

REPORT ON THE RESULTS OF THE CONSULTATION ON THE COMMISSION STAFF WORKING
DOCUMENT
“TOWARDS A EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG LEARNING”
IN HUNGARY

Ministry of Education

Budapest, 21st December 2005

I.

THE EQF CONSULTATION IN HUNGARY

The EQF consultation process in Hungary was set up following preliminary coordination talks held with the representatives of the various ministries involved in the consultation, and it was based on the consultation plan (21726/2005) accepted at the ministerial meeting of the Ministry of Education held on 6 September 2005.

Following detailed discussions on terminology, the Ministry of Education translated the Commission Staff Working Document 'Towards a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning' into Hungarian to allow for the contribution of the widest possible range of participants in the consultation. Furthermore, a glossary of terminology was also compiled in order to provide a single framework that facilitates the interpretation of the consultation document by resolving the problems resulting from the various expressions and differing definitions used in the individual areas of education and training and the various sectors.

As the possible future launch of a EQF to be designed on the basis of the results of the consultations held in the Member States and at European level and defining links to the Hungarian system will probably require significant efforts in Hungary, which had already been apparent prior to the commencement of the consultation process, those coordinating the consultation added further questions to the original ones raised by the Commission working document geared specifically for the Hungarian context in order to map out and describe circumstances in Hungary.

In line with the consultation plan, the Ministry of Education called upon a large circle of Hungarian stakeholders to express their views, raise questions and describe challenges that may arise in relation to the development and implementation of an EQF. Thus, the organisations and institutions of the education and training sub-sectors (experts and interest groups of public education, vocational education and training and higher education, teachers' organisations, developers, etc.) the sectoral partners (ministries responsible for various sectoral qualifications, their partner organisations, employers', employees' representations, non-governmental organisations, organisations involved in informal and non-formal learning) participated in the consultation in large numbers. In addition to written consultation, the EQF was discussed at the professional forums of several institutions. The organisations sent their written comments to the competent ministries or departments of the Ministry of Education. (Following sectoral consultation, ten ministries sent the summaries of the responses of the respective sectors to the Ministry of Education that was responsible for the coordination of the consultation process. Furthermore, consultations were held with 35 (institution-level) stakeholders of the various sub-sectors of education and training (public education, vocational education and training, higher education, adult education).

In addition to professional stakeholders directly involved, the consultation intended to reach all those potentially concerned. All interested parties could join in the opinion formulation process on the website of the Ministry of Education (www.om.hu/ekkr), where they had the opportunity to gain information about the draft proposal on a EQF and ask questions from the experts, and respond to the European and Hungarian questions for the consultation process. In addition to the electronic interface, the experts coordinating the consultation also provided information about the possible EQF at professional and, upon request, other events.

The partners showed great interest in participating in the consultation. The draft of the EQF opened intensive professional discourse along the themes of the document regarding the development of the education and training sector and a more intensive cooperation between education and the economy. The themes of the EQF are expected to be continuously on the agenda of policy forums and, as the elements forming part of the meta-framework fit into the directions of the development of the Hungarian education and training sector, joining the EQF also has its effect at the level of strategic development documents.

The following report was prepared on the basis of the comments received.

II.

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1. General Observations

- During the consultation process it became clear that the expert groups, organisations and institutions consider every component of the system of objectives of the EQF important and that they also support these elements.
- The representatives of the various sub-sectors had differing views on the applicability of the EQF. Thus, for instance, in the view of the representatives of higher education—already at an advanced stage of the Bologna reform process—the reference levels of the EQF seemed to be easy to apply, whereas representatives of vocational education and training thought that several adjustments facilitating developments would be needed.
- During Hungarian consultations on the EQF, the following issues received special emphasis:
 - The effects of the implementation of the EQF on the international economic competitiveness of Hungary;
 - The applicability of the EQF, its anticipated influence on the future content of Hungarian qualifications and the transformation of Hungarian qualification requirements;
 - The effect of the implementation of the EQF on the processes underway in the various sub-sectors of the education and training system.
- No major doubts were raised during the consultation as to the applicability of the EQF as a classification instrument; on the other hand, major doubts were, in fact, raised in respect of whether the various elements of the Hungarian qualification system were classifiable in the EQF system and thus, regarding the general applicability of the EQF in Hungary. At the same time, an agreement seemed to be developing regarding the issue that ensuring correspondence between Hungarian qualifications and EQF reference levels and the reform of these qualification systems already underway are not contradictory.
- The consultation process strengthened the need for the development of a single national qualification framework that can be easily adapted to EQF reference levels. At the same time, the identification of the obstacles impeding the above and outlining the scope of the necessary developments calls for a longer development process of seven to eight years. Consequently, a full-scale application of the EQF in the entire educational and training system in Hungary can only be achieved gradually.
- The full-scale application of the EQF in Hungary, just as probably in several other European countries, requires a long-term development process. Therefore, following the future adoption of the proposal on the EQF, which already incorporates lessons learnt from the consultation, a medium-term EU development programme supporting national-level developments is necessary.

