Minutes of the expert groups

Brussels, 23 March 2017

Minutes of the 39th meeting of the EQF Advisory Group
8-9 February 2017, Brussels (BE)

1) APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA AND OF THE MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The agenda was accepted. The minutes from the 37th and 38th meetings of the EQF AG of 4-5 October and 8-9 December 2016 were accepted.

2) NATURE OF THE MEETING

The meetings of the EQF Advisory Group are restricted to EQF advisory group members. The EQF advisory group is composed by representatives from the 39 countries that currently participate and have committed to the EQF process. In addition, representatives of education and labour market stakeholders at European level are part of the group. The European Commission opens and chairs the meeting and the Council of Europe, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), the European Training Foundation (ETF) and external expert take part in the meeting, supporting the Commission and the members of the EQF advisory group.

In total 60 individuals participated in the EQG advisory group meeting of 8-9 February 2017. Four delegates from the Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework and two delegates form UNESCO attended the EQF AG meeting as observer, as a result of an EQF AG decision.

3) LIST OF POINTS DISCUSSED

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

1.1 Information on the latest developments as a follow-up to the last meeting (8-9 December 2016) (cf. Note AG39-1)
COM presented note AG39-1 on relevant developments in the European cooperation in education, training and employment. COM informed the group on the Youth Initiative adopted by the Commission in December 2016; on the call for proposals in the context of the Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills launched on 26 January; on the third meeting of the Member States Working Group (MSWG) in the context of ESCO that took place in Brussels on 12 December 2016 and on the publication of the joint technical reports with Hong Kong and Australia on the Commission website.

Comments (BE)

As the Commission decided end 2016 to stop the ESCO board, the two members of the EQF AG that were also part of the ESCO board will no longer be involved in the ESCO project. Consequently a solution for remaining informed on ESCO meetings and developments needs to be found.

Conclusion

COM will provide relevant information on ESCO to the EQF AG each time it meets.

1.2. New Skills Agenda for Europe

COM updated the EQF AG on the state of play of Council negotiations with regard to the revision of the EQF recommendation and the revision of the Europass decision. Negotiations are still undergoing and further discussions with the Maltese Presidency will take place in March 2017. With regard to EQF negotiations, the Education Committee asked for a technical discussion in the EQF AG on Annex II of the Commission proposal, where "Responsibility and Autonomy" replaces "Competence" as heading of the third column in the level descriptors. Therefore this item has been added to the agenda of the meeting.

Comments (CoE, BE, FR, FI, HU)

Decisions or changes with regard to diploma and certificate supplements should be coordinated with those working groups in the Bologna process that work on it. Participants expressed concern on the possible binding nature of ESCO as a result of its reference in the Europass decision. Concern was expressed also in reference to the creation of a unique National Contact Point that would be responsible for an increasing amount of tasks beyond EQF.

Answers and conclusions

On the diploma and certificate supplement COM agreed on the importance of cooperation, explaining that the work done on the modernization of education is followed. Regarding the inclusion of ESCO in the Europass decision, COM explained that at the Education Committee of February 6th, 2017 the Council legal service clarified that the current formulation does not have any effect on ESCO's legal nature. COM further clarified that ESCO is developed by the Commission that can decide to use it for the portal, but its use is not binding for Member
States. Regarding the national contact point it was explained that the proposal aims at increasing synergies by having one contact point, however the task distribution would remain under countries' responsibility.

1.3 Information on VET

COM presented the main results of the European Vocational Skills Week of 5-9 December 2016. The main objective was to raise the attractiveness and image of VET through quality and excellence. The high number of events registered (1,733 and 983 accepted) and the broader participation (784,569 in national events and activities 1500 in Brussels) showed the positive results of this bottom-up approach that mobilized and put the stakeholder together.

1.4 Updates on the Handbook on learning outcomes

Cedefop presented the state of play of the draft of the Handbook on learning outcome and the feedback received so far. The Handbook will be finalized and Cedefop will circulate it by the end of February 2017 in order to receive feedback and discuss it at the EQF AG of 28-30 March.

1.5 Information from Council of Europe (CoE)

CoE informed about the discussion on certificate and diploma supplements as implementation tools. CoE also referred to the role of education in promoting the development of competences for a democratic culture in order to have active and informed citizens and how an increasing number of countries are including these competences in their curricula. The issues of fake qualifications at all levels and the role of ethics in ensuring trust in the system and as a consequence in qualifications were raised. The issue of how to recognize refuges' qualifications remains central for the working group that is working on assessment for job and academic purposes. Results and conclusions of the working group are foreseen for this spring.

2. REFERENCING

2.1 Overview of national developments related to the implementation of the EQF

COM presented note 39-2 providing information on the state of play of the 39 countries that participate in the implementation of the EQF. In total 30 countries referenced their NQF to the EQF (BE, BG, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, FR, HR, IE, IT, LV, LT, LU, HU, MT, NL, AT, PL, PT, RO, SI, SK, SE). Updates on the current situation were given. CY presentation on pending issue was scheduled for the current meeting. TR presentation of the referencing report and SK presentation for pending issues are scheduled for the next EQF AG meeting of 28-30 March 2017.

