

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK IN THE UK: 2010-2011



Qualifications
Frameworks
in the UK



A SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES FROM THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK NATIONAL COORDINATION POINTS¹ FOR THE UK

April 2011

BACKGROUND

The European Qualifications Framework

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is an overarching framework designed to serve as a translation device to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries in Europe. It was developed in response to requests from Member States of the European Union, the social partners and other stakeholders for a common reference tool to increase the transparency of qualifications. The principal aims of the EQF are to promote citizens' mobility between countries and to facilitate their lifelong learning.

The EQF is a framework of eight reference levels described in terms of learning outcomes. As an instrument for the promotion of lifelong learning, the EQF is intended to encompass all levels of qualifications acquired in general, vocational and higher education.

The EQF was formally adopted by the European Parliament and Council on 23 April 2008.

Member States agreed to reference their national qualifications systems to the EQF and make reference the EQF levels on certificates. The UK presented its report on referencing the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW), the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) to the EQF in January 2010².

¹ The National Coordination Points for the UK comprise the Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum and Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership (SCQFP), the Welsh Government, and the Office for Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (OFQUAL).

² See <http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/qualification-and-assessment-framework/eqf>

THE EQF PROJECTS

The UK's National Coordination Points for the EQF (NCPs) have collaborated in a programme of implementation activities that have communicated the EQF to potential stakeholders and opened a means of feedback from stakeholders about their needs in terms of making best use of the EQF. In addition the NCPs began an investigation into how the EQF could enhance and support the validation of learning.

The requirement to include a reference to EQF levels on certificates is considered challenging and this issue was explored tentatively with those likely to be involved in making decisions in this area.

Finally the EQF will only work if there is high trust in the quality and outcomes of the referencing process in all countries. With this in mind, the NCPs set out to support countries in understanding the UK referencing process and to determine progress made by these countries in the referencing process.

Thus there are five projects³ that are described in more detail below:

1. Communications activities
2. Recognising learning from different settings
3. Sectoral engagement with the EQF
4. EQF levels and their place on certificates of UK qualifications
5. International peer learning

EQF IMPLEMENTATION

The projects described below represent the first formal process of implementing the EQF in the UK. The UK NCPs identified communications, sectoral engagement, presenting the EQF levels on certificates and building trust with other country systems as the priorities for collaborative action. The NCPs see this as the start of a process that will gain momentum as the EQF becomes more widely understood and used.

The final beneficiary of the EQF is clearly the individual citizen, who will be supported in the process of mobility, and the social partners who will be able to use the EQF for business purposes such as recruitment and investment decisions. These users, and those that support them, are the people who will in fact implement the EQF and the NCP leads consider it their task to make the process of using the EQF as straightforward as possible.

Next year's programme of activities builds on the results of the project outcomes described below and hopefully will describe progress and a further step in the implementation process.

³ Funding from the European Commission was used in all five projects. However, in the proposal to the Commission projects 2 and 3 were presented as a single proposal. The outcomes of this single proposal reported separately as projects 2 and 3 for ease of understanding the outcomes.

PROJECT 1: COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITIES

The aim of the project was to set out clear messages to help communicate the purposes of the EQF to diverse audiences. The messages to be communicated focussed on:

- what the EQF is;
- the purpose and scope of the EQF; and
- how the UK qualifications frameworks link with the EQF.

ACTIVITY

A range of activities were undertaken and included the following:

- the production and dissemination of explanatory materials that could be used anywhere in the UK;
- developing a template for those promoting the EQF in the UK so that messages were consistent and reinforced at different events;
- attendance at national stakeholder conferences, making presentations on the EQF and distributing explanatory materials to participants.

The explanatory materials included web-based information and text in e-magazines produced routinely by framework organisations and government departments.

Responses to the explanatory materials and presentations were monitored so that developing understanding of the EQF could be taken into account in the development of a second communications strategy.

AUDIENCES

The main audiences for communications were identified as:

- national implementation groups (including policy and decision makers);
- providers (e.g. training centres, schools, higher education, further education);
- Sector Skills Councils, sector bodies, UK Commission for Employment and Skills;
- individual advice and guidance providers (careers advice organisations, teacher associations, learners); and
- Awarding organisations.

