

Comments on the Irish EQF referencing process from a European perspective

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It was a pleasure for me to participate in the Irish referencing process, as one of the three international experts involved, and I am glad to share with you today some reflections on that experience.

Given the short time span, I have linked my story to 5 important questions about the European referencing process. During the Irish referencing process “lessons were learned” that are, without doubt, meaningful for other European countries.

I start with Question 1:

Does the national report give a full picture of and insight in the Irish Qualification System ?

The answer is negative. The Irish report as such, gives only a picture of the “basics” of the Irish Qualification System, because it is impossible to explain in a compact report of about 100 pages the more complex but very relevant aspects of this national system. Nevertheless, the Irish report is – in my opinion – a “model” for other countries.

Like an “entrance hall” of a hotel, it contains enough information for guiding international visitors to other parts of the building, even the more distant rooms. Part 2 of the Irish report is a perfect illustration of this entrance function. It gives a complete but short description of the Irish education and training system: the different sectors, providers, curricula and types of awards, and that in relationship to the National Framework. In each section we can find links to specific websites on subsections of the qualification system.

This enables the reader to look for more detail information, and even more important, to follow ongoing and new developments within the qualification system, since the referencing report is only a “snapshot” of the situation today.

This is an advantage of an English-speaking country: all documents are directly available to an international public. For others countries, like for example the Netherlands and the Flemish Community of Belgium that are Dutch-speaking countries, it is not so obvious to deliver this more detailed information to a wider European public. These countries are expecting support from the European Commission to get their basic documents translated into English or French.

Part 2 of the Irish report has been included on the demand of the international experts. To Irish stakeholders this information may seem rather superfluous, but for the international public it is necessary to be able to situate the different types of awards and qualifications.

I give an example: the placement of the Leaving Certificate at two levels of the National Framework and by consequence at two levels of the EQF, needed more explanation and this information is given on pages 23 and 24 of the printed report.

Papers are not sufficient to understand a complex system. The international experts involved in the process could take advantage of the productive dialogues within the Steering Committee. Other international experts can contact the National Qualifications Authority and discuss specific matters in the European Advisory Group on EQF.

Question 2: In Europe there are two overarching Qualifications Frameworks: EQF and the European framework for Higher Education. Is it therefore necessary to organise two referencing processes for the highest qualification levels ? And what is the added value of the referencing to EQF ?

The European Working Group that elaborated the list of 10 criteria and procedures for referencing National Qualifications Frameworks to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) was very aware of that question. Therefore, it made the list of criteria fully compatible with the criteria and procedures of the Bologna process so that a duplication of the work wouldn't be necessary. The Irish referencing process is a good illustration of integrating the results of the former referencing to the Bologna framework into the referencing process to EQF. The Maltese referencing process, that is almost finished now, is the first example of a combined referencing to both frameworks in one process.

In the Irish Qualification System, and also in the Flemish Qualification System of Belgium, the highest levels are not exclusively dedicated to Higher Education awards. Also higher vocational training awards can be aligned to these levels. In Ireland, the added value of the EQF referencing for the highest levels lays here: these higher training awards can now be aligned to EQF, next to the higher education awards. This creates opportunities for sectoral qualifications and frameworks to reference to the National Framework of Qualifications. But sectors should also be interested in referencing to the lowest levels, from a lifelong learning perspective.

Question 3: The European Qualifications Framework contains, as a meta-framework 8 levels; thus this mean that National Qualifications Frameworks should be adapted to a 8-level structure ?

The Irish Framework was launched in October 2003, this is almost 5 years before the adoption of EQF, and it has a 10-level structure. In Ireland there is an overall consensus that this 10-level structure matches very well with the existing Irish education and training system.

The fact that level 1 and 2 of the Irish framework are both linked to level one of EQF and that this alignment is well motivated in the report, is an illustration that national decisions and traditions can be maintained, even under pressure of a European meta-framework.

Annex 2 of the referencing report shows a clear comparison and exposition of the two sets of descriptors for each of the 10 respectively 8 levels of the two frameworks. The fact that the Irish framework contains more levels than EQF causes no problems. Some countries have or will have a 7-level framework, for example Iceland. In this case two EQF-levels will match with one national level. This is all possible thanks to the flexibility of the European framework EQF.

The visibility of national qualification frameworks versus EQF is a point of attention. Some countries, like Ireland, have a National Framework with more than 8 levels that has been promoted very actively to the national public before the EQF Recommendation. These countries see not much added value in adding an EQF level at the forefront of their qualification system. EQF is meant as a “meta-framework” or “translation device”; it should not be a disturbing factor in using the National Framework levels by the broader public. It will be a challenge for Ireland to hold the national levels on the forefront and add now the EQF levels, as a bridge to other national frameworks.

Question 4: When should we start communication with the stakeholders ? When is the referencing process finished ?

In Ireland communication with stakeholders has become inherent to education policy. The established structure for consultation has been useful during the referencing process.

The impressive list of references at the end of the Irish report makes clear that transparency was already achieved on almost all topics before the start of the referencing process, by several publications, all available on public sites. The recent impact study is another illustration of the ongoing dialogue with stakeholders on the implementation of the Irish National Framework.

Part 4 of the Irish report contains a list of matters arising from the EQF referencing exercise. These matters are challenges for the near future, both in Ireland as in the other European countries. These are not new challenges, but they had disappeared in the background and by the national referencing processes they come again on the European agenda.

The first one is the relationship between the European Framework EQF and the European Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications.

The next one is the relationship between the European Framework and sectoral qualifications that are not sanctioned by public authorities or aligned to national qualification frameworks.

In part 3 of the report, under criterion 4, we get a clear picture of which qualifications are not yet assigned to the Irish framework and some examples of how it could be realised in the future. So, the referencing process is an ongoing process.

As Ireland is the first country that formally has referenced his framework to the European Qualifications Framework, it will certainly be approached now by international sectoral groups and by countries outside Europe with the proposal to reference their qualifications frameworks to the Irish. With the hope that this single, national alignment can guarantee an alignment to EQF and by this way, automatically to other national frameworks in Europe. But, life is not as simple as that. It will necessitate several cross-referencing processes and reports to reach the ambitious objective of a pan-European recognition of sectoral qualifications frameworks or non-European qualifications frameworks. A working group installed by the European Commission is working on that topic.

Question 5: What should be a priority in reforming qualification systems ?

The Irish case demonstrates that the first priority is to have good quality assurance in place on all levels of education and training. This is a condition for creating mutual trust between providers. And this mutual trust is a precondition to set up feasible procedures for recognition of prior learning and common credit systems.

In part 3 of the Irish report, we find ample information on the quality assurance arrangements in the different education and training sectors. These arrangements form a solid fundament for further work on validation of non-formal and informal learning. The Qualifications Authority should further promote and coordinate the development of processes for recognition of prior learning. It should also be a topic in the dialogue with NARIC in Ireland.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I stop here my list of questions.

It is up to you now to add other ones that we can put on the European agenda. We will discuss this European agenda during the Belgian EU Presidency, next year in Bruges. After a conference on enhancing the synergy between general education, VET and higher education, the ministers will decide on the European agenda towards 2020.

Concluding remark.

Ireland is the first country finishing the referencing to the European Qualifications Framework. The Irish approach to this referencing process and the report can be seen as a “model” for other European countries. The real added value for the Irish citizens shall become visible once several countries have also finished the referencing and, by this way, individual qualifications have become more visible and transparent all over Europe. The European deadline for that is 2012.

Let us all work together to reach this ambitious goal!

I thank you for your attention.