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## EUROPEAN INTEGRATION IN EDUCATION OF THE EQF AND NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS: CHALLENGES AND ACHIEVEMENTS BY MALTA

SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. — 2. Background to Education Reforms Across Europe. — 3. Bologna Process. — 4. Copenhagen Process. — 5. Adult Education. — 6. Integration of European Reforms. — 7. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF). — 8. Malta's Educational landscape. — 8.1. Malta's achievements. — 9. Initial developments as part of the Bologna Process. — 9.1. Within Higher Education institutions. — 9.2. At governance Level — 10. Developments by the Malta Qualifications Council. — 11. Key aspects of success. — 12. Conclusion.

### 1. — *Introduction.*

Europe, through the European Commission and the EU Member States have long recognised education as the key to strengthening the European economy and for promoting social cohesion in society (Green *et al*, 2003). It was with the Maastricht Treaty, back in the beginning of the 90s that the EU expanded its remit beyond being only an economic agreement. It is for this reason that the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and employment (European Commission, 1993) recognised education and training as part of the responsibilities of the European Union.

The European Commission also views education as the cohesive force behind the European social model (European Council, 2000) through which many social problems such as social exclusion, intolerance and racism can be tackled successfully. Education plays a major role in securing an open political system, in achieving civic responsibility, social cohesion and last but not least economic success (Reiterer, 2003). Education gained importance as the relationship between education and the labour market became closer and

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stronger. More recently, one finds that the publication 'New Skills for New Jobs' (European Commission 2010), sets the agenda and core priorities of the European Union with which to anticipate the skills that European citizens and companies will need. In working towards 2020, as the Expert Group Report (European Commission, 2010) highlighted, improving people's skills is a real 'win, win' situation in all aspects: for the economy; for society; for employers; and, of course, for the individuals themselves. The economy benefits through increased productivity and competitiveness as it leads to increased employment and entrepreneurship. Employers experience better business performance and greater profitability. Society benefits through improved health, increased citizen participation, and more social cohesion. Finally, individuals also gain through improved job entry, sustainability, mobility, better work opportunities, more start-ups as well as higher job satisfaction. It has, however, to be kept in mind that preparing people for future jobs requires a future looking education provision. This has resulted in the implementation of reforms in the education and training systems across Europe to achieve better coordination between employment and education policies, not only at national level, but also across the EU Member States and thus European level.

Europe thus needs to utilize all the skills within its workforce to the maximum (CEDEFOP, 2010). This requires that all forms of learning taking place formally, informally and non-formally be recognized as it helps people to adapt more quickly to structural changes (CEDEFOP, 2010a). There is also the need for a framework which allows any learning recognized to have taken place in one Member State, to also be recognized in any other Member State within the European Labour market. Improving the equity and efficiency of education and training systems across Europe thus becomes essential to avoid the waste of its human and financial resources, increasing employability and reducing inequalities (European Commission, 2008). This intertwining and inseparable relationship between education and training and the European labour market has long led to the realisation that Europe needs to consider the Integration of Education across Europe as a key element to ensure European economic success (Cippitani & Gatt, 2009).

This chapter tackles the education reforms which have taken place across Europe this last decade. It describes how education reforms of the Bologna Process in higher education as part, and the Copenhagen Process in vocational education and training on the other, have overlapped and led to the develop-

ment of the European Qualifications Framework as that tool which combines the different forms qualifications given within Member States. Education reforms at European level only make sense if they are taken up and implemented at national level. The EU Directive on the recognition of qualifications (European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2005) makes it possible for EU nationals who obtained their professional qualifications in one or more Member States to pursue their profession in other Member States. This Directive is beneficial for those professionals who are EU nationals, but it is not comprehensive, as it does not cover all jobs, and all competences. In fact the issue of recognition of qualifications is problematic in the case of non professional qualifications, as well as to those professionals from non EU Member States (NGO Network of Integration Focal Points, 2007). Building on work by the Council of Europe on Recognition of qualifications across borders, education reforms are aimed to allow easier recognition of qualifications across European borders in view of facilitating the mobility of workers within the European labour market.

It is no easy task to implement overarching systems at national level when systems and structures for the provision of tertiary and vocational education and training are complex and multilevel, have historically been considered as two separate training systems, and vary from one national system to another as well. This is one of the main challenges faced by Member States in their quest to realign their education and training systems to facilitate recognition of qualifications across European borders for the benefit of all EU citizens as well as countries.

