

Strasbourg, May 27, 2020

# **Network of National Qualifications Frameworks Correspondents**

Report to the Bologna Follow Up group, online, June 25, 2020

## 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 – 2020 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 role of the Council of Europe as coordinator of the Network stems from its role in helping developing and coordinating the QF-EHEA, including as Chair of EHEA working groups on QFs in 2007 - 09 and 2009 - 12 and co-chair of the Structural Reforms WG in 2012 - 15.

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.

## NETWORK MEETINGS

The Network meets annually, normally in September at Council of Europe Headquarters in Strasbourg.

### 2018 meeting

Whereas the annual meetings up to and including 2017 gathered representatives of some 20, maximum 25 countries, the 2018 meeting was attended by representatives of 37 countries as well as of the European Commission, the European Training Foundation, EURASHE, ESU, the IAU, and the Bologna Secretariat. Participants underlined the need for the network to continue as a forum of exchange of experience and discussion on developments with regard to qualifications frameworks.

The main topics at the 2018 meeting were the full integration of short cycle qualifications, mainly found in professional higher education, into the QF-EHEA in follow up to the [Paris Communiqué](#) adopted by Ministers in May 2018 as well as how competences for democratic culture can best be integrated into national qualifications frameworks. During the evaluation of the meeting, participants underlined several elements:

- The Paris Communiqué, especially regarding the full inclusion of short cycle qualifications in the QF-EHEA, was a central element for many delegations in deciding to participate in the meeting. These delegations feel it is important to

have a space for discussions on policy development concerning NQFs, including the question of inclusion of the short cycle.

- The question of updating the QF-EHEA is on the table: what are the modalities of the exercise? What is the role of self-certification reports in case of updating NQFs? This question is linked to the EQF practice in which the updated referencing reports are presented and discussed by the EQF Advisory Group.
- For the future, several topics could be of common interest:
  - How to include, or not, international qualifications in the HEI NQF.
  - How to deal with “old qualifications” which were “pre-Bologna”, and therefore not expressed in Learning Outcomes terms.
  - The integration of and link between the different tools (QF, QA, recognition ...) is and remains a challenge.

## 2019 meeting

As for the 2018 meeting, participation at the 2019 meeting was considerably higher than it was up to and 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; some representatives participated in both meetings.

### *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 underlined the following elements:

- 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 qualifications frameworks in the recognition of foreign qualifications](#) 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 presentation 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 Network<sup>1</sup>, 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.

## ***Inclusion of short cycle qualifications within the QF-EHEA***

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<sup>1</sup> It is recalled that the EQF Advisory Group meets several times per year.

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 QFs. During the conversation, several elements were highlighted:

- Short cycle qualifications, even within higher education<sup>2</sup>, 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 be defined.
- Some countries, due to their historical background, have not introduced short cycle qualifications and have no plans to do so.

## 2020 meeting

The 2020 meeting of the Network was scheduled to be held in Strasbourg on April 27 but had to be postponed because of the COVID pandemic. The Council of Europe is now seeking to reschedule the meeting, most likely to September 11 and most likely online.

## CONCLUSION

In the two meetings held since the 2018 Paris Ministerial conference, then, the Network has focused on:

- The inclusion of level 5 in national frameworks compatible with the QF-EHEA:
  - This question is difficult as some countries that do not have short cycle higher education qualifications have expressed concern that they would be obliged to incorporate this qualifications level in their higher education QF.
  - The inclusion of level 5 within higher education QFs (national and the QF-EHEA) has also created some tensions between VET providers and higher education institutions.

Nevertheless, the Network has considered examples of national practice as well as results of the work undertaken within professional higher education, presented by EURASHE. These presentations have demonstrated that, while certainly not an

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

obligation, short cycle higher education qualifications are considered by many countries to fulfill an important function within national QFs.

- Self-certification. In contrary to EQF mechanisms, the self-certification process includes international experts but unlike the referencing of national frameworks against the European Qualification Framework for lifelong learning (EQF), they are not subject to the mechanism of critical but friendly peer review.

For the next work period of the EHEA, it is considered important that the Network of National QF Correspondents continue its work, as it needs to address several issues, including:

- Self-certification, and in particular the role of peer review;
- The paradigm shift related to the use of Learning Outcomes;
- The articulation of specific qualifications levels and education provision with the QF-EHEA and national qualifications frameworks, in particular short cycle qualifications and shorter units of learning (micro-credentials);
- A further reflection on the triangle “QF/QA/recognition”;
- A greater coherence between the work done on Competences for democratic culture and qualifications frameworks for higher education;
- A more coherent “narrative” regarding the two overarching frameworks (QF-EHEA and EQF). While the two are consistent today, it is crucial for the learners, stakeholders, and public authorities to reflect together on the two overarching frameworks not only from a technical point of view but also on the overall role of qualifications frameworks as education tools.