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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND
THE COUNCIL**

Evaluation of the European Qualification Framework (EQF)

**Implementation of the Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council on
the Establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning**

1. INTRODUCTION

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF)¹ promotes lifelong learning and improves learner and worker mobility, employability and social integration by creating a European reference framework for qualifications systems. The EQF makes it easier to compare and recognise the qualifications of millions of graduates looking for further learning opportunities or entering the labour market across Europe each year. For example, the Czech Republic awarded 900 kinds of vocational qualifications to almost 150 000 students in 2012. In the same year, approximately 69 000 types of regulated qualifications were awarded to about 16.8 million learners in the UK.

The EQF represents a new approach to European cooperation on qualifications. It introduces eight reference levels described in terms of learning outcomes, spanning all forms and levels of qualifications. This focus on learning outcomes puts the learner at the centre, and is important when comparing and recognising qualifications from different countries and different learning contexts.

The Commission has consistently underlined the importance of supporting the comparability of skills and qualifications across the EU, especially in the context of today's high unemployment levels, as doing so makes it easier for learners and workers to move across countries and occupations. Enabling learners and workers to present their skills and qualifications acquired in formal, non-formal or informal learning environments is especially important in the context of Europe 2020 flagship initiatives 'Youth on the move', the 'Agenda for new skills and jobs' and the 'Digital Agenda', as well as the 'Towards a job-rich recovery' Employment Package and the Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. To support this work and ensure that skills and qualifications can be easily recognised across borders, the Commission announced its intention to create a 'European Area for Skills and Qualifications' as part of its 'Rethinking Education' initiative².

The EQF is stimulating national governments to make recognising qualifications easier and more transparent: 36 countries voluntarily participate in the EQF (28 EU Member States, five candidate countries, and Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland).

This report presents the EQF experience so far and discusses possible implications for the future. It looks at whether the recommendation in its current form can cope with new challenges caused by rapid socio-economic and technological changes, and if it fosters flexible learning. This evaluation comes at a time of particular significance, to address high unemployment and the increasing number of available learning opportunities and qualifications. Challenges include the increasing number of qualifications offered by private providers, more international qualifications, and the recent emergence of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which have the potential to reach many students. This evaluation, together with the Europass and EQAVET evaluations and the progress report on quality assurance in higher education, will help identify challenges for and possible improvements to the European Area of Skills and Qualifications.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/eqf_en.htm.

² COM(2012) 669 final.

2. OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

2.1. The main features of the EQF

The following elements are at the core of the EQF:

- *Eight European reference levels* defined in terms of learning outcomes and able to capture all types and levels of qualifications across Europe. EQF levels 5, 6, 7 and 8 are compatible with the descriptors of short cycle qualifications and the three cycles of the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA);³
- *Learning outcomes approach*. The level descriptors are expressed in terms of knowledge, skills and competences, and are not linked to elements of the learning context, such as learning duration or location;
- *Common principles for quality assurance* in higher education and vocational education and training in the context of the EQF.

An EQF Advisory Group (AG) was created and National Coordination Points (NCPs) were set up in Member States to implement the EQF.

The AG ensures overall coherence and promotes transparency of the process of relating qualifications systems to the EQF. In its role to support referencing in 2009 the EQF AG adopted ten criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF⁴. These have helped establish a common approach to presenting referencing results to stakeholders. All countries use these criteria to structure their national referencing reports. Some criteria (in particular criteria 3 and 4) could be interpreted in a variety of ways and need further clarification to ensure the overall coherence of the referencing process.

The NCPs support and, in conjunction with other relevant national authorities, guide the relationship between national qualifications systems and the EQF and promote the quality and transparency of that relationship.

2.2. Accelerating implementation: a new sense of urgency is needed

The recommendation includes two target dates:

- *2010*: Member States should relate their national qualifications systems to the EQF, in particular by referencing their qualifications levels to the EQF and, where necessary, developing national qualifications frameworks (NQFs);
- *2012*: all new qualification certificates, diplomas and 'Europass' documents issued by the competent authorities must contain a clear reference to the relevant EQF level.

The 2010 milestone

³ <http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/qualification/QF-EHEA-May2005.pdf>.

