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THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

Consultation Conference

Organised by
Department of Further Studies and Adult Education

On behalf of
**Permanent Secretary,
Ministry of Education Youth and Employment**

Friday 18th November 2005
Dolmen Resort Hotel – Qawra, MALTA

General Report

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THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

The Malta Consultation Process

The Department of Further Studies and Adult Education within the Education Division, was entrusted by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment with the organisation of the EQF consultation process.

The first phase of consultation consisted in a wide dissemination of the Commission Staff Working Document: Towards a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning – (SEC (2005) 957: Brussels, 8.7.2005). A questionnaire based on the thematic questions poised in the document was also sent to help focus on the salient issues of the document. These documents were sent by electronic mail to all learning institutions, qualifications awarding authorities, as well as professional warrant and licenses awarding bodies. The documents were also mailed to non-government organisations, the trade unions, employers associations, and other stakeholders.

In the second phase all the stakeholders were invited to attend a consultation conference. Approximately one hundred and sixty delegates attended this conference. The Honourable Dr Louis Galea, Minister of Education, Youth and Employment, and Mr. Gordon Clark, European Commission, addressed the conference.

Anthony DeGiovanni
Mutual Recognition Coordinator
Malta

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THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

Consultation Conference – Malta

1. Introduction

Objectives

- 1.1. Following the European Commission's request at the informal ministerial meeting in London in July 2005 for support in the development of a European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment organised a national consultation on the EQF on the 18th November 2005.
- 1.2. Various experts and stakeholders involved in sectors which are directly or indirectly concerned by the development and implementation of the EQF attended the conference, and gave valid contributions throughout.
- 1.3. This document is reporting on the structure of the conference, the outcome of the various sessions held and the salient points which emerged in particular during the workshop sessions

Agenda

- 1.4. The first part of the conference consisted of the opening address of the Hon. Minister Dr. Louis Galea, Minister for Education, Youth and Employment, and was followed by the address of Mr. Gordon Clark, Head of Unit: European Commission – Directorate General.
- .5. Subsequently six workshops discussed the following three themes in parallel;
 - The rationale, reference levels and descriptors of an EQF
 - EQF and Development at sectoral level
 - EQF, mutual trust building and the National Qualifications Framework
- 1.6. The final part of the conference consisted of a brief presentation of the various points emerging from the workshops and concluding remarks by the general Rapporteur Mr. Jacques Sciberras, Mr. Gordon Clark and Mr. Frans Borg, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment.

2.1 Part one – Opening session

Welcome Address: Mr. Anthony DeGiovanni, Mutual Recognition Coordinator, Conference Convenor

- 2.1 Mr. Anthony DeGiovanni welcomed the delegates present thanking them for their participation. He also welcomed and thanked the Hon. Minister of Education, Youth and Employment and Mr. Gordon Clark from the European Commission for kindly accepting to address the conference.
- 2.2 He briefly outlined the consultation process and then invited the Hon. Minister to inaugurate the conference.

Address of the Hon. Minister Dr. Louis Galea, Minister for Education, Youth and Employment

- 2.3 The Minister opened the conference by announcing the set up of a National Qualifications Council responsible for the development of a National Qualifications Framework and its eventual link to the EQF. Government published the regulations on the Malta Qualifications Council in Legal Notice 347 on the 28th October 2005.
- 2.4 The main role of the Council is to steer the development of the National Qualifications Framework and to oversee the training and certification leading to qualifications within the Framework and which is not already provided for at compulsory education institutions or degree awarding bodies. 2.3. It will also establish and maintain a qualifications framework for the development, accreditation and award of professional and vocational qualifications, other than degrees, based on standards of knowledge, skills, competences and attitudes to be acquired by learners; promote and facilitate lifelong learning access, transfer and progression; foster the recognition abroad of professional and vocational certificates awarded in Malta under these regulations.
- 2.5. The Minister highlighted the importance for all European citizens to have easily transferable qualifications, which can be read more inexpensively, with less bureaucracy, with clearer equivalence criteria and more mutual recognition between European institutions and authorities. There is no doubt that the EQF will strengthen the process of developing the NQF in a more relevant manner which will lead to further cohesion.

