National Correspondents for Qualifications Frameworks (QF-EHEA)

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Study of self-certification reports on the compatibility of national qualifications frameworks with the overarching qualifications framework of the European Higher Education Area

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Summary

The success and the real acceptance of the Bologna Process in a country in Europe depends on trust and confidence amongst stakeholders in the country and internationally, which further depends on transparency of national self-certification processes and their results. The self-certification reports must be prepared according to agreed common criteria and procedures for the self-certification. They must be made public so that partners in the Bologna Process countries are able to see the reasons that led competent national authorities to conclude the compatibility of their qualifications framework for higher education with the Bologna framework.

This study paper has been prepared to support understanding and discussions on the self-certification processes and their methodologies of referencing national higher education qualifications, and on presenting the results of the self-certification processes.

Several aspects from self-certification reports have been analysed in this study: relation of the self-certification of a particular country with the referencing process to the EQF; the role, structure and involvement of international experts during self-certification processes; the state of play of the implementation of validation of non-formal and informal learning; the usage of learning outcomes by higher education institutions and characteristics of learning outcomes; and the implementation of quality assurance processes, as defined by the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA.

Key words

Bologna process, Self-certification, Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area, Qualifications frameworks, Quality assurance, Validation of non-formal and informal learning.
1 Introduction

The idea for the development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks for higher education in most countries in Europe originates from the aspiration to increase the competitiveness and better the lives of individuals and the society. All agree that this is possible to achieve by development and implementation of relevant quality assurance to the entire qualifications system.

The quality of the entire qualifications system in any country, especially the quality of the higher education, is crucial for societies that want to create knowledge-based economy and social inclusion of individuals. Modern globalising economy requires countries with more and more well-educated individuals who are able to perform complex tasks and adapt rapidly to their changing environment and the evolving needs of the society, labour market and individuals. The extent of ongoing learning, compared to formal education, is crucial because of the importance of continuous non-formal and informal learning for ensuring a constant upgrading of knowledge, skills and competence.

It is more and more clear that in the globalised world it is not possible for governments and societies to improve the quality of citizens’ lives without ensuring the quality and relevance of the national higher education system, which should integrate carefully scientific, technology development, and social dimensions.

The Bologna Process is an example of an instrument, which integrates such dimensions of individuals and society and has arrived at a very critical point.

Currently, a number of higher education institutions in 49 countries in Europe, and other stakeholders, understand the importance of quality assurance mechanisms for higher education. Several thousand higher education institutions and other stakeholders in Europe have adapted their higher education systems, modernised study programmes, implemented quality standards and strengthened their quality assurance mechanisms.

Although all countries and higher education institutions in Europe are going towards the same direction, most of them still need to do lot in order to be competitive compared to higher education institutions in some other well developed countries.

Many students are interested in studying or working abroad, but when going or coming back from most of European countries they still face obstacles in having their qualifications or part of studies recognised for work and even for further studies. Very often, individuals realise that they do not have right knowledge, skills and competence for employment or other parts of their careers.

The Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) is an instrument designed to improve transparency of qualifications, to support lifelong learning, and geographical and sectoral mobility. The QF-EHEA intends to help modernisation and build bridges between national higher education systems in, currently, 48 Bologna Process countries.

The success of the Bologna Process in a country and in Europe depends on trust and confidence amongst all key stakeholders in the country and internationally. This further depends on transparency of national self-certification processes and their results. Thus, it has been important to agree on common criteria and procedures for the self-certification to the QF-EHEA.

A set of agreed self-certification criteria and procedures includes the designation of competent bodies responsible for the maintenance of the NQF by the national ministry responsible for higher education, a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the NQF and the cycle qualification descriptors of the QF-EHEA, the existence of national quality assurance systems for higher education consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent communiqué agreed upon by Ministers through the Bologna Process.
Furthermore, the national qualifications framework and any alignment with the QF-EHEA, is to be referenced in all Diploma Supplements. The self-certification report must be made public so that partners in the Bologna Process are able to see the reasons that led competent national authorities to conclude the compatibility of their qualifications framework for higher education with the Bologna framework, and other QF-EHEA criteria and procedures.

The particular purpose of this study paper is to support understanding and discussions on the self-certification processes and their methodologies of referencing national higher education qualifications to the QF-EHEA, and on presenting the results of the self-certification processes.

The recently developed self-certification reports are the obvious source of information about technical methods for referencing to the QF-EHEA. Sometimes the technical details have been explicit in the reports, and sometimes the technical details have been included only in background documents, or even not at all.

Several aspects from self-certification reports have been analysed in this study: the relation of the QF-EHEA self-certification of a particular country with the country’s referencing process for the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF); the role, structure and involvement of international experts during self-certification processes; the state of play of the implementation of validation of non-formal and informal learning; the usage of learning outcomes by higher education institutions; and the implementation of quality assurance processes, as defined by the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA.

