

## **AEI-NOOSR response to the European Commission Stakeholder consultation on the European area of skills and qualifications**

### **About AEI-NOOSR**

AEI-NOOSR is part of the Australian Government Department of Education. The Department of Education works with the education sector, other government agencies and ministries to ensure Australia is recognised as a regional and world leader in education and a partner of choice for international collaboration. The Department of Education provides leadership and coordination across government, delivering programs and policies, to support mobility and the global exchange of knowledge.

AEI-NOOSR is Australia's National Information Centre for qualifications recognition. AEI-NOOSR provides official information and advice on the comparability of overseas qualifications with Australian qualifications, using the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) as its benchmark. This supports student and labour market mobility through qualifications recognition.

Qualifications recognition in Australia is guided by principles outlined in two UNESCO Regional Recognition Conventions:

- The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Recognition Convention); and
- The Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education (Tokyo Convention).

Australia became a Party to the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 2002. To meet Australia's obligations under this Convention, AEI-NOOSR:

- provides information about the Australian higher education system to promote the recognition of Australian qualifications in other countries; and
- provides information and advice about overseas education systems to facilitate the recognition of overseas qualifications in Australia.

AEI-NOOSR participates in the ENIC-NARIC network in its role as a National Information Centre. AEI-NOOSR's information and advice is used by Australian and overseas recognition bodies that recognise foreign qualifications for study, employment and migration purposes. These bodies include universities, other education providers, professional assessing authorities, registration/licensing boards, state and territory governments and Commonwealth government bodies. These bodies are responsible for making qualifications recognition decisions and developing their own assessment policies and processes. AEI-NOOSR supports these organisations by providing broad information services about the recognition of foreign qualifications. It is estimated that well over 100,000 recognition decisions in Australia are supported by AEI-NOOSR every year.

### **General comments on the *Stakeholder consultation on the European area of skills and qualifications Background document***

Given its roles and responsibilities in qualifications recognition and support for mobility, AEI-NOOSR highly values international initiatives and activities that improve qualifications recognition good practice and those that directly remove barriers to recognition, including information barriers. Qualifications recognition underpins the partnerships, linkages, collaborations and two-way mobility that support successful internationalisation.

Key to efficient, equitable and transparent qualifications recognition practices is easy access to authoritative, clear, and comprehensive information about an overseas education system, its education institutions and programs. This includes information about a country's system of qualifications (such as a national qualifications framework) and quality assurance arrangements.

The Bologna Process and EHEA have contributed to greater transparency in qualifications recognition in Australia and have supported mobility for Australian graduates in Europe through increased awareness of quality assurance, qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes as key indicators for recognition. In particular, on review of items listed in the Annex, the European qualifications frameworks, quality assurance arrangements, European credit transfer systems, European cooperation on the recognition of qualifications and various information websites e.g. the Eurypedia and ENIC-NARIC websites, have been an essential information source to AEI-NOOSR's development of qualifications recognition policies for Europe.

Some key issues with the recognition of educational qualifications in AEI-NOOSR's experience has been in relation to: access to information on how European countries implemented Bologna style qualifications, particularly with respect to quality assurance arrangements; variations across countries with the implementation of Bologna style qualifications and European policies and instruments which facilitate recognition; and understanding some qualifications from some countries which fall outside the regular postsecondary and higher education qualifications framework in the absence of a Diploma or Certificate Supplement.

The joint EU-Australia *Study on the (potential) role of qualifications frameworks in supporting mobility of workers and learning* in June 2011 established the potential benefits to closer engagement between the AQF and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The AQF Council agreed to pursue an alignment of the respective frameworks in 2012. This work is continuing, with a joint technical experts meeting held in April 2014. It is anticipated that the alignment will support student and labour mobility through improved understanding of the qualifications frameworks, comparative learning outcomes and underpinning quality assurance. It will also support the internationalisation of Australian education providers by facilitating a common understanding of the overarching outcomes-based framework used for program development in Europe for the purpose of joint program development and staff/student exchange.

## **Responses to questions in Annex II**

AEI-NOOSR has provided responses (in blue) to questions within our remit.

### ***1. How to place a stronger focus on higher and more relevant skills***

#### ***Closed questions:***

1. Should curricula and assessment practices be more focused on boosting transversal skills such as digital, language and entrepreneurial competences?
2. Would it be useful to develop reference frameworks describing learning outcomes per level per competence, following the example of the language competence framework<sup>80</sup>?
3. Would it be useful to have more hands-on experts from the employers' side involved in the design of the curricula?

#### ***Open question:***

4. What has been the effectiveness and value of the European Key Competences Framework<sup>81</sup> so far in promoting the competences that it refers to?
5. Could other European initiatives than the European Key Competences Framework be more effective? If yes, which ones?

