

NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS SYSTEM IN RUSSIA – AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. *Introduction.* The article offers an insight into an epistemological perspective of establishing the national qualifications system in Russia that is critical for creating a “market of qualifications in the country that would be adequate to the current context.

The *aim* of the research was to examine the context and factors underpinning the formation and evolution of the structure of knowledge relating to the national qualification system in Russia.

Methodology and research methods. The methods applied comprise a mixed-method approach that included: review and analysis of official documents, semi-structured background and individual interviews with key stakeholders (line ministries, experts from industry and qualifications awarding bodies etc.) and desk research.

Results and scientific novelty. The performed analysis of documents and of research data has revealed that the process of generating and enhancing knowledge about the national qualifications system semantically and methodologically is in broad terms contingent on the needs and objectives of social and economic development, and in narrower terms – on the development of occupational standards that underpin the standards of vocational and higher education, as well as on the enhanced institutionalisation of employers’ involvement in the training of personnel and in the search of effective mechanisms and instruments of independent assessment of qualifications.

It also offers an insight into current key paradigmatic gaps in the NQF-related epistemology in Russia that account for the specificity of the observed state of play and for the key conceptual epistemological contradiction that has been identified by the authors as the opposition of and conflict between occupational and

education qualifications. The authors propose ways out of the situation based on international practices in this area starting from aligning the terminology and conceptual approaches with international ones.

The performed epistemological research and the conclusions made by the authors contribute to the national qualifications system discourse. It is stressed that core principles underpinning the development of the national qualifications system should be adapted to the social and economic and local factors.

Practical significance. The material of the article can be used by policy-makers dealing with the NQS development and implementation of the NQS.

Keywords: qualification, national qualifications framework, national qualifications system, infrastructure of the national qualifications system, occupational standards, education standards, learning outcomes, competences.

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НАЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ СИСТЕМА КВАЛИФИКАЦИЙ В РОССИИ – ЭПИСТЕМОЛОГИЧЕСКАЯ ПЕРСПЕКТИВА

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Аннотация. *Введение.* В статье рассматривается эпистемологическая перспектива становления в России национальной системы квалификаций, необходимой для появления в стране отвечающего современным реалиям «рынка квалификаций».

Цель публикации – обсуждение содержания, факторов формирования и эволюции знаний об аспектах функционирования национальной системы квалификаций в российских условиях.

Методология и методики. В ходе работы применялись комплексный подход к объекту изучения, включающий такие методы исследования, как обзор и анализ официальных документов, полуофициальные опросы и индивидуальные интервью с представителями наиболее заинтересованных сторон –

руководителями и сотрудниками отраслевых министерств, отраслевыми экспертами, специалистами структур по присуждению квалификаций и т. д.

Результаты и научная новизна. Проведенный анализ документальных и научных источников показал, что процесс генерирования и совершенствования знаний о системе национальных квалификаций семантически и методологически связан в широком понимании с потребностями и целями социально-экономического развития; в более узком – с разработкой профессиональных стандартов, которые должны служить основой стандартов профессионального и высшего образования, а также с усилением институционализации участия работодателей в подготовке кадров и поиске эффективных механизмов и инструментария независимой оценки квалификаций и компетенций.

Вскрыты имеющиеся в настоящее время парадигматические пробелы в системе знаний о национальной рамке квалификаций, порождающие проблемы дальнейшего развития данного направления в России. В качестве узлового концептуального эпистемологического противоречия выделено неправомерное противопоставление профессиональных и образовательных квалификаций. С опорой на зарубежный практический опыт предложены пути выхода из сложившейся ситуации, в частности, рекомендуется прежде всего согласовать терминологию и концептуальные подходы с международными нормами.

Предпринятое в контексте эпистемологии исследование и сделанные авторами выводы расширяют дискурс о национальной системе квалификаций; подчеркивается, что при соблюдении общих принципов разработки национальной системы квалификаций важно учитывать специфические внутригосударственные социально-экономические и территориальные факторы.

Практическая значимость. Материалы статьи могут быть использованы в практике отечественных специалистов, ответственных за создание инфраструктуры и внедрение национальной системы квалификаций и формирующих политику в этой области.

