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**THE COMMITTEE OF THE CONVENTION ON THE RECOGNITION OF
QUALIFICATIONS CONCERNING HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE
EUROPEAN REGION**

**SUBSIDIARY TEXT TO THE CONVENTION:
“RECOMMENDATION ON THE USE OF
QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN THE
RECOGNITION OF FOREIGN
QUALIFICATIONS”**

Directorate General II, (Directorate of Democratic Citizenship and Participation – Education Policy and Rights Division) of the Council of Europe and the UNESCO Division for Teacher Development and Higher Education

Distribution: LRC Committee

RECOMMENDATION ON THE USE OF QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN THE RECOGNITION OF FOREIGN QUALIFICATIONS

Preamble

The Committee of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region¹,

Considering that the aim of the Council of Europe and UNESCO is to achieve greater unity between their members, and that this aim can be pursued notably by common action in cultural matters and by supporting the reforms of higher education;

Having regard to the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region;

Having regard to the European Cultural Convention;

Having regard to the Declaration of the European Ministers of Education in Bologna on 19 June 1999, and the subsequent communiqués of the Ministerial meetings within the Bologna Process, especially their reference to qualifications frameworks and the role that they (sub-national, national and overarching) could play in the reforms of higher education in Europe as well as in countries which belong to the UNESCO European Region and which although not involved in the process, have or intend to develop a National Qualifications Framework;

Having regard to the subsidiary texts adopted under the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region: the UNESCO/Council of Europe Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education, the Revised Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications, and the Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees;

Having regard to the Diploma Supplement which facilitates the recognition of qualifications by indicating the NQF, EQF and EHEA QF level, developed jointly by the European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNESCO;

Having regard to the European Union's Europass² as well as to developments with the use of credit systems, in particular the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS);

Having regard to other similar transparency tools existing in countries party to the Convention;

Having regard to the work undertaken towards improving the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education by the Council of Europe/UNESCO European Network of National Information Centres (ENIC³) on academic recognition and mobility and the national information centres;

¹ In this Recommendation, the Convention will be referred to as "the Lisbon Recognition Convention".

² Decision 2241/2004/EC (15 December 2004) of the European Parliament and of the Council - on a single Community framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences (Europass).

³ Some ENIC centres are also NARIC centres and all cooperate through the ENIC/NARIC Networks

Considering that the Council of Europe and UNESCO have always encouraged academic mobility as a means for better understanding of the various cultures and languages, and without any form of racial, religious, political or sexual discrimination;

Considering that studying or working in a foreign country is likely to contribute to an individual's cultural and academic enrichment, as well as to improve the individual's career prospects;

Considering the developments of qualifications frameworks at subnational, national and regional levels (including for example the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) and the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LLL));

Considering that National Qualifications Frameworks in the European Higher Education Area are often self-certified and referenced against the QF-EHEA and EQF-LLL;

Considering that there are parties to the Lisbon Recognition Convention that are not committed to the QF-EHEA and/or the EQF-LLL, but where qualifications frameworks also exist or may be developed;

Considering that learning outcomes provide the basis on which qualifications frameworks and recognition practices are built;

Considering that qualifications frameworks include and/or refer to arrangements for ensuring the quality of programmes and of the institutions issuing the qualifications included in the frameworks;

Considering that the recognition of qualifications is an essential precondition for both academic and professional mobility, as well as for building knowledge based societies;

Recommends the governments of States party to the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region:

- i. to take into account, in the establishment of their recognition policies, the principles outlined in the appendix hereto which forms part of this Recommendation;
- ii. to draw these principles to the attention of the competent bodies concerned;
- iii. to promote the implementation of these principles by government agencies, local and regional authorities within their country, and by higher education institutions;
- iv. to ensure that this Recommendation is distributed as widely as possible among all stakeholders concerned with the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education;

Invites the Secretary General of the Council of Europe and the Director-General of UNESCO, as appropriate, to transmit this Recommendation to the governments of those States which have been invited to the Diplomatic Conference entrusted with the adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention but which have not become parties to that Convention.

**APPENDIX TO THE RECOMMENDATION ON THE USE OF QUALIFICATIONS
FRAMEWORKS IN THE RECOGNITION OF FOREIGN QUALIFICATIONS**

I. Definitions

1. General Terms:

- a. The general terms used throughout the present Recommendation are the same as those understood in the Lisbon Recognition Convention and referenced in the definition of terms (Section I) of the Convention.