Malta is a small country. However, it still has, over the years developed its own systems of education and training provision for vocational and tertiary education. There have also along the years, been the development of many forms of other types of adult training, as initial or continuous professional development, or for leisure. Thus, despite its smallness, Malta's complex education provision landscape, still presents major challenges to the development of new structures to be in line with the meta-framework of the European Qualifications Framework. Malta's main strategic advantage, however, remains its small size which allows all the key stakeholders to physically get together easily. Malta has managed to be among those EU Members States spearheading reforms at national level. In this chapter, Malta can be considered as an example to obtain insight into how challenges and hurdles within European integration in education can be overcome through dialogue and sharing of responsibilities by all the key players.

## 2. — *Background to Education Reforms Across Europe.*

Current changes taking place at national level in the UE Member States are the result of processes which have been ongoing for over a decade at European and International level. In fact, one finds that there have been reforms at European level in the different sectors of education provision (Bologna Process for tertiary education; and Copenhagen Process for vocational education, as well as to a lesser degree within Adult Education with the Commission's action plan) with the momentum increasing in recent years, partly as a result of the support provided by the European Commission. Both processes were before 2010 driven by the Lisbon strategy to make Europe 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustaining economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (European Commission, 2000). In parallel to these reforms in Higher and vocational education, one also finds that work was also initiated in the area of adult education. Even if the reforms in this sector are at a later stage due to the complexity of the type of education provision, work achieved has aimed at converging towards what has already been achieved in the Bologna and Copenhagen Processes.

## 3. — *Bologna Process.*

The Bologna Process within Higher education is moving forward in line with the targets set as part of the Europe 2020 Strategy (European Commission, 2010). The Bologna Process for Higher Education was initiated in 1998 as a result of the action of the Ministers responsible for Higher Education in France, Italy, the United Kingdom and Germany when they signed the 'Sorbonne Declaration' (Ministers in Charge of France, Germany, Italy and United Kingdom, 1998) on the 'harmonisation of the architecture of the European Higher Education system'. This initiative was considered attractive by a number of countries, and in 1999, as many as 29 European Ministers in charge of Higher Education met in Bologna and signed the Bologna Declaration (European Ministers of Education, 1999) which lay the basis for establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. Malta was among those countries involved in this initiative, and consequently was among the signatories of the Bologna declaration in 1999.

The Bologna Process, although voluntary and supported rather than led by the European Commission, has brought about reforms in Higher Education which probably were not even conceived as possible. It has expanded, increasing in the number of signatories as it has attracted the attention of countries beyond Europe. This transnational collaboration in Higher Education has brought about a number of major changes in higher education across Europe. One example which can be cited include the establishment and extensive use by different Universities of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) which has facilitated the transfer of learning obtained as a result of periods of study across different Universities. Another major achievement within the Bologna Process was that related to quality assurance with the development of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2009). This has led to the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) for Higher Education in 2005. EQAR has since published and managed a register of quality assurance agencies that comply with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG). The aim is to provide the public and other institutions with clear and reliable information on quality assurance agencies operating in Europe. Likewise there has been work: promoting mobility of students and staff; making higher education more accessible to students from vulnerable groups; as well as considering higher education through a lifelong learning perspective. There has also been the establishment of a number of Joint European Degrees at Masters and Doctorate level through the support of the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission - ERASMUS. The Bologna Process can be considered to have, more or less by 2010, to a good degree established the targeted European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Work within the Bologna Process has been kept up beyond the initial target of 2010, as new challenges and new horizons for Higher Education are explored. The last communiqué of Louvain (European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2009), in line with Europe's EU2020 Strategy (European Commission, 2010) focused on the current major challenges being faced across Europe, with focus mainly on globalisation and accelerated technological developments with new providers, new learners and new types of learning; student-centred learning; and helping students develop the competences needed in a changing labour market. Ministers have also agreed to look into the issue of funding in view of the financial difficulties

which many countries are facing. The target of 40% graduates by the year 2020 set by the EU2020 Strategy has put forward to governments the challenge of making Universities more accessible, while still managing to provide quality education in times when funding is more difficult to obtain.

