



Background paper:

Testing the EQF:

Relating international, national and sectoral qualifications to the EQF¹

Cedefop supports the Commission on the challenges involved in the future implementation of the EQF at European, national and sectoral level and provides insights into sectoral dynamics and cross-sectoral developments at national and international level.

The Lifelong Learning Programme funds a wide range of actions, including co-operation projects to develop and spread innovation and to test European tools and principles. The potential beneficiaries are similarly wide – from trainees in initial vocational training, to people already in the labour market, as well as VET professionals, sectors and private or public organisations active in this field.

1. The EQF test and pilot projects

Following from the above, the piloting of the European Qualifications Framework is a priority of the programme. Member States underlined, in their responses to the consultation on the EQF (2005), that their future support to the EQF would be linked to a period of systematic testing and trial. This was also strengthened, after the official adoption of the EQF (in April 2008), in the responses of the Directors General for Vocational Education and Training collected by Cedefop (Spring 2008). Consequently, the first 12 test and pilot projects were selected in 2006 and have since been followed by 11 projects in 2007 and 10 in 2008. Call for proposals are currently being planned for 2009 and 2010.

Cedefop organises the workshop on EQF test and pilot projects in an effort to build on the lessons learned from the projects started in 2006 and 2007. While the 23 projects in question cover a wide range of issues relevant to the ongoing implementation of the EQF, two main questions can be identified:

- How can national qualifications systems link up to the EQF and how can we solve the challenges of learning outcomes, National Qualifications Frameworks and best fit?

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- How can the EQF serve the interests and needs of sectors, branches enterprises and to what extent can the EQF become a reference point for all qualifications, including international certificates and diplomas?

These two main themes have been used to structure the seminar, hosting two parallel sessions on the first day to allow the different projects to present their specific findings and to contribute to the discussion on the overarching themes.

We see however that all projects, whether they focus on the national or sectoral linking up to the EQF, address many of the same problems and challenges. These are not least linked to the shift to learning outcomes in the definition and development of qualifications and we hope that the seminar will be able to address in a systematic way the challenges in this field. We also encourage the participants in the seminar to reflect on the future needs for testing and piloting – in order to feed into the planning of the 2009 and 2010 projects.

The remaining part of this paper will address two main issues reflecting the particular responsibilities of Cedefop as regards the follow up of and support to the EQF testing and piloting:

- The issue of sectoral qualifications and the challenges related to a potential use of the EQF as a reference point for all kind of qualifications.
- How can we best make use of, valorise project results.

2. EQF as a reference point for all qualifications; including those awarded by sectors enterprises and at international level?

The EQF has raised interest in every broad sector of industry; service (financial services, personal services, commerce, tourism, health care, sports), manufacturing (automotive, chemical industry, electricity, metal), construction and the primary sector. There are also important cross-sectoral projects emerging; e.g. in ICT, marketing, social sciences, the latter with an aim to bridge education and training in VET and Higher Education. Reflecting the above interest, a number of test and pilot projects have been supported by the Commission focusing on how sector qualifications can make best use of the EQF.

Stakeholders react differently to these issues. Many national education and training authorities are concerned that the development and promotion of qualifications at sector/company and (in particular) international level will reduce transparency, threaten quality and in general undermine mutual trust towards qualifications. Their preferred option is that sectoral and enterprise-based qualifications should be linked to the EQF via national qualifications systems and frameworks. Indeed, it is argued, a direct linking of sectoral qualifications to the EQF would be unacceptable as there is (currently) no way their relevance and quality can be verified. A direct linking of sector and company qualifications could create a false image of reliability and trust, and thus increase the problems listed above.

Sectoral organisations and associations argue on their side that the rapid changes in markets and technology require more flexible and tailored solutions serving the needs of

individuals and enterprises better. These stakeholders point to the de facto development of qualifications and certificates outside the domain of national qualifications authorities. While the most common solution will be to link sector and company qualifications to the EQF via national systems and frameworks, there will be cases where stakeholders prefer to operate on their own. According to these stakeholders, ignoring these initiatives is not an option.

This diversity of approaches represents a challenge for individual citizens, for employers and for education and training authorities, illustrated by the following questions:

- Is it possible to combine sector or enterprise based qualifications and certificates with those awarded by national authorities?
- What is the value of sector and enterprise based certificates in the labour market and in the education and training system?
- How can we judge the quality of sector and company based qualifications compared to those awarded within national systems and frameworks?

Projects have been initiated by a range of stakeholders, including sector organisations, social partners, national authorities and education and training institutions. While several of these projects are still at an early stage, success seems to be closely linked to the degree of involvement of stakeholders and the feeling of ownership to an initiative achieved. This means that narrow and isolated initiatives, failing to link up to relevant stakeholders in the relevant field, may face problems as regards overall credibility and trust.

