On 28 February – 1 March 2013 in Västerås, Sweden, Swedish Ministry of Education, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, European Commission and Cedefop jointly organised a peer learning activity on including qualifications from outside formal education and training systems into NQFs. 42 participants from 20 countries took part in the peer learning activity.

**Country survey**

A survey was carried out prior to the event asking countries whether they are including or are planning to include non-formal and private qualifications in their NQFs. A total of 23 responses were received, covering 26 national frameworks. The survey illustrated that there is a growing interest in this subject and that countries see it as important to establish links to qualifications and certificates awarded outside the public, formal education and training sector – in particular by the voluntary sector and by companies and branches. The survey showed that 11 of the 23 countries have put in place or are planning to put in place procedures and criteria allowing private and non-formal qualifications to be included in the frameworks. All countries see it as important to establish robust quality assurance criteria to avoid that the opening up of the frameworks undermine overall trust to national qualifications.

**The focus and conclusions of the PLA**

The two day PLA was organised around 4 workshop sessions:

- Why open up NQFs to private and non-formal qualifications;
- The use of learning outcomes in describing qualifications outside the formal system;
- Quality assurance underpinning qualifications outside the formal system
– Criteria and procedures for the inclusion of non-formal and private qualifications?

Based on intense discussions in these workshops, the following main concluding points were highlighted at the end of the PLA:

There’s a broad agreement that national qualifications frameworks should support lifelong learning and it is therefore crucial that they are open to non-formal and private qualifications. This not only provides a more comprehensive overview over existing qualifications, it also makes allows for strengthening the linkages between different types and levels of qualifications.

To succeed with this opening up towards non-formal and private qualifications, NQFs need to be communicated better to relevant stakeholders – they need to be established in the consciousness of a broader public than being limited to national authorities and public bodies.

The PLA illustrated that including a broader range of qualifications awarded outside formal systems in NQFs entails some risks. The following anxieties were voiced:

– Costs must be controlled and there is a need to decide on how to share these;
– Complicated bureaucracy must be avoided. The design of criteria and procedures must be taken forward in a way which ensures simplicity;
– An opening up of NQFs must not result in an overall lowering of standards. While criteria and procedures may vary between public and private qualifications, it is important to avoid a perception of ‘A’ and ‘B’ qualifications; equivalence rather than similarity must be sought.

The discussions in the PLA repeatedly pointed to the potential added value of an opening up of NQFs:

– it can help to improve the quality and consistency of qualifications awarded in the private and non-formal sector;
– it can help to improve the overall quality of the existing formal system by drawing on the experiences from the private and non-formal sector.

The opening up of NQFs must be seen in relation to the existing national education and training system. The concrete mechanisms for including non-formal and private qualifications have to be designed with reference to the national context. Issues of particular relevance are:

– Is the NQF mainly oriented towards education and training providers or towards ‘qualification owners’ (awarding institutions);
– Is the national qualification system operating according to a modularised approach or is it giving priority to ‘full’ (‘holistic’) qualifications;
– Is there a credit system in place?

The PLA illustrated that the potential inclusiveness of NQFs can be viewed from different perspectives. The following tension was observed:
Should a strict or tolerant approach be applied when accepting a qualification for inclusion; to what extent should non-traditional qualifications be asked to change and conform to the existing formal system?

While reflecting the national context (see above), the procedures for inclusion of qualifications must address and influence the following aspects:

- Procedures must clarify the importance of describing qualifications in learning outcomes and provide guidance on format and orientation of these descriptions;
- Procedures must underline the importance of assessment; only learning outcomes which can be assessed should be included;
- Procedures must encourage qualifications owners to clarify the relevance of the qualification to the labour market;
- Procedures must emphasise the importance of continuous renewal of qualifications; a qualification should be included for a limited period of time (4-7 years) and putting in place a continuous dialogue on renewal should be mandatory;
- Procedures should be designed in a way which reduces complexity and cost.

The PLA pointed to a number of follow up-activities:

- The detailed minutes of the PLA will be circulated as soon as possible;
- Further terminological clarification is needed;
- The work programme on learning outcomes (2013-2015) agreed by the EQF AG can support continued work in this area, in particular when developing procedures and quality criteria.
- The PLA illustrated the need for a ‘community of practise’ in this area and the Commission and Cedefop were encouraged to continue to support the work in this area.
- Cedefop will publish a working document summarising the results of the survey as well as taking into account the results of the PLA.

While it was agreed that the question of including international qualifications is linked to the inclusion of private and non-formal qualifications, it was also acknowledged that this is a separate issue raising a number of additional questions not covered by the present PLA. A separate PLA or seminar on this issue could be considered in the near future.