KEY MESSAGES

A set of key messages were agreed for the different audiences.

General Policy/Decision Makers:

- The EQF for lifelong learning is a common European framework which enables European countries to compare their qualifications systems to one another.
- The EQF is a translation device which will make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems in Europe.
- The EQF can help learners and workers who wish to move between countries, change jobs or move places of learning.
- The EQF will contribute to creating a European workforce that is mobile and flexible.

Learners/Individual Advice & Guidance Providers

- The EQF will make it easier to describe the broad level of competence of learners to recruiters in other countries.
- The EQF will make it simpler to compare the levels of one country's qualification system with another, e.g. when looking for further education and training opportunities.
- The UK Frameworks are aligned with the EQF, meaning that the level of a qualification gained in the UK can be compared with a level in the EQF. This will help people and organisations translate achievements between countries and work across the EU.
- All of the UK's frameworks have already been referenced.

Sector Skills Councils

- The EQF will make it easier to interpret the level of qualifications of prospective employees from other countries.
- The EQF will simplify comparisons between qualifications, supporting labour mobility.
- The EQF will enable a better match between supply and demand for knowledge, skills and competencies.
- All of the UK's frameworks have already been referenced.

Awarding Organisations

- The EQF presents qualifications in a way that is easy for everyone to understand and measure.
- The EQF will make it easier to describe the broad level of competence of learners to recruiters in other countries.
- The EQF will make it simpler to compare the levels of one country's qualification system with another, e.g. when looking for further education and training opportunities.
- The UK Frameworks are aligned with the EQF, meaning that the level of a qualification gained in the UK can be compared with a level in the EQF. This will help people and organisations translate achievements between countries and work across the EU.
- All of the UK's frameworks have already been referenced.

CONCLUSIONS

This communications project was an attempt to provide an initial introduction to the European Qualifications Framework; it has provided each NCP with a set of generic EQF tools to use to ensure a consistent message is conveyed throughout the UK.

Key stakeholders were reached via conferences, exhibitions and having the opportunity to formally present the EQF at conference events. As a result, a lot of interest was generated in the EQF and its purpose.

Next year there will be opportunities identified to explain the EQF along with other policy initiatives as they evolve. Activities will include identification of new events for seeking and sharing information, seeking feedback on understanding and use of the EQF, and the effectiveness of information shared so far.

Work will also continue in relation to EQF visibility in the UK, with a plan to develop the comprehensive communications strategy that will draw on the outcomes of the four projects outlined below and the developing policy and practice occurring in Brussels and other Member States. For example, the developing use of validation of non formal and informal learning and the proposed European Union Recommendation on this, expected at the end of 2011.

Project 2: Recognition of Prior Learning

The centrepiece of this project was a one day international event which focussed on the EQF as a tool for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The event involved presentations and workshops and was structured to optimise exchanges between people and to facilitate peer learning.

BACKGROUND

RPL takes on increasing importance with the implementation of the EQF. RPL provides the opportunity to validate the skills and knowledge of experienced people who have gained substantial professional development since completing their original training or qualifications. At individual, company and national levels, we have the opportunity to reflect and acknowledge the achievements of our workforce that are vital to continued UK competitiveness.

The event keynote speakers discussed the added value of national qualifications frameworks in implementing the EQF and addressed contemporary issues in implementing RPL.

There were opportunities to share experience in depth during peer learning workshop sessions addressing sectoral perspectives and methodological approaches.

A copy of the presentations used on the day can be downloaded from www.cqfw.net

DELEGATES

Delegates were invited from across the UK and European Union. 77 people attended and represented 20 countries and devolved administrations.

Five employment sectors - Care, Construction, Health, Land-based and Tourism - were identified as priorities in the EU programme which supports this event. Although only 10% of attendees were directly related to the five priority sectors, many of the representatives of national organisations and agencies had connections or relationships with these sectors.

WORKSHOPS

After some scene setting by keynote presenters, the event moved on to its main focus - eight workshops were each run twice during the day. A brief outline of these workshops follows.

