INTRODUCTION

The twenty-third meeting of the EQF AG was attended by representatives of 30 countries, and by representatives of social partners and stakeholder organisations. In addition, representatives from the European Commission, Cedefop, the European Training Foundation, the Council of Europe and external experts to the Commission also attended.

COM chaired and opened the meeting. The agenda was accepted without further comment. The minutes and the action points of the twenty-second meeting of the EQF Advisory Group of 16-17 December 2013 were also adopted without comment.

COM informed the group that no comments had been received on the note summarising the first draft of the Greek referencing report, thus it will be attached to the minutes of the meeting.

1. RELEVANT DEVELOPMENTS IN EUROPEAN COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

COM referred on the latest developments and follow-up to the meeting of the EQF AG of 16-17 December 2013 (cf. Note AG23-1).

COM informed that an Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting was held on 24 February 2014, under the Greek Presidency. A policy debate on skills and employability in the light of the results of recent OECD surveys (PIAAC and PISA) took place. This debate highlighted that focus should be on achieving a ‘well-skilled’ population rather than high/medium/low-skilled population. Discussions also addressed whether there was a link between qualification level and employability (‘having a
university degree does not guarantee employability in the labour market’). The discourse highlighted that apart from a qualification many other factors contribute to, and are relevant to, employability.

COM invited country representatives to initiate and engage in discussion with ministers at national level to ensure that government officials are aware of the EQF and its purpose, and to help push forward the implementation of the EQF in their respective countries.

Information on developments in the Copenhagen and Bologna Processes (cf. Note AG23-3)

Bologna process:

Council of Europe informed the EQF AG about recent developments in the Bologna process:

- A Bologna Follow-Up Group meeting will be held in Athens on 9-10 April 2014. There is currently an open discussion on whether the Bologna process will be able to retain its mandate; ministerial attendance is decreasing from conference to conference. There is the risk that the process may lose momentum and political weight. The next Ministerial Conference is set to be held in Yerevan, Armenia, in 2015.
- Save the date: The Council of Europe (together with other partners) will organise a conference to reflect on the role of universities in the development of democracy and citizenship. The ‘Global Forum on Higher Education for Democratic Innovation’ will be held from 25-27 June 2014 in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Further information will be made available on the Council of Europe website.

Copenhagen process:

Information on recent developments in the Copenhagen process is summarised in Note AG23-3.

Information from the Presidencies (Cf. ppt)

The Greek representatives briefly outlined the priorities of the Greek EU Presidency and provided an overview on the events planned for the first half of 2014. This includes the meeting of General Directors for Vocational Education and Training (27-28 March 2014), and the European Youth Conference (10 March 2014).

- COM pointed out that an event focusing on quality assurance had been announced but was not noted on the list of upcoming events, and requested EL to provide additional information to EQF AG members.
2. VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

Information on the update of the Inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014

COM thanked EQF AG members for the feedback provided on the draft reports. IT, LT & BE (fr), had not yet submitted their feedback and were asked to report back as soon as possible.

The feedback received from country representatives and the EYF was mostly positive and only in some cases were more substantial comments made. Any outstanding issues will be resolved bilaterally. COM emphasised that the final product should be of high quality and fully reflect the actual situation in the respective countries. As the intention is to publish this information (probably in September 2014), it is important that countries feel confident about the quality of this document. EQF AG members are requested to contact COM or Cedefop on any open or outstanding issues.

The reports will be returned to countries in April, and they will then have three weeks to check them. Countries should return their reports to Cedefop in May 2014. COM reminded the AG that the reports should only include information on developments that took place before 31 January 2014; any developments after this date shall be included in the next Inventory.

Proposal for national roadmaps for establishing validation arrangements by 2018 (cf. Note AG23-2)

COM presented the current draft proposal for a roadmap for arrangements on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Many of the comments and suggestions received from the EQF AG have been integrated into the current proposal, such as a peer learning activity to be held at the beginning of October 2014 (back to back with the 26th meeting of the EQF AG). EQF AG members will be asked to reflect on potential topics for the PLA.

In the annex to Note AG23-2, an additional line will be added to the roadmap table for 2019, when the Commission will deliver its report to the Council.

Comments, questions and answers (reactions from AT, Cedefop, Council of Europe, EUCIS-LLL, EYF, FR, IE, NO, UK):

- Revised Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning: Could you please provide a roadmap for the revision of the Guidelines?
  - COM: The Guidelines were, at the time of production, an extremely valuable contribution, delivering guidance on the significant issues to consider when discussing the validation of non-formal and informal learning. At that time, however, no Recommendation was available. Now that the Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning is available, it should represent the new point of reference – similarly to how the EQF Recommendation is used. The Guidelines must be adapted in order to reflect the new configuration, which is a challenging task. The current delays are due to the difficulties encountered in determining the necessary level of granularity for the Guidelines. The guidelines should give value to the Recommendation and
provide a useful addition. COM emphasised that they would like to present the EQF AG with a solid proposal for the Guidelines.

