Thematic Peer Group A on Qualification Frameworks

Fifth Meeting, Vienna

26 April 2023

Minutes of meeting

List of participants

Country	Name	Surname
Andorra	Jordi	Llombart
Armenia	Ani	Mkrtchyan
Austria (Co-Chair)	Karin	Riegler
Austria	Regina	Aichner
Austria	Stephan	De Pasqualin
Austria	Agnes	Medve
Azerbaijan	Samir	Hamidov
Belgium Flemish Community	Nina	Mares
Council of Europe	Jean-Philippe	Restoueix
Croatia	Slaven	Zjalić
Croatia	Ana	Tecilazic
Cyprus	Kyriacos	Charalambous
Estonia	Janne	Pukk
ESU - European Students' Union	Tanguy	Guibert
EURASHE	Jakub	Grodecki
European Commission	Tina	Polo
Georgia	Ketevan	Panchulidze
Georgia (Co-Chair)	Khatia	Tsiramua
Germany	Tilman	Dörr
Hungary	Flora	Megyeri
Kazakhstan	Aitzhan	Kulumzhanova
Kazakhstan	Banu	Narbekova
Kazakhstan	Amantay	Nurmagambetov
Latvia (Co-Chair)	Baiba	Ramiņa
Latvia	Liene	Zvirbule-Jankova
The Netherlands	Lineke	Van Bruggen
Romania	Tiberiu	Dobrescu
San Marino	Monica	Cavalli
Slovak Republic	Vladimir	Bilohušäin
Sweden (Observer)	Petra	Nord
United Kingdom/Scotland	Sheila	Dunn
BFUG Secretariat	Enis	Fita
BFUG Secretariat	Patrik	Bardhi

Albania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic; EI – ETUCE, Greece, Italy, Malta, North Macedonia, Spain and Turkey did not attend the meeting.

1. Welcome and Approval of the Agenda

The Co-Chairs welcomed everybody to the fifth meeting of the peer group. The agenda of the meeting was adopted without changes.

For more detailed information, please see *TPG_A_SE_BA_5_Agenda*

2. Feedback from the Working groups (Micro-credentials, Short cycle HE, Self-certification)

2.1. Feedback from the Sub groups (Micro-credentials, Short cycle)

Baiba Ramina (Co-Chair) provided an update on the state-of-play of the TPG A, and informed on the progress of the Working Group on Micro-credentials and the Short cycle. Ms. Ramina highlighted the successful Peer Learning Activity (PLA) on micro-credentials that took place in Riga. During the event, participants exchanged experiences and engaged in fruitful discussions. Several important topics were addressed, such as the inclusion of micro-credentials in national qualification frameworks, the use of ECTS in different educational levels and sectors in relation to micro-credentials, the use of micro-credentials to enhance access to lifelong learning opportunities, as well as findings and recommendations that emerged from the discussions. The schedule of the Working Group on micro-credentials was presented, which includes meetings, experience sharing, and other key activities. During the April 25 PLA meeting, all discussions on the recommendations were drafted and would be sent to the members for their feedback. It was emphasized that active collaboration with the comments is necessary in order to finalize the recommendations. The aim is to achieve a unified communication from TPG A, B, and C regarding micro-credentials, covering three key topics: qualification framework, quality assurance, and recognition. This communication is planned to be ready in July.

Additionally, the Co-chair provided an update on the Short cycle Higher Education Sub Group. The last PLA meeting covered various topics, including best practices related to short cycle qualifications, the development of pathways, solutions for achieving recognition by learners and the labor market, as well as the main findings and recommendations from the discussions. The schedule of the Sub Group meetings on Short-cycle was presented, along with the main activities, such as the creation of a document (fiche) on short cycle among the working group members, a survey on short cycle qualifications, and the drafting of recommendations. It was emphasized that the recommendations should take into account the differing contexts of short cycle recognition across countries.

