INTRODUCTION

The thirty-fourth meeting of the EQF AG was attended by representatives of 33 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 action points of the thirty-third meeting of the EQF AG of 1-2 December 2015 were also adopted without further comment. As for the draft minutes of the 33rd meeting of the EQF AG, Norway requested an addition to item 6 (‘Lessons learnt from the Joint Technical Working Groups with AUS, NZ, HK’).

COM welcomed the representatives from Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina to the EQF, which participated for the first time in a regular EQF AG meeting.

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

Information on developments in the Bologna Process

Council of Europe informed the EQF AG about recent developments in the Bologna Process. The three working groups and four advisory groups for the current period (2015-2018) are currently having their first meetings and starting their work. One of the advisory groups specifically focuses on the revision of the Diploma Supplement.

The issue of refugees continues to be in the focus of discussions. In the recent Council meeting, the issue of refugees was high up on the agenda. A recent survey carried out in the ENIC-NARIC network highlighted that several ENIC-NARIC centres have to deal with soaring numbers of applications for recognition, this also implies a financial burden for the centres. Council of Europe also referred to a recently presented report on child

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1 Please note: all meeting documents and Power Point presentations have been uploaded to the e-community of the EQF Advisory Group: http://europa.eu/sinapse/directaccess/qualification_framework
refugees, emphasising the obligation of countries to provide education to minors below the age of 18.

Council of Europe informed the EQF AG of the launch of a new platform on ethics in education, which aims to fight corruption in education – an existing problem in several countries, which must be addressed.

Council of Europe has been developing a competence framework for democratic culture, similar to the language competence framework. There is currently a testing exercise ongoing (accessible through the CoE website) to identify the most important and relevant descriptors.

Main elements of the Draft Joint Report on ET 2020 from the Council and the Commission

COM (DG EAC) presented the main elements of the Joint Report on ET2020, which was adopted at the Education Council of 23 November 2015. The annex to the report outlines six new ET2020 priority areas for the period up to 2020 (cf. Note AG34-I). Each of these priority areas is further described through concrete issues which refer to them. The priority areas and concrete issues are not to be understood as the priorities for the national level, but as priority areas for European cooperation. COM added that the Joint Report for the first time explicitly refers to the work of the EQF AG.

The report also refers to specific priorities for VET and for adult learning for the period up to 2020. For VET, they correspond to the Riga conclusions of 22 June 2015, proposing a new set of medium-term deliverables in the field of VET for the period 2015-2020.

The new ET 2020 working groups

The implementation of above mentioned priority areas and concrete issues will be done through six ET2020 Working Groups (on the topics of school education, higher education, vocational education and training, adult learning, digital skills and competences, and Paris Declaration follow-up). These groups gather various experts from relevant Ministries and other international organisations, social partners and civil society organisations, and public bodies. The groups will start their work on 22-23 February 2016 (kick-off meeting).

2. EU Financial Support

EACEA provided the group with an update on the state of play of EQF-NCPs restricted calls for proposals (cf. ppt), referring to the restricted calls for EQF-NCPs (2015 and 2016), and to the restricted call for EQF databases (2015). EQF-NCP calls aim to provide an annual action grant to EQF-NCPs to support the implementation of the tasks assigned to them by the EQF Recommendation. As for the restricted call EQF-NCP 2016, EACEA informed the group that for the first time, there has been one joint restricted call with three lots: for EQF-NCP; Euroguidance; and Europass, in order to improve the exploitation of synergies between the different networks. In total, EACEA received 29 applications out of 37 eligible countries; the notification of the grant decision and signature of grant agreements will take place in February 2016, the ending date of the action is 31 December 2016. There will be a cluster approach for monitoring visits.

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For the restricted call for EQF Databases 2015, EACEA received 16 applications. The notification of the grant decision and signature of grant agreements will take place in May 2016, i.e. the scheduled starting date of the action is 1 June 2016, and the ending date of the action is 31 May 2018. The evaluation procedure will involve external evaluators, with a focus on project management, implementation of the work plan, promotion and dissemination, and networking.

EACEA also provided an overview of the implementation of actions for the funding period of 2014, based on the data provided by the NCPs in their final reports. COM addressed the fact that the available budget has not been fully exploited and invited countries to comment on possible reasons for this.

