Standardizing education?

The development of the European Qualifications Framework and national qualifications frameworks

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Summary

This study will contribute to a better understanding of the development of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), a new policy solution proposed at the European level, with its stated aim being to create more transparency of qualifications across Europe by providing a standardized translation tool. The research problem of this study is to *identify the main factors that have led to the introduction, development and implementation of the EQF*. The study composes of four articles and an extended abstract.

In this study, the EQF is conceptualized as a process of standardization, a process that can take different functions – the symbolic, instrumental and informational function. To zoom into the process of standardization, the analytical toolbox relies on three key themes that are based on an overall institutional perspectives. The first theme concerns *decision-making about standards in the context of various formal and informal rules*. Decision-making is conceptualised as a coupling between problems and solutions. This coupling is outlined according to four possible patterns: historical contingency, rational problem solving, solution driven normative process, and processes of chance. The second theme examines *how specific structures can become institutionalized,* in that they become taken-for-granted, acquire legitimacy and assure stable access to resources. The third theme is focused on *the coupling between problems and solutions in a multi-level context*, with emphasis on the scope of change and degree of coupling, highlighting possible patterns for how a European policy solution can be coupled to national policy problems. These three themes form a basis for examining the process through which the EQF was introduced, the intergovernmental structures that have been developed on European level, and the national processes that have taken place.

Methodologically, the EQF is viewed as a case, and an unlikely case. The study has examined the process of developing a national qualifications framework (NQF) in three countries (Estonia, Ireland, and Norway). In Ireland the NQF was developed before the EQF, in Estonia and Norway the NQF was developed as a response to European initiatives. In addition, these countries provide a mix of other similarities and differences (EU attachment, policymaking context, NQF status, etc). The study is qualitative and relied on document analysis and expert interviews as data sources. The main time frame for the collected data here is from approximately year 2002 to 2013.

The findings of this study are threefold. First, part examines the *origins and development of the EQF*. The analysis indicated a dual source for the EQF, with an expanding lifelong learning agenda in the EU, and the Bologna process as a source of inspiration. The analysis highlighted how the process of introducing the EQF was dialectic – being both problem driven and solution driven at times, and that serendipity and path-dependencies played a role at other times. The various interests that have been incorporated have also lead the EQF as a policy solution to be characterised by internal tension. Second, *the study has examined the changing function of the EQF advisory group (EQFAG)*. The study shows how the EQFAG went through a process of rapid creation of procedures and norms, and fast expansion of informal power, to the extent that this can be considered stretching of the subsidiarity principle. Third, *the study shows how national processes can vary substantially* in how far European solutions are coupled to national policy problems. The distinct nature of processes that take place as a consequence of European initiatives is highlighted, and how this can lead to ad-hoc processes and weak links to national policy domain. The study shows how local policymaking traditions have an effect on the coupling of problems and solutions, where actor composition and interests have considerable effect on the process.

From a standardization lens, the study discuses the EQF in light of the three functions. First, examining the *symbolic function*, the EQF can be seen to create common language, placing various educational systems in one larger meta-system, all of these represent an idea of a closer integrated Europe in the area of education. However, the EQF is not a very coherent and unified expression of values. The study proposes a view of "EU on demand", where member states can pick and choose various ideas packed into the EQF. Second, examining the *instrumental function*, the EQF as a means for standardization can also be seen as a new mode of policymaking, where the Commission has taken the role of the standardizer, representing a more indirect mode of policymaking. Third, examining the *informational function*, the EQF is frequently presented as value-free, technical, the ultimate Babel fish that instantly translates any set of European educational qualifications into another set of qualifications. The case studies in this study have shown that this neutrality is to a large extent illusory.

Sammendrag

Formålet med denne avhandlingen er å identifisere *de viktigste faktorene som har bidratt til introduksjonen, utviklingen og implementeringen av det Europeiske kvalifikasjonsrammeverket for livslang læring (EQF)*. EQF er en ny *policy løsning* utviklet av den Europeiske Union. Det uttrykte formålet med EQF er å gjøre kvalifikasjonene i Europa mer transparente og sammenlignbare ved å skape et standardisert oversettelsesverktøy mellom nasjonale utdanningssystemer. Studien er skrevet som en artikkel-basert avhandling som består av fire artikler og en kappe.

I denne studien er EQF begrepsfestet som en standardiseringsprosess som kan ha ulike funksjoner – beskrevet her som symbolsk, instrumentell og informasjonsbasert funksjon. For å se nærmere på standardiseringsprosessen, blir det i denne avhandlingen benyttet et institusjonelt perspektiv med tre hovedtemaer. Det første temaet handler om *hvordan beslutningen tas i en kontekst som består av formelle og uformelle institusjonelle regler*. Beslutningsprosesser er konseptualisert som en kopling mellom problemer og løsninger, og det skisseres fire variasjoner av denne koplingen: stiavhengighet, rasjonell problem-løsning, løsnings-drevne prosesser, og tilfeldigheter. Det andre temaet handler om *hvordan ulike strukturer kan bli institusjonalisert over tid*: legitimitet økes, strukturene blir over tid tatt for gitt, samt at det sikres en kontinuerlig tilgang til ressurser. Det tredje temaet handler om *koplingen mellom problemer og løsninger i en flernivåkontekst*. Her er fokus på hvordan nye løsninger fra europeisk nivå kan koples til nasjonale policy problemer, hvor ulike disse nye løsningene er fra de eksisterende løsninger på nasjonalt nivå, samt hvor tette koplinger som skapes mellom problemer og løsninger. Disse tre temaene er grunnlaget for å analysere hvordan EQF ble utviklet, de mellomstatlige strukturene som har blitt skapt på europeisk nivå, og de nasjonale implementeringsprosessene som har skjedd i etterkant.

Studien er designet som en case studie av EQF. I tillegg til analysen på europeisk nivå har studien sett på utviklingen av nasjonale kvalifikasjonsrammeverk i tre land (Estland, Irland og Norge). Alle disse land har i de senere årene utviklet et nasjonalt kvalifikasjonsrammeverk, der en viktig forskjell er at i Irland ble det nasjonale rammeverket utviklet før EQF. I tillegg har disse tre land en rekke likheter (alle er forholdsvis tett koplet til Europeiske prosesser) og ulikheter (EU medlemskap, nasjonale tradisjoner for policy-utvikling). Tidsrammen for alle

analysene er fra omkring 2002 til 2013. Det empiriske datagrunnlaget bygger på kvalitative analyser av ekspertintervjuer og gjennomgang av ulike typer dokumenter.

Studiens konklusjoner er tredelt. *Den første delen av analysene har fokus på opprinnelsen og utviklingen av EQF som en policy-løsning.* Analysene viser at EQF har en todelt opprinnelse – på den ene siden var det økt fokus på livslang læring som et viktig mål på europeisk nivå, på den andre siden kom inspirasjon fra Bologna prosessen. Analysene viser også at utviklingen av EQF var en prosess med ulike drivkrefter i ulike stadier av prosessen. I noen stadier av prosessen kunne det identifiseres både problem-løsning og løsnings-drevne elementer. I andre stadier spilte stiavhengighet og en viss mengde tilfeldigheter inn. EQF som policy løsning kan også sies til å være preget av spenninger og ulike mulige fortolkinger. *Den andre delen av analysen så på utviklingen av den rådgivende gruppen knyttet til EQF* (EQF Advisory group). Studien viser hvordan den gruppen raskt utviklet tydelige prosedyrer og normer, samt at det ble identifisert en økning i uformell makt. På mange måter kan man si at det kan karakteriseres som en uformell «strekking» av subsidiaritetsprinsippet i EU. *Den tredje delen ser spesielt på ulikhetene i nasjonale prosesser.* Case studiene viser hvordan nasjonale policy-prosessene blir ulike når opprinnelsen til nye initiativene kommer fra europeisk hold. Det betyr at koplingene til nasjonale problemer må finnes ad-hoc og at disse koplingene i noen tilfeller kan forbli svake. Det er spesielt lokale tradisjoner for policy utvikling og aktør-interesser som har betydning i hvordan den prosessen utvikles.

Studien har sett på tre ulike funksjoner EQF har fra et standardiseringsperspektiv. For det første kan EQF sies til å ha en *symbolsk funksjon* ved å skape felles vokabular og skape et større meta-system av kvalifikasjoner. Det bør bemerkes at EQF ikke er et veldig koherent og enhetlig sett av ideer, og at landene kan i stor grad velge hvilke ideer de vil ta med i nasjonale prosesser – også kalt «EU on demand» i studien. For det andre kan EQF anses til å ha en *instrumentell funksjon*, der EQF kan anses til å være en ny måte å utvikle politikk på EU nivå som er indirekte og der EU tar rollen som standardiseringsorgan. For det tredje kan EQF anses å ha en *informasjonsfunksjon.* EQF er presentert som teknisk og nøytral løsning som kan oversette europeiske kvalifikasjoner. Det case studiene her har vist er at denne nøytraliteten er i stor grad en illusjon.

List of articles in this dissertation

Article 1:

Elken, M. (2015a) Developing policy instruments for education in the EU: the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, *International Journal of Lifelong Education,* Avalable at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2015.1103795

Article 2

Elken, M. (special issue under review) Expert group institutionalization and task expansion in European education policy-making

Article 3:

Elken, M. (2015b) New EU instruments for education: Vertical, horizontal and internal tensions in the European Qualifications Framework, *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, Vol 11, No 1, pp 69-83

Article 4 :

Elken, M. (in review) "EU-on-demand": Developing national qualifications frameworks in a multi-level context.

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There are many things to be said about a PhD writing process, but nothing really encapsulates the feeling of "finally!" when putting the last full stop. The Thing you barely dare to mention is finally completed, a rather overwhelming feeling. After some time your shoulders start to move back to normal altitude having almost touched your ears for a number of months. Finally. Often you hear that PhD writing is a lonely process. While staring at an article draft and trying to find the right words can feel like that, my experience is that this is also a process where a great number of people have played a significant role. People who push you in the right direction academically, trying to nudge you further to become a better researcher, find meaning in where you cannot find any, provide laughs when things go uphill, kick you in the backside when you slow down too much and give a hug when it all seems irrationally dark and gloomy. Thank you.

I was once told that the PhD process is an investigation into the unknown. Being a newbie in the research world, one really needs some good help navigating this unknown, not to drown in the abyss. I am truly indebted to my two supervisors Peter Maassen and Bjørn Stensaker. You have provided a wonderful duo of expertise, experience, advice and occasional pep talks. I don't know how you have managed to realize when I needed the latter, but you have. It is a bit difficult to find all the right words to express how much I appreciate all the work you have put into getting me to complete this Thing. To find the balance between keeping on working on something to make it better and sending it off when it is good enough. Not only have you been academic supervisors, but I also consider you as mentors in this big and scary academic world. I only hope I can keep on learning from you. Thank you both!

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Through NATED, I was fortunate enough to be able to spend a semester abroad at CHEPS at the University of Twente in Enschede. I still remember the sheep herding, extreme biking, Ameland, unforgettable Zumba, goose dinner and the curse of Zwolle. So, here is a shout-out to the CHEPS crowd! I learned a lot at CHEPS, and I truly appreciate the amount of expertise present at the centre.

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As is rather evident, it is difficult to formulate these things short. I suppose there is some consolation in that I didn't try to write a monograph.

To PhD life: "So long, and thanks for all the fish!"

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Oslo

I   EXTENDED ABSTRACT

1 Introduction

This study will contribute to a better understanding of the development of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), a new policy solution proposed at the European level, with its stated aim being to create more transparency of qualifications across Europe by providing a standardized translation tool.

The EQF has been introduced in the context of a changing European educational landscape. Formal competences with respect to education as a policy area are under the sphere of the sovereign nation state. However, recent decades have witnessed a proliferation of various intergovernmental, transnational and supranational efforts in joint education policymaking. These efforts have led to various outputs, several of which are aimed at standardizing educational processes and outcomes, and at making education more relevant for the society and economy. Among other things, the European educational landscape is intended to become more transparent with the introduction of qualifications frameworks, credit points are now measured in ECTS/ECVET, and quality assurance agencies have sets of standards for good practice (ESG).

Fifteen years ago, a national qualifications framework was a rather unknown phenomenon in Europe, with the exception of some early adopters. However, over a fairly short period of time, national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) have been introduced across Europe. Even though compliance with the EQF is voluntary, in November 2014 38 countries were working towards a NQF. In total, 29 frameworks have been formally adopted within the EU (European Union), EEA (European Economic Area), Switzerland and EU candidate countries (CEDEFOP, 2015). While one can debate the impact of these frameworks or the depth of the processes, the fact is that qualifications frameworks *are* formally being developed and linked towards the EQF. This development is surprising for at least two reasons.

The first reason is related to the context in which the EQF has been introduced. Education, including higher education, is generally regarded as a nationally sensitive policy area, commonly linked to the construction of the nation state (Meyer, Ramirez, & Soysal, 1992). As a consequence of its national anchoring, education (and higher education) has traditionally been rather resistant to any supranational involvement by the European Union (EU), despite longstanding efforts by the Commission (Corbett, 2005; Gornitzka, 2009). Since the Treaty of

Maastricht (1992) European coordination processes in education are formally framed under the subsidiarity principle, meaning that EU initiatives can only be undertaken with explicit consent and backing from the member states (Maassen & Musselin, 2009). This means that, unlike other policy areas where the Commission can take the initiative to issue directives that the member states have to comply with, in the area of education European initiatives are possible when the member states agree with it beforehand (with the exception of some professional education and vocational education). This would suggest that the introduction and wide spread of an EU-initiated qualifications framework could be seen as an unlikely development.

The second reason is related to the nature of an overarching and comprehensive qualifications framework. A comprehensive qualifications framework integrates and standardizes the way in which one describes outputs of various levels and types of education. General, vocational and higher education traditionally represent different sets of issues, involving different actors and interests, and have different traditions, norms and sets of concepts (i.e. how one defines a qualification). These sectors also have different traditions regarding state steering with respect to educational content. In general education, state steering of educational content through national plans and standards is not a new phenomenon in a number of countries (see, for instance, Karseth & Sivesind, 2010, for analysis of the Norwegian national study plans in a global context). In vocational education, educational content is traditionally shaped by trade associations who develop particular standards in the context of distinct national skills systems (Brockmann, Clarke, & Winch, 2008). For higher education, learning has traditionally been perceived as an open-ended endeavor (Barnett, 1990), and the new focus emphasizing relevance and skills poses some fundamental questions for higher education institutions (Muller & Young, 2014). One could expect that various interests within the sectors would likely challenge the introduction of a comprehensive NQF (Young, 2009a, p. 2870). Furthermore, these diverging interests create questions regarding the ownership and purpose of the instrument. This would suggest that the very idea of a qualifications framework where outcomes are standardized across educational sectors could be seen as a challenging process, even in a single country (Allais, 2014).

These two reasons suggest that the aim to create the EQF is potentially problematic both due to the comprehensive nature of the framework and the European context in which this takes place. However, amongst the 34 countries who have adopted a framework, and those who are working towards one, surprising similarity can be found, 29 countries have proposed or adopted an 8-level framework, seemingly following the structure and number of levels proposed with the

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EQF. Taking into account the "shocking diversity" among educational systems in Europe (Neave, 2003), these 8-level national frameworks indicate peculiar similarity in the manner of describing national systems. Thus, the development of the EQF and the adoption of these national frameworks across Europe (as well as frameworks that are in the process of being finalized) becomes a rather interesting enigma.

1.1   Qualifications frameworks in Europe: A brief introduction

The introduction, development, and implementation of the EQF is a process taking place under the auspice of the EU. It is formally titled as the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and it covers all levels and types of education, including informal and non-formal learning. In spring 2008, the EQF was adopted as a joint Parliament and Council recommendation (European Parliament and the Council, 2008). Formally, the scope of the EQF is limited to EU, EEA and candidate countries.

The EQF comprises 8 levels, where level descriptors for qualifications are formulated as learning outcomes, categorized as knowledge, skills and competencies (See the Appendix p. 197 for an overview of the levels and descriptions of categories). The main stated idea is that the EQF would function as a "meta-framework" between various national frameworks, by being a "translation device". In order to function as a translation device, when national frameworks are developed, these need to be "referenced" towards the EQF through the referencing process. This means that level descriptions in national frameworks are expected to be referred to the EQF levels to identify sufficient match. To provide oversight for this process, an advisory group was formed (the EQF Advisory Group – EQFAG), its main aim being to provide transparency and assure coherence of the various national referencing processes. Furthermore, there is a network of national coordination points (NCP). In each country, there is a NCP that assists the implementation process on national level.

The EQF is also not the only European-level development with respect to qualification frameworks. In the Bologna Process that was launched in 1999, the cycle-based structure for higher education is one of the main action lines. In 1999, two main cycles were proposed – bachelor and master (Bologna Declaration, 1999), with this action line also being repeated in following ministerial meetings. In 2005 in Bergen, a qualifications framework for European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) was proposed, composed of three cycles (bachelor, master, PhD), with generic descriptors for each cycle (in the form of learning outcomes and competencies) (Bergen Communique, 2005). National frameworks in the Bologna Process are

matched to the QF-EHEA through a self-certification process. All signatory countries of Bologna (currently 48) are part of this process.

While the two European overarching frameworks have somewhat different scopes (both in terms of educational sectors and geography), QF-EHEA and EQF are termed complementary in various information materials and documents, the three main cycles in the higher education framework having been matched to levels 6-8 in the EQF (EQF level 5 is considered equivalent to short cycle higher education). However, from having no "meta-frameworks", European countries now need to tackle two such frameworks – the comprehensive EQF, and the QF-EHEA for higher education. Furthermore, the relationship between the two is not as straight forward as sometimes assumed, representing different sets of actor interests and logics built into the frameworks. The challenging nature of dealing with two European frameworks on national level was noted in a Eurydice report on Bologna implementation in 2010 (Eurydice, 2010).

The main focus of this study is on the EQF as it provides a particularly interesting case to examine the scope of action that is possible within the subsidiarity principle, having in mind that a) EU coordination in the education policy area has traditionally been contested and is formally limited; and that b) the very idea of introducing standards for the full scope of education through qualifications frameworks is a challenging endeavor.

1.2 Main focus and approach to the study

Given the above considerations, the overall research problem underlying this study is:

> What are the main factors that have led to the introduction, development and implementation of the European Qualifications Framework?

Ideas regarding cross-national coordination of qualifications are not new in the context of the EU (Deane, 2006). This main research interest then deals with how particular ideas at the EU level become "hardened" into specific standards (Gornitzka, Maassen, Olsen, & Stensaker, 2007). One can propose various possible explanations for this "hardening" process: incremental changes and historical trajectories, deliberate choice, or even the element of chance. Once developed at the EU level, instruments are also introduced at the national level, putting focus on national processes that take place as a result of European standards and instruments. It should be emphasized that these national processes cannot appropriately be examined through an "implementation study" in the sense of studying the carrying out of an "EQF policy". Instead,

national processes take place in a multi-level context where national and European processes are interrelated. These national processes that also imply a coordination process between various countries require arenas for oversight: this can be done through delegation to specific agencies at the EU level or by developing specific intergovernmental structures. Following this line of argument, the overall research problem has been the basis for the following specific research questions:

- *Where did the EQF originate from and how is it linked to policy objectives for education in the EU?*
- *What was the role of intergovernmental structures in the development of EQF?*
- *How have NQFs been introduced in this context and what is their relationship to the EQF?*

The study takes a starting point in that from a macro perspective, the EQF is a process of standardization as its main function is to create a common set of standards for qualifications. Studying this process then concerns how specific standards emerge and are agreed upon, what kind of structural measures are developed in standardization processes, and how standards are introduced in diverse contexts. The concept of standardization thus integrates various strands of literature that have been used to construct the analytical framework for this study.

While standardization is often used as a proxy for certain aspects of processes becoming more similar, one should distinguish between a standardization process and a convergence process. Convergence is the measurement of increased similarity, whether between countries, or towards a specific model (Knill, 2005). Convergence thus focuses on the outcomes – that is, whether things have become more similar. Standardization, on the other hand, concerns the development and application of standards as specific kinds of rules, where increased similarity is only one of the possible outcomes. Standards are informal rules with a clear source that create a specific kind of coordination pattern (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000). Being a particular kind of rules, standards can take various functions in the European governance context. Gornitzka et al. (2007, p. 204) have outlined three different kinds of functions for standardization. First of all, the development of standards can be seen as a symbolic expression of common European norms and values. Second, they can be seen as a specific kind of policy instrument. Third, they can be seen as being a market information tool that enhances cross-border interaction. These three suggest a symbolic, instrumental and information function for a standardization process. Having these three functions in mind, it is then possible to zoom onto the process of how such standards are introduced, developed and implemented.

Standardization implies a rule-based view on society. Furthermore, the various functions imply that it is not only the formal rule-based aspect that is of relevance when examining standardization processes. Rather, standards also take a more symbolic function as representations of particular norms and values. A means to "zoom in" and combine emphasis on both the formal rules and the symbolic norms and values, is to build the analytical framework by drawing on neo-institutional theories. Having this theoretical approach in mind, one can assume that when standards are introduced, they enter a field characterized by "competing, inconsistent and contradictory principles and structures" (Olsen, 2007, pp. 13-14). These processes take place in a multi-actor and multi-level context, where mutual adjustment (Olsen, 2002) takes place in the reciprocal processes between the national and European level.

In this study, the role of actors is particularly emphasized, as they bring specific interests with them to the process, and operate within formal and informal rules for behavior – both constraining and enabling particular courses of action. Furthermore, the starting point in this study is that actors also have individual preferences, emphasizing their role as agents for both change and stability. The benefit of this view is that rather than viewing either the European or national level as a black box[1], this focus on multiple levels allows examination of the adjustment processes that take place on both levels during this process and how these levels interact. This overall ambition is related to the analytical interest of actors and institutions in the context of expanding European cooperation in education, and the mechanisms through which standardization takes place in the context of subsidiarity. A more elaborate presentation of the analytical framework can be found in Chapter 3.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative case study design, where the main emphasis is on examining the development of the EQF as a case. To examine the development at the level of the member states, the dissertation examines the processes in three countries – Estonia, Norway and Ireland. All three countries represent small, rather peripheral countries in Europe that have opted for developing a NQF, while at the same time representing different pathways and approaches to the process[2]. While not aiming for a representative sample of all European systems, these three empirical illustrations show how the development of NQF has played out at the national level in a context where national processes are linked to European ones.

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[1] Focusing on the effects of European instruments at the national level has been preeminent in both studies of higher education and vocational education (see discussions of such tendencies in Holford, Milana and Spolar 2014 on vocational education and Vukasovic 2014 on higher education)

[2] Ireland had a NQF before EQF whereas the two other countries have developed one in the context of recent European developments

1.3 Extended abstract focus and outline

Viewing the EQF as a process of standardization represents a macro view on standards and their functions in the larger project of European integration in education. However, this macro view also requires "zooming in" on the specific parts of the process, which requires specific analytical tools for examining various parts of the process that are presented in the overall analytical framework. The empirical analysis undertaken in this study that zooms in on the process is presented in the four articles included in this dissertation. The final discussion in the extended abstract builds on the empirical analysis conducted and shifts focus back on the three functions of standardization, and the EQF as a symbolic expression of values, instrument for policy, or market information mechanism.

An issue that emerged in writing this article-based dissertation is that there is some repetition between the full texts of the articles and the analytical framework given here in the extended abstract. As the analytical framework concerns the "sewing together" of the various frameworks presented in the individual articles, this was difficult to avoid.

This introductory chapter has provided the background and rationale for the study as well as introduced the main research problem and research questions, along with a brief introduction of the approach that has been employed. Chapter 2 will provide an academic and contextual positioning of the study, with respect to the literature on European integration in education and qualifications frameworks.

The analytical framework of the study is presented in Chapter 3. It first highlights the nature of standardization in relation to (policy) problems and solutions. After this, the analytical tools for "zooming in" to the EQF process are presented. First, the various dynamics of coupling problems and solutions are presented by emphasizing the role of actors and institutional structures in the process. Second, the process of institutionalization is outlined, with specific emphasis on concerns for legitimacy, taken-for-grantedness and resources. Third, the coupling of problems and solutions is placed in a multi-level and multi-actor context. The chapter concludes by emphasizing some of the main expectations, in light of the different perspectives on standardization (symbolic, instrumental and information).

The main emphasis of Chapter 4 is on the methodological choices made in the study. It first places the study in a critical realist tradition in terms of epistemology and ontology. Then, the rationale and implications of using a qualitative case study design are outlined. Data sources and analysis strategies are presented for both of the methods employed: expert interviews and

document analyses. Key issues regarding different kinds of validity are discussed, along with ethical considerations and study limitations.

Chapter 5 provides summaries of the articles, outlining the main focus for each of the articles, presenting briefly the main analytical tools used and then presenting the key findings. Where relevant, empirical and analytical findings are presented separately. It should be noted that the main emphasis in these summaries is on the findings, to avoid further repetition between the articles, summaries of the articles and the analytical framework.

