

## THE OBJECTIVE OF THE PROJECT

The origin of the EQF-PRO project is linked to the discussions in European Union both at European and national level on the implementation of the EQF, on the establishment of National Qualifications Frameworks, on referencing these NQFs to the EQF. These discussions are particularly intense between the European Commission and the EHEA (European Higher Education Area) regarding the highest levels of qualifications because of the coexistence of two qualifications frameworks: the EQF and the EHEA-QF.

Qualifications Frameworks were seen as tools likely to encourage and facilitate European mobility of students and workers between countries but more and more they are envisaged as powerful tools contributing to the lifelong learning perspective, introducing a common language between all actors involved, and ensuring fluid progression in individual learning paths. This challenge is particularly crucial at the intermediate level, the so called "grey zone", the EQF level 5 and the Bologna short cycle and the EQF level 6 (Bachelor level), which is at the junction of the vocational education and training and higher education subsystems and the basis of the articulation between the two qualifications frameworks.

The promoters of the EQF Pro project share this conviction. However, while the principles promoted by qualifications frameworks are suited to reduce barriers in individual learning pathways, they observe that the impact of these instruments on continuity and progression depends on the extent to which European countries accept this perspective. Our choice was to explore what was actually happening in 10 countries at EQF levels 5 and 6 in two sectors (banking and IT). This was done through case studies (29 collected), meetings in countries with national authorities and stakeholders, and workshops.

## OUR METHOD

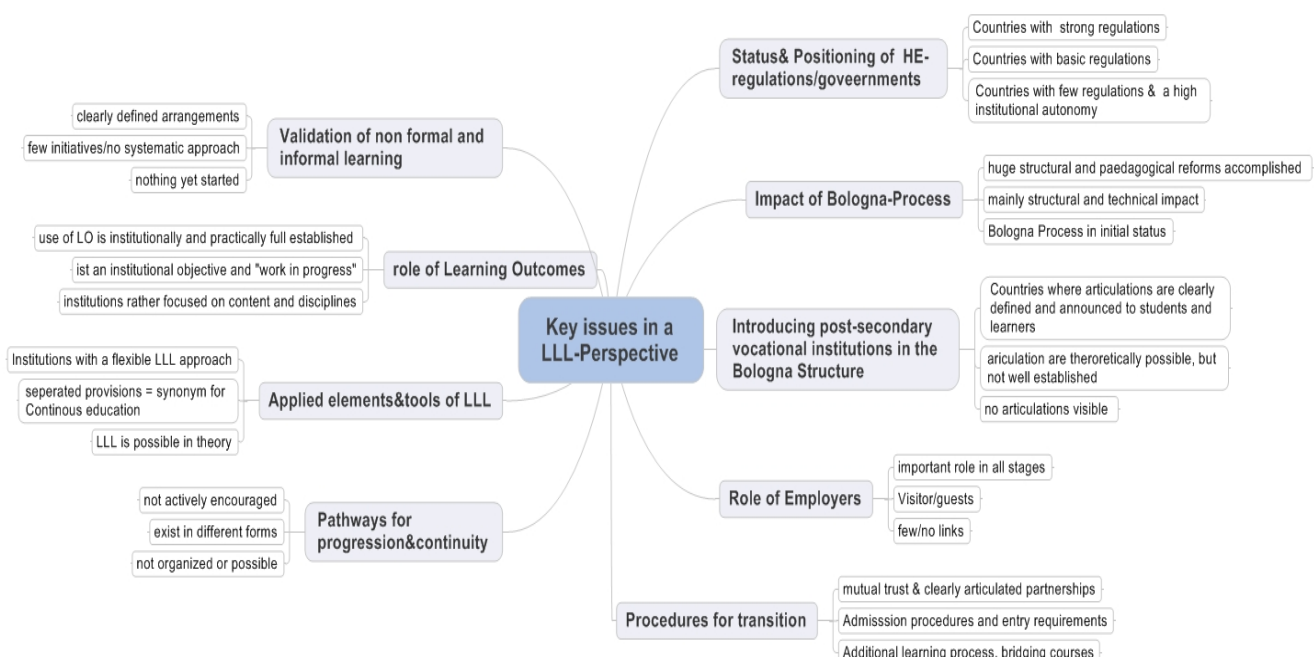
Our method has been based on four steps:

- an analysis of the current situation in the 10 countries and in Europe regarding the implementation of NQFs and the articulation between EQF levels 5 and 6;
- a collection of 29 case studies presenting qualifications at EQF levels 5 and 6 in two sectors (Banking and IT) and a discussions of these results at national level;
- a transversal analysis of the case studies;
- a discussion of our results with external partners at European level.