Ключевые слова: квалификация, национальная рамка квалификаций, национальная система квалификаций, инфраструктура национальной системы квалификаций, профессиональные стандарты, образовательные стандарты, результаты обучения, компетенции.

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Introduction

The article examines the evolution of the epistemology underpinning the national qualifications system (NQS) in Russia. It is obvious that nowhere

in the world has the process of NQS formation and hence of the maturing of the respective methodology been fast, easy or smooth. However, the post-industrial paradigm world over makes the NQS an inherent developmental must as both a pre-requisite and a factor of countries' competitive development in the interests of the economy and of the population. For the above development to be competitive it must rely on a sound system of knowledge.

It is common knowledge that the changing nature of the world's development triggers off new challenges, contexts and requirements for skills development to meet the specificity of the globalised economy and of digitalisation on the one hand, and of lifelong learning, on the other.

The changing nature of work calls for more flexible, multi-skilled workers who would be mobile across the domestic economy and internationally. For the sake of efficiency and fairness, this requires that qualifications or skills, whenever and wherever acquired, should have a common meaning for employers in their selection of workers throughout the country and be comparable internationally. For individuals it means opportunities for having their qualifications and skills recognised both for entry into further studies or relevant forms of employment over their lifetime [1].

In view of the above, NQSS have been/are being designed and put in place to bridge the gap between the supply and demand of skills/qualifications and to provide learning opportunities within the lifelong learning paradigm to diverse target groups, including opportunities to have qualifications acquired outside the formal system of education assessed/validated and recognised.

Literature Review

To date there has been a wealth of publications that reflect on and examine the NQS development across the world [2–7]. They differ in the depth of the insight and width of coverage. However despite their differences they are based on a common epistemology and hence on a shared interpretation of the underlying concepts and terms forming a common system of knowledge built on a set of key parameters. These parameters may be called the backbone of the theoretical perspective of the NQS. Some of them can be said to bear an invariant character (like the round shape is an invariant parameter of the wheel), while others can vary in the configuration depending on the national specificity and on traditions of industrial regulation and of the national system of education (e. g. formats of the normative/regulatory framework, of stakeholder involvement, etc.) [8, 9].

The publications vary in scope, depth and coverage. Some refer to the national landscape and cover the specificity of the NQFs, others summarise the status quo internationally, and still others provide insights into the evolution of the developmental paradigm and gradual build-up of the knowledge system relating to the qualifications frameworks and systems. The common denominator underpinning them all is their focus on lifelong learning and on ensuring progression and portability qualifications.

International reports largely bear a comparative character and reflect the evolution of the perceptions and practices of the qualifications systems development, accompanied by a crystallisation of the conceptual framework and insights. They are produced by the OECD (The Role of National Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning, 2004; Qualifications Systems: Bridges to Lifelong Learning, 2007); by CEDEFOP (Changing qualifications, 2010; Analysis and overview of NQF developments in European countries, 2012; Development of national qualifications frameworks in Europe, 2012; publications in the European qualifications framework series); by the ETF (Global National Qualifications Framework Inventory, ETF, 2014; Making Better Vocational Qualifications, ETF, 2014); by the ILO (Tuck R. An introductory guide to national qualifications frameworks: conceptual and practical issues for policy-makers. 2007; The implementation and impact of National Qualifications Frameworks: Report of a study in 16 countries, 2010) [10–14].

Overviews of the qualifications frameworks landscape can also be found in numerous other publications (Burke G. et al. Mapping Qualifications Frameworks across APEC Economies, 2009; Global National Qualifications Frameworks Inventory, 2013; Méhaut P., Winch C. The European qualifications framework: skills, competences or knowledge?, 2012; Allais S. The impact and implementation of national qualifications frameworks: a comparison of 16 countries; Bohlinger S. Qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes: challenges for Europe's lifelong learning area, 2012) [1, 5, 10, 15].

There has been a series of publications with a comparative analysis of national qualifications systems and the European Qualifications Framework (Comparative Analysis of the Australian Qualifications Framework and the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning; Comparative analysis of the EQF and New Zealand QF). These publications analyse the compatibility of qualifications and suggest ways to compare them. The latter is made possible by a common understanding and structuring and by the overall epistemology of the national qualifications frameworks and systems.