COM requested countries to indicate their planned presentation dates for the referencing reports, the update reports and the pending issues. COM urged countries to send the missing
referencing reports in order to upload them in the portal and to send the information for the interactive comparison function of national qualifications as soon as this is available.

**Comments (FI, BE, IE, NO, ETF, ES, IS)**

FI informed that the law on NQF is in Parliament and that it should be able to present the referencing report in Q3 of 2017. ES informed that a date has not been decided. TR confirmed the presentation of the referencing report at the next EQF AG meeting of 28-30 March, while SK was not present to confirm a date for presenting outstanding issues. IS confirmed the presentation of the updated referencing report at the EQF AG of 13-15 June. ETF informed the group that Serbia’s referencing report will likely be ready in 2018 rather than in 2017.

The usefulness of the comparability tables and the loss of information when data are not provided were acknowledged by participants. Relevance and complementarity of other sources of information on national databases and national qualification frameworks was underlined.

**Conclusion**

COM summarized the discussion stressing Member States’ responsibility in providing the necessary information to be published on the portal. A discussion will be devoted on the way of presenting information on the referencing process.

### 2.2 Outstanding questions related to the referencing report of Cyprus.

CY presented a detailed roadmap on planned measures for implementation of the national qualification framework.

**Comments (Cedefop, FR)**

Participants congratulated Cyprus for the work done. Cedefop stressed that all the comments provided during the year were addressed and included in the referencing report.

**Conclusions**

COM praised CY for the progress made and concluded that CY is the 31st country having referenced to the EQF. COM underlined the importance of moving toward implementation and invited CY to present an update on the implementation of the referencing in late 2018.

### 2.3 Updates on the pilot on horizontal comparisons and discussion on follow-up

The chair of the HC group summarized the outcome of the HC working group meeting in Warsaw on 13 January and outlined the content of the comments received by members of the EQF AG, explaining that more time is needed to finalize a new version of the report on the bases of these inputs. The main comment was that the report should be more focussed by mainly addressing the two qualifications under analysis keeping in mind the specific purposes of the pilot. Data on SE, NO and Scotland have been corrected and included and all remarks
on the comparison fiche were taken into account. A deeper and specific discussion on the levelling methods of the two qualifications under analysis is taking place within the HC workgroup. As a consequence countries participating in the pilot were asked to provide further data. The HC group aims at finalising the report further to the comments received and send it to the EQF AG before the end of February in order to discuss the main results at the EQF AG meeting on 28-30 March.

Comments (FR, PL, CoE, BusinessEurope)

Participants underlined that this is a first pilot aimed at developing methods to compare or check consistency of qualifications; as a consequence neither a final solution nor generalizations are expected from the study. Participants suggested using the PLA on Horizontal Comparison to test the comparison fiche on more qualifications and countries instead of using the PLA to disseminate the results.

Conclusions

COM emphasised that the final report should include strengths and weaknesses of levelling and that the main focus should be on the consistency of the qualifications under analysis. Although the name Horizontal comparison was decided the focus is on consistency of qualifications. The work is exploratory in nature and the pilot is testing a method (the fiche) and recommendations on what could be improved should be included. COM stressed also the importance of testing the fiche by including those countries that differ from the majority in terms of learning outcome descriptions.

2.4 Presentation of results from a comparative study of vocational qualifications (in 26 countries worldwide)

Cedefop and UNESCO presented the preliminary observations and conclusions of a comparative study of vocational qualifications in 26 countries worldwide. The study was carried out also with the support of ETF.

The structure and the function of four VET qualifications (Bricklayer/mason, Healthcare assistant, Hotel assistant/receptionist and ITC service technician) were presented. Across countries these qualifications showed a spread from EQF levels 2 to 5, with level 3 and 4 being the most common. In most countries these qualifications support lifelong learning, giving access to the following level of education, although only in few countries access to higher education is ensured. The link of these qualifications to the labour market was also outlined in the study.

In order to compare the intended learning outcomes of qualifications in the 26 countries the draft skills and competence terminology (English version) from the ESCO project was for the first time used. Skills and competences present in all countries or missing in more than 6-8
countries were outlined for the Healthcare assistant and ITC service technician qualifications. The study is still ongoing but among the first preliminary observations it was noted that depending on the country more relevance is given either to job specific or to transversal skills in describing learning outcomes. Overall, the study is showing that different learning outcomes can be compared but that a common point of reference is required. Notwithstanding the limits of the first version, the ESCO terminology resulted useful to this end.

Comments (BE, FR, IE, LU, CoE, EUA, ETF)

Clarifications were requested on the definition of transversal skills and on what these include, stressing that reference to transversal skills can vary according to the type of qualification. Some qualifications can be more labour market oriented than others and the inclusion of transversal skills in VET qualifications can vary among countries. Further, it was pointed out that transversal skills are not only for the labour market but also for different aspects of individual life. In addition, some transversal skills can be encompassed in other skills; as a result these would not be explicitly mentioned in the qualifications' descriptions.