The objectives of our analysis and discussions were to provide decision markers and stakeholders with propositions and recommendations likely to ensure continuity and progression individual learning, paths and to sensitise all the actors involved to this issues.

## THE KEY ISSUES

The diagram below identifies the nine key issues emerging from case studies according the perspective adopted. For each of these key issues, from the data collected and our discussions with partners in the ten countries, it is possible to identify three distinct descriptions that classify the context and situation of the different universities engaged in the project.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 In some countries, the regulations, the academic culture, the weight of traditions and habits are obstacles for the implementation of fluid educational pathways between subsystems. However, some initiatives developed by HEIs demonstrate that what it is not possible at national level may be successfully initiated at local level between institutions on a collaborative basis.

So, we could, where it is not prevented by formal regulations, encourage developing **agreements and partnerships between institutions of different subsystems** to ensure continuity of learners' paths. The case studies identify some options. This could be:

- The development of "bridging qualifications". As, in some countries, access to a higher level or to universities is commanded by the participation in transition programmes, this could be a way to give an official recognition to these programmes and to position them in a NQF.
- The recognition of credits gained at lower level offering the opportunity to learners to reduce the length of their path in a higher level programme.
- The identification on the basis of regular exchanges or the definition, when designing programmes, of common or equivalent units that would be further more easily recognised

More generally, we conclude that many universities or HEIs, Continuing Education services or departments have already developed partnerships with other subsystems and with companies, diversifying the entrance criteria to programmes, offering alternative ways for access, recognising prior learning and in particular experiential learning. **We would recommend taking advantage of the best practices and of the expertise developed by these units.**

- 2 **It is necessary to accelerate the implementation of credit systems and the description of programmes in terms of learning outcomes to design progressive learning pathways both for young populations and adults.**

For the moment credit systems do not really provide an effective solution. ECTS was established as a tool for mobility allowing transfer and accumulation of credits between HEIs in Europe. It is mainly a way to share students' workload between units in a programme. The transfer is not general but is linked to agreements between institutions or leaders of programmes to facilitate the recognition of credits. It is not yet an accumulation system allowing the construction of individual "coherent" learning pathways irrespective of programmes, forms of learning, institutions, systems and countries. ECVET is still in development. The process started in 2002, the launching Conference was held in Brussels on 17 & 18 November 2009, and some experiments have been developed or are in progress, some initiatives have been taken in several member states. But, at this stage, it is impossible to use this system as a common tool. And remains the question introduced when ECVET has been launched: the coexistence of the two credit systems. Have the two systems to converge to one system? This is refused by higher education and this option has little chance to be successful due to the difference of conception underpinning the two systems. Have the two systems to cooperate and to establish dialogue in order to facilitate continuity and progression between VET and Higher education? This is encouraged by numerous actors and this is the way explored by the Commission which would like to enhance compatibility and complementarities between systems. The adoption of a learning outcomes perspective is certainly a point of potential convergence of the two systems. Today ECTS insists more than in the past on learning outcomes as a way to describe units and programmes. ECVET stipulates that transfer and accumulation are based on learning outcomes structured in units.

In consequence, our recommendation would be to give more emphasis now on the generalisation of the description of learning programmes on the basis of learning outcomes. Learning outcomes must become a common language between programmes, institutions, forms of learning (formal, non formal and informal), subsystems in a country or in different countries, to pull down the current Tower of Babel. Learning outcomes are a powerful tool for dialogue. *"Increasing use of learning outcomes is expected to have profound implications for making systems more learner-centred, organising institutions, curricula and for the roles and training of teachers and trainers"*<sup>1</sup>. A pre-condition is to develop successful policies and arrangements for recognition and validation of prior formal learning and experiential learning. On the basis of our evidence, we can conclude that in countries and/or institutions that have already developed recognition and validation policies, fluid progression is easier for learners and the obligation to change the traditional approaches of assessment alters the mind-set and the attitudes of decision makers and teachers in institutions. We think that the recent publication by the Commission of the European Guidelines for the validation of non formal and informal learning can certainly help European countries to integrate this essential dimension for developing progressive and positive individual professional and personal paths in the future; this is worthwhile activity and can make an important contribution.

