

Quality assurance in HE and VET in the context of NQFs, EQF and QF-EHEA: promoting trust between the sectors?

Biograd na Moru, Croatia
27 June 2013

REPORT

The Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports organized the International Seminar entitled *Quality assurance in HE and VET in the context of NQFs, EQF and QF-EHEA: promoting trust between the sectors?*. The Seminar took place on 27 June 2013 in Biograd na Moru, Croatia and hosted around 80 participants.

The Seminar was organized in order to further explore some of the Conclusions from the Irish Presidency Conference on Quality Assurance in Qualifications Frameworks (Dublin, March, 2013) with the objective of enhancing greater compatibility of relevant QA arrangements in HE and VET. The purpose of the Seminar was to examine QA capacities in HE and VET and how these interrelate with the development and implementation of qualifications frameworks. Furthermore, the issue of different QA arrangements for facilitating recognition of foreign qualifications, both in HE and VET, was discussed.

The Seminar consisted of an introduction followed by three thematic sessions. The Agenda of the Seminar can be found in Annex I.

INTRODUCTION

Opening statements were given by Ružica Beljo Lučić, Assistant Minister, Ministry of Science, Education and Sports and Leonardo Marušić, Vice Chancellor for mobility and projects, University of Zadar.

Assistant Minister Beljo Lučić presented an overview of reform processes in the field of education and training in Croatia which began during the pre-accession period and which will continue as Croatia joins the EU. Croatia is developing a new Strategy on Education, Technology and Science which is in line with the EU strategic document "Education and Training 2020". Improvement of quality culture was underlined as an important aspect in reform and particular emphasis was put on the facilitating role that qualifications frameworks can play in the recognition of foreign qualifications.

Leonardo Marušić, Vice Rector described the establishment of quality assurance mechanisms at the Zadar University within the TEMPUS project which set the basis for the current approach implemented at higher education institutions in Croatia.

Key expert presentation was given by Mile Dželalija, University of Split. The presentation gave an overview of priorities within the EU Strategy Europe 2020 and initiatives, processes and tools in the field of education and training that promote citizens' mobility and facilitate their lifelong learning: Key Competences for LLL, EQAVET, ECVET, ECTS, QF-EHEA, EQF, ESCO, New Skills for New Jobs, EU Skills Panorama, Recognition of Prior Learning, Modernised PhDs etc. It was stressed that qualification frameworks are often mechanisms for the implementation of all of the enlisted initiatives. The presentation firstly focused on the main idea and reasons for development of national and meta qualifications frameworks. As a practical example, the impact of the development and implementation of the NQF in Croatia was presented: involvement and effective communication among all relevant stakeholders; examples of good partnerships between E&T institutions and employers; an increasing number of individuals and institutions willing to reform the existing qualifications system; relevant QA Body in HE (Agency for Science and Higher Education) registered in EQAR; development of RPL system initiated.

Secondly, the Common principles for quality assurance (Annex III of the EQF) were presented along with the conclusions from the Irish Presidency Conference on Quality Assurance in Qualifications Frameworks (Dublin, March, 2013) which underline that the Common principles for QA should be strengthened.

Finally, the presentation concluded that the QFs are needed as they provide support for QA systems: QA is crucial in the qualifications systems but since in practice the QA often does not cover all aspects of the educational system, there is a need for QFs which would provide an overall support. In practical terms, it was explained that a QA agency can examine Phd programmes, but it cannot properly measure if the content corresponds to the knowledge acquired. QFs also provide better understanding and integrate stakeholders and partnerships and develop mutual trust based on clear criteria, procedures and principles.

That is exactly why it is important to strengthen the Common principles for QA both in the field of HE as in the field of VET.

