

## **COORDINATION OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS COMPATIBLE WITH THE QF-EHEA**

*Document by the Council of Europe*

### **INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE**

In 2007, the Council of Europe was asked by Ministers through the London Communiqué to coordinate the sharing of experience in the development of national qualifications frameworks compatible with the overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. At the Council of Europe's proposal, the BFUG appointed a Coordination Group to assist with this task, and the Group submitted a report<sup>1</sup> to the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve ministerial conference.

In the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, the Ministers made the following statement on the further development of qualifications frameworks:

*The development of national qualifications frameworks is an important step towards the implementation of lifelong learning. We aim at having them implemented and prepared for self-certification against the overarching Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area by 2012. This will require continued coordination at the level of the EHEA and with the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. Within national contexts, intermediate qualifications within the first cycle can be a means of widening access to higher education. (para. 12).*

The statement underlines the need for continued coordination and it also underscores the importance of cooperation with the EQF-LLL. In discussions within the BFUG, it has been understood that the Council of Europe would continue to take responsibility for this coordination.

At the same time, discussions in the BFUG has underlined the importance of bringing together the national correspondents for qualifications frameworks (hereafter: NQF correspondents) that were appointed – at least by most countries – in summer and fall 2008 to provide information on the stage of

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/2009\\_QF\\_CG\\_report.pdf](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/2009_QF_CG_report.pdf)

development of national qualifications frameworks<sup>2</sup>. This was also underlined by participants at the third Bologna seminar on qualifications frameworks, held in Tbilisi in November 2008<sup>3</sup>, many of whom were themselves NQF correspondents.

The purpose of the present document is to explore the tasks that need to be accomplished in fulfilling the mandate given by Ministers in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve as well as to outline how this work could be organized. It is understood that the mandate covers the period 2009 – 2012. The document builds on a document submitted to the meeting of the Bologna Board in Stockholm on September 4, 2009 and takes account of the discussion at that meeting.

## **COORDINATION TASKS**

The need for continued coordination is, therefore, not the subject of debate. On the other hand, this coordination may take different forms, which need not be mutually exclusive. In order to consider how the coordination should be organized, one should look at the tasks which need be accomplished. As mentioned, these will be considered with a time perspective of 2012: it is unrealistic to accomplish them by March 2010, when the next ministerial meeting will be held. This time perspective is also consistent with the revised deadline for establishing national qualifications frameworks.

The main tasks fall into two main categories. While there is some overlap between them, they are nevertheless distinct:

### ***Category I – networking, mutual exchanges and assistance:***

- 1) sharing of experience and (good) practice;
- 2) sharing of information on the state of development of national qualifications frameworks;
- 3) stimulating and, where needed, assisting in developing regional cooperation on NQFs, as exemplified by the regional network for South East Europe;
- 4) where needed/appropriate, assisting with national developments
- 5) maintenance of the Bologna QF website through updates provided by the NQF correspondents
- 6) on the basis of the experience gained, giving advice to the BFUG and members on specific policy aspects of the development of NQFs, as the need may arise;

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[http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/Synthesis\\_NQF\\_Reports\\_March2009.pdf](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/Synthesis_NQF_Reports_March2009.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/BolognaSeminars/Tbilisi2008.htm>

- 7) more generally, implementation of overall policies developed within the framework of the EHEA, see below.

***Category II – more policy making agendas where the BFUG might play an important role in developing European as well as national policies:***

- 8) explore specific policy issues, such as:
- the conceptual change in expressing qualifications in higher education through learning outcomes as the main building blocks;
  - the integration of ECTS into the development and implementation of NQFs;
  - the relationship between qualifications frameworks and the recognition of qualifications;
  - between qualifications frameworks and quality assurance<sup>4</sup>;
  - development of qualifications frameworks in a global context, exemplified by but not limited to the inclusion of QFs as an area of cooperation in the ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) higher education cooperation;
- 9) maintaining and developing relations to the EQF-LLL, including contributing to the EQF Advisory Board;
- 10) contributing, through close cooperation with the European Commission, to the development of policy and practice within the EQF-LLL, in particular with a view to helping ensure compatibility and coherence between the QF-EHEA and the EQF-LLL;
- 11) organize, or stimulate the organization of, Bologna conferences and events on issues related to qualifications frameworks;
- 12) coordinate requests for assistance;
- 13) as countries proceed to self certification of their NQFs, provide advice to new countries undertaking self certification, as needed, including maintaining an overview of international experts with experience from self certification exercises.
- 14) reporting to the BFUG and, through the BFUG, to the Ministerial meetings of the EHEA in 2010 and 2012;
- 15) maintenance and development of the Bologna QF web site on aspects other than those concerning the development of NQFs.

