



EQF Referencing Process and Report

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This publication is the final result of the Lifelong Learning project ‘EQF Referencing Process – Examples and Proposals – EQF-Ref’. As the project coordinator, it is a great pleasure to be able to publish the project outcomes and to share the reflections and ideas of the project partnership after two years of diligent work!

The publication on hand represents the outcome of a peer-learning approach realised as a process of exchanging and discussing information and developing further ideas in relation to the EQF referencing process within the project partnership. All project team members (see list on the previous pages) have contributed their experiences and expertise to these discussions and also to this publication. However, of course, the organisation of the project and this publication was only made possible by the contributions and support of numerous people and – on behalf of the project partnership – I would therefore like to express my gratitude to all of them:

All project team members are supported by colleagues and administrative staff within their institutions. It is not possible to list all their names here but I would like to thank them for their valuable support.

Furthermore, I would like to express my gratitude to the colleagues outside the EQF-Ref partnership on both national and European level who discussed with us the preliminary results of our project. In particular the contributions and feedback from the participants at the Peer-Learning Seminar ‘EQF referencing: process and reports – challenges and open questions’ organised at the end of March 2011 in Sofia (Bulgaria) were very much appreciated. Special thanks go to Mike Coles who has also shared his valuable expertise with us.

The EQF implementation process is an ongoing process and there are still a number of open issues that need to be discussed and decided. We hope that our reflections and recommendations are useful contributions to these discussions.

Vienna, May 2011

Karin Luomi-Messerer

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Part I:

Introduction

Content of Part I:

This introductory part describes the background of the EQF-Ref project and its partnership and provides an overview of the aims and content of this publication.

I.1 Background of the EQF-Ref project

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a **common European reference framework** acting as a **translation device** to make qualifications acquired within the different education and training systems in Europe more readable and understandable (cf. info box). The EQF will relate different countries' national qualifications systems and frameworks together around a common European reference: the eight EQF reference levels described in terms of learning outcomes. This enables the EQF to connect the different national systems and to serve as a bridge between qualifications systems, different segments (for example, general vocational or higher education), and learning contexts (formal, non-formal and informal learning). Thanks to this **overarching, integrative perspective** and the **learning outcomes approach**, the EQF should contribute to a better understanding of different qualifications systems and to facilitate the **transparency** and **comparability** of qualifications and therefore their portability and transfer across countries, systems, sectors and learning contexts.

European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

The EQF acts as a translation device to make national qualifications more readable across Europe, promoting workers' and learners' mobility between countries and facilitating their lifelong learning. The EQF will relate different countries' national qualifications systems to a common European reference framework. Individuals and employers will be able to use the EQF to better understand and compare the qualifications levels of different countries and different education and training systems.

More information about the EQF is available here: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm

In order to use the EQF as a translation device, countries are asked to reference the levels of their national qualifications systems to the EQF. According to common agreement, the national EQF **referencing processes** must use **transparent procedures and methods**. The EQF **Advisory Group** has decided on **criteria and procedures** that should be considered for the referencing of national qualifications levels to the EQF (cf. Annex and info box). The referencing criteria aim to ensure that the referencing processes and results can be compared and generate trust. Therefore, the referencing processes need to be transparently conducted and documented: countries need to refer their qualifications systems and levels to the EQF in a demonstrable, explicit and defensible way. Those not familiar with a country's qualifications should be able to judge the information provided as valid or not. However, each country's qualifications authorities must choose the modality of linking their qualifications levels to the EQF.

Criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF developed by the EQF Advisory Group

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. This set of criteria and procedures indicate the general direction of the referencing process and is presented in a note. The aim is to ensure that the information and documentation put into the public domain is validated by the competent authorities, is relevant, is transparent, is comparable and generates trust. In addition to listing the 10 criteria/procedures agreed by the EQF Advisory Group, the note contains a brief explanation that clarifies context and intentions.

The note is available here: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/criteria_en.pdf

The EQF Recommendation, adopted in 2008, sets 2010 as the recommended target date for countries to relate their national qualifications levels to the EQF. Up to now, only a few countries have officially completed this process (Ireland, Malta and the United Kingdom – all referencing reports are available here: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm).

To support the EQF implementation and development, several activities are carried out. For example, in each country, an EQF National Coordination Point (NCP) has been designated as the single national contact for all issues related to the EQF.

Furthermore, the European Commission is financing EQF pilot projects via the Lifelong Learning Programme. One of these projects is the EQF-Ref project (cf. info box).

I.2 The EQF-Ref project

EQF Referencing Process - Examples and Proposals

The EQF-Ref project sought to facilitate communication between the partner countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany and the Netherlands), to enhance learning from each other and to develop ‘mutual trust’ in referencing qualifications levels to the EQF. The project was running between March 2009 and April 2011 and its main result is this publication.

More information is available here: www.EQF-Ref.eu

Aims of the project

The purpose of the EQF-Ref project was

- to facilitate **discussions and exchange of experience** between the partner countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany and the Netherlands),
- to enhance **learning from each other** and
- to develop ‘**mutual trust**’ in referencing qualifications levels to the EQF.

In particular, the EQF-Ref project sought to develop a **proposal for the structure and content of the EQF referencing reports, to reflect on important issues related to the EQF referencing process and to develop some recommendations.**

The recommendations and examples used for illustrating them were developed in cooperation between the partners involved and are mainly based on the decisions taken and current discussions in the partner countries (as of April 2011).

Partner countries and profile of the partner institutions

The project partnership includes countries that did not have a tradition with classifying their qualifications in an NQF before the introduction of the EQF. However, most of them (except the Czech Republic) are now developing or implementing a comprehensive NQF and all are currently discussing how to link the national levels to the EQF (cf. info box).

Links to information on NQF developments in the EQF-Ref partner countries

Austria:	www.lebenslanges-lernen.at/nqr
Bulgaria:	http://mon.bg/left_menu/documents
Czech Republic:	www.nsk.nuov.cz www.nuov.cz/nsk2
Finland:	www.oph.fi/qualificationsframework
Germany:	www.deutscherqualifikationsrahmen.de
The Netherlands:	www.nlqf.nl

The EQF-Ref project was used as a **platform for discussion and exchange** of experiences in this process during the 26 months of the project's lifetime. The outcomes of the peer-learning process were supposed to be fed back into national discussions and the project's proposals and recommendations were supposed to be based on these discussions and their reception in each of the partner countries. Since the partner countries are at different stages in this process, the partners' possibilities for contributing examples from their national contexts to the EQF-Ref project differs to a certain extent. Similarly, the actual impact of the EQF-Ref project on the referencing process in the partner countries depends on their current position in the referencing process.

The EQF-Ref project concerns the national qualifications systems of the partner countries, the process of the NQF development and the EQF implementation (referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF). Therefore, the **organisations involved** represent **relevant public bodies** as well as **research and consulting institutions** with quite vast experience in the field of qualifications and qualifications frameworks.

Since the project partners are also involved in activities related to the implementation of the EQF and the development of an NQF in their respective national contexts, the results of the EQF-Ref project can be and have been directly exploited in these processes (depending on the progress already made on a national level).

All **project partners** are, in a certain way, **involved in the EQF referencing process** in their respective national context. However, their relationships towards the bodies responsible for

NQF development, EQF referencing or the NCP (for example, some are the NCP, some are ‘critical friends’), their roles and positions and the impact of this position on the referencing process are very different. Some partner institutions function as the NCP in their country (NUOV in the Czech Republic and FNBE in Finland), others are involved as experts (or ‘critical friends’) in these processes in their countries. Some representatives of partner institutions are also involved in the EQF implementation on the European level (for example, colleagues from NUOV and Finland belong to the EQF Advisory Group; 3s provides expertise to the European Commission in this context).

The following overview briefly describes the different roles of the partner institutions in the EQF implementation process:

- **3s, AT:** is an independent research and consulting institute providing expertise to Austrian Ministries regarding the development of the NQF; is commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture to contribute to the Austrian EQF referencing process; is providing expertise to the European Commission for the further development and implementation of the EQF.
- **NAVET, BG:** is actively involved in processes related to EQF/NQF development/implementation on a national level since the very beginning.
- **NUOV, CZ:** is an agency for VET governed by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports responsible for development of core curricula for secondary VET and the national (vocational/professional) qualifications register; is representing CZ in the EQF Advisory Group; functions as the Czech NCP and the national EUROPASS centre.
- **BIBB, DE:** advises the Ministry of Education and Research on EU VET policies such as implementing the EQF and developing the NQF.
- **MBO Raad, NL:** is the Dutch national association of VET colleges. The MBO Raad is requested by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to contribute to the Dutch referencing process by participating in the national expert group to develop the NLQF.
- **FNBE, FI:** is involved in the development and implementation of the NQF, a member in the National NQF Committee; represents FI in the EQF Advisory Group and in the sub-group on quality assurance; it functions as the Finnish NCP.

In all EQF-Ref partner countries, the partner institutions involved, as **supporting partners**, the ministries responsible for the EQF referencing process (and, in some cases, also other institutions).

I.3 Content and aim of this publication

This introductory part which describes the background of the EQF-Ref project, its aims and partnership, is followed by three more parts:

- **Part II** is related to the **EQF referencing process** and addresses the following issues: who is responsible for this process, who organises it, how are stakeholders involved, what is the timeframe for this process, how are international experts involved and how can other kinds of international cooperation be used in this process, what is the role of the EQF Advisory Group.
- **Part III** is related to the structure and **content of the referencing report** and focuses in particular on Criterion 2 (linking national qualifications levels to the EQF levels) and on Criterion 4 (transparent criteria and procedures for classifying qualifications in an NQF).
- **Part IV** is related to the phase **following the EQF referencing process** and addresses the following issues: when do EQF referencing reports need to be updated, how can the reports be analysed and evaluated and who are the actual beneficiaries of the referencing processes.

These topics were discussed in the EQF-Ref project and this publication presents, on the one hand, proposals and recommendations and, on the other hand, it includes examples from the partner countries (in boxes) illustrating how certain issues have been addressed in the respective national context.

- The **proposals and recommendations** presented reflect, of course, the view of the project members, which does not necessarily conform to the official perspectives in the partner countries.
- The **illustrative examples** represent the current state of affairs in the partner countries. The NQF development processes in the partner countries are at different stages and, therefore, the process of referencing national levels to the EQF has developed at different speeds. Thus, in some of the countries, the EQF referencing report has already been prepared, whereas, in others, the focus of the development work is still on the NQF and the referencing process is discussed only in a very limited way. Due to the different stages of relevant developments, not all partner countries are represented by these examples to the same degree. Furthermore, it is important to mention that some examples reflect decisions already taken, while others are related to current (as of May 2011) expectations, proposals or intentions. The respective ‘character’ of an example is always expressed in the description.

This publication does not address all issues that are relevant in relation to the EQF referencing process and report. It **concentrates on** certain **topics** that emerged in the discussions within the project partnership and seem to be **of high relevance** in this context. To get further information and ideas related to the EQF implementation, it is recommended to look into the results of **other EQF projects** and to consult the **EQF note on referencing** (cf. info box).

Referencing National Qualifications Levels to the EQF. European Qualifications Framework Series: Note 3 (2011)

The particular purpose of this Note is to support discussions and decisions on the process and methodologies of referencing national qualifications levels to the levels of the EQF and on the presentation of the results of this referencing process. The considerations included in this Note are based on the debates in the EQF Advisory Group and National Coordination Points on the 10 Referencing criteria and experiences of countries that have presented their referencing reports until today. It is probable that the Note will need to be further elaborated as information on forthcoming referencing processes becomes available.

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm

Additional information is available in the e-community on ‘European Qualifications Framework Implementation’ (cf. info box!).

European Qualifications Framework Implementation e-community

The EQF Implementation e-community is meant to reach and inform a broad audience of experts, decision-makers and practitioners involved in education, training and qualifications. The aim is to encourage and support debate on the way in which the European Qualifications Framework is being put in practice both within EU countries and at the European level.