Numerous publications cover sectoral qualifications frameworks that began to be formed in Europe in the light of globalisation and growing labour

and academic mobility (Study on International Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks and Systems. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2016; Sector qualifications strategy; Iglesias-Fernandez C., Llorente-Heras R. Sectoral structure, qualification characteristics and patterns of labour mobility, 2007; Study on International Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks and Systems, 2016) [11, 16, 17].

A number of publications address the NQFs, covering both the established systems and as well as prospects for their development. A graphic example of the later is demonstrated by, for example, publication by Iwata K. (Towards the Early Construction of Japanese Qualifications Framework – JQF is the Key Node for Addressing Many Challenges of Human Resources Development in Japan, 2014); by Agata K. (How Should We Recognise the Utility of Vocational Qualification in Japan?, 2010) [18, 19].

Examples of publications on the themes of the NQFs, their added value for the society, economy and the individuals can, for example, be found in the article by Lester S. (The UK qualifications and credit framework: a critique, 2011); by Strathdee R. (The implementation and impact of the New Zealand national qualifications framework, 2011) [20, 21].

The key specificity traced through the qualifications systems evolution process is the bottom-up approach to forming the knowledge base for the QFs. Having started with the national level, as evidenced in South Africa, New Zealand and United Kingdom – countries with the longest tradition of NQFs based on learning outcomes – the qualifications frameworks and systems spread onto the regional level as evidenced, for example, by the European Qualifications Framework.

Materials and Methods

The materials used comprise a wealth of publications including research and analytical reports, national and international; data from national bodies responsible for national qualifications systems governance and operation; conference proceedings.

The methods applied for the given research comprise a mixed-method approach that included: review and analysis of existing national and international documents and reports, conducting semi-structured background and individual interviews with key stakeholders (from sector ministries, sector skills councils called in Russia “occupational qualifications councils”, experts from industry and the recently established independent qualifications assessment bodies, etc.) and comparative research.

Results and Discussion

The research shows that systemic, or invariant features of the NQS include the NQF as its core, and the purpose of the NQS to improve quality, access, linkages and public and labour market recognition of qualifications within a country and internationally.

Thus, the NQF represents a formal classification arrangement that allows designing new qualifications, comparing qualifications and assessing and recognising qualifications. Qualification frameworks are often expressed as diagrams of the main qualifications and the levels of these qualifications. Levels typically relate to either complexity of learning and/or the progression routes that learners take.

The governance of NQS and its elements is a rule performed under the acting legislation that stipulates legal and institutional mechanisms of regulating qualifications and the roles and responsibilities of communities of practice in this practice and professional associations.

As a rule, apart from legislation on the national level, a strategy for developing qualifications is adopted that formulates own methodological and information principles and regulations.

Other invariant parameters of the national qualifications framework comprise occupational standards, a public register and information system on qualifications, a quality assurance system for qualifications including tools and regulation of the accreditation of qualifications, and an institutional infrastructure to develop, approve, update and maintain qualifications.

Configurations, or formats occupational standards take, may vary from explicit (e.g. in UK, Australia), or implicit like in the majority countries.

The variable parameters also include the scope of the NQF, namely whether the NQF involves all education and training and qualifications, or just some sectors and qualifications; the number of levels; the detail in the level descriptors for units of learning or descriptors of broad qualification levels; descriptors defined against a taxonomy of learning outcomes (e. g. complexity of knowledge, and skill, application, autonomy); measures of the volume of learning (e. g. 10 learning hours = 1 credit); formulae for the volume and level of units needed for qualifications to be obtained (e. g. 100 credits at level 3 for a Certificate 3 in UK), associated credit framework to estimate the level and volume of learning in various qualifications and in non-formal and informal learning to assist in transfers within the system; links to other frameworks including regional frameworks (e. g. to the European Qualifications Framework); and character of regulation of the NQS [4, 5, 15, 22–25].

Descriptors may follow the format of the EQF, or envisage a more detailed approach. E.g. the NQF in Germany splits the parameter of competence as “*handlungskompetenz*” into two groups – occupational competences (knowledge and skills), and personal ones (social competences and autonomy).

Another variable parameter is types of NQFs depending on whether they communicate the acting state of play in terms of qualifications, or whether they aim at modernisation and regulation. Hence they can be reformatory or descriptive, legislative or having a regulatory power of a lower order).

