

## **Results of the national consultation in the Netherlands about the EU-proposal for an European Qualification Framework**

### **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?*

The initiative to develop an European framework for the international comparison of national qualifications has been welcomed. The Dutch stakeholders support the objective to encourage mobility on the European labour market. The initiative for an EQF can be a positive contribution to this. The linking of formal learning to informal and non-formal learning (recognition of other types of learning than mere formal learning) is also supported. At the same time, it should be noted that recognition of informal and non-formal learning is in the initial phase in the Netherlands.

The proposal has also elicited some critical reactions. These reactions are based on the concern that the EQF may develop into an extensive system offering no room for national and sectorial developments, would have insufficient meaning for individual citizens and would be bogged down in bureaucracy.

Two options have been suggested for seeking out the right functionality for the eight reference levels of the proposed European Qualifications Framework: as a point of reference for international comparison of national qualifications and as an instrument to test competencies of an individual. The experts' opinion is that the eight reference levels of the EQF are unsuitable to test competencies of an individual. Specification of the levels at national and sectorial level is required for this purpose. The recognition of competencies acquired by an individual via formal, informal or non-formal education must be regulated at national level. The next step would be to compare the qualification obtained in this way at European level via the EQF. As a point of reference for the international comparison of national qualifications, the EQF has potential. In this respect, instruments such as the Europass are important. Creating an effective specific relationship between the eight reference levels and instruments such as the Europass is a major challenge for the further development of the EQF.

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

Some recommendations put forward by the Dutch stakeholders are:

- The greatest challenge in the short term is recognition or rather understanding, and support of the EQF by business and industry at national and European level. It has been proposed to do this by:
  - fine tuning the descriptors for the eight reference levels based on their relevance for the labour market;
  - asking countries to integrate professional requirements and the EQF principles into their national qualifications;
  - asking the various sectors at European level to apply the EQF principles into their sectoral qualifications.
- To try and avoid bureaucracy upon implementation, keeping the instrument simple by not adding too many supporting tables.
- One condition for effective implementation is to attune related developments at European level to each other and integrate them, for example, grafting with the Europass and the European framework on key competencies.
- Instruments like the Europass and a integrated system for credit transfer in higher and vocational education, should be linked to the EQF.

### **The reference levels and the descriptors**

- *Does the eight-level reference structure sufficiently cover the complexity of lifelong learning in Europe?*

Generally speaking, the eight levels are considered as a good starting point with emphasis being placed on additional attempts to bring all types of education (formal, informal and non-formal) under one framework. Those involved in vocational education have the opinion that the Dutch qualification structure for post secondary vocational education can be easily fitted into the EQF. The cycles of higher education are recognised at the three highest levels (Bachelor's, Master's and PhD). Elucidation is required for level 5 by means of international comparison and eventual adjustment.

During the consultation the question rose how secondary education must be positioned within the EQF. Secondary education in the Netherlands consists of VMBO (pre-vocational secondary education, both professionally oriented and more general oriented), HAVO (general secondary education) and VWO (pre-university education). The Education community in the Netherlands asked the European Commission to clarify the way in which secondary education (not only vocational oriented, but also general secondary education) can be positioned in the further development of the EQF with regard to the reference levels.

The relationship with the Framework of Qualifications for the Higher Education Area must be clear. The implementation of this framework based on the Bologna process will be continued for higher education. Although the link between both frameworks is set out in Annex 3, the same descriptors were not used when describing the reference levels (in the case of higher education, the so-called Dublin descriptors were used). This led to confusion about the relationship between the two frameworks for the Dutch stakeholders. In addition, it should be noted that this is not in line with the request submitted by the ministers of Education to the European Commission. This request stated that although the Bologna and Copenhagen processes have their own administrative approach, the results of both processes must contribute to a single European Qualifications Framework (Maastricht, December 2004).

The view of employers is that less than eight levels could be sufficient. The differences between the current eight levels are minor and are as such difficult to differentiate by employers.

- *Do the level descriptors in Table 1 adequately describe learning outcomes and their progress at the various levels?*

The reference levels are described as learning outcomes. This has been widely accepted. During consultation, some experts had the opinion that the descriptors are mainly developed from a general and educational point of view while they would have preferred to have more attention paid to requirements of the labour market. In order to make the descriptors more relevant to the labour market, it was suggested during consultation to add the "leadership" descriptor (to be worked out in detail per level).

