

Executive Summary

Introduction and background

In 2008, the European Parliament and the Council adopted a Recommendation on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (the EQF Recommendation). The EQF is a European instrument which aims to enable the comparison of qualifications and qualification levels across European countries in order to encourage mobility and lifelong learning. It is designed to accommodate all types and levels of qualifications, including those awarded in formal education and training, in schools, higher education, vocational education and training, adult education, as well as following the validation of non-formal and informal learning. It is structured around eight qualification levels, which are described through learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competence).

The Recommendation contained the following main features:

- A set of key definitions that underpin the EQF (e.g. definition of the term 'qualification' and the term 'learning outcomes');
- The EQF structure, more specifically the eight levels and their descriptors;
- Common principles for quality assurance in higher education and VET to be used to underpin EQF implementation;
- A set of Recommendations to the Member States about how they should use the EQF;
- Definition of the European Commission's role in the process of EQF implementation;

The Recommendation in particular called on Member States to:

- Designate a National Coordination Point;
- Reference their national qualifications systems or frameworks to the EQF by 2010;
- Indicate the EQF level on all newly-issued certificates/documents of qualification delivered to individuals as of 2012.

The EQF Recommendation invited the Commission to *"assess and evaluate...the action taken in response to this Recommendation (and) report to the European Parliament and to the Council on the experience gained and implications for the future"*. This report - the final version of the external evaluation of the EQF Recommendation - provides input to the Commission's report to the European Parliament and the Council. The evaluation covered the period 2008-2012, the countries involved in the EQF initiative and activities foreseen in the EQF Recommendation at national and European level. The terms of reference for this evaluation proposed evaluation questions related to the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, impact and sustainability of the EQF.

The effectiveness of the EQF

Effectiveness in relation to EQF target dates and the referencing process

The EQF Recommendation foresaw that all national qualifications systems should be related to the EQF by 2010 and that all new qualification documents contain a clear reference, via the national qualifications systems, to the appropriate EQF level by 2012. Only four countries met the 2010 deadline – and all of these countries had pre-existing National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF). The fact that no countries without pre-existing NQFs met the deadline, while all countries remained committed to referencing qualifications systems to the EQF, suggests that the 2010 deadline was unworkable in the absence of an NQF.

Based on progress to date, it is possible that EQF referencing could continue beyond 2013. Fewer countries completed referencing in 2012 than in 2011. It is important to note that while the first EQF target date was not widely met, this does not mean that stakeholders generally see the setting of the date as problematic. Numerous stakeholders reported the value in having an ambitious timetable for referencing. It helps to generate momentum at national level. Participating countries are still aiming for a European qualifications system that is more transparent and clear. This is significant because it shows that, beyond the mechanics of actual progress to date, the underpinning commitment to the EQF objectives remains relatively strong.

By the end of 2012, 24 countries had formally adopted an NQF and 16 countries had referenced their NQF to the EQF (15 Member States and 1 candidate country). Of these, France, Malta, UK and

Ireland are most advanced in implementing their NQFs. The remaining countries are in the early stages of implementation. Most countries developing new NQFs have based them on the eight levels of the EQF. A total of 28 European countries have proposed (or are developing) an eight-level framework. All the NQFs that have been developed (or are being developed) are based on learning outcomes.

As half of the countries are still focusing on meeting the objectives set for the first target date, the second objective (to ensure that documents issued by national authorities refer to the EQF, through the national qualification system, by 2012) has been considered less of a priority among participating countries. Six countries have met this deadline and five are in the process of doing so in 2013. The EQF Recommendation gave countries the opportunity to choose between referencing their national qualifications system to the EQF or to do it via an NQF. Almost all countries¹ chose the NQF route to reference their national qualifications systems to the EQF. Those countries that have not yet referenced are working towards a national framework as an intermediate step to EQF referencing. It seems unlikely that all countries would have undertaken to develop an NQF within the same timescale without the EQF acting as a catalyst. The link here is not directly causal. What the EQF provides is an overall timetable to drive NQF development. It sets parameters to ensure that NQF development occurs consistently across different countries, which provides benefits in terms of the international dimension to NQFs (i.e. the comparability of qualifications). It also supports certain design characteristics based on the EQF main features; notably the use of levels, learning outcomes descriptors and approaches to quality assurance.

