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## EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

### RICS Position

RICS is the world's leading professional body on all aspects of land, property, construction and the associated environmental issues. An independent, not-for-profit organisation, it regulates, represents and promotes over 110,000 individually qualified chartered surveyor members in 120 countries worldwide.

We very much welcome the Commission's initiative on the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF), as markets characterised by rapid technological and economic change necessitate continuous renewal of skills and knowledge.

This initiative addresses a major problem experienced by RICS members, i.e. the lack of transparency of qualifications.

Our members continue to experience a reluctance to recognise qualifications acquired in another Member State, and transferral of qualifications is prevented in actual practice by lack of communication and co-operation between education and training providers/authorities at different levels, as well as by barriers between institutions and countries.

The EQF is vital in addressing difficulties with regard to cross-border transfer and recognition of qualifications, which continue to block economic development across the EU. Especially in the context of the Lisbon agenda, which we will comment on below, transnational action is badly needed in the face of growing internationalisation of the economy and labour markets.

**I. Are the most important objectives and functions to be fulfilled by an EQF captured?**

In its March 2005 conclusions on the mid-term review of the Lisbon strategy, the European Council asked for the adoption of a European Qualifications Framework in 2006. The Council as well as the European Commission have joined this request, and RICS very much welcomes the decision of the European Commission to give a prominent place to both competitiveness and lifelong learning for its 2006 priorities.

We fully agree that the EQF has significant potential in contributing to growth and jobs, and therefore share the view that the initiative on EQF has to be seen in the context not only of the Lisbon Strategy, but also in a wider perspective including the initiative on opening up the services sector and fostering competition.

Especially now that doubts have been raised about OECD countries' capacity to create new jobs, while at the same time offering new opportunities for international trade and investment, an EQF is needed as part of a combination of policy measures to successfully promote growth and jobs. The services sector will come to play an increasingly crucial role in delivering growth and, if opportunities are seized, challenges can turn out to provide a launchpad for sectoral growth.

An *OECD report* of May this year ("*Growth in Services*", report no. 83117/2005) identifies the challenges the services sector is going to face, such as growing globalisation of both services and manufacturing, and rapid technological change. The EQF plays a crucial role

in addressing these challenges, and the OECD report explicitly encourages policy makers to take action in several areas, including life-long learning. As structural policies are mutually reinforcing, life-long learning should ideally be accompanied by market opening, fostering investment, effective labour and social policies, effective ICT services, and avoiding new tax barriers.

The interaction of different policy measures is another reason why there is an urgent need for an EQF. Although some progress has been made through the existing Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications, progress is rather limited in the area of the general recognition system. Depending on the outcome of the legislative procedure on the Services Directive, there is a risk that this situation is not redressed: there are proposals to exclude all regulated professional activity from the scope of the new services directive, the very sector prone to reap the greatest benefits in terms of job creation and GDP according to the economic evidence cited by the OECD.

However, the *2000 Lisbon Council*, with the objective of making the EU the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010, acknowledged that **professional services constitute a large part of the EU economy**, and have knock on effects on the competitiveness of a wide range of other sectors. Highly restrictive regulation in the professions may be having a negative impact on employment and growth.

We believe that the EQF can significantly contribute to an integrated approach to competitiveness and can address any issues not tackled by other instruments.

In this context, we view the following objectives of an EQF as the most important:

- 1) facilitating the transparency of qualifications** in Europe,
- 2) supporting the comparability** of qualifications held by individual citizens and, by doing so, **easing the process of recognition**, and
- 3) help improving the transfer of qualifications between different national or sectoral qualifications systems.**

We believe that creating a co-operation mechanism between European qualification authorities and other stakeholders will contribute to encouraging geographical mobility of workers and learners. It will reduce barriers to the effective functioning of the European labour market by making qualifications needs and supply match better, and it could facilitate mobility of learners and workers by strengthening transparency and simplifying transfer of qualifications.

Therefore, we very much welcome the EQF as a supplementary voluntary instrument, closing the gaps of the Qualifications Directive and potentially of the new Services Directive. We believe it will be of growing importance as a reference point for comparing qualifications cross-border.

## **II. EQF as a catalyst for developments at sectoral level?**

Existing problems with regard to recognition of qualifications in European labour markets will increase if no further action is taken. We believe that the voluntary approach chosen by the Commission is the right way forward, as regulatory action is not possible and a bilateral approach would both be limited in outcome and only lead to more fragmentation, which is part of the problem the current initiative intends to address.

A European reference framework, to be used by Member States on a voluntary basis for their co-operation, will facilitate transparency, transfer and recognition of qualifications in Europe, and build up mutual trust between the relevant stakeholders. A set of common reference levels will facilitate the comparison of education and training provisions. If based on these clear objectives, a voluntary approach can be more efficient than legislation.

Common reference levels, and the implementation of shared quality assurance criteria, will make an impact on the way objectives are set for education, training and learning systems. The common reference levels will therefore have a beneficial impact on how learning

outcomes are valued and recognised, bring about more widespread recognition of non-formally acquired competences at sectoral level, and support recognition of (foreign) qualifications in the different sectors.

To conclude, the EQF is a very positive initiative and an important step towards a transparent qualifications framework that addresses persisting problems in the area of labour mobility and recognition of qualifications in an effective way.

**RICS would be happy to be involved in developing the EQF and to share its expertise in the framework of the expert group set up to support the Commission.**

We thank you for taking our concerns into consideration.

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