

## **Outcome of Latvian National Consultation on the Commission Staff Working Document “Towards a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning”**

Latvian national consultation process on the European Commission Staff Working Document “Towards a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning” was organised by Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia. In that national consultation process took part several government institutions – *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Economics and Ministry of Welfare of the Republic of Latvia, Centre of Professional Education, Centre for Curriculum Development and Examinations, The State Inspection of Education, Agency for Vocational Education Development, Agency for International Youth Programmes, Academic Programme Agency, Latvian Academic Information Centre, State Agency for Assessment of Quality of General Education, Centre of Assessment of Quality of Higher Education, The State Youth Initiative* and social partners such as *Council of Higher Education, The National Youth Council of Latvia, The Adult Education Association of Latvia, Association of Educational Institutions of Vocational Education of Latvia, Association of Managers of Educational Work of Latvia, Association of Colleges of Latvia and Association of Private Higher Education Institutions*. Named institutions also involved their social and cooperation partners in the EQF consultation process, thus covering a wide range of experts, stakeholders and policy-makers from different fields such as NGOs, youth work and voluntary work organisations, employers and sectoral associations.

The process of the EQF consultations was organised in a way that the interested institutions sent their views and commentary in a written or e-mail form to Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia. On 16<sup>th</sup> of December, 2005 there was also held the national EQF consultation conference in the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia, where all different involved parties met once more and in a form of presentations and discussions talked over all the questions concerning EQF.

**Common position: We support the idea of common European Qualifications Framework, but for successful further discussions on implementation of the EQF there are a lot of principal questions in the national level. Before expressing our support to the EQF we would like to work out and finalize clear National Qualifications Structure. We also advice to clarify and work out more precise existing EQF working document in the fields like definitions of terms, role of informal and non-formal education, descriptors and EQF references on other previous documents.**

Main conclusions, commentary and recommendations you will find in the following sections.

### ***The rationale of an EQF***

- Are the most important objectives and functions to be fulfilled by an EQF those set out in the consultation document?
- What is needed to make the EQF work in practical terms (for individual citizens, education and training systems, the labour market)?

In general the EQF questions and discussion give a contribution to the common understanding of Lifelong learning in the national level, also give the opportunity to review the levels and content of national qualifications and possible National Qualifications Structure.

However the social partners mark the uncertainty concerning the context of the term of Lifelong learning. Looking through the EQF Working Document it is possible to conclude that EQF place much more emphasis on the arranging and structuring the qualifications than to lifelong learning processes. It makes an impression that the term “Lifelong learning” is just attached to the EQF not really worked on the basis of it.

Secondly it is not thoroughly clear who is the addressee, the main user of the EQF idea – employers or educators or other involved parties? During the consultation process the employers remarked also the complexity of the EQF document and the necessity of the simplification.

During the consultations there was an emphasis on the topic that the offered EQF working document not enough explains and analyses different key terms and makes references on other previous made documents and directives. For example, the national parties of non-formal education particularly accented the unclear and too abstract role of non-formal education in the context of EQF, and also poor link to the common Youth Policy in the Europe.

In the discussion “Towards a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning” there was also hypothesis that the EQF document looks like it is more education than qualifications framework. Wherewith came the suggestion to make more precise, more described and related document.

Politically the attempt to ensure the employment and thus to strengthen the competitiveness of Europe with the help of EQF is supportable. The idea to cover all levels of qualifications under one framework and link them to the learning outcomes is not bad. The problems may occur in the practical side of the implementation of the EQF in the national levels. For example, in Latvia the framework of higher education qualifications has been discussed already since year 2003, and besides for example people who are involved in the field of general education are not so familiar with even these national level ideas.

***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?
- What should be the content and role of the ‘supporting and indicative information’ on education, training and learning structures and input (table 2)?
- How can your national and sectoral qualifications be matched to the proposed EQF levels and descriptors of learning outcomes?

During the consultation process a special attention was paid to the non-formal education. The social partners several times pointed that there is relevant need to make clarifications in the EQF document concerning non-formal education. How it incorporates and adapts to the

described EQF? How the youth organizations and institutions offering non-formal education take part in the EQF? How non-formal education is linked to the labor market? The significance of the question of non-formal education highlights the trend that with every coming reference level the description of non-formal education skills is increasing in the EQF document. The non-formal education in the EQF context is important also because due to fast changes of the needs and requirements of labor market the higher education institutions cannot really trace the trends. And this lack of flexibility empowers the role of non-formal education.