- Relationship between Guidelines and Inventory: The revision of the Guidelines should be based on the Inventory of non-formal and informal learning. The Guidelines may be even more important than the Inventory. They should be discussed in other relevant fora.
  - COM: The Guidelines should not be built on the Inventory, they should be built on the basis of the Recommendation on the validation of non-formal learning. The Inventory will then provide the examples. These three elements – Recommendation, Guidelines, and Inventory - will then represent a useful and coherent set of tools. Both the Guidelines and the Inventory will be finalised by September 2014.

- Participants generally welcomed the roadmap and considered it a good contribution to re-invigorating the discussion. Some participants raised concerns that the 2018 deadline may be too long-term, and that consequently very little progress may be achieved by 2020. Since not all countries start from the same position – with 13 countries currently lacking a national strategy on the validation of non-formal and informal learning – the suggestion was made to divide countries into different groups with different timelines and speeds. This may help to speed up the overall process. During the implementing the EQF Recommendation, it was very helpful to see that some countries were moving ahead of the others. A similar process may also be helpful with the Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.
  - COM invited EQF AG members to reflect on the suggestion of having a small group of ‘frontrunners’ and share their thoughts. COM also added that some countries with well-established validation procedures (e.g. LU, FR) could make a presentation to the EQF AG – thereby making a valuable contribution to the overall process.

- Nature of the roadmap: Participants appreciated that the voluntary nature of the roadmap was clearly highlighted.
  - COM had received several comments asking whether the roadmap was mandatory or voluntary and provided clarification. The roadmap is indeed voluntary; all activities and deadlines included are suggestive. The purpose of the roadmap is to help countries achieve the goal of having established validation arrangements by 2018. It has been designed in such a manner that it will also be possible for those countries which have a less developed field of validation to meet the 2018 target. This does not mean that more advanced countries should step on the brake.

- Nature of the Recommendation: What is expected from countries by 2018? Would all countries be expected to submit their one-off reports? Or is it voluntary?
  - COM: The Recommendation itself does not specifically call for a report. However, there is collective agreement that this can provide value to the process; and it provides this group with the opportunity to fulfill its task of monitoring the process. The goal of the Recommendation is for every country to put in place validation arrangements by 2018. This does not, however, preclude a country from achieving this earlier than the 2018 deadline.

- EYF, EUCIS-LLL and CEV announced their willingness to present their policy positions to the EQF Advisory Group in 2015.

- Peer learning activities: The importance of supporting this process through the organisation of PLAs was emphasised. A PLA on the cost and benefits of validation of non-formal and informal learning was conducted several years ago. This was a very useful exercise: a follow-up to this should be considered.
o COM agreed and invited EQF AG members to submit their ideas and suggestions for PLAs in this context.

- ENIC-NARIC addresses issues of recognition on a daily basis. Furthermore, the Strasbourg Process (in which EYF also participates) is closely involved in the issue of giving value to learning that takes place outside the formal system. This could be included in the roadmap in some form.
- The Council of Europe higher education series includes two booklets on recognition.
- The EYF announced that two of its member organisations were working on a pilot project in the field of validation. EYF suggested presenting the preliminary results of the project at the October 2014 meeting of the EQF AG.
- EUCIS-LLL briefly announced the “Building Learning Societies: Promoting validation of non-formal and informal learning” project, written information on which participants should have been sent.

COM specifically invited representatives from social partners to consider what their specific input to this debate and to the further process could be.

Information on the assessment of arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in the national Youth Guarantee Implementation Plans

COM informed the EQF AG about the current ‘Youth Guarantee’ initiative, a project based on the 2013 Council Recommendation on establishing a Youth Guarantee. This initiative, which is coordinated by DG EMP, is discussed within the EQF AG due to its relationship to the Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The Youth Guarantee initiative was inspired by developments in Finland and Austria, and has been designed to tackle youth unemployment in Europe. The aim of the guarantee is for every young person under the age of 25 to receive a ‘good-quality offer’ within 4 months of becoming unemployed or out of education. ‘Good-quality offer’ may refer to a job, an apprenticeship, a traineeship or further training. 6 billion Euros of funding will be provided for the initiative – 3 billion from ESF funds and another 3 billion from a dedicated budget line for two years (2014 and 2015). Complementary funding from other European funding sources is also a possibility.

Member States have been asked to submit national Youth Guarantee implementation plans; 19 plans have already been submitted. For many Member States the implementation of the Youth Guarantee will require structural reform. COM has been holding bilateral meetings with Member States to give feedback on the implementation plans received, providing the basis on which countries can modify their approach.

With regard to those implementation plans that have already been submitted, COM pointed out that several of the plans consisted of a collection of existing initiatives rather than a strategy for fundamental reform. In particular, the majority of the implementation plans did not touch on the topic of validation at all. COM emphasised that there should be a strong link between validation and youth employment initiatives. COM urged country representatives to ensure that the topic of validation is included, if possible, in their (revised) national implementation plans.

COM also reminded participants that the Youth Guarantee implementation plans represent a means to obtain financial support. If validation procedures are not mentioned as part of the Youth Guarantee implementation plan, they obviously will not be funded.
under this initiative. COM thus invited country representatives determine whether there was an interest at national level in considering validation procedures in the context of youth employment initiatives.