2. Terminology specific to the present Recommendation:

- a. “National Qualifications Framework(s) (NQFs)” refers to qualifications frameworks developed at the national or sub-national level and specific to a country’s structure of education and training;
- b. “Overarching frameworks” refers to regional frameworks to which NQFs are related (for example the QF-EHEA and EQF-LLL);
- c. “Qualifications frameworks” refers in general terms to both NQFs and overarching frameworks.

II. Scope and General Considerations

1. The Recommendation focuses on the use of qualifications frameworks as important information and transparency tools in the recognition of higher education qualifications and qualifications giving access to higher education.

2. The Recommendation takes account of the fact that, from a lifelong learning perspective, qualifications frameworks can also facilitate the recognition of prior learning, since qualifications frameworks describe qualifications in terms of learning outcomes independently from learning paths. It also takes account of the fact that qualifications frameworks can be used to facilitate access to the labour market.

3. The Recommendation demonstrates ways in which qualifications frameworks may be helpful in establishing similarities between foreign qualifications and relevant qualifications within the education system in which recognition is sought, and whether or not there are substantial differences between qualifications.

4. The fact that not all countries, or indeed all signatories to the Lisbon Recognition Convention, have national qualifications frameworks should not be an impediment to recognizing qualifications from such countries. Likewise many older qualifications may not be placed in a qualifications framework even if the country in question has now developed one.

5. National Qualifications Frameworks facilitate recognition especially when they have been linked in a transparent and comparative way – through self-certification and referencing – to the overarching frameworks, such as QF-EHEA and EQF-LLL.

6. While the existence of a NQF alone does not lead to “automatic recognition”, the positioning of qualifications within the NQF of the awarding country and their relation to one or more overarching frameworks gives important information to facilitate the recognition processes.

III. Recommendations

1. The competent recognition authorities, and the ENIC Network should develop a common understanding on how to use national, European or other overarching qualifications frameworks for the purpose of facilitating the fair recognition of qualifications and should identify the opportunities and challenges they present.

2. Qualifications frameworks should be used to make it easier for competent recognition authorities to assess foreign qualifications.

3. Qualifications frameworks should be used while considering the five key elements in recognition: level, learning outcomes, quality, workload and profile. However, qualifications frameworks provide limited information to support the recognition process when it comes to the profile of a qualification.

4. The following principles should apply to assure the effective use of qualifications frameworks in recognition practice:

a. Level

- i. If a National Qualifications Framework has been self-certified or referenced, there is, as a general rule, no need for the competent recognition authority to investigate the level of qualifications further;
- ii. In the case that qualifications have been referenced/self-certified towards the same level in overarching frameworks, they should be seen as broadly compatible;
- iii. When level discrepancies occur, qualification specific information including the Diploma Supplement or other documents should be used. In these cases, the formal rights the qualification in the awarding country should be taken into account.

b. Learning outcomes

- i. The learning outcomes of National Qualifications Frameworks and of overarching qualifications frameworks are generic and provide a reference point for recognition;
- ii. In cases where the learning outcomes provided by the qualifications frameworks are insufficient for recognition purposes, the more detailed descriptions of learning outcomes provided by institutions should be used. The description of learning outcomes in the Diploma Supplement or other documents is useful for recognition purposes.

c. *Quality*

- i. A transparent link between recognition, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance should be established;
- ii. If a National Qualifications Framework has been self-certified or referenced, there is an assumption that the individual qualifications included in the framework by the competent authority are quality assured. Therefore as a general rule there is no need for the recognition authority to investigate the quality of the qualification.

d. *Workload*

While recognising that qualifications should as far as possible be assessed on the basis of learning outcomes, competent recognition authorities may also be guided in their assessment by the workload learners are assumed to require in order to obtain the given qualification. This is normally expressed as credits and indicates the typical workload expected to achieve the learning outcomes associated with a qualification.



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The Explanatory Memorandum follows the order of the subsidiary text to the Lisbon Recognition Convention

Preamble

The Preamble builds on the existing legal framework for the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education, as elaborated by the Council of Europe and UNESCO. It places the Recommendation in the context of the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention and the European Higher Education Area and points to the main developments that call for a common understanding on how to use qualifications frameworks in the recognition of foreign qualifications. Specific attention is drawn to other parties or entities developing qualifications frameworks especially in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF LLL)¹ and to qualifications frameworks developed or being developed in countries party to the Lisbon Recognition Convention outside the European Higher Education Area.

Regarding the EHEA, the subsidiary text recalls references to qualifications frameworks in several Bologna Process Ministerial Communiqués, including:

The Berlin Communiqué in 2003:

“Ministers encourage the member states to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile. They also undertake to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area.”

