**FIRST MEETING OF THE EHEA WORKING GROUP ON STRUCTURAL REFORM**

**Outline of the break out session on qualifications framework**

Chair: Sjur Bergan

Facilitator: Bryan Maguire

Rapporteur: Erzsébet Szlamka

**Purpose and background**

The purpose of the break out session will be to identify the most salient issues regarding qualifications frameworks that the Working Group should address. These may be issues specific to qualifications frameworks but the session should (also) seek to identify QF issues that link to one or more other areas of structural reform (recognition, quality assurance, transparency).

The Bucureşti Communiqué identifies a number of issues related to qualifications frameworks. These are outlined in Appendix 1.

In addition, the report by the Working Group on Qualification Frameworks submitted to the Bucureşti conference makes a good number of suggestions of both policy and a more technical nature. A full list of these suggestions will be found in Appendix 1.

**KEY ISSUES**

On the background of the Bucureşti Communiqué, the proposals by the QF Working Group in its 2012 report and developments since then, the following issues would seem to be among those that the current WG on structural reform will need to address:

* The development of learning outcomes as an integral part of structural reform and developing a common understanding of learning outcomes throughout Europe and across various strands of education.
* How can we quality assure learning outcomes. In particular, how can we ensure that they exist not only on paper, but also in practice? Is the learning outcomes approach required for *all* qualifications? Is this a strict prerequisite for introducing NQFs?
* The role and place of short cycle qualifications within the QF-EHEA
* The placement and referencing of secondary school leaving qualification giving access to higher education and, more broadly, developing a common understanding of certain key reference points (access qualifications, first, second and third cycle qualifications)
* The definition of both subject specific and generic competences and their place in frameworks as well as the more detailed descriptors for each discipline/subject area (cf. the Bucureşti Communiqué on employability)
* Self-certification. The self-certification reports (and the referencing reports for countries that also reference their (higher education) frameworks against the EQF) constitute the main document through which the competent authorities of a country demonstrate the compatibility of its framework with the QF-EEHA and, as the case may be, the EQF. While the report is issued by and under the authority of the country in question, it needs to establish credibility with the other countries of the EHEA. The break out session could consider whether there are transversal issues arising from the self-certification and referencing reports published so far and how possible issues of acceptance could be addressed.
* One issue that has surfaced in the framework of the EQF – less in the QF-EHEA – is whether national frameworks can have leave certain levels “empty”, e.g. have no national qualifications that correspond to EQF level 5/short cycle qualifications (inside or outside higher education) and be considered compatible.

The break out session may of course define further issues that it would like to see addressed by the working group.

**OUTLINE OF THE SESSION**

The main purpose of the breakout session is to provide participants with an opportunity for discussion, so most of the time should be devoted to this.

The chair will briefly recall the background for the discussion and ask the facilitator to offer some introductory comments to launch the discussion.

The discussion may be organized around specific topics after a first round of general comments. The structure of the discussion will depend somewhat on participants but it will seek to ensure that the major issues are covered. Participants will be encourage not only to identify issues but also to offer thoughts on what position the Working Group may wish to take. They will also be encouraged to identify aspects of these issues that may require further work throughout the 2014 – 15 period.

At the end of the session, the rapporteur will summarize the main messages from the discussion.

**APPENDIX 1 Relevant parts of the Bucureşti Communiqué**

***[on qualifications frameworks, p. 3]***

We welcome the progress in developing **qualifications frameworks**; they improve transparency and will enable higher education systems to be more open and flexible. We acknowledge that realising the full benefits of qualifications frameworks can in practice be more challenging than developing the structures. The development of qualifications frameworks must continue so that they become an everyday reality for students, staff and employers. Meanwhile, some countries face challenges in finalising national frameworks and in self-certifying compatibility with the framework of qualifications of the EHEA (QF-EHEA) by the end of 2012. These countries need to redouble their efforts and to take advantage of the support and experience of others in order to achieve this goal.