The Bologna Process is not without criticism. Universities are discovering that the implementation of the Bologna Process makes new demands on resources and it is not clear who is to pay for the additional expenses incurred (McMahon, 2008). Some Universities, for example those in the UK, who have enjoyed high reputations for a long time are now feeling threatened by the reorganizations taking place in other European Universities which can start to compete in attracting students from round the globe (House of Commons, 2007). The European Student Union (ESU, 2008) also raises concerns and criticises aspects in which the Bologna Process has developed, or has not given enough attention to. The student union is concerned that Ministers have allowed tuition fees to be introduced or where they already exist, to be raised. Students are still experiencing great obstacles when opting to go on ERASMUS exchange. Students should also play a greater role in quality assurance than mere participation in bureaucratic procedures. ESU also notes that ECTS have not been implemented across all Bologna signatories and that maybe rather than create the ECVET system for Vocational Education, that the ECTS could be developed further. But most of all, they express the belief that there has as yet not been a real paradigm shift toward student-centred learning in practice across Universities.

#### 4. — *Copenhagen Process.*

Since 2001, reforms in vocational education have been part of what is known as the Copenhagen Process (European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training & European Commission, 2002). This process has addressed changes in the area of Vocational Education and was initiated in November 2002 at a meeting of European Ministers of Vocational Education and training in the Danish capital who agreed to a declaration on enhanced European cooperation in Vocational education and training (VET) (European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training, 2002). The work done within the Copenhagen Process aimed at improving the quality and effectiveness of vocational education and

training systems across the EU as well as opening them to the wider world. The main objectives set by the Copenhagen declaration included: establishing a single framework for transparency of qualifications and competences; promoting cooperation in quality assurance; developing a credit transfer system for VET; strengthening policies, systems and practices for lifelong guidance; supporting the development of qualifications and competences at sectoral level; and giving attention to the learning needs of VET teachers and trainers.

Results obtained since 2002 were many, with the main achievements including: the development of the Europass, a single framework for transparency of qualifications and competences, and which was launched in 2005; work with respect to the validation of informal and nonformal learning; and the development of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF) (European Parliament and Council, 2009). The recent Bruges Communiqué focused on targets in line with the EU2020 Strategy and recognises that Initial and continuing VET share the dual objective of contributing to employability and economic growth, as well as that of responding to broader societal challenges, in particular promoting social cohesion (European Ministers for VET, 2010).

Both the Bologna and Copenhagen processes promote the further education and training of workers through frameworks which allow the recognition of skills and qualifications across EU Member States to facilitate the mobility of European citizens. In working further towards the targets of EU 2020, convergence between these two processes is being achieved through the European and National Qualifications Frameworks. Europe 2020 Strategy reinforces the attractiveness of vocational education and training (VET) and promotes the vision of mobility. One of the key actions included by the European Commission in response to the 2020 vision with respect to VET (European Commission, 2010) is that by 2020, there will be the systematic use of EQF, ECVET and Europass aimed at transparency of qualifications and portability of learning outcomes to allow cross-border recognition of VET qualifications. These changes bring about many challenges, among them the increasing important role of quality assurance of the different forms of certification issued by the different Member States and which will serve to allow European citizens to work across Europe.

In view of the current economic crises across Europe, VET education and training, and the Copenhagen process have a number of challenges to face. Cedefop (2004) back in 2004 had already identified a number of issues such

as: tackling the large number of low skilled workers who risk unemployment; promoting continuous vocational development in view of the need for existing workers to upgrade and to update their skills and remain employable; increase the mobility of skilled workers to achieve a real European market; invest in quality VET systems; as well as invest in the further development of VET Professionals. There still also remains the challenge of the same terms such as 'skills' and 'qualifications' ([Brockmann et al, 2008](#)) that have different meanings in different contexts and there is a need to develop trans-national categories that are a joint social construction of meanings across the European Member States. There is also an argument that the Copenhagen Process policies are developed within a supranational setting, and that despite the open-method of coordination, the implementation of policy (designated as programme in the official documents) is subject to explicit control by the authorities that define it – the 'Education' Council, the European Commission, the Council of the European Union – and is based on shared benchmarks and indicators which are regularly checked and made public (Antunes, 2006).

### 5. — *Adult Education.*

Adult Education is the 'other' type of education provision which is also attracting attention. This is because adult education is an essential contribution to lifelong learning, which through the acquisition of key competences by all, promotes and increases opportunities of employability and mobility to citizens in a modern labour market. It is also considered as a powerful tool to promote social inclusion. Adult education encapsulates a much wider and complex type of education provision than tertiary and vocational education. Adult education in the Communication on Adult Education (European Commission, 2006) is defined to include all forms of learning undertaken by adults after having left initial education and training, however far this process may have gone (e.g., including tertiary education). It also makes up a significant part of education provision in any national education system. Adult education may involve learning leading to: a whole qualification as part of tertiary education or IVET; short courses in either vocational or general education leading to partial qualification; or forms of short courses which are motivated by leisure and often without any form of certification. The type of institutions providing adult education are also many, and



include both formal education and training institutions, as well as various forms of non-formal education organised by NGOs, Local Councils and other organisations whose main activities may not necessarily be that of providing education.