- *The first article* examines the pre-decision process, namely, the historical development and the processes that led to the introduction of the EQF by examining how problems and solutions have been coupled.
- *The second article* examines the EQF Advisory Group (EQFAG) by analyzing the institutionalization process of this group and illustrates the transformation process of an expert group that has now become a semi-permanent group in the area of lifelong learning.
- *The third article* examines the EQF as an integrative mechanism, located at the intersection of horizontal, vertical and internal coordination and the kinds of tensions this creates for the instrument.
- *The fourth article* presents three national case studies (Ireland, Estonia, and Norway) to provide an analysis of how national qualifications frameworks are developed in a multi-level context.

In sum, the four articles set their focus on when and how the initial idea of the EQF emerged on the agenda, its formulation and the implications of those choices, as well as on the outputs of the process and national processes of introducing qualifications frameworks.

Chapter 6 first presents the main findings of this dissertation, by summarizing the main empirical and analytical conclusions in light of the research questions and analytical expectations. Then, these findings are discussed in the light of the three functions of standardization (the EQF as a symbolic expression of values, the EQF as a governance instrument, and the EQF as a market information tool). Finally, some promising avenues for further studies are presented.

2 Contextualising the study

The introductory chapter made two main arguments for an academic study of the EQF – arguments related to the nature of qualifications frameworks and the characteristics of the European context in which the EQF is introduced. This chapter takes these two arguments as a starting point and contextualises this study in the broader literature on European integration in education and on qualifications frameworks. Thus, these two themes also form the basis for selecting literature for this review section[3]. The concluding section of this chapter will highlight some of the remaining blind spots.

2.1   European integration in education – the EU and beyond

Studies examining the development of European integration in education can be categorized into several sets of literature – including those focused on the developments at the European level, and a multitude of studies focused on national developments in the context of European integration, primarily the Bologna Process for higher education. This section will first discuss studies that have examined the development of EU education policy – emphasizing historical trajectories, sectoral dynamics and expansion of the EU policy agenda. Second, focus is put on studies that examine the relationship among various EU institutions in policymaking. Third, as higher education and the Bologna Process have been a subject for a number of studies that emphasize specific elements of European integration processes, these are discussed separately.

Several studies at the European level have studied the development of education policies, examining the historical roots of European integration in education, where the provisions in the Treaty of Rome in 1957 in the area of education were limited to vocational training and recognition of professional degrees. This basis however meant that recognition, comparability and transparency of qualifications are not new topics in the EU context, and a number of initiatives have been taken in these areas (Deane, 2006). The historical studies have discussed the initial weak legal basis, incremental development of the policy agenda through specific programmes, and the role of policy entrepreneurs (Beukel, 2001; Corbett, 2005; De Wit & Verhoeven, 2001; Pépin, 2006, 2007). In addition, particular historical turning points have been

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[3] The implication of this choice is that developments related to knowledge policies in general (including research policies) are not covered by this section, even if this would have allowed for a more comprehensive discussion on European integration in *higher* education.

analysed. For example, while the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 formalized education as a policy area, the Treaty also formalized the subsidiarity principle that limited EU competencies[4], even if it has been argued to be more of a political than purely legal constraint (De Witte, 1993; Ertl, 2006). However, the subsidiarity principle also set a clear and limited frame for EU action (De Wit & Verhoeven, 2001), and can thus even be seen as a reduction of competencies (De Witte, 1993). Overall, one can identify a historical process of the EU education policy increasing in salience as a policy sector, in particular as a means for economic development (Walkenhorst, 2008). The Lisbon agenda in 2000 promoted education as a key driver for the European knowledge economy (Ertl, 2006; Gornitzka, 2007; Pépin, 2011).

At the same time, the economic rationale in the Lisbon agenda is accompanied with emphasis on social cohesion, suggesting a dual focus (Borrás & Jacobsson, 2004; Gornitzka, 2007; Holford & Mleczko, 2013; Rodrigues, 2002). It has been argued that this dual focus regarding economic rationales and social cohesion, as well as emphasis on lifelong learning has replaced the traditional focus on vocational training in the EU (Cort, 2009; Saar, Ure, & Holford, 2013). This development has created tensions between VET and other sectors in education related to their diverging legal standing (Holford & Mleczko, 2013). Vocational training and education as a whole have had distinctly different pathways for policy development in the EU, and competence in the area of vocational education has been a basis for lifelong learning policies (Cort, 2009). Recently, lifelong learning has functioned as an umbrella term for a number of agendas and policy objectives at the European level. Studies have shown how lifelong learning and specifically its economic relevance has provided an entry point for policy actors within the Commission, who have "made a virtue of blurring the boundaries between the Union's economic and social objectives" (Holford & Mleczko, 2013, p.39). While lifelong learning has become consolidated as a policy aim at the European level, national definitions of the concept vary considerably. For example, in some cases lifelong learning is linked to a narrowly defined employability agenda (Saar et al., 2013).

In addition to focusing on historical growth and shifting meanings, EU's expanding policy agenda has been analysed through focusing on spill overs, as, for example, in the case of free

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[4] Since the Lisbon Treaty in 2007, education is considered an area where the EU has so-called supporting competence. Supporting competence in the Treaty of Lisbon entails "*the EU can only intervene to support, coordinate or complement the action of Member States*"[4]. General studies on the EU have highlighted that while the Treaties can be seen as the "ultimate legal documents", they are also "frameworks than constrain, but do not determine, institutional outcomes" (Hooghe & Marks, 2001a, p. 7). Therefore, rules outlined in the treaties need to be operationalized for particular situations, and thus also become reinterpreted over time.

movement and the right to education for the children of migrant workers that led to a directive in 1977 (Pollack, 1994). This is one example of policies that are developed for other sectors that are of relevance for education. Such sectoral spill overs are linked to the nature of policymaking in the EU and the multi-organisation (Cram, 1997) of the Commission, which is divided into various DGs that deal with different policy sectors where the legal competencies vary. The argument also follows the traditional neofunctionalist argument for expansion of European integration (Haas, 2008 [1963]; Sandholtz & Zysman, 1989). At the same time, these spill overs have not led to more supranational legalization (Ravinet, 2008a), suggesting that analysing European integration in education from a neofunctionalist perspective has not been able to explain current patterns.

A number of the studies draw on literature from political science and international relations for analysing European governance structures. There is also a set of sociologically framed literature on educational policy in Europe conceptualizing governance of education through the concept of policy spaces and discursive approaches to understanding policy (Lawn & Grek, 2012; Lawn & Lingard, 2002). While these represent a both disciplinary and theoretically different starting point, this research tradition has also highlighted the increased focus on standardization and measurement in European governance of education (Lawn, 2011).

Focusing on the role of specific EU institutions, a number of more recent studies have examined more directly the role of the European Commission and its expanding agenda in the area of education (in particular higher education) (Corbett, 2011; Gornitzka, 2007, 2009) and the specific logics that underpin the policy outputs (Maassen & Stensaker, 2011). However, the Commission is not the only EU institution that has shaped policy development. The European Court of Justice is another actor with significance in the process of expanding the EU agenda in education, as it played a key role in the creation of programmes (ERASMUS, COMETT, LIGNUA) with the ruling that defined access to education as, in principle, equal with access to vocational training (Demmelhuber, 2000). Arguably, this ruling an be seen as a window of opportunity, as later studies have identified that this was subsequently followed with a considerable budgetary increase for education in the EU (Pollack, 1994).

Research on European integration in *higher* education increased quite dramatically after the start of the Bologna Process in 1999, an intergovernmental coordination process for higher education outside the EU framework. To a large extent, Bologna has paved the way for how European integration in higher education could be operationalized as an alternative to the EU (Hoareau, 2012). A multitude of studies have been conducted on the Bologna Process and its

scope, logic and mechanisms for operation (Corbett, 2006; Elken & Vukasovic, 2014; Lažetić, 2010; Neave & Maassen, 2007; Ravinet, 2008b). Over time, its relationship to the EU has also grown closer, and activities are increasingly coordinated with the construction of the so-called Europe of Knowledge[5] (Beerkens, 2008; Gornitzka, 2010; Keeling, 2006; Maassen & Musselin, 2009; Veiga & Amaral, 2009). The European project of modernizing universities builds on strong convictions regarding the need for reform and the challenges and shape of European higher education (Maassen & Olsen, 2007).

What studies on the Bologna Process show is that policy problems matter. For instance, while mobility as a policy aim was easy to create consensus around early on, issues of quality assurance were more contested (Amaral & Magalhães, 2004) and that the changing nature of the goals has made them to be "moving targets" (Kehm, Huisman, & Stensaker, 2009). Studies on the Bologna Process have also shown that compliance on national level can be created without legally binding rules. On the national level, the Bologna Process has created mechanisms for compliance (Hoareau, 2009; Vukasovic, 2014) and countries have been developing policies that fit with the European agenda, "re-nationalizing" the Bologna aims, in some cases with side effects (Gornitzka, 2006; Huisman & Van Der Wende, 2004; Musselin, 2009). At the same time, despite mechanisms for compliance, this compliance would not necessarily mean convergence, as arguments about persistent variation also remain (Witte, 2006, 2008).

Bologna Process has also been influential for the EU initiatives, marked by the launch of the Copenhagen Process for vocational education in 2002, mirroring the Bologna process for vocational education (Corbett, 2011). The key difference between these is that, in the Copenhagen Process, the EU is more closely involved. Copenhagen Process marked an increased interest in qualifications and competencies on European level, among other things by developing a credit transfer system for vocational education (Winterton, 2005).

However, what emerges from this discussion is that there seems to be a rather sectoral focus in the literature on, for instance, vocational and higher education policy on European level. Studies on higher education policy in Europe have become rather well established, and there is a set of literature that examines lifelong learning and VET in the EU. While examples of studies that

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[5] Europe of Knowledge was launched by the EU in a 1997 Communication (COM(97) 563) with the aim of "gradual construction of an open and dynamic European education area". Here it is used as an overarching term to represent the various processes, policies and instruments that aim to create such an education area. In the context of this study, explicit focus is on the educational sector, while the term has also been used as a term to denote knowledge policies in the EU in general, including also research policy.

have a more cross-sectoral focus have been produced in recent years on national level (Busemeyer, 2014; Graf, 2013) and in few instances on European level (see, for instance J. J. W. Powell, Bernhard, & Graf, 2012; or J. J. W. Powell & Solga, 2010 on comparison of Bologna and Copenhagen processes), there is also need for more comprehensive interaction between these various sets of literature, in particular when one would examine Europeanization processes.

In sum, European integration in education is a topic that has received increasing attention, not least in the area of higher education after the introduction of the Bologna Process. The studies in this overview show varied focus and explanations for the expansion of EU education policy. However, it also appears that the studies frequently emphasize incremental processes over time, with particular historical turning points. These studies also show that there has been an increase in activities on European level since the Lisbon agenda, even as the Treaty provisions have not changed. The EQF is one example of this increased level of activity.

2.2   Qualification frameworks

This section will discuss relevant literature on qualifications frameworks. First, an examination of what a qualifications framework is will be presented as well as where the underlying ideas originate from. Second, the section summarises studies on the development of national qualifications frameworks in recent decades. Third, the section focuses on literature that has examined European level developments in this area, with focus on the EQF and the QF-EHEA.

It has been noted that much of the literature on qualifications frameworks has been in the form of advocacy, rather than being research-based (Fernie & Pilcher, 2009; Young, 2007). What has been less visible is academic literature that makes claims beyond the practice/application context and specific evaluations, with some exceptions (see, Allais, 2003; Fernie & Pilcher, 2009; Granville, 2003; Karseth, 2008; Karseth & Solbrekke, 2010; Raffe, 2003; Young, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2009a; Young & Allais, 2011, amongst others).

An issue that has received attention in academic literature is the definition of a qualifications framework, as a qualifications framework can be conceptualized in different ways, with distinct national variations (Allais, 2014, pp. xxv-xviii). Coles and Werquin (2009, p. 439) define a qualifications framework as "a set of criteria reflecting the levels of learning achieved". According to this definition by Coles and Werquin (2009), a framework is either implicit or explicit with level descriptors (sometimes with division according to qualification types), and

they can range from comprehensive (all kinds of learning) to sector-based (focused on a specific sector). In addition, it is possible to distinguish between weak and strong frameworks – referring to the level of prescription in the framework (Young, 2009a, p. 2874). Others take a far broader approach and argue that any qualification system is actually a qualifications framework (Young, 2009a). In short, one can argue that current developments in introducing QFs are characterized by focusing on a single set of criteria and levels covering various fields, they are formulated in terms of learning outcomes, and qualifications are defined according to particular units (Young, 2009a, pp. 2870-2871).

From a broad perspective, the idea of a qualifications framework can be traced centuries back to the control mechanisms by trade organizations regarding the necessary skills to practice a particular trade (Coles & Werquin, 2009, p. 439). Traditionally, this would refer to an ordering of specific skill levels. The emergence of NQFs in their current form has been dated back to 1960s France (Coles & Werquin, 2009) as well as New Zealand and UK in the 1980s (Young, 2009a). There are also a number of developing countries, such as South Africa, that have been amongst the early developers of NQFs following New Zealand and UK. In recent years, the issue of frameworks has been gaining in popularity. Not only are frameworks being developed in Europe, in 2009, a study identified over 70 countries world-wide working on developing a qualifications framework (Allais, Raffe, Strathdee, Wheelahan, & Young, 2009).

The majority of studies on NQFs take a starting point in national case studies, highlighting how the process of developing NQFs is linked to specific processes of system change. There have been multiple rationales for introducing qualifications frameworks world wide (Allais et al., 2009) – as a means to communicate with employers, to provide more transparency, to increase mobility and access within the system, to name a few. For instance, NQFs can be introduced to certify informal learning in order to overcome inequalities, and at the same time drive international competitiveness (Allais, 2003; Young, 2009a). In the UK, the national developments with respect to the NQF were anchored in developments related to VET and the role of employers in defining training needs (Young, 2009a). It should be noted that alongside the UK Framework, Scotland had its own framework where the question of sectoral coordination had been quite high up on the agenda (Raffe, 2003). However, all of these have a basic premise that the way in which educational outputs (qualifications) are described is becoming more standardized. This standardization does not mean that the processes are value free. Analysis of the Scottish case has revealed how the framework, despite being presented as

a neutral rationalization instrument, also included transformative aspects originating from specific political preferences (Fernie & Pilcher, 2009).

Overall, even if the specific aims vary, it has been asserted that the introduction of NQFs is frequently associated with a more managerial and economic logic (Allais, 2014; Blackmur, 2004; Fernie & Pilcher, 2009), and qualifications frameworks become a means to build trust (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009) in the context of increased accountability demands. At the same time, the development of NQFs that are based on learning outcomes has also been framed as a shift towards more learner-focused pedagogical thinking (Allais, 2014; Young, 2009a, p. 2870). However, this outcome focus implies a more standardized and one-size-fits-all view that is unable to take into account the different knowledge domains (Allais, 2014). The latter can be seen as problematic due to the distinct disciplinary cultures for how knowledge is organised, and that one can expect further specialization and differentiation (Muller, 2015).

Furthermore, it has been questioned whether the NQFs that are now being introduced across Europe will be able to meet all of the stated expectations. Young (2007) has argued that there is a substantial gap between the real practical problems that an NQF can address and the unrealistic reform agenda attached to their introduction. Fernie and Pilcher (2009, p. 230) challenge the assumption that the introduction of NQFs is "unproblematic, universally welcomed and benign". Instead, they suggest that the frameworks need to be analysed from a more critical perspective, taking into account the political and institutional conditions that surround the processes.

While studies on national frameworks usually focus on single case studies, comparative approaches can also be identified, for instance, in an evaluative research project commissioned by the International Labour Office (ILO). The aim of the project was to examine evidence on the effectiveness of early NQFs in contributing to more flexible, relevant and high quality training systems – in short, the study aimed to explore what kind of outcomes have been produced by the qualifications frameworks introduced at the time. Among other things, the lessons learned from the "early adopters" were examined – focusing on the UK (Scotland separately as they have their own framework), New Zealand, Australia and South Africa (Allais, 2009; Raffe, 2009; Strathdee, 2009; Wheelahan, 2009; Young, 2009b). The final report with case studies identified that the first wave of national frameworks that were developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s show substantial national variations in the policy processes (Allais et al., 2009). The case studies warn against uncritical policy borrowing where contextual factors are not taken into account. Local conditions matter and it is argued that the more prescriptive a

framework is, the more resistance one can expect from the stakeholders. Overall, it was concluded that the frameworks had achieved their aims in a partial manner and had experienced difficulties, due to contestation and too fast implementation processes (Allais et al., 2009). This resonates with the literature highlighting the unrealistic reform agendas that were attached to the NQFs (Young, 2007).

Academic literature that specifically examines the European level "meta-frameworks" is scarcer than literature focused on national processes. Research on the so-called Bologna framework, QF-EHEA, has identified the institutional collision of the logic proposed in the European frameworks and in national institutionalized sectors, suggesting that there is a need for translation (Karseth & Solbrekke, 2010). The EQF represents a more difficult set of concerns related to the qualifications framework, due to its linkages to VET and debates on skills and competencies that go beyond a single sector. Some of the initial studies examining the potential of the EQF point out these challenges related to conceptions of VET and the difficulties of arriving at a single conception of qualifications and qualifications with respect to VET systems across Europe (Barabasch, 2008). There are rather well established differences regarding national skills systems, and one can identify distinct British, German and French thinking around this. The very conceptions of skills in the Anglo-Saxon and German traditions are rather different: the German conceptualization is closer to the concept of qualification for the labour force, while the British version is closer to performance (Clarke & Winch, 2006). Similar issues can be identified with many of the key concepts related to the EQF. For instance, skills, competence, knowledge, or even learning outcomes have distinct national terminology (Allais, 2014, pp. xxv-xviii; Bohlinger, 2008). What this means is that translation issues can occur both across borders and across sectors. It is also not given that the introduction of EQF has made cross-sectoral collaboration in education easier. For instance, a study on established hybrid VET and HE provision suggested that in the case of Germany, Austria and Switzerland, the recent NQF development had in fact challenged further hybridization and created new barriers between sectors (Graf, 2013). This points towards the complicated set of sectoral interests in these processes.

Overall, studies that focus specifically on the EQF itself are still comparatively few, and can for the most part be found around the time the EQF was proposed. The focus of these studies had main emphasis on the content of the EQF and the possible implications of introducing such an instrument (Bohlinger, 2008; Brockmann, Clarke, & Winch, 2009; Cort, 2010b; Young, 2008). The challenging nature of the EQF has been pointed out, in particular with respect to the

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way in which learning outcomes and competence have been approached (Méhaut & Winch, 2012). On national level, these studies examined some of the early national developments (Elken, 2012) and possible implications of the EQF on specific levels/sectors (Isopahkala-Bouret, Rantanen, Raij, & Järveläinen, 2011).

In addition to academic literature, there is a vast body of practitioner-oriented literature related to the EQF. A number of reports, books and chapters have been produced by those working on the development of qualifications frameworks and through projects funded by the Commission, international organisations or national bodies in the process of developing an NQF (i.e. Bergan, 2007; Bjørnavold & Coles, 2007; Raffe, Gallacher, & Toman, 2008). Even though these contributions are of relevance in mapping the aims and operation of the EQF and provide considerable expertise on the topic, many of these represent a more practice-oriented focus.

In 2013, an evaluation of the EQF was commissioned by the European Commission (ICF GHK, 2013). The final report concludes that, despite widespread introduction of NQFs, the actual implementation of learning outcomes-based approaches and the validation of non-formal learning and informal learning has not yet been substantial across Europe. Furthermore, while acknowledging that there has been progress thus far, a number of specific recommendations are provided, related to the referencing process and the use of EQF levels, stakeholder involvement, performance monitoring, and relationships to other European instruments. There have been other European funded studies, such as a Commission funded study (EQF-Ref) that has examined various aspects of the implementation process in selected countries. Overall, while shedding light on the broad issues related to the implementation of NQFs across Europe, these studies also represent a practitioner-focused approach where the aim often appears to be to provide best practice examples for lesson-drawing.

In sum, while an increasing number of countries in Europe are currently working on an NQF, there has not been a similar increase in the academic literature focusing on qualifications frameworks – neither on the national nor on the European level. While several very interesting case studies on national level can be identified (in particular concerning countries that have experiences with national frameworks), and while there is an emerging body of literature on the implications of such national frameworks, these have primarily highlighted the complex national processes. Studies on European level frameworks have been scarce, and there is a lack of studies that have examined the relationship between European and national processes with respect to the EQF.

2.3 Summary and implications for this study

This study is placed in the intersection of the areas covered by the two sets of literature that have been discussed in the previous two sections. In this section, some of the implications are summarised.

Studies on European integration in education outline the dynamics between European and national level in this area. The EQF can be said to be an instrument that is introduced in a context where there is on the one hand an expanding policy agenda, but on the other, there is also ambiguity in terms of policy aims (i.e. the reframing of lifelong learning as a policy objective). This requires attention to examining the specific policy problems that the EQF as a solution is presumed to solve, and the formal rules in which the process is embedded. Furthermore, the EQF is clearly not introduced in a vacuum. This would suggest that studying the introduction of the EQF cannot start with the moment when the EQF was formally adopted. This is an area where there are multiple processes taking place, and such processes relate to each other, suggesting that this means that the EQF should also be seen as embedded in a wider context of creating mechanisms for standardizing education in the context of European integration.

Studies on qualifications frameworks suggest that while the notion of a qualifications framework in a broad sense is not new, the contemporary developments in Europe have a different nature than the historical ideas of qualifications systems. What this literature points out is that studying the EQF should also pay attention to the sectoral nature of qualifications. There is also some ambiguity with respect to the notion of qualification frameworks and what the process of introducing a national qualifications framework would entail (i.e. the strict vs loose definition of a framework). The introduction of national qualifications frameworks has taken place in relation to multiple policy aims, with specific national dynamics. The few studies that exist on European level frameworks also emphasize the contested nature of the ideas embedded into the frameworks. This suggests that the introduction, development, and implementation of the EQF represent a standardization process in a complex policy area that is both highly political and nationally anchored.

This study is related to both sets of literature. It can be seen as related to the studies that examine the expanding European governance capacity with respect to education, and the relationships between European and national level in the context of this expanding policy agenda. One can argue that this study can be seen as novel as it integrates higher education, vocational education

and lifelong learning, where existing studies on European level processes are often focused on a specific type/level of education. Furthermore, this study examines the EQF process through multiple stages, from its origins, introduction, further development, to the national processes that have taken place. This study also has a relationship to the studies on qualifications frameworks, as it contributes to the literature on the complex and potentially contested ideas embedded into qualifications frameworks. However, rather than just assuming that there are contested ideas built into the framework, this study aims to focus on the processes through which these contestations emerge when qualifications frameworks as new policy solutions are developed.

3 Analytical framework

One of the conclusions that can be drawn from Chapter 2 is that there has been a lack of studies on how qualifications frameworks have become an important policy solution in the EU policy domain. The few studies available have focused more on the content and implications of national frameworks, and less on the actual political and administrative processes that have led to the development of the EQF by the EU and the subsequent introduction of NQFs at the national level. While it has been argued that the EQF is *not* a "neutral device" (Cort, 2010b), in order to understand why this is the case, it is necessary to examine the processes through which policy solutions, such as the EQF, are developed at European and national level and the kind of structures that have been developed around them. Hence, to "zoom in" on the process of how the EQF was introduced, developed and implemented, this study draws on political science, public administration and European studies literature. Key concepts that are used derive from studies on multi-level governance, the role of institutions and actors in developing policy solutions, and the process of institutionalization. The analytical toolbox for "zooming in" is based on an overall institutional perspective and relies on three key themes:

- Decision-making about standards in the context of various formal and informal rules.
- The institutionalization of structures, in the sense that they become taken-for-granted and acquire legitimacy through replication.
- The reciprocal relationship between the European and national level in developing policy solutions.

The remainder of this chapter presents the main pillars for the analytical framework. The first section of the chapter will focus on the process of standardization, highlighting what characterizes standards as specific kinds of rules. Then, the chapter outlines an institutional perspective to actor behaviour in the process of coupling problems and solutions. Next, the chapter turns to the process of institutionalization and discusses how legitimacy and taken-for-grantedness are developed. These processes are then placed in a multi-level context, amongst other things, regarding the conditions under which preferences are uploaded to the European level, and how European solutions are linked to national policy processes.

3.1   Standardisation as a policy solution

The EQF is not the only standard-setting exercise the EU has engaged in. The use of standards has, for example, been described as a central element in current European level educational governance (Lawn, 2011), and standards are frequently being used in environmental policies in the EU (Frankel, 2004). In general, areas where there is not yet an established order are particularly fruitful for standardization (Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006a). The heterogeneity of educational systems in Europe would suggest that there is no established order, indicating that this could be a sector where standardization would find fertile ground. However, as stressed in the introduction, education is a sector that poses certain challenges for standardization processes – due to the nature of education and the context in which the EQF was introduced.

One can view standards as specific kinds of rules for coordination, distinguished from other kinds of rules by their voluntary nature and clear source (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000), as well as by being decontextualized in space and time and by the role of expertise in their development process (Jacobsson, 2000, p. 41). At the same time, a standardization process can take various functions and these can vary over time. For instance, debates about establishing standards in particular professional fields emerged already in the earliest decades of the 20th century (Brown, 1909). Peer review processes and quality assurance are rather well established (Maassen, 2009, pp. 290-291). The issue of standardization is in such cases closely linked to concerns for quality. However, standards can also take other kinds of functions, where their primary function is related to assuring compatibility or transparency.

