



Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks

REPORT BY THE EHEA WORKING GROUP ON QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

BACKGROUND

The present report is submitted to the BFUG by the EHEA Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks. It also draws on the activities of the Network of National Correspondents for Qualifications Frameworks, formally established by the BFUG in March 2011 but *de facto* established in autumn 2009, as well as on the excellent cooperation established with the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF).

The report seeks to take stock of the state of development of national qualifications framework compatible with the overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). It is recalled that Ministers in 2009 committed to completing their national frameworks and having them prepared for self certification by the end of 2012. The overall conclusion of the report is most EHEA countries seem to be reasonably close to fulfilling the commitment ministers undertook in 2009. As of January 19, 2012, 21 countries have reported that they are in the final stages of preparing their national qualifications framework and self certifying it against the QF-EHEA¹. A further 16 countries are in the middle of the process². Only 5 countries are a long way away from meeting their commitments³.

Nevertheless, this picture needs to be nuanced somewhat. While few countries are far away from fulfilling their commitment, there is reason for concern about some of the countries in the “middle group”. Progress in this group is somewhat uneven and some countries in this group will find it difficult to complete their national frameworks in the course of 2012 or even shortly thereafter. It is therefore necessary to continue to observe progress in the development of national framework, a point that is further underscored by the fact that 4 countries have provided no information on the development of their frameworks.

There is also reason for some concern about the conceptualization, writing, implementation and examination of learning outcomes. It is worth noting that no country reports that it is at the stage of the process that require that study programs be redesigned on the basis of the learning outcomes included in the EQF: the most advanced countries report that they are either at the stage just before this or that they are already at one of the two following stages of development. This could indicate that there are issues with redesigning study programs on the basis of learning outcomes, a supposition that seems to be underscored by the data on the understanding of learning outcomes and the extent to which programs and their components link to them.

The report also seeks to give ministers advice on the further development of the QF-EHEA beyond self certification. As has been shown by several national experiences, self certification is an important step but it is in no way a final step. In order to become a living reality that matters to the

¹ In technical terms, this group comprises countries that have completed steps 7 – 10 as outlined in the 2007 report by the Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks.

² This group comprises countries that have completed steps 5 or 6 as outlined in the 2007 report by the Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks

³ This group comprises countries that have completed steps 1 – 4 as outlined in the 2007 report by the Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks

life of staff and students, qualifications frameworks must continue to be developed. Put bluntly, establishing a structure – the step that most countries are now close to completing – is considerably less difficult than ensuring that the structure works in practice.

The report examines a number of factors that will be of critical importance to the successful development and implementation of national frameworks compatible with the QF-EHEA as well as with the EQF. These considerations, which constitute the main part of the report, will be found in chapter V and may be summarized under the following headlines:

- Ensuring implementation of structures – learning outcomes
- Self certification
- Access qualifications and short cycle qualifications
- Developing and reviewing qualifications frameworks after the self certification has been completed
- Stakeholder involvement
- Qualifications frameworks and quality assurance
- Qualifications frameworks and recognition
- Qualifications frameworks in a global context

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

Some EHEA countries have yet to finalize their national qualifications frameworks and some seem unlikely to do so by the end of 2012, the goal to which Ministers committed at the 2009 meeting in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve, or in reasonable time thereafter. These countries should reinforce their efforts and, by autumn 2012, put forward revised timetables for the development of their national frameworks. They should be encouraged to make good use of the experience of partner countries in the EHEA.

As member countries develop their national qualifications frameworks, attention will shift from developing structures to ensuring coherent implementation of these structures. This implies that national frameworks as well as national and institutional practices must be compatible with the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA (QF-EHEA) and that even if developments at national and institutional level will take on greater prominence, there is continued need for coordination of qualifications frameworks at the level of the EHEA. Cooperation with the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) must be further developed and the compatibility between the QF-EHEA and the EQF must be clearly documented and communicated to avoid misunderstandings and incompatible referencing and self-certification of national qualification frameworks to the two overarching frameworks.

The continuing development of transparency tools such as ECTS and the Diploma Supplement should reflect the development of qualification frameworks and the emphasis on learning outcomes.

Coherent implementation will require opportunities for sharing experience and training practitioners at European, national and institutional level.

It is also of vital importance that a common understanding of the implications of the different levels of qualifications within frameworks be developed. In this context, it is particularly important that Ministers commit to referencing school leaving qualifications giving access to higher education at EQF level 4 or, where they are not bound by the EQF, place their school leaving qualifications at a similar level. This should be done regardless of the particular profile of a qualification and regardless of whether it gives general access to higher education or access only to certain kinds of

higher education programs. Ministers should also commit to referencing their first, second and third cycle qualifications against EQF levels 6, 7 and 8, respectively.

In view of the fact that many countries have availed themselves of the opportunity offered in the QF-EHEA to develop short cycle qualifications within the first cycle in their national frameworks as well as the fact that several countries are referencing their short cycle higher education qualifications against EQF level 5, it is of great importance that the QF-EHEA take explicit account of short cycle qualifications. The BFUG could be mandated to submit proposals in this respect, taking account of the Dublin descriptors and the proposal put forward to the Bergen meeting in 2005, in time for the 2015 Ministerial conference. In București, Ministers could nevertheless recall that a Dublin Descriptor is already available for short cycle qualifications and encourage countries to make use of it in their national contexts.

The link between the three main areas of structural reform within the EHEA – qualifications frameworks, quality assurance and recognition – needs to be strengthened further. In particular, the contribution of quality assurance agencies as well as recognition centers is key to the development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks. Qualifications frameworks presuppose the consent of the competent quality assurance agencies and full advantage must be taken of their potential in facilitating the recognition of qualifications.

The development and implementation of learning outcomes is of key importance in making qualifications frameworks a living reality of the EHEA. It is in particular one of the main conditions for implementing the validation of prior learning, to increase the lisibility of the qualifications and employability of the students. In this context, it is of particular importance that the possibility of a learning outcomes approach be integrated into the ongoing review of the EU Directive for professional recognition. The clear reference to the ECTS in Commission document COM(2011) 883 final on amending the said Directive is noted with satisfaction. Opportunities for sharing experience and training those responsible for conceptualizing, writing, implementing and assessing learning outcomes at higher education institutions should be given high priority by public authorities and institutional leaders.

OVERVIEW OF ALL RECOMMENDATIONS

References are to the relevant chapters of the report.

THE STATE OF DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

III.1 Ministers should call on the countries that have so far provided no or inadequate information on the state of and timetable for the development of their national qualifications frameworks to provide the necessary information no later than in time for the BFUG meeting to be held in autumn 2012.

III.2 Ministers are advised to encourage dialogue about the challenges they face in developing and implementing their qualifications frameworks. Ministers of the countries which will be unable to meet their commitment by 2012 are advised to submit a revised timetable by autumn 2012. They may also wish to consider whether to request advice or assistance from EHEA partners in developing their frameworks, with a view to ensuring that qualifications frameworks become a reality within the EHEA so as to ensure trust in the whole system by the different stakeholders.

COOPERATION WITH THE EQF

IV.1 Acknowledging that qualifications frameworks should reflect all aspects of the missions of higher education, Ministers are advised to acknowledge and support the complementarity of the two overarching frameworks

IV.2 Ministers are advised to reiterate the importance of maintaining and further developing the close cooperation between the QF-EHEA and EQF.

IV.3 Ministers are advised to commit to implementing their own national qualifications frameworks and ensure continued compatibility with both overarching European frameworks as well as to facilitate transfer and progression between various education and training subsystems. Ministers are further advised to recognize the importance, at national level, of dialogue and cooperation between the different public authorities and other possible actors responsible for qualifications frameworks, in particular to foster dialogue and cooperation between higher education and the VET sector.

THE FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN THE EHEA

V.1.1 Training those responsible for conceptualizing, writing, implementing and assessing learning outcomes at higher education institutions should be given high priority by public authorities and institutional leaders.

