



Final report

Conference: Lessons learned and to be learned

18 – 19 June 2012, Utrecht, the Netherlands

Introduction

The report consists of three parts:

Part one gives an overview on the reporting of current developments in the different member states and the ongoing work in the European Commission and CEDEFOP.

Part two summarize the topics being discussed and the conclusions as a result of the discussions.

Part three focus on recommendations towards the European Commission.

1. Current developments

All the participants have been asked to prepare a short overview on the current developments in their home country and in the European Commission and CEDEFOP.

Jeanette Noordijk, director of vocational education and training and adult education in the Dutch ministry of Education Culture and Sciences and former chair of the steering group responsible for the development of the Dutch Qualification Framework (NLQF), started with a short presentation on the importance of the NLQF.

The goal of the NLQF is to increase the transparency in the education and training sector (including public and private) and the student and labour mobility. In this hectic economic situation, also affecting education and training, the implementation has not the highest priority. However it is considered to be an important tool, in particular for the private sector. In the Netherlands the decision has been taken to open up the NLQF also for private providers (not paid by the ministry) to have the possibility to have their qualifications classified in one of the levels of the NLQF and thus the EQF. There is eagerness from their side to request for a classification.

The NLQF has eight levels and an entry level. The NLQF doesn't change the Dutch education system. A change of legislation is necessary and now in development. This is necessary to give NLQF a legal basis and put it on diploma's and qualification files. It's foreseen that new legislation will be official in 2 years.

We are fully aware that implementation of the NLQF has a long way to go. In particular it is important to ensure the quality and to reach out to the people concerned: employers, providers and individuals.

Kristina Cunningham, for this conference representing the European Commission and CEDEFOP, explains the governance structure within the Commission and gives an update of the current situation concerning the referencing of NQF's to the EQF.

There is a formal body that is in charge of European Governance: the EQF Advisory Group. (AG) All countries involved in EQF are represented in this Advisory Group and meeting each other at least 2/3 times a year. Meetings have been more frequent recently because of the number of countries presenting their draft referencing reports.

The national referencing reports concerning the referencing of the NQF's to the EQF are presented and discussed in the meetings of the Advisory Group. Comments and questions are prepared and each country is asked to consider these in the final version of the EQF Referencing Report. After agreement on the report it is published on the EQF website of the DG EAC. In the meeting last week the reports from Austria and Luxembourg were presented.

The representative of Austria explains that the referencing in Austria is not completed at the moment: their procedure is not clear and there is an ongoing discussion on the topic of legislation. There is a difference between practical implementation and political implementation. Formal decision are still pending, before the referencing report can be adopted .

Peer learning activities (PLA's) are organised on a regular basis, focussed on different issues. This is important because of finding coherence and agreements between different countries. International experts are involved in these activities. The latest PLA took place in Brussels in May this year. The aim of the PLA was to better understand the variety of qualifications referred to level 5 of the EQF and the main functions fulfilled by these - notably their ability to promote lifelong learning and in serving the needs of the labour market.

Participants in the PLA represented the national correspondents of the QF EHEA, EQF Advisory Group members as well as higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies, employers and trade unions from 21 countries.

Participants in the PLA agreed that exchange of views and systematic analysis of qualifications at EQF level 5 should be continued. EQF level 5 also drew attention to the importance of a better understanding of the learning outcomes approach in the various countries and education and training sub-systems. Therefore, it was suggested at European level a compilation of existing practises or guidance material, building on the existing EQF note on Using learning outcomes, should be developed on the use of learning outcomes.

As of June 2012, and counting the two draft presentations mentioned above, 17 NQF's from 15 countries have been referenced to the EQF. In preparation of the AG meeting in June, a quick survey was carried out on the plans for indicating EQF levels on certificates and diplomas. The pathways leading to this essential part of the 2008 EQF Recommendation are different from one country to another, but there are no fundamental obstacles that will jeopardise the end result.

The European Parliament has commissioned a study on the "State of play of the implementation of the EQF". It is available on their website¹.

