary sector. These were not successful in creating conditions conducive to the development of qualifications.

The urgent need to survive in the market pushed the questions of human resource management and qualifications aside. Employers and human resource managers recruited people with the capability and competence to deal with the changed economic conditions, irrespective of their official qualifications. Indeed, for the first 5 or so years of independence, there was a growing negative attitude towards qualifications and formal education on the part of employers, employees and learners. Qualifications were seen as impractical and incapable of helping people adapt to a free market and to seize new opportunities. Enrolment into higher education and VET fell and drop-out rates increased. For example, the number of students in higher education institutions in the period 1990-96 decreased from 67,000 to 54,000 and the number in professional colleges fell from 46,000 to 24,000.

The development of a modern civil society and relationships based on mutual trust has been slow and difficult in Lithuania. The history of the country has resulted in poor conditions for the development of participative democracy at all levels: local, regional and national. Totalitarianism changed the mentality of the population by enforcing obedience to authority and eliminating autonomy. As Havel (1990) argues, people policed each other in terms of deviation from and disloyalty to the regime, resulting in high levels of distrust. Activism and solidarity between 1989 and 1991 was primarily ethnically based and mobilised against the Soviet regime. It did not survive or translate into trust when the external threat was overcome. Research highlights that levels of general trust amongst citizens in post-communist countries is considerably lower than in so-called 'Western democracies' (Lietuvos tauta, 2007).

Another problem related to the above is the low level of organisation in Lithuania. Research undertaken in 2005 showed that only 17 per cent of citizens belong to any kind of social organisation or movement; 2.9 per cent of citizens are members of trade unions; 2.5 per cent belong to political parties and 1.8 per cent belongs to youth organisations (Lietuvos tauta, 2007).

A procedural (rather than participative) model of democracy prevails, which favours state dominance over consultation (Lietuvos tauta, 2007). This is particularly the case in education. Although the majority of population are dissatisfied with the prevailing socioeconomic and political conditions, they do not believe they can change things through political process. Yet they have high expectations that the government should take care of their welfare. Gylys (2008) identifies the prominence of market fundamentalism in Lithuania and a concomitant low level of appreciation of the notion of public interest. What is good for business is seen as good for society.

Implications for the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework

There are three key implications:

1. The state has adopted a top-down highly regulative approach to the NQF. There is a very strong belief amongst policy makers, that strict and comprehensive legal prescriptions are absolutely necessary.

2. The NQF cannot be interwoven into societal networks of cooperation, partnership and social dialogue because such networks are either weak or non-existent. There is a risk that the implementation of the NQF will be more concerned with the formalities of introducing legislation, approving level descriptors and establishing institutions than with the real impact of the NQF on education, employment and social cohesion.

3. There is a risk that the NQF will not correspond to the defined needs of citizens and stakeholders because of the absence of meaningful liaison between government and citizens and between the government and stakeholders.

2. The current education and training system

There are three main sectors in the Lithuanian national education system: general education, VET and higher education. A general overview of each section and its development and structure is followed by an analysis of the relationship between education and the labour market and pertinent features of education and employment policy.

2.1. General education

Education starts at 7 years of age. General education is provided in public schools (free of charge) and in private educational establishments. Compulsory education lasts for ten years. Thereafter, pupils can either continue their studies for a further two years at a secondary school or go to a VET school. Students do not receive a qualification after secondary school. However, secondary school attendance is a precondition for access to further study at a VET school, a college or a university. VET schools award vocational qualifications without general secondary education or vocational qualifications with general secondary education.

One of the most important recent trends, not yet fully completed, is the introduction of learning outcomes expressed in terms of competences. Another trend, recently abolished, was the profiling of secondary education whereby students and their families could opt for an academic route (with orientation to sciences, humanities or arts) leading to university study or a technical route with

pathways into further education in VET institutions or colleges. This system was abolished because it was viewed as ineffective and because tended to increase inequalities in access to education.

Demographic change has resulted in a decrease in the number of pupils enrolled in general education; from 732,663 in 2000 to 611,745 pupils in 2007. The largest cohort of pupils (in 2007) is in lower secondary education (ISCED level 2) – 275,848, followed by 135,752 in primary education (ISCED level 1).

2.2. Vocational education and training

<u>Initial vocational training</u>

Initial vocational training in Lithuania is provided by vocational schools. As mentioned, pupils in these schools can acquire both secondary education and vocational qualification. Training programmes cater for students of different ages and with varying levels of education:

- *Type 1 vocational training* is aimed at pupils of at least 14 years of age who have not finished basic general education school and who wish to acquire vocational qualifications. Normally this training lasts for two to three years with the option to also acquire basic general education. Successful completion of this type of training leads to the acquisition of a qualification corresponding to the second level of the NQF and to the same level of the European Qualification Framework (EQF).[3]

- *Type 2 vocational training* is aimed at pupils who have completed their ten years of compulsory education and who wish to obtain a vocational qualification. Length of study is two years. The curriculum leads to the acquisition of a qualification corresponding to the third level of the NQF (qualified worker diploma) and to the same level of the EQF.

- *Type 3 vocational training* is aimed at those pupils who have completed compulsory education and who wish to acquire both a vocational qualification and a secondary school certificate. The course of study lasts for three years, leading to the acquisition of a qualification corresponding to the fourth level of the NQF and the EQF. Successful completion leads to a qualified worker diploma and a secondary school-leaving (maturity) certificate. The latter provides an opportunity to continue studies at a college or university.

- *Type 4 vocational training* is aimed at pupils who have finished secondary school or gymnasium (have obtained a maturity certificate) and who wish to acquire a vocational qualification. Depending on the complexity of the chosen occupation, studies last from one to two years, leading to a qualification at the fourth level of both qualifications frameworks.

The vocational schools are public training institutions funded by the state. Since 2003, learning outcomes are assessed and qualifications have been awarded by the Chamber of Industry, Commerce and Trades, which is responsible for the organisation of qualifying examinations. Vocational schools are accountable to county-level governments. The involvement of other stakeholders in the governance and work of vocational schools is weak. Although regional VET councils (with representation from

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[3] Accreditation is not yet fully in place, but will be in the foreseeable future.

VET schools, employers, trade unions and county-level government) do exist, their activities are limited to discussions of regional VET problems and they do not have any decision-making power.

At the present time there are 75 vocational education schools in Lithuania; 13 of which are public vocational schools owned and governed by the Ministry of Education and Science, business organisations and/or municipalities. From 1990 to 2003 further vocational schools (aukštesniosios mokyklos) continued to exist. These were derived from Soviet era technikums. They were phased out after 2000 when Lithuanian VET became tuned to European systems and replaced by a sub-system of higher vocational studies providing vocational bachelor degrees and qualifications.

A number of overarching VET institutions exist:

- *Regional VET centres* were established to optimise vocational schools and centres that could not secure enough enrolments for cost-effective training. Currently there are seven such centres in different regions of Lithuania.

- *Public VET enterprises* were initiated about five years ago in response to the growing public status of VET schools and centres. They involve social stakeholders (including employers) concerned to respond more flexibly to student and employee need and to the labour market. Some enterprises are multifunctional in that they seek to meet regional human resource needs by integrating initial vocational training, adult education and continuing vocational training.

- *Sectoral centres of practical training* are under development. Funded by the European Union, and falling under the Ministry of Education and Science, these partnership-based centres are designed to serve the initial vocational training, higher education and continuing vocational training needs of employees. For example, mechatronics training in Panevėžys has 19 stakeholders including representatives from higher schools, business and other VET schools. Another example is the sector training centre at Gruzdžiai which was established to provide opportunities for VET students from across the country to acquire practical skills and competences in agriculture. However, this centre has since merged with a local VET school because of a lack of additional financial support to cover transport and subsistence costs for trainees from other regions.

The Ministry of Education and Science states that the VET system is now completely open to employer initiatives and participation in the preparation of training standards and curricula. Although the law requires numbers of VET pupils to be agreed with employers in each county, in practice, there is still a lack of motivation regarding employer and trade union involvement in VET.

Continuing vocational training

The main public institutions of continuing vocational training are the Labour Market Training Centres which provide vocational training for the unemployed and for employees at risk of unemployment. The activities of these centres, including the curricula, are coordinated by the Labour Market Training Authority under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Students can re-qualify or update their skills and competences. Some centres provide continuing vocational training services for business e.g. training in health and safety and Information Technology (IT) skills.

Institutions providing initial vocational education and training also use their training facilities and staff to provide continuing vocational training. This applies to 47 per cent of vocational schools, 37 per cent of advanced VET schools and 80 per cent of higher educational institutions – all of which offer qualification upgrading or re-training courses to adult learners. Continuing vocational training is also provided by a variety of private institutions - businesses and companies, private training centres, and so on. Part of this continuing training is formally regulated.

In terms of policy, the Ministry of Science and Education and the Ministry of Social Security and Labour are the main role-players and the initiators and coordinators of the Lithuanian VET system. A dedicated centre in the Ministry of Education provides methodological assistance to all levels of VET. It is therefore the case that state or state-founded organisations remain the main actors in the system. This is enshrined in law. The only exceptions are the chambers of commerce and the Chamber of Agriculture which have specific roles within the overall VET system.

A new law pertaining to VET was passed in 2007 (Lietuvos Respublikos Profesinio mokymo įstatymo pakeitimo įstatymas. Valstybės žinios, 2007-04-19, Nr. 43-1627). In order to comply with the law, simplify governance and reduce financial outgoings, the government has begun a process of merging initial vocational training with the labour market training centres. These mergers mean that VET schools will in future undertake initial vocational education and the training of the unemployed. All public initial and continuing vocational training will fall under the Ministry of Education and Science. These reforms have faced rather intensive opposition from the network of labour market training centres. Nevertheless, it is envisaged that mergers will start in 2010.

