NQF-SQF

National Qualifications Frameworks
Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks

Common grounds for referencing NQFs and SQFs to the EQF

Final Report   Public Part

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Executive Summary

Following the philosophy of the *European Qualifications Framework (EQF), learning outcomes* should be basically describable for all qualifications by using the 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, however, cannot dispel any doubts about the real value of these learning outcomes. For the EQF *as such* does not deliver enough criteria for assessment and comparison of qualifications: These descriptors leave a lot of space for interpretations with regard to the *level* where the qualifications have to be allocated.

It is therefore important *how national and sectoral qualification frameworks are referenced* to the EQF: A *reference* of national or sectoral frameworks to the EQF should deliver a link that needs no further discussion and ensures that everybody understands the relationship between EQF and national/sectoral frameworks in the same way. However, 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. But as the EQF is not intended to serve as a regulation of European education, institutional aspects do not play a primary role, and organisations responsible for frameworks of any kind are encouraged to reference them to the EQF. Due to not existing general content-oriented referencing criteria, this should cause problems especially where qualification systems/frameworks compete or at least exist separately from each other: This is the case for national qualifications frameworks ministered by public bodies and sectoral qualification frameworks supervised by (private) sectoral organisations; but it concerns also "isolated" sector-oriented qualifications.[1]

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[1]   The EQF recommendation of the European Parliament allows national qualification frameworks as well as sectoral qualification frameworks to be directly linked to the EQF, see *RECOMMENDATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, p.2.* The EQF Advisory Group, dealing with the described problem of competition, now suggests that sectoral frameworks should in the future only be related to the EQF via national qualification frameworks. This might help to clarify the conflict lines, but it does not finally solve the problem: If understandings of EQF descriptors differ, this should now become obvious in direct confrontation. This is makes it the more necessary to identify criteria for generally acceptable interpretations.

The overall aim of the project NQF-SQF is to *create common grounds for referencing national qualifications frameworks and sectoral qualifications/competence frameworks to the EQF*, thereby providing for *comparability of qualifications* on the basis of learning outcomes defined in terms of *abilities* required by *work processes*. This shall be enabled by the use of an *instrument to be developed within the project*: the *employability grid.* This grid shall be applicable for the assessment of qualifications as well as for the evaluation of frameworks these qualifications refer to. It shall test how far descriptions of frameworks and qualifications make visible what the learning outcomes of qualification processes are in terms of work process requirements, thus supporting employment at the European labour market.

This instrument was piloted by using it in order to design *typologies of national and sectoral frameworks*, leading to recommendations for enhancing referenceability of frameworks, encompassing also a work process relationship criterion which can be added to the catalogue of referencing criteria already defined by the *EQF Advisory Group.*

On the basis of this work, suggestions for *future collaboration between private/public* stakeholders at European level were drafted, referring to the work of relevant *already collaborating stakeholders*: the *EQF Advisory Group.*

The composition of the project consortium (twelve private/ public partners from nine European countries) reflects the project objectives: Some partners belong to the EQF Advisory Group or fulfil the role of national EQF contact points, others are closely linked to them: Existing networks were used in order to mobilise all expertise necessary to achieve the above described goals.

These networks were not only useful for reaching *experts* in the field, but also those who are provided to be *end users* of the EQF: *organisations of various origin and individuals*. The project should contribute to overcome the "EQF information divide"; it is therefore considerable efforts were put into relevant activities.

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Project Objectives

The overall aim of the project was to *create common grounds for referencing national qualifications frameworks and sectoral qualifications/competence frameworks to the EQF*, thereby providing for *comparability of qualifications* on the basis of learning outcomes defined in terms of *abilities* required by *work processes*. This was to be enabled by the use of an *instrument to be developed within the project*: the *employability grid*[2]. This grid shall be applicable for the assessment of qualifications as well as for the evaluation of frameworks to which qualifications refer; it shall be able test how far descriptions of frameworks and qualifications make visible what the learning outcomes of qualification processes are in terms of work process requirements, thus supporting employment at the European labour market.

