



EHEAROME2020

Network of National Qualifications Frameworks Correspondents

F I N A L R E P O R T



EUROPEAN
Higher Education Area



bologna
process



ITALIAN BFUG SECRETARIAT
2018-2020



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BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

At its meeting in Wien in September 2018, the BFUG confirmed the Terms of Reference of the Network of National Correspondents for Qualifications Frameworks as part of the 2018 – 20 work program. As in previous periods, the Network is coordinated by the Council of Europe.

It is recalled that the origin of the Network lies in the need to exchange experience in the development and self-certification of national qualifications frameworks within and against the Overarching Framework of Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) as well as to ensure coherence between the QF-EHEA and the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF), overseen by the European Commission.

The role of the Council of Europe as coordinator of the Network stems from its role in helping to develop and coordinate the QF-EHEA, including as Chair of EHEA working groups on QFs in 2007 - 09 and 2009 - 12 and co-chair of the Structural Reforms WG in 2012 - 15.

The Council of Europe is a member of the EQF Advisory Group to help ensure coherence between the two overarching frameworks and, among other things, played an important role - with the European Commission and CEDEFOP - in ensuring coherence between the criteria and procedures for referencing national frameworks against the EQF and self-certifying national higher education frameworks against the QF-EHEA.

The background features a gradient from orange at the top to green at the bottom. On the left, there are intricate white line art patterns consisting of multiple overlapping, curved lines that create a mesh-like effect. On the right, a large, stylized white outline of the number '2' is visible, partially cut off by the edge of the page.

**TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE
EHEA NETWORK OF NATIONAL
COORDINATORS FOR QUALIFICATIONS
FRAMEWORKS 2018-2020**

NAME OF THE NETWORK

EHEA Network of National coordinators for qualifications frameworks

COORDINATOR

Jean-Philippe Restoueix - Council of Europe

COMPOSITION

Coordinators of national qualifications frameworks for higher education of all EHEA member states, European Commission, EHEA consultative members

PURPOSE AND/OR OUTCOME

1. To exchange experience and offer advice in the development, implementation, and review of national qualifications frameworks
2. Further coherence between national QFs and the Overarching Frameworks of Qualifications of the EHEA (QF-EHEA)
3. Further coherence between the QF-EHEA and the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF)
4. Advice EHEA members and the BFUG on issues related to the QF-EHEA.

REFERENCE TO THE PARIS COMMUNIQUÉ

«In many of our systems, ECTS-based short cycle qualifications play an increasingly important role in preparing students for employment and further studies as well in improving social cohesion by facilitating access for many who would otherwise not have considered higher education. We are therefore including short-cycle qualifications as a stand-alone qualification within the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA (QF-EHEA). Each country can decide whether and how to integrate short cycle qualifications within its own national framework».

SPECIFIC TASKS

The Network shall act as a forum for debate and advice on issues related to the QF-EHEA and national frameworks, in particular with a view to:

- ensuring coherence between national frameworks and the QF-EHEA;
- ensuring coherence between the QF-EHEA and the EQF;
- the development and implementation of ECTS based short cycle qualifications as stand-alone higher education qualifications within the QF-EHEA in countries that wish to develop and implement which short cycle qualifications;
- encouraging period reviews of the implementation of national qualifications frameworks for higher education;
- encouraging and providing advice on renewed self-certification of national frameworks for which development make this necessary or desirable;
- encourage reflection on how national qualifications frameworks can best help education systems fulfill all major purposes of higher education.

WORKING METHOD

Annual meetings of the Network with the participation, as far as possible, of representatives of all EHEA members and consultative members. The meetings will normally be held in September/October.

When desirable, joint activities with the EQF Advisory Group or national contact points may be organized.

The Network is coordinated by the Council of Europe, which brings the outcome of its work to the attention of the BFUG as well as the EQF Advisory Group.

REPORTING

Reports will be submitted to the BFUG and Board in writing.

The image features a background with a teal-to-red gradient. On the left, there are several overlapping, curved lines in red and teal that create a complex, grid-like pattern. In the center, the text "NETWORK MEETINGS" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font. On the right side, a large, white outline of the number "3" is visible, partially cut off by the edge of the frame.

NETWORK MEETINGS

3

The Network meets annually, normally in September, at Council of Europe Headquarters in Strasbourg.

