1. Introduction

The EQF Recommendation is a reference tool intended to compare all types and levels of qualifications across Europe. A qualification means a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent authority determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards. The EQF is a reference tool for both formal qualifications which are fully integrated (through legal and administrative decisions and agreements) into the national qualifications systems and non-formal qualifications, e.g. awarded by private and/or international bodies and/or companies. The EQF referencing process has so far mainly addressed formal qualifications. Qualifications operating outside national jurisdiction, for example have been addressed and included in national qualifications frameworks to a more limited extent.

Only a limited number of countries that have referenced to the EQF have introduced criteria and procedures, including for quality assurance, for the inclusion of qualifications resulting from non-formal education and training. In the majority of cases these processes do not distinguish between private qualifications and international (sectoral) qualifications.

This note focuses in particular on international qualifications, as these are specifically addressed by the EQF Recommendation.

The EQF Recommendation contains the following definition of an international qualification: "a qualification awarded by a legally established international body (association, organisation, sector or company) or by a national body acting on behalf of an international body that is used in more than one country and that includes learning outcomes assessed with reference to standards established by an international body".

Its recommendation no. 11 stipulates that the Commission, in cooperation with Member States and stakeholders within the EQF Advisory Group, “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”.

The purpose of this note is to start the process aiming at the setting up of voluntary procedures on the levelling of international qualifications and the information exchange between countries.

The EQF AG is invited to:
- discuss the note;
- agree on the proposed working method for setting up information and consultation procedures on international qualifications;
- indicate their willingness to take actively part in their elaboration.

2. **State of play of international qualifications and their inclusion in NQFs**

The offer of qualifications, diplomas and certificates available to citizens is increasing. This includes qualifications awarded by private and international organisations and bodies. This is exemplified by the development and award of international qualifications where a variety of bodies, ranging from international organisations via multinational companies to sectorial organisations, are now active. A study on international sectoral qualifications frameworks and systems identified 254 organisations awarding international qualifications in 21 different economic areas, amounting to the combined award of close to 4.5 million qualifications. The following categories of international qualifications can be distinguished:

- Qualifications awarded by internationally operating education centre such as the American Hotel & Lodging Educational Institute (AHLEI) that has more than 90 licensed affiliates in 54 countries.
- International organisations falling under the United Nations, such as qualifications of the International Maritime Organisation.
- Qualifications offered by international sectoral association such as the European Welding Federation (EWF) and EuropeActive (health, fitness and outdoor), which are based on membership of national associations.
- International companies such as Microsoft, Cisco, Amazon.

International qualifications can be stand-alone qualifications, but also be awarded next to national qualifications or can be integrated into national qualifications.

The study also made it clear that 8 referenced NQFs contain procedures for including international qualifications in the national framework (BG, FR, LT (under development), NL, PT, SI, SK, UK-EWNI, UK-SC). According to the information of the study in Ireland such

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procedure on hold and in Slovenia it is technically possible to include international qualifications but there is no explicit procedure.

3. Work of the Sub-group of the EQF AG on international sectoral qualifications

The topic of international qualifications has been addressed by the EQF AG from the beginning, as international sectoral qualifications and international sectoral organisations were mentioned in the EQF Recommendation of 2008.

The EQF AG has worked actively on the issue of international qualifications and their inclusion in national frameworks and referencing to the EQF. Between March 2014 and May 2015 a sub-group of the EQF Advisory Group focussed on international sectoral qualifications and made recommendations with regard to the consistency of their referencing across countries participating in the EQF.

The sub-group made concrete recommendations with regard to the inclusion of international qualifications in NQFs and the EQF. Its propositions can be summarised in the two following scenarios which are compatible with the EQF Recommendation of 2017:

1. Each NQF which includes international qualifications does so in its national context. A consultation procedure should be set up, embedded in a digital network for information exchange between the EQF-NCPs (and members of the EQF AG). A conciliation mechanism should be included to solve possible disagreements on the level allocated to the same international qualification between two different countries. A small scale European database should be developed and maintained with relevant examples of international sectoral initiatives and developments using EQF levels.