The instrument was to be used in order to draft *typologies of national and sectoral frameworks*, leading to recommendations for enhancing referenceability of frameworks. On the basis of thus improved framework descriptions, similar national/sectoral qualifications/occupational profiles had to be compared for selected sectors. The results of these piloting activities were used for final refinement of the employability grid.

The whole process of drafting typologies and comparing qualifications/profiles was to be considered in order to find out which work process oriented criteria for referenceability of frameworks can be determined, possibly addable to the catalogue of referencing criteria already defined by the EQF Advisory Group.

Using the results of this evaluation as a starting point, a *suggestions collaboration between private/public stakeholders* at European level had to be made, to be supported by partnerships at national level. This kind of collaboration should be flexible enough to match continuously changing work process requirements, but at the same time cover the need of stability in terms of transparent and reliable rules of referencing.

It was intended to refer activities providing for the sustainability of project results *to the work of already collaborating stakeholders belonging to the EQF Advisory Group*. The project consortium, encompassing some of these stakeholders and further partners embedded in already existing or arising networks, could open doors for further development, and this should help to apply a dissemination strategy intending to overcome the "EQF information divide" between EQF experts and possible users, thereby creating a "zone of mutual trust" for smooth future use of the EQF by all kinds of stakeholders.

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[2] This name was chosen since the ability to fulfill tasks within concrete work processes is crucial for being employed. This does not exclude that there additional reasons for getting a job.

Project Approach

The project approach can be divided into two areas:

1. The development of a *methodology usable for refining mechanisms of referencing national and sectoral qualification frameworks to the EQF* was the core issue of the project. The main idea that underlies the project activities carried out in order to draft this methodology was to set up an instrument which is called *employability grid*: Starting from the *work process* that is understood as an ensemble of activities steered by a common goal (to deliver a *product* or a *service*), then defining the main issues of the work process understood that way, it shall be determined how *abilities* can be identified that correspond to it. Since it is assumed that the EQF descriptors *knowledge, skills,* and *competence* basically include components relevant for this purpose (if this not the case, this would mean that EQF relevant features of qualifications have nothing to do with work), they were analysed from this *work perspective*.

   This analysis was led by the following reflection: If a general work orientation of the EQF can be identified, it makes sense to suppose that *differences in EQF levels* correspond to *differences in work position*s. Against this background, it seemed reasonable to investigate if a *levelling logic* exists which is based on this correspondence. This kind of logic can only be an *implicit* one; otherwise it would have been described together with the EQF descriptors.

   The result of this analysis refers to two issues:
   - It gives an answer to the question how far the EQF is appropriate as a standard that shall correspond to the requirements of work: to the same extent as it is possible to identify the above mentioned levelling logic
   - Making this implicit logic explicit means to reduce the opportunities for interest-led assignments of national and sectoral qualification frameworks to the EQF – which was one of the main objectives of the project.

   The basis for this procedure was laid within Workpackage 2 where a draft of the employability grid was developed. This draft version was used within

piloting activities having taken place within WP 3 – 5. The results of these activities were used in order to design a final version of the employability grid.[3]

2. Creating Ground for a Future Zone of Mutual Trust

A *zone of mutual trust* of EQF promoters and users should be initiated referring to a collaboration model between public/private stakeholders based on the evaluation of project results achieved in the above mentioned workpackages dealing with the d*evelopment and application of referencing methodology.* The aim of work was to supplement already existing referencing criteria and to describe procedures for accrediting referencing processes (Workpackage 6), to be supported by a dissemination strategy which should help to overcome the "EQF information divide" between experts and potential end users of the EQF (Workpackage 7).

