



European Economic and Social Committee

SOC/256
Lifelong learning

Brussels, 30 May 2007

OPINION

of the

European Economic and Social Committee

on the

**Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the
establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning**

COM(2006) 479 final – 2006/0163 (COD)

On 19 October 2006, the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning
COM(2006) 479 final.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 2 May 2007. The rapporteur was Mr Rodríguez García-Caro.

At its 436th plenary session, held on 30 and 31 May 2007 (meeting of 30 May 2007), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 256 votes to 1 with 1 abstention.

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1. **Conclusions**

- 1.1 The Committee believes that there is a need for the proposal establishing a European Qualifications Framework, given that adequate transparency of qualifications and competences boosts mobility within the EU and ensures standardised, widespread access to the European labour market by enabling certificates obtained in one Member State to be used in another. However, the Committee has identified and set down herein a number of problems in the proposed model which could hinder its implementation.
- 1.2 The EESC notes that the legal form chosen for the proposal's adoption is the recommendation which, as set out in Article 249 of the Treaty Establishing the European Community, is not legally binding.
- 1.3 The EESC believes that greater clarity and simplicity are needed in the model's descriptors, especially where professional qualifications are concerned, in order to make them easier to understand by the general public, businesses and experts; in addition, there should be an annex giving Member States a reference on which to base their National Qualifications Frameworks, thus ensuring consistency throughout the reference system to be set up.

2. **Introduction**

- 2.1 The proposal forming the subject of the EESC's opinion meets one of the objectives set by the Lisbon European Council in 2000, during which it was concluded that by improving the transparency of qualifications and fostering lifelong learning, it would be possible to adapt

European education and training systems in order to reach the targets set by the Council in terms of competitiveness, growth, employment and social cohesion in Europe.

- 2.2 This conclusion was recognised in 2002 by the Barcelona European Council, which resolved that Member States should encourage cooperation and build bridges between formal, non-formal and informal learning. This was seen as a prerequisite for the creation of a European area of lifelong learning, building on the achievements of the Bologna process in higher education, with the aim of making European education and training systems a worldwide benchmark for quality by 2010.
- 2.3 In the same year, the Seville European Council invited the Commission to develop a framework for the recognition of education and training qualifications, in close cooperation with the Council and Member States.
- 2.4 The Council and Commission's interim report of 2004 on the implementation of the Education and Training 2010 programme stressed the need to set up a European qualifications framework. The Copenhagen Council, held in autumn 2004, also stressed the need to prioritise the development of an open and flexible European qualifications framework, based on transparency and mutual recognition, that would become a common standard for education and training.
- 2.5 The conference of higher education ministers held in Bergen in spring 2005, during which a European higher education qualifications framework was adopted, highlighted the importance of protecting the complementarity between the European Higher Education Area and the European Qualifications Framework.
- 2.6 In the context of the review of the Lisbon Strategy, the employment guidelines for 2005-8 stressed the need to guarantee access to flexible learning, increasing opportunities for the mobility of trainees and students, improving the transparency of qualifications and the validation of non-formal learning throughout Europe.
- 2.7 The European Council of March 2005 called for the adoption of a European Qualifications Framework in 2006. This resolution was ratified at the European Council of March 2006.
- 2.8 This proposal and, particularly, the descriptors defining the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), were drawn up on the basis of: a methodical consultation process led by the Commission with the cooperation of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) and the Bologna Process Follow-up Group; the working document *Towards a European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning*,¹ to which contributed the 32 countries involved in the Education and Training 2010 programme, the social partners, sectoral organisations, educational bodies and NGOs; the discussions at the

¹ SEC(2005) 957.

Budapest Conference held in February 2006; and the work carried out by the groups of experts and consultants assisting the Commission.

2.9 After carrying out an impact assessment of the possible forms that the EQF proposal could take, it was decided to opt for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council.

2.10 At the end of September 2006, the European Parliament approved a report on the creation of the European Qualifications Framework².

3. **Summary of the proposal**

3.1 The proposal for a recommendation contains a reference tool that will make it possible to compare the qualification levels of the different national qualification systems. It is based on a series of eight reference levels which are described in terms of learning outcomes, covering general and adult education, vocational education and training and higher education. The proposal comprises the text of the recommendation, a series of definitions and two annexes (one setting out the descriptors for defining the levels of the EQF, and the other covering the principles for quality assurance in education and training).

3.2 The European Parliament and the Council recommend that the Member States:

- use the EQF as a reference tool for comparing qualification levels;
- align their national qualification systems with the EQF by 2009 and develop national qualification frameworks;
- ensure that, by 2011, all new qualifications and Europass documents include a reference to the corresponding EQF level;
- adopt an approach based on learning outcomes when describing and defining qualifications;
- promote the validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- designate a national centre for supporting and coordinating the national qualification system with the EQF, in order to:
 - correlate the levels of both systems;
 - promote and apply quality assurance principles during the correlation process;
 - ensure the transparency of the methodology applied in order to establish correspondences between levels;
 - guide interested parties and ensure their participation.