The Bergen Communiqué in 2005:

“We adopt the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA, comprising three cycles (including, within national contexts, the possibility of intermediate qualifications), generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges in the first and second cycles. We commit ourselves to elaborating national frameworks for qualifications compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA by 2010.”

The London Communiqué in 2007:

“2.7 Qualifications frameworks are important instruments in achieving comparability and transparency within the EHEA and facilitating the movement of learners within, as well as between, higher education systems. They should also help HEIs to develop modules and study programmes based on learning outcomes and credits, and improve the recognition of qualifications as well as all forms of prior learning.”

The Leuven/Louvain la Neuve in 2009:

“12. 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

¹ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong learning, 2008/C111/01

Framework for Lifelong Learning. Within national contexts, intermediate qualifications within the first cycle can be a means of widening access to higher education

The Bucharest Communiqué in 2012

“We welcome the progress in developing qualifications frameworks; they improve transparency and will enable higher education systems to be more open and flexible. We acknowledge that realising the full benefits of qualifications frameworks can in practice be more challenging than developing the structures. The development of qualifications frameworks must continue so that they become an everyday reality for students, staff and employers. Meanwhile, some countries face challenges in finalising national frameworks and in self-certifying compatibility with the framework of qualifications of the EHEA (QF-EHEA) by the end of 2012.”

“A common understanding of the levels of our qualifications frameworks is essential to recognition for both academic and professional purposes. School leaving qualifications giving access to higher education will be considered as being of European Qualifications Framework (EQF) level 4, or equivalent levels for countries not bound by the EQF, where they are included in National Qualifications Frameworks. We further commit to referencing first, second and third cycle qualifications against EQF levels 6, 7 and 8 respectively, or against equivalent levels for countries not bound by the EQF. ”

“We are determined to remove outstanding obstacles hindering effective and proper recognition and are willing to work together towards the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees, building on the tools of the Bologna framework, as a long-term goal of the EHEA. We therefore commit to reviewing our national legislation to comply with the Lisbon Recognition Convention. We welcome the European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual and recommend its use as a set of guidelines for recognition of foreign qualifications and a compendium of good practices. ”

(Source: www.ehea.info)

Similar transparency tools have been developed in countries which are not members of the EHEA but are party to the Convention, these include:

New Zealand:

“The NZQF is designed to optimise the recognition of educational achievement and its contribution to New Zealand’s economic, social and cultural success. Specifically, the NZQF:

- conveys the skills, knowledge and attributes a graduate has gained through completing a qualification*
- enables and supports the provision of high-quality education pathways*
- requires the development of integrated and coherent qualification*
- enhances confidence in the quality and international comparability of New Zealand qualifications*
- contributes to the strengthening of Māori as a people by enhancing and advancing mātauranga Māori*
- represents value for money and is sustainable and robust”*

(Source: www.nzqa.govt.nz)

Australia:

“The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) is the national policy for regulated qualifications in Australian education and training. It incorporates the qualifications from each education and training sector into a single comprehensive national qualifications framework.

The accreditation of the AQF qualifications, the authorisation of the organisations to issue them and the ongoing quality assurance of qualifications and issuing organisations is legislated within Australian jurisdictions.

Verification of AQF qualifications and the organisations authorised to issue them is through the AQF Register.”

(Source: www.aqf.edu.au)

Canada:

A qualifications framework is a tool that

- *describes the main purposes and learning expectations for each qualification in a particular education system, and the relationship between the different qualifications;*
- *provides the continuum of learning expectations along which any new qualifications can be placed in that education system;*
- *provides a context for policies on credit transfer and qualification recognition that facilitate lifelong learning;*
- *assists in comparing one's own standards with those in other education systems, whether for purposes of study elsewhere or the export of programs to other jurisdictions.*

(Source: www.cicic.ca)

Further information on qualifications frameworks at a global level can be found at the European Training Foundation (www.etf.europa.eu).

The development of qualifications frameworks reinforces the use of learning outcomes within educational discourses and qualification systems. The principle of learning outcomes provides the basis on which qualifications frameworks and recognition practices build.

It should be noticed that the stage of development of qualifications frameworks and their implementation varies considerably in Europe. As of January 2012, 21 countries reported that they were in the final stages of preparing their National Qualifications Framework and self-certifying it against the QF EHEA. 16 countries were in the middle of the process and 5 countries had yet to begin the process in earnest.

The current Recommendation should be considered at first step in how to use qualifications frameworks in recognition practises. The competent recognition authorities, and the ENIC network are encouraged to develop the use of qualifications frameworks in recognition further. The Recommendation does not aim to comment or to advise how National Qualification Frameworks should be elaborated.