A conference will also be held on the Youth Guarantee initiative.

Comments, questions and answers (reaction from PES):

- Participants pointed out that the profiling of young people is one essential aspect of youth employment initiatives, and that validation processes could be considered to be part of a profiling exercise.

3. Overview of national developments related to the implementation of the EQF

COM presented the updated roadmap on referencing and requested feedback on the referencing plan overview (cf. Note AG23-4; ppt).

Comments regarding the expected date for the presentation of draft EQF referencing reports:

- SE could not confirm the June date for their presentation. They are very close to distributing the document for a public consultation, which will take approximately three months. They anticipate that their presentation should be ready for the December meeting.
- CY stated that they would confirm the date for their presentation – either the March or June meeting - by the end of next week (i.e. 7 March 2014).
- NO stated that they intend to keep the scheduled date, but could not confirm this yet.

COM reminded those countries set to present their referencing report in the second semester of 2014 (FI, HU, TK and MK) to indicate whether they will present at the October or December meeting.

With regard to the 2nd EQF milestone, COM invited countries to provide information on any relevant updates (no updates received so far).

- MT stated that they have updated their online register of qualifications (January 2014). They will now discuss possible sources of funding for linking the online register to the EQF portal.

COM invited countries to provide some examples of diplomas, certificates and Europass Supplements, in order to examine the ways in which the EQF level is referred to.

COM was asked to explain why only a small number of countries appear on the EQF portal, when a total number of 21 countries have now completed their referencing. COM clarified that the information can only be uploaded to the portal once the respective country has given permission to do so, i.e. when countries send their final referencing report to COM and confirm that the information can be uploaded to the portal. In addition, the referencing report of Luxembourg in three languages has recently been added. The Italian report will soon follow.
4. **State of Play of EQF Implementation in Spain**

(Cf. ppt.)

The Spanish Qualifications Framework (ESQF) is known as ‘MECU’ (Marco Español de Cualificaciones) in Spain. A Royal Decree serves as the legal basis for its implementation, although this decree has yet to come into force.

The aims of the ESQF are to promote and recognise lifelong learning; to facilitate national and transnational mobility; to inform citizens on the learning requirements ascribed to each level; to inform employers on the knowledge, skills and competence of those that are to be employed; and to inform teachers and trainers on the type of training they are to provide learners with.

The ESQF encompasses the whole range of qualifications. Non-formal and informal learning can be included if validated according to the official procedures for doing so. The ESQF is based on the learning outcomes approach. The framework consists of eight levels; levels 5 to 8 will be in line with QF-EHEA (Técnico Superior, Grado, Master, Doctorado). ESQF descriptors are divided into three categories: knowledge, skills, and competence.

Various stakeholders have been involved in the design and referencing procedure. These include ministries, advisory bodies, social agents, sectoral conferences, as well as students’ organisations, parents’ organisations and quality agencies.

The draft Royal Decree recommends the establishment of a Spanish Qualifications Framework Committee – including representatives of various stakeholders, such as trade union and business representatives and qualifications framework experts.

Upcoming activities include the adoption of the Royal Decree, the finalisation of the Spanish referencing report; and the presentation of the referencing report to the EQF Advisory Group in the second semester of 2014.

Comments, questions and answers (reactions from Cedefop, CEV, Council of Europe, FR):

- ES received compliments on their very clear and concise presentation of the ESQF.
- Scope of the ESQF: Will there be a link between the two national qualifications frameworks? Will higher levels of the framework also be open to qualifications from levels other than those covered by the QF-EHEA?
  - ES has started to integrate the two frameworks. The issue of higher vocational qualifications must still be addressed.
- It would be interesting to hear about the challenges encountered by ES in this process - for instance, discussions relating to levels 3 and 4 (VET certificates and diplomas).
- It would be interesting to hear how the work on the national qualifications catalogue has fed into the development of the ESQF.
- Regional autonomy: More information was requested on how the work on the ESQF is linked to the reality of regional autonomy in Spain. To what extent is there dialogue at national and regional level and what is the interaction between the two? How will the issue of regional autonomy – which is a common problem in more than one European country – be tackled?
- ES: Regional councils for education have been involved in the process; representatives from all regions have been involved. ES is seeking to create a simple and practical system that is robust but also flexible enough to respond to the requirements of regional autonomy.

- Non-formal learning: There are significant regional differences in the field of non-formal learning in Spain (e.g. very different approaches are taken in the youth sector across the different regions of Spain). Could you provide more information on how ES takes these regional differences into account?

- Involvement of stakeholders: More detailed information was requested on which (types of) stakeholders were involved in the development process (e.g. were representatives of higher education institutions, such as the group of rectors, involved? Were representatives from general education consulted? Did representatives from lower education levels [compulsory education] participate? Were representatives from non-formal education involved in the process?)