2. Questions for consultation and the most important issues arising in relation thereto in Hungary

2.1 The rationale of an EQF

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

- *Is it in the interest of Hungary to join the EQF system? If yes, why? If not, why not?*
- *In addition to the common European objectives, are there any objectives of an EQF that are particularly important for Hungary? How can these be identified in your professional field?*
- *Beside its European-level functions, what influence can the EQF exert on the operation of the Hungarian education and training system and, which of these effects can be considered desirable or undesirable? Analyse these in your professional field.*

Due to its small-scale and open economy, Hungary is clearly interested in the implementation of every instrument whose purpose is to facilitate the mobility of workers and services. This support was raised both in terms of the success of Hungarian employees and enterprises on international markets and also regarding the provision of incentives for foreign enterprises to invest in Hungary. This latter factor refers to the advantage that entrepreneurs investing in Hungary can receive a clearer picture on the real value of the qualifications of the Hungarian workforce.

International mobility must be reckoned with on each level and in each branch of education. The failure to join an EQF could significantly restrict such mobility. Thus, for example, a large number of those who receive a degree in higher education would like to find a job on the European labour market.

The implementation of an EQF could become a driving force in terms of the modernisation of the current fragmented learning output regulation instruments (qualification requirements) in Hungary. This is a process that has already begun, the continuity of which, among others, can be ensured by international reference points. The application of an EQF as a frame of reference may contribute to ensuring the transparency of the Hungarian education and training system and that its elements are built on each other.

The application of an EQF may speed up the transformation of the education and training system—which is currently overly supply-oriented—in a manner better suited to the needs of students. In this respect—especially in vocational education and training—communication between training institutions, employers and labour organisations is of key importance and the EQF could play an important role in encouraging such communication.

Ensuring the applicability of an EQF must result in the development of a single national framework of qualifications. The process leading to this goal may strengthen the efficiency of policy coordination within the education and training system, ensure that each stage of the various learning routes build on each other and may restore, to a certain extent, the currently weakened role of qualifications in informing employers. The Hungarian process of joining the EQF must ensure that in comparison with the current situation returns on investments in learning improve and that skills that are important in terms of lifelong learning are developed. In Hungary, there are not only obstacles to the international comparability of qualifications, but their comparability within the country may also be problematic. The low level of mobility of the workforce within the country is a source of numerous problems that are difficult to resolve. The situation could be improved with the help of learning outcome regulating instruments, which can be adapted to the EQF.

The EQF also offers several instruments for the reform of Hungarian higher education aimed at ensuring conformity with the 'Bologna' system, if, instead of offering the former full-scale

educational supply, more and more emphasis were placed on the formulation of a specialized training structure also competitive on the international market. In addition, there are certain specialized fields of education and training which, due to the low number of students cannot be maintained profitably in Hungary and require the involvement of foreign students. The comparability of qualifications obtained in Hungary may greatly facilitate the maintenance of such specialized fields in vocational education and training as well.

There are quality assurance systems operating in higher education institutions. Each institution has the right to and is also obliged to supply its own quality assurance system. The development of such systems is also assisted by a manual. Pursuant to the new act on higher education, the one of the tasks is to development new course and output requirements in line with the new system of majors. The implementation of an EQF may facilitate this process and the EQF may also provide references for accreditation in higher education.

The challenges of the implementation of the EQF in Hungary include the following:

- If linking qualifications to the EQF levels is not based on accreditation/quality assurance mechanisms (but it evades them), the mechanisms aiming at guaranteeing the quality of educational programmes will weaken;
- The costs required for implementing the EQF are not significant, however, meeting the requirements of its implementation call for the use of considerable resources. If such resources are lacking, the linkage of the Hungarian qualification system to the EQF will become weak and it will not be able to serve its most important functions.
- The international comparability of qualifications will increase the weight of international references related to expenditures on education, which may become a source of tensions that are difficult to deal with.

