

## PLA on QF: Reflections and recommendations

1. QF are seen as useful by the HEI but there are also challenges.  $\frac{1}{3}$  of HEI still struggle with implementation of Learning Outcomes (LO) according to data from EUA (details in slides from Therese).
2. Teachers also find QF useful but there are challenges in how to understand the language of LO and how to reflect it into teaching and assessment in a way that is comparable to other teachers.
  - a. For assessment many teachers have still not moved towards being Learning Outcomes oriented but still “count mistakes”, this needs to be solved by training the teachers.
  - b. Some teachers still use relative assessment and not LO oriented assessment, they have not read the ECTS Users Guide. This is hard to check by external Quality Assurance but can be solved by peer learning between teachers.
3. For the design of study programs there is a need to sit down in one place and evaluate the total skills and competences aimed to be achieved by the students. A balance needs to be made between subject specific knowledge and broader competences.
4. Learners are not well aware of the QF in many countries. Improved awareness would improve their understanding of the education landscape. But it is not necessarily the goal that all students can state the EQF level of their degree, rather they should be well informed about the intended learning outcomes of their program, and of where they can find more detailed information if they need it. There should however be a group of students who are well informed so they can participate meaningfully in program development and development of the NQF. To achieve this:
  - a. Facilitate transparent information about the QF so students can find it if needed. Make it easy to find out how your own education system relates to other countries systems so international mobility is easy.
  - b. Implement automatic recognition also of not full degrees but elements of degrees so students can be easily mobile. There can be a lot of specific problems that need support to be handled. Students need to get a good understanding of what recognition they can expect *before* they go abroad. Neutral information is important, unfortunately there is a lot of rather marketing-focused information given to students instead. NARICs can help with this.
  - c. Communicate the intended Learning Outcomes to all students so they know what is expected from them. Ensure constructive alignment between intended LO, teaching and assessment.
  - d. Train student representatives on QF when they are trained to participate in program development and QA.



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5. Aim for a comprehensive NQF that includes all types of qualifications regardless of provider. Use an inclusive and open dialogue between the stakeholders for developing this. Keep a focus on the added value for the users of the framework.
6. Teachers have an important role. They must feel ownership of the QF and LO implementation: Are teachers writing LO because they have to or because they see a real value? To ensure that they see real value:
  - a. Work on culture shift towards Student Centered Learning. Then teachers will see LO as a useful tool for SCL not as an obligation. This needs to move from being a policy discourse to being implemented in practice in the institutions.
  - b. Make “stakeholder involvement” not only mean involvement of stakeholders on the national level but also mean platforms for exchange of good practices on other levels, e.g. from teacher to teacher.
  - c. Train teachers on writing Learning Outcomes and applying them in the teaching and assessment.
  - d. Use a collaborative approach to developing LO so the individual teacher is not doing it in a detached way and will better see the purpose of using LO.
7. In the Netherlands they are working on making the QF useful for recognition of qualifications from other organisations than education institutions. (See Henri Ponds’ slides for details on how it is done). This is potentially very useful in a life long learning perspective, other countries should consider doing something similar. Flanders has also a system for recognising prior learning when it is informal.
8. Work towards a better international understanding of how LO are formulated and how many LO to have. Respecting the subsidiarity but still moving towards understanding each other better between different institutions and countries. This requires a multi-layer dialogue.
  - a. Agree on some principles that all can use as guidance while they design LO bottom-up.
  - b. Avoid too technical language or too many detailed LO because it becomes hard to read.
  - c. Have discussions within each discipline/field e.g. between the different providers of degrees in nursing. In Flanders they have good experience with Domain Specific Reference Frameworks. In this also involve students and international peers.
  - d. Fields are rapidly changing so continuous updates are necessary.
  - e. Keep ECTS connected to both LO and associated workload. Ideally, reading the LO should make it possible to understand the level of the qualification.
9. Many may in their everyday work be using the QFs indirectly without knowing it, including teachers and admission officers. It may also not be necessary for them to see it as using the QF, as long as they are using a good local system that is linked clearly to the QF. But if there is a wish to improve their awareness of the QF, it can be done by:

- a. Making clear references to the QF and the ECTS Users Guide in the documents used locally.
  - b. Training the teachers who write LO on why they are useful: For SCL, for recognition.
  - c. Making clear links to the QF in the internal QA system.
  
10. As one purpose of QF is to increase transparency for prospective students and for employers, improved communication of the QF to the general public is needed. In Belarus they will try making a website about the QF where prospective students, students, graduates and employers can get an overview of the education landscape and answers to questions about the QF. In Ireland the awareness of the QF among prospective students and their parents is high according to an impact assessment (<https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/Reviewing-the-NFQ.aspx>). This high awareness came from a campaign.
  
11. To make QF more useful for prospective students: Communicate about it to students of secondary education to guide them on how to navigate the landscape of further education. Make guidance of high school students more focused on their life long learning opportunities not just “what profession can I become”. Make sure counselling and guidance staff are well informed about the QF and can communicate it to students in a not to technical language.
  
12. Embed a description of how to use of QF and LO into the internal and external Quality Assurance. This can be challenging when using institutional evaluation rather than program evaluation. In that case it is key to ask in the institutional QA how the QF and LO are used in the internal QA mechanisms.
  
13. For recognition of partial qualifications: Sweden and Flanders have good practices that can be learned from. But a challenge can be giving access to the courses that would be needed for finishing the partial qualification and formally getting access to the next level. A special challenge in the case of refugees: If the partial qualification is not well understood by the national framework, they are asked by some NARIC to start over completely on the degree. Some universities may choose to recognise their partial qualification but others within the same country not. It is needed to get a more nuanced approach to this “50 shades of recognition”. Currently some NARICs can come out with only “recognised” or “not recognised” while on the institutional levels there are more opportunities such as admitting people to masters courses even though their bachelor is not fully recognised. For refugees:
  - a. Studying, not only working, should be seen as a way of integrating into society. Education can be socialising and in the longer run a higher qualification also gives more opportunities to contribute to society.
  - b. Communication between immigration agencies, NARICs and education institutions should be improved so they can more flexibly take into account the situation of the individual.