The great majority of countries that have already referenced their NQF to the EQF used similar approaches to referencing:

- Almost all countries undertook a contextual analysis and comparison between the EQF level descriptors, learning outcomes and the national qualifications system. In some cases, specific working groups – involving, national experts and social partners – were created to undertake this analysis.
- Some countries used the results of pilot projects to provide guidance for the referencing process. International experts also took part to the referencing process in the vast majority of countries and were widely considered to provide a valuable contribution.
- A considerable number of countries proactively sought good practice from elsewhere. It was common to analyse how neighbouring countries – or countries with similar educational systems – had established their referencing processes and use the learning to inform the national approach. This was particularly the case with regard to the Nordic countries.

An important area of variation between countries has been the extent of stakeholder involvement in the referencing process. More than a quarter of national stakeholders surveyed have actively contributed to the referencing process, while around 40% said they had been consulted as part of the referencing process. A third of stakeholder survey respondents had no involvement in the referencing process. Even though there was fairly widespread awareness of the EQF among stakeholders, most reported that they had no significant influence over or input into the referencing process. This was particularly true for social partner representatives. Stakeholders with a strong focus on a given qualification, a given sector, or a given education and training sub-system (e.g. VET) felt their voice had greater weight.

Effectiveness with regard to the use of learning outcomes and validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe

Both the learning outcomes approach and the EQF implementation are still ‘work-in-progress’ in many countries, especially at the level of curriculum design. The evidence collected so far about the EQF’s contribution to the expansion of the learning outcomes approach in Europe is scarce. Furthermore, in higher education, it is difficult for stakeholders to distinguish the effects of the EQF from those of the overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Although evidence of EQF impact on the use of learning outcomes has been scarce so far, these effects are perceived to be potentially very significant in the future and worth investigating at a later date. The reverse link between the EQF and

¹ Italy is the only country that chose to reference its qualifications levels to the EQF and then to develop a national qualifications framework

learning outcomes is also observed. In countries where the learning outcomes approach is more established (mainly in higher education and introduced in the context of the QF-EHEA and ECTS), EQF implementation is more straightforward. There appears to be mind-set in place in these countries associated with greater openness to the EQF model.

There is an expectation among countries that the EQF will impact on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, but only once NQFs are well-established and only if there is effective promotion of validation at national level. There is little direct evidence on the effects of the EQF on validation to date. Where validation systems are in place, these typically pre-date the EQF and are a consequence of a wider culture of validation of learning at national level. However, expectations about the future contribution of the EQF are high. This is most persuasively characterised in terms of the EQF providing a framework and quality guarantees to underpin validation systems in European countries.

Effectiveness of the EQF as a reference point

Stakeholder engagement in EQF and NQF developments varies greatly between countries. In some cases, national authorities have preferred to communicate about the referencing process to wider stakeholders once the referencing process was over, rather than while it was still underway. There is a persuasive rationale for waiting to market the benefits to users until qualification comparison is available with all or most countries. However, the difference between this wider marketing of the EQF and the involvement of other groups, such as social partner representative bodies, as *part of* the national development process is not always clear.

There is little evidence that the EQF is a reference point for international sector organisations (i.e. facilitating consistency in the award of international sector qualifications at national level). There are only examples of in-depth work on the relationship between the EQF, NQFs and sector qualifications from the EQF pilot projects. Some work in this area has also been carried out under projects supported by the European Social Fund. These projects highlight challenges (e.g. an international sector qualification that would not be referenced at the same level in different NQFs) and opportunities created by the EQF and, as such, are rather important tests of the credibility of and benefits from the EQF.

The efficiency of the EQF and its implementation structure

The efficiency of the EQF advisory group

The EQF advisory group effectively provides “soft control/guidance” of national referencing processes, and fulfils its role in terms of ensuring trust and common understanding among the participating countries. The presentation of the referencing reports is arguably the most valuable aspect of the advisory group’s work. It has a motivating effect on participating countries, through their EQF advisory group member, to sustain efforts towards meeting the EQF objectives.

The EQF advisory group has also practically supported the referencing process with the establishment of referencing criteria (through one of its sub-groups) and the provision of expertise and reference documents (EQF notes). The referencing criteria have played a crucial role in establishing the common EQF approach; and it is significant that this dimension has been led by national representatives working collaboratively through the EQF advisory group structure. However, there is a clear desire for even more ownership of the EQF advisory group from its members.

The EQF advisory group is also an effective way to ensure networking, peer-learning and the sharing of experiences among participating countries, thus facilitating dialogue among countries about qualifications issues. In that respect, the peer learning activities (PLAs) that have been organised provide an important contribution by making it clearer to EQF advisory group members how the EQF could work in practice. This type of activity should be continued and reinforced. The European Commission plays a very important role in managing the work of the EQF advisory group, including agenda-setting, chairing meetings, reporting, organisation and logistics.