The analysed qualifications frameworks demonstrate varying degrees of “rigidity”. More rigid frameworks have a set of level descriptors common for all subsystems of education, with each subsystems developing own formats for describing qualifications. Rigid frameworks as a rule bear a regulatory character and set sown uniform specifications to qualifications and their descriptions for all subsystems. This approach was observed initially in New Zealand and Australia; it was overhauled with time as being counter-productive. As a result the character of the frameworks became looser and less rigid [11, 21, 22].

The volume or coverage of qualifications in the NQF can also vary. Namely, it can embrace all levels of education, including VET and higher education, or it can differentiate between levels 1–5 and 6–8, with levels 6–8 referring to qualifications of higher education, or (like in Austria) levels 6–8 are segmented into two strands – one as academic, and the other as vocationally oriented.

It is important to stress – for the sake of the narrative below – that a qualification is understood as a proven capacity to perform a certain occupation that is confirmed by a respective award, certificate, diploma or degree. Thus, a qualification is formal document issued by an officially authorised agency, in recognition that an individual has been assessed as achieving learning outcomes or competencies to the standard specified for the qualification title. The key point is that a qualification in this context testifies to an official recognition of its value for the labour market and for the individual’s further education and training. Even the use of the term occupational qualification (as in South Africa where it indicates VET qualifications that form part of the national qualifications framework) does not contradict the above understanding, simply indicating that it stands for qualifications acquired in the VET sector.

The above underpins the epistemology of the NQF, and the knowledge base for the NQF has formed around the holistic interpretation of the central notion of *qualification*. In this context the term *qualification* has a number of

synonyms, such as *awards, certificates, diplomas, degrees*, etc. The terms are differentiated by the underpinning amount of required learning that can be measured in hours and credits.

In this context, it is important to stress that in the context of the NQS there is one quality assurance system “to safeguard” the relevance and content of qualifications. There is hardly an example of separate quality assurance systems for labour market/occupational qualifications and for qualifications awarded within the system of education. Obviously, such parallel systems would be too costly, against common sense and irrelevant.

Hence, there is no rift or division between occupational and education qualifications, given that one can acquire a qualification only through a process of learning that can be formal, non-formal and informal.

The brief overview above covers the established epistemology of NQS against which the NQS evolution in Russia will be examined. On the whole, in Russia the need for the NQS is gradually gaining recognition both in the education and employers’ communities, and concrete steps have been taken along the way towards it. However the implementation starting point followed a different logic and has resulted in a different epistemology and ensuing problems as will be shown below.

Overall, the reasons for undertaking the NQS development in Russia have been the same as in other countries embracing a rapid pace of change in the structure and content of occupations, and the growing labour mobility, as well as other factors accompanying the transition to the knowledge-based economy/society. However in Russia the global tectonic developmental shifts have been aggravated by the radical overhaul of the ideological, political and social developmental paradigm internally. Namely, the abrupt transition from socialism and from the industrial order to the market model, has affected all spheres of life and subsystems of society, including the system of education and training. For the latter, the change resulted in the severance of links between the education system and the world of work, as enterprises were for over a decade concerned largely with survival, and not with development, new industrial relations only slowly groping their way towards institutionalisation and legitimisation. It took a while for the situation to begin to straighten out, and at the turn of the century the survival orientation started to give way to the development and enhancement of the competitiveness discourse and goal-setting.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the labour productivity discourse in Russia was enriched by the term “occupation standards” that at first was met with suspicion and even rebuttal. It took a few years for the term to start

taking root, first – nominally – in the VET and labour market discourse, and later – in real terms, in concepts and practical tools and actions.

Unfortunately, the “survival”-oriented years impacted dramatically the supply of skills to the labour market as the vocational and higher education sectors were left largely to their own devices, due to disrupted cooperation with the labour market, and had to rely largely on themselves in what and how they taught students. Naturally, employers largely lost trust in the vocational and higher education systems as in the source of qualified graduates, and to make up for the skills shortage and gaps had to develop own training and professional development systems and invest in the on-the-job adaptation of graduates from VET and higher education who they were forced to hire.

This bifurcation of vectors may have been the underpinning reason for the turn the events took, as will be shown below, even though this reason has hardly ever been brought up in the country’s discourse of skills gaps and shortages.