For policy processes in the EU, one can argue that the introduction of standards can take additional functions. It can be seen as a symbolic expression of common European norms and values, as policy instruments for oversight, or as market information tools to enhance cross-border interaction (Gornitzka et al., 2007, p. 204) – described in the introduction as symbolic, instrumental and informational function of standards. These three perspectives represent a macro perspective of a standardization process – that is, the overall function of a standardization process. Zooming in, the notion of standard-setting then represents a process through which particular ideas in a policy domain become "hardened" and agreed upon by relevant actors, raising questions of how "European standards are formulated, how they function across levels of governance and across diverse national and institutional settings" (Gornitzka et al., 2007, p. 203). Furthermore, zooming in requires paying attention to the various aspects that constitute the process of how standards are developed and distributed. The EQF thus represents an output of this "hardening" process in the form of a policy solution at the European level that has

specific national implications. This leads to the analytical framework in this study, focusing on how actors operate in a particular institutional context where problems and solutions are coupled to produce specific outputs, and how specific procedures and norms become institutionalized. More specifically, the EQF is a specific *policy solution* that is linked to a specific *policy problem*.

Viewing the EQF as a policy solution suggests a focus on the policy context in which it was introduced. In more general terms, the study of policy concerns the process of how "problems are conceptualized and brought to government for solution; governmental institutions formulate alternatives and select policy solutions; and those solutions get implemented, evaluated and revised" (Sabatier, 2007, p. 3). As the focus in this study is not on a policy process as a whole, but related to one specific policy solution, this also narrows the notion of policy problems to the outputs of this specific policy process. However, not all policy problems are alike. In the context of this study, relevant aspects include the boundary-spanning nature of problems (both in terms of geography and sectors), their scale, solubility and complexity (Peters, 2015). Following Peters' argument, the boundary spanning nature of problems creates the need for coordination – both vertically and horizontally. The larger the scale of problems, the more difficult it is to achieve coherent decisions, as they incorporate more different actors and interests. Solubility concerns whether the problem can actually be solved with the proposed policy solution. As Peters argues, insoluble problems tend to operate in areas that become "crowded" (Peters, 2015). Complexity to a large extent builds on the previous arguments in terms of interest involvement as well as issues of having clear evidence of the causal effects of appropriate solutions. This suggests that the nature of the problem also has important consequences for how solutions are selected. For this study, this highlights the relevance of studying that the manner in which the EQF was coupled to policy problems.

Policy solutions are also not alike, they can take a variety of forms, depending on the specific sector and kind of problem at hand (see, for instance Bemelmans-Videc, Rist, & Vedung, 2011; or Hood, 2008, for an overview of categories; or for instance, Howlett, 2004; Howlett, 2005; and Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009, for mixed approaches to typologies). While categorizing multiple solutions according to function and category has its merits, this has less relevance for this study and its single case focus. Instead, the main emphasis in this dissertation is on the process through which particular solutions are chosen, how they are coupled to problems, and how they are developed in the process. The factors that constrain the available choices regarding solutions in this process are similar to other decision-making processes, and include the often

ambiguous decision-making procedures, information asymmetries, as well as the context-dependent nature of the specific solutions proposed (Howlett, 2005, p. 40). These processes are always embedded in the governance structure in which the process takes place (Eliadis, Hill, & Howlett, 2005, p. 5). As there is no single solution to an identified policy problem, one can also assume that some solutions are more relevant than others in solving the problem. This indicates that one can view the linkage between problems and solutions as having various strengths – from rather loose coupling, to a tighter coupling. In organizational literature, the concept of loose coupling has been defined as "the image that coupled events are responsive, but that each event also preserves its own identity and some evidence of its physical or logical separatedness" (Weick, 1976, p. 3), used to challenge the rationalistic view of goals and practices in organizations. While the conceptualization by Weick focused on loosely coupled *systems*, the concept of "loose coupling" can also be used to denote "*anythings*" that are linked in a weak manner (Weick, 1976, p. 5), and has, for instance, been used to study reform symbols and reform practices (Christensen & Lægreid, 2003). Loose coupling can, for instance, emerge when policy problems are unclear, ambiguous, there is a lack of information regarding appropriate solutions, or when the solution is implemented ad-hoc. It should be noted that this is not a categorical view. Instead, the level of coupling is conceptualised as a continuum, where a solution can be either tighter or looser coupled to the policy problem. For the purposes of this study, loose coupling indicates that a policy solution is introduced with weak links to identified policy problems.

Hence, studying the EQF as a specific policy solution needs to take into account the various formal and informal rules that frame interaction and actor behaviour, and the multi-level and multi-actor governance context in which it is embedded. These will be discussed further in the following sections.

3.2 Coupling problems and solutions in an institutional context

Using an institutional perspective implies that the starting point is that society is seen in a structured manner where interaction follows certain patterns, has a certain degree of stability, which in turn has a certain effect on individual behaviour (Peters, 2001b). The following two subsections further outline the perspective on institutions and actors, and how they are engaged in the process of coupling between policy problems and policy solutions.

Institutions and actors

In this study, institutions are defined as sets of rules and organized practices. An institution then is an: "enduring collection of rules and organized practices derived from collective identities and belongings, and embedded in structures of meaning and resources" (Olsen, 2007). In this definition, rules can in principle be many things, including routines, procedures, conventions roles, strategies, organizational forms, and technologies, and it is their continuity and replication that assures stability over time (March & Olsen, 1989). These rules can have varying degrees of formalization, including formal and informal rules, laws, social and political norms and conventions that frame preferences (Schmidt & Radaelli 2004). The second half of the definition includes resources and structures of meaning, where organizational, financial as well as staff capabilities can be used as resources; and structures of meaning consisting of role identities, common purposes, and causal and normative beliefs (March & Olsen, 2008, p.691). What is important is that access to resources is routinized, and that the institutionalized structure has taken-for-granted and self-legitimized characteristics (Colyvas & Powell, 2006; Gornitzka, 2007). When an institutionalized structure has been developed, one of the implications of such a structure is its resistance to change, and abandoning such a structure is costly (Pierson, 1996). This means that change processes are in many cases more evolutionary (Bulmer, 1998) and characterized by patching up rather than replacement (Blatter 2003). The level and scope of change is dependent on a number of conditions. Modes and possibilities for change are dependent on the political context (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, p.18) and existing policy legacies (Weir & Skocpol, 1985). This implies that the basic assumption is that current decisions have an influence on future decisions (Tallberg 2002).

Emphasizing the role of institutions, classic explanations about actor behaviour refer to compliance with institutional norms – either through functional necessity, self-interest or internalization (Zucker, 1977, p. 727). However, revolutionary change can and does take place, and can most frequently be linked to critical junctures in the environment (Thelen, 1999). In addition, actors themselves can become the key drivers of such major changes. A prerequisite is that it needs to be the preferred option for those who have sufficient power and resources to manage change (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). This implies that the role of institutions is not deterministic, actor preferences have a particular role in shaping decisions (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Scharpf, 1997, 2000), and actors themselves can become agents of change (Holm, 1995). Overall, this suggests that while institutions can primarily be seen as providing stability, institutional change takes place when a particular threshold has been reached in terms

of actor preferences for change. This means that while institutions increase the likelihood of certain actions, they do not fully determine political behaviour or policy outcomes (March & Olsen, 2008).

While this section outlined some of the main characteristics of institutions, one can identify variation in terms of the main pattern of change within this theoretical starting point. The next section outlines four variations for how such change can take place, with particular focus on examining the process of change as (a) path-dependency (institutional rules assuring stability), (b) problem driven and (c) solution driven processes (actors act as agents of change), and (d) change as a result of chance (especially resource/time constraints).

Various patterns in coupling problems with solutions

Section 3.1 outlined standardization as a specific kind of policy solution that is coupled with policy problems, suggesting that problems and solutions can be seen as distinct entities. While reminiscent of the multiple streams conceptualization (Kingdon, 2003) of the streams of problems and solutions, an important distinction here is that these two are not conceptualized in separate streams that interact during windows of opportunity. Instead, actors actively engage with problems and solutions, and their preferences regarding both are dependent on their institutional environment and also their own preferences (either individual or collective). Adopting an institutional perspective implies emphasizing how existing formal and informal rules frame the selection and further development of policy solutions, and that decisions are taken in the context of previous decisions.
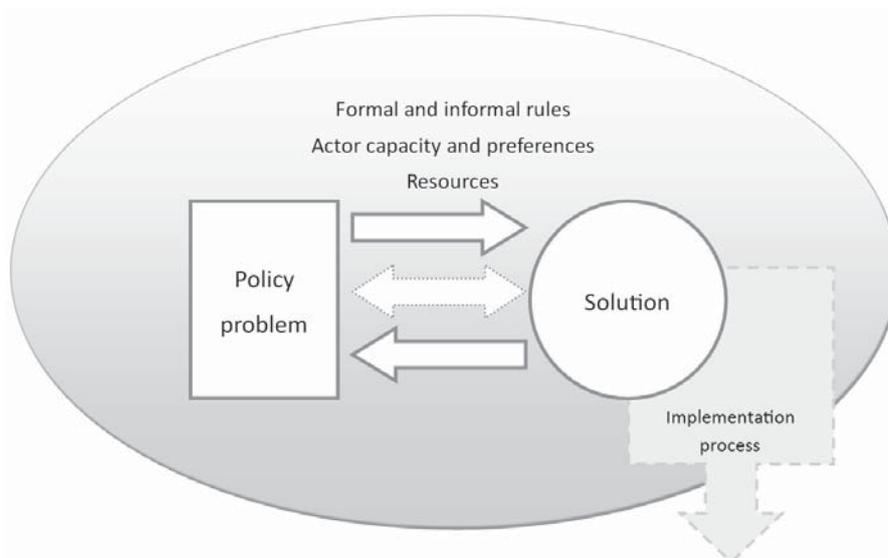
Figure 1 - Coupling between problems and solutions

It can be questioned whether a particular solution represents a change from the status quo, that is, can the new solution be conceptualized as *change.* In an institutionalized environment, one can also expect that under certain conditions the preference is towards repackaging existing solutions where no real change has taken place. Under some conditions, the changes might merely include readjusting existing policy solutions and not the policies themselves (Hall, 1993). This line of argumentation will later be discussed as the historical contingency variation where path dependency and maintaining current structures and solutions constitutes the main dynamic. However, when the solution does represent a change in the status quo, one can argue that the coupling of problems and solutions can follow still follow different patterns of change. The first, more technical and rational dynamic would be that there has been a shift in identified policy problems, which also requires a shift in the appropriate solutions – this could be the rational problem solving approach. However, as discussed earlier, policy processes are seldom linear and rational. As selection of appropriate policy solutions is part of that process, one can also argue that under certain conditions, solutions would precede existing problems – this is represented by the solution-driven pattern. The final pattern is labelled as chance, the main argument here is related to resources and other concurrent and unrelated processes. However, one can also widen the argument of chance to include other random events and configurations that have an effect on how the process unfolds.

While presenting different perspectives for what is the main dynamic and scope of change, all these perspectives take a starting point in an institutional perspective on how change takes place, but emphasize different aspects of such change processes. In terms of actors, these represent three different kinds of arguments. The specific outcome is either nothing new, a result of purposeful action, or a result of chance.

Historical contingency.   This perspective incorporates that institutional settings are path-dependent, and that policy processes can also have unintended consequences as various processes interact within the existing cultural and social context (Thelen, 1999). Change thus takes place according to two logics – the incremental and path-dependent evolution (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010), and change as a result of critical junctures. Under normal conditions change is incremental, and critical junctures are triggered by fundamental changes in the environment. Even when critical junctures emerge, the kind of change that is possible is still constrained by "past trajectories" (Thelen, 1999). These past trajectories represent particular policy legacies that imply that even new initiatives are in certain respects a reaction to existing policies (Weir & Skocpol, 1985, p. 119). New policies or policy solutions also evolve over time, suggesting

that both problem and solution definitions are not static. Particular initiatives can initially be rather symbolic and latent but at a later stage may acquire new meaning and functions (Pierson, 1996). This suggests that a new policy solution might not be a completely new initiative, but can instead represent a re-packaging and reframing of existing solutions.

Rational problem solving. A starting point in this perspective is that a particular institutionalized setting represents an equilibrium where change is costly, and usually is incremental as each element of change is embedded in a complex set of constraints (North, 1990, pp. 83-87). The key difference here is the focus on equilibrium. While a path-dependency argument would emphasize incremental processes, a rational perspective focuses on maintaining an equilibrium and the constraints on change. From a rational perspective, a policy process in essence is about achieving specific outcomes, even if the kinds of choices actors make are framed by actor preferences, interaction patterns and the institutional setting (Scharpf, 1997). The main logic of coupling problems and solutions in this process is linear - it is the policy problem that forms the basis for policy solutions. This means that clearly identifiable stages can be identified, a process of agenda-setting is followed by decision-making and implementation, in principle constituting a bureaucratic model (Larsson & Trondal, 2006).

Solution-driven normative processes. While a problem-driven argument would focus on how shifts in problems also require new solutions, this is not always the case. Under certain conditions, it is the "social value" of particular solutions that drives the process forward (Gornitzka & Metz, 2015). This can be linked to the ideational perspective of having normative views on what a good solution is (Peters, 2002). This also means that the introduction of new solutions can be a contested process, where competing and contradictory processes can be identified (Olsen, 2007, p. 13) in cases where the proposed solution does not fit with existing norms and values, and when key actors disagree on what an appropriate solution is. The rationale for having a preference for a particular solution can be, for instance, the result of policy borrowing from other contexts. Here, particular solutions are promoted by the actors involved due to being seen as superior, where sources for such ideas are, for instance, expert communities and professionals or ideological preferences (Gornitzka & Metz, 2015; Peters, 2002).

A process of chance. The final alternative is that it are neither institutional rules that are maintaining stability nor purposeful actors who assure a specific decision, it is primarily the result of chance. This perspective would draw from the 'garbage can' perspective implying that problems and solutions, as well as the actors involved, are rather loosely coupled (Cohen,

March, & Olsen, 1972), and any action would be the result of a "temporal accident" (Gornitzka & Metz, 2015), i.e. that such processes involve an element of serendipity. The chance element is not necessarily only linked to the fact that problems and solutions are coupled in a random manner or that actors would not have specific preferences. Instead, what this suggests is that time is a scarce resource, and the available attention that actors have for a specific process is dependent on other concurrent and unrelated processes (Gornitzka & Metz, 2015). Chance then represents external unplanned and uncontrolled events and constraints that influence the process. Given that the actors who make decisions are people, there are always other constraints that can exert influence on the process in this manner.

	Main pattern of behaviour	Main pattern of change	Problems and solutions	Coupling of problems and solutions
Historical contingency	Path dependency	Incremental	Embedded, transforming	Both tight and loose coupling
Rational	Equilibrium	Costly, constrained	Sequential, Problem driven	Tight coupling
Normative	Social norms and practices	Incremental, contested	Solution driven	Both tight and loose coupling
Chance	Chance	Temporal accidents	Exist independently	Loose coupling

Table 1 – Summary of the perspectives on change

These perspectives represent four ideal types (see Table 1 – Summary of the perspectives on change), with different arguments for the role of the institutional environment, how problems and solutions are coupled, the intentionality of the process, and on the process through which change takes place. The extent to which actor behaviour can be seen as rational and the extent to which actors can influence change, varies as well. What they have in common is that the process takes place in an institutionalized context of formal and informal rules that either enable or constrain action. Actors in this context have specific capacities and preferences with respect to change, and they have different levels of resources to facilitate such change. Furthermore, the different nature of policy problems in terms of scale, solubility, complexity and boundary issues (Peters, 2015) can influence the process. For instance, large scale, boundary-crossing and complex problems require a broader scope of actors involved (who can have diverging interests), thus creating ambiguity. Unsolvable problems on the other hand create clutter in the policy area – with layers of new solutions as the problem is not possible to solve. In this context, path dependencies can become more influential.

As argued in this section there are various pathways for standards and standardization processes to emerge. Overall, this section has outlined the possible variations of the process through which

ideas become "hardened", that is, how one can account for the manner in which specific standards are being developed (Gornitzka et al., 2007).

3.3 The process of institutionalization

The first part of the analytical framework zoomed in on how actors engage in the coupling of problems and solutions as a means to examine the processes that constitute standardization. This section is concerned with how institutionalized rules are developed over time and how stability is created. While the first section focused on a meso-level development with respect to the coupling of problems and solutions where actors could be either individual or collective, the focus here is on the micro-level analysis of how the institutionalization processes occur through interaction between individuals within a specific group or structure. As the process of standardization can also be seen as an expression of norms and values (Gornitzka et al., 2007), this section discusses how these can become legitimate and taken for granted through the process of institutionalization.

Earlier in this chapter, an institution was defined as an "enduring collection of *rules* and *organized practices* derived from *collective identities and belongings*, and embedded in *structures of meaning* and *resources*" (Olsen, 2007). This section deals primarily with a bottom-up process of institutionalization, that is, how particular rituals and organized practices aggregate over time (W. W. Powell & Colyvas, 2008, p. 278). As in the previous section, actors have an important role here. Actors do not blindly follow rules nor are they always entrepreneurs with change preferences. The primary logic of actor behaviour being a result of both institutional rules and specific preferences is also maintained here. However, where the previous section focused on actors as possible agents for change and the conditions for change to take place, this section enunciates the role of actors in creating processes of reproduction and institutionalization – thus creating stability. Building primarily on the work of Colyvas and Powell, this section outlines the development of institutionalization as a process of increased legitimacy, taken-for-grantedness and routinized access to resources.

Legitimacy
Rules that are perceived as legitimate are also followed when there is no coercion or self interest (Hurd, 1999). Legitimacy is a central characteristic for structure, practices and perception (Suchman, 1995). From an internal perspective, legitimacy can be defined as a "tool that reinforces organizational practices and mobilizes organizational members around a common ethical, strategic or ideological vision" (Drori & Honig, 2013, p. 347). According to Colyvas

and Powell (2006), construction of legitimacy is linked to three key aspects – justification for existence (appropriateness), creation of a shared internal concept base (language and standards) and redrawing of boundaries. For the framework here, the first two dimensions are emphasized[6].

According to Colyvas and Powell (2006), in the early phases of institutionalization processes rules and practices are discussed at a high level of detail, and legitimacy claims are first linked to external justifications. However, as the legitimacy increases, the need for externally drawn justification for adoption decreases, and discussions move from the necessity for action to the more technical aspects – from "why" to "how to". The other aspect highlighted by Colyvas and Powell (2006) is the development of a common language around a common set of problems and solutions. The clarity of vocabulary increases over time, as does the level of agreement on key definitions that become internalized. Furthermore, this can also lead to more technical complexity in language that differentiates the group from the environment. An increased level of technical and scientific complexity can also lead to a higher level of discretion of the group vis-à-vis its environment (Epstein & O'Halloran, 1999). From this overall perspective legitimacy can be seen to have increased when justification is internalized and when language has become codified.

While Colyas and Powell primarily focus on the internal dynamics of how legitimacy is constructed, legitimacy also has an external dimension (Drori & Honig, 2013) which has to do with how a particular structure is viewed by the community it is embedded in. Furthermore, legitimacy can be seen as a resource, and a basis for acquiring other resources (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). One can argue that actors are more likely to invest time and effort in a policy arena that is considered legitimate. While it is important to take external legitimacy into account when discussing internal legitimacy, the main emphasis in this study is on the mechanisms through which legitimacy is created within, thus highlighting primarily the internal aspect of legitimacy construction. One could also argue that the external and internal dimensions can become blurred when members of a particular structure also have functions in the wider community, as is the case here.

Taken-for-grantedness
The taken-for-granted nature of institutionalized rules is often stressed as a key element of an institutionalized structure. Following Colyvas and Powell (2006), the development of taken-

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[6] The rationale for this is that in the case of the EQF, the creation of shared internal concept base empirically overlaps with the boundary-drawing exercise in the EQF. Boundaries in this case are largely re-drawn through the development of common language.

for-grantedness is operationalized here as the development of practices and roles within the group. While in their original text Colyvas and Powell also included a third aspect, categories, in this case the categorization process is closely linked to practices. For this reason, the main focus here is on practices and roles that cover the kind of aspects that can become taken for granted.

Practices become embedded into unquestioned routines through repeated application as well as interaction and activities of the participants. By attaching meaning to everyday activities, participants develop taken for granted understandings and rules that have been mediated by shared language. This process has several stages - over time leading to increased intersubjectivity, where concepts become codified and abstract (Colyvas & Powell, 2006). Practices are then initially idiosyncratic and developed on a case-by-case basis, as there are no standardized sets of procedures. Over time variation is reduced and collectiveness is emphasized by habitualized activities as the range of options becomes narrower: the practices acquire procedural aspects and one can identify a set of scripts for how certain processes take place (Colyvas & Powell, 2006).

Furthermore, taken-for-grantedness also concerns the roles of various actors. Actors' identities form the basis for the decisions they make, not only the available choice options (W. W. Powell & Colyvas, 2008, p. 284). Where the role division is initially ambiguous, over time contestations can emerge as various ideas about an appropriate role division emerge. In the process of developing taken-for-grantedness, the roles of various actors become clearer over time, and increasingly have a set of expectations related to them (Colyvas & Powell, 2006).

Resources

In addition to taken-for-grantedness and legitimacy, a structure that becomes institutionalized also needs a sufficient and routinized resource base (Gornitzka 2007). While seemingly a more instrumental argument, when resources are scarce or disappear, even taken-for-granted and legitimate structures can cease to exist or go through significant changes due to resource constraints. Furthermore, an unstable resource basis will likely destabilize the structure, as concerns for ensuring necessary resources for survival can override other processes.

Resources do not come only in the form of money. Available time and political attention are important resources (March & Olsen, 1989), as well as available expertise on a topic, linking available and routinized access to resources as a key element for constructing legitimacy.

The main elements of the institutionalization process are outlined in Table 2.

		Low	Medium	High
Legitimacy	**Language & standards**	Symbols and vocabularies external	Developing local vocabulary	Local language widely accepted and used
	Appropriateness	Uncertainty over adoption, high articulation	Values more clear but can provoke opposition	Norms and values respected and objectified
Taken-for-grantedness	**Practices**	Idiosyncratic and developed on case-by-case basis	Consolidation occurs	Scripted and well-rehearsed
	Roles	Ambiguous	Varying conventions offered, some trigger debate	Defined, with expectations
Resour-ces	**Resources**	Unstable, high level of uncertainty	Process of stabilization	Stable and routinized

Table 2 – Institutionalization as development of legitimacy, taken-for-grantedness and a stable resource base (based on Colyvas and Powell, 2006 and Gornitzka, 2007)

3.4   Multi-level and multi-actor processes in the EU

Examining the wider process of standardization requires multiple points of zooming in on specific parts of the process. Having first outlined how decisions about policy solutions can be conceptualized as a coupling between problems and solutions and various possible patterns for change, and the micro processes that can lead to institutionalizing particular structures and assure stability, this section places these developments in the context of European integration and examines how the coupling of problems and solutions can take place at multiple levels.

First, this requires a conceptualisation of the governance arrangements that can be found in the post-Lisbon era, in particular the vertical (multi-level) and horizontal (multi-actor) nature of such governance arrangements. The necessity to complement the vertical dimension with a horizontal perspective has also been noted in the EU studies literature:

> *"it is clear that they [vertical relationships] could and should eventually be complemented by other lower-level concepts focusing on structures and processes of interest intermediation and political interactions between governmental actors at both levels and constituencies"* (Scharpf 2001:4).

This section will first focus on conceptualizing the multi-level, multi-actor and formal/informal nature of EU governance, and then outline how coupling between problems and solutions takes place across levels.

The multi-level nature of the EU

An institutional approach to European governance entails focus on how institutions "are organized, how they work, and how they emerge, are maintained and change" where such institutions are endogenous and socially constructed (Olsen, 2007, p. 4). The integration process here is not a singular process towards a supranational entity or an intergovernmental bargaining process. Instead, integration is seen as a process where multiple orders co-exist and there are frequent contestations on the appropriate form and scope of political organization (Olsen, 2010). In simplified terms, scholars working in the rational choice tradition of institutional studies on the EU have primarily focused on formal rules, those working in the historical institutionalist tradition focused on path dependencies and lock-in mechanisms that constrain action, and those working in the sociological strand focused mainly on patterns of interaction and persuasion (Rosamond, 2010, pp. 109-113).

For the purposes of this study, these approach also implies that actors who engage in these patterns operate on multiple levels. The concept of multi-level governance (MLG) represents a well-established stream in the European studies literature. It goes beyond seeing the division of competencies of nation states vs. EU as two independent levels (Marks, Hooghe, & Blank, 1996, p. 348). Instead, both nation states and the EU are actors in European politics, in addition to various subnational actors and other groups. MLG thus challenges the view that formal vertical competence allocation determines capacity for policymaking (Benz & Zimmer, 2010, p. 16). MLG as a means to describe the multi-arena multi-actor nature of the EU has become a rather commonplace term in EU studies in recent years, used to signify the "peculiar qualities" of the political system in the EU (Rosamond, 2010)[7]. MLG implies that decision-making is "shared by actors at different levels rather than monopolized by national governments", where political arenas are viewed as interconnected rather than nested (Hooghe & Marks, 2001a, pp. 3-4). Such arguments resonate with the characteristics of education as a policy sector, where formal competencies have not been expanded, but there has been increased joint policymaking in Europe with actor involvement across multiple levels.