2 Self-certification in relation to the EQF referencing process

The QF-EHEA predated the EQF by three years. Hence the process for self-certification of national frameworks relating to higher education, adopted by the Bologna ministers in 2005, does not anticipate the similar process for referencing national frameworks for lifelong learning, generally including higher education, to the EQF adopted in 2008. Moreover, there are differences in in the legal and political basis of the two exercises and indeed in their geographical scope, as the EQF process includes 39 countries whereas the EHEA has 48. Until now those countries completing QF-EHEA self-certification have also been within the set of EQF countries but this will probably not be the case in the future.

Just as the QF-EHEA gives for self-certification process, the EQF gives a set of criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications systems ¹ to the EQF. Both sets of criteria and procedures, for the QF-EHEA and for the EQF, are similar but still different. For example, their levels have different functions and values; they have different governance structures and so on.

Analysis of the two sets of referencing and self-certification criteria and procedures (EQF criteria and QF-EHEA criteria and procedures), reveals similar elements:

- The criteria 1 and 7 of the QF-EHEA correspond to the criterion 1 of the EQF. Those criteria are related to the designated authority involved in the referencing and self-certification processes.
- Criteria 2 of both sets (QF-EHEA and EQF) illustrate the importance of having "clear and demonstrable links" between the NQF and the EQF, and the QF-EHEA.
- Criteria 3 of both sets focus on the implementation of learning outcomes and credit systems. However, the EQF criterion 3 is also related to the arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, which is not the case for the criterion 3 of the QF-EHEA.

¹ Whereas the Bologna process commits countries to establishing a national qualifications framework for their HE qualifications, the EQF Recommendation also allows the possibility of referencing national qualifications systems to the EQF without first establishing an overall national qualifications framework. This has happened in the case of Italy, which has referenced its vocational qualifications system to the EQF.
• Transparency is the common element for criteria 4 of both sets. Both criteria 4 describe a transparent allocation of qualifications in the NQF.

• Criteria 5 of both sets are focused to principles and procedures of quality assurance systems.

• The criterion 6 of the QF-EHEA can be matched to the criterion 10 of the EQF. Both criteria focus on the necessary mechanisms to certify any learning process in a standard and easily verified manner.

• Procedures 1, 4 and 5 of the QF-EHEA are well matched to criterion 8 of the EQF, and procedures 2, 3, and 6 of the QF-EHEA to criteria 6, 7 and 10 of the EQF.

• Criteria 8, and 9 of the EQF are not directly linked to criteria and procedures of any criteria and procedures of the QF-EHEA.

Besides clear similarities, there are some differences between two sets of criteria and procedures. For example:

• In the case of the QF-EHEA, the objective is to show that the national higher education qualifications structure matches that of the QF-EHEA. In broad terms a kind of a harmonisation with the QF-EHEA is expected. The follows from the fundamental logic of the Bologna process action line of restructuring degree cycles. In the case of the EQF, the national qualifications system should demonstrate how it relates to the EQF descriptively but without any prescribed or implied convergence.

• In the case of the QF-EHEA, the self-certification process is based on the assumption that once the compatibility of a national higher education qualifications framework is self-certified, the link between the national levels of qualifications should be taken as proven. Another country doubting the linkage of that NQF to QF-EHEA would be required to show substantial difference.

• The reporting of the EQF referencing and the QF-EHEA self-certification process in a country may be kept separate (as it is the case, for example, for Ireland) or the reporting can be combined in one document with separate sections for each process (for examples, the Estonian report follows this pattern and many other countries). The EQF Advisory Group sees a single report presenting the results of the EQF referencing process and the QF-EHEA self-certification process as a tool for increased transparency indicating that the processes have been closely coordinated and agreed by stakeholders.

• The self-certification process was envisaged in the EHEA ministerial communiques as a one-time only event. However, qualifications frameworks evolve over time as do ancillary functions such as quality assurance arrangements. Over time the content of the reports, the earliest of which date from 2006, becomes stale and out of date. In the EQF process there have been discussions about how second referencing or continuing referencing might be accomplished. There has been little or no corresponding debate within the Bologna Process where the focus remains on initial self-certification, particularly for those countries outside the EQF space, none of whom have yet self-certified.

For countries that are involved in both processes (the QF-EHEA self-certification and the EQF referencing processes), coherence between the two European meta-frameworks should be ensured at national levels, including through coordinated self-certifications. This is sometimes complicated politically by the fact that different ministries, agencies or levels of government in federal countries have political responsibility in individual countries. It is the prerogative of national government to decide the manner of implementing the QF-EHEA and associated reforms, and the EQF and the manner in which these two processes are coordinated.

