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The EQF: an important European enabler or a questionable diversion for bureaucrats?

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Summary

The Recommendation of the European Parliament and Council of Ministers to establish a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) was approved on 23 April 2008.

The objective... is to create a common reference framework which should serve as a translation device between different qualifications systems and their levels, whether for general and higher education or for vocational education and training,

as well as recommending that Member states:

use an approach based on learning outcomes when defining and describing qualifications, and promote the validation of non-formal and informal learning... paying particular attention to those citizens most likely to be subject to unemployment or insecure forms of employment, for whom such an approach could help increase participation in lifelong learning and access to the labour market.

This issues paper considers the Framework and attempts to examine how, and how well, it is likely to achieve its own stated objectives.

A European Qualifications Framework

What exactly is the EQF? The material on the Commission's website tells us:

The EQF is a reference framework which will relate different countries' qualifications systems and frameworks together. It will act as a translation device to make qualifications more readable and understandable to employers, individuals and institutions, so that workers and learners can use their qualifications in other countries.

It has two principal aims: to facilitate mobility and lifelong learning.

The EQF will relate different countries' national qualifications systems to a common European reference framework. Individuals and employers will be able to use the EQF to better understand and compare the qualifications levels of different countries and different education and training systems.(http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm)

Given the considerable variety of education, training and working arrangements around Europe, how is it supposed to operate and how well is it likely to help individuals, employers and learning providers?

For many years the *European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training* (Cedefop) has worked to clarify, document and disseminate the different education and training systems in EU Member states. In attempting to strengthen mutual understanding, it has focused increasingly on the *learning outcomes* that qualifications aim to certify, with particular interest in the concept of *workplace competence*. This activity,



together with the political pressure arising from recognition of the importance of skills to the achievement of the aspirations of the 2000 'Lisbon declaration', led to an accelerated programme of work, resulting in 2005, in a commitment to establish a EQF for lifelong learning.

The preparatory work by the European Commission (EC) quickly led to recognition that, given the diversity of arrangements in the (then) 25 countries, any common framework would have to be comparatively simple, and, in keeping with the principle of *subsidiarity*, would have to *relate to*, rather than *attempt to harmonise*, the systems and structures of qualification authorities in the Member states. This has led to a voluntary agreement focusing on levels, and on generic learning outcomes based on levels of Knowledge, Skills, and Competence. The final agreement was for a framework of eight sets of level specifications, with definitions at each level for the relevant Knowledge, Skills and Competence that would be expected. These level descriptors are listed at http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/publ/pdf/eqf/leaflet_en.pdf, and are highly generic. As examples,

the **knowledge** requirements at Level 2 are specified as:

- basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study;

the **skills** required at level 3 are:

- a range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information, while

the **competence** learning outcomes defined at Level 5 are (an ability to):

- exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change
- review and develop performance of self and others

A number of questions arise as to how effective these kinds of generic statements are as level discriminators, and how they could be used in practice. However, it is important to recognise that the framework is a *reference* framework, in that it was not intended that individual qualifications be allocated to its levels, but that the EQF should be mapped, or 'referenced', to the (level) arrangements in individual member states. Note that not all member states had their own Qualifications Frameworks that can map directly, and not all the national frameworks that do exist have eight levels!

What is the scope of the EQF?

Is it just for qualifications from Vocational Education and Training (VET)? After all, the 'Bologna process' has resulted in the establishment of a framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area,

with its own set of level descriptors. The relationship between the EQF and the 'QF-EHEA' involves, because the two were developed separately, certain sensitivities, but the EC indicates:

The EQF's four highest levels correspond to higher education levels as defined within the European Higher Education Area: EQF level 5 corresponds to the descriptor developed for the higher education short cycle, EQF level 6 to the descriptor developed for the first cycle (Bachelor level), EQF level 7 to the descriptor developed for the second cycle (Masters level) and EQF level 8 to the descriptor developed for the third cycle (PhD level).

However, the EQF is an overarching lifelong learning framework, incorporating vocational and other qualifications as well as more academic qualifications.

A second relationship must also be taken into account. A separate development since the late 1990s in a different part of the Commission (D-G Internal Market) led to a European Directive in 2005 on the *mutual recognition of professional qualifications*, relating in particular to handling differences between arrangements in Member states where a profession is regulated. Directive 2005/36/EC was established to directly tackle serious barriers to mobility between Member states. It, too, specifies a set of levels, and the mapping between the EQF's levels and these is by no means straightforward. However, the purposes of the two frameworks are not identical.

So (how) will it work?

It is not surprising that the development, refinement, promotion, and – ultimately – implementation of the EQF has involved a great deal of the time of qualifications officials and experts. What, precisely is planned for the implementation? The EQF website tells us:

The EQF encourages countries to relate their qualifications systems or frameworks to the EQF by 2010 and to ensure that all new qualifications issued from 2012 carry a reference to the appropriate EQF level.

It is an indication of the recognition around Europe of the need for greater transparency of qualifications that this Recommendation has been accepted. In the UK, which had started its VET reform back in the late 1980s and whose approach had a significant influence on the EQF design, a rather thorough exercise has been carried out to (level) 'reference' the UK's three qualifications frameworks to the EQF.

In considering how the EQF might 'make Europe a better place' the two core aspirations need to be examined: *facilitate mobility and lifelong learning*.

Mobility

As indicated the real, tough, profession-practising-constraining barriers to mobility have already been tackled by 2005/36/EC. So what other barriers to mobility remain, and how will the EQF overcome them? This is where the evidence is limited. Certainly language is a real barrier to 'perfect mobility' and there are a range of other hurdles for those who choose to study and work in other Member states (limited-transferability of pensions would be an example). But how many Polish plumbers or electricians have been refused work in the UK (or indeed France or Germany) because they have not been able to show the right piece of paper?