ES did not deliver an immediate response to the majority of these questions but stated that they preferred to answer them in writing. COM invited ES to provide further information either in writing, or verbally at the next meeting of the EQF Advisory Group. COM emphasised that the information provided should help other countries to understand how the national qualifications system is translated into the ESQF. It is important to provide as much clarity as possible, including an explanation of the role of the different actors involved in the process.


COM provided the group with a recap of the purpose, priorities, and operational pillars of the learning outcomes work programme that was adopted one year ago. The central aim of this work programme is to achieve a ‘common language’ on learning outcomes.

The detailed work programme has been included in the annex to Note AG23-5. Among the events planned for 2014 are the following: three seminars on learning outcomes in ECVET; a peer learning activity on learning outcomes in the recognition of qualifications; a peer learning activity on relating similar qualifications to the EQF (master craftsperson qualifications); and the conference on the EASQ public consultation to be held in June 2014.

Towards the end of 2014, the EQF Advisory Group should take stock of progress made by preparing a report to inform policy makers and experts on what has been achieved and the challenges still to be addressed. A proposal on the first draft of this report is scheduled to be presented to the EQF AG at the October 2014 meeting.

COM informed participants about the electronic document library that has been created within the e-community of the EQF implementation (http://europa.eu/sinapse/directaccess/qualification_framework). The library has been developed in order to make the wealth of information on learning outcomes more easily accessible to policy makers and experts working in this field. It is structured according to the four priority areas of the learning outcomes programmes, and should be
regularly updated and expanded. The e-community library is open to all stakeholders upon registration.

COM invited EQF AG members to disseminate information about the e-community as well as share their ideas and suggestions on whether more action needed to be taken under the current learning outcomes work programme.

Cedefop provided an overview of their ongoing work related to learning outcomes – further information on the respective studies is provided in the annex to Note AG23-5.

Comments, questions and answers (reaction from FR):

- The e-community library was considered a useful addition. Translation of (some of the) documents into other languages was requested; without this the library may have limited impact at the national level.
  - COM pointed out that the key issue here is to identify the most important or relevant documents for which translation could be of value. COM offered to investigate possibilities for translation once the most important or relevant documents have been identified at national level.

6. FOLLOW-UP TO THE EVALUATION OF THE EQF

Report from the Commission on the evaluation of the EQF (Cf. ppt)

COM presented the main conclusions of the Commission report of 19 December 2013 on the evaluation of the implementation of the EQF Recommendation. The report is based on the external evaluation study prepared by GHK; the European Parliament report on the state of play of the EQF; Cedefop studies as well as inputs from the EQF Advisory Group and NCPs.

Some follow-up actions will be launched immediately, while some others, in particular those related to the synergy of the EQF with other policies and instruments, will be prepared following the public consultation on the European Area of Skills and Qualifications (EASQ). COM will also run a Eurobarometer survey in early 2014. Data will be analysed and stakeholder feedback presented at a European conference on 17 June 2014. If the revision of the legal basis is required, this will be based on an impact assessment.

COM also presented a proposal for the follow-up to the evaluation of the EQF (cf. Note AG23-6). This proposal distinguishes three categories of follow-up action: by the EQF Advisory Group; by other actors; follow-up that would require the revision of the EQF Recommendation.

Comments, questions and answers (reactions from AT, DK, FI, FR, IE, IT, NL, SE, UK, BUSINESSEUROPE, Cedefop, Council of Europe, UEAPME)

Comments on the Commission report
• Participants welcomed the Commission report and pointed out that it reflected the increasing expectations that are put on the EQF.

• The Commission report mentions that one quarter of all qualifications issued in Europe should include an EQF reference by the end of 2014. This sounds like a good benchmark, as it would put a little pressure on Member States. It would be interesting to know, though, where this benchmark comes from.
  o COM: This benchmark was suggested by COM, not the external evaluator. It intends to make sure that the frameworks are not all empty. The suggested benchmark of 25% is considered realistic. This benchmark is certainly within reach, in particular when looking at the maturity of some frameworks.

• Ad. ‘Possible revision of the legal basis’: There is a need to discuss what this means and would entail.

Comments on the proposal for follow-up

• Need for a more binding follow-up plan: The proposal for follow-up was generally appreciated, but it was also suggested making it more detailed and giving it a more binding character. It could, for instance, be designed as a mid-term work programme, e.g. by adding a separate column with specific actions. This would also help identify any ‘blank spots’, i.e. area(s) for which additional action would be needed.

• Second round of referencing: One of the original ideas of the referencing reports was to open the qualifications system of a country to outsiders so that they can better understand it – i.e. the creation of transparency. How does the group intend to proceed about the second series of referencing reports? It was also suggested setting a fixed interval for the revision of referencing reports (e.g. every five years).

• More than short-term action required: It was pointed out that more than short-term action would be required; the AG should seriously reconsider the organisation of its work and how to quality assure the referencing process, i.e. the work of the AG.

