1. Introduction

On 22 May 2017 the Council adopted the revised Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning, thus repealing the EQF Recommendation of 2008.

The revised recommendation consolidates the purpose of the EQF, namely to improve the transparency, comparability and portability of people’s qualifications. It also confirms that the EQF should promote lifelong learning; it should contribute to modernising education and training systems and to increase the employability, mobility and social integration of workers and learners. It further aims at better linking formal, non-formal and informal learning and supporting the validation of learning outcomes acquired in different settings. Building on what has been achieved since 2008, the revised Recommendation allows for a deepening the cooperation process initiated by the EQF.

The revised Recommendation gives a clear mandate to the EQF Advisory Group to continue to coordinate and monitor this process. This note, taking into consideration the experiences gained after 2008, is a first attempt in identifying tasks to be addressed and working methods to be applied in the coming period. It is a note for discussion inviting the EQF AG to further clarify these tasks and methods.

Section 2 of the note addresses the remaining tasks of the Recommendation of 2008, section 3 summarises new elements of the revised Recommendation, sections 4-9 deal with specific issues (updating referencing, levelling of qualifications, learning outcomes, international qualifications, communication, and links with third country frameworks) and sections 10 and 11 deal with EU level support and next steps.

The EQF AG is invited to discuss the proposed suggestions for future work in the EQF AG, in order to implement the revised EQF recommendation. The EQF AG is also invited to comment and give suggestions on the concrete working methods proposed for each topic. The AG should further express which topic sees as the most relevant to address.
2. The 2008 EQF Recommendation – remaining tasks

The first and initial stage of EQF referencing, as outlined by the 2008 Recommendation, is now close to completion: 32 out of 39 countries have (by June 2017) referenced their national qualifications levels to the EQF. The EQF has by this reached the critical mass required for the framework to take on the role as reference for European qualifications. To support the completion of this initial stage, and thus support the implementation of the 2017 Recommendation, priority should be given to the following three tasks:

(i) Completion of initial referencing reports:

Of the seven remaining countries, two are currently in dialogue with the EQF AG on completion of their referencing reports. Five countries, among which two EU Member States have yet to submit initial referencing reports but have all indicated that this will happen during 2017-2018. Finalising this stage of the EQF process signals a significant achievement and should be widely communicated. The remaining countries will, in the same way as previously, structure their reports according to the 10 referencing criteria. On a voluntary basis they could be invited to reflect on new elements introduced by the 2017 Recommendation.

(ii) Dealing with outstanding issues related to the referencing.

In the majority of cases where the EQF AG has given its green light on a referencing report (thus acknowledging that the 10 criteria have been met), countries have also been asked to provide additional and complementary information on specific issues, as documented in summary notes prepared by Cedefop and the Council of Europe after each discussion in the EQF AG. These issues vary from information on implementation of the NQF, legal processes; inclusion of qualifications in the NQF to information on governance structures. While some countries have provided this information, others have yet to do so. With reference to the summary notes, countries could be invited to prepare short information updates (orally or in writing) to the EQF AG responding to any outstanding issues and questions. The issue could be addressed every EQF AG under the agenda point of "Overview of national developments related to EQF implementation”.

(iii) Update and complete information at European level

For the EQF to work as a tool supporting transparency and comparability of qualifications, information should be easily accessible. Completing the initial phase of referencing should be accompanied by a strengthening of communication along the following lines:

- All initial referencing reports having received the green light of the EQF AG should be published as soon as possible (the revised referencing criterion nr 9 invites to do so within 6 months from having referenced).
- The summary notes prepared by Cedefop and Council of Europe, and agreed with the relevant country, could be published on the Commission web-site, increasing the transparency of the referencing process.
- The ‘comparison tool’ should be further developed to include as many countries as possible.
- Existing European web-sites addressing the EQF from the Commission (Europa, LOQ), Cedefop and the ETF should be better interconnected so as to provide a clear and univocal message to external users.
3. **The 2017 EQF Recommendation – New tasks**

The new elements of the revised EQF Recommendation compared to the EQF Recommendation of 2008 are:

**Recommendations to Member States:**

- Member States are invited to review and update, when relevant, EQF referencing.
- Member States are invited to ensure that qualifications that are part of national qualifications frameworks or systems referenced to the EQF are in accordance with the common principles for quality assurance set out in Annex IV (replacing former Annex III on quality assurance), without prejudice to national quality assurance principles that apply to national qualifications. Annex IV on ().
- Member States are invited, where appropriate, to promote links between credit systems and national qualifications frameworks or systems taking into account the common principles on credit systems of Annex V;
- Member States are invited to make the results of the referencing process publicly available and to ensure that information on qualifications and their learning outcomes is accessible and published (using data fields of Annex VI).