- 3 The shift to a learning outcomes approach leads to another shift, a progress towards a learner-centred approach in institutions. **This requires building systems likely to facilitate and support personal and professional development through individual learning pathways taking into account what the learner has acquired in different ways in different settings, their projects, their expectations, their needs.** This requires:

- Making systems legible and flexible to answer to a diversity of demands and needs;
- Preparing teachers and trainers to adopt other ways of teaching and assessing, and preparing learners to become lifelong learners - which means more independence and the learner's taking more responsibility;

<sup>1</sup> CEDEFOP, *the shift to learning outcomes, conceptual, political and practical development in Europe*, 2008.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Increasing the range of provision to more diverse groups of learners, and investing in guidance and counselling professional services likely to help lifelong learners to manage their individual learning paths. At present these services are more or less well established at least in some countries, but are often limited to young populations. In the future we need reinforced and competent services able to attract and support a larger diversity of populations.
- 4 We strongly recommend using the opportunity offered by the NQF discussions **to question the whole national system from the point of view of continuity and progression in a lifelong learning perspective**. The information that we have collected during this project show that it is impossible for all countries to follow the same procedures. Even if the EQF level 6 corresponds to existing qualifications and employments in all countries, this is not the case for EQF level 5. The establishment of a NQF is, as well as the EQF, a stepping stone for continuity and progression. It obliges countries to elaborate an overarching framework integrating and articulating different qualifications frameworks linked to subsystems in order to present a homogeneous system covering more or less all qualifications awarded in a country. This does not necessarily mean changing the structure and the design of each subsystem, or of existing qualifications, but to make them compatible and to provide an articulated vision to citizens, educational and training institutions and stakeholders.

In some cases this will lead to changes in regulations and statements to avoid dead ends. But in most of cases, the elaboration of a NQF sets up a platform for a dialogue and cooperation between ministries, between ministries and stakeholders, between institutions. The NQFs, in building a general description of all qualifications using the three descriptors (knowledge, skills and competences) irrespective of institutions and subsystems, provide an “independent” way of positioning qualifications on the basis of the level of learning achieved and not on the basis of regulations or reputation. This makes more transparent the respective position of each qualification on the basis of reference points and of broad descriptors using the same general logic at all levels. It makes the relationships between qualifications explicit, and thus can open up progression routes. The purpose is not only to come to an aggregate (as addition in a framework of subsystems framework), or to a compromise (which is certainly a necessary step), but also to offer an articulated national qualification system.

Only two countries in our membership have already a Qualifications Framework, the others are at different stages of discussions and implementation, so it is difficult to measure for the moment what the impact of the process will be in terms of reviewing regulations, encouraging partnerships, and establishing better articulations between subsystems. The CEDEFOP survey published in September 2009 provides interesting information on the state of play in member states, EEA and candidate countries and underlines the common preoccupation of European countries on articulation issues, in particular in the so-called “grey zone”, the EQF levels 5-6. **It would be useful to regularly update this picture focusing in particular on progress in the improvement in continuity and progression.**

In some countries, **the creation of independent National Agencies**, working together with ministries and stakeholders, employers and social partners, could support the elaboration of NQFs, avoiding competition between ministries, mainly the ministry in charge of vocational education and training and the ministry in charge of higher education.

