



EQF Referencing Process – Examples and Proposals (EQF-Ref)

Progress Report

Public Part

Project information

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Executive Summary

According to common agreement, the national EQF referencing processes must use transparent procedures and methods. The EQF Advisory Group has decided on criteria and procedures that should be considered for the referencing of national qualifications levels to the EQF. However, each country's qualifications authorities must choose the modality of linking their qualifications levels to the EQF. To establish mutual trust in the referencing process, EU countries need to discuss and exchange experiences. Therefore, the purpose of the EQF-Ref project is to facilitate communication between the partner countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany and the Netherlands), to enhance learning from each other and to develop 'mutual trust' in referencing qualifications levels to the EQF. The main results of the project will be:

___ National Case Studies: describing the steps and procedures that partner countries are planning or have already accomplished in referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF (these reports are already published on the project website).

___ Comparative / Evaluation report: identifying commonalities and differences in the approaches planned or taken by the partner countries, evaluating the national case studies based on the criteria developed by the EQF Advisory Group, and continually evaluating the criteria of the EQF Advisory Group. A draft version of the report will be discussed with national stakeholders in 'national feedback workshops'.

___ Proposal for the structure of the 'EQF referencing report': The proposal will be prepared based on the criteria developed by the EQF Advisory Group. It will include illustrative examples from the partner countries (e.g. regarding the kind and amount of evidence that should be provided) as well as recommendations on how peer review among countries (involvement of international experts) could be organised in the EQF referencing process. A draft version of the proposal will be presented and discussed at an international expert seminar.

The organisations involved represent research and consulting institutions as well as public bodies with quite vast experience in the field of qualifications. The project partnership includes countries that are currently in the process of developing or implementing an NQF and are discussing the way how to link the national levels to the EQF. All partner organisations are involved in activities related to the implementation of the EQF and the development of an NQF.

The project considers the national qualifications systems of the partner countries and their processes for NQF development and EQF implementation; and, as a result, the project will have an impact on the design of the EQF referencing processes on national levels. Therefore, the target group includes public authorities and stakeholders involved in these processes in the partner countries as well as policy makers on the EU level (in particular, members of the EQF Advisory Group, of the European Commission and of national contact points in other countries).

More information about the EQF-Ref project and its results as well as further relevant information (about events, publications, links etc.) is available at the website www.EQF-Ref.eu.

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1. Project Objectives

To implement the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), countries are asked to link their qualifications systems or national qualifications frameworks (NQF) to the EQF: National qualifications systems should be referred to the EQF until 2010 and references to the EQF levels should be introduced in all new certificates and Europass documents by 2012.

According to common agreement, the national EQF referencing processes must use transparent procedures and methods. The EQF Advisory Group has decided on criteria and procedures that should be considered for the referencing of national qualifications levels to the EQF. The referencing criteria aim to ensure that the referencing processes and results can be compared and generate trust. Therefore, the referencing processes need to be transparently conducted and documented: countries need to refer their qualifications systems and levels to the EQF in a demonstrable, explicit and defensible way. Those not familiar with a country's qualifications should be able to judge the information provided as valid or not. This analysis and comparison of the approaches taken in selected countries should help to identify 'example of good practices' in providing valid arguments and evidence in the referencing reports. However, each country's qualifications authorities must choose the modality of linking their qualifications levels to the EQF. To establish mutual trust in the referencing process, EU countries need to discuss and exchange experiences.

The purpose of the EQF-Ref project is to facilitate communication between the partner countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany and the Netherlands), to enhance learning from each other and to develop 'mutual trust' in referencing qualifications levels to the EQF. In particular, the project aims to identify procedures of 'good practice' for referencing qualifications levels to the EQF and to propose the structure of the EQF referencing reports.

The EQF-Ref project concerns the national qualifications systems of the partner countries, the process of the NQF development and the EQF implementation (referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF). Therefore the target group includes responsible bodies and stakeholders involved in these processes at national level in the partner countries and in other European countries as well as policy makers at European level (in particular members of the EQF Advisory Group and of the European Commission, members of national contact points in other countries). Stakeholders and experts responsible for EQF referencing processes are continuously informed about the project's developments and are also directly involved in the EQF-Ref project (for example, as interview partners or participants at workshops).

Since the project partners are also involved in activities related to the implementation of the EQF and the development of an NQF, the results of the EQF-Ref project can be directly exploited in these processes.