The overall objective is to better organise and stimulate the flow of information between the members and notably to offer them dissemination tools that can increase the visibility of their own activities, to the community members or to the public at large, when this is relevant.

In this regard, the e-community is open experts, decision-makers and practitioners active in the field of NQF development and implementation, referencing to European frameworks and working with or using qualifications for different purposes.

Its library contains legal texts, policy documents, guidance material, project reports, discussion papers that may be useful referencing for those working on the implementation of the learning outcomes approach, NQF development and implementation and referencing

to the EQF. The calendar posts information on relevant national and European meetings, conferences and seminars.

Access to the e-community is available here: http://europa.eu/sinapse/directaccess/qualification_framework

As mentioned above, the topics included in this publication were discussed within the project partnership and jointly developed recommendations as well as experiences from the other partner countries were brought back to the national levels. The feedback received and further considerations were then again discussed in the project partnership. This **peer-learning approach** was considered as very useful by the partners involved despite the differences in the progress made so far in the EQF referencing process on a national level.

However, the issues addressed are not just relevant for the EQF-Ref partner countries. Since most **other European countries** are also currently implementing the EQF, it can be assumed that they can **use the considerations of the EQF-Ref partners for reflecting on their own EQF referencing process** and can build on them for developing their own ideas how to proceed in their countries. Since the way the EQF referencing process is conducted in a country depends a lot on traditions and existing structures in this country, each country has to find its own way of dealing with this issue. Nevertheless, it is important to share experiences in this process, to discuss pros and cons of different approaches and to get ideas on what could be considered as good practice and might fit to the own situation. Therefore, this publication seeks to address a target group that includes responsible bodies and stakeholders involved in these processes (for example, members of National Contact Points) in the partner countries and in other European countries as well as policymakers at European level (in particular members of the EQF Advisory Group and of the European Commission).

Part II: EQF Referencing Process

Content of Part II:

This part addresses topics that the EQF Ref project partners recommend to consider in the preparation of the EQF referencing process. The topics discussed here and examples from the partner countries are mainly related to structural, organisational and procedural issues.

II.1 Responsibilities

Criterion 1 (cf. info box) of the ‘EQF Referencing Criteria and Procedures’ asks for transparent information on the responsibilities of those involved in the referencing report:

Criterion 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.

To determine the responsibilities for the EQF referencing process and the report, it needs to be clear who is in charge of the process and who actually makes the final decisions. This should also be described in the referencing reports.

In some countries, one body (quite often the relevant ministry) has the final authority in the decision making process (for example, in Finland this is the Ministry of Education and Culture). This is very different from Germany's highly decentralised structure, where the process is based on the principle of decision making by consensus and where the *Länder* are given a lot of power according to the constitutional law.

In relation to these questions, it would also be interesting to get some ideas from the information presented in the EQF referencing reports about the nature of the referencing process, which varies to a certain extent across countries. In some countries, the EQF referencing process seems to be highly political, whereas in other countries, it is very technical. The nature of the process is, on the one hand, reflected in the decision on who is the responsible body in this context and, on the other hand, in the organisation of the whole process (who is involved, how is it done etc. – cf. II.2).

The following paragraphs present information on the decision making bodies for the EQF referencing process in the EQF-Ref partner countries. As one would expect, these institutions are also responsible for the NQF development in the respective country (except in the Czech Republic where there is not yet a decision on the formal establishment of a comprehensive NQF).

Austria

Key actors in the NQF development process are the Federal Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (bm:ukk) and the Ministry of Science and Research (bm:wf). These ministries head the so-called NQF Steering Group, in which members of all ministries, the social partners and the *Länder* (provinces) are represented. It is coordinated by the General Directorate for Vocational Education and Training of the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture.

This group will also be the decision making body for the EQF referencing report. The National Coordination Point, established at the National Agency for Lifelong Learning/OeAD-GmbH, will support this process.

Bulgaria

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Science (MEYS) is responsible for the EQF referencing process.

In April 2008, a task force was set up by an Order of the Minister of Education to develop proposals on how to relate the national qualification degrees to the EQF, to prepare a plan for sectoral qualifications development, and to submit a proposal for changes in the national legislation. This task force was composed of representatives of the MEYS, the NAVET, and the ENIC-NARIC centre.

A separate task force prepared a draft qualifications framework for HE, based on Dublin descriptors. It also aligned the national descriptors of the existing higher education structure (BA, MA and Doctorate) introduced by the Higher Education Act (1995) with the cycles and descriptors introduced in the context of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). A draft set of national HE-descriptors has also been elaborated.

In January 2011, the task force responsible for drafting the entire NQF was expanded by including representatives of all stakeholders at a national level, incl. the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, all six nationally represented organizations of employers and the two nationally represented trade unions, the Rectors Conference, the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency, and the National Statistical Institute. The elaboration of the referencing report was also added as a task to this group.

The coordination of the referencing process is ensured by the National Coordination Point – International and European Cooperation directorate at the MEYS.

The first draft of the NQF is approved by the Minister of Education, Youth and Science and is published at the MEYS official website. National consultations are taking place till the end of October 2011.

Czech Republic

The referencing of national qualifications to the EQF is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.

The National Coordination Point for the EQF in the Czech Republic was established at the National Institute of Technical and Vocational Education (NUOV) based on a proposal approved by the Ministry of Education. NCP CZ plays the main role in organising the referencing process and writing the report.

Proposals are made within the EQF NCP and discussed with stakeholders, experts and policymakers and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.

The Ministry makes decisions and approves proposals.

Finland

The legal authority and the process owner belong to the Ministry of Education and Culture. It co-ordinates the referencing process and the preparation of the referencing report. The Ministry of Education and Culture appointed the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) to serve as the National Coordination Point (NCP). The FNBE has been asked to prepare the referencing report for the Ministry. The National Qualifications Framework Committee, appointed by the Ministry of Education and Culture to prepare the proposal for the National Qualifications Framework, will be consulted during the process.

Germany

Key actors in the decision-making on the referencing process are the Ministry of Education and Research (responsible for VET in companies based on the Vocational Training Act and overarching questions) and the *Kultusministerkonferenz* (Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the *Länder* in the Federal Republic of Germany [*KMK*]). Representatives from these authorities form the so-called *Bund-Länder-Koordinierungsgruppe* (Federal/*Länder* Co-ordination Group) and are setting the agenda for the *Nationale Arbeitskreis Deutscher Qualifikationsrahmen* (National Working Group German Qualifications Framework), which comprises the representatives from:

- the Federal and *Länder* authorities (4+4),
- the social partners (employers 4 + unions 4),
- HE: Science Council, Universities Rectors Conference, Accreditation Council, Students Organisation,
- free, training providers organisations (continuing education, private schools, NGOs),
- Federal Employment Agency,
- two professors (for VET and HE) and an expert from the Federal Institute for Vocational Training.

This group will also be the decision making body for the EQF referencing report. The process is highly political.

The Netherlands

All responsibility for the process, decision-making and reporting lies with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW). The ministry of OCW organises the process and writes the report. They have set up a steering group which includes directors of the ministry. Besides that, the ministry has created an expert group of stakeholders involved in the process, which they consulted regularly. In addition, the minister established an independent committee of professors in the area of lifelong learning. Their task is to advise on the NQF and the NCP. Using this advice, the minister will determine the NLQF (and the relation to the EQF). Afterwards, the ministry will hand over the final NLQF and referencing document to the (European) EQF Advisory Board.

II.2 Organisation

As mentioned above, the way the EQF referencing process is organised is closely linked to the question on who is **responsible** for this process. However, the organiser of the process does not necessarily have the decision making power. For example, the process could be split; different organisations, different experts or groups of experts could organise the process and write the report. In some cases, the report is solely written by representatives of national bodies (for example, in the Czech Republic or in Finland); in other cases, external experts are directly involved (for example, in Austria, in the Czech Republic or in the Netherlands). In the Netherlands, a specific approach can be observed: An independent committee (*Committee Leijnse*) has been set up for advising the responsible ministry on issues related to the NQF and the EQF referencing process.

Another question in this context relates to the **role and tasks of the NCP** and its institutional profile. The roles and responsibilities of the NCP may differ across countries, as well as its degree of independence. For example, in some countries, the tasks of the NCP are assigned to national bodies and their experts that were already closely involved in the NQF development process (such as NUOV in the Czech Republic or the FNBE in Finland) or new institutional structures are established for setting up the NCP (for example, in Austria, the NCP was established as a new organisational entity as part of the National Agency for Lifelong Learning). In many countries, the NCPs are currently within ministries or in close cooperation with or under supervision of ministries that are responsible for the NQF and the EQF referencing process.

The roles, tasks and the structure of the NCP in the EQF-Ref partner countries are described in the following paragraphs:

Austria

The Austrian NCP was set up in autumn 2010 as a new organisational entity as part of the National Agency for Lifelong Learning which belongs to the OeAD-GmbH, the Austrian agency for international mobility and cooperation in education, science and research. All shares of the OeAD-GmbH are in the ownership of the federal government and the federal minister of science and research has been appointed with the power to exercise shareholder rights. The NCP is fulfilling its tasks with support from the European Commission on behalf of national authorities (under supervision of the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture). The NCP has the role of a service and communication platform without any decision-making power in relation to the NQF or the EQF referencing.

The main tasks of the NCP include:

- supporting the development and implementation of the NQF in Austria;
- developing and implementing an internet-based NQF information system including the NQF register;
- organising public relation activities, events, consultations; and
- networking on the national and European levels.

One task of the NCP is also to support the EQF referencing process; concrete activities have not been planned so far.

Bulgaria

The Bulgarian NCP is operating since 2008 and is located at the International and European Cooperation Directorate at the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science. It plays an organizational, coordination and supportive role in the referencing process, with respect to:

- referencing the national qualifications levels according to the national qualifications system to the EQF;
- using a transparent methodology in the referencing;
- providing information and guidance concerning the national qualifications system; and
- promoting the participation of all stakeholders in the referencing process.

The NCP is also represented in the task force for elaboration of the NQF and the referencing report. It is also represented in the EQF Advisory Group.

The activities of the NCP are supported by the task force responsible for drafting the NQF and the referencing report.

Czech Republic

For NUOV, as the NCP, it was a big accomplishment to bring all the stakeholders around one table. They were able to produce some quite remarkable outcomes in their referencing conference, which would have been unimaginable several years ago.

The NCP CZ was established and has been fully functional since January 2009. It has the following components.

- **NUOV Workgroup:** The group's responsibility is to coordinate the activities of the Czech NCP and to create an environment supporting its domestic and international activities.
- **Advisory Group:** The work of this group is consultation and advising, which contributes to the publications of the NCP.
- **National Council for Qualifications EQF Implementation Working Group:** The purpose of the Working Group is to discuss issues related to the EQF and its relation to the Czech qualifications system (NSK – National Register of Professional Qualifications) and to present its conclusions to the National Council for Qualifications.

Finland

The Finnish NCP is part of the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE). The FNBE is the national agency subordinate to the Ministry of Education and Culture. The NCP provided part of the secretariat and expertise for the work of the National Committee preparing the proposal for the Finnish NQF. The NCP coordinates the preparation of the referencing report, which will be approved by the Ministry.

Germany

For the time being the NQF steering group (Bund Länder Koordinierungsgruppe: Federal Ministry for Education and Research [BMBF] and Kultusministerkonferenz [KMK], see above) acts as NCP and will be in charge of the referencing process. There is no separate formal structure. For the time after referencing decision needs to be taken.

The Netherlands

The NCP, currently (during the referencing process) is established at the ministry. In the next phase the minister planned to install an independent organisation to execute the tasks of the NCP.

The minister asked ‘Committee Leijnse’ to advise her on the role and tasks of the NCP. Although the referencing report (and the advice of the committee) is not finished yet, it is foreseen that the NCP will have four major tasks:

- maintaining and evaluating the NLQF;
- (re) assigning (new) qualifications;
- communicating and informing stakeholders, national and international; and
- registering qualifications.