Anyway, the role of economic factors enhanced role when labour productivity and international competitiveness were recognised as problem issues, with skills shortages recognised as an impediment on the way to innovation-based development and competitive labour productivity.

In this context, and thanks to international cooperation projects implemented in Russia with support from the European Commission, the issue of occupational standards surfaced that was shortly associated with the national qualifications framework development. And the NQF discourse began to gradually involve both the education and employer communities, each within its own epistemology.

Given the persisting lack of trust between the two sides, the priority focus was given to occupational standards and later – to occupational qualifications that have been contrasted to vocational and higher education diplomas and qualifications. Even though steps taken further on were aimed at applying the occupational standards to updating vocational and higher education standards, the rift has not only persisted but aggravated, as would be shown below.

The impetus for the growing interest in occupational standards and qualification systems was largely twofold. On the one hand, in a global world certain systems changes and elements are inevitable due to the enhanced pace of exchanges and global interdependencies, on the other – enhanced exchanges and sharing speed up the developmental processes. The latter is true of Russia in relation to the occupational standards and to the NQF development that was sped up by the NQF project supported by the European Tra-

ining Foundation in the early 2000s. This project laid down the first “bricks” in the foundation of the future developments triggering off the awareness-building process and the internal human capacity build-up.

As part of the latter process, private restaurant businesses invested in the development of the occupational standards for their sector. This small project based on the inputs from UK occupational standards experts has been critical in terms of creating a pool of experts competent in occupational standards development. Their involvement in the occupational standards development was instrumental for forming an understanding of the workings of the sector qualifications. As a result, the first publication appeared in the country that was produced by the authors of the given article and M. Coles, one of the leading international experts in the area of NQF development [26].

During the same period, employers – members of the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (often referred to as “Big Businesses Club”) – suffering from the shortage of skills and highly critical of the VET and higher education systems – instituted two working groups to address the enhancement of quality and effectiveness of vocational education and training. These working groups explored international practices and discussed ways to deal with the skills gaps.

As a result, in 2007 the National Qualifications Development Agency (NQDA) was established under the umbrella of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs. The Agency was meant to coordinate the development of occupational standards and sector qualifications. It was expected that the occupational standards and sector qualifications would lay the foundation for the national qualifications framework. At this time a draft of the national qualifications framework was proposed by the Institute for Education Development. The draft failed to get official approval as it did not rely on learning outcomes, merely reflecting the structure of the education system and not supported by a typology and inventory of qualifications.

Another draft, this one fully based on learning outcomes – was prepared by the Centre for VET Studies where the authors of the given article work. Unfortunately, it failed to catch the eye of the National Qualifications Development Agency. In both cases it may have been for better, as the overall context for the NQF and the capacity for its implementation had not yet been fully shaped at the moment.

Overall NQDA’s focus has since then been on the occupational standards development that recently has been enriched by the issues relating to the validation and recognition of qualifications, which will be addressed later in the given article.

By Federal Law of 03.12.2012 № 236-ФЗ, the notions of qualifications and occupational standards were included in the Labour Code and in the Law “On Technical Regulation”¹.

The development of occupational standards as an inherent element of the NQS took on a new impetus after the May 2012 Presidential Decrees “On measures for the implementation of the state social policy” and “On measures to implement the state policy in the field of education and science”. At this point the targets for occupational standards development were set, namely 800 occupational standards were to be approved by the end of 2015. As of now, their number has exceeded the target figure.

At this period another actor emerged on the NQF scene, namely a newly established Agency for Strategic Initiatives that developed a road map for the national system of qualifications and competences². This holistic road map included career guidance measures to help citizens make an informed choice of occupations relevant for the labour market, a comprehensive standards development programme, as well as targets for education and training. The aim of the roadmap was to set up an interface between citizens, businesses and public bodies responsible for education, and to support the development and assessment of competences for a more competitive and productive workforce.