After the introductory part, the following comments were made:

- Currently, levels are often connected to the number of years of education. In practical terms, however, it is not always easy to define the level, as shown in the case of post-master studies. That is why the process of referencing to a common framework is necessary and while at the moment we are discussing formal procedures, we need to build trust to allow for this process to become automatic, especially when it comes to the process of recognition of foreign qualifications.
- Quality assurance agencies should be regularly evaluated and monitored.
- 20 European countries have up to now completed their referencing processes to the EQF. Croatia presented its interim report. The most important aspect of the Croatian Qualifications Framework will be the CROQF Register, where all aspects of QA will be developed. Entry into the Register will help institutions and qualifications to become recognized outside of the country.
- The idea of the EQF brand is being discussed as the second phase of the referencing is taking place: development of RPL; mutual trust; connection to ESCO.
- Programmes expressed in LOs should be linked to standards and standards are the basis for QA.
- Croatia is currently developing a new Act on recognition of foreign qualifications which will take into account new developments related to the EQF, QF-EHEA and the referencing and self-certification processes.

FIRST THEMATIC SESSION: Quality assurance systems in HE and VET in relation to NQFs

The first thematic session consisted of two introductory presentations and two country example presentations:

- Colin Tück, European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)
"Introductory presentation: Safeguarding quality assurance principles in HE"
- Dana Stroie, European Quality Assurance in VET, Working Group 1 (EQAVET)
"Introductory presentation: EQAVET – supporting European quality assurance in VET"
- Tomas Egeltoft, Swedish Higher Education Authority
"Country example: Implementation of learning outcomes in quality assurance of HE"
- Eduard Staudecker, Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Art and Culture
"Country example: National Developments and Reforms in Austrian VET influenced by EQF"

The first presentation gave an outline of the European Standards and Guidelines for QA (ESG) and how they relate to the EQF common principles for QA (Annex III). While they broadly represent a very good match, the key differences can be found regarding the learning outcomes – where the EQF common principles are more clearly focused and in line with LO; as well as regarding the external QA – where the ESG define that it should be performed by an independent body which is not the case in the EQF common principles. However, the ESG are being revised and the new document where the focus on LO will be clearer will be finalized in 2015. The importance of EQAR was outlined in providing a reliable information point and assurance, enhancing trust and achieving recognition of all the assessed institutions. The presentation also outlined the importance of QA for the development of mutual trust and reminded how the recognition of QA and qualifications of different countries should be improved through the use of the Bologna tools. The Bucharest Communiqué invites countries to recognise QA decisions on joint/double degree programmes of EQAR registered agencies.

Furthermore, recent trends at the EU level show that a lot of attention is being put on bringing all the initiatives and tools closer together. QA is certainly linked to QFs through referencing and self-certification processes and examples of already closely connected QA to QFs can be found in Germany, Denmark and UK. They form a sound basis for (automatic) recognition which can be seen in the recent example from the Flemish Community of Belgium where it was decided that EU degrees that have been referenced to the QF-EHEA and accredited by an EQAR registered QA agency will be automatically recognized.

The second presentation gave an overview of the development of QA in VET and an overview of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET Recommendation 2009). The said recommendation is a reference instrument intended to help Member States promote and monitor continuous improvement of their VET systems based on common European references. It comprises a quality assurance and improvement cycle of planning, implementation, evaluation/assessment and review/revision of VET, supported by common quality criteria, indicative descriptors and indicators. It should be applied, on a voluntary basis, at the VET-system, VET-provider and qualification-awarding levels. The recommendation also states that extra emphasis should be placed on cooperation with HE as more work is needed to promote transparency and permeability as well as facilitate progression between VET and HE. If compared, the EQAVET and the ESG have similar common principles, in terms of explicit and strong European dimension and subsidiarity (voluntary approach by the Member States). They both put focus on stakeholders' needs, quality assurance mechanisms at providers' level and QA developments on a LLL perspective. They also share a common methodological approach at provider level, in terms of using self-assessment as a pillar of the QA system, involving stakeholders across the whole QA cycle, developing evidence based QA mechanisms, focusing on the QA of students' learning outcomes, emphasizing the role of quality improvement. Furthermore, the EU strategic document *Rethinking education* contains areas of mutual interest for VET and HE: promoting work-based learning, promoting partnerships between public and private institutions (education, business and research), promoting mobility, creating a European Area for Skills and Qualifications to promote a stronger convergence between the EU transparency and recognition tools and funding Education for Growth. Finally, the speaker announced *A Quality Assurance in VET and Higher Education* seminar which will be organised by EQAVET in conjunction with CEDEFOP in October 2013. The aim of the seminar is to identify the priorities and establish appropriate partnerships to support an on-going cooperation on QA issues between VET and HE in order to promote mobility and permeability.