The experiences made so far by the EQF-Ref partners clearly suggests that **thorough co-ordination** on a national level is needed when different national bodies are involved in the referencing processes.

The (planned) organisation of the referencing process in the EQF-Ref partner countries is described in the following paragraphs:

Austria

The Austrian EQF referencing report will – according to current plans – be presented as one report but it will be developed in two parts. The Austrian NQF will comprise of eight levels, with levels 6 to 8 being divided into a ‘Bologna-strand’ and into a ‘non-Bologna-strand’. Bachelor-, Master- and PhD-degrees will probably be classified based on the Dublin descriptors, while qualifications outside the Bologna architecture will follow the

NQF descriptors. Therefore, the Ministry of Science and Research (bm:wf) is responsible for preparing relevant information related to the ‘Bologna-strand’ and the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (bm:ukk) will cover all other areas.

Both ministries have commissioned external experts for writing the report and will coordinate the process together.

Bulgaria

The Bulgarian draft referencing report is currently at an elaboration stage. The referencing will be made both to the EQF and the Qualifications Framework in the EHEA in a single report. The draft NQF is foreseen to contain eight levels, the last three levels cover the higher education qualifications.

The stakeholders represented in the task force have consultative functions. Consultations with a broad spectre of stakeholders and participation of international experts in the referencing process are foreseen as well.

The final draft of the referencing report is to be approved by the Minister of Education, Youth and Science.

The draft NQF and the draft referencing report will be submitted to the working group on ‘Education, mutual recognition of professional qualifications, youth, science and research’ (Working Group 16) to the Council of European Affairs, where representatives of the responsible ministries and other institutions and stakeholders including social partners participate. The Council of European Affairs will also be directly involved in commenting on the NQF draft.

It is foreseen that the entire proposal will be officially approved and adopted by the Council of Ministers in form of a decree by the end of 2011.

Czech Republic

The process is being organised by the NCP CZ. The NCP CZ coordinates discussions with relevant organisations and institutes (for primary, secondary and tertiary education, Europass, etc.).

A team of authors writes the report within the working package of the project NCP-EQF, which is supported by the grant from the European Commission. The report is based on several expert studies of specific subjects (higher education, quality assurance in education, general education etc). Authors are members of the NCP CZ and other experts in fields of education and qualifications. The draft report has been consulted and discussed within the editorial board and was presented and discussed at the national referencing conference in March 2011. National and international experts will review the draft report. Consultation among all relevant stakeholders and bodies aims to ensure the report’s credibility and acceptance.

After the draft report is reviewed and suggestions for improvement are incorporated, the final version of the report will have to go through the consultation process at the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in order to be approved. Finally, the report will be approved by the Government of the Czech Republic.

Finland

The preparation of the referencing report is coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Culture, who has asked the Finnish National Board of Education (that also acts as NCP) to prepare the draft report. On 21 August 2008, the Ministry appointed a National Qualifications Framework Committee, whose task was to prepare the proposal for the National Qualifications Framework. During its work, the Committee also discussed the principles of completing the referencing report, including details such as principles for inviting international experts. The FNBE organizes the work, including contacts with the international experts and is preparing the text for the referencing report. Comments for the draft report will be asked from the Ministry of Education and Culture as well as members of the National Qualifications Framework Committee. The Ministry of Education and Culture approves the final version of the referencing report.

Germany

As of April 2011, there is no written procedure for the referencing process. However, there is a common understanding that the referencing will be done by the institutions responsible for the different sectors (Federal Ministry for Education and Research [BMBF] for VET qualifications based on the Vocational Training Act; Kultusministerkonferenz [KMK] for school/university qualifications), based on consensually developed principles/guidelines and in consensus with the National Working Group German Qualifications Framework. The German Qualifications Framework working group for the VET sector suggests that a committee of representatives from all sectors shall monitor the process. The referencing report shall be submitted by the end of 2011.

The Netherlands

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) organises the process and writes the report. They set up a clear structure to ensure that the planned activities will be achieved in the most optimal way. The Ministry has created an expert group of stakeholders involved in the process, which they consult regularly. Besides that, the Minister has established an independent committee (*Committee Leijnse*) from 1 December 2010 that is involved with setting up and maintaining the NLQF. The committee consists of four professors in the area of lifelong learning. They will consult national and international experts before advising the Ministry. In May 2011, the Committee Leijnse will advise the Minister on this topic. The advice will consist of three elements:

- 1) A proposal for an NLQF;
- 2) A proposal for the way to link the NLQF to the EQF; and
- 3) A proposal for the way the NCP can be designed, what its tasks would be, and how the quality of the NLQF will be guaranteed.

Based on this advice, the Minister will determine the NLQF (and the relation to the EQF). Afterwards, the Ministry of OCW will hand over the final NLQF and referencing document to the (European) EQF Advisory Group.

II.3 Involvement of stakeholders in the EQF referencing process

Most of the EQF-Ref partner countries have just finished or are still developing their NQF. In most cases, this process is closely linked to the **EQF referencing process**. Therefore, quite often the **same stakeholders** are involved in both processes, but not necessarily to the same extent.

The EQF-Ref partners stress that it is important to develop **ownership** on a national level, not just for the NQF, but also for the result of the EQF referencing process (i.e. the EQF referencing report). The latter communicates the classification of national qualifications to other countries and will be made available at the EQF portal. It therefore has an important function in generating trust, since its validity will be judged by others that are not familiar with a country's qualifications system.

It is therefore recommended to involve **stakeholders from different segments and different parts of the qualifications system**, who should contribute from their different perspectives to the referencing processes. It is suggested to reflect on the following questions:

- Who should be involved and contribute to the results to ensure the success of the referencing?
- How should stakeholders be involved (for example, in working groups, advisory boards or in a consultation process)?
- What is the position and role of stakeholders (for example, social partners) in the referencing process?

Although all EQF-Ref partner countries involve stakeholders at some point of the EQF referencing process, the following examples show the considerable differences between countries in how they proceed.

Austria

It is planned to discuss the draft Austrian EQF referencing report with the NQF Steering Group, which comprises stakeholders from different sectors and different parts of the qualifications system. A consultation process is not planned.

Bulgaria

The draft NQF and the draft referencing report will first be consulted with all the stakeholders represented in the task force for elaboration of these two documents. A broad consultation process is also foreseen, with participation of stakeholders coming from the entire education system.

Czech Republic

Stakeholders from different sectors and different parts of the qualifications system are involved, as they are members of the components of the NCP CZ (NCP Advisory Group, National Council for Qualifications EQF Implementation Working Group). They are representing organisations and institutions from both public and private sectors, such as Chamber of Commerce of the Czech Republic, Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions, Czech Confederation of Commerce and Tourism, Masaryk University, Centre for Higher Education Studies, etc.

The process of referencing is discussed and consulted with them regularly.

The report is designed for professionals and experts and should be understandable to a wide audience of people interested in the Czech qualification and education systems. The report will be written in Czech and translated into English. The editorial board of the report comprises of representatives of various stakeholders (representatives of ministries, employers, unions, HRD companies, etc).

NCP CZ coordinates the referencing process and also writes the referencing report. NCP CZ communicates with stakeholders, social partners and organisations involved in the process, organises regular meetings and seminars, disseminates information and promotes the EQF. The list of involved stakeholders as well as list of meetings and seminars, where the referencing process was discussed with them, is among appendices of the national referencing report.

The report will be available at www.eqf.cz .

Finland

The referencing report is being prepared mainly by the Finnish National Board of Education and the Ministry of Education and Culture. The main principles for preparing it have been agreed upon in the National Qualifications Framework Committee and by the Ministry of Education and Culture. Stakeholders, including quality-assurance authorities

as well as members of the NQF Committee, will comment on the draft report and provide text for the report. The NQF Committee gathers together all important stakeholders: including four different ministries, national employer and employee organisations, national education and training committees, education providers, rectors' organisations, quality-assurance agencies and student organisations. The stakeholders are members of the NQF Committee. They have also given official statements about the development work in two different phases: first, when the Committee report was published. At this stage, 86 opinions were submitted. In their opinions, the submitting parties considered the committee's initial proposal as being a good point of departure for describing qualifications and other learning and developing education to focus more on learning outcomes. They regarded preparation of a national framework for qualifications and other learning as justified and the framework itself as necessary. Placement of qualifications was mostly viewed as being a success, but some problems were also perceived in terms of certain types of qualifications. All stakeholders considered it important to expand the framework to also cover other learning (not leading to a formal qualification), although some pointed out that caution should be exercised when proceeding with expansion plans. The next step was that stakeholders' official statements were gathered about the government's draft proposal for national legislation. Stakeholders continue to be involved in the preparations of the referencing report.

Germany

The referencing exercise will include all stakeholders represented in the GQF National Working Group.

So far, there is no written procedure. But most likely *the Bund-Länder-Koordinierungs-Gruppe* will be responsible for the report, with the advice of an 'editing group' including representatives from social partners and all sectors; the GQF working group will be consulted.

The Netherlands

During the referencing process, stakeholders (social partners, branches, providers of education, agencies, etc.) are involved at several moments.

Representatives of stakeholder were involved in the experts group's development of the NLQF.

A broader group of professionals (from education and branches) were invited to give their comments on the first draft version of the NLQF.

In autumn 2010, the ministry organised six roundtable meetings in which stakeholders were informed about the development of the NLQF. Those meetings included a discussion about the pros and the cons of the proposal of the (draft version) NLQF.

The comments of those meetings resulted in a renewed proposal of the NLQF. That proposal is presented a few months later for the digital national consultation.

Finally, in February 2011, a written consultation was held in which all stakeholders could react on the draft framework. At this consultation, 128 persons made comments. These reactions will be used by the ministry to improve the draft version and to finalise the development of the NLQF in May 2011.

During the whole referencing process, a website was opened to involve everyone and give the opportunity to react and comment (www.nlqf.nl).

II.4 Time schedule for the EQF referencing process

The EQF-Ref partners discussed the **necessary duration** of the EQF referencing process and how long it actually takes to prepare the referencing report. Of course, **no definite answer** can be given to these questions, since this depends greatly on the progress already made in the NQF development process, on the characteristics of the NQF itself (i.e. how closely its design is linked to the EQF) and the nature of the EQF referencing process (for example, is it a more political process or a more technical one).

As it has already been mentioned, as of February 2011, none of the EQF-Ref partner countries actually had an NQF implemented or used in practice. Some have made more progress than others. And, all partner countries have made the experience that – for different reasons – it was not possible to keep the deadline of 2010 for referencing their national qualifications levels to the EQF although some countries were quite confident at the beginning of the project that they would be able to present the EQF referencing report in 2010.

The only recommendation relating to the issue of timeframe is that it is nevertheless **important** to **plan** and **agree** upon a **schedule** for the EQF referencing process and to **transparently communicate** it to the stakeholders. Nevertheless, it also needs to be pointed out that – in particular, in those cases where certain design features of the NQF are still under discussion – the timeframe will probably need to be changed (such changes of the timeframe for the referencing process can be observed in many European countries).

However, more important than to keep deadlines agreed upon at a European level, seems to be **ensuring** that the **relevant national stakeholders are actively involved** and not risk losing their commitment by rushing the process. The European agenda can provide some reference for the planning on a national level, but it might turn out that some issues need

to be more thoroughly discussed on the national level and therefore the originally planned schedule might need to be changed.

The following paragraph presents as an example the activities and time schedule for conducting the EQF referencing process in the Czech Republic. The Czech NCP used a grant received from the European Commission for designing a project and deciding on relevant activities for conducting this process:

Czech Republic

The referencing process in the Czech Republic is organised within the project NCP-EQF, which is supported by a grant received from the European Commission, and consists of eight activities:

1. referencing qualifications awarded in general education – a study and a disseminating workshop;
2. listing of EQF level on all Czech diplomas and certificates through a study;
3. assuring quality in primary, secondary and tertiary education systems through two studies and a workshop;
4. referencing qualifications awarded in tertiary education – a study and a seminar with international experts;
5. supporting and promoting the EQF and referencing at the labour market through a series of seven seminars in regions intended for representatives of employers, labour offices (for unemployed), unions, the National Europass Centre and NCP CZ;
6. creating and translating the referencing report;
7. organizing a national conference on the referencing process in the Czech Republic; and
8. disseminating information on the referencing, printing the report.