RPL for Self-Empowerment

In this workshop the tool of self-management of competences was presented and debated as an important means for making the qualifications framework customer-steered. The main issues raised in the session were concerned with the currency of learning and how the transfer value is variable between different settings. The fact that, in general, people tend to underestimate their capabilities was reiterated and there was also a discussion of the pros and cons of partial qualification.

The key issue of training the professionals that guide an individual through an RPL process was discussed, as was the more technical issue of portfolio design and assessment.

Participants indicated that this was a very interesting discussion. It was suggested that a UK RPL network would be useful for supporting validation of learning in the UK.

The Customer Journey as a Focus for Training and RPL

The context of this workshop was the air passenger transport industry and consideration of the myriad of ways a person's trip could be optimised by employees working together and understanding the business. Many issues were raised including consistency of the standards applied in appraising employees - if you have 1000 employees; the RPL process is only valid if all 1000 are assessed to the same standard. A major consideration for businesses is whether using RPL is more cost effective than traditional training methods and how much value do learners attach to a qualification gained through RPL? The question was asked about whether a company's existing assessment tools could be used to map/meet qualification criteria.

Strategic priorities that emerged from discussions included:

- using sector skills councils to drive change across sector/national/international boundaries;
- producing common RPL referencing systems to validate skills across borders; and
- making sure that the barriers between the different players in the RPL process are removed to ensure that the skills that people need for work are specified, delivered and that employers then use them.

It was agreed that responsibilities lie with:

- government and the devolved administrations to set the qualifications frameworks;
- SSCs to set down the programmes to recognise learning;
- awarding organisations to establish practical delivery vehicles;
- training providers to deliver them; and
- employers to use them.

The subject and scenarios provoked lively, constructive discussions. Progress was underpinned by using the practical example in the workshop to raise practical issues and solutions and people seemed engaged in taking these back to their work setting to use as reasons to address/make changes to current practice.

Recognition of Prior Learning and Social Services in Scotland

This workshop focused on the RPL materials and resources developed to support the social services workforce to gain qualifications for registration with Scottish Social Services Council. A key issue emerging was that RPL will become more challenging if assessment becomes too regulated and is driven towards the methods used in formal assessment. The participants agreed that RPL is not only about getting to the next academic level but also about horizontal progression - maintaining and keeping up-to-date. It was agreed that a serious challenge was encouraging and maintaining a culture of lifelong learning in the current economic climate and getting people to take responsibility for their own learning, to think creatively how to use qualifications levels and recognise what level of skills and knowledge they already have.

Feedback suggested that the wider European perspective adds considerably to the UK understanding of RPL and systems to support this present many challenges to the status quo.

Implementing RPL in the Care Sector in Romania

This case study approach showed that RPL can be a direct response to the need to up-skill or qualify the workforce. The case study also showed that increased mobility across the European labour market increases the need for RPL to be embedded within national qualification and learning systems and recognised across countries.

One problem encountered was that achievements gained through the validation of prior learning need to have parity with achievements gained through other routes and that learning outcomes are the key criterion for assessment and not other factors relating to learning inputs.

The question was raised for this particular sector whether it is possible to develop sectoral agreements on core competencies e.g. customer service in the care sector.

Models for RPL and Their Impact on Stakeholders

This workshop considered five different models for the validation of prior learning. Participants preferred a model that was designed to work in a specific sector as it brings employers and providers together and is tailored to employer needs. However some questions arose:

- Is it for the individual or the organisation?
- Is the resource requirement for the organisation based on the assumption the learner knows what they want?
- Is it easier to apply in multi national companies as opposed to SMEs?

Professional Bodies also need to be part of the stakeholder group. There is also a need to ensure that sectors have comparability in terms of standards, quality assurance procedures etc.

All models must recognise that learners have different entry points and levels and there needs to be evaluations of whether RPL has benefits in all contexts and models and whether the benefit outweighs the costs.

Transferability of Skills

This workshop concentrated on the transferability of skills, with particular focus on customer service within the passenger transport sector, with messages to be drawn from this for other sectors.

The standards issue was discussed and the point made that there must be clear criteria from the National Occupational Standards that can be used in the design and mapping processes of RPL. The importance of a common understanding of levels in recognition of prior learning (particularly across other countries) was also discussed. There was a discussion about how different countries map their levels against the EQF, and the implications for RPL – what extra learning needs to take place to meet the different criteria?

