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Criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF

The EQF Recommendation invites countries to refer their national qualifications levels to the EQF by 2010. To meet this deadline and to ensure that the referencing process is designed in such a way that it can be understood and trusted by stakeholders in all countries involved, the EQF Advisory Group has agreed on a set of criteria and procedures to guide this process. In addition to listing the 10 criteria/procedures agreed by the EQF Advisory Group, this note contains a brief explanatory part clarifying context and intentions. Further clarification will be brought by debate within the EQF Advisory Group, based on work by its thematic subgroups and on the experience gathered through the practice of referencing.

1. REFERENCING CRITERIA AND PROCEDURES

These criteria aim to ensure that the information and documentation that is put into the public domain is validated by the competent authorities, is relevant, is transparent, can be compared and generates trust. This emphasis reflects that the success of the EQF depends on the ability of the countries to refer their qualifications systems and levels to the EQF in a demonstrable, explicit and defensible way; that means in a way that the information can be judged as valid or not by those not familiar with a country's qualifications.

The referencing criteria are essential in the sense that they indicate the general direction of the referencing process. It is however important to note that criteria have to be proved through practise. This means that an agreement on a set of referencing criteria represents only a first step and that the application of the criteria needs to be followed up through guidance and systematic exchange of experiences and good practises. The National Coordination Points as well as the test and pilot projects play an important role in pursuing this.

The EQF is a voluntary initiative, based on mutual trust among the participating countries. These criteria and procedure provide countries that wish to engage in the EQF referencing process with a guide to carry it out in a transparent and consistent way, contributing to mutual trust.

Criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF

1. The responsibilities and/or legal competence of all relevant national bodies involved in the referencing process, including the National Coordination Point, are clearly determined and published by the competent public authorities.
2. There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications levels in the national qualifications framework or system and the level descriptors of the European Qualifications Framework.
3. The national qualifications framework or system and its qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and linked to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and, where these exist, to credit systems.
4. The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national qualifications framework or for describing the place of qualifications in the national qualification system are transparent.
5. The national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer (s) to the national qualifications framework or system and are consistent with the relevant European principles and guidelines (as indicated in annex 3 of the Recommendation).
6. The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality assurance bodies.
7. The referencing process shall involve international experts.
8. The competent national body or bodies shall certify the referencing of the national qualifications framework or system with the EQF. One comprehensive report, setting out the referencing and the evidence supporting it shall be published by the competent national bodies, including the National Coordination Point, and shall address separately each of the criteria.
9. The official EQF platform shall maintain a public listing of member states that have confirmed that they have completed the referencing process, including links to completed referencing reports.
10. Following the referencing process, and in line with the timelines set in the Recommendation, all new qualification certificates, diplomas and Europass documents issued by the competent authorities contain a clear reference, by way of national qualifications systems, to the appropriate European Qualifications Framework level.

2. REFERENCING CRITERIA AND PROCEDURES: CONTEXT AND INTENTIONS

2.1. The role of National Qualifications Frameworks in the referencing process

Countries are not required by the EQF Recommendation to develop National Qualifications Frameworks and can, in principle, relate their qualifications levels to the EQF without formally establishing a national framework. The criteria and procedures have therefore been written in such a way that countries without a formally established NQF will be able to refer to the EQF (see [criteria 2, 3 and 4](#)). While keeping the door open to national qualifications systems, there are several reasons why NQFs will play a key role in the referencing process.

First, all countries concerned by the EQF have committed to developing NQFs compatible with the QF-EHEA in the framework of the Bologna process (cf. the Bergen Communiqué) and will therefore have NQFs for at least the higher education part of their education systems. Second, the overwhelming majority of countries in the EQF co-operation are currently introducing NQFs covering the full scope of qualifications. While a few countries are still considering their options as regards the development of NQFs, the referencing of national qualifications levels to the EQF will therefore in the majority of cases take place via a national qualifications framework. Third, and crucially, countries which want to relate their qualifications levels to the EQF have to make these levels explicit as well as define them in terms of learning outcomes. While the adoption of a formal NQF is not required for referencing to the EQF, a shift to learning outcomes and an explicit listing of qualifications levels will be necessary and can to a certain extent be seen as introducing a de facto NQF.

2.2. The learning outcomes requirement

The learning outcomes approach is fundamental to the EQF and [criterion 3](#) states that the national framework or qualifications system and its qualifications should be demonstrably based on learning outcomes. Some countries argue that the learning outcomes approach can only be introduced gradually and that it is unrealistic to expect that all countries will have completed a total shift to learning outcomes before starting the referencing process. Instead, some argue, criterion 3 should be seen as a strong impetus for using a learning outcomes approach, not as something preventing countries entering into the process of gradual shifting to learning outcomes.