Public authorities have the responsibility of ensuring the rights of citizens to have access to opportunities for acquiring and updating knowledge and competences throughout life (European Commission, 2001). As referred to by the European Commission Communication (2006), raising the overall level of skills of the adult population can be achieved by offering more and better learning opportunities throughout adult life. Not only does adult learning help make adults more efficient workers and, better-informed and more active citizens, but it also contributes to their personal well-being. The communication (European Commission, 2006) put forward five key messages which included: lifting the barriers to participation; ensuring the quality of adult learning; recognition and validation of learning outcomes; investing in the ageing population and migrants; and setting indicators and benchmarks to monitor developments. Following this communication, an Action Plan aiming at helping strengthen the adult learning sector in order to be able to use its full capacity was drawn up and published in 2007 (European Commission, 2007). This action plan addressed all the five key issues and proposed practical actions with respect to the five key messages of the previous communication. The action focused on policy, governance and delivery within the adult education sector. Member States were asked to participate in a European Action Plan in the following areas: analysing the effects of reforms in all sectors of education and training in Member States on adult learning; improving the quality of provisions in the adult learning sector; increasing the possibilities for adults to go “one step up” - to achieve a qualification at least one level higher than before; speeding up the process of assessment of skills and social competences and have them validated and recognised in terms of learning outcomes; and improving the monitoring of adult learning sector.

The current situation is that reform in the adult education sector is catching up with the other education reforms as tools and processes developed within the Bologna and Copenhagen process provide direction to be taken also within the adult education sector.

In reporting the work done in the area of adult education, the European Commission as published a working paper outlining the achievements related to the action plan on adult learning 2008-2010 (European Commission, 2011). It highlights the way forward, referring to the Council Conclusions of May

2009, which provides the platform for taking forward adult learning as part of its four broad strategic objectives of: making lifelong learning and mobility a reality; improving the quality and efficiency of education and training; promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship; and enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

The European Commission has worked on updating the action plan to reflect the Europe 2020 targets, making the adult education sector a stronger player in contributing to reaching the targets set, supporting governments, networking players within the adult sector, and particularly in helping individuals in updating and upgrading their knowledge and skills and improving their employability and possibilities of a better quality of life.

#### 6. — *Integration of European Reforms.*

As developments and reforms were being achieved by the different educational sectors, there was a felt need across Europe to converge these processes. Convergence aimed to create flexible pathways for learners such that they can proceed from one level to another or switch between vocational, tertiary and adult education in a smooth way and without obstacles where learners are often caught up within one particular system and cannot proceed with their studies due to structural barriers. It was for this reason, and to identify those basic skills which are necessary for all citizens to have to be able to find employment within the European labour market, that the European Commission worked on developing and setting up the European Qualifications framework (European Commission, 2006).

#### 7. — *The European Qualifications Framework (EQF).*

The European Commission has, on 5<sup>th</sup> September 2006, adopted a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. On the 29<sup>th</sup> September 2006 the European Parliament adopted the EQF. The EQF was designed to remove many barriers and that employees and employers would be able to make better use of their skills. Mobility between the Member

States and various systems of education would also be facilitated. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (European Commission, 2006a) is thus the result of both the Copenhagen and Bologna process which highlighted the need for an instrument to act as a translation device and neutral reference point to compare qualifications and to facilitate their transparency, comparability and transfer throughout Europe. It also was developed to act as a catalyst in stimulating and bringing about reforms within national education and training systems of the EU Member States with the aim of promoting lifelong learning.

The EQF is intended to help persons involved in lifelong learning to overcome barriers in progression between institutions, systems and countries, and which prevent learners from access and choice for further learning. Qualifications frameworks at national level in conjunction with the EQF, on the other hand, open up access, clarify progression routes and facilitate the validation of non-formal learning as well as provide a better match of qualifications to knowledge, skills and competences. The EQF was also developed to provide transparency, comparability and transfer of qualifications in order to promote the mobility of workers and students across Europe. The EQF was thus a measure towards achieving the Lisbon goals and continues to play an important role in view of the EU2020 strategy.