It is a good report and possibly can contribute to create synergy and recognition of the functioning of the EQF in relation to the proposal for the new directive on regulated professions. The synergy between validation and recognition of non formal and informal learning and qualification is a key factor to achieve more student and labour mobility. The challenge for today is to go from the political and theoretical level to the practical and operational level.

Building on the most recent work on referencing NQF's to EQF and taking account of national referencing reports, CEDEFOP reports and the results of the EP study, the European Commission has started an evaluation exercise, as required in the 2008 Recommendation. The NCP's will be asked to contribute to the overall reporting.

There is an EQF portal where all validated national information is presented. There are plan to develop a joint website for the EQF Portal and for PLOTEUS. PLOTEUS is the Portal for Learning Opportunities in the European Space (a website of education and training programmes).

Sylvia Kestner, representing the DQR- office, responsible for the steering committees and work sessions with the different stakeholders around the NQF in Germany.

In October 2006, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (KMK) agreed to work together on the development of a German Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. The starting point was the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the EQF. The Federal Government and the federal states (Länder) embraced the recommendation by establishing a joint "Federal Government-Federal State Coordination Group for the German Qualifications framework". This Coordination Group was commissioned with the task of managing the GQF process and is accompanied by the "German Qualifications Framework Working Group" in which a large number of stakeholders from general education, higher education and vocational training, social partners and other experts from research and practice are represented. These two steering committees are important for the establishment of the GQF and for the establishment of a NCP.

At the moment, Germany does not have a German NCP. In the current state of discussion, the Federal Government-Federal State Coordination Group will function as NCP named German Qualifications Framework Federal-Government-Federal State Coordination Point. Administrative support will be ensured through the relevant working units in the BMBF and KMK as well as the GQF-office. The GQF Working Group will persist as advisory body to ensure the participation of all relevant stakeholders.

¹ State of play of the European Qualifications Framework Implementation , published in March 2012
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/fr/studiesdownload.html?languageDocument=EN&file=73578>

Costs for the NCP may be shared by the Federal Government and the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder, but a final decision is not made.

With regard to the development and implementation of a GQF, it is not a question how to get German stakeholders on board. There is a wide range of stakeholders involved in the GQF process. Relevant stakeholders are from different sectors such as the academic sector (e.g. university experts) and the economic sector (e.g. skilled crafts organisation). They all have a genuine interest in participation.

Legal aspects: The steering committees are still examining options of legislation. Currently, it does not seem necessary to enact a law. The Stakeholders may conclude that a joint agreement will be sufficient. The legal basis for the establishment of a NCP is linked to the federal structure in Germany, which means that the federal state consists of 16 constituent states. The federal state and the single federal states have their own/different competences. Education is in charge of the federal states. This means, with regard to the GQF, that consensual decisions between all stakeholders are necessary. This has to be considered in the development and implementation process. No final decision is made yet.

There are also discussions on the inclusion of non-formal and informal learning and how to include this in the GQF. All relevant stakeholders are involved in these discussions. For example, two working groups had been established to develop recommendations on the criteria via which non-formal and informal learning can be linked to the GQF. The interest is high. They ask themselves how the outcomes will affect them.

The referencing report will hopefully be ready in December.

Sean O'Reilly, representing the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland presented an overview for Ireland. Sean worked full time for the Qualifications Authority until 2011 and now continues some NQF / EQF work as an independent consultant.