It was acknowledged that the study could be seen as a validation of ESCO with regard to the qualifications analysed, however a number of elements cannot be grasped through ESCO. It was also stressed that ESCO is not future-oriented and thus not suitable for grasping future labour market needs. Attention was drawn also on translation issues, especially when working only in English. Therefore caution was urged when drawing general conclusions and the exploratory nature of the exercise was underlined.

Further clarifications were asked on the different levels awarded to the qualifications, on the use of EQF and ISCED (The International Standard Classification of Education) and whether programmes or certified outcomes were used to assess intended learning outcomes.

Answers

It was confirmed that the study is a pilot, clarifying that the aim is to develop and test a transparent method to compare learning outcomes rather than drawing general conclusions. Simultaneously, the study showed both the added value and the limits of ESCO, making clear which aspects should be improved. The translation issue was acknowledged. It was explained that participating countries were asked to answer the survey directly in English. The relevance of qualitative analysis and countries-specific knowledge, when analysing learning outcomes was stressed.

It was clarified that the balance between technical and transversal skills needs to be further analysed. In addition, when international data are compared many elements go missing. The balance between technical or transversal skills can also depend on the type of document that is used. It was mentioned how existing labour market regulations can influence the way qualifications are designed. It was explained that the EQF was used in the study, but because many non-EU countries involved in the study referred to ISCED, references were kept in order to provide additional information. Finally, it was emphasised that the aim of the project was not ranking but to acknowledge similarities and differences and to attest whether qualifications increase employability and have an impact on lifelong learning.
Conclusions

COM acknowledged the high empirical level of the study inviting Cedefop to keep the EQF AG updated on the study. The first report is planned to be finalized in three weeks. Cedefop took the opportunity to inform also about an ongoing study launched by Cedefop on initial VET qualifications at EQF levels 3 and 4.

2.5 Latest development on qualifications framework in Europa

Cedefop presented the preliminary results of the most recent developments with regard to NQFs in Europe in 2016. By the end of 2016 a total of 43 NQFs are under development, 33 countries have formally adopted their framework while 6 are working on formal adoption. The EQF recommendation of 2008 has spurred this process. 35 countries are working toward comprehensive NQFs addressing all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training system (VET, HE, general education). Countries are at different stages in realising this objective. By the end of 2016 advanced operational stage of NQF implementation was reached by 16 countries and 20 countries are now indicating NQF and EQF levels on certificates and qualifications.

Cedefop’s evidence shows that development of national qualifications frameworks with explicit learning outcomes based levels have helped make the national education and qualification systems more readable and understandable within and across European countries. The new generation of comprehensive NQFs have helped to bring together stakeholders from different subsystems in education not commonly cooperating or speaking to each other (VET, HE, general education) and stakeholders from education and employment. Evidence shows that this cooperation has increasingly being institutionalised.

It was presented how NQFs have been filled with concrete qualifications and this is linked also to the use of databases; levels are more visible on qualifications and NQFs act as a reference point for qualifications renewal and development of new qualifications (e.g at EQF level 5). Links between validation arrangements and NQFs are becoming stronger in most of the countries. Despite this progresses the visibility and the use of NQFs in the labour market is still limited.

Comments (BE, LV, CY, BusinessEurope, CoE)

It was pointed out that the use of learning outcome is an important tool for transparency; however describing qualifications in HE in terms of learning outcome can be difficult. Explanations were required with regard to comprehensive NQFs. The fact was questioned that all types and levels of qualifications are included in the NQFs, especially with regard to general education and international qualifications. It was stressed that the difference between intended and achieved overarching frameworks should be underlined. The issue of recognizing and awarding NQF levels to qualifications obtained before the establishment of a
NQFs was raised. In addition, questions were raised on the embedding of NQFs in employment policies and on the reasons why qualifications frameworks are not visible on and used by labour market actors.

**Answers**

It was noted that a number of studies show an expansion in the use of the learning outcome concept, including in HE. For instance the Cedefop study on Application of learning outcomes approaches across Europe (2016) shows that significant developments have taken place in higher education, reflecting the increased priority given to learning outcomes, both in policies and practices. The Bologna process and the development of qualifications frameworks have informed changes in higher education policy in most countries examined, though progress is uneven across countries. Quality assurance procedures, especially accreditation, seem to have played a powerful role in this process.

It was explained that 35 countries are working towards comprehensive frameworks to include all levels and types of qualification from formal education and training (VET, HE, general education) and half of them expressed the intention to open up towards qualifications awarded outside formal education and training. The issues of recognition of qualifications awarded before the establishment of the NQFs and the developments of bridges between frameworks, institutions and stakeholders are open issues that could be discussed in the EQF AG. It was noted as the link between actual labour markets needs and qualifications' intentions should be further addressed.

