

TOWARDS A EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG LEARNING SKILLS FOR BUSINESS NETWORK RESPONSE

Introduction

The Skills for Business network is made up of 25 Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA). SSCs are employer-led, independent organisations that cover a specific sector across the UK. Together, they cover approximately 85 per cent of the workforce. The SSDA is responsible for funding, supporting and monitoring the network of SSCs. The SSDA is also responsible for providing minimum cover for sectors without a SSC and for co-ordinating work that covers more than one sector. The key objectives of the Skills for Business network are to: improve UK productivity, business and public service performance; reduce skills gaps and shortages; increase opportunities for employers to boost skills and productivity of everyone; and improve the quality of learning supply at all levels, whether apprenticeships or higher education. The Skills for Business network is at varying stages of development, but some SSCs would welcome the opportunity to test and pilot the EQF model, as part of their work to reform qualifications for their sectors.

Where SSCs have a particular sector perspective, they will write individually. This document contains the key headline messages consistent across the employer communities of SSCs. If you have any queries about the status of this document or its contents, please contact Paul Burnand (SSDA).

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 most important objectives and functions are those set out in the consultation document. In particular it will be essential for employers to have clear, simple, accurate information about the competences, skills and knowledge of potential employees from elsewhere in Europe. This will support labour mobility across Europe.

The proposed EQF “meta-framework” must be sensitive to the needs of employers and recognise learning achieved in work effectively, in addition to learning through education and training systems. It must not add to the complexity of UK qualifications for employers by introducing an extra tier to the frameworks for the four home nations: the proposed Framework for Achievement (England and Northern Ireland, excluding higher education); the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (higher education only); the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales; and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. The EQF will need to be developed in the context of a growing number of international frameworks.

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

There needs to be agreement across sectors and countries on the infrastructure (sets of level descriptors, credit definitions) and how this will be applied (quality assurance approach). As the EQF is to be voluntary, there will need to be agreement amongst member countries and clear benefits or incentives for sectors, and education and training bodies to use the infrastructure.

The reference levels and descriptors

Does the 8-level reference structure sufficient to capture learning outcomes and their progression in levels?

There is a difference between sectors about whether the 8-level reference structure is sufficient to capture progression within sectors. This is an important issue, if we are to have a meta-framework that meets the needs of all sectors. For sectors where there are issues, this relates to whether the structure could inhibit the development of higher technical skills in their sectors, because of the breadth of levels 3 and 4. Relevant SSCs would welcome the opportunity to work with sector bodies in other EU countries to take forward further work on the 8-level reference structure. The development of higher technical skills is particularly important to increased productivity in many sectors.

A further issue relates to the definition of level 1. There is a risk that learning designed to introduce learners to a sector, or include learners with very basic standards of achievement will not receive recognition through the EQF. This may affect the status of what are currently described as “entry level” qualifications, and weaken progression opportunities for vulnerable learners. Further work is necessary to address this issue.

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

Although the term “learning outcome” is becoming an accepted generic term across the frameworks of the four home nations, including higher education, there remains some uncertainty in some sectors about whether the term “learning outcome” will lead to an undervaluation of recognition of work-based competence by the education and training systems of the European countries.

Table 1 divides learning outcomes into definitions of knowledge, skills and personal and professional competence with professional and technical competence as a small part. The reference levels are largely about problem solving. This does not give occupational competence sufficient emphasis. It would be difficult to translate the definitions into meaningful competence based qualifications for sectors, particularly where technical competence is important.

The reference levels do not refer to context, and attempt to show progression. This means that they are highly dependent on interpretation of language. Sector-sensitive guidance will be necessary to support appropriate application of the level descriptors. In the four home nations of the UK, SSCs are planning to work closely with other key partners to review level descriptors, and ensure they are sensitive to work-based learning and sector variation. We look forward to working on related EQF initiatives.

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

Table 2 should be a set of level descriptors that are meaningful for work-based learning in addition to learning that occurs through education and training providers. A project should be set up to take forward this work, building on existing best practice.

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

There are two ways (not mutually exclusive) of matching the proposed EQF levels and descriptors of learning outcomes.

One approach would be through national occupational standards (NOS), which define the knowledge, skills and understanding required for competence in occupations. NOS are developed and up-dated by SSCs, working with their employers, and are required to meet certain quality criteria before they are approved for use across the four home nations. SSCs use their national occupational standards as the basis for education and training in their sectors, and to underpin current frameworks in the four home nations. Most NOS are developed for use by employers in people development in addition to their role in qualifications, and therefore they do not, on the whole, have levels or credit values assigned to them. Also, national occupational standards are not widely used across all vocational areas to underpin the HE curriculum.