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

- *How adequate is the EQF to provide information to career guidance and labour counsellors?*
- *Does it provide proper information to employers about the actual value of the various qualifications?*
- *Does it provide proper information to students when they make decisions about their learning pathways? In your view, what modifications would be necessary?*
- *Does it facilitate the free flow of labour within the territory of the European Union and the employment of foreign citizens in Hungary?*

The EQF function of supporting career guidance can only be asserted efficiently if the PLOTEUS database contains all relevant information and becomes accessible, and if the members of the Euroguidance network participate in the classification of the qualifications.

The career guidance and labour counselling system that is currently operating in Hungary does not meet the expectations, its effect on individual learning pathways, its role in resolving the difficulties that may arise during transition from education into the world of work and its effect on finding a job in the labour market are inadequate. The EQF would ensure that these services are developed and the training of and the activities on the part of professionals involved (teachers, advisors, HR staff of business organisations) are carried out on the basis of a uniform system of references and standards. Naturally, the full-scale exploitation of this possible role requires the improvement of other elements of the system as well.

Special attention must be paid to school-level career guidance services that are currently substituted by initial vocational training in vocational education and training and in relation to which there are only a few isolated experiments in public education. Career guidance that has an effect on the entire labour market can only be established with efficient school-level career guidance as a basis. Accordingly, not only labour market experts need the information that facilitates the implementation of the EQF, but also those who work in public education.

In areas that require a particular qualifications, the classification of levels may become a source of orientation for employers that are increasingly interested in experience and skills behind the qualifications in Hungary. If the reliability of the quality assurance of the Hungarian system of qualifications and, in general, of the educational system guarantees the accuracy of correspondence, via the application of the EQF, the hiring related decision-making mechanisms of employers may become cheaper and facilitate informed decisions and may result in fewer hiring related risks .

Due to the differentiation of the Hungarian education system, it was raised during the consultation that the eight reference levels of the EQF might not be enough for making individual decisions on investments in learning. If the use of the EQF includes the provision of information to students, competence levels should be described using concepts that are comprehensible for students as well.

According to the participants of the Hungarian consultation process, the differences in qualifications do not, even at this point in time, present a serious restriction to the free flow of workforce. Such restrictions are more present in the form of various discriminative measures, the lack of foreign language skills and the low level of mobility of Hungarian workers. Nevertheless, the EQF could significantly influence the accreditation of qualifications and the provision of information to foreign employers.

2.2 Reference levels and descriptors

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

- Is there a level or type of Hungarian education supply whose requirements expressed in learning outcomes do not correspond to any of the eight reference levels of the EQF? What problems may arise in this respect?
- To what extent is the EQF suited to recognize the knowledge, skills and competences that can be acquired in the course of informal and non-formal learning?

Finding correspondence between individual EQF levels and the actual levels of education is far from being simple; the eight EQF levels do not always seem to prove to be adequate for the classification of programmes building on or running parallel with each other. Problems related to this issue usually come to light during implementation, in practice, consequently the EQF should be reviewed continually.

Some professionals think that the currently proposed EQF reference levels are too detailed, and thus form an overly rigid system..

In consideration of the above, it can be suggested that the proposed reference levels embrace outcome curve of lifelong learning. In higher education, no problem is expected with linking national qualifications and qualification systems to the EQF;, however, in other fields, the applicability of the EQF requires further efforts in development as well as a number of additional experimental classification tests on the part of professionals involved in classification. (During the Hungarian consultation process, experts attempted to link certain qualifications and exam requirements, to the proposed EQF on a test basis, and the technical

experiences gained from this would be worth taking into consideration during the finalization of EQF reference levels.)

Due to the uncertainty related to the interpretation of formal, informal and non-formal forms of learning, emphasis must be placed - when introducing the EQF - on a uniform definition of what these terms actually cover. In Hungary, there is no generally accepted system for the recognition of competences acquired outside formal education; thus, the implementation of the EQF in Hungary can be carried out in several stages; meaning that the classification of competences obtained via informal and non-formal learning could follow gradually after the classification of qualifications obtained in formal education. According to experts, this is a new challenge that affects most European countries.

2.2.2 Do the level descriptions in table 1 adequately capture learning outcomes and their progression in levels?

- Are there any existing outcome regulations in Hungary in which the criteria relating to knowledge, skills and competences acquired previously cannot be clearly linked to any of the EQF reference levels? (Different elements can be linked to different reference levels.)