The consultation partner – The State Youth Initiative Center marks that in the structure of 8 reference levels is not possible to include the informal education of Latvia, because these informal knowledge, skills and competencies haven't been estimated under common criteria and there is no common education paper one can receive achieving particular level. In the national context the informal education is educational activity for realizing needs and wants of individuals irrespective of age and previous education, and there isn't such a goal as acquisition of measurable and comparable result.

The discussions were marked that it's unclear why the EQF working group used different descriptors than it is stated in the overarching qualifications framework for European Higher Education Area (Bologna process). The differences are not principal. In the Bologna process at the of Bergen conference 45 ministers (including 25 EU government ministers) with their signatures verified that they accept the overarching qualifications framework for European Higher Education Area. The differences are based on more extended and detailed description of EQF descriptors in comparison to the ones worked out in Bologna process. With two different sets of descriptors for levels of higher education Europe will not make clear understanding of qualifications in the world perspective and it will also hinder the inner cooperation.

Coming back to the questions of EQF document references to the other European framework documents, we would like to point out that in the document "Common European Framework of Reference: learning, teaching, assessment" there are 6 levels for assessing language competencies, and that these levels could be linked to the proposed EQF reference levels, thus making all comparing and evaluating process much more clear and effective. Next to it in the discussion there was also remark on the Directive of Recognition of Qualifications worked out in the year 2005 by Directorate of Internal Market and Services. This directive should work and be linked hand in hand with the proposed EQF.

There is also suggestion that the level descriptions should more focus on the description of result – specific skills and knowledge gotten in formal or non-formal way.

Another suggestion is to link the EQF 8 reference levels to the levels of education. Also it would be useful to show the link to the regulated professions.

Partners from the culture sector noted the necessity to show and highlight the professional orientation (talented youth and children). Also it is not really clear in which of the reference levels will be music and art schools. Suggestion from the partners of culture sector was also to add in the table 1 first level, in the "knowledge" column – the "acquirement of basic knowledge".

### ***National Qualifications Frameworks***

- How can a National Qualification Framework for lifelong learning be developed in your country – reflecting the principles of the EQF-be established?
- How, and within which timescale, can your national qualifications systems be developed towards a learning outcomes approach?

During the consultation process it was clear that there is a need for arranging and structuring different principal questions in the national level, in order to evaluate more effectively the necessity and benefits from the offered EQF.

Currently there are 5 qualification levels of professional education defined in the Law of Professional Education of Republic of Latvia. There is also working group of Law of Higher Education of Republic of Latvia working on qualifications in the field of higher education. In the process of discussions there was a suggestion to implement three levels of qualifications of higher education in the national qualifications structure what brings possibility to integrate national qualifications structure into the 8 reference levels of EQF: 5 qualification levels of professional education + 3 qualification levels of higher education.

Partners also pointed out that the current system of professional qualifications is recognizable in the national labor market – everybody knows what it is and what to expect - and the coming changes may make the confusion and uncertainty about the different terms and levels.

In general there is a need for more detailed and deeper analysis to evaluate the impact of changes to 8 qualification levels on legislation in all different fields of qualification categories (education, employment etc.) in the national level. In addition The Ministry of Culture of Republic of Latvia advised to make a survey in the national level concerning the situation of Lifelong learning in the country (demand – supply, needs – possibilities, access to Lifelong learning in all different ages and knowledge levels etc.).

During the consultation process there was also remark on concurrence of 8 reference levels to Classification of Professions of Latvia based on the International Classification of Professions.

### ***Sectoral qualifications***

- To which extent can the EQF become a catalyst for developments at sector level?
- How can the EQF be used to pursue a more systematic development of knowledge, skills and competences 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?

EQF could really become a catalyst for developments at sectoral level just in a case if the players of the sectoral level have complete understanding about this offered set of instruments and tools. During the discussions the partners from sectoral level recognized that EQF working document is complicated and there is poor link to other already existing documents, structures and agreements, also it is lacking the link to already existing categories of qualifications, education and professions.

There is also need for more clear and detailed separation of professional qualifications and education.

***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 the quality of all levels of lifelong learning?

In general the idea of EQF is supportable and would give a contribution to the development of mutual trust between stakeholders involved in lifelong learning at European, national, sectoral and local levels, but there is a need for deeper analyses of national differences and complicated national partners structures.

It is also really necessary to continue explain and distribute information about EQF. For successful communication with different sides involved it would be useful to “translate” the EQF message in a more audience oriented language and explain the idea with already operating systems. It would be also a relevant contribution for the term of mutual trust to organize common seminars, working groups where all different sides could discuss the problems that may occur in national and European level.