² A6-0248/2006. Rapporteur: Mr Mann.

- 3.3 The European Parliament and the Council support the Commission's intention to:
- assist the Member States and international sectoral organisations in using the reference levels and principles of the EQF;
 - set up an advisory group for the EQF in order to supervise, coordinate and ensure the quality and consistency of the correlation process between the qualification systems and the EQF;
 - oversee the measures adopted and inform, within five years, the European Parliament and the Council on the experience gained and future repercussions.
- 3.4 The eight reference levels are described in Annex I, according to the individual learning outcome, based on what the person knows, understands and is able to do. These aspects are expressed in the level descriptors in terms of knowledge, skills and competence.
4. **General comments**
- 4.1 The Committee welcomes the proposal for a recommendation submitted for its opinion, subject to the observations made herein. The Committee believes that adequate transparency of qualifications and competences boosts mobility within the EU and ensures standardised, widespread access to the European labour market by enabling certificates obtained in one Member State to be used in another.
- 4.2 In the conclusions of its Opinion³ on the Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the recognition of professional qualifications⁴, the European Economic and Social Committee supported the creation of a joint platform for the recognition of all qualifications: i.e. higher education, vocational education and training, and non-formal and informal learning. The Committee considers that the European Qualifications Framework is an important step forward in the recognition and transparency of qualifications.
- 4.3 As it is based on learning outcomes, the EQF should help to bring education and training closer into line with the needs of the labour market, which would also make it easier to validate non-formal and informal learning and encourage, in turn, the transfer and use of qualifications between different countries and education or training systems. In the EESC's opinion, these are the most important benefits of the initiative, together with the influence that the reference levels will have on employment.
- 4.4 The European Qualifications Framework should cater for the requirements of individual learning: validation of knowledge, skills and their social integration, employability, and the

³ See the EESC Opinion of 18.9.2002 on "Recognition of professional qualifications", rapporteur: Mr Ehnmark, (OJ C 61, 14.3.2003).

⁴ COM(2002) 119 final.

development and use of human resources. Validation of the non-formal and informal education of European workers should be one of the priorities driving the European Qualifications Framework.

- 4.5 The Committee believes that the EQF will help to make European education and training systems clearer and more accessible for citizens in general. The EU's workers and their potential employers need a reference framework that enables them to compare the qualifications obtained by a person in one or more Member States with the reference qualifications in the Member States to which the person wishes to relocate in order to work. The Committee therefore welcomes the effect that the proposal will have in overcoming the obstacles to transnational mobility. The European Qualifications Framework should build bridges between training systems, facilitating mobility between vocational training and general education (including higher education).
- 4.6 As regards the legal form given to the EQF, the Committee appreciates the analysis carried out by the Commission in its impact assessment⁵, and notes that successive recommendations in the field of education, training and mobility have been supported to a greater or lesser extent by the Member States. However, the Committee believes that the recommendation, as a non-binding act and therefore without legal obligation for the addressees, might prove to be a short-term instrument which would not enable its objective to be met in the medium term, particularly if the reference must be established with a hypothetical National Qualifications Framework (NQF) from each Member State.
- 4.7 Furthermore, in this context, and in line with the outcome of the Budapest Conference of February 2006, five EU countries have already established a National Qualifications Framework and the rest are either developing one or have expressed their intention to do so, or are not going to develop a National Qualifications Framework in their country.
- 4.8 This initial approach means that, in the Committee's opinion, there could be great difficulties in completing the project and that, without a National Qualifications Framework, the EQF lacks content. As the Commission says in its document *Towards a European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning*⁶, "from the point of view of an EQF, the optimal approach would be that each country set up a single National Framework of Qualifications and link this single National Framework to the EQF".
- 4.9 The Committee believes that priority should be given to the effective validation and recognition of the various types of qualifications resulting from formal, non-formal and informal learning across countries and educational sectors, through increased transparency and better quality assurance. This reiterates the point made by the Council in its resolution of

⁵ COM(2006) 479 final.

⁶ SEC(2005) 957.

27 June 2002 on lifelong learning⁷. It should also be recalled that in this resolution, the Council calls upon the Commission to develop a framework for recognising qualifications within the context of higher education and vocational training. The Committee therefore stresses, taking this new argument into account, that the efforts to complete the eight reference levels of the EQF cannot be left until the end of the process, and subject to the will of the Member States – or, indeed, to the legal approach of a recommendation.