I. Definitions

The terms “National Qualifications Frameworks” and “QF EHEA” refer to the more general descriptions presented in Ministerial Communiqués. For the “EQF LLL” the text is the official definition as presented in the European Parliament and Council Recommendation.

a). In the Berlin Communiqué National Qualifications Frameworks are described as:
“A framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile.”

b) The overarching framework for the EHEA is described in the Bergen Communiqué:
“The overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA, comprising three cycles (including, within national contexts, the possibility of intermediate qualifications), generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges in the first and second cycles.”

c) *“The EQF LLL is a common reference framework which should serve as a translation device between different qualifications systems and their levels, whether for general and higher education or for vocational education and training. This will improve the transparency, comparability and portability of citizens' qualifications issued in accordance with the practice in the different Member States. Each level of qualification should, in principle, be attainable by way of a variety of educational and career paths.”*
(Source: <http://ec.europa.eu/education>)

II Scope, General Considerations and Recommendations

1. As a tool for transparency, compatibility and comparability, National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) are increasingly being introduced to present and structure qualification systems, clarifying the relations between qualifications and how they can be combined to facilitate progression and support the movement of learners within and between education systems and sub-systems, such as vocational education and training and higher education. The Lisbon Recognition Convention (Article III.4) underlines that each party shall provide adequate and clear information on their education system. NQFs contribute to this body of information. ENIC centres are encouraged to include information about their NQFs on their national websites.
2. While qualifications frameworks can also provide useful information to facilitate professional recognition and access to the labour market, as well as promote the

recognition of prior learning, in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention the focus of the Recommendation is on academic recognition.

3. Qualifications frameworks were first developed outside Europe, e.g. in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Many education systems worldwide are now developing qualifications frameworks often as an integral part of the reform processes of their higher education systems.

Nevertheless, there are also systems, including countries that are current or potential parties to the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which have no current plans for developing sub-national or national qualifications frameworks. The fact that there is no sub-national or national qualifications framework should not in any way harm the recognition of qualifications from the country in question.

4. In Europe, two overarching qualifications frameworks have been developed: the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) and the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF-LLL). The two overarching frameworks are compatible, since levels 6, 7 and 8 of the EQF-LLL correspond to the three cycles of the QF-EHEA. QF-EHEA also foresees the possibility that countries within their national frameworks develop short cycle qualifications within the first cycle, corresponding to level 5 of the EQF-LLL. This complementarity, combined with the comprehensive character of the EQF, makes visible the relationship between higher education and other parts of the education and training systems. These frameworks provide a reference point for comparing the learning outcomes of national qualifications and can thus facilitate recognition.

For qualifications frameworks to facilitate recognition, trust in the work on national level, as well as in the self-certification and referencing processes is of critical importance. On national level, transparent and rigorous analysis of qualifications in the awarding country before they are levelled to the national framework is required. On European level, the jointly agreed criteria and procedures for the self-certification and referencing processes create trust in the process and its outcomes. The processes should be carried out in transparent way and according to agreed quality criteria.

5. For qualifications earned at institutions within the EHEA, the competent recognition authorities should check if the NQF of the country where the qualification was obtained has been self-certified against the QF-EHEA and/or referenced against the EQF-LLL. Nevertheless, the fact that NQF is neither self-certified nor referenced should not in any way harm the recognition of qualifications from the country in question.

Even if the information which can be found in the national qualifications framework is most important for recognition purposes, the fact that self-certification and/or referencing has taken place, should further facilitate recognition. In the case that qualifications have been referenced/self-certified towards the same level in the overarching frameworks, they should be seen as broadly comparable.

The results of any other similar processes adding to the comparability of qualifications, like Australia and New Zealand having both undertaken joint certification processes with

Ireland (which has self-certified against EHEA and referenced towards the EQF) should also further facilitate recognition.

The information provided by the qualifications frameworks as regards levels and learning outcomes, level, workload, profile and quality should be used as far as possible. When this is not deemed sufficient, competent authorities need to take into account additional information (for instance workload and/or formal rights the qualification gives in the awarding country).

The generic learning outcomes used by qualifications frameworks provide a reference point for the more detailed learning outcomes used by institutions for curricula and assessment. In cases where the learning outcomes provided by the qualifications frameworks are deemed insufficient, the more detailed descriptions of learning outcomes provided by institutions should be used.

With a view to improving the use of national qualifications frameworks by competent recognition authorities, ENIC Centres should seek to be involved in the development processes for National Qualifications Frameworks as well as in, where called for, the referencing and self-certification processes.