NQF-SQF
National Qualifications Frameworks
Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks

Summary report
on referencing NQFs
and SQFs to the EQF

Deliverable:	22	Version:	1.0
WP:	6	Last update:	August 2012
Prepared by:	Gerald Thiel, DEKRA Akademie GmbH (DE) Claudio Demartini, Politecnico di Torino (IT) Sigrid Nindl & Viktor Fleischer, 3s research laboratory (AT)		
With contributions from:	NQF-SQF project partners		
For further information on the project please consult:	www.project-nqf-sqf.eu		
For further information on the paper please contact:	EU-project.akademie@dekra.com		

INTRODUCTION

Although learning outcomes should be basically describable for all qualifications by using the EQF descriptors knowledge, skills, and competence in the same way, regardless of their origin in terms of country or organisation responsible for maintaining and monitoring structures in which they are embedded, a mere description in EQF terms cannot dispel any doubts about the real value of this qualification: the EQF as such does not deliver enough criteria for assessment and comparison of qualifications.

It is therefore important how qualification frameworks are referenced to the EQF. In a situation where qualification frameworks are not available in every European country, every educational area, and occupational sector at the same level of development, it does not surprise that a common understanding of appropriate referencing these frameworks to the EQF does not exist.

Such a statement might be unacceptable for all who have spent a lot of efforts on trying to achieve agreements on the way how the EQF should be understood, in their national environments as well as in the framework of European collaboration. Indeed, these attempts seem to have led to some success with regard to principles how referencing of national qualifications should be undertaken, but this could up to not guarantee that ambiguity is avoided: It still happens that the same qualification is assigned to different levels, depending on the national qualification framework over which the qualification is related to the EQF.

This problem can only be solved if referencing of national or sectoral frameworks (and thereby various kinds of qualifications) does not only fulfil formal criteria, but also refers to content: This was the starting point of the project Common Grounds for Referencing NQFs and SQFs to the EQF.

In order to overcome the above suggested ambiguity of EQF level descriptions, this project developed an instrument that should be used as a kind of shadow grid of the EQF: The employability grid shall show the implicit logic of EQF levelling (as far as it exists) that is based on a relationship to work, and thereby become usable as a yardstick for assessing referencing of frameworks (resp. qualifications) to the EQF.

The employability grid was piloted within the activities of Workpackage 3 (Referenceability of national qualification frameworks) and Workpackage 4 (Referenceability of sectoral qualifications, qualification frameworks and competence frameworks): Using the employability grid as methodological instrument, typologies of frameworks were carried out and SWOT analyses produced.

The results of these activities are described in detail in the deliverables of these workpackages; for the purpose of the deliverable at hand the experiences of piloting have been summarised aligned to the above mentioned workpackages.

In the context of the project NQF-SQF 3s research laboratory was the leader of workpackage 3. 3s therefore was responsible to supervise and conduct several tasks within this workpackage as well as giving contributions and feedback on the products of other parts of the project. The aim of WP 3 was mainly defined as to investigate NQFs according to the criterion of their structure and therefore to their potential of referenceability to the EQF and to each other. Consequently, WP 3 of the project NQF – SQF explored at an early stage of the project the structure of different NQFs.

In a first step the work within WP 3 consisted of gaining an overview on National Qualification Frameworks of the different partner countries. The overview was provided by collecting relevant information from the partners. The results referred to the structure of the NQFs as well as to their typology regarding the question of coordinating, regulating or transforming the national system. Besides of descriptions of educational systems the referencing process onto the EQF was focussed. Finally, the methods of quality assurance were explored. The results were provided as ➔ *deliverable 8(a) 'Overview of National Qualification frameworks".*

Following this first step of work it turned out that further information was needed. This second round of collecting data was already influenced by the development of the employability grid within WP 2. Consequently, the questions focussed on the explicit or implicit logic of the NQFs and their relationship onto the implicit logic of the EQF. Furthermore it was asked how far work objectives and work processes were taken into account and in which way aspects as autonomy, responsibility, knowledge and skills were considered.

On the basis of the data collected a typology of the NQFs in question was compiled (see ➔ *deliverable 9 'Typology of NQFs based on the employability grid'*). This typology focussed specifically on the aspects researched in regard of the employability grid. It therefore showed the shaping of the single NQFs with respect to the implicit logic of the NQFs and the aspects of the Core Work Objective as defined within WP 2. The presentation of the typology was conducted in a descriptive way as well as in a schematic form. This happened in order to reach general statements referring to the referenceability to the work process.