2.2. Feedback from the Sub groups (Self-certification)

Khatia Tsiramua (Co-chair) provided an update on the progress of the TPG A Working Group on Self-certification. The schedule and key outcomes of the three meetings held so far were presented. The first online meeting took place on September 29, 2022, during which the Sub Group approved the Terms of Reference (ToR) and discussed the self-certification processes in various countries. Kazakhstan delivered a presentation on their own self-certification process, and general outlines of the recommendations were outlined, with a decision to continue the discussion in Riga. The second in-person meeting was held in Riga on October 21, 2022, where the Sub Group agreed to gather good practice examples and identify emerging needs regarding self-certification. In December 2022, a survey was launched, with 16 members of the TPG A on QF providing their responses. The third online meeting occurred on February 23, 2023, during which the survey results were presented. The survey had three main objectives: to gather lessons learned from countries that have completed the self-certification process, to identify major challenges and needs of countries with self-certification on their agenda, and to contribute to the development of recommendations on self-certification. The Co-Chair presented the lessons learned perspective of the countries that have completed the self-certification process, highlighting that it was comprehensive and time-consuming working process, requiring dedication from multiple stakeholders. Countries

invested significant effort in preparing their self-certification reports, and collaboration and agreement with national stakeholders were crucial for success. Some countries completed the self-certification and referencing processes concurrently, while most countries have not updated their self-certification reports since their initial publication.

The key challenges in the self-certification process were presented for two groups: countries that have completed the process and those currently in the process. It was noted that both groups shared a need for clear guidance and instructions throughout the entire process. Countries in the process had additional questions regarding guidelines for engaging international experts, the lack of awareness among national authorities about the aims and benefits of self-certification, and uncertainties about their obligations for successful completion of the process. Several interesting findings were also highlighted, which included the need for guidance and peer support, learning from successful examples of countries that have completed the process, a platform for presenting and discussing self-certification reports, and ensuring that guidelines and relevant information, including self-certification reports, are accessible on the EHEA website-page.

As for the next steps, it was suggested that an additional online meeting may be necessary in June or July 2023 to discuss the drafted recommendations based on the survey and findings. The PLA on Self-certification is scheduled for September 21, 2023, in Tbilisi, Georgia, where the TPG A Sub Working Group on Self-Certification will present the developed recommendations on self-certification.

3. Follow up to the PLA: Policy priorities in the context of learning outcomes

Mr. Jordi Lombart (Andorra) expressed the usefulness of the PLA meeting about learning outcomes and gave the floor to the participants in the panel to learn how different stakeholders see learning outcomes.

Mr. Stephan De Pasqualin (Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research) emphasized the significance of strategic documents in Austria, specifically the common Austrian development plan for universities, which places great emphasis on learning outcomes. He highlighted the importance of the performance agreement between the government and Austrian public universities, which initiated the focus on learning outcomes between 2000 and 2003. Universities were requested to propose projects for implementing learning outcomes and adopting a strategic approach. He mentioned that desk research has been conducted on public universities to assess the implementation and description of learning outcomes at various levels, ranging from modules to programs. The findings indicated that app. 70-80% of Austrian public universities comprehend the concept of describing learning outcomes. However, empirical data on the effectiveness of their implementation was lacking. Mr. De Pasqualin emphasized the need for an institutional approach to effectively implement learning outcomes. This approach requires clear objectives and ideological guidance from HEI leaders, creating a common strategic framework. Additionally, teaching and learning centers could play a crucial role by providing up-to-date training and practice opportunities. In conclusion, Mr. De Pasqualin underscored the importance of learning outcomes as a basis for calculating ECTS credits and highlighted the need for ongoing dialogue between the ministry and HEIs, especially with student unions, to ensure equity in ECTS credit allocation.

Tanguy Guibert, (ESU) underlined ESU's position on learning outcomes, which was based on the "Bologna with Student Eyes" survey conducted by student unions at the national level. In response to the question on learning outcomes, students highlighted the importance of being involved in their development. Mr. Guibert emphasized the need for learning outcomes to be communicated to students at the beginning of each semester, ideally even before the semester begins. He stressed the importance of making learning outcomes readily available on university websites and easily accessible on all platforms. By doing so, students would be informed, can make decisions and choose the curricula that align with their interests and goals. Furthermore, he highlighted the necessity of discussing learning outcomes after their initial presentation at the beginning of the semester.