## **FORMS OF COORDINATION**

Existing structures should be assessed regularly, and one should build on them as long as it seems reasonable and efficient. As the EHEA sets out on a new

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<sup>4</sup> It should nevertheless be noted that this is currently the topic of a working group appointed by the EQF Advisory Board, and that care should be taken to avoid overlaps or working at cross-purposes.

three year work program, this seems like an appropriate moment to reassess working methods and structures as well as the goals of activities for the period 2009 – 2012. This is also in line with the recommendation by participants of the latest Bologna seminar on qualifications frameworks held in the previous period, organized in Tbilisi in November 2008: “*continue the coordination of their development at the Bologna Process level and use the existing and newly emerging structures.*”

So far, the ***Bologna Coordination Group on Qualifications Frameworks***, which has been working under the authority of the BFUG, has fulfilled the coordination tasks, with the help of experts and in cooperation with the Bologna Secretariat. Some of the tasks outlined above have, however, been taken on only to a more limited extent. As an example, there has been limited consideration within the Coordination Group and the BFUG of the impact of QFs on recognition, even if the ENIC and NARIC Networks have addressed issues of the relationship between qualifications frameworks and recognition in their annual meetings, with the participation of the Chair and/or secretary of the Coordination Group as well as the representative of the Networks in this Group.

The coordination with the developments in EQF-LLL structures is particularly important and sometimes difficult, even if it has been made easier through the good cooperation established with the European Commission. An important part of the challenge, faced by both the QF-EHEA and the EQF-LLL, is that in developing comprehensive national frameworks compatible with both overarching frameworks, representatives of different sectors with quite different priorities and outlooks on education must be brought together. Since many EU countries seem likely to develop comprehensive national frameworks with reference also to the EQF-LLL, and since some countries that are not formally a part of the EQF-LLL may also wish to develop comprehensive frameworks, it is particularly important that adequate implementation of the principles and procedures of the EHEA with reference to the QF-EHEA also be ensured. For this a clear structure is required.

As far as expert advice is concerned, so far only some countries have asked for advice in the choice of experts for their self-certification exercise but it is highly likely that in the coming period the demand will grow. In line with another recommendation from the Bologna seminar in Tbilisi<sup>5</sup>, maintaining a list of experts with experience in or relevant for self certification, where appropriate also for referencing national qualifications to the EQF-LLL (higher education part), would be a task, even if countries are of course not limited to such a list in their choice of experts. It should be kept in mind that the EHEA as well as individual countries will face a challenge if many countries launch their self certification exercises at approximately the same time. The EHEA would also face a challenge if self certification reports – which are the “visiting cards” of

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<sup>5</sup> *To have credible national frameworks for qualifications in the EHEA the BFUG should create a network of international experts for the countries to choose as examiners for the self-certification process.....*

the frameworks concerned – were to be of highly uneven quality. This is important also because the self certification of NQFs against the QF-EHEA could, according to the decision of each country, also be recognized as a part of the referencing of the NQF to the EQF-LLL for the corresponding levels of qualifications (most likely levels 5-8 or 6-8 according to national contexts).

The *network of NQF correspondents* is an emerging structure<sup>6</sup>. On the one hand, the NQF correspondents should play an important role as liaison between their respective national frameworks and the overarching QF-EHEA. They should play an essential role in informing other countries about the development of the NQF of the country they represent, including examples of good practice as well as examples of less successful experiences. In describing practice, it would be important to include a description of the circumstances in which a given practice has worked well or less well and, preferably, a brief analysis of possible reasons. The NQF correspondent should also play a key role in disseminating information and experience from other countries as well as from the EHEA as such to relevant stakeholders in the country that he or she represents.

While countries are of course entirely independent in appointing their NQF correspondents, it is assumed that the typical NQF correspondent will, in addition to being able to work in English, play a role in developing the NQF-HE of the country he or she represents since this will greatly facilitate his/her role in facilitating information.

The NQF correspondents may, but do not necessarily need to, play a role in policy making within the EHEA. They should, on the other hand, be well aware on developments in the EQF-LLL as well as the QF-EHEA and cooperate closely with their national representative in the network of EQF-LLL contact points.

For a number of the tasks listed above, notably those listed under Category I networking, mutual exchanges and assistance (tasks 1 – 7), the NQF correspondents would play a crucial role. For the tasks listed under Category II (tasks 8 – 15) here would seem to be a stronger element of policy advice. For this, one might wish a profile that may be different from that of many – but perhaps not all – NQF correspondents, with a stronger link to policy making and – at least for some participants - a link to the BFUG.

Based on the reflections above, there would seem to be two ways of coordinating the sharing of experience in developing national qualifications

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<sup>6</sup> Within the framework of the EQF-LLL, the European Commission has established National Coordination Points. NQF correspondents in the framework of the EHEA may or may not also be National EQF Coordination Points; they will at any rate need to maintain close contacts to their NCP.

frameworks compatible with the QF-EHEA, and with appropriate coordination with the EQF-LLL, for the period 2009 – 2012.