Initial findings show that there are substantial problems related to the existing differences regarding of EQF/ NQF developments but also of the educational and training systems between the member states. There are difficulties on:

- engaging all sectors of education and training (Universities, VET Institutes, Companies and Sectoral organisations etc);
- implementing the learning outcomes approach at the levels of qualifications, standards, curricula and certification;
- referencing qualifications to the NQFs and the EQF interpreting the best fit approach;
- including non formal and informal learning settings;
- establishing a common understanding of concepts and terms.

Focusing on sectoral and company based qualifications, we assume that the issue is still open-ended:

- we still lack a comprehensive overview over needs and developments in this area;
- the political implications of these issues are not sufficiently debated and need to be clarified;

- we lack a systematic elaboration on how mutual trust can be supported, for example through quality assurance and other practical measures, between the diverse stakeholders active in this field.

Increasing diversity of qualifications – for example triggered by internationalisation of markets and technology - may lead to a lack of transparency which threatens their role as trusted currencies in the labour market and education and training systems.

The question is thus whether - and how - the EQF, as a common European reference point for qualifications, can help to increase the transparency of all qualifications, irrespective of their institutional or geographic origin? While we can observe a broad agreement that the EQF can be helpful in this respect, as we have seen above, opinions vary considerably in terms of how to achieve this.

3. Making best use of project results – the challenge of valorisation

The workshop will also address the challenge of valorisation particularly related to the EQF context, and try to go beyond the dissemination - activities normally described in project proposals. For the purpose of the project presentations and the workshop discussions, a common understanding of the valorisation concept in this context should be established.

The results of the projects funded through EU programmes and initiatives need to achieve maximum impact: they should radiate as widely as possible so that the valuable lessons and experience gained by one group can benefit others. Moreover, what is learnt from a project should inform future policy. All this can happen only if connections are made between the organisers of the project and the wider community. The key means of connecting with a target audience is the process of dissemination and exploitation.

To this end, the project promoters are invited to present their project focusing on:

- the preliminary/main findings;
- the (future) promotion of these findings; and
- their (potential) contribution to lifelong learning and mobility.

Participants in the parallel sessions are invited to raise and answer the following questions:

- What are the (expected) project results?
- What kind of needs does the project respond to?
- Who are the final or potential users or beneficiaries of the project's outcome?

What we are looking for, is a potential application of the concept of valorisation to the projects and the questions above. Valorisation can be described as the process of disseminating and exploiting the results of projects with a view to:

- optimising their value;

- strengthening their impact;
- transferring them to other contexts;
- integrating them in a sustainable way; and,
- using them actively in systems and practices at regional, national, sectoral and European levels.

Dissemination of project results is often purely ‘spreading far and wide’ activities, using quantitative measures, and for valorisation, the exploitation process is quite decisive. ‘Exploitation’ is to enable others to make use of and benefit from the results, and we can identify two categories of exploitation mechanisms: mainstreaming and multiplication.

The terms ‘usefulness’ and ‘benefits’ are strongly embedded in the term ‘valorisation’ because valorisation is of origin related to an economic concept, referring both to the process whereby a capital value is conferred on something and the increase in the value of a capital asset. A valorisation process is not just a value creation process, but “a value creation process which goes beyond the point at which the worker has just created the equivalent of the value of his own labour power” (Karl Marx). Applied to projects, valorisation means that we are looking for findings and results that go beyond the context of the project itself (participants, project experiences, etc.) and the mandatory reporting of activities and outcomes.

We can describe ‘findings and results’ in the term of ‘knowledge’. The concept of valorisation is based on the underlying metaphor of ‘knowledge as a thing’, and that ‘thing’ must have a specific ‘value’. Value can be defined as the degree of usefulness or desirability of something, especially in comparison with other things, and values are inherently benefit oriented. We should also take into account that value is by definition subjective. What is useful in one context does not have to be useful in another context.

Knowledge valorisation can be understood as the process of making use of knowledge. It is quite interesting that the origins of the term ‘knowledge valorisation’ can be traced back to the debate about policy measures to turn European economy into the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world (Lisbon Agenda).

Knowledge valorisation requires identification of project results that have the potential to add value and give benefits in terms of usefulness for stakeholders not directly involved in the project.

Results can be tangible and intangible, and this affects the tools used to disseminate and exploit them. Examples of results are:

- ✓ Products
- ✓ Methods
- ✓ Experiences
- ✓ Policy lessons

Products are tangible and easy to disseminate, but usually the products will only be part of the overwhelming information flow and not part of a real valorisation process. Valorisation of results requires identification of “products, methods, experiences and

policy lessons” that have the potential of exploitation (‘knowledge valorisation’) either for mainstreaming or multiplying.

For the EQF test and pilot projects, a valorisation of results can be related to three processes:

- the development of EQF and the implementation of the EQF at national and sectoral level;
- policy development; in particular a Lifelong Learning Strategy at national and sectoral level;
- cooperation processes; identification of stakeholders and methods for cooperation at European, national and sectoral level.

Thus, this is a possible structure for the presentation of achieved and potential project results and for a follow up of the outcomes of the workshop. We expect all projects to give valuable contributions to the particular opportunities and challenges of valorisation of results in the EQF context.