With regard to the above mentioned collaboration model, it turned out that it was less easy to lay the ground practically. It could be reached that the project approach will be discussed in one of the next meetings of the EQF Advisory Group, but, of course, it is not clear how far the suggestions of the project consortium will be taken in account.

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[3] This goes beyond a mere *labeling* of qualifications by the (necessarily) abstract EQF descriptors which seems to be characteristic for a big part of current approaches to relate qualifications to the EQF. It is understood that criteria have to be delivered which help to avoid debates about the relative weight of features identified to be characteristic for certain qualifications; this will end up with (political) agreements on EQF assignment which are arbitrary to a high degree and will not contribute to create "zones of mutual trust" based on transparency for all interested parties.

Project Outcomes & Results

The major project outcome is the so called "Employability grid/ EQF Shadow grid". This grid is applicable for the assessment of qualifications as well as for the evaluation of frameworks qualifications refer to. It shall tests how far descriptions of frameworks and qualifications make visible what the learning outcomes of qualification processes are in terms of work process requirements, thus supporting employment at the European labour market:

- **Employability grid / EQF Shadow grid**
  (Draft employability grid v.1)
  The deliverable "Employability grid" describes an approach to develop a holistic model of abilities required for working as a professional and the related learning objectives by mirroring the work process. This draft is based on the analysis outcomes described in del. "Methodological approach for a holistic and functional description of work processes" and on further investigation of this approach in relation to different sectors, NQFs and SQFs. Furthermore this document outlines basic considerations that lead to this draft and discusses its general applicability and usability in praxis.

- **Key questions for NQF and SQF analysis**
  Starting from the draft instrument presented in deliverable "Draft employability grid" key questions have been developed that can be used in order to analyse NQFs, SQFs and "isolated" qualifications regarding the criterion of "creating employability". This document outlines basic considerations that lead to these key questions and will discuss their general applicability and usability in praxis. Therefore it is the basis for further investigations primarily in WP 3 and 4 of this project.

- **Methodical approach for a holistic and functional description of work processes**
  This deliverable documents different approaches to describe work processes considered for further investigation within this project as well as their selection criteria and the approach applied in order to analyse them. Furthermore it documents the analysis results and the conclusions drawn from analysis. Finally it presents a methodological approach for a holistic and functional description of work processes and discusses its usability for deriving a system of abilities from the work process description received.

The application of the employability/ shadow grid has been explored and tested in the context of:

National Qualifications Frameworks

- **Overview of National Frameworks** and
  National Qualifications Frameworks: Their logics, orientations, strengths and weaknesses
  These papers summarise the data collected within the NQF-SQF workpackage 3 on "Referenceability of NQFs" and build the basis for further analysis with regard to the employability grid approach.

- **Typology of National Qualifications Frameworks based on the employability grid**
  This typology suggests categorises of National Qualification Framework within Europe regarding their referenceability to the work process.

- **Compilation of SWOT analysis results of National Qualifications Frameworks and recommendations for further enhancement**
  Different NQFs that have a strong reference to SQFs in the sectors chosen within the project have been selected and analysed with the SWOT analysis. This deliverable documents the selection of the different NQFs for further investigation as well as their analysis. Based on the analysis results recommendations have been drafted within this deliverable how the selected NQFs could be enhanced and refined in order to make work processes transparent.

- **Limitations regarding the work process orientation as referencing criterion**
  This deliverable critically discusses the work process as referencing criterion and highlights its limitations and also the threats that might occur by relying without critical reflection on this approach.

Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks

- **Overview of Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks**
  This overview of Sectoral Qualification Frameworks provides a first overview on existing Sectoral Qualification Frameworks and "isolated sectoral qualifications" and intends to describe the different SQFs primarily according to their objectives and structure.

- **Typology of Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks based on the Employability grid**
  This typology suggests categories of Sectoral Qualification Framework within Europe regarding their referenceability to the work process.

- **Typology of Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks based on their relationship to national qualification systems and NQFs**
  This typology is a supplement to the previous typology and suggests categories of Sectoral Qualification Framework within Europe regarding their relationship to national qualification systems and frameworks.