However, apart from the Roadmap, the Agency has not remained a full-fledged player on the NQF scene for long, giving way to the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection that has since 2012 been the key regulatory body for occupational standards and qualifications. To address this new role the Ministry as the regulatory body, approved a template for the occupational standards development, a methodology for filling out the template and a structure of qualifications (description of qualifications linked to the educational attainment)³. The latter document envisages 9 qualification levels and the descrip-

¹ О внесении изменений в отдельные законодательные акты Российской Федерации в целях предоставления объединениям работодателей права участвовать в разработке и реализации государственной политики в области профессионального образования: федеральный закон от 1 декабря 2007 г. № 307-ФЗ [Электрон. ресурс]. Режим доступа: <http://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/92328/> = On amendments to certain legislative acts of the Russian Federation to grant united employers extended rights to participate in the development and implementation of the state policy in the field of vocational and professional education. Federal Law № 307 of December 1, 2007. Available from: <http://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/92328/>

² The Agency for Strategic Initiatives is a high level private-public partnership including leading business representatives and senior members of government.

³ Об утверждении уровней квалификации в целях разработки проектов профессиональных стандартов: приказ Минтруда России от 12.04.2013 № 148н [Электрон. ресурс]. Режим доступа: <http://legalacts.ru/doc/prikaz-mintruda-rossii-ot-12042013-n-148n-> = Levels of occupational qualifications for developing occupational standards Order of the RF Ministry of Labour № 148n of 12 April 2013. [Online] Available from: <http://legalacts.ru/doc/prikaz-mintruda-rossii-ot-12042013-n-148n/>

tors are somewhat compatible with the descriptors of the European Qualifications Framework. They comprise such parameters as *responsibility* (correlates with the competences in the EQF), *character of skills* and *character of knowledge*. Overall the document stipulates that the structure embraces all levels and sectors of education and is characterised by a rigid regulatory approach. However, despite this claim, there is no indication as to how to apply the level descriptors to all sectors and actual qualifications in terms of quality assurance and an inventory of qualifications.

Unfortunately, the document reveals a lack of awareness of international experience concerning the typology of NQFs and their evolution (especially in the countries like UK, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand with a long history of NQF development). Hence, the above “structure of qualifications” can be called a “quasi NQF”, but in no way can it be considered a full-fledged NQF as it has not been developed with a strong stakeholder participation, has not undergone open public review processes, is lacking a register of competence-based qualifications. Moreover, the descriptors include such parameters as “ways of attaining the level of qualification” and “duration of formal education programmes” that limit attainment of qualifications to formal education pathways, which is in contradiction to the lifelong learning philosophy.

A major weakness in the evolution of the epistemology of the NQS is the neglected need to develop a typology of qualifications that would be applicable to the levels and to the amount of learning. As is, the labour market qualifications remain largely on their own and they fail to transparently relate to education qualifications due to the initial discrimination between occupational and education qualifications. As a result, instead of bridging the gap between the labour market requirements to skills and the supply of required skills by the education sector the conflict of interests persists despite the transition of VET and higher education to the competence-based paradigm and the legal requirement to the VET and HE standards and programmes to be based on occupational standards. However, gradually the concept of learning outcomes is gaining ground, which may contribute to the development of the NQF that would be internationally comparable [12, 26–27].

In parallel to the above developments on the federal level, other attempts of addressing the qualifications frameworks development have been made. Namely, under the EC supported Tempus projects a regional qualifications framework for Chelyabinsk region has been developed with participation and direct involvement of 33 regional companies, and sector qualifications frameworks have been developed that have been instrumental in enhancing the quality of VET and higher education programmes (e.g. in the food industry, environmental field, land management, IT and management).

Currently, sector qualifications frameworks are under development in the sectors that have become aware of their added value in the course of the elaboration of occupational standards. Largely, the available SQF drafts carry additional parameters to the level descriptors contained in the document “Structure of Qualifications” depending on the specificity of their sectors. However, as the drafts have not yet been finalised, they cannot be quoted. It is expected that the development of sector qualifications will streamline the NQF epistemology and will contribute to enhancing the awareness of the added value of qualifications frameworks among the employer community which will in the long run speed up the development of the national qualification framework. However, the SQFs are not the only input to the formation of the NQF, as will be shown below.

A further impetus to the development of the NQF and of occupational standards has been given by the establishment by the Presidential Decree of the National Council for Occupational Qualifications and by the consecutive establishment of around 30 sector qualifications councils. The establishment of this umbrella high-level body was meant to overcome the fragmentation of the earlier efforts and to inject a systemic character to the development of up-to-date qualifications in Russia.

