Minutes of the expert groups

Brussels, 5 April 2018

Minutes of the 43rd meeting of the EQF Advisory Group
12-13 December 2017, Brussels (BE)

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

The agenda of the meeting was approved. The EQF AG can send comments on the minutes of 4-5 October by 8 January 2018.

2) NATURE OF THE MEETING

The EQF AG consists of representatives from the 39 countries that currently participate and have committed to the EQF process. In addition, representative EU level stakeholders from education and training, the labour market and civil society are part of the group. The European Commission (COM) chairs the meetings, and the Council of Europe (CoE), the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), the European Training Foundation (ETF) and external experts take part in the meetings to support COM and the members of the EQF AG. In total, 64 persons participated in the meeting on 12-13 December 2017.
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 (4-5 October 2017) (cf. Note AG 42-1)

No questions were raised on note AG43-1 on relevant developments in European cooperation on education, training and employment.

COM informed the participants that the deadline to submit a grant request for the policy networks, including the EQF-NCPs, was extended to 15 February. COM informed on the ongoing work to prepare a study on quality assurance for the inclusion of international qualifications in ESCO. On the Europass Decision, COM informed that the last planned Trilogue discussions between the Parliament, Council and Commission will take place on 13 December in Strasburg. If agreement is reached, the next step is formal agreement in both the Council and the Parliament.

1.2. Information on the Bologna Process

The Council of Europe (CoE) informed that as two members of the Bologna process (Russia and Turkey) decided not to fulfil their financial obligations, possible future budgetary problems could arise. The work on drafting the Paris Ministerial Communiqué is still ongoing. It will include references to the digitisation of the Diploma Supplements and it will confirm the inclusion of the short cycle (corresponding to EQF level 5) in the EHEA qualifications framework. Finally, CoE showed a video on the results of the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees.

1.3. Information from the Presidency (cf. ppt).

The slides with events of the Bulgarian Presidency will be uploaded in Sinapse.

1.4 Information from the EQF AG representatives

COM clarified that this new agenda item gives AG members the opportunity to update the group on any relevant national development or event.

NL informed that its NQF has been evaluated and it aims at adopting its NQF by law by the end of 2018. NO informed that the Norwegian QF and the EQF were formally connected by regulation and an evaluation will begin.

2. REFERENCING

2.1 Overview of national developments related to the implementation of the EQF and VNFIL (cf. Note AG43-2)

COM presented Note 43-2 providing information on the status of the 39 countries that participate in the implementation of the EQF. In total, 33 countries have referenced their NQF to the EQF (AT, BE, BG, CH, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, FR, HR, IE, IS, IT, LI, LV, LT, LU, HU, ME, MK, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, SI, SE, SK, TR, XK, UK). FI will present its referencing report at the current meeting.
A total of 22 countries indicate EQF levels on qualifications and 15 countries include EQF levels in qualifications databases or registers. So far, 5 and 2 countries have linked their database to the LOQ and ESCO portal, respectively. 15 countries have sent the data to be included in the comparison function of the LOQ portal that allows for comparing qualifications from different countries.

The UK informed that significant changes have taken place and that the UK is planning to present an update of the referencing next year for both the Welsh and Scottish frameworks (but not for the England/Northern Ireland framework). Also NL and LV informed the group that they plan to present an update of the referencing.

PT postponed the presentation of the one-off report on validation from February to April meeting. NO clarified that its presentation is of the one-off report on validation is planned for December 2018.

2.2 Presentation on the referencing report of Finland (cf. ppt).

FI presented for the first time its referencing report that describes the referencing of the Finnish National Framework for Qualifications and Other Competence Modules (FiNQF) to the EQF and the self-certification to the QF of the EHEA. In the presentation, Finland addressed most of the issues raised in the written comments of FR, IE and Cedefop. The difference between qualification, syllabus and competence module, which had been seen as unclear, was clarified. Finland further explained that the framework is composed by eight levels and the level descriptors are general enough to cover both VET and HE. Differently from the EQF and other countries, the level descriptors are not divided in knowledge, skills and responsibility and autonomy, a holistic approach is adopted. Because the learning outcomes is at the core of the framework, it makes it possible to have an open system and to ensure permeability between HE and VET. Validation exists at all level of education and special attention is given to what kind of learning outcomes are missing in order to recommend further training. The framework ensures interaction also with ECVET and the quality assurance system takes into account the EQF recommendation, the EQAVET and the principles of the European Standards and Guidelines. Rather than a register of qualifications, Finland has a portal where qualifications and possible learning paths are described.