V.1.2 As many EHEA countries as possible, provided they have the relevant experience, should also organize such training activities, to ensure that a variety of experiences and views are shared across the EHEA. All EHEA countries should provide selected experts with an opportunity to participate in such training activities at European level. The BFUG should include such training in its 2012 – 2015 work program.

V.1.3 While most training should be provided at national and institutional level, at least the trainers or the “trainers’ trainers” should be trained at EHEA level, in order to exchange experience and encourage coherent practice. Countries need to play an active role in this respect and should avail themselves of the various kinds of support offered by the European Commission, including support for Peer Learning Activities.

V.1.4 The European Commission is advised to continue financial support for Peer Learning Activities in this field and to facilitate the dissemination of the results of such activities.

V.1.5 Web based means of information sharing should also be explored. The EHEA site on qualifications frameworks should be further developed and play a crucial role in this regard.

V.1.6 In view of the particular challenges of developing and implementing learning outcomes, this should be a key feature of the training offered at both national and European level, in order to develop a common and shared understanding of key concepts.

V.1.7 Ministers could mandate the BFUG to consider how conceptualizing, writing, implementing and examining learning outcomes could be included as a part of teacher training curricula as well as how this training could be brought into the pedagogical preparation of higher education staff at national and European level.

V.1.8 Ministers could encourage cooperation between the QF-EHEA and the EQF on the interpretation and application of learning outcomes and, where possible, a sharing of resources, with a view to further reducing unnecessary barriers between education and training levels and types, including the validation of prior learning.

V.1.9 Higher education institutions and accreditation agencies should ensure that learning outcomes as well as student workload are evaluated when assigning ECTS credits to programs and modules.

V.1.10 The Diploma Supplement and the guidelines for its use should be further developed to ensure that a learning outcomes approach is sufficiently reflected in the Diploma Supplements issued by higher education institutions.

V.2.1 The Council of Europe and the BFUG Secretariat should continue to help identify foreign experts for the self certification exercises of countries that request such assistance.

V.2.2 Seminars for those responsible for self certification exercises at national level as well as for potential foreign experts should be conducted in 2012 – 2013. Full use should be made of opportunities for Web based training and for placing the collective experience of the EHEA at the disposal of stakeholders and experts, on the web and through any other means considered appropriate.

V.2.3 In 2013, a European conference should be organized, aiming mainly at policy makers, to take stock of the development and implementation of national frameworks and of the self certification process completed so far with a view to identifying issues of concern that could be taken into account in the remaining self certification exercises.

V.2.4 Since the same challenges face the referencing of national frameworks to the EQF, cooperation between the two overarching frameworks should be pursued on how to strengthen the credibility of the self certification and referencing exercises.

V.2.5 Academic research on qualifications frameworks should comprise different aspects including the modalities and effects of self certification and referencing and the BFUG should consider commissioning a comparative analysis on the self certification reports. In cooperation with the EQF, this may be extended to include completed referencing reports. Academic researchers could also be encouraged to send their findings to the BFUG Secretariat for appropriate distribution.

V.2.6 Ministers could mandate the BFUG to ensure review of the self certification processes, also with a view to identifying cases in which self certification reports seem inconsistent and/or seem to be at variance with the corresponding referencing report.

V.3.1 Ministers could agree that secondary school leaving qualifications should be positioned in national levels below levels referenced to the European first cycle of higher education. In EQF terms, school leaving qualifications should be positioned in national levels to be referenced against EQF level 4 or, where they are not bound by the EQF, place their school leaving qualifications at a similar level. Ministers are aware that EQF-LLL levels 5, 6, 7, and 8 have been considered compatible with the short, first, second and third cycle of the QF-EHEA from the launching of the EQF-LLL onward and could further agree to reference the first, second and third cycle higher education qualifications against EQF levels 6, 7 and 8, respectively.

V.3.2 The BFUG could be asked to submit proposals for the inclusion of short cycle qualifications within the QF-EHEA, taking account of the Dublin descriptors and the proposal put forward in 2005, in time for the 2015 ministerial conference of the EHEA.

V.4.1 Once national frameworks have been developed and self certified, the competent national authorities should review the framework from time to time to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of society and of higher education as well as to ensure it continues to be compatible with the overarching frameworks. The outcomes of such reviews should be made public and communicated to partners within the EHEA.

V.4.2 Competent authorities should prepare information material in non-technical language describing the main features of qualifications frameworks and their value to learners, employers and others. Such descriptions should be prepared for the QF-EHEA as well as for individual national frameworks.

V.4.3 Where a national framework undergoes major modifications, the need for a new self certification exercise should be assessed.

V.4.4 In 2015 – 2016, a conference should be organized to take stock of the implementation of national frameworks. The conference proposed may provide a basis for considering whether a review of the QF-EHEA is required. The BFUG should also contribute to the conference on the EQF planned for 2013 during the Irish Presidency of the European Union. As a principle, major European conferences on qualifications frameworks should be held jointly and consider the QF-EHEA as well as the EQF.

V.4.5 Toward 2018 – 2020, the experience with the QF-EHEA should be assessed and on this basis it should be decided whether a review of the QF-EHEA is required. If such a review is undertaken, it should be done in close cooperation with the EQF and any review of the EQF should be undertaken in cooperation with the QF-EHEA.

V.5.1 The competent public authorities should ensure the involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the implementation and continued development of their national qualifications frameworks.

V.5.2 The competent public authorities should develop a website on and for their own national framework catering to the different needs of the different stakeholders, both for their national needs but also as an information tool for foreigners who would like to study or to live in the country.

V.5.3 In national contexts, professional regulators should be encouraged to take account of national qualifications frameworks and consult the authorities responsible for these.

V.5.4 A learning outcomes perspective should be progressively integrated into the European Directive on professional recognition.

V.6.1 The competent public authorities should ensure the involvement of the relevant quality assurance agencies in the implementation and continued development of their national qualifications frameworks.

V.6.2 The E 4 Group should be encouraged to make the relationship between qualifications frameworks and quality assurance a topic for one of the forthcoming annual meetings of the European Quality Forum.

V.6.3 The Diploma Supplement and the guidelines for its use should be reviewed to ensure that the quality assurance status of the institution(s) issuing the qualification be included in the Supplement.

V.7.1 National recognition legislation, policies and practice should be reviewed to ensure that adequate account is taken of the role of qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes in facilitating the recognition of qualifications as well as to ensure that experience in the recognition of qualifications supports the development and implementation of NQFs

V.7.2 If regular recognition issues appear between two different national qualifications frameworks, countries should be invited to develop direct contacts or/and regional cooperation to find common guidelines.

V.8.1 Qualifications and qualifications frameworks should be made an important topic for discussion in the Bologna Policy Fora.

V.8.2 An international conference should be organized on the role of qualifications frameworks in relation to the strategy on the EHEA in a global setting.

V.8.3 Cooperation should be sought between the QF-EHEA and regional qualifications frameworks in other parts of the world, as far as possible also in cooperation with the EQF.

I. MANDATE AND CONTEXT

In the 2007 London Communiqué, the Council of Europe was asked to support the sharing of experience in the elaboration of national qualifications frameworks. This request was renewed in the 2009 Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué. The Council of Europe has been assisted in this work by the Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks, which was appointed in accordance with the decision by the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG), as well as the Network of National QF Correspondents. The latter was established provisionally and received permanent terms of reference from the BFUG in March 2011.

The EHEA Qualifications Framework – QF-EHEA for short – was adopted by Ministers in Bergen in 2005 on the basis of a report by the Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks. The development of national qualifications frameworks is within the competence and responsibility of the competent national authorities. Ministers committed to launching this work by 2007 and to completing it by 2010. Furthermore, the 2007 report by the Bologna Working Group on qualifications frameworks is an important element on which the current Working Group has drawn in its work.

