Revision and further development of EQF Guidance notes

Following the adoption of the 2008 Recommendation, significant effort was put into the development of guidance material supporting implementation of the EQF at national and European level. A total of five EQF guidance notes were published between 2008 and 2013. In addition to providing a general overview of the EQF (1), these notes cover the development of national qualifications frameworks (2), the shift to learning outcomes (3) and the referencing of NQFs to the EQF (4) (5). Due to the direct involvement of the EQF AG, the 2015 European Guidelines on validating non formal and informal learning (6) and the 2017 European Handbook on defining, writing and applying learning outcomes (7) can also be considered as forming part of this guidance material.

The purpose of this note is to briefly summarise some of the experiences made so far and on this basis indicate possible future developments.

The critical role of peer learning and expert support

The guidance material produced so far builds on extensive dialogue and cooperation at European level, notably through peer-learning activities systematically addressing the relevant topics. When discussing the review and further development of the EQF guidance material it is therefore necessary to make a connection to the EQF work programme and the PLAs forming part of this. Guidance material cannot be written ‘top down’ in isolation from those directly involved in implementation at national level.

While building on the conclusions from peer learning activities, the guidance material listed above also builds on significant input from a core group of experts (EU Commission, EU Agency as well as externally contracted experts). Future development of guidance material requires that this expert support is retained and strengthened.

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Areas where guidance material is needed

The EQF Guidance notes produced between 2008 and 2013 address the initial challenges involved in implementing the EQF, notably through the setting up of NQFs, the referencing of national qualifications levels to the EQF and the implications of a shift to learning outcomes. Given the adoption of the 2017 EQF Recommendation and the (close to) finalisation of the initial phase of referencing, a review and update of this guidance material is needed:

General presentation of the EQF

The general presentation of the EQF: Guidance note 1 summarises the main points of the 2008 Recommendation. This general overview is now outdated, due to the adoption of the 2017 Recommendation, and it is suggested to replace it with the new EQF Brochure presented in March 2018 (*The European Qualifications Framework: supporting learning, work and cross-border mobility*)⁸. The new Brochure (supported by Infographics and video-material) should be used to reach a broader audience and support overall dissemination of the EQF.

The added value of NQFs in implementing the EQF

Guidance note 2 on the ‘Added value of NQFs in implementing the EQF’ directly supported the initial design and setting up of qualifications frameworks across Europe. A majority of NQFs have now, however, reached a more mature stage, reducing the relevance and usefulness of the existing note. Guidance material relevant to operational NQFs could be developed along the following lines:

- An increasing number of countries are now carrying out (or planning to carry out) impact assessments/evaluations. Referring to the conclusions of the November 2017 peer learning activity in Thessaloniki, guidance material supporting these assessments/evaluations could be considered. A guidance note summarising existing experiences (in Europe and possibly beyond) would directly support these initiatives. While impact assessments must make sense in a national context, they should also seek to address the wider European objectives addressed by national frameworks. A discussion on assessment baselines was initiated in 2015 (AG 31-5) and would need to be further developed.

- The inclusion of non-formal (private and international) qualifications in NQFs is becoming an increasingly important topic. While some countries already have gained experiences in this field, others are still at the planning stage. In view of the emphasis of the 2017 Recommendation on this particular point, a strengthening of guidance makes sense.

- Apart from the issues mentioned above, countries are experiencing a number of challenges related to the implementation of NQFs. The members of the EQF AG should identify issues of particular importance and discuss whether the development of guidance material could add value.

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Referencing to the EQF

Guidance notes 3 (2011) and 5 (2013) are both focussing on the referencing of national qualifications levels to the EQF. The fact that two guidance notes have been developed underlines the urgency attributed to this topic.

The completion of the first phase of referencing makes it necessary to consider a further revision of these guidelines. A new guidance note should build on the agreement of the December 2017 EQF AG meeting on the process linked to the updating of the referencing reports (as outlined by AG 43-4). It should also take into account the experiences made in relation to comparison of qualifications, as exemplified by pilots carried out by the EQF AG during 2016-17 (coordinated by Poland) and by several Cedefop research projects. There is a need to focus more in depth on how countries better can address criterion 2 (the relationship between national and EQF levels), 3 (learning outcomes) and 4 (inclusion of qualifications) of the referencing criteria. There is also a need to look more closely into the relationship between criteria 2-4 and criteria 5-6 (quality assurance).

Learning outcomes

Guidance note 4 on ‘Using learning outcomes’ played an important role in deepening the understanding of the learning outcomes approach and how this supports and informs qualifications frameworks. The note is valuable in the sense that it exemplifies how learning outcomes already have been defined and applied in some countries. Since its publication in 2011, the number of countries working in this area has increased and there is a need to also include their experiences.

The publication in 2017 by Cedefop of the European handbook on the definition, writing and application of learning outcomes, illustrates the need to broaden and deepen the focus on learning outcomes. The handbook underlines that while the qualifications frameworks have played a significant role in taking forward learning outcomes, they cannot operate in isolation. For learning outcomes to strengthen transparency and promote reform, the learning outcomes of frameworks must interact (align) with the learning used in qualification standards, curricula and assessment specifications. Put in another way, for the learning outcomes approach to make a difference it must reach and inspire teachers, trainers and learners.

As indicated in note AG 45-4, there is a need to continue developing guidance material in this area. For this reason it is suggested that the European Handbook is revised and developed into a more comprehensive EQF Guidance note in 2019/2020.

Additional topics and issues where guidance material is needed

While there is a need for reviewing existing material, there is also a need to consider whether guidance material should be developed for other issues.

Members of the EQF AG are invited to identify any such areas during the debate or in written comments following the EQF AG meeting.
Dissemination of Guidance material

EQF Guidance material needs to be better disseminated and more easily available to a broader group of interested stakeholders. This requires:

- An improved communication and dissemination strategy at European level where the presentation of the material in Commission/Cedefop and ETF web-sites is coordinated and improved. The production of additional material (exemplified by the videos and infographics produced by the Commission, and the Briefing notes and NQF inventories produced by Cedefop) should be continued.

- With the exception of Guidance note 1, material so far has been produced exclusively in English. Translations need to be considered in the future.

Invitation to the EQF AG

The EQF AG is invited to:

- discuss the need for revision and further development of EQF guidance material and, in support of the EQF work programme, to identify priorities for guidance material for 2018 and 2019.

- see this review of guidance material in connection with the PLA programme for the relevant period.