The role of Commission agencies (Cedefop, ETF and EACEA) and the Council of Europe have also been key to the implementation of the EQF: the Council of Europe is mandated to represent the Qualifications Framework European Higher Education Area in the EQF advisory group; Cedefop and ETF have contributed to the work of the EQF advisory group and NCP activities; while the EACEA has supported the coordination of the NCP and EQF pilot project calls.

The efficiency of the EQF NCPs

The NCPs are implementing the tasks as described in the EQF Recommendation in an effective way, with the important caveat that, in many cases, the NCPs have focused on only some of the assigned tasks. In part, this varies depending on each country's progress with EQF implementation. However, it also depends on organisational aspects of qualifications in each country. This influences the extent to which NCPs are perceived as a single point of contact for information, guidance and advice regarding qualifications and, indirectly, each NCP's scope for action in promoting and disseminating information about the EQF and its implementation.

EQF NCP grants have been used to support a wide range of EQF-related actions. This has primarily involved communication activities targeting a large audience, such as hosting conferences, setting up websites and developing dissemination tools. To a lesser extent, it has also included activities to support effective management, including methodology design, stakeholder consultations, feasibility studies and evaluations. There is little evidence on the extent to which these grants have effectively contributed to EQF implementation. Moreover, the grants have only been used to a limited extent so far (for example, in 2012, only 68% of available funding for NCP activities were requested).

The efficiency of the EQF pilot projects

Overall, the EQF pilot projects have covered relevant aspects of EQF implementation. However, the use of project outcomes has been somewhat limited. Participation is clearly beneficial to project partners and their institutions. There are also examples of impacts at sector level and on policy development and implementation at national level, such as informing national social dialogue and policy development. However, it is clear overall that the outcomes of EQF pilot projects have not been systematically taken into account at European level. Similarly, the dissemination strategies of the EQF pilot projects have reached EQF insiders effectively, but their impact beyond these core stakeholders is rather limited.

Relevance of the EQF

Relevance of the principles and structure of the EQF

The EQF is structured around eight common reference levels and each level is described in terms of knowledge, skills and competences based on learning outcomes. The EQF levels and descriptors are presented in Annex II of the EQF Recommendation. Although issues were identified in relation to specific EQF levels (1, 2, 5 and 6-8) in some countries (Austria, Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK), the number of EQF levels is generally adaptable to national qualifications systems and to the needs of the national EQF stakeholders. The appropriateness of the eight levels is clearly a matter for debate in some countries, but there is no clear picture that it is intrinsically problematic in any country.

The learning outcome descriptors contained in Annex II of the EQF recommendation effectively reflect the system of qualifications at national level, or do so with only minor exceptions. In some cases, views are likely to be untested – i.e. if the use of learning outcomes at national level is not well-established. Overall, stakeholders consulted during the evaluation were confident in the capacity of the learning outcome descriptors to reflect qualifications systems at national level, even if some issues were raised by a limited number of stakeholders. This suggests that while there are dissenters, the majority view in all countries is that the learning outcome descriptors are appropriate.

The notion of framework development at national level being on-going or iterative appears to have gained wide acceptance as countries have progressed through NQF/EQF development. This further helps to sustain the credibility of the EQF referencing process, even in the face of specific referencing challenges. It helps to ensure that there are reasonable expectations about what the EQF structure can achieve as a meta-framework that is being tested through the initial referencing process in many different countries. This has important implications for the future of the EQF because it implies on-going refinement of national frameworks and a need to ensure that:

- consistency of approach is maintained across countries;
- there is scope for European-level discussion on how best to address challenges that emerge in national implementation;

- the learning from national implementation (e.g. solutions to challenges such as qualification types at national level that do not easily align to an EQF level that is consistent with referencing in other countries) informs future guidance and the possible further refinement of the EQF itself.

Most countries have developed (or are planning to develop) a comprehensive (overarching) qualifications framework which includes all officially recognised qualifications from general, vocational education and training, including higher and adult education and promoting the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning. This has caused difficulties in practice (e.g. descriptors that corresponded to qualifications from different education and training sub-systems and which were not referenced at the same NQF level). Many of these difficulties are the result of the scale of ambition and the complexity of achieving alignment between what remain, in many countries, distinct education and training sub-systems and delayed the referencing process in some cases.