The role of the Council of Europe and, by extension, the Working Group and the Network of national correspondents, has therefore been to facilitate the sharing of experience and to help develop good practice so that the competent national authorities could benefit from relevant experience from other countries to the extent that the national authorities wished to do so. The Council of Europe, the Working Group and the Network have seen their role as that of facilitators, not least in deepening the European reflection on qualifications frameworks. An important part of this mandate is the role the Council of Europe and by extension the Working Group and the Network are playing in supporting exchanges of views, sharing experience and discussing common challenges as well as in building trust between countries and framework owners. In this context, the excellent cooperation established with the European Commission in view of coordinating the development of national frameworks under the QF-EHEA with that under the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) should be emphasized. One very practical example is that the Network of national QF-EHEA correspondents now meets yearly with the national Coordination Points (NCPs) of the EQF.

II. SCOPE OF THE REPORT

This report is submitted prior to the 2012 Ministerial conference of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). 2012 is a crucial year because it is the time when ministers – through their Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve commitment – have indicated they would have developed their national qualifications frameworks and prepared them for self certification.

This report therefore has a double objective. On the one hand, it will seek to assert to what extent Ministers have honored their commitment from Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve, which states: "We aim at having them [i.e. national qualifications frameworks] implemented and prepared for self-certification against the overarching Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area by 2012". Even if, strictly speaking, the commitment does not imply that everything needs to be completed by the Ministerial conference in April 2012, the state of development toward the end of 2011 will give a fairly good indication of whether countries are likely to meet their goals or not.

On the other hand, the report seeks to look ahead. If and when all or at least most EHEA member countries have developed their national frameworks, does this mean the end of the story and that each country will then implement its framework on its own? Is there, on the contrary, a need for continued coordination at EHEA level to ensure that the national frameworks are compatible not only in their structures but also in their implementation? If the latter, how can this best be done? The challenge of implementing qualifications frameworks is at least as big as that of developing them. The Working Group sees the QF-EHEA as moving into – or at least as being close to moving into - a new phase in which making a reality of the qualifications frameworks that have now been developed will be the main challenge. This new phase should look at the implementation of qualifications frameworks at national and institutional level and seek to assess whether the implementation of qualifications frameworks has indeed led to a paradigm change in higher education, by which students are at the center of the learning processes, programs are defined in terms of learning outcomes and teaching and evaluation methodologies have been reviewed in this perspective. The Working Group believes this next phase will require continued coordination at the level of the EHEA – in close cooperation with the EQF – but that the form that this coordination and cooperation should take may need to be reassessed and should include reinforced coordination at institutional level and through stakeholder organizations.

In seeking to answer both questions, the relationship between the overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area – QF-EHEA – and the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF), will need to be taken into account. This issue will be given separate consideration, bearing in mind that the EQF is overarching and comprehensive in the sense that it encompasses all levels and types of qualifications.

In answering the first question, data were collected through national correspondents and analyzed as a part of the overall reporting on the state of implementation of the EHEA carried out by EURYDICE under the guidance of the EHEA Reporting Group. The present report will therefore not go into great detail at this point but rather summarize the main trends and then use these as part of its basis for what will be the main part of the report: seeking to answer the second question. The self certification and referencing reports published by the countries that have undergone these exercises to date also form a part of the evidence on which the Working Group bases its report. It should also be borne in mind that the Working Group, led by the Council of Europe, has provided valuable support to the development of qualifications frameworks, through the Network of national correspondents, through joint sponsorship of event such as the April 2010 conference on qualifications frameworks in Dublin, through work in South East Europe as well as individual countries such as Armenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and by putting qualifications frameworks squarely on the agenda of the ENIC and NARIC Networks as well as of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee.

These issues are of key importance for making the EHEA a reality. This report will, therefore, essentially seek to stake out a course for the further development and implementation of qualifications frameworks in the European Higher Education Area.

III. THE STATE OF DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

The coordinated implementation report developed under the auspices of the Reporting Working Group provides an overview of the development of national qualifications frameworks for higher education, on the basis of information provided by the competent national authorities as a part of their reporting on the overall implementation of the EHEA.

The overall impression is that most EHEA countries will meet – or will be close to meeting - their commitment to develop their national frameworks and have them prepared for self certification by the end of 2012. This finding is also consistent with those of CEDEFOP as for the EQF, which encompasses 32 countries – all of which are also members of the EHEA – but which covers all areas and levels of education.

As of January 19, 2012, 21 countries had reported that they are in the final stages of preparing their national qualifications framework and self certifying it against the QF-EHEA⁴. A further 16 countries are in the middle of the process⁵. Only 5 countries are a long way away from meeting their commitments⁶.

Nevertheless, this picture needs to be nuanced somewhat. While few countries are far away from fulfilling their commitment, there is reason for concern about some of the countries in the “middle group”. Progress in this group is somewhat uneven and some countries in this group will find it difficult to complete their national frameworks in the course of 2012 or even shortly thereafter. It is therefore necessary to continue to observe progress in the development of national framework, a point that is further underscored by the fact that 4 countries have provided no information on the development of their frameworks.

There is also reason for some concern about the conceptualization, writing, implementation and examination of learning outcomes. It is worth noting that no country reports that it is at the stage of the process that require that study programs be redesigned on the basis of the learning outcomes included in the EQF: the most advanced countries report that they are either at the stage just before this or that they are already at one of the two following stages of development. This could indicate that there are issues with redesigning study programs on the basis of learning outcomes, a supposition that seems to be underscored by the data on the understanding of learning outcomes and the extent to which programs and their components link to them.

While the Working Group thus expresses concern about the state of development of the national qualifications frameworks of some countries, it should be underlined that these countries share a crucial challenge with the countries that have completed or are about to complete their national frameworks: making qualifications frameworks work in practice is considerably more challenging than developing the structures. Making the QF-EHEA work in practice will be one of the main challenges of the European Higher Education Area in the years to come and this challenge will be common to its 47 members.

Recommendations

III.1 Ministers should call on the countries that have so far provided no or inadequate information on the state of and timetable for the development of their national qualifications

⁴ In technical terms, this group comprises countries that have completed steps 7 – 10 as outlined in the 2007 report by the Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks.

⁵ This group comprises countries that have completed steps 5 or 6 as outlined in the 2007 report by the Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks

⁶ This group comprises countries that have completed steps 1 – 4 as outlined in the 2007 report by the Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks

frameworks to provide the necessary information no later than in time for the BFUG meeting to be held in autumn 2012.

III.2 Ministers are advised to encourage dialogue about the challenges they face in developing and implementing their qualifications frameworks. Ministers of the countries which will be unable to meet their commitment by 2012 are advised to submit a revised timetable by autumn 2012. They may also wish to consider whether to request advice or assistance from EHEA partners in developing their frameworks, with a view to ensuring that qualifications frameworks become a reality within the EHEA so as to ensure trust in the whole system by the different stakeholders.

IV. COOPERATION WITH THE EQF

Work on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning was launched at approximately the time when the QF-EHEA was adopted and in the early stages of the preparation of the EQF there seemed to be some danger that the descriptors for the higher education part of the EQF would be substantially different from those ministers had adopted for the QF-EHEA. However, this danger was averted and it is one of the important achievements of both the EHEA and the European cooperation within education and training through the EQF that while the two frameworks are not identical, they are compatible and close cooperation has been established between the European Commission, which services the EQF, and the Council of Europe, which does the same for the QF-EHEA. The European Commission participates in all meetings of the EHEA Working Group as well as the Network of national correspondents, while the Council of Europe is a member of the EQF Advisory Group and has participated in several EQF working groups. Likewise, close cooperation has been established with CEDEFOP on technical and analytical issues and CEDEFOP is also a member of both the Working Group and the Network of National Correspondents.

This cooperation was taken one step further in autumn 2010, when the network of national correspondents held its first joint meeting with the National Coordination Points of the EQF, in Strasbourg. It was decided to hold yearly joint meetings and the second meeting was held in Poland in November 2011. The joint meetings provide an important forum for the discussion of common issues in the development and implementation of national frameworks. In the present period, self certification/referencing has been a prominent part of the discussions. In some cases, the joint meeting has also provided the first forum in which the national QF-EHEA correspondent and the national EQF contact point from the same country have met.