- **Compilation of SWOT analysis results of Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks**
  For sectors chosen for the case studies a/the SQF has been selected and analysed with the SWOT analysis. This deliverable documents the selection of the different SQFs for further investigation as well as their analysis. Based on the analysis results recommendations have been drafted within this deliverable how the selected SQFs could be enhanced and refined in order to make work processes transparent.

- **Referenceability report on sectoral qualifications approaches**
  This deliverable summarises the findings of this workpackage and drafts suggestions on how SQFs could be enhanced and refined in order to be referenced directly or via a NQF to the EQF.

Sectoral Case Studies

- **Case study construction sector**
- **Case study ICT sector**
- **Case study logistics sector**
- **Case study retail sector**
- **Overall case study report**

Based on the project results a number of **recommendations and proposals** have been developed in order to enhance the facilitation of employability through qualifications frameworks.

- **Summary report on referencing NQFs and SQFs to the EQF (based on the employability grid)**
  This report summarises and processes the workpackages and project findings regarding the referencing NQFs and SQFs to the EQF by proposing a model of collaboration between sectoral and public stakeholders.

- **Suggestions for extending the catalogue of referencing criteria**
  This deliverable draws suggestions from the project results in order to extend the already available catalogue of referencing criteria in a way that comparability of qualifications and professional profiles can be assured.

- **Collection of possible organisational approaches and model of collaboration**
  This deliverable discusses organisational approaches conceivable for the proposed model of collaboration of stakeholders. Options are outlined and discussed regarding their feasibility for this specific community.

Based on these development results **four major events** have been successfully implemented in the framework of the NQF-SQF project in cooperation with public bodies, other European projects and a German broadcasting:

- An expert conference on **"Qualification frameworks - a contribution to the establishment of a European labour market?",** 26 June 2012, Munich (DE)
  This conference has been implemented in cooperation with the Bavarian Broadcasting together with the related project Matching Frames and gathered a large group of high-level experts and stakeholders.

- A German expert conference with the same title **"Qualification frameworks - a contribution to the establishment of a European labour market?",** 25 June 2012, Munich (DE)
  This workshop has also been implemented with the Bavarian Broadcasting and in cooperation with the project Matching Frames. It discussed the conference topic from the German perspective.

- An expert workshop on **"Methodological Reflections on Referencing",** 18 February 2011, Sliema (MT)
  This workshop focused on methodical reflections on referencing and started an informal ongoing expert dialogue among experts from in- and outside the project consortium.

- A stakeholder workshop on **"EQF from theory to praxis: the implementation of sectoral qualifications frameworks",** 26 November 2010, Athens (HE)
  This workshop addressed a wider group of stakeholders involved and/or concerned by the development of qualifications frameworks. It has been implemented in cooperation with the GSLLL and EOPP in Greece.

Furthermore a number of publications on referencing and on the EQF in general have been developed in order to reach a wider public as well as experts and to make a contribution to the EQFs implementation also beyond the projects thematic focus:

- **A collection of (scientific) articles on the topic of referencing to Qualifications Frameworks**

- **An expert workshop documentation on "Methodical Reflections on Referencing"**

- **The brochure "Summaries of European Debate on Qualifications Frameworks: The status quo in Europe"**

- **The brochure on "The Employability Grid" and its application**

All project results and documentations of the events are publicly available on the project website: www.project-nqf-sqf.eu.