• Need for prioritisation: The proposal for follow-up action is too big an agenda for this group to tackle at once. COM was requested to make a proposal for prioritisation, i.e. by preparing a strategic document, as not all these actions could be taken at once. In a first step, the focus should be on achieving the actual aim of the EQF, i.e. by making it a practical transparency tool. If there is a situation where the same qualifications are referenced differently across countries, this represents a serious problem that should come first on the list of priorities. Only afterwards, all other aspects, which surely are important as well, should be dealt with.

• Reflect on working methods: Given the significant change in the composition of the group (no. of participants) and the larger number of topics to cover, it would be important for the EQF AG to reflect on its working methods. This could be done without changing any legal mandate.

• Referencing empty NQFs: In order for the EQF to really serve citizens, NQFs must be fully operational first. It is not until an NQF is populated with real qualifications that the really complex issues arise. The referencing of empty NQFs should thus be avoided. It would be better to make sure that countries have populated their NQFs with qualifications before presenting their referencing report.
  o COM: This mostly depends on the type of country. Requiring from countries to have fully populated NQFs before presenting their referencing report – for several countries this would take many years due to ongoing reforms. This certainly would not be the right signal. Of course, however, there is the need to make sure that qualifications will indeed be included in the qualifications frameworks.
• Lack of indication on EQF levels: the implementation of the 2nd milestone of the EQF is urgent.

• Linking QA systems: Several participants pointed out that there it should not be attempted to create common quality assurance systems across sectors. The attempt to produce links between the systems would create some (unwelcome) unification, as QA systems need to serve the purpose of the sector they have to work in. Others however disagreed and, while sharing the concerns about unification, highlighted the need to build inter-linkages between the different QA systems, in particular between HE and VET, to create the necessary transparency of quality assurance systems.

  o COM: This does not refer to the implementation, i.e. not on how quality assurance is put into practice. What we are aiming for is to have a common understanding of the principles of quality assurance, such as the learning outcomes approach. There is certainly room for improvement here. This is definitely not about having a European action towards harmonising quality assurance across Europe – that is not the intention. The intention is rather to bring them closer together in terms of principles and spirit, to create a certain level of transparency.

• Strengthened monitoring: The follow-up proposal mentions the strengthening of the monitoring (of countries). The EQF AG would certainly have an important role to play in how to do this monitoring – more specific information should thus be provided on this.

• Reflect on 10 criteria: The AG should also reflect on the ten criteria in order to make sure they are ‘the good ones’.

• EASQ: there are lots of links between the EQF and the EASQ public consultation; however, the EASQ developments should not slow down the implementation of the EQF

Cedefop suggested two follow-up actions which could be carried out right away (i.e. in the first half of 2014): It would be worthwhile to revisit the comments made on countries’ referencing reports in order to identify how this process has developed over the years. In addition, there could be an analysis on how countries have actually understood and applied the ‘competence’ descriptor.

COM summarised the main points of discussion. The AG welcomed the conclusions of the Commission report. The report was sent to the Parliament and the Council.

COM pointed out that the AG can address most of the issues highlighted in the Commission's evaluation report under its current mandate. Some other issues may require the revision of the legal basis.

COM invited members to provide their comments on the main priorities for follow-up action by the end of next week (i.e. 7 March 2014). Taking these into account, COM will propose priorities and prepare an operational roadmap for the next meeting of the AG.

COM reminded that the attention of high level policy makers need to be drawn to the usefulness of qualifications frameworks in education and training as well as skills and mobility policies.

7. **REVISION OF THE EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The representative of EURASHE, as member of E4 Group presented the proposal for the revised European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
(ESG) (Cf. ppt). The document has only very recently been sent to the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) and consequently it was not possible for the EQF AG to receive it at an earlier date.

The current proposal is based on the original European Standards and Guidelines published in 2005, and has been developed through a collaborative process involving the cooperation of seven different organisations. The ESG will primarily serve as a practical guide for higher education institutions, agencies and other quality assurance stakeholders in higher education. The revision of the ESG included several consultation rounds involving the key stakeholder organisations and ministries. One of primary focus areas of the revision has been to address the weaknesses of the previous ESG by improving the clarity, applicability and usefulness of the document. The resulting revised document has been developed on the basis of consensus reached between relevant parties.

The three-part structure of the previous ESG has been retained:
- Part 1: Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance
- Part 2: Standards and guidelines for external quality assurance
- Part 3: Standards and guidelines for quality assurance agencies

One of the guiding principles in the revision of the ESG has been to guarantee their adaptability to future developments in higher education. Furthermore, the ESG apply to all forms of higher education regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery. The term ‘programme’ in this context refers to higher education in its broadest sense.

In a next step, the current proposal will be discussed within the upcoming Bologna Follow-Up Group meeting on 9-10 April. The adoption of the revised ESG is scheduled to take place at the 2015 Ministerial Conference in Yerevan, Armenia.