The third presentation showed how the learning outcomes were implemented as tools for the external quality assurance of first and second cycle HE programmes in Sweden. The development of this process is closely connected to the establishment of the Swedish Qualifications Framework in 2007 as since then all qualifications are defined in terms of learning outcomes and workload. Accordingly, qualification descriptors with intended learning outcomes (ILOs) were introduced and later became the central element in the external part of QA procedure. The new QA procedure initiated in 2010 represented a shift in focus, from external quality assurance of the internal processes of the higher education institution to results of courses and study programmes. The National Agency assesses to what extent the students' achieved learning outcomes correspond to the intended learning outcomes laid down in the qualification descriptors specified in the Higher Education Ordinance. The National Qualifications Ordinance contains descriptors for each qualification and each descriptor includes 8-24 ILOs. Besides ILOs, all first and second cycle qualifications require independent projects by students. At the same time, the institutions should take full responsibility for the development and quality assurance of their activities. The new quality evaluation system is peer review based and takes place in a four year cycle (2011-2014). For each evaluation there is peer review team or a panel composed of experts, students and practitioners. Following the guidelines for the selection procedure established by the National Agency, the team makes a selection of the outcomes listed in the Higher Education Ordinance on which to base the subsequent assessment of the material. From four different assessment factors that are taken into account (students' independent projects, self-evaluations from HEIs, student experiences and interviews with the HEIs), the students' independent projects together with the learning outcomes accounted for in the self-evaluations provide the main basis for the overall assessments. As regards to independent student projects, it was stressed that the purpose is not to review grades of individual projects, given by the examiners and that a random selection of no more than 24, and a minimum of 5, independent projects from each study programme is made.

The panel report includes an assessment of each chosen ILO and an overall assessment for each study programme which is presented on a three-level scale: very high quality, high quality and inadequate quality. HEIs with 'very high quality' programmes receive additional funding, while those with 'inadequate quality' can continue have one year for the improvement or they will no longer be able to perform the programme. Since 2011 up to now, about 800 out of 1500 programmes have been evaluated involving nearly 700 experts. The new model has led to an increased awareness of the national qualifications descriptors and to the improvements of HEIs internal quality assurance systems.

The fourth presentation illustrated the reforms in vocational education and training initiated by the EQF in Austria, as well as an overview of QA in VET, the implementation of ECVET and educational standards in VET. While the Bruges Communiqué (2010) promotes a vision of enhanced European cooperation in VET for the period 2011-2020, in practice the challenges are connected to heterogeneous VET systems in Europe, lack of transparency and trust as well as lack of comparability. Progress has been made in comparability through the use of learning arrangements between countries within the Leonardo and the Lifelong-learning programme, but efforts are still needed to achieve recognition of competences, systemic cooperation and definition of common goals. As regards to the EQF and NQF implementation in Austria, the strategic aim is to use it as a tool for translation between the numerous qualifications offered within the national qualifications system and develop criteria and procedures for validating non-formal qualifications and informally acquired learning outcomes.

Educational standards in VET is a project that started in 2004 with the aim of developing and implementing a competence-based teaching and 'competence-catalogues' for assessments on the basis of educational standards in school-based VET as well as developing and implementing new curricula, deriving their educational targets directly from competence-models.