The funding of RPL provision was a strong theme for discussion. Another key point discussed was that soft skills have a longer shelf life and are far more transferable than 'industry specialist skills'.

The APL-Bud Project

The basis of this workshop was a project aimed at recognising the competences of unqualified construction workers in Poland. The project explored the experience of migrant workers in obtaining construction qualifications in other countries.

The first point that emerged from the project was a common understanding of transferable skills that are accepted in other sectors, occupations and incorporated in standards.

Other points were the need to engage the social partners and the need for good quality assurance that protects the individual, protects the sector and ensures that assessment and learning outcomes are linked.

There was a broad discussion on the application of information, advice and guidance, funding mechanisms and overcoming the obstacles of language. The role of government was discussed in terms of international qualifications and 'stateless' qualifications. There was also a discussion about whether by establishing equivalence between qualifications gained formally and through RPL actually obscured cultural differences and concepts of standards and quality.

RPL in the Power Industry in North Wales

A project operating for some time in the nuclear industry was the focus of this workshop and the experience led to discussions around the necessary preparations for an RPL process. For example, to ensure all parties have an understanding of levels and qualifications and thinking ahead about the impact of an RPL process. Sustainability was another consideration, as necessary funding levels were perceived to be expensive. A third consideration was the need for certain skills in the RPL adviser (sector specific expertise / process expert).

The challenges identified were:

- ensuring that learners are aware of RPL process, its benefits and where they can use it;
- ensuring there is appropriate induction – matching units/standards/etc; and
- not raising false expectations.

Questions were asked about whether RPL should sit outside education provision as in the Netherlands; whether RPL should be the responsibility of careers advisors, sector experts or both and how multi-agency provision of RPL can be managed.

SUMMARISING THE PEER LEARNING THAT INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCED

“Natural RPL” takes place in the workplace as part of job enrichment. All people have an idea of their competencies, and this is likely to be a ‘spiky profile’ of strengths in some fields and areas to develop further.

There is a need to demonstrate and promote the value of the RPL process in employer models, national models, sectoral and transnational models. Promotional activity needs to be clear and as simple as possible.

Expectations and understanding need to be developed amongst learners, employers, sectoral leaders, national frameworks and transnational arrangements.

The EQF offers a bridge of recognition across geographical barriers and institutional thresholds. National systems need to have common references such as those embedded in the EQF.

Soft skills were seen to have a longer shelf life than some subject-specific skills.

Do higher skills automatically mean demands for more pay, or do recognised skills mean the workforce is keeping pace with changing needs and new technology?

Social partner engagement is important.

There needs to be a balance between regulation and flexibility.

Funding is not just ‘who pays?’ – There is a need to consider the balance of investment and risk.

- Who takes the risk?
- Why do they take the risk?
- Who has the responsibility?

Risk may be financial – can it be afforded? Risk may be regarded as personal – is the candidate going to succeed in gaining recognition? What are the consequences of not achieving validation?

RPL is a tool toward skills renewal, for recognising continuous professional development (CPD) and lifelong learning. It is not a short cut to achieving 2nd class qualifications.

EVALUATION OF THE EVENT

The feedback from participants on the event was positive in all aspects. Many participants wished to see future events of this type planned and offered a range of topics to be covered, for example: evaluations of RPL models in action; how these have impacted on individuals and organisations; and how quality assurance arrangements regarding these models have been received and embedded. Another suggestion was for more focus on the new approaches at European level related to the validation.

PROJECT 3: SECTORAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE EQF

This project involved a sectoral survey covering five sectors: land-based industries, social care, construction, health and travel and tourism. A project compendium of sectoral European funded projects linked to the implementation of the EQF was also produced and the project culminated with the EQF – Developing Sectors event in October 2010. A number of case studies were produced as a result of these activities.

THE SECTORAL SURVEY

A web-based questionnaire was used to discover the views of the five sectors about sectoral mobility (mechanisms, barriers, levels and types of mobility); qualifications and referencing activity; awareness (of NQFs/EQF developments and of the existence of UK NCPs) and future activity (perceived usefulness of the EQF; interest in future developments and activities related to EQF implementation). Of the 14 organisations invited to participate, 8 responses were received, covering 4 of the 5 target sectors (not travel and tourism).