Comments, questions and answers (reactions from EL, IE, LT, Council of Europe, ESU, EYF, PES)

- The importance of the ESG and its use at the national level was underlined, as they allow to directly reach the programme level at higher education institutions.
- Ad. standard no. 1.4 (‘Student admission, progression, recognition and certification’): (How) Could this be relevant for the discussions on validation of non-formal and informal learning within the EQF Advisory Group?
  - EURASHE: This refers to accounting for the different contexts in which a learner participates in education. It happens in the context of an institution. It also refers to the cooperation with the national ENIC-NARIC centre, i.e. the structures are there, but it is up to the institutions to use them.
- Are there any potential implications for public funding?
  - EURASHE/Council of Europe: Effectively the document has a purpose of its own; governance is certainly an issue. The revised ESG will be included in the 2015 Yerevan Declaration, i.e. funding may depend on how far ministries will be prepared to go with this.
- Consultation process: The revision of the ESG included an extensive consultation process – firstly undertaken with stakeholders, and then with the broader public (via website). The draft document has also been presented to the ministers in order to collect feedback from the national level. Part I of the document will probably be most relevant to the work of the EQF Advisory Group, as issues such as the recognition of prior learning and the student-centred approach are found there.
Creating transparency: Do the ESG address the issue of transparency in order to promote/facilitate transnational mobility? How can we ensure that when employers are confronted with higher education graduates that those prospective employees possess the competence required from HE graduates? How can transparency be created here, particularly in light of the recently published results of the PIAAC survey?

- EURASHE: These concerns are legitimate. However, the ESG must be viewed as generic. The document reflects a consensus between seven different organisations; it was not possible to go any further with this document. Nevertheless, for a good reader, there is a lot to be found in there.

COM invited EQF Advisory Group members to submit their comments on the proposal for the revised European Standards and Guidelines by 10 March 2014; alternatively, they could also contact their national BFUG representatives. The proposal is set to be discussed at the upcoming BFUG meeting to be held in Athens in mid-April.

8. RELATING INTERNATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS TO THE EQF

COM provided the AG with a recap of the work on sector-related issues between 2009 and 2010, and the conclusions of the EQF Advisory Group in 2010 based on inputs from Subgroup C. In addition, a survey on international qualifications was carried out among EQF AG members in 2013.

The themes to be addressed by the EQF Advisory Group include:

- There is no single definition of the term ‘international qualification’. Three major categories of international qualifications have been identified according to their legal basis.
- There are different national approaches towards international qualifications.
- There is a need for European level coordination on linking international qualifications to the EQF.

COM suggested a roadmap for the further work of the EQF Advisory Group in this field:

- By June 2014: EQF AG to discuss a proposal for a definition of the term ‘international qualification’, and to provide an overview of national approaches to the inclusion of international qualifications into NQFs.
- By December 2014: EQF AG to discuss an initial proposal on how to coordinate the linking of international qualifications to the EQF at European level.

AT presented the draft mandate of the EQF AG sub-group on international sectoral qualifications (cf. document version of 20 February 2014) which was prepared by the representative from BE-vl, who could not attend the meeting. The focus of the sub-group should be on technical work related to international sectoral qualifications; political discussions remain a topic of the plenary EQF AG meetings. The sub-group should continue the work that has already been achieved in this context – e.g. within previous EQF AG meetings, peer learning activities or related subgroups. There will be two main
perspectives to the work of the sub-group: the learning outcomes approach and quality assurance arrangements.

The work programme for the sub-group is subject to a very tight schedule until the end of 2014. The first task will be to develop a common definition of the term ‘international sectoral qualification’. The definition should be illustrated with examples, if possible.

Sub-group meetings should be organised back-to-back with EQF Advisory Group meetings. Sub-group participants should also be prepared to invest time to work on this issue between sub-group meetings.

EQF AG members were invited to express their interest in participating in the sub-group by 7 March 2014. The same deadline applies to the provision of feedback on the draft mandate document. EQF AG members were reminded that the sub-group should be restricted to a limited number of participants in order to keep the group manageable.

Comments, questions and answers (reactions from AT, FR, IE, LU, NO, SE, BUSINESSEUROPE, UEAPME)

- The AG generally welcomed the draft mandate document and appreciated the effort undertaken towards building this sub-group. In particular the idea of separating technical and policy-oriented work was considered very useful.
- Some participants also expressed scepticism towards the creation of a new sub-group for this purpose, as it might cause additional inconsistencies and might not help solve the problem. Instead it was suggested that COM should provide more guidance, e.g. through organising peer learning activities or through setting up an expert groups to develop referencing examples and guidance material.
- ‘international sectoral qualifications’: it was requested to use this term in this context in accordance with the specifications provided in the EQF Recommendation.
- COM and Cedefop should be part of this subgroup.
  - COM confirmed its willingness to take part in this subgroup as a stakeholder, but stated that it would not chair the meetings. With regard to expenses for subgroup meetings, COM informed participants that they would be paid as long as the meetings were held back-be-back with meetings of the EQF Advisory Group or peer learning activities. Difficulties will only arise if subgroup meetings are organised as stand-alone meetings.
  - Cedefop also confirmed its willingness to support the work of the subgroup. They stated that they could also contribute their expertise from the work on ESCO.
- Sub-group work: FR offered to provide comprehensive information on their international qualifications to be used as a potential case study for the sub-group (information might need to be translated into English).
- Subgroup work: It was suggested that the outcomes of the subgroup could distinguish between the two guiding principles – learning outcomes and quality assurance. This was backed by the example of maritime qualifications where standards are set at international level but quality assurance takes place at the national level. (I.e. In any given country, these standards might meet the requirements of the national QA and the qualification can be included in the national framework, while in another country this might be different.)
- Mandate of the EQF Recommendation: the Recommendation allows for work on relating international sectoral qualifications to the EQF; however, there is also need
for technical information and assessment how further international qualifications (eg. private/company qualifications) can be related to the EQF