EQF reference levels are easy to comprehend on their own and in relation to each other. However, linking certain levels and programme types of the Hungarian education system to these reference levels presents significant difficulties as the outcome requirements of the Hungarian system are not necessarily defined in terms of the learning outcomes used in the EQF. This linking and communication issue is not significant with respect to “Knowledge” and “Skills”; however, it is rather pressing in terms of „Personal and Professional Competences”. Since Hungarian attempts at ensuring communication between the Hungarian system and the meta-framework could only be made on the basis of the above two categories (Skills and Knowledge), they were unable to expose the potential discrepancies between the various levels. The modernisation of the Hungarian system of qualifications that has already been started in certain areas identifies, to a growing extent, the learning outcomes in terms of required competences. EQF reference levels may serve as a possible model for the reform aiming at transforming the accreditation and qualification systems that are currently still strongly input and process-oriented.

During the discussions it was raised whether it is possible to ensure the matching of qualifications that had been obtained earlier (in the sixties and the seventies) to EQF reference levels and whether the EQF can be modified for this purpose?

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

- In its current form, what kind of orientation does the EQF provide in the development of curricula and programmes as well as in the development and quality assurance of the various training programmes? What sort of information do the professionals involved in this field require?

The professionals working in the field of programme development in Hungary do not work according to the objectives of the EQF. Additional explanations and information are extremely important for professional activity to ensure comparability; however, they are not sufficient to support implementation in Hungary in the broader sense. This requires the development of training programmes that can be matched to the EQF (modules that can be included in other training programmes). At the same time, further improvement of such

additional information may provide efficient assistance to career guidance counsellors and other professionals working in this field.

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

- To what extent are the eight EQF reference levels adequate to be included in the criteria serving as the basis for the review of the outcome requirements of the various levels and types of education (regulation, exam requirements, accreditation, task descriptions, etc.)?

The possibility of matching the Hungarian qualification requirements to the EQF– due to the lack of a uniform national qualifications framework and the different pace of modernisation of this kind in the sectors – varies between levels of education and training and within such levels between professional fields. In public education, for instance, the preliminary measures related to the establishment of curriculum based success rate standards have only been started recently.

Taking into account the current Hungarian regulatory system, the lower and higher ends of the eight reference levels are well suited to the orientation of the Hungarian qualification requirements; however, professionals suggest that levels 3 to 6, might prove to be problematic.

2.3 National Qualifications Frameworks

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

- How timely is the development of a single national qualifications framework in Hungary? Who would be the most important beneficiaries of such a framework?
- What are the characteristics of the cooperation between the professionals of the various levels and branches of education and training in the modernisation of the outcome regulations in Hungary? Within what framework could this cooperation be intensified?
- Do the current mechanisms of policy coordination in Hungary facilitate the development of a single national qualifications framework?
- Is there need in Hungary for an agency that would continuously supervises such a learning outcome based qualifications framework?

The development of frameworks serving as a condition for lifelong learning do not require Hungary to join the EQF, as the above can be accomplished without such course of action. In this regard, the consolidation of the outcome regulation system, the review of the financing system, the development of the career guidance system and improvements in other areas are necessary in Hungary. Nevertheless, the application of the EQF may support the transformation of the above systems.

In Hungary, the development of a single national qualifications framework has become a topical issue in all respects; the lack of such a framework has become one of the major factors impeding lifelong learning. Formal education has lost of its relevance, degrees have had less informational value for employers, educational supply has diversified and has become more ambiguous for students, and the value of result-oriented objectives expressed in terms of learning outcomes has increased, all of which render the establishment of a national qualifications framework inevitable.

In higher education, there is a lively debate going on between views that stress academic quality and those that would focus on labour market efficiency. Thus, at present, not really the quality of outcome regulations is at the focus of attention but the adoption of outcome driven regulations. themselves.

The most important factors in the development of a single national qualifications framework are political commitment, improved efficiency of policy coordination mechanisms, the arrangement of an intensive consultation process among stakeholders involved as well as ensuring an appropriate background of experts and information. A condition for the strengthening of policy coordination mechanisms that still might need further improvement is political consensus, that is policy-makers should make efforts to work beyond government cycles.

Work currently under way within the individual branches of education and training in modernising the instruments that regulate learning outcomes are arranged with an adequate level of openness and by involving stakeholders. However, communication between the branches is not sufficient, which results in diverging parallel developments.

As the existing system of qualification requirements, maintained at the level of individual branches of education and training can be operated by the current system of institutions, in general, participants considered that there is no need for setting up an independent agency. If, however, there were a single, uniform framework of qualifications that would link the qualification requirements of public education, vocational education and training, higher education and adult education, currently none of the Hungarian institutions would be capable of operating such a framework. The representatives of higher education were the most open to setting up a national agency for this purpose.

