



Basic Typology of expectable EQF application

(deliverable 13)

Prepared by ACPART (RO)

INTRODUCTION

The EU policy documents and recent developments in the field of education and training have induced the need for a system-based and coherent manner in approaching the issue of NQFs, in the sense of developing an overarching EQF. At the present moment, the development of the EQF and subsequent NQFs represents one of the strategic priorities on EU's agenda, being part of the policy-making process in many countries. The interest in the EQF is justified by the need for increased transparency and facilitated comparability, as well as by the opportunity it offers to individuals to develop learning and career paths and to assess the value of their qualifications and competences in an internationalized labor market.

As the EQF would be voluntary and will not entail any legal obligations, the success of the initiative depends on the level of commitment to the framework from different stakeholders operating at different levels. National authorities must determine how the qualifications within each country are linked to the EQF.

THE EQF PRESENTATION

The core element of the EQF is a set of 8 reference levels which will act as a common and neutral reference point for education and training authorities at national and sectoral level. The eight levels cover the entire span of qualifications from those achieved at the end of compulsory education (*which varies from State to State, but generally this refers to learners aged 15 years of age*) and training to those awarded at the highest level of academic and professional and vocational education and training. As an instrument for the promotion of lifelong learning, the EQF encompasses general and adult education, vocational education and training as well as higher education. Levels 5-8 mirror those cycles for the EHEA. The description of the 8 EQF reference levels is based on learning outcomes - in the EQF understood as the statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process. This reflects an important shift in the way education, training and learning is conceptualized and described. The shift to learning outcomes introduces a common language making it possible to compare qualifications according to their content and profile and not according to methods and processes of delivery. In the EQF learning outcomes are defined by a combination of knowledge, skills and competence. The definitions associated with these elements were elaborated as follows:

- (a) knowledge which may be theoretical and/or factual;

(b) skills which may be cognitive (*involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking*) and practical (*involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments*), and,

(c) competence is described in terms of responsibility and autonomy.

The balance between these elements will vary from qualification to qualification as the EQF covers all qualifications at all levels and academic as well as vocational qualifications. The use of learning outcomes in describing qualification levels also facilitates the validation of learning taking place outside formal education and training institutions, which is in general seen as a key element of lifelong learning.

The EQF is also a framework for cooperation and an instrument for strengthening mutual trust between national stakeholders and also international sectoral organisations involved in education and training. The Commission's document notes similar trends in the area of quality assurance in EHEA which have been pursued by ENQA. The successful implementation of the EQF requires, however, that national education and training authorities and Sectoral stakeholders commit to it on a voluntary basis.

The primary users of the EQF will be bodies in charge of national and/or Sectoral qualification systems and frameworks. The EQF will only be relevant to individual citizens, employers and education and training providers after the referencing process has been carried out at national and/or sectoral level. As to the involvement of sectors, the EQF will provide an opportunity for international sectoral organisations to map their qualification systems onto the EQF. The main objective in relation to sectors is to develop stronger links between the national qualifications systems and emerging international sectoral qualifications.

A GENERAL VIEW OVER THE CORRELATION BETWEEN NQFs AND EQF

The EU Member States acknowledged the need identified at European level, but, at the same time, indicated their own specific needs related to the definition, certification and recognition of qualifications in general or at definite levels.

Depending on the present state of development of NQFs, there can be identified two categories of specific needs:

- the need for countries with a well established NQF (Ireland and UK) to focus on reviewing effectiveness and implementation of framework, as well as comparability with the frameworks proposed at European level (EQF and FQ-EHEA):

- the need for countries which at present are in the process of developing NQF to focus on how they will do so, which stakeholders they will engage, how many levels NQF will have, etc.

There is a clear and demonstrable interest in identifying the link between the qualifications in the national framework and the qualification descriptors of the European framework.

The present NQFs developed in different countries at European level can be categorized in two ways:

- a. comprehensive frameworks;
- b. partial frameworks (especially for HE level).

LEVELS

The first remark is that any approach related to the qualifications frameworks developed by the European countries from the assumption that, may it be a national,

sectoral/vocational or HE framework it should be structured on the basis of levels, and each level should have specific descriptors attached. The countries with an established NQF / qualifications structure vary greatly in the number of levels adopted: *France* (there are two registers in force: the one of July 11th, 1967 which proposes six levels, respectively the register of March 21st, 1969, proposing five levels); *Romania* currently maintains a five-level system, *England, Wales and Northern Ireland* have an nine-level framework (includes entry level), while *Ireland* has a greater number of levels still, with ten, while *Scotland's* framework comprises twelve.

Thinking to how may be designed the features of an NQF in order to be useful for referencing to the EQF, most of the countries that intended to develop their own NQF planned to elaborate it by keeping the 8 levels offered by the EQF.

In that sense, Austria considers that 8 levels are sufficiently distinct to give an adequate depiction of the implicit hierarchy in the Austrian qualification system.

Italy has the same opinion in a sense that it is probable that the NQF will have 8 levels too, in order to be consistent with EQF. Slovenia also considers that the future NQF will be based on 8 levels.

The fundamental differences in approach that can be noticed when comparing various NQFs/national qualifications structures in the European countries can be traced back to the varying political/economic/social situations of the countries when developing their system.