The project runs from May 2010 to April 2011.

The studies, which served as basis for the referencing report, were prepared between June and November 2010.

Seminars and workshop were held in November and December 2010.

The editorial board for the report was established in September 2010. Four meetings were organised, where structure, content and various stages and forms of the report were discussed. The final meeting of the editorial board was scheduled at the end of March 2011 after the referencing conference (11 March 2011) and the consultation process.

Dissemination and promotion of the referencing results and the EQF are planned for April 2011.

II.5 Involvement of international experts and international co-operation

One of the 10 EQF referencing criteria and procedures asks for involving international experts in this process (cf. info box). The EQF-Ref partners agree that involving international experts is an important aspect for ensuring that the information in the EQF referencing reports is presented in an understandable way that generates trust. Nevertheless, at the same time, we would like to point out that other forms of international co-operation can be very valuable in this context. Therefore, both aspects are described in the following sections.

II.5.1 Involvement of international experts

Criterion 7:

The referencing process shall involve international experts.

As mentioned in the note on the 10 criteria, the involvement of international experts should be seen as a contribution to producing a report that **complies with the criteria** and is also **understandable** by those not familiar with the national qualifications system. In order to achieve this aim, the following issues need to be considered and respective decisions have to be taken:

Profile of the international experts:

The selection of the international experts lies in the competence of the national authorities responsible for the referencing process. They need to decide on how and on what basis the international experts should be selected. Experiences show that involving **experts with a variety of different backgrounds** might be **beneficial**. The following criteria could help with decisions on the profile of the experts to be invited:

Experts from **countries** that share **similar structures** ('like-minded countries') will not need much time for being introduced to the qualifications system. They even could contribute to crucial questions based on experiences or solutions in their own national context. Experts from countries with very **different structures** are able to give feedback on whether the referencing report's information is understandable for someone not acquainted with the system; these experts can point to aspects that might need to be better clarified. Since both possibilities have advantages and disadvantages, it might be beneficial to involve experts from both 'sides'.

- Another criterion for selecting experts in relation to the country of their origin could be the aspect of **existing cooperation** (for example, such cooperation usually ex-

ists with neighbouring countries or between countries with a lot of learners and/or workers mobility). Experts from these countries could contribute to the referencing process based on their experience in this cooperation. Another decision could be to select experts from countries where **cooperation should be established or intensified**. Their involvement in the referencing process could be seen as contributing to or starting an enhanced cooperation.

- Since the EQF is an overarching framework and covers **all areas of learning**, one selection criterion could be the **specific expertise** of the experts in one or more of these areas (for example, general education, vocational education and training, higher education). It is recommended to make sure that the group of experts involved have, as far as possible, expertise in all areas of the qualifications system being referenced to the EQF. The international experts should also be familiar with other transparency instruments and related initiatives (such as QF-HE, ECVET, ECTS, Europass, EQARF).
- Another aspect of the profile of experts is their **institutional background**. Some countries invite experts from national bodies that are themselves in charge of the referencing process in their country or are at least involved in the decision making process. The advantage of this decision might be that their involvement is considered as of a more ‘official status’. Some countries (additionally) select experts that are not representing national bodies, but have vast expertise in qualifications systems and frameworks in the European context and are **familiar with referencing or self-certification processes**.
- Countries might chose experts that have **experience in working on the European level**, are **well known**, have a **good reputation** and **represent certain groups**. For example, the experts could be selected because of their membership in the EQF Advisory Group or because they cooperate in the network of NCPs or of the Bologna Correspondents.
- An important issue is the **language skills** of the experts. Some problems might arise if one or more of the experts are not able to read texts in the national language, since not all information is readily available in English.

Only a limited **number of international** experts can be involved in the EQF referencing process (also because financial matters need to be considered). In most cases, three or four experts participate in the process. Therefore, it is suggested to reflect on how the group of experts could be composed best in order to represent sufficiently relevant aspects related to their profile(s).

When and how to involve international experts:

International experts do not need to be involved in all steps and details of the referencing process, but the timing of their involvement plays a crucial role. On the one hand, if they are involved already at an **early stage**, there might not be much available to comment upon or relevant information might not be available in English. This would be necessary in case the experts do not speak the national language, but translating draft documents depends on available resources. On the other hand, if experts are involved **very late in the process**, there might be little room left for changes. For example, if international experts are only involved after the national authority has already decided on the report's final version, the possibilities are quite limited for including their feedback.

The decision on when to involve the international experts depends a lot on how the overall referencing process is designed, **what actually is expected from the experts** (how their role is seen) and in what way they are involved. If the international experts are expected to contribute to crucial questions, problems or challenges in the referencing process, then it is, of course, useful to consult them already at an early stage. If their role is seen solely in providing feedback to the referencing reports (for example, whether the whole report is understandable and coherent and the criteria are addressed sufficiently and in a transparent way), it makes sense to involve them when a draft version of the report is available. However, it is recommended to provide, on the one hand, sufficient time for them to read and comment on the report and to discuss open issues in the group of external experts and with national stakeholders. On the other hand, it should also be possible to consider their feedback and revise the report if necessary. However, of course, it is up to the national authority in charge of the referencing process to decide on how the feedback will be used in the final version of the report.

Different possibilities exist for involving international experts in this process: For example, it would be possible to collect only **written statements** or recommendations from them (for example, to the referencing report). It is also possible to invite them to **meetings** with a working group responsible for conducting the referencing process or with other stakeholders. The note on the 10 criteria and procedures does not suggest any specific way on how to involve them. Based on the experiences so far, it is recommended to organise at least one or two meetings with the international experts for discussing their feedback, suggestions and open questions. In such discussions, possible misunderstandings can be clarified and solutions or additional ideas for addressing certain issues can jointly be developed; additional feedback could also be provided in writing (for example, as comments in texts or via email). Nevertheless, of course, this also depends on the timeframe of the process, the working structures established, the language skills of the international experts, the financial resources and also on the availability of the international experts.

Attitude of international experts:

The EQF-Ref partners also discussed the **attitude** that is expected from international experts. Independently of their roles and tasks, the EQF-Ref partners agreed that the experts should be **open-minded** and should provide feedback as **‘critical friends’**. The experts also need to be **confidential**, i.e. they have no right to discuss the issues or problems learned during the involvement in the referencing process in public or use them as an example without permission. However, this idea of confidentiality does not contradict the concept of transparency. The international experts can be seen as ‘allies’ to help make the NQF understandable in other countries and they should act as (independent) experts, not as evaluators that give approval or hand out ‘certificates’ (‘you have passed’).

How to address Criterion 7 in the EQF referencing reports:

First, it should be mentioned who was involved and it should also be explained why these experts were invited. It is recommended to describe how they were involved in the process (roles, activities) and at what stage and how their feedback was taken into account.

The EQF-Ref partners also discussed the **added value of including statements of the international experts** in the report. The decision on whether or not to include such statements depends on the message the national authority in charge of the referencing report wants to communicate. For example, positive statements of international experts could be used for underlining the credibility of the report. However, the question is whether this is really needed in a ‘good’ report or whether a ‘weaker’ report can really benefit from such a statement. Nevertheless, a statement of an international expert pointing out critical issues could also be used for enhancing credibility of the report because it enhances transparency.

It is in each country’s decision whether and what kind of statements to include in the report. However, it is recommended to discuss the decision and also the respective statement with the international experts.

The EQF-Ref partners suggest that the most important information in relation to Criterion 7 should, as mentioned above, describe how the experts were selected and involved and how their feedback was taken into account (for example, what was the procedure if experts didn’t approve of certain aspects or if the feedback of different experts was diverse).

Up to now, only three of the EQF-Ref partner countries already have experience in involving international experts in the EQF referencing process. The approaches taken in the Czech Republic, in Finland and in the Netherlands are described in the following paragraphs:

Czech Republic

The referencing process and the writing of the referencing report involved three international experts, who were chosen because of their expertise and experience in areas of the referencing process, tertiary education and vocational education and training.

They visited the Czech Republic in November 2010, participated at a meeting of higher education experts and at a seminar where studies on referencing of higher education qualifications and quality assurance in higher education were presented. Based on these discussions and comparisons, they made suggestions that were discussed at the meeting of the editorial board and taken into account when the referencing report was drafted. A second meeting of the experts took place in March 2011. The experts met with the authors' team and various representatives from higher education, Czech School Inspectorate (a quality-assurance organ), promoter of the NSK (the national professional qualifications register), etc. The following day, 11 March 2011, they presented their views and experiences with qualifications framework and referencing process at the referencing conference. They summarised their comments to the draft referencing report in a comprehensive list. All comments were discussed at the referencing report, editorial board meeting and incorporated into the final version of the report.

Experts were provided with available information on the Czech education system, and with the draft referencing report for evaluation. The participation of the experts is supported by the grant from the European Commission, which, in the form of a project, is intended to support the referencing process and the work of the NCP CZ.

Finland

Finland has invited international experts from Austria, Estonia and Sweden.

The Ministry of Education and Culture decided on the basic principles of whom to invite to work as international experts in the Finnish referencing process already in December 2009. The decision was based on discussions in the National Qualifications Framework Committee. The criteria for inviting experts were later further specified by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Board of Education (National Coordination Point).

The experts were expected to represent and know different levels of the education system. It was considered important that at least one expert would have expertise in vocational education and training and one in higher education.

It was considered good to invite experts who are familiar with the referencing and self-certification processes and who are centrally involved with the EQF/NQF work in their own countries. It was considered useful to have one person who is the Member State representative in the EQF Advisory Group and one from the National Coordination Point. In addition, since NQF/EQF is in Finland considered, among other things, to be a

transparency tool for recognition of qualifications, it was considered important to have a person with expertise in recognition of qualifications.

It was considered necessary to have someone from a Nordic country, mostly because of the language issue. Nordic experts are able to read the original official documents, which are always available both in Swedish and Finnish.

Finland wanted to invite experts from countries with which there is much mobility (Sweden and Estonia). This was mainly for two reasons: since there is already mobility, it normally means that the experts already know Finnish qualifications system. On the other hand, referencing process is considered as a good opportunity also to give more information about Finnish qualifications.

The Netherlands

The Ministry of OCW now has invited three international experts.

- Mike Coles – an independent consultant and an experienced EQF expert
- Wilfried Boogaert – Flemish Ministry of Education
- Michael Schopf – German Ministry of Education

They have chosen two experts from the neighbouring countries in order to make sure the feedback is on a peer level. One independent expert is involved to monitor the process and outcomes.

The first meeting has taken place in November 2010, and was meant as a first meeting between the experts and directors of the educational departments of the Ministry. This was a very positive meeting in which they have agreed upon the most open, honest and blunt way of communicating. They see each other as critical friends.

II.5.2 International cooperation

Developing trust seems to be an **iterative** or **spiral process** that requires different kinds of activities. In addition to the involvement of selected international experts in the EQF referencing process, other forms of international cooperation could be used to learn from each other and to generate trust.

Peer-learning meetings or seminars

It could be useful to organise meetings or seminars for **exchanging information on intended approaches or experiences** on a ‘peer level’. For example, such meetings could be organised by a group of Member States based on certain commonalities. Such commonalities could be, for example, language related (for example, German-speaking countries), they could be related to a geographical area (for example, Nordic countries), they could be identified based on similar structures in the qualifications system (for example, countries with a dual

VET system) or based on similar qualifications included in their qualifications system (for example, the master craftsperson qualification in Austria and Germany). In these meetings or seminars, the countries involved can **discuss open questions, critical points as well as good practices** in the referencing process. These countries could share their experiences and, if appropriate, develop **common solutions**. This is of particular importance regarding qualifications now considered similar but might be linked to different EQF levels via their classification in the NQFs (this issue has been raised not only in the EQF-Ref partnership, for example, in relation to the upper secondary school leaving certificate providing access to higher education).