Comments and questions (reactions from DE, FR, IT, LV, NL, AT):

- Participants thanked EACEA for the excellent support provided in the administration of the proposals and grants.
- Request for longer contractual periods: Several countries commented that the relatively short contractual periods make it difficult to put certain activities into practice, e.g. when internal procedures at national level require that a public tender be launched before a study can be commissioned.
- Funding needs will actually increase rather than decrease in the future (in particular for the databases); underutilisation of the budget is rather a result of difficulties arising from the design of calls and/or requirements imposed by national level procedures.
- It was requested that COM would make more active use of the network of NCPs, and that the exchange between NCPs would be better promoted, e.g. through more regular NCP meetings.

EACEA informed the EQF AG that they will consider advancing the publication of calls, in order to make it easier for countries to access and utilise the funds made available at EU level. In addition, EACEA invited countries to contact them if they experience any specific problems, which might hinder them from submitting proposals for funding and/or using available funds.

COM currently schedules and organises bilateral meetings (country visits) with technical staff at national level, in order to learn more about national requirements regarding the databases and possible future activities which could be considered for funding in future calls for proposals. Countries were invited to signal their interest in such a technical meeting at national level to COM. On 4 February 2016, a technical workshop on this topic was held in Brussels, addressed to technical (database) experts. A second workshop of this type could be organised if countries signaled sufficient demand for it.

3. INFORMATION ON THREE STUDIES IN RELATION TO THE POSSIBLE EQF REVISION

COM informed the group about three ongoing studies in relation to the possible revision of the EQF Recommendation. The outcomes of the studies will feed into the discussion on the possible revision of the EQF Recommendation and its operational implementation.
All three studies are carried out by external contractors, in close cooperation with COM. The final reports to the three studies are to be submitted to COM for end of June.

**Study on ‘Obstacles to Recognition of Skills and Qualifications’**

This study will explore empirical evidence on the obstacles (and underlying causes) faced by education and training providers, employers and intermediary organisations in coming to fair, efficient and effective recognition decisions; and the obstacles faced by individuals when they want to have their skills and qualifications recognised. The study will identify existing formal and de-facto recognition practices (acknowledgement of the value of skills and qualifications through economic and social stakeholders) both for employment purposes and for further study. The study covers 13 countries in total.

**Study on ‘Sectoral Qualifications Systems and Frameworks and their Relation to the EQF’**

This study will collect comprehensive information on and identify current challenges with regard to international sectoral qualification systems and frameworks and their relation to the EQF. The 39 EQF countries are covered. The outcomes of the study shall help COM to explore how to better support initiatives in this area.

**Study on ‘Feasibility of Setting Institutional Arrangements at European Level to Ensure Management and Quality Assurance of Issues Related to an Extended Scope of the EQF’**

This study aims to explore possible new tasks which might arise, at European level, as a result of the possible revision of the EQF Recommendation. In this respect, it will study quality assurance criteria and procedures related to international sectoral qualifications, qualifications systems and frameworks, preparatory work for the alignment of third country qualifications frameworks to the EQF and the management of the ESCO classification after its first full release. The study will also explore, from a more theoretical perspective, the feasibility of the development, governance and continuous updating of European core profiles of qualifications.
Comments and questions (reactions from BE, DE, IE, EE, FR, IT, BUSINESSEUROPE, Council of Europe):

- The EQF AG welcomed the implementation of these studies and confirmed that it would be very important to further explore these three topics, as an empirical analysis to underpin the policy thinking.
- Timing of the studies: Participants expressed their dissatisfaction about the timing with which the EQF AG received information about the three studies. Furthermore, participants wondered why the studies were not commissioned earlier, so the final results can be available in time for the possible revision of the EQF Recommendation.
- The EQF AG requested COM to regularly inform the group about the progress and development of the three studies, and to provide interim results as soon as they become available.
- The EQF AG would have preferred to discuss the European core profiles for qualifications and its relevance within the EQF before COM decided to further explore this through a study and a call for proposals.
- Study 1: Several participants raised concerns about the definition of the term 'de facto' recognition, which seems to go beyond of what is normally understood as recognition. It was suggested differentiating between different fields of application, e.g. recognition for education and training purposes; and recognition for employment purposes. Furthermore, participants mentioned a study on the legal monitoring of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which could be of use for this study.
- Study 2: It would be particularly important to take into account the quality assurance mechanisms currently in place for international (sectoral) qualifications.
- Study 3: The terms of reference do not mention the principle of subsidiarity at all.