**Recommendations to the Commission, in cooperation with Member States and stakeholders – in the context of the EQF AG:**

- Setting up voluntary procedures on the levelling of international qualifications through NQFs and information exchange and consultation between Member States on those procedures to ensure consistency.
- Develop guidance for communicating the EQF, in particular how to present EQF levels on newly issued certificates, diplomas and supplements, and/or registers of qualifications, in accordance with national systems and regulations on certificates and diplomas.
- Explore possibilities for the development and application of criteria and procedures to enable, in accordance with international agreements, the comparison of third countries’ national and regional qualifications frameworks with the EQF.

**Other new elements:**

- The EQF referencing criteria for national qualifications frameworks developed by the EQF Advisory Group since 2008 have been included in the Recommendation as Annex III in a slightly modified way;
- Change of the heading of the third column of the level descriptors into "responsibility and autonomy" instead of "competence".

4. **Updating the referencing (Recommendation 2)**

*Purpose*

The referencing reports represent a ‘snap shot’ in time and will eventually, as national qualification systems and frameworks evolve, become outdated. They should make sure that the information underpinning the referencing is accurate and transparent, as this directly influences the extent to which the EQF is trusted. This also determines to which extent the EQF is able to facilitate comparability and portability of qualifications.

*State of play*

So far three countries have presented updates of their referencing report to the EQF AG, namely Belgium (FL), Estonia and Malta.
Working method within the EQF AG

The updating of the referencing should follow the 10 referencing criteria. To provide the necessary context for addressing these criteria, countries could indicate how their qualification systems and frameworks have evolved and point to any changes relevant to understanding their qualifications and the way they have been levelled. When available, see also below, countries could include information on evaluations and impact studies.

The working method for updated reports could build on the experiences of initial referencing and include the following steps:

- Sending the updated report 8 weeks prior to the EQF AG meeting where it will be discussed.
- Preparation of the discussion by three EQF AG members, who have not been involved as international expert in the context of the update.
- Technical comments to the country prepared by Cedefop and Council of Europe to be sent 2 weeks prior to the EQF AG meeting.
- Discussion in the EQF AG (1.5 hrs), consisting of a presentation by the country updating its referencing, followed by comments from the group of three EQF AG members, Cedefop, the Council of Europe and possibly international experts, and then followed by a discussion in plenary.
- Steps after the discussion:
  - Technical note to be prepared by Cedefop and the Council of Europe summarising the discussion of the EQF AG and including recommendations for the updated report before its publication in the portal.
  - For archiving and transparency purposes the updated referencing report will be published on the portal (currently LOQ) next to the existing referencing reports (the latter should remain accessible).

Impact of EQF at national level

As part of the exercise of updating the referencing report, EQF countries may, on a voluntary basis, include an assessment of the impact of the EQF at national level in their revised report. Such assessment could include a visiting programme for a limited number of EQF AG members to the country concerned.

5. Levelling of qualifications (Recommendation 9)

Background/Purpose

The overall objectives of the EQF are to improve transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications. For comparison of qualifications to be trusted, the criteria and methods for levelling used at national level must be transparent and accessible and understandable to external stakeholders and users. Strengthening the quality of levelling requires a more systematic focus on how the learning outcomes approach is applied by countries, but also on how contextual (political and social) factors influence the levelling (1). A systematic strengthening of these working methods will support a more consistent application of the learning outcomes principle across countries, clarifying strengths as well as weaknesses in current practices.

(1) This is clearly demonstrated by PLA on Levelling Master craftsman qualifications, Berlin 2015 and Horizontal comparison exercise, 2016-2017
State of play
Experiences from 2008 and onwards demonstrate that levelling criteria and methodologies differ from country to country. While countries so far have given priority to demonstrate how national qualification level descriptors align with the EQF (referencing criterion 2), there is now a need to better understand how the learning outcomes principle is interpreted and applied to place concrete qualifications at a particular level (criteria 3 and 4). The referencing process has also demonstrated that levelling is influenced by contextual factors related to the particular institutional and political set up in particular countries and that this have to be taken into account and demonstrated. There is also a clear distinction between countries levelling ‘blocks’ of qualifications and those levelling single qualifications. There will be a need to address the strengths and weaknesses of these different approaches, and the extent to which they promote trust in the levelling.