2. Project Approach

The purpose of the proposed project is to facilitate communication between the partner countries to enhance learning from each other and to develop “mutual trust” in the context of referencing qualifications levels to the EQF. The project fits very well to the time frame set by the EC because countries are asked to do the referencing process within the next 2 years.

The key activities include:

Facilitating discussions and exchange of experiences:

The project partnership is used as a platform or forum for exchange of experiences between the partner countries (and other countries) that are in the process of referencing qualifications levels to the EQF. It is also used for discussing and disseminating results from national pilot projects that are being conducted in the context of implementing the EQF and referencing qualifications to levels (also pilot projects for referencing qualifications to NQF levels).

Identifying procedures of “good practice” for referencing qualifications levels to the EQF:

There are various ways how such referencing could take place. The general quality assurance principles presented in the EQF recommendation as well as the set of criteria developed by the EQF Advisory Group must be interpreted and taken forward in the specific national contexts. The project partnership is comparing and reflecting different procedures and methods used in the referencing process and aims at developing criteria for “good practice” in this context.

Developing a proposal for the structure of the EQF referencing reports:

In order to establish mutual trust it is necessary to provide sufficient information about the procedures and the reasons underlying decisions in the context of EQF referencing. One of the main questions is related to the amount of information expected from each country; information ‘overload’ could easily become a problem, reducing transparency and making comparison more difficult. Aim of the project is to develop a proposal for the structure and content of these reports (based on the criteria developed by the EQF Advisory Group) as well as recommendations on how peer review among countries (involvement of international experts) could be organised in the EQF referencing process.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

The project website www.EQF-Ref.eu is not only used for documenting the results of the EQF project but also for disseminating information about relevant events, publications and links. The website includes a news line and will be updated regularly.

The following results are available to date (for more information see: www.EQF-Ref.eu):

1. National case studies:

In a first step, national case studies were conducted describing the steps and procedures partner countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany and the Netherlands) are planning or have already accomplished in the context of referencing to the EQF (as of October 2009). The national reports are already available on the project website

These case studies are based on expert interviews (based on common interview guidelines) and on analysis of relevant reports (for example, outcomes of pilot projects) or other documents: In the Czech Republic as well as in Bulgaria, interviews were conducted for the preparation of the national case studies: In Bulgaria, five interviews were conducted with different stakeholders and in the Czech Republic, six interviews were conducted with representatives of various stakeholders. In Finland, information has been obtained from discussions in committee meetings and from e-mail correspondence after the committee report had been published. In Austria, in Germany and in the Netherlands the information related to the criteria is mainly based on expectations and assumptions. However, in the Netherlands some information from stakeholders is available as a result of the interviews and the report by Karin Sanders, the expert commissioned for the development of the Dutch NQF. The Austrian answers are mainly based on the NQF consultation document, the report analysing the results of the consultation process, the results of 'NQF pilot projects' and the results of so-called 'discussion circles' (status quo: September 2009) as well as on an interview with a member of the 'NQF Project Group'. Since the BMBF and the KMK (representing the Länder) will not issue any official comment on the referencing process before the end of the testing phase, information for the German case study is drawn from the answers which working group members have given to a questionnaire relating to another project. Additionally, the Cedefop report on the development of national qualifications frameworks in Europe was used as a source of information.

The case studies provide information about the status quo of the NQF and EQF implementation in the partner countries (plans/procedures/pilot projects) and are addressing the set of EQF referencing criteria (http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/ireland_en.pdf) developed by the EQF Advisory Group (by referring to decisions already taken, expectations, and/or assumptions). The case

studies were discussed at the 2nd partner meeting in October 2009, they were partly adapted after the discussion and are now available at the project website (www.Eqf-Ref.eu).

2. EQF Referencing Process – Exchange of Experience: Summary of national case studies, conclusions and recommendations (draft internal document):

This report is summarizing and comparing the different national approaches and aims at identifying challenging issues in the set of EQF referencing criteria as well as at developing first recommendations for the preparation of the referencing processes and reports. At a later stage it will be decided which examples could be used to illustrate the recommendations. It is planned to discuss the conclusions and recommendations with experts on national level in workshops in each partner country. The feedback of the national workshops will be included to this report.