**Conclusions**

COM stressed that these developments are linked to national policies and reflect what is happening on the ground. COM acknowledged the sensitiveness of the inclusion of qualifications awarded before NQFs establishment, concluding that this should be a topic of discussion in the EQF AG. Cedefop informed that the 43 NQF chapters are being uploaded onto the European Inventory on NQFs and that the synthesis report will be published by the end of March.

**2.6 Discussion on Annex II of the proposal for a revision of the EQF Recommendation (third column – responsibility and autonomy)**

COM explained that at the Education Committee of 6 February 2017 some delegations suggested a discussion within the EQF AG on the Commission proposal of changing in Annex II of the EQF Recommendation the heading of the third column of the level descriptors. In the proposal under discussion the term “competence” is replaced by the terms “responsibility and autonomy”. COM asked the EQF advisory group to express an opinion on the topic.
Summary of the discussion

The EQF Advisory Group had a thorough discussion. Representatives from BE, DK, EL, ES, FR, HR, LU, HU, NL, AT, PT, SI, TK, ETF and EUA took the floor. Additional written comments were sent in by B&H, DE, EE, IE, LV, NO, RO, RS, FI, UK and Eurashe. The opinions expressed can be subdivided into three groups:

1. **Representatives who clearly support the proposed change (BE, EL, FR, HR, NL, PT, RO, FI, UK, ETF, EUA)**

   The arguments by this group can be summarised as follows:
   - The term "competence" has created ambiguity because the term is used in two different ways in the Recommendation of 2008, namely as a broad concept and as a narrow concept. To replace the term with "responsibility and autonomy" would end this ambiguity and make the EQF recommendation more consistent and clear.
   - The narrow definition of “competence” (restricted to responsibility and autonomy) is contested in the literature.
   - Most of the countries supporting the change already use “responsibility and autonomy” for indicating a category of descriptors in their national frameworks (and not “competence”).

2. **Representatives who oppose the proposed change (DK, AT)**

   Arguments put forward by this group:
   - These countries wish to keep the current situation as change would lead to confusion and uncertainty. In AT the law on the NQF is based on the current terms. In DK both the NQF and the Higher Education NQF are based on the current terminology.
   - The current terminology is quite clear and one cannot control the world through definitions.
   - The focus should be on portability of qualifications.

3. **Representatives who can live with both the proposed change and with the continuation of the current situation (B&H, DE, ES, IE, LU, LV, HU, NO, RS, SI, TK, Eurashe)**

   These representatives made a variety of observations, some leaning more towards option 1 and others leaning more towards option 2. Not all observations are necessarily supported by all representatives grouped under this option:
   - Support to the arguments under option 1, in particular the first two bullets
   - The proposed change will make the Recommendation more consistent and readable and the substance of the descriptors is not changed.
   - There exists a large variety of situations at the national level in which “competence” is used in many different ways.
– The change may have implications at national level, in particular for those countries that use the term "competence" alongside knowledge and skills in their descriptors;
– On the other hand Member States can call the descriptors as they wish. Given the existence of subsidiarity the probable impact of the change on the national level may be minimal.

The EQF in addition discussed the following:
– If the change in the title of the third column to “responsibility and autonomy” is maintained then the definition on “competence” in annex I should be adapted accordingly and reflect the broader meaning of “competence”. Rather than the definition of the Presidency text of 19 December 2016\(^1\), this should contain the definition of competence of the Recommendation of 2008\(^2\). This would maintain the importance of the broader concept of “competence” for the EQF.
– The text in the cell just below the heading\(^3\) should express the increasing degree of responsibility and autonomy progressing up the levels. The EQF AG did not come up with a precise suggestion for a formulation. Another suggestion that the text should refer to “proven” ability, received little explicit support.

Finally in the written observations the following point was made:
– The use of the term "competence" should be consistent with its use across tools and recommendations (ECVET, key competences framework, recommendation on validation, ESCO).

Conclusions
COM thanked all members of the EQF AG for the inputs on this. Minutes of the discussion on Annex II will be prepared and sent to Maltese Presidency. The note will be sent to the EQF AG members for revision and members absent at the meeting can take this opportunity to add their opinion as experts.

2.7 Initial discussion on a revised working method of the EQF AG in the context of referencing
COM opened an initial discussion on a revised working method of the EQF AG in the context of referencing. The current method used on the EQF AG was outlined and the existence of an asymmetrical involvement from EQF AG members depending on the country was stressed. The need for updating EQF notes and other guidance material was also expressed. COM posed a set of questions to the group in order to initiate a discussion on a revised working

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\(^1\) Competence: a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context.
\(^2\) Competence means the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development.
\(^3\) “In the context of the EQF responsibility and autonomy is described as the ability of the learner to apply knowledge and skills autonomously and with responsibility”.
method for the EQF AG. COM invited the group to express thoughts and needs and to reflect upon a stronger and more balanced involvement of the EQF AG members in the peer review process of referencing.

**Comments** (BE, FR, IE, LU, CoE)

Participants acknowledged the demanding but successful work of last years and the positive results delivered during this first phase if referencing. Participants agreed in including more effective elements in the second phase that is starting, stressing the need to move forward in a coherent way and establishing engaging working methods.

