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The commission staff working document “Towards a European Qualifications framework (EQF) for lifelong learning”

EUNEC’s elements of reflection

1 Preliminary remarks

On 24-25 October 2005, EUNEC, the European Network of Education Councils, held a conference in Brussels on the consultation of the European Commission on the EQF. Representatives of twelve education councils debated on this item. The purpose of this conference was double.

- EUNEC tried to understand the concept of the EQF and to discuss on the stakes, the benefits and the obstacles of the EQF.
- EUNEC wanted to produce some elements of reflection, which member councils could use to give advice to their governments.

The Commission Staff working document is a proposal of the Commission for a new European qualifications framework. The framework, once adopted by the council and the parliament, will become an important instrument for the Member States, for education and training centres and for employers and sectors to communicate on the value of qualifications. They will be able to reinforce the position of the pupil, student, trainee and employee when these persons want to enter in the labour market, want to look for another job or sector, to work abroad or to continue their studies.

The Lisbon goals and the mid-term report raised the awareness of the importance of education and training systems in building up Europe’s economic and social future. The framework is an important stepping-stone in the implementation of the Lisbon goals and it stands at the core of the Copenhagen process. The issue is also linked with what is happening within the Bologna process and is mentioned in the final texts of Bergen.

The aim of this text is not to formulate statements for the European Commission. This text is an instrument to help education councils to give advice to their own ministers of education and -where possible- to other ministers involved. We highlight the most important issues and challenges to discuss on.

2 What are the benefits and the stakes of an EQF for

the individual

The EQF has to be an instrument to realise mobility (geographical, social, professional, academic, ...) for the European citizen. The EQF has an added value because it focuses on the learner by valorising flexible, diverse and efficient ways of learning. It stimulates lifelong learning and a durable integration in the labour market and the society. It emphasises the accumulation of acquired competences, rather than to focus on deficits.

Therefore, the EQF has to be a clear instrument that is not only readable for experts, but also for the citizens. The EQF should not become a bureaucratic and rigid system.

A difficult question is whether, for the medium range, the EQF will involve rights for the individual concerning entrance in the labour market and/or academic recognition. At the moment, the EQF is constructed as a tool for communication on the level of acquired qualifications. But will a student have the right to have access to certain courses based on previous qualifications qualified at a certain level? Here, we have to consider directly the question of coherence between the Copenhagen and the Bologna process

In terms of rights of access to the labour market, the directive on the recognition of professional qualifications is decisive. Building coherence between the EQF and the directive is an important work for the years to come.

The EQF is built on more individual learning paths. For individual learners, the identification of learning needs, the setting up of a learning path and the steering of their own learning process are difficult tasks. The individual will also be responsible for matching his qualifications with the requirement of his job and the labour market. The weight of the personal responsibility is (too) high. Too much emphasis on the individual responsibility could be a danger. Therefore, there has to be a balance between individual and collective responsibilities.

We also need an enhanced attention for the systems of information, guidance and orientation. These tools have to be of high quality and accessible for everyone.

the labour market (and economic sectors)

The EQF stimulates mobility of people with intermediate education levels. At the moment mobility is mostly seen between the unskilled and the highly skilled.

In 2004, EUNEC has already remarked that the social cohesion in Europe requires that all the acquired qualifications should be recognised and that the competences of the unqualified persons should be valorised on the labour market.

The EQF should contribute in creating more chances for the most vulnerable groups in the society (under- and unskilled workers). Therefore the EQF has to content entrance levels to stimulate unqualified persons to enter into lifelong learning. This supposes a good integration of lower levels (concerning basic competences) in the EQF.

Therefore, it is important that the descriptors of the qualifications levels should depart from a broad concept of competence. The competence levels used in the EQF and a national (regional) framework (NQF) have to include a concept of durable employability.

the concept of lifelong learning (including the whole education and training system)

We need national (regional) qualifications frameworks as a basis for common understanding and the education structure should reflect the main principles of it. The EQF and more explicitly the NQF offers an instrument to regulate and integrate new educational (private) institutes into the regular education structure. It also is a basis for mutual recognition of qualifications both between different sectors (education, training, human resources management) and between Member States.