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/documentation_en.htm

By 2010, four Member States had referenced their national qualifications systems. Three of them already had an NQF in place in 2008.

By June 2013, twenty Member States had presented their national reports on referencing to the EQF. The remaining countries (eight Member States, four candidate countries, and Norway) plan to finalise their referencing in 2013-14.

By end of 2010	FR, IE, MT, UK
2011	BE-vl, CZ, DK, EE, LT, LV, NL, PT
2012	AT, DE, HR, LU
2013	BG, IT, PL, SI
To reference	Member States: BE-fr, BE-de, EL, ES, FI, HU, KY, RO, SE, SK, Candidate countries: IS, ME, MK, TK EEA country: NO

Table 1 — Overview of the implementation of the EQF Recommendation's the first milestone, September 2013

This shows that the Recommendation generates reforms — for example, the development of comprehensive NQFs based on learning outcomes — which require significant political and technical engagement from a variety of stakeholders. Such developments take time. Therefore, despite the strong national commitment to the EQF, the delay in its implementation becomes visible.. To avoid further delays, all countries should finalise their referencing processes by the end of 2014 and implement the recommendation more quickly. The Commission will strengthen its monitoring of the EQF's implementation at national level, if necessary through bilateral exchanges, to help individual countries overcome their specific challenges.

It should be noted that a referencing report is a snapshot of a country's qualifications system, whereas referencing is a continuous process of reflection on changing qualifications systems. Therefore, countries should regularly review their referencing reports and inform the AG about any changes and about how they responded to stakeholders' comments. The AG should set criteria and procedures for following up on developments in national qualifications systems and their impact on referencing.

The 2012 milestone

The second milestone has the benefit of bringing the EQF directly to learners, workers, education and training institutions, and to employers. Including EQF levels on qualifications and supplements is a major step towards making it easier to better compare qualifications across borders.

Missing the referencing milestone caused significant delays in meeting this second milestone. Only one country included EQF levels in its Europass supplements by 2012. Two countries included EQF levels in their qualification databases. By September 2013, three countries had issued qualifications that referenced an EQF level and five countries had started including

EQF levels in their Europass supplements. Six further countries plan to start doing this in 2013-14.

	End of 2012	Sept. 2013
EQF level included in new certificates and diplomas		CZ, DK, LT
EQF level included in Europass supplements — Diploma Supplement (ds) and/or Certificate Supplement (cs)	FR (cs)	CZ (cs), DK (ds), EE (ds), IE (ds)
EQF level included in national qualifications databases	FR, UK	CZ, DK,

Table 2: Overview of the implementation of the EQF Recommendation’s second milestone

Reaching the second milestone is now urgent. Including the EQF level and clearly describe the learning outcomes acquired gives a powerful tool to people to better communicate about the level and variety of their skills and qualifications. This is especially important in times of crisis. It is now urgent to step up work at national level to ensure that by the end of 2014 at least a quarter of all qualifications issued in Europe include an EQF reference.

Countries approach the second milestone in different ways. Most national authorities are considering technical solutions to be systematically used at national level. Others leave it up to the institutions that award qualifications to decide if and how to include EQF levels in certificates, diplomas, Europass supplements and qualifications databases. Overall, countries agree that a common EU approach is needed to ensure the same level of transparency to all learners and workers. The AG should develop such a common approach.

2.3 A coherent system

The eight-level structure of the EQF is applicable to national qualifications systems and to stakeholders needs. Most countries have or develop comprehensive NQFs that cover all types and levels of qualifications in formal education and training systems. The number of NQF levels depends on national needs.

The EQF’s overall principles and architecture — the definition of ‘qualification’ and the levels based on learning outcomes — make it easier to compare qualifications. However, a few substantial issues should be considered for future improvements:

1. While the EQF aims to be a reference point for all qualifications in Europe regardless of what body awards them, most NQFs are limited to qualifications awarded by public education and training institutions. Only few NQFs cover qualifications awarded outside formal systems, for example in the private sector, which are often important on the labour market. A key challenge is to ensure that all qualifications in NQFs, including those acquired through non-formal and informal learning are trustworthy and meet basic quality requirements. The AG should give guidance on common criteria to be considered for including qualifications in NQFs.