The countries that pioneered this work have separated the two processes, beginning with self-certification and then completing EQF referencing (e.g., UK for England, Wales and North Ireland; Scotland; Ireland; Nederland and Flanders; Germany; Romania). Over time more and more countries have decided to join the two processes and present a single report (e.g., Estonia, Croatia, Montenegro, etc.). Usually, within those reports there are separate chapters explaining explicitly self-certification processes and fulfilment of
the QF-EHEA criteria and procedures.

Titles of some of those reports explicitly include parts on the self-certification process (e.g., Norway, Hungary, Croatia, Lithuania, Latvia,). There are also reports where title is related only to the EQF referencing report, but still those reports include separate chapters focused to fulfilment of the QF-EHEA self-certification (e.g., Austria, Iceland).

As an additional group of reports, we can find those where the QF-EHEA self-certification process has just been mentioned in the text showing that those countries aware on the QF-EHEA process (e.g., Estonia, etc.). Furthermore, there is a group of reports in which there are titles covering both processes, but in text of the reports there are nothing further which is explicitly related to the self-certification process. This shows that those countries aware of both processes, but only implicitly demonstrating evidence of the fulfilment (e.g., Luxemburg).

As a final group of reports, there are those where QF-EHEA process has not been mentioned at all. In the following illustration we can see relation between types of reports and the time of their publications.

In more recent years as EQF referencing processes have become well established, those countries involved in both processes generally find it beneficial and efficient to have combine EQF referencing and QF-EHEA self-certification processes, leading to a joint report. In such cases it is still important to take into account both sets of criteria and procedures (EQF and QF-EHEA) explicitly and separately.

The self-certification process and referencing process do not have exactly the same aims or intended audiences. Higher education stakeholders and experts should be vigilant when the processes are combined to ensure that the EHEA dimension is properly addressed.

Technical fulfilment of only the EQF referencing criteria does not guarantee at the same time the fulfilment of all QF-EHEA self-certification criteria and procedures. Similarly, fulfilment of QF-EHEA criteria and procedures does not guarantee automatic fulfilment of all EQF criteria even in respect to the HE element of the national framework.

The Figure 1 shows that by time more reports a prepared jointly, and some of them at some time with less explicit response to the QF-EHEA criteria and procedures. As we see, first self-certification reports were prepared separately, while over time more and more have been jointly prepared. There is also evidence that the referencing and/or self-certification processes in some countries is anticipated by and even overlaps with the process of developing the NQF itself. In some cases this has led to the EQF advisory group requesting that countries delay finalizing their reports until further evidence of NQF implementation is available.
3 The role and involvement of international experts

The QF-EHEA aims to improve transparency and international understanding of qualifications in all countries, and by using some tools even making them more harmonised, if possible. This means that the self-certification process should demonstrate the link between the QF-EHEA and the national higher education qualifications framework.

International experts have a clear role in making sure that these expectations, defined by QF-EHEA criteria and procedures, have been met.

Self-certification reports (separate or integrated with EQF referencing reports) and experiences during the self-certification processes show that these international experts have not been in all cases involved in all stages. They have been usually involved more or less productively when concrete levelling and quality assurance issues begin to arise, and as an advanced draft version of the report becomes available. It means that international experts usually have not been often involved in the design of the self-certification process or the development of the first drafts of self-certification reports, though there are also some such cases. Most of international experts have been involved in the self-certification process to make reports more transparent and understandable by readers from other countries.

There is not a fixed template for the involvement of international experts in finalising the QF-EHEA self-certification reports and the experience varies from country to country. For example, they were usually invited to meetings with working groups responsible for conducting the self-certification process and they were asked to provide written feedback and recommendations for improvement of the reports or even the processes, if needed, in order to achieve the transparency and better understanding for all.

From the existing reports (separate self-certification or comprehensive with EQF referencing reports), it is possible to find different groups of experiences in regard to:

- Number of international experts involved.
- Profile of international experts.
- The role of international experts in the process.
Publications and the scope of their opinions in reports.

Regarding the number of international experts, it is possible to find reports in which there have been only two international experts involved (for example, Denmark, Germany) up to five experts (for example, Romania, Portugal). If we include integrated reports, than sometimes there are no experts with a clear experiences within the higher education sub-system (for example, Luxemburg).

Profiles of international experts have been defined differently for different countries. Some of countries have used international experts from those countries with similar qualifications systems and those, which have quite different higher education systems. Experts come from various institutions, with expertise in recognition, validation of non-formal and informal learning, self-certification, and/or quality assurance, etc. There are various examples. There are self-certification reports that have been prepared by the support of international experts coming only from neighbouring countries, but there are those reports that have been prepared by the support of experts coming from various countries, from neighbouring and countries having quite different higher education systems, including some from outside Europe.

The role of international experts has been defined usually as that of making the reports transparent and understandable for readers, especially for readers from those countries that have quite different qualifications systems.

International experts usually participated in several meetings, workshops and even national and international conferences related to self-certification processes. In some cases, they were able to provide their opinions and to give suggestions for various improvements of reports.