The NQFs' analysis was continued by a SWOT analysis. Again, the main emphasis was laid on the results from WP 2, the employability grid. The description of strengths and weaknesses as well as threats and opportunities reflected back on building up a typology of the NQFs in question. For this reason, the basis of the SWOT analysis interacted in a strong way with the composition of the typology. The information needed for the SWOT analysis was collected within the two-step research process described above. As a consequence, the research results can be divided into two parts – the first one focussing on the NQFs as such whereas the second one connecting the structures of the NQFs with the concept of the core work objective. Both questions were integrated into the final SWOT analysis, though laying a focus on the

NQF-SQF:
Summary report on referencing NQFs and SQFs to the EQF

"This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein."

Education and Culture DC
Lifelong Learning Programme

3/11
prepared by DERKA (DE), Politecnico di Torino (IT) and 3srl (AT)

more specific, last mentioned part of the information. Further information see in → *deliverable 8(b) 'National Qualification Frameworks. Their logics, orientations, strengths and weaknesses'* and → *deliverable 10 'Compilation of SWOT analysis results of NQFs'.*

As a concluding step a critical discussion was led aiming at work process orientation as referencing criterion for qualification frameworks (→ see *deliverable 11 'Limitations regarding the work process orientation as referencing criterion'*). As the projects' main product, the employability grid tried to make work process orientation more tangible. So this criterion constituted the background for the whole proceeding within the project. The discussion included general considerations on the significance of work process orientation within the development process of the EQF. Then experiences made within the project NQF-SQF by the project partners were reflected. Those experiences could be identified in single products of the project, specifically within the partners' feedback referring to SQFs (WP 4) and NQFs (WP 3) existing in the single partner countries.

From the perspective of 3s research laboratory as work package leader of WP 3, there are several lessons learned from the project NQF-SQF. In general, the practical experience of the whole EQF process shows certain limitations of the concept of work process orientation. Especially levels 6 to 8 of the EQF are defined in a way which is not exclusively rooted within the paradigm of work process orientation. It rather applies to a institutional differentiation between academic work and other work. The reasons for this conceptualisation are rather to be found in the institutional history of the EQF-development. Nevertheless, consequences of this fact could also be identified within the project.

In detail, the main challenge could be identified in the fact that the EQF's entitlement to be generally applicable to all kinds of qualifications, sectors and professions leads to the need to stay on a rather abstract level. Thus the descriptors cannot refer to specific work processes as this is only possible for frameworks referring to one specific sector or other smaller units. The abstract character of the EQF results in abstract definitions of work processes. For example professional tasks like personnel management or product innovation (expressed via different aspects of knowledge, skills and competences) can mean very different intents when being applied in different sectors. This again widens the distance between concrete work processes in the world of work and their formulation within the EQF terminology.

Beyond that, the application of the EQF-descriptors referring to knowledge, skills and competences in practice reveals that those definitions only come into effect in connection with the context of work and therefore with the hierarchical organisation of work. Organisational hierarchies however are not purely defined over the tasks to be fulfilled within one job. So the reference to the organisation of work also abandons from a pure reference to work processes. The aim of the employability grid, defined as to make explicit the relationships between work processes and the abilities to carry them out, underlied similar demands as the EQF itself.

Also within the project context the restrictions mentioned above implied the need to stay on a rather abstract level resulting in the same implications as they were made above for the EQF. The Core Work Objective, meant as a common nucleus which is inherent to all work processes, was created

A comprehensive approach like the employability grid required in advance a collection and a decent analysis of already existing frameworks in order to develop a functional tool of translation and support. The results of this research and analysis opened a further source for the question of the limitations of work process orientation. The reflections on NQFs under the light of discussion around the employability grid showed rather similar restrictions as they were discussed above concerning the EQF. The abstract character of the EQF is occasionally also mirrored within the concepts of single NQFs, in particular if their development had started alongside with the EQF. The abstract character abandons, as mentioned above, from connecting framework definitions with specific work processes. This gap condensed in the fact that many partners could not identify the aspects of the Core Work Objective – and therefore work processes – within the national NQFs.

As shown above, the discussion concerning the limitations of work process orientation is predominantly based on methodological and practical problems appearing within the project. But beyond that, also a more general discussion took place referring to the question of the relationship between work and qualifications meant as ability to meet the employers' demands. So some general objections against an exclusive view on work via work processes appeared. According to these statements, this orientation on work processes detracts the view from other social aspects, for example from ethical questions.