- Impact of level inconsistencies: COM invited social partners to share their view on the potential implications of relating the same international sectoral qualification to different levels of the EQF in different countries; what would this inconsistency imply in practice?
  - It was pointed out that these level inconsistencies would put the entire endeavour of the EQF in danger, independent of whether they have any practical impact or not. This could place the EQF and the work dedicated to it for many years in a very bad light. The EQF could lose its credibility vis-à-vis employers, and credibility once lost would be very hard to win back.
  - It was suggested following a step-by-step approach. Now that there are well-established NQFs across Europe, the EQF AG can go further in its analytical work than several years ago. First and most important step should be a detailed analysis to find out what is going wrong that leads to these level inconsistencies. All other aspects could be discussed afterwards anyway.

COM clarified that all this work is essentially being done to achieve transparency, mobility and recognition. That is why it is important to identify examples of potential inconsistencies and the concerns related to them. This would also be important in the light of the modernised Professional Qualifications Directive, which calls for common training frameworks, and their potential link to the EQF.

9. **EXTERNAL DIMENSIONS OF THE EQF**

COM introduced the revised proposal for exploring the role of the EQF in cooperating with third countries (cf. Note AG23-8). The current note is a revised version of the document presented at 22nd meeting of the EQF Advisory Group (December 2013), with the feedback provided by six countries taken into account.

COM invited the EQF Advisory Group to share their views on whether this could be considered a suitable approach, and requested any suggestions on how to simplify the process.

**Comments, questions and answers** (reactions from FI, IE, NL, UK, Council of Europe, ETF)

- NL noted that they have provided comments on the note.
- The document and the roadmap provided by COM was generally welcomed.
- Staged approach: Participants suggested the use of a staged approach where it would only possible to move on to the next stage when the previous stage has been completed. The following example was presented:
  - Stage 1: learn about each others’ framework (maturity of the framework, use of learning outcomes, etc.); become more informed about the third country’s readiness for referencing.
  - Stage 2: analysis on behalf of the EQF AG and the respective country, in the form of a summary of opportunities and risks, in order to identify the value of proceeding.
  - Stage 3: application of the existing 10 referencing criteria to the third country’s framework; determination of whether alignment is satisfactory.
  - Stage 4: alignment.
- Simplified procedure: Shortening the long research phase was suggested. Participants also pointed out that the kind of feasibility study suggested in the proposal would not contribute much to the process. It would, however, be important to maintain a clear perspective on the expectations of both sides. When developing these procedures, the fact that not all third countries will have very well developed qualifications frameworks (as Australia does) must be taken into account.
- Use of the ’10 criteria’: It was pointed out that the existing 10 referencing criteria should be used as extensively as possible in this process, rather than developing a new set of criteria.
- Participants pointed out that a number of non-Bologna countries were developing frameworks for the higher education area. Mexico developed a qualifications framework on the basis of the EQF. It is a reality that the qualifications frameworks (whether EQF or QF-EHEA) are used outside Europe; the important issue here is to ensure that they are not used in a way that could harm the original frameworks.
- Participants also commented that several countries from Southern and Eastern partnerships, which are currently signing association agreements with the EU, may soon articulate similar requests for cooperation with the EQF. These countries are often in the early stages of qualifications framework development. Providing these countries with information on how this process is expected to be undertaken, particularly with regard to the highly relevant criterion No. 4, could be helpful. Existing financial instruments of EU external policy could possibly be used to support these countries in improving their qualifications frameworks.
- The suggestion was made to clearly distinguish between those third countries that can be aligned/referenced to the EQF and those which are developing an NQF ‘in association’ with the EQF.

COM will revise the proposal for exploring the role of the EQF in cooperating with third countries based on the feedback provided by the EQF AG. In particular this implies a substantial modification of stage A. An additional stage may be introduced before stage A; this first stage could consist of an exchange of views between the EU and the respective third country. One possibility would be for third countries to make a presentation on their NQF in the EQF Advisory Group. At the end of this stage a decision would be made on whether to move forward in the process.

With regard to the ‘European criteria’ for cooperation between the EQF and third country or regional qualifications frameworks, COM suggests ‘guiding principles’ or a similar term, to clearly set them apart from the existing ten referencing criteria to be used by European countries. These “guiding principles” should be considered ‘elements of readiness’ that can be used to assess a country’s readiness for cooperation before engaging in further work. The research phase could possibly be altered into an analysis of benefits and risks.

COM will contact the three countries that have expressed their interest in cooperation with the EQF in order to begin the suggested ‘exchange of views’ stage. This may start in next EQF Advisory Group meeting.