Participants welcomed COM suggestion to shift the focus on practical implementation of the EQF. Countries could inform about the state of play of implementation, showing how EQF is operating. Some participants also stressed the relevance of assessing the potential impact of NQF/EQF when moving toward implementation in order to evaluate quality and effectiveness of the frameworks. Preparation of self-evaluation report with peer review from peer expert and Cedefop was proposed and in order to avoid excessive workload, reports could be shaped according to national priorities. Mobility was identified as an element to be assessed since this was one of the main objectives of EQF.

In outlining the current procedure the first presentation of the state of play of the country should also be included. Participants agreed that small groups with a specific focus could be set up to study the report. Some doubts were expressed on the usefulness of study visits to countries because of the complexity of education systems, unless the visit is restricted to specific aspects. Further questions were raised with regard to how the role of international experts relates to the role of EQF AG representatives preparing the referencing discussion for the plenary EQF AG.

**Answers**

COM thanked all participants for sharing their views. COM acknowledged the importance of an initial state of play presentation that gives an overview of the national education and qualification system. In the context of a revised working method COM welcomed the idea of a self-evaluation report with peer review through a study-visit, and stressed the voluntary nature of such exercise. The study visit could focus on what is not working and whether what is working is connected to national political priority. COM recalled that the impact of EQF is multiple and mobility could be an interesting element to be assessed. The balance between small study groups and international experts, which could also not be members of the EQF AG, needs to be explored. Further reflection is also needed on whether to explicitly include self-certification in the report. COM will take into account workload issues. COM concluded that on the basis of this first discussion a practical note on the EQF AG's working method will be elaborated and sent before the EQF AG meeting of 28-30 of March 2017.

2.8 Presentation on the Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF)
SADC presented the state of play of the Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF). The SADC regional qualifications framework was approved by the ministries of the 15 member states participating in the process. The SADC is composed by 10 levels, alignment criteria and quality assurance guidelines have been developed. Currently, an action plan to restart the implementation of the ministers' decision to establish the SADCQF is being discussed. The purpose is to make the SADCQF operational as soon as possible. The purpose of the study visit was to gain further insights on the EQF process and its implementation. For this reason SADC asked the EQF AG to share insights on the main challenges faced during the referencing process and on the strategies used to maintain the momentum and promote the implementation of the framework.

**Comments (BE, FR, IE, EUA, CoE, Cedefop, ETF)**

Participants found the presentation very interesting. Questions were asked on quality assurance bodies, recognition, vocational and verification, on the role played by the regional framework in stimulating the set of NQFs. In relation to the request of advice from EQF experiences, members of the EQF AG underlined the importance of collaboration and cooperation as well as the relevance of the EQF AG and PLAs. These were identified as crucial tools to foster countries' and stakeholders' involvement in the process and to discuss themes of common interest. The PLAs were identified as a useful tool to maintain momentum. It was emphasised that it takes time to build mutual understanding. The relevance of technical and analytical assistance from ETF and Cedefop, as EU agencies, was also underlined. The importance of a balance between labour market and education stakeholders in the EQF process was also stressed. A final observation expressed that after initial criticism from higher education stakeholders, universities are now changing their approach in relation to their environment (including the labour market) and giving also more importance to the principle of learning outcome, thanks to the EQF process.

**Answers**

In terms of recognition of qualifications SADC explained that, similarly to the Lisbon Convention, countries should recognize qualifications similar to the corresponding qualifications in their own system. It was explained that not all countries have NQF in place yet and that the creation of NQFs is encouraged. Moreover, involvement of social partners is strongly encouraged while consultant-driven process is strongly discouraged. The verification network involves also VET. SADC thanked all members of the EQF for their comments and advises, thanking again the Commission for making the study visit possible and engaging.

**Conclusions**

COM thanked the delegation for the clear and straightforward presentation and answered to the questions regarding the Commission role in the EQF process. COM explained that many member states worked on their NQF because of the EQF and stressed the importance of involving stakeholder also at EU level.
3. VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

3.1 Presentation on the approach to take by the EQF AG in discussing the national one-off reports on validation

COM presented note AG 39-3 on the approach to take by the EQF AG in discussing the national one-off reports on validation. The note, prepared in cooperation with Cedefop, has been built up on the basis of EQF AG inputs received further to a Commission e-mail (21 December 2016) with a set of questions on the working method. The structure of the report was already agreed in the EQF AG of 4-5 February 2013. The process is voluntary and there is no obligation to strictly follow the structure. COM invited the EQF AG to reflect about the process and outlined four possible steps on how the discussion of the report could take place in the EQF. A discussion on the aim, the structure and process of the presentation of the one-off reports took place. COM particularly involved in the discussion those countries that already confirmed presenting their one-off report (LU-AU-PT), or that intend to do so (FR-DE-CY).

