PEER LEARNING ACTIVITY ‘INTERNATIONAL SECTORAL QUALIFICATIONS’

16-17 June 2015, Sofia, Bulgaria

Summary report

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INTRODUCTION

On 16 and 17 June 2015, a Peer Learning Activity (PLA) was held in Sofia, Bulgaria, on the topic of ‘Referencing International Sectoral Qualifications to the EQF’.

This PLA was hosted by the Ministry of Education and Science, Bulgaria, in cooperation with France and the EQF AG sub-group on International Sectoral Qualifications, and financially supported by the European Commission. The event was attended by approximately 37 participants from 14 European countries (Austria, Belgium-FI, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Romania, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, Hungary, and Bulgaria).

PLA objectives

The purpose of this PLA was to further explore the topic of International Sectoral Qualifications (ISQ) and their link to qualifications frameworks.

One of the objectives set by the EQF Recommendation adopted in 2008 was that the EQF should ‘enable international sectoral organisations to relate their qualifications systems to a common European reference point and thus show the relationship between international sectoral qualifications and national qualifications systems’. The EQF Recommendation however does not provide a definition of what is to be understood by an International Sectoral Qualification, nor does it refer to how this link to the EQF should be established.

This has led to a number of open questions on the topic of ISQ, which this peer learning activity sought to address, by gathering representatives of Member States, representatives of sectors, and experts, to discuss these aspects.

The current working definition of an ISQ (as developed by the EQF AG sub-group on ISQ) is as follows: ‘An ‘International Sectoral Qualification’ is a certificate, diploma, degree or title awarded by an international body (or a national body accredited by an international body) and used in more than one country which includes learning outcomes (based on standards developed by an international sectoral organisation or an international company) relevant to a sector of economic activity.’

Purpose of this report

This report summarises the discussions that took place during the PLA. It is written for a wider audience than those who participated in the PLA in order to share information with the wide range of organisations and bodies involved in implementing national qualifications frameworks and referencing qualifications levels to the EQF.

This report should be used to support the work of the Commission and participants in the PLA in disseminating the results of the activities of the PLA to countries’ stakeholders.

The report is structured according to the objectives of the PLA and draws on a range of presentations, country cases and workshop discussions that formed the PLA. A full list of the agenda for the PLA is included in Annex A.
PLA STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

Day 1

Day 1 began with a welcoming address by Vladima Popova-Natova, on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Science, Bulgaria, and by representatives of the Technical University of Sofia. Susanne Lonscher-Räche welcomed participants on behalf of the European Commission and thanked Bulgaria for having agreed to host this peer learning activity.

Brigitte-Veronique Bouquet (CNCP, FR) presented the background note to this PLA. She emphasised the purpose of this event, namely to find, or at least discuss, a suitable definition of ISQ, based on the working definition elaborated by the ISQ sub-group, and to discuss the risks and benefits of linking ISQs to qualifications frameworks. She also drew a parallel to the topic of including non-formal or private qualifications in NQFs.

This was followed by three input presentations, the aim of which was to set the scene for the workshops sessions. Each input presentation focused on a different perspective towards ISQ.

- The first input presentation focused on a sectoral approach. Irina Topalova (Cisco Academy of the Technical University of Sofia, BG) presented the concept of Cisco Academy as an IT skills and career building programme for learning institutions and individuals worldwide.

- Baiba Ramina (Academic Information Centre and EQF-NCP for Latvia) went on to provide a national perspective, by presenting the outcomes of a recent national study on international qualifications, in which they explored the concept of international qualifications and tried to gauge the demand for linking them to the Latvian NQF.

- In the third and final input presentation, Wilfried Boomgaert, Chairman of the ISQ sub-group to the EQF AG, presented the final outcomes and recommendations of the sub-group’s activity.

After these plenary presentations, participants were invited to attend one of three parallel workshop sessions which were held in the second half of the afternoon, each one focussing on a different aspect of International Sectoral Qualifications. Each workshop session started with two presentations of (national) case studies, followed by group discussions. Group 1 discussed the differences between ISQ and national qualifications, in particular with regard to their link to qualifications frameworks. Group 2 reflected on International Sectoral Qualifications in the context of non-regulated qualifications/professions. Group 3 discussed International Sectoral Qualifications in the context of regulated qualifications/professions.