COM agreed to inform the EQF AG about the progress and development of the three studies; interim results will be presented at the April meeting of the EQF AG. COM emphasised the role of the EQF as a tool for comparison and transparency of qualifications; there is no intention for the EQF to become a recognition tool. Furthermore, there are no plans to establish a new body or agency at EU level to deal with the discussed issue. Also, the topic of European core profiles for qualifications will only be explored from a theoretical perspective. As for the timing of the three studies, COM informed the group that while the outcomes of the studies will inform the preparation of the proposal for a revised EQF Recommendation, they more importantly will provide information for its subsequent implementation.

4. **Main Elements of the Skills Agenda**

COM presented the main elements of the upcoming Skills Agenda, which is currently being devised. The focus of the Skills Agenda stems from an employability and competitiveness perspective – with the overall aim of ensuring higher and more relevant skills for all. According to the current state of the work, proposals for the Skills Agenda will focus on the following three main areas: EQF, Europass, low-skilled population.

COM also referred to additional topics which are currently being discussed within the framework of the Skills agenda, including: intensified cooperation with the business world (e.g. through sector initiatives); digital skills, entrepreneurship skills; fostering VET mobility (extension of duration of mobility stays).
COM emphasised that the presented reflections are still very much work in progress, to which they would welcome the EQF AG’s feedback, input and ideas.

Comments and questions (reactions from BE, DE, FR, IT, NL, Council of Europe, BUSINESSEUROPE, UEAPME):

- Participants requested to receive more information on how and when the EQF AG is expected to contribute to the work on the proposed Skills Agenda.
- If the focus is on up-skilling, EQF and Europass might not be the most relevant tools to select, but perhaps the EQF in relation with ECVET and the validation of non-formal and informal learning.
- While acknowledging the importance of basic skills, participants also pointed out that there is a need for tools to promote the excellence of education and training.
- When discussing VET, and its attractiveness in particular, higher VET should not be left out of the picture.
- When discussing VET mobility, it would be worth looking also at the practical obstacles preventing employers from engaging in longer-term learner mobility (administrative burden, social security issues, etc.).
- Terminology used: EQF AG members emphasised that any communication should pay careful attention to the use of the terms ‘skills’ and ‘qualifications’ and how they are understood. The EQF in particular is a qualifications framework.
- Role of the EQF: Participants commented that the EQF, as a tool for transparency and comparability of qualifications, has not been developed to fulfil some of the functions and roles that have been suggested; there is a risk that the EQF as a tool will be ‘overburdened’ with additional roles and functions.

COM agreed to circulate a document highlighting the proposed main topics for the Skills Agenda for more in-depth discussion at the April meeting of the EQF AG.

5. REFERENCING REPORT OF THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia presented their EQF report to the EQF AG (cf. ppt). NQF development started already in 2002-2005 with initiatives and proposals. The law on the National Qualifications Framework was adopted in October 2013. The EQF Referencing process started in May 2014. The role of the NQF goes beyond a mere transparency tool; it has been designed to help reform the system of education and training in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The presented report is a joint report for EQF referencing and self-certification to QF-EHEA.

The Ministry of Education and Science plays an important role in the process. It coordinates NQF development and implementation; coordinates the referencing of the NQF to the EQF and the self-certification to the QF-EHEA; adopts standards for qualifications and is in charge of communicating the NQF to the general public. The National Board for the Macedonian Qualifications Framework was established in October 2015. The MKQF has eight levels, with levels 5 to 7 being divided into sublevels A and B; these sublevels are defined by different volumes of qualifications. There is a register of qualifications; which is composed of several sub-registers for the different segments of education and training. This is based on an inventory of qualifications, which was carried out with the support of ETF between 2014 and 2015.
The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia then briefly addressed each of the ten EQF referencing criteria. The presentation was concluded by pointing out the most important steps for the next two to three years: harmonising legislation with the law on the NQF; reforming VET qualifications/system; strengthening partnerships with employers and other stakeholders; strengthening the quality assurance system; work on validation of non-formal and informal learning; developing a database of qualifications.