A common understanding of the levels of our qualifications frameworks is essential to recognition for both academic and professional purposes. School leaving qualifications giving access to higher education will be considered as being of European Qualifications Framework (EQF) level 4, or equivalent levels for countries not bound by the EQF, where they are included in National Qualifications Frameworks. We further commit to referencing first, second and third cycle qualifications against EQF levels 6, 7 and 8 respectively, or against equivalent levels for countries not bound by the EQF. We will explore how the QF-EHEA could take account of short cycle qualifications (EQF level 5) and encourage countries to use the QF-EHEA for referencing these qualifications in national contexts where they exist. We ask the Council of Europe and the European Commission to continue to coordinate efforts to make the respective qualifications frameworks work well in practice.

We welcome the clear reference to ECTS, to the European Qualifications Framework and to learning outcomes in the European Commission’s proposal for a revision of the EU Directive on the recognition of **professional qualifications.** We underline the importance of taking appropriate account of these elements in recognition decisions.

***[on learning outcomes, p. 3]***

To consolidate the EHEA, meaningful implementation of **learning outcomes** is needed. The development, understanding and practical use of learning outcomes is crucial to the success of ECTS, the Diploma Supplement, recognition, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance – all of which are interdependent. We call on institutions to further link study credits with both learning outcomes and student workload, and to include the attainment of learning outcomes in assessment procedures. We will work to ensure that the ECTS Users’ Guide5 fully reflects the state of on-going work on learning outcomes and recognition of prior learning.

***[on employability, p. 2]***

Today’s graduates need to combine transversal, multidisciplinary and innovation skills and competences with up-to-date subject-specific knowledge so as to be able to contribute to the wider needs of society and the labour market.

***[on recognition, p. 4]***

We are determined to remove outstanding obstacles hindering effective and proper recognition and are willing to work together towards the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees, building on the tools of the Bologna framework, as a long-term goal of the EHEA.

*NB. It should be noted that a special “pathfinder group” has been established to explore the issue of automatic recognition, which is therefore outside of the remit of the Structural Reform WG. Qualifications frameworks are among the tool of the “Bologna framework” and hence relevant to recognition broadly.*

[on priorities at national level, p. 5]

* Work to enhance employability, lifelong learning, problem-solving and entrepreneurial skills through improved cooperation with employers, especially in the development of educational programmes;
* Ensure that qualifications frameworks, ECTS and Diploma Supplement implementation is based on learning outcomes;
* Invite countries that cannot finalise the implementation of national qualifications frameworks compatible with QF-EHEA by the end of 2012 to redouble their efforts and submit a revised roadmap for this task;

[on priorities at European level, p. 5]

* Coordinate the work of ensuring that qualifications frameworks work in practice, emphasising their link to learning outcomes and explore how the QF-EHEA could take account of short cycle qualifications in national contexts;

**APPENDIX 2 Overview of suggestions by the WG on Qualifications Frameworks (2012)**

**OVERVIEW OF ALL RECOMMENDATIONS**

References are to the relevant chapters of the report.

**THE STATE OF DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL FRAMEWORKS**

**III.1** Ministers should call on the countries that have so far provided no or inadequate information on the state of and timetable for the development of their national qualifications frameworks to provide the necessary information no later than in time for the BFUG meeting to be held in autumn 2012.

**III.2** Ministers are advised to encourage dialogue about the challenges they face in developing and implementing their qualifications frameworks. Ministers of the countries which will be unable to meet their commitment by 2012 are advised to submit a revised timetable by autumn 2012. They may also wish to consider whether to request advice or assistance from EHEA partners in developing their frameworks, with a view to ensuring that qualifications frameworks become a reality within the EHEA so as to ensure trust in the whole system by the different stakeholders. 4

**COOPERATION WITH THE EQF**

**IV.1** Acknowledging that qualifications frameworks should reflect all aspects of the missions of higher education, Ministers are advised to acknowledge and support the complementarity of the two overarching frameworks

**IV.2** Ministers are advised to reiterate the importance of maintaining and further developing the close cooperation between the QF-EHEA and EQF.