Day 2

Day 2 began with another workshop session, in which the sessions of Day 1 were repeated, to allow participants to effectively attend to different workshop sessions. This was followed plenary session to discuss the perspective of EU social partners on the topic of ISQ.

Afterwards, workshop rapporteurs presented a summary of the presentations and discussions of the workshop sessions held on Day 1 and 2, reflecting on the main points of discussion and key messages raised in their workshops.

The peer learning activity concluded with a synthesis session, chaired by Wilfried Boomgaert, in which participants reflected on the main challenges and recommendations discussed, and on issues to be further explored in relation to International Sectoral Qualifications.
Key messages from the PLA

The two recurring key topics of this peer learning activity, which emerged across all workshops, referred to the definition of ISQ and to understanding the actual demand by international sectoral qualifications for inclusion in NQFs/EQF. Further key points include:

**Definition of ISQ:**
- Scope: What can be considered as an ISQ is not always a clear-cut decision; also, national perspectives differ. Examples: national qualifications which are based on certain international regulations, but which are integrated in or awarded as a national qualification; (parts of) national qualifications, which are exported to another country.
- Discussions referred to all elements of the term ‘ISQ’, i.e. to what is meant by ‘international’, by ‘sectoral’ and by ‘qualification’. Ambiguity refers to all three elements. The checklist added to the definition is considered as very useful, but could be further developed.

**Understanding of the EQF**
- The EQF should be considered as a ‘package’. It is not only about levels. Instead, other core aspects of the EQF also need to be taken into account: learning outcomes and quality assurance.

**Value added of ISQ inclusion in NQFs**
- Consulting international sectoral organisations: Listen to those concerned – it is important to take the perspective of international sectoral organisations into account, i.e. those who provide ISQ. The value added of an inclusion to the respective international sectoral organisations plays an important role, as the procedure of inclusion must be driven by the owner’s initiative.
- It is important to determine what defines the interest of international sectoral organisations in the NQF/EQF. Possible factors include: access to funding; promotion/visibility; quality label; competition with public qualifications. > This requires reflection on what the appropriate policy response by national/European authorities would be.

**Opening up frameworks**
- The inclusion of ISQ is closely related to the wider topic of opening up frameworks to qualifications outside the formal (and often public) education and training system.
- Key requirements of opening up frameworks: quality assured qualifications & coherent alignment. Frameworks integrating qualifications from outside the formal system (‘open frameworks’) must have sensible policy in place (capacity to react when somebody contests a levelling decision; capacity to say no to inclusion).
- The inclusion of international/non-formal qualifications into NQFs provides added value, as it helps to draw a complete picture of a countries’ qualifications system. It must however be accepted when providers do not want to take the burden and prefer to rest outside.
- Do all qualifications require a level? Would it be an option to include qualifications in a national register of qualifications or database of qualifications without linking them to a level?
**Direct vs. indirect linking of ISQ to the EQF:**

- There was no clear preference within the group towards direct or indirect linking of ISQ to the EQF. There seemed to be agreement, however, that the different scenarios should be further explored, and that sufficient time should be available to select the most appropriate one.

- There is little experience with actual procedures for linking ISQ to NQFs. Most qualifications identified were in fact national qualifications with an international component, or based on international standards, which belong to formal education and training. Thus, the procedure for linking formal qualifications to the NQF was applicable in such cases.

- A procedure for direct linking of ISQ to the EQF would require a clear statutory basis and significant capacity building at EU level. Would the EQF AG have the necessary capacity, resources and know-how to engage in such a process? Would the EQF AG engage in assessing these quality assurance processes?

**Issues to be further explored**

- More exchange on the inclusion of non-formal or private qualifications in NQFs is requested, e.g. through peer learning activities.

- International standards (e.g. in the maritime sector) often have a long history. Very often, they are characterised by strong input orientation. One possibility would be to approach the standard-setting bodies, to work together towards achieving a more outcome-centred perspective in these standards.

