

The National report of the Czech Republic on the consultation process towards a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning

1. Characteristics of the current situation in the Czech Republic

Recently, the development in the sphere of description of development and availability of qualifications made a noticeable acceleration in the Czech Republic.

Beginning and rapid progress of work on preparation of a bill on verification and recognition of further education outcomes have been of a fundamental importance. The prepared law should remove systemic deficits like absence of legislation on further education, low and stagnant participation of citizens in this kind of education, low motivation for further learning both on the part of employees and on the part of employers as well as resulting low contribution to the overall level of education among population. The law should create conditions for implementation of a coherent formalized system that would recognize also outcomes of non-formal and informal learning thus contributing to a better employability and flexibility of individuals in the labour market.

Considering a direct relationship to the issues of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF), it is essential that the bill takes into account a National qualifications framework. *The Development of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) supporting links between initial and further education* project will have a fundamental significance for the NQF creation. The project, which develops national policy and the education system and whose final receiver is the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MŠMT), has been under way since April 2005 with the aim to create a National qualifications framework and to support its subsequent development. The NQF will describe qualifications (both entire and partial qualifications) and mutual relations among them. It will specify the so called qualification standards and assessment standards for individual qualifications. Experts of the National Institute of Technical and Vocational Education (NÚOV) and Trexima s.r.o., a company selected following a call for tender, in cooperation with other experts from the world of work, representatives of employers and employees and their organizations as well as with experts from schools, Regional Administrations and Ministries will take part in the project execution till December 2007.

Another project of similar significance is the *Accreditation of prior learning experiences in network of schools that provide educational services for adults (UNIV)* system project. The general aim of the project, whose final receiver is the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MŠMT), is the development of further education in the Czech Republic through involvement of upper secondary and post-secondary technical schools into its implementation. This aim is to be achieved by two ways:

- a) building up, in six Regions, networks of schools supposed to provide both initial and further education;
- b) creating a system for recognition of outcomes of non-formal and informal learning and its pilot testing.

Generally speaking, the current situation in the Czech Republic (ČR) can be considered very suitable, open and relatively well prepared for using such a tool as the proposed EQF.

2. The course of the consultation process

The consultation process towards a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning was launched in the ČR in September 2005. Alena Štěrbová, Deputy Minister of Education, Youth and Sport, addressed through a letter the Social Partners from education, youth, employment and economy sectors and asked them to nominate experts who would take part in the consultation process towards a European Qualifications Framework on the national level. The nominated experts received consultation document elaborated by the European Commission and were asked to assess the EQF and to make their observations on questions presented in the document.

A conference titled “Transformation of primary and secondary education in the broader context” took place in Prague, 11 October 2005. The conference was divided into four sections: Changes of education in the light of European trends, Curriculum reform and school educational programs in the ČR, National Qualifications Framework on the starting line, and Development of a European Qualifications Framework. Alena Štěrbová, Deputy Minister of Education, Youth and Sport, opened the conference and at the same time also officially started the consultation process towards a European Qualifications Framework in the ČR. Many European experts took part in the conference. Jens Bjørnåvold from the Education and Culture Directorate-General of the European Commission presented a paper „The European program ‘Education and Training 2010’ as a starting point not only for the development of a European Qualifications Framework“. He took part also in a panel discussion on topic „The development of a European Qualifications Framework as a way of interconnection of national qualifications frameworks“. Stuart Garvie from the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and Ivan Hromada, general director of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic were other foreign participants who presented their papers in the conference.

Next conference took place in Prague, 1 December 2005. Opinions acquired during the consultation process towards an EQF were summarized in the conference, which at the same time became a launching conference for advisory teams of The Development of the National Qualifications Framework project. Members of advisory teams of the NQF project and members of the conception group of the MŠMT and the NÚOV, who will take an active part in the NQF project, and also all experts, who had been addressed in connection with the consultation process towards a European Qualifications Framework, were among the participants in the conference.