The presentation of opinions of experts is also varied. There are cases where the international expert feedback is incorporated into various revisions of the draft report, alongside feedback from domestic respondents, and the final reports do not include any separate records of the experts’ opinion at all (e.g., Romania, Italy, Germany, etc.), but there are other reports with very clear statements, even specifically addressing individual criteria and procedures (e.g., Malta).

Nearly all opinions from international experts documented in the final reports are positive, but in some cases there are reports in which international experts present neutral or indeed very critical opinions of the process.

After analysing reports, it is clear that a country’s self-certification processes can benefit a lot if international experts have been used as critical friends. Whatever approach is taken to using international experts, the self-certification reports should state who was involved and explain why these experts were invited and how they were involved in the process (roles, activities) and at what stage and how their feedbacks were taken into accounts.

Furthermore, QF-EHEA self-certification (and EQF referencing) processes suggest the following:

- Different profiles and experiences of international experts should be considered as a benefit, which is even more important when preparing one integrated report for self-certification and referencing. As a group of experts, they should cover with specific competence in one or more of these areas – general education, vocational education and training, and higher education.

- The critical friend approach is a very good approach. It is generally agreed that the experts should be open-minded and should provide feedbacks to national bodies as critical friends. The experts also need to exercise professional judgement in balancing transparency and openness with the need to keeping some information confidential – for example, they should take care with the issues or problems arising during the self-certification process.

- Attention needs to be focussed on the self-certification process and all steps within the process.

- Reflections on the report and the self-certification process from the international experts should be included in the report as this would give an extra layer of transparency, understanding and trust.

- There should be international experts involved from countries that share similar structures (‘like-minded countries’). Those experts will not need much time to appreciate the qualifications system but will be able to focus on the particular application of the criteria. In addition, for transparency,
international experts from countries with very different structures should also be involved. Expertise should include familiarity with other European transparency instruments and related initiatives (such as EQF, ECVET, ECTS, Europass, etc.), and if possible come from varied institutional backgrounds. Some countries invite international experts from national bodies in other countries that are themselves in charge of the referencing and self-certification processes in their countries or are at least involved in the decision making processes. Those international experts have experiences in working on the European level, in particular membership of the EQF Advisory Group and often they cooperate in the network of NCPs or of the QF-EHEA Correspondents.

The following figure displays the involvement of international experts in self-certification and their roles during the self-certification process.

### Involvement of international experts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Experts</th>
<th>Role Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>transparent; no written opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>transparent; no written opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>transparent; no written opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>transparent; written opinion presented</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>transparent; written opinion presented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>transparent; written opinion presented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>transparent; written opinion presented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>transparent; written opinion presented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>transparent; written opinion presented</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2: The role and involvement of international experts by countries.**

### 4 Validation of non-formal and informal learning

There is a wide spectrum of approaches of the validation of non-formal and informal learning in European countries. Only some of those countries have used this concept systematically across their qualifications system, and even less of those countries have used the concept of validation within their higher education systems. For example, access to some of higher education study programmes by validation process has been used in some of countries in Europe.

In addition to different understanding of validation process, there are different terms used in different countries for this process, such as:

- Recognition of prior learning.
- Recognition of non-formal and informal learning.
- Validation of non-formal and informal learning.
- National credit rating, institutional alignment.
For example, analysing the QF-EHEA self-certification and EQF referencing reports for the Netherlands, we can see that the term “Recognition of prior learning” is used exactly as the term “Validation of non-formal and informal learning” in many other countries or international organisations.

Within that validation system in the Netherlands, knowledge, skills and competence of individuals are compared against the standards described by using learning outcomes. All qualifications in higher education regulated by the ministry can, in principle, be achieved within the recognition system.

To make this process transparent, it is important to explain the functions of the validation systems in self-certification reports, as they are important for opening qualifications systems to national and international users. The explanation should include the relationship to the NQF, including levels and credit systems.

It is interesting to notice that the process for validation of non-formal and informal learning is not guided by any QF-EHEA self-certification criteria and procedures, but it is guided by the EQF referencing criteria (Criterion 3, in relation to the Criteria 4 and 5 of the EQF).

Criterion 5, relating to quality assurance, is very important for the development of trust in validation process of non-formal and informal learning. EQF referencing reports need to explain national quality assurance systems and demonstrate the links to the validation process. These quality assurance procedures are powerful influences on trust and confidence in qualifications in the country and internationally. Those procedures should define the content of qualifications, the nature of curricula, assessment practices, awarding procedures, certification requirements. Within recent Bologna process developments, there is an emphasis on validation that resonates with that found in the EU Recommendations.

For example, the importance of the recognition of knowledge and skills gained through non-formal and informal learning has been stressed by set of communiqués of ministerial conferences. With the Bucharest Communiqué ministers explicitly have agreed to “step up efforts towards alternative access routes, including recognition of prior learning”.