## ***2. Further strengthening links between education/training, mobility and the labour market***

### ***Closed questions:***

6. To help individuals take advantage of available opportunities in a wider and more open context, career guidance policies and practices are crucial. Are you aware of the European policies on career guidance?
7. Is it useful to be able to use a common multilingual European terminology (such as ESCO<sup>82</sup>) to support describing learning outcomes of education and training programmes in terms of knowledge, skills competences relevant to the labour market?

AEI-NOOSR uses the learning outcomes of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) as its benchmark. Learning outcomes using terminology that is more clearly defined, transparent and consistently applied supports overseas qualifications recognition good practice. AEI-NOOSR highly values easy to access information about learning and employment outcomes of overseas postsecondary qualifications. Given that the recognition of qualifications and skills is usually for the end purpose of employment, a better balance between terminology relevant to the labour market and student mobility may be more appropriate.

8. Should forecasts on skills supply and needs be better integrated into the education and training strategy in order to reduce skills mismatches?
9. Several sectoral skills and qualification passports have been developed that promote the recognition of skills, experiences and qualifications, facilitating transnational mobility within the same sector<sup>83</sup>. They can play a role in the phase of identification and documentation of skills. Do sectoral skills and qualifications passports or cards have added value compared to more general European documentation tools such as Europass, e.g. for cross border mobility of learners and workers?

Applicants to AEI-NOOSR with European higher education qualifications sometimes provide Diploma Supplements, not qualifications passports. Diploma Supplements are highly valued in AEI-NOOSR's qualifications recognition work. The type of information on a Diploma Supplement readily facilitates recognition decisions and improved recognition outcomes. In developing policies and undertaking educational assessments on the comparability of overseas qualifications, AEI-NOOSR highly values easy accessible information about learning and employment outcomes of overseas postsecondary qualifications.

10. Is better integration between these passports and the Europass framework needed?

### ***Open questions:***

11. How can guidance services be organised to best support learners and workers in their educational, training and occupational choices and facilitate their participation in the labour market?

12. What new features should initiatives such as EQF, ESCO, European Skills Panorama and the sector skills alliances include in order to raise the understanding of skills needs and on the communication between education and the labour market?
13. If you think that better integration between sectoral passports and the Europass framework is needed, please give your suggestions on how it could be achieved.

### ***3. Adapting to internationalisation trends***

#### ***Closed questions:***

14. A number of qualifications awarded at international level (e.g. by international sectoral organisations and multinational companies) are often valued in the labour market. Is European level coordination needed to facilitate the recognition of such qualifications throughout Europe?
15. Should criteria and procedures be developed for the inclusion of international qualifications in National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) and the European Qualification Framework (EQF)?

AEI-NOOSR from time to time assesses such international qualifications and supports easily accessible information about international qualifications from a country's educational authorities. Official information (from a country's educational authorities) about qualifications that do not readily fit into a country's qualifications framework or qualifications system is highly valued in AEI-NOOSR's overseas qualifications recognition work. Pertinent information about international qualifications includes identification and recognition status of the awarding body, the recognition status of the qualification in the country or countries, quality assurance of the program, admission requirements, the type and level of the program, learning (including any credit transfer arrangements) and employment outcomes, and advice on where the qualification would sit relative to a country's national qualifications framework. Where this type of information is not readily accessible, AEI-NOOSR seeks information from the relevant country authority or ENIC-NARIC contact. Quality and timely information better supports AEI-NOOSR recognition outcomes.

16. An increasing number of study programmes, such as Masters or PhDs are being jointly developed by two or more higher education institutions in different countries offering joint degrees. Are existing recognition arrangements suitable for the recognition of these degrees?

AEI-NOOSR assesses qualifications of this type. In doing so, easily accessible information about such qualifications better supports quality recognition outcomes. AEI-NOOSR values quality information that is easy to access to identify the awarding body or bodies and the status of the program. In particular, AEI-NOOSR seeks information about the status of the awarding body or bodies, the recognition status of the program in the country or countries by the relevant education authorities, and program quality assurance. Where this information is not readily found on the award and transcript documents or Diploma Supplement, or from the institutions' information and the relevant countries educational authorities, AEI-NOOSR seeks information from the relevant countries authorities or ENIC-NARIC contacts.

#### ***Open questions:***

17. What further steps could be taken at EU level to promote mutual recognition of qualifications, credits or learning outcomes between the EU and third countries? Could the EQF be useful in this context? If yes, how?

AEI-NOOSR is currently involved in an alignment of the EQF and the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). AEI-NOOSR highly values opportunities, initiatives and activities to promote efficient and effective information sharing and exchanges, and mutual understanding of education systems as these underpin high quality recognition outcomes.