3. The opinion of the Czech Republic within the consultation process towards a EQF

The European Qualifications Framework is a complex system whose implementation will unify the principle of recognition of qualifications among the Member States involved in the consultation process. We recommend to put an accent on the process coordination by the European Commission, which would take over a role of an international coordinator in classifying of qualification levels within the EQF to avoid different understandings of the EQF levels (overestimating some qualifications). This measure would ensure transparency and coherency of the whole system.

Concerning the Commission Staff working document “Towards a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning” we notice that this document defines commitments and challenges of the Member States both at national and sectoral levels (e.g. on page 31). In this connection, it has to be pointed out that the proposition in this wording contradicts The Treaty establishing the European Community, namely its Title XI, Chapter 3 — Education, vocational training and youth (Article 149/former Article 126 Cooperation in educational policy and Article 150/former Article 127 Policy of vocational education and training), which obliges not to interfere with national policies of the EU Member States in such a manner. We demand to change the wording into a text in which the commitment is delegated to the Member States. Likewise, we propose to omit the first sentence from Chapter 8.2 - *Compatibility of national systems with an EQF; the principles of self-certification and transparency*, which reads: “It is important to consider the process by which each country will certify the compatibility of its own qualifications with an EQF.” The aim of certification process is not clear. This requirement seems to be insufficiently justified and it was not discussed beforehand.

As for the questionnaire below, we raise the following recommendation: Question 9 does not formulate unambiguously what a respondent should focus on. Therefore we recommend define more precisely the notion *a catalyst at sector level*, to make a meaning of the question clear.

4. The answers to questions posed for the consultation process towards an EQF

The rationale of an EQF

1. Are the most important objectives and functions to be fulfilled by an EQF those set out in the consultation document?

The consultation document describes the most important objectives and functions of a prepared EQF adequately. Nevertheless, functioning of qualifications frameworks at national levels relates also to other aspects and the consultation process seeks to acquire information and views about them.

2. What is needed to make the EQF work in practical terms (for individual citizens, education and training systems, the labour market)?

The process of the EQF implementation should be based on the following four principles:

- Understandability
- Awareness
- Application
- Continuation of the consultation process

Understandability

The EQF has to be described understandably and clearly. The description of individual levels should be supplemented by examples of applications to particular qualifications.

Awareness

Information on the EQF should be spread across managerial staff and experts from the fields of education, employment services, from employers' associations and chambers and other Social Partners.

Application

The EQF in itself is nothing. It needs to be related to a concrete qualifications system. The basic prerequisite for the EQF functioning therefore is to develop national qualifications systems, which will be co-developed and accepted by representatives of both employers and educational sphere, and whose levels and qualifications will be related to the EQF levels. Application for educational levels of vocational streams (sectors, industries) is of a great importance, this application, however, could be realized gradually. A successful application to one industry or sector can contribute to implementation of the EQF into other areas.

In order to enable the whole system to work, there has to be a legislative support for recognition of the qualifications defined in this way. Comparability and equality of qualifications acquired through various educational paths should be ensured as well.

Interconnection of the EQF with national occupational classifications should also contribute to its functioning.

The EQF should be applied at supranational levels as well. In this case, the links with other related activities (e.g. Europass, Ploteus, etc.) and classifications (ISCED, ISCO) will be very important.

Continuation of the consultation process

The consultation process towards an EQF should continue and be concerned first of all by implementation of the EQF. The process should be accompanied by the implementation monitoring, sharing information on „best practice“ at national level, which shows possibilities of relating national qualifications with the EQF. Regular supranational meetings of experts could be supplemented by creation of international virtual communities.

The reference levels and descriptors

3. Does the 8-level reference structure sufficiently capture the complexity of lifelong learning in Europe?

The eight levels seem to be sufficient for expressing and distinguishing the complexity of educational systems and qualification requirements. As for their application to national systems, it will be important to come to an agreement on the first starting point level and to prevent countries from “overestimating” their qualifications in order to give them advantage. This would result in gradual devaluation of the whole system (and a necessity to add further levels on the top).