Acting as a meta-framework, the EQF enables national and sectoral frameworks and systems to relate and compare to each other to promote and facilitate the transfer, transparency and recognition of qualifications. It also is a means to provide mutual trust between the different stakeholders involved in the lifelong process. The EQF is intended to enable citizens to navigate between complex education systems and locate the levels of their learning outcomes. It also provides support to authorities and institutions and other training providers to identify and position the learning outcomes of their training on the EQF. The EQF also simplifies the process of recognition of qualifications between sectors and countries across the EU as well as outside the EU.

It has been the task of each Member State, national authorities and sectoral bodies and training providers, since the publication of the EQF, to review their existing qualifications and programmes and to ensure that they can be understood as learning-outcomes qualifications. This then makes it possible to peg national qualifications to the National Qualifications Framework, itself referenced to the EQF meta-framework. The successful implementation and application of the EQF is thus based on the development of national and sec-

toral qualifications framework for lifelong education as well as to the degree to which these frameworks can be applied in practice to interpret and understand the myriad of qualifications which exist across Europe.

Development in different countries has progressed to different degrees and at different speeds in the EU Member States. Some countries have been more positive and pro-active than others in developing their national systems and implementing educational reforms to align their qualifications to the EQF. Other countries have been less active, lagging behind in the process. In this chapter, the case of Malta is considered as one of the countries which has been at the forefront of education reforms at national level. Malta is one of the smallest EU Member States. Smallness of size can at times be an advantage in that there are limitations to the possible existing permutations, and the different players involved in education are also confined to a small geographic area. Despite its small size, Malta, however, still has its own educational complexities which created challenges for the implementation of educational reform. Despite these challenges, Malta can be considered as one of the countries with greatest improvement. Its study can thus provide insights from which other EU Member states can draw inspiration as to how to overcome their own national challenges.

## 8. — Malta's Educational landscape.

Education provision in Malta at post-compulsory level is complex and includes a mix of general and vocational education. One finds a tertiary sector, a vocational sector as well as an adult education sector. Up to a few years ago tertiary education in Malta was provided by one main University – the University of Malta. This presented a simple and uncomplicated Higher Education area at the beginning of the Bologna Process. However, recent years have seen changes in this sector. The Vocational sector has started offering vocational degrees since 2009. In addition, a number of institutions offering tertiary degrees have grown slowly but steadily, particularly in the area of ICT. The tertiary sector has become complex and in need of more regulation.

The state vocational sector is provided mainly by one umbrella organisation: the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) which houses a number of institutes providing vocational education and training in a number of different sectors. MCAST offers a range of vocational courses at various levels

with some which are home grown qualifications and others which are part of the British Technology Education certificate (BTEC) system run by EDEXCEL in England. Only tourism studies are offered by another state organisation: the Institute of Tourism Studies which offers home vocational courses leading to qualifications in the tourism sector. One also finds a number of private institutions which offer initial vocational courses of different duration and which usually lead to international qualifications. These courses are offered as either continuous professional development or as initial vocational training.

Continuous vocational sector is more complex. The Employment and Training Corporation provides training courses mainly to the unemployed, but also to those who wish to improve their existing employment prospects. In addition, both the state and private IVET institutions also offer courses on part-time basis, allowing workers to upskill and update while still working. In addition, many are those companies which offer training courses to their employees as part of professional development.

The adult education sector, in addition to CVET already described, is mainly provided by the Directorate for Lifelong Learning within the Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family. A long list of courses is offered as evening classes in both general, vocational and leisure areas. This is complemented by numerous short courses which are offered by Local municipalities, private entities and other education institutions.

Finally, one must also include the wide provision of non-formal learning by the numerous NGOs which vary in sector from environment, trade unions, scouts, sports, music to religious groups, all of which at some point offer training courses to their members.

It is this educational landscape within which education reform in Malta as part of European integration has taken place. This is the context within which Malta has been able to achieve so much since the start of the Bologna and Copenhagen Process. It is probably not much different from many of the other Member States, even if limited by its geographical size.

### 8.1 – Malta's achievements.

Malta has managed to implement a good number of reforms in an effective and efficient way and to the benefit of the country and its citizens. This can be traced back from the first days of the Bologna Process in the early 2000-4.

However, the major changes have been noted mainly following the publication of the communication on the EQF by the Commission in 2005. From then on, Malta has been one of the countries at the forefront, leading and serving as an example of good practice to other countries.