In Germany, for example, the following seminars with experts from other European countries were organised:

Germany

To support the development of the German Framework and its compatibility with the EQF five seminars with European experts were organised:

- ‘The referencing of qualifications from the dual system of VET’;
- ‘The relation between HE and VET in various National Qualifications’; Frameworks and compatibility with the EQF’;
- ‘The relation between National Qualifications Frameworks for HE and between them and the EHEA Framework’;
- ‘Expectations of the EU as regards the national referencing reports – exchange of experiences with the writing of reports’;
- ‘Exchange of experiences in securing compatibility of NQFs with the EQF’.

Peer-learning activities (PLA) related to the NQF development and the EQF referencing process have already been organised by the European Commission. A peer-learning seminar was also organised in the context of the EQF-Ref project (cf. info box).

‘EQF referencing: process and reports – challenges and open questions’ - Peer-Learning Seminar organised by the EQF-Ref project (30-31 March 2011 - Sofia, BG)

One of the main aims of the seminar was to present the preliminary results of the EQF-Ref project and to discuss challenging issues with the participants. Approximately 50 experts from different European countries participated in the seminar. In the morning session, a keynote speech on ‘EQF referencing – experiences and activities’ was given by Mike Coles (UK) and the project results were presented by the project partners. In the afternoon, three workshops were organized to discuss how to address Criteria 2, 4 and

7 in the EQF referencing report as well as related issues. In the final session, a panel discussion on ‘EQF referencing – What happens afterwards?’ was moderated by Slava Pevec Grm (Cedefop).

The documentation of the seminar (presentations and pictures) is available at the EQF-Ref website: www.eqf-ref.eu

EQF pilot projects

The EQF pilot projects financed by the European Commission through the Lifelong Learning programme could also be used to exchange information and peer-learning. Such projects are, for example, the EQF-Ref project, the TransEQFrame project (in which most EQF-Ref partners were also involved: www.transeqframe.net) or the ZOOM project (www.zoom-efq.eu). National authorities in charge of the referencing process should be informed about the activities and results of the projects and should explore how they can be exploited. Information about the EQF projects is also available in the e-community on ‘EQF Implementation’ (cf. info box in Section I.3). Additional EQF related projects can be found in the ADAM database, the projects and products portal for Leonardo da Vinci (www.adam-europe.eu).

Informal context

In addition to these more formal, peer-learning activities, much is happening informally during this process. For example, exchange of experience and discussion of crucial issues also takes place in the context of meetings not directly related to the referencing process or during breaks of meetings. These rather informal ways can also be considered as very important for learning from each other and for exchanging views in a rather unofficial way.

The Finnish experience, as described below, demonstrates how the EQF referencing process can be supported by different forms of international cooperation:

Finland

Finnish National Board of Education (acting as National Coordination Point) has been involved in some international projects related to the EQF and/or development of the NQF. The main purpose has been to support the work on a national level as well as to have feedback on work being done.

Finland has participated in the following EU-funded projects: EQF-Ref, TransEQFrame as well as in one partnership project. TransEQFrame provided good insight on certain vocational qualifications in certain Member States and their placement on EQF levels was discussed. EQF-Ref has concentrated on referencing. The timing has been very good for Finland, the national process and the projects have proceeded almost simultaneously. The partnership project has also concentrated in developing frameworks and has pro-

vided good knowledge about work in certain Member States as well as activities in their NCPs. It has also given the opportunity, for example, to discuss and compare descriptors for certain NQF levels.

The Nordic Council of Ministries has supported the co-operation among National Co-ordination Points in the Nordic Countries and meetings in each Nordic country covering topics related to the EQF and where work on a national level have been organised. Earlier, Finland has participated in a Nordic project, in which the post-secondary qualifications in Nordic countries were discussed and their learning outcomes compared.

The NCP staff members have also actively taken part in other countries' seminars and workshops. Their service as international experts for self-certification/referencing in other countries has also supported the work on a national level.

II.6 EQF Advisory Group

An important **milestone** in the EQF referencing process is the **presentation** of the report in a meeting of the **EQF Advisory Group**. By end of May 2011, only a very few countries had presented their reports (Ireland, Malta, United Kingdom, Denmark, France).

Since the EQF implementation is a **voluntary process**, no official body can actually accept or reject the referencing report. However, the presentation and discussion in the EQF Advisory Group can be seen as a kind of **quality-assurance procedure** at European level. The members of the EQF Advisory Group provide feedback to the information given in the report, the **transparency** and **comprehensibility** of the decisions.

In the discussions in the EQF-Ref project, the question arose as to what could be considered as the right **time to present the report** in the EQF Advisory Group. The EQF-Ref partnership recommends that the report should be presented only **when the national authorities feel the report is ready**, i.e. when there has been a national-level decision on how to address the 10 criteria and procedures and the (preliminary) final version of the report is available. The feedback of the EQF Advisory Group should then focus on transparency and clarity issues.

It is suggested that countries should send their reports in English to the EQF Advisory Group well in advance (for example, at least two weeks ahead of the meeting), to give **sufficient time** to group members to look at the report and prepare their questions and comments.

Countries should be **prepared to take into account the feedback** they receive in the discussion at the EQF Advisory Group meeting and adapt their report, if necessary (for example, to make changes in parts with unclear information).

Part III:

Content of the Referencing Report

Content of Part III:

This part relates to the structure and content of the referencing report and particularly focuses on Criterion 2 (linking national qualifications levels to the EQF levels) and on Criterion 4 (transparent criteria and procedures for classifying qualifications in an NQF).

III.1 General issues

A consensus generally exists that the EQF referencing reports need to be concise. Therefore, the core part of the reports should be kept **short** and **compact**; additional information should be included in the annex (or communicated via links to websites where relevant information is available in more detail in national language and in English). The EQF-Ref partnership suggests that the report could have a **maximum** of **70 pages** (excluding annexes).

Furthermore, it is recommended to have a clear picture of the **target group** of the referencing report: whom is the referencing report for? What audience does it address? Is it for qualifications or qualifications-frameworks experts, for stakeholders with responsibilities for qualifications on a national level, for recognition bodies in other countries or is it aimed at a wider national or international audience? This is an important question and the deci-

sion has a crucial influence on the wording of the information presented in the report and the amount of detail given.

The referencing reports are needed in **national languages** as well as in **English**. . Nevertheless, countries need to be aware that for certain terms no perfect translation into English might exist (and vice-versa). The terms and concepts used could also be interpreted differently in different countries. It is therefore recommended to provide short explanations of key terms (for example, in a glossary, or, if necessary, in a more detailed way). For elaborating and discussing how certain terms are used and interpreted in the national language, the 10 criteria and procedures need to be translated into the national language. For example, all EQF-Ref partner countries saw the use of national languages as necessary.

III.2 Structure of the EQF Referencing Report

Basing the reports on a common structure could be useful. The reports would be much easier to read, it would be easier to make comparisons and this would also enhance credibility. However, national systems are very different, the purposes and functions of the reports might be different (for example, in some cases, they might go beyond merely presenting the results of the referencing process). Therefore, it might be difficult to agree on a common structure.

The EQF-Ref partnership proposes the following structure as a kind of orientation for the development of the reports. It lists the parts considered as most relevant and should therefore be clearly visible in the reports (even though it is not expected or intended that exactly the same structure or the same naming of sections should be used):

Structure of the EQF referencing reports proposed by the EQF-Ref partnership:

Information on the state of the report

Short statement which specifies the basis for the report (for example, is it a first version or an up-dated one) or how long it will be valid (cf. part IV.1).

Executive summary

Short overview of the results of the referencing process and, in particular, a summary of the information related to the 10 criteria and procedures.

Description of the national qualifications system and the NQF

Short presentation of the national qualifications system (including pathways, access to programmes, etc.) and the NQF (design features, aims and functions, stage of

the development process) – the description should focus on information relevant for understanding the answers to the 10 criteria and procedures.

Background information

Short description of the process for preparing the report (referencing process)

The 10 criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF

Main part of the report: addressing each criterion separately

Further information

Short presentation of, for example, plans, intentions and next steps regarding the NQF development and implementation, challenges expected or already met in this process, the expected impact of the EQF implementation (What will change on a national level?).

Annexes

For example, list of institutions or experts involved in the preparation of the report, examples of qualifications (that will also be presented at the EQF portal), statements from national stakeholders and/or international experts, relevant legal texts.

The following examples illustrate the approaches taken for structuring the EQF referencing reports in the Czech Republic and in Finland:

Czech Republic

Several versions of the report structure were considered. At first, the report seemed to be too long and repeated some information. Therefore, another structure was chosen to avoid repeating facts and the final decision is very similar to the one recommended by the partners in the EQF-Ref project.

Structure of the Czech referencing report:

Executive summary (including results of the referencing process)

1. Introduction (including purpose of the report, legal framework and description of the referencing process)
2. The Czech education and qualifications systems (including quality assurance)
3. Fulfilment of the referencing criteria
4. Conclusions (including next steps regarding the NQF; challenges and further work)

Annexes (including a list of bodies involved in the process, a list of meeting organised during the referencing process, excerpts from curriculum documents supporting/justifying referencing Czech qualifications to the EQF, examples of qualifications, the NSK level descriptors etc.).

Finland

Finland will prepare a report, which serves both for the referencing and self-certification purposes. The National Qualifications Framework Committee agreed on the main contents and structure of the report.

The first part describes the Finnish education and qualification system. In describing the qualifications, special emphasis is placed on learning outcomes. The second main section provides the development, main contents and (plans for) implementation of the Finnish National Qualifications Framework.

Then, in two separate big sections, the referencing and self-certification criteria are individually discussed and answered. These sections form the core of the referencing/self-certification report.

The last section presents discussion of the implementation and further plans for developing the framework.

III.3 Criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF

III.3.1 Introduction

As mentioned above, the **answers to the 10 criteria and procedures** (cf. Annex) should form the **main part** of the EQF referencing reports. The criteria should explicitly and separately be addressed. To enhance transparency and comparability between reports, it is recommended to use the criteria for structuring the relevant part of the report. When using another approach an explanation would be helpful why this approach has been taken.

Discussions of the referencing criteria in the EQF-Ref partnership considered the **crucial** ones as **Criterion 2 and Criterion 4**. Because most partner countries have decided to develop an NQF with eight levels, they have generally developed their national level descriptors based on the EQF level descriptors. However, there might be some differences in the wording of the descriptors or different interpretations of some key words or concepts used in the NQF and EQF level descriptors. Therefore, it is still necessary to closely address the issue of how the NQF levels are linked to the EQF levels (Criterion 2). Furthermore, the

criteria and procedures for classifying qualifications in an NQF are particularly important where an NQF also has eight levels and ‘borrowed’ EQF descriptors are used for the NQF levels (for example, in Austria) or where the implicit qualifications levels are linked to the EQF levels (for example, in the Czech Republic).

It was therefore decided to particularly focus in the final publication on these two criteria. The following issues need to be considered when answering to them:

- **Transparency:** Countries are asked to explain how they came to their decisions; the procedures and methodology applied need to be described. However, does everybody share the same concept of transparency? What actually can be considered as ‘sufficient’ transparency? How detailed does the information needs to be? How much and what kind of additional information is needed?
- **Evidence:** How can transparency and credibility be enhanced by providing evidence for justifying the decisions presented in the referencing reports? One possibility could be to include selected qualifications to illustrate the classification procedure or for justifying the linking of an NQF level to a certain EQF level. Such examples need to be introduced by explaining their purpose. For example, indicate whether it is a typical qualification or an exceptional one. In case of exceptions, further explanations are needed: for example, why is this qualification allocated to a higher/lower level than the others of the same type?
- **Trust:** In order to create trust, challenges and possible conflicts in the referencing process should be addressed and explanations should be provided on how the country managed to resolve such problems. Sharing this kind of information instead of hiding it can enhance understanding of the decisions and approaches taken in the national context.

