

A standpoint from EURASHE on the Development of a European framework of qualifications for lifelong learning (EQF)

1 In the **Vilnius Statement for Bergen** (April 2005) EURASHE proposed six action lines that underpin our position towards building an overarching qualifications framework for the EHEA. Summarising their content we can say that the main focus areas were transparency in the HE structure, involvement of a broad range of stakeholders, the establishment of trust through quality assurance and accreditation, a focus on employability, a regional embedding, wider access to higher education, all this linked to the social dimension of higher education.

2 It is out of the above concerns that EURASHE expresses its support for the Life Long Learning agenda, as it is embodied in the creation of a broader European Qualifications Framework, encompassing general as well as vocational education and training. The underlying document wants to make a contribution to the Consultation on the European Commission Staff Working Document 'Towards a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning'.

2.1 The transparency factor

By assessing all forms of learning (formal, informal and also non-formal) and by creating the possibility of recognizing all qualifications in internal and external mobility, whether they are offered by national, private or sectoral education providers, the profile of the entire education and learning paths should become apparent through its learning outcomes formulated in terms of competences (transparency of degrees, variety of trainings, education structures).

2.2 The involvement of all stakeholders

The EQF will have a much wider scope, in that it involves many more stakeholders, who all feel involved in the learning process: new groups of learners via flexible learning paths, graduates seeking further studies, employers wanting to stimulate people in employment to seek career advancement, providers of sectoral training programmes, etc.

2.3 Trustbuilding

The EQF emphasises the accountability of the various stakeholders not only by recognising their involvement in the various learning paths, but most importantly by making them actors in the QA proceedings, internally and through peer review. This creates confidence and trust among these actors on both national and European levels. The role of a correct QA along the principles set out in the working document should not be underestimated as it will not only build trust and confidence, but it is also a means to relate the national and sectoral qualifications with each other and internationally.

2.4 The employability factor

The framework should enable trainings to make their positions clear both in the educational area and in the labour market: this will stimulate them to make their programmes relevant for the labour-market and also more practice-oriented. The EQF is therefore well in line with the

Lisbon goals and is 'at the core of the Copenhagen process', which enhances European cooperation in vocational education and training.

2.5 National and regional embedding

The EQF can act as a meta framework that interrelates the national and also sectoral QFs, if not inserted in the national frameworks. HEIs with a tradition of regional embedding play an important role in their local environment, as regional centres of knowledge and innovation stimulating new forms of learning in close cooperation with the world of labour.

2.6 Wider access to higher education, in view of its social dimension

By developing a broader concept of competences the EQF will open up (higher) education to new groups of learners, and facilitate access to HE for underprivileged groups of society. It is therefore important that broader qualifications frameworks value skills and competences which relate to more complex contexts, social norms and behavioural attitudes than is the case in more traditional forms of education.

2.7. Learning outcomes, competences and credits

The fact that the EQF is based on learning outcomes is a break-through that should underpin all qualifications and relate learning with the social and economic realities of the modern world. This is a most innovative element for education and training that enhances their transparency in favour of the individual learner and all stakeholders.

By formulating the learning outcomes in terms of competences education and training will not only be result-oriented, but is directly linked to the functioning of the individual in an ever more complex and globalising reality. The integrating element in the definition of competence, linking knowledge, skills, and attitudes with a context, should therefore be stressed and used throughout the document. Moreover, the learning outcomes should be linked to credits in order to make transfer and accumulation easier.

3 Assumptions and risks

The construction of two parallel systems of wholly or partially incompatible frameworks that would confuse the world of employment must on all accounts be avoided.

Keeping a clear profile of what the different processes want to achieve (Bologna and Lisbon/Copenhagen) will avoid overlapping and can contribute to recognising the added value of an additional (European) qualifications framework. The discussion should therefore remain open, and it must be possible to make adjustments in both frameworks 'en cours de route'.

4 A positive element is that a greater compatibility is imaginable between the two frameworks. The EQF can be seen as a further extension of the QF for the EHEA: its concept allows for mobility (influx) in horizontal and vertical ways, whereas the Bologna Process builds upon a (more rigid) vertical frame of three cycles.

5 Criticism is mainly on the terminology: upholding 'levels' instead of cycles is confusing. Rigidity in the interpretation should be avoided: for example, it cannot be argued that the intermediate short cycle is the only route to the first cycle in a number of trainings/disciplines; on the contrary it is just an alternative. The possibilities of vertical and horizontal mobility by the use of learning outcomes in terms of competences as a basis for the

qualifications should be stressed and stated more clearly in the document, as they are essential in Lifelong Learning.

6 Summary:

In a framework which takes into account Lifelong Learning processes differentiations must be entirely based on learning outcomes in terms of competences. It follows from this that the EQF is broader in concept than the more 'school- or system-based' approach in the Bologna Process. However, that does not mean that the two systems are antagonistic: just that one frame (the EQF) is much broader than the other, as it has to comprise non-formal and informal next to formal learning processes and systems and is not limited to higher education. In order to be instrumental competences of learners have to integrate all aspects of knowledge, skills and attitudes with a context, acquired via different learning paths and in accordance with what is required in a modern, complex and globalising world .

Quality assurance has a key role in the development of a European framework for qualifications based on the Lifelong Learning concept. It is through QA that the role of sectoral and national stakeholders in linking qualifications to the EFQ can be guaranteed. However, this requires that a Quality Assurance Guide is available to assist the countries and sectors in referring to the European framework in a correct and verifiable way.

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