18. What further steps could be taken at EU level to promote the recognition of joint degrees offered by European higher education institutions in cooperation with institutions from other parts of the world?

In its qualifications recognition work, AEI-NOOSR values accessible, clear, timely and transparent information on the awarding body or bodies and program quality assurance.

AEI-NOOSR strongly encourages institutions and organisations to more fully and holistically take into account qualifications recognition considerations when developing joint degrees (or other qualifications) to enable holders of those qualifications to achieve full recognition. Institutions need to consider recognition arrangements in other countries including the range of recognition decision-makers for the purposes of study, employment and migration purposes. Transparency of this information supports student choice.

#### ***4. Ensuring overall coherence of tools and policies and further implementing the learning outcomes approach***

##### ***Closed questions:***

19. In your opinion, are the current tools seen altogether clear and understandable?

The Bologna Process and EHEA have contributed to greater transparency in qualifications recognition in Australia and have supported mobility for Australian graduates in Europe through increased awareness of quality assurance, qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes as key indicators for recognition. In particular, on review of items listed in the Annex, the European qualifications frameworks, quality assurance arrangements, European credit transfer systems, European cooperation on the recognition of qualifications and various information websites e.g. Eurypedia and ENIC-NARIC, have been primary sources of information to the AEI-NOOSR's development of qualifications recognition policies for Europe. However, there can be considerable variation in the quality of information from country to country.

20. The learning outcomes approach (what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process) is a key common principle in European transparency and recognition tools. Its transparent use and full implementation can significantly improve the understanding of and trust in qualifications within and across borders, eventually making the recognition of qualifications smoother.
- a. Should qualifications and study programmes be systematically described in terms of learning outcomes (knowledge skills and competences to be acquired)?

AEI-NOOSR uses the learning outcomes of the Australian Qualifications Framework as its benchmark when making comparative assessments. More systematic descriptions of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes, particularly if they do not belong to the country's regular system of qualifications, would support more timely and efficient recognition decisions.

- b. Would a common definition of "unit of learning outcomes" and "credit" between higher education and vocational education and training be desirable?

Common definitions that are consistently applied across different education sectors would support more valid, timely and efficient qualifications recognition decisions. In the absence of common definitions, AEI-NOOSR highly values accessible information and terminology that is easy to understand.

- c. Could the use of the learning outcomes approach support the validation of non-formal and informal learning?
  - d. Do you consider the current European tools for the documentation of learning experiences satisfactory or unsatisfactory?
- 21. Do you consider the possible integration of Europass tools and self-assessment tools to document non-formal and informal learning outcomes (such as the Youthpass) in a common framework useful?
  - 22. Would you support a development towards a single supplement documenting learning outcomes acquired in formal education bringing closer together the Diploma Supplement (for higher education) and the Certificate Supplement (for Vocational Education and Training)?

AEI-NOOSR values clear, transparent and easily accessible information and recognition tools which more clearly document the relationship between a country's vocational education and training sector and its higher education sector, their respective qualifications and learning pathways.

#### ***Open questions:***

- 23. What are, in your opinion, the obstacles to base curricula design and assessment practices on a learning outcomes approach?
- 24. What actions are needed at EU level to enhance the synergies between the European Qualification Framework and the Qualification Framework for the European Higher Education Area and build a common reference for all qualifications levels for all participating countries? Should the adoption by all countries of a single referencing process combining EQF referencing and QF-EHEA self-certification be promoted?
- 25. Do you have any further suggestions for simplifying and for improving the coherence of the European transparency and recognition tools?

#### ***5. Ensuring clarity of rules and procedures for the recognition of skills and qualifications for further learning***

##### ***Closed questions:***

- 26. In order to enable individuals to move more freely between the different sub-systems of education and training, within and across countries, the recognition of skills and competences needs to be improved.

- a. While respecting national competences, should European criteria and procedures for the recognition of qualifications for further learning be developed in the areas of adult learning and general education?
- b. For the purposes of further learning (and in the context of the autonomy of higher education institutions), are the criteria used by higher education institutions for recognising qualifications acquired in another Member State sufficiently clear, transparent and accommodating of learners' needs?

There are some barriers to the recognition of Australian qualifications in some European countries. AEI-NOOSR encourages higher education institutions to contact us directly if full and face-value recognition of Australian qualifications is in doubt, or if potential substantial differences are identified.

- c. Should European criteria and procedures for the recognition of vocational qualifications for further learning within and across Member States be developed?