III.3.2 Criterion 2

Criterion 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.

Different approaches are possible for demonstrating the link between the levels in the national qualifications framework or system and the EQF levels.

First, the **decision** needs to be taken whether to **create an NQF** or whether to **link the (implicit) levels of the existing qualifications system to the EQF**. Most of the European coun-

tries – and also the EQF-Ref partner countries with the exception of the Czech Republic (see example below) – are now planning to reference NQF levels to the EQF levels.

Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, the decision was taken to use (a modified version of) the existing qualifications system for referencing to the EQF, because it was not possible to create a comprehensive framework within the short time frame. All stakeholders agreed to use eight qualifications levels for referencing to the EQF (the same number is also used in the new national professional qualifications register – NSK) and to link sub-frameworks separately to the EQF: the NSK, the proposed framework for initial general and vocational education and the emerging framework for higher education). The approach taken on a national level could be understood as the development of a bridging framework or as the early stage of the development of a comprehensive NQF.

A crucial issue in this context is the **number of levels** that will be referenced to the EQF. As mentioned above, most EQF-Ref partner countries have decided to develop an NQF with eight levels and these eight NQF levels will be directly linked to the eight EQF levels (NQF Level 1 to EQF Level 1, NQF Level 2 to EQF Level 2, etc.). Such a decision seems to be – on the one hand – rather pragmatic (‘for the sake of comparability’), but at the same time it also seems to fit the (so far) implicit hierarchies within those national qualifications systems. These implicit hierarchies were, for example, identified in research studies or in consultation processes (for example, in Austria - cf. description below). In the note on EQF referencing, these activities are summarised as ‘**social approach**’.

However, such a decision could also reflect one country’s reform plans towards an eight-level structure. Thus, the existing qualifications in this country might not fit ‘perfectly’ to the eight NQF levels linked to the eight EQF levels. Therefore, the national agenda should be considered. For example, a country could decide to design an NQF with eight levels, but certain levels might be empty while waiting for plans for developing new (types of) qualifications to be allocated to these levels. This is the case, for example, in Finland, where no qualifications are currently allocated to NQF Level 1. Because the Finnish Government plans to extend the framework to cover ‘other learning’, which does not lead to a certain qualification, Level 1 might be used later.

In order to demonstrate the linking of the levels, the evidence provided could be based on the matching of the level descriptors: The NQF descriptors and the EQF descriptors are analysed and compared level by level and thus identifying similarities as well as differences. In the note on EQF referencing, this textual analysis is called ‘**technical approach**’. Since

none of the EQF-Ref partner countries had an NQF established before the introduction of the EQF, they based the national descriptors – at least to a certain extent – on the EQF descriptors. In some cases (for example in Austria), it is even suggested to adopt the EQF descriptors as part of the NQF (and therefore Criterion 4 is most relevant!), whereas other countries (for example, Finland) have developed their own descriptors using (slightly) other categories. Therefore, the technical approach in these cases will probably differ from those taken in countries with already existing NQFs. However, the matching of the descriptors need to be demonstrated, for example, by explicitly describing the comparability of the terms and categories used. An example of textual/technical analysis from the Finnish context is presented below. Furthermore, explain how to understand the categories and the key words used for describing the levels and used in the national qualifications system as well as the reason and logic for using them in the NQF descriptors.

In any case, explain how the **best-fit principle** is applied when linking national qualifications levels to the EQF level descriptors. The following questions could be considered:

- What is the starting point:
 - linking implicit levels of the national qualifications system to the EQF levels or an NQF; if implicit national levels are linked to the EQF: how are they identified?
 - linking an NQF with more or less than eight levels to the EQF; in case an eight-level NQF is linked to the EQF levels: what is the basis for this approach (pragmatic reason, fits reality, reform plans)?
- Which approach is used: social or technical approach or both and what is the reason for this decision; if both approaches are used (and in particular when they are showing different results): how are they balanced?
- Which concrete methodology is used for demonstrating the link?
- What kind of evidence can be provided to support the decisions?

The following examples from the EQF-Ref partner countries provide some insight in possible approaches:

Austria

The Austrian NQF will be composed of eight levels. This decision is based on a study conducted in preparation of the NQF consultation document (2007/2008), on results of ‘NQF pilot projects’ and on the results of the NQF consultation process carried out in 2008.

The study focuses on statistical educational research and statistical frameworks for the classification of qualifications– for example, ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) or ISCO (International Standard Classification of Occupations) and provides important information regarding the implicit hierarchy in the Austrian qualifications system. It suggests that an eight-level structure is sufficient for distinguishing the levels in the Austrian qualifications system.

The NQF pilot projects were commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (bm:ukk) and conducted in certain fields during the consultation process (for the tourism sector and for the construction sector) or following the consultation (for the electrical engineering and the commercial sector) In the pilot projects, the EQF level descriptors were discussed in joint working groups with experts from a certain field (for example, tourism) but from different segments of the qualifications system (such as VET, higher education, adult education). The working groups concluded that eight levels are sufficient for the classification of Austrian qualifications.

The consultation process then confirmed this proposal.

The EQF descriptors will form the basis for the classification of qualifications to the Austrian NQF. Therefore, the EQF referencing process will be closely linked to the process of allocating qualifications to the Austrian NQF (cf. Criterion 4).

Bulgaria

The Bulgarian draft NQF is designed as a comprehensive, learning-outcomes-based, national qualifications framework covering all levels of the education and training system and their corresponding qualifications/degrees. It has an eight-level structure plus one additional ‘zero’ level covering the pre-school education. This network architecture was chosen in view to cover the entire education and training system. The number of NQF levels and the level descriptors were chosen based on the best-fit principle. The level descriptors are designed taking into account both the EQF and the QF-EHEA. Thus, the draft NQF is designed to be compatible to the both European frameworks.

The draft NQF consists of a general education part, VET part and a higher education part. All levels are described in terms of learning outcomes:

- knowledge (theoretical and empirical);
- skills (cognitive and practical); and
- competences (personal and professional).

The VET levels are described by degrees of vocational qualification.

The higher education levels cover all the existing higher education degrees and qualifications, i.e. ‘Professional Bachelor’, Bachelor, Master and Doctor.

Czech Republic

Referencing Czech qualifications to the EQF levels can be assigned to two methods:

1. Formal education

In formal education, the relevant qualification level is based primarily on the relevant level of education of a specific qualification. A system of levels of formal education is called KKOV (*Klasifikace kmenových oborů vzdělání* - Classification of Educational Programme Types). Levels of education from primary to higher education are identified by the letters of alphabet from A (primary education) to V (doctoral degree). Each level (each letter) is defined by various curricular and legislative documents. Analysis of these documents and comparison with the EQF descriptors executed in the supporting studies within the project NCP-EQF propose referencing of these formal education levels to the EQF levels.

All national (core) and school curricula for primary and secondary education are described in terms of learning outcomes. Key competences expected in educational programmes at a certain level of education are common to all qualifications/programmes of the same level of education. Therefore, all qualifications at a certain level of education will be assigned to the same EQF level.

The Act on Higher Education institution from 1998 introduced a three-stage progression for higher education: with bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programmes. The learning outcomes of these stages are briefly described in the Act and therefore are binding for institutions. Qualifications awarded in higher education were referenced on the basis of these descriptions and on other documents (study program descriptions, Accreditation Commission requirements, etc.). The qualifications framework for higher education that will be compatible with QF EHEA (Bologna process) is currently under development within the project Q-RAM. The self-certification is expected after this the project is concluded in 2012.

2. Non-formal and informal learning

Skills achieved through non-formal and informal learning can be assessed and validated according to standards listed in the new national professional qualifications register (called *Národní soustava kvalifikací* – NSK). All qualifications in this register are assigned to eight levels with descriptors comparable to the eight EQF levels and descriptors.

The content of a complete qualification (i.e. combination of several partial qualifications) is in accordance with the content of a corresponding qualification achieved in initial VET. This ensures compatibility, comparability and permeability (up to and including the Level 4 EQF) of qualifications achieved in formal and non-formal/informal learning. All standards are created by experts from the labour market (mainly employers) and experts in education (i.e. education providers, experts from NÚOV) and must be approved by several bodies on the national level (including sector councils and relevant ministries) before their final approval by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.

Finland

In the table below, an example of textual/technical analysis is given. More information about the procedures can be found under Criterion 4.

A comparison of the level descriptors of EQF and NQF, Level 3

EQF/ NQF level	European Qualifications Framework(EQF) Level descriptors	Finnish National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level descriptors
Level 3	<p>Knowledge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <u>knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts</u>, in a field of work or study <p>Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ a range of <u>cognitive and practical skills</u> required to <u>accomplish tasks</u> and <u>solve problems</u> by selecting and applying <u>basic methods, tools, materials and information</u> <p>Competence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <u>takes responsibility</u> for completion of tasks in work or study ▪ <u>adapts own behaviour to circumstances</u> in solving problems 	<p>Understands <u>facts, principles, processes and general concepts</u> in his/her field</p> <p>and has <u>certain cognitive and practical skills</u>, which are needed for <u>performing the duties and solving problems</u>. Can choose and apply <u>basic methods, tools, materials and information</u>.</p> <p><u>Takes responsibility</u> for completing his/her duties and works safely within the work community. <u>Tailors his/her actions to the circumstances</u> and operating environment when solving problems. Can work in an entrepreneurial manner in someone else's service. Evaluates his/her own competence and actions pertaining to work or studies. Is capable of continuous learning. Knows how to communicate diversely and interactively in various situations and can produce varied texts in his/her native language. Can act in a familiar studying environment and work community. Is able to communicate and interact at an international level in one official language and at least one foreign language. Can act in a way that is consistent with sustainable development.</p>

Germany

The DQR represents the first comprehensive use of matrix for the alignment of qualifications. It extends across educational areas and acts as a considerable aid to navigation within the German educational system. For this purpose the DQR describes competences on eight reference levels – like the EQF.

The DQR differentiates between two categories of competence. These are ‘Professional competence’, subdivided into ‘Knowledge’ and ‘Skills’ and ‘Personal competence’, subdivided into ‘Social competence’ and ‘Autonomy’. Thus, the German Framework is similar to the EQF, at the same time it singles out ‘autonomy’ and enlarges ‘responsibility’ into ‘social competence’.

The eight reference levels of the DQR provide descriptors describing the competences required to obtain a qualification on the individual level. They do not, however, map individual learning and occupational biographies. The term ‘competence’, constituting the heart of the DQR, depicts the ability and readiness of the individual to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and methodological competences and conduct himself or herself in a considered and individually and socially responsible manner. Competence is understood to refer to comprehensive action skills within this context.

The Netherlands

Adding up all individual education levels started the process in the Netherlands. This first resulted in around 15 levels. Later, the expert group searched for overlap in these levels. This resulted in 10 levels. Then, after six regional meetings, criticism about the complexity arose and the advice was to have eight levels, plus an entry level, in order to enhance transparency and comparability with the EQF.

III.3.3 Criterion 4

Criterion 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.

As mentioned above, this criterion is seen as very important for **building trust** in the referencing decisions. In many cases, the result of the classification of qualifications will be the inclusion of the qualification in a **national register** (NQF register or database). Such a register seems to be an important instrument for quality assurance: qualifications that are included and are supposed to meet the required criteria for linking them to a specific NQF level.

The procedures for classifying qualifications on a national level are of high relevance because they also express the **nature of an NQF**. For example, the range of qualifications that are or will be included in an NQF is one of its main characteristics as well as any differences that can be identified between different types of qualifications or segments of the qualifications system.

For classifying qualifications based on the **best-fit principle** on a national level, it is possible, similar to the approaches described for Criterion 2, to use technical analyses or a social approach or for both. Using a more **technical approach** means to compare qualifications descriptors with level descriptors and to allocate the qualifications based on this linguistic matching. However, this is, in many cases, possible only to a certain extent, because some degree qualifications are described in terms of learning outcomes. Furthermore, the question might emerge of how the descriptions actually reflect the reality.

