

COORDINATION OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS COMPATIBLE WITH THE QF-EHEA

Draft document by the Council of Europe

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the Council of Europe was asked by the ministers through the London Communiqué to coordinate the sharing of experience in the development of national qualifications frameworks compatible with the overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. At the Council of Europe's proposal, the BFUG appointed a Coordination Group to assist with this task, and the Group submitted a report¹ to the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve ministerial conference.

In the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, the Ministers made the following statement on the further development of qualifications frameworks:

The development of national qualifications frameworks is an important step towards the implementation of lifelong learning. We aim at having them implemented and prepared for self-certification against the overarching Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area by 2012. This will require continued coordination at the level of the EHEA and with the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. Within national contexts, intermediate qualifications within the first cycle can be a means of widening access to higher education. (para. 12).

The statement underlines the need for continued coordination and it also underscores the importance of cooperation with the EQF-LLL. In discussions within the BFUG, it has been understood that the Council of Europe would continue to take responsibility for this coordination. At the same time, discussions in the BFUG has underlined the importance of bringing together the national correspondents for qualifications frameworks (hereafter: NQF correspondents) that were appointed – at least by most countries – in summer and fall 2008 to provide information on the stage of development of national qualifications frameworks². This was also underlined by participants at the

¹ http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/2009_QF_CG_report.pdf

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http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/Synthesis_NQF_Reports_March2009.pdf

third Bologna seminar on qualifications frameworks, held in Tbilisi in November 2008³, many of whom were themselves NQF correspondents.

COORDINATION TASKS

The need for continued coordination is, therefore, not the subject of debate. On the other hand, this coordination may take several forms, which need not be mutually exclusive, and before considering appointments and procedures, it may be worth exploring possible forms of coordination. In order to do so, one should look at the tasks which should be accomplished. These will be considered with a time perspective of 2012: it is unrealistic to accomplish them by March 2010, when the next ministerial meeting will be held. This time perspective is also consistent with the revised deadline for establishing national qualifications frameworks.

The main tasks fall into two main categories. While there is some overlap between them, they are nevertheless distinct:

Category I – networking, mutual exchanges and assistance:

- 1) sharing of experience and (good) practice;
- 2) sharing of information on the state of development of national qualifications frameworks;
- 3) stimulating and, where needed, assisting in developing regional cooperation on NQFs, as exemplified by the regional network for South East Europe;
- 4) where needed/appropriate, assisting with national developments
- 5) maintenance of the Bologna QF website through update provided by the NQF correspondents
- 6) on the basis of the experience gained, giving advice to the BFUG and members on specific policy aspects of the development of NQFs, as the need may arise;

Category II – more policy making agendas where the BFUG might play an important role in developing European as well as national policies:

- 7) explore specific policy issues, such as the conceptual change in expressing qualifications in higher education through learning outcomes as the main building blocks, the relationship between qualifications frameworks and the recognition of qualifications, or

³ <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/BolognaSeminars/Tbilisi2008.htm>

- between qualifications frameworks and quality assurance⁴, all of which are main priorities of the EHEA;
- 8) maintaining and developing relations to the EQF-LLL, including the EQF Advisory Board;
 - 9) contributing, through close cooperation with the European Commission, to the development of policy and practice within the EQF-LLL, in particular with a view to helping ensure compatibility and coherence between the QF-EHEA and the EQF-LLL;
 - 10) coordinate requests for assistance;
 - 11) as countries proceed to self certification of their NQFs, provide advice to new countries undertaking self certification, as needed, including maintaining an overview of international experts with experience from self certification exercises.
 - 12) reporting to the BFUG;
 - 13) maintenance and development of the Bologna QF web site on aspects other than those concerning the development of NQFs.

FORMS OF COORDINATION

Existing structures should be assessed regularly, and one should build on them as long as it seems reasonable and efficient. As the EHEA sets out on a new three year work program, this seems like an appropriate moment to reassess working methods and structures as well as the goals of activities for the period 2009 – 2012. This is also in line with the recommendation by participants of the latest Bologna seminar on qualifications frameworks held in the previous period, organized in Tbilisi in November 2008: *“continue the coordination of their development at the Bologna Process level and use the existing and newly emerging structures.*

So far, the Bologna Coordination Group on Qualifications Frameworks, which has been responsible to the BFUG has fulfilled the coordination tasks as outlined above, in particular as concerns tasks 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9 and 12. It has also fulfilled tasks 4 and 10 with the help of experts and tasks 5 and 13 in cooperation with the Bologna Secretariat. Task 10 has been taken on only to a more limited extent, even if the ENIC and NARIC Networks have addressed issues of the relationship between qualifications frameworks and recognition in their annual meetings, with the participation of the Chair and/or secretary of the Coordination Group as well as the representative of the Networks in this Group.