The case studies as well as further discussions show that some of these EQF referencing criteria play an essential role: the criterion related to the procedures for including qualifications in the NQF or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system (Criterion 4) and the criterion related to the correspondence between the levels of the NQF and the eight levels of the EQF (Criterion 2). For example, how should Criterion 2 actually be addressed in those cases where the NQF and the EQF have an equal number of levels? Does this mean that the linking of levels is already fixed ex-ante? Have the countries just taken a pragmatic approach ('for the sake of comparability')? Does this fit reality or are countries planning to change their national systems to an eight-level structure? A crucial question in the EQF referencing process is related to providing arguments and evidence when allocating qualifications to the NQF and when linking national levels to the EQF levels. These questions will be further elaborated and discussed during the second half of the project.

4. Partnerships

The organisations involved represent research and consulting institutions as well as public bodies with quite vast experience in the field of qualifications. The project partnership includes countries that are currently in the process of developing or implementing a NQF and are discussing the way how to link the national levels to the EQF. All partner organisations are involved in activities related to the implementation of the EQF and/or the development of a NQF.

Project coordinator:

- 3s, AT (is providing expertise to Austrian Ministries regarding EQF/NQF; providing expertise to the European Commission for the further development and implementation of the EQF)

Project partners:

- NUOV, CZ (is responsible for development of the NQF in CZ)
- NAVET, BG (is actively involved in processes related to EQF/NQF development/implementation on national level)
- BIBB, DE (is advising the Ministry of Education and Research on EU VET policies like the implementation of the EQF and the development of the NQF)
- MBO Raad, NL (is extensively monitoring European processes concerning EQF in order to adapt national developments to it)
- NBE, FI (is involved in the development of the NQF; representing FI in the EQF Advisory Group and in the sub-group on Quality Assurance)

Supporting partners:

- Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture, AT
- Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, CZ
- Ministry of Education, FI
- Federal Ministry of Education and Research, DE
- Ministry of Science, Economic Affairs and Transport of Land Schleswig-Holstein, DE
- DIHK (Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce), DE
- Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, NL
- COLO, NL

External Evaluator

- ECBO (NL) is contracted to support quality assurance activities and to give feedback to the results of the project

5. Plans for the Future

A proposal for the structure of the 'EQF referencing report' will be developed and national and international workshops with experts will be organised to inform about the project's activities and to get feedback to the results of the project. The feedback will be used for the further development of the results.

The following main activities are planned:

1. The draft comparative / evaluation report will be discussed with experts on national level ("national feedback workshops"). These workshops will be organised by each project partner on a national level based on a common structure. The experts will mainly include those who were also involved in developing the national case study (representatives of national contact points or other responsible authorities, other stakeholders). The experts involved will be able to use the preliminary results of the EQF-Ref project (e.g. experiences and examples from other countries, evaluation of different approaches) also for further developments on national level (in particular for the preparation of the EQF referencing reports).
2. Proposal for the structure of the 'EQF referencing report': The proposal will be prepared based on the criteria developed by the EQF Advisory Group. It will include illustrative examples from the partner countries (e.g. regarding the kind and amount of evidence that should be provided) as well as recommendations on how peer review among countries (involvement of international stakeholders) could be organised in the EQF referencing process.
3. The draft proposal for structure and content of the EQF referencing report will be presented and discussed at an international expert seminar organised by the project partnership at the end of the project.

6. Contribution to EU policies

The EQF plays an important role in realising the European area for lifelong learning and particularly aims at promoting workers' and learners' mobility between countries and facilitating their lifelong learning. In order to act as a translation device for this purpose, the EQF needs to be implemented on national levels. A crucial aspect of its implementation is the way how national qualifications levels will be linked to the EQF. To establish mutual trust in the referencing process, discussions and exchanges of experiences between European countries are necessary.

The EQF is not an initiative aiming at harmonisation of qualifications, instead its objective is to facilitate communication between systems and increase transparency in an environment characterised by an increasing diversity and complexity of qualifications. Referencing levels of national qualifications systems or frameworks to the EQF will have to be based on common criteria but will also have to take into account the diversity of national qualifications systems.

The EQF-Ref project aims at supporting the EQF referencing process (implementation and development of the EQF by relating national qualifications systems/frameworks to the EQF). By conducting and analysing national case studies, principles, methods and procedures for placing levels of national qualifications against the EQF levels are analysed and discussed. The “proposal for the structure and the content of the EQF referencing reports” can be seen as one of the necessary supporting guidance tools which will assist experts and stakeholders in interpreting and applying the EQF.