14. Recognition between different types of education institutions: A main barrier here is lack of trust and understanding of each other's way of describing the qualifications.
- Trust can be built by communicating about what happens in the cases where people are mobile between these institutions, so the benefits are understood and the difference in describing the qualifications also become better understood. Make the good experiences visible.
  - The principle should be trust of the individual applicant. Mindset of recognising unless there are substantial differences.
  - While respecting autonomy, give guidance for the education institutions in your country on how they can write their LO in a comparable way. In the Czech Republic they have a guideline on the national level.
15. Education institutions should be encouraged to become more trusting of the applicants for accessing education and less focused on minor differences between programs. Autonomy should be respected but ministries can still send political messages and have a dialogue with education institutions.
16. In Finland there is de jure and de facto automatic recognition by the principle: If there is access where you come from, there is access here. This is for access to apply to an education institution, not for in the end giving an admission. In some countries the access to apply is denied. In the Benelux and the Baltic states regional agreements are in place, we should use these examples to move towards the same opportunities all over Europe. In the Benelux case there is not even a need for a recognition procedure, the qualifications are automatically valid.
17. The survey identified that there is an interest from countries in making QFs more useful for communicating the qualifications of graduates to employers. The world of work should not determine the content of education and training but a healthy dialogue is needed between the education institutions and the stakeholders of the labour market. Students should be given information about labour market expectations as well as opportunities to get experience in a workplace while studying but in not all cases exist good systems for doing this in a high quality way. For improved communication of qualifications between education institutions and employers, Kazakhstan has made a working group in the ministry for discussing this. In Malta when the public sector is hiring, they emphasise the Qualification Framework and this makes the awareness spread to other sectors. For improved understanding of qualifications on the employer side, actions can be taken:
- Communicate to the employers about the content of the degrees in their country. Workers unions and employment agencies should also become better informed about the different qualifications, here a collaboration with the NARIC can be helpful.
  - Ensure transparency. Make an easily accessible tool for employers to find and compare qualifications online.
  - Diploma supplements should be issued automatically and free of charge, and contain Learning Outcomes.

- d. Employers and graduates should be made aware of how Diploma Supplements can be used.
  - e. Link LO to ESCO skills, this will make it easier to make skills based jobs matching. Dialogue with HEI about this can be challenging so care should be taken of not sounding like you want to instrumentalise education for only employment or atomise education into only skills.
  - f. Use the NQF to understand qualifications of people who studied outside the EU to make it possible for them to seek employment and further learning that corresponds to their skill level.
18. Involving students, graduates and teachers on the national level as well as in the local implementation of QF is necessary. It creates a focus on how the QF can actually be valuable for the users. This is also necessary for the cultural shift mentioned in 6.a. Involvement should not just mean communicating to stakeholders about the QF but involving them directly in the development and implementation. Some countries do this extensively, they can be used as good practice. Good practises identified in the survey included these descriptions:

*“For the purpose of developing and monitoring the National Qualifications Framework, our agency sets up working groups comprised of representatives of educational institutions, representatives of the Ministry and its subordinate agencies, employers, field experts from different governmental and non-governmental institutions.”*

and,

*“Representatives of the students, employers, unions, authorities were involved in the process of development of QF. Now, their representatives are member of the Boards for trust and cooperation with public, HE Quality Assurance Board, NQF Board who discuss learning outcomes and study programme design.”*

A strong involvement of the stakeholders on all levels is experienced to add value to the implementation of the NQF and to help build ownership which is a prerequisite for operationalisation of the framework. It should be not only employers but all relevant stakeholders together such as public employment agencies, HEI, VET providers, students, teachers, civil society and trade unions. In Kazakhstan they will make seminars to have a broad dialogue. The working group for the NQF should have a strong mandate to make real changes in the implementation.

In the EQF recommendation it says about the relevant stakeholders to include:

*“(7) A wide range of stakeholders should be involved in implementing the EQF at Union and national levels in order to ensure its broad support. Key stakeholders include all learners, education and training providers, qualifications authorities, quality assurance bodies, employers, trade unions, chambers of industry, commerce and skilled crafts, bodies involved in the recognition of academic and professional qualifications, employment services and services in charge of migrant integration.”*

19. Communication of QF should take into account the different potential users of the QF.
- a. Make language less jargon and more user-friendly. Make communication less focused on technical implementation and more on the benefits for the individuals and employers.
  - b. Communicate about the different uses of qualification frameworks: For accessing education, for recognition, for employment, for mobility of students and graduates.
  - c. NARICs can help in communicating the value of using the QF so it is not seen as an administrative burden but as something useful.
  - d. Communicate the added value of a skill level to the employers so they understand what is the added value of the additional learning outcomes the worker has (Malta has an example of foreign workers with qualifications in caregiving fields)
  - e. In the formulation of LO of the different qualifications, highlight the possibilities for advancements to make it clear how LO can add on top of each other. In Malta they had success with a video to explain the assessment process, perhaps this could be done on a supranational level too relating to QF.
  - f. Make use of the CEDEFOP handbook on learning outcomes ([https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4156\\_en.pdf](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4156_en.pdf)) which has some guidance on formulating LO in a clear way.
  - g. The discussion of learning outcomes should not be done in silos between different sectors, dialogues should be made to bring the different education types together, including HEI, VET, adult learning.