The key message from this section is that actors from multiple levels engage in policymaking processes, framed by specific rules for the scope of activities. One can assume that these actors would have different preferences for stability/change.

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[7] MLG is also not a phenomenon uniquely identified in the context of European integration, shared authority is an aspect of federal polities (see for instance Hooghe & Marks, 2001b).

The formal/informal nature of EU policy processes

After Lisbon, policy processes in the EU have emphasized soft coordination, in particular the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). New modes for policymaking stress common objectives, monitoring and benchmarking instead of legal implementation (Gornitzka, 2007, p. 155; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008). Given that these so-called new soft governance approaches do not have clear procedures (Borrás & Jacobsson, 2004) and that they are not always based on legislation (Héritier, 2001), this enables more experimentation and innovation with respect to the kind of structures that can be created on the European level, for instance, in the form of standard-setting. For these reasons, OMC also challenges the traditional means of studying Europeanization in terms of compliance and implementation (Radaelli, 2008), viewing integration as an open-ended and flexible endeavour (Olsen, 2007, p. 15), with increasingly blurred boundaries between formal and informal governance structures.

In the post-Lisbon era, the prominence of informal elements has increased, even in procedures that have been clearly outlined in the Treaty, that is, the decision-making process (Farrell & Héritier, 2003; Reh, Héritier, Bressanelli, & Koop, 2013). Specific arenas are informal according to two key aspects: the activities are non-codified as there are no formal written rules regulating their behaviour, and they are not publicly sanctioned through formal legal power but instead through exercising social pressure (Christiansen, Føllesdal, & Piattoni, 2003). It has also been argued that such soft coordination processes would have limited effect unless linked to traditional governmental processes (Diedrichs, Reiners, & Wessels, 2010). However, research on informal governance has shown that even in a loose form, this does not imply that informal governance arrangements are more fragile (Dehousse, 1997, p. 260). They can become highly institutionalized (Wincott, 2003) and provide important new arenas for increased governance capacity, even if they do not become formalized and regulative.

There has been a clear increase in the use of soft law, networks, partnerships, OMC and committees, and there is also blurring of the formal and informal aspects of the processes (Peters, 2007; Wincott, 2003). Developing new arenas for joint discussion that are of informal nature for "open coordination" and joint debates is not unique for education, and can also be found, for instance, in environmental policy (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008, p. 309).

Examples of various governance arenas for education at the European level can be found in the co-existence of the Bologna Process and various initiatives for higher education by the EU (Gornitzka, 2010). When such arenas become institutionalized on their own, interaction between them can create friction in cases where the basic norms and values collide. These

processes of soft and informal governance are neither value free nor apolitical, since the Commission, stakeholder organizations and member states all have a stake in assuring that their preferences prevail. Taking into account the limited legal capacity and competencies of the EU in the area of education, one can expect a degree of informality in the kinds of structures that are created and how particular rules and standards are used and practiced. One can further expect that the informal understanding of what is considered to be an appropriate scope for joint policymaking can have a substantial role to play in the scope of possible action.

This section highlights that the mode for policymaking has an implication for both the process and the outcome. Current policymaking arrangements in the EU suggest that it is necessary to examine the dynamics between formal and informal structures and practices. Standardization in this context can also be seen as a new kind of governance mechanism, further blurring the formal/informal nature.

Multi-actor nature of EU policy processes
In addition to being a multi-level process, European policy processes are characterized by being a multi-actor process that requires coordination between actors. The starting point for these debates on horizontalisation is the view that a policy process is "complexly interactive" (Lindblom & Woodhouse, 1993). The idea that actors and various new groups play a role in policy processes is not new. It is already portrayed in the classic "muddling through" perspective of Lindblom (1959), where he exemplifies how certain choices have implications for other groups – and where making decisions essentially means balancing various interests. This is of importance as patterns and linkages between actors structure not only outcomes, but the process and behaviour as well (Hanf, 1978).

Various actors in the process can span across various policy sectors that can have parallel aims, creating vertical links to the national level (Braun, 2008). While there is a proliferation of various new included actors and interests, these vertical links have been closed systems (Braun, 2008). From an institutional perspective one can further argue that coordination between various institutional domains can not only be difficult, but can also create friction where basic norms and values collide. However, even when actors come from the same institutional domain, one can expect that their preferences for change are not the same (see discussion of actor preferences in section 3.2.). In the case of policies that are made in a context with multiple actors and interests that have to be coordinated, this is likely to lead to competing ideas and less consistency, a coherent output being the least likely outcome (Bish, 1978), and one can expect

that the decision represents the lowest common denominator (Richardson, 2000). At the same time, the traditional work methods in the process of developing standards are based on consensus building and inclusiveness (Werle, 2001, p. 397). From this perspective, the greater the scope of actors and interests involved, the more ambiguity one can expect as this can be a means to ensure consensus. Ambiguity here can be seen as a means to tackle multiple and possibly colliding preferences, norms and values.

In the context of the EU, actors operate on multiple levels in a non-hierarchical manner (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008), representing a more participatory approach to policymaking (Peters, 2001a). The use of interest groups, stakeholder organisations and new policy actors is not a recent phenomenon in the EU. Already in the early 1990s, Mazey and Richardson (1993, 1996) examined the increasing focus on interest group activity in the EU processes. Prompting more interest groups to participate in EU processes can facilitate gradual competence building without alienating the member states (Mazey & Richardson, 2006). On some occasions, this inclusion can be more cosmetic, where the processes are more reminiscent of window-dressing and legitimacy building after decisions have already been reached (Richardson, 2000, p. 1010).

In addition to interest groups, experts are another important group of actors. As the Commission itself has only limited capacity for expertise on various policy areas due to its relatively limited staff capacity, it is dependent on external expertise. Such experts can provide links to interest groups and stakeholders (Christiansen et al., 2003). While it has been considered a "crucial property" of the multi-level governance system of the EU (Majone 1997), the topic of expertise has been a subject of debate in EU studies literature (Metz, 2013; Radaelli, 1999). Studies by Gornitzka and Sverdrup (2008, 2010) have identified that there has been overall growth of the use of expert groups by the Commission; that there is sectoral variety linked to technical complexity; and that the expert groups' links to governance levels vary. Experts provide advice, knowledge as well as information (Gornitzka & Sverdrup, 2008), thus the selection of particular experts can have consequences on decisions about a particular course of action.

While one can identify a horizontalisation process, it is important to distinguish between formal and informal capacity for actor participation. Here, the Commission is the gate-keeper with the potential to define boundary rules (Larsson & Trondal, 2006), for instance, by creating rules for the configuration of expert groups, or by inviting particular experts to provide their expertise. However, individuals from formally weak institutions can exert considerable influence through coalition building, despite their lack of formal status (Warleigh, 2003, p. 24). This suggests that

the power of each actor is not only dependent on their own resources, but their ability to find means to exert influence.

One can then identify a coordination process both on national and European levels, in addition to various sets of vertical links in both directions. For instance, interest groups can influence their national governments to push towards a particular policy preference at the European level, at the same time, these interest groups on many occasions also have representative networks and associations at the European level that provide another channel of influence.

This section highlighted that horizontal coordination between actors has implications for the outcomes. This means that the scope of interest involved, the basis for actor selection, their ability to influence the process, and the formal and informal rules that frame their behaviour become relevant factors in examining how processes that contribute to standardization unfold.

Coupling of problems and solutions in a multi-level and multi-actor context: uploading and downloading

The vertical dimension refers to the relationship between member states and the EU. While the emergence of soft governance arrangements has increased the informality of the processes and puts focus on the multi-level context of such processes, the question remains: under which conditions are preferences transferred to the European level? The first part of this section then concerns the division of competencies, and why and how delegation to the EU takes place in this multi-level context (*uploading process*). Second, this concerns how particular European rules (i.e. standards) are transferred to national contexts and what kind of possible outcomes this has (*downloading process*), having in mind the challenges of horizontal coordination. The basic underlying assumption is that there is mutual adaptation (Olsen, 2007) or mutual adjustment (Scharpf, 2001), and we need to examine both the national and European level to examine the interrelationship between the two and under what conditions certain courses of action are considered to be desirable.

Under certain conditions, member state actors are willing to transfer formal competencies. This widening scope for more competence can be related to the short time horizon of political actors at the member state level when "the substantive policy stream of European integration [is] more salient for powerful domestic constituencies than its decisional implications" and sovereignty may be sacrificed (Marks et al., 1996, p. 349). Alternatively, state leaders may wish to transfer competencies as the specific issue is not desirable for domestic decisions (Marks et al., 1996). In essence, member states may prefer to upload issues to the European level when such

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uploading is seen to be beneficial to ensuring success at the national level (Martens & Wolf, 2009), or to ensure that European preferences are closest to national ones, so costs of compliance can be reduced in the future (Falkner, Hartlapp, Leiber, & Treib, 2004). This process is not risk free, and can have unintended consequences as this widens the scope of activities on European level (Martens & Wolf, 2009).

Bearing that in mind, it is important to not only focus on the formal widening of competencies, but also the rules that operationalise how these competencies can be used (Benz & Zimmer, 2010). Such formal rules need to be operationalized in a manner that is acceptable to those involved. For this reason, it is essential to examine the formal-informal nature of cooperation. This is of particular relevance following the introduction of the Open Method of Coordination where the vertical division of competencies can be seen from additional dimensions, other than just the legal executive competencies – and where the Commission has in certain areas acquired communicative and coordinating powers, even when there has not been any formal change in rules (Borrás, 2008). Furthermore, standardization represents a different way of thinking about European coordination. Thus, the upwards vertical stream in this case concerns not only the transference of competencies, but also preferences/inputs to the European level (Börzel, 2003) that become inputs for a standardization process. However, one can argue that the rationales for engaging in this uploading of preferences can be linked to those that concern uploading of formal competencies – that is, for strategic behaviour to assure national leverage or ways to ensure that the developed standards match national preferences.

Taking a starting point in the institutional perspective outlined earlier in this chapter, the success of this uploading process is dependent on a number of factors. First, this is dependent on the scope of change, whether the proposed solution matches existing preferences, norms and values. In Europeanization literature, this is often broadly referred to as "goodness of fit" (Börzel, 1999), that is – how similar the proposed solution is to existing solutions. Second, following the analytical framework outlined earlier that emphasizes the role of actors, this would also be linked to existing actor capacity. That is, the extent to which there are actors who have a preference for change and whether they have sufficient capabilities and resources to manage this change (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996).
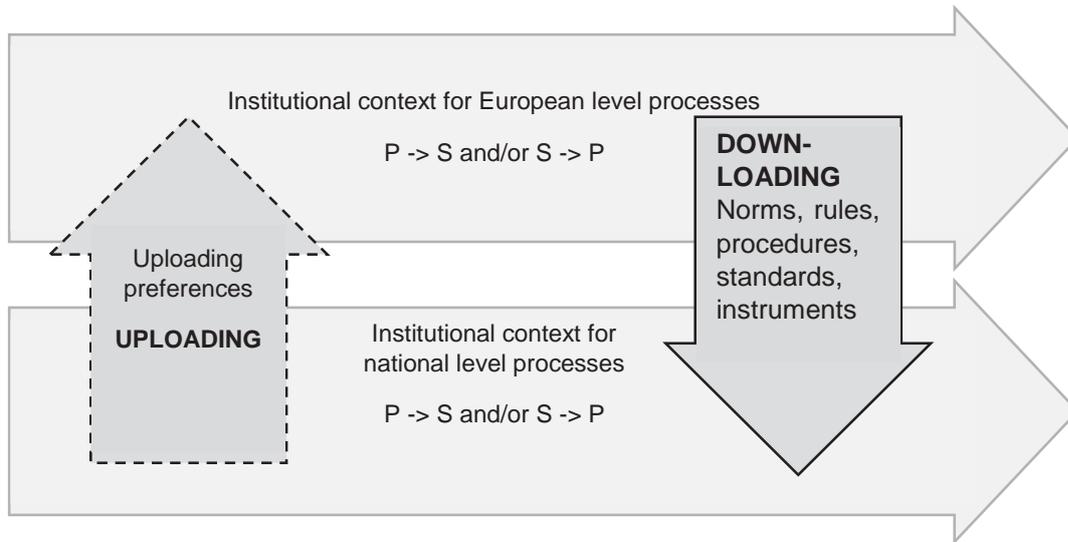
Figure 2 - Uploading and downloading processes, adapted from Börzel (2003)

The downward stream concerns the process of adapting to European solutions. One can label this as implementation in a broad sense. However, the proposed solution comes in a form of recommendation. Thus, the underlying logic does not emphasize enforcement, but persuasion (Hartlapp, 2007). In a simplified manner, the downward stream can be conceptualized as a process of *downloading*, where particular European solutions (Börzel, 2003) are introduced at the national level. In the context of OMC, this downloading process is more flexible and countries have more autonomy on how they want to introduce recommended solutions.

When a country has not uploaded preferences to the European level, the *downloading* process can mean that the European solution obtains an agenda-setting role, putting certain issues on the domestic agenda. This becomes per definition a solution-driven process at the national level as the European rule or norm is what pushes the process forward. At the same time, this process can nevertheless become tightly or loosely coupled to existing national policy debates and identified policy problems. Having in mind that the institutional perspective entails that change can be costly when it represents a major change from status quo, one can expect that when the proposed solution represents a major change on the national level, this can create resistance and contestation. Having in mind the notion of coupling (tight versus loose), and change or no change, one can develop four possible expectations for the trajectories, with a continuum on both axis.

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Change (new solution)

Institutional collisions Contested process	Window dressing Instrumental process

Tight coupling ← → **Loose coupling**

Re-emphasis Integrative process	Low relevance Disinterested and/or technical process
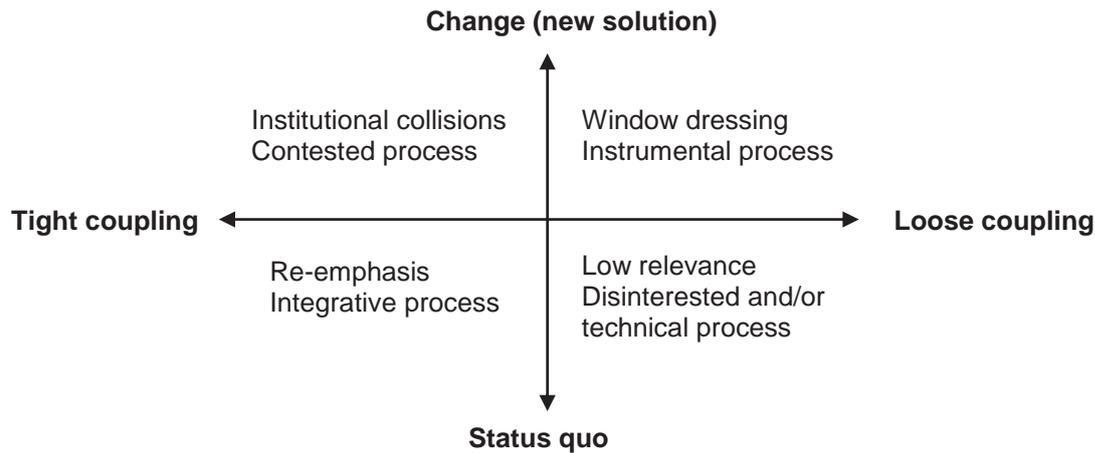
Status quo

Figure 3 - Process and outcome with respect to the scope of change and coupling with national policy problems

First, if the new proposed solution represents a major change from status quo and is at the same time tightly coupled with existing national policy problems, the process would likely be subject to contestation, as the rules that have framed the adoption of the solution at the European level can differ from the ones that exist at the national level, and the various actors involved are likely to have diverging preferences regarding the outcomes. From an institutional perspective, the process would thus likely lead to institutional collisions.

Second, if such a European solution is not clearly coupled (or loosely coupled) with an existing national policy problem but nevertheless represents change, the process is likely to be superficial as the policy problem in such cases becomes compliance with European standards and not an identified policy problem from the wider policy domain on national level. The process can be become rather instrumental, and include window-dressing strategies, in particular if there are costs related to non-compliance.

Third, if the proposed European solution is a not a change from status quo, one can expect that with tight coupling to national policies the various norms and practices related to the solution would not be contested, as they are already highly matched. The process can be seen as integrative and emphasizing the relevance of status quo, and national actors can also strategically use European processes to emphasize the relevance of the process in a national context.

Fourth, when the new European solution is similar to solutions already found on national level, but where there is loose coupling of the solution to existing national policy problems, one can

expect a disinterested process where the instrument would likely to be seen as not having added value or relevance.

The dynamics of these four processes are dependent on a number of factors. Local policymaking context plays an important role, as it sets the scope for action and traditions for including actors. Furthermore, the incentive for change is an important factor for the actors to actively engage in the attempts to create a tighter link between the European solution and national policy domain. This means that actors also have a role in bridging European and national policy problems and solutions. Temporal sorting is also important, as European processes can also provide a window of opportunity for particular local processes (Cort, 2010a). Furthermore, one can expect that the level of institutionalization of European coordination plays a role, that is, whether compliance with European initiatives is considered legitimate and taken-for-granted.

The key message from this section is that even if there are no formal competencies at the EU level, under certain conditions one can identify a process of *uploading* of member state preferences to the European level. The process of *downloading* and the dynamics on the member state level depend on how the existing proposed solution from the European level is linked with existing national policy debates.

3.5   Summary of main expectations

The dissertation employs standardization as an overarching perspective, zooming in on various parts of the standard-setting process: the processes through which standards are developed as specific kinds of policy solutions, the mechanisms for oversight and the manner in which standards are distributed. Based on this, three main sets of expectations can be formed.

The first set of expectations is linked to the processes leading to the development of a qualifications framework as a specific *solution*, with particular focus on its linkages to the policy objectives in the sector at the EU level and the various actors involved. The basic assumption is that the dynamics of the process can be outlined in terms of the specific institutional rules and path-dependency; actor capacities and preferences for change (solution vs. problem driven); chance. Furthermore, the nature of the policy problem has implications for the scope of actors, interests and ambiguity of the process. In order for a specific actor to be able to put an issue on the agenda at the European level, this actor needs resources and expertise. At the same time, that actors share a preference to change status quo would not necessarily

imply that they agree regarding the content of proposed change. In a situation when actors have been successful to assure that change has taken place, one can assume that - as actors can also maintain diverse interests and preferences -, ambiguity and vagueness would increase with larger numbers of actors involved. This would be the case as the solution has to cater for various kinds of preferences while at the same time has to be a change from status quo.

The second set of expectations is linked to the creation of oversight structures for particular policy solutions on EU processes. The very basic proposition is that since the EQF is a process of standardization that also deals with cross-border interaction by operating as a translation tool, this requires administrative capacity at the European level, and the creation of specific oversight structures. Taking into account the legally constrained nature of the education sector at the EU level, one can expect that there would be a considerable degree of informality in this oversight process. Institutionalization here would require development of legitimacy (language and appropriateness), taken-for-grantedness (practices and roles) and a stable resource basis. One can expect that due to the heterogeneity of interests of various member states, this structure would be difficult to institutionalize due to the high level of turnover amongst participants.

The third set of expectations is related to the manner in which standards are spread, that is, what happens when European solutions meet diverse national educational systems. One can argue that due to the highly institutionalized educational systems across Europe this would be dependent on whether the solution aligns with existing solutions on the national level. This means that the outcome on the national level is dependent on the scope of change proposed by the European solution and the coupling to national problems. One can expect that if the European solution represents radical change, there would be resistance as national institutional barriers would prevail, as there is little formal sanctioning of non-compliance. The intervening factors here are national institutional structures, policymaking legacies and the role of actor preferences.

Zooming out, these three elements represent a means to interpret the broader process of standardization. Having in mind the symbolic, instrumental and information functions of the standardization process (Gornitzka et al., 2007), these three sets of expectations contribute to examining how these three play out. First of all, if the standardization process is a process of expressing particular European norms and values, a key question is how these have been developed and how agreement has been reached in the context of very different educational systems and actor interests? Second, if standardization represents a specific policy instrument, what are the implications of introducing such European solutions and how is this linked to

changes in governance capacity? Third, if the standardization process concerns primarily cross-border exchange, how does the standardization process play out on the national level? These three perspectives will further be discussed in the concluding chapter.

4 Methodology

The chapter on methodology is divided into six sections, explaining first the epistemological and ontological positioning of this study in the realm of critical realism. Then, the basic implication of a qualitative case study design is examined, outlining the design and principles for case selection. Then, the various data sources are presented, including documents and expert interviews. This is followed by sections on validity, ethics and the methodological limitations of the study.

4.1 Epistemological and ontological positioning of the study

The choice of ontological and epistemological starting point has implications for the theoretical positioning, data gathering/generating and the requirements one sets for data validity. Historically, much of the early research in the institutional tradition had a starting point in behaviouralism and rational choice thinking, with research being concerned about "hard facts" through examination of formal structures and individual behaviour being motivated by self-interest (Scott, 2001, p. 7). This focus on utility maximization has been considered as a powerful explanation for human behaviour, and the logic can be traced back to Mill and the idea of the "economic man" (Persky, 1995)[8]. In this line of thought, conceptualizing individual actors as being motivated by self-interest would also allow concrete measurable behaviour where certain courses of action allow for higher or lower maximization of individual utility. In social sciences, this would most commonly be associated with a positivist research tradition.

The emergence of neo-institutionalism largely questioned this narrow focus, and instead suggests focusing on how various kinds of rules both constrain and enable action, while retaining rational choice as one possible explanation among others (Scott, 2001, p. 8). This study is placed in the neo-institutionalist tradition, as an institution was defined in the previous chapter (Chapter 3) as an "enduring collection of *rules* and *organized practices* derived from *collective identities and belongings*, and embedded in *structures of meaning* and *resources*" (Olsen, 2007). Here, institutions are something more than merely aggregate behaviour of self-interested actors who operate within formal rules, marking an important difference from the earlier institutionalism (Lowndes, 2010). Consequently, instead of merely explaining the social

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[8] It should be noted that Mill never used the term itself, and according to Persky (1995) the earliest mention of the term can be found in the work by Ingram in 1888.

world as a system of laws in a similar vein as the natural world, focus is on understanding social structures as the "fabric of meanings" (Hollis, 2010, p. 19). According to Hollis, meaning is what makes social sciences different from natural sciences, linked to concepts about values, representation, agreed symbols, normative expectations and beliefs. Following Hollis, one can distinguish between "natural adaptive response to a changing environment and self-conscious, theoretically-informed social interaction" (Hollis, 2010, p. 146). The former in his explanation refers to reactions that are similar to a biological stimulus response, whereas the latter is characteristic of social interaction where actors interpret social norms, beliefs and meanings in the process. In a social world where actor behaviour is expected to also follow certain social norms, this interpretative element in social interactions can be seen as one basic premise. At the same time, even when social actors interpret situations, one can also under certain conditions assume intersubjectivity – that is – shared understanding of certain events. The ontological position adopted here implies a level of intersubjectivity as the very concept of institutions implies a level of shared norms and values. This is different from an objectivist account of institutions independent of human action and of the perspective where an institution is composed of individualistic subjective actions (Hollis, 2010, p. 159). Furthermore, while actors in the world interpret social norms, such norms have an existence of their own and they have an effect on human action – thus being also an identifiable object of study. Once developed, societal norms are capable of both enabling and constraining action. As such, the viewpoint here would perhaps be closest to a critical realist position. This perspective can be argued to provide an alternative position to the positivist and interpretivist dichotomy (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009), and its usefulness has been identified in various disciplines of social science (Fairclough, 2005; Patomäki & Wight, 2000) since its establishment in the 1970s.

A critical realist position can be characterized by focus on identifying patterns, generalisations and possible causations, while acknowledging the difficulty of developing general law-like claims, as would be the case in natural sciences. Ontologically, these patterns and possible causations are viewed from a moderately objectivist account – while they might be at some point socially constructed, they also acquire an objective existence independent of our knowledge of it. What is of key interest for the critical realist is to examine the kind of social structures that underlie the observable and unobservable reality – what is conceptualized as the "real" domain, beyond the empirical (observable) and actual (reality beyond observation). The real domain consists of the structures and mechanisms that cause a social phenomenon (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 40), in principle, the *how*-question. Distinguishing ontology

and epistemology is considered important in critical realism. The critical realist position directly contrasts empirical realism which, according to critical realists, would induce epistemic fallacy by not sufficiently distinguishing between epistemology and ontology and "analyse being in terms of knowledge" (Bhaskar, 2007, p. 29). While the ontological position implies a degree of objectivism, epistemologically one can be perceived as a moderate constructivist in the sense that our knowledge of a certain phenomenon is constructed. Others have described the epistemological position as weak relativism, described as: "both the ontological world and the worlds of ideology, interests, values, hopes, and wishes play a role in the construction of scientific knowledge" (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002, pp. 29, cited in Kleven 2008).