The development of Irish framework took place many years before the recommendation on the EQF has been published. Originally, work had started on developing a national qualification framework but there was not enough acceptance by stakeholders. Legislation was passed in 1999, based on this initial work. The legislation established three new organisations, including the National Qualifications Authority with responsibility for leading development and implementation of a NQF. It took two years to establish three new organisations and another two years to develop and publish the NQF. It is important to appreciate that it takes a lot of time to convince some organisations to participate. The NCP continues to spend time meeting individual organisations and stakeholders. This is an important reason for the success to date of implementation in Ireland. Communication is crucial: A clear communications strategy was developed with key messages (what is the purpose, how does it work, what are benefits) and key audiences. The audiences were grouped into a number of stages, each of which was given different priority. Today a restructuring takes place: several organisations will be part of one organisation: the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Authority of) Ireland (QQAI). Approximately, 80 People will work for the new organisation, dealing with all parts of the education and training system. This reorganisation will be cost-neutral and the new organisation will continue to report to the ministry of Education. This reorganisation is a challenge because it will bring together different interests and perspectives e.g. quality assurance and support for implementing the NQF. The qualification framework remains the central focus for the QQAI.

The several bodies united in this new organisation are responsible for private and public VET and for private and public higher education.

Ireland has been one of the first countries who have been referencing their NQF to the EQF.

The Irish NQF has 10 levels unlike the 8 levels in the EQF. Ten levels were chosen because this meets national needs. The NQF also has classifications / categories of qualifications e.g. major and minor qualifications. This allows for the recognition of smaller packages of learning. The existence of 10 levels is one of the reasons why it is difficult to put also an EQF level on certificates. This is a significant issue for the future as it is unclear how this will be addressed.

Question has been raised concerning the different interests of the different organisations that will be combined into one organisation. Sean points out that the added value of these organisations combined in one is more important than the conflict of interest.

The decision to restructure was made by the ministry of Education. The current and new organisations report to the ministries of Education and of Labour.

Ingrid Vanhoren and Sarah Bonte, are both representing the Belgium Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and training.

The Flanders NQF is part of the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training. There are three units in this organisation: the unit on validation of non formal and informal learning, the unit on NQF and general education and the quality assurance unit.

The agency is financed by the ministry of Education. The agency is a bridge between the labour market and education.

Contact with stakeholders is now on operational level. The agency is considering to install regular consultations of strategic stakeholders.

Flanders has educational and professional qualifications. Educational qualifications consist of professional qualifications and general education. Educational qualifications can only be attained through formal education. Professional qualifications can be attained in other public organisations or private organisations. Professional qualifications need to be classified within the NQF. In the labour market they develop professional qualifications. The educational part has to translate these to educational programs. Especially the labour market stakeholders want the NQF to be implemented in order to have a better connection between labour market demands and educational programs and in order to reduce the number of unqualified school leavers. Most of the education and training is organised by public organizations (formal education, public employment service, organisations subsidised by the government, ...). There are a few private organisations offering training programs.

In 2008 the act on the NQF has been accepted, it is amended in 2011 and the implementation has started.

The implementation of the NQF started on the basis of a pilot. Procedures and criteria were developed, as well as a method for classification in the NQF. The first new qualifications were recognised in April. The professional qualifications are developed by sector organisations (employers organisations and trade unions are involved), not by separate organisations.

They have five recognised qualifications until now.

Quality assurance is a next step in the implementation of NQF. Accreditation and quality inspection of training programs and RPL, leading to professional qualifications will be developed. The quality inspection will be done by a mixed team of inspectors (education and labour market). In 2012 a pilot will start to elaborate procedures, criteria and methods of accreditation and quality inspection. Legislation will be developed based on the outcomes of this pilot.

Communication is an important part of the work done by the agency and takes a lot of effort.

Questions raised:

How do you convince the labour market?

This is not difficult. It's more difficult to convince educational organisations of the need to install professional and educational qualifications. Formal education is financed or subsidised by the government, but the organisation of formal education is free (based on the constitutional freedom of education). The NQF describes to a certain level of detail the learning outcomes, which will have an impact on the educational programs.

How independent are you from the ministry?

We are not independent and are playing two roles: on the one hand supporting the policy making and on the other hand developing and implementing the different instruments (NQF, RPL, quality assurance).

Are you developing the same standards?

Yes, RPL processes can lead to partial qualifications. Educational stakeholders however consider RPL as part of a process of reaching a qualification.

Udo Bachmayer represents the national agency for lifelong learning in Austria.

