

## Gordon Clark's Speech

EQF Referencing Seminar, 17 September 2009, Dublin

### Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to highlight some key principles and critical factors for the successful implementation of the EQF within the overall framework of European policy cooperation.

Firstly, implementing the EQF, through NQFs, must be about making LLL a reality.

The EQF idea dates back to 2002 when the European Education Ministers adopted a crucial resolution on lifelong learning. This emphasised the need for a qualifications framework to increase the transparency of qualifications and that this should build on the achievements gained both in the Bologna Process and through cooperation within vocational education and training, later to become the Copenhagen Process.

The major strength and essence of the EQF is therefore that it is an initiative aimed at making lifelong learning a reality by breaking down the barriers to mobility, defined broadly whether geographical or occupational mobility or between educational levels and sectors.

Now in our new adopted Strategic Framework for European policy cooperation in E+T (ET 2020), EQF implementation remains the principle LLL initiative to which all MS give top priority.

Secondly, the EQF must provide a comprehensive and overarching framework to which key EU initiatives on transparency of qualifications, mobility and LLL should be closely connected.

As you are aware, there are various European policy initiatives and processes that exist to promote lifelong learning, transparency of qualifications and mobility. Although it may not seem that way, they are inter-related and complementary.

Although EQF and Bologna are historically separate processes which have led to two distinct qualification frameworks sharing the goals of enhanced transparency and mobility, the EQF is the only European qualifications tool with a comprehensive and overarching lifelong learning scope. Through national qualifications frameworks, the EQF aims to support the development of flexible learning pathways and easier progression between the various types and levels of education. That is why levels 6-8 of the EQF encompass not only the 3

cycles of the Higher Education Qualifications Framework but also cover advanced vocational qualification levels building on progression from the initial vocational levels.

The existence of two European frameworks does not have to be an issue at the national level. MS can coordinate and synchronize their national referencing to both the EQF and the Bologna QF. The Irish NFQ clearly meets this challenge. The recent Maltese QF, with integrated referencing to the EQF and to the HE Framework, is also a pragmatic model.

Other separate EU initiatives in both HE and VET aim to promote the Quality Assurance needed to underpin mutual trust in national qualification systems and levels. The EQF therefore identifies a set of common criteria that countries need to respect when implementing the EQF. I know that it is a big challenge but national authorities should consider integrated QA systems underpinning their NQFs covering both HE and VET.

And of course we have European tools for citizens: credit transfer systems, Europass and recognition networks such as ENIC/NARIC

Credit transfer and accumulation is crucial to support citizens' mobility and the recognition of their learning outcomes. The use of the ECTS system for higher

education and the newly adopted ECVET system for vocational training can therefore also be closely linked to the implementation of the EQF through national qualification frameworks. And of course at the EU level, we should return to the issue of how to develop an integrated LLL credit system building on both ECTS and ECVET.

Citizens also have the possibility to use the Europass portfolio of transparency documents to present their knowledge, skills and competences. By 2012, all new Europass documents, including the diploma and certificate supplements, should contain a clear reference to the EQF. We are currently planning how to develop Europass as a more user-friendly instrument based on learning outcomes and key competences.

We recognize that all these European initiatives, processes and tools should be more closely linked to the implementation of the EQF to ensure that qualifications are better trusted, understood and recognized throughout the EU.

Thirdly, the successful implementation of the EQF, through NQFs, is very much dependent, from day one, on cooperation with and dialogue between all relevant stakeholders at both the national and European levels. This is how we can build mutual trust

The development and implementation of NQFs, and the referencing process to the EQF, is a big challenge for all countries. You here in Ireland are particularly aware of the joys and difficulties of achieving a learning outcomes-based framework of qualifications. You have learnt that the establishment of a common language and the architecture around it require sustainable long-term cooperation and mutual learning within a diverse group of national stakeholders.

Similarly, at the European level, the successful implementation of the EQF depends on dialogue and cooperation leading to mutual trust between countries and stakeholders. In practical terms, learners, jobseekers, employers, institutions and experts in each country all need to be able to understand and trust how other countries have referenced their qualifications level to the EQF.

At the European level, our essential instrument is the EQF Advisory Group, comprised of national representatives, the European social partners and key stakeholders, which aims to provide the overall coherence and transparency of the EQF implementation process in order to build this mutual trust.

A few words on how European cooperation and programmes are supporting Member States developments in various ways, particularly through mutual learning.

In relation to the EQF, the Commission working closely with Cedefop and the EQF Advisory Group has developed support and guidance materials for experts and stakeholders. A common set of referencing criteria has also been agreed to guide countries in writing their national referencing reports. Bilateral or multilateral exchanges and peer learning activities are organised where national representatives and stakeholders meet to discuss their experiences and address common challenges or specific problems. And we have EQF pilot projects financed under the Lifelong Learning Programme to test approaches and solutions

Mutual learning in the near future will focus on themes such as the interpretation and best use of learning outcomes in defining qualifications levels or individual qualifications. We may also examine how to include in the NQFs those diplomas or certificates, developed by sectors or multinationals, that are currently outside the national frameworks.

Based on all these discussions and mutual learning, further guidance materials and support for the implementation of the EQF and the development of NQFs will be elaborated and disseminated.

So what is the current state of play of EQF implementation, particularly referencing?

The EQF Recommendation of April 2008 sets out 2 significant milestones for implementation by the countries that voluntarily join the initiative. By 2010, they should reference their national qualifications levels to the appropriate levels of the EQF. And by 2012, all new certificates and diplomas should contain a clear reference to the appropriate EQF level.

Virtually all the 32 countries participating in our E+T policy cooperation framework have seen the added value in implementing this European reference tool and have committed themselves to its success.

Now following Ireland's example, Malta has recently presented its referencing report to the other countries. In 2009-2010, 14 further countries plan to relate their national qualifications framework to the EQF, while another 10 countries will finalise their referencing in 2011. So by that date, 26 countries will have completed the process. This indicates the real momentum that has been created

throughout Europe, and indeed in other parts of the world.

### Conclusion

Since 2003, the development of the EQF has involved experts from many countries in long discussions and negotiations to agree on a common instrument and approach to ensure the comparability of qualifications throughout Europe. As Odile Quintin has stressed, Irish colleagues, particularly Sean, Edwin and Jim, have been very supportive and influential. I am sure that Irish experience and expertise will continue to be important for the future of the EQF.

We have made major progress. But the implementation of the EQF and of national qualifications frameworks will remain work in progress. Even after the crucial period until 2012, we will never be able to say that, when we have established the EQF and NQFs and finalised the referencing process, our work is complete. This process will require regular monitoring, evaluation and updating to ensure sustainability.

Indeed, the Framework Implementation and Impact Study Report commissioned by the NQAI to evaluate the NQF implementation to date highlights that frameworks need to manage a tension between stability and development. On the one hand, they need to maintain sufficient stability as a guarantee of

certitude. On the other hand, they should achieve satisfactory dynamism to be able to reflect ongoing change. This tension will exist equally for the EQF.

The EQF and NQFs must avoid becoming bureaucratic instruments. They must remain very relevant to the labour market and flexible enough to adapt to the rapidly evolving needs of citizens to acquire and update their knowledge, skills and competences for the purposes of both employment and personal fulfilment. We therefore look forward to continuing our work with you in in this venture which is so important for long term economic and social development.

Thank you all very much for your support and attention.