The Lithuanian VET system is still in a transitional period from a state-regulated (or supply model) to a market-regulated (demand) model based on qualifications. Participation of employers and trade unions formed part of the Law on VET in Lithuania, 1997 and the Vocational Education White Paper, 1998. Employer bodies (chambers of commerce) and trade unions have been authorised to undertake specific functions in relation to VET:

- to make proposals to the Lithuanian VET Council regarding defining the requirements for VET curricula and examinations;
- to organise final qualification examinations;
- to register practical training agreements/contracts between school, enterprises and trainee; and
- to supervise practical training agreements and their implementation.

Social partnerships

Given that Lithuanian VET and general education have been traditionally school- (not company-) oriented and centralised, the above changes and new social partnerships represent radical systemic reform. The Vocational Education White Paper, 1998, described social partnership as regular cooperation, negotiation and coordination of interests among governmental institutions (mainly the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour and VET schools), employees' representatives (trade unions) and employers' representatives (associated business structures). The Trade Union Congress (2005, 37) expresses this as follows: "The involvement of social partners in the coordination of supply and demand of skills and qualifications is often manifested in neo-corporatism, which refers to tripartite bargaining of trade unions, employers' representatives and

the state." Unfortunately to date trade unions have not been motivated to engage in VET processes, mainly because of internal weaknesses.

Rimantas Laužackas (2005) discerns three levels of social partnership in the Lithuanian VET system:

1. *National policy level.* At this level partnership has to be secured through the activities of the Council of the Vocational Education and Training which was established on the basis of tripartite cooperation between government institutions, employers' organisations and trade unions. However, it should be noted, that the council has an advisory not a decision-making function.

2. *Sector level.* At this level the main institutions securing social partnerships are the branch experts groups (also known as industry lead bodies) and the Central Experts Group of Branches These experts groups are also constituted on a tripartite basis and consist of representatives of the branch employers, trade unions and VET institutions. Their main responsibility is designing the standards of initial vocational education and training under the supervision of the designated methodology centre in the Ministry of the Education and Training. However, it must be recognised that the real involvement of the employers and trade unions remains insufficient. The representatives of employers are not always motivated to participate and unions representatives lack know-how and experience and in most cases are "silent partners" unable to provide any valuable feedback.

3. *Practical vocational level.* Social partnership at the practical vocational level takes the form of cooperation between VET schools and employers in the organisation of practical training or between enterprises and the labour market training centres in the case of continuing training for employees. However, this form of partnership is still rather passive, fragmentary, scattered and unsystematic (Laužackas, 2005).

Problems with social partnerships

One of the main reasons for lack of employer and trade union engagement is the absence of a clear systematic approach to what social partnership entails. Strategic documents fail to provide a clear and concrete vision, frequently describing partnerships in general and vague terms without concrete strategies.

In some cases employers and trade unions are involved at a formal level but not in practices such as: designing VET standards, curriculum development, provision of training in schools and enterprises, assessment of learning outcomes and competences, governance of the system and so forth. On some occasions, employers and unions are not fully appraised of the over-arching intentions of the government or of the financial and fiscal policies which could support their involvement.

It is also the case that the laws regulating cooperation between social stakeholders in vocational education and training do not always make provision for empowering stakeholders to participate actively and to cooperate with each other to coordinate their interests. The lack of attention to concrete functions is illustrated in the VET law adopted in 2007 which recommends the implementation of an apprenticeship system in Lithuania, but fails to indicate clearly defined functions and responsibilities for the social stakeholders in this regard.

Paradoxically, when the roles of social stakeholders are defined more concretely they tend to be accompanied by some form of government control. For example, the VET law referred to above recommends delegating the accreditation of qualifications to social partners, but stipulates that such partners have to be appointed by the government.

The organisation of VET

Legislation favours a rather centralised VET system. The Ministry of Education and Science has responsibility for planning VET according to input from economic sectors.[4] The number of enrolments and their distribution across different training programmes in VET schools is agreed with county-level administration on an annual basis. Municipal bodies monitor provision at the local level.

A range of national VET provider networks and associations exist, for example, the Association of VET Schools and the Association of Colleges. These tend to be established and managed centrally (a top-down approach).[5]

Relationships between VET institutions and employers are frequently conflictual; discussions turning into counter-claims and accusations rather than problem solving based on compromise and mutual obligations. Information flows between the two parties are often weak. For example, the Confederation of Industrialists of Lithuania (the largest employer organisation, established 17 years ago) claims that it has never been consulted regarding skills needs in different sectors and noted that some employers are not aware of VET schools and the qualifications which they provide. On the other hand, employer organisations have themselves been unwilling to engage with VET in the past. Some employers have make recommendations to the Ministry of Education and Science to intervent to enable them to work in more supportive ways with VET schools. Others are keen for public VET schools to be privatised so that they can play a more active role as stakeholders and/or co-owners.

Skills shortages at the intermediate level and low unemployment have acted as a catalyst for change. For example, employers in the construction sector are seeking to attract skilled workers by increasing wages and supporting career development. Skills shortages have led to closer relationships between enterprises, vocational schools, the Association of Builders and the Ministry of Education and Science. The Association of Builders and the Ministry of Education and Science have prepared sector guidelines to enhance retention, improve the quality of the preparation of construction workers and increase the attractiveness of the industry to new recruits. There have been similar developments in the road freight sector. Linava, the national association of road freight carriers, has established its own training centre to train 3,000 truck drivers a year. However, this is only about half of the number of drivers that are required. To address this, Linava is working with VET schools, supporting them to design curricula, providing training materials, organising seminars for teachers and providing practical training in the various transportation centres.

A range of views were expressed by interviewees regarding the quality of provision in the public VET schools. Teachers' levels of qualification and continuing training were questioned as were the general levels of funding to the institutions and the outmoded nature of the practical side of the training. There

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[4] This input is rarely forthcoming.
[5] This is also true of the labour market training centres.

is a perceived gap between the competence of teachers and the current realities and needs of industry. In their defence, interviewees from VET schools claim that their teachers are poached by employers. The Ministry of the Education and Science is interested in organising industry internships for VET teachers to expose them to technological and organisational realities. Whilst this proposal enjoys popularity in some quarters, some employers' associations argue against it in terms of likely costs.

Return on investment was raised as an issue and a disincentive to cooperation. Employers supporting VET schools were mindful that this might benefit competitors that are less forthcoming in terms of support. A proposal has been put forward which would commit VET graduates to a period of employment in the supporting organisations. This proved highly controversial. One interviewee referred to such a situation as "feudal" and likely to encourage ex-students to work only for the minimum period of time until "they save enough money for the ticket to Dublin."

2.3. Higher education

At present Lithuania has 19 state-owned (13 universities, 5 academies and 18 colleges) and 14 non-state owned (4 university-type institutions and 10 colleges) higher educational institutions.

Vocational higher education

Higher education in Lithuania consists of non-university and university studies. Non-university higher education developed from the further vocational education schools (which enrolled secondary school leavers and provided them with high-level vocational qualifications). In 1998, the further vocational education institutions initiated a self-assessment process (through the PHARE project, with participation from foreign experts). Rankings were used to set up a colleges' network and to identify those schools with the capacity to deliver higher education. Existing institutions were restructured and merged to form colleges oriented to regional and local labour market requirements. These colleges were the forerunners of the non-university higher education sector. A further self-assessment process was undertaken in 2000 and the new sector was formally established, offering broad high-quality higher education and vocational programmes, offered over three or four years. The sector is increasingly referred to as vocational higher education.

Levels of higher education

Legislation established three main levels of higher education in Lithuania: 6

- General studies (level one)
- Post-graduate, specialised professional studies (level two)
- Integrated studies (mix of levels one and two)
- Residential medical, art, and graduate school studies (level three).

Students can acquire bachelor, master and doctoral degrees. The duration of bachelor degree studies cannot exceed four years. Graduates from universities are awarded professional qualification and/or the bachelor degree: graduates from vocational higher education programmes receive a vocational bachelor degree and professional qualification. Masters programmes are offered at research-oriented

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[6] Higher Education in the Republic of Lithuania, 2000. However, the basic degree framework was introduced in 1992 and followed the American model.

universities. Specialised professional studies incorporate practical skills. Residential studies in medicine are intended for those following state syllabi leading to internships. Postgraduate study in art has its own mode of organisation. Doctoral studies involve a dissertation which is defended at university collegial councils.

<u>Problems within higher education</u>

There are some shortcomings in the current system. Degrees cannot be granted to students who graduate with inconsecutive studies i.e. have a break in their studies. In such cases, students receive a certificate of completion, despite the existence of legal provisions allowing for their reintegration and/or for the development of an individual study programme.[7] This means that compensatory periods of study have to be undertaken, for example, in the case of a student who has followed a bachelor degree but not graduated and wishes to access a masters programme. Another example is vocational higher education graduates who wish to progress to a university bachelor degree and from there to master's level. They also have to undertake compensatory study, which creates additional workload for them and often puts them off study altogether. There is a need therefore for a system capable of accrediting partially completed programmes and duplicated subjects (where students transfer between providers).

The critics of the higher education also identify the following problems in higher education:
- Poor quality of studies.
- Lack of relevance to labour market needs.
- A closed system lacking systemic cooperation with stakeholders, particularly business and employers.
- Ineffective use of public funding and lack of co-funding activities.
- Content that often fails to develop creativeness, innovation, competitiveness, leadership and other important skills and capacities.
- Mass higher education is tied to the public funding mechanism which encourages institutions to enrol as many students as possible irrespective of their motivation or the institutions capacity to deliver.
- Professors and lecturers without research experience and understanding of the world of work who in addition are not motivated to upgrade themselves.