Their NQF has eight levels. The levels 1 to 5 are assigned to the descriptors of the NQF, the levels 6 to 8 are based on the Dublin descriptors.. The objective in principle is that, in this way, Levels 6 to 8 will remain open both for qualifications from the HE sector and for IVET and CVET qualifications.

The aim of the NQF is to increase transparency, not to connect it to any rights: it is guiding and not regulating.

Formal, non-formal and informal learning is important in order to fulfil the requirements of the lifelong learning strategy.

They distinguish 3 corridors:

- All qualifications of the formal educational system : they have been referenced to the NQF
- Non formal qualifications
- Development of classification of learning outcomes for informal learning

This will help to facilitate the implementation of the NQF. It must be noted here in particular that the three corridors have been created as a 'bridge' to make NQF implementation easier; this tool mainly aims to structure and clarify the complexity of the Austrian education system and its complex competence distribution. The corridors are understood in line with the lifelong learning principle: different pathways are accessible, and the long-term goal is to make it possible to portray all of these pathways in the NQF. The overall strategy on the NQF in Austria foresees that, in a first step, all qualifications acquired in the formal sector will be referenced.

Short overview of the structure:

The NQF project group: representing the federal ministry of education art and culture (BMUKK) and the federal ministry of research and science (BWF) (higher education)

NQF STRG comprises representatives of major institutions of the Austrian educational landscape with direct influence on the qualification processes and contents as well as legislative framework conditions: representatives of federal ministries, social partners and provinces.

In 2008 there was a high level of involvement: it was considered to be a relevant instrument for labour market and educational sector.

In 2009 official launch of the NQF

In 2010 the NCP started up

The pilot phase has started in 2011, comprising also the qualifications from the non-formal sector.

Important developments:

The Coordination Point for the NQF in Austria (NCP) was set up as a staff unit of the National Agency for Lifelong Learning, which in turn is a unit of the Austrian Agency for International Cooperation in Education and Research (OeAD-GmbH). It is the central administrative, coordinating and information office on the NQF in Austria. The NCP's activities are funded by the Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture (BMUKK) and with grants of the European Commission.

- To use an internet based system.
- To create networks.
- Organising events, pr, and website support.
- Seminars for the orientation on learning outcomes.

At the moment the NQF is not referenced to the EQF, possibly it will take place early 2013.

Regina Kleingeld, representing the Dutch NCP

In May 2011 the minister of Education Culture and Sciences received the recommendations for the NLQF, the referencing to the EQF and the NCP from a special committee of professors, representing the different educational sectors. Their recommendations have been based on the work of the different groups and round table meetings with stakeholders. The advice from the special committee was sent to the minister. With some minor remarks the minister sent the report and thus the national framework to parliament July 2011.

In October 2012 the NCP started her work.

One of the main objectives, among increasing the student and labour mobility in the light of lifelong learning, of the NCP is the classification of qualifications in the NLQF offered by the private sector. Therefore two procedures have been developed:

1. Validation of organisation: it concerns the validity of the organisation, the quality assurance and how the examination is organised. This work is done by the NCP and controlled by a committee of people representing the quality assurance for the different sectors.
2. The classification of the required qualification: a team of experts, who have experience in awarding qualifications prepares an advice for the qualification committee

The board of the NCP takes the final decision on both issues.

The NCP records Government-regulated qualifications because the awarding is done by other competent bodies.

As public providers don't have to do anything due to the generic classification of their qualifications they nearly neglect the existence of the NLQF.

The NCP is paid by the ministry of Education, there are two and a half FTE working for the NCP. Private suppliers have to pay for validation and classification to cover costs.

Discussion points for the Netherlands:

- Vulnerability of a small NCP
- Link to other European instruments
- Legal entity or not
- Question of how to reach social partners and other stakeholders?

Communication is crucial but there is not so much time to do so. The Dutch NCP is looking for partners who can do a part of job. One of the initiatives is to set up a network of ambassadors.

