Brussels, 31 May 2018

EQF Advisory Group, 12-13 June 2018, Brussels

Note AG 46-4

Draft mandate for the Project Group on Horizontal Comparison of levelled qualifications in the context of the EQF AG Work Programme 2018-19

1. Introduction

During the EQF AG meeting of 17-18 April 2018, it was concluded that a draft mandate for a project group on Horizontal Comparison in the context of the EQF AG Work programme 2018-19 would be discussed in the next EQF AG meeting. Fiche E of the EQF AG Work programme explicitly mentions further development of the work carried out by the horizontal comparison group.

The EQF Advisory Group began working in 2015 on the horizontal comparison of levelled qualifications. The AG 32-3 note of November 2015 states that: “The credibility of the EQF very much depends on the quality of the levelling process. Inconsistent and poorly founded levelling can undermine the mutual trust on which the EQF depends. The main objective of ‘horizontal comparisons’ is thus to contribute to the quality assurance of the EQF, removing uncertainty regarding the way EQF levels have been assigned to national qualifications”.

Following this, the EQF AG launched a horizontal comparison exercise in February 2016, addressing the need for more systematic dialogue, and contributing to the development of a pre-defined approach where comparable information is gathered, exchanged and analysed.

The pilot stage of the exercise focussed on a few qualifications and resulted in a method for horizontal comparisons, including a ‘technical comparison fiche’. This method and fiche were discussed during a PLA in Warsaw in May 2017, providing the opportunity to disseminate the pilot results. During this PLA, several recommendations were made, and it was concluded that further steps at both national and European levels are needed to continue the work on horizontal comparison. At European level, a new mandate and the means to support the work on Horizontal Comparison should be decided in the context of the EQF AG.

The following proposed mandate for a project group on this subject is a reflection of that.

The EQF AG is invited to:

− agree on the mandate for the project group;
− indicate interest to actively take part in the project group.

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2. Outcomes of the previous working group on Horizontal Comparison

The topic of Horizontal Comparison has been addressed by the EQF AG several times in the past years. A methodology was presented (Note EQF AG 32-3) at the end of 2015 for a pilot on "horizontal comparisons’. The aim of this pilot was to strengthen the consistency of the levelling of qualifications to the EQF. Working towards a common understanding of comparability criteria for qualifications in the national frameworks referenced to the EQF, the Horizontal Comparison exercise contributed comparability of qualifications across borders.

In particular, the project aimed to deliver a proposal of a methodology for horizontal comparisons, including a “technical comparison fiche” serving as a starting point for further work towards the integration of the horizontal comparisons into the range of activities related to the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework. The fiche could become a common tool to determine the comparability of qualifications in EU Member States.

The exercise concluded that in the case of the two selected qualifications, “CNC operator” and “Mechanical engineer”, consistent comparisons could be made in the participating countries (i.e. Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Norway, Poland, Sweden and Scotland). But the most important lesson from the pilot project was that the cooperation between the countries involved was a significant factor in achieving better transparency and mutual trust among team members concerning the qualifications identified for the project.

A crucial element of this process was improving the common understanding of many aspects underlying the work of levelling and the methodologies adopted by different countries. These aspects were the basis for a more specific comparison which took place during a PLA in May 2017 in Warsaw, where countries other than the ones involved in the project tested the fiche and agreed that the instruments elaborated by the pilot project allowed to compare qualifications.

Overall, the project concluded that:

- The language developed by countries for the description of qualifications is consistent with the revised EQF recommendation of 2017.
- Consistency of comparison does not require identical national methods of levelling. Nevertheless, to allow the “best fit” method to work effectively, two core elements should be present in any national method of levelling:
  - the learning outcomes of a qualification should be referred to the level descriptors,
  - their mutual reference is to be evaluated and/or confirmed by the quality assurance mechanisms.
- The referencing criteria adopted by the Advisory Group and now included in the 2017 EQF recommendation are a sufficient tool for referencing and consistent in comparing levelled qualifications.
- The technical fiche prepared in the project framework is a potential voluntary diagnostic tool for qualifications systems. It can provide valuable information about individual qualifications levels, levelling processes and even qualifications frameworks (at national and European levels).
However, several obstacles were identified and the fiche requires further development in order to serve as a tool for the consistency of horizontal comparison of levelled qualifications.

A comprehensive guidance note is needed on the use of the fiche.

This led to the following recommendations:

- To further continue the work on horizontal comparison with the tools prepared in the pilot project.
- To respect the diversity of national descriptions of qualifications and methods of levelling – but to protect the ability to make comparisons.
- To make good use of the context information giving additional insight into the originality of qualifications and explaining the potential differences between qualifications named and levelled in the same way.
- To continue the good tradition of the soft coordination approach, opening – in the case of qualifications frameworks – the floor to transparency, trust, and better understanding among countries.
- To systematically build on the ongoing work carried out by CEDEFOP in the project on ‘Comparing VET qualifications; towards a European comparative methodology’ (2017-2019).
- To prepare and publish a guideline / guidance note for the horizontal comparison of qualifications.

**Proposed composition of the group:**

The group should include representatives of some countries from the former working group, some that participated in the PLA in Warsaw and some that were not yet involved. Furthermore, some stakeholder representatives in the EQF AG should ideally participate in the group.

**The following mandate for the group is proposed:**

- Further develop the work carried out by the previous working group on horizontal comparison with the tools prepared in the project and test the methodology with other qualifications (specific attention could be given to qualifications with EQF level 5).
- Prepare a draft guideline for the horizontal comparison of qualifications.

During its work, the group will take full account of the recommendations of the previous work, including the need to respect the diversity of national descriptions of qualifications and methods of levelling while protecting the ability to make comparisons.

**Expected workload:**

The group is expected to meet in Brussels approximately every 2 months (back-to-back with EQF AG meetings). The workload will consist of attending and preparing the meetings. The Commission and CEDEFOP will draft the meeting documents.
**Reporting to the EQF AG:**

The group will report to the EQF AG on the progress achieved.

**Proposed timetable:**

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<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>September 2018</td>
<td>Information to the Commission on interest in joining the group (ideally the size of the group should not exceed 8-10 experts)</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 2018 – June 2019</td>
<td>3-5 meetings of the group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q3 2019</td>
<td>Presentation of agreed procedures for discussion and endorsement by the EQF AG</td>
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**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 (as far as possible meetings will take place back-to-back with EQF AG meetings).
- 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 on horizontal comparison qualifications carried out in the context of the EQF AG work programme.