2.4. Continuing vocational training

In Lithuania, continuing vocational training courses are provided by the initial vocational training institutions, higher education schools and a range of private training providers. Over and above this, the public system of employment training with its national network of labour market training centres, helps about 20,000 unemployed people per year to upgrade their qualifications or acquire skills and qualifications to reintegrate into the labour market.

The Strategy on Assurance of Lifelong Learning (Mokymosi visą gyvenimą užtikrinimo strategija. Švietimo ir mokslo ministro ir socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministro 2004 m. kovo 26 d. įsakymas No. ISAK-433/A1-83) reports a lack of motivation amongst the adult population to take part in continuing

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[7] On the Procedure for Recognition of Higher Education According to the Results of Consecutive Studies, Government Resolution, 23 February 2001.

vocational training; with enrolment at between 5 and 10 per cent compared with an EU average of more than 40 per cent. Research (Lietuvos tauta, 2007) identifies the following reasons for this:

- No systemic evaluation and recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences and learning outcomes.
- Little information on continuing vocational training opportunities.
- Underdeveloped distance and e-learning.
- Lack of public funding and limited means for learners to finance their continuing training.
- Lack of systemic and coherent provision in the regions of Lithuania.

2.5. Relations between the further education and labour market

Statistical data show that between 2001 and 2007 there was overall decrease in the unemployment rate across all cohorts of educational attainment. Unemployment amongst those with higher and post-secondary tertiary education decreased from 8.4 per cent in 2001 to 2.1 per cent in 2007. The unemployment rate amongst those with general upper secondary and vocational education decreased from 19.7 per cent in 2001 to 5.1 per cent in 2007. The proportion of unemployed people with vocational lower secondary or primary education decreased from 23.6 per cent in 2001 to 7.3 per cent in 2007 (Statistics Lithuania, 2009).

3. The qualification system

This section of the case study will present an overview of the current structure and the levels of qualifications in Lithuania and will summarise processes related to designing, providing and awarding qualifications.

At the present time (and before official approval of an 8-level NQF) two frameworks are in operation; five levels of vocational education (introduced in 1997[8]) and three levels of higher education (introduced in 1992).

Table 1:   Levels of vocational education under the order of 1997 (amended in 2001)

Level of vocational education	Description of the level of vocational education	Minimum general education requirement for enrolment
1	Competence to perform simple, repetitive operations	-
2	Competence to perform a specialised work that requires essential independent decisions	Primary/basic education
3	Competence to perform complicated work requiring quite responsible and independent decisions. Ability to adjust to teamwork as required.	Secondary education

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[8] These were updated slightly in 2001 with the establishment of vocational higher education in the colleges.

4	Competence to perform complicated work requiring responsibility, independence, deep knowledge and specific skills. Ability to adjust to teamwork as required. Ability to independently plan, organise, administer and control as required.	Secondary education Further education
5 [9]	Competence to perform creative work in particular areas of activity that require responsibility.	Higher education

Although bachelor, master, and doctoral levels of study were introduced in 1992, further development of levels was undertaken with the introduction of the Bologna process. However, Lithuanian higher education has responded to the Bologna process in very limited way, mainly by the introduction of the two types of higher education studies (university and vocational) referred to earlier. Higher education qualifications in the vocational higher education sector (the colleges) are acquired after three years of full-time study. The vocational bachelor degree was legislated in 2006 through an amendment of existing higher education law. Prior to this, graduates of vocational higher education received a vocational diploma. Short study cycles are yet not implemented in Lithuania.

Table below analyses the compatibility of Lithuanian higher education degrees with the European Higher Education Area Qualifications Framework:

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[9] The fifth level is attained after three years of full-time vocational higher education.

Table 2: Compatibility of Lithuanian higher education degrees with the EHEQF

European Higher Education Qualifications Framework levels		Type of consecutive study in Lithuania	Higher education qualification and academic degrees awarded in Lithuania
First level of qualification (study cycle)	Short cycle studies	-	-
	First qualification at degree level (bachelor degree)	Bachelor (undergraduate) studies	Bachelor degree and (or) vocational qualification (universities)
			Vocational bachelor degree and (or) vocational qualification (non-university)
Second level of qualification (study cycle)	Master level	Master studies	Master qualification degree and (or) vocational qualification
		Specialised vocational studies Residential studies	Vocational qualification
Third level of qualification (study cycle)	Doctorate level	Post-graduate studies in art	Art licentiate degree - transformed into art doctorate in 2008
		Doctoral studies	Doctorate academic degree

3.1. Problems of compatibility

There are two key problems relating to compatibility and transferability:

- Access of vocational higher education institution graduates to master's degree level. As mentioned, this is currently only achievable via compensatory studies that enable these graduates to acquire a university bachelor degree. Legitimisation of the vocational bachelor qualification has not solved this problem because of the resistance of universities. This raises the question of whether an NQF will be able to address this problem (it seems unlikely).

- Current NQF developments prefigure the recognition and awarding of professional qualifications in higher education (such as engineering). One of the most important preconditions for this is the existence of well-developed professional organisations or associations, which are still not sufficiently developed in Lithuania.

Table 3: **Structure of the Lithuanian workforce according to levels of education and qualifications**

Existing levels of education and qualifications	Composition and number of the workforce having the corresponding level of qualifications
First level of vocational education	Unskilled workforce in elementary occupations. Statistical data (2001-04) show that the number of people with primary and general lower secondary education without vocational qualification decreased slightly from 897,000 to 859,000 (Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis 2005, 2006). The number of the unskilled workers in elementary occupations (2000-04 increased from 143,100 to 154,700 (Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis 2005, 2006).
Second level of vocational education	Low-skilled workforce, graduates of labour market training programmes. Statistical data show that the number people with low-level vocational qualification without lower secondary education decreased from 20,300 in 2001 to 14,900 in 2004 (Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis 2005, 2006).
Third level of vocational education	Skilled workers with vocational qualification and lower secondary education. According to statistics, in recent years the number of people with vocational lower secondary education decreased from 102,200 in 2001 to 77,200 in 2004 (Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis 2005, 2006).
Fourth level of vocational education	High skilled workers with vocational upper secondary or post-secondary education (craft and related trades workers, plant and machine operators, assemblers, etc.). Statistical data indicate that the number of employees in this category increased significantly from 366,300 in 2000 to 394,600 in 2004 (Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis 2005, 2006). This category is in high demand in the labour market.
Fifth level of vocational education Vocational bachelor degree	Skilled and experienced employees (technicians, foremen and associate professionals, younger clerks), former graduates of the special secondary schools (technikums) and higher vocational schools. It is difficult to estimate the number of people in this category because of reforms since 2001. Moreover, there is rather scattered statistical data on the participation of skilled workers in continuing vocational training. However, the combined number of people with special secondary education (i.e. graduates of former technikums) and graduates of the former higher vocational schools reached 574,000 in 2001 (Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis 2005, 2006). The number of the graduates from colleges increased from 4,602 in 2003 to 8,750 in 2004. This category of the workforce is also in high demand in the labour market.

Existing levels of education and qualifications	Composition and number of the workforce having the corresponding level of qualifications
University bachelor degree	People with a bachelor or corresponding higher education degree (graduates from university bachelor and professional programmes). Statistical data show a very important increase in the number of people with higher education (all degrees): from 348,400 in 2001 to 408,500 in 2004 (Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis 2005, 2006).
Master degree studies and specialised studies	People with a master's degree or corresponding degree of higher education. The number of the master's graduates was 7,435 in 2004 (Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis 2005, 2006).
Doctoral studies	Employees with a doctoral degree (researchers, R&D specialists). According to statistical data, the number of researchers in this category in the public sector increased slightly from 5,333 in 2000 to 5,706 in 2004 (Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis 2005, 2006).

The above analysis shows that there is an overlap between the fifth level of vocational education and the vocational bachelor degree level. This problem has been addressed in the NQF design process by pegging the vocational bachelor degree on the sixth level of the framework.

3.2. Designing and planning qualifications in Lithuania

A range of institutions are involved in designing and planning qualifications:

1. State institutions – the ministries of education and science, economy, social affairs and labour act as coordinators and formulate objectives and tasks for the planning of qualifications.

2. The economy branch expert groups (also known as industry lead bodies) and the Central Economy Experts Group were established on the basis of tripartite cooperation. In the qualification planning process, these groups act as consultants, providers of information, and assessors of qualifications. They also provide information on the demands of labour market for competences and qualifications. However, they operate in a very formal way and are dominated by representatives from VET schools; the involvement of employers and representatives of trade unions is limited.

3. Research institutions – the Methodological Centre for Vocational Education and Training and the Centre for the Assessment of the Quality of Studies develop the vocational training standards and the higher education regulations. The vocational training standards define the nature of the vocational qualification, training objectives, general skills, levels and final assessment[10]. At present only about 90 standards have been prepared and approved and some qualifications do not yet have standards. The upshot of this is that vocational training institutions have had to prepare temporary standards as a basis for training curricula and modules.

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[10] In consultation with the economic sector groups.

4. Universities design and develop their own syllabi according to the requirements contained in the Order of the Minister of Science and Education of the Republic of Lithuania (11 December 2003). Vocational higher education syllabi are based on vocational training standards, where they exist. It should be noted that syllabi aim to integrate cognitive, functional and general competences – this is characteristic of both university and vocational higher education syllabi.