**IV.3** Ministers are advised to commit to implementing their own national qualifications frameworks and ensure continued compatibility with both overarching European frameworks as well as to facilitate transfer and progression between various education and training subsystems. Ministers are further advised to recognize the importance, at national level, of dialogue and cooperation between the different public authorities and other possible actors responsible for qualifications frameworks, in particular to foster dialogue and cooperation between higher education and the VET sector.

**THE FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS IN THE EHEA**

**V.1.1** Training those responsible for conceptualizing, writing, implementing and assessing learning outcomes at higher education institutions should be given high priority by public authorities and institutional leaders.

**V.1.2** As many EHEA countries as possible, provided they have the relevant experience, should also organize such training activities, to ensure that a variety of experiences and views are shared across the EHEA. All EHEA countries should provide selected experts with an opportunity to participate in such training activities at European level. The BFUG should include such training in its 2012 – 2015 work program.

**V.1.3** While most training should be provided at national and institutional level, at least the trainers or the “trainers’ trainers” should be trained at EHEA level, in order to exchange experience and encourage coherent practice. Countries need to play an active role in this respect and should avail themselves of the various kinds of support offered by the European Commission, including support for Peer Learning Activities.

**V.1.4** The European Commission is advised to continue financial support for Peer Learning Activities in this field and to facilitate the dissemination of the results of such activities.

**V.1.5** Web based means of information sharing should also be explored. The EHEA site on qualifications frameworks should be further developed and play a crucial role in this regard.

**V.1.6** In view of the particular challenges of developing and implementing learning outcomes, this should be a key feature of the training offered at both national and European level, in order to develop a common and shared understanding of key concepts.

**V.1.7** Ministers could mandate the BFUG to consider how conceptualizing, writing, implementing and examining learning outcomes could be included as a part of teacher training curricula as well as how this training could be brought into the pedagogical preparation of higher education staff at national and European level.

**V.1.8** Ministers could encourage cooperation between the QF-EHEA and the EQF on the interpretation and application of learning outcomes and, where possible, a sharing of resources, with a view to further reducing unnecessary barriers between education and training levels and types, including the validation of prior learning. 5

**V.1.9** Higher education institutions and accreditation agencies should ensure that learning outcomes as well as student workload are evaluated when assigning ECTS credits to programs and modules.

**V.1.10** The Diploma Supplement and the guidelines for its use should be further developed to ensure that a learning outcomes approach is sufficiently reflected in the Diploma Supplements issued by higher education institutions.

**V.2.1** The Council of Europe and the BFUG Secretariat should continue to help identify foreign experts for the self certification exercises of countries that request such assistance.

**V.2.2** Seminars for those responsible for self certification exercises at national level as well as for potential foreign experts should be conducted in 2012 – 2013. Full use should be made of opportunities for Web based training and for placing the collective experience of the EHEA at the disposal of stakeholders and experts, on the web and through any other means considered appropriate.

**V.2.3** In 2013, a European conference should be organized, aiming mainly at policy makers, to take stock of the development and implementation of national frameworks and of the self certification process completed so far with a view to identifying issues of concern that could be taken into account in the remaining self certification exercises.

**V.2.4** Since the same challenges face the referencing of national frameworks to the EQF, cooperation between the two overarching frameworks should be pursued on how to strengthen the credibility of the self certification and referencing exercises.

**V.2.5** Academic research on qualifications frameworks should comprise different aspects including the modalities and effects of self certification and referencing and the BFUG should consider commissioning a comparative analysis on the self certification reports. In cooperation with the EQF, this may be extended to include completed referencing reports. Academic researchers could also be encouraged to send their findings to the BFUG Secretariat for appropriate distribution.

**V.2.6** Ministers could mandate the BFUG to ensure review of the self certification processes, also with a view to identifying cases in which self certification reports seem inconsistent and/or seem to be at variance with the corresponding referencing report.