Question raised:

Who formulates the learning outcomes for the various qualifications for the private institutions?

The private provider needs to describe this.

Similar 'qualifications' can describe the learning outcomes but can be at the same level.

The qualification belongs to the organisation who gives the diploma even if it is executed by different providers.

2. Topics being discussed.

All the questions raised and already discussed during the presentations are clustered for further discussion around the following issues:

- a. Policy making/legislation
- b. Structure of the NCP's
- c. The work of the NCP's
- d. Research and monitoring
- e. The link to other EU instruments
- f. How to put the levels of qualifications on diploma's/certificates
- g. The use of Ploteus

a. Policy making/legislation

The advantage of having legislation is to create trust and involvement among the different stakeholders. You need more or less the legislation for the registration of the qualifications (for the regulated qualifications), to have them on the diploma's/certificates. The danger is to develop it in far too detailed way, which makes it difficult to introduce changes coming forward in implementing the framework. A legal basis is needed, but not detailed because NCP's must be able to operate in a flexible way.

It is remarkable to observe that from the side of the labour market partners it is considered not to be important. They can live with joint agreements.

Ireland has legislation, with clear objectives but it is limited in detail which allows the organisations to develop appropriate policies and, perhaps, to change these if the need arises in the future.

Flanders has an Act. After the pilot phase it will become more detailed.

In Germany the option of a joint agreement is in the phase of discussion.

Austria has no legislation; a working group is looking for legal implementation.

In the Netherlands the ministry is preparing a change in legislation to achieve a legal base for the NLQF.

b. The structure of the NCP's

The five countries present, have 5 different structures. However we could observe some communality:

- The NCP should be an objective organisation and a lot of effort is required to build up the credibility of the organisation.
- It should be a legal entity under the final responsibility of ministries, with the ministry of education in the lead
- But....the NCP should act independently from the ministry. A board with representatives from the different stakeholders could help.
- After launching the framework you can expect changes, so management of expectations is important
- There are different stages of maturity for the organisation. At the start, there is a need for development and strategic activities. Later, there is a greater need for operational and implementation activities.
- Funding by the Government is a condition sine qua non.
- In some countries there is a strong cooperation with the quality assurance agencies and they are working in the same organisation.
- The naming of the organisation is important.

In *Ireland* reorganisation takes place: several organisations will be part of one organisation: the Qualifications Quality Assurance Ireland (QQAI). Approximately, 80 People will work there today. In the start, there were approximately 6 to 10 people working on researching and developing the NQF. At the moment there are more project officers than people working on the strategic level.

In *Flanders* the NCP is a unit in the agency, working closely together with the quality assurance unit.

Around 30 people are working there both at the strategic and organisational level.

In *Austria* they are rethinking the organisational structure of the NCP linked to the current problems.

In *Germany* nothing has been decided yet.

In the *Netherlands* the pilot phase has just started. So far there is no legal entity.

c. The work of the NCP's

One of the most important issues concerns the quality of the qualification that is classified into one of the levels of the NQF's. Which includes also maintaining the quality of the framework?

This is done in various ways:

In Ireland the awarding body is responsible for the quality of the qualification, in Flanders the inspectorate for the formal qualification. For the non formal part the inspectorate works together with representatives from the private side. Quality is based on accreditation.

In the Netherlands the inspectorate is responsible for the Government regulated qualifications. For the others it is the NCP. The quality will be ensured by procedures and methods used.

Communication to and involvement of the different stakeholders is another critical key element to succeed in the implementation of NQF and to achieve the final objectives. Which means besides a website you need to organise seminars to tell be what it is all about, to visit your clients on a face to face base, to look for good publicity. Success stories still work. You need to be clear about what is in it for you if you participate.

d. Research and monitoring

To guarantee the quality of the framework, research and monitoring forms part of the work of the NCP's. It concerns improvements based on practical experiences or developments in the education and training world asking for changes in the framework. Or as a result of implementing the framework the influence of it on the education systems.