Learning outcomes should be seen as dynamic and adaptable to meet the individual needs of students, while still upholding the values of education, such as fostering active citizenship and promoting practical skills through innovative research. Transparency and recognition were identified as crucial factors in facilitating student mobility and exchange programs. It was noted that, often, the learning outcomes and programs attended by students abroad were not recognized by their home universities. This lack of recognition posed a significant problem that needed to be addressed in terms of facilitating mobility and ensuring that students' educational achievements are acknowledged and valued across different institutions.

Janne Pukk, (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research) provided an overview of the implementation of the ECTS and learning outcomes in Estonia. She explained that the process began in 2009 in alignment with the goals of the Bologna Process. Currently, all study programs at different levels of education in Estonia are required to define learning outcomes. This is a legal requirement that ensures programs adhere to the ESG qualifications, as outlined in two regulations. The Law of Higher Education sets out the general objectives and learning outcomes of subjects within study programs. Additionally, the government's act on higher education standards provides more detailed guidelines for the completion of learning outcomes. The regulations aim to ensure that students at all levels of study receive comprehensive information about their programs. It was emphasized that Estonia has been using learning outcomes as the basis for study programs for over a decade. However, given the evolving world and educational landscape, there is a need to update the learning outcomes to align with current trends and advancements. To address this, working groups consisting of stakeholders from HEIs, the ministry, and the quality agency have recently been established. Their purpose is to update the study programs through extensive consultations within the higher education sector, to ensure that the process of updating learning outcomes is conducted after thorough discussions and deliberations in the field of higher education.

Jean-Philippe Restoueix (Council of Europe) highlighted CoE's significant role within the Bologna Process, particularly concerning the qualifications framework for higher education. He emphasized that the CoE has been organizing annual meetings for over 10 years to discuss the development and challenges of the qualifications framework, focusing on the legal instrument, which is the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Mr. Restoueix emphasized several principles related to learning outcomes. Firstly, he stressed the importance of creating a safe learning environment that considers the global context and incorporates the social dimension. He also emphasized the need to base the development of learning outcomes on a set of educational values. Furthermore, he highlighted the significance of involving the academic community, including education administrators, teachers, and students, in the process of developing and writing learning outcomes that address present-day needs. Secondly, he addressed the educational contract with students, emphasizing that learning and the negotiation of appropriate learning outcomes should be a challenge for HEIs. The issue of qualifications and learning outcomes should be approached with reliability, ensuring that all members of society have access to the job market and promoting research and development of new knowledge in a rapidly changing world. Mr. Restoueix underscored the importance of incorporating democratic values and competencies in the development of learning outcomes. Additionally, he emphasized the need for clear descriptions of learning outcomes as a transparency tool, facilitating interpretation and international recognition.

Lineke Van Bruggen, (NVAO, the Netherlands) emphasized the significance of domain-specific frameworks, which outline the learning outcomes for each program, the implementation of the ECTS system, and the correlation of outcomes with evidence of achievement and shared the Netherland's experience in this aspect. Ms. Van Bruggen emphasized the need for continuous updating of frameworks in domains that are experiencing rapid changes. This involves discussions among colleagues from different programs and institutions. Colleagues have also attempted to evaluate domain-specific frameworks to identify distinguishing features. Some of these features include stakeholder involvement and ownership by academics and teachers, institutional autonomy within the domain, a shared language among stakeholders to ensure a common understanding of qualifications, transparency in qualifications, and internationally recognized and comparable levels of qualification for

employment mobility. She highlighted the importance of considering both international comparability and other functions that guarantee the quality of achieved qualifications. She stressed that quality assurance should also take into account the strategic choices made by institutions in establishing domain-specific frameworks. The quality agency will focus on assessing how these programs are organized and how they ensure the required changes are implemented effectively.