The coordination with the developments in EQF-LLL structures is particularly important and sometimes difficult, even if it has been made easier through the good cooperation established with the European Commission. An important part

⁴ It should nevertheless be noted that this is currently the topic of a working group appointed by the EQF Advisory Board, and that care should be taken to avoid overlaps or working at cross-purposes.

of the challenge, faced by both the QF-EHEA and the EQF-LLL, is that in developing comprehensive national frameworks compatible with both overarching frameworks, representatives of different sectors with quite different priorities and outlooks and education must be brought together. Since many EU countries seem likely to develop comprehensive national frameworks with reference also to the EQF-LLL, it is particularly important that adequate implementation of principles and procedures of the EHEA with final reference to the QF-EHEA also be ensured. For this a clear structure is required.

As far as experts advice is concerned, so far only some countries have asked for advice in the choice of experts for their self-certification exercise but it is highly likely that in the coming period the demand will grow. In line with another recommendation from the Bologna seminar in Tbilisi⁵ maintaining a list of experts with experience in or relevant for self certification, where appropriate also for referencing national qualifications to the EQF-LLL (higher education part), would be a task, even if countries are of course not limited to such a list in their choice of experts. It should be kept in mind that the EHEA as well as individual countries will face a challenge if many countries launch their self certification exercises at approximately the same time. The EHEA would also face a challenge if self certification reports – which are the “visiting cards” of the frameworks concerned – were to be of highly uneven quality. This is important also because the self certification of NQFS against the QF-EHEA could, according to the decision of each country, also be recognized as a part of the referencing of the NQF to the EQF-LLL for the corresponding levels of qualifications (most likely levels 5-8 or 6-8 according to national contexts).

The network of NQF correspondents is an emerging structure⁶. On the one hand, the NQF correspondents should play an important role as liaison between their respective national frameworks and the overarching QF-EHEA. They should play an essential role in informing other countries about the development of the NQF of the country they represent, including examples of good practice as well as examples of less successful experiences. In describing practice, it would be important to include a description of the circumstances in which a given practice has worked well or less well and, preferably, a brief analysis of possible reasons. The NQF correspondent should also play a key role in disseminating information and experience from other countries as well as from the EHEA as such to relevant stakeholders in the country that he or she represents.

⁵ *To have credible national frameworks for qualifications in the EHEA the BFUG should create a network of international experts for the countries to choose as examiners for the self-certification process.....*

⁶ Within the framework of the EQF-LLL, the European Commission has established National Coordination Points. NQF correspondents in the framework of the EHEA may or may not also be National EQF Coordination Points; they will at any rate need to maintain close contacts to their NCP.

While countries are of course entirely independent in appointing their NQF correspondents, it is assumed that the typical NQF correspondent will, in addition to being able to work in English, play a role in developing the NQF-HE of the country he or she represents since this will greatly facilitate his/her role in facilitating information.

The NQF correspondents may, but does not necessarily need to, play a role in international policy making within the EHEA. They should, on the other hand, be well aware on developments in the EQF-LLL and cooperate closely with their national representative in the network of EQF-LLL contact points.

For a number of the tasks listed above, notably tasks 1 and 2, the NQF contacts would play a crucial role. They would most likely also play an important role in tasks 3, 4 and 5. For tasks 6 - 13 there would also seem to be a stronger element of policy advice. For this, one might wish a profile that may be different from that of many – but perhaps not all – NQF correspondents, with a stronger link to policy making and – at least for some participants - a link to the BFUG.

Based on the reflections above, there would seem to be two ways of coordinating the sharing of experience in developing national qualifications frameworks compatible with the QF-EHEA, and with appropriate coordination with the EQF-LLL, for the period 2009 – 2012.

The *first alternative* would be to maintain the Coordination Group and to supplement this with meetings of all NQF correspondents. The distribution of tasks between the groups would be as indicated above. A first meeting of all NQF correspondents is planned for mid-November, and such meetings could be held once or twice a year, as the need may arise. A meeting of the ENIC and NARIC Networks focusing on qualifications frameworks and involving at least some NQF correspondents (QF-EHEA) will be coorganized by the Council of Europe, the European Commission and UNESCO-CEPES in November or December 2009. It is intended to hold this meeting end on with the autumn meeting of the NARIC Network. In this model, the size of the Coordination Group would remain limited and preferably at approximately the size of the current Coordination Group.