Partnerships

The consortium is composed of twelve partners from nine European countries:

- Institut Technik und Bildung, Universität Bremen (ITB), Germany, Project Promoter, a public research institution

- DEKRA Akademie GmbH (DEKRA), Germany, Project Coordinator, a training provider

- 3s research laboratory (3s), Austria, a private research institution

- Association pour le développement de la Formation (AFT-IFTIM), France; an organisation of the French logistics sector

- Fundación Laboral de Metal (FLM),Spain; a foundation of Spanish trade unions

- ANC (former ACPART), Romania; an educational body of the Romanian government

- Lux Personal & Kommunikation GmbH (Lux), Germany, a consultancy service in the field of VET

- Centre Régional pour le développement, la formation et l'insertion des jeunes (CREDIJ), France, a spin-off of the ministry of labour

- Politecnico Torino (Politecnico), Italy; a public research institution

- General secretariat for Lifelong Learning (GSLL), Greece; an educational body of the Greek government

- Malta Qualifications Council (MQC), Malta; an educational body of the government of Malta

- Kenniscentrum Handel (KCH), The Netherlands; a public body responsible for VET in the trade sector

It can be seen that the partnership encompasses public bodies as well as private organisations dealing with educational issues in specific sectors. With one exception, all partners have already participated in EQF-oriented projects, most of them in more than one, some of them as co-ordinators. The exception concerns the *General Secretariat for Lifelong Learning in Greece;* this public body is the EQF national contact point and deals ex officio with EQF issues.

This shows that the project consortium is familiar with project issues not only in principle, but has achieved a level of matter-related experience in previous work

which should allow partners to start project activities not from scratch, but at a level of discussion which refers to problems to be solved while implementing the EQF as a tool for making descriptions of national qualifications understandable abroad.

Apart from these general skills enabling partners to carry out project work, specific abilities to fulfil the tasks provided in the project can be demonstrated as follows:

Overall management and quality assurance

- *WP 1 Project management*: The project was co-ordinated by *DEKRA Akademie GmbH* who already had this role within four completed and running EQF-related projects (*Embedding ICT/Multimedia Standardisation Initiatives into Vocational Training Strategies in Europe, European Automotive Sector Competence Meta-Framework – EASCMF, Ways to Sustainability, VET Stakeholders in the Automotive Sector - VETAS, EQF-adapted educational elements in a predictable framework of change- EQF Predict, Professional dirivng – more than just driving! - ProfDRV*)

- *WP 8 Quality assurance:* This workpackage was led by FLM who has relevant experience in quality assurance activities.

Development and Application of Methodology

- *WP 2 Employability grid*: This work package was led by DEKRA Akademie who was strongly involved in developing a work process related approach of interpreting EQF descriptors within the project EASCMF. *ITB*, also involved in this project, disposing of a lot of experience in describing work processes, contributes to this workpackage as well as the leaders of the other workpackages of the group *Development and Application of Methodology,* thereby ensuring that the methodology is properly applied within the WPs led by them.

- *WP 3 Referenceability of national qualification frameworks:* This workpackage was led by *3s*, co-ordinator of the project *EQF-Ref* which seeks to identify procedures of 'good practice' for referencing (national) qualifications levels to the EQF and deals with testing the referencing criteria defined by the EQF Advisory Group. All partners who are responsible for national qualification systems/frameworks or parts of them participated in this workpackage: MQC, GSLL, UECNCFPA, (responsible for qualifications of higher education in Romania), in this workpackage especially considered the framework issues of higher education.

- *WP 4 Referenceability of sectoral qualifications, qualifications/competence frameworks*: This WP was led by *Politecnico di Torino*, responsible for the

currently carried out CEDEFOP study *The relation between sectoral qualifications and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)* and involved in sector-oriented EQF projects, supported by *DEKRA Akademie* and *Kenniscentrum* who were also involved in this study. Further contributors were *AFT-IFTIM*, the most important French training provider in the sector of transport and logistics, *CREDIJ* (experienced with issues of the construction sector), and *FLM* with relevant experience of the metal sector.

- *WP 5 Case studies piloting the application of methodology*: This workpackage was led by *KCH* who develops and maintains the national qualification structure for existing and new occupations in the trade sector of the Netherlands. Although being a public body, it works in close co-operation with trade companies. Further participants were *DEKRA Akademie* (experienced by co-ordinating the ICT related project *Embedding standards* and member of the CEN/ISSS Workshop on ICT Skills), *AFT-IFTIM*, and *CREDIJ*.