As a final conclusion, it can be stated that the limitations of work process orientation as referencing criterion are mainly based on the conception of the EQF and qualification frameworks referring to the EQF. Thus they are connected with the abstract character which those frameworks necessarily have to feature. One of the projects goals was to deliver a concept how to bridge this gap between specific work processes and the actual conceptualisation of the EQF. In this context it turned out to be a practical problem to reference already existing frameworks (SQFs, NQFs) to the new terminology developed within the employability grid. Those methodological problems will have to be solved before being able to apply the employability grid to a wider range of frameworks and therefore to make it a comprehensive tool of translation.

Based on the analysis outcomes, the emerging scenario identifies two sectors, Construction in Romania together with its transnational perspective, and Retail, even though bounded to its transnational instance, that are developing their own SQF, even if within the context of specific projects, where strategies adopted by partners exploit EQF guidelines directly for the definition of core elements of a qualification thus overcoming national borders. An interesting case study concerns the ICT sector, where the European e-Competence Framework establishes a transnational common language for ICT competences that can support the description of jobs, training courses, qualifications, career paths, formal and non-formal learning rules, certificates, etc. Since the definition process for e-Competence took place far before the emergence of the well-known institutional framework on qualifications, national ICT frameworks have been put in place, which could also be linked to the European e-Competence one, thus gaining an international dimension, independent of, even if compliant with, the EQF scenario.

On the other hand, a national SQF has already been developed in Spain for the Public Service sector and in France for Logistics. According to strategies adopted in both the countries by the government bodies, SQFs for the Public Service and Logistics should exploit NQFs first in order to be linked to EQF. In case of France linking the French Logistics Qualification Frameworks to EQF, requires French stakeholders implement a shift from a "competence" approach organized in 5 levels to one organized on 8 tiers, where skills, knowledge and abilities may be formally separated and distinguished. In any case, the scenario becomes more complex when private contexts take the floor. In fact, based on the results of the analysis carried out in Spain, but verified in other countries too, the link SQF-NQF could imply a general reassessment on a country base of professional levels of workers thus affecting heavily wages and salaries. For this reason, and for the fact that NQFs are too rigid to comply with fast changes featured by the labour market, enterprises are likely to sustain a direct link SQF-EQF. This is particularly true if another key point is considered when linking a given SQF to EQF, which is the difference between competences and performance needs, a mail stone for enterprises, even if not related to the previous issue dealing with levels. Usually, qualifications are in fact described in terms of competences, while wages are linked to performance. In any case, both these issues seem to be overcome by the <u>EQF Advisory Board which has finally recommended that SQFs should not be referenced directly to the EQF, but passing through the NQFs.</u> This guarantees a direct link between National Agencies for the Qualification Frameworks and the European Commission also providing a uniform and shared reading schema of qualifications stated at National level and a simplified organization of relationships.

Concerning SQFs referenceability to the work process by means of the Employability grid developed in WP2, it came out from the investigation that many sectors (Logistics and Construction sectors in France are good examples) have their SQFs fully work-objective

NQF-SQF:

Summary report on referencing NQFs and SQFs to the EQF

"This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein."

Education and Culture DC
Lifelong Learning Programme

6/11

prepared by DERKA (DE), Politecnico di Torino (IT) and 3srl (AT)

oriented and also complying for the most with the work core-objectives represented in the employability grid. However, the work-orientation criterion is not as easy to consider in practice as expected. In fact, SQFs might be "real" work-objective oriented, if SQFs levels perfectly fit to the needs of the industry, by contrast "in theory" work-objective oriented, when SQFs levels fit only in part to those needs.

Regarding SQFs orientation to EQF descriptors (SKC), it was found out that this orientation can be identified in the majority of sectors but only in some cases (still referring to Logistics and Construction in France) the relation among "knowledge", "skills" and "competences" is really abiding by the logic of EQF. Another example is offered by Spain where even though the relation among "competences", "skills" and "knowledge" is aligned with EQF, nonetheless it does not comply with the same logic structure. For doing this, it is currently necessary to dive into professional profiles descriptions and get the most from the content.

Finally, autonomy and responsibility concepts have been made visible in all the sectoral qualifications frameworks, whether formalized or not, which have been taken into account for the analysis.

