



ETUC positive on European Qualifications Framework

There are 80 million non- or low-qualified adults in the European Union. At the same time more than 60 % of new jobs are estimated to require a highly skilled work force. The development of education and training systems and qualifications systems are crucial to the future of Europe.

ETUC considers that education and training is a key part of the European Social Model, where all citizens will have a real chance to develop their skills, competencies and qualifications for a better life, for employment and for active citizenship. This way lifelong learning can support social cohesion and the economic competitiveness of Europe.

EQF for mobility and development

ETUC has supported the initiative to develop the European Qualifications Framework. For trade unions the European Qualifications Framework is a question of mobility and a question of development of lifelong learning in Europe.

The rationale of the consultation document is acceptable for ETUC. The EQF is justified when it supports the mobility of individual workers and citizens across national and sector boundaries. The EQF has to enable mobility of individuals from work life to education and training and vice versa throughout life.

From workers' point of view the objective of facilitating mutual comparison of qualifications across national or sector borders is the key element of the EQF. We believe that the EQF must promote transfer of qualifications across border so that workers will be able to obtain a job or participate in education and training in another EU member state at a level adequate to their qualifications.

From workers' point of view increasing transparency of qualifications is necessary in removing obstacles to professional mobility. In this way the EQF can act as a positive step towards a European labour market.

Transparency of qualifications is also needed to tear down barriers to lifelong learning that exist in national education and training systems. The EQF must aim to build bridges within education system, notably to facilitate mobility between vocational education and training and general education including higher education. At the same time the EQF must aim to build ways between learning in workplace and the formal education and training systems.

Recognition of non formal and informal learning described at the EQF consultation document, is a fundamental question to workers. Development of competencies in a lifelong learning perspective after initial education takes place mainly at daily work situations. Validation and recognition of these activities are key areas in the development of skills and competences of the European work force.

ETUC stresses the need to implement the council decision from May 2004 on validation of non-formal and informal learning in member states. We also recognise the need to follow up

implementation of this decision. The European Network for Quality Assurance in VET is a good example how follow up and support can be organised at European level.

Our general impression is that the EQF will exert a positive influence on the development of national frameworks to standardize and facilitate access to the recognition of qualifications, as well as in the quality standards required to develop new qualifications and to update old ones.

The EQF can act as catalyst for national projects and actions which aim to develop new qualifications, validation and recognition of learning and skills. In this way EQF can support individuals when they want to acquire qualifications. These are long term expectations, which will improve quality of provision of training and learning outcomes.

National Qualifications Frameworks

The EQF will not fulfil its purposes unless national qualifications systems are established. In every case this will be done at national not at European level. Decisions concerning national frameworks, individual qualifications and methods of recognition, validation and certification will be done at national or regional level. As the EQF doesn't aim to harmonisation all decisions can be made in accordance with national needs and strengths. ETUC stresses the need to involve all stakeholders in these processes. Social partners are active and major players in development of qualification frameworks.

European Qualifications Framework is the top of a building that hopefully will be constructed from national, regional and sector frameworks. These frameworks will be built on individual qualifications, which are based on training, learning and validation. The operational role of the EQF will be limited to comparison of individual qualifications within different systems. ETUC stresses this task as it enables workers to be mobile with their qualifications and work at the same level across borders. This is a fundamental question to trade unions.

Implementation of qualification framework is not technical work. ETUC points out that implementation don't mean only decisions by competent authority, but use by people. Qualifications framework at national or sector level is legitimate only when it is usable for citizens. Same goes with the EQF.

EQF for wide audience

One of the major questions that have not been answered yet is, to whom EQF is addressed. Would the EQF benefit individual citizens and workers, employers, social partners, training providers, authorities or all parties mentioned above?

The structure and definitions of EQF document are quite complex, which means that this proposal is mostly addressed to experts in the field of qualifications. This does not mean that the EQF itself should be addressed only to public authorities. It has to be developed to serve interest of individual worker and citizen. Social partners as important actors of vocational training and as representing work life are co owners of the EQF. This is extremely important in development of sectoral frameworks and qualifications.

ETUC stresses that the EQF and national frameworks must together benefit individuals. For the individual the major impact that EQF can bring is better opportunities to build personal learning pathways throughout life. In this way EQF can help workers when they are seeking a job. The EQF should make their qualifications more transparent.