A critical realist position emphasizes the importance of theory as a guiding principle for research, where a range of methodological tools can be used (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002). The idea of theory being principal to how we see is not a new claim in philosophy of science. In fact, Hanson argued that all of our observations are in any case theory laden (Hanson, 1958). Taking this as a starting point, being clear about the analytical starting point for the study is essential, as it also sets a baseline for the study and the kinds of patterns that would be observed. If observations are theory laden but these theoretical assumptions are not clarified before the empirical study, findings would likely confirm these assumptions. Not acknowledging their existence beforehand can create this bias. From a critical realist position, the fact that our observations are theory laden is not problematic, this is in fact a basic starting point – we need theoretical tools to understand the mechanisms of the "real" domain. What is particularly relevant here is that a critical realist view integrates individualism and holism (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 43), an often-used dualism in philosophy of science (Fay, 1996; Hollis, 2010). As such, this epistemological and ontological perspective allows for a more open focus on institutions and actors, and the interdependent relationships between the two.

4.2   Qualitative case study design

Often the paradigmatic distinction is also drawn together with the methodological camps – thus the differentiation becomes a "shorthand proxy for referring to philosophical differences" (Yanow, 2007, p. 406), where quantitative methods are linked to the positivist world view and qualitative to the interpretivist/constructivist view. The interpretivist turn in social sciences is often linked to the idea that social scientists are a part of the same world they are researching, thus they "actively construct knowledge by inventing tools and instruments to collect and produce data […and] formulate concepts to make interpretations of the data" (Sadovnik, 2007,

p. 420). It is argued that qualitative research is seen to stress "the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). There are various myths about qualitative research, from the good vs. bad science, to the very question of whether qualitative research really is science. Often the division comes down to whether one counts (quantitative) or interprets (qualitative), but in reality qualitative researchers do count and quantitative researchers do interpret their data (Yanow, 2007). Another common division is that quantitative research is seen as objective whereas qualitative is subjective, but it has been argued that both methodologies in their essence follow the same interpretation model (Ercikan & Roth, 2006), as both require interpretation of social reality.

The critical realist starting point that is adopted here is not deterministic about methodology (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009), and one could principally use either quantitative or qualitative methods – what is essential is uncovering the mechanisms that operate in social reality and the theories we employ that guide what we see. This means that the position adopted here would not agree with equalizing the methodological approach with a philosophical paradigm, as often appears to be the case, especially in educational sciences. Following this, the view on qualitative methods here would not make a sharp distinction when discussing, for instance, validity or data quality (Kleven, 2008). Methodological choice is viewed here as a more pragmatic rather than a paradigmatic choice – it is about obtaining the most relevant data for the kinds of questions that are posed. As this study is an in-depth examination of one specific process, this study is outlined as a qualitative case study.

The EQF as an unlikely case
The dissertation focuses on a process of standardization, examining in particular one case of such standardization processes – the European Qualifications Framework. One can argue that the EQF as a whole provides by its nature an intrinsic case (Stake, 2005, p. 450) as much of the starting point to this study started with inquiry into the nature of the EQF and how it came about. However, the EQF represents more than just an intrinsically interesting case. Despite more space for coordination in education in Europe, this policy solution (i.e. holistic view on educational systems, shift to learning outcomes and ideas about informal and non-formal learning, etc.) can be seen to contain rather radical ideas for many educational systems, and one could therefore expect resistance on the national level. While one perhaps might not call it a *least likely* case, at the outset it could be seen as an *unlikely case*.

Case studies are known for in-depth examination of a particular case, with multiple possible definitions for the scope of a case (Stake, 2005). What makes a case study different from other methods is that "a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2009, p. 18). This makes case studies particularly appropriate when one is studying processes where the origins and outline of the process are rather open-ended and not predefined. A case study approach is also in line with a critical realist position with its strong emphasis on theory. As Yin has argued, if there are no theory-driven statements, "chronologies become *chronicles*" (Yin, 2009, p. 149).

Furthermore, an important aspect of case studies is that they rely on multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009, p. 18). This suggests that case studies are particularly relevant when studying processes that require a detailed and in-depth explanation. Context is an important factor in case studies – both historical and physical, but also political and social (Stake, 2005, p. 449). Case studies can draw from various sources of empirical data, including documents, artefacts, interviews and observations (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009). While some of these techniques can also be used in a quantitative manner, the focus in this project points towards a qualitative research approach, as aspects of the process that are studied cannot be pre-defined completely, and a more flexible and open approach is needed. In this project, data collection was conducted through two key methods – qualitative document analysis and interviews with various actors in the process on the European and national levels. The analytic strategy was based on theoretical propositions that were used to focus the study, where the process is characterised by iterative explanation building (Yin, 2009). This iterative process is also closely linked to the nature of a dissertation writing process, where initial theoretical assumptions are revisited and empirical material is re-examined over time. As such, the research process here was not linear – the concepts used in the various parts of the analytical framework were also adjusted after data collection, and up until that point, the theoretical tools had also been revisited.

The main time period for the collected data here is from approximately year 2002 to 2013. The study initially started with focus on the year 2008 when the EQF was formally adopted, and then followed the empirical data in an open ended-manner backwards in time, with focus on aspects such as the alternatives that were considered before the decision, where the idea originated from, who was involved in the process, and how one ensured compliance and agreement. The time period for the emergence of the EQF can be placed around 2002/2003, whereas older policy initiatives in the same area at the European level were also examined in

order to place the policy solution in its historical context, as historical legacies are presumed to play a role based on the adopted theoretical starting point (see Chapter 3). Starting the research project in 2009 also allowed for some real-time following of the developments over time. The interviews were conducted in spring 2013.

Selection of national cases

While one can view the EQF as *the case* in this study, it should be viewed as an embedded case(Yin, 2009), due to examinations of three national processes of introducing NQFs and their relationship to the EQF. Being an embedded case then implies that certain units within the process were further chosen for closer examination, and the NQF development was framed as the implementation of the European process at the national level.

One minor caveat should be mentioned here – while multiple NQF processes were studied, this study does not employ a strict comparative design. These cases are illustrations of how the EQF has been used in national processes and the cases are used to examine the different dynamics at the national level. A full-scale comparative design would require a much more structured comparison, which has not been possible in this case, as the national processes have unfolded in a rather idiosyncratic manner.

As focus at the national level was on the development of NQF in the context of EQF, the basic starting point was that the countries that were selected should also be countries that have engaged in developing an NQF – so the countries selected for examination here are Ireland, Norway and Estonia. In addition to all having opted for an NQF, these countries provide a mix of other similarities and differences. These similarities allow for the countries to be considered as *comparable* cases. The three selected countries are all rather small countries on the European periphery. They are often underrepresented in larger studies, where focus tends to be on the larger central EU countries. All three selected countries have traditionally been performing well in the Bologna Process and are generally engaged in European processes. One can thus expect that their orientation in terms of European integration in education would generally be positive, and that they would be experienced in terms of adopting European rules[9]. It can be argued that this is important, as it would also give a general indication that policy orientation in these countries. From this perspective, while one would argue that the EQF can be seen as an unlikely

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[9] Alternatively, these countries could also be successful in terms of uploading their preferences, but for the sake of case selection, it suffices to show that their preferences are close to European ones – that is, they can be seen as rather Europeanized.

case due to the challenges outlined in the introduction, these three countries can be seen as likely cases to adopt the policy solution once it is adopted at the European level.

These three countries also provide a mix of differences. Ireland and Estonia are EU members, whereas Norway is associated into European processes through the EEA. Ireland has been a long-term member since joining the European Economic Community (EEC) already in 1973, the predecessor of the EU. Estonia is one of the new EU members, having regained its status as a sovereign state only in 1991, joining the EU in 2004. So, while all of the countries suggest a similar level of alignment with the Bologna process, their formal linkages to the EU are rather different. A further difference lies in the manner of developing NQFs. Ireland was by many seen as one of the forerunners in Europe in terms of developments around qualifications frameworks, and developed their framework before the EQF.

Granted, this selection of countries has a number of limitations. First of all, the selection is not representative and emphasizes cases that have adopted an NQF. To be able to say something about the outcomes of the wider EQF process, a more balanced and representative case selection would be required (old/new, big/small, north/south, east/west, more variation in policymaking traditions, etc.), along with cases where one could identify failed initiatives for developing an NQF. There were other interesting cases that could have been selected due to their national processes that had particularly interesting dynamics. For instance, Germany provides a fascinating case due to their debates about developing an NQF with pillars, and the multi-level system in Germany. At the same time, it would not easily compare to other countries in terms of the multi-level structure in Germany.

Overall, the selection of countries here represents an entry point for studying how NQFs are developed at the national level by countries that have opted for such a solution. The principal question then is not about the decision of whether to introduce an NQF or not, but about the process through which this takes place.

4.3 Data sources and analysis

The data sources in this study relied primarily on document analysis and interviews. The rationale for selecting each will be provided in the respective two sections, followed by an explanation of how multiple sources of data were used.

Document analysis

Documentation has been argued to be relevant in almost any case study and includes a variety of possible sources, ranging from various types of personal documents, to meeting documentation (agendas, minutes, etc.), various internal documents (proposals, reports), formal evaluations, and media and news sources (Yin, 2009, pp. 101-103), as well as formal policy statements, legal texts, etc. What is key to document analysis here is that such texts are produced without the intervention of the researcher (Silverman, 2001, p. 119). The strengths of using such documents were exemplified by Yin, as using documents provides stable access to data, it is unobtrusive, is relatively precise (date, participants, event details, etc.) and allows examination of information over a long timespan (Yin, 2009, p. 102). As such, documents are an essential means of documenting processes in a historical perspective. However, as was evident here, documentary data did not in all cases provide the whole range of factual information regarding the process, and this was supplemented with interview data.

The view on documents often mistakenly tends to adopt the starting point that they show a skewed formal version of reality, the tendency described by Silverman as a model of viewing texts as a means to show that "the documents claim C, but we can show that Y is the case" (Silverman, 2001, p. 119). Elsewhere, Yin has cautioned against using documents as a definite representation of reality (Yin, 2009, p. 103). Both of these might under certain circumstances be correct, this being dependent on the nature of documents and what the documents are seen to represent. For instance, a formal text or decision might not be a completely correct representation of reality or the practices that take place. At the same time, the formulation of a decision represents a particular agreement at a point in time that also has a particular function for those involved, and for the environment. Documents have an inherent value as a source and should not be seen only as background data – they represent important formal agreements, especially in cases where they also require compliance. Documents are an important source for identifying certain formal rules, practices and procedures, important elements in a standardization process. Furthermore, they can also bring attention the gaps in formalization, highlighting areas where there is possible scope for re-interpretation and stretching.

At the same time, to identify the manner in which formal rules are translated to practice, it is very likely that it is necessary to supplement documents with data from interviews or observations (if possible). This is not to assert that the documents are somehow invalid, but is to exemplify that they have a different function and that they represent different aspects of reality. For instance, from an institutional starting point one can also assume that the more

codified the process becomes, the more likely one would produce specific written guidelines for behaviour and practices. Over time, one can expect that such practices become more habitualized, and the amount of formal documentation would decrease as practices and procedures are increasingly taken for granted (see discussion in section 3.3). In this process, one can expect that documentation would be available only after the codification process begins, and would decrease over time.

The kinds of documents that were included in this analysis included policy documents from the Commission as well as reports produced for such documents (recommendations, communications, reports, staff working documents, reports etc.), to trace back how qualifications were viewed, when qualifications frameworks emerged in the documents, how they were proposed, what was the problem that qualifications frameworks were addressing, and so forth. Various news items and information produced by the Commission and CEDEFOP related to the development of the EQF were examined, as well as feedback received during the consultation process and the external evaluation of the EQF process conducted in 2013. In addition, documents included various other kinds of documents related to the advisory group, meeting agendas and minutes (in so far as these were made available). A request was made to gain access to all meeting minutes, but this access was not obtained, thus the available documents include those made available in the database on Commission Expert groups and is for the most part limited to more recent documents. In general, there were some difficulties in gaining access to internal documents. For this reason, the data collection primarily included documents that were publicly available through registries of the EU and other sources. This includes documents from both Eur-Lex (final documents) and Pre-Lex (preparatory documents). This means that the sources are primarily formal documents, and various other sources.

Overall, documents were used in multiple functions and for different purposes in the analysis. Formal documents were examined to establish the various steps in the process and identify policy content – formulation of problems, ideas, etc. These are the main documents representing key decisions in the process, setting the formal "rules of the game". These documents were coded manually, primarily as the amounts of relevant data were more manageable and the documents by their nature are more systematic. A number of additional policy documents were read as background information to view the EQF in the context of other policy initiatives and understand its role as a specific policy solution in EU context. Furthermore, other kinds of written documentation, such as various meeting agendas, notes, press releases, speeches, etc

were used as information sources. These were not coded but rather used as sources for information to create a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of the process (see lists of all document sources in appendix on page 203). Having this somewhat eclectic approach to the selection of documents allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the whole process that has unfolded around the EQF.

One should also note the limitations that framed this study with respect to document analysis. For instance, the availability – or lack thereof - of certain internal documents of the advisory group, which were not obtainable during the process of this project. Here, interviews were used to supplement this kind of information, the implications of which will be discussed in the next section.

Expert interviews
We are increasingly living in what has been termed "the interview society". In social sciences, the strengths of using interviews as a method are obvious, they provide access to events that might not otherwise be documented sufficiently– including undocumented events in the past and information about actor preferences and perceptions that are internal. Interviews can in some cases be the sole way for gaining information on particular events that have not been recorded in other forms. As the interest in this dissertation lies also in the informal practices and procedures that may or may not be documented, relying on interviews is to a large extent a necessity. On the other hand, the same strengths also form a basis for the weaknesses of using interviews. Since one is dealing with people's personal accounts of certain events, people's perspectives can be distorted. People are influenced by their memory, pre-conceptions as well as their changed views on issues.

One can distinguish between interviews with lay people, specialists, experts and the elite (Littig, 2009). What distinguishes these various types of interviews is the amount of knowledge and power that the respondents have. An expert interview is with a person who has a specific and high level of expertise in a particular topic. This has also implications for the interview process – rather than being fully standardized, an expert interview would open for new themes from the respondents (Dexter, 2006). The various types of expert interviews can be divided into exploratory, systematising and theory-generating interviews (Bogner & Menz, 2009). When doing exploratory interviews, experts are being interviewed to gain a more thorough understanding of a concept or a process. Within this view, expert interviews are often used as a supporting method in quantitative projects as well, and the expert interviews are open by

nature. In the case of systematising interviews, where the expert possesses some exclusive knowledge of a process, the focus is on action and experience, but the focus is on relatively 'objective' knowledge, and interviews are usually semi-structured, but can also be quantitative and survey-like. Theory-generating interviews are of the type where the expert does not have the role of catalyst in the research process, but rather the focus is on "the communicative opening up and analytic reconstruction of the subjective dimension of expert knowledge" (Bogner & Menz, 2009, pp. 47-48).

For this study, the expert interviews are conducted as the systematizing and exploratory types, where the focus is on gaining in-depth knowledge on the various processes that happened to trace the process. While the purpose is to gain as neutral knowledge as possible, it is clear that in any interview, actor perceptions will nevertheless form a basis for their account of the processes. Furthermore, while actors have personal opinions, in most cases they do not act on their own behalf − thus their own perceptions get diffused with organisational tasks and preferences (Scharpf, 1997). Thus, there is a need to relate individual (observable) behaviour to the appropriate unit of reference on whose behalf action is taken in order to study potential discrepancies. Scharpf (1997) argued that in most cases this is unproblematic since social roles are identifiable. Furthermore, others have argued that careful examination of: "what an informant says, how he views the world, how he views the investigator, etc. will provide clues to the ways he is apt to be unrepresentative" (Dexter, 2006, p. 21). Problems arise if individuals act in a variety of roles, and this is not uncommon in European policy processes, since the patterns for participation are not fixed and actors can have "different hats" (Andersen & Eliassen, 2001). Actors in this study act both as individual experts in the process, and in a representative function. For this reason, this was also specified in the interview process, when questions about the formal position of the organization vs. individual preferences were specified, in cases where such follow-up questions were asked.

High level of expertise is not the same as having the most senior position in all cases. In some instances, those with the highest position are not always those with the best knowledge of a particular topic (Dexter, 2006), thus one should avoid the "higher the better fallacy" (Welch, Marschan-Piekkari, Penttinen, & Tahvanainen, 2002, p. 626). For this reason, an important consideration is to identify who the experts are. However, it is important to distinguish here between the definition of *expert interviews* as a method, and those who are defined as experts in a policy process. The former has to do with the methodological approach to the interviews, the latter about EU policymaking and the role of expertise.

Starting with a methodological definition, the nature of an expert involves a high degree of expert knowledge, expertise, and a certain amount of decision-making power (Littig, 2009). While decision-making power can vary, it is this specific combination that distinguishes experts from laymen, specialists or elite interviews. In the context of this study it is important to emphasize that the power to influence decisions can also be informal, that is, the actor has considerable influence on particular formal decision-making situations or is able to influence the kind of knowledge that is included in decision-making processes.

Taking a starting point in the conceptual definition, experts can be seen as specific actors who contribute with their expertise to a policy process. In this study, a number of actors who are not formally working within the Commission or CEDEFOP have been involved in the process in formal and informal capacities. This group of experts also included a number of actors at the national level in various capacities. These actors have been involved in the process by having been consulted, or have been in the various expert/advisory groups in the process. This conceptualisation has its limitations, as a number of the actors in these expertise positions change functions and positions over time, and they can also shift from a more advisory role to a more formal role. Furthermore, a policymaker from one country can function as an expert in another country for an NQF process. From a methodological point of view, all of the interviews that have been conducted can be seen as expert interviews, as they involve actors who have a high degree of expert knowledge about the topic, and they have had opportunities to influence the process.

The number of interviews with members of the advisory group is somewhat skewed towards those representing stakeholder organizations, in comparison to the number of national representatives. However, as the interviews were conducted it also became clear that a saturation level had been reached and adding further national respondents would likely not have added new information regarding the practices and procedures within the group. It is however noted that if one would like to make generalisations about the introduction of NQFs across Europe, it would be desirable to do so with a more representative sample of national respondents across European countries, and more detailed analyses of additional cases.

The respondents were all initially contacted via email, with information about the project as well as the main purpose of the research. This was followed with a reminder after a few weeks' time. Not all of the contacted actors were available for the interview, which could be expected for expert interviews. The first set of possible respondents was identified through the publicly available lists of participants through their position in an organization, in expert groups, as well

as websites, documents and so forth. Upon starting the interviews, this was followed up with a snowball sampling, as inquiries were made about other possible relevant actors that should be contacted. When certain names were repeatedly suggested, they were contacted for interviews as well.

In total, 37 interviews were conducted at the European and national level with both those who currently work with the EQF and those who had previously been associated with the process. However, several of these interviews included people who had "multiple hats", in the sense that they both had a role at the European and the national level and in multiple capacities on both or either levels. Some respondents were national representatives but also involved on European level in the advisory group or as a national coordination point, some had changed positions, some had multiple capacities as experts and as representatives of stakeholders in the advisory group. In such instances, the respondents were interviewed about both/all of their capacities. Some respondents had also changed positions in the meantime, or after data collection – this was applicable both to respondents who had been working in the Commission and those who had been involved as experts. While these "multiple hats" make counting complicated, this also shows is that the respondents have considerable expertise on the subject from various perspectives.

Respondents	Number of interviews*
Commission + CEDEFOP	7 interviews
Consulted experts	5 interviews
First expert group/EQFAG/NCP	10 interviews
Norway	8 interviews
Estonia	9 interviews
Ireland	5 interviews

* Some actors interviewed in multiple capacities, in this table the person would be listed under both/all capacities

The interviews were generally 45-60 minutes in length, some being longer (in particular those with respondents who had multiple capacities). 15 of the 37 interviews were conducted over the phone/Skype. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, with an interview guide prepared beforehand. If respondents (or their assistants, on their behalf) asked to see the questions beforehand, this was provided to them in the form of a thematic guide and it was specified that follow-up questions might be asked during the interview.

The generic interview guide (see appendix, page 199) was tailored to the nature of the individual respondent and their role in the process, but key focus was on the actor's role in the process, their reflections on the content, origins and scope of the EQF, the nature of actor involvement

in the process, coordination with other sectors, and comments about implementation and future outlooks. Follow-up questions were asked throughout to specify and further explore the information provided. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Also, in the case of experts, one cannot avoid the question of objective vs. subjective information. It is important to remember that "the statements an informant makes to an interviewer can vary from purely *subjective* statements […] to almost completely *objective* statements" whereas many fall in between (Dexter, 2006, p. 100). According to Dexter, there are two central questions when evaluating the objective/subjective dimension: What light does a statement throw on the subjective sentiments of the informant? How much do the statements correspond to objective reality? Provided that this project has a critical realist starting point, these questions have to be examined carefully. By assuming that it is possible to obtain an intersubjective explanation of reality, there is particular need to take into consideration the respondent's subjectivity. Dexter (2006) suggests that there are four major factors that need to be considered when evaluating the subjectivity of an informant: personal motives, spontaneous restrictions, desire to please and other idiosyncratic factors (mood, connotations, etc.). These aspects were considered during the interview process. While some actors due to their formal function had an interest in the EQF, spontaneous restrictions or desire to please were not identified in the interview process. Using multiple respondents was used as a means to reduce the subjectivity related to interests related to how the processes around the EQF were described.

The analysis of the interview data was conducted according to predefined analytical concepts for each of the articles in a rather iterative manner. This means that certain categories and concepts were derived from the analytical framework, while retaining sensitivity towards themes that might occur in the empirical data (see list of thematic coding nodes used in the various articles in appendix on page 208). The latter was particularly important to ensure a comprehensive view on explaining the case. As the case can be conceptualized as an unlikely case, sensitivity towards aspects that might not follow existing conventional theoretical accounts is important. Furthermore, specific terms were used to gather data on specific parts of the process, marking more descriptive terms to view various actor perspectives.

NVivo10 was used for coding and systematizing interview data. This choice was made primarily due to the nature of interview transcripts that are longer and less systematic in terms of thematic coverage. However, software was primarily used for coding and systematizing data and not for advanced analysis techniques. The kind of analysis technique that was adopted could closest be compared to bricolage. The interview transcripts were first read, then coded

according to identified concepts/terms in NVivo. Then, data was read across the various interviews according to the coding made, and then interviews were re-read later again to assure that the meaning from the interviews was condensed in sufficient manner in the analysis. In this process, thick descriptions of the case (and the embedded cases) were produced.

Using multiple data sources

Using data from documents and interviews is particularly important in this study, as documents also provide a first-hand insight to the kind of decisions that were recorded at the time, unobstructed by the respondents' memory and current views. At the same time, they also capture the specific compromise made at the time, and do not reveal the processual elements nor the compromises made. For this reason, one could argue that interviews were the main source for data in this study regarding processual aspects. This is not to imply that documents were used as background information, but their function was to establish the formal aspects of the process, while interview data provided information about the process.

One term often used with reference to multiple data sources is triangulation. Triangulation can mean multiple things. More precisely, it has been defined as "a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation" (Stake, 2005, p. 454). In this study, it concerns primarily data triangulation where multiple sets of data have been collected on a single phenomenon. An important consideration here is to avoid a naïve perspective on qualitative data and triangulation, as the embedded nature of empirical data from interviews and documents needs to be taken into account to avoid the problem of equating "*common sense with social science – a recipe for the lazy qualitative researcher who settles for simply reporting people's 'experiences'*" (Silverman, 2001, p. 289).

For this reason, triangulation is also necessary when using the same method, triangulating multiple respondents of interviews. This is especially important when interviews are used as a means to document events, processes and procedures that are not formally documented, as relying on the memory of one respondent can introduce bias. As long as the objective is to not only understand respondent perceptions, cross-checking various respondents becomes central in assuring the highest possible level of intersubjectivity of the claims made. Triangulation is more than just mapping various experiences, it should also lead to more systematic analysis of the various underlying patterns. This was conducted by systematizing data on specific events across various respondents in creating thick descriptions.

4.4   Validity and concerns for quality

In a number of methods books there is a tendency to continue with the paradigmatic schism between qualitative and quantitative methods, where criteria for quality are also evaluated accordingly. Arguing for a constructivist paradigm in qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 24) argue that the (post)positivist accounts of internal/external validity would not apply; rather, one should focus on criteria such as trustworthiness, credibility, transferability and confirmability. Elsewhere, it is argued that validity is perhaps the area where paradigmatic differences are most "fertile" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 205).

As the starting point here is one of critical realism, this suggests that neither the purely constructivist nor positivist arguments apply. Kleven has argued that from a critical realist starting point, validity is in principle about the kinds of inferences that are drawn, and not about whether data is quantitative or qualitative. In addition, he argues that one should distinguish between types of validity and methods for validation – as such, validity is a property of inferences, not a property of data itself (Kleven, 2008). Yin has also placed validity as a key aspect in judging the quality of case study research (Yin, 2009). The discussion here focuses on three kinds of validity: construct validity, internal validity, and external validity (Yin, 2009). As the study does not involve statistical claims about covariation, statistical validity was not included from Kleven's operationalisations of various kinds of validity. In the following sections, each of the validity concerns shall be discussed.