Comments (Cedefop, CoE, IE, FR, AT, BE(fl), FR, NO, UEAPME)

The group welcomed the report for being concise, holistic and easy to read. Although participants considered that all 10 referencing criteria were met, clarifications and explanations to better understand the Finish system and the context around it were asked. The group suggested including the explanations given in the presentations in the report and adding a glossary.

- The group positively noted that qualifications from different ministries are included in the framework and that stakeholders are involved in the developing of the level descriptors.
Further information was requested on the Finish levels descriptors and at how fast they can be revised.

Participants requested more information also on the permeability between VET and HE and the role of validation in the legal system.

More information was requested also on the existence of the short-cycle at level 5 and how previous work experience to access a University of applied science is quality assured.

Clarifications were asked on the display of NQF/EQF levels on certificates/diplomas and on the role and purpose of competence modules.

**Answers**

- The Finish descriptors were modelled on the level descriptors of the 2008 EQF recommendation, but they are wider and were complemented with language skills and other elements to reflect national features. Because the level descriptors are quite general, they will not be revised easily. However, any feedback from the labour market can serve as a basis, especially now that the VET system is undergoing some reforms.

- Also movements from HE to VET are possible and occur (permeability). The learning outcomes approach has always been strong in VET, but nowadays it is used throughout the Finish Education System. Validation is well integrated in the system and is part of the national legislation giving the learners the right to have their prior learning assessed on all levels of the education system.

- No short-cycle higher education exists in Finland, but preparations are ongoing for a 2-year diploma that could be placed at level 5. According to the law, work experience has to be relevant in order to gain access to e.g. the applied science Master’s programme.

- FI will likely include FiNQF/EQF levels on certificates, diplomas and their supplements already in spring 2018. A single national qualification database does not exist, but the FiNQF/EQF levels will be displayed on the portal that describes qualifications and learning paths.

- Competence modules will be included in the framework and will be the object of discussion in the near future. Levels 1 and 3 are still empty and could be filled with competence modules.

- The VET system will be reformed and the learning structure could undergo important changes. In this case, an update of the report will be presented.

**Conclusions:**

COM congratulated FI for the concise and transparent report. All referencing criteria have been addressed and FI is the 34th country to reference to the EQF. FI will adapt the referencing report in view of the comments given by the EQF AG and will make it ready for publication on the LOQ Portal within 6 months.
3. **Outcome of the PLC "Do national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) make a difference – how to measure and evaluate NQF impact?"** (cf. ppt).

Cedefop presented the key conclusions of the peer learning conference on the NQFs' impact, co-organised by Cedefop, QQI Ireland and the European Commission on 9-10 November in Thessaloniki. Cedefop stressed the added value of having brought together researchers and policy-makers.

During the conference it emerged that NQFs have some positive impacts on cross-sectoral cooperation, bringing together stakeholders and linking policies. They have moreover contributed to better equivalence between VET and other types of qualifications. On the other hand, it was pointed out that awareness among end-users is still too weak and that it is still challenging for NQFs to reach citizens.

Although NQFs have impacts these should not be oversold. NQFs are embedded in national systems and interact with many other processes and tools. As a result, NQFs cannot be studied in isolation and direct causality cannot be expected, contextual factors play an important role.

The group suggested taking on board and further developing the topic of NQF impact in the context of the updating of referencing report. As immediate follow up it was suggested to systematically collect knowledge in the area, carrying out literature review and providing an overview on existing evaluations.

COM will consider exploring the possibility of carrying out a literature review and collect evidence on evaluations related to EQF-NQFs' impact in the Erasmus+ programme or its successor.

4. **Discussion on the EQF AG work plan & roadmap for 2018-2019: setting the priorities (cf. Note AG43-3)**

COM presented the main changes made to the AG work-plan for 2018-2019 (note 43-3) further to the comments received during and after the 42th EQF AG meeting. The number of fiches remained the same and the work plan is now a good base for the work ahead; it may be adapted as needed over time.