Whilst all respondents confirmed the importance of sectoral mobility at all levels of employment, supporting statistical data was not always so easy to obtain. Occupational mobility was also confirmed as important, by all participating sectors, at international, inter-sector and inter-employment levels, with a range of existing approaches to skills development and skills recognition cited. In some sectors however, activities to facilitate international mobility were often targeted purely at workers incoming to the UK. Identified barriers to mobility centred round the need to improve existing academic or professional recognition mechanisms (e.g. through updated European Directives), the need to enhance levels of involvement in education, training and skills development for existing employees and the need to better address basic skills development needs (e.g. increased language development and testing facilities) for migrant workers coming to the UK.

Qualifications and referencing activity was perceived as mainly reliant on current mechanisms for qualification recognition, such as the achievement of first, second or third cycle higher education qualifications (tied to the Bologna Process), the European Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications and/or the mapping or linking of qualifications to existing qualifications frameworks. Little evidence was available for certificating levels of achievement in line with the NQFs or the EQF.

There were high levels of awareness of the referencing of UK NQFs to the EQF. However, respondents were less aware of the existence of the UK NCPs, although NCP host organisations were often well-known in their own right.

SECTORAL EUROPEAN FUNDED PROJECTS LINKED TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EQF

All of the European funded qualification projects relevant to the five sectors were identified. The reports of these projects were analysed and the project leaders invited to join a seminar entitled EQF – Developing Sectors. Beginning with a total of 1458 funded projects, a series of selection criteria were applied which led to seven highly relevant projects being identified. Links to all of the presentations and supporting materials from the morning session are available on the SCQF website at: www.scqf.org.uk

The seminar involved workshops which allowed a closer evaluation of the projects. The main points emerging from the workshops were as follows:

- EQF on its own is not enough. It is a starting point but there also needs to be a synergy between the EQF, ECVET (European Credit system for VET), EQAVET (European Quality Assurance system for VET and ESCO (European System of Competences and Occupations).
- There is a need for sector involvement and a need to develop case studies.
- Learning outcomes are sufficiently well understood across sectors and forms the basis for original EQF development – however ‘outcomes’ are often understood differently in different countries.
- Employers are interested in competence – there is a need to confirm/recognise competence rather than purely stating qualifications.
- There are issues around complexity and consistency of terminology, e.g. level versus cycles.
- Putting substance under the EQF is a gradual process – SSCs case studies could be a starting point. There is also a need for a common methodology for SSCs to carry out a mapping exercise of levels of understanding among members.
- NCPs should be a focus for the distribution of funding.
- A need exists for common tools to aid recognition (national is as important as European level) and also the development of a common approach to recognition which bridges old and new (European directives and the EQF).
- There is a need for inclusivity – access at all levels and for continuing communication on what the EQF can and cannot do.
- For sectoral involvement to happen the EQF must have credibility among the sectors and the question remains on whether the sectors are looking at curriculum or at National Occupational Standards.

CONCLUSION

The value of the EQF as a translation tool or point of reference is recognised by all sectors, although priorities often differ in terms of future expectations with some requiring greater harmonisation across existing tools, processes, mechanisms and frameworks (EQF, European Directives, Bologna Process) and others recognising the potential of the EQF itself.

PROJECT 4: EQF LEVELS AND THEIR PLACE ON CERTIFICATES OF UK REGULATED QUALIFICATIONS

The EQF Recommendation is in two parts, the second Recommendation states:

'Member states should adopt measures so that by 2012 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 EQF Level'.

This project engaged key stakeholders on a range of options for increasing the visibility of the EQF according to the Recommendation. All recognised UK Awarding Organisations (AOs) and Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) were invited to complete a questionnaire. A total of 64 responses were received; this included 38 from AOs representing a 23% response rate and 13 from SSCs representing a 56% response rate. In addition, focus groups were held with some employers organisations.

The consultation has provided information on:

- the current level of awareness of the European Qualifications Framework;
- the perceived benefits of increasing visibility of the EQF within regulated qualifications; and
- options for raising the visibility of the EQF for regulated qualifications.