4. Do the level descriptors, in table 1, adequately capture learning outcomes and their progression in levels?

Descriptions of levels in current form represent good points of reference for distinguishing various levels of EQF. However, using the descriptors to distinguish concrete qualifications involves two problems:

Borders between descriptors are sometimes quite blurred, which could cause difficulties in distinguishing among descriptors. As a result of this, the whole framework could look like a very complex tool. This could have a negative impact on its acceptance. It could be worth to consider, if there are not too many descriptors. For example descriptors called “skills” and “professional and vocational competences” are to some extent overlapping, or it is difficult to distinguish between them. If we conceive professional competences as an application of knowledge in problem solving, is it really necessary to have another category of skills, which also represents application of knowledge (and should be, in point of fact, a subset of professional competences)?

The emphasis is put mainly on distinguishing levels of social and general (transversal) competences, while professional competences, i.e. competences necessary for professional problem solving, are of a relatively little importance and their distinguishing at individual levels is not quite clear. This drawback will appear during determining levels for individual qualifications because professional competences are the most important ones for majority of qualifications (namely qualifications of technicians’, workers’ and craftsmen’ nature, but not

only). Professional competences, like ability to apply knowledge and information in problem solving, have both analytic (determining causes and connections, comparing, assessing, diagnosing, etc.) and synthetic dimensions (application of techniques and methods, planning, generalizing, decision making, etc.).

5. What should be the content and role of the ‘supporting and indicative information’ on education, training and learning structures and input (table 2)?

The role of supporting and indicative information should lie in contribution to consistent interpretation of the EQF levels, i.e. to provide basic information on the EQF levels in a simple and understandable way, so that it would be accessible for general public. It means that the terms used should be understandable even for non-experts and that the table should be structured according to individual information circles for every level.

Nevertheless, the main problem is that this concept of supporting and indicative information does not mean an interpretation of the same thing using other words, but a description of something else. The whole EQF refers to description of the levels as results of learning, while here the ways of learning are described instead. The information on ways of learning may be of some importance if it refers to individual countries (as information on ways leading towards a particular qualification level in the country in question; then such information can explain the level to a non-expert in the country). However, such generalized information loses its informative value and could be even confusing. Thus the information should be prepared at national level, but only after the countries refer their levels to those of the EQF – only then the countries can formulate the ways how to achieve the levels.

The supporting and indicative information at the generalized international level could mention also comparable levels used in established international classification systems (e.g. ISCED and ISCO).

6. How can your national and sectoral qualifications be matched to the proposed EQF levels and descriptors of learning outcomes?

Matching qualifications to the 8 EQF levels is feasible in the ČR. Nevertheless, the professional and vocational components of descriptors need to be defined more clearly in order to be sure, that interconnections between the EQF levels and levels of qualifications in the ČR are really adequate (see also Question 4 – the same need for clearer definition of descriptions will without a doubt occur in the other countries as well).

National Qualifications Frameworks

7. How can a National Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning – reflecting the principles of the EQF- be developed in your country?

In the ČR, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) has been developed within the system project of the MŠMT, using ESF funds. The NQF follows the System of Initial Education Branches and the information system on occupations (the Integrated System of

Type Positions; a National System of Occupations has been currently under preparation). The NQF is to create standardized descriptions of all qualifications enabling citizens to have their qualifications verified and recognized regardless of the form in which they achieved them.

8. How, and within which timescale, can your national qualifications systems be developed towards a learning outcomes approach?

Three steps have to be done:

- Develop the National Qualifications Framework based on learning outcomes. The process started in the ČR in 2005, the framework is to be established and to certain extent filled (by qualifications at lower levels) by the end of 2007.
- Achieve acceptance of the National Qualifications Framework by all relevant partners, particularly by employers.
- Build sufficiently widespread networks of independent assessment authorities that would take over the system of assessment of all aspects of qualification from educational institutions.

It is difficult to estimate the duration of implementation. It will depend on involvement of employers' representatives as well as on changes in thinking of people, who still associate education primarily with schools. A lot of influence is also due to the fact that the tradition of education system is very profound in the ČR. In comparison with education systems of many other countries, our system is exceptional for its recognition of equality between general and vocational qualifications, which also means wide access to higher education regardless of previous educational paths. Therefore the system will have to contain also motivational elements connected with utilization of learning outcomes and acquiring qualifications.