Even more important than the institutionalized cooperation between the two frameworks, however, is the fact that it is entirely possible to develop national qualifications frameworks that are compatible with both overarching frameworks. This is important because to the individual student and teacher, the national qualifications framework will be their immediate, everyday reality. The national framework will determine the qualifications students will earn and toward which academic staff will teach. It also represents and will largely determine the learning paths through which a given qualification may be obtained. The role of the overarching frameworks is primarily to ensure that the variety of national frameworks will be compatible, thus ensuring transparency and mobility, as well as to show how diverse qualifications from multiple institutions or system put together can play an important role in an individual learning career. Both the overarching and the national frameworks are furthermore key instruments for promoting a learning outcomes based approach as well as critical factors for the development of lifelong learning policies and practice permitting a more flexible access to education and training at different levels and the recognition of prior learning.

The point that it is possible to develop national frameworks compatible with both overarching frameworks was eloquently made in autumn 2009, when Malta became the first country to self certify its national framework against the QF-EHEA and reference it against the EQF in the same exercise. That illustrates that while the two overarching European frameworks play an important role, they need to meet at national level to be of use to the individual learners. This was, incidentally, already indicated when the ministers for higher education agreed with the EQF-LLL only after the compatibility of the two European frameworks had been established. Since Malta self certified and referenced its national framework against both overarching frameworks in a single exercise, at least 4 countries (Croatia, Estonia, Latvia and Romania) have followed or are following the same path and others may be expected to follow suit.

In fulfilling its mandate to cooperate closely with the EQF, the Working Group has identified issues that will require closer attention in the 2012 – 2015 period and that the BFUG may wish to include in its work program. In particular, this concerns the position of qualifications giving access to higher education – typically a variety of secondary school leaving qualifications – as well as the short cycle qualifications referenced against EQF level 5. In many national frameworks, these are also considered as short cycle qualifications within the first cycle when self certified against the QF-EHEA. These distinct but linked issues are given separate consideration in V.3 below. More generally, there may be issues with comparable specific national qualifications that are coated differently within national frameworks. A NARIC project will aim to explore these issues.

Recommendations

IV.1 Acknowledging that qualifications frameworks should reflect all aspects of the missions of higher education, Ministers are advised to acknowledge and support the complementarity of the two overarching frameworks.

IV.2 Ministers are advised to reiterate the importance of maintaining and further developing the close cooperation between the QF-EHEA and EQF.

IV.3 Ministers are advised to commit to implementing their own national qualifications frameworks and ensure continued compatibility with both overarching European frameworks as well as to facilitate transfer and progression between various education and training subsystems. Ministers are further advised to recognize the importance, at national level, of dialogue and cooperation between the different public authorities and other possible actors responsible for qualifications frameworks, in particular to foster dialogue and cooperation between higher education and the VET sector.

V. THE FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN THE EHEA

As seen above, it seems likely that national qualifications frameworks will largely be in place throughout the European Higher Education Area over the next 2 – 4 years and recommendations are made in this report for providing assistance, where required and/or desired, to EHEA member countries to finalize the development of their frameworks.

It therefore seems reasonable to assume that the main challenge from 2012 until 2020 will be to give more priority to the practical implementation of the national qualifications frameworks. At one level, this is a national responsibility and a national prerogative. On the other hand, it is important to provide a measure of European cooperation to ensure that national frameworks are compatible with the QF-EHEA not only in their structure but also in their implementation and hence fulfill their potential to help learners, employers, higher education institutions, policy makers and other stakeholders. Ensuring coherent implementation is a far greater challenge than developing

coherent structures, and it will require rethinking the way in which European cooperation and coordination can be developed.

This part of the report aims to identify the main challenges in making qualifications frameworks a living reality and characteristic feature of the EHEA and to put forward recommendations in this respect.

V.1 Ensuring implementation of structures – learning outcomes

The overall challenge will be to ensure that the structures of national qualifications frameworks, once developed and adopted, will be implemented in practice. While this may have an aspect of stating the obvious, the challenge is real. The EHEA is made up of 47 countries – and a slightly higher number of education systems – which, even if their public authorities have committed to common goals and compatible structures, have very different academic traditions, teaching and learning practices, legal frameworks and political and societal contexts. Concepts and practices that are reasonably well established in some countries, such as learning outcomes and active student participation in teaching and learning, have yet to be developed in others. Even if developing the structures of qualifications frameworks is a serious challenge, it is far more difficult to ensure that they become a part of actual practice at all higher education institutions. Nevertheless, the EHEA and its individual member countries, public authorities, institutions, teachers and students will only succeed in achieving the key objectives of the QF-EHEA if they succeed in developing qualifications frameworks as a living practice, understood and accepted by the different social partners and by society in general.

The key conceptual connection between the QF-EHEA and the EQF-LLL is that both are based on learning outcomes and hence both are associated with NQFs based on learning outcomes. This has the fortunate advantage that the development of the capacity to write and use learning outcomes within countries and institutions supports both processes. There is a methodological synergy between the implementation of the EQF and the QF-EHEA. This synergy can support dialogue between the respective partners in different sectors of education and training, and is of value in implementation processes.

Shifting the focus on qualifications frameworks from developing structures to ensuring coherent implementation has implications for the relationship between the European, national and institutional level. In the development of structures, the European level – through the ministerial conferences of the EHEA and, on its mandate, the BFUG – has played and can play an important role, in particular in setting policy objectives and ensuring intergovernmental coordination. When the focus shifts to implementation, the role of the national and institutional levels becomes more prominent and the role of the European level needs to be reconsidered. The implementation of qualifications frameworks will above all depend on what is done within each institution. The competent national authorities, which are responsible for their own education system, will play an important role in ensuring coherence between structures and practice as well as between practice between institutions within a single education system. In so doing, public authorities will be able to rely on – as appropriate - relevant legislation, established practice, provision for quality assurance, steering through appropriations and their authority over the education system, who extends to the authority to decide whether a given institution or study program is considered as belonging to that education system or not.

At European level, the EHEA relies on voluntary cooperation toward commonly defined goals. There is no European education system in the sense of a system over which specific public authorities have defined competences or within which higher education institutions provide their

programs and grant their degrees. Rather than provide courses or exercise public authority, the issue at European level is therefore how best to stimulate good practice and how to encourage practice that is sufficiently coherent to contribute to what can reasonably be labeled an “agreed European practice” or an “agreed European understanding”, while respecting the particular situation of each country and each institution. Nevertheless, it needs to be underlined that even if qualifications will still be Albanian or Andorran (to take the example of the first two EHEA countries in the alphabetical order), they should also be recognizable as “European degrees” in the sense of being comparable to degrees issued in other EHEA countries and compatible with the QF-EHEA. This is key to promoting the attractiveness of the EHEA as well as its European dimension. National qualifications frameworks are the responsibility of the competent national authorities but to make the EHEA a reality, national authorities need to fulfill their commitment to make their national frameworks compatible with the QF-EHEA.

A key but difficult aspect of both overarching and national qualifications frameworks is the conceptualization, writing, implementation, and assessment of learning outcomes. Writing “formally correct” learning outcomes is a difficult task but not quite as difficult as making learning outcomes an integral feature of education practice. In a limited number of EHEA countries, developing and implementing meaningful learning outcomes is a well established practice but in many countries this is still a novel concept. Combined with a student centered learning approach, the two concepts have the potential to bring about a real paradigm shift in European higher education. Among other things, this implies a deep change in attitudes: emphasizing learning outcomes over procedures and length of study and making higher education learning and student centered rather than teacher and teaching centered.

This shift is crucial also in two other respects. One important function of qualifications frameworks is that they should provide learners with opportunities to move within and between education systems. They should make it possible for learners to change tracks and to reorient their education paths without having to repeat learning they have already undertaken. In more technical terms, qualifications frameworks should provide various learning paths toward given qualifications. This includes granting recognition for prior learning and this is only possible if learning outcomes are well conceptualized, described and implemented.