Social partners can benefit from EQF as their role in the development lifelong learning will be emphasised. Social partners will play role in definition of national and sectoral qualifications frameworks. Social partners will together with authorities define and implement national principles, legislation and tools to enable national frameworks to work in practice.

ETUC believes that the EQF will also have a role as a catalyst of change. This will take place at national and sectoral level in form of policy development and projects aiming to develop curricula, new qualifications and validation and recognition of learning and skills. The real challenge behind frameworks that are based on learning outcomes is development of curricula. How can curricula or syllabus be described from the point of view of learning outcomes?

In this way the EQF can support individuals when they want to acquire qualifications, which they need at (work) life. It is possible that the EQF will support work life as a whole by pushing forward implementation of lifelong learning in concrete terms. A qualified and skilled work force is the interest of work life and society as a whole.

The reference levels and descriptors

Qualification frameworks should not be used to standardise or simplify reality. Their role is to co-ordinate the diversity of different qualifications. They are to bring order into disorder. Many times also national, regional or sectoral qualifications are based on and understandable against the culture in which they exist. Qualifications framework should provide top level of simplicity as complex models are not understandable for wider public. This needs to be the leading principle in development of European and national frameworks.

The most important aspect of consultation document is concentration on skills and competencies. Learning outcomes have been raised to be the most important factor in definition of qualifications. The biggest challenge in ahead of us is recognition and validation of prior, informal and nonformal learning.

ETUC feels that the descriptions of knowledge, skills and competencies in table 1 are quite academic and not easy to understand by common people. On the other hand learning outcomes are described in a harsh way. There is schematic in it, which can produce some automatism and will not show the entire complexity which is need for transparency.

In our opinion, the mix among the eight levels of knowledge, skills and competences should be made more flexible, because a mechanic application of the scheme that has been provided could hamper the aim and the function itself of the EQF. There is a need to describe a more articulated and comprehensive approach, which could read different levels of knowledge, skills and competences, in a more holistic way that would make transparent the

expertise and skills results, in order to translate in a adequate way and to make transparent the content of individual qualification.

The definitions relating to personal and professional competence are particularly problematic and should be substantially further developed. Considering the difference in cultural connotations and value granted to the definitions employed to describe the eight levels of the “personal and professional competence” bloc, it seems that these aspects should be only part of national qualification framework instead of the EQF.

Levels 6 – 8 refer to higher education cycles defined in the framework of Bologna process although it could be interesting to make a distinction in level 8 between the accomplishment of the Diplome of Advanced Studies and the full recognition of the PhD.

Sector Qualifications Frameworks

In general ETUC takes a positive position on sectoral qualifications frameworks, but these have to serve the interest of whole sector or branch. Sectoral frameworks must not become tools for multinational companies to strengthen their position in the market. ETUC is also concerned that sector frameworks will not be used to professional exclusion within a sector.

Sector social dialogue provides good forum for development of sectoral qualifications. Professional platforms mentioned in directive on regulated profession could also work in development of sectoral or branch frameworks.

Sectoral frameworks are needed only if the branch or sector benefits from them.

Building up mutual trust

Among trade unions there is a wide opinion that an approach to create an EQF 'bottom-up', starting from the already realised pilot-projects for example in the context of Leonardo da Vinci, would work better than the now proposed 'top-down' approach of the EQF (to create firstly an abstract framework fitting for everything and to work towards a more concrete meaning of it later on). The EQF must be designed in a way that allows future changes to its structure.

The EQF should not take a position how skills and competencies have been acquired by an individual. ETUC feels that table 2 gives contradictory messages that can be wrongly understood. As table 2 makes strong references to certain models of education and training it can be understood as a limitation how certain qualification can be achieved. ETUC proposes that table 2 should be removed or reformulated to better correspond to diversity of LLL in EU member states.

To create and enforce mutual trust development of standards of quality assurance at the European level is crucial. Development of validation of nonformal and informal learning is needed in all countries and at all levels of education and training. This must also be taken into consideration when quality assurance is developed and implemented.

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As the document is still quite general and takes no position concerning implementation, it is possible that consultation will initially raise more questions than answers. ETUC reminds the

Commission that all stakeholders involved need enough time to contribute in the further development of the EQF before final political decisions are taken. European, national and sector qualifications frameworks need to be developed, piloted and tested according to bottom up –approach to give all stakeholders possibility to contribute and commit.

Finally ETUC stresses the need to follow up implementation of the EQF decision after it will be taken in future. It is necessary that member states and sectors learn from each others experiences in building up their frameworks.

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