The Austrian Initiative for Quality in VET (QIBB), QIBB has been gradually implemented since 2006 at all VET school types throughout Austria. Within QIBB, evaluation is regularly carried out and data is systematically collected for all groups of persons affected by educational and administrative processes. Qualitative and quantitative indicators are used to check whether the intended objectives have been achieved. QIBB started with internal self-evaluation on a voluntary basis. A range of evaluation instruments, into which tools for standardised data evaluation are integrated, are available via an internet platform for all schools. A further step was made in 2009 with the introduction of an external evaluation tool within QIBB: Peer Review in QIBB. Finally, when it comes to ECVET, the Recommendation does not state clearly how the implementation should be done, it is left to countries to decide. From Austria's point of view, the implementation of ECVET should evaluate learning outcomes (potentially through the use of credit points) and transfer the LO and competences; be compatible and consistent with ECTS; be applicable not only to transnational mobility activities; avoid extra bureaucratic effort for stakeholders and create and use synergies with other European tools and instruments (EQAR, EQAVET).

The following questions and comments were made after the first thematic session:

- The recent example of recognition of foreign qualifications from the Flemish Community of Belgium underlines the importance of international cooperation through initiatives such as EQAR. It also shows that the EQF common principles are equally important in the process since the second condition for the automatic recognition in this example is related to the referencing process of the qualifications frameworks.
- In VET there are still no immediate plans for establishing a register similar to EQAR. EQAVET recommendation states that there should be external evaluation, but it is not so strictly defined as in EQAR.
- Two different blocks of countries can be identified in the EU with regards to main differences in VET: those with developed work-based training and those with low or none work-based training. Because of these differences it will not be easy to establish a coherent system of validation of VET qualifications.
- In Sweden, a large number of experts were interested in participating in the quality evaluation panels because they recognized the importance of the process and accepted the responsibility that comes with autonomy. The learning outcomes and their descriptors are defined in generic terms, the panel of experts defines the criteria and the levels.

SECOND THEMATIC SESSION: Quality assurance arrangements for facilitating recognition of foreign qualifications

The second thematic session started with an introductory presentation which was followed by two country example presentations:

- Carita Blomqvist (Finnish National Board of Education)
"Introductory presentation: Qualifications frameworks facilitating recognition"
- Angela Kee, UK NARIC
"Country example: Recognition of academic, vocational, and professional qualifications – challenges in implementing the policy and procedures"
- Ana Tecilazić Goršić, Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports
"Country example: Quality assurance in recognition of foreign qualifications"

The first presentation was structured around the use of qualifications frameworks in the recognition process with an overview of the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (access qualifications, periods of study and final qualifications issued in signatory states; applicants entitled to fair assessment of their qualifications within reasonable time limit; transparent, coherent, reliable procedures and criteria used in the assessment; recognize unless substantial differences; possibility to appeal; burden of proof upon the host country/body making recognition decisions). The Convention contains different subsidiary texts that resulted from the furthering of cooperation in education and training at the European level and the most recent recommendation is related to recognition and qualifications framework. It resulted from the developments on national and European level in terms of European and National QFs, learning outcomes, life-long learning, recognition of prior learning and self-certification and referencing processes. It is considered that more stakeholder involvement and co-operation between national and European stakeholders is needed (role of ENIC/NARIC offices) and such recommendation would benefit individual learners as both QFs and recognition are supposed to help individuals understand qualifications and move within and between systems. In short, the recommendation states that national QFs facilitate recognition especially when they have been linked in a transparent and comparative way – through self-certification and referencing – to the QF-EHEA/EQF-LLL. While the existence of a national QF alone does not lead to "automatic recognition", the positioning of qualifications within the national QF of the awarding country and their relation to one or more overarching frameworks gives important information to facilitate the recognition processes. QFs should be used when considering the key elements in recognition: level, learning outcomes, quality, workload and profile. As regards quality, the recommendation states that as a general rule there is no need for the recognition authority to investigate the quality of the qualification if a NQF has been self-certified or referenced, since there is an assumption that the individual qualifications included in the framework by the competent authority are quality assured. The presentation concluded with the remark that QFs will not guarantee automatic recognition, but will facilitate recognition by improving transparency, increasing information, helping to make judgements more accurate and helping to see similarities.

The second presentation outlined the recognition of academic, vocational and professional in UK which is performed by the UK NARIC office. UK NARIC has a wide range of databases with information on qualifications from 190 countries. A large number of those do not have developed QFs.