Comments (DK, DE, EE, IE, FR, HR, CY, LV, LU, NO, AT, PT, SI, FI, BusinessEurope, CoE)

Clarifications were asked on the role of the reports in the context of the evaluation report of the Commission to the Council for 2019. The relevance of this last report for some Member States was stressed and COM was urged to avoid duplication of work for Member States.

Participants agreed on the overall aims and objectives of the report. In order to take into account different countries' situations it was suggested to keep the aim of the report open and flexible, leaving space for discussion on concepts and initiatives. Participants agreed that the report on validation should not be the same of the referencing report. Advantages of having reports focused on impacts resulting from the validation recommendation were stressed. This would be especially useful in order to improve comparability. The added value of involving experts of systems different from the one under analysis was also stressed. Some participants asked elucidations on the use of the word "draft" report i.e. whether this would lead to a report that is checked, commented and approved before becoming final. Other participants supported the use of the word "draft" because from the discussion following the report presentation, constructive feedback and reflections informing the final report could come out. It was stressed that because of the heterogeneity of the group it might be challenging to provide practical examples, as suggested in the note, that are interesting for both EQF and validation representatives and stakeholders..

Participants agreed on the 12 elements presented in the note for the structure of the presentation. The importance of having fixed elements in order to improve documents' readability was underlined. At the same time it was emphasized that because it is a volunteer
process, flexibility in the structure in order to reflect countries' different realities and priorities, must be ensured.

With regard to the process for presenting the report, few participants considered difficult to envisage the process and considered it slightly demanding because of three discussants' involvement. Several clarifications were asked on the role and the way of selecting discussants. More specifically, whether these would come from the advisory group; to what extent representatives would be involved in the process of selection of discussants; what if nobody volunteers for being a discussant. It was suggested to be open to invite people from outside the group. It was also proposed to set up small groups working together in order to prepare the report. The involvement of stakeholders and social partners was considered as a lesser priority.

Further clarifications were asked on the role of Cedefop, CoE and Commission and on the nature of the note prepared by Cedefop and the written comments prepared by discussants. It was proposed to disseminate the note prepared by Cedefop within the group in order to make full use of it. It was stressed that it is important to see the link between EQF and VNFIL recommendations.

During the discussion some representatives mentioned their situation concerning the preparation of the report. PT and LU confirmed that they will be able to meet the aims of the report. FR explained that an internal discussion on what can be presented is ongoing. CY volunteered for presenting the one-off report on validation especially in order to receive feedback on implementation. LV agreed at national level on writing the report but there are some delays. NO will not volunteer because a comprehensive report for the end of 2018 is scheduled and because they already presented their system to the EQF AG.

**Answers and conclusions**

COM explained that it will be responsible for evaluating the actions taken in response to the 2012 Recommendation on validation and for preparing a report to the Council by 2019. The work done within the EQF AG will form useful input for the report that will also be discussed in the group. The presented timetable in the note ends in June 2018 to show that in order to meet the deadline set out in the recommendation 2-3 countries per meeting should present their validation arrangements. On the use of the word "draft report" COM clarified that there is no intention of undertaking any peer review but to allow countries to present a first draft of the report if they wish to do so.

COM clarified that because the structure of the report was already agreed the discussion concerned only the structure of the presentation and not the structure of the report itself. It also stressed that the exercise is voluntary and countries can decide to give priority to specific national elements, however the EU dimension should also be addressed.
On the process for presenting the report, especially on the way of selecting discussants, COM invited the group to put forward some concrete proposals. COM stressed that members of the EQF AG in charge of validation can work together when preparing the report but COM cannot take part in the organization of such groups outside the context of the EQF AG.

COM thanked the group and informed that the note will be adapted to the inputs received, especially on the process for presenting the one-off report to the EQF AG. The note will circulate before the EQF AG meeting of March.

4. DISCUSSION ON THE PLA PROGRAMME 2017-2018 (EQF AND VNFIL)

COM presented note 39-4 on the PLAs work-plan for 2017-2018 in the context of the EQF AG. The proposed topics and the division of tasks among Commission, hosting country and EQF AG in organizing a PLA were outlined. More detailed information on the purpose of each PLA was presented by those representatives that proposed a specific topic or by the Commission.

In the context of the EQF, PL presented the provisional programme of the PLA on Horizontal Comparisons that will take place on 18-19 May in Poland. The PLA would focus on testing the fiche on different qualifications from different countries. Therefore, some previous work is required in order to effectively participate to the workshops. IE outlined some ideas for a PLA on Thoughts about NQF Evaluation, encouraging members of the AG to express interest for hosting the PLA. The PLA would open a dialogue on what kind of evidence to evaluate the effects of national qualifications frameworks can be collected and examined and through which methods. AT presented the relationship between EQF and Credit System as a theme for a PLA that could be hosted in Vienna at the end of 2017/beginning of 2018. COM presented a theme for a PLA on Communication and databases, inviting interested members of the AG to host it.