Comments, questions and answers (reactions from IE, HR, Cedefop, Council of Europe, ESU, ETF):

- The group thanked the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia for their presentation. The EQF referencing report is a comprehensive and well-structured document. It clearly depicts the current state of implementation of the NQF, making it clear that it is a young framework, with a young governance structure. The report is honest in clearly pointing out the gaps and the next steps to be taken. The report describes the MKQF as a comprehensive framework with a strong reform role, clearly outlining that it will be implemented in stages.
- Criterion 1: More information was requested on how the newly established governance body (National Board) interacts with other bodies currently in place, especially quality assurance bodies.
  - The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: The collaboration between the different bodies is indeed a challenge that must be dealt with. Also, a harmonisation of the law will be needed.
- Criterion 2: Further information concerning the ‘restructuring’ of five domains that had existed in higher education qualifications architecture into three domains of knowledge, skill and competence of the MQF, would be of interest.
- Criterion 3: The report clearly points out that this criterion is not fulfilled in all areas; it describes that the implementation of learning outcomes is very much work in progress. More information was requested (examples) on how learning outcomes are designed in different parts of the system. Also, more information in English language was requested.
- Criterion 4: is considered to be partly met. The inclusion of qualification seems to follow two procedures: one based on the NQF law, and one for vocational-type qualifications. The report should address these procedures in more detail, explaining how levelling decisions are taken. The existing inventory of qualifications could be annexed to the report.
- Criterion 5: The report explains the quality assurance procedures in a clear manner; the EQF AG requested to receive more information on how this is implemented in practice. In addition, further information on the stated independence of the Higher Education Accreditation and Evaluation Board would be of interest.
  - The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: The Board is indeed independent; the Department of HE within the Ministry partly takes over its administrative and technical work. The Board is currently an affiliated member to ENQA; full membership is expected to be granted soon. Within the planned amendment of higher education legislation, the Board will be placed as an agency-type body, emphasising its independent status.
- Recognition of prior learning: More information on the recognition of prior learning in higher education would be of interest.
  - The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: Some higher education institutions autonomously allow for recognition of prior learning; but it does not take place often. There is no national procedure for RPL.
• Sublevels: The reason for the sublevels in place on level 5 to 7 is still not very clear for an international audience.
  o The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: Sublevels only reflect different ‘sizes’ of qualifications. The introduction of sublevels was demanded by employers.

• Qualification types: For the ‘vocational type’ qualifications (as opposed to ‘education level type’ qualifications), more information was requested as to how these qualifications are being designed and used, and how they link to the formal system.

• Stakeholder involvement: A few issues for the future: Much more effort required to improve the systematic cooperation with institutions of the labour and employment domain (Ministry of Employment) – must be better involved in the activities from now on. Another issue is cooperation with trade unions, which have been involved very little in the process so far.
  o The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: In the future, both the Ministry of Employment and trade unions will be involved in the process through the National Board for the MKQF.

• Language diversity: The report is not sufficiently clear about the role which the NQF plays in managing diversity in the country; more information on the extent to which the education system covers minority languages (and mobility between subsystems of education in different languages) would be of interest.
  o The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: As soon as a given municipality has share of minority languages of more than 20 percent, primary education must be offered in the respective language. Education programmes offered in a minority language must include Macedonian as a second language. As for HE, when a particular study programme is not offered in a given (minority) language, the government will impose a quota on the respective study programme in Macedonia, making sure that there will be places reserved for the minority group concerned.

• Sustainability of the framework: The strongly project-driven development of the NQF is an issue in terms of sustainability; the report is not sufficiently clear on how implementation of the NQF will be guaranteed once support through project funding will stop.
  o The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: For the development of the NQF, financial support from abroad was elementary. However, sustainability of NQF implementation is guaranteed and will rely on national funds; it does not depend on support through project funding. The main reason for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’s active involvement in project activities is to cooperate as much as possible with other countries – with the aim of facilitating the recognition of qualifications abroad.

• Detailed roadmap: A more detailed roadmap with specific activities planned to effectively implement the NQF would be of interest.

COM thanked the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia for their presentation and the clear replies to the questions provided. The report provided is transparent, clear and comprehensive. COM also congratulated on the completed referencing to the EQF, and invited them to complete their report and make it ready for publication on the EQF portal, including a more detailed roadmap and a link to the report on the inventory of qualifications. COM added that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has, with significant and remarkable effort, reached the starting point for its NQF implementation. It will be interesting to watch the implementation of the framework in the future. COM invited the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to make, in about one year’s time, a
brief presentation to the EQF AG to inform the group about the steps taken and the further progress made.

6. **STATE OF PLAY OF THE SWEDISH REFERENCING REPORT**

Sweden presented the state of play of the referencing of the SeQF to the EQF (cf. *ppt*). The SeQF has been designed as a comprehensive framework to include all types of qualifications – regardless of the provider type. Given that a substantial part of education and training takes part outside the formal education system in Sweden, one of the expected key benefits of the SeQF is that it allows to bring qualifications awarded inside and outside the formal system together in a national framework, to increase transparency and provide an accurate and useful overview of qualifications awarded in Sweden.