**V.3.1** Ministers could agree that secondary school leaving qualifications should be positioned in national levels below levels referenced to the European first cycle of higher education. In EQF terms, school leaving qualifications should be positioned in national levels to be referenced against EQF level 4 or, where they are not bound by the EQF, place their school leaving qualifications at a similar level. Ministers are aware that EQF-LLL levels 5, 6, 7, and 8 have been considered compatible with the short, first, second and third cycle of the QF-EHEA from the launching of the EQF-LLL onward and could further agree to reference the first, second and third cycle higher education qualifications against EQF levels 6, 7 and 8, respectively.

**V.3.2** The BFUG could be asked to submit proposals for the inclusion of short cycle qualifications within the QF-EHEA, taking account of the Dublin descriptors and the proposal put forward in 2005, in time for the 2015 ministerial conference of the EHEA.

**V.4.1** Once national frameworks have been developed and self certified, the competent national authorities should review the framework from time to time to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of society and of higher education as well as to ensure it continues to be compatible with the overarching frameworks. The outcomes of such reviews should be made public and communicated to partners within the EHEA. 6

**V.4.2** Competent authorities should prepare information material in non-technical language describing the main features of qualifications frameworks and their value to learners, employers and others. Such descriptions should be prepared for the QF-EHEA as well as for individual national frameworks.

**V.4.3** Where a national framework undergoes major modifications, the need for a new self certification exercise should be assessed.

**V.4.4** In 2015 – 2016, a conference should be organized to take stock of the implementation of national frameworks. The conference proposed may provide a basis for considering whether a review of the QF-EHEA is required. The BFUG should also contribute to the conference on the EQF planned for 2013 during the Irish Presidency of the European Union. As a principle, major European conferences on qualifications frameworks should be held jointly and consider the QF-EHEA as well as the EQF.

**V.4.5** Toward 2018 – 2020, the experience with the QF-EHEA should be assessed and on this basis it should be decided whether a review of the QF-EHEA is required. If such a review is undertaken, it should be done in close cooperation with the EQF and any review of the EQF should be undertaken in cooperation with the QF-EHEA.

**V.5.1** The competent public authorities should ensure the involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the implementation and continued development of their national qualifications frameworks.

**V.5.2** The competent public authorities should develop a website on and for their own national framework catering to the different needs of the different stakeholders, both for their national needs but also as an information tool for foreigners who would like to study or to live in the country.

**V.5.3** In national contexts, professional regulators should be encouraged to take account of national qualifications frameworks and consult the authorities responsible for these.

**V.5.4** A learning outcomes perspective should be progressively integrated into the European Directive on professional recognition.

**V.6.1** The competent public authorities should ensure the involvement of the relevant quality assurance agencies in the implementation and continued development of their national qualifications frameworks.

**V.6.2** The E 4 Group should be encouraged to make the relationship between qualifications frameworks and quality assurance a topic for one of the forthcoming annual meetings of the European Quality Forum.

**V.6.3** The Diploma Supplement and the guidelines for its use should be reviewed to ensure that the quality assurance status of the institution(s) issuing the qualification be included in the Supplement.

**V.7.1** National recognition legislation, policies and practice should be reviewed to ensure that adequate account is taken of the role of qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes in facilitating the recognition of qualifications as well as to ensure that experience in the recognition of qualifications supports the development and implementation of NQFs

**V.7.2** If regular recognition issues appear between two different national qualifications frameworks, countries should be invited to develop direct contacts or/and regional cooperation to find common guidelines. 7

**V.8.1** Qualifications and qualifications frameworks should be made an important topic for discussion in the Bologna Policy Fora.

**V.8.2** An international conference should be organized on the role of qualifications frameworks in relation to the strategy on the EHEA in a global setting.

**V.8.3** Cooperation should be sought between the QF-EHEA and regional qualifications frameworks in other parts of the world, as far as possible also in cooperation with the EQF.