## 9. — *Initial developments as part of the Bologna Process.*

### 9.1. – Within Higher Education institutions.

The Bologna process influenced changes in Higher Education in Malta from the early stages. The main important developments can be considered to be those which were implemented at the University of Malta, as it was the main provider of tertiary education in Malta then. Among the major achievements one finds the implementation of the ECTS system across undergraduate courses. The Senate of the University of Malta approved the University of Malta General Regulations for University Undergraduate Awards in 2004 which were published as a legal notice on 16 March 2004. In September 2008 (University of Malta, 2008) there were amendments to these regulations following other changes that were effected in 2005. Article 34 of the 2008 regulations states that a credit value is assigned to each study-unit, including time devoted to tuition, private study and assessment. All undergraduate courses offered by the University of Malta now use ECTS.

The University of Malta was at an advantage in that its undergraduate and post-graduate courses were mainly based on the British system, which was also adopted within the Bologna Process. Reform, thus, were to be made mainly in course structure involving fine tuning than that of overhauling the existing system. The University of Malta has updated its undergraduate and post-graduate course regulations (Government of Malta, 2008a) to reflect the range of ECTS in courses offered as recommended by the Bologna Process and today the great majority of courses are aligned to these regulations and so Malta is now fully compliant.

The University of Malta also took up the challenge of developing its own Diploma Supplement and set up a Senate sub-committee to work on the format which the University of Malta Diploma Supplement was to take. The first few Diploma Supplements were issued in the 2006 Graduation as a pilot pro-

ject. In 2007 the University of Malta awarded the Diploma Supplement to over 200 graduates in the Bachelor of Engineering (Honours), Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Information Technology, Bachelor of European Studies, Bachelor of European Studies (Honours) and Bachelor of Psychology (Honours) courses. In November/December 2010, the University of Malta issued the Diploma Supplement automatically and free of charge to all the students graduating from the University of Malta (Gatt, 2011).

The University of Malta has also worked towards strengthening its internal quality assurance system through setting up the Academic Programmes Quality and Resources Unit (APQRU), which was established in 2007 (Calleja, 2008). This division functions as the administrative arm of the Programme Validation Committee (PVC), a standing committee of Senate with the aim of providing quality assurance mechanisms acceptable to Senate and appropriate for internal and external audit purposes; ensuring that academic programmes are of appropriate standard; and ascertaining the validity of the programmes on offer.

The University also has a strong international dimension, being highly active in the ERASMUS programme and with many incoming and outgoing students. It is also involved in a number of ERASMUS Mundus masters courses, increasing its role within the European Higher Education Area (Gatt, 2011).

This does not mean, however, that the University of Malta has fully implemented all the requirements of the Bologna Process. Areas for further investment by the University of Malta still exist and refer among other things, to the participation of students in the Quality Assurance cycle, this despite the efforts by the University of Malta to introduce additional measures for quality assurance (Rauhvargers *et al*, 2009). In addition, with the new vocational degrees offered by MCAST, the Bologna requirements now also have implications to this institution too. So while developments have been achieved in one single entity, the challenges are also becoming greater as the sector expands.

## 9.2. – At governance Level.

Reforms in European Integration in education also requires reforms at national levels, often with the implementation of new laws. There is also the need for government to regulate all forms of education provision in view of the reforms at European level. This challenge has also been taken up by Malta with government responding positively and pro-actively to the challenges be-

ing presented by the changes taking place at European level. One can see that as early as in 2002, Malta promulgated three legal notices to amend the Mutual Recognition of Qualifications Act (Act No. XVIII of 2002). These included an amendment to the: Mutual recognition of Professional Education and Training regulations; Mutual Recognition of Professional Activities; and Malta Qualifications Recognition information and the Mutual Recognition of Qualifications Board Regulations. This Act catered for the setting up of the Malta Qualifications Recognition Information Centre which has the function of evaluating diplomas, providing assistance in the comparative analysis and evaluation of diplomas, collecting and disseminating information about professional and vocational qualifications, promoting the recognition of Maltese qualifications abroad, facilitating mobility of professionals, and promoting transparency of qualifications. Annex VII includes the Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications (Government of Malta, 2006) and lists the possible qualifications within the European Union that are recognised for specified professions.

#### 10. — *Developments by the Malta Qualifications Council.*

In 2005, following the publication of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), a new legal notice was published establishing the Malta Qualification Council (Government of Malta, 2005). The remit given to the Malta Qualifications Council was to steer the development of the National Qualifications Framework and to oversee the training and certification leading to qualifications within the Framework and which is not already provided for at compulsory education institutions or degree awarding bodies. This legal notice fell under the Employment and Training Services Act (Government of Malta, 2006). The setting up of the Council was the first step to education reforms in Malta.