3.3. Assessing and awarding vocational qualifications

Article 32 of the Law on Vocational Education and Training (1996) states that students who complete their studies according to the curricula of Level 1 of basic vocational training are issued qualification certificates; those completing their studies according to the curricula of levels II, III and IV are issued the qualified worker diplomas. Article 32 also emphasises the work-relatedness of vocational education.

Assessment consists of two parts – the theoretical examination and the practical examination. By law, the examinations are set by the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Trade, the Chamber of Agriculture or other institutions deemed competent, as authorised by the Government of the Republic of Lithuania. An examination commission is formed at each school, consisting of at least three members, representing employers, vocational trainers and trade unions. The examination process is complex. Apart from the school commissions, examinations are monitored and controlled by the qualification examination execution group, members of which cannot be subject specialists in that particular school. The chief executor is usually the deputy director of the VET school.

In reality the participation of employers and representatives of trade unions is seldom hands-on. VET institutions often accuse the chambers of being concerned only with the organisation of the examinations and of delegating the preparation of examination tasks (especially of the contents of these tasks) to the VET teachers. Since preparation of tasks for a qualification examination is decentralised, equal complexity and content of tasks cannot be assured across all vocational training institutions.

3.4. Assessment in higher education

The assessment of qualifications within the higher education system is performed in the following ways:

1. Bachelor-level study is assessed by examination and thesis. The degrees are awarded in a format established by the state consisting of separate subject scores. Vocational bachelor study (at colleges) is assessed by examination and defence of the final thesis. College graduates are issued the vocational bachelor degree in a format established by containing separate subject scores.

2. Master-level study is evaluated by examination and thesis.

3. A PhD is granted after defending a dissertation. The dissertation defence conditions require examinations to be passed and that scientific articles on the topic of dissertation are published.

Students not completing the full period of study receive a document from their institution stating the subjects studied and the requirements for completion.

4.   The NQF process

4.1. Preconditions for an NQF

Table 4 presents the views of interviewees on the current state of qualifications in Lithuania and the preconditions for the introduction of an NQF. These preconditions can be classified into four general types:

Table 4.   Typology of preconditions for an NQF in Lithuania

General type of precondition	Manifestation in Lithuania
Lack of coherence and communication between the different socioeconomic systems, fields and their parts related to human resources	• Mismatch between the qualifications on offer and labour market needs • Lack of coherence and smooth transition pathways between the qualifications acquired in VET and higher education
Shortages, deficiencies and needs related to labour market, education systems and processes, and social cohesion	• Lack of a reference instrument (such as a framework) for comparison of qualifications and quality assurance, enhancement of the professional and geographical mobility of workforce and learners etc. • Lack of comparability between the curricula of different providers of training and qualifications • Lack of qualifications referencing and comparison instruments for human resource management and development in enterprises – recruitment, performance assessment, career management • Big variation in quality of programmes in the same field of study in the different higher education institutions • Absence of possibilities of the formalisation of competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning and work experience
Existing structures, conditions and processes which provide the basis for designing an NQF, or which are capable of enhancing its design and implementation	Existence of separate 'frameworks' for qualifications provided by VET institutions (vocational education levels introduced in 1997) and higher education institutions (introduction of bachelor, master and doctoral degrees in 1992) and the lack of articulation between them.
Implementation of national and European policy agendas	Ensuring lifelong learning by enabling people to acquire competences for careers in different professional fields.

Most of the preconditions above have evolved organically within the socioeconomic and cultural context of society and are closely related to real problems and shortages of education, employment, socio-economic development, human resource development. Preconditions imposed externally (for example, the EQF, the lifelong learning principle, the need to formalise competences acquired in informally and non-formally) have played a supportive role, but have not driven the agenda.

The most important preconditions are the mismatch between qualifications and labour market needs and the lack of articulation between VET and higher education. Other preconditions tend to be related to (i) particular elements of the education system (lack of compatibility between the curricula of different training providers and wide variation of quality in the same fields of study) or (ii) the world of work (lack of reference instruments for comparing qualifications needed for human resources development management and development in enterprises).

All interviewees stressed the need for an NQF to improve coherence amongst qualifications, inter alia:

- improving the design, provision, assessment and awarding of qualifications (through more active and motivated involvement of stakeholders);
- responding to the needs of learners;
- restructuring and streamlining institutions to overcome duplication and to increase transparency;
- identifying and designing qualifications to address gaps in provision.
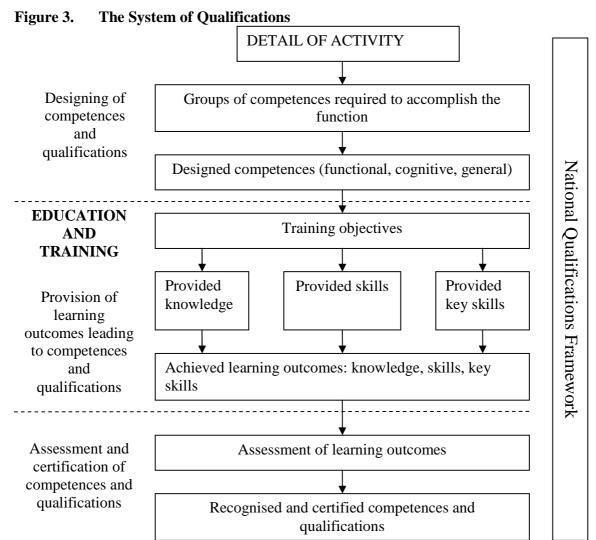
4.2. NQF: design, structure, and levels descriptors

The design of the Lithuanian NQF was based on the local situation and local needs and avoided direct copying and borrowing from other countries. The design process was initiated in 2006 by the Lithuanian Labour Market Training Authority through a project called the Creation of the National Qualification System, financed by European Structural Fund, and bringing together experts from different fields of education and the world of work. The government intention was that the NQF would be implemented in 2008. This proved to be unrealistic. Although the Qualification Authority was established in January 2008, it was later abolished and to date there is no legal basis for the NQF. The revised governmental timeline envisages implementation at the end of 2010 (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 2008).

In order to understand the design of the Lithuanian NQF, it is necessary to introduce the basic ideas and principles. According to the Concept of the National System of Qualifications of Lithuania (National Labour Market Training Authority 2007a), the NQF is the organising framework for the design, provision (and acquisition) of qualifications, assessment of competences, and the award of qualifications. The character and level of a qualification is determined by qualification criteria and performance-related competences grouped according to NQF principles (Lietuvos darbo rinkos mokymo tarnyba, 2006).

Goals and objectives of the NQF

The NQF aims to promote lifelong learning in order to meet individual, civic and economic needs. It cannot in and of itself solve the problems of vocational education and training; its effectiveness

depends on the quality of stakeholder activity. The expectation is that the Lithuanian NQF will play the important role in the national System of Qualifications (figure 3).

Figure 3.   The System of Qualifications

	DETAIL OF ACTIVITY	National Qualifications Framework
Designing of competences and qualifications	Groups of competences required to accomplish the function Designed competences (functional, cognitive, general)	
EDUCATION AND TRAINING **Provision of learning outcomes leading to competences and qualifications**	Training objectives Provided knowledge / Provided skills / Provided key skills Achieved learning outcomes: knowledge, skills, key skills	
Assessment and certification of competences and qualifications	Assessment of learning outcomes Recognised and certified competences and qualifications	

Through stimulating change in education and HRD policy and practice, its objectives revolve around:

- Coordination i.e. articulating qualifications with labour market requirements, linking economic, social and employment policies, connecting VET and higher education and establishing a national register of qualifications based on national occupational standards.

- Collaboration i.e. the participation of employers, unions, and other stakeholders in the processes of designing, delivering and awarding qualifications.

- Information i.e. increased public awareness of qualifications and learning pathways.

- Quality assurance i.e. developing coherent design and delivery systems to ensure that qualifications and competences are fit for purpose and internationally recognised.

- Flexible learning pathways i.e. between general education, initial vocational education and training, higher education and continuing vocational education and training, including the recognition of prior and experiential learning.

- Assessment and certification i.e. based on criteria and progression routes between levels.

- Workforce mobility i.e. developing qualification and learning settings to enhance geographical and occupational mobility.

Influences on the design of the NQF

The main sources of information for the designers of the Lithuanian NQF were countries where NQFs had already been implemented, particularly Scotland, Ireland and Australia. The other important influence was the qualification framework discourse related to the European Qualifications Framework and the concept of the Europass.

The nature of the NQF

The NQF in Lithuania followed the adaptive approach and did not challenge or have ambitions to radically change the existing system of qualifications. The intention was that the existing system would be incorporated into NQF. Table 5 (below) locates the Lithuanian NQF on the typology developed by Young (2006).

Table 5.   Typology and the Lithuanian NQF

No.	Criteria of types	Characteristics of the Lithuanian Qualifications Framework
1.	The goals and purposes of a QF	Regulatory NQF
2.	The capacity of a QF to achieve the goals set out by government.	Strong NQF
3.	The scope of a QF	Comprehensive NQF
4.	The way qualifications are registered on the framework	Qualification-based NQF
5.	The peculiarities of the process of QF implementation	Institutional-led NQF

The Lithuanian NQF is comprehensive for all learners and is not limited to a particular sector or level. Although the framework is not divided into fields or tracks, VET and HE qualifications can be easily pegged at different levels. The amount of learning that a qualification represents is not referenced.

The NQF is based on a set of level descriptors which are supposed to aid the design of qualifications. However, most existing qualifications could be levelled according to the descriptors because the

qualifications are based on VET competence-based standards. Two parameters are used to attribute a level: characteristics of activities and types of competences (linked to work activity). These are shown in Table 6.