Address of Mr. Gordon Clark, Head of Unit: European Commission – Directorate General

- 2.6. Mr. Gordon Clark outlined the general features of the EQF during his presentation titled “*Towards a European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning*”.
- 2.7. In his overview Mr. Clark explained that the EQF is principally a translation device for comparing qualifications and secondly a neutral reference point based on learning outcomes. It aims to overcome obstacles faced by European citizens along their lifelong learning path – obstacles encountered: within and between countries; between education and training systems; in the use of acquired skills; and in gaining access to new learning.
- 2.8. Mr. Clark explained how the EQF is structured around eight reference levels, each of which incorporates three dimensions namely the level of knowledge, of skills and wider personal and professional competences.
- 2.9. The focus of the EQF is on learning outcomes, and the intended beneficiaries include individuals, sector employers and social partners, and education and training systems. He explained that the participation within this framework is on a voluntary basis, entails no legal obligations on member States and fosters change by supporting and informing gradual reforms on a national basis. Above all, the EQF is not intended to replace National/sectoral frameworks nor define any new qualifications itself.
- 2.10. Mr. Clark concluded that the ultimate goal was “to create an integrated credit transfer system at European level, meeting the needs of vocational and academic institutions” and for this to happen successfully the commitment from national and sectoral bodies was necessary.

3. Part two – Feedback from discussion groups

The Rationale, reference levels and descriptors of the EQF

- 3.1. Workshops 1 and 2 addressed the following questions as presented by Dr. Grace Grima.
- 3.2. Most important objectives and functions of the EQF
- 3.3. The Framework is deemed sufficiently comprehensive and the workshops reinforce the notion that the following are key objectives and functions the EQF should fulfil:
 - a common reference point
 - a translation device
 - a common reference for quality assurance and development
 - a reference for development of sectoral qualifications
 - a force for change at EU, national, sector level
- 3.4. Additionally, the workshops stressed that for the EQF to work in practical terms, systems to ensure the following are a pre requisite:
 - Transparency
 - Supporting mutual trust
 - Facilitating transfer and recognition
- 3.5. Reference levels and descriptors
 - National and sectoral framework in Malta needs to be fully developed
 - More work on non-formal and informal aspects in terms of recognition and assessment
 - Clearer links to the broader policy framework for education and training
 - Urgent recognition of dying traditional skills before these are lost forever
 - Care in presenting assessment to those ‘failed’ by schooling
- 3.6. The workshops recommend that the levels and descriptors take the following into consideration;
 - Easy access
 - Inclusive flexible settings
 - Importance and link to a good guidance system
 - Labour market needs to be more informed
 - Involvement of all stakeholders including labour market
 - Regular updates of framework
 - Vocational qualifications need to be developed immediately
 - Careful that model is not too economic but holistic education: respecting NMC vision
 - Has ‘academic’ bias
 - Is Level 1 low enough to capture significant proportion of Maltese population ? We need to consider Entry Levels below level 1
 - Persons may be at different levels in Knowledge, Skills and Competence. Could partial accreditation be considered for lower levels?

EQF and development at sectoral level

- 3.7. Workshops 3 and 4 addressed the following questions as presented by Mr. Anthony Camilleri.
- 3.8. EQF as a catalyst for development
 - Strengths:

- Cross-border qualification and recognition of qualifications will be improved
- Prior learning is included
- Weaknesses:
- Lack of communication between EU centre and countries / entities should be strengthened
- Opportunities
- Develop standards for lifelong learning
- More ability to export/import qualifications
- Increased transparency increases competition and hence quality
- Threats
- Potential disturbance/unwanted pressure or resistance within existing qualification systems

3.9. EQF for more Systematic Development

- Acts as a spur for the National Qualifications Framework
- Foreground best practice in formal qualifications
- Permanent external quality assurance framework
- Especially useful as guide to unregulated sectors

3.10. Stakeholder involvement

- Stakeholders to be involved for full ownership
- Consultative council of all stakeholders should include amongst others:
- Qualification providers
- Accreditation providers
- End-users (employers, users, others)

3.11. Link between sectors

- Much more work required in developing these links
- Do we have the admin capacity to run all this? More professional and full-time resource should be dedicated to this.

EQF, mutual trust and the National Qualifications Framework

3.12. Workshops 5 and 6 addressed the following questions as presented by Mr. Horace Caruana.

3.13. EQF contribution to the development of mutual trust between stakeholders involved in lifelong learning at Sectoral, National, & European levels.

- There must be the legal institution of a national qualifications council that oversees the establishment and implementation of a qualifications framework for local certification: the development, accreditation and award of professional and vocational qualifications based on standards of knowledge, skills, competences and attitudes to be acquired by learners. The legal provision of a qualifications council should also include sectoral initiatives, providing for their linkage with the NQF and subsequently to the EQF.
- Provisions of NQF should be explained extensively to everyone so that the levels' criteria and their vertical and horizontal implications are understood well by all stakeholders.
- Quality assurance procedures in the NQF should be consistent with European indications (Bologna & Copenhagen Process).