During the discussion, participants provided comments and suggestions regarding various aspects of learning outcomes and qualifications. The key points raised included the importance of involving students in the process of describing learning outcomes and exploring effective ways to collaborate with professors in this regard. Further, the role of students as key stakeholders was highlighted, particularly in the context of their involvement in expert groups, as well as including student perspectives in decision-making processes. Participants stressed the importance of establishing effective mechanisms for gathering feedback on the learning process and outcomes. Participants discussed the importance of transparency in qualifications to address barriers and facilitate the mobility of learners and workers. They also highlighted the role of transparent qualifications in supporting lifelong learning initiatives. The progress made by the EQF advisory group and Europass in developing guidelines for creating short descriptions of QF was acknowledged, to enhance transparency and portability of qualifications by sharing them in Europass databases. Participants stressed the need to incorporate an ethical and value framework into the design of learning outcomes. They emphasized the importance of aligning learning outcomes with societal goals and promoting values that benefit society as a whole. Overall, the comments and suggestions put forward by the participants highlighted the significance of student involvement, feedback mechanisms, transparency, and ethical considerations in the development and implementation of learning outcomes and qualifications.

4. Reflections from TPG A meetings and activities

Khatia Tsiramua (Co-chair) emphasized the importance of reflecting on the progress of the action plans presented by the countries to TPG A at the start of the new mandate in 2021. She requested by the members to provide printed copies of their action plans after the meeting. To facilitate discussions, she organized participants into three groups. Each group would address two questions: 1) the purpose of each TPG A member regarding the implementation of their action plan and the latest updates, and 2) the best ways in which TPG A can support the countries in meeting their needs related to action plan implementation. Following the selection process, the three groups engaged in separate discussions for 40 minutes, followed by a 30-minute session to share the findings of each group. Each group was chaired by one of the TPG A Co-Chairs.

4.1. Findings of the first group

Each of the group member presented the brief update on the implementation of their action plan. Kazakhstan did not have an action plan submittedat the time but committed to providing one. In terms of support, positive feedback was received regarding the country's involvement in peer group learning. The group identified the following needs for support: the development of guidelines encompassing micro-credentials within the broader context of society, the involvement of various stakeholders, and the recognition of the role played by qualifications frameworks in lifelong learning. It was also emphasized that education should be recognized as a public good rather than merely a service or product.

4.2. Findings of the second group

Concerns were raised about the involvement of stakeholders at the national level, which sometimes hinders progress on certain topics, potentially causing delays in international implementation. Stakeholders expressed their desire for additional assistance in the self-certification process and the expected contributions from the state's perspective. A lengthy discussion took place regarding micro-credentials and certification levels, focusing

on the need to establish connections between different levels and ensuring that students understand these transitions.

4.3. Findings of the third group

The findings from the third group were presented. Slovakia, which joined the process later, had not yet developed an action plan. Participants acknowledged the valuable clarification provided by TPG A's work on micro-credentials and learning outcomes. However, they highlighted the need for further discussions on micro-credentials, particularly on establishing a common path while considering the sensitivities in the international context. The group also emphasized the importance of practical advice and guidance, particularly in terms of initiating the development of learning outcomes and navigating the self-certification process. There was a suggestion for practical sessions or support to address these specific needs.

5. Invitation to the next PLA and TPG A meeting in Tbilisi, Georgia

Khatia Tsiramua (Co-Chair) announced that the next PLA on self-certification and the Sixth TPG A meeting is scheduled to take place in Tbilisi, Georgia, on 21-22 September 2023. The Co-Chair emphasized that approximately 50 attendees are expected to attend the planned PLA, including TPG A members, international experts, the EQF advisory group, and national authorities. The agenda for the PLA was presented, which included the following topics: the presentation of self-certification recommendations, a panel discussion with international experts who have contributed to the self-certification process in different countries, and sharing best practices through 2-3 country examples.

6. AOB

The Council of Europe representative announced that the annual meeting of the EHEA Network of QF Correspondents will take place on September 8th in Strasbourg. The agenda for the meeting will be shared with the group, allowing TPG A members to review and determine the topics of focus for the meeting. The Co-Chairs expressed their intention to present the recommendations on the self-certification of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) during this meeting, emphasizing the mutual benefits of such presentation. No other business was brought forward and the fifth meeting of the TPG A on QF was concluded.