There were also developments in regulation of higher education in view of the Bologna Process, with the setting up of the National Commission for Higher Education (NCHE). NCHE was established in 2006 to consult and advise Government through the Minister responsible for Education, to engage in a structured dialogue with all institutions, and inform the public on issues relating to sustainable development of the further and Higher Education sectors to meet the needs of society. The first interim Commission was nominated on 3 February 2006 (Gatt, 2011). As part of its work, NCHE has focused,



among other things, on quality assurance producing a report which put forward a number of recommendations for a new licensing, accreditation and quality assurance framework, applicable to all public and private providers of further and Higher Education and their programmes (NCHE, 2007).

The Malta Qualifications Council (MQC) has enabled Malta to develop new tools and structures needed at national level in order to be able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by developments at European Level. One of the main challenges posed to all EU Member States was that of developing a national qualifications framework which is pegged to the European Qualifications Framework. The Malta Qualifications Council has responded positively to this challenge, not only by being one of the countries, first developing the Malta Qualifications Framework published in June 2007 (Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family, 2010), but also in publishing a number of policy documents to explain why it is embarking on these new initiatives and the implications involved. These policy documents highlighted the value which Malta was giving to all forms of learning taking place and how this learning should be valued and accredited using the newly drawn up Malta Qualifications Framework. The first policy document focused on the qualifications framework (Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family, 2007) and explained why it was so important for Malta to develop one as well as explained the 8 levels which it was proposing together with the level descriptors for each level. The second policy document (Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family, 2007a) discussed the implications of the new qualifications framework to qualifications within the vocational sector. The third document (Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family, 2007b) focused on quality assurance in the vocational sector while the fourth document (Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family, 2008) treated validation of informal and non formal learning and the way forward which the country would like to take.

The Malta Qualifications Council also developed a system for level rating short courses and qualifications offered in Malta with the Malta Qualifications Framework. This led to the publication of the first version of the Referencing document in November 2009 and a finalized revised version in 2010 (Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family, 2010), being the second country among the EU Member States, after Ireland to publish such document. This document describes the procedures for level rating qualifications across the 8 levels of the Malta Qualifications Framework, in reference to the descriptors

of the European Qualifications Framework as well as the Dublin Descriptors for Higher Education. Not only does the document cover the referencing of qualifications in Malta, but it also stipulates the process for level rating qualifications of foreign institutions represented by local institutions in Malta, as well as any other form of short training course being offered in the country. In addition, the Malta Qualifications Council has published a proposal for a system of qualifications which would provide the possibility for all type of courses, whether short or long to be attributed official accreditation, either as a full or partial qualification. Eight types of awards were put forward: Academic Higher Education Awards HEA and Higher VET Awards (Levels 5-8 on the MQF); VET awards (Levels 1-4 VET qualifications); Continuing Professional Development Award (Levels 4-6); customised Awards (Levels 1-6); work-based Learning Awards (Awards based on supervised on-the-job training with a minimum of 5 ECVET or the validation of prior learning and a minimum of 5 years of professional experience in a recognised sector); school Awards; and two types of Legacy Awards - Awards conferred to individuals prior to 2007 and which have relevance to the labour market and employment. VET awards are classified up to MQF Level 5 (Ministry of Education, employment and the Family, 2011). All these changes work towards accrediting and making visible all forms of learning which Maltese citizens have achieved through either formal, nonformal and informal learning.

These changes bring with them the requirement to work also in other areas. This applies particularly to quality assurance. While Malta still does not officially have a Quality Assurance Agency for higher education due to its small size, government has recently promulgated a new law which gives the Malta Qualifications Council and the National Commission for Higher Education, the legal role of a regulator. The Malta Qualifications Council is also currently involved in two national EQF Leonardo projects, working on piloting the implementation of ECVET for vocational courses and of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF) in local initial and continuous vocational education and training institutions in Malta. These two projects running in parallel will allow Malta prepare guidelines and manuals for local VET institutions in Malta to implement these two tools on a national level, ensuring both the there is quality provision of training as well as a system which allows both learners and workers in Malta to work and transfer within the European labour market.

There has also been work related to the validation of informal and nonformal learning. The Malta Qualifications Council has also worked in laying the first steps by first developing a model for drawing up of occupational standards and a tool for validating workers who have developed skills and competences in comparison to these occupational standards. In addition, the Council has also been involved in developing further occupational standards and setting up of sector skills councils.