2018 MEETING

Whereas the annual meetings up to and including 2017 gathered representatives of some 20 - 25 countries, the 2018 meeting was attended by representatives of 37 countries as well as of the European Commission, the European Training Foundation, EURASHE, ESU, the IAU, and the Bologna Secretariat. Participants underlined the need for the network to continue as a forum of exchange of experience and discussion on developments with regard to qualifications frameworks.

The main topics at the 2018 meeting were the full integration of short cycle qualifications, mainly found in professional higher education, into the QF-EHEA in follow up to the [Paris Communiqué](#) adopted by Ministers in May 2018 as well as how competences for democratic culture can best be integrated into national qualifications frameworks. During the evaluation of the meeting, participants underlined several elements:

- The Paris Communiqué, especially regarding the full inclusion of short cycle qualifications in the QF-EHEA, was a central element for many delegations in deciding to participate in the meeting. These delegations feel it is important to have a space for discussions on policy development concerning NQFs, including the question of inclusion of the short cycle.
- The question of updating the QF-EHEA is on the table: what are the modalities of the exercise? What is the role of self-certification reports in case of updating NQFs? This question is linked to the EQF practice in which the updated referencing reports are presented and discussed by the EQF Advisory Group.
- For the future, several topics could be of common interest:
 - How to include, or not, international qualifications in the HEI NQFs.
 - How to deal with “old qualifications” which were “pre-Bologna”, and therefore not expressed in Learning Outcomes terms.
 - The integration of and link between the different tools (QF, QA, recognition) is and remains a challenge.

2019 MEETING

As for the 2018 meeting, participation at the 2019 meeting on September 5 was considerably higher than it was up to and including 2017. Despite a couple of last-minute cancellations, 47 participants from 31 countries as well as several stakeholder representatives participated in the meeting. In addition to an update on national developments, the meeting focused on:

- The coherence between the different structural reform areas and tools: qualifications frameworks, recognition, and quality assurance.
- Self-certification: review of the existing mechanism and ideas for the future.
- Inclusion of short cycle qualifications within the QF-EHEA.

The EHEA peer group on qualifications frameworks met in Strasbourg on September 6; some representatives participated in both meetings.

Coherence between the different structural reform areas

As concerns the coherence between the different structural reform areas and tools - qualifications frameworks, recognition, and quality assurance - Brian Maguire from Quality and Qualifications Ireland shared his experience and ideas. In particular, he underlined the following elements:

- The crucial link between quality assurance and qualifications frameworks both in terms of qualifications themselves, of the recognition process and of higher education institutions
- In terms of recognition, the subsidiary text to the Lisbon Recognition Convention on the [use of qualifications frameworks in the recognition of foreign qualifications](#) is a central element of the work of the ENIC and NARIC centers and Networks, including through a peer group activity on the quality of the recognition process.
- The question of the coherence of the three pillars of structural reforms is important not only at European but also at national level.

Self-certification

The current presentation and lack of peer reviews of self-certification reports is unsatisfactory. Almost all self-certification reports are included within the referencing reports against the EQF, and few countries outside of the EQF have so far self-certified. Even if the EQF criteria now underline that where countries submit joint self-certification and referencing reports, these should include explicit reference to the QF-EHEA criteria, this is not always done, and it was done to a much lesser extent until recently. It was suggested that the wording of the QF-EHEA criteria should also be reviewed and made more easily available. It was suggested that in addition to written statements by the foreign experts that are part of each self-certification exercise, there should be a written statement by the competent quality assurance agency to confirm – or not - that national the higher education qualifications framework adequately incorporates the quality assurance dimension.

Self-certification reports are in principle made available on the qualifications frameworks part of the EHEA web site, but participants felt that this site is insufficiently visible and known. It is also limited to the earlier self-certification reports, which were submitted before the referencing procedure against the EQF was launched. There is therefore a need both to make the self-certification reports – as well as the criteria for self-certification – more visible and easier to find and to make a link to the referencing reports under the EQF, where these include referencing/self-certification of the higher education part of national frameworks.

Unlike the EQF, the QF-EHEA has not made provision for discussion or peer review of self-certification reports, even if it is recognized that there is an element of peer review through the participation of foreign experts in every self-certification exercise. The EHEA lacks the resources to undertake systematic reviews of self-certification reports through the Network¹, but the meeting encouraged reflection on how a peer review process could be introduced within the QF-EHEA, the peer group on QF could be a proper based for this review.

