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## "EQF Reference Exercise" Conference

Introductory speech

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Education and Culture DG

### *Introduction*

Minister O'Keefe, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here today. And for a good reason: to mark the fact that Ireland is the first Member State to reference its national framework of qualifications to the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning.

It is my first time too, to visit Ireland in my present job, as Director-General for Education and Culture. But I was a frequent visitor in the past, when I was responsible for the European Social Fund. I have seen how your strategy of investing in skills and innovation has paid off, and I believe it will be a good basis for coming out of the crisis, which has touched all of us, but Ireland in particular.

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### *Backdrop is economic crisis*

Qualifications frameworks – EQF or NQFs – may come across as a little dull and technical. But, even if it sounds undramatic, creating and fitting together qualification frameworks from different European countries actually makes a real difference to people, and is a real contribution in response to the economic crisis.

As you know in Ireland, the crisis is having a serious impact on jobs, on the well-being of our societies, and on the lives of co-citizens.

Thus, helping *all* citizens raise their skills is, more than ever, a necessity. We knew all this even before the crisis: the speed of technological development, the complexity of today's society, environmental constraints, the certainty that the future will be marked by unrelenting change - these call on people to develop new skills for work as well as for life.

The crisis has simply underlined something we already knew – that our future well-being has to be built on different foundations than the past, and that the only secure base is our knowledge and creativity.

People must be able to upgrade their skills to keep up with change. They must be able to move around to take up better job opportunities. They must be able to keep learning throughout their lives. These are then the critical factors for short-term recovery and for sustained long-term economic growth and social wellbeing.

Education and training have always sought to prepare people for the world of work. But as that world changes, schools and universities must change too, so our young people have the right knowledge and skills for today's and tomorrow's jobs.

More openness, more partnership between education and the labour market – between education and business and society at large - will help both sides discover what the other needs.

Citizens, too, are looking for openness. They want their learning recognised so they can move with their skills when and where they want.

This is a well-known story in Ireland. You have a long history of people being mobile, and overcoming many obstacles in the process – one being lack of recognition in the new country for qualifications gained at home. More recently, thanks to your open labour market, you have been bringing people in to work – but they, again, will have had similar difficulties.

It doesn't stop there, either. People also return to their country with their skills and their viewpoints enriched by their experiences abroad. What counts for the individual is to have their lifelong portfolio of skills, whether acquired here or abroad, recognised wherever they go.

To do this, education and training must put the learner at the centre. To focus on what a person knows and can do - the learning outcomes - rather than on the input - how and where the learning took place.

This calls for more information and transparency about qualifications, and mutual trust in each others' national qualification systems throughout Europe. That is why we are here today.

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### ***Added value of European cooperation in E+T***

EU Member States have full responsibility for education and training. European policy cooperation is a support: Member States come together to address agreed common challenges – how to develop education and training despite the economic crisis, for example, or how to make it easier for learners and professionals to move between European countries.

I imagine you are all familiar with our Erasmus programme: over 27.000 young Irish students have travelled to another EU country, expanding their skills and their personal horizons. What's even more impressive, you have welcomed over 50.000 European students who have had their lives enriched by a stay in Ireland.

We also coordinate and support peer-learning by the Member States. And we develop common European tools which, once agreed on by Member States, countries may choose to use. Such as the European Qualifications Framework, of course.

The EQF is one of our – and your - biggest success stories.

It has sparked real momentum for developing national qualification frameworks, to make lifelong learning a reality. All Member States have decided to implement this voluntary recommendation. The potential of the EQF to spur reform is felt not only in Europe but throughout the world.

I stress that this is not a regulation, but the outcome of cooperative exchange. This type of voluntary recommendation is very much how the EU works in areas like education and training, where EU competence is limited, supporting the Member States' efforts. As the EQF and our European tools show, such 'soft' cooperation produces powerful results.

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### ***What EQF and National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) offer***

Within the EU we have 27 very different, independent national education systems. To move between countries, and to have your qualifications recognised in the process, we need to understand each other.

This is what the EQF makes possible. It is a common reference which works as a translation device between national qualifications systems. It safeguards the diversity of our systems, but makes communication between them possible, by using the common language of learning outcomes.

For the user, the EQF opens up Europe, making it easier to move from one country to another.

Just as important, it opens up the world of education. It covers all sectors and all types of education. Every individual should be able to rely on a qualifications framework to help them put together a learning pathway that is flexible and lifelong, moving from vocational training to higher education, for example, or recognising the skills gained through voluntary work.

I am glad to say that all EU countries are now developing national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) on this basis. They plan to follow Ireland's lead, and to reference their frameworks to the EQF by 2011.

Every new qualification should have its 'EQF tag' by 2012. Our citizens will all benefit. To take the example on your government website "EU Matters.ie", the pipe-fitter from Letterkenny will be able to bring his or her certificate to an employer in Naples who should accept it in the same way as an Italian qualification.

This kind of personal mobility for work and study will be increasingly common in the Europe of the future. Free movement around Europe is a key principle of the Treaty. For example, we believe that all young people should have the opportunities that Erasmus students enjoy, to improve their skills in another country. Free movement, in both directions, will always be important for Ireland and your open labour market. In this mobile Europe, the EQF will help everyone make the most of their skills.

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### ***Ireland a model for other European countries***

Ever since the 1960s, Ireland's emphasis on upgrading skills and high-quality education and training have been central to the competitive knowledge economy you have been putting in place. This ambitious long-term strategy - which includes the Irish NFQ - has been a key part of the economic growth and success

which Ireland has known until the current crisis. This strategy remains essential for a rapid and sustainable recovery.

And it has enduring value outside your country too. Ireland was the first Member State to establish a national framework for qualifications. Your experience is a very good model for the other European countries which are now following your lead.

I particularly want to thank your National Qualifications Authority, especially Sean O Foghlu and Jim Murray, for their vision, support and advice in helping us, in the Commission and other Member States, to make the EQF the success it is today.

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### ***Conclusion***

Ireland has a long tradition of influencing European policies. You have been a team-player in our voluntary European cooperation in education and training. I am sure you will continue to support the European tools - the EQF, Europass, ECVET ... - that give Irish people the chance to show their skills.

At the same time, this is not a moment for sitting back. We must continue to invest in and improve education and training right across Europe:

- to improve existing skills;
- to ensure people have the right