The *second alternative* would be to entrust all tasks to the Council of Europe advised by the NQF correspondents, and in this case the NQF correspondents would in this case probably need to meet twice a year. This alternative would emphasize the work to be accomplished at national level, with coordination but limited further policy development at European level.

The *third alternative* would be to entrust coordination to the network of NQF correspondents and to, mandate a working group (rather than coordination group) on qualifications frameworks to put forward proposals for further policy development in this area. These concern e.g. issues of coherence in implementation of qualifications

frameworks and in the recognition of “Bologna degrees” across EHEA that but require further political discussions and agreements. This alternative would, more strongly than alternative 2 and also somewhat more strongly than alternative 1, emphasize that while much important work must still be accomplished at national level, there is also a need for further policy development at European level.

Under any of the three alternatives, small *ad hoc* groups may be appointed to make recommendations on specific issues.

MEMBERSHIP

The group of NQF correspondents would comprise all member states (even if Azerbaijan, Luxembourg, Moldova, the Russian Federation and the Slovak Republic have yet to appoint a correspondent). If *alternative 2* is chosen, the BFUG would also need to decide whether and how to associate the European Commission and all or some consultative members with this group. In particular, it would be important to associate the European Commission in view of the importance of coordinating developments of NQFs for higher education compatible with the QF-EHEA with developments concerning the EQF-LLL.

If *alternative 1* is chosen, NQF correspondents would still be appointed by all member states. It would also be good to associate consultative members, and it will remain important to associate the European Commission also with meetings of NQF correspondents. Communication to the ENIC and NARIC Networks will also need to be maintained.

Under this alternative, a Coordination Group will need to be appointed by the BFUG. This can only be done once the Bologna Secretariat has received all replies to its call for expression of interest in participation in the different parts of the 2009 – 2012 work program. A few principles for the composition of the Coordination Group may nevertheless be discerned:

- Ideally, it should not be larger than the current Coordination group;
- There should be a mix of continuity and renewal of membership;
- There should be a mix of representatives of member countries and of consultative members, and there should as far as possible be a measure of balance in terms of geography and experience;
- Some members of the Coordination Group should also be members of the BFUG;
- The European Commission as well as the Bologna Secretariat should be represented;
- Among country members, it would seem important that Ireland be represented because Ireland will organize a conference in

2010 on the relationship between the QF-EHEA and the EQF-LLL.

If *alternative 3* is chosen, the scenario will resemble that of alternative 1, with the appropriate changes in terminology. In this alternative, the case for a smaller rather than larger group may be even stronger and the composition should to some extent reflect the main issues to be addressed. For example, if the relationship between recognition and qualifications frameworks is to be one of the main issues, adequate representation of the ENIC and NARIC Networks should be ensured. Similarly the relationship to quality assurance might be considered, in which case ENQA should be involved and the Bologna Process should take on board the work undertaken in the framework of the EQF Advisory Board so as to avoid overlap and working at cross purposes. Under this alternative, the working group could involve all partners (well chosen, limited number of representatives): BFUG members and consultative members, the European Commission⁷, NQF correspondents and the ENIC and NARIC, Networks. It should still be possible to have 10-12 members.

An overview of the composition of the current Coordination Group will be found in Appendix 1, while an overview of the expression of interest in participating in the Coordination Group – as well as other parts of the work program - in the next period will be issued by the Bologna Secretariat as a separate document.

FINANCES

The EHEA, including the BFUG and its working and coordination groups, is based on the principle that members and consultative members cover the costs of their own participation. In the case of the Coordination Group, the Council of Europe has nevertheless been able to find funds to cover the participation of 3 or 4 members of the group to ensure broad representation. The Council of Europe will continue to seek to make this participation possible in the coming period but it will be necessary to consider alternative sources of financing to ensure that all NQF correspondents will be able to attend meetings of this group, regardless of the alternative chosen. For the meeting foreseen for November 2009, the Council of Europe will be able to cover the cost of some correspondents.

⁷ The Commission is of course a BFUG member but is mentioned specifically here because of the relationship to the EQF-LLL.

APPENDIX 1**Members of the Coordination Group on Qualifications Frameworks 2007 – 2009**

- Council of Europe (Chair and Secretariat)
- Bologna Secretariat
- Czech Republic
- ECTS Counsellors
- ENIC and NARIC Networks
- European Commission
- ESU
- EUA
- EURASHE
- Georgia
- Germany
- Ireland
- Portugal
- “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”
- Turkey
- United Kingdom/Scotland