

Last modified: 20.10.2016

QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

Meeting of National correspondents, Strasbourg, 2 September 2016

ITEMS 1 and 2: Opening of the meeting and update from the Council of Europe and the Bologna Secretariat

The agenda as the list of participants are presented in appendix 1.

Sjur Bergan, Head of the Education Department, opened the meeting. In his introduction, he emphasised that:

- The development of the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education should be perceived as a work in process.
- One of the challenges is to ensure the coherent development of qualifications frameworks within the EHEA: this should not be perceived of as only a “tick the box” exercise.
- The study on self-certification prepared for this meeting presented a number of challenges which will be discussed during this meeting.
- Some questions need to be given consideration, such as the inclusion of the short cycle within the QF EHEA and access qualifications.
- The Bologna Follow-up Group will most likely hold a thematic discussion on qualifications frameworks at its meeting in spring 2017. The report and conclusion of today’s meeting, plus the report on self-certification will be the starting point for the discussions.

Françoise Profit, Head of the Bologna Secretariat, underlined the following points in her presentation¹:

- It is important to reflect on the link between the process of the European Qualifications Framework for Life-Long Learning and the QF-EHEA. The discussion in one forum has ipso facto consequences for the other one.
- One of the challenges for the QF-EHEA is the inclusion of the short cycle (level 5) within national QFs.

ITEM 3: Self certification reports

Mile Dželalija presented the study conducted by Brian Maguire and himself². In his presentation, Dr Dželalija stressed the following elements:

- He explained the methodology used to conduct the study and indicated the different approaches which exist between different types of reports depending on when they were developed.
- He drew attention to a number of challenges:
 - The role of international experts as critical friends was important even if several approaches exist:
 - The international team can be composed of experts from neighbouring countries only or from a variety of countries
 - Experts can come from national backgrounds but also from international organisations
 - Some reports presented negative feedback but most of them were supportive and gave positive comments
 - Overall, the idea to have an external view appears to be good and welcome.
- The question of validation of non-formal and informal learning is still a challenge. The problem is the link to adult education. One of the challenges is to understand what a “non-formal qualification” could be.
- The use of Learning Outcomes as a corner stone of the Qualifications Frameworks is still a challenge for most Higher Education Institutions. For instance, the number of working hours required to earn one ECTS credit can vary substantially.
- One important question is the link between the Qualifications framework and other Bologna tools such as Quality assurance.

¹ link to her power point presentation: P:_coe-settings\desktop\PrésentationQF_EHEA.pptx

² link to his power point presentation P:_coesettings\desktop\CoE_SEE_Strasbourg_2_Sep_2016_MDzelalija.ppt

During the debate which followed, several items were mentioned:

- From the standpoint of the European Higher Education Area, what potential follow-up could be given? For example, monitoring of the countries in the process of developing their national qualifications framework?
- A revision of the criteria could be envisaged
- Regarding the link between the self-certification process within the Bologna Framework and the referencing process in the EQF, it must be made very clear that if a national report claims to cover both processes then the report must explicitly address both of them.

ITEM 4: Review of the National Qualifications Reports

Each delegate presented the state of play regarding the development of their NQF with regard to the following three issues: the self-certification process; the next steps of the development; the inclusion of level 5 within the QF-EHEA and the overall challenges met.

Several points made during the exchange are worth mentioning here:

- It is important to have clear political back up on national level: decisions by the Government; legal base... This also includes financial provision to avoid that NQF development depend on external funding and be project driven.
- Regarding the self-certification process, the debate clearly underlined the importance of the involvement of the different groups of stakeholders and especially of the academic community to ensure that they can feel ownership of the process. It also focused on the inclusion of short cycles, both for Higher Education in terms of post-secondary programmes and for VET in terms of vocational Higher Education processes.
- The interaction between National Qualifications framework and the other Bologna reforms tools like Quality assurance and Recognition Practice is often not so clear at national level. What roles play does the NQF play in the debate around automatic recognition? How are QF-EHEA linked to the national register of qualifications, which is very often developed in relation to the EQF?
- This question is related to the real implementation of NQF:
 - How do HEIs use QF as a tool for modernization and a learner-centered approach? How do they really perceive QF as an opening up scope for their own offer?
 - How are NQF a tool to promote learning outcome approaches, both reflected as expected and/or acquired outcomes?
 - It is also important to keep in mind the question of levelling: how is the progression described? And how can sub levels as they exist in several NQF be dealt with in terms of comparability?
 - How are NQF used or not used in terms of accreditation processes?
 - All these questions are also related to the debate around the role of Higher Education and especially in relation to the issue of employability.
- Another element mentioned was the issue of recognition of non-formal and informal education and how qualifications acquired through these paths are included, or not, in the NQF Higher Education. This question could also be related to that of recognition of refugees' qualifications