The requirement to develop and use learning outcomes may be seen as providing a link to mechanisms and systems supporting transfer of qualifications, notably credit transfer systems and validation of non-formal and informal learning. Criterion 3 underlines, however, that the link to credit systems and validation is non-mandatory and should reflect existing national or European practises.

2.3. EQF and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)

The entire set of referencing criteria and procedures has been drawn up so as to take into account the relationship between EQF and the European qualification framework for higher education (the EHEA framework or ‘Bologna framework’). While based on separate political initiatives, the EQF and the Bologna Framework overlap in terms of objectives and timing. Given the fact that EQF levels 5-8 are fully compatible with the EHEA first, second and third cycles as well as with the possibilities for national frameworks to comprise intermediate qualifications within these cycles, the Bologna framework can be seen as part of the overarching EQF. This has to be reflected at national level and consequently, the criteria for referencing to the EQF and those for self-certification in the Bologna Process¹ must be compatible.

The referencing criteria have been designed in such a way that the framework initiatives can work together. A country which has completed the referencing process within the context of the EHEA has the choice of not repeating it for the relevant levels of the EQF. And vice versa, a country which refers its qualifications levels to the EQF has likewise the choice not to repeat it for the QF-EHEA. While this is eventually up to each country to decide, it should in principle be possible to carry out one of the two exercises and recognise its results within the other. Aiming for one national referencing process covering both the EQF and the EHEA would not only help to avoid double work but also – most importantly – avoid confusion among individuals and employers – the main users of qualifications. The development of overarching NQFs covering the entire scope of qualifications, including higher education, will greatly contribute to achieving this integration.

It is important to note that levels 5-8 are relevant to other institutions than those covered by the EHEA framework. The EQF level descriptors, through their focus on knowledge, skills and competence, should also be used as a reference for high level vocational qualifications awarded outside the EHEA context.

2.4. The link to national quality assurance systems and bodies

The success of the referencing process, and the mutual trust it generates, is closely linked to criteria 5 and 6, both addressing quality assurance. Countries are asked to demonstrate the links between national quality assurance systems, NQFs and the overarching European agreements in this field (criterion 5), including a statement from the relevant quality assurance bodies that they agree with the documentation provided in the referencing process. If such an agreement were to miss, this would seriously undermine the credibility of the referencing.

2.5. The limitation of the referencing criteria and procedures

The criteria and procedures outlined above will guide countries in their interaction with the European meta-framework, its levels and descriptors. The referencing

¹ See in annex for self-certification criteria for the European Higher Education Area.

criteria are thus not addressing the national political processes of reforming qualifications systems, for example by developing NQFs or introducing quality assurance systems. This distinction is illustrated by criteria 7 concerning the involvement of international experts. This requirement applies to *the referencing process*, for reasons of mutual trust, and *not* to national reforms (where the inclusion of international experts is a matter of national decision). In particular, involving international experts should be seen as a contribution to producing a report that, while complying with the criteria, presents the results of the referencing process in such a way that readers not especially acquainted with the national system can understand and appreciate the validity of this referencing. International experts do not need to be involved in the detailed referencing. The selection of the international experts is the competence of the national authorities in charge of the referencing process. As a general guideline, the membership of the referencing team should reflect a variety of stakeholders.

2.6. The need to speak with one voice

Criterion 8 asks for one comprehensive report outlining the national referencing process. This report must be certified by the competent national body/bodies. The aim of this criterion is to ensure that countries cover the entire range of qualifications levels (and types) in their framework or system, thus reflecting the overarching, lifelong learning character of the EQF.

**Qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area:
Criteria and procedures for self-certification**

A. Criteria for the compatibility of national frameworks to the EHEA Framework

- The national framework for higher education qualifications and the body or bodies responsible for its development are designated by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education.
- There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework.
- The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS compatible credits.
- The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent.
- The national quality assurance system for higher education refer to the national framework of qualifications and are consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent communiqué agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process.
- The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements.
- The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published.

B. Procedures for verifying that national frameworks are compatible with the EHEA framework were set out in the report to Ministers in Bergen as follows:

- The competent national body/bodies shall certify the compatibility of the national framework with the European framework.
- The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies in the country in question recognised through the Bologna Process.
- The self-certification process shall involve international experts.
- The self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall be published and shall address separately each of the criteria set out.
- The ENIC and NARIC networks shall maintain a public listing of States that have confirmed that they have completed the self-certification process.
- The completion of the self-certification process shall be noted on Diploma Supplements issued subsequently by showing the link between the national framework and the European framework.