- Importance of information and exchange: The importance of continuing to inform each other on procedures in place or under development at national level to link ISQs to NQFs was emphasised.
INTRODUCTION TO THE PLA: PRESENTATION OF THREE APPROACHES

A) Example of a sectoral approach: the case of Cisco

Irina Topalova (Cisco Academy of the Technical University of Sofia, BG) presented the concept of Cisco Academy as an IT skills and career building programme for learning institutions and individuals worldwide. The Faculty of German Engineering Education and Industrial Management, of the Technical University of Sofia, host the Cisco Academy. Since 2002, more than 1,800 certificates have been awarded.

Cisco Academy offers several different certificates, ranging from the basic ‘IT Essentials’ to the ‘CCNP’ certificate, which addresses university graduates. Training is managed through an online platform. The certificates issued are CISCO certificates; there is no correspondence to the formal system of education and training. The certificates are well-recognized by the labour market.

The Bulgarian NQF currently only includes qualifications from the formal sector. The possibilities for including non-formal qualifications into the framework are being explored.

B) Example of a national approach: International qualifications in Latvia

Baiba Ramina (Academic Information Centre and EQF-NCP for Latvia) provided a national perspective, by presenting the outcomes of a recent national study on international qualifications, in which they explored the concept of international qualifications and tried to gauge the demand for linking them to the Latvian NQF. Latvia currently does not have a specific approach for including international qualifications into the LQF.

The core research questions for the study were as follows:

- What are international qualifications?
- What international qualifications are awarded in Latvia?
- What is the role of international qualifications in the education and labour market?
- Should we include international qualifications in LQF?

As one part of the research, interviews with 15 different providers of international qualifications were carried out. The working definition applied for the study was rather broad in scope; some of the qualifications referred to in the survey would thus not fall into the definition of ISQ by the EQF AG sub-group (example: a module of a foreign national qualification, which has been exported to another country).

Latvia experiences interest from several sectors, which aim to have their qualifications included in the LQF (e.g. TOEFL, CIDESCO certificates).

The survey led to the following conclusions: First, there is a need to raise awareness of international qualifications and to change the public attitude towards online assessment tools. Second, there is a need to introduce a learning outcomes-based approach for international qualifications. Third, the results of the survey do not lead to a conclusive answer as to whether or not international qualifications should be linked to the LQF; further discussion is needed.

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1 Note that the Latvian study refers to international qualifications, not international sectoral qualifications.
C) EU approach: conclusions of the ISQ sub-group

Wilfried Boomgaert, Chairman of the ISQ sub-group to the EQF AG, presented the final outcomes and recommendations of the sub-group’s activity. The EQF Recommendation does not provide a definition of ISQ as such; it only provides a definition of ‘sector’ and of ‘international sectoral organisations’. This last definition is however rather narrow in scope. The sub-group has developed the following (preliminary) working definition of ISQ: ‘An ‘International Sectoral Qualification’ is a certificate, diploma, degree or title awarded by an international body (or a national body accredited by an international body) and used in more than one country which includes learning outcomes (based on standards developed by an international sectoral organisation or an international company) relevant to a sector of economic activity.’ The working definition is complemented by a ‘check list’ for selecting those categories of ISQ which are relevant in the context of the EQF Advisory Group (EQF AG). This ‘check list’ refers to the ownership of the ISQ; its scope and a focus on stand-alone qualifications.

The report concludes with a set of recommendations, addressed to the EQF AG, on the further dealing with ISQ. Key aspects are the definition of ISQ, the possible different scenarios for linking ISQ to the EQF, and methods supporting the exchange of information between countries (e.g. through a digital platform). As regards the possible three scenarios for linking ISQ to the EQF mentioned in the report of the sub-group, two basic options exist: either, ISQ are directly linked to the EQF; or ISQ are indirectly linked to the EQF, through their linking to National Qualifications Frameworks.

The sub-group’s advice to international sectoral organisations is that they consider the EQF as a ‘package’. It is not only about levels. Instead, the EQF is a package which consists of the learning outcomes approach, common principles for quality assurance, and EQF levels. This should be very well communicated to the wider public including the international sectoral organisations.
WORKSHOP SESSIONS

After the plenary presentations, participants were invited to attend one of three parallel workshop sessions which were held in the afternoon, each one focussing on a different aspect of related to International Sectoral Qualifications. The workshop sessions were repeated on Day 2, in order to allow participants to attend more than one workshop.