However, education (compulsory and higher education) can never be reduced to a qualification structure since citizenship, personal development, critical attitudes and meta-competences are essential parts of every education programme. Education programmes reflect a balance between societal (professional) demands and the needs of learners.

Within EUNEC, there is a concern that the concept of qualifications frameworks will reduce the autonomy of education systems and will increase bureaucratic procedures. Therefore, EUNEC proposes that table 2 of the EQF document should be developed at a national (regional) level. It should be the result of a national (regional) debate between educational stakeholders on the relationship between the educational structure and the national (regional) qualifications framework. The national (regional) qualification framework should involve all names of national (regional) qualifications.

In former statements EUNEC already expressed its concerns about citizenship competences. In the context of the EQF, we have to avoid that personal competences will be inextricably bound up with purely professional competences.

3 The EQF as a communication instrument

The concept of mutual recognition of competences has to be put into a future perspective. Besides the EQF, there exist also the qualification framework for higher education, the directive on the recognition of qualifications and the ISCED¹ and SEDOC² levels.

We are convinced that, in the future, we will need a common understanding of levels of competences based on learning outcomes so that educational systems can compare their position. The systems of international organisations should all be formulated in terms of learning outcomes as was agreed in the Bergen declaration (higher education).

To assure the implementation of the EQF, EUNEC thinks it would be useful to set up an agenda and to set forward priorities for that work. It is important that this new tool in construction should build further on or refer to former established tools (Europass, validation, common guidelines for guidance, quality assurance...).

¹ International Standard Classification of Education – UNESCO

² European System for the International Clearing of Vacancies and Applications for Employment

4 European, sectoral and national (regional) responsibilities

There is a need to clarify the different roles and responsibilities of the sectors, the social partners involved, the national (regional) governments and the European level in the development of a sound and readable system of qualification structures. But the final responsibility has to remain in the hands of the public authorities.

The questionnaire of the Commission is founded on the sectoral qualifications framework. EUNEC states that this sectoral framework should always be linked to national frameworks, even if some sectors, especially those which are internationally orientated, could go further by integrating national qualifications frameworks in European frameworks.

A qualification structure is and must remain definitely a public responsibility. It is important that stakeholders are able to contribute to the credibility of the system. Therefore consultation processes are highly relevant.

5 The need for quality assurance and accreditation

Transparency of qualifications is built upon mutual trust and confidence. The need for mutual trust will even be reinforced when a European credit transfer system for VET will be implemented. Trust and confidence can also be strengthened by peer learning and peer visits. This is a methodology used by the European Commission. We worked on this methodology during our conference in May 2005.

The quality of national (regional) frameworks must be guaranteed by systems for quality assurance on national (regional) level and, if the Member States agree, on European level. There is a need for supporting instruments to guarantee the transparency and the credibility. Accreditation or other forms of quality assurance have to be based on quality standards.

The questions that can be asked concerning this issue are for instance: What will be the profile of the experts for quality assurance (educationalists or experts of the sectors)? Which criteria will one use? Who will define these criteria? What will give legitimacy to the experts? Is accreditation a competency of each Member State or do we need an international expertise?

6 Relevant learning outcomes

There is a need to study closely the descriptors used in the EQF. The descriptors have to reflect scientific and educational approaches of competences.

It is not clear on which concepts the descriptors are built (labour market requirements, educational concepts,...) The key competences and meta-competences reflecting more generic competences should be part of national (regional) qualifications.

Qualifications of a "higher" level embrace the competences of the "lower" level. This could suggest there is a hierarchy between people with "higher" and "lower" competences.

7 Necessary preconditions

The EQF and all the other tools for transparency (guidance, accreditation of prior learning, Europass, ...) have to be set up to strengthen the concept of transparency and mobility. We also need other compatible instruments to reach an accumulation of competences towards better employability and towards academic recognition of competences.

A European social dialogue has to clear out the relationship between the sectors and the national (regional) authorities on the one hand and the transversal responsibilities of different authorities on the other hand (labour, education, training).

The introduction of national (regional) qualifications frameworks into education and training systems is part of a renewal process. It is important to set up implementation strategies strengthening the "ownership" of all the educational stakeholders.

It is necessary to determine an agenda and a precise calendar for the further development of the EQF and the underpinning tools. This has to be done in relationship with the directive on professional qualifications and the framework for higher education.