

Estonian Comments on the European Qualifications Framework

Each European state has developed its own specific educational and qualifications system that is unique and different.

However, due to the increased mobility over recent years of pupils, students and workers, the need has become increasingly apparent to make the educational path of citizens, the content of curricula and the acquired qualifications more transparent and mutually comprehensible. This purpose has been met through the political agreements in Lisbon, Bologna and Maastricht, and the same purpose is also served by the ENIC/NARIC network, Europass, as well as by the European quality assurance network (ENQA, CQAF).

The goals of a common educational space and labour market cannot be achieved merely through the mutual recognition of certain qualifications. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a step towards the formation of a common labour market and educational space, since it simplifies recognition and trust at all stages of lifelong learning.

Therefore, the EQF initiative, and the striving towards a common comparative framework, is a logical continuation of developments to date, and, as such, is a welcome initiative.

Estonia supports the EQF initiative – in particular the principles expressed therein: implementation on a voluntary basis, descriptions of learning outcomes, reference levels and being output-based – but also notes that linking the EQF to national qualifications frameworks requires considerable further work.

The rationale of EQF

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

The European Qualifications Framework is appropriate for fulfilling its main objective – the facilitation of inter-state educational and labour market communication.

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

Whether the objectives presented in the documents are fulfilled, or to what extent the EQF meta-framework is usable on the individual and educational system levels, is to a great degree dependent on the use of the instruments meant to support the implementation of the EQF, i.e. Europass, ECTS, systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning and, in particular, systems to ensure the quality of national education. The EQF, as a stand-alone system, without its supporting systems, cannot fulfil its objective, i.e. to generate trust and cooperation.

In order to develop all the additional instruments, and for the recognition of EQF on the level of the individual, sector and state, there must be extensive information provision, clarification and advice.

For the individual, the EQF meta-framework will work only if there is an existing national qualifications framework for the respective state. Therefore, there must be respective systems in each state, and these must be officially linked to the meta-framework.

The reference levels and descriptors

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

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

The suggested 8-level framework is optimal for covering the entire spectre of learning, taking into account the levels of formal education, i.e. having more levels would be too detailed, and fewer levels would be insufficient. An 8-level EQF also seems to be optimum as regards implementation, taking into account the levels of ISCED 97 in formal education.

Although applauding the attempt to describe educational and professional qualifications in a common framework, difficulties in realising the objective can be noted in the document. Table 2, meant as explanatory information to supplement the consultation document, clearly dominates Table 1 that is meant as the basic description document, since Table 2 is more detailed and contains specific examples from both formal education and specific occupational tasks. In addition, it unfortunately seems that the information in the two tables is contradictory in places, which means that it would probably be useful to use Table 2 as an annex after the transition period. The description of the levels would also be made more comprehensible by adding specific examples (of professions) to Table 1.

In the development of the Estonian 5-level professional system, the desire has been clearly expressed by representatives of the professions to describe the professional development of a specific profession through various levels, regardless of whether a rise in the level of qualification is accompanied by a higher formal educational level or not.

The description of learning outcomes per level is in places difficult to follow – i.e. the Commission should emphasise that the description of each EQF level should be viewed as part of the system, by assessing the total of all the descriptors. In the attempt to assess the qualification level of a profession by using the progression per level of only one descriptor (e.g. skills), the general purpose of EQF is lost, i.e. the linking of formal education and professional levels into a common framework.

What should be the content and role of the “supporting and indicative information” on education, training and learning structures and input (table 2).

Since the wider purpose of EQF is the use of output-based indicators, and since Table 2 contradicts this ideology, we recommend that Table 2 be used only as an annex to the document.

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

Estonia has a common national system of professional qualification, which is also used to describe the levels for sectoral professions. As of the end of 2005, over 250 specialties in the field of 15 professions have been described. Estonia is prepared to match its national system’s sectoral professional qualifications and formal education qualifications with EQF levels. We have already begun this work, and it will be continued in 2006.

National Qualifications Frameworks

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

The levels of professional qualifications in Estonia have been described in the Professions Act. In Estonia we currently have a 5-level competence-based system for (awarding) professions. The professional levels are not linked on a one-to-one basis with the formal education system.

Taking into account national developments, the EQF proposal, and the developmental trends in the labour market, and in professional and higher education, Estonia has embarked upon the analysis and modernisation of its qualifications system.

How, and within what timescale, can your national qualifications system be developed towards a learning outcomes approach?

The Estonian system of professional qualifications is based on the assessment of learning outcomes and (acquired) competences. Professional education (competence-based curricula) and the system of professions are more closely linked. In the coming years, Estonia is gradually changing the legal bases for its qualifications system so that the qualifications system embraces the entire spectre of lifelong learning. Since a need for study programmes based on the description of learning outcomes is becoming

increasingly apparent in higher education as well, the universities have initiated relevant analyses and activities.

Sectoral qualifications

To what extent can the EQF become a catalyst for developments at sectoral level?

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

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

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

The link between sectoral developments and national qualifications can be improved – by developing it through cooperative bodies (in Estonia the primary institutional form is the system of Professional Councils). In Estonia we need to better coordinate the cooperative bodies of various sectors in order to achieve a common understanding of qualification levels.

Mutual trust

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?

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

The objectives of the EQF can only be implemented if the stakeholders trust each other. The EQF and the 8 levels of qualification must be described simply, the implementation of the system must be transparent and be based on certain agreed criteria. EQF can play an extremely important role in the increase of mutual trust – between states, sectors and institutions – if all stakeholders are included in the implementation of the system.