10. Presentation and Discussion of the Referencing Report of Greece

Greece presented their referencing report to the EQF Advisory Group (Cf. ppt). The current report is a significantly revised version of the draft report presented to the EQF AG in December 2013.
The process of the development of the Hellenic Qualifications Framework (HQF) began in 2009, with a broad consultation process taking place in 2009–2010. The National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance (E.O.P.P.E.P.) was established as the national coordination point for Greece. The technical development of the HQF started in early 2013. The HQF has been designed as a comprehensive framework consisting of 8 levels. The referencing process officially began in July 2013.

Greece applies an approach whereby qualifications are related to defined Qualifications Types, which are then placed at the appropriate framework levels. The referencing report explains the methodology for this process. Every Qualifications Type is defined by a ‘specification’ that indicates the learning outcomes related to such qualifications and supplementary information (e.g. size, purpose, sector). The entire HQF is based on the concept of learning outcomes.

The term ‘non-formal education’ is commonly used in Greece (including in legislation) to denote a sector of initial VET. The Greek concept thus differs from the widely accepted European concept of non-formal education.

The process of establishing compatibility between Greek higher education qualifications and the QF-EHEA has not been formally undertaken. However, Greek higher education qualifications follow the Bologna structure, and ECTS has been in use since 2005. Greece has, however, not completed self-certification and considers itself to be ‘in the middle of the process’ in this context.

Greece emphasised that their referencing report was the result of hard and collective work, and is based on broad political and stakeholder consensus. At the same time, the Greek delegation made clear that they were aware of existing technical shortcomings in its framework. The Greek representatives emphasised that for Greece the HQF is not seen as simply a ‘technical’ instrument, but is considered to also have a wide political impact. The HQF is expected to have a reforming role in Greece.

Comments, questions and answers (reactions from IE, UK, Cedefop, Council of Europe)

- Participants expressed great admiration for Greece for this achievement, particularly given the difficult conditions in the country. Participants welcomed the presentation of this significantly revised report and congratulated Greece on the work achieved so far. The referencing report now presents the development of the HQF in a clear manner, and also describes the involvement of stakeholders and the referencing process in a far more transparent fashion. The intention for the HQF to include non-formal qualifications and international qualifications is now stated clearly.
- The report also makes clear that it is, in fact, work in progress. The report contains rich background information in relation to the 10 referencing criteria. According to the report, appropriate structures and procedures have been developed. However, these procedures and structures must still be implemented and put into practice. In particular, the framework needs to be populated with qualifications based on learning outcomes.
- Criterion 1: Legal and formal responsibilities are presented in a clear manner. What is less clear, however, is how other stakeholders (e.g. other ministries in charge of awarding qualifications) will be mobilised in the implementation of the framework.
• Criterion 4: Even though Qualifications Types are related to the same level, the learning outcomes may in fact be different. The report honestly states that more levels (e.g. sub-levels) may be required. The testing of the Qualifications Types will provide direction on how criterion 4 will be addressed.

• ‘Non-formal’ education: The term ‘non-formal education’, which in Greece describes a part of initial VET, has now been explained with clarity.
  o EE: This term is part of Greek legislation and thus cannot be simply ignored.

• Higher education: The issue of higher education within the HQF appears to still be ‘work in progress’. Greece’s honesty in openly declaring this was widely appreciated.

• ‘Bridges’ between different systems: The pathways within the education system are now well described. However, there is a need to explain the bridges between the different systems/types of education more thoroughly.

• International experts: Participants suggested the inclusion of specific comments made by the international experts – this would provide added value to outside readers.

• Stakeholders’ reactions: It would be interesting to hear about the reactions received from stakeholders. Was it all ‘sweetness and light’ or did certain people reject the framework?

• Need for a roadmap: Several EQF AG members pointed out the need for a more specific action plan for future developments, including more detailed steps.
  o EL acknowledged the need for a more detailed roadmap. There is general awareness of the issues to be addressed in the future, in particular that there are many elements that need to be implemented and tested in practice. EL confirmed its intention to report back to the EQF Advisory Group in the future to inform members on the progress made.

COM acknowledged the substantial progress made by Greece since the last presentation to the Advisory Group. More effort may be required to help other countries better understand the situation of Greece and be convinced by the work undertaken. Some ‘grey areas’ remain which must be clarified. The scope of the report – i.e. which qualifications are to be included in the framework – could be described more clearly. COM invited EL to discuss some of the open issues with the EQF Advisory Group during its next meeting. This need not take the form of a comprehensive presentation; a discussion of selected points would be sufficient.

CONCLUSIONS AND AOB

Upcoming dates:
• 31 March – 1 April 2014, 24th meeting of the EQF Advisory Group
• 5-6 June 2014, 25th meeting of the EQF Advisory Group
• 17 June 2014, European EASQ conference
• 1-2 October 2014, 26th meeting of the EQF Advisory Group
• 2-3 December 2014, 27th meeting of the EQF Advisory Group
Annex: List of participants

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