The development of the SeQF has been quite a long process in Sweden. More than 10 commissions have worked on different topics related to NQF development between 2009 and 2015. In 2014, the Ministry of Education issued the official proposal for hearing to 143 stakeholders. In August 2015, the Ordinance on the SeQF was adopted by the government. This Ordinance came into force in two steps between October 2015 and January 2016 – as regulation of the framework and regulation of the application for levelling. The development of the SeQF has been characterised by extensive stakeholder involvement.

The SeQF comprises eight levels expressed in learning outcomes. Descriptors have been formulated to allow for inclusion of qualifications from different areas and from different actors on equal terms. The levelling of qualifications is done in two steps. First, qualifications that are regulated, quality assured and have learning outcomes specified in their regulation, are levelled by the government and included in the annex to the Ordinance. Secondly, providers of other qualifications can apply for levelling in the SeQF with the Agency for Higher Vocational Education, by following a specified application procedure. There is an Advisory Body in place to assist the Agency in deciding on the level for a qualification. The decision on a level will be valid for a period of ten years, after which a renewed application will be needed.

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

- The group thanked Sweden for their highly informative presentation, which presented an updated state of play of their EQF referencing process.
- What is the motivation of owners of non-formal qualifications to request inclusion in the framework?
  - SE: For the owners of these qualifications, it is a way to work on the quality assurance of their qualifications, to work with learning outcomes – they consider this as a way to make their qualifications more transparent. The application fee will be EUR 1,000.
- How is the QA for private sector qualifications organised?
  - SE: there is no difference between the public and the private sector. However, a strategy for long-term QA for private providers must be developed.
Parity of esteem between public and private owners of qualifications: Do public bodies/ministries have an ‘easier route’ to the SeQF?
  SE: The procedures do not distinguish between private and public providers, but between providers that have their learning outcomes regulated and those that have not (the latter must undergo the application procedure). I.e. there are also formal qualifications which must undergo the application procedure (e.g. police qualifications).

Definition of ‘qualification’: What are the reasons for and implications of having a definition of the term ‘qualification’ that is even shorter than the one used by the EQF?
  SE: The definition has been developed for the purpose of the Ordinance. It is up to the Agency to decide on the inclusion of a qualification into the SeQF.

Which body takes the final decision on the levelling of a (non-formal) qualification?
  SE: The formal decision on the level is taken by the Agency (NCP), based on the result of the discussion in the Advisory Body, which includes members from various stakeholders.

Empty level 3. will there be qualifications on level 3 in the future? What are the implications for progression to higher levels?
  SE: This has not been a major issue at national level. The expectation is that qualifications from other (private) providers will be allocated to level 3.

Levelling of upper-secondary engineering qualifications: why on SeQF level 5?:
  SE: With vocational tracks, learners can choose between a school-based or the apprenticeship model; the learning outcomes should be the same. Whether an apprenticeship done after graduation can ultimately lead to a higher qualification level, remains to be seen: this is a task for the future.

More information on the 10-year period of validity of qualifications
  SE: Throughout the 10-year validity period, the Agency will at least once conduct a follow-up and re-affirm that the qualification meets the requirements for the level. Qualification owners will need to proof, through documents, that the relevant criteria are still met. This process is currently under development.

Scope: Will the SeQF include former qualifications?
  SE: Sweden has generally included only qualifications that are currently being awarded. One exception is the secondary school, where a new model was introduced in 2011. In this case, both qualifications (the former and the new one) have been included.

COM concluded the discussion by thanking Sweden for their excellent presentation, adding that they look forward to the presentation of their EQF referencing report at the April meeting of the EQF AG.

7. Validation of non-formal and informal learning: overview of national developments on the implementation of the Council Recommendation on VNFIL

COM (cf. Note AG34-3, ppt) provided an overview of the national reporting on VNFIL arrangements expected from countries towards 2018. There are four core elements of reporting:
• National reports by 2018: Presentation to the EQF AG of a one-off report on the implementation of validation arrangements by each country. A common structure for this report was agreed upon during the 22nd meeting of the EQF AG (cf. Note AG22-8; Note AG34-3). COM prepared a list of optional guiding questions (Note AG34-3), which follow the agreed structure of the one-off national reports and the (revised) European Guidelines for VNFIL.