Table 6.   Criteria for attribution of level to a qualification

PARAMETERS AND CRITERIA	
Characteristics of activities	Types of competences
- complexity of activities - autonomy of activities - changeability of activities	- functional competences - cognitive competences - general competences

There are two types of level descriptor: concise descriptors and comprehensive descriptors. Concise descriptors are for general information and include: characteristics of activities; content and mode of acquisition of qualification; opportunities for further learning, and the value of the qualification. Comprehensive descriptors are for designers of VET curricula, assessors, awarding bodies and those responsible for the recognition of qualifications acquired abroad. Qualifications are described comprehensively according to the criteria detailed in Table 6 i.e. in terms functional, cognitive and general competences. Some competences remain the same despite progression through levels, for example knowledge of work safety and key skills.

The expert group that developed the NQF descriptors concluded that an eight-level structure would be appropriate for the Lithuanian National Qualifications Framework. This decision was based on labour market research, analysis of labour process and existing practices within the education system. The first five levels encompass vocational qualifications provided in the VET system, continuing vocational training and learning acquired formally and informally (on-the-job etc.) Levels 6-8 are mainly higher education qualifications. The level structure also allows for qualifications acquired through non-formal, informal learning and lifelong learning. Each qualification level can be subdivided; level six is a case in point in this regard.

4.3. The legal situation in 2007

The first legal mention the NQF was in the amendment of the Law on Vocational Education and Training, 2007 (Lietuvos Respublikos Profesinio mokymo įstatymo pakeitimo įstatymas, 2007). The third chapter of this law is called System of Qualifications and includes paragraphs referring to the design, provision and awarding of qualifications in the field of VET. However, the NQF was not approved in this legislation. What follows is an analysis of the System of Qualifications chapter:

2.1 Designation and structure of the System of Qualifications

1. *Designation of the System of Qualifications is to ensure the correspondence of qualifications to the needs of economy, to ensure their transparency, comparability, to enhance the continuity paths of training and the occupational and territorial mobility of individuals.*

> 2. *Functioning of the System of Qualifications is based on the cooperation between the social partners, state institutions and VET institutions.*
> 3. *System of Qualifications includes the design and regulation of qualifications, evaluation of the acquired competences and awarding of qualification.*
> 4. *System of Qualifications to be managed by the Qualifications Authority.*

There are some shortcomings and inconsistencies in section 2.1 above. The System of Qualifications only includes VET and not higher education. This contradicts the idea of a national qualifications system. One possible reason for the omission of higher education was the government's desire to legislate the System of Qualifications as quickly as possible in order to complete the work within the terms of the ESF-funded project – the Creation of the National System of Qualifications of Lithuania (2005-2008). To that end, the amendment of the Law on Vocational Education and Training provided a convenient legislative vehicle.

A section on the 'design and regulation of qualifications' introduces:

- The competence-based nature of qualifications to be expressed as occupational standards.
- The Qualifications Authority as the manager of all qualifications in the NQF.
- Bodies responsible for the design and preparations of occupational standards (central and sector occupational committees).
- The Minister of Social Security and Labour as minister with jurisdiction over above bodies.

The NQF is mentioned in name only, without any detailed prescriptions of its future and functions.

Article 1.1 is concerned with the 'assessment of competences' and the 'awarding of qualifications:

> 1. *Government defines the requirements for the bodies which assess competences and prescribes the procedures of accreditation of these institutions.*
> 2. *Assessment […] is organised by specialised institutions […] according to the prescriptions of assessment of competences which are defined by the Minister of Social Security and Labour and approved by the Minister of the Education and Science.*
> 3. *Qualification is awarded to a person who has acquired all the competences needed […] as indicated in the occupational standard.*
> 4. *Qualification is awarded by the Qualifications Authority referring to the results of the assessment of competences.*
> 5. *Supervision of the awarding of qualifications is undertaken by the Ministries of Social Security and Labour and Education and Science according to the prescriptions defined by the Government.*

Article 1.1 prescribes the order of the assessment of competence. It is interesting to note that assessment can be undertaken by different institutions (accredited by the government). This marks a departure from previous legislation where assessment was the prerogative of the Chambers of Industry, Commerce and Trades. An element of competition has been introduced into the process. However, the detailed functions of these institutions and criteria for assuring the quality of their activities are not prescribed.

Article 2.2 outlines the responsibilities of the main actors in the governance system of vocational qualifications. These are the government, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, other ministries, social stakeholders, institutions responsible for assessment of competences and the Qualifications Authority. Each has a clearly defined function or shares functions with other actors (this is particularly the case for the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Social Security and Labour). It is interesting that no obligations are placed on the providers of education and training regarding the orientation of their provision to the competence-based system e.g. the design and implementation of new training curricula. Nor are providers of education and training obliged to participate in the assessment of competences.

Article 2.2 states that: "The Ministry of Education and Science shall be responsible for the supervision of the awarding of qualifications […] as well as for the development of the System of Qualifications." Some functions are shared with the Ministry of Social Security and Labour which is responsible for forecasting "the demand for qualifications in the labour market", for "the supervision of the awarding of qualifications" and for determining the "tasks and functions of central and sector occupational committees and the order of establishment and funding of these committees." Both ministries have responsibility for supervising the award of qualifications. Furthermore, both ministries are obliged and empowered to:

- Define the specifications of the occupational standards.
- Establish procedures and rules for the assessment of acquired competences.
- Plan the distribution of funding for assessment.
- Determine the content and form of the certificates of competence and qualifications and the procedures to be followed in relation to issues these documents.

As mentioned, other actors have governance responsibilities regarding the maintenance and support of qualifications system, especially in the area design. The problem is that no reference is made to the resources that will be required to undertake the functions.

The role of social stakeholders in the System of Qualifications is very important. However, their empowerment is limited to the initiation phase of the preparation of occupational standards. No responsibilities are prefigured regarding the actual design of the standards or in the approval and conduct of assessment. Moreover, no intention to fund the activities of social stakeholders is advanced. Their role therefore is largely rhetorical; in reality they will be subordinate to the activities of state institutions.

The amendment of the Law on Vocational Education and Training, 2007 (Republic of Lithuania, 2007) also establishes the Qualifications Authority for the governance of the System of Vocational Qualifications. This new body was to be controlled and supervised by the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Social Security and Labour. The creation of such a governance situation almost "programmed in" inter-institutional conflict. Although motivated by a desire to speed up implementation, the decision not to fully include the NQF in the amendment, did cause confusion and raise questions about the future legitimacy of the NQF.

4.4. The legal situation in 2008

A new government came into power at the end of 2008. Despite the fact that resources had been secured from the European Social Fund for the implementation of the NQF-based System of Qualifications, the government decided to abolish the Qualifications Authority and distribute its functions amongst ministries. This decision was made because of the increasing financial difficulties of the state and the need to reduce bureaucracy. Such a shift will inevitably cause delays in implementation. In summary, the new government proposes the following changes:

- Most of the functions of the Qualifications Authority and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour are transferred to the Ministry of Education and Science. This means that the body charged with overseeing the provision of qualifications will also be responsible for the System of Qualifications as a whole, including the design and award of qualifications.[11] This contradicts the widely accepted and practised principle of NQFs, that the design of qualifications and the assessment of competences be separate from the providers of education and training.

- The Qualifications Authority is replaced by the Institution of the Governance of Qualifications in the Ministry of the Education and Science. This means that the governance function is retained, but only in relation to one ministry. Moreover, only part of the proposed functions of the Qualifications Authority has been transferred to the new institution. The latter will be responsible for planning qualification requirements; implementing the NQF-based System of Qualifications; evaluating institutions undertaking assessment and making recommendations for their accreditation to the Ministry of Education and Science.

- The removal of the Institution of the Governance of Qualifications from area of design. This means that a crucial part of the System of Qualifications is outside of the governance structure. However, this problem has been partly solved by a proposal to delegate the development of occupational and VET standards to the Centre for the Development of VET and Qualifications – the former Centre for Methodology in VET.

- A proposal to create a national register of all qualifications does not include clear definitions of the conditions and order of registration. This means that the complex relationships between occupational standards, VET standards and the curricula of VET and higher education are not addressed.

These changes do suggest a backward step for the NQF. However, they are still at the proposal stage. The upshot is that the Lithuanian NQF-based System of Qualifications remains at the initial stage of its implementation and has not yet become the basis for the development of VET and higher education. The introduction of the Law on Qualifications proposed by the Qualifications Authority would support a coordinated and coherent approach to the implementation of the NQF. In comparison, the government's current proposals introduce confusion and complexity by fragmenting the roles and functions of stakeholders.

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[11] The Ministry of Education and Science already had responsibility for the provision of qualifications in initial and continuing VET and higher education.

4.5. Dashed expectations?

4.5.1 Changes in the design and provision of qualifications

As discussed, it is expected that the introduction of the NQF and occupational standards will create coherence in and across higher education and VET and standardisation in curriculum design. Traditionally, VET schools have designed their curricula according to the VET standards prepared by the economic sector groups, coordinated by the Centre for Methodology in VET. In recent years, the Centre for the Quality Evaluation of Studies has introduced some standardised practices in the design of higher education programmes. Neither of these centres deals with the big problem of articulation between VET and higher education especially in areas such as engineering

It is also expected that the introduction of the NQF and occupational standards will facilitate cooperation between VET schools, colleges and universities. The Irish experience suggests that an NQF can motivate individuals and enterprises to take up skills development opportunities, especially continuing vocational training which remains underdeveloped in Lithuania.[12]

However, given the current state of play, it is unclear as to who will actually design the occupational standards. Given the abolition of the Qualifications Authority, the plan is that the Ministry of Education and Science will 'subcontract' different experts from business or use researchers for this task. Another problem is to persuade universities that occupational standards are not in breach of their autonomy in the field of designing the content of studies.