Since many countries do not yet have sufficient learning outcomes descriptions, they may need to be indirectly identified by applying the **social approach**: For example, the questions could be addressed of how qualifications are currently regarded on a national level and what is the current practice in relation to implicit levels. This could be done based on empirical research, on analyses of available data or by directly consulting stakeholders. This approach could also support a better link between the learning outcomes described and the reality. In case stakeholders will be consulted, the issues need to be considered of who should be involved and in what role and how their feedback will be considered when developing consensus.

When applying the best-fit principle, **levels** should be **understood as corridors** and not as exact lines. Qualifications might include learning outcomes related to different levels. In this case, the ‘centre of gravity’ has to be identified. Different dimensions or categories of learning outcomes may be emphasised in qualifications placed at the same level. Therefore, qualifications allocated to the same level do not necessarily have to be similar but they can be considered as equivalent in terms of level of learning outcomes achieved (principle of ‘equivalence but not similarity’).

To generate trust in this context, **transparently describe** the procedures for classifying qualifications, in order to **justify** the decisions and to provide **evidence**. For example, descriptions of selected qualifications could be added and the reason for allocating them to certain levels could be explained. The evidence can be based on the technical or social approach. Those who plan to classify types of qualifications and not each single qualification should explain and justify this approach. This could be done, for example, by referring to common

rules for describing the qualifications belonging to the same type, to common accreditation procedures applied by the responsible authorities or by referring to results of a consultation process with relevant stakeholders.

The EQF-Ref partners also discussed the question of what can actually be considered as ‘**valid evidence**’ in this context. For example, since the learning outcomes approach should be applied, is it valid to refer to input criteria (such as the time needed for acquiring the qualification) in the justification of the classification decision? Another argument that could be used for allocating a qualification to an NQF level could be based on its ‘value’ on the labour market, i.e. the status of qualification holders on the labour market or their income, by referring to relevant statistical data. Is it valid to use this kind of evidence?

It is not possible to answer this question in a general way: It can be assumed that the approach taken depends on the meaning of an NQF in the national context, on its objectives. The kind of evidence used in the classification process **reflects implicit or explicit values** connected with the classification of qualifications. For example, in those cases where the NQF should support the development of a closer link between the qualifications system and the labour market, indicators related to the use of a qualification on the labour market could be included or emphasised. However, it is recommended to focus on learning outcomes in the classification process, to make additional indicators or criteria used for coming to a decision explicit and to explain why they are used.

Based on these considerations, it is suggested to **reflect upon the following questions when addressing Criterion 4:**

- How do these classification procedures reflect:
 - the purpose and function of an NQF?
 - the segments of the qualifications system covered (scope of the NQF)?
 - the types of qualifications included?
 - any possible binary divide between types of qualifications or segments of the qualifications system?
- How is the concept of best-fit applied and how are different approaches balanced?
 - Is the classification decision solely based on learning outcomes or are also other criteria or indicators used?
 - In case only learning outcomes descriptions are used: are certain categories more important than others?
 - In case additional indicators or criteria are used: what kind of values do they reflect and are they in accordance with the explicit objectives of the NQF?

The following examples provide some information on the approaches planned in Austria, in the Czech Republic and in Finland:

Austria

According to current plans, Levels 6 to 8 of the Austrian NQF will be divided into a ‘Bologna-strand’ and into a ‘non-Bologna-strand’. Bachelor-, Master- and PhD-degrees will probably be classified based on the Dublin descriptors, while qualifications outside the Bologna architecture will follow the NQF descriptors.

However, Austria will not develop its own NQF descriptors but rather use the EQF descriptors. This decision is based on the results of the consultation process and of the NQF pilot projects as well as on experiences made in EQF projects with Austrian institutions as coordinators or partners supported by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (bm:ukk; for example, the TransEQFrame project: www.transeqframe.net).

The NQF pilot projects sought to map selected qualifications to the EQF descriptors table and to allocate them to levels. The working groups discussed whether the EQF descriptors are sufficient to classify qualifications in Austria or whether additional information is necessary. They concluded that the EQF descriptors generally appear to be suitable for the classification of qualifications despite – or because of – the considerable scope for interpretation.

A proposal was made (and taken up in the further NQF development process) to provide explanations/details/specifications to the EQF descriptors from the perspective of the Austrian qualification landscape. These additional descriptors are partly based on analyses of curricula and training regulations, legal documents, decrees, and other descriptions of qualifications. These explanations should make the EQF descriptors more ‘tangible’ and should facilitate the classification of qualifications. Furthermore, ‘reference qualifications’ will be classified and thus better illustrating the requirements of each level’s learning outcomes. These are qualifications that are well known in Austria and can function as kind of ‘corner stones’ for allocating other qualifications.

The definition of criteria for the NQF classification, of the classification procedure and the NQF governance structure will be published in an ‘NQF Manual’, which will be included in the annex of the EQF referencing report.

A draft manual has already been prepared. It addresses the following issues:

- How do qualifications have to be structured and described to be ‘NQF-classifiable’?
- What information has to be provided when applying for classification?
- What criteria have to be met for the classification on a particular level?
- Which steps have to be taken when applying for classification?

- Who are the stakeholders involved in the NQF process and what are their tasks?
- Which implications does a classification have?

A template has been prepared for presenting qualifications that should be classified in the NQF (a similar template was developed in the EQF project ZOOM that was coordinated by an Austrian institution and supported by the bm:ukk: www.zoom-eqf.eu). The proposed template asks for providing arguments for allocating a qualification to a certain level. The argumentation will have to be based on the EQF descriptors and the above mentioned Austrian explanations/details/specifications. The existing qualification descriptions in Austria are, however, currently not always oriented towards learning outcomes and thus provide quite varied and often only very limited arguments for assigning a learning outcome to a particular level. The learning outcomes approach will be further developed and as the learning outcomes associated with a qualification are better documented in the qualification descriptions it becomes easier to match the EQF descriptors and assigning qualifications to a particular level.

However, the argumentation for allocating a qualification to a certain level could additionally be based on:

- Relation to other qualifications from the same learning or working area or to similar already classified qualifications (for example, to the ‘reference qualifications’);
- International comparison (for example, transnational agreements on mutual recognition of qualifications, European projects etc.);
- Further ‘indicators’ (for example, statistics, results of surveys).

This approach is currently being tested in a so-called ‘simulation phase’ with selected qualifications.

Czech Republic

Although the implicit qualifications framework in the Czech Republic is well understood and widely accepted, the comprehensive explicit national qualifications framework is not formally established yet. Therefore, the referencing report will reference qualifications and education systems and will only mention emerging parts of the future NQF (i.e. the framework for vocational qualifications and the framework for tertiary education qualifications).

All core/national curricula for primary and secondary schools must fulfil certain criteria before they are approved. They are described in terms of learning outcomes and students are evaluated both continually and at the end of the study on whether they meet the requirements described in curricula.

The procedures for inclusion and referencing partial qualifications to qualification levels in the NSK (the register of vocational qualifications, which facilitates RNFIL) are described in the Guidelines for Inclusion of Qualifications in the NSK. The process of creating and approving qualifications standards is described in the Guidelines as well.

Qualification levels (of qualifications within the register NSK) are based on levels of individual competencies, which are listed in qualification standards. Each competency has its own numerical code and a level indicator (1-8). All the requirements described in an assessment standard in terms of learning outcomes must be fulfilled by the prescribed method during an examination in order to obtain a certificate. Thus all competencies and qualifications in the register NSK are in accord with relevant level descriptors. The NSK level descriptors are comparable with the EQF descriptors.

Qualifications are included into the NSK after several rules/steps are fulfilled with the participation of many stakeholders.

Finland

A national committee has made the proposal on the placement of qualifications obtained in Finland. This committee included representatives from nearly all educational stakeholders: groups that operate in the field of education either directly or indirectly. For the proposal, the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) was commissioned to draft a suggestion about the placement of upper secondary vocational degrees on the framework levels. The Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Defence, and the Ministry of the Interior were requested to provide descriptions for placing qualifications within their administrative sectors. The working group produced a unanimous proposal based on the stakeholders' suggestions and extensive discussions.

General principles in placement

The qualifications and degrees were placed on different levels in the framework depending on the overall learning outcomes deemed necessary for completing the studies. The placement was done using the best-fit principle. The learning outcomes in some fields of the qualification may correspond to a level lower or higher than the majority of studies included in the qualification and the qualification as an entity. Qualifications placed on the same framework level can differ in terms of learning outcomes; their emphases and dimensions of learning can be different. If the learning outcomes are clearly more demanding, certain qualifications can, for a special reason, be placed one level higher than other similar qualifications

Placement according to the types of qualifications

1. Basic education

The national committee analysed the learning outcomes described in the core curricula of basic education and upper secondary school education, and compared them with the level descriptions in the NQF. In addition to the national committee members, experts from the Ministry of Education and the FNBE participated in the analysis.

2. Upper Secondary Vocational Qualifications

Experts at the FNBE analysed the qualifications in their field of expertise. They compared the learning outcomes and competencies defined nationally for vocational qualifications to the level descriptions in the NQF. The results of this text analysis were later discussed in expert meetings, organised internally at the FNBE. The outcome of these negotiations was a unanimous motion regarding the placement of these qualifications.

The suggestions drafted by the FNBE experts were also discussed in the training committees that represent education providers, employees and employers. Views expressed by the training committees were considered when drafting the final placement proposal.

The FNBE experts viewed that one vocational basic degree, one vocational qualification and five special vocational degrees should be placed a level higher than other qualifications of the same type, since the learning outcomes required in these qualifications are clearly more demanding. The divergent placement of these seven qualifications can be justified also by studies that reveal the qualifications' high status.

3. Tertiary Degrees / Degrees from higher-education institutions

Placement of tertiary degrees was done as previously agreed on a national and European level. In 2005, a proposal for the Finnish higher-education qualifications framework was prepared and this proposal was integrated in the NQF. Finnish higher-education degrees were placed in the framework according to the standardised cycle system introduced by the Bologna process and implemented in Finland since 2004.

Comments on the placement proposal and follow-up actions

The Ministry of Education requested comments on the proposal from focal stakeholders. Altogether 86 statements were made and the great majority preferred using the best-fit principle for the placement. The proposed placement was considered successful by most statements. The greater part of the commentators sided with the working group's proposal that certain vocational qualifications can be placed on a level higher than other similar qualifications; because the required competence is clearly much more demanding, a different placement is necessary.

After receiving and discussing the comments, the national committee asked the Finnish National Board of Education to specify the grounds for the placement of vocational qualification into the framework. Experts from the FNBE defined the reasoning behind the placements. The seven vocational qualifications with divergent placements were re-examined by field-specific training committees, and the grounds for placements were reassessed. In addition to this, the steering group of TUTKE- project (a project for developing the system of degrees and curricula) examined the grounds for placement. The national committee that had prepared the placement proposal further specified their placement reasoning by employing the feedback from the TUTKE steering group and the experts at the FNBE.

Germany

In May 2009, a testing phase was initiated, in which the draft DQR was tested within four domains (IT, Commerce, Health, Metal/Electric) by allocating a sample of some 70 qualifications from all educational segments and all levels to the DQR levels. Each of the four domains had its own working group. There was no standard method, however comparable elements for the classification process in the working groups existed. The allocation work followed an interpretative method, including the analysis of curricula, training regulations and other relevant documents. They were analyzed with regard to contents and terminology of the draft DQR for the selected qualifications. For each qualification, 5-10 activity areas were identified. Learning outcomes for each of the areas were tested against each of the descriptors in the 4 columns of the draft DQR. The allocation was carried out per activity area first, and then for the complete qualification. The final result was a rather differentiated allocation of each qualification, not just based on a mathematic average of the various results. In many cases qualifications spread across two or three levels and different experts had different opinions. Thus, the best-fit principle had to be applied.

