THE ROLE OF NATIONAL QUALIFICATION SYSTEMS IN PROMOTING LIFELONG LEARNING
NOTE BY THE SECRETARIAT

1. During the Education Committee’s discussion of the 2001 - 2002 Programme of Work, 17 countries had expressed interest in the proposed activity on The Role of National Qualification Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning. An expert meeting in September 2000 helped to explore underlying issues and to gain an initial view of reforms and policy approaches in different countries.

2. Drawing on the results of the expert meeting, the attached paper outlines a proposal for the activity to examine the effects that qualifications and qualification policies can have upon various aspects of lifelong learning. The proposal suggests a fact-finding approach, as well as a series of international meetings on particular aspects of the relationship between qualifications and lifelong learning.

3. The activity will begin with a meeting of national representatives and experts in early 2001 at the OECD in Paris. Representatives of countries that have decided to participate in the activity, as well as representatives of other countries, are invited to take part in this meeting.

4. Delegates are invited to:
   i. COMMENT upon the themes and the organisation of the activity; and
   ii. INDICATE their country’s intention to participate in the activity
Introduction

1. Lifelong learning for all has become a widely shared policy objective within OECD countries. It is seen as a necessary condition for individual success in the labour market and as a basis for democracy and citizenship. It is also believed that the competitiveness of national economies depend heavily on the capacity of societies to encourage and to facilitate lifelong learning. Nevertheless, for many people the learning roads are fraught with numerous obstacles. Qualification arrangements are prominent among these.

2. For instance, in many countries access requirements to tertiary and higher education exclude vocational education students and apprentices from tertiary education. Dropouts from all sorts of programmes are discouraged from completing their studies later on because they have to start at zero again. Similarly, migrants wanting to work or study in another country can often do so only by taking entire programmes with the content of which they are already familiar. Persons having acquired knowledge and skill informally on the job frequently find it difficult to have this recognised as a basis for formal study or to see them valued in the labour market. Furthermore, increasing numbers of adults acquire specialised skills in short “non-formal” training programmes that are not recognised in the education system and that are “invisible” in the labour market. Finally, qualifications can have stifling effects not only on individual learners but also on the curriculum and on learning processes. All these obstacles can render continuing learning difficult or impossible, in particular for many adults with relatively low levels of formal education and training.

3. However, this is only one part of the picture: the challenge for policy makers to “get qualifications right”. Over the past 15 years several countries have undertaken significant reforms of their qualification systems with two major objectives: to render occupational qualifications more visible and more relevant for employers; and to make education and training pathways more accessible and more coherent for young people and for adults. Prominent among such reforms has been the introduction of new qualification frameworks: the most well known of these is the National Vocational Qualifications framework (NVQs) in the United Kingdom. Many other countries are currently considering or are about to consider similar reforms or elements of such reforms. All of this raises multiple questions about the results achieved so far, and about appropriate policy approaches in countries with different educational traditions, labour market and cultural contexts.
Aims of the activity: 4. The activity will pursue the following three objectives:

Fact finding
Analysis
Cross-country learning

i. To gather information about qualification systems in participating countries;

ii. To examine the impact of different qualification policies on participation and quality in lifelong learning;

iii. To help countries to share know-how and policy experience gained from recent reforms and adjustments of qualification systems.

Why are Qualifications important?

5. Occupational and educational qualifications are certificates and diplomas testifying that a person has reached certain standards of knowledge, skill or competence under specified assessment conditions that guarantee their validity and reliability. Qualifications can be issued at the national level by ministries or other public bodies, by competent organisations of industry sectors, or by enterprises, schools and other public and private agencies. The value of qualifications for the individual consists in the visibility thus given to his or her capabilities. In addition, depending on education and labour market contexts, qualifications entail certain rights, such as access to higher level educational programmes and entitlement to particular employment conditions and remuneration in work places covered by relevant agreements. For employers qualifications are useful if they permit them to select the most suitably qualified candidate for a job. Furthermore employer involvement in the design of qualifications may allow them to signal the sorts of knowledge and skills that are needed in the labour market.