Each workshop session started with two input presentations of (national) case studies, followed by group discussions. Group 1 discussed the differences between ISQ and national qualifications. Group 2 reflected on creating a method for the levelling of qualifications. Group 3 discussed which aspects should (or should not) be taken into consideration when levelling qualifications.

Workshop 1: Differences between International Sectoral Qualifications and national qualifications

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<th>Workshop 1: Differences between International Sectoral Qualifications and national qualifications</th>
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<td><strong>Session chaired by Maria Kargl, 3s Unternehmensberatung</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Rapporteur: Ivana Radonova, Ministry of Education and Science, Bulgaria</strong></td>
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### MetaLog Project

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<th>Sigrid Nindl, 3s</th>
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<td>‘METALOG – European Logistic Skills Network’</td>
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The MetaLog project, a two-year Leonardo da Vinci project (2013-2015), aims to improve transparency and comparability of transport and logistics qualifications in Europe, by developing a sectoral qualifications framework for transport and logistics. In addition, MetaLog also aims to establish a forum for the anticipation of future skills needs in the sector, by consolidating a European Logistics Skills Network.

The project thus hopes to make a contribution to greater transparency and comparability between qualifications/qualifications systems in this sector. The project consortium includes partners from six European countries: Germany, France, Austria, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Hungary.

www.project-metalog.eu

### Poland

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<th>Andrzej Zurawski, IBE</th>
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<td>‘Sectoral qualifications frameworks – Polish experiences’</td>
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Poland has decided to take a specific approach towards sectoral qualifications frameworks, by trying to express how they can be made explicit within an overarching conceptual (learning outcomes) approach. SQFs in Poland can be understood to provide a ‘third degree’ of level descriptors, i.e. in addition to universal level descriptors and descriptors for education and training sub-frameworks (e.g. for GE, VET and HE).

Sectoral qualifications frameworks have been developed for five sectors: telecommunications, tourism, banking, sports, IT. There are plans to establish 16 more.

Guiding questions:

- Which ISQs are frequently used in your country? What are their specific characteristics, and for which purposes are they used?
- Are the examples presented during this workshop relevant in your country? If not, why?
- What is your motivation to consider a linking of these ISQs to your NQF?

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2 As presented in the background note.
- Which kind of (additional) information would you need for starting the linking of these ISQs to your NQF?
- What are the most essential advantages of these ISQs? Do we really need the linking of these ISQs to the NQF to optimize these advantages?
- What is the difference, within the same economic sector, between ISQs and national qualifications awarded in the formal education system?
- Do you agree with this definition of ISQ as proposed by the sub-group?
- Is the relevance checklist developed by the ISQ sub-group useful to define what can be considered an ISQ?
- If not, which other aspects should it include?

**Key points:**
- It is key to have the support from stakeholders in the sectors, and therefore it is important to pay attention as to how to involve them successfully. The Polish experience is a good practice example: the support of sector experts was very important for the success of the framework.
- The definition of ISQ was questioned in some aspects, specifically with respect to the terms ‘international’ and ‘sectoral’, as well as regarding the scope of the term ‘qualification’ itself.
- Quality criteria should be considered when including ISQ.
- Clarity is needed about what is already included in NQFs.
- Frameworks as ‘soft regulation’: Frameworks are sometimes conceived to have a regulatory aspect.

**Open questions:**
- Is there an actual need to include international sectoral qualifications into qualifications frameworks? > More time needed to investigate.
- Is it necessary to link all qualifications to the NQFs even if they do no meet all the requirements?
- Does mapping everything really have added value?
- Scope of the term ‘qualification’ itself: should ‘small’ certificates be included?
- How to bridge the gap between the education and the labor market?
- How to build mutual trust between stakeholders in the sectors and the group?
- What is actually meant by ‘international’ – does it refer to the skills or the qualification, or else?
- Are there transversal ISQ, and should they be included?
Workshop 2: International Sectoral Qualifications and non-regulated qualifications/professions: risks and benefits

Ireland
John O’Connor, QQI

‘If relating ISQs to the EQF is the solution; what is the problem?’