2. A small group of countries (3-6) work together on allocating an EQF level to an international qualification in the context of their respective national procedures for including qualifications in the national framework. This would then set the standard for the EQF level for this qualification if included in other national frameworks. The digital network and European database would also be included in this. Where inconsistencies occur within the small group a panel is set up at EU level to resolve the issues and agree on a consistent EQF level. This information would then be communicated to the digital network.

4. Proposed working method to address the setting up of procedures for information exchange and consultation:

A group representing several national frameworks (with the most appropriate national experts, whether EQF AG member or other) could develop the procedures for information exchange and consultation. The group could include both representatives from countries that do have procedures in place and representatives from countries that do not (yet). Also stakeholder representatives in the EQF AG should be invited to the group. The Commission proposes to chair the group, to host its meetings and to ensure its secretariat.
In line with the EQF Recommendation the procedures for information exchange and consultation should have the purpose of achieving consistency of referencing of the same international qualification by different countries. As the allocation of an NQF level in one referenced NQF automatically gives the EQF level corresponding to that NQF level, any differences in EQF levels for the same qualification may lead to perceived inconsistencies by users. There may however be cases where a different level is appropriate, related to the integration of international qualifications in the national system (e.g. if an international qualification is awarded in addition to a national qualification). Such cases need careful explanation to the general public. Another risk of inconsistency exists when international qualifications have to go through a large number of separate national procedures for inclusion in NQFs that moreover lead to high administrative burden.

As part of the work it is suggested that the group will:

- Map existing procedures of (all) countries participating in the EQF that have procedures for including international qualifications in their NQF.
- Agree on which (learning outcomes based) categories of international qualifications to address.
- Agree on procedures for notification (how and when to notify) to other countries on international qualifications emerging as candidates for inclusion in the national framework.
- Discuss ways of exchanging information on the substance of the individual decisions made at national level for the inclusion of international qualifications and whether there is potential to use these in order to obtain a common position on such decisions.
- Discuss possible minimum common quality requirements for international qualifications to be included in the NQF. These should comply with the principles of annex IV of the EQF Recommendation.
- Address the costs and benefits of different procedures for information and consultation.

In agreement with the group a limited number of owners of international qualifications could be invited to the discussions at EQF AG meetings, in order to take into account their experiences with NQF procedures so far.

Proposed timetable:

In the case of endorsement of the approach outlined in this note the following table for the work on international qualifications is proposed:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>31 January 2018</td>
<td>Information to the Commission on interest in joining the group</td>
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<tr>
<td>February – October 2018</td>
<td>3-4 meetings of the group</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 2018</td>
<td>Presentation of agreed procedures for endorsement by the EQF AG</td>
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The EQF AG will be informed about the progress achieved by the group.

Before the agreed procedures are discussed by the EQF AG the results of the group could be subject to a Peer Learning Activity to which also stakeholders and industry representatives could be invited. The PLA could serve as validation event for the proposed approach and serve as a platform for dialogue between NQFs and international providers of qualifications.

5. **Commission and Cedefop support**

The Commission will fully support the group by:

- Chairing it, hosting its meetings and ensuring its secretariat.
- Reimbursing travel costs for participation in meetings in accordance with the Commission rules for experts.
- Providing technical support by external contractors if considered relevant and necessary by the group.

Cedefop will, as part of its mission, fully support the work in international qualifications carried out in the context of the EQF AG work programme.
ANNEX IV of the EQF Recommendation

Quality assurance principles for qualifications that are part of national qualifications frameworks or systems referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

All qualifications with an EQF level should be quality assured to enhance trust in their quality and level. In accordance with national circumstances and taking into account sectoral differences quality assurance of qualifications with an EQF level should:

1. address the design of qualifications as well as application of the learning outcomes approach;
2. ensure valid and reliable assessment according to agreed and transparent learning outcomes-based standards and address the process of certification;
3. consist of feedback mechanisms and procedures for continuous improvement;
4. involve all relevant stakeholders at all stages of the process;
5. be composed of consistent evaluation methods, associating self-assessment and external review;
6. be an integral part of the internal management, including sub-contracted activities, of bodies issuing qualifications with an EQF level;
7. be based on clear and measurable objectives, standards and guidelines;
8. be supported by appropriate resources;
9. include a regular review of existing external monitoring bodies or agencies, carrying out quality assurance;
10. include the electronic accessibility of evaluation results.