It was recommended to examine how language skills could be included in the European framework. Especially for higher levels, the mastery of one or more foreign languages is essential for operating in the social and communication fields. Professional mastery of foreign languages is part of the professionally oriented determination of the reference levels by the various sectors.

Accreditation experts working in higher education indicate that the current descriptors are difficult to operate (e.g. social competence at level 5/6). It has been proposed to use the Dublin descriptors in their entirety for the higher levels in the EQF.

Lastly, the coherence between the EQF and the European framework on key competencies should be stressed. Both frameworks must be integrated as much as possible.

- *What should be the content and role of the 'supporting and indicative information' on education, training and learning structures and input (Table 2)?*

From the reactions received, it appears that Table 2 mainly contains educational contexts. This distracts from the principle of opting for learning outcomes. Detaching learning outcomes from education systems is considered the major advantage of the approach of the EQF. Therefore, it has been recommended not to include this table in the proposal, or otherwise to extend it with examples of learning in a professional context.

- *How can your national and sectorial qualifications be matched to the proposed EQF levels and descriptors of learning outcomes?*

The national qualifications can be compared with the main features of the proposed EQF. The qualifications for vocational education in the Netherlands have already been formulated as learning outcomes. International standards are increasingly being used in the current reappraisal of these qualifications. More information is needed about the supporting structure of the levels in the EQF for an accurate comparison with national qualifications.

Demonstrating links between the EQF and existing international models for comparison (ISCO/NACE) might add its value.

In higher education, levels (cycles) are being implemented which have been developed in the context of the Bologna process on the basis of the so-called Dublin descriptors. It was suggested earlier that these international agreements for higher education and the EQF should be more closely integrated. Moreover, regarding the highest levels, there was a clear desire expressed during consultations that the EQF should express the value of an academic education in a wide social context, rather than divert to sectorial qualifications.

Due to the variety of courses and programmes, it is not an easy task to create an exact relationship with the EQF for pre-vocational secondary education. On the whole, the results of pre-vocational secondary education correspond to levels 1 and 2 of the EQF. However, a more accurate analysis of courses and programmes is required.

#### **National Qualification Frameworks**

- *How can a National Qualification Framework for lifelong learning be developed in your country, reflecting the principles of the EQF?*
- *How, and within which time scale, can your national qualification systems be developed to include a learning outcome approach?*

Attempts are being made in the Netherlands to strengthen the cooperation between pre-vocational secondary education, vocational education and higher (professional) education. As stated above, qualifications for these types of formal education are increasingly being formulated in terms of learning outcomes and are adjusted to each other. The EQF can contribute to this process which (to an important extent) corresponds to the idea of a national qualification framework. This process, which has been given a "bottom up" approach by educational institutions and business, will probably take several years.

In addition, more attention is required for the specific transfer of learning outcomes, i.e. competences of informal and non-formal courses into formal qualifications. Although elaboration per national context may differ, suggestions on how to deal with this in the context of the EQF should be indicated. A comparative approach in the various countries would strengthen the EQF's metafunction.

#### **About sectorial developments and the EQF**

- *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 competencies at sector level?*

The EQF should be general in nature (a so-called meta framework) and should not be sector specific. The link to the sectors can be done via national qualification structures and at European level by branch organisations. Branch organisations, which discuss standards for qualifications of their employees at European level, will be able to make optimum use of the descriptions as set out in the EQF. This will facilitate comparisons and harmonisation of qualifications.

- *How can stakeholders at sector level be involved in supporting the implementation of the EQF?*
- *How can the link between sector development and national qualifications be improved?*

In the Netherlands, the social partners and the sectors are already involved in the development of national qualifications. They give advice about national qualifications together with educational institutions. In addition, cooperation between schools and business is stimulated at regional and national level to support e.g. lifelong learning.

### **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, sectorial and local levels?*

Mutual trust must be based on national quality assurance systems. In a European context, common principles can be agreed with regard to national quality assurance.

In addition, mutual trust can be encouraged through:

- constant communication between national and European levels to facilitate implementation in a transparent way. This must be a condition so that the EQF has the same objective and results in all countries making the framework genuinely transparent and comparable;
- transparency about organisation and methodology to link national qualifications to the EQF (Ploteus could be used to achieve this);
- linking with existing methodologies such as those used for NARIC [Centre for Equivalence of Documents on Education], NRP [National Reference Point] and RAS [EU General System Directive for the recognition of higher-education diplomas]. Also by linking with instruments which have already been developed such as Europass and sectorial standards.