2. Current EQF features may not be suited to new developments. New practices such as blended learning are increasingly used. MOOCs are a recent development in distance education, and make it possible to organise learning across borders and time zones, anywhere that is connected to the internet.

Qualifications are also awarded by international bodies and multinational companies in various countries in Europe and beyond. Some countries have included them in their NQFs, but not always with the same EQF level. These issues call for a coherent approach in referencing to the EQF by all countries to avoid confusion to employers and qualifications holders.

3. EQF level descriptors for ‘knowledge’ and ‘skills’ match national descriptors. However, the ‘competence’ descriptor is more problematic as the descriptor included in Annex II is not fully consistent with the definition of ‘competence’ in Annex I. The ‘competence’ descriptor should therefore be clarified.
4. The common principles on quality assurance have helped countries going through the referencing process. Although they were intended to address only vocational education and training and higher education qualifications, they are of course relevant to other qualifications as well. Their potential to provide guidance for all levels and all kinds of qualifications should be made explicit.
5. Some issues more thoroughly discussed at European level are related to qualifications at EQF level 2–3 – leaving qualifications of compulsory education and at EQF level 3–5 – including school leaving qualifications giving access to higher education and Master craftsman qualifications.

According to the Lisbon Recognition Convention, school leaving qualifications that give access to higher education are broadly equivalent, giving access to higher education across Europe and beyond. Relating these qualifications to different EQF levels suggests difference in the level of learning outcomes achieved, which may present obstacles to the mobility of school leavers wishing to access higher education in another country.

In some cases, national qualifications with the same name/title differ in content and complexity. In other cases, countries have different interpretations of how learning outcomes best fit an EQF level. These differences, even if legitimate, will not be understood by people, for whom the title of the qualification remains similar and should therefore represent a similar qualification. Exchanging information and issuing guidance at European level should continue to aim for making referencing decisions understood and trusted.

6. The EQF’s design is fully compatible with the QF-EHEA. Coherence in implementation is ensured, in particular because the Council of Europe (CoE) participates in AG and NCP meetings and the Commission attends QF-EHEA meetings. This coherence has made it possible for most countries to carry out their EQF referencing and QF-EHEA self-certification in a single process, and to present a single report addressing the criteria of both processes. Several non-EQF Bologna countries have also developed lifelong learning NQFs based on learning outcomes. It

would be useful to assess countries' views on the added value of two overarching European qualifications frameworks.

2.4 The EQF as a central tool for recognising qualifications and ensuring transparency

The EQF relates to all levels and types of qualifications. Coherence between the EQF and other European policies and tools⁵ that aim to improve the transparency of skills and qualifications (such as the QF-EHEA, Europass, ECTS, ECVET, Directive 2005/36, ESCO, validation of informal and non-formal learning) as well as quality assurance frameworks and principles (EQAVET and ESG) is fundamental for their effectiveness and impact. All of these facilitate the free movement of people and promote lifelong learning, and some share the learning outcomes approach.

The EQF and European systems for credit transfer and accumulation, namely the ECTS and the ECVET, are coherent in their underlying principles, but not yet fully aligned in their practical implementation. ECTS is used in around 75 % of higher education courses. While most programmes are now described in terms of intended learning outcomes, the challenge is to extend the learning outcomes to programme design and assessment. The on-going revision of the ECTS guide will provide additional European guidance. The ECVET is fully based on learning outcomes, but it is at an earlier stage of implementation.

The EQF's common principles on quality assurance are broadly compatible with European standards and guidelines (ESG), and with the EQAVET. However, the principles of all three tools refer to quality assurance in education and training in general only, and do not provide specific guidance for ensuring the quality of the learning outcomes approach, qualifications and qualifications frameworks. The on-going evaluations of the EQF, EQAVET and the revision of the ESG should be used to identify where further synergies between European qualifications frameworks and quality assurance arrangements can be achieved.

The EQF is consistent with the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC),⁶ which facilitates the recognition of qualifications in and access to higher education in Europe. The LRC's subsidiary text on the use of qualifications frameworks in the recognition of foreign qualifications, adopted in June 2013 encourages closer links between qualifications frameworks and qualifications recognition for further learning purposes. However, recognition practices at institutional level rarely take into account qualifications frameworks and the increased transparency brought by European frameworks.