Ireland has a National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ) rather than a national qualifications framework, highlighting the fact that it is not restricted to Irish qualifications, but an integrative, comprehensive framework. The framework is open to professional qualifications, provided that they are backed by good policy. Ireland has a very flexible qualifications architecture, which allows them to develop special-purpose qualifications, for small volumes of learning (e.g. 10 ECTS only).

Microsoft Certifications are one example of ISQ which have been included in the Irish NFQ. As for the procedure of inclusion, they applied an approach which part-nationalises private qualifications (through a traditional academic accreditation approach). They are included at NFQ level 6 (EQF level 5). This approach is currently suspended, and a new one is being developed.

There is a lot of reflection going on as to whether the inclusion of ISQs into the NFQ is a sensible thing to do, as there should be a good reason for imposing this procedure and the cost related to it on the organisations.

Latvia
Gunta Kinta, Academic Information Centre

‘Country study: International sectoral qualifications in ICT’

For Latvia, the ICT sector is one of the priority sectors in education and for the economy. ICT sector exports have increased by 62.5% between 2008 and 2013. ICT education and training is provided by vocational schools, higher education institutions and education centres.

In autumn 2014, Latvia carried out a study to explore the definition of an international qualification, and to discuss whether they should be included in the Latvian NQF. Study results show that the following advantages are related to international ICT qualifications: international popularity; specific and up-to-date knowledge; based on standards. Disadvantages refer to the high cost for obtaining these qualifications, and to the fact that they are not recognised for public procurement procedures, where typically a higher education qualification is required.

There is no conclusion as to whether international qualifications should be included in the LQF. Further research and discussion will be needed.

Guiding questions:

- What can be learned from the cases presented?
- In the case of countries that have already linked ISQs to their NQFs or have studied the relevance of certain ISQs in their country, which ISQs were chosen and why? Are ICT certificates or qualifications a priority? Why or why not?
- Does having an ISQ (for example in the ICT sector) open more doors within the sector: does it create additional rights and advantages in the national or global labour market, sometimes leading to a higher salary?
- Does this kind of ISQs make recruitment easier for employers?
- Are these ISQs adapting more rapidly to changing needs of the industry?
- Are they described in terms of learning outcomes?

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3 As presented in the background note.
- Is the obtaining of these ISQs feasible in a shorter period of time than through formal education pathways? And is it more expensive than formal education pathways?
- In order to be accredited as a training provider and/or assessment centre, are there specific requirements regarding education/training process, certification process, equipment and tools, staff or work safety?

**Key points:**

**General remarks**

- Purpose of leveling: EQF leveling for mobility (ex-post recognition for standards achieved) vs. EQF leveling as an ex-ante assurance with respect to programme and provider quality?
- Terminology: There are many different concepts used to describe the process of ‘relating qualifications’ (which is the term used by the EQF Recommendation), which leads to the risk of getting lost in translation. Examples of terms used: including, aligning, referencing, allocating, classifying, leveling, and linking.
- In several countries, the interest in ISQ is not particularly pronounced at the moment, often because they are incorporated in national education and training systems, for example as part of a national qualification.

**The interest of international sectoral organizations in the NQF/EQF**

- ICT qualifications are well understood in the labour market. What is the benefit of NQF inclusion then? The cost and time required to undergo the inclusion process should not be imposed on providers for nothing.
- It is important to determine what defines international sectoral organizations’ interest in the NQF/EQF. Possible factors include: access to funding; promotion/visibility; quality label; competition with public qualifications. What is the appropriate policy response by national/European authorities? Can it be solved by improved guidance and information, or will a different policy response be necessary?

**Scope of NQFs and inclusion of ISQ**

- The area of ISQ is inconclusive, contested space about which there is not much information available yet. > There is a need to learn more about it.
- What is the purpose of leveling a qualification? What is the nature of the problem? Information? Regulation? Quality assurance?

The following matrix was suggested to illustrate this issue:

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<th>Member State activity</th>
<th>EU level activity</th>
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<td>Information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality assurance</td>
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- Key aspects of opening up frameworks: quality assured qualifications & coherent alignment. In addition, it is important for a country to have sensible policy in place (capacity to react when somebody contests a leveling decision; capacity to say no to inclusion).
- The inclusion of international/non-formal qualifications into NQFs provides added value, as it helps to draw a (close to) complete picture of a country’s qualifications.
system. It must however be accepted when providers do not want to take the burden and prefer to rest outside.