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

- To which extent is learning outcome-based thinking – in terms of the goals of education and training – is accepted by the experts of education and training providers operating at the various levels and branches of Hungarian education and training?
- At what stage is the development of the qualifications systems into a learning outcome-based system at the individual levels and branches of the Hungarian education and training sector?
- What are the various institutional development, capacity building (education), regulatory requirements and financing conditions that need to be ensured for the maintenance of this process?

The present regulations of the individual sub-sectors/branches also focus on an outcome-based approach, but matching qualifications to the EQF reference levels could only be achieved as a result of long-term development. The developments in public education, vocational training and training and higher education currently underway also reinforce this process.

As regards the definition of educational goals, the learning outcome based approach has been accepted to varying degrees in the different branches of education and training. Most of the educational service provision systems are still strongly supply-oriented; consequently, for example, in vocational education and training institutions that offer training for traditional industrial trades or in public education, the learning outcome based approach has not yet become generally adopted. Accordingly, the assertion and the widespread adoption of a learning outcome based approach can only be a result of a longer process. The consultation on

the EQF and later on the national qualifications framework may intensify this process significantly.

A single national qualifications framework—in addition to developments directly focusing on it—require a more intensive integration of the fragmented supply of courses in vocational education and training and higher education, just as it requires the development of a quality assurance system that is much more efficient than the current system. The standardization of supply began with the establishment of “regional integrated centres of vocational education and training” in vocational education and training, and with the transition towards the Bologna system in higher education. The development of a single quality assurance system is currently in the planning phase.

The developments necessary for the establishment of a single national qualifications framework may be financed from several sources; in this respect, contributions to vocational education and training and the EU Structural Funds may play a major role; however, central government budgetary resources may also be needed. The inclusion of the developments necessary for the implementation of the EQF in the 2007-2013 National Development Plan was a recurring proposal during the consultation process.

2.4 Sectoral qualifications

2.4.1 To which extent can the EQF become a catalyst of developments at the sector level?

- Is the EQF capable of supporting professional discussions on the modernization of the system of qualifications in the various sectors?

The consultation process also proved that the EQF could be a useful instrument in informing professional and political discussions. However, as regards further discussions on future developments, the extent to which the EQF is considered credible and accepted is a key factor. As international references have a stronger effect on discussions on education than ever before, the role of the EQF as a catalyst may also become important in the consultations within the individual branches.

In the case of certain official training courses, qualification requirements are regulated by international standards that should be brought in line with the logic of the EQF.

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

The concepts of knowledge and competence at EQF reference levels will be the starting point of significant professional debates in Hungary, which will have a positive effect on the way of thinking of the professionals developing and operating similar instruments in the various branches. Beyond that, the influences of the EQF cannot be predicted.

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

- Can the expectations of the groups interested in the efficiency of the various branches of education and training in terms of learning outcomes be exposed? How efficient are the consultation mechanisms in Hungary that serve the above purpose?

In Hungary, the individual branches have well-established and, in most cases, smoothly operating mechanisms for engaging stakeholders. The experiences of the operation of these mechanisms indicate that education and training is not facing homogeneous groups of

stakeholders. Thus, for instance, the employers – depending on the size of companies and their position in the industry – often convey controversial expectations towards education and training. Accordingly, consultation processes must be open and changes in the service provision must reinforce flexible adaptability.

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

The mitigation of the fragmented nature of sector management and the improvement of policy coordination are the most important conditions of the above question.

2.5 Mutual trust

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

- What instruments could promote the strengthening of trust in the service provider organisations and institutions of the various educational sectors in Hungary? What role could the EQF take in this issue?

Trust in education can be developed by way of strengthening the relevance, success and quality assurance of the services. The EQF could become a useful instrument in all three respects.

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

- To what extent can the various educational, quality evaluation and quality assurance systems integrate the references offered by the EQF?

The major problem standing in the way of the above in Hungary is that currently there is no system of testing and evaluation (performance management) in public and vocational education that would provide feedback about the information collected on the achievement of goals set on the basis of learning outcomes to education and training providers and to groups interested in the operation of such providers. At least two aspects must be taken into account when the quality of education or training is discussed, namely, the quality of the outcome (employer/society as client) and that of the process/circumstance (the student as client). The EQF could be a reference point in respect of the quality of the outcome, but it does not primarily influence education and training in respect of the processes/circumstances.