Construct validity is in principle the process through which we can make claims about "what we have seen to what we call what we have seen" (Kleven, 2008, p. 223). In case study research, this has also been frequently a common criticism, to which Yin suggests possible "remedies" (Yin, 2009, p. 41). These include: triangulation of data, establishment of chain of evidence and review of transcripts by informants. In this study, two of the strategies were used, including use of multiple sources of data and establishing a "chain of evidence". Triangulation was conducted via examining both available documents about various structures, mandates and processes, as well as information materials. This then combined with data from the interviews. The reason why no key actor was selected to review the case study was primarily due to the fact that multiple actors in this process had various views about the process, and giving priority to one view could introduce a bias to the analysis (Silverman, 2010, p. 278). Instead, the various viewpoints and contested terrains were presented in the various articles (i.e. linkages to policy problems, contestation, disagreement etc.).

To assure chain of evidence for the study on the European level, document review was first conducted on the formal decisions of the EQF, followed by a wider search for documents in the area of educational policy on the EU level to identify the kinds of processes the EQF had been linked to. Which documents was the EQF explicitly mentioned in, and which documents did these again refer to? In the process, relevant structures and organisations were identified, and persons belonging to them were contacted for expert interviews. For national-level analysis, the data collection process started with national contact points (all countries have established a national contact point (NCP) for the EQF) and the information available there, followed by examination of documentation about the introduction process and interviews with key experts. The strategy adopted here was to be as clear and detailed as possible about the events that were identified, and initial drafts of articles included longer narrative versions of processes that took place. These were later shortened and restructured according to more theoretical arguments, more appropriate for article format.

Another aspect should be mentioned as having an impact on construct validity, and that is the role of language. Whether the kinds of constructs that we have made are representative of the phenomenon is also an issue of language, due to national variations. For instance, in Estonian the word "policy" can be translated to "politics", "strategy" and "direction", amongst others, whereas no direct translation for "policy" exists. A similar translation issue regarding the word "policy" also emerges in Norwegian, where it can commonly be translated to politics, but increasingly the English word "policy" is also used in Norwegian. When examining processes in various countries, different languages can thus often be a limitation – both in terms of access to a wide range of documentation, but also to understand the nuances of the cases. One of the benefits of this case selection was that the researcher was able to read policy documents in the original language in all of the countries, which helped to ensure that all documents that access could be gained to were reviewed and that interpretation of meaning was not dependent on additional translation.

Internal validity is the process through which we can claim that certain aspects of the phenomenon have an effect on other aspects (Kleven, 2008, p. 223) – that is, make claims about causal effects. While the key focus of this study is not on causal claims, making claims about certain aspects of the process leading to other aspects has some causal implications. This has to do with the fact that case study research "involves an inference every time an event cannot be directly observed" (Yin, 2009, p. 43), thus making inferences about events based on documents and interviews in principle is making causal claims. To assure some degree of intersubjectivity,

several respondents were interviewed wherever possible about the same process to ensure validity of the kinds of inferences one drew about causal links between events. Furthermore, alternative explanations were considered. However, as also suggested by Yin (2009), it is difficult to have a clear-cut tactic that could function as a checkbox in assuring internal validity. The longer narrative versions covering the events were also used here as a means to ensure the appropriate mapping of the sequence of events.

External validity, when concerning validity of inferences, then denotes whether it is possible to make conclusions about other contexts or a wider context (Kleven, 2008, p. 223). In principle, case studies cannot be equalized with N=1, and any generalizations have to be analytic generalizations and based on theoretical arguments. Here, one can argue that choosing EQF as a case can be seen as an unlikely solution to succeed at the European level. In that sense, if the EQF represents a case of a policy solution that has been introduced and implemented, this could be seen as an indication of increased likelihood of developing other European solutions and standards. However, these claims should be made with some caution.

4.5 Ethical considerations

While the nature of this project means that the more obvious ethical issues (e.g. vulnerable groups, gaining informed consent from people with reduced capacity, participatory research in observations, research on children, and so forth) are not in focus, this does not imply that ethics in this project can be overlooked or is of lesser importance. In qualitative research, the ethical dilemmas might emerge during the research process, or perhaps even during the actual interview situation, thus forcing the researcher to make decisions on the spot. While it is impossible to think of all potential ethical dilemmas that can emerge, this nevertheless means that it is even more important to think through the potential ethical dilemmas.

It could be argued that research is only ethical if it is valid, that is – if it answers the research problem in an adequate manner. Having issues with validity, such as including a bias in the research that is not accounted for, also brings the ethics of a project into question. Ensuring validity and accuracy of data is also linked to transparency and assurance that there is no fraud or data manipulation (Christians, 2005, p. 145). Clear documentation about the propositions underlying the study as well as the procedures for data collection represent the first premise for an ethical study. It should be noted that the author of this dissertation has a starting point in an applied and multidisciplinary field of higher education studies, and has also worked in a higher education institution while conducting this research. Considering that higher education sector

perspectives represented one of the tensions where polarized views were presented (in particular between higher education and vocational education), this was an aspect that the author had to be aware of in the analysis, to avoid personal bias due to a starting point in a particular field.

Another aspect that should be noted here is that the author was also involved in the team of researchers who were involved in developing the technical report for the Norwegian referencing process. However, upon taking this task, it was clarified that this was considered a technical contribution and there was no actual involvement in the Norwegian national process on behalf of the author that would create a conflict of interest. However, one could argue that for this reason, the author likely has obtained more detailed information about the Norwegian case than the other two. Furthermore, this could have had implications for the interview process and how the interviewer was perceived in this case vis-à-vis the other cases. For this reason, specific care was put when writing up the cases to assure equal level of detail in the article concerning national cases.

Two key aspects of ethical considerations include informed consent and ensuring confidentiality. The project was registered at NSD[10] (see confirmation in appendix), and all the respondents received written information about the interview procedure and about the possibility of withdrawing from the interview up until the publication of results. The information was distributed along with an invitation to the interview, and was further orally confirmed when meeting with the respondents to clarify whether they had any questions regarding the procedure (in person or by phone). It was stressed that the personal details of the respondents would not be revealed. However, where relevant, it was orally clarified that it is possible that due to the small number of people involved in certain parts of the process, others who have been involved might guess who the respondents may be (i.e. limited number of people involved in particular organizations). The fact that specific people represent specific organizations in the advisory group limited the kind of information that it is possible to provide in the analysis about the nature of actors (making it difficult to identify actors as representatives of X and Y sector as it is only one organization representing the sector and in some cases a single person having this function). In some instances, the respondents also informally mentioned they had talked to others they knew, so they themselves had knowledge of others who had been interviewed or would be interviewed later in the process. Furthermore, snowball sampling as a technique would at least reveal those who would be considered for contact for an

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[10] Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste (NSD)

interview. However, personal details are omitted in the research reporting, and particular care is taken in the articles to ensure that specific quotes could not be attached to specific people.

Regarding interviews in general, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) stress the power asymmetry that exists when the researcher has a specific competence and guides the interview. In the case of expert interviews that were used in this project, the power asymmetry may be in the opposite direction, where the expert is in possession of specific high-level knowledge and expertise on the topic, and often has substantial experience with being interviewed . Such experts are usually experienced in giving interviews, making them experts in communication.

It has also been argued that the gender of the interviewer plays a role when conducting interviews (Padfield & Procter, 1996). While the study by Padfield and Procter was in a different kind of interview context, there are grounds to believe that gender does play a role in expert interviews as well. There was also some gender bias amongst the respondents – the majority of respondents on the European level (incl. Commission and experts) were male, often senior. Six of the 21 respondents that were interviewed, who were also in the capacity of European-level actors, were women. However, the picture was more balanced on the national level, where there was in fact a slight majority of women. Overall, gender was not considered as a major ethical issue in the process.

4.6   Limitations

This study obviously has a number of limitations. An obvious one is the selection of cases that represents only positive and likely cases, which also limits the kind of analytical claims one can make about the dynamics of the process on national level. Another obvious constraint is that the study stops on national policy level. While examining various aspects of the introduction of the EQF, this comprehensiveness concerns the introduction of EQF and NQFs. Having a title that suggests a standardization process taking place, it is also important to clarify that no claims are made about the standardization of educational content. While it is emphasized here that there are 29 NQFs that have been adopted, a number of these had for some time been "empty frameworks" (CEDEFOP, 2015). For this reason, any comment on the "success" of the EQF has to be seen in the context of its effects on enabling the spread of the NQFs. In that sense, the study can make claims about the output of the process, but not necessarily about the outcomes. The EQF is a standardizing process, but the real outcomes of NQFs will be visible on the institutional and study programme level (if such outcomes can be identified).

There are also some limitations in the data that was collected and that was available. First of all, the study would have ideally also used observations of an advisory group meeting as a means to collect data on the dynamics of the group. However, access to such a meeting was not granted, with the argument that the issues debated also represent sensitive national issues. Similar argument was received when inquiring regarding access to all meeting minutes, thus leading to a more eclectic collection of various documents to map parts of the process.

Furthermore, there is some skewness in terms of the interviewees in the advisory group, where the majority of them are stakeholder representatives. One could argue that the study could have included more interviews, to have a more balanced inclusion of country representatives and stakeholder representatives. However, based on the data that was collected, there is reason to believe that this does not represent a substantial influence on the outcomes.

5 Summaries of the articles

5.1   Article 1

Elken, M. (2015a) Developing policy instruments for education in the EU: the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, Avalable at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2015.1103795

The article examines the process of developing the EQF, with particular focus on the establishment of the EQF, taking a starting point in neo-institutional theories. The research problem in focus is the interpretation of the process through which the EQF was introduced, having in mind the contested nature of the instrument and that education is also a policy area that is considered under the subsidiarity principle. The article is primarily focused on the pre-decision stage, tracing the genesis of the idea and how it is linked to previous initiatives in the area of lifelong learning. The article examines the dynamics of introducing the EQF, taking a starting point in the four different kinds of dynamics within the institutional tradition for how problems and solutions can be coupled. These dynamics are described in more detail in Chapter 3.2 of this extended abstract, and include historical contingency that focused on the argument of path dependency, the rational problem solving approach with assumptions of rational actors, the solution-driven approach emphasizing the normative value of specific solutions, and the element of chance due to other concurrent events and processes. These four ideal types imply different dynamics of change, being either driven by actors (both problem solving and preferred solution), through reframing and adjusting existing instruments (path dependency) or just due to serendipity.

Empirically, the article identified that the process leading up to the EQF was first marked by rather incremental development since the 1980s, in line with the path dependency perspective. Experimentation by the Commission at the time did not lead to successful initiatives. Nonetheless, the initial period was also marked by the gradual development of lifelong learning and mobility as policy themes in the EU. However, earlier activities were primarily limited to vocational education and professional education, with varied levels of success. A specific case that was highlighted was the EU initiative to develop vocational standards that was abandoned in the 1990s because it did not yield the desired results. The Lisbon Agenda provided a significant change in the environment for educational policies, marking a critical juncture. Not

only did it place education much higher on the agenda, it also created a method for joint policymaking (OMC) that could bypass limited legal competence.

When the idea for a qualifications framework first emerged in the EU around 2002, the identified purposes were related to the priorities set by the Lisbon agenda about the need for increased transparency, suggesting a degree of problem-solving. Overall, the two main flagship headlines for the EQF were linked to mobility and lifelong learning – both by that time considered as "acceptable" policy aims in EU. One could argue that its establishment was not foreseen in the documents following the Lisbon agenda, as it was initially highlighted that no new instruments would be proposed. However, the subsequent period nevertheless provided fruitful grounds for new initiatives. When the idea first emerged, it was followed with rapid development from CEDEFOP and involvement of expertise. In 2004-2005 substantial work was put into shaping the instrument. Overall, one can argue that the ready-made "solution" during the height of political attention ensured success at the European level. Specific individual actors played an important role here.

The development of EQF included a degree of policy borrowing from the Bologna Process (for EQF, but also for the Copenhagen process as a whole), and backing from member states that had an interest for uploading these preferences, where one can most clearly see that the combination of other external processes has a significant effect. After the first blueprint for the EQF had been developed, expert groups, consultations and various meetings were held to reach consensus. This consensus was necessary as the EQF was a recommendation, and thus, in principle, voluntary. This suggests that in this part of the process, it was about promoting the solution (EQF).

Empirically, the analysis highlighted how the outcomes of an EU policy process are dependent on a number of specific factors coming together, some of which were neither part of original intentions nor planned. Overall, it appears that the process was the result of actors seizing opportunities and specific contextual factors that enabled this. Rather than being purely problem driven or solution driven, the process can be characterized as a dynamic and dialectic process where the role of problems and solutions shifting over time. Other important factors include earlier activities in the area of comparing qualifications that provided opportunities for learning; the OMC which provided the mode for action; political acceptance of more joint coordination in education after the Lisbon 2000 summit; actors with specific expertise, linkages and networks who were at the right place at the right time; and the parallel Bologna Process.

Analytically, the main contribution is to show how variations of institutional theory can be used to analyse a specific process, and how a single perspective alone would not have been able to capture the different dynamics at different stages. It also shows that in the process of coupling problems and solutions, actors matter as brokers in the coupling process.

5.2 Article 2

Elken, M. (special issue under review) Expert group institutionalization and task expansion in European education policy-making

In this article, focus is shifted to the advisory group (EQFAG) as the arena for the intergovernmental oversight of the EQF process. The EQFAG[11] group was established in the context of developing the EQF, with its mandate outlined in the Recommendation to assure the coherence and promote transparency of the processes related to the EQF. The starting point for the article is the role of expertise in EU policy processes that has been noted as an important aspect of EU governance (Radaelli, 1999). The use of expertise and experts in EU policy processes is widespread and can take a variety of forms (Gornitzka & Sverdrup, 2008; Metz, 2013). Expert groups are defined according to EU rules[12] (European Commission, 2010) as a '*consultative entity set up by the Commission or its services for the purpose of providing them with advice and expertise*'. The concept of who can be considered an expert varies. The main research problem in the article is whether and how the EQFAG expert group became institutionalized, taking into account the constrained possibilities for European integration in the sector.

Analytically the article builds on the bottom-up process of institutionalization, where local practices acquire institutionalized characteristics over time, that is, legitimate and taken-for-granted rules and practices with routinized access to resources (Colyvas & Powell, 2006; Gornitzka, 2007; Hurd, 1999; March & Olsen, 1989; W. W. Powell & Colyvas, 2008). More specifically, focus is on the development of formalized procedures and practices that become standardized, creating a process of reproduction with common language and an established division of roles in the group (Colyvas & Powell, 2006). To study these aspects, the article focuses on three main points: (a) the formal mandate for the EQFAG group and how it is understood by its members; (b) role division between the members and the Commission and

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[11] Advisory Group for the European Qualifications Framework – EQFAG
[12] 21 horizontal rules for Commission expert groups outlined in C(2010) 7649.

how this shifts over time; (c) the scope and nature of the group in terms of membership and tasks. Enactment of the group's main mandate to oversee the national processes is done through the referencing process and key focus is on the development of procedures related to this process. Taken-for-grantedness can be argued to exist if the procedures and rules are not questioned by the members of the group. As the group does not have any regulative power, legitimacy can be argued to have increased if the group's decisions are complied with in cases where this goes against certain member states' will, despite lacking any coercive capacity and the process being constrained by the subsidiarity principle.

The empirical study showed that the mandate of the EQFAG was rather loosely defined to start with, but that understanding of the group's role has changed over time, becoming stronger and having the capacity to exert considerable informal pressure in an area where legal competencies are formally limited. The changing mandate has led to the development of a complex set of procedures related to the referencing process, in particular after some critical cases emerged where member state and group preferences diverged. Over time, these procedures have become increasingly formalized and taken-for-granted by the members and the group's suggestions are being adhered to. This development of routines was a rather rapid process over only a few years, a surprising development considering the available time and the heterogeneity of the members, both in terms of different national and different sectoral perspectives. The existence of this rather established set of criteria would suggest that the group is relatively sustainable and stable with respect to turnover of individual actors, despite its initially temporary nature. Common language (concepts) has played an important role as focus has shifted from translation issues to core concepts. While some debates remain, a more common vocabulary appears to be emerging, built around trust between the participating countries.

Membership of the group was assigned according to the formal guidelines, with some actors also having lobbied their access. However, it is also evident that the capacity to participate varies and the process is characterized by a smaller "inner group" that has high expertise in the area and that has had an impact on the process. Furthermore, the nature of the process on the national levels means that the actual activities of the group are not evenly distributed across meetings that are scheduled in advance and usually have the same time available. This means that sometimes there is more time available for additional discussions. This has given the Commission an opportunity to introduce upcoming policy ideas and discuss potential new policy developments, an opportunity that has been used. Role division has not been settled and there is some ambiguity amongst members regarding how much Commission steering is

appropriate. The scope and tasks of the group have also expanded over time, with the group being assigned additional formal assignments[13] and new members being assigned due to these formal tasks, a development that can on the one hand strengthen the group's existence, but on the other make it more fragile in terms of shared values.

Empirically, the article illustrates how the EQFAG has managed to exert informal pressure to assure compliance. This suggests that despite a lack of formal sanctioning, this arena has acquired informal power that can be seen as stretching of the subsidiarity principle as it is formally outlined. There is more capacity for joint policy coordination, even when formal rules are not changed. The Commission appears to have acted as an entrepreneur, by bringing member states into one room. Being cross-sectoral by nature, the EQFAG has created an arena for debates that previously did not exist, and that also appears to be valued by the member states. Such new arenas can be seen as a laboratory for the Commission to test and spread upcoming ideas to assure compliance in the context of soft governance and OMC. In an area where joint coordination has been constrained, this represents considerable policy innovation.

Analytically, the article highlights how the development of procedures and taken-for-granted structures can also take place over short periods of time and how rather weak structures can lead to strong positions and considerable informal power. Furthermore, this raises the question of the changing nature of governance of education in the EU, where oversight of instruments can also create arenas that can enable further spill overs and policy transfer.

5.3   Article 3

Elken, M. (2015b) "New EU instruments for education: Vertical, horizontal and internal tensions in the European Qualifications Framework", *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, **Vol 11. No. 1, pp pp 69-83**

This article takes an overarching perspective on the EQF and examines some of the tensions built into the process. The starting point is that initiatives and progress towards more integration in the area of education are characterized by frequent contestations on the vertical (national-European) and horizontal (coordination between sectors) integration (Chou & Gornitzka, 2014) of a multi-arena, multi-actor and multi-level system in the making. Consequently, the two research questions in this article are: What kind of coordination tensions can one identify in relation to the EQF as an instrument? What are the consequences of such tensions for the EQF

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[13] Oversight of the Recommendation on Validation of informal and non-formal learning (2012/C 398/01)

as an instrument for increased European coordination in the area of education? This article examines the EQF at three tension points, related to the nature of EU integration and policy processes, the nature of education as a policy sector and the nature of this specific policy instrument.

Analytically this article first identifies changes in the vertical coordination dimension in the context of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). Focus on coordination rather than supranational legislation has shifted the vertical balance of competencies, also called partial transference of competencies (Borrás, 2008). Furthermore, in the context of OMC horizontal coordination has become a more relevant topic of discussion (Borrás & Jacobsson, 2004), where existing divisions between Directorate-Generals (DGs) might be challenged. In addition to the vertical and horizontal dimension, the article brings in an additional dimension by examining the internal logics of the EQF, by drawing on the concept of institutional logics (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012), here operationalized narrowly as the norms and vocabulary specific to a particular field. The tensions identified in the article lie in the intersection points of (a) vertical coordination where the OMC has created new space for action that has come in addition to national processes; (b) horizontal coordination between sectors with varying legal capacity and institutional dynamics; (c) internal coordination where varying institutional logics have consequences for the internal coherence of the instrument.

The article shows how, regarding vertical coordination, two kinds of uses of the EQF have been identified – *descriptive* (how systems are) and *prescriptive* (how systems should be) use (Coles & Oates, 2005). The article shows how the initial framework, suggested by Coles and Oates in their report to be a descriptive framework, has over time become an increasingly prescriptive framework where a specific reform agenda can also be identified and the EQF is viewed as a "catalyst for change" by European actors. Furthermore, the article outlines how political agreements can go against the basic principles of the EQF of actually finding the best match – i.e. three upper levels are now earmarked for higher and the entrance level for higher education is informally set at a particular level. The article also highlights the role and power of the EQFAG in the process that has become an important discussion arena between member states and the Commission (read more about the EQF AG in section 5.3). While the article takes a cautionary stance in terms of the EQF delivering its promise, thus far it has led to the development of new policy discussion arenas, and shown how indirect reform agendas from the European level can be put forward through the introduction of seemingly neutral policy instruments.

Regarding horizontal coordination, the article primarily focuses on two coordination points: first between DG EAC and DG Markt regarding the directive of professional qualifications, and then with DG Employment and ESCO[14]. Varying legal competence is particularly relevant here as the EQF has its main stated aim to foster transparency and mobility, partially overlapping with the existing directive on professional qualifications. Being a directive and managed by DG Internal market, the introduction of the EQF was initially considered a problematic development and while they have been reduced, they have not been removed. The other horizontal linkage is to DG Employment. The very aim of the instrument in the recommendation text was outlined to contribute to an integrated European labour market. Here, increased coordination appears to take place more smoothly, even when the coordination was not quite obvious to start with, according to the respondents. While there appears to be more coordination on the EU level, there also appears to be some division amongst stakeholders in the EQFAG. These two points of horizontal coordination illustrate two different kinds of coordination patterns, and suggest that adding soft instruments to existing hard law might be complicated.

The third tension is within the EQF itself as an instrument. The EQF is also placed at the intersection of various levels and types of education because of its content and scope. Such education levels on the national level have varying historical traditions, legacies and structures. The article examines this tension by focusing primarily on the relationship between higher education and vocational education. This is particularly relevant with respect to the QF-EHEA developed in the context of the Bologna Process. EQF being a lifelong learning instrument, this is an area that has historically had close links to vocational education (Cort, 2009). While the integration between these two instruments was considered a high priority by the Commission officials, there were also indications that even within DG EAC there was some contestation with respect to those working with higher education and those working with vocational education. The article emphasizes the role of the EQFAG as a rather innovative arena for bringing together people from different educational levels and its role in developing a common vocabulary and reducing these internal tensions.

This article emphasizes that the vertical dimension cannot be seen as a null-sum game of more or less supranationalism, suggesting a far more complex structure where considerable

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[14] European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations – a multilingual classification developed as part of the Europe2020 strategy. ESCO is jointly coordinated by DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and DG Education and Culture, and work is supported by CEDEFOP.

innovation is taking place in terms of new institutional arrangements. Horizontal coordination showed two different patterns, where it appeared that coordination with a well-established directive with different legal status appeared to be difficult. This would fit well with an institutional argument of path dependence. Due to the heterogeneity of member states, the various sectors and levels of education involved, the main empirical conclusion is that the EQF is rather open for interpretation and ambiguous as an instrument.

5.4 Article 4

Elken, M. (in review) "EU-on-demand": Developing national qualifications frameworks in a multi-level context

This article shifts focus away from the European level to the national level. The starting point for the article draws on the notion that the EQF can be viewed as a descriptive or prescriptive framework (Coles & Oates, 2005) and that it is frequently perceived as a catalyst for change on the EU level (see, article 1, 3). The main focus of the article is on analysing how three countries selected for national level analysis (Ireland, Estonia and Norway) developed their NQF in this multi-level context. This concerns questions of why these countries opted to develop a NQF, why they chose a particular form for it, and how the process has been anchored in national policy problems.

Analytically this article focuses on the introduction of a particular policy solution on the national level. It highlights the nature of the specific institutional context and the role of actors' preferences and resources. With its focus on the coupling between problems and solutions, the article examines this in a multi-level context. Here, both the processes of *downloading* and *uploading* are of relevance. Under certain conditions, countries prefer to *upload* preferences to the European level. If such preferences become formalized as specific policy solutions at the European level, they are *downloaded* to national contexts – both to countries that engaged in the uploading process and those that did not. Consequently, the downloaded solutions are either aligned or represent a new European solution. In case this is a new solution, following an institutional perspective one can identify various strategies, dependent on the scope of change and the coupling to the national policy domain (see section 3.4 for a discussion).

The key facts regarding the introduction of NQFs in the empirical analysis can be found in Table 3.

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	Ireland	Estonia	Norway
Establishment of the NQF process (system-wide)	1999	2008	2006-2007
NQF adopted	2003	2008	2011
Legal status	Qualifications (Education and Training) Act	Law of Occupations	Regulation
Referenced to EQF	2009	2011/2012	2014
Number of levels	10	8	7
NQF purpose	System coherence	Link to European, somewhat unclear	Link to European, describe system (initially)
Coupling of problems and solutions	Problem driven (national)	Solution driven (European), weak link to problems (national)	Solution driven (European), linked to problems (national)

Table 3 - Key data of national processes in Ireland, Estonia and Norway

Ireland. The NQF process in Ireland started much earlier and can be described as a nationally anchored process. In this study, Ireland was the country that showed considerable uploading capacity, to assure compliance by the universities to their national framework. Thus, the comprehensive nature of EQF can also be traced back to the Irish preferences due to their work in promoting a comprehensive framework. Many describe the Irish framework as a mature framework, stressing the time element in the national process. Describing the process as "death by consultation" in the interviews was a means to describe the complexity and comprehensiveness of the process. As the national framework was mature, the introduction of the EQF did not introduce anything new to the system and the referencing process was a technical process that was hardly noted nationally. Overall, the Irish case shows that it takes time to develop a framework and to achieve consensus across sectors, and, that linking to the EQF was a much more technical exercise when the NQF was a more mature framework, coupled to national policy problems.