Qualifications frameworks evolve, and substantial developments in national frameworks may require undertaking new self-certification exercises. These may be completely new referencing exercises or be limited to the new aspects of national frameworks. Rather than stipulate that self-certification be renewed after a

¹ It is recalled that the EQF Advisory Group meets several times per year.

specific time period, e.g. 5 years, it was suggested that self-certification be renewed when a national framework had undergone changes that make the existing self-certification inadequate. This review should also take into account elements like quality assurance mechanisms and recognition processes. This was the intention when the QF-EHEA was adopted but there is insufficient understanding of when and why a new self-certification would be required. It was therefore suggested that a set of criteria be developed, based inter alia on a study of the reasons that have led countries to undertake renewed self-certification or referencing so far.

Inclusion of short cycle qualifications within the QF-EHEA

After the Paris Communiqué, the inclusion of short cycle higher education qualifications within the QF- EHEA as well as within national frameworks is on the agenda of all bodies dealing with QFs. During the conversation, several elements were highlighted:

- Short cycle qualifications, even within higher education², represent a large variety of qualifications; some of them only or mostly linked to employment and the labor market;
- In some systems, like that of the French Community of Belgium, short cycle qualifications are directly related to adult education or as a second chance for mature students. This is related also to the social dimension of the European Higher Education Area.
- The inclusion of short cycle qualifications underlines the importance of establishing a fruitful dialogue between VET providers and higher education institutions.
- In some cases, the quality assurance mechanism for short cycle qualifications need to de defined.
- Some countries, due to their historical background, have not introduced short cycle qualifications and have no plans to do so.

2020 MEETING

The 2020 meeting of the Network was scheduled to be held in Strasbourg on April 27 but had to be postponed because of the COVID pandemic. It was instead held online on September 11. The meeting gathered 46 participants representing 30 countries, the European Commission and 5 consultative members (in addition to the Council of Europe as coordinator of the network). The QF correspondents provided updates on developments in their respective countries.

The main topic for discussion was the development of micro-credentials and how they can be defined, developed and implemented within the QF-EHEA and national qualification frameworks, with presentations by the European Commission, EURASHE, and EUA.

The Network also considered draft Terms of Reference for the next work period (2022 – 24).

² Many short cycle (level 5 within the EQF) qualifications belong to sectors other than higher education, in particular vocational education and training.



CONCLUSION

In the three meetings held since the 2018 Paris Ministerial conference, then, the Network has focused on:

- The inclusion of short cycles qualifications in national frameworks compatible with the QF-EHEA:
 - This question is difficult as some countries that do not have short cycle higher education qualifications have expressed concern that they would be obliged to incorporate this qualifications level in their higher education QF.
 - The inclusion of short cycles qualifications/level 5 within higher education QFs (national and the QF-EHEA) has also created some tensions between VET providers and higher education institutions.

Nevertheless, the Network has considered examples of national practice as well as results of the work undertaken within professional higher education, presented by EURASHE. These presentations have demonstrated that, while certainly not an obligation, short cycle higher education qualifications are considered by many countries to fulfill an important function within national QFs.

- Self-certification. In contrary to EQF mechanisms, the self-certification process includes international experts but unlike the referencing of national frameworks against the European Qualification Framework for lifelong learning (EQF), they are not subject to the mechanism of critical but friendly peer review.

For the next work period of the EHEA, it is considered important that the Network of National QF Correspondents continue its work, as it needs to address several issues, including:

- Self-certification, and in particular the role of peer review;
- The paradigm shift related to the use of Learning Outcomes;
- The articulation of specific qualifications levels and education provision with the QF-EHEA and national qualifications frameworks, in particular short cycle qualifications and shorter units of learning (micro-credentials);
- A further reflection on the triangle “QF/QA/recognition”;
- A greater coherence between the work done on Competences for democratic culture and qualifications frameworks for higher education;
- A more coherent “narrative” regarding the two overarching frameworks (QF-EHEA and EQF). While the two are consistent today, it is crucial for the learners, stakeholders, and public authorities to reflect together on the two overarching frameworks not only from a technical point of view but also on the overall role of qualifications frameworks as education tools.