On the basis of the feedback to the consultation, recommendations have been made on how work on EQF visibility for regulated qualifications should be taken forward.

FINDINGS

Most respondents (73%) believe that raising the awareness of the EQF would be beneficial. However, there is general agreement that there is confusion and some concern regarding who has overall responsibility for implementing the EQF and raising awareness of the EQF across the UK.

There is growing need to interpret qualifications from different countries. Examples of the need to interpret qualifications is in relation to exemption requests, organisational requests, learners who have come from an EU Country with qualifications and are undertaking an apprenticeship, but also requests for interpretation of qualifications from countries outside the EU. No definitive procedure or process was identified by respondents about how they interpret qualifications.

The EQF was perceived to offer a wide range of benefits for key stakeholders, including employers, AOs, SSCs, learners and job seekers. These benefits can be summarised in relation to mobility, transparency, clarity, quality standards and overall increasing the knowledge throughout the member

states and internationally regarding the UK education system. Respondents were in agreement that a communications strategy was needed. Careers advisers, teachers, lecturers, job centres etc. would all need to be fully aware of the EQF, to offer consistent advice in the marketplace to learners and employers.

A full range of options for making clear the EQF levels reference on UK certificates were considered, they included:

- displaying the EQF level on the front of all regulated qualification certificates achieved by learners, supplemented with an explanation of the EQF and how the EQF levels correspond to the levels of UK qualifications frameworks;
- displaying the EQF level on the front of unit/credit certificates for regulated qualifications, supplemented with an explanation of the EQF and how the EQF levels correspond to the levels of UK qualifications frameworks;
- displaying a table on the back of qualification and unit/credit certificates for regulated qualifications to illustrate how the EQF levels correspond to the levels of UK qualifications frameworks;
- a separate EQF reference leaflet issued to learners receiving their qualification and/or unit certificates for regulated qualifications;
- displaying information and a table to illustrate how the EQF levels correspond to the levels of UK qualifications frameworks on Awarding Organisations' websites;
- if a learner record/transcript exists, displaying EQF level on this, supplemented with an explanation of the EQF and how the EQF levels correspond to the levels of UK qualifications framework; and
- a link from the qualification level field of the Register of Regulated Qualifications and the SCQF database, which displays an explanation of the EQF and a table to illustrate how the EQF levels correspond to the levels of UK qualifications frameworks.

The main message from the consultation was that an online solution is preferred for raising awareness of the EQF. The online option was supported because it would have least impact on current processes, also any further change needed could easily be made without excessive costs. The online solution could include:

- a link from the qualification level field of the Register of Regulated Qualifications and the SCQF database, which displays an explanation of the EQF and a table to illustrate how the EQF levels correspond to the levels of UK qualifications framework;
- displaying information and a table to illustrate how the EQF levels correspond to the levels of UK qualifications frameworks on Awarding Organisations' websites; and
- a reference could be made on the front (or back) of qualification/unit certificates to a website where a fuller explanation of the EQF is given.

TAKING THINGS FORWARD

In order to take forward an online solution it was considered necessary to:

- Consider the feasibility of implementing the preferred solutions on a UK basis and how this should be approached from an NCP perspective.
- Conduct further work with AOs, SSCs, regulators and other key stakeholders as necessary to: explore the feasibility of the possible online solutions; the nature of the solutions and; how to take these forward.
- Develop a comprehensive communications strategy to support the implementation of the preferred options.
- Set out who has overall responsibility for EQF implementation and awareness raising.
- Establish a suitable timeline for the implementation of the preferred online solutions taking cognisance of European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and European Quality Assurance for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) developments in the UK and the synergy between these initiatives.
- Target all stakeholders including awarding organisations, sector skills councils, training and education providers, professional bodies, careers information, advice and guidance co-ordinators, employers and learners.
- Propose activities, such as educational workshops, for key stakeholders on: the national frameworks; the EQF and its benefits; what the EQF means for them and; how these different frameworks relate to each other.
- Look at ways to ensure consistency of information (on websites and materials produced) across the different organisations and UK countries.
- Evaluate the overall effectiveness of the online solution in raising the awareness of the EQF and ensuring that it is fit for purpose and continues to meet all stakeholder requirements.

