

A SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION ABOUT THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK (EQF) IN LITHUANIA

Economic, social and cultural shifts in Europe have an enormous impact on the developments in the field of VET and general education. Both numbers of students enrolling in various programmes, and numbers of programmes leading to specific qualifications have increased. Learners find more options and different routes leading to attractive and desired qualifications. Informal learning has grown in popularity, while skills acquired following this route are valued equally with those brought from the formal education system. EU expansion has not only expanded labour markets, but has significantly accelerated the professional mobility of European citizens.

The task of achieving more transparency in the national VET and general education systems and providing a clearer and better understanding of acquired qualifications becomes more significant in this context. To this end, common principles of planning, awarding, assessing and recognising qualifications should be developed and put into operation, capable, in their turn, of increasing mutual trust and cooperation between agencies in qualification systems.

We perceive the project of creating a European Qualifications Framework as a realistic step towards improvement of education systems and achievement of the political and cultural goals of the European Union. We value the declaration of the principle, which is so important to the Member States, of immunity of the national education systems and comparability of EQF and the national qualification frameworks.

We see the EQF as a stimulus to seek quality VET and general education throughout Europe. The focus of learning outcomes drives educational content closer to the needs of the labour market and facilitates the unity of the process of planning, awarding and assessing qualifications. Learning outcomes should undoubtedly play the core role in clarifying the opportunities and routes in VET and general education throughout Europe.

We are well aware there is an immediate need for learning outcomes-based national qualifications frameworks comparable to the EQF. , We should however note that the EU Member States, including Lithuania, already have in place a qualification system that has met and continues to meet national needs. In 1997 Lithuania introduced a 5-level reference qualifications framework., The rapidly shifting labour market and the changing VET system have however gradually rendered the system incapable of adequately reflecting qualifications issued by the education and training system. The non-university tertial education sector created in 2000 was not tailored to address informal study level either. Thus the national qualifications system currently existing in Lithuania does not sufficiently promote the transparency of qualifications acquired or enabled their perception, planning or assessment. It is therefore necessary to discuss these issues and undertake adequate measures to adjust the national qualification frameworks so that they meet current challenges and align them with common principles.

In the following pages, short answers and comments on the questions for the consultation process are provided.

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

In our view, the main objective of the EQF largely realizes the growing need of unified Europe to link qualification frameworks and systems at sectoral and national levels. At the same time, it facilitates and increases the transparency of the process of planning, awarding and recognising qualifications. This objective is realistic and answers the technological, economic and social challenges faced by Europe. It is aligned with the political determination to pursue the lifelong learning strategy and instrumental in the practical implementation of the Lisbon, Bologna, Berlin, and other European initiatives in the field of education and vocational training.

A key and noteworthy objective of the EQF is to establish and define reference levels that constitute the basis for transparency and clarity of qualifications throughout the EU, contributing not only to the promotion of the higher mobility of learners and individuals seeking higher qualifications but also aiding co-operation between VET and general education institutions in different countries. An EQF should achieve one key objective regarding lifetime education, that of recognizing outcomes of informal education and motivating individuals to acquire new and important skills through different routes.

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

The EQF should become a key component of the EU qualifications system. The EQF cannot perform its function unless compatibility with national and sectoral qualifications systems is ensured. Thus the description of the national qualifications frameworks has to be based on uniform criteria or criteria that are universally understood within a wider context. Such an EQF can aspire to fulfil its function of ‘translation’ and other functions.

Practical implementation of the EQF should be based on two related initiatives. First, the EQF should be recognized as a practical, useful innovation by everybody it relates to: creators of educational policy, VET and general education institutions, learners, employers and employer organizations, trade unions, etc. To achieve this, all interested parties should be included into the EQF discussions at all levels. Second, a target group of interested parties should be actively involved in developing and implementing the national qualification frameworks and systems.

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

We find that the working group designing the EQF have arrived at a sufficiently precise decision to have an 8-level reference structure as a starting point. The 8-level structure largely embraces the existing EU Member States' qualification systems, VET and general education traditions and structures. The current Lithuanian system of awarding and recognizing qualifications can be smoothly and transparently linked to such an EQF.

Having in mind the selected format of developing an EQF, however, it is necessary to take care to preserve the principle of parity between the EQF and the national qualification systems.

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

The advantage of the EQF is an attempt to reflect individual qualification through four types of skills: cognitive, functional, personal and ethic. Such a classification of skills emphasises the bounds of human skills in general. It is a new and

progressive approach. Skills are the most important achievements in regards of individual performance. It is not sufficiently clear, however, why the descriptors refer not to four types of skills (cognitive, functional, personal and ethic) but to knowledge, skills, and personal and professional abilities, that is, in a traditional way. We suggest keeping the interpretation of learning outcomes throughout the document consistent.