ITEM 5. Relationship with European Qualifications Framework Lifelong Learning (EQF LLL)

The chair of the EQF Advisory Group, Ms. Ana Carla Pereira (European Commission), presented the proposal for revision of the EQF. She underlined several items:

- The proposal for a revised EQF Recommendation aims to review the present text and it is a staff working document
- The legal basis is Articles 165 (regarding education) and 166 (regarding vocational training) of the Treaty.
- The structure and aims of the proposal are to:
 - strengthen the existing process and improve transparency
 - develop better communication regarding EQF
 - take into account the relationship between EQF LLL and Third Countries
 - improve governance
- One of the main changes is the question regarding qualifications provided by private bodies

- The proposal should help to clarify and adjust the “competences”. For this, it is important to involve other stakeholders in the EQF. One of the challenges is to ensure the quality assurance of National QF referenced to EQF.
- How can credit systems also be related to EQF?

The proposal will be discussed by the Education Committee in September with a view to adoption during the EU Maltese Presidency (first half of 2017).

Several questions were raised in response to this presentation:

- Why is it necessary to carry out this revision now?
- When will the technical non-paper be distributed?
- How is the question of portability of learning Outcomes taken into account in the revision?
- What is the link between this revision and the revision of Europass?

Other comments included:

- In the revision of the EQF, it is important to be aware of the great complexity of qualifications.
- How can the revision really improve recognition of qualifications held by refugees?
- Does the revision take the risk of tending towards uniformisation instead of promoting comparability?

In her answers, Ana Carla Pereira stressed that a new energy was needed for the EQF. If it stays too much within a closed community, it will implode. It is also important to clarify the relationship between the EQF and international qualifications. The idea is nevertheless not to uniformise anything but to guarantee comparability and transparency. The Europass document will be presented at the end of September.

ITEM 6: Future of the network

Regarding the follow-up to the meeting, several points were mentioned:

- The study on self-certification should be sent to the Bologna Follow Up Group as a basis for discussion.
- The question of the periodicity of the review of national qualifications framework for higher education needs to be addressed
- If at national level, a similar process includes self-certification QF EHEA and references to EQF, both criteria must be explicit for each meta frameworks.
- It is important to promote peer assistance for the development of NQF EHEA to support countries which need assistance with its development
- It is important to continue to support a network around QF-EHEA. The BFUG therefore needs to reflect on the role of QF among the different Bologna tools.
- The different perspectives of the various meta-frameworks should be addressed not in terms of competition but of complementarity respecting their differences
- The mandate of the QF network should be reviewed to reaffirm the importance of supporting the development of QF EHEA. The network is a place for dissemination, promotion of good practises and common reflection regarding the role of NQF and its implementation.

In conclusion, Sjur Bergan stressed 3 elements:

- The Council of Europe is ready to continue to support the network of national correspondents of National Qualifications Frameworks for Higher Education. Due to staff limitations, it will also mean that the regional network on QF HE in South East Europe will cease its activity
- The Network needs to offer concrete support to countries, especially those which have not yet developed QF HE
- The network needs to provide added value to the whole process.

The conclusions of the meeting will be transmitted to the BFUG with the report on self-certification and will be part of the basis for the thematic debate of the BFUG.

A presentation of the results of this meeting could also be given during the EQF meeting in December.

The BFUG should also make its position clear regarding the existence of the network itself.