Dealing with the relationship between SQFs and the National Qualification Systems and Frameworks, the investigation shows that only some countries have declared their SQFs integrated in the NQF. This will be a sensitive issue to be debated at collective agreements and will likely take years to develop, at least at the private company realm. One reason for the concerns lies in the fact that linking SQFs to the NQF could imply reassessment of workers professional levels which could eventually lead to salaries rising at large. Furthermore SQFs in general are often described in terms of "Professional Categories", not as "Qualifications" and these Professional Categories are pretty much related to "Job positions" than to "Competences".

In addition the majority of cases declare to prefer an indirect link between SQFs and EQF passing through NQFs. Depending on the standpoint this can be perceived either as a strength or a weakness. It is a strength when it is read as a means to decrease complexity of the overall system of referenceability, on the contrary it is perceived as a weakness when the system is evaluated in terms of opportunities for the valorisation of the sector international visibility and interaction.

Although the relationship between SQFs and work processes seems obvious according to their sector-orientation, it is not self-evident that this relationship is properly expressed in a way that sectoral qualification becomes comparable with similar qualifications embedded in NQFs and in EQF.

In order to decide how sectoral qualification approaches could best be referenced to EQF – directly or over the NQFs – it is also important to know what the relationship of sectoral systems to national systems is, if their existence mirrors a critical position of sectoral

NQF-SQF:
Summary report on referencing NQFs
and SQFs to the EQF

7/11
prepared by DERKA (DE),
Politecnico di Torino (IT) and 3srl (AT)

stakeholders against NQFs, or if they can – in a wider sense – be considered supplements of the national systems.

For this purpose, a SWOT analysis was carried out in order to *draft recommendations on how the SQFs analyzed could be enhanced and refined to make work processes transparent.* In other words, the results of the SWOT analysis performed on individual sectors have been joined yielding to the following table, which can be considered the coherent synthesis of all collected data.

Taking care of these results achieved, the synthesis scenario can be depicted using the following image which takes into account all the reference points involved in the investigation: the worker (W) at the lower layer L0, the Work Process (WP) at layer L1, SQF and NQF at the intermediate tiers (L3 and L2) and EQF at the Higher one (L4).
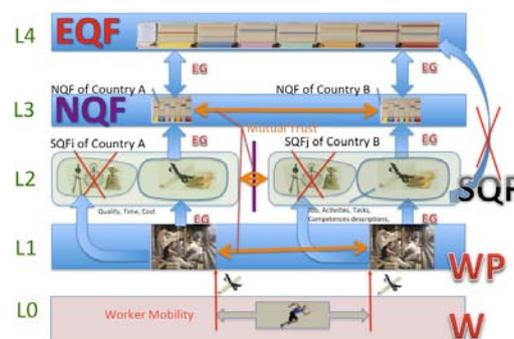
As fully sustained by the SWOT analysis, referencing SQFs to EQF is commonly recognised like a useful tool to enable and increase permeability, transparency and comparability of qualifications. This also means enabling mobility of employees, caught in the image at level L0, as the main objective of the whole hierarchical system made available in Europe.

By the way, to this day promoting mobility in the European countries is not an easy task, because – for example – a qualification recognised being "level 4" in a country does not imply that level in another one. Because of this, mutual recognition of European qualifications is sometimes not working properly, also due to the wrong appliance of a "protectionist" view of the local labour market. These drawbacks could be overcome thanks to the development of a qualification recognition system based on transparency able to enforce mutual trust, as suggested in the figure.

Being largely recognized that both SQFs and EQF show work orientation, fully awareness has also been assumed about work orientation shown by the Employability grid (EG), put in place in this study and applied, taking it as a tool to validate relationships among the layers depicted in the figure.

The study has also shown as a common feeling that SQFs should not be referenced directly to the EQF, but through the NQFs, as it was also stated by institutional bodies of the Commission. It is not only a political correct way for building the link, since it contributes effectively to

decrease the complexity of the overall system of referenceability providing a direct link between National Agencies for the Qualification Frameworks and the European Commission. The figure reports the direct link between L2, SQF, and L4, EQF, deleted in favour of the indirect link through NQF.

Referencing SQF (L2) to NQF (L3), assumed that once declared by a country it respects all the criteria indicated by the Commission, is also useful to make a qualification aligned with local, national and transnational perspectives and to implement a target setting and a quality-assurance tool for training providers. The latter plays a basic role making mutual trust sustainable at all levels, being the validation got at the higher layer the means to strengthen the mutual trust pursued at the lower one.

In other words, the system shown in the figure represents the main opportunity to overcome the gap between the different European qualification systems and the differences in the content and interpretation of jobs within the European labour market, harmonizing sectoral qualifications across Europe; identifying employability features and attracting employees with a clear education framework to help companies get on board of the qualification recognition scene.