Creating Ground for a Future Zone of Mutual Trust

- *WP 6 Model of collaboration between sectoral/public stakeholders*: This WP was led by MQC, EQF National contact point for Malta. MQC has to deal with the challenge of reconciling issues of national and sectoral frameworks in the own country. In this workpackage, all partners played an active role who are sectoral stakeholders or competent bodies at national level.

- *WP 7 Overcoming the EQF information divide*: This workpackage had two leaders who closely collaborated: *ITB* with a lot of experience in the field of VET research and involved in various projects dealing with EQF issues at sectoral level will be responsible for the "scientific" part of this workpackage, *Lux Kommunikation*, having worked since years as a "professional disseminator" and involved in sectoral EQF projects, therefore responsible for developing and realising a dissemination strategy for a cluster of EQF projects in the automotive sector, will take over the task of planning and co-ordinating dissemination activities addressed to a broader audience. All project partners used their networks in order to contribute to work in this workpackage.

The project consortium can use the involvement of partners in a lot of EQF-related projects for facilitating work to be carried out: Projects could be considered easily accessible resources of preparatory work. The networks of partners, intentionally developing through project activities, was a *resource of experts* which could be activated at short notice.

Plans for the Future

1. It is suggested to exploit project results for creating a wider structure of *collaboration between all stakeholders who are relevant for setting up and monitoring qualifications and occupational profiles* at European, national or sectoral level, coming from the public as well as from the private side. These stakeholders could build a *community* whose structure and composition of this as well as the *system of criteria for recognition of referencing to the EQF* should help to create a *central zone of mutual trust in terms of flexibility and reliability.* For this purpose the following activities could be carried out:

   - Typologies developed within the project and reports related to them could be evaluated in order to extend the already available catalogue of referencing criteria in a way that comparability of qualifications and professional profiles can be ensured.

   - A model of accreditation of referencing processes could be based on the overall set of criteria shall be drafted.

   - Methods of monitoring referencing processes could be established.

   - Procedures of accreditation, criteria for recognition of referencing, organisational structure of the community shall be laid down in an agreement of stakeholders which reflects the specific quality of both kinds of organisations.

   - The role of the future community within a dissemination strategy could be defined.

2. These activities could be accompanied by further actions intended to overcome the "EQF information divide".

3. It does not depend only upon willingness and resources of the partners' consortium if these suggestions will become reality. The consortium has sought the dialogue with the EQF Advisory Group, and the results of this dialogue (that is at the very beginning) have to be awaited.

Contribution to EU policies

Given the different national traditions and backgrounds of training systems, it cannot be expected that scenarios for the application of the EQF and related instruments can be developed in a single national context and then simply be transferred to other countries. Instead, the performance of the research and development activities outlined in the present proposal requires a collaborative effort of partners from a variety of European countries. The transnational structure of the consortium ensures that experiences and perspectives from diverse backgrounds can be integrated into the debate, and that, in turn, a common understanding can be achieved that facilitates the dissemination of results within the various national contexts.

But, it is not only the involvement of partners embedded in a wide spectrum of networks, working in national environments and related to various areas of stakeholders, which delivers the specific contribution of the project to EU policies. The position of these partners in these particular networks is a mere condition for achieving the project objective which explicitly refers to the intention of EU policies:

Real referenceabiilty of national and sectoral frameworks to the EQF is a critical issue for the usability of the EQF in the future. If ambiguity of EQF cannot be limited, the EQF cannot gain sufficient value to be recognised as translation device between national/sectoral educational systems. Thus the contribution of the project to EU policies has not a peripheral character: The focus of the project lies exactly in an area where the destiny of some crucial European educational initiatives is pre-decided.