• Shared roadmap highlighting milestones to be achieved, both at EU and national level. It shall help secure the commitment towards the 2018 deadline.

• Development of national roadmaps (optional). The EQF AG is not expected to comment on the information provided by a country in its national roadmap. This milestone had been set for mid-2015.

• Information on the progress in VNFIL to the EQF AG: COM proposed two options for this, either through short (5-minute) update presentations to the EQF AG on the progress of national roadmaps, or through a state-of-play country overview presented to the EQF AG, in which the country describes the progress in developing validation arrangements under development more in detail. COM aims to have 2-3 short presentations and one state-of-play country overview per EQF AG meeting.

COM will maintain a monitoring table, providing an overview of national progress and developments in relation to the 2018 target for VNFIL arrangements (i.e. similar to the monitoring table maintained by COM for the EQF referencing milestones).

Cedefop informed the group that the European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning have recently been published in their second edition; paper copies are available upon request. The document is currently being translated into several different languages.

Ireland provided a 5-minute presentation, and gave a brief overview of what is currently happening with regard to the development of national arrangements for VNFIL.

A RPL Practitioner Network has been established, aiming to connect RPL practitioners nationally to share learning, toolkits and insights, including through online fora, to promote RPL practice and make it more visible, and to enable a coherent practitioner voice to shape and inform policy development. Colleagues of the EQF AG are invited to attend meetings of this network.

COM invites other countries to volunteer for a short update presentation or a state-of-play presentation on their validation arrangements at one of the upcoming EQF AG meetings.

Comments and questions (reactions from BE, DK, IE, Cedefop):

• The group welcomed the note and presentation which helps to better explain the expectations on countries’ reporting on VNFIL arrangements up to 2018.

• The suggested plan for presentations might be too ambitious (in particular the progress presentations to the EQF AG). The AG suggested focusing on a small number of key activities, such as a 10-minute state-of-play presentation, the organisation of PLAs, and the one-off national reports.

• Participants suggested creating a separate mailing list of validation representatives within the EQF AG, to facilitate their networking activities.

France presented the key outcomes of this peer learning activity, which was held on 11 and 12 January 2016, in Paris, FR. The PLA showcased a variety of different examples of good practice from various fields, regions and/or enterprises.

Guidelines and counselling should accompany all steps of the validation process. Furthermore, PLA participants identified the need for general national guidelines for guidance/counselling. Participants expressed the need for some kind of ‘lifelong portfolio’, accompanying individuals throughout their trajectories.

PLA discussions also highlighted a problem of terminology regarding the term ‘validation’. Companies tend to talk about competence assessment rather than validation. In certain languages ‘validation’ (or its translation) implies all four steps of the validation process, leading to certification, whereas in others it may only comprise the steps of ‘identification’ and ‘documentation’.

COM informed the group that the report on the PLA has already been sent to the participants for their feedback; it will be forwarded to the EQF AG shortly.

Comments and questions: No comments.

9. **ERASMUS+ CALL KA3 POLICY EXPERIMENTATION, PRIORITY 2: EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS – VNFIL IN E&T**

EACEA and COM informed the group about the open call for proposals on policy experimentations, under Erasmus+ Key Activity 3 (cf. ppt). The key objective of policy experimentations is to promote transnational cooperation and mutual learning among public authorities at the highest institutional level of the eligible countries in order to foster systemic improvement and innovation in fields related to education, training and youth. The current call lists six priorities for education and training and one on youth. One of these priorities specifically refers to validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Policy experimentations must involve high-level public authorities. The proposal stage is split into two stages: a pre-proposal and a full proposal (submission dates: 14 April and 13 October 2016 respectively). Projects are intended to be large-scale, with a duration between 24 and 36 months and a maximum EU grant of EUR 2 million (max. EU co-financing of 75%). Projects are expected to start between 1 January and 28 February 2017. The call also lists specific requirements for the composition of project partnerships.

COM specified that it is about identifying, designing and testing assessment methods and tools for validating informal and non-formal learning (in particular of transversal skills). The field trials do not have to be the same in all countries. Each public authority (partner) carries out the field trials in its own territory, on the national sample selected, with the help of the key stakeholders and of the evaluator. All projects must be supported and accompanied through sound a evaluation/review throughout its lifetime.