Qualifications function as turning points between learning and work 6. Qualifications could be described as “hinges” or turning points between learning and work and, within education systems, between different types and levels of education and training. As such, they can have important effects on various aspects of lifelong learning, such as:

- The accessibility and the openness to progression of learning for all;

- The “connectivity” of learning in different environments, be it at work, in educational institutions, in the family or in the community;

- The relevance of learning outcomes to changing needs and opportunities in the labour market and in peoples’ lives more generally;
− The visibility and value of formal as well as non-formal learning;
− The quality of learning processes and learning outcomes, both at school and in the work place.

7. Qualifications can act either as bridges or as barriers between types and levels of education, thus affecting equity and progression within educational systems. They can facilitate or hinder transitions between learning and work and enable or discourage adults to participate in organised learning. The design of qualifications can either assist or inhibit the integration of general and vocational education, and it can prevent or promote the recognition of non-formal learning alongside the recognition of knowledge and skills acquired in formal education and training. Not least, qualifications are goal setters for teaching and learning. The ways in which qualifications are designed and examinations are conducted can have significant effects on the breadth and quality of teaching and learning processes and of learning outcomes.

“Qualification frameworks” and “qualification systems” — a conceptual clarification

8. In recent years, some countries have engaged in the development of “national qualification frameworks” in order to harmonise or “unify” large segments of existing qualifications (or even all qualifications) within a country. The main objectives are to improve the visibility and comparability of qualifications in the labour market and to render education and training pathways more accessible and more coherent for both young people and adults. Such frameworks provide descriptions of the knowledge and skills to be demonstrated as well as a common grid of skill levels for all the qualifications included within a framework. In principle, they may allow “equivalences” to be established between elements of different qualifications (modules, credits). They may also allow progression routes, to be established between different fields of study, between general and vocational education, between learning in initial and further education, and between qualifications obtained through formal and non-formal learning.

9. The term “national qualification systems” is used here to designate all qualification arrangements within a country. It refers to relationships between all existing kinds of qualifications -- be they part of a qualification framework or not -- and to interactions between all the players involved in defining, certifying and accrediting qualifications (government, the education community, industry, professional organisations…). “National qualification systems” are thus about institutions, policy processes and agreements shaping qualifications and qualification frameworks within countries.
Qualifications and qualification frameworks differ across countries

10. Qualification frameworks and institutional arrangements vary across countries, and so does their impact on education systems and labour markets. Countries differ strongly in the ways in which educational and labour market qualifications are defined, certified and accredited, and in the ways in which they relate to each other. Some countries have carefully engineered frameworks of qualifications that are defined in great detail (e.g. NVQs in the United Kingdom). In other countries qualifications are more loosely defined and the effectiveness of qualification arrangements relies more directly on the participation of the actors involved and on the experience and judgement of teachers, trainers and examiners (e.g. German speaking countries, Nordic countries).

11. In some countries students (especially in initial education) can obtain only either complete qualifications or no qualifications. However in other countries partial qualifications (credits, qualification modules) can be certified and accumulated over time. Similarly, several countries have developed different approaches to assessing and recognising non-formal skills and to relating them to traditional qualifications. Other countries do not yet have any mechanisms allowing for the recognition of non-formal learning. Finally, many countries are currently developing new qualification frameworks (often for vocational qualifications), or they are reflecting on adjustments of current qualification arrangements to changing learning and working conditions. In different countries such adjustments tend to concentrate on different policy objectives (cost-effectiveness, shorter duration of studies, equity, breadth of qualifications…) and to involve various players more or less actively and intensely (employers, trade unions, teachers…). Learning outcomes are defined differently and related in different ways to learning processes and to financing mechanisms.