- Qualifications cannot capture all learning that is relevant. Furthermore, not all learning necessarily requires certification. However, if it is to be certified and included in the NQF, it must be able to be assessed.

- It is important to distinguish between ISQ that are part of a national qualification and stand-alone ISQ. ISQ only become an issue when they are stand-alone qualifications. Otherwise they are included as part of a national qualification, thus the procedures for linking national qualifications to the NQF will apply.

- Should a difference be made between vendor-specific and vendor-neutral certifications?

- Should there be a possibility for NQF/EQF inclusion without a level?

**Possible direct linking of ISQ to the EQF**

- Is there room for a European solution on ISQ?

- What is the status of an EQF leveling of an ISQ and what purpose does it fulfill?

- Clear statutory basis required: It is important to make sure that there is a policy and a toolkit to do this properly at European level. Would the EQF AG have the necessary capacity, resources and know-how to engage in such a process? Would the EQF AG be equipped to deal with appeals to leveling decisions?

- Whenever an EQF level is associated to a qualification, there should be some form of quality assurance in place. Would the EQF AG engage in assessing these quality assurance processes? Would this be a departure from the purely transparency-related role of the EQF?

- The roles and purposes of NQFs differ across countries; some of them are pure transparency tools. In case of a direct inclusion, it must be made clear that the relationship to NQFs will then be an indirect one, i.e. the EQF level of a (directly included) ISQ does not automatically translate into an NQF level.
### Workshop 3: ISQ and regulated qualifications/professions: risks and benefits

**Session chaired by Stephanie Mayer, Federal Ministry for Education and Women’s Affairs, Austria**

**Rapporteur:** Mimi Daneva, Ministry of Education and Science, Bulgaria

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<th>Bulgaria</th>
<th>‘Seafarers’ Qualifications and the Bulgarian Maritime Administration’</th>
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| Spaska Georgieva, Maritime Administration Executive Agency | Bulgaria provided an information about who is who in the field of Maritime in national context (national competent authority, executive agency), what their responsibilities, functions and activities are. Most of powers of the Minister of Transport in the field of Maritime are directly transferred to the Maritime Executive Agency. Some of the functions are shared with the Minister of Education and Science and the Minister of Health.  

The Minister of Transport, Information Technology and Communications is responsible for Policy Making and the implementation of the International Treaties and Agreements in the field of Seafarers’ Qualifications, Safety of Shipping and Environment Protection, as well as for the implementation of legal and administrative acts. The Executive Agency Bulgarian Maritime Administration performs functions and activities related to Seafarers.  

BG informed about:  
- the international treaties and the main pieces of national legislation in the sector, in particular:  
  ✓ the Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers’ 1978, as amended;  
  ✓ Directive 96/50/EC on harmonization of conditions for obtaining national Boat-Master Certificates  
- the levels of responsibility of various professionals in Maritime (management level, operational level and support level);  
- types of competences and qualifications of staff in the sector according to the STCW Convention;  
- which are the Bulgarian E&T institutions in Maritime, |

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<th>France</th>
<th>‘Maritime Qualifications: The French Case’</th>
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<td>Brigitte Bouquet, CNCP</td>
<td>In France, maritime qualifications were linked to the NQF at a very early stage of NQF implementation already. The origin of a qualification (i.e. whether it is from the formal or non-formal sector) is not relevant for inclusion into the French NQF. There are four requirements towards a qualification for it to be included, upon demand, in the NQF: relevance of the qualification (related to</td>
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the skills needs of the specific sectors); graduates’ opportunities for labour market insertion; quality of certification (guaranteeing that the certified learning outcomes correspond to what is expected from a holder of qualification at this level); arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. France generally applies a strong dissociation of ‘certification’ and training programmes.

When the ‘first generation’ of maritime qualifications were registered, some issues remained, such as: input-based description of the qualifications (i.e. no learning outcomes-based description; compliance with STCW requirements); issues related to the validation of non-formal and informal learning. France has tried to solve this with the ‘second generation’ of maritime qualifications to be registered.