The relevance of the Recommendation as a policy instrument

Given the objective of the EQF as a reference tool, the Recommendation was an appropriate approach to supporting transparency and comparability of qualifications at European level, while recognising the national basis of qualifications systems. There are no apparent alternative approaches that would have been likely to achieve the same level of commonality in approach and timing between countries. Several elements of the Recommendation supported implementation. The existence of implementation target dates generated momentum and helped to reinforce commitment and mutual trust in the EQF's potential to reach its objectives. The fact that the Recommendation and its annexes could be used as common reference documents for all stakeholders, thus ensuring a common understanding of the EQF objectives and mutual trust among countries, also contributed, by its nature, to the effectiveness of the EQF.

Beyond the instrumental aspect of the Recommendation and the impetus it gives, policy support at national level is considered the main factor in ensuring commitment and mutual trust among participating countries. The challenge here to date (and in future) is that EQF development and implementation takes considerable time, and national policy support has to be maintained and sustained to some degree over a period of years.

The relevance of the EQF to wider European strategy for education and training

The EQF, in its design, aims to facilitate recognition of all types of learning, the transparency of qualifications systems and comparability of qualifications, thus removing barriers to mobility (horizontal and vertical) and making lifelong learning a reality. The effects of the EQF on mobility are hard to perceive for the time being – because implementation is still at an early stage. However, it may be anticipated that a fully-implemented EQF will effectively facilitate mobility of learners across education and training sub-systems, levels and countries, in line with the ET2020 mobility objective. While the activities undertaken as part of the implementation of the EQF Recommendation are not, in isolation, sufficient to addressing the mobility objectives of ET2020, it is clear that the EQF provides a tool that might be seen as a precondition for achieving these objectives.

The coherence of the EQF with other European mobility and transparency tools

The EQF shares common or complementary ambitions with other tools and processes at European level, including EQAVET and ECVET in the vocational arena, as well as the tools associated with the Bologna process, Europass, the European Skills, Competences and Occupations taxonomy (ESCO) and the Professional Qualifications Directive.

Coherence between the EQF, EQAVET and ECVET has been ensured at European level through cooperation in management and organisation. At national level, cooperation depends mainly on structural factors. It tends to be higher in countries where staff in charge of these initiatives are part of the same organisation or have a history of working together. Where co-ordination has been actively pursued at national level, this delivers efficiencies for national agencies and helps to ensure consistency in approach.

The EQF and Europass are inter-dependent, especially given the objective to have EQF levels reflected in Europass documents. However, there have only been limited synergies so far (for example, through joint implementation strategies at national level). This is partly a consequence of the delays in meeting the second EQF deadline. Yet the evaluation also found little evidence of

cooperation between EQF and Europass initiatives at national level except where these initiatives were the responsibility of the same organisation.

The pre-existence of relevant higher education initiatives as part of the Bologna process has necessitated co-operation since the start of the EQF to ensure coherence. This cooperation has improved in recent years, with an increasing participation of higher education and Bologna process stakeholders in EQF activities. There are also more formal mechanisms in place to ensure coherence between the EQF and the QF-EHEA (e.g. participation of the Council of Europe in the EQF advisory group and NCP meetings).

Cooperation has also been developed beyond the education and training area, in particular with the framework of the ESCO initiative. There is a potential future synergy between the EQF and ESCO once the latter reaches a more mature stage of development. The Commission has also investigated the potential for closer cooperation between the Professional Qualifications Directive and the EQF, but the extent to which these synergies happen in practice will depend on the upcoming policy decisions on the revision of the Directive.

The impact and sustainability of the EQF

The EQF has contributed to changing in the way in which qualifications are classified and defined at national level, but the impact to date depends on whether the country had a qualifications framework in place and on the stage reached in the implementation of the EQF/NQF. The overall impact of the EQF on education and training policies has been limited so far, although there are examples of countries in which the EQF has been an opportunity to launch wider reforms of the education and training system. This limited impact is mainly due to the fact that the EQF implementation is still at an early stage in most countries. However, there are high expectations for further impact once implementation has progressed across a larger number of countries and many of the anticipated benefits of the EQF in practice can begin to be realised. For the time being, countries' commitment to the EQF is in line with their commitment towards improving lifelong learning, transparency of the education system to a very large extent, thus indirectly contributing to wider EU goals linked to the development of individuals, competitiveness, employment and social cohesion.

Given that work is continuing on the referencing process and there is considerable work to ensure that EQF levels are included on qualification documents, support to the EQF implementation is still needed and should be maintained, both to ensure continuity in the implementation and keep the momentum once countries have reached the objectives set in the EQF Recommendation.