Working method in the EQF AG
The recently adopted Recommendation invites the Commission – within the EQF AG – to: "support consistency in the further implementation of the EQF across Member States by comparing and discussing the methodologies used for the levelling of qualifications in national qualifications frameworks or systems, with due regard to national contexts". (Recommendation 9).

It is therefore proposed to dedicate specific sessions of the AG meetings to present and discuss existing national methodologies for levelling qualifications. Countries could prepare short presentations on methods and procedures used for levelling, explaining whether one or more methods are applied in the country and which elements are taken into account when levelling qualifications (role of national context factor).

6. Learning outcomes (Recommendation 10)

Background/purpose
The learning outcomes approach is fundamental to the EQF. Triggering the rapid and massive introduction of national qualifications frameworks across Europe since 2008, the EQF has played a key role in promoting the use of learning outcomes for a variety of purposes. Studies carried out by Cedefop in recent years (2) show that countries interpret and apply learning outcomes in different ways. While this reflects diverse national contexts and as such is positive, some of these differences reduce transparency and may prevent the portability of qualifications across countries. For a better understanding of qualifications the systematic exchange of experiences between countries on the interpretation and application of learning outcomes could be strengthened, without leading to harmonisation or standardisation of learning outcomes descriptions.

State of play
Significant work has been carried out on the use of learning outcomes for levelling qualifications, inter alia reflected in EQF Note nr 4 on Using learning outcomes (3). Furthermore Cedefop organised policy learning fora (4) on writing and defining learning outcomes and will publish in 2017 an updated set of Guidelines for defining and writing learning outcomes.

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**Working method in the EQF AG**

It is suggested to further develop the cooperation on the application of the learning outcomes principles by building on the new handbook on learning outcomes published in 2017. Members of the EQF AG are invited to disseminate the new Handbook and also to suggest areas where this can be developed further. The work on a common format for presenting learning outcomes (also referred to in Annex IV of the revised Recommendation) could be further discussed. Such format could be applied on a voluntary basis and for international communication purposes without affecting national learning outcomes descriptions.

7. **International qualifications** (Recommendation 11)

**Background/purpose**

International qualifications are a reality and reflect the globalisation and digitisation of economies and labour markets. The EQF aims at being a translation device for all types and levels of qualifications, including qualifications awarded outside formal education and training systems, such as international qualifications. This improves opportunities for holder of qualifications in terms of progression in education and training system or in the labour market. However, to ensure that EQF supports lifelong learning, mobility and employability objectives in practice, it is important to promote a consistent levelling of international qualifications to the EQF through NQFs. A crucial feature of international qualifications is that these are issued by international bodies (or national bodies acting on their behalf) in more than one country. In addition, the general need to increase the transparency of qualifications is even more important when dealing with qualifications awarded by international bodies (associations, organisations, sectors or companies) operating outside national jurisdictions.

**State of Play**

Available data suggest that in 2016 nine countries had national procedures in place (or under development) for including international sectoral qualifications in their NQFs (BG, BIH, FR, LT, NL, PT, SI, SK, UK).

**Working method in the EQF AG**

The recently adopted Recommendation invites the Commission – within the EQF AG – to "support the setting up of voluntary procedures on the levelling of international qualifications through national qualification frameworks or systems and information exchange and consultation between Member States on those procedures to ensure consistency." (Recommendation 11)

Building on the work carried out by the EQF AG sub groups on International Sectoral Qualifications countries could be invite to present their national approaches toward international qualifications. Presentations could focus on: whether qualifications are included in NQFs or why it is not the case; what methodologies are used for levelling; to what extent their international dimension is taken into account and what is the situation of portability of international qualifications. Such presentations would be the basis for information exchange and consultations between countries.

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6 See Report from the EQF AG sub-group on International Sectoral Qualifications (ISQs), May 2015;
Communicating about EQF (Recommendation 12)

**Background/Purpose**
The EQF aims to facilitate mobility for workers and learners, promote lifelong learning for young and adult, and contribute to meeting the requirements of supply and demand in the European labour market. In order to reach these objectives, it is crucial to raise awareness of the EQF and ensure its understanding by users. Improved communication should serve to better reach out to learners, workers, employers, social partners, education and training providers and other stakeholders and inform them about the EQF’s benefits.

**State of play**
The 2008 Recommendation invites member states after having referenced their NQF to the EQF, to adopt measures so that all new qualification certificates, diplomas end Europass documents contain a clear reference to the appropriate EQF level.