PROJECT 5: INTERNATIONAL PEER LEARNING

The aim of this project was to build trust in the rigour of the UK qualifications frameworks and the process by which they were referenced to the EQF. There were two main actions to building the trust – to explain the UK provision to interested parties in other countries and to ask questions of experts from other countries about their provision. It was acknowledged that this building of trust is likely to be a long process and that the EQF had provided a beginning and an impetus to this process.

There are already exchanges with other countries via the official meeting of NCPs, the EQF Advisory Group and its sub groups, particularly the Learning Outcomes Group which offers peer learning activities. There are also a wide range of informal exchanges of information between colleges and companies with exchanges and interests in different countries. It was considered necessary to supplement these useful exchanges with activities that focussed hard on frameworks and EQF referencing.

The UK NCPs agreed that they should:

- supply international experts to the referencing process in other countries if this was requested;
- attend international meetings where the focus was on the referencing process; and
- arrange bilateral discussions with France and Germany (as large EU countries).

INTERNATIONAL EXPERTS TO REFERENCING PROCESSES

The UK was one of the first countries to complete the referencing process. The NCP leads in the UK engaged international experts from Ireland, Hungary, Slovenia, Spain and the European Universities Association. The experts made a positive contribution to the UK processes and reports. Most European countries have been building NQFs and setting out on a referencing process. So far the UK has supplied experts to Belgium, Estonia, Ireland, Lithuania, Netherlands and Portugal.

The costs of these processes have been met by the host country.

ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS

In addition to official EU meetings in Brussels and Strasbourg, the UK NCPs have made contributions to EQF referencing conferences in Estonia, Ireland, Finland, Germany (x2), Hungary, and Lithuania.

The costs of these meetings have been met by the host country.

BILATERAL DISCUSSIONS

France and Germany are large EU member states. France has had a qualifications levels framework since the 1960s and Germany is currently developing a new qualifications framework. It was considered important for UK qualifications to be well understood in these countries and for UK experts to have confidence in the qualifications processes in these countries. A proposal from the UK to French and German counterparts for a meeting to discuss in detail the form, function and current issues related to frameworks and the referencing process was met enthusiastically and meetings have taken place in Paris and Cardiff. A further meeting with German colleagues is under discussion.

The concept of bilateral meetings with informal exchanges has been attractive to other countries and Ireland, Poland and Cyprus have observed a meeting that has taken place. The meetings have been useful to all concerned with each participant expressing a much deeper understanding of the basis of framework levels and qualifications in all the countries.

The costs of these meetings have been the responsibility of each expert attending⁶.

SUMMARY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION WORK

The UK NCPs have made a good start to building an understanding of the EQF and its potential amongst the stakeholder groups of the UK. There is still much to be done in the UK, ranging from better and more extensive communications to promotion of the economic advantages of better transparency of qualifications across Europe.

The EQF has helped the NCPs to focus on the development of systematic recognition of learning that takes place outside formal learning institutions. The wealth of case study experience has been opened up for a wide range of interested parties to use in their own contexts.

The EQF is a metric for levels of learning and it is clearly important that people with aspirations to work or study in other European countries can see the equivalence of their qualifications in their country of choice. For this reason, a start has been made to show the EQF levels of UK qualifications in a way that is accessible to people from other countries without confusing citizens and undermining established UK framework levels.

The whole EQF project to establish transparency across the qualifications systems in EU countries depends on making sure accurate and trusted information about qualifications levels is available and used. The UK NCPs have started a process of capacity building in this respect.

NEXT STEPS

The work so far is only a beginning and the NCPs propose to extend activities into 2011/12 on the basis of the experience so far. The NCPs have agreed to continue to work collaboratively using European funding to:

- implement a comprehensive communications strategy, targeting employers in particular;
- produce an EQF digest for wide circulation that will include a summary of the synergy between the EU education and qualifications initiatives, a summary of the 2010 activities and a commentary on the UK referencing report in the light of referencing reports from other countries;
- work closely with Sectors (by supplying information and answering questions) and promote the recognition of prior learning in relation to the EQF; and
- facilitate technical exchanges between key EU Member States.

⁶For the meeting in Cardiff (18 April 2011) the local costs of visitors from other countries were met by the project

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