Guiding questions:

- What can be learned from the cases presented?
- In the case of countries that have already linked ISQs to their NQFs or have studied the relevance of certain ISQs in their country, which ISQs were chosen and why? Are maritime certificates or qualifications a priority? Why or why not?
- Does having an ISQ (for example in the maritime sector) open more doors within the sector? Does it create additional rights and advantages in the national or global labour market? Are these rights enhanced by the European Directive on professional qualifications (2005/36/EC) or not? Why?
- Are these ISQs adapting more rapidly to changing needs of the sector? Or on the contrary, are they very static because of the link with regulated professions?
- Are they described in terms of learning outcomes?
- For being accredited as a training provider and/or assessment centre, are there specific requirements regarding the education/training process, certification process, equipment and tools, staff or work safety?
- Can the ISQs from the maritime sector be obtained in combination with formal education? Are they awarded together with national qualifications? How this ‘double awarding’ is organised? Who awards the ISQ and who the national qualification? Are there formal agreements on that issue?
- Would there be interest in common European levels built by Member States and the Commission?

Key points:

- Added value of link to NQF? The qualifications discussed are very specific. They are national qualifications which are part of an internationally regulated sector. Is there an additional demand for them being part of a qualifications framework?
- The maritime sector is characterized by a high degree of regulation, and qualifications are often well-recognized. What is the added value then, for international sectoral organizations, in taking the bureaucratic burden required to have their qualifications included in a qualifications framework? Even if the added value seems evident, it would be worth finding out about the organizations’ perspective.

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4 As presented in the background note.
• It is important to communicate with sectors, to gauge their demand for inclusion in qualifications frameworks. For this purpose, it is also important to identify the ‘owner’ of these qualifications – in some cases, they may not be evident.

• Common core and national context-related elements: Maritime qualifications often share important similarities across countries, e.g. because they are based on certain core standards, and complemented by other elements which are more related to the national context. The aviation industry, for example, is quite similar in this regard.

  How to deal with qualifications, which have a ‘common core’ but whose different national context-related elements lead to different EQF levels? Do the different levels compromise acceptance?

• There is little experience with actual procedures for linking ISQ to NQFs. Most qualifications identified were in fact national qualifications belonging to formal education and training, thus the procedure for linking formal qualifications to the NQF was applicable.

• In many cases, maritime qualifications still have a strong input orientation, i.e. it is difficult to describe them in terms of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, competence). The international treaties, on which they are based, are not written in terms of learning outcomes.

• The inclusion of ISQ in NQFs does not seem to be a national priority in many countries.

• More exchange on the inclusion of non-formal or private qualifications in NQFs in general is requested, e.g. through peer learning activities.
POINT OF VIEW OF EU SOCIAL PARTNERS

Thomas Mayr, Director of the ibw institute (Research & Development in VET, AT) presented the point of view of EU social partners towards International Sectoral Qualifications, which was then discussed among participants. He represents UEAPME in the EQF Advisory Group. UEPME is the employers’ organization representing the interests of European crafts, trades and SMEs at EU level.

As UEAPME, they fully support the development of the EQF and NQFs and consider them as important tools to provide transparency. It is desirable to have a picture of the qualifications landscape of a country available which is as complete as possible, i.e. by including also non-formal and private qualifications, and thus international sectoral qualifications. It must be taken into account, however, that the inclusion of qualifications in qualifications frameworks will often entail bureaucratic and financial effort for these organizations. Their interest in the NQF/EQF is thus highly welcome, but cannot be taken for granted.

The decision on the appropriate procedure for linking ISQ to the EQF – whether directly or indirectly through NQFs – is a complex one, albeit also a necessary one. The different scenarios should be further explored, and sufficient time should be taken to select the most appropriate one. It must be taken into account in this context that the roles and purposes of National Qualifications Frameworks strongly differ across countries. In some countries, they will have a regulatory function, whereas in others their role is related to the provision of information and transparency only.

In case of a direct linking of ISQ to the EQF, it must be made clear that the relationship to NQFs will then be an indirect one, i.e. the EQF level of an (directly linked) ISQ does not automatically translate into an NQF level. This must be in particular communicated to international sectoral organizations which might (wrongly) assume that the linking of an ISQ to the EQF automatically implies inclusion into NQFs (and the assignment of an NQF level).