There is less coherence with the Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications. The directive works with five levels and input criteria such as course duration to recognise qualifications on the labour market, while the EQF has eight levels based on learning outcomes. This has caused uncertainty among stakeholders. Therefore, the new directive⁷ envisages synergies with the EQF. It keeps the five-level inputs system, but makes it possible to set up 'common training frameworks' that enable countries to agree on minimum levels of knowledge, skills and competences linked to EQF levels. Based on this, countries will be able to automatically recognise professional qualifications.

⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/mobility_en.htm.

⁶ ETS 165 — Recognition Qualifications 1997 Higher Education in the European Region, 11.IV.1997.

⁷ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52011PC0883:EN:NOT>

The recommendation envisages a close link with Europass. The Europass supplements should refer to the corresponding EQF level, but this is rarely the case due to the limited implementation of the second EQF milestone.

Finally, there exist close links between the development of the European multilingual Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations classification (ESCO) and the EQF. Qualifications that are related to the EQF will be indirectly included in ESCO. This will be done via the EQF portal, which will link to national qualifications databases. International qualifications that are not included in NQFs will be directly included in ESCO. The learning outcomes approach used in the EQF and ESCO should be coordinated.

2.5 Governance

The EQF is governed by the AG and NCPs (section 2.1).

The AG is composed of representatives of:

- 36 countries (28 Member States, five candidate countries, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland);
- European social partners (ETUC, BusinessEurope, UAEPME, CEEP);
- European umbrella organisations that award qualifications (Eurochambres, EUCIS-LLL, EUA); and
- other stakeholders (Public Employment Services, European Student Union, European Volunteer Centre, European Youth Forum).

The CoE participates in the AG to ensure coherence between the EQF and the QF-EHEA.

Cedefop and the European Training Foundation support the AG.

The AG provides effective guidance for national referencing processes and builds trust and understanding among participating countries. Its mandate was extended in 2012 to monitor the implementation of the Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning⁸. This aims to further strengthen links between qualifications frameworks and validation arrangements, which are yet to be developed in most countries.

NCPs have been set up in 36 countries. They are in various institutional settings, including ministries, national agencies, national qualifications authorities, educational research institutions, and educational information centres. Their effectiveness largely depends on how closely they are linked to the national governance of the NQF/EQF process. NCPs focus most of their activities on communicating with stakeholders, but they find it challenging to liaise with social partners and lack expertise in communicating with the broader public. National authorities should assess how the NCPs could better communicate with a variety of stakeholders and put in place communication strategies.

Although, NCPs have only used around 75 % of their available budget in the past three years due to initial organisational difficulties and changes to the referencing timetables, their activities were considered pivotal to implementing the EQF at national level.

The EQF portal communicates about the EQF and the results of the national referencing processes. It makes it possible to compare national qualification levels to the EQF and to search on qualifications. The comparison function shows information about nine out of the 20

⁸ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF>

countries that have referenced. Searching individual qualifications will only be possible in late 2013. There is a significant challenge in the fact that national qualifications databases do not yet exist in all countries and that existing ones do not cover all qualifications in NQFs. The portal needs a critical majority of countries to participate so that its potential can be fully realised.

2.6 Impact and sustainability

Although there are no statistics on the EQF's impact on lifelong learning and mobility and its implementation is at an early stage, shifting to the learning outcomes approach is a major achievement. It has paved the way for more flexible learning pathways and the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The EQF has had impact beyond the 36 participating countries. Several EU Partnership countries adopted EQF concepts for their own national and regional developments, and countries from other regions of the world are seeking dialogue on the EQF.

Given the level of political commitment to the EQF, the common reference tool would be sustainable without European financial support, but stakeholders see that strong EU-level coordination is a must for coherent and transparent implementation.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Findings confirm that the EQF is widely accepted as a reference point for developing qualifications frameworks, implementing the learning outcomes approach, and enhancing the transparency and recognition of skills and competences. It could be central within a future European Area of Skills and Qualifications. However, implementation delays have created a sense of urgency. The EU should make it possible for learners and workers to make their skills more visible no matter where they acquired them. It must make the EQF fully operational as soon as possible.