The *first alternative* would be to maintain the Working Group<sup>7</sup> and to supplement this with meetings of the network of NQF correspondents. The distribution of tasks between the groups would be as indicated above. A first meeting of all NQF correspondents is planned for November 9 – 10 in Strasbourg, and such meetings could be held once or twice a year, as the need may arise. The first meeting of the new Working Group is planned for November 10 in the afternoon, end-on with the meeting of NQF correspondents. Both meetings are, of course, planned subject to the decision of the BFUG.

In this model, the size of the Working Group would remain limited and preferably at approximately the size of the current Coordination Group.

The *second alternative* would be to entrust all tasks to the Council of Europe, advised by the network of NQF correspondents and drawing on the advice of experts as required, and in this case the NQF correspondents would possibly need to meet twice a year. This alternative would emphasize the work to be accomplished at national level (Category I), with coordination but limited further policy development at European level (Category II).

Under either alternative, small *ad hoc* groups may be appointed to make recommendations on specific issues.

Regardless of the alternative chosen, a meeting of the ENIC and NARIC Networks focusing on qualifications frameworks and involving some other experts, hopefully including some NQF correspondents (QF-EHEA), will be coorganized by the Council of Europe, the European Commission and UNESCO-CEPES in late November 2009, end on with the autumn meeting of the NARIC Network.

## MEMBERSHIP

The *network of NQF correspondents* should comprise all member states. BFUG members should ensure that any changes in NQF correspondents are communicated to the Bologna Secretariat and the Council of Europe, and the five countries that have yet to appoint a correspondent (Azerbaijan, Luxembourg, Moldova, the Russian Federation and the Slovak Republic) should do so without further delay.

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<sup>7</sup> The terminology has been changed to reflect the decision announced at the Bologna Board on September 4 that the distinction made between Working and Coordination Groups in the 2007 – 2009 work program will be abolished and all such groups will henceforth be referred to as Working Groups.

The *Working Group* should be appointed by the BFUG for the period 2009 – 2012 but with the possibility of adjusting its composition following the Ministerial meeting in 2010. A separate Secretariat document will provide an overview of the members and consultative members that have indicated an interest in participating in this group, if the BFUG decides to appoint one. Considerations for the composition of the Working Group include:

- There should be a mix of representatives of member countries and of consultative members, and there should as far as possible be a measure of balance in terms of geography and experience;
- Ideally, it should not be larger than the current Coordination Group;
- There should be a mix of continuity and renewal of membership;
- Ideally, some members of the Working Group should also be members of the BFUG;
- The European Commission<sup>8</sup> as well as the Bologna Secretariat should be represented;
- Among country members, it would seem important that Ireland be represented or at least associated with the work of the Group until 2010 because Ireland will organize a conference in spring 2010 on the relationship between the QF-EHEA and the EQF-LLL.

An overview of the composition of the current Coordination Group will be found in Appendix 1, while an overview of the expression of interest in participating in the Coordination Group – as well as other parts of the work program - in the next period will be issued by the Bologna Secretariat as a separate document.

## **FINANCES**

The EHEA, including the BFUG and its working groups, is based on the principle that members and consultative members cover the costs of their own participation. In the case of the Coordination Group, the Council of Europe has nevertheless been able to find funds to cover the participation of 3 or 4 members of the group to ensure broad representation. The Council of Europe will continue to seek to make this participation possible in the coming period but it will be necessary to consider alternative sources of financing to ensure that all NQF correspondents be able to attend meetings of this group, as well as to ensure balanced representation in the Working Group if this alternative is

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<sup>8</sup> The Commission is of course a BFUG member but is mentioned specifically here because of the relationship to the EQF-LLL.

chosen. For the meeting(s) foreseen for November 2009, the Council of Europe hopes to be able to cover the cost of a limited number of participants.

## **ACTION**

The BFUG is invited to:

- take note of the information on coordination of the sharing of experience in the development of national qualifications frameworks compatible with the QF-EHEA, as outlined in the present document;
- reaffirm the importance of coordinating this work with developments within the EQF-LLL;
- consider the coordination tasks as outlined in the present document;
- decide on the organization of this work by adopting one of the two alternatives outlined in this document (alternative 1: Network of national QF correspondents and a Working Group on QFs; alternative 2: Network of national QF correspondents only);
- if alternative 1 is chosen, decide on the composition of the Working Group in accordance with the expressions of interest by members and consultative members.



**APPENDIX 1****Members of the Coordination Group on Qualifications Frameworks 2007 – 2009**

- Council of Europe (Chair and Secretariat)
- Bologna Secretariat
- Czech Republic
- ECTS Counsellors
- ENIC and NARIC Networks
- European Commission
- ESU
- EUA
- EURASHE
- Georgia
- Germany
- Ireland
- Portugal
- “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”
- Turkey
- United Kingdom/Scotland