Results achieved so far to support the communication.

Efficiency in the financing and so on.

e. The link to other EU instruments

In Austria ECVET belongs to the same agency as it is also based on learning outcomes.

Lifelong learning is a big issue in Germany. There are lots of initiatives to test the different methods and instruments. At the moment the discussion concerning RPL takes place. Different ministries of the Federal State and of the Länder and various stakeholders will be involved.

In Flanders the agency covers everything, it is under one umbrella. Now there is too much at the same time which needs to be developed and implemented and one thing is going faster than another.

In Ireland it belongs to the new organisation.

In the Netherlands there are several small organisations responsible for the different instruments. Coordination will be warmly welcomed.

f. How to put the level of qualification on diploma's and certificates

In Flanders the NQF level is mentioned not the EQF as it is the same level.

In Germany it is being examined as it is in the Netherlands.

In Ireland NQF levels are mentioned on the FETAC awards.

There is still a lot of work to do on this topic.

g. EQF Portal & PLOTEUS

Ploteus is a website for European citizens to compare learning opportunities in different countries. The EQF Portal currently shows the results of Referencing Reports from each country. There are plans to provide the EQF Portal and PLOTEUS on one shared website. In the next development of the EQF Portal, national qualifications databases will send qualification information to the Portal. This will allow users to search information on individual qualifications from different countries. There is detailed technical information available for countries planning or implementing qualifications databases but the final decision about which information will be used for each qualification has not yet been agreed. Countries that have referenced their NQF to the EQF will be consulted about a qualification template by the end of June and a final recommendation will be made by the EQF Portal Steering Committee to the EQF Advisory Group in, perhaps, September / October.

3. Recommendations towards the European Commission

On basis of the topics discussed the participating countries agreed upon the following recommendations concerning some basic characteristics of NCP's:

- A legal basis is needed, but not too detailed because flexibility is requested for the functioning of NQF's, due to the fact that new developments in the world of education and labour market might influence the NQF's;
- The NCP should function as an objective organisation and being able to act independently from the ministry or ministries;
- All the work of the NCP's should focus on delivering high quality, this will help to bridge the differences between the NCP's and create mutual trust;
- To guarantee this quality and to have insight in the results of working with framework research and monitoring is needed;
- The EU instruments for lifelong learning should be linked to each other. This will support and facilitate the learning, create more transparency and in the end be cost effective;
- NQF (and possibly EQF) levels should be put on diploma's/certificates, it's one of the recommendations of the EQF;
- National databases should be linked to the EQF portal, but this process shouldn't be too detailed.

The Commission would like to progress from the framework to more compatibility and transparency between levels and to stimulate mutual recognition. This can be reached through quality assurance and mutual trust. Still a lot of decisions about admission haven't been taken (in and between countries). This can only be achieved through common understanding about the quality of qualifications. If this can be achieved and the connection between VET and higher education is settled a large step forward will be taken.

At the Bologna conference in Bucharest in spring 2012 a strong commitment for cooperation and the implementation of learning outcomes has been shown.

A new mandate has been proposed for the learning outcomes group. It is suggested to give the learning outcomes group an enlarged mandate, not only advising the EQF advisory board but also to groups working on the other instruments.

There was a strong agreement in the group, that the Grants coming from the Commission in this phase helps the countries to develop their frameworks, to reference it to the EQF and for extra activities of the NCP's as increasing the involvement of stakeholders and for communication. The new call for the Grant will arrive before summer.

The following recommendations came from the group:

- Send this report for the next meeting of the NCP's as an annex and discuss the recommendations coming forward of this conference;

- Start working in smaller groups on the most important challenges during the meeting of NCP's;
- Give an overview of foreign experts who could help during the implementation process in another country;
- Develop a small guide how things are organised in the different countries based on a template: political, organisational and implementation results;
- Stimulate by giving the good examples the inter relation between the different instruments;
- Ask countries to organise meetings with the NCP's of the neighbouring or between well and less advanced countries.