AEI-NOOSR is guided by the principles of the UNESCO recognition conventions (Lisbon and Tokyo) in its qualifications recognition work. These principles are embedded within AEI-NOOSR's assessment methodology. The same principles and methodology are applied in the assessment of overseas postsecondary qualifications regardless of whether the qualification is a vocational education qualification or a higher education one.

- d. Would a European system of recognition of skills, competences and qualification in school education help improving mobility and employability of young people?
27. To which extent are validation systems and credit systems suitable to recognise the outcomes of new forms of learning such as digital learning (e.g. Massive Open Online Courses, MOOCs)?

AEI-NOOSR seeks information about postsecondary programs, including online courses, such as how they are quality assured by the country's educational authorities, their admission requirements, the depth and breadth of content, their educational outcomes and learning and employment pathways on completion of the program. The amount of credit, although highly valued information if it is clearly defined and consistently applied, is only one aspect of the myriad of information that is sought when making comparative assessments.

28. Would it be desirable to develop common criteria and procedures for recognition that could apply to all education and training sub-systems (for vocational education and training, schools, adult education), and all qualifications related to European qualifications frameworks (including those obtained through validation of non-formal and informal learning, open on-line courses, private qualifications, etc.)?

See response to question 26.c. above. Regardless of the type of qualification, AEI-NOOSR uses the same methodology to assess overseas qualifications. This ensures a fair, equitable and consistent approach for all individuals, supporting the validity of recognition outcomes. In Australia, recognition is decentralised, and AEI-NOOSR's assessment policies support these national and state and territory policy settings.

***Open questions:***



29. Which measures, if any, should be taken at the EU level to improve the recognition of learning outcomes related to new forms of learning such as learning through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)?
30. In case you agree with question 28, please provide your suggestions here on how such criteria could be developed.

## ***6. Increasing the focus on quality assurance***

### ***Closed questions:***

31. In order to enable learners to assemble their tailor-made learning pathways by selecting learning opportunities from different sub-systems and forms of delivery, it is necessary to develop a common understanding of quality across countries and different education sub-systems.
  - a. Is it possible to identify some common basic principles and guidelines of quality assurance valid across sectors and applicable to all qualifications?

Information about overseas quality assurance systems operating in education is highly valued by AEI-NOOSR in its qualifications recognition work. It is these qualitative aspects of a country's education system that primarily support full and face-value recognition of an overseas qualification. Quality information includes information that is transparent, easily accessible and understood, as well as providing an accurate and valid picture of what is occurring in country and any systemic issues arising. In some European countries, there are variations in the quality assurance frameworks operating in education and their effectiveness. Given the implementation of national qualifications frameworks linked to the EQF, the development of common quality assurance principles and guidelines would only further strengthen understanding and trust in European qualifications.

- b. Should there be a core of common European quality assurance principles for the provision of learning opportunities in all sectors of education and training?
32. In your opinion, to which extent are existing quality assurance principles and credit systems suitable to support new forms of learning, such as digital learning (e.g. Massive Open Online Courses, MOOCs)?

### ***Open questions:***

33. If you agree with question 31 b, please provide here your suggestions on what could be the common basic principles and guidelines for quality assurance applicable to all qualifications.

## ***7. Providing learners and workers with a single access point to obtain information and services supporting a European area of skills and qualifications***

### ***Closed questions:***

34. Could learners and workers benefit from a one-stop shop providing integrated services - including their supporting platforms - covering the full range of European services on learning opportunities, career guidance and recognition of qualifications for employment purposes or further learning.
35. In your opinion, to which extent is it desirable to create integrated service-points for learners and workers covering the full range of European services currently spread over the networks of ENIC/NARIC, Europass, Euroguidance, NQF-NCP?



36. Is the current landscape of webtools in the area of skills and qualifications (Europass Portal, Your Europe, Study in Europe, We mean Business, Ploteus, EQF Portal, European Skills Panorama, ESCO) effective/ineffective?
37. Do you consider useful/not useful to provide individuals with self-assessment tools for measurement of knowledge skills and competences?
38. If you are working in the ENIC/NARIC, Europass, Euroguidance, NQF-NCP networks, please answer the following:
- a. How frequently do you work with the following networks? *The answer categories should list the networks quoted as well as Eures Advisers and Europe Direct, National Agency, Eurodesk.*

As the Australian National Information Centre (NIC), AEI-NOOSR engages regularly within the ENIC-NARIC network to fulfil its roles and responsibilities in qualifications recognition.

- b. How would you rate your contacts with other European services in your country in terms of cooperation?

Obtaining quality information is key to successful qualifications recognition. Generally speaking, information about European education systems can be readily obtained.

***Open questions:***

39. If you agree with question 34, please provide here your suggestions on *what could be the features of this one-stop shop.*