Secondly, qualifications frameworks should include learning outcomes developed for the variety of purposes higher education may be expected to fulfill. This includes preparation for employment – a strong concern in our current policy debates – but equally purposes that are less prominent in current policy debate, such as preparation for active citizenship in democratic societies, personal development and the development and maintenance of a broad and advanced knowledge base.

It is also important that the shift toward a learning outcomes approach be adequately reflected in the instruments designed to make qualifications more easily understandable to those – especially outside of the circle of education professionals – who need to understand and make use of qualifications, such as employers but also parents and the public at large.

The implementation of qualifications frameworks – including an emphasis on learning outcomes – requires that those responsible for the implementation, in particular academic staff, be trained and that they develop a common understanding across institutions, education systems and the EHEA. This will require training a high number of practitioners and it is clear that most of this training will need to be done at national and institutional level. Even if there would be considerable advantages in conducting much of this training at European level, so as to bring together participants from different countries, it is unrealistic to aim to do much more than “training the trainers” or perhaps even “training the trainers’ trainers” at European level. In a medium term perspective, it should also be considered whether conceptualizing, writing and implementing learning outcomes should not be

included as a part of teacher training at all levels, keeping in mind that teacher training is normally conducted at higher education institutions. For higher education, it needs to be considered how this training could be brought into the pedagogical preparation of higher education staff – as well as how such training can be introduced where it does not yet exist.

It is, however, essential that the “trainers” and/or the “trainers’ trainers” be trained in a European setting. This is the minimum needed if a measure of common practice and understanding is to be developed within the many higher education institutions in the EHEA. Each country should identify its own trainers and all countries must be represented in training activities at EHEA level. It is also important that training activities be organized by several countries, authorities and institutions, so that through the full range of training activities, a common understanding of rather than a “monopoly on” learning outcomes or other aspects of qualifications frameworks be developed.

Since the EHEA has no funds of its own but is rather built on the principle that countries or actors cover their own expenses, it is important that public authorities as well as higher education institutions in all EHEA countries give sufficient priority both to adequate participation in training activities as well as to organizing training activities to share their own experience.

Recommendations

V.1.1 Training those responsible for conceptualizing, writing, implementing and assessing learning outcomes at higher education institutions should be given high priority by public authorities and institutional leaders.

V.1.2 As many EHEA countries as possible, provided they have the relevant experience, should also organize such training activities, to ensure that a variety of experiences and views are shared across the EHEA. All EHEA countries should provide selected experts with an opportunity to participate in such training activities at European level. The BFUG should include such training in its 2012 – 2015 work program.

V.1.3 While most training should be provided at national and institutional level, at least the trainers or the “trainers’ trainers” should be trained at EHEA level, in order to exchange experience and encourage coherent practice. Countries need to play an active role in this respect and should avail themselves of the various kinds of support offered by the European Commission, including support for Peer Learning Activities.

V.1.4 The European Commission is advised to continue financial support for Peer Learning Activities in this field and to facilitate the dissemination of the results of such activities.

V.1.5 Web based means of information sharing should also be explored. The EHEA site on qualifications frameworks should be further developed and play a crucial role in this regard.

V.1.6 In view of the particular challenges of developing and implementing learning outcomes, this should be a key feature of the training offered at both national and European level, in order to develop a common and shared understanding of key concepts.

V.1.7 Ministers could mandate the BFUG to consider how conceptualizing, writing, implementing and examining learning outcomes could be included as a part of teacher training curricula as well as how this training could be brought into the pedagogical preparation of higher education staff at national and European level.

V.1.8 Ministers could encourage cooperation between the QF-EHEA and the EQF on the interpretation and application of learning outcomes and, where possible, a sharing of resources, with a view to further reducing unnecessary barriers between education and training levels and types, including the validation of prior learning.

V.1.9 Higher education institutions and accreditation agencies should ensure that learning outcomes as well as student workload are evaluated when assigning ECTS credits to programs and modules.

V.1.10 The Diploma Supplement and the guidelines for its use should be further developed to ensure that a learning outcomes approach is sufficiently reflected in the Diploma Supplements issued by higher education institutions.

V.2 Self certification

The success of the QF-EHEA and the EQF will depend on the extent to which the relationship established between their levels and those of the national QF is perceived as transparent and trustworthy. In this respect, the self certification report is crucial and will serve as the “calling card” of the national framework in question.

The commitment undertaken by Ministers in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve is to develop their national frameworks and prepare them for self certification by 2012, which would imply that there may be a series of self certifications undertaken in the period 2012 – 2014. The self certification may be undertaken jointly with referencing against the EQF or as a separate exercise⁷. Where the exercise is joint and leads to a single EQF and EHEA report, this report should conform to both the EHEA self certification criteria and procedures⁸ and the EQF referencing criteria. In either case, it needs to include foreign experts and the expenses need to be covered by the country.

Self certification is likely to be a key issue but for a limited period of time. One challenge is to handle a high number of self certifications at approximately the same time. Even if each competent authority handles its own self certification, there is a limited supply of experienced international experts. Each country identifies the international experts for its self certification and/or referencing exercise at its own discretion but the Council of Europe and the BFUG Secretariat could continue to help identify foreign experts if countries request assistance with this.

The relative lack of international experts with experience in self certification exercises could to an extent be remedied by exchange of experience, peer learning activities and training seminars, which should also be directed at those responsible for organizing and conducting their own self certification. Self certification has also been an important topic for the Network of national correspondents and will continue to be so in 2012 and beyond. In this context, it should be underlined that self certification is increasingly considered as a dynamic process rather than as an “end station”, as demonstrated by the countries revising or considering revising their self certification and/or referencing reports. It is noted that Malta, which in 2009 became the first country to self certify against the QF-EHEA and reference against the EQF in the same process, has already reviewed part of its self certification/referencing report.

Most national self certification and referencing reports are internally consistent, even when they have been carried out as separate processes at separate times. On the basis of some of the discussions during 2010 – 2011, the Working Group would nevertheless like to underline the importance of such consistency. Where the self certification and referencing are carried out as separate processes, the need for the competent national authorities to be aware of the importance of internal consistency is particularly strong.

A potential issue is how to handle a self certification report that were to be regarded by foreign peers as unconvincing and/or in which one or more of the foreign experts were to state

⁷ “Self certification” refers to the QF-EHEA, while “referencing” refers to the EQF.

⁸ http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/QF/Bologna_Framework_and_Certification_revised_29_02_08.pdf

disagreement with the conclusion that the national qualifications framework in question is compatible with the QF-EHEA. It is worth recalling that the term self certification implies that the report is issued by the competent authority for the framework in question and that there can be no formal approval or disapproval of the report by an outside body. There is no European body with the authority to accept or to reject self certification reports. At the same time, a self certification report that were not to be credible would do the country in question a disservice in that it would fail to convince its partners in the EHEA that its national framework is compatible with the QF-EHEA and would hence fail to establish trust in that country's framework. Whatever the formal arrangements, a self certification report that fails to convince peers in other EHEA countries will have failed in one of its key objectives. To put it in undiplomatic terms, a Ministry that would want to force through an unconvincing self certification report and have its national framework registered as self certified in order to "tick a box", would do its own students, academics and institutions no favor.

As already stated, there is no European body that could prevent a Ministry from doing so and the consequences of such action would be uncertain. Ultimately, an unconvincing self certification report could mean that other countries would refuse to recognize qualifications from the country concerned but this would most likely be a decision made by each country – there is unlikely to be a concerted action by a number of EHEA countries to prevent recognition of qualifications from country A. That may be a victory of sorts for diplomacy but this decentralized course of action would make it very difficult to identify and address a possible problem.

To a large extent, it is up to national authorities to decide on the dissemination they wish to give their self certification report. However, all self certification reports will be in the public domain because they will be posted on the web sites of the EHEA (more specifically the sub site on the QF-EHEA) as well as the ENIC/NARIC web site. One issue for further discussion at EHEA level is the extent to which further dissemination should be given to the self certification reports at European level, either directly or – more likely - through promotion of the relevant sections of the EHEA web site. Convincing self certification reports well disseminated would strengthen the credibility both of the EHEA itself and of the countries and education systems concerned by the reports.