Participants appreciated the broader orientation of the work-plan and the proposal to set up small project groups to advance in the different discussions. The importance of the portals to display information was also stressed as being a relevant theme to discuss further. COM suggested to postpone the discussion around the LOQ and other EU portals until the adoption of the Europass Decision.

EQF AG members can send written comments by 8 January on note 43-3 on the AG work plan for 2018-2019. COM will revise the document and send it as a background note before the next EQF AG meeting.

5. **Discussion on a common approach to updating the referencing (cf. Note AG43-4)**

COM presented note AG 43-4 on updating the EQF referencing as part of the EQF AG work-plan 2018-19 (Fiche C). Participants agreed on the general approach and on the issues raised
in the note. They welcomed the possibility to include an assessment of the impacts of the NQFs and/or EQF at national level. When presenting an update of the referencing, reference to all the 10 criteria is essential, but countries can decide on a voluntary basis to go beyond and to make links with other elements of their education and training policies.

The purpose of the report and therefore the level of detail contained in it were discussed. When discussing what changes are relevant to be reported to the AG, some participants argued that when making these considerations not only the national but also the European perspective should be kept in mind.

The group asked for clarifications on the working methods and the country visits. COM explained that the working method that will be put forward would be flexible and adaptable, but at the same time the purpose is to have a fair and balanced workload. Because many countries have updates in the pipeline, the method/methods can be collectively organised and tested.

The EQF AG members can send written input by 8 January on note 43-4 on updating the EQF referencing. COM will revise the note and shape it in the form of a guidance note to provide a basis for the updating work to start.

6. Discussion on voluntary procedures for the referencing of international qualifications to NQFs (cf. Note AG43-5)

COM presented note AG 43-5 on international qualifications in the context of the EQF AG work-plan 2018-19 (Fiche F). The aim was to agree on the working method for setting up information and consultation procedures on international qualifications. The note was considered to go in the right direction and the group suggested considering the problem of levelling international qualifications together with the wider issue of levelling non-formal qualifications.

The group welcomed the proposal of setting up a project group to develop the procedures for information exchange and consultation. Some members of the AG expressed interest to be part of it and they suggested to involve external stakeholders (such as awarding bodies) for consultation purposes but to avoid including them as full members of the group.

Some delegates stressed the voluntary nature of the process and the freedom of the national authorities in dealing with international qualifications. They invited to reflect upon the consequences of including qualifications in the NQFs and stressed that the EQG AG should not only be informed of the results of the project group but also consulted throughout the process.

CoE informed the group on the plans of the ENIC-NARIC network to study the recognition of international qualifications in practical terms, presenting their findings at the annual meeting that will take place in June in Prague.

EQF AG can send written input by 8 January on note 43-5 on international qualifications. COM will revise the note, preparing a draft mandate for the project group that will work on international qualifications.
7. Update on the EQF Conference (cf. ppt)

COM presented the organisation of the conference so far, inviting the EQF AG to actively take part in it. The group gave suggestions on the thematic workshops of the first day and on the panels of the second day which will be more policy oriented. Some of the suggested themes were: how thanks to the EQF different systems communicate (HE and VET), the role of learning outcomes, the impact of qualifications framework in shaping education systems, the role of EQF in making qualifications more transparent, the role of social partners, the importance of flexible pathways. The group pointed out that the conference should focus more clearly on what the EQF has achieved and the use of testimonials was suggested.

COM will further develop the programme and ask more specific suggestions for speakers and contributors for both the workshops and the panels early January 2018.

8. Discussion on the PLA programme as part of the EQF AG work plan for 2018-2019 (cf. Note AG43-6)

COM presented note 43-6 on the PLA work plan and invited the group to contribute shaping the programming of PLAs for 2018:

- SK confirmed the hosting of the PLA on assessed and intended LO in April 2018.
- PL confirmed its willingness to organize the PLA on HC in the second quarter of 2018.
- AT proposed to organize a PLA on the referencing of non-formal qualifications in the second semester of 2018 during its Presidency of the EU.
- TR clarified that the proposed PLAs on recognition and quality assurance can take place in Turkey. TR would be interested to host the PLA on quality assurance on the last quarter of 2018 and a PLA on the role of recognition in 2019.
- HU confirmed its interest for the PLA on qualification databases clarifying that before volunteering for hosting the PLA an internal discussion would need to take place.
- NL will consider the possibility of hosting the PLA on communication.
- The European Volunteer Centre proposed a PLA to be organized in cooperation with the European Youth Forum and Lifelong Learning Platform on the validation of skills and competences acquired through voluntary activities.