The system image cannot show the perspectives caught in terms of weaknesses registered for the link SQFs - NQF – EQF. The SWOT analysis exhibits in fact that the link could imply reassessment of professional levels of workers affecting also wages. Enterprises and Trade Unions perceive it as a problem which can appear as soon as they link their qualifications within the NQ Framework. In particular, enterprises fear that the levels applied to workers in that case may change and influence the salary of their employees. Furthermore they claim NQFs being too rigid to comply with fast changes of the labour market, considering that enterprises often change work requirements, while curricula may in some cases experience changes only after several years. This means that since learners need learning-competence to keep up-to-date with work requirements, it is important to evaluate how far a successful implementation of SQFs/NQFs/EQF is based on a right specific environment, which delivers the right possibilities, that is why enterprise sometimes declare to prefer a direct link SQFs-EQF.

In some cases qualifications are also as diverse as the cultures they represent, because some NQFs are not only oriented on work processes but also on values, related to professional body corporate, as an example. In these case orientations lead to conflicts in daily life work practice, when interests of clients and workers are in contrast. Thus, the assumption "it is preferable an indirect link between SQFs and the EQF through the NQFs" could be seen both as a strength or a weakness at the same time. It is a strength when reasoning in terms of complexity decreasing of the overall referenceability system, it is a weakness when taking into account the degree of valorisation of the sectoral international visibility and interaction.

Nonetheless, linking SQF to EQF through NQF, does not seem to narrow so much the potential visibility of a national SQF which can for sure by its own prosecute its specific internationalization process, also coping with the interactions required by the National Agency to get the new release of the qualification aligned with its NQF.

A key point, also relieved in the analysis, that should be considered when linking a given SQF to the EQF, is the difference between competences and performance needs, which in the figure are represented in terms of Quality, Time and Cost (Q,T,C), being them parameters collected at layer L2, when observing the human resource at work in layer L1. Since qualifications are described in terms of competences, while performance are linked to wages, they are considered not related to each other and, even though graphically represented in the diagram, having them being dealt with by the experts, they have been explicitly marked as cancelled. Some of the experts, especially those more acquainted with SMEs environment perceive all this as a weakness of the whole system.

Another weakness declared in the study is the work-orientation criterion, which has been made explicit in both the Employability grid and EQF, but difficult to render in practice. To simplify SQF has been taken as "real" work-objective oriented if levels perfectly fit to the needs of the enterprise, but only "in theory" work-objective oriented if relationships among "knowledge", "skills" and "competences" does not cope with the logic of EQF.

Finally, in the following, a summary is reported on some threats which contrast the referencing of SQF to EQF:

- some enterprises declare poor need of having sectoral qualifications related to EQF since the most relevant feature asked for to an employee is motivation, since, they sustain, abilities are usually gained through learning on the job;
- specific sectors, gathering for the most small companies, mainly working on local territories, declare a small interest in the internationalization process;
- polyvalent jobs, featuring qualifications which could embrace different levels when referenced to EQF, thus leading to unavoidable criticalities, are more than likely in the labour market;
- cultural differences losing, as a consequence of progressive homogenization of qualification frameworks, is often considered a drawback
- political implications, related to obsolete Collective Agreements, legal structures and procedures, adopted by the labour market and resisting against change of the very fundamental pillars of these structures and the way professional profiles and categories are described, can make the adoption process complex and slow;
- unaffordable response time of political decision and consensus making among Labour Unions, Companies and government bodies, can cause intolerable delay.

CONCLUSION

The chapters above have summarized the work results achieved by applying the employability grid as a tool of analysis. They are specific in terms of the topics to which Workpackage 3 and 4 refer: referencing of national and sectoral frameworks to the EQF. They are generic in terms of the usability of the employability grid. With regard to these results, it can be said:

- Work results achieved in the above mentioned workpackages show that relevant typologies and SWOT analyses could be set up with the help of the employability grid. This proves the basic usability of the employability for the purposes planned within the project.

- In order to provide for easier applicability, the employability grid has to be further developed, using technical assistance tools (as matrices, etc.) as far as possible. This means that simplicity is fine, but must not appear if the subject is complex.

- Moreover, it has to be reflected within further development which role issues play that could for the time being not be considered: the "educational competence" of individuals that is mentioned in the descriptions of higher EQF levels, and the ways how knowledge and skills refer to competence (which is in our opinion the ruling category)