# Current and Future Trends – Linking Qualifications Frameworks with Quality Assurance

Summary of the seminar

Bologna Thematic Peer Group A on Qualifications Frameworks

Prague, 17 February 2020

## Background and Objectives

The seminar was hosted by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic in cooperation with the Centre for International Cooperation in Education (DZS) and the Finnish National Agency for Education. The event was held as a part of the Bologna Thematic Peer Group A on Qualifications Frameworks and was attended by about 60 participants that included representatives of national authorities of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions and others.

The seminar provided a platform for an exchange of views and sharing of best practices and experience on how to connect the qualifications frameworks and quality assurance systems. As was emphasized in the introductory presentations, both of these areas have been discussed heavily, but at a majority of occasions separately from each other. The seminar aimed at bridging this gap, based on a presumption that quality assurance is a key to establish trust towards qualifications frameworks.

The seminar was opened with introductory remarks by the chair Carita Blomqvist (Finnish National Agency for Education), followed by the welcome address by the deputy minister Pavel Doleček (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, Czech Republic) and Koen Nomden (European Commission, DG EMPL). The subsequent addresses were delivered by Jens Bjornavold (CEDEFOP) and the key-note speaker Eve McMahon (New Zealand Qualifications Authority).

Jens Bjornavold explained the main characteristics and purposes of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), a multi-level reference framework for Europe that covers all types and levels of education and serves as a translation grid for qualifications across European countries. The Council Recommendation on the EQF underscores the need that national quality assurance mechanisms ensure consistency of the national qualifications systems with EQF. EQF puts emphasis on the learning outcomes as a tool to increase transparency and portability of qualifications in Europe.

Eve McMahon presented the quality assurance system of New Zealand and the work of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). In New Zealand, the qualifications framework embodies the centre of the gravity of the entire educational system and optimises the recognition of educational achievement and its contribution to the economic, social and cultural success. NZQA manages the qualifications framework and operates an integrated quality assurance system balancing supporting innovation with increasing assurance and managing risk.

Afterwards, the representatives of six EHEA countries (Armenia, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Norway, the Netherlands) presented their national practices of linking qualifications frameworks with quality assurance and engaged in discussion with audience

In the afternoon panel discussion, the various perspectives and views were shared and exchanged between the different stakeholders – quality assurance organisations (ENQA), higher education institutions (European University Association), students (European Students' Union) and international organizations (Council of Europe).

Below both messages and recommendations from the conference are listed. These reflect views of various speakers and stakeholders in the conference even if they were not specifically endorsed by the conference or the thematic peer group.

## Messages

- The overarching objective of qualifications frameworks and quality assurance is to reinforce trust towards our educational systems.
- The topics of qualifications frameworks and quality assurance should not be dealt with in an isolated manner, separately from each other. Conversely, their mutual interconnectedness and interdepence should be emphasized, analyzed and used as a basis for future policy considerations.
- Guidelines on qualifications frameworks and quality assurance (The Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in EHEA – ESG, Annex IV of the Council Recommendation on EQF) are in line with each other and provide good formal basis for practical application of connecting the qualifications frameworks and quality assurance. Learning outcomes are in the centre of both, 5 out of 10 standards in the Annex make reference to them.
- Learning outcomes have been steadily moving to the centre of focus concerning both qualifications frameworks and quality assurance. An increasing number of higher education institutions (HEIs) have defined learning outcomes for all of their study programmes. Learning outcomes serve as one of the main reference criteria and quality measures. Recently, positive perception of learning outcomes tend to prevail within the academic community more than in past.
- Focus on learning outcomes implies the realization of the student-centered approach to education. We should differentiate between the intended and the achieved learning outcomes. A learner should not be viewed as a mere passive receiver, but rather as an active co-creator of a learning process.
- Higher education has to satisfy a variety of different missions (such as employability). In the same vein, qualifications frameworks aim to fulfil multiple purposes (including active citizenship, environmental consciousness etc.).
- A clear and intensive dialogue between the ministries and the HEIs, in particular including a proper communication of tasks to be completed by HEIs, is of utmost importance for the effective and fruitful collaborative educational systems on both the national and the international (European) perspective. A transnational dialogue between HEIs is also very significant – it can foster a common understanding of what these standards and tools are and how they should operate in practice. Quality assurance agencies can play a role of a mediator of the dialogue.
- The notion of quality assurance often makes distinction between external quality assurance and internal quality assurance – both processes, although belonging under the broader quality assurance umbrella, are distinguishable from one another and refer to different processes

conducted by different actors. The former denotes external evaluation whether study programmes at HEIs match with the national qualifications framework (usually carried out by accreditation bodies), the latter refers to internal procedures within HEIs aimed at verifying their compatibility (usually carried out by relevant institutional bodies) with e.g. national qualifications frameworks.

- Qualifications frameworks and quality assurance mechanisms are sometimes considered to be too rigid and static, in need of greater flexibility and ways to incorporate innovative approaches enabling the inclusion of new formats of education (microcredentials, interdisciplinary programmes, university-business partnerships, European university alliances). The implementation of this flexible educational tools should not come however at the expense of compromising the coherence and trustworthiness of educational systems. Various challenging questions emerge in response to rise of the new formats, such as whether these have to accommodate all aspects of learning outcomes as the traditional formats or not.

## Recommendations

- Successful application and implementation of qualifications frameworks and quality assurance mechanisms requires effective coordination and cooperation between various stakeholders involved in the higher education community, ranging from students across teachers and universities to civil society. The core of the tasks to be accomplished rests with the national-level stakeholders.

- Implementation of qualifications frameworks and quality assurance mechanisms should not remain on a purely formal, superficial level. It should be fully internalized by the stakeholders concerned and implemented with diligence and proper attention with a view to elevate and solidify the quality standards and interconnectedness of the educational systems in EHEA. Increasing use of learning outcomes by HEIs can serve as a positive example of such an internalization by the stakeholders.

- During the explanation and communication of the qualifications frameworks and/or learning outcomes system to stakeholders, much emphasis is currently put on describing how to implement them. It would be important still to justify also reasons for the implementation.

- Acknowledging the importance of the labour market and its needs, it should be bore in mind during the process of qualifications frameworks preparation that higher education should produce graduates with competences for more and other things than only the labour market needs.

- Qualifications frameworks should reflect the long-term societal needs, not only short-term priorities of selected segments within the society. The related question is what these long-term needs are and how to ensure their appropriate identification. While being receptive to the long-term needs, qualifications frameworks at the same time should not be ignorant of the recent developments and dynamisms.

- While making effort to ensure adoption of qualifications frameworks and quality assurance mechanisms, we must also ensure that autonomy of HEIs is safeguarded and HEIs do not consider the coordination attempts to be a top-down intrusions into their autonomous self-governance rights.

- Assessment methods and criteria should be given even greater attention in relation to qualifications frameworks and quality assurance; we should always reassure ourselves that the

assessment methods applied are fit for the purpose of verifying the achievement of intended learning outcomes.

- In light of the emerging rise of the new, flexible and unconventional educational formats (e.g. microcredentials or other smaller units of learning), stakeholders should adopt a stance towards this recent phenomenon. These forms should be recognized as parts of our educational systems. Any credential, regardless its specific formal classification within the educational system, shall be quality assured.
- Our prospective efforts in qualifications frameworks and quality assurance sub-areas should be underpinned by the determination to strike balance between the ability to invent new, dynamic and innovative educational formats on the one hand and to ensure compliance with quality standards on the other.