4.5.2 Changes in the assessment of competences and the award of qualifications

The expectation in this regard is that the introduction of the NQF and occupational standards will render assessment and the award of qualifications more flexible and transparent. The present system does not allow partial credit or credit accumulation.

However, there is a lack of clarity regarding the institutions that will be responsible for assessment. The Concept of the National System of Qualifications (National Labour Market Training Authority, 2007a) argued for the "demonopolisation" of the function by withdrawing the exclusive rights enjoyed by the chambers of industry, commerce and trades and opening up to other institutions providing they can prove their competence in this regard. This would have meant that any institution (employers' organisations, trade union etc.) could have applied to the Qualifications Authority for this status. After the abolition of the Qualifications Authority, the function passed to the Ministry of Education and Science and it now seems as if the chambers will retain their exclusive status on account of their experience and know-how in the field.

Moreover, there are no estimations of the demands this shift in assessment paradigm will make on staff or how such demands will be met. Nor is it clear how or if changes in assessment will affect the quality and status of VET: will they lead to an increase or deterioration?

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[12] Statistical data shows that the uptake of continuing vocational training Lithuania is one of the lowest in the EU countries (CVTS-2, CVTS-3 surveys) (Markowitsch, Hefler, 2008).

5. The views of interviewees on the implementation of the NQF

5.1. Views on political and legal preconditions for implementation

- Interviewees from higher education reported that they are influenced by the Bologna process and the EQF regarding harmonising qualification levels. Lithuanian higher education is obliged to conform to EU principles regarding the free movement and of learners, students, academics and the workforce generally.

- The current legal situation in Lithuania permits NQF implementation in all sectors and fields of education, but full implementation will require new laws. Importantly, the proposed Law on Qualifications is in the process of being legislated.

- Current legal, political and financial conditions do not encourage the mutual trust between stakeholders, providers of qualifications and the public that is essential for the implementation of the NQF. One interviewee endorsed the importance of trust in relation to higher education, but questioned the role of an NQF in increasing that trust, arguing that it is good quality provision that correlates with trust. The historical lack of public trust in education providers and qualifications in Lithuania was noted: the interviewee concluded that the issue is broader than the NQF, "to increase the effectiveness of the implementation of NQF it is necessary to improve the socioeconomic conditions and to increase mutual trust in society." A trade union interviewee argued that trust was a huge challenge under current social conditions: "Lithuania is in the stage of wild capitalism and it is hardly possible to speak about any kind of social trust and agreement in society, but nevertheless we have to be active in changing this situation by implementing different measures and instruments which can gradually make industrial relations more civilised and increase social trust".

- A lack of political will and too superficial an attitude on the part of policymakers towards the implementation of the NQF. Interviewees noted a fragmentation of initiatives, especially after the 2008 elections, even though Lithuania has obligations to the EU to implement the NQF in the terms defined. One interviewee was of the view that the Lithuanian NQF was too ambitious given the preparatory work that was needed on the ground. However, the situation was not seen as insurmountable.

5.2. Views of different stakeholders and institutions on the implementation of the NQF

5.2.1 Higher education

- The expectation is that vocational higher education will be more supportive to NQF implementation than the universities and that support will vary across fields of studies. One interviewee noted that: "Some higher education institution and fields of studies can ignore this process or treat the NQF as just another formal bureaucratic instrument […] limiting the academic freedom and initiatives of universities".

- "Innate" resistance to perceptions of government interference in higher education need to be overcome by high quality dissemination activities. Interviewees variously referred to an "allergic reaction" from universities to "imposed new bureaucratic orders" and to the

traditionally conservative response of higher education to "novelties" which are rejected first and maybe considered later.

- The level of organisation of academic communities in different fields of study was seen as an indicator of likely responsiveness: "Where the organisation of academic community is strong it can be easier to persuade and to involve the members of this community in the implementation of the NQF". The same views applied to professional organisations.

- An encouraging factor is that levels six to eight on the NQF are very close to the Dublin descriptors of the European Higher Education Qualifications Framework. As one interviewee put it: "I do not see any big problems in accepting the NQF by the higher education institutions, because the descriptors of levels in NQF in principle correspond to Dublin descriptors of Bologna framework, which is widely accepted and recognised by the all higher education institutions".

- A disincentive for higher education is the competence-based approach to which it has traditionally been opposed. One interviewee reported how higher education needs to be "persuaded" of the value competence as well as academic knowledge.

- One of the biggest problems facing higher education and the potential success of the NQF is duplication of roles and functions in universities and non-universities (colleges). One interviewee reported that pathways between vocational and university higher education still lack clarity and transparency. A recommendation was made that universities revert to their former status: "The titles of universities should be adhered to only in the classical universities - the specialised higher education institutions should be labelled differently, like academies, institutes of studies etc". The argument was that this would improve transparency and transition pathways. For example, an engineering graduate from a college could have direct access study in an institute of engineering; and VET school-leaver with a specialism in veterinary science could apply directly to a veterinary academy.

5.2.2 VET practitioners

- The general view is that existing practices in VET will merge seamlessly with the NQF. As one interviewee put it: "The implementation of NQF in the VET system is practically started and there are no disagreements and contradictions here. There are designed VET standards. We only need to place these qualifications in the NQF and to ensure the pathways of progression between these qualifications and their levels – there are no essential problems here". The same applies to NQF levels and qualification levels.

- The uptake of occupational standards and the reform of VET curriculum may curtail the current autonomy of VET schools and may therefore engender some opposition. Although curricula will still be designed by the VET institutions, there will be tighter controls in terms of ensuring curricula correspond to standards. The NQF will encourage credit at the levels of modules (at the moment only whole qualifications carry credit). This will enhance learner mobility.

- Some VET schools make small changes in curricula and rebrand the qualification in order to attract more students. This practice can create misunderstandings, because very often the new

title does not correspond to the contents of curriculum. Such schools will not be happy with stricter controls.

5.2.3 Trade unions

- Union interviewees were critical of the duplication and lack of good coordination in the current system. In particular, there were concerns about the duplication of research efforts: "Our country is not so big and it is a pity, that the process of designing of the NQF in some cases involved research activities to find the data, which were already obtained by previous research, like for example in case of the analysis of the current state of qualifications".

- Union representatives were of the view that the design of the NQF was largely undertaken by academics and that other stakeholders (such as themselves) were invited to rubber-stamp developments or involved simply because of formal requirements. The general view was that unions were ignored in the NQF design processes.

- Although it was acknowledged that unions lack expertise in VET, higher education and human resource development, interviewees were keen to emphasise that unions are not "monolithic". For example, trade unions in the private sector are more experienced in industrial relations than education and qualifications, whereas public sector unions have considerable education-related experience.

- Interviewees argued that the Confederation of Trade Unions has competent people which could become involved in NQF implementation and that the unions have an important role to play especially in relation to members who are unskilled or low-skilled and who are seeking higher qualifications, higher wages and greater career opportunities.

5.2.4 Employers and business

Interviewees from the Kaunas Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Trades indicated the following main problems and shortcomings in the design and implementation of the NQF:

- A lack of concreteness and coherence in the processes of implementation. For example, it was argued that the Qualifications Authority's approach to the development of occupational standards was "rather vague and poorly managed" largely because stakeholders lacked understanding of their roles and functions. The same views applied to the assessment of competences and the award of qualifications "because there are still no legal acts and instructions".

- An overly bureaucratic and controlling attitude on the part of the responsible state institutions which risks jeopardising effective implementation. One interviewee referred specifically to assessment practice and the award of qualifications: "The proposed order of the assessment of competences and awarding of qualifications is excessively bureaucratised" singling out the organising of contracts for assessment as "very difficult to control".

- A rushed process that failed to build on earlier achievements. As one person put it: "Everything has been made in a very rushed way […] largely ignoring what has been achieved by the different stakeholders in the other projects", for example, an ESF-funded project with the

Chamber of Industry, Commerce and Trades called Establishment and Development of the Unified System of the Evaluation of Vocational Knowledge and Competences. The result of the project was a unified system of tasks and tests for the VET schools aligned to VET standards. Where no standards existed, participating schools prepared examination tasks and tests themselves with the assistance of experts from the chambers. Interviewees respected the need to introduce competition into the field of assessment, but were mindful of the need to use existing know-how. Not to do so was seen as a waste of financial and human resources and as increasing the costs of NQF implementation. The Chamber of Industry, Commerce and Trades has more than ten years experience in assessment and a regional structure covering the whole country. It was recognised that sector employers' organisations could hardly compete in this regard.

- An incremental process of NQF implementation was favoured: "The NQF should be implemented gradually – sector by sector or region by region". Rushed, national and top-down implementation such as the merger of initial vocational training schools with the labour market training centres and the introduction of the national system of modular training should be avoided because they are high-risk strategies where the costs of failure are high and opportunities to learn from mistakes are limited.

- A lack of information about the NQF was reported. Although sector employers' organisations and the Confederation of Industrialists accepted the need for an NQF, some resistance stemmed from this lack of information. Large and established employers and businesses with well-developed HRD systems (including their own internal frameworks of qualifications) are likely to be most supportive of the NQF. However these in the minority and general support for the new system will depend on the quality of information and dissemination.

5.3. Roles of institutions in NQF implementation

- The role of the Centre for the Evaluation of the Quality of Higher Education is recognised as being concerned with designing and awarding higher education qualifications, especially at levels six and seven.[13] The centre is also responsible for regulating the quality of study, an important aspect of the NQF. As one interviewee from the centre put it: "For us, as external evaluators of the quality of studies [the NQF is very important] because today we measure only the process and do not have relevant instruments to measure the outcomes". The interviewee reported synergy between the centre and the NQF.