By 2013, the EHEA will have a higher number of completed self certifications than today, while at the same time various countries will still be in the process. It would therefore be useful to organize a European conference, perhaps aiming mainly at policy makers, to take stock of the development of national frameworks and of the self certification process completed so far with a view to identifying issues of concern that could be taken into account in the remaining self certification exercises.

Recommendations

V.2.1 The Council of Europe and the BFUG Secretariat should continue to help identify foreign experts for the self certification exercises of countries that request such assistance.

V.2.2 Seminars for those responsible for self certification exercises at national level as well as for potential foreign experts should be conducted in 2012 – 2013. Full use should be made of opportunities for Web based training and for placing the collective experience of the EHEA at the disposal of stakeholders and experts, on the web and through any other means considered appropriate.

V.2.3 In 2013, a European conference should be organized, aiming mainly at policy makers, to take stock of the development and implementation of national frameworks and of the self

certification process completed so far with a view to identifying issues of concern that could be taken into account in the remaining self certification exercises.

V.2.4 Since the same challenges face the referencing of national frameworks to the EQF, cooperation between the two overarching frameworks should be pursued on how to strengthen the credibility of the self certification and referencing exercises.

V.2.5 Academic research on qualifications frameworks should comprise different aspects including the modalities and effects of self certification and referencing should be encouraged and the BFUG should consider commissioning a comparative analysis on the self certification reports. In cooperation with the EQF, this may be extended to include completed referencing reports. Academic researchers could also be encouraged to send their findings to the BFUG Secretariat for appropriate distribution.

V.2.6 Ministers could mandate the BFUG to ensure review of the self certification processes, also with a view to identifying cases in which self certification reports seem inconsistent and/or seem to be at variance with the corresponding referencing report.

V.3 Access qualifications and short cycle qualifications

Access to higher education is granted on the basis of a variety of secondary school leaving qualifications as well as, at least in many countries, on the basis of non-formal learning and/or work experience. Access may be general – to all kinds of higher education – or restricted to certain kinds of higher education, such as technical education. Implementation of the QF-EHEA requires that access routes to the first cycle be indicated. Qualifications giving access to higher education are not a part of the QF-EHEA but they are included in the EHEA through the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention, which is the only legally binding treaty of the EHEA. It should be kept in mind that the full title of this convention is the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region. This rather long title was preferred to “convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications” precisely because the Convention comprises access qualifications as well as higher education qualifications proper.

An important function of qualifications frameworks is to provide routes – learning paths – through which learners may obtain qualifications and to ensure that where a system is made up of various strands – such as theoretical and vocational strands – it is possible for learners to shift course from one strand to another without needing to repeat learning already accomplished. While this is a particularly strong concern in qualifications frameworks covering all levels and kinds of education it is important that higher education frameworks provide various possibilities for accessing higher education. This is one further reason why this report also considers access qualifications.

The Bergen Communiqué adopted the overarching QF-EHEA, comprising three cycles and including, within national contexts, the possibility of intermediate qualifications. Descriptors for short cycle qualifications, based on the Dublin Descriptors, were included in the report on qualifications frameworks submitted to the Bergen meeting. The EQF-LLL included the note that a short cycle qualification within or linked to the first cycle is comparable to level 5. While the compromise formulation reached in Bergen would allow for intermediate qualifications within every cycle in national frameworks and not just short cycle qualifications within the first cycle, in the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué ministers clearly linked the concept of intermediate

qualifications to the short cycle qualification within the first cycle⁹. Short cycle qualifications are a reality of many national higher education qualifications frameworks and a recent EURASHE report on tertiary short cycle higher education shows that this level of qualifications is now developed in many countries.

The development of the EQF and the close cooperation established between the QF-EHEA and the EQF have introduced important new elements. In general, the assumption has been that qualifications giving access to higher education would be located at a level just below the first cycle of the QF-EHEA. In EQF terms, this corresponds to level 4. This assumption holds true for national frameworks referenced so far and almost all the other countries participating in the EQF initiative plan to follow this approach. In a couple of countries where frameworks are now being prepared for referencing, there is discussion about whether at least some secondary school leaving qualifications are compatible with and/or should be referenced against level 5 of the EQF. It should also be noted that in a few cases, there has been discussion of whether a limited number of secondary school leaving qualifications are compatible with and/or should be referenced against EQF level 3, although this option is not likely to be finally adopted by any country.

Short cycle qualifications in higher education are referenced against the QF-EHEA descriptors, or more recently also against EQF level 5, which includes but is not limited to short cycle higher education qualifications, in the same way that the EQF also opens the possibility for countries to reference VET qualifications against EQF levels 6, 7 and 8.

In the view of the Working Group, this raises two distinct but linked issues with regard to the QF-EHEA. On the one hand, what should be the position of the QF-EHEA with regard to access qualifications and, on the other hand, has the time come to review the position of short cycle qualifications within the QF-EHEA?

That the issues are linked is brought out by the experience of the EQF. If secondary school leaving certifications are normally referenced against EQF level 4 and short cycle qualifications against EQF level 5, it follows that there is scope for considerable confusion should one or more countries reference some or all secondary school leaving qualifications against EQF level 5. Even if countries have the authority to do so, this would raise issues of consequence to the EQF as well as to the QF-EHEA. If some or all secondary school leaving qualifications in a given country are referenced against EQF level 5, following an analysis of learning outcomes, this would logically imply that they are seen – in QF-EHEA terms – as intermediary qualifications within the first cycle of the higher education framework. Logically, this would then raise the question of whether they should give access not only to beginning higher education courses but to more advanced courses within the first higher education cycle. Logically, this would also raise the question of whether secondary school leaving qualifications thus referenced should give rise to (ECTS) credits toward a first cycle higher education degree. These issues arise where reference models are applied to a variety of higher education systems and providers and a variety of routes of access and progression.

It should be noted that all school leaving qualifications are not identical and that they may fulfill different functions. Some may give general access to higher education while others may give access only to specified study programs or kinds of higher education. In some countries, there may also be a perception that different kinds of secondary school leaving qualifications may be at different levels within the national system. Where this is the case, this could be reflected by assigning different kinds of school leaving qualifications to different levels within the national

⁹ The relevant part of the Communiqué reads: “Higher education is being modernized with the adoption of a three-cycle structure including, within national contexts, the possibility of intermediate qualifications linked to the first cycle and with the adoption of the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance”.

framework while referencing them against the same level – level 4 - in the EQF. If one or more country were to reference some or all of their school leaving qualifications against EQF level 5 would, however, have potentially damaging effects on recognition and academic mobility between countries participating in the EQF and would undermine the common understanding that was implicit in the development of the QF-EHEA and that underlay the decision not to include school leaving qualifications giving access to higher education in the QF-EHEA. The Working Group therefore underscores the urgency of reestablishing a common understanding of key reference points in the QF-EHEA and the EQF.

Recommendations

V.3.1 Ministers could agree that secondary school leaving qualifications should be positioned in national levels below levels referenced to the European first cycle of higher education. In EQF terms, school leaving qualifications should be positioned in national levels to be referenced against EQF level 4 or, where they are not bound by the EQF, place their school leaving qualifications at a similar level. Ministers are aware that EQF-LLL levels 5, 6, 7, and 8 have been considered compatible with the short, first, second and third cycle of the QF-EHEA from the launching of the EQF-LLL onward and could further agree to reference the first, second and third cycle higher education qualifications against EQF levels 6, 7 and 8, respectively.

V.3.2 The BFUG should be asked to submit proposals for the inclusion of short cycle qualifications within the QF-EHEA, taking account of the Dublin descriptors and the proposal put forward in 2005, in time for the 2015 ministerial conference of the EHEA.