Comments and questions (reactions from DK, DE, EE, IE, FR, AT, UK):
The group thanked EACEA and COM for the information provided. Several countries signalled their interest in taking part in a project but also pointed out that they would not have the capacity to take on a leadership role.

The group also suggested that ‘information meetings’, such as the EQF AG, might not be best suited for partnership building; another format could be considered to promote the creation of partnerships for projects of VNFIL.

COM acknowledged the capacity issue raised by countries, and pointed to the possibility of choosing a ‘delegated body’. As for the composition of countries (geographically speaking), the call does not include any indication. COM also informed the group that the call for proposals on policy experimentations is biennial; the priorities of the call however will be different next time. COM concluded the discussion by offering to organise a webinar for interested parties, to promote the formation of partnerships.

10. STATE OF PLAY OF THE REFERENCING REPORT OF “KOSOVO”

Kosovo presented the state of play of their EQF referencing process (cf. ppt). The development of the NQF started in 2004 through working groups established with EU support. The NQF has been implemented since 2012. The EQF referencing process started in 2014. Besides its role as a transparency tool, the NQF is considered as a major reform tool for reforming the education and training system in Kosovo.

The NQF is based on the principle of learning outcomes and comprises eight levels (no sub-levels). ECVET and ECTS are used as credit systems. Furthermore, Kosovo has started to work on the issue of recognition of prior learning (RPL). There are six different types of qualifications placed in the framework: Higher Education Qualifications, General Education Qualifications, National Combined Qualifications, National Vocational Qualifications, Qualifications based on International Standards, Tailored Qualifications (recently introduced). The National Qualification Authority, is responsible for development and management of the NQF, and for VET qualifications. Its Governing Board includes representatives from Ministries, universities, social partners and NGOs and is responsible for the strategic management of the NQF. MEST (Ministry of Education) is in charge of general education qualifications. KAA, the Kosovo Accreditation Agency, is in charge of higher education qualifications. There are three main processes related to the implementation of the NQF: the development and verification of occupational standards; the development and validation of qualifications; the process of accreditation of VET and HE institutions.

Kosovo concluded their presentation by pointing out the most significant challenges for the future: the post-accredited monitoring for VET, the development of occupational standards, and the full participation of all relevant stakeholders.

Comments and questions (reactions from Cedefop, Council of Europe, ETF):

- The group thanked Kosovo for their good and concise presentation, which clearly highlights the progress made in the implementation of the NQF and the EQF referencing process.

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3 This designation is without prejudice to position on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.
• It would be interesting to learn more about the main observations made so far on the impact of the NQF, now that it has been in place for three years, i.e. on the education and training landscape, on the linkages between subsystems, and on its users.
  o Kosovo: Private sector actors increasingly wish to have their qualifications included in the NQF. Sectors approach the NQF with the request to develop occupational standards. Furthermore, the public has become significantly more aware of the NQF. There is no study on the impact of the NQF so far.

• The NQA is very close to vocational education and training. How are representatives from general and higher education involved in the process, in order to make sure that they are equally represented?

• What are the different types of qualifications and their implications, in particular as regards mobility and progression between the types.

• Kosovo has not been accepted to the Bologna Process, as it is not accepted as an entity. Have provisions been made, in the development of the EQF Referencing Report, for the case that Kosovo were accepted as a member of the Bologna Process (i.e. could it serve as joint report for QF-EHEA self-certification)?

• Which work is currently ongoing on the development of procedures for RPL, the objective of validation procedures and the link to the NQF?
  o Kosovo: RPL for Kosovo already takes place and plays an important role, in particular for its situation as a post-war country. The current objective is to put everything under one umbrella and have it quality assured.

• The group asked Kosovo to briefly address the topic of minority languages.
  o Kosovo: General education must be delivered in all languages, also in the languages of minorities. There are also HE qualifications included in the NQF which are delivered in Turkish language, for instance. In general, the language is not an issue as long as the technical criteria for inclusion in the framework are met.

COM thanked Kosovo for their clear presentation and the reaction to the comments made. COM informed Kosovo that references to EQF-levels can only be used once a country has referenced to the EQF.

11. **Peer Learning Activities**

Results of the PLA on ‘Levelling master craftsperson qualifications’

Germany presented the main outcomes of the PLA on the topic of ‘master craftsperson qualifications’, which was held on 30 November and 1 December 2015 in Berlin, DE and which was attended by 63 participants from various countries (cf. *ppt*). Master craftsperson qualifications, despite sharing the same name/title, are allocated to different NQF levels (thus resulting in different EQF levels) across countries, as exemplified by the examples of Slovenia (level 4), France (level 5) and Germany (level 6) presented at the PLA. This PLA thus sought to explore the reasons for allocating master craftsperson qualifications to different levels, taking into account possible differences in learning outcomes; the role of national contexts; and the criteria applied for levelling.