- A representative from the Academy of Art noted the need for differentiation between fields of study. Specific applications of the NQF were recommended to respond to the particularities of fields. It was argued that some of the academy's practices fit with the NQF but that "descriptors of qualifications are very specific and different from the other fields of studies".

- It was accepted that the Centre for Methodology in VET will play an important role in the implementation of the NQF in the Ministry of Education and Science largely because of its expertise in designing VET standards and approving VET curricula which are similar to NQF processes. Furthermore, the centre has been appointed as a National Coordination Point for

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[13] More information about this centre is available at http://www.skvc.lt

EQF implementation, a function it will undertake in collaborations with the Centre for the Evaluation of the Quality of Higher Education.

- The Ministry of Education and Science inherited the coordination and governance of the NQF after the 2008 elections. Specific functions and activities will be delegated to different public institutions or expert groups. One interviewee noted that the evaluation of competences will be delegated to accredited institutions.

5.4 Lessons for the NQF from the implementation of other national policies

- Interviewees stressed the need for the government and its organs to combine strong political will with social dialogue. Changes in higher education are illustrative in this regard in that there has either been political will or social dialogue, but not both at the same time. One interviewee lamented the lack of social dialogue around higher education reform at the current time, likening the situation to a meeting of a communist youth organisation where all dissent was stifled. The government was further criticised for only consulting when reports to the EU were due and for claiming more progress than exists.

- The implementation of the NQF should not be seen as a fixed and immutable point in time. It should rather be seen as an ongoing, organic and changing process.

- Capacity was raised as an issue. One interviewee had recommended study visits and temporary work missions to different institutions in other countries. These measures are seldom taken and no resources have been allocated to such activities.

- Mistakes are often associated with delegation, whereby the human and financial capacity of the receiving institution is overestimated. As one person put it: "Tasks are given with rather unrealistic execution terms incurring rush and resulting in poor quality [products]."

6. Potential impact of the NQF

6.1. Problems and risks

6.1.1 The pros and cons of labour mobility

As an instrument for promoting the mobility of learners and the workforce, relating the NQF to the EQF may threaten Lithuanian national and ethnic identity and the cultures of smaller ethnic groups within the country's borders. One interviewee feared for the economic and social development of a small and relatively weak country such as Lithuania:

> What frightens us [is] that if we expand the possibilities of mobility, more economically developed countries will attract much more [of the] skilled workforce from Lithuania thus endangering our economic development possibilities. What is even more frightening for me is that increasing mobility can endanger the survival of our national and ethnic culture. [The] NQF, as the instrument facilitating mobility, also enhances the processes of melting of different national cultures […creating…] real danger for the small national cultures.

A trade union representative had a very different opinion, arguing that increased mobility (via the NQF or the EQF) will help employees improve their socioeconomic status and increase their bargaining

power in the field of industrial relations. Increased competition for human resources could improve the attitude of employers to the retention of employees. Trade unions see other potential risks and dangers associated with the NQF and the EQF, for example, the possibility that employers involved in design processes could downgrade the qualifications and occupational status of employees and decrease bargaining power in the national and European labour markets. This is regarded as the most important reason for the involvement of trade unions in the implementation of the NQF.

6.1.2 Splits and separation

A possible further split between VET and higher education after the implementation of the NQF was feared. It was argued that such splits typify Lithuanian society already. The problem of university and vocational higher education both offering level six qualifications was given as an example as well as difficulties that already exist in terms of progression from level four to five and from level five to six. Further fragmentation and separation would have an extremely deleterious effect on the education and training system.

6.1.3 Narrow interests and the public good

Defensive and selfish approaches of public institutions that concentrate only on their narrow interests rather the public good are seen as a threat. Interviewees suggested that further development of the tripartite social partnership approach could help to overcome this problem: as one person put it, "It is not easy to achieve the common interest, but I think that institutional settings such as tripartite committees can help to coordinate the interests of institutions and keep the balance between the interests of the market (employers), employees and the state." An employer representative also noted the tendency for stakeholders to view the NQF in terms of their particular (narrow) interests and needs.

6.1.4 Overarching body

The lack of a competent coordinating institution after the abolition of the Qualifications Authority was seen as having the potential to create a lot of problems for the implementation of the NQF:

> Now formally the Ministry of Education and Science is responsible, but in reality nobody is responsible. The Ministry of Education and Science lacks expertise, capacities and human resources […]. The problem here is to find an institution with sufficient expertise that could represent all sectors of education. If, for example, such responsibility [was] delegated to an institution related to VET, then the process will be largely ignored by the higher education institutions and vice versa, we will have similar reaction of VET to the […delegation...] of this responsibility to an institution related to higher education."

6.1.5 Recognition of non-formally and informally acquired learning

There is a dearth of competent professional organisations and stakeholders to evaluate and award competences and qualifications acquired in different ways, especially in informal and non-formal ways. One interviewee reported that: "It can only be done by professional organisations and I do not see them in many fields, maybe with some exceptions in fields such as law, medicine, architecture and a few other regulated professions".

Resistance from higher education

At the present time, higher education institutions are responsible for their own qualifications. There is a tendency for higher education to resist external influences, which could limit the impact of the NQF in

this sector. One interviewee expressed a difference between "real" and "formal" NQF implementation, with the possibility that higher education will only conform to the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law.

6.2. Impact on the quality of education, training and higher education

- There was a general view that the NQF can contribute to the quality of education, training and higher education. The emphasis on learning outcomes based on the requirements of the world of work is popular. This is set against a focus on the learning process. As one interviewee put it: "When we will start to measure the outcomes and not the process, then the quality will improve."

- It was seen as important that professional associations and trade unions be actively involved in all aspects of the NQF in order to enhance its impact on quality and its relevance to the world of work. State bureaucracy alone cannot enhance quality.

- If the NQF is to enhance quality in higher education, then the level descriptors need to address the specific characteristics of higher learning. One interviewee stressed that these must be different to the descriptors in VET.

- Quality improvement needs to be at the forefront of the implementation process. One interviewee suggested that this was in danger of being superseded by an emphasis on creating an ordered system of qualifications.

- Hopes were expressed that the NQF will contribute to improved quality by raising the status and attractiveness of VET. Interviewees noted a lack of parity between vocational and academic education which needs to be addressed if more "motivated and skilled young people" are to choose VET.

- The NQF is seen as capable of enhancing quality through recognising that a balance of formal study and practical experience is required in order to create high-skilled professionals: as one interviewee put it, "Maybe the introduction of NQF will help us […] in order to acquire the qualification of construction engineer, you will have to acquire the basic qualifications of construction worker, because the engineer must deeply understand the process of construction not only from the theoretical, but also from the practical and experiential side."

- One of the most important contributions of the NQF to the quality of education was seen as the creation of learning and career pathways. These would enable students to make rational decisions, thereby avoiding situations where "secondary school leavers go to the universities just to obtain the 'paper' called higher education diploma."

- Quality will be improved if learner-centeredness means that young people appreciate the value of learning outcomes oriented to the real-life world of work and employability. This was seen as a less consumerist approach than an appreciation of formal education. Motivation to study is currently a problem and the NQF was seen as having the potential to improve this situation by encouraging more students to take up professional careers which would in turn enhance the quality of the provision: "Motivation to acquire competences will increase the demands and

requirements of students and learners on: qualifications and teachers and professors, quality of the equipment in the labs, provision of libraries and other important conditions of quality of VET and higher education."

6.3. Views of providers of qualifications

6.3.1 Preconditions

Interviewees from VET schools and institutions of higher education stressed that one of the main reasons for the NQF in Lithuania is the need to address the mismatch between the demand for qualifications in the labour market and the supply of qualifications from VET and higher education. This is a multi-dimensional problem spanning institutional, economic and social development dimensions.

At the institutional level, there is little coordination between VET and higher education providers regarding the provision of qualifications and associated curricula and syllabi. As mentioned, duplication is an issue, for example, institutions in a region offer the same qualification even though there is no labour market demand for it.

At the economic level, VET and higher education compete for students and the funding that comes with them in ways that do not take account of the demands of the labour market. Providers claim that one of the main reasons for this situation is the lack of reliable data and information about present and future labour market needs. Instead, the VET schools and the higher education institutions have to estimate skills needs themselves. Furthermore, there is a lack of expertise in this area so when forecasting is undertaken; the results are of dubious quality and value. When providers attempt to forecast skill needs, they do so without any coordination at regional or national levels. Therefore it is unsurprising that the result is duplication of curricula and ongoing mismatches between demand and supply. The NQF is seen as providing an opportunity to develop reliable processes of labour market needs analysis and forecasting. This, together with occupational standards and a national qualifications register should ensure compatibility between qualifications and the needs of enterprises. However, it is important to recognise that solutions to the above problems cannot be assured by the NQF alone; the providers also have to change their competitive attitudes and behaviour.

There are also cases where skills needs that have been identified are not satisfied by providers. For example, there is a need for skilled technicians and supervisors which were previously trained by the higher vocational schools. After the reform of VET and higher education some of these schools were transformed into institutions of vocational higher education (colleges) and those remaining were transformed into the vocational schools. As a result, there are no institutions that can provide these intermediate-level qualifications and consequently they are acquired through informal and experiential learning. However, the job specifications of technicians, foremen and supervisors require more theoretical knowledge and know-how which can only be acquired through contact with experienced trainers and teachers and more formalised training.

At the level of social development, VET and higher education providers believe that the NQF will have the positive impact on the attitude of society and government towards the skills and qualifications of the population. Although the negative effect of skills shortages is recognised by government and employment sectors, no efforts are made to address the problem. The introduction of the NQF is expected to change this situation.