In the case of a direct linking to the EQF, the following elements would be required: an information and alert mechanism (which ensures communication between countries and facilitates early identification of potential conflicts); a mechanism for conciliation (to deal with actual problems); and an emergency break mechanism (to suspend the procedure and forgo the linking of this particular qualification). Such procedure would require significant capacity building at EQF level.

What should be avoided in any case is a situation where one and the same qualification is linked to different NQF levels in different countries; as such a case could seriously compromise the credibility of the EQF and its role as a transparency tool.
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The peer learning activity concluded with a synthesis session, chaired by Wilfried Boogaert, in which participants reflected on the main challenges and recommendations discussed, and on issues to be further explored in relation to International Sectoral Qualifications.

Participants argued that in some respects, the peer learning activity has raised more additional questions than it has been able to answer, emphasizing the need for further discussion and exchange on the topic of International Sectoral Qualifications.

Definition of ISQ

- Discussions referred to all elements of the term ‘ISQ’, i.e. to what is meant by ‘international’, by ‘sectoral’ and by ‘qualification’. Ambiguity refers to all three elements.

  Example Norway: There are tripartite discussions on the contents of a qualification. Yet, they would not be called ‘sectoral’ qualifications.

  ‘Sectoral’: can be understood as ‘driven by sector requirements’.

  ‘International’: qualifications usually have no ‘home country’ as such.

- It is a good idea to complement the definition with a checklist of criteria to define what is to be understood by an ISQ. The existing checklist could be further developed. The ‘ownership’ aspect is of particular relevance.

Which ISQ are relevant for including them into NQFs/EQFs and why?
What is the added value of linking this kind of Qs to frameworks?

- What are countries’ experiences from engaging with sectors? Are there examples of sectors which actively request to become part of the NQF?

- Should the national approaches and methods for linking ISQs to NQFs be used for developing EU guidelines for this type of linking?

- Do all qualifications require a level? Would it be an option to include qualifications in a qualifications register or database without linking it to a level?

- Value added to qualification owners: It is important to consider the value added which an inclusion provides to the owner of a qualification, i.e. the international sectoral organization. After all, the procedure of inclusion must be driven by the owner’s initiative. Therefore a dialogue with the international sectoral organizations is needed.

  ‘Is there an interest for CISCO in potentially engaging with the EQF, given that these qualifications are so well accepted by the industry?’

- The benefits perceived from inclusion into a qualifications framework will differ across sectors and stakeholder groups.

- Organizations that wish to have their ISQs linked to the EQF should be offered a solution to do so. Those who do not carry this wish, should not be pressured.

Issues to be further discussed

- Two key topics emerge from this peer learning activity: first, further work on the definition of ISQ and in particular to ensure common understanding of the term and its scope; second, communicate with those concerned (i.e. international sectoral organizations) and take their perspectives into account.
Countries’ attitude towards non-formal qualifications or towards qualifications outside the formal system in general, plays an important role. This attitude is related to the development stage of the NQF: new NQFs are focusing on formal qualifications.

Despite the revised definition of ISQ, its scope is still broad. To make further work on ISQ manageable, it would be important to set priorities, and start by exploring several particular areas or fields of ISQ only.

Examples mentioned for selection: selecting the top-10 ISQ in Europe in terms of mobility activity; selecting the top-10 ISQ where the level of frustration with mobility issues is highest; distinguishing between qualifications which are international by nature (e.g. transport) from others which are not, despite high levels of mobility (e.g. doctors); making a cost-benefit analysis; taking stock of existing EU projects and sectoral initiatives.

International standards (e.g. in the maritime sector) often have a long history. Frequently, they are characterized by strong input orientation. One possibility would be to approach the standard-setting bodies, to work together towards achieving a more outcome-centered perspective in these standards.

Harmonization issue: full harmonization is not wanted; European work should be focused on common core sector profiles.

How to deal with sectors which use EQF principles (sometimes in an inconsistent way) to develop sectoral standards? One possibility would be to distinguish between using EQF principles for the development of sectoral standards and the explicit use of EQF levels by sectors (e.g. sports sector, Frontex). The second issue (i.e. the explicit use of EQF levels) is more critical and should be focused on. Attention should be paid to the difference between a qualification and an occupation and between a qualification and a concrete education or training programme.