There are national qualifications systems, which are fully or partly open to admission based on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. In some countries access to the higher education systems is open through the validation procedures as a legal right for candidates. Thus, all higher education institutions in the country are obliged to provide relevant procedures for all individuals (for example, France, Luxemburg, Norway, etc.). The final decision about validation is responsibility of higher education institutions.

More widely implemented than admission based on the validation of non-formal and informal learning is the possibility to take non-formal and informal learning into account towards partial or complete fulfilment of a higher education study programme. In many countries, it is a legal right for candidates to have their non-formal and informal learning validated towards fulfilment of a higher education study programme and higher education institutions must provide relevant procedures.

Of course, higher education institutions have autonomy to decide about the procedures and results. Very often there is requirement related to the duration and currency of prior non-formal and informal learning (for example, Denmark, France, Luxemburg, Scotland, etc.).

Analysing self-certification and referencing reports, it is clear that in some other countries, validation of non-formal and informal learning within higher education systems can only lead to a limited number of ECTS credits.

The lowest limits concerning the number of credits that may be given on the basis of validation of non-formal and informal learning exist in Italy (up to 12 ECTS), Spain (up to 15 %) and Portugal (up to one third). But for example, in Scotland and Sweden, it is up to higher education institutions to decide how many credits they grant on the basis of recognition of prior learning, which is in general up to half. In some countries, validation of non-formal and informal learning can lead to complete higher education qualification (for example, France, Netherlands, Norway, etc.).
It is important to stress, in most of those cases, it is however more a theoretical possibility or still in the progress of being developed rather than a common practice. An example of a country with a commonly used practice to full qualifications based on the validation of non-formal and informal learning is – France.

The validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education systems remains an area where further actions are needed. This applies to the validation of non-formal and informal learning as a basis for allocation of ECTS credits towards a qualification and/or exemption from some study programme requirements and even more so to recognition as a basis for access to higher education programmes.

Analysing QF-EHEA self-certification reports (and referencing reports when integrated) show that in some countries the validation of non-formal and informal learning is related only to lifelong learning, mainly adult learning.

There are also different principles used for the validation processes. In some cases, a principle of equality is the base for the validation process which puts the individual in the centre of the process. Other countries introduce different parallel qualifications, compared to formal education, as the end result from the validation of non-formal and informal learning, naming them – “non-formal qualifications”, and even “informal qualifications”.

In addition to the above examples on validation process, many countries currently are presenting their ideas for validation process to be implemented only within some economy sectors.

Many of the above-presented findings are not possible to find within separate QF-EHEA self-certification reports. Even in self-certification report for Denmark’s higher education framework, which is very open in regard to types of learning, but without compromise to quality of qualifications (and assessment), including strong system for validation of non-formal and informal learning, there is nothing on that validation system.

Most of information on validation it is possible to find only in the EQF referencing reports, and other related literature such as CEDEFOP’s regularly updated Inventory on Validation and the associated country profiles. While the EQF Advisory group includes national representatives for validation of non-formal and informal learning there is no corresponding locus for the regular exchange of views within the EHEA since the demise of the informal network on the recognition of prior learning in 2014. Individual seminars and peer learning activities sometimes address the topic.

In some cases, within the EQF referencing reports, there are new concepts defined, such as “non-formal qualification”, “informal qualification” and (usual) “formal qualifications”, which will probably cause new dimension of issues related to validation process.

The following figure presents how countries have been distributed by using different concepts, procedures or roles related to validation of non-formal and informal learning, such as, access to higher education institutions, assessment included, achievement of full or partial qualifications, focus to adults, other groups or all individuals, implemented in all or only specific economic sectors, equal-value principles, etc.

In the figure, for the simplicity, it is presented only the general status of implementation of validation process in countries.
Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL)

- VNFIL exists and linked to NC
- VNFIL exists and there are strategy plan link to NC
- Procedures for implementation of VNF
- Strategy plan for VNFIL development exists, but some issues with concept
- No-clear concepts, no strategy plan, but declared to introduce VNF

Figure 3: Distribution of the status of implementation of validation process in countries.

5 Learning outcomes used in higher education

The role of learning outcomes in higher education systems plays an integral part of a lifelong learning strategy in a country to promote different elements, such as:

- Modernisation of higher education.
- Promotion of student centered learning.
- Award, accumulation and transfer of ECTS (or equivalent) credits.
- Quality assurance.
- Flexible learning pathways.
- Key competences for lifelong learning.
- Validation of non-formal and informal learning.
- Credibility for higher education institutions and employers.

Describing qualifications in terms of learning outcomes is part of many reforms in European countries. All European tools for supporting mobility and transparency of qualifications and learning achievements encourage the use of learning outcomes. However, the full implementation and use of learning outcomes is a long process and depth of implementation varies considerably between different parts of qualifications systems. This means that in Europe there are countries that are in transition from learning inputs to using learning outcomes in higher education system, but still are self-certifying and referencing to the QF-EHEA and the EQF by using national standards that are not yet explicit in terms of learning outcomes.