- So far 21 countries (CH, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, FR, IE, IT, LV, LT, LU, HU, ME, MK, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, SI) put EQF levels on certificates and diplomas and/or their supplements (partly only on VET certificates).
- A total of 15 countries (CZ, DK, DE, EE,EL,FR, LV, LT, MK, MT, NL, PL, PT, SI, UK) put EQF levels on their databases or registers (also initial stage).
- A total of 5 countries (BE, EL, IE, LV, SI) have linked their national databases to the le LOQ portal in order to give information on qualifications via the common European interface.
- In addition, 13 countries (DK, DE, EE, FR, IE, IT, LV, LT, MT, NL, NO, SI, UK) present information about national qualifications in the functionality of the EQF Portal that allows for comparing qualifications levels.

**Working method in the EQF AG**
In the revised Recommendation Member States are invited to ensure that all newly issued qualifications and/or register of qualifications contain a clear reference to the appropriate EQF level. In addition, the Commission is invited – within the EQF AG – to "develop guidance for communicating the EQF, in particular how to present EQF levels on newly issued certificates, diplomas and supplements, and/or registers of qualifications, in accordance with national systems and regulations on certificates and diplomas." (Recommendation 12)

In the context of the EQF AG short sessions could be organised in which Member States present their communication policy and action. Presentations could focus on: how EQF levels are presented and where; how qualifications in databases are displayed; how information are disseminated (websites, publications, newspaper articles, social networks); how employers and education and training providers are informed on EQF and supported; what are the main challenges to implementation and lessons learnt. Building on such exchanges on existing good practices and lessons learnt, guidelines for communicating about the EQF could be developed.

9. Third countries' national and regional qualifications frameworks (Recommendation 13)

**Background/Purpose**
The EQF has been a source of inspiration for the development of national and regional qualifications frameworks throughout the world. An increasing number of countries and regions are seeking closer links between their qualifications framework and the EQF. The lack of comparability of qualifications awarded in the EU with third-country qualifications hinders the trust in foreign qualifications and makes their recognition more difficult. This situation applies as much to people with third-country qualifications coming to the EU as it does to people with EU qualifications going to third countries.

State of play
The third country element is entirely new in the Recommendation. Pilots comparing third country qualifications frameworks with the EQF have been carried out with the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF) and the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF). The pilots have resulted in joint reports published on the Europa website and the websites of the AQF, NZQF and HKQF respectively.

Working method in the EQF AG
The Recommendation invites the Commission in cooperation with Member States – in the context of the EQF AG- to "explore possibilities for the development and application of criteria and procedures to enable, in accordance with international agreements, the comparison of third countries’ national and regional qualifications frameworks with the EQF" (Recommendation 13).

The pilots carried out in 2014-15 comparing the EQF with the AQF, the HKQF and the NZQF can serve as a source of inspiration for future working methods. The comparisons took place on the basis of criteria derived from the EQF referencing criteria that were agreed bilaterally for each report. Common elements addressed in the report were: roles and responsibilities of the bodies in charge of the frameworks, comparability of the frameworks and their levels, learning outcomes, transparent processes for the inclusion of qualifications, quality assurance and validation of prior learning.

The three reports have shown that comparability between qualifications awarded in the EU and qualifications from the rest of world is possible, at least at system level. They have also shown that for a good mutual understanding the nature, purpose and the governance of the EQF, the relationships between the EQF and the European NQFs and the overall EU institutional context need careful explanation. Another lesson learned is that for comparison technical exchanges and mutual visits, as well as discussions with the bodies in charge of the management and development of the qualifications framework and with stakeholders are essential for a better understanding of the respective qualifications frameworks.

10. EU level support

European Commission:
The Commission will support the implementation of the EQF in the following ways:

- Co-financing of activities for implementation at national level through grants under the Erasmus+ programme
- Support to Peer Learning Activities and to Peer Counselling
- Support to possible country visits in the context of the assessment of impact of the EQF at national level
- Updating guidance notes and other guidance materials to support referencing (and updates)
- Carrying out studies

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EU decentralised agencies:

- Cedefop will continue its support role by carrying out studies, surveys, preparing policy briefings, organising policy learning fora and through its role in the EQF AG;
- the ETF will, continue to provide support to the ETF partner countries

11. Next steps

Further to the AG feedback the Commission in cooperation with Cedefop will further develop the note. In addition, specific notes for each of the topic under discussion will be prepared. One or few of the topics mentioned in the note could already be included in the agenda of the EQF AG of October.