6.3.2 Features of the NQF descriptors

According to providers, one of the most important features of the Lithuanian NQF is its overarching nature in that it includes VET and higher education qualifications and degrees. This increases expectations that the NQF will solve the problem of the low status of VET qualifications. There are also expectations that the NQF will help to overcome the current lack of provision at level five, although whether short-cycle study cycles will be introduced remains unclear. Providers of higher education raised the possibility of holders of level 6 qualifications from colleges being able to apply for university master's level study leading to level 7. Another unresolved problem is the status and level of specialised studies such as resident studies in medicine. It remains unclear where such qualifications will be pegged on the NQF.

6.3.3   How prepared are VET providers?

Interviewees displayed different degrees of preparedness. Those in VET emphasised their readiness because curricula are already based on competences (learning outcomes) but also expressed some reservations:

- Lack of clarity regarding how existing standards will relate to the new occupational standards. Will the former be abolished or be retained for referencing purposes? In the latter case, the occupational standards would provide information about the competences which constitute the qualifications and the VET standards would describe the training specifications (training objectives, requirements and assessment specifications) which would lead to the acquisition of competences.

- The extent to which the NQF will change current assessment practices, for example, by the involvement of employers. As mentioned, examinations and the assessment of competences are currently organised by the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Trade without employer involvement. There will be a need for capacity building amongst employers and trade unions if they are to play a meaningful role in VET assessment.

- The NQF requires the "flexibilisation" qualifications e.g. recognition of informal and non-formal learning as well as formal learning and modularisation of curricula. The current VET system and VET providers do not have expertise in these areas and most of the VET students lack the skills and attitudes required for independent learning.

In summary, the NQF is not expected to introduce radical change to existing practices of curriculum design, provision of training or assessment of knowledge and skills. It is regarded primarily as an instrument of communication which should facilitate the improvement of VET by enhancing and communication and coherence between:

- the VET system and the world of work - through the introduction of occupational standards and the supply of information about skills needs in order to enhance compatibility between the supply and demand of qualifications;
- the VET system and higher education – through an NQF that includes all qualifications with pathways between them;
- initial and continuing vocational education and training - through guidance and information so that learners can construct their own pathways after the completion of initial VET programmes.

- VET providers and employers – through employer involvement in programme design, delivery and assessment (although some interviewees questioned the likelihood of employer engagement given other pressures upon them).

There is a danger, however, of VET providers adopting an indifferent and passive attitude to the NQF, seeing it as one more "novelty" copied from other countries and introduced under pressure from the European Commission, which will bureaucratise the training process and increase the workloads of teachers and trainers without bringing any obvious positive results. Almost 20 years of reforms and changes in VET and higher education, many taking an "adoptive" policy borrowing approach, has engendered "reform fatigue" and scepticism.

7. Concluding remarks

All major discussion documents (e.g. the Concept of the National System of Qualifications of Lithuania and the Outline of the National Qualifications Framework of Lithuania) see the NQF as a holistic process that goes beyond an eight-level system linked to the EQF. Rather, the intention is that it will support improved coherence and effectiveness in the design, delivery, assessment and award of qualifications. According to one of the architects of the NQF, the framework itself is simply a structuring mechanism to ensure better articulation between levels and enhanced learning pathways between different parts of the education and training system. This suggests an incremental and gradual process of implementation which in fact has not been the case to date. Why is this so?

One possible explanation is that there has been a rupture between the design and the implementation of the NQF. The design stage was led by academics and attention was focused on the methodological validity and quality of models and measures, prefiguring an open, discussion-based and incremental process of implementation. In reality, implementation has been overtaken by state bureaucracy and a top-down, formal and legalistic approach. This situation has been exacerbated by external demands: the European Commission requirement that NQFs in member states articulate with the EQF by 2012 has led to hasty and impatient implementation.

Discussion documents also state that the NQF should introduce more order and transparency into a national system of qualifications which has become complex and fragmented as a result of previous reforms. In early discussions, it was claimed that Lithuania did not have a national system of qualifications; based on an understanding of "system" as well-established functions and responsibilities with clear relationships and communication between associated stakeholders and institutions. From this perspective, Lithuania only had the "preconditions" for the establishment of a national system of qualifications *stricto sensu*. This led to the rather strangely titled ESF project: 'Creation of the National System of Qualifications in Lithuania'.

In the light of the above issues, the authors offer the following assessment of the extent to which the NQF will achieve its goals disclose the following potential changes, which are expected to be brought by the introduction of the NQF and the possibilities to achieve these changes.

Current problems in the system of qualifications

Lack of transfer and progression pathways between subsystems of education (especially VET and higher education) and between initial and continuing vocational training.

"We have to avoid the typically Lithuanian solution: the formation of two independent subsystems or sub-frameworks with no communication and connections between them."

"Higher education at level 6 of the NQF is already subdivided into university and college higher education and the lack of communication between them creates a lot of problems. There are also problems in terms of progression from level 4 to levels 5 and 6."

Past reforms have resulted in a lot of different qualifications, which although not provided today, still circulate in the labour market and education system e.g. qualifications from the Soviet period, qualifications from further vocational schools which were reformed into colleges as well as other degrees and qualifications. The challenge is how to compare such qualifications with those that are currently provided.

Qualifications provided by the VET schools, colleges and universities do not correspond to labour market needs.

Expected role of NQF in addressing the problem

Competences will help to develop pathways between the subsystems.

All qualifications will be placed on a unified framework including the means of progression from the one level to another.

The framework should provide learning and career-related information and guidance for learners and employees.

The framework should inform the integration of initial and continuing vocational training, and create the preconditions for the assessment and recognition of experiential learning.

Occupational standards will comprise all VET and higher education qualifications (these are different from the existing VET standards).

Occupational standards will be designed with the participation of employers and professional

Limitations of the NQF in relation to the problem

Lack of trust and dialogue between the providers of qualifications, especially between VET schools, colleges and universities.

Long-standing insulation between subsystems and lack of contact between them has created certain cultural attitudes and stereotypical thinking (especially universities' attitudes towards VET schools and colleges), which will not be easy to overcome.

Lack of experience and a systematic approach to the assessment and recognition of competences acquired informally and non-formally.

The framework descriptors are oriented to experts and need further elaboration to make them an understandable and attractive source of information for the wider public.

The NQF has not followed the same approach to qualification design and levelling in VET and higher education.

Higher education in Lithuania is very oriented to a time-based approach. The same is true in some parts of VET.

"The learning outcomes approach is at a very initial stage and it will not be easy to implement it."

There are serious

Current problems in the system of qualifications	Expected role of NQF in addressing the problem	Limitations of the NQF in relation to the problem
	organisations (different from the design of the existing VET standards which is undertaken by VET schools). The NQF is expected to become an instrument for human resources management and development in enterprises.	methodological obstacles related to the standardisation of higher education study, especially in the arts, humanities and social sciences. The NQF has not been sufficiently discussed within the wider business community (especially in the sector organisations) and it is still not clear whether business will support it. There are no mechanisms for establishing labour market skill needs which are necessary to inform and maintain the NQF and the occupational standards.
No coordination between providers of qualifications within and across subsystems. Lack of compatibility between curricula. Changes in the structure of the economy and employment, decrease in industry, rapid development of the tertiary sector and the lack of finance for high quality technical and technological infrastructure for the provision of 'industrial' and 'technical' qualifications in VET schools has favoured a massive reorientation to service sector qualifications. These do not require high levels of investment in infrastructure for practical training and do enjoy high levels of demand in the labour market. The result has been a significant increase in VET providers offering the same qualifications, big variations in the quality of provision and overlaps between the curricula of VET schools,	Occupational standards and a national register of qualifications are expected to help coordinate and control the provision of qualifications and avoid unnecessary competition amongst providers. The NQF is expected to introduce clear and consistent criteria for the levelling of qualifications and degrees, thereby avoiding overlapping curricula in VET schools, colleges and universities. This in turn will discipline providers and prevent them from using ambiguous marketing strategies which cause misunderstandings.	Defensive and selfish approaches by public institutions concentrating on self-interest rather than public interest. Occupational standards and the reform of VET curriculum may threaten the autonomy of VET schools and lead to opposition to the NQF.

Current problems in the system of qualifications	Expected role of NQF in addressing the problem	Limitations of the NQF in relation to the problem
colleges and universities.		
Low status of VET and imbalanced flows of students between VET schools and higher education institutions i.e. larger flows to higher education.	The NQF is expected to raise the status of VET through better coordination and transit from VET to higher education.

"It is difficult to expect improvement in the prestige of VET unless we show young people open progression pathways from VET to higher education."

The NQF will encourage long-term cultural and mental changes in the understanding and valuing of vocational knowledge and skills

"*The NQF will facilitate different and more serious approaches to vocational knowledge and skills in Lithuania […] increasing the interest in VET from more advanced and skilled learners in general education.'* | It is difficult to estimate the influence of the NQF on the status of VET, because this is a long-term process.

The NQF will have a limited effect on the status of VET unless there is also:

- investment in infrastructure; - reforms in higher education which make it less financially accessible thereby forcing more school leavers to think about entering VET schools;

- changes in the labour market e.g. fewer jobs that require a degree

2. The influence of the introduction of the NQF to the prestige of VET very much depends on the success of the dissemination of the information about the NQF, its benefits and usage instructions to the society. Until now, there is no such dissemination strategy or measures foreseen.

Transit between VET and higher education does not depend solely on placing all qualifications on the same framework, but also on very real improvement in the quality of both VET and higher education and on an improvement in the general accessibility and responsiveness of education to society and its needs. |

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