In most cases, while countries have formally introduced level descriptors to their qualifications they have not yet systematically implemented learning outcomes within higher education institutions. Those countries need to develop trust by explaining carefully the real state of progress on learning outcomes to stakeholders in other countries. The criteria that need to be met by higher education institutions and programmes in terms of learning outcomes and quality assurance should be included in the QF-EHEA self-certification and EQF referencing reports.
Self-certification reports show that there are various representations of learning outcomes by level descriptors in different countries.

Level descriptors are defined by levels of complexity with a set of domains (or categories, as written in some reports), usually covering knowledge, skills (or application of knowledge), social skills, and other wider domains, such as communication, learning, etc. There are examples in which some of these larger domains have been divided into finer ones, for example, domain of skills.

The Dublin descriptors of the QF-EHEA give generic descriptors of three cycles and one short-cycle within five domains of learning outcomes:

- Knowledge and understanding.
- Applying knowledge and understanding.
- Learning skills.
- Making judgments.
- Communication.

The EQF gives only three main domains:

- Knowledge.
- Skills.
- Competence.

National qualifications frameworks in different countries introduce various representations of learning outcomes, but still most of them use the picture of the EQF (knowledge, skills, and competence). For example, this is the case for Portugal, Slovenia, Denmark, and Lithuania.

There are other countries introducing similar sets of domains (for example, Norway, which introduces “generic competence” instead of “competence”; or the Netherlands introducing “responsibility and independence” instead of “competence”, or Croatia and Belgium-FL introducing “autonomy and responsibility” instead of “competence”, etc.).

But, there are other innovative representations of learning outcomes, such as in Malta (Knowledge and understanding; Applying knowledge and understanding; Communication skills; Judgement skills; Learning skills; Autonomy and responsibility).

Even having a general structure of domains similar to the EQF, sub-domains sometimes are very detailed. For example, in the Netherlands, the skills domain has been subdivided into a range of sub-domains that reflects its use in Dutch qualifications:

- Applied knowledge.
- Problem solving skills.
- Learning and development skills.
- Information skills.
- Communication skills.

Some of the domains are just named differently in some countries. For example, in Portugal, the competence domain is better understood as “attitudes”, which covers the aspects of autonomy and responsibility (as in the EQF). It means that in Portugal the concept is essentially the same as in the EQF but uses a different label.

As very interesting example it is possible to find in the Polish self-certification report, which explains two types (layers) of level descriptors. One layer has been interpreted as universal level descriptors and the other layer as specific to different sectors: general education, vocational education and higher education.

Analysing carefully these representations of learning outcomes and their level descriptors, it is evident
that some of level descriptors are not completely generic. Some of level descriptors have incorporated set of key competences for lifelong learning within the level descriptors, such as: learning, communication, ICT skills, etc.

In addition to representation of learning outcomes by domains, there are other features of qualifications associated with learning outcomes – levels (or cycles) and the volume (represented by ECTS credits or other equivalent credits).

The QF-EHEA introduces three cycles and one short cycle within the first cycle of qualifications (and their learning outcomes), defining them by Dublin descriptors and ECTS credits:

- Third cycle (not specified).
- Second cycle (normally 90 ECTS, minimum 60 ECTS at the second cycle).
- First cycle (typically 180-240 ECTS).
- Short cycle (approximately 120 ECTS).

The analysis of the QF-EHEA self-certification reports (and the EQF referencing reports) shows that most of countries introduce three main levels in their higher education systems. In addition to those three levels, some countries introduce short cycle qualifications or other intermediate qualifications. Additional levels can be found in some countries, for example in Iceland, Scotland, Ireland, Montenegro, etc.

Most countries use the ECTS credit system as a measurement of the volume of learning outcomes. Other countries have their own credit system (for example, Scotland, etc.) that are deemed compatible with ECTS. Most of countries define ECTS credit as: 1 ECTS equivalent to 25 hours of the workload. There are some variations, for example, Estonia, where 1 ECTS correspond to 26 hours of the workload, etc.

The conversion of national credits into ECTS is not always straightforward. It is possible to find, for example, to credit system in Scotland, where 1 credit is defined as to correspond to 10 hours of the workload, and at the same time making equivalence to the ECTS as half of credits. This diverges from other countries usage. In that example it means that 2 Scottish credits (equivalent to 1 ECTS) correspond to only 20 hours of the workload, which is between 20 and 33 % less than that claimed for the typical European country. The fundamental basis of comparison is the use of 60 ECTS credits to account for the traditional academic year. However no country has included in its self-certification report an empirical verification of the correspondence between notional student effort and students’ actual use of their time in any or all of their HE institutions. The reported ECTS credits are based on the designed or intended use of time.