In the context of VNFIL, BE presented the PLA on funding validation that should take place on June 2017. LLP and CEV presented the provisional agenda for the PLA on the role of non-governmental stakeholders in implementing VNFIL recommendation that will take place in September 2017. COM presented the themes of Skills audit and Quality assurance of validation as interesting themes for PLA, encouraging representatives to volunteer for hosting these PLA.

Comments (BE, DK, IE, FR, LU, NO, AT, PL, PT, FI, Cedefop, ETF, UAPME)

Participants welcomed the idea of focusing the PLA on Horizontal Comparison on testing and checking the fiche as a method to compare qualifications rather than limit the PLA to disseminate the results of the Horizontal Comparison working group. Questions were asked on what type of qualifications will be chosen for the comparison. A participants suggested to focus on VET qualifications. Participants expressed interest in the idea proposed by IE of a PLA aimed at investigating the impact of NQFs. However, no members of the AG
volunteered to host the PLA. Cedefop offered to host the PLA in Thessaloniki unless other representatives volunteer for it. The theme proposed by AT for a PLA on EQF and Credit systems was considered interesting but concerns were expressed due to the current revision of the EQF Recommendation and its reference to credit systems. On the possible organization of the proposed PLA it was suggested to involve also institutions from VET but to avoid focusing only on ECVET. Participants agreed on the theme presented by COM on communication and databases, especially because it would address very practical and concrete issues. Participants proposed to involve EQF national coordination points, and the networks in general, because they struggle with communication, promoting awareness activities, exchanging information and connecting databases. On the proposal of BE to focus the PLA on the issue of funding validation and on the request for suggestions, a representative advised to look at the Canadian and American cases. In addition a participant expressed the willingness to put BE in contact with some firms that invested in validation in order to have an idea of the costs. With regard to the PLA on the role of the stakeholder in validation the theme was considered interesting. However, the issue of social partners and stakeholders lacking expertise on the field of validation was raised. Clarifications were asked on the role of social partners in the PLA and on what results countries would expect from this PLA.

Conclusions

COM congratulated all members for the interesting proposals and invited members of the EQF AG to volunteer for hosting the remaining PLA. AT is invited to elaborate further the proposed PLA on EQF and Credit Systems in order to further present it at the EQF AG meeting on 28-30 March. COM concluded that the PLA work plan will be updated and further discussed by the EQF AG at the meeting of 28-30 March.

3) CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS/OPINIONS

Referencing reports:
- CY presented a detailed roadmap on planned measures for implementation of the national qualification framework. CY is the 31st country having referenced to the EQF.

Referencing process: working method + information:
- COM presented note 39-2 on overview of national development on the implementation of EQF and urged countries to send missing referencing reports and information for the comparison function of the portal.
- COM opened an initial discussion on a revised working method of the EQF AG in the context of referencing. COM suggested to shift the focus on practical implementation of the EQF and to reflect upon a stronger and more balanced involvement of the EQF AG members. EQF AG members welcomed the discussion and emphasised the added value of self-assessment.

Working group on horizontal comparisons of levelled qualifications:
– The chair of the HC group summarized the outcome of the HC working group meeting in Warsaw on 13 January and outlined the content of the comments received by member of the EQF AG, explaining that more time is needed to finalize a new version of the report on the bases of these inputs.
– Scotland and SE have been included in the analysis.
– COM stressed that the final report should include strengths and weaknesses of levelling and that the main focus should be on the consistency of the qualifications under analysis. The work is exploratory in nature, and the pilot is testing a method (the fiche) and recommendations on what could be improved should be included.

Learning outcomes:
– Cedefop presented the state of play of the draft of the Handbook on learning outcome & feedback.
– Cedefop and UNESCO presented the preliminary observations and conclusions of a combined Cedefop-unesco-ETF study on learning outcomes. In the context of the study the draft skills and competence terminology (English version) from the ESCO project (European classification of occupations, skills, competences and qualifications) were for the first time used to compare the learning outcomes in different VET qualifications descriptions from more than 20 countries worldwide.

National qualification frameworks:
– Cedefop presented the preliminary results of the most recent developments with regard to NQFs in Europe in 2016. By the end of 2016 a total of 43 NQFs are under development, 33 countries have formally adopted their framework while 6 are working on formal adoption. The EQF recommendation of 2008 has spurred this process. 35 countries are working toward comprehensive NQFs addressing all levels and types of qualifications from formal education and training system (VET, HE, general education). By the end of 2016 many countries had reached the operational stage of their NQF implementation and 21 countries are now indicating NQF and EQF levels on certificates and qualifications. Links between NQFs and validation are increasing.

Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) delegation study visit to EQF:
– SADC presented the state of play of the Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF) and an exchange of information with the EQF AG took place. Members of the EQF AG underlined the importance of collaboration and cooperation as well as the relevance of the EQF AG and PLAs as tools to foster countries and stakeholders involvement in the process.