Based on the evaluation results, the Commission suggests considering the following measures to enhance the relevance, effectiveness and impact of the EQF:

Accelerate EQF referencing and developing national qualifications frameworks

All countries should develop strong NQFs that are understood and used by stakeholders. They should build on national consultations, establish a broad consensus on how national qualifications levels relate to the EQF and work towards finalising their first referencing report by 2014.

Strengthen the role and impact of qualifications frameworks based on learning outcomes at national and European levels

Governments should commit to using the learning outcomes approach in all education and training sub-systems, by implementing comprehensive NQFs that include qualifications awarded both within and outside of traditional formal education and training systems. NQFs should be integrated into overall education, training and employment policies. At European level, the 'competence' descriptor in Annexes I and II to the recommendation should be clarified.

Enhance transparent and coherent EQF referencing, taking into account the changing nature of qualifications systems

Referencing should be seen as a continuous process, and should not be limited to presenting one referencing report. The AG should provide guidance on criteria 3 and 4 and develop a comprehensive strategy for following up referencing reports in the future. This should include strengthened monitoring of how countries take into account the AG's comments on national referencing reports and addressing referencing inconsistencies between countries. The AG should also support communication among stakeholders on challenging referencing issues.

Strengthen the link between European quality assurance and qualifications frameworks

The EQF's common principles on quality assurance, EQAVET and the ESG should be made more coherent and support the learning outcomes approach, with a view to developing coherent quality assurance principles for lifelong learning. Beyond increased trust in qualifications, qualifications frameworks and referencing to the EQF, this could also lead to increased trust and better permeability between education and training sub-systems.

Improve communication on the EQF, to better reach out to learners, workers and other stakeholders and inform them about the EQF's benefits

Having referenced their qualifications to the EQF, countries should ensure that all new certificates, diplomas and Europass supplements include a reference to the relevant EQF level. Countries should set up national qualification databases/ registers and connect these to the EQF portal. The EQF portal should be linked with the European portal on learning opportunities (Ploteus) and ESCO. The Commission will explore how web tools can be used to offer skills-related services to learners, workers and other stakeholders, to support mobility, lifelong learning and employability.

Make better use of the EQF in policies and tools for mobility and lifelong learning

The EQF can act as a hub to which other European policies and tools, such as credit transfer and recognition, relate. Qualifications frameworks and credit systems based on learning outcomes facilitate more flexible individual learning paths in different institutions, sectors and countries. The Commission, Member States and stakeholders should strengthen and explain the links between the EQF and European credit transfer and accumulation systems. Countries should increasingly use the EQF as an additional source of information for the competent authorities examining the recognition of qualifications issued in other Member States in the context of the Directive on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications and in ET2020 countries in the context of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

Clarify the EQF's role in relation to international qualifications and for countries and regions outside Europe

The EQF is increasingly being used as a reference point for comparing qualifications. The existing referencing process and its criteria should ensure that the EQF covers all kinds of qualifications, including international qualifications. It should be further explored how the EQF could support the comparison and recognition of qualifications gained outside of Europe.

Develop the EQF to make it better adapted to current developments in online learning and international qualifications

The EQF should cover international qualifications and qualifications that include modules completed in different countries or that blend face-to-face and online learning. The EQF can only become a truly all-encompassing framework if it adapts to these new developments and remains capable of keeping up with changes in the provision of education and training.

‘Rethinking Education’ emphasised education’s role in economic growth, competitiveness and employment. One of its proposals concerns carrying out exploratory work on further synergies between EU tools for transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications. This should go towards building a European Area of Skills and Qualifications in which everyone could move freely and have his/her competences and qualifications quickly recognised for further learning and adequately understood by employers.

The Commission will discuss the conclusions presented in this report with relevant stakeholders also during the public debate on the European Area of Skills and Qualifications in winter 2013/2014. Based on the conclusions of this debate and an Impact Assessment, the Commission may consider proposing a revision of the current legal basis of EQF — (2008/C 111/01) Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008.