The testing exercise did not provide a clear picture accepted by all experts involved. Finally, it will be a rather political (social) decision where to place all the qualifications. Differences arise between the different logics of the education system and the employment system, VET in Germany to a large extent is part of. For example, since November 2010 there is a deadlock concerning the question whether the Abitur (general university entrance certificate) could be placed on a higher level than the skilled workers certificate.

Content of Part IV:

This part relates to the phase after the (first version) of the EQF referencing reports has been published and addresses the following questions: When is an update of a report needed? How can the reports be analysed and evaluated? Who are the actual beneficiaries of the referencing processes?

IV.1 Updating EQF referencing reports

Experience shows that in many countries the EQF referencing follows the NQF development quite closely or is done in parallel. Undoubtedly, qualifications systems and frameworks continually develop and often the NQF implementation process needs some time before actually becoming a real force. For example, in some countries, the NQF concept will be introduced in a first step and the actual inclusion of qualifications follows in a second step. It might also be the case that, at the beginning, only certain parts of the qualifications system will be included in the NQF and the inclusion of other segments will follow at a later stage. The EQF referencing report represents the **status quo** of the situation in a national context at a certain time and it needs to be considered whether changes of an NQF or of the

national qualifications system that has been referenced to the EQF might require an update of the referencing report.

So far, there is no proposal on how to proceed in changing the referencing reports, although one country (Malta) has already presented an update of the report (cf. info box).

Update of the Maltese EQF referencing report

Malta had already presented the first version of the referencing report in 2009. In 2010, a second version of the report was published (and presented at the EQF Advisory Group in February 2011). The main changes in the revised edition are:

1. The state-of-play of the consultation process 2010
2. The renaming of sections to correspond with developments and fine-tuning of the text in relation to European developments such as those related to the Bologna and Copenhagen processes
3. An added Part 5 - to illustrate the introduction of (a) the validation of informal learning in compulsory education and (b) the setting up of an awards system referenced to the Malta Qualifications Framework.

The revised version is available here: <http://mqc.gov.mt/revisedreferencingreport>.

The EQF-Ref partnership noted differences between minor changes and major changes and suggests that only the latter requires an update of the referencing report:

- A **minor change** might be the change in the name of one particular qualification (but without changing the content of this qualification). The new title of the qualification needs to be communicated (for example, in the national qualifications register or database and, if appropriate, also at the EQF portal). However, since there are no changes in the classification of this qualification in the NQF, there is also no need for changing the referencing report.
- **Major changes** might be, for example, changes in the number of levels of the NQF, the placement of qualifications, the inclusion of new (types of) qualifications or additional segments of the qualifications system (for example, the non-formal learning context), or changes regarding important legal issues/laws. Such major changes are also changing core aspects of the information presented in the referencing reports and should therefore be presented in revised versions of the EQF referencing reports.

The EQF-Ref partnership and particularly the EQF-Ref peer-learning seminar discussed diverging views on the **definition** and **interval** of referencing report **updates**. One approach

could be to publish changes in an **amendment** of the first version of the report; another possibility could be to prepare a new report reflecting the changes. However, this should not create an administrative burden and too much paperwork should be avoided. In regards to the interval of updates, it was discussed as to whether a country should reflect on the referencing report after a given period of time or only in case of significant changes in the national system or regarding the NQF. Whatever the decision may be, it was suggested to initiate an update only in case of major changes instead of automatically updating the report after a certain period of time.

Furthermore, it is suggested that any **changes need to be communicated** in a predetermined way. In particular, the EQF Advisory Group should be informed of any changes made (minor and major) and online resources should always be updated (on a national level as well as on the European level –for example, on the EQF portal). For the sake of transparency, the EQF referencing reports should always include a statement on their status (for example, first version, updated version etc.) and updated reports should indicate the changes made (cf. III.2. – Structure of the EQF referencing reports proposed by the EQF-Ref partnership).

In order to define a more systematic **approach regarding the update of EQF referencing reports**, the following issues should be **discussed and agreed upon at European level** (by the EQF Advisory Group):

- What kind of changes on a national level and in the contents of the referencing reports actually require an update of the report and a new presentation in the EQF Advisory Group?
- How should changes or updates be included and made visible in the reports?
- How should the changes be communicated (for example, should an updated version be presented in the EQF Advisory Group or should it only be published at the EQF portal)?

In the following paragraphs, some considerations are presented on what kind of changes in the EQF-Ref partner countries might lead to a need for updating the referencing report or how this issue will be addressed:

Austria

In Austria, all qualifications – irrespective of the focus (general education qualifications and VET qualifications) and the learning context (for example initial VET, continuous VET, higher education) – will be classified to the NQF. Due to the complexity of the NQF

development process and the fact that different ministries, departments and stakeholders need to be involved, it was decided to work on the ‘formal qualification area’ (comprising qualifications based on legal regulations, for example, laws, directives, etc.) and the ‘non-formal qualification area’ separately. Although, the same classification principles will ultimately apply for qualifications from both areas, the starting situation differs in regards to stakeholders in charge and governance principles. Thus, working groups deal with the questions attached to both areas separately and also the timeframe differs: First qualifications from the ‘formal qualification area’ will be placed on the NQF. At a later stage, qualifications from the ‘non-formal area’ will be added.

The EQF referencing report will present the plans for the ‘non-formal area’, but will focus on the ‘formal qualification area’. New developments in the ‘non-formal area’ could therefore lead to an update of the EQF referencing report.

Bulgaria

The draft Bulgarian NQF covers all qualifications within the education and training system. It is based on the current national legislation. In this respect, a major legislative change, which shall affect the NQF as well, is foreseen through a new law for preschool and school education development. This new law is currently at an elaboration stage. It was set as a measure in the National Reforms Programme (2011-2015) of the Republic of Bulgaria and is to be adopted by the end of 2012. A new structure of the school education system is to be introduced by this new law. It will cause further adjustment of the NQF, which should be aligned according to the new school education structure. In this case, the referencing report should be modified as well.

Czech Republic

There is no official decision on how the changes will be included in the report in future. The NCP CZ will be in charge of updating of the report, but still unanswered is the frequency or kind of changes in the system that will/should be reflected in the report.

The NCP CZ applied for another grant from the European Commission in February 2011 and the application proposes, as one of the activities, to discuss this question. It is expected that the referencing report must reflect all legislative changes related to education and qualifications systems.

Finland

The proposal for the Finnish National Qualifications Framework covers all official qualifications. The Finnish Government plans to extend the framework to cover ‘other learning’, which does not lead to a certain qualification. If and when this will happen, there will be a need to either prepare a new referencing report or inform the international audience in some other way – depending on what has been agreed upon at a European level.

Germany

In Germany, all qualifications – irrespective of the focus (general education qualifications and VET qualifications) and the learning context (for example initial VET, continuous VET, Higher Education) – will be classified in the NQF. It was decided to work on ‘formal qualifications’ (comprising qualifications based on legal regulations, for example, laws, directives, etc.) and the outcomes of ‘non-formal/informal’ learning separately. The same classification principles will ultimately apply for recognised learning outcomes from both areas. First, formal qualifications will be classified in the NQF. At a later stage, there will be decisions on how to include outcomes of ‘non-formal’ and ‘informal’ learning.

The EQF referencing report will focus on ‘formal’ qualifications. Developments in the ‘non-formal’ or ‘informal’ area could therefore lead to an update of the EQF referencing report.

IV.2 Review of EQF referencing reports

During the next months, a high number of EQF referencing reports will be available. Experience so far shows that, on the one hand, the **referencing reports** are **similar**, since they are using the ‘Criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF’. On the other hand, **substantial differences** between the reports can be observed; for example, regarding the detail of information on the referencing methodology or evidence (such as descriptions of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes). Within the EQF-Ref partnership and also at the peer-learning seminar, the question was raised whether and how the EQF referencing reports should be **analysed** or **evaluated**. A meta-evaluation could increase the **overall credibility** of the EQF referencing process and therefore enhance the development of mutual trust and contribute to the success of the EQF initiative.

It is therefore suggested to **agree on procedures and criteria** for such a **review of EQF referencing reports**. The following questions should be discussed:

- **Who** should carry out this review process? – Cedefop is already monitoring the NQF development processes and prepares feedback to the reports presented at the EQF Advisory Group. Therefore, Cedefop would also be a logical candidate to develop a meta-analysis of referencing reports.
- What should the concrete **purpose** of the review process be? – As stated above, the main purpose should be enhancing credibility and supporting the development of mutual trust. This means that this exercise should, for example, not be understood as evaluating referencing reports in order to identify good and less good ones. How-

ever, it could be used to address critical issues that need to be further considered on national levels or discussed on the European level.

- What kind of **criteria** should be used for carrying out the review? – It is suggested that the EQF Advisory Group agrees on a set of criteria for this exercise. The issues to be addressed could, for example, include:
 - How far is the notion of the EQF as a lifelong learning framework reflected in the national qualifications levels or NQF levels linked to the EQF?
 - To what extent has the EQF referencing report been put into practice already, how far are the results already visible and usable for beneficiaries?
 - Are qualifications from different countries that have been perceived as similar so far (for example, the higher entrance examination qualification often acquired at the end of upper-secondary level) linked to the same EQF levels via the national qualifications levels or NQF levels linked to the EQF? Might this cause some ambiguities instead of enhancing transparency?

IV.3 Beneficiaries of the referencing process

Only a few EQF referencing reports have been published so far and the discussions on the referencing processes in the European countries seem to remain in experts' circles. However, it is important not to forget the **beneficiaries** of the whole EQF project and to be aware of the EQF's two principal aims: to promote citizens' mobility between countries and to facilitate their lifelong learning.

The beneficiaries of the EQF are, for example, **learners** and **workers** who want to study or work abroad, **employers** who can use the EQF for interpreting the qualifications of foreign applicants, **individuals** and **providers** who can use the EQF for increasing progression, permeability and participation in lifelong learning. These beneficiaries do not need to be familiar with the overall technicalities of the referencing process, but they need to be informed about the results and the implications these results might have for them.

Including the appropriate EQF levels on qualification certificates, diplomas and 'Europass' documents as well as developing **NQF websites** or **registers** on a national level play a crucial role in the process of making the result of the EQF referencing process visible to the citizens. However, these websites or databases need to be developed in a **user-friendly** way and should be **linked to or connected with other relevant websites or databases** (for example, with programme databases or the Europass website). Furthermore, it is of particular

importance that the **guidance personnel** is well informed about these information resources so that they can use them in their guidance processes.

On the European level, an **EQF portal** was launched that allows comparison of qualifications from different countries by using the EQF (cf. info box).

EQF portal

The EQF portal launched by the European Commission presents the results of the national processes for relating national qualifications levels to the levels of the EQF. It provides the possibility to compare how national qualifications levels of countries that have already finalised their referencing process are been linked to the EQF.

The EQF portal further presents information about the EQF implementation and key terms that are agreed by all countries participating in the EQF and are essential to take into account when cooperating with stakeholders at national and international level in implementing the EQF. The EQF portal also seeks to gather relevant documentation, such as the legal text of the recommendation on the establishment of the EQF, other key policy documents and EQF notes and useful links lead to other information sources that may prove useful for the comparability of qualifications. It is also possible to read and subscribe for the various issues of the EQF Newsletter through the EQF portal.

The current English-only portal will be expanded during the next year into 27 languages. A search function is also planned that will provide access to national databases with information on qualifications.

The EQF portal is accessible here: http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/home_en.htm

The planned use of the EQF portal for comparing qualifications from different countries will depend on the availability of qualifications descriptions (learning outcomes) from the European countries and of national databases or registers. However, in the future, the portal could become the main information resource on EQF related issues.

Annex: Criteria and procedures for referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF

Full text is available here: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/criteria_en.pdf

Criterion 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.

Criterion 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.

Criterion 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.

Criterion 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.

Criterion 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).

Criterion 6: The referencing process shall include the stated agreement of the relevant quality-assurance bodies.

Criterion 7: The referencing process shall involve international experts.

Criterion 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.

Criterion 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.

Criterion 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.



www.EQF-Ref.eu