The description of qualification levels is of greatest significance to all audiences. It therefore has to be rendered in a complete, simple, concise and clear manner. The descriptions of qualification levels presented in table 1 can be judged based on these requirements. It should be noted that hierarchic differences of qualification levels can be functional on condition only that they all (from one through eight) are described on the basis of common criteria. It would provide not only the feel of increasing or reducing complexity of the levels within a general hierarchic structure, but would also clearly identify content differences between adjacent qualification levels.

To make this observation more concrete, it would be expedient to present the criteria used to describe qualification levels separately. Having these criteria separate would also serve an additional purpose. They would facilitate a better evaluation of the description of the levels and ease the process of matching concrete qualifications to certain levels within the reference structure.

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

Besides the rather complete and balanced foundation of the qualifications framework, some issues still need to be discussed. That is the case with the supporting information on the EQF levels presented in table 2. The advantage of the framework is it being based exclusively on learning outcomes. The

“supporting and indicative information” features description of conditions, means and circumstances: these are important for the process of acquiring qualifications, but are not for describing learning outcomes. In various countries, qualifications based on outcomes can be acquired in different ways and under different circumstances and conditions. It depends on educational experiences and traditions. The qualifications acquired, on the other hand, must essentially be the same, regardless of the country. For this reason, it is doubtful whether the description of learning conditions, means and circumstances (place and type of learning, learning aids and content) in effect contributes to a better understanding of the EQF. It can, however, be part of the national qualification frameworks, which are supposed to be more concrete.

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

It should be noted that the qualifications framework currently existing in Lithuania to a great extent fails to reflect real shifts in the labour market and in vocational education and training. The five-level qualifications system introduced in 1997 has already become too narrow to define and recognize qualifications acquired through the educational system. On the other hand, both the five-level system and the curricula of VET and higher education (and above all, the standards) have been based on skills and the learning outcomes approach. The process of harmonising a new Lithuania qualifications system to the EQF should therefore be smooth and rapid.

On the other hand, as the EU document reads, the national qualification systems should above all reflect a specific situation in the country, but they are to be designed according to the EQF principle and strive for the same objectives., A new Lithuanian national qualifications framework is therefore being designed (the

work has already been started) by an open discussion involving all interested parties and based on accumulated VET and general education experience, as well as the EQF working document.

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

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

The development of a Lithuanian national qualifications framework is linked to the ongoing European Structural Funds project entitled “Developing a Lithuanian Qualifications System”, which has a timeframe of three years. The national framework is perceived as the core part of a future qualifications system and a unifier of the processes of planning, awarding, evaluating, and recognising qualifications. A conception of a national framework – reflecting the principles of the EQF – will be drafted by the joint efforts of VET social partners and educational institutions in the first half of 2006 and presented for nationwide deliberation.

A pilot phase of a national qualifications system employing the learning outcomes approach has a timeframe until 2007 and includes development of a conception and research into two industry sectors that will enable qualifications for these two sectors to be elicited. The results of this phase will facilitate the research into the remaining industry sectors and will assist in developing professional standards, which in turn, will serve as the basis for developing curriculum content for secondary vocational education and graduate and post-graduate professional training. All this will create the necessary methodological and organizational

conditions to improve the process of assessment and awarding qualifications acquired (including ones acquired by informal learning).

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 competencies at sectoral level?

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

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

The EQF should serve as a point of reference in the process of linking sectoral acts with national qualifications. General EQF guidelines can provide for that. We should, however, keep in mind that responsibility for qualifications lies primarily with national institutions. The relationship between developments at a sectoral level and national qualifications can therefore be ensured by expanding cooperation between the various interested parties.

We expect an EQF to function as a catalyst in developing and refining national qualification frameworks. Moreover, it will stimulate a needed constructive discussion regarding definitions of sectoral qualifications and the development of the sectoral level. However, it is doubtful whether an EQF can be used effectively to achieve more systematic development of knowledge, skills and competencies at a sectoral level.

It should be noted that interested parties (employer organizations first of all) are becoming increasingly active in discussions and problem solving when it comes to the national qualifications systems. In Lithuania, employer organizations are

active partners in all qualification system management bodies: national and regional VET boards, working groups developing normative documents for vocational training, and boards of VET institutions. Employer organizations play an important role in the quality improvement field of vocational training.

How can the EQF contribute to the development of mutual trust (e.g. based on common principles of quality assurance) between interested parties 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?

Mutual trust grows by including all interested parties into development and deliberations on the EQF and national qualification frameworks. At the same time, synchronized perception of the content of qualifications (based on learning outcomes) provides clarity and encourages participation in processes like the planning, awarding and assessing of qualifications. On the other hand, common understanding of qualifications and learning outcomes provides a solid foundation for constructive co-operation between stakeholders in applying quality assurance and lifelong learning across all levels.

Of great importance is continuous assessment of the impact EQF has on achieving the established objectives. It also matters how beneficial all the EU Member States will find the EQF. It will affect the attitude of all parties with a stake in this field.