- 4.10 The EESC believes that the Commission should clarify the repercussions for the process in the event that one or more Member States should fail to adopt a National Qualifications Framework or to link it with the EQF. With this in mind, the Committee believes that the Commission should analyse this eventuality and its possible solutions in order to remain able, subsequently, to respond to unforeseen situations. The final document must provide an incentive for Member States to adopt this instrument.
- 4.11 The EESC is not calling for the creation of a uniform education and training system within the EU, nor is claiming to tell Member States what qualifications their education centres should dispense. What the Committee wishes to convey is the need to consolidate the steps being taken in the search for transparency, recognition and transfer of qualifications between the Member States. Sophisticated mechanisms also need to be put in place for guaranteeing quality - in particular the quality of certification bodies - at Member State level. Without this framework for action, student/trainee mobility has little meaning, and worker mobility is hindered.

At national and regional level, decisions relating to the National Qualifications Framework should be adopted jointly with the social partners. These partners, with the authorities responsible, should define and apply principles, rules and objectives for the design of the National Qualifications Framework. Consideration should also be given to the role of civil society organisations working in this field.

- 4.12 The proposal provides for the creation of an EQF advisory group responsible for overseeing, coordinating and ensuring the quality and consistency of the process to correlate qualification systems and the EQF. In this regard, and with the aim of ensuring uniform criteria in the correlation of national systems and the EQF, the Committee believes that the advisory group, given the profile of the proposed members, should also be responsible for validating the correlation between national levels and the reference framework, before this correlation is set in stone.

⁷ OJ C 163/1 of 9.7.2002.

5. Specific comments

- 5.1 At the end of page 9 of the English version of the proposal, a reference is made to the 25 EU Member States. Following the last enlargement, this reference should be amended to 27 Member States.
- 5.2 The Committee believes that the deadlines referred to in the recommendation to Member States, particularly under point 2, are too early, given the situation regarding the National Qualifications Frameworks in the Member States. The Committee understands that the deadline is voluntary but notes that, given the current state of affairs, the timeframe is likely to be longer.
- 5.3 The tasks entrusted to the Commission by the proposal include, under point 3, that of monitoring the measures adopted and informing the European Parliament and Council of the experience gained, including a potential review of the recommendation. The Committee considers that to comply fully with Articles 149(4) and 150(4) of the Treaty establishing the European Community, the report should also be addressed to the European Economic and Social Committee.
- 5.4 With regard to the descriptors set out in Annex I of the proposal, as these criteria are to be used to establish the correlation of levels, the Committee believes that they should be worded more simply, so as to make them more understandable, clear and concrete, using language that is less academic and closer to the language of vocational training. The annex containing the descriptors could also be accompanied by a second, explanatory annex, which would make it possible to match qualifications to levels, thus making it easier to later transpose these qualifications on a comparative basis between Member States.
- 5.5 Clear definitions make it easier to understand the meanings of terms used in the document under consideration. In this context, the Committee believes that some of the definitions contained in the Commission document *Towards a European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning*⁸ are clearer than those in the proposal under discussion. More specifically, for instance, the Committee proposes that the definition of "skills" be replaced by that given on page 47 of the abovementioned document.
- 5.6 The Committee supports the correspondence established between the last three levels of the EQF and the academic levels of the Bologna qualifications framework (bachelor, master and doctor). During these phases of education, the knowledge, skills and competences acquired should be classified according to the level of learning attained in the university studies undertaken.

⁸ SEC(2005) 957.

- 5.7 The Committee agrees that it is necessary to continue applying quality criteria at all levels of education and training in the Member States. It has reiterated this point on several occasions, both in its Opinion on the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education⁹, and in its Opinion on the Proposal for a Recommendation of the Council and of the European Parliament on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education¹⁰. More specifically, in the latter opinion, the Committee stated that "[t]he requirement for high quality education and training is vitally important for achieving the Lisbon Strategy objectives."
- 5.8 The Committee endorses the content of Annex II of the proposal in its entirety. However, in order to adapt to current trends in the area of quality, in all fields, it believes that Annex II should be entitled "Principles for the ongoing quality improvement in education and training", bringing the text of the annex into line with this title.
- 5.9 The Committee recommends that Member States, their education and training centres and the social partners work with the model set up by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM). This accredited model, supported by the EU, could be the frame of reference on which educational establishments base their ongoing quality improvement processes.

Brussels, 30 May 2007.

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

The Secretary-General
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Dimitris Dimitriadis

Patrick Venturini

⁹ See the EESC Opinion of 29.10.1997 on "European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education", rapporteur: Mr Rodríguez García-Caro (OJ C 19, 21.1.1998).

¹⁰ See the EESC Opinion of 6.4.2005 on "Quality assurance in higher education", rapporteur: Mr Soares (OJ C 255, 14.10.2005).