There is an interesting result from the analysis of the reported implementation of ECTS for third cycle qualifications. The Dublin descriptors do not specify ECTS credits for the third cycle qualifications, but there is widespread use of ECTS credits in the third cycle in many countries.

Most of self-certification and referencing reports presents the usage of ECTS credits to express the workload for PhD qualifications (for example, Denmark, Estonia, Norway, Slovenia, etc.).

Some countries resist the use of credits in the third cycle qualifications, particularly in relation to the research components (for example, Germany, Belgium-FL, Nederland, Ireland, Malta, Croatia, etc.). However even in these countries specific taught components likes research methods courses may have credits associated.
6 Quality assurance

Higher education has a specific role in qualifications systems in all countries, giving a base for research and innovation, which all together play a crucial role in supporting social cohesion, economic growth and global competitiveness for individuals and countries.

The role of quality assurance is crucial in supporting higher education systems and institutions in responding to changing environments while ensuring the qualifications achieved by students remain relevant and at the forefront of institutional missions.

Quality assurance mechanisms are the core components for all qualifications frameworks – meta-frameworks and national qualifications frameworks.

Most of the QF-EHEA and the EQF criteria and procedures for self-certification and referencing touch on quality assurance, but quality assurance requirements are explicitly expressed in Criterion 5 (in the QF-EHEA and EQF), and Procedure 2 (in the QF-EHEA, and Criterion 6 of the EQF). Those criteria and procedures define clear requirements for the quality assurance mechanisms and the evidence for their implementation, which should include context, input, process and output dimensions, organised as internal and external quality assurance.

Quality assurance in the EQF is necessary to ensure accountability and constant improvement of higher education (and vocational education and training) in all EU member states and countries linked to the EU. It is for this reason that the EQF Recommendation expresses common principles for quality assurance in these two sectors in Annex III.

The criteria presented in Annex III are consistent with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG). The ESG assert inter alia that quality assurance should be an integral part of the internal management of higher education institutions and that they should be regularly evaluated, as should the agencies or other bodies that carry out quality assurance. These quality assurance procedures should give particular emphasis to outputs and learning outcomes.

A revision of the ESG was adopted by the ministers of the EHEA in Yerevan in 2015. Unlike its predecessor, this version includes an explicit obligation on higher education institutions to refer to qualifications frameworks. “The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and...”
communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.” (from standard 1.2). The criterion for self-certification is written in a way that anticipates this kind of evolution of quality assurance expectations. Of course all of the self-certification reports analysed for this study were prepared before the implementation of the 2015 ESG revision but it is to be expected that future reports, like future evaluations of quality assurance agencies (see below) will refer to the revised version.

Higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies use the ESG as a reference document that they must conform to for internal and external quality assurance systems and processes. The ESG also form the basis for admission of quality assurance agencies to the European Quality Assurance Register in Higher Education (EQAR).

Furthermore, quality assurance agencies should be involved in preparing the NQF and the proposal for the QF-EHEA self-certification (and EQF referencing) and they should give official (and positive) statements during the process, which should include information and guarantee that this criterion has been fulfilled. If this is missing from the self-certification report (or referencing report), it would seriously undermine the credibility of the self-certification process.

The ESG provide a clear set of international expectations regarding countries’ quality assurance systems. However, it is clear from the self-certification reports that presenting quality assurance processes for international readers is a challenging task. There are several reasons for this, such as:

- The fact that quality assurance can include implicit agreements and processes, that are difficult to describe formally.
- A second reason is that there is sometimes no independent external single body with responsibility for the quality assurance.
- A third reason is that documentation is usually a diverse corpus of texts with little obvious linkage between them.

The countries that have already self-certified their qualifications systems to the QF-EHEA confirm that the self-certification process is an opportunity to bring coherence to quality assurance arrangements – this is possible because all of the main quality assurance bodies have been involved in self-certification processes.

As qualifications systems are evolving towards more focus on learning outcomes, quality assurance systems are also moving towards making sure that expected learning outcomes are met when a qualification is awarded. Many quality assurance systems were traditionally based on ensuring the quality of inputs (teachers’ qualifications, teaching methods, etc.) but the QF-EHEA self-certification reports should show that processes directed at learning outcomes are progressively being introduced.

It is clear that quality assurance agencies are key stakeholders in the self-certification processes and are required to agree the self-certification and the way the quality assurance system in the country is described. This includes the laws, regulations, procedures and any points of discussion for improvements. This is what is intended by the phrase stated agreement used in the Procedure 2.

The analysis of self-certification reports shows varying degrees of implementation of the ESG, starting from a group of countries that have yet to establish an independent external quality assurance agency, and ending with a group of countries with the full implementation of the ESG whose quality assurance agency or agencies have been subject to repeated independent reviews for membership of the European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA) and inclusion in EQAR.

For example, some countries have put in place a system whereby a national committee is entrusted with the quality assurance of the higher education system, under the direct authority of the ministry (Czech Republic, Iceland, Slovakia, etc.).