New Skills Agenda for Europe - Updates on the state of play of Council negotiations:
– Revision EQF Recommendation: Further to the first reading of the proposal at the Education Committee in the autumn of 2016, the Slovak Presidency presented a first revision of the text on 19 December. At the Education Committee on 6 February 2017
the discussion was limited to recommendations and annexes. Recitals will be discussed at a later stage. The text will be discussed again with the Maltese Presidency at the beginning of March. The Education Committee asked for a technical discussion in the EQF AG on Annex II of the Commission proposal, where "Responsibility and Autonomy" replaces "Competence" as heading of the third column in the level descriptors. The discussion took place within the EQF AG on 8-9 February 2017.

- **Revision Europass decision:** After a first discussion on 2 December, the Commission produced a non-paper, further clarifying the Europass proposal, which was discussed by the Education Committee on 6 February. Member States raised issues especially on ESCO and on the effect of mentioning EQF in a decision. COM explained that during the Education Committee the legal service of the Council confirmed (orally) that to mention EQF in a decision does not affect its legal nature as such. Negotiations will be pursued under the Maltese Presidency in March.

**Validation of non-formal and informal learning:**
- COM presented note 39-3 on the approach to take by the EQF AG in discussing the national one-off reports on validation. The note prepared in cooperation with Cedefop has been built up on the basis of EQF AG inputs received further to a Commission e-mail (21 December 2016) with a set of questions on the working method.
- A discussion on the aim, the structure and process of the presentation of the one-off reports took place. COM particularly involved in the discussion those countries that already confirmed presenting their one-off report (LU-AU-PT), or that intend to do so (FR-DE-CY).

**Peer Learning Activities:**
- COM presented note 39-4 on the PLAs work-plan for 2017-2018 in the context of the EQF AG.
- Presentations on PLA proposals in the context of the EQF were made by PL – Horizontal comparison; IE - Thoughts about NQF Evaluation; AT - EQF and Credit Systems: COM – Communication and databases.
- Presentation on PLA proposals in the context of VNFIL were made by: BE – Funding validation; LLP – The role of non-governmental stakeholders in implementing VNFIL recommendation; COM - Skills Audit; COM - Quality assurance of validation.

4) **NEXT STEPS**

**Referencing reports:**
- CY is invited to present an update on the implementation of the referencing in late 2018.
- TK is scheduled to present its referencing report at the EQF AG meeting of 28-30 March 2017. The report was sent to the Commission and will be sent out to EQF AG members during the month of February.
SK will address its pending issues at the EQF AG meeting of 28-30 March 2017. The report and information on pending issues should be sent to the Commission by 28 February.

IS is scheduled to present an update of the referencing report at the EQF AG meeting on 13-15 June 2017. The report should be sent to the Commission by 13 May.

**Referencing process: working method + information:**

- COM to reflect on a different way of presenting information on the referencing process in close coordination with Cedefop.
- Members of the EQF AG to send the missing referencing reports and provide requested information for the interactive comparison of qualifications.
- COM to prepare a note on the EQF AG’s working method with regard to referencing further to the inputs received during the meeting. COM will circulate the draft note to the EQF AG before its discussion at the EQF AG meeting of 28-30 March 2017.

**Working group on horizontal comparisons of levelled qualifications:**

- The HC group to finalise the report further to the comments received and it will be sent to the EQF AG before the end of February in order to be presented at the EQF AG meeting on 28-30 March.

**Learning outcomes:**

- Cedefop to finalize the new draft of the Handbook and circulate it by the end of February 2017 in order to receive feedback and discuss it at the EQF AG on 28-30 March.
- Cedefop to keep the EQF AG updated on the results of the still ongoing comparative study on 26 vocational qualifications worldwide.

**National qualification frameworks:**

- Cedefop to publish the 23 national chapters that have been updated onto the European Inventory on NQFs: [http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/european-inventory-on-nqf](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/european-inventory-on-nqf).
- Cedefop to prepare and publish the synthesis report on the base of the national chapters by the end of March.

**New Skills Agenda for Europe - Updates on the state of play of Council negotiations on the Revision EQF Recommendation and Europass Decision:**

- COM to prepare the minutes of the discussion on Annex II to be sent to the Maltese Presidency. The note will be sent to the EQF AG members for revision and members absent at the meeting can take this opportunity to add their expert opinion.

**Validation of non-formal and informal learning:**
– COM to disseminate before the EQF AG meeting on 28-30 March a revised note based on feedback received. COM to make concrete proposals and to provide more detailed information on the potential role of discussants in the process.

Peer Learning Activities:
– Members of the AG to express interest to host the PLAs proposed by COM (Communication and databases, Skills audit, Quality assurance of validation) and by IE (Thoughts about NQF Evaluation). If no interest is expressed by members of the EQF AG, Cedefop may decide to address the theme proposed by IE and the COM may host the PLA on communication and databases.
– AT is invited to elaborate further the proposed PLA on EQF and Credit Systems in order to further present it at the EQF AG meeting on 28-30 March.
– COM to keep updated the PLA work plan that will be discussed by the EQF AG at the meeting of 28-30 March.

5) NEXT MEETING

Planned EQF AG Meetings in 2017:

- March 29-30
- June 13-15
- October 3-5
- December 11-13
### 6) List of participants

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