- 5 **We recommend the creation of Repertoires**, or Registers, describing all qualifications awarded in a country on the same basis, using the same format to avoid confusion in definition of descriptors and to be aware of the coherence between levels, making them more legible to all potential users. The experiments developed in several countries are considered as positive and contributing to a better vision of the “national landscape”, in particular when they are linked to descriptions of job profiles, of professional standards. In addition this process oblige institutions and teachers responsible of programmes to map horizontally and vertically their qualifications that they often consider as “unique and irreplaceable”, in a set of qualifications which are similar or contributing to common well identified learning pathways.
- 6 The notion of progression is now more largely used at European level by a wider range of decision makers and experts. The September 2009 CEDEFOP conference, together with our observations in 10 countries confirm this trend. Although, each country is responsible for the establishment of its NQF and for referencing it to the EQF, **guidelines or examples of good practices are needed. The role of CEDEFOP is here crucial in the regular analysis of the state of play of progress at the national level.**
- 7 **There is a need for a dynamic approach connected to the future.** Our analysis of the future developments of individual paths shows that there is a risk that these paths will be more and more fragmented with increased obligation to move from one company or organisation to another, to one activity to another, to one region or country to another one. It was clearly stated in the recent consultative document of the Commission *EU 2020*. This document underlines the new patterns emerging “where there are several entries in and exits from the labour market during a working life, instead of the traditional sequence (education, work, and retirement), offering more opportunities to people”. This obliges educational institutions and universities in particular to take care of these transition points and to elaborate new provisions lively to offer flexible answers to all people concerned. “Transition between jobs, between training and jobs will have to be managed”. Transition points are becoming the most important moments in the development of personal and professional pathways, “avoiding long term unemployment”, and educational institutions have to take into account what people have learnt from previous activities, assessing and validating this non formal and informal learning and opening new perspectives both on the basis of the results of this learning process and of the personal and professional project of the individuals, the opportunities that are offered to them, the new employments accessible,... In addition this approach must not be seen only from the employability perspective, also from the personal development and citizenship

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

perspective. This is particularly crucial if we want to involve people meeting difficulties for social insertion or persons who are not inserted in the labour market: principally women at home and aged or retired people. The challenge in our societies is not only to face rapid changes in economy but also in social, community or family life.

- 8 **We encourage the development of strategies at institutional level** based on clear and shared goals, on governance having a vision, allocating properly tasks and responsibilities, organising evaluation and review. Our analysis of case studies demonstrates that the issues regarding progression are dealt at micro level by one or two teachers responsible for programmes, or by groups of teachers, with few contacts with the top management of their university. In most of cases they do their best but without any recommendations or indications on the institutional orientations and perspectives.
- 9 **We think that it is necessary to work on a new educational culture.** The lifelong learning perspective is not just a new way of presentation of education and training. Lifelong learning does not result of the addition of local practices dedicated to more diversified populations or offering more flexible learning provisions, lifelong learning is a system which introduces a rupture in the way of thinking, in the institutional culture. This culture is currently more focused on academic approaches than on employability and personal development. The lifelong learning perspective imposes a new organisation based simultaneously on the provision of formal learning pathways (leading or not to qualifications) and on the capture and the formalisation of all forms of learning gained by individuals in different ways and settings.

## ABOUT EQF PRO

<b>A c t i v i t i e s</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A brief analysis of the situation in the 10 partners countries</li> <li>• 29 case studies on qualifications awarded at levels 5 and 6 in two sectors in 10 countries</li> <li>• 4 workshops in Lille, Barcelona, Versailles and Szczecin</li> <li>• A Seminar of consultation in Lille</li> <li>• A final Conference in Porto</li> </ul>
<b>P r o d u c t s</b>	<p>A number of documents have been published:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A brief presentation of the situation in each partner country on the basis of a common grid and a transversal analysis of these situations</li> <li>• A state of play of the European situation regarding qualifications frameworks : the European Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (EQF-EHEA), the European Qualifications Framework for LLL (EQF-LLL) and National Qualifications Frameworks compatible with both EQF</li> <li>• 29 case studies</li> <li>• A transversal analysis of the 29 case studies</li> <li>• A self-assessment by partners via spider diagrams</li> <li>• A final report</li> <li>• An executive summary</li> </ul>
<b>W e b s i t e</b>	<p>All the documents produced by the project and the full thematic report are available on the project's website: <a href="http://www.eucen.org/EQFpro/index.html">http://www.eucen.org/EQFpro/index.html</a></p>
<b>P a r t n e r s h i p</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Université de Liège (BE)</li> <li>• Universität Oldenburg (DE)</li> <li>• Université de Versailles (FR)</li> <li>• Klaipėdos Universitetas (LT)</li> <li>• Zachodniopomorska Szkoła Biznesu (PL)</li> <li>• Universidade de Porto (PT)</li> <li>• Universitatea Aurel Vlaicu din Arad (RO)</li> <li>• Univerza na Primorskem (SI)</li> <li>• University of Bradford (UK)</li> <li>• Chelyabinsk State University (RU)</li> </ul>

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