Namely, the aims of the National Council are to (<http://nspkrf.ru/>):

- contribute to the establishment of the NQS in Russia;
- align the interests of the business community with the interests of the system of education and training;
- contribute to the formation of independent quality assurance institutes and a system of recognition of qualifications;
- organise and coordinate all activities aimed at developing the up-to-date NQS and its elements (the NQF, federal education standards for VET and higher education, etc.); to mention the key ones.

To perform the above functions, the National Council undertakes research in the field of VET and qualifications systems, and holds to this end various events for different stakeholder target groups.

Another step towards a NQS is the gradual development of qualifications quality assurance tools and procedures. Quality assurance of qualifications typically involves three regulatory elements: accreditation, awarding and monitoring of providers. Variations in national qualifications, apart from their coverage of qualifications, typically relate to these three sets of variables. As international experience shows, accreditation may rest with a single or with multiple agencies, including self-accrediting providers. Some NQFs have brought the accreditation of most groups of qualifications under the jurisdiction

of respective qualifications authorities or agencies. In others, the accreditation functions remain distributed across multiple smaller agencies and providers. There are no countries where all qualifications are awarded by a single central agency or authority.

Conclusion

As revealed by the performed research, the QA mechanisms do not differentiate between occupational and education qualifications and presuppose operation of national quality assurance agencies, as a rule separate for VET and for higher education that operate by uniform standards and set down assessment standards that result in the validation of qualifications.

In Russia the QA system is being formed for occupational qualifications, though there is yet no full awareness of how qualifications are formed and the typology of qualifications is lacking as such, as has been indicated earlier. Part of the forming quality assurance system for occupational qualifications is the process of approval of occupational standards that underpin the occupational qualifications. This process is a multi-stage one. First the occupational standard is to be accepted and approved by the Ministry of Labour, and then it is to be endorsed by the sector and specifically by the appropriate Sector Qualifications Council, while the final approval is vested with the National Qualifications Council.

Once approved, occupational standards are to be used by the system of VET and higher education for the development of education standards and curricula, and for the assessment of qualifications.

The latter procedure in Russia is vested with assessment centres, established specifically for this purpose, and has nothing to do with the assessment of education qualifications that are awarded by education providers. Namely, Law of July 3, (№ 238-FZ) "On the independent assessment of qualifications", stipulates independent assessment of qualifications of candidates wishing to undertake certain occupational activities¹. Overall, this is a positive development, or would be one, had there been a uniform interpretation of the notion of qualifications instead of having two notions – of occupational and education qualifications. Currently, due to the parallel life of education and occupational qualifications, to ensure validation, or legitimisation of

¹ О независимой оценке квалификации: федеральный закон от 03.07.2016 № 238-ФЗ (последняя редакция) [Электрон. ресурс]. Режим доступа: http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_200485 = On independent assessment of qualifications. Federal Law № 238 of July 3, 2016. [Online] Available from: http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_200485

occupational qualifications graduates from education institutions may have to undergo an additional assessment procedure, which will only enhance the rift between the world of work and that of education.

The functions relating to the above assessment procedures are vested with the National Agency for Qualifications Development that is being very active, creating an appropriate infrastructure and issuing regulatory documents.

Formally, the system for occupational qualifications assessment has been established. A register of qualifications has been approved numbering over 1,300 qualifications for specialists with a higher education and secondary vocational education. Over 200 examination centres have been opened in the RF regions.

A system of tax breaks has been introduced for employers who make their staff take exams to have their qualifications assessed. Employers can have the tax base reduced by deducting from it the costs of qualifications assessment. Earlier, the costs of qualifications assessment were to be met from the company's profits. Appropriate amendments have been made to the Tax Code.

However, things are not running too well here, due to the above epistemological gap between education and occupational qualifications and problems with developing appropriate assessment tools and assignments conditioned by a lack of culture of competence-based assessment as such. Traditionally, assessment was aimed at knowledge and less frequently at skills or competences. Active assessment tasks have always been far and few between.

Though the establishment of the occupational qualifications assessment system in its current form can hardly be considered a positive development, it may be viewed as part of the trial and error pathway towards the full-fledged NQS that has a meaning in the overall evolution strategy, as learning from own mistakes is a hard way to learn, though an effective one.