Estonia. The national framework in Estonia is more or less a copy of the EQF, following up on an earlier occupational framework. Examining how the EQF as a particular solution is coupled with national policy problems, the coupling is rather loose as the aim is to comply with the European solution (the EQF) and not to solve national issues. One can characterize the process as being rather quick and effective, but also to some extent superficial compliance with a European initiative. While some aspects related to the EQF can also be found in national policy debates, the EstQF process was not very closely coupled to such processes. Due to the individual sectoral frameworks, the overarching EstQF has not been introduced with key focus on transparency and parity of esteem – as the national framework is based on sectoral

frameworks that have not been integrated sufficiently. The Estonian case shows that when the process is not anchored in national policy debates, the process can formally be rather fast, but the role of the EQF as "catalyst for change" would not be substantial. Instead, compliance with the European solution becomes the substantive policy problem.

Norway. In Norway, the basic starting point was to have a framework that would describe the national system but not change it. At the same time, the way in which the Norwegian framework (NKR) was introduced, it revealed certain existing national policy issues and created spill overs on such themes. Lifelong learning has been included in the title of the framework in Norway from the very beginning. As this is a topic of high priority for labour market representatives, this quickly became a contested topic. While opportunities for change were downplayed by the ministry to the dismay of the unions and labour market representatives, more recent developments indicate that there have been spill overs from the work. In the case of Norway, perhaps the most substantial outcome has been focus on learning outcomes. As higher education got a head start with the Bologna Process, the often-described inertia has also been less prominent according to the respondents. Overall, the Norwegian process can be characterized by frequent contestations by various actors involved who saw the NKR as an opportunity for their own agendas and preferences. For this reason the process was also much slower. A number of the issues that were initially discarded have entered the national policy domain over time.

Empirically, the three cases here show very different approaches to developing NQFs. The empirical stories show a rather obvious difference between developing a national framework to address national problems, and when such processes are instigated by a European initiative. In the latter case, alignment with national policy problems was not given and needs to be found ad-hoc. Using European processes as windows of opportunity was mentioned, but neither of the cases showed substantial use of that, while an attempt was made in Norway by some actors. In Norway, with its tripartite system, the divergence of interests that emerged *after* choosing to use the framework as a descriptive framework indicates that actor composition matters in the process, as do local policymaking traditions. Much of the frustration expressed by some of the participants of the process was linked to the fact that a very basic decision about the framework had been made before the debates, in contrast with the deliberative tradition in Norway. In the case of Estonia, there has been a much lower involvement of actors, and the implications of the EQF have not been internalized to the same degree, indicating that a culture of efficiency can also lead to pragmatic choices. The Irish case also showed how uploading can be used

strategically. More importantly, it showed how different the process looks like when it has been initiated nationally. While the cases are too few for generalisations, one can argue that this also shows that sufficient time is important in such processes.

The study shows how the EQF can be seen as an instrument described as "EU-on-demand", as the broad set of ideas included in the EQF can also provide countries to pick and choose something amongst the issues that would echo their national debates. EU-on-demand also works the other way and it is possible to use EU level strategically to advance national priorities. Analytically, the article contributed to understanding national policy processes when the specific policy solution is introduced ad-hoc, and how local policymaking traditions become an intervening variable for the coupling of problems and solutions, where actor composition and interests have considerable effect on the process.

6 Discussion and conclusion

In this final chapter the conclusions of the study are presented and discussed in four separate parts. First, the main empirical and analytical contributions of this study are outlined. The following section examines these conclusions in the light of the three functions of a standardization process. After this, some of the main limitations of this study are presented. The final section outlines future avenues for research that have emerged as a result of this study.

6.1   Empirical and analytical contributions of this study

Empirical contributions

The overall research problem for this study is formulated as follows: What are the main factors that have led to the introduction, development and implementation of the European Qualifications Framework? To address this problem, three research questions were presented in the introduction of this extended abstract:

- *Where did the EQF originate from and how is it linked to policy objectives for education in the EU?*
- *What was the role of intergovernmental structures in the development of the EQF?*
- *How have NQFs been introduced in this context and what is their relationship to the EQF?*

These three questions were also linked to specific expectations derived from the analytical framework.

The first question concerns the process of developing the EQF as a specific policy solution, with particular focus on its linkages to the EU policy objectives in the sector and the various actors involved. To pinpoint the origins of the EQF to a specific individual or document has not been possible, but its origins have a dual source. On the one hand, there is the widening lifelong learning agenda and existing policy initiatives to coordinate qualifications. On the other hand is the Bologna Process and the perceived necessity to have something similar for the VET sector. While the actors involved emphasized that the EQF had a lifelong learning dimension early on in the process, a number of initial documents also refer to a VET framework,

suggesting that sectoral ownership was somewhat open in the beginning[15]. That it became an overarching comprehensive framework is a result of specific actor preferences and uploading capacity by some member states (i.e. Ireland). Having in mind that the EQF challenges existing sectoral boundaries and norms, one can argue that this is also an example where actor preferences for change can be seen as sufficient to challenge existing institutional norms. The analysis showing how the process was dialectic – being both problem driven and solution driven at times, and that serendipity and path-dependencies played a role at other times. One of the expectations was that expertise would be the primary means for acquiring legitimacy. However, the study also revealed the role of consultation and persuasion as key means to ensure that the EQF was termed acceptable by the member states.

The EQF is addressing the issue of qualifications - a complex, boundary-spanning and large-scale policy problem, with multiple interests and preferences involved. Questions related to qualifications is an area where multiple initiatives have been taken earlier (Deane, 2006), suggesting at least some degree of being a "crowded" area for new solutions. Increased transparency, lifelong learning and mobility as the headline goals of the EQF are often seen as rather taken-for-granted objectives in EU context. While the EQF was initially more directly linked to the objectives from the Lisbon agenda, it has acquired additional purposes over time. For this reason, one can argue that the EQF also has a number of implicit tensions built into the instrument due to the coordination processes that have involved a number of actors with very different sectoral perspectives. The sectoral tensions and additional interests have in some sense made the EQF more than a policy solution for transparency of qualifications. As could be expected, the EQF thus turned out to be rather ambiguous and open for translation. This ambiguity allowed for multiple interpretations, from being a translation device to describing it as a "Trojan horse" of educational reform. The added ideas included in the framework have been a common theme in all of the four articles, and in particular in articles 3 and 4.

The second question concerns the role of intergovernmental structures, and in this the study focused on the EQF advisory group (EQFAG) as a primary arena for oversight. The study showed how the EQFAG went through a process of rapid creation of procedures and norms, and fast expansion of informal power, to the extent that this was considered stretching of the subsidiarity principle. Even more interestingly, the member states appear to welcome this

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[15] For instance, Commissioner Jan Figel highlighted in a press release in 2005 that «the European Qualifications Framework now being developed in line with the agreement reached in December in Maastricht» (Maastricht Communique)(European Commission, 2005), linking the agreement to the VET sector.

process suggesting that there is a shift in what is possible with respect to European coordination. For the EQF, one can also argue that the institutionalization of the EQFAG represents an important way to ensure continuity and that the EQF remains a policy solution that persists on the agenda. This is important, as it would not be likely that the EQF could lead to standardization without this continuity.

The third question focused on the implementation processes on national level. The study showed how national processes can vary substantially when it comes to in how far and in which ways European solutions are coupled to national policy problems. Having a multi-level focus allowed examining the various directions of influences flowing between the two levels. Rather than black-boxing the processes of uploading and downloading to two separate processes (Börzel, 2003), this allowed tracing the process between levels. While the three cases are too few to make definite generalisations, the distinctly different strategies illustrate differences on the national level and whether the solution is linked to national problems (over time) or not. What has been essential is the coupling to national policy problems. Countries such as Estonia where frameworks have been developed but remain to some extent "empty" also question the notion of a standardization process and the scope of change. At the same time, the national process in Norway showed that when national actors bring in their own interests for change and view this new solution as a means to further own interests, these ad-hoc processes can also become rather intensive. A contrasting case here was Ireland where the process was locally anchored and focused on local problems, showing also how European level can be used as leverage to push the process forward nationally. Being presented as a meta-framework in the policy domain, one could also suggest that the EQF can, from a more analytical starting point, conceptualise a meta-standard providing the basic language for standard-setting exercises. The broad set of nation states, interests and actors involved would suggest that there is a need for a common vocabulary and reference points on the European level.

Having in mind these three research questions, one can also bring forward some more general empirical contributions. Taking into consideration that there is comparatively little research on European level qualifications frameworks and in particular the EQF, the most obvious contribution and straightforward point is that the study sheds empirical light on how standards emerge and develop. Besides providing insights into a previously understudied case, increased knowledge of the EQF itself will also provide an informed starting point to study implementation processes on institutional level. Some of the early literature on the EQF immediately contested the proposed neutral and value-free nature of the EQF (Cort, 2010b).

This study follows this line of argument, providing further empirical evidence about the various policy ideas built into the EQF and the consequences of this for the coherence of the instrument.

The study here uncovered considerable enthusiasm for the EQF and its possible impact among some European actors, it being frequently seen as a catalyst for change. This enthusiasm stands in stark contrast to what empirical studies have shown about the initial frameworks in the UK, Scotland, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. The study by Allais et al. (2009) discussed in the above review of qualifications frameworks showed early on that even in the countries where the process had been nationally anchored, there was considerable resistance, challenges and contestations of the frameworks. Frameworks took different shapes, forms and functions, even when similar on surface. The study shows the complications that arise when a national policy process is initiated as a result of a European initiative, where anchoring in national policy problems can be ad-hoc or remain rather weak. While from a standardization perspective it can be expected that translations to local practices take place, if the level of differentiation reaches a level where it can threaten the EQF's role as the translation device – what does this mean for the process in Europe? It would appear unlikely that the NQFs would be abolished, in the same way that it is unlikely that the ECTS would be abolished even if there is variation in how it is used.

While it might seem appealing to discard the EQF-NQF processes as an administrative burden with no real function, the empirical analysis in this study also showed their appeal. In this manner, the EQF is not just about the EQF itself. The kind of structures it has created on the EU level with the advisory group that has become an informal governance arena, the spill over effects in terms of debates on informal learning and validation – these processes also show that the EQF has not been insignificant, neither in the vertical nor in the horizontal dimension. It has created legitimate means for the EU to engage in a process of standardization, and it has, both on the EU level and on the national level, been able to bring actors across various educational sectors to one table. Not least, it has further emphasized the shift towards learning outcomes that already started with the QF-EHEA. From that perspective, it is not similarity that is important, it is the construction of trust. There is also awareness of this trust-building element, manifested, for example, in that the advisory group meetings were not made available for research purposes, the argument being the issue of trust.

Following this argument, perhaps the most important empirical contribution of the study has been to show how the subsidiarity principle has become stretched and how additional reform ideas can be introduced through standardization processes. One can thus argue that the study

contributes to the understanding of European integration in education by viewing the EQF as one example of standardization processes that are taking an increasingly notable place in the governance architecture (Lawn, 2011). This adds empirical evidence to the arguments of how EU activities have come about, in addition to national policies. More importantly, it shows the transformation of this dichotomy, how rules are reinterpreted in an incremental manner, and the new kinds of roles the Commission can take in this process.

Analytical contributions of this study

The analytical contributions of this study are twofold. First, there is the input into public policy analysis as a field in terms of developing tools for the analysis of policy processes on multiple levels. Second, this study also contributes to the understanding of European integration, from the neo-institutional perspectives that are used in this study.

The study highlights that in order to study public polies in the area of education more effectively, there is a need for a broader set of analytical tools and disciplinary perspectives. In mainstream policy analysis, the so-called "ideational turn" marked increased focus on analysing policies in terms of beliefs or discourse (Fischer & Forester, 1993; Hajer & Laws, 2008). In educational policy, analysis of "policy" has sometimes become decoupled from analysis of public governance structures and the actors involved, and instead takes the form of (critical) content/discourse analysis. There is no doubt that important contributions have been and are made through analysing the ideas, logics and discourses that are found within policy texts, and how these shape reality as we know it (Fischer & Forester, 1993). However, the underlying idea in this study is that in addition to these analyses, there is a clear need for more process-, institution- and actor-oriented policy analysis in educational research, as there is comparatively little focus on process approaches to educational policy[16]. Rather than establishing that there are contestations, power dimensions and ambiguities, this can allow empirically grounded interpretations for *why* such contestations and ambiguities exist. This suggests that one could instead make a case for the need for an *institutional* as well as an *actor-* and *interest-based turn* in educational policy, to examine the interplay between political and bureaucratic processes, the institutional configurations that frame actor behaviour, and the specific decision-making principles and processes in policy processes.

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[16] One should note that in higher education policy studies there are considerably more studies that examine policy change from a processual perspective, whereas this is seemingly less common in studies of education policy in general.

While this study makes no pretence to being unique or capturing all of these aspects that are suggested, it does join the call for more process-oriented policy research in educational research, by adopting a toolbox that enables the study of policy processes on multiple levels through an institutional lens. Analysis in terms of specific formal and informal rules, actor behaviour, and the coupling process between problems and solutions proved to be a fruitful way of capturing these processual aspects. Using an institutional approach can also accommodate and combine the analysis of specific ideas with the analysis of institutional structures and the role of actors. Of course, further conceptual refinement is also necessary, in particular in unpacking the role of actors in the processes of coupling problems and solutions.

Another analytical contribution of this study is in the area of the specific analytical tools employed. First, it maintains the central role of actors in change processes, and how the combination of various streams of institutional theory can be used in a complementary manner as the dynamic nature of policy processes over time likely would yield different kinds of explanations at different points in time. The way in which the EQF was introduced showed how actor preferences and capacity are constitutive in change processes. Second, the study shows the complicated nature of expertise in policy processes. Who are the actors that are legitimately considered as experts and according to what criteria is some knowledge considered legitimate as expert knowledge? The study here has stressed the blurring boundaries between experts, stakeholders and policymakers in European policy processes, and how such groupings can acquire considerable informal power while becoming increasingly technical in nature.

This study also provides insights into EU operations on the fringes of formal EU cooperation, highlighting the role of standardization as a coordination mechanism. Education is a policy sector under the subsidiarity principle, and this study shows is that there is considerable innovation on the boundaries of formal cooperation in terms of coordination approaches. Even if formal rules do not change, rules can become reinterpreted and stretched. This then sets an agenda for novel thinking about EU governance, viewing the notion of standardization as a specific coordination mechanism. There is an emerging research agenda on standards-based global governance (Peña, 2015) and on the use of standards at the national level where standards have taken a quasi-regulatory role (Higgins & Hallström, 2007). This study contributes to this literature (albeit from a somewhat different theoretical/philosophical starting point), exemplifying how the EU takes the role of a standardizer in a context of low legal enforcement where compliance is ensured indirectly. From this perspective, standardization could be seen as a specific policy mode, a variation of the five commonly outlined – community method,

regulatory mode, distributional mode, policy coordination, and intensive transgovernmentalism (Wallace, 2010). What makes standardization distinct from these five policy modes is that it employs a voluntary and open approach, while also retaining a degree of centralization. While the Commission retains considerable power in the process of defining standards by selecting appropriate experts and being a mediator and persuader in the process, the spread is an open-ended process. Furthermore, oversight and coordination are moved away from the main EU institutions, creating new structures for policy diffusion that build on this standardization process. This represents a considerably more technical channel for influence, bypassing representative EU institutions (i.e. the Parliament). Similar processes have also been described for other educational policy processes in the EU (Lawn, 2011). The question then becomes: is this instrumental and standards-based integration a more substantial shift in how one can conceptualise European governance?

The study also had a methodological implication for studies on European governance, suggesting that detailed qualitative analysis of single cases can provide important insights. Rather than measuring the scope of integration in terms of policy outputs or even the locus of decision-making (Börzel, 2005; Pollack, 1994), this approach is able to analyse the informal widening of formal rules, that is − examining actual change when formal change does not necessarily take place.

6.2   The EQF through the lens of standardization

The starting point for this extended abstract was the vision of the EQF as a standardization process. In chapter 3, different functions of standards were introduced to describe the standardization process from a macro perspective, being a symbolic expression of common European norms and values, a policy instrument for oversight, or market information tools to enhance cross-border interaction (Gornitzka et al., 2007, p. 204) – termed as the symbolic, instrumental and information-based functions of standards. These three functions form a basic categorisation for viewing the empirical conclusions of this study through the lens of standardization.

The EQF as a symbolic expression of common European norms and values

Examining the relationship between Europe, as a common educational area, and the sovereign countries that compose this area, there have been few formal changes in terms of the autonomy of member states. Instead, it seems that the constraints are more informal, suggesting a shift in how subsidiarity as a political and legal constraint is perceived. From this perspective, one can

argue that the EQF has a particular symbolic function, creating common language, placing various educational systems in one larger meta-system, with all of these representing an idea of a closer integrated Europe in the area of education.

In the empirical material it was highlighted that European coordination in education is something that countries willingly engage in, and that the subsidiarity principle had become stretched, allowing for initiatives that would perhaps have been unthinkable ten years ago. At the same time, this does not imply a willingness to transfer legal competencies in the form of building formal authority at the European level in the area of education. There is little reason to suggest that the subsidiarity principle might be discarded. However, the kind of policymaking that the OMC has introduced has definitely widened the scope of possible action (Gornitzka, 2005). Here, the more nuanced view of partial transference of competencies is particularly relevant, distinguishing between legal and executive competencies on the one hand, and communicative and coordinative competencies on the other (Borrás, 2008). Article 3 in particular discussed how this balance has shifted and, while the national level has retained legal competence, there is considerable coordinative and communicative competence in the Commission.

However, whether it is a question of shared values or shared problems is perhaps still unresolved. The empirical material here suggests that the notion of shared problems appears to have increased, providing legitimacy for arguments of shared solutions. Decisions by the EQFAG that go against preferences that have been outlined on the national level can be seen as one manifestation of this, another can be found in the informal agreement on the entrance qualifications to higher education. These kinds of decisions effectively block countries from referring their educational systems significantly differently from other countries. It appears that there is increased normative pressure for a more unified education area. Thus, as increased space for joint coordination that has been developed after Lisbon (Gornitzka, 2007), the EQF can be seen as a backbone for this coordination. At the same time, the shape, scope and form of this coordination is not yet decided.

The main purposes of the EQF are linked to mobility and transparency. These goals have high symbolic value, as was evident in the empirical material. In addition to these largely unquestioned key ideas, there is a multitude of other ideas included in the EQF, about lifelong learning, in/non-formal learning and parity of esteem. From that perspective, the EQF is not necessarily a very coherent and unified expression of values. Instead, the phrase "EU on demand" was suggested in Article 4, where actors on both the national and European level pick

and choose to couple problems and solutions according to their perceived interests. This would view the EQF as a whole shop of values, of different shape and purpose. This would also not be uncharacteristic for the European integration process - its dual focus on both economic growth and social cohesion is a feature of the EU's Lisbon Agenda (Borrás & Jacobsson, 2004; Gornitzka, 2007; Holford & Mleczko, 2013; Rodrigues, 2002).

The EQF as a policy instrument

Whether a backbone for policy initiatives or a mechanism for standardization, the practices, processes and structures created around the EQF can be seen as belonging to a new approach to policymaking in the area of education. The EQF has contributed to the increase of governance capacity on EU level in the area of education. One example of this can be found in the advisory group – EQFAG. Not only was the developed structure of the EQFAG perceived as desirable, it has also acquired informal power in terms of its decisions. Furthermore, as the process has evolved from being a one-time referencing exercise to a continuous process of referencing and re-referencing, this has created the need for monitoring practices. As the group has acquired new tasks, it is also likely that the structure is now more stable, beyond its formally temporary nature. Furthermore, it has become an arena for discussing other policy initiatives.

Even when real stability is built around common identities, values and norms (Olsen, 2007, p. 24), and it is by no account clear that this is the case at this point for the EQF as a policy solution, the creation of processes, initiatives and accompanying stable structures that can facilitate such developments is a first step in this direction.

The EQF as a means for standardization can also be seen as a new approach to policymaking by the Commission. Rather than being about intergovernmental bargaining or supranational policymaking, the Commission here takes a different role, the role of a standardizer. This would also differ from the usual institutional and MLG approaches. Being a standardizer, the EU is more detached from the political process, while at the same time retaining influence over the content, distinguishing this from more intergovernmental and joint coordination processes. The governance perspective in this function is technical, where the policymaking structures that are created are detached from the political domain, suggesting a technocratic rule through expertise (Lawn, 2011). As highlighted earlier, this shift can also be seen as part of a larger shift towards standards-based governance (Peña, 2015). Furthermore, the inclusion of various stakeholder groups introduces an element of transnationalism to these structures (Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006b).

Overall, while it would be difficult to call the EQF a reform package, its added ideas, linkages and implications also make it difficult to conceptualise it as a solution to one particular policy problem. It provides a mechanized and rationalized view of the basic structure of what educational systems look like. In this view, the EQF can be seen as a backbone for a variety of initiatives. Developments since also suggest that new initiatives are linked to the EQF at the European level (i.e. recommendation on validation, ESCO) and that this can also have implications for national level policy dynamics (see, for instance, article 4). This suggests that the EQF is a dynamic instrument that changes over time and the possibilities for what the EQF can be on European level remain rather open-ended.

The EQF as a market information tool for cross-border information

This final view of the EQF as a standardization process builds on its function as a translation device and information tool. It would portray the EQF as a technical standard, rather similar to technical standards in engineering that would ensure comparability and where the dominant standard will prevail (Brunsson, Rasche, & Seidl, 2012). This view on standards emphasises the measurable and comparable nature of their components, in this case, qualifications. This idea has been rather visible in the EQF early on, as mobility and transparency have been the main headline aims of the EQF. There was also great optimism for the EQF to fulfil this promise. In 2007, Ján Figel, at the time Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth stated in his speech at the EUA convention:

> *I also expect more mobility. By, say, 2015, it will be quite common (...) Going abroad will not pose a recognition problem, as thanks to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System ECTS, the EQF and the numerous cooperation agreements between universities recognition problems will be rather a thing of the past. (Figel, 2007)*

Predicting the future is always a tricky thing as change is usually complicated, as is also evident in this study. As with most visions of the future, reality has not quite been able to live up to the ambitions, and recognition is still frequently an issue for European students. Furthermore, recognition is an issue that requires a different kind of legal basis (i.e. the Lisbon convention that was adopted in 1997), whereas the EQF can be more related to transparency. So what does this say about the function of the EQF as a market information tool?

In a sense, the very basic principle of the EQF has a standardizing effect built into it. If one would follow the EQF to the letter, one could expect rather different NQFs based on national systems, where the EQF acts as a translation device between these NQFs. At the same time, it would seem that the effect has been quite the opposite – there is considerable surface similarity

between the frameworks that have been adopted as a consequence of the EQF. The EQF does not dictate that countries need to develop a NQF, nor that it should have a particular number of levels. Nevertheless, a large share of the countries have introduced 8-level frameworks, following the structure of the EQF. The creation of a common vocabulary can also be seen to have a standardizing effect on the educational landscape of Europe, exemplified clearly in the debates in the advisory group that in the beginning had to focus on a very basic understanding of what certain concepts mean in different countries (see article 2). These processes facilitate more communication, and the very aim of transparency would nicely suit the idea of the EQF as an information tool.

However, while the EQF has potential to fulfil this function, for the time being the analysis still identified persistent variation, which would not support the idea of the EQF as a technical standard. The development of the EQF on European level suggested that the process is also characterized by political agreements, for instance, regarding the agreement on threshold levels for particular levels of education (i.e. the informal agreement on secondary education diplomas being on level 4). The diverging sectoral interests have also created ambiguity within the instrument (see also article 3).

Furthermore, while the analysis in this study was limited to three countries, the experiences show structurally different developments (see article 4). These three rather different experiences suggest that the impact they might in turn have on educational practices might vary considerably. Even if one might observe the development of NQFs across Europe, the nested nature of educational change processes means that actual impact of the instrument needs to be studied empirically at the grassroots level (Maassen, 2009; Musselin, 2005). This emphasizes the contextual nature of NQFs, cautioning against the idea of transferability, since national contexts, cultures and traditions have a substantial effect on how qualifications are formulated and understood (Fernie & Pilcher, 2009).

The conceptualization of being a market instrument highlights the view of the EQF as something that is value-free, technical, the ultimate *Babel fish* that instantly translates any set of European educational qualifications into another set of qualifications in a transparent and neutral manner. The analysis of the EQF itself and the case studies in this study have shown that this neutrality is to a large extent illusory.

6.3 Limitations

This section will outline some of the empirical and conceptual limitations of this study. Designing a study usually involves certain trade-offs – regarding a broad vs narrow lens on the process or focusing on specific stages of the process vs the whole process. Furthermore, selection of analytical tools emphasizes particular aspects while downplaying others.

The methodological chapter already outlined some limitations in terms of case selection, and the possible positive benefits of other kinds of cases. Not least, analysing cases that were not successful would have been of great interest, to examine the processes that have led to frameworks that are lagging behind, have not been adopted, or are adopted as just "words on paper" with barely any content. It would also be of interest to examine whether there would be any typologies for the implementation and how national frameworks are developed. That is, are there other variables (other than the issue of coupling between problems and solutions) that can explain variation between countries? While this study would suggest the role of actors as one explanation, the case selection is not sufficient to exclude other possible explanations.