A second approach would be to build on current credit and qualifications frameworks at varying stages of development across the four home nations. There is a well-developed Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework; a Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales and the emerging Framework for Achievement for England and Northern Ireland. There is also a consultation about credit developments in higher education. It would be helpful if these frameworks could agree consistent definitions for credit values and level descriptors, which matched with the EQF. This would make qualifications more transparent and support labour mobility across Europe.

National Qualifications Frameworks

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

Developments are currently underway to apply credit principles in our four home nations. In England and Northern Ireland, the Framework for Achievement is under development; in Wales there is the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales; in Scotland, there is the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework; and there is the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications. With the exception of the latter, these frameworks aim to have common credit principles and level descriptions based on definitions consistent with EQF developments. The SCQF uses 12 levels; however these are mapped to the other UK frameworks and can also be referenced to the EQF.

There is a consultation in progress on credit in higher education. All this work, together with the contribution national occupational standards make, in defining the skills, knowledge and understanding requirements of the sector, should support convergence with the proposed EQF.

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

There are reservations about the learning outcomes approach articulated in the proposed EQF.

Assuming the approach outlined in the previous paragraph is possible, SSCs could agree a timeline with appropriate qualifications regulatory authorities and awarding bodies to gradually bring sector-based qualifications into line with changes to frameworks in the four home nations and this EQF meta-framework. This timeline can be developed and submitted by 31 March 2006.

Sectoral qualifications

To what extent can the EQF become a catalyst for developments at sectoral level?

The EQF is not a catalyst without other factors, but many of these are in place now. For example, SSCs have been established, and some report that their employers are keen to recruit migrant workers and to provide a means for creating the necessary partnerships within member countries and across national boundaries. This is significantly easier if skills, knowledge and understanding achieved by potential employees is quality assured and easy to interpret for the four home nations context. Therefore, there is already an enthusiasm for transparency of training and qualifications across Europe. The EQF can deliver this – as long as it is simple, relevant to the workplace, consistent with framework developments in the four home nations, and links with other international frameworks.

How can the EQF be used to pursue a more systematic development of knowledge, skills and competences at sector level?

The EQF can use the national occupational standards to underpin its framework. National occupational standards are developed and up-dated by SSCs, working with their employers, to systematically develop knowledge, skills and competences at sector level. There are variations in how NOS are presented between and across sectors. Work is in progress to get the right balance between degree of differences needed for sector diversity and standardisation to support labour mobility across sectors.

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

The EQF can align with framework developments in the four home nations, and build on the work SSCs are already doing through Sector Skills Agreements. SSCs are: gathering information from employers about current and future skills needs; analysing the supply of education and training; and working with key partners to strengthen the responsiveness of the supply of education and training to employment needs. SSCs are working with qualifications regulatory authorities and awarding bodies covering the four UK home nations to ensure that the national occupational standards, training and qualifications needed by employers are set in the context of frameworks in the four home nations. This could be extended to cover the requirements of the EQF.

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

In addition to the role of SSCs described above, there is the need for the Skills for Business network to use its intelligence obtained from its employers and work with qualifications regulatory authorities, awarding bodies, professional bodies and higher education providers to shape qualifications for sectors, and in subjects of relevance to SSCs. In doing this, sectors and subjects must be sensitive to learners who work in occupations that move across sectors (for example: management and leadership, finance, marketing, business etc). The aim of this work must be to rationalise the volume of qualifications available for some occupations. In some sectors, SSCs are being asked by their employers to endorse training materials, training providers and/or higher education provision. This happens mainly in sectors where employers struggle to understand which courses or qualifications lead to “job-ready” employees or can

support continuing development in work.

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?

The EQF would need to develop its common principles for quality assurance, by building on existing quality assurance and endorsement schemes for qualifications and provision across Europe, at national and local levels. These principles would need to be supported and implemented through existing bodies in each home nation. The qualifications regulatory authorities would apply the common principles when approving awarding bodies and accrediting qualifications; and the inspectorates and review bodies would support the embedding of quality assurance principles through their systems.

At sectoral level, SSCs cover the four home nations and the English regions. They are well placed to work with key partners in the four home nations and Europe to ensure that common principles for quality assurance were sensitive to sector needs. However, care is necessary to avoid building up too many layers of bureaucracy, which would simply add to the cost of provision.

How can the EQF become a reference to improve the quality of all levels of lifelong learning?

The EQF will provide benchmarks so that qualifications in different countries can be compared and matched. This matching process should make it easier to clarify whether any weaknesses in productivity issues in a sector can be attributed to the qualifications. Awarding bodies would be able to work with SSCs and qualifications regulatory authorities to adjust their qualifications in particular sectors accordingly.

Keith Marshall
Chair
Skills for Business Network Workforce Development Group

23 November 2005