Luxembourg is a country where the small size of the system has also led to a different solution. In Luxembourg, there is a council that bases its work on the international expertise of experts acting independently.
From the analysis of self-certification reports, it is clear that practically all countries have established some form of external quality assurance systems, but there are significant differences in the approach behind those systems.

One important distinction that can be drawn is between countries where the primary aim and orientation of external quality assurance is to regulate institutions and study programmes – deciding which of them have a sufficient threshold of quality to operate – and those where the main thrust of external quality assurance is to support improvement in the quality of provision.

In systems where responsible quality assurance agencies have the power to permit or refuse study programmes and/or institutions to operate, or where they advise governments on such decisions, quality assurance can, in broad terms, be perceived as supervisory in character. In these cases, it generally aims to ensure that minimum quality thresholds are met.

In some countries agencies play other roles – including giving advice on the enhancement of quality of institutions, study programmes and activities at higher education institutions.

Another important distinction is whether external quality assurance in a country focuses on the quality of study programmes or looks at higher education institutions as a whole. In this respect, it is noteworthy that the vast majority of quality assurance systems now focus on a combination of higher education institutions and study programmes. Some systems focus more exclusively on study programmes, and some focus on higher education institutions.

The picture from self-certification reports in overall suggests that quality assurance systems are becoming more complex, and dealing with more information at different levels. It is difficult from the way in which quality assurance systems are presented in self-certification reports to present a comprehensive comparative analysis. A number of surveys and reports by ENQA have presented such comparisons.

The analysis of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), which is the first organisation created in the context of the Bologna Process, gives us a very important picture.

The EQAR has been established in 2008, following an agreement of the Ministers responsible for higher education in the London Communiqué, to provide reliable information on credible quality assurance agencies operating in Europe, and thus supporting trust in quality assurance agencies wishing to work across national borders in the EHEA.

The essential condition to be listed on the Register is that the agencies have been evaluated and proven to operate in compliance with the ESG.

The countries, which presented self-certification report and where at least one agency is listed in EQAR are 18 countries: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, France, Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Three other countries have agencies listed in the register but have not submitted self-certification reports.

The following figure shows distributions of the implementation level of the quality assurance in higher education systems in European countries.
7 Conclusion

Several aspects from self-certification reports have been analysed in this study:

- The relationship of the QF-EHEA self-certification of a particular country with the country’s referencing process for the EQF.
- The role, structure and involvement of international experts during self-certification processes.
- The state of play of the implementation of validation of non-formal and informal learning.
- The usage of learning outcomes by higher education institutions.
- The implementation of quality assurance processes, as defined by the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA.

The first countries started the self-certification process have prepared two processes separately. Over time, more countries have decided to combine both processes into one process and present a single report. Such reports usually have separate chapters explaining explicitly self-certification processes and fulfilment of the QF-EHEA criteria and procedures. Titles of some of those reports explicitly include parts on the self-certification process, and those where title is related only to the EQF referencing report, but still those reports include separate chapters focused to fulfilment of the QF-EHEA self-certification. Some of self-certification reports only presents that countries aware on the QF-EHEA process, and those reports in which there are titles covering both processes, but in text of the reports there are nothing further which is related to the self-certification process, which shows that those countries aware of both processes, but only implicitly demonstrating evidence of the fulfilment. As a final group of reports, there are those where QF-EHEA process has not been mentioned at all, which probably demonstrates that those countries don’t aware to the QF-EHEA.

The analysis of the involvement of international experts shows that in most cases, countries have not taken full advantage of international experts. By using them to full potentials as critical friends, countries could benefit more from the self-certification process. Regarding the transparency of the process, it is clear, that the self-certification reports should state who was involved and explain why these experts were invited and how they were involved in the process (roles, activities, etc.) and at what stage and how their feedbacks were taken into accounts. In most cases, the reports missed to explain that in more details.
The validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education systems clearly remains an area where further actions are needed. The validation system has not been in the focus of self-certification reports.

All reports claim the implementation of learning outcomes, but there is relatively little evidence or analysis of how deeply they are implemented and linked to assessment criteria. Deeper analysis of study programmes and how quality assurance mechanisms interrogate both intended and actual achieved learning outcomes are needed in order to find more about implementation of learning outcomes.

From the analysis of self-certification reports, it is clear that practically all countries have established some form of external quality assurance systems, but there are significant differences in the approach behind those systems. Most higher education systems have a quality assurance agency or agencies, which are registered with EQAR, confirming to desired of the development of quality assurance in Bologna countries.

The variety of approaches to self-certification documented in this study is a reflection of weakness in the EHEA. Indeed, it expresses the principles of subsidiarity and autonomy which are core European values. However, it does mean that readers have to work to draw clear comparisons between national reports. In addition to this broad overview, further in-depth, comparative analysis of self-certification reports and related documents is encouraged.

8 References