V.4 Developing and reviewing qualifications frameworks after the self certification has been completed

Self certification is an important step because it signals the completion of the national qualifications framework by putting it squarely in the international public space. “Completion” should, however, not be taken to imply that all work on the framework is terminated. The importance of ensuring implementation has been referred to above. In addition to that, a qualifications framework needs to undergo development to ensure that it is up to date and able to accommodate changes in the roles higher education plays in our societies and in meeting possible needs for new qualifications. As institutions develop new study programs and as existing programs evolve, the qualifications they confer need to find their place within the national qualifications framework.

There may be a need to review the framework from time to time to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of society and of higher education as well as to ensure it continues to be compatible with the overarching frameworks. As an example, Ireland, which was the first country to self certify its higher education framework, published a framework implementation and impact study¹⁰ in 2009 and the study contains 19 recommendations concerning the further implementation of the framework. It should be noted that a review of a national framework may be driven by internal factors, such as the development of new study programs and qualifications in response to developments at national level – typically within the national labor market – as well as by external factors such as developments within other countries party to the QF-EHEA, developments in other regions of the world or needs arising from recognition or quality assurance policy and practice.

The need to review and possibly amend national frameworks will vary from country to country and the Working Group does not propose to indicate any kind of time limits for such reviews. It is important that frameworks be assessed periodically to ensure that they continue to serve their

¹⁰ Available at <http://www.nqai.ie/documents/FIISreportFINALsept2009.pdf>

purposes well and it is important that the outcomes of such reviews be communicated to partners within the EHEA. It does, however, not seem meaningful to recommend that such reviews be undertaken at specific intervals, such as every 3 or 5 years. In the same way, it does not seem meaningful to recommend that the self certification exercise be repeated at fixed intervals but at the same time, it is important that if major changes are made in a national framework, these be followed by a new self certification to ensure continued compatibility with the overarching frameworks.

By 2015 – 2016, most EHEA members will have some experience with the implementation of their national frameworks. The Working Group therefore recommends that a conference be organized around that time to take stock of the implementation of national frameworks. Toward the end of the next “Bologna decade”, there may also be good reasons to review the QF-EHEA on the background of developments in national frameworks. The conference proposed for 2015 – 2016 may provide a basis for deciding whether such a review is required. If the review is undertaken, this needs to be done in close cooperation with the EQF so as to ensure continued compatibility between the two overarching frameworks. For the same reason, any review of the EQF should be undertaken in cooperation with the QF-EHEA.

One important function of qualifications frameworks is as transparency tools. For qualifications frameworks to fulfill this role, they need to be described in accessible language understandable also to non-specialists. While the legal provision and technical description of frameworks may require technical language – although even these descriptions should be simplified as far as possible – the competent authorities should prepare information material in non-technical language describing the main features of qualifications frameworks and their value to learners, employers and others. Such descriptions should be prepared for the QF-EHEA as well as for individual national frameworks.

Recommendations

V.4.1 Once national frameworks have been developed and self certified, the competent national authorities should review the framework from time to time to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of society and of higher education as well as to ensure it continues to be compatible with the overarching frameworks. The outcomes of such reviews should be made public and communicated to partners within the EHEA.

V.4.2 Competent authorities should prepare information material in non-technical language describing the main features of qualifications frameworks and their value to learners, employers and others. Such descriptions should be prepared for the QF-EHEA as well as for individual national frameworks.

V.4.3 Where a national framework undergoes major modifications, the need for a new self certification exercise should be assessed.

V.4.4 In 2015 – 2016, a conference should be organized to take stock of the implementation of national frameworks. The conference proposed may provide a basis for considering whether a review of the QF-EHEA is required. The BFUG should also contribute to the conference on the EQF planned for 2013 during the Irish Presidency of the European Union. As a principle, major European conferences on qualifications frameworks should be held jointly and consider the QF-EHEA as well as the EQF.

V.4.5 Toward 2018 – 2020, the experience with the QF-EHEA should be assessed and on this basis it should be decided whether a review of the QF-EHEA is required. If such a review is undertaken, it should be done in close cooperation with the EQF and any review of the EQF should be undertaken in cooperation with the QF-EHEA.

V.5 Stakeholder involvement

Qualifications frameworks are ultimately the responsibility of public authorities but they cannot be successful without the participation and commitment of stakeholders. This is true for the development of qualifications frameworks and also for their implementation. By the time Ministers meet in April 2012, the development of qualifications frameworks will be well advanced in most EHEA countries. While Ministers could remind themselves of the importance of involving stakeholders effectively in the development of frameworks, attention should probably focus on the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation and continued development of frameworks.

Stakeholders are of course to be found within the academic community of staff and students while higher education institutions are also stakeholders. Stakeholders are found outside of the higher education community: social partners, professional associations and regulators, local and regional authorities – to the extent they are not the public authorities directly responsible for higher education – and more broadly civil society, mostly represented through NGOs. In particular, employers should be encouraged to play an important role in making sure that qualifications frameworks, by ensuring the quality of the qualifications and their relevance to the labor market, further employability. Employers and their organizations should also be encouraged to make good use of qualifications frameworks in their human resources policy and practice. This should apply to public as well as private employers. Not least public employers should ensure that first cycle qualifications be given due regard for employment. Employers should also be encouraged to play a role in designing curricula, in cooperation with higher education institutions. Vice versa, higher education institutions should be encouraged to approach employers for internships as well as participation in the development and description of learning outcomes.

The role of stakeholders is important in ensuring that qualifications are relevant to the needs of society, including but not limited to those of the labor market and to furthering democratic citizenship, and make progression and transfer between education subsystems possible. This includes ensuring facilitating transition between various levels of general secondary education, vocational education and training as well as non-formal education at various levels and higher education as well the development of lifelong learning paths.

The Working Group is aware of the fact that the European Directives on professional recognition are currently being revised. It is important that this revision incorporate the learning outcomes perspective that is an essential part of the EQF and the QF-EHEA as well as of the national frameworks compatible with the overarching frameworks. Learning outcomes should provide an important part of the basis of dialogue between the employment and higher education sectors. In this context, it is important that higher education institutions establish systems that allow them to track the professional careers of their graduates.

Recommendations

V.5.1 The competent public authorities should ensure the involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the implementation and continued development of their national qualifications frameworks.

V.5.2 The competent public authorities should develop a website on and for their own national framework catering to the different needs of the different stakeholders, both for their national needs but also as an information tool for foreigners who would like to study or to live in the country.

V.5.3 In national contexts, professional regulators should be encouraged to take account of national qualifications frameworks and consult the authorities responsible for these.

V.5.4 A learning outcomes perspective should be progressively integrated into the revision of the European Directive on professional recognition.

V.6 Qualifications frameworks and quality assurance

The link between qualifications frameworks and quality assurance is twofold: Quality assurance agencies play a role in the development of qualifications frameworks as stated in the criteria and procedures for self certification, where procedure 2 stipulates that “the self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies in the country in question recognized through the Bologna Process”. In addition to their clearly assigned role in the self certification process, quality assurance agencies should be involved in the implementation and continued development of national frameworks. In this respect, it would be useful to develop an overview of good practice from various EHEA countries.

Credible qualifications frameworks presuppose that the qualifications be issued by higher education institutions have undergone quality assurance. In the EHEA, this will mean that the quality assurance will have been carried out in accordance with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) adopted by Ministers in 2005. Hence compliance of programs with qualifications frameworks has become important an reference point for the assessment of higher education programs. Where this is not the case yet, quality assurance agencies will need to consider how the new dimension of qualifications frameworks should be integrated into quality assessments. Higher education institutions will for their part need to consider how qualifications frameworks will impact on their own quality development.

It is suggested that the relationship between qualifications frameworks and quality assurance be a topic for one of the annual meetings of the European Quality Forum, organized by the E 4 Group.

Recommendations

V.6.1 The competent public authorities should ensure the involvement of the relevant quality assurance agencies in the implementation and continued development of their national qualifications frameworks.

V.6.2 The E 4 Group should be encouraged to make the relationship between qualifications frameworks and quality assurance a topic for one of the forthcoming annual meetings of the European Quality Forum.