The work on structural reforms in Malta are converging towards one main vision of an education system which is quality assured throughout and which gives value and accredit all forms of learning which has taken place. The focus on learning outcomes has allowed the system to focus on what learners have achieved and not where and with whom learning has taken place. In giving value to all forms of learning, Malta aims to map the competences that the Maltese workforce possesses.

#### 11. — *Key aspects of success.*

The success achieved by Malta is the result of a number of aspects which have been present throughout the whole development and implementation process. These successful factors have ensured that the structural changes made are the result of consensus held by all the key stakeholders involved. The Malta Qualifications Council, working hand in hand with the National Commission for Higher Education, has achieved so much as a result of the following aspects:

- *Recognising change as opportunities:* People are usually afraid of change, as it threatens the reality and structures which they know and are familiar with. However, change does not always lead to worse situations. They can also create new prospects, paving the way for opportunities which current structures and situations may not as yet provide. The Maltese government has recognised the opportunities that the proposed reforms could bring and has taken on the challenge in order to be able to provide certification for all learning that has taken place by each and every Maltese citizen. It is this objective that has served as inspiration for all the efforts and initiatives which were taken. Every small development achieved serves to move one step forward towards this one single vision;

- *Malta's physical smallness*: It has to be said, that unlike in many other circumstances where the geographical smallness of Malta has placed the country at a disadvantage, in this case, smallness of size has been one major advantage. The limited geographical circumference of the country has made the process much more manageable for the Malta Qualifications Council. The Council has been able to meet the different key stakeholders, their being: VET providers; trade unions; employers and employer associations etc., often managing to get them physically in one room. This provided real opportunities for the key stakeholders to discuss issues in person. When things are discussed through direct personal contact, then the chances for people to accept and have positive attitudes towards change is much higher;
- *Investment in information*: There has been a lot of investment in information and explanation to the various key stakeholders of the implications and opportunities which the reforms bring. There have been numerous meetings with the different key stakeholders by the Malta Qualifications Council as the EQF contact point, but also as part of its other different EU projects which it was coordinating. The Council has also published different leaflets explaining to the various stakeholders from learners, parents, training providers, employers, trade unions etc, in order to disseminate the changes as much as possible and promote understanding as well as seek consensus. The more people know about the changes made and how the new structures being set up can help their particular position, the greater are the chances that these changes are accepted;
- *Investment in consensus with the different actors*: Changes made and implemented can only be effective if those who are to use the new systems and structures are convinced of their usability and value. This is best achieved if decisions are taken in conjunction with those directly involved. The Malta Qualifications Council has invested heavily in this aspect, and this has resulted in support for the reforms by both employers and trade unions. Many of those involved are looking forward to and recognising the opportunities being created despite the great challenges which developing tools yet to be tried and tested and used first within the labour market and then wider across Europe bring;
- *A proactive team*: Finally, one has but to recognise the value of the team of people working at the Malta Qualifications Council who have worked very hard. The personnel have invested all their energy and capabilities to achiev-

ing the mission and vision of Malta in taking up the opportunities which European reforms presented. They have been capable of developing tools and systems which are in balance between the need for procedures while are the same time facilitating the process such that they are accessible for all to use. Each and every new system has many implications, some of which are not necessarily foreseen and it thus also has to be acknowledged that there may still be greater challenges ahead in the actual implementation.

All these aspects were key to the successful implementation of all the reforms outlined and described here. It is evident that success in overcoming challenges requires much hard work and time as people become familiar with the new structures as they start using the new tools for the recognition of their learning.

## 12. — *Conclusion.*

There are many lessons to be learnt and it would be worthwhile to look at how Malta is working in order to put together the different pieces of the puzzle for the various types of education and training provided. The country's vision is that all forms of learning, whether through formal courses and qualifications at initial and or continuous professional development, in short or long training courses, or within non-formal settings, as well as learning taking place informally is to be given value and be accredited. If the vision of real lifelong learning is to be achieved, then the whole structure for education provision within one nation needs to be inter-linked in order to facilitate the movement of learners up the qualification levels as well as across it.

Malta is not yet there, even if it appears to be well on its way. However, the challenges remain great and much more work is required. None the less, the country has managed to move forward much more than other EU Member States who can look at the work done in this country to learn on how one country has tackled the challenges. The ultimate aim is one common European integrated education provision which while conserving the national traditions and culture of how education is provided, allows learners to move smoothly from one national system to another as well as use the accredited learning which they have obtained in one country to work within a bigger European labour market.

European integration in education is thus one major key target which Europe has set, and it is the Member States who can learn from each other's achievements to make this target a reality.

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