The evaluation elements used in the recognition process are: the status of the awarding institution, entrance/admission requirements, duration of study, course content and structure, examination methods, research elements/thesis, title of final qualification, rights attached, learning outcomes. The European Area of Recognition manual which is a practical tool for credential evaluation that provides recommendations on a number of key recognition topics such as accreditation, learning outcomes and transparency is used in the process. The recognition process ends with the issuance of Statement of Comparability. A 15 level NARIC Band Framework with level descriptors of what an individual is able to do was created to facilitate this process since the evaluation criteria accommodate different educational systems in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Band Framework was designed to ensure accuracy and consistency of comparability statements and to represent all different types of international qualification and provide meaningful linkages

to the most similar UK awards. Common recognition issues are related to joint degrees, transnational education and distance education.

The third presentation outlined the quality assurance in recognition of foreign qualifications in Croatia. An overview of the strategic documents which define how internationalization contributes to quality higher education was given. The number of recognised qualifications in Croatia has been increasing and ever since Croatia joined the Lifelong learning programme, the number of periods of study abroad has also been rising. When it comes to comparison of quality assurance of national and foreign programmes and institutions abroad it is clear that the national rules are very strict while for the foreign qualifications the only conditions are whether the issuing institution and the qualification have been accredited. Croatia is currently developing a new legislative framework for the recognition of foreign qualifications which will contain clear criteria in terms of level, volume, quality and profile (learning outcomes) and be based on quality assurance and national qualifications frameworks. Professional bodies will be included in the recognition of professional qualifications. The new legislative framework will be in line with the 'Bologna triangle' where the learning outcomes are situated in the middle between recognition, national QF and QA. The future challenges so far identified relate to further developing NQFs based on learning outcomes, referencing and self-certifying NQFs to the meta-frameworks, reviewing national legislation related to recognition procedures (LOs – based) and further building LOs QA system.

Comments made after the second thematic session were the following:

- Although quality assurance in HE is implemented quite well, further work is needed as national QFs are at different stages of development across countries.
- In VET, further support and work is needed, especially when it comes to implementation of ECVET points which would facilitate the recognition process. However, all other aspects will still have to be taken into account. There are still large differences among countries, especially when it comes to progression to HE from VET. The component of work-based training should also be taken better into account.

AGENDA

Registration:
8:30 – 9:00

Moderator: Daria Arlavi

9:00 – 9:30	<p>Welcome and opening statements</p> <p>Ružica Beljo Lučić (Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports) Leonardo Marušić (University of Zadar)</p>
9:30 – 10:30	<p>Introduction to the Seminar – key expert presentation</p> <p>Mile Dželalija (University of Split)</p> <p><i>Discussion</i></p>
10:30 – 11:00	Coffee break
11:00 – 13:00	<p>Session 1: Quality assurance systems in HE and VET in relation to NQFs</p> <p>Introductory presentation: Safeguarding quality assurance principles in HE Colin Tück (EQAR)</p> <p>Introductory presentation: EQAVET – supporting European quality assurance in VET Dana Stroe (EQAVET WG 1)</p> <p>Country example: Implementation of learning outcomes in quality assurance of HE Tomas Egeltot (Swedish Higher Education Authority)</p> <p>Country example: National Developments and Reforms in Austrian VET influenced by EQF Eduard Staudecker (Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Art and Culture)</p> <p><i>Discussion</i></p>
13:00 – 14:00	Lunch break
14:00 – 16:00	<p>Session 2: Quality assurance arrangements for facilitating recognition of foreign qualifications</p> <p>Introductory presentation: Qualifications frameworks facilitating recognition Carita Blomqvist (Finnish National Board of Education)</p> <p>Country example: Recognition of academic, vocational and professional qualifications – challenges in implementing the policy and procedures Angela Kee (UK NARIC)</p> <p>Country example: Quality assurance in recognition of foreign qualifications Ana Tecilazić Goršić (Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports)</p> <p><i>Discussion</i></p>
16:00 – 16:30	Coffee break
16:30 – 17:00	Conclusions and Seminar close (Mile Dželalija, University of Split)