On the other hand, we can observe that „an approach based on learning outcomes“ has been applied to an extent in the ČR. Stipulated aims of education including desirable competences, which are verified at the end of technical/vocational education, form part of educational standards and educational programs as well. A competence model has been developed and applied also within the Integrated System of Positions (a national information system on occupations).

Sectoral qualifications

9. To which extent can the EQF become a catalyst for developments at sector level?

It is not quite clear, what is meant by “developments at sector level”.

The prerequisites for application of the EQF in the area of sectoral qualification should be namely:

- Broad international consensus on the EQF and its functions;
- Application of qualifications systems interconnected with the EQF levels at national level;

- Involvement of employers' representatives in the process of development of the National Qualifications Framework interconnected with the EQF levels;
- Acceptance of the EQF principles by sectoral Ministries and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs;
- Acceptance of the EQF by leading companies preparing the systems of employees' assessment for firms;
- Legal anchorage of the National Qualifications Framework.

10. How can the EQF be used to pursue a more systematic development of knowledge, skills and competences at sector level?

Prerequisites are the same as those at the previous question:

- Broad international consensus on the EQF and its functions;
- Application of qualifications systems interconnected with the EQF levels at national level;
- Involvement of employers' representatives in the process of development of the National Qualifications Framework interconnected with the EQF levels;
- Acceptance of the EQF principles by sectoral Ministries and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs;
- Acceptance of the EQF by leading companies preparing the systems of employees' assessment for firms;
- Legal anchorage of the National Qualifications Framework.

It is also important to transform the National Qualifications Framework into classification structures of knowledge, skills and competences, which will be developed in a balanced way for various occupational fields.

11. How can stakeholders at sector level be involved in supporting the implementation of the EQF?

Stakeholders should be involved into:

- Processes of development of qualification standards (which will be a part of the national qualifications frameworks interconnected with the EQF levels);
- Processes of accreditations of bodies charged with verifying the qualifications;
- Promotion and information on the EQF.

The involvement should be realized through sectoral and industrial commissions representing leading actors in the labour market.

12. How can the link between sectors development and national qualifications be improved?

The links have two levels:

- Involvement of experts from various occupational areas in the development of qualification standards and in the whole process of development of the National

Qualifications Framework – at this level we can expect professional contribution with regard to contents;

- Involvement of accepted representatives in processes of development of qualification standards and in processes of accreditations of bodies charged with verifying the qualifications – at this level we can expect contribution in the form of acceptance and dissemination of the National Qualifications Framework by relevant sectors.

A significant contribution would also be made by a legal anchorage of the National Qualifications Framework. This should solve also the problem of establishing an umbrella institution for qualifications at the national level. This institution should then coordinate the processes concerning sectoral and industrial councils or commissions.

Should a qualifications system develop in a sector as a whole, it becomes a subsystem of the National Qualifications Framework including connections with the EQF, in spite of its possible specificities.

Mutual trust

13. How can the EQF contribute to the development of mutual trust (e.g. based on common principles for quality assurance) between stakeholders involved in lifelong learning-at European, national, sectoral and local levels?

Provided that the EQF will be accepted by countries and sectors (prerequisites for this is a good setting of the EQF and also the fact that its application in individual countries will be adequate to the real qualification levels, i.e. it will not be “overestimated” in some countries), the mutual trust would be strengthened and possible doubts about educational standards in respective countries would be removed. It could become a significant impulse for occupational mobility.

14. How can the EQF become a reference to improve the quality of all levels of lifelong learning?

Provided that the EQF will be applied within national qualifications frameworks and will be well set, it helps to assure that certificates awarded just for attendance at educational programs or completion of educational programs of poor quality cease to be accepted.

This depends on the existence of assessment standards and accredited bodies, which will use the standards in a competent way while verifying qualifications. It will be also necessary to introduce control mechanisms for checking activities of these accredited bodies. Transparency and understandability of qualification systems is very crucial as well.