- To ensure credibility and transparency, the process should involve international experts, in the same way that the various Faculties within the University of Malta bring external specialists to quality assurance in their professional levels.
 - At international level, the formulation and maintenance of the NQF should envisage the involvement of existing European qualifications' networks such as ENIC, NARIC, NRP, EUROPASS.
 - Links should then be established between the national qualifications and competences levels and the level descriptors of an EQF. This process of compatibility between the NQF & an EQF should be clear, transparent, & credible. Regular audit and upgrading of NQFs and an EQF should be considered.
 - The NQF & EQF should also provide for the social dimension and not focus exclusively on economic aspects and outcomes.
- 3.14. EQF as a reference to improve the quality of all levels of lifelong learning - The EQF will clarify and streamline the various competencies with the sectoral, national and European systems and define clear, accepted, standards. This will be of benefit to all stakeholders.
- In Malta there are artistic and vocational courses that are not certified by national authorities and institutions, e.g. drama and MCAST courses. The NQF would provide for certification in these courses that would be linked directly to an EQF.
 - Difficulty exists in defining and evaluating qualifications from certain countries. EQF will provide standards that can contribute to resolve some of these difficulties. For example, the University of Malta would be in a better position to evaluate and recognise qualifications from foreign countries in subjects and areas that are not part of its various academic programmes.
- 3.15. National Qualification Framework for lifelong learning – reflecting the principles of the EQF - The legal notice issued recently on 28th October 2005 provides for the establishment of the Malta Qualifications Council with the overall objective to steer the development of the NQF and to oversee the training and certification leading to qualifications within the framework and which is not already provided for at compulsory education institutions or degree awarding bodies. It will promote and facilitate life-long learning access, transfer and progression; and foster the recognition abroad of professional and vocational certificates awarded in Malta under its regulations.
- 3.16. How, and with which timescale, can the national qualifications systems be developed towards a learning outcomes approach
- 3.17. ?
- The entry of Malta into the EU has accelerated the need for the development and implementation of the NQF linked with an EQF. This urgency lies especially with worker who do not have certification. Within the context of the future knowledge-based Europe, failure to act soon will result in local workers without qualifications not being able to compete on the job market with qualified foreign workers.
 - The point was made that Malta, being a very small state, would need a considerable amount of human and financial resources to implement the certification of informal and non formal competencies. (An example was given by one of the participants, who represents the Education Division on the NARIC, about how the procedure in Norway to certify an unqualified electrician takes months and costs about Lm3,000).

4. Part three – Concluding remarks

Mr. Jacques Sciberras (General Rapporteur)

- 4.1. Mr. Sciberras concluded the overall session of workshop feedback and made some final comments regarding the EQF and its main objectives. He pointed out that in its current format the EQF contributes towards the supply of more information to all end-users – a crucial underlying dimension which allows for better informed choices by all stakeholders.
- 4.2. These are some of the choices which stakeholders make based on the information derived from the EQF:
- Student and parent choice regarding institution, programme, certification and qualification pathway Employer choices in terms of what level of qualifications to use as a benchmark/standard for the required skill level of a workforce, and the recruitment implications that would bring along;
 - Professional/sectoral choices in terms of levels and standards necessary for qualification;
 - Institutional choices are made in terms of what programmes should be offered, to what standard, what pathways and entry points emerge from clearer equivalence, how is access to learning improved and what resource implications would this have in terms of programme capacity (infrastructure, trained staff, etc.);
 - A series of policy choices are made based on more transparent methods of benchmarking and measuring the relative outcome of different programmes across institutions, sectors and countries;
 - Finally, add to this a series of cross-border issues with implications for mobility, transfer of knowledge across regions and other obstacles and barriers that emerge through the complication of a very diverse web of standards and systems.
- 4.3.1. He pointed out that due to the vast volume, diversity and complexity of this task, it was not feasible to handle in the past. However, with the rapid advance in information technology, what was previously ring-fenced, bureaucratically guarded, and very slow and expensive, is gradually becoming manageable, fast and more effective with the adoption of more and better information.
- 4.4. He concluded by stressing the point that reliable information for better informed choices is the key deliverable of both NQF and EQF and that both processes must ensure relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and integrity towards this goal.

Mr. Gordon Clark, Head of Unit (DG EU Commission)

- 4.4. Mr. Clark acknowledged the relevance of the points raised during the conference and gave assurance that this feedback would permeate throughout the entire phase of consultation.

Mr. Frans Borg, Permanent Secretary (MEYE)

- 4.6. Mr. Borg closed the session by thanking all participants, and reiterating the importance of this process and the need for more dialogue with all stakeholders for successful implementation of both the NQF and the EQF.

Mr. Jacques Sciberras
General Rapporteur – EQF Consultation Conference