COM will update the PLA-table with more details on content and timing.

VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

4.1 Presentation on the one-off report on VNFIL of Luxembourg (cf. ppt)

LU was the first country to present its one-off report on validation (cf. ppt). The report was appreciated for being easy to read, concise and practically oriented. A peer learning discussion took place. Further to the questions asked by the group, LU clarified that almost all formal qualifications can be obtained through validation and that, as these are exactly the same qualifications, they have the same value as qualifications obtained after a training course. Costs of validation for individuals and for the country, training to staff involved in VNFIL, links between the 3 sectors providing validation were the areas around which more clarifications were asked. LU also clarified that the link to the NQF is not spelled out because it is embedded in the system.
COM thanked LU for the clear presentation and all the details given during the discussion. COM pointed out that countries were also warmly invited to present reports of their arrangements still being developed and to be put in place, as a peer learning discussion of work in progress would also be valuable.

10. Information on the Update 2018 European Inventory on VNIL (cf. ppt)
COM explained that the contract for the European inventory will be signed in December and the work will start in January. This will be the last update of the Inventory before the 2018 deadline included in the Council Recommendation.

COM clarified that while the Inventory carried out by external experts provides a technical state of play, the one-off report on validation is written by the country and can be considered as a policy answer to the recommendation. The results of the one-off reports will also be used as inputs for the Commission report on validation to the Council that is due by 31 December 2019.

11. Brainstorming on validation of VNIL event (cf. ppt)
COM presented the idea of organising a validation festival, planned for June 2018, to illustrate the importance of validation and showcase what is happening on the ground (cf. ppt). The group welcomed the idea and asked clarifications around the final scope, target, and topics to be addressed in the event. Many stakeholders offered to contribute actively to the event.

Further to the observations and the comments made by the AG, COM will further shape the structure of the event and keep the EQF AG updated.
4) NEXT STEPS

Referencing process
- IS is scheduled to present the updated referencing report EQF AG at the next meeting.
- FI will adapt the referencing report in view of the comments given by the EQF AG and make it ready for publication on the LOQ within 6 months.

Outcome of the PLC on NQFs’ impact
- COM will consider exploring the possibility of carrying out a literature review and collect evidence on evaluations related to EQF-NQFs' impact in the Erasmus+ programme or its successor.

Notes on the EQF AG work-plan (note 43-3), on the updating of the referencing report (note 43-4), on international qualifications (note 43-5)
- The EQF AG is invited to send written comments by 8 January on note 43-3 on the work-plan, note 43-4 on the updating of the referencing report, note 43-5 on international qualifications. The EQF AG is also invited to send written comments by 8 January on the minutes of the 4-5 October.
- COM will revise note 43-3 (on updating the referencing) and send it to the EQF AG.
- COM will on the basis of note 43-4 and the discussion that followed, prepare a guidance note for the work on updating the referencing to start.
- COM will revise note 43-5 (on international qualifications) and send it to the EQF AG.
- COM will, on the basis of note 43-5 and the discussion that followed, prepare a draft mandate for the project group that will work on international qualifications.
- The discussion around the LOQ and other EU portals is postponed until the adoption of the Europass Decision.

EQF Conference
- COM will circulate a save the date on the EQF conference before the Christmas holidays. By mid-January COM will circulate a further developed programme of the conference and ask for speakers and panellists.

Discussion on the PLA programme (note 43-6)
- COM will update the PLA-table with more details on content and timing.

Validation
- PT will present its one-off report at the EQF AG of April 2018.
- The contractor will be invited at the next EQF AG meeting in order to present the 2018 Inventory project.

Validation event
- COM will further shape the structure of the event and keep the EQF AG updated.
5) NEXT MEETING

Planned EQF AG meetings in 2018 (all dates still to be confirmed):

- 44th EQF Advisory Group: 6-7 February 2018
- 45th EQF Advisory Group 24-25-26 April 2018
- 46th EQF Advisory Group: 12-13-14 June 2018
- 47th EQF Advisory Group: 2-3-4 October 2018
- 48th EQF Advisory Group: 11-12-13 December 2018

6) LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

participants list.xlsx