The analytical approach of focusing on the coupling between problems and solutions was to a large extent useful for examining the different dynamics of change processes. While actors in this study are seen as central for processes of change, the emphasis on the coupling between problems and solutions to some extent downplayed the nuances of detailed actor interaction patterns. Rather than focusing on ties between actors and their coordination pattern, the perspective here focused the role of those actors with capacity and resources to maintain change. One could argue that a more pronounced focus on actor behaviour in general could have added further insights to the study.

There are also empirical limitations in terms of the scope of the analysis – both in terms of being broad, but potentially not broad enough. This study had the aim to examine the process from its origins to the national implementation, a rather lengthy process that constitutes a number of different individual elements. This also sets some limitations to the depth for each individual element. There is no doubt one could also write a dissertation of a single case of developing a national qualifications framework and with a much more detailed analysis of actor behaviour. In this sense, the broad perspective here provided a limitation. At the same time, this also allowed for examining the process as a whole – so the limitation can be seen as a trade-off.

At the same time, one can argue that the study has also had a narrow focus in some aspects. For instance, emphasis in this study has been on the role of the Commission and the various experts

in this process, and less so on other EU institutions, for instance, the role of the European Parliament or the Council. For example, deliberations that took place in the Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) have not been studied in detail. However, as one of the main questions of this study is unpacking how the EQF came about, focus on the Commission was a natural choice due to their gatekeeping role with respect to the EU agenda.

6.4 New avenues for research

The key findings from this study can also be seen as a starting point for a research agenda on the functions and role of standardization in the transformation of European policymaking in education.

First, this study suggests that the notion of standardization could be seen as a specific new policymaking mode. This research agenda goes beyond the EQF and even beyond education as a sector. Is this "hardening of ideas" (Gornitzka et al., 2007) to standards a more general phenomenon? If this can indeed be seen as an additional and distinct policy mode, what does the use of standards mean for the governance structures of the EU? Under what conditions are standards used as policy instruments? This study showed that a standards-based voluntary approach was not easily coupled with hard law (directive). Is this unique to the EQF as a case? How do standards complement, contrast and contest hard law?

Second, this study also shed light on the role of actors, and how specific linkages between actors can assure uploading and specific outcomes. Taking a starting point in a standards-based view, what kind of actor constellations does the use of standards facilitate? Does this represent a new dynamic between EU and the member states in the area of education and the kind of actors who gain prominence in this process? The kinds of parallel links that are created through the advisory group and the NCPs – how are these related to traditional EU representation?

Third, this study has shown the value of detailed case studies in the examination of the stretching of formal rules, where various structures, such as expert groups, can acquire informal power. This highlights the need to further examine the micro processes of governance arrangements, to identify the dynamics between formal rules and the scope there is for operating these rules. Do other advisory and expert groups in the EU behave in a similar manner? Is this widening and stretching of the subsidiarity principle a more general phenomenon? Is there a difference between various kinds of expert and advisory groups (temporary/permanent)? Furthermore, can similar trends be identified in other policy sectors?

Fourth, the multiple ideas and functions of the EQF that were highlighted in this study also indicate that there is movement in how one would view education. The question then becomes, are we witnessing a real shift in terms of standardizing education? While describing systems is not the same as system structure, the manner in which we describe structure and place qualifications on a map also has implications for how we understand this system. So, what kind of change is this? Is this merely a technical change where formulation of standards will facilitate more mobility, or are we in fact witnessing a more substantial shift where education is becoming increasingly closed-ended, measurable, comparable and standardized? These are among the questions to be further examined in future endeavours.

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II ARTICLES

III   APPENDIX

The EQF with level descriptors

Level	Knowledge	Skills	Competence
Level 1	Basic general knowledge	Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks	Work or study under direct supervision in a structured context
Level 2	Basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study	Basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools	Work or study under supervision with some autonomy
Level 3	Knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts, in a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information	Take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study; adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems
Level 4	Factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study	Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change; supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities
Level 5	Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change; review and develop performance of self and others
Level 6	Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles	Advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts; take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups
Level 7	Highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the	Specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate	Manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches; take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and

		knowledge from different fields	practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams
	basis for original thinking and/or research Critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields		
Level 8	Knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields	The most advanced and specialised skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in research and/or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice	Demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research

The three categories are defined as following:

Category	EQF description
Knowledge	In the context of EQF, knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual.
Skills	In the context of EQF, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking), and practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments)
Competence	In the context of EQF, competence is described in terms of responsibility and autonomy.

Interview guide

Interview guide (generic version, guides tailored according to specific actors profile)

(INTRO, PERSONAL PROFILE)

- Could you briefly introduce yourself?
- How are you involved in policy processes in EU (education or employment)? What kind of capacity and in what kind of specific processes have you participated in?

(IDEA, CONTENT AND PURPOSE OF EQF)

- Where did the idea for a qualifications framework come from? (optional: Any countries that were inspirational? Organisations?)
- When did the idea emerge? Was it linked to any specific issue or event? Which one?
- What is the long term goal or purpose of the instrument? What about the ideas of LLL and informal learning?
- What kind of specific problem is the instrument supposed to solve?
- Were any other alternative instruments considered? Which ones?
- Why choose a qualifications framework as an instrument?
- Implications of this being a recommendation? Why in this form? Do you see this as top down or bottom up process?

(ACTORS AND COOPERATION)

- Who else was involved in the development of this instrument?
- Who was the main driver? Did you feel any actors were more prominent than others? (individuals, organisations)
- What kind of expertise was involved in the process, and when? How and on what basis were experts found and selected? Have they been involved in other processes earlier?
- Who have you been cooperating with most closely? Have you cooperated with them before?
- What were major concerns during the process? Main obstacles? How did you overcome these?

(LINKAGES, HORIZONTAL COORDINATION OF POLICY ARENAS)

- How is EQF linked to other instruments? (i.e. Directive/BolognaQF/Europass) What kind of instruments is it related to, which ones important in your perspective? How are they integrated and how do you assure complementarity?
- How do you see the relationship between LLL, education and employment as thematic areas in Europe? Any other thematic arenas that you think are relevant, why? How do you see these areas in relation to EQF?

- In your opinion, what kind of activities related to education/research are necessary to be coordinated on European level and how?
- Does the issue of qualifications frameworks need to be coordinated on EU level? Why/why not?
- How do you see the balance between European coordination and national interests at the moment and in the future?

(PROCESS/IMPLEMENTATION)

- What are your reflections on implementation this far? Has the process been as expected, smoother/more difficult? Why do you think this is the case?
- Could you reflect on the potential value of EQF and achievements this far?
- What is needed for the EQF to deliver its goals in the future?

Project information for the respondents

Project: The development and implementation of the European Qualifications Framework

Project information

Education is one of the central domains in the EUs efforts to become to world's most competitive knowledge economy, as expressed in the Lisbon 2000 agenda and the Europe 2020 strategy. This research project focuses on the developments in European educational policy, more specifically, the emergence of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) as a common policy approach for facilitating lifelong learning and cross border recognition.

The main objective of the project is to examine the emergence of the EQF throughout the various stages of its development. This includes a specific focus on agenda setting, horizontal coordination between various actors and policy sectors on European level, and an understanding of actor dynamics in implementing common policy approaches in a multi-level policy setting.

This research will improve our understanding of the development of educational policy in Europe, and is therefore of great relevance to both practitioners and scholars in the field. Furthermore, this will improve current understanding of the mechanisms that facilitate different kinds of outcomes of implementation processes on national level.

The study relies on document analysis and interviews with key informants as the main sources for data.

The project is conducted in the context of a larger international cooperation studying the emergence of common educational policy arenas in Europe. The project forms a part of a PhD project at the University of Oslo in Norway (supervised by prof. Peter Maassen and prof. Bjørn Stensaker), and is funded through the Norwegian National Graduate School for Education (NATED).

Information about interview process:

- Conducting interviews with participants in the process on both European and national level is a key element in this project.
- The interviews will be conducted in a semi-structured manner, which means that in addition to the prepared interview guide with themes, the researcher might ask additional follow up questions.
- The focus of the questions is related to information about the policy process, perceptions of the participants on the process and coordination with other actors.
- The interview will take approximately 45 minutes, and will be recorded and transcribed.
- Participation is voluntary and it is possible to withdraw at any point up until the research results have been published.
- The interview recording and transcriptions will only be processed in a form that does not reveal your identity and your personal details will not be disclosed to third parties. Your personal details will be deleted five years after the completion of the project.

UiO : **Department of Educational Research**
University of Oslo

NATED
National Graduate School
in Educational Research

HEIK
Higher Education
Institutional dynamics
and Knowledge cultures

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Additional information about the project can be found at:

UiO : **Department of Educational Research**
University of Oslo

NATED
National Graduate School
in Educational Research

HEIK
Higher Education
Institutional dynamics
and Knowledge cultures

List of documents and sources

Documents/reports/etc sources European level by year

Year	# (if applicable)	Title of source
1985	85/368/EEC	Council decision on the comparability of vocational training qualifications between the Member States of the European Community
1992		Guide for Comparability of Vocational Training Qualifications. System implemented by the Commission of the European Communities with the assistance of CEDEFOP. Final document
1993		Towards a European area for vocational qualifications. European forum on Vocational Training. Jointly organized by Commission of the European Communities, Belgian Presidency of the Council, European Parliament, Economic and Social Committee.
1995	95/431/EC	Decision No 2493/95/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 1995 establishing 1996 as the 'European year of lifelong learning'
1999		Bologna Declaration. Towards the European Higher European Area. Bologna, Italy.
2001	COM(2001) 59 final	Report from the Commission - The concrete future objectives of education systems
2001		National Actions to implement Lifelong Learning in Europe. Brussels: CEDEFOP, Eurydice.
2001		Prague Communiqué. Towards a European Higher Education Area: Communiqué of the meeting of European Ministers in charge of Higher Education in Prague on May 19th 2001.
2001	COM(2001) 501 final	Draft detailed work programme for the follow-up of the Report on the concrete objectives of education and training systems
2001	SEC(2001) 130 final	Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament concerning the common position of the Council Relating to the proposal for a recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on mobility within the Community for students, persons undergoing training, young volunteers, teachers and trainers
2002	2002/C 163/01	Council Resolution of June 2002 on lifelong learning
2002		Declaration of the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training, and the European Commission, convened in Copenhagen on 29 and 30 November 2002, on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training "The Copenhagen Declaration"
2003	2003/C 13/02	Council Resolution of 19 December 2002 on the promotion of enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training
2003		Berlin Communiqué. Realising the European Higher Education Area: Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin on 19 September 2003.
2004	13832/04 EDUC 204 SOC 499	Draft Conclusions of the Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the Future priorities of enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training (VET)
		Berlin Communiqué. (2003). Realising the European Higher Education Area: Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin on 19 September 2003.
2004		Maastricht Communiqué on the Future Priorities of Enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training (VET)
2004		European Commission – Towards a European Qualifications Framework and a credit transfer system for vocational education and training (progress report)
2005	COM(2004) 853 final	Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament pursuant to the second subparagraph of Article 251 (2) of the EC Treaty concerning the common position of the Council on the adoption of a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the recognition of professional qualifications
2005		A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. Report prepared by the Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks for the BFUG.
2005		Bergen Communique. The European Higher Education Area - Achieving the Goals. Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Bergen, 19-20 May 2005.
2005	CEDEFOP Panorama series 109	Coles, M. & Oates, T. (2005) European reference levels for education and training: promoting credit transfer and mutual trust. Study commissioned to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, England. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities

2005	COM(2005) 152 final	Communication from the Commission. Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy SEC(2005) 518
2005	COM(2005) 248 final	Opinion of the Commission. pursuant to Article 251 (2), third subparagraph, point (c) of the EC Treaty, on the European Parliament's amendments to the Council's common position regarding the proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the recognition of professional qualifications
2005	SEC(2005) 419	Commission staff working paper. Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training. 2005 report
2005	SEC(2005) 957	Commission staff working document. Towards a European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning.
2005	COM(2005)548 final	Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning
2005	COM(2005) 549 final	Communication from the Commission. Modernising education and training: a vital contribution to prosperity and social cohesion in Europe. Draft 2006 joint progress report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the "Education & Training 2010 work programme"
2006	(2006/C 298/05)	Conclusions of the Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on the future priorities for enhanced European cooperation on Vocational Education and Training (VET) (Review of the Council conclusions of 15 November 2004)
2006	SEC(2006) 639	Commission staff working paper. Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training. 2006 report
2006	COM(2006) 208 final	Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament. Delivering on the Modernisation agenda for universities: Education, research and innovation.
2006	COM(2006) 479 final	Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning
2006	SEC(2006) 1431	European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET). A system for the transfer, accumulation and recognition of learning outcomes in Europe
2006	2006/962/EC	Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning
2006		The Helsinki Communiqué on Enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training
2007	COM(2007) 680 final	Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council repealing Council Decision 85/368/EEC on the comparability of vocational training qualifications between the Member States of the European Community
2007		London Communiqué. (2007). Towards the European Higher Education Area: responding to the challenges in a globalised world.
2007	SEC(2007) 1484	Commission staff working document. Accompanying document to the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European economic and social committee and the Committee of the regions. "Delivering lifelong learning for knowledge, creativity and innovation" Draft 2008 joint progress report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the "Education & Training 2010 Work Programme"
2008	2008/C 86/01	Information from European Union institutions and Bodies. Council. 2008 joint progress report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the 'Education and Training 2010'work programme—'Delivering lifelong learning for knowledge, creativity and innovation'
2008	2008/C 111/01	Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning
2008	COM(2008) 865 final	Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European economic and social committee and the Committee of the regions. An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training
2008	SEC(2008)3048	"An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training" Impact Assessment Summary
2008		The Bordeaux Communiqué on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training, meeting in Bordeaux on 26 November 2008 to review the priorities and strategies of the Copenhagen process

2008	16459/08 EDUC 278 SOC 736 MI 499	Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on the future priorities for enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training (VET)
2009		Leuven Communique. The Bologna Process 2020 - The European Higher Education Area in the new decade. Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28-29 April 2009.
2009	COM(2009) 329 final	Green paper – Promoting the learning mobility of young people
2009	COM(2009) 640 final	Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European economic and social committee and the Committee of the regions. Key competences for a changing world. Draft 2010 joint progress report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the "Education & Training 2010 work programme"
2010		Focus on higher education in Europe 2010: The Impact of Bologna Reforms. Brussels: EACEA, Eurydice.
2010		Budapest-Vienna Declaration. Budapest-Vienna Declaration on the European Higher Education Area.
2012		Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area. Bucharest Communiqué
2013	COM(2013) 897 final	Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. Evaluation of the European Qualification Framework (EQF). Implementation of the Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council on the Establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning

Various other sources (i.e. agendas/speeches/press releases/meeting minutes) by year

Year	# (if applicable)	Title/description of source
2007		Jan Figel speech «The future of European Higher Education beyond 2010" at the 4th EUA Convention of European Higher Education Institutions. "The future of European Higher Education beyond 2010—diversity with a common purpose".
2007	IP/07/1601	Press release: The European Qualifications Framework: promoting mobility and lifelong learning
2007	MEMO/07/427	FAQ: why does the EU need a European Qualifications Framework
2008	EAC A/1 C/CS D(2008)	NOTE AG1-2 EQF Advisory Group, 13-14 March 2008, Brussels Subject: Organisation and working methods of the EQF Advisory Group (EQF AG)
2008		"Implementing the European Qualifications Framework" conference. Workshop 1: Linking national qualifications levels to the EQF: How can quality assurance and criteria for self-certification promote mutual trust?
2008		"Implementing the European Qualifications Framework" conference. Workshop 2: How can the EQF – and National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) – facilitate the validation of non-formal and informal learning?
2008		"Implementing the European Qualifications Framework" conference. Workshop 3: How can the EQF be used as a reference point for all qualifications - including those developed by industry sectors, enterprises and professions?
2008		"Implementing the European Qualifications Framework" conference. Workshop 4: What is the role of National Qualifications frameworks in implementing the EQF?
2008		"Implementing the European Qualifications Framework" conference. Workshop 5: How can the EQF be used to build links between different sub-systems of education, including adult, Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education?
2008	DG EAC A/I D(2008) 2008/EUR QUALIF FRAME/002	Draft minutes of the first meeting of the EQF advisory group, Brussels. 13-14 March 2008
2008		The European Qualifications Framework (brochure and information leaflets)
2012	Ares(2012)9829 25 - 20/08/2012	PLA on qualifications related to level 5 of the EQF.
2012	Ares(2012)9879 95 - 21/08/2012	Agenda for working group on synergies between qualifications frameworks and recognition for further learning purposes, 26 June 2012 (DG EAC, CoE)

2012	Ares(2012)9878 66 - 21/08/2012	Agenda. Steering committee for the development of the EQF web-based tool EQF Advisory Group (EC)
2012	Ares(2012)9829 98 - 20/08/2012	Fifteenth meeting of the EQF Advisory Group. 11-12 June 2012. Agenda
2012	Ares(2012)9864 65 - 21/08/2012	Main conclusions and action points of the fifteenth meeting of the EQF Advisory Group. Brussels. 11-12 June 2012
2013	Ares(2013)1355 3 - 07/01/2013	Procedural conclusions of the EQF portal Steering Group, Note AG 15-7 (DG EAC, EQFAG, CEDEFOP)
2013	Ares(2013)5115 11 - 26/03/2013	PLA on national approaches to including private and non-formal qualifications in national qualifications frameworks
2013	Ares(2013)1271 707 - 23/05/2013	Extension of the Composition of the EQF Advisory group further to the Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (DG EAC)
2013	Ares(2013)2841 778 - 06/08/2013	Draft conclusions of the meeting of the joint EQF/Ploteus portal steering group of 20 November 2012 (EC)
2013	Ares(2013)2919 917 - 22/08/2013	Draft conclusions 3rd joint EQF/Ploteus steering group meeting 10th of July 2013
2013	Ares(2013)8020 - 04/01/2013	Draft main conclusions and action points of the seventeenth meeting of the EQF Advisory Group. Brussels. 4-5 December 2012
2013	Ares(2013)1330 5 - 07/01/2013	Seventeenth meeting of the EQF Advisory Group. 4-5 December 2012. Draft agenda
2013	Ares(2013)1962 83 - 14/02/2013	Eighteenth meeting of the EQF Advisory Group. 5-6 February 2013. Draft agenda
2013	Ares(2013)5116 92 - 26/03/2013	Nineteenth meeting of the EQF Advisory Group. 13-14 March 2013. Draft agenda
2013	Ares(2013)5115 40 - 26/03/2013	Draft main conclusions and action points of the nineteenth meeting of the EQF Advisory Group. Dublin, 13-14 March 2013
2013	Ares(2013)1500 844 - 29/05/2013	Twentieth meeting of the EQF Advisory Group. 29-30 May 2013. Draft agenda
2013	Ares(2013)2747 819 - 24/07/2013	Draft main conclusions and action points of the twentieth meeting of the EQF Advisory Group. Brussels, 29-30 May2013
2013	Ares(2013)2842 517 - 06/08/2013	Draft minutes of the eighteenths meeting of the EQF Advisory Group Brussels, 5-6 February 2013
2013	Ares(2013)3277 067 - 17/10/2013	Twenty-first meeting of the EQF Advisory Group. 26-27 September 2013. Revised draft agenda
2013	Ares(2013)3286 466 - 18/10/2013	Draft main conclusions and action points of the twenty-first meeting of the EQF Advisory group. Brussels, 26-27 September 2013
2014	Ares(2014)1153 7 - 06/01/2014	PLA on increasing synergies between the implementation of the learning outcomes approach and quality assurance arrangements (EC)
2014	Ares(2014)1755 1 - 07/01/2014	Working Methods of the EQF Advisory Group (revised) (EC)
2014	Ares(2014)1755 1 - 07/01/2014	Annex 1 National coordination points for EQF
2014	Ares(2014)1755 1 - 07/01/2014	Annex 2 Criteria and procedures for referencing national qualification levels to the EQF
2014	Ares(2014)1158 1 - 06/01/2014	Twenty-second meeting of the EQF Advisory Group 16-17 December 2013. Draft agenda.

Explanation of terms

L: EU legislation

C: other official documents of the EU institutions, bodies and agencies (incl: recommendations and opinions)

COM: Commission documents to the other institutions (communications, reports, etc), including legislative proposals

SEC: documents that cannot be classified otherwise, by Commission

ARES is a web application for registering formal documents in the EU, the reference number refers to the record in ARES system

National sources (including web sources)

Ireland

Year	Source
	QQI website http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-(NFQ).aspx
	Website for the Irish Qualifications Framework http://www.nfq-qqi.com
1999	Qualifications (Education and training) Act, 1999
2001	CEDEFOP (2001) Irish citizens and lifelong learning.
2003	Outline National Framework of Qualifications– Determinations made by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
2006	Verification of Compatibility of Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area
2009	Report on referencing the Irish Qualifications Framework to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) (NQAI)
2009	Framework Implementation and Impact Study
2012	Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act 2012

Estonia

Year	Source
	Kutsekoda website (information about the EstQF) http://www.kutsekoda.ee/et/kvalifikatsiooniraamistik/ekr_tutvustus
	Ministry of Education website https://www.hm.ee/et/tegevused/kvalifikatsioonid/kvalifikatsiooniraamistik
	ENIC NARIC website http://adm.archimedes.ee/enic/akadeemiline-tunnustamine/rahvusvahelised-dokumendid/kvalifikatsiooniraamistik/
	Eesti kvalifikatsiooniraamistik (Estonian Qualifications Framework) (information materials)
2001	Kutseseadus (Law of Occupations, former) (RT I 2001, 3, 7; 2007, 24, 127)
2008	Kutseseadus (Law of Occupations) (RT I 2008, 24, 156)
2008	Kõrgharidusstandard (Higher Education Standard) RT I 2008, 57, 322 https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/13255227
2011	Report on referencing of the Estonian Qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework (Kutsekoda)

Norway

Year	Source
	NOKUT website for the NKR http://www.nokut.no/no/fakta/det-norske-utdanningssystemet/nasjonalt-kvalifikasjonsrammeverk-for-livslang-laring/
	Ministry of education and research website for NKR https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/utdanning/voksnes_laering_og_kompetanse/artikler/nasjonalt-kvalifikasjonsrammeverk/id601327/
2011	Consultation of the National Qualifications Framework in Norway: hearing notice
2011	59 responses from the consultation round in Norway with comments
2011	Nasjonalt kvalifikasjonsrammeverk for livslang læring (NKR). (The Norwegian Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning)
2012	The referencing of the Norwegian Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and self- certification to the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA)
2014	Referencing the Norwegian Qualifications Framework (NQF) to the EQF (presentation to the EQFAG)

List of concepts/terms

Article	Nodes
Article 1, Article 3	Problem definition Expert involvement Implementation Standardization Sectoral coordination Link to other policy instruments Link to Bologna Trust Incentives Informal learning Learning outcomes Reform agenda Subsidiarity EU competence Political will Importance/relevance of EQF Future developments
Article 2	Aim of the EQFAG Tasks of the EQFAG Activities of the EQFAG Membership Roles within group Role of Commission/EU Shared norms Appropriateness Shared problem formulation Procedures and practices Common language Legitimacy (internal) Role of individual actors
Article 4	Stages and timeline of the process Policymaking tradition Uploading capacity Problem and purpose definition of NQF Rationale for compliance National policy dynamics – LO National policy dynamics – informal learning National policy dynamics – LLL National policy dynamics – qualification National policy dynamics – transparency and parity of esteem Use of NQF (if relevant) Planned future developments

Approval from NSD

Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste AS
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Vår dato: 25.04.2013   Vår ref:34108 / 3 / SSA   Deres dato: Deres ref:

TILBAKEMELDING PÅ MELDING OM BEHANDLING AV PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

Vi viser til melding om behandling av personopplysninger, mottatt 04.04.2013. Meldingen gjelder prosjektet:

34108	The Development and Application of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)
Behandlingsansvarlig	Universitetet i Oslo, ved institusjonens øverste leder
Daglig ansvarlig	Mari Elken

Personvernombudet har vurdert prosjektet og finner at behandlingen av personopplysninger er meldepliktig i henhold til personopplysningsloven § 31. Behandlingen tilfredsstiller kravene i personopplysningsloven.

Personvernombudets vurdering forutsetter at prosjektet gjennomføres i tråd med opplysningene gitt i meldeskjemaet, korrespondanse med ombudet, ombudets kommentarer samt personopplysningsloven og helseregisterloven med forskrifter. Behandlingen av personopplysninger kan settes i gang.

Det gjøres oppmerksom på at det skal gis ny melding dersom behandlingen endres i forhold til de opplysninger som ligger til grunn for personvernombudets vurdering. Endringsmeldinger gis via et eget skjema http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/meldeplikt/skjema.html. Det skal også gis melding etter tre år dersom prosjektet fortsatt pågår. Meldinger skal skje skriftlig til ombudet.

Personvernombudet har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet i en offentlig database, http://pvo.nsd.no/prosjekt.

Personvernombudet vil ved prosjektets avslutning, 31.12.2014, rette en henvendelse angående status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.

Vennlig hilsen
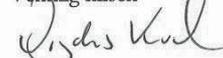
Vigdis Namtvedt Kvalheim

Sondre S. Arnesen

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