The role of qualifications in the labour market varies across countries. This is reflected in the structure of qualifications and the organisation of learning pathways

12. Significant cross-national differences are also observed when it comes to the role of qualifications in the labour market. The importance attached by young people and by adults to obtaining formal qualifications varies not only among individuals and social groups within each country: it also varies across countries. Where young people can obtain well paid work without specific occupational qualifications, where employers are more interested in general education certificates than in specific occupational certificates, and where further education is readily accessible, young people might be less hesitant to enter the labour market early on. So called “occupational labour markets”, on the other hand, will usually not encourage the recruitment of persons with less than complete occupational qualifications. In countries where such labour markets dominate, young people are therefore strongly encouraged not to leave initial education and training before having obtained at least a
full upper secondary occupational qualification. In such cases organised adult learning is likely to focus upon allowing adults to obtain additional certificates and diplomas rather than remedial education or additional credits. Finally, in countries with high labour mobility, qualifications that signal smaller skill units or modules will play an important role, especially for adult workers. This may be less the case where a relatively stable work force continues to be the rule and where the value of additional learning often relates to careers and pay scales within one and the same enterprise, rather than to inter-enterprise mobility and recruitment.

Why an activity on qualifications and lifelong learning?

Qualifications may be used as one important policy lever in promoting lifelong learning

13. The role of qualifications in articulating learning pathways and working life careers suggests that qualification policies could provide one effective policy approach, among others, to promoting lifelong learning. The diversity of national qualification systems, the variety of qualification policies across countries and the experience of recent reforms in some countries offer a broad range of information on the basis of which this assumption can be examined. It should thus be possible to explore the effects of different qualification systems and their linkages with other policy approaches on participation in lifelong learning and on its quality and effectiveness.

Countries could learn from each others experience and exchange policy ideas

14. Many Member countries are currently reconsidering various aspects of current qualification arrangements\(^1\), others are about to develop national qualification frameworks from scratch\(^2\) and some have gone through one or several waves of systemic reform\(^3\). All these countries could benefit from sharing their experience -- successes as well as difficulties -- in developing national qualification systems, and from comparing the policy objectives and policy processes underlying different approaches. Not least, countries could benefit from developing common frameworks for data collection about qualification systems.

Proposed organisation of the activity

Meeting of national representatives and experts (early 2001)

15. The activity will start with a meeting of national representatives and experts in early 2001. On the basis of a detailed outline the meeting of national representatives and experts will discuss the conceptual and analytical framework of the activity. Participants at the meeting will be asked to discuss several

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1. For instance Norway, Finland, Denmark and France. Questions are also starting to be raised in the German speaking countries, for example about modular qualifications.

2. For example Italy, Spain, Mexico and some Central European countries.

3. The United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand
orientations that work under this activity could take, either alternatively or in combination.

**Elaborating a framework for data collection (2001 and 2002)**

16. As indicated before, one possible orientation relates to general fact finding about the nature of existing qualification frameworks. Such work would require careful preparation of a framework for data collection. It would appear to be useful as a basis for appreciating the actual impact of different kinds of qualifications and of qualification reforms undertaken in a number of countries.

**Thematic seminars**

17. A second orientation could take the form of country-hosted seminars. Each of the seminars could look at the impact of qualification systems on lifelong learning from one specific angle, for example:

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- Improving the articulation between formal and non-formal learning -- qualifications, standards, assessment and accreditation;

- Reconciling qualifications and the curriculum: making learning objectives, processes and outcomes compatible;

- Encouraging lifelong learning: institutional and organisational aspects of “user friendly” qualification systems;

- Facilitating mobility in the global market: the roles of governments, industry and commercial players

18. Other themes can be proposed and discussed at the meeting of national representatives and experts.

**Final Conference**

19. The thematic seminars could be followed by a final conference.

**Sharing the results of the activity**

**Publications**

20. Papers prepared at different stages of the activity will be made available on the OECD web site. The final synthesis report will be published in book form.

**Dissemination meetings**

21. Dissemination meetings might be organised in interested countries (including non-member countries), in order to share the results of the activity with those in charge of developing or reforming national qualification systems.