Hopefully, later in the day it may turn out redundant or may be transformed into an independent quality assurance system for VET and for higher education.

As evidenced above, the current policy developments and documents in the field of NQS development envisage enhancement of and are built on links between the world of work and the system of education to ensure a balance of the demand and supply of qualifications and to enhance quality of qualifications to ensure an increased productivity level.

These documents include:

- Federal Law № 273-FZ of December 29, 2012, *On Education in the Russian Federation*;
- Decree of the President of the Russian Federation № 597 of May 7, 2012, *On Measures to Implement the National Social Policy*;

- Decree of the President of the Russian Federation № 599 of May 7, 2012, *On Measures to Implement the National Social Policy in Education and Science*;

- The Strategy for Innovative Development of the Russian Federation for the Period up to 2020 (Directive of the Government of the Russian Federation № 2227-p of December 8, 2011);

- The Government Programme of Education Development for 2013–2020 (approved by Directive of the Government of the Russian Federation № 792-p of May 15, 2013);

- The Action Plan (Roadmap) for Social Reforms Aimed at Improving the Performance in Education and Science (approved by Directive of the Government of the Russian Federation № 2620-p of December 30, 2012).

- The Strategy for Workforce Training and Skills Development in the Russian Federation for the Period up to 2020.

The new developments overviewed above are supposed to contribute to the elaboration of up-to-date qualifications which would in its turn result in the development of the NQF and the national system of qualifications embracing the institutional (sector qualifications councils/sector bodies), methodological (occupational standards and qualification standards development), quality assurance (qualifications accreditation and updating, award of qualifications) mechanisms. Ultimately, the NQS is expected to contribute to the modernisation of qualifications and curricula and to the reducing skills gaps and shortages.

Formally, or nominally, the development of the NQS is under way and progressing. However, these processes are taking place against the backdrop of unresolved epistemological, theoretical and practical issues, which results in false assumptions and meanings that hamper the formation of an effective NQF and its supporting mechanisms that is of the NQS. These problems are rooted in the persistent stereotypes, psychological, organisational and methodological ones, in the lack of an in-depth understanding of the world developments in the field of NQS, often rooted in a lack of foreign language skills in researchers and methodologists.

Currently, the approaches to the NQF development combine both output and input ones, which undermines the transformative character of the NQF and points to the formation of a largely comprehensive, or all-embracing and “tight”, or “one-fit for all” framework prescribing the rules of the game to all levels of qualifications.

The critical issues waiting to be addressed in terms of the NQS development relate to identification and formulation of learning outcomes that would

be accepted by the system of education and by the world of work and would underpin the shaping of qualifications relevant for and accepted both by the system of education and the world of work, as well as their hierarchy and interdependencies in the NQF.

Another issue is a need of a pool of properly qualified experts competent both in the identification of descriptors and in assessing qualifications.

Hence the steps for the future may envisage:

- removing the rift between occupational and education qualifications to arrive at an holistic and consistent epistemology of the NQS;
- developing a systemic vision of the NQS and its elements and tools compatible with international practices;
- finalisation of the NQF based on learning outcomes and compatible with the EQF;
- developing a taxonomy of qualifications and their titles;
- putting in place a holistic system of quality assurance of qualifications with specific tools and principles for different sectors of the education system;
- establishment of transparent mechanisms of governance of the NQS that would preclude overlaps.

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The concept of the article and the main content of the research were designed by A. A. Muravyeva and O. N. Oleynikova as well as the basic analytical framework of the research, data requirements and formulation of proposals and conclusions. N. M. Aksenova and E. V. Dorozhkin carried out literature review on the research topic and highlighted the key issues of developing the national qualifications system. The first version of the article was prepared by A. A. Muravyeva with follow up corrections made by each author and final draft of the article.

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Вклад соавторов.

A. A. Муравьева и O. N. Олейникова разработали концепцию и аналитическую рамку исследования, выбрали и описали требующийся фактический материал, а также сформулировали предложения и выводы. N. M. Аксенова и E. M. Дорожкин провели обзор литературы по теме исследования и выделили ключевые проблемы в организации и содержании подготовки национальной системы квалификаций. A. A. Муравьева подготовила начальный вариант текста статьи, который впоследствии дорабатывался и дополнялся посредством внесения необходимых правок каждым из авторов.

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