DESCRIPTORS

In terms of underpinning *descriptors*, these vary from generic in nature (the *UK* and *Romania*, although even here more specific information, related to content and assessment is developed by Awarding Bodies (UK) or higher education institutions (Romania) to more specific, as is the case in the *Irish* NQF. For a more explicit and complete perspective on the level descriptors in partner countries (for the whole NQF or only for specific levels, depending on the degree of development) see Annexes: 1 (Romania), 2 (Ireland), 3 (The Netherlands) and 4 (UK). Although they are based on learning outcomes, the way in which these are expressed is not uniform across all frameworks. For example the **Irish descriptors** are expressed in terms of **knowledge, know-how and skill**, and competence expected of a learner having completed a qualification at a certain level. The **Romanian QF for HE** however, expresses its descriptors using **functional-actional competences and knowledge competences**. Nevertheless all countries have developed descriptors for each level of HE. All NQFs take into account entry to the labor market and the professional competences of learners at each level.

Additionally Ireland and the Netherlands focus heavily on *access, transfer and progression*, for both new qualifications and as part of their national framework. These elements play an important part in the promotion of the Lifelong Learning Programme agenda for citizens of the countries in question. That said, with the Europe-wide emphasis on the importance of lifelong learning, this is increasingly being taken into account in the development of NQFs.

The countries which intend to elaborate a NQF, such as Austria or Slovenia, have in mind to use the EQF descriptors table as basis for a national descriptors table.

Furthermore, there is increased interest in implementing *credit transfer and accumulation systems* in particular ECTS for higher education and ECVET for vocational training. Interestingly, Scotland and Wales are the only countries to have developed a credit-based framework, although the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) is

planning to introduce a new Qualifications and Credit Framework to supersede the current NQF.

TYPICAL ISSUES

The analyse of different project reports which the objective was the implementation of the EQF at the national level revealed many aspects concerning the main issues of the NQFs correlation to the EQF.

There are two major opinions regarding the referencing of national qualifications to the EQF. There are countries that consider necessary the existence of the NQF, meanwhile others don't see this necessity, however the NQF may help if the qualification system has certain characteristics in accordance with EQF principles, such as learning outcomes based qualification descriptors. Introducing an NQF is not easy but if the qualifications (system) are simply linked to the EQF it seems to miss out on the wider benefits.

Many countries think that the ideal model is the integrated NQF (incorporating all the principles of EQF), but it is possible to move from an implicit model, in a step by step approach, through sector framework, a bridging framework and then to an integrated framework. Each country must decide which approach is the best fit for them. Here we have some different examples of approaches:

1. **Austria** intends to include in its NQF full and partial qualification, which means that the NQF should encompass all sectors of education (including general education, vocational training and higher education, adult education, further education) and all forms of learning: formal, informal and non-formal. That's why it is not clear yet whether the generic descriptors as provided in the EQF are sufficient or whether additional or more specific descriptors are needed for a better matching to the national context in Austria. The EQF descriptors table shall be used as a starting hypothesis for a national descriptors table and thus as the basis for further NQF development. If EQF descriptors aren't sufficient to classify qualifications additional information is necessary and this will be arranged in **two additional tables**: an explanation table and a supplement table.
 - (a) **The explanation table** includes additional information specific to the Austrian qualification system, proposal for changes to the EQF level descriptors, examples to facilitate a better allocation of national qualifications to the EQF level descriptors.
 - (b) **The supplement table** includes any further dimensions that are considered as necessary for a better characterization on the levels of the national qualification system.
2. **France** has already a national register for the professional qualifications (RNCP) considered as the National Qualification Framework which encompass the vocational certifications recognized as qualification indicators. In this NQF, the partial qualifications are not included and many other "qualifications" that exist and are delivered in France by different actors will not be officially referred to the EQF. Regarding the reference of the French NQF to EQF, it seems that official procedures

aren't planned for referencing RNCP to EQF. For the EQF use, the qualifications registered in the RNCP are the NQF basis¹.

Although the terminology and level of detail may differ between the national systems, it is clear that the focus on **output** rather than **input** indicators is in line with developments relating to the Bologna Process and the implementation of the EQF. Certain countries, such as Spain, still place importance on an element of standardized curriculum at national level in order to achieve the learning outcomes, whereas others, such as the UK and Ireland place all content and assessment decisions with HEIs and Awarding Bodies.

Since now, it can be underline one important conclusion: the countries which already have an NQF try to refer it to the EQF. For example, France considers that only the qualifications registered in the RNCP can be referred to the EQF and that the ongoing revision of the NQF may imply a reconsideration of the number of levels used in the present (currently 5). UK has been given the remit to implement the EQF in the England and Northern Ireland in the context of Qualifications and Credit Framework. It has been set up the National Coordination Point for referencing levels to the EQF.

For the countries which are to elaborate and to implement their own NQF, it can be observed that they have already in mind to refer it to the EQF by adopting the 8 levels or by expressing their descriptors in terms of learning outcomes: knowledge, skills, competences.

References

Project No. 20064 – 607/001 – 001 LE2 – 707EQF “Developing key methodological units for the implementation of EQF by means of NQFs”

Prepared by ACPART (RO), August 2009

¹ Report on the state of the development/ implementation of the National Qualifications Framework in the partners' countries, “Ways of Sustainability (WAYS)”, Work package 2: Scenarios of using the instruments of a Future European Learning Space.