More importantly, what piece of paper will the EQF enable the Polish plumber or electrician to present to a prospective employer? Providing everything works according to plan, each new qualification issued in a Member State from 2012 will carry a reference to the appropriate EQF level. It is still not clear precisely what the nature of this reference will be. However, in the end, all it can substantively be is a number, from one to eight, indicating the level of the qualification on a scale that most employers will (initially) not be aware of. Just how much will that help the employer understand about that qualification? (not least since the document will generally remain in the language of the originating country). There are various things that can be done to help this process. Nevertheless, based on current plans, there must remain a real question about how much value the EQF, as an enabler of valid equivalencing of individual qualifications, will add.

Lifelong learning

It is not immediately clear how a qualifications framework – even less a framework that (only) relates other qualifications 'frameworks' – could of itself really hope to encourage individuals to invest more in learning. Of course there are genuine questions about the level of acknowledgement given by learning providers in one country to qualifications from another, and in particular the threshold of achievement evidence that is required for admission to Higher Education in different countries. However, the latter has been addressed for more than 20 years by a network of National Academic Recognition Information Centres and other EC measures, including *Europass*. So what precisely is the EQF adding to that infrastructure? In principle, it could be viewed as:

- an international language of learning outcomes
- an enabler to bridge the education and labour market requirements, and
- a tool for multinationals to use in recruitment.

But how could it achieve these contributions in practice?

Relating two sets of levels through a third

Finally, the *practical challenges* of implementing this top-down structure cannot be ignored. Since the level referencing between national systems (generally a *National Qualifications Framework* – an 'NQF') and the EQF are to be determined by each Member State, there will be no guarantee of 'level synchronisation', particularly where the number of levels in a national system is different from the **eight** of the EQF.

Where two frameworks have different numbers of levels, agreeing a mapping ('referencing') between them will always pose problems, and problems with reference frameworks are serious because of the knock-on effects to all processes based on them. The greater the difference in numbers of levels, the greater the issues that may arise. There is always an inclination in designing such mappings to align level boundaries, in particular where the number of levels is close. While doing this reduces complexity, the inescapable result involves merging two levels of one framework into one of the other. Doing this means accepting that qualifications at a level anywhere within the two merged levels are all at the same level. This is clearly not what the designers of the framework with more levels had intended and will inevitably have undesirable consequences of some kind. The challenge becomes selecting the level at which the merger is to take place through the minimisation of the negative impact.

The alternative is to try to spread the greater number of levels (more) 'evenly' across the smaller number of levels, which will result in fewer, possibly no, alignments of level boundaries. Relevant experience with mutual recognition of professional engineering qualifications confirms that serious elements of drift can arise between pairs of qualification reference levels. The main practical function envisaged for the EQF is the comparison of qualifications across two Member states, in particular those of an individual's country of origin (where the qualification was acquired), and the host country from which s/he seeks appropriate recognition. Where these two countries have different numbers of levels in their frameworks, and where neither is the eight of the EQF, it would be possible for two qualifications that are in reality two levels apart to finish up at the same EQF level (see diagram).

The real risk of 'imperfections in the referencing' is that, if the various pairs of equivalencing via the EQF do finish up indicating allocation of the qualification from country A *higher* (or *lower*) in the framework of country B than it 'ought to be', then trust in, and respect for, the effectiveness of level 'equivalencing' will be at risk. In many countries, there are those in a particular sector who have some reasonably valid understanding of the approximate level of some qualifications from other

Qualification	Country A NQF	EQF	Country B NQF	Qualification
	↑	↑	↑	
		L5	NQF level to which qualification is allocated in originating country	actual qualification level
		L4		
	NQF level to which qualification is allocated in originating country	L3		
actual qualification level				
	↓	↓	↓	

countries. If what comes out from the EQF process is different from what they already 'know', they are likely to lose confidence in the whole process. Unfortunately it is likely that, at least from a theoretical point of view, mapping between two frameworks via a third 'loses more information' than if the two frameworks were mapped directly.

The *indirect* effects – the real benefits?

So is it all a complete Eurocrat waste of time? Not quite! The very considerable upheaval caused by the need for national qualifications authorities to respond to the EQF has inevitably made people stand back and think. It is also worth remembering that public sector initiatives from the EC will always have different impacts in different member states.

The debate about comparing knowledge, skills, and competence in relation to the value of learning outcomes achieved in acquiring a qualification is a fundamental one. Thus it is possible to discern three *indirect* outcomes of the initiative, whose value may well be significant for the future of Europe:

1. The extending of real understanding by qualifications authorities in all Member states of qualification arrangements in their neighbours' countries. If Europe is to become a more coherent economic force in the world, a step increase in mutual understanding of skills matters must be valuable;
2. The review of national arrangements (and indeed the purpose of education and training, and their learning outcomes assessed in a qualification), in the quest for raising productivity and competitiveness of European enterprises. In particular this has involved at least a deep debate about competence, even if at the end it may not be as fully embraced in the national learning agenda as it has been in the UK; and

3. The debate has inevitably, both in general and in terms of the specifics of the referencing across from national frameworks, catalysed considerable testing of national assumptions and conclusions. This is already beginning to result in certain refinements to national systems that are genuinely viewed as improvements.

In the end, these indirect benefits – and above all the promotion of viewing qualifications in terms of **learning outcomes** – might turn out to be the most valuable contribution of all towards achieving the high aspirations of the Lisbon objectives.

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