One of the key outcomes of the PLA was that while learning outcomes are considered as highly useful for making similarities and differences between qualifications visible, they are not the only factor determining the NQF and EQF levels of qualifications. Also national context factors play a role in practice. Understanding national contexts and
mutual exchange are of great importance to make national differences understandable, to create and foster transparency and trust.

Comments and questions (reactions from BE, FR, UK, NO, Council of Europe):

- Participants reiterated the importance of PLAs as an instrument for mutual learning and exchange.
- The fact that levelling is more than a technical exercise, and that there is a social dimension to it, has been known for a long time. Yet, the topics discussed and the depth of discussions at the PLA were considered as a concrete sign of maturity of the EQF, and of the format of PLAs.
- It is both enlightening and worrisome to learn that the levelling of qualifications depends as much on national context factors as on learning outcomes; to which extent will this have an impact on European mobility (and thus on individual citizens),
- Participants underlined that comparing similar qualifications in different countries is indeed a topic that should be further dealt with.

Draft programme of the PLA on ‘Qualifications Frameworks and Recognition’

Luxembourg presented a first draft agenda (still subject to changes) of this upcoming peer learning activity, which will take place on 17-18 March 2016 (cf. ppt). The PLA will include plenary sessions and table discussions, all held in English language.

The overarching question that shapes this PLA is how qualifications frameworks can help facilitate the recognition of qualifications. ‘Qualifications’ may refer to regulated or non-regulated qualifications, professional or academic ones, and including third-country qualifications. The purpose of the PLA is (1) to clarify the term ‘recognition’; (2) to analyse to which extent the recognition tools and the qualifications frameworks can be complementary; and (3) to analyse if frameworks are fit for purpose, i.e. whether the two elements of levels and learning outcomes are sufficient.

LU invited the EQF AG to submit ideas and suggestions for the PLA and warmly invited the group to take part in this PLA.

Comments and questions (reactions from FR, UK):

- Participants welcomed the organisation of a PLA on the topic of recognition. It was suggested that a clarification of the term ‘recognition’ would indeed be very valuable. Furthermore, the point was made that the PLA should focus on the added value qualifications frameworks can provide in the context of recognition.

COM acknowledged the importance of providing clarity on the most important terms and definitions used in this context ahead of the PLA; this could be done through a background paper. COM added that in the context of recognition of third-country qualifications, the topic of refugees might be touched upon.

First outline of the PLA on ‘Levelling school leaving certificates’

Ireland presented a first outline of this PLA, which will take place on 2 and 3 June 2016 in Belfast, UK, and which will be jointly hosted by Ireland and the UK. The PLA will focus on upper-secondary school leaving qualifications that provide access to higher
education and aims to build on the outcomes of previous PLAs on the topics of school-leaving qualifications and of the levelling of qualifications. The PLA will not focus on domestic issues but explore the topic from a European dimension.

Comments and questions (reactions from BE, NO, Council of Europe, ETF):

- The group welcomed the organisation of a PLA on this particular topic.
- Participants suggested several topics and aspects, which could be considered for the PLA: (a) the existence and importance of bilateral agreements, which are of high relevance for HE access (such as between BE and FR); (b) the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which also applies to qualifications providing access to HE; (c) the topic of what can actually be considered as a school leaving qualifications (e.g. will the PLA cover vocational upper-secondary school-leaving qualifications too?)

12. CONCLUSIONS AND AOB

COM concluded the meeting and briefly summarised the dates for the upcoming meetings. SE confirmed that they intend to present their EQF referencing report at April meeting of the EQF AG, whereas RO stated that they would not be able to present at that date.

Upcoming dates:

- 17-18 March 2016, peer learning activity on ‘Qualifications frameworks and recognition’, Luxembourg (LU)
- 13-14 April 2016, 35th meeting of the EQF Advisory Group, Brussels (BE)
- 2-3 June 2016, peer learning activity on ‘Levelling of school leaving certificates’, Belfast (UK)
- 14-16 June 2016 (tbc), 36th meeting of the EQF Advisory Group, Brussels (BE)
Annex: List of participants

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