V.6.3 The Diploma Supplement and the guidelines for its use should be reviewed to ensure that the quality assurance status of the institution(s) issuing the qualification be included in the Supplement.

V.7 Qualifications frameworks and recognition

One of the main functions of qualifications frameworks is as a transparency instrument facilitating the movement of learners within and between education systems. In theory, both functions require the fair recognition of qualifications but in practice the term “recognition” is used for assigning value to a given qualification from a given system in a different system, i.e. for international (or at least “inter-system”) recognition.

The basis for recognition is the Council of Europe/UNESCO (Lisbon) Recognition Convention, which is the only legally binding text of the EHEA and which has now been ratified by all EHEA member states except Greece. The Convention stipulates that foreign qualifications should be

recognized unless the competent recognition authorities can demonstrate that there is a substantial difference between the foreign qualification and the similar qualification(s) in their own system.

With the advent of qualifications frameworks in all EHEA countries and hence in the vast majority of countries party to the Convention¹¹, the question of whether there is a substantial difference between two qualifications will need to be assessed in terms of their respective qualifications frameworks. Put simply, qualifications frameworks should make it easier even for someone who is not intimately familiar with a given education system to understand where a specific qualification is placed within that system. To the extent that national qualifications frameworks are described in similar terms, comparison across systems should be greatly facilitated. Once developed, national frameworks are self certified as being compatible with the overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) and/or the EQF. For the national frameworks concerned, the self certification therefore establishes the relationship between national qualifications by describing and justifying their linkage to the overarching framework. Broadly, a qualification may be said to be made up of five main components: quality, workload, level, profile and learning outcomes. Within the EHEA, qualifications frameworks should make it possible to assess the first three components relatively easily and should provide important elements for assessing the remaining two components.

The ENIC and NARIC Networks have had the relationship between qualifications frameworks and recognition on their joint agenda for at least three years, and the European Commission and the Council of Europe have now appointed a working group with representatives of the recognition community as well as of the QF-EHEA and the EQF to assess the issue.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee Bureau has launched work on a recommendation on the role of qualifications frameworks in facilitating recognition as a subsidiary text to the Convention and foresees adoption at the next meeting of the Convention Committee, in 2013. In 2010, the Convention Committee adopted a revised Recommendation on the Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications in which the important role of qualifications frameworks and the focus on learning outcomes in recognition practice are acknowledged.

With the adoption of the new subsidiary text, the legal framework for recognition will therefore include adequate reference to qualifications frameworks. The main challenge will be to incorporate the reality of qualifications frameworks in actual recognition practice. This will require developing attitudes to recognition in the direction of a broader view of what may constitute substantial differences and training of credentials evaluators but also a review of national recognition legislation, policies and practice. It is also important that the voice of recognition specialists is heard in the development and implementation of qualifications frameworks. Already the analysis of the national action plans for recognition submitted to the 2007 ministerial conference indicated that practice diverges widely and too often tends to take a very narrow view of how similar qualifications should be to warrant recognition.

In the framework of the NARIC invitation to submit projects for 2011-2012, funded by the European Commission, the French ENIC-NARIC, in cooperation with the Irish, Dutch and French-speaking Belgian centers, is leading a project exploring the use and potential use of the European Qualifications Framework in procedures for the recognition of qualifications. This project offers a

¹¹ The Convention is open to all Parties to the European Cultural Convention, the UNESCO Europe Region and/or the previous Council of Europe and UNESCO conventions concerning recognition in the European region. Some of the non-EHEA countries concerned, like Australia and New Zealand, have developed qualifications framework, while others, like the United States, have not.

first systematic analysis of the impacts of the overarching and national qualifications frameworks on the recognition practices of foreign qualifications, based on national case studies. It is also of high relevance since the different countries involved are at different stages of development and implementation of their NQFs and also have their own recognition procedures and practices. The final report is available on the ENIC-NARIC France website: <http://www.ciep.fr/enic-naricfr/>.

Recommendations

V.7.1 National recognition legislation, policies and practice should be reviewed to ensure that adequate account is taken of the role of qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes in facilitating the recognition of qualifications as well as to ensure that experience in the recognition of qualifications supports the development and implementation of NQFs.

V.7.2 If regular recognition issues appear between two different national qualifications frameworks, countries should be invited to develop direct contacts or/and regional cooperation to find common guidelines.

V.8 Qualifications frameworks in a global context

Qualifications frameworks were first devised outside of Europe, with Australia, New Zealand and South Africa as pioneering countries. The Bologna Process as well as the development of the EQF have, however, put the issue of qualifications frameworks more firmly on the international higher education agenda and they have also been instrumental in developing the concept of overarching frameworks within and in relation to which national frameworks will be developed. All in all, some 120 countries and territories have now developed qualifications frameworks, are in the process of doing so or have stated their intention to do so. A number of regional qualifications frameworks have also been established or are under consideration. While not all qualifications frameworks in other regions of the world have the same range of purposes as the overarching European frameworks and the national frameworks compatible with these, furthering regional and interregional mobility as well as furthering employment are important goals of many of these frameworks. It should also be noted that most academic disciplines are international by nature and that many international academic communities are well established on a disciplinary basis. For the most part, subject communities are already global.

Qualifications frameworks are therefore an important part of the international debate on education policy and it is important that overall developments in this area be reasonably compatible with those in the EHEA. This does of course not mean that non-European countries should adopt the QF-EHEA or the EQF blindly but rather that it is important to seek to develop a common understanding of qualifications and qualifications frameworks not only within the EHEA but world wide. The European Training Foundation (ETF) has so far, with the encouragement of the EQF Advisory Group, played a strong role in stimulating international dialogue around qualifications frameworks and has made a point of including the QF-EHEA in this dialogue. This work should continue and qualifications frameworks should also be made an important topic for discussion in the Bologna Policy Forum. So far, this Forum has been organized at political level and linked to the ministerial conference of the EHEA but it is important to recall that when the Policy Fora were proposed, it was suggested was that they could also be organized at expert and high ranking civil servant level and decoupled from the ministerial meetings. If Policy Fora on qualification frameworks are organized, it would be important to include the EQF and the ETF in these discussions.

Recommendation

V.8.1 Qualifications and qualifications frameworks should be made an important topic for discussion in the Bologna Policy Fora.

V.8.2 An international conference should be organized on the role of qualifications frameworks in relation to the strategy on the EHEA in a global setting.

V.8.3 Cooperation should be sought between the QF-EHEA and regional qualifications frameworks in other parts of the world, as far as possible also in cooperation with the EQF.

APPENDIX

EHEA WORKING GROUP ON QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

ote: the composition and participation has varied somewhat in the course of the period.

Chair

Council of Europe - Mr. Sjur BERGAN

Participants - countries

Armenia - Mr. Ruben TOPCHYAN

Austria - Mr. Florian PECENKA

Belgium, French Community - Mr. Kevin GUILLAUME

Czech Republic – Mr. Petr ČERNIKOVSKÝ

France - Ms. Yolande FERMON

Germany - Mr. Achim HOPBACH (Mr. Kurt SCHANNE)

Ireland/EURASHE – Mr. Brian MAGUIRE

Netherlands - Ms. Marlies LEEGWATER

Poland – Mr. Zbigniew MARCINIAK

Romania – Mr. Sorin ZAHARIA

Turkey – Mr. Mehmet DURMAN

United Kingdom /Scotland – Ms. Kirsty SKIDMORE

Participants – organizations

Council of Europe - Mr. Jean-Philippe RESTOUEIX

Chair of the BFUG WP on Recognition - Mr. Andrejs RAUHVARGERS

EURYDICE - Mr Simon DALFERTH

ESU - Ms. Monika MALJUKOV/ Ms. Nevena VUKSANOVIĆ

EUA - Ms. Lea BRUNNER

European Commission - Mr. Carlo SCATOLI, Ms. Anita KRÉMO, Ms. Maria Kristin GYLFADÓTTIR

Bologna Secretariat – Mr. Augustin MIHALACHE