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Network of National Qualifications Frameworks Correspondents

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Background and purpose

At its meeting in Wien in September 2018, the BFUG confirmed the Terms of Reference of the Network of National Correspondents for Qualifications Frameworks as part of the 2018 – 20 work program. As in previous periods, the Network is coordinated by the Council of Europe.

It is recalled that the origin of the Network lies in the need to exchange experience in the development and self-certification of national qualifications frameworks within and against the Overarching Framework of Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) as well as to ensure coherence between the QF-EHEA and the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF), overseen by the European Commission. The Council of Europe is a member of the EQF Advisory Group to help ensure coherence between the two overarching frameworks and, among other things, played an important role - with the European Commission and CEDEFOP - in ensuring coherence between the criteria and procedures for referencing national frameworks against the EQF and self-certifying national higher education frameworks against the QF-EHEA.

The Network held its annual meeting in Strasbourg on September 5, 2019. The purpose of the present document is to provide a summary of the discussions at the meeting and to point to some issues that should be given further consideration in the next work program (presumably 2020 – 23) and also in the Rome Communiqué.

The 2019 Network meeting

As for the 2018 meeting, participation at the 2019 meeting was considerably higher than it was up to an including 2017. Despite a couple of last-minute cancellations, 47 participants from 31 countries as well as several stakeholder representatives participated in the meeting. In addition to an update on national developments, the meeting focused on:

- The coherence between the different structural reform areas and tools: qualifications frameworks, recognition, and quality assurance.
- Self-certification: review of the existing mechanism and ideas for the future.
- Inclusion of short cycle qualifications within the QF-EHEA.

The EHEA peer group on qualifications frameworks met in Strasbourg on September 6; this meeting will be the subject of a separate report.

Coherence between the different structural reform areas

As concerns the coherence between the different structural reform areas and tools - qualifications frameworks, recognition, and quality assurance - Brian Maguire from Quality and Qualifications Ireland shared his experience and ideas. In particular, he stressed the following items:

- The crucial link between quality assurance and Qualifications frameworks both in terms of qualifications themselves, of the recognition process and of higher education institutions

- In terms of recognition, the subsidiary text to the Lisbon Recognition Convention on “the use of QF in recognition practices” is a central element of the work of the ENIC and NARIC centers and Networks, including through a peer group activity on the quality of the recognition process.
- The question of the coherence of the three pillars of structural reforms is important not only at European but also at national level.

Self-certification

The current prestation and lack of peer reviews of self-certification reports is unsatisfactory. Almost all self-certification reports are included within the referencing reports against the EQF, and few countries outside of the EQF have so far self-certified. Even if the EQF criteria now underline that where countries submit joint self-certification and referencing reports, these should include explicit reference to the QF-EHEA criteria, this is not always done, and it was done to a much lesser extent until recently. It was suggested that the wording of the QF-EHEA criteria should also be reviewed and made more easily available. It was suggested that in addition to written statements by the foreign experts that are part of each self-certification exercise, there should be a written statement by the competent quality assurance agency to confirm – or not - that national the higher education qualifications framework adequately incorporates the quality assurance dimension.

Self-certification reports are in principle made available on the qualifications frameworks part of the EHEA web site, but participants felt that this site is insufficiently visible and known. It is also limited to the earlier self-certification reports, which were submitted before the referencing procedure against the EQF was launched. There is therefore a need both to make the self-certification reports – as well as the criteria for self-certification – more visible and easier to find and to make a link to the referencing reports under the EQF, where these include referencing/self-certification of the higher education part of national frameworks.

Unlike the EQF, the QF-EHEA has not made provision for discussion or peer review of self-certification reports, even if it is recognized that there is an element of peer review through the participation of foreign experts in every self-certification exercise. The EHEA lacks the resources to undertake systematic reviews of self-certification reports through the Network¹, but the meeting encouraged reflection on how a peer review process could be introduced within the QF-EHEA, the peer group on QF could be a proper based for this review.

Qualifications frameworks evolve, and substantial developments in national frameworks may require undertaking new self-certification exercises. These may be completely new referencing exercises or be limited to the new aspects of national frameworks. Rather than stipulating that self-certification be renewed after a specific time period, e.g. 5 years, it was suggested that self-certification be renewed when a national framework had undergone changes that make the existing self-certification inadequate. This review should also take into account elements like quality assurance mechanisms and recognition processes. This was the intention when the QF-EHEA was adopted but there is insufficient understanding of when and why a new self-certification would be required. It was therefore suggested that a set of criteria be developed, based *inter alia* on a study of the reasons that have led countries to undertake renewed self-certification or referencing so far.

¹ It is recalled that the EQF Advisory Group meets several times per year.

Inclusion of short cycle qualifications within the QF-EHEA

After the Paris Communiqué, the inclusion of short cycle higher education qualifications within the QF-EHEA as well as within national frameworks is on the agenda of all bodies dealing with QF. During the conversation, several elements were highlighted:

- Short cycle qualifications, even within higher education ², represent a large variety of qualifications; some of them only or mostly linked to employment and the labor market;
- In some systems, like that of the French Community of Belgium, short cycle qualifications are directly related to adult education or as a second chance for mature students. This is related also to the social dimension of the European Higher Education Area.
- The inclusion of short cycle qualifications underlines the importance of establishing a fruitful dialogue between VET providers and higher education institutions.
- In some cases, the quality assurance mechanism for short cycle qualifications need to de defined.
- Some countries, due to their historical background, have not introduced short cycle qualifications and have no plans to do so.

Next annual meeting

It is intended to hold the next annual meeting of the network in Strasbourg in the first half of September 2020.

Action

The Bologna Board is invited to take note of this report and to consider submitting it to the BFUG, with a recommendation that reference to the need for further development of the QF-EHEA be included in the draft Rome Communiqué, in particular as concerns:

- A review or update of the criteria for self-certification;
- The need to include a stronger element of peer review of self-certification reports;
- The need to develop criteria for undertaking new self-certification of national frameworks.
- Inclusion of further development of qualifications framework as well as the continuation of the Network of National Correspondents for Qualifications Frameworks in the next work program.

² Many short cycle(level 5 within the EQF) qualifications belong to sectors other than higher education, in particular vocational education and training.

The need to improve the visibility of self-certification reports as well as the criteria for self-certification – including coordination with the published referencing reports under the EQF – is perhaps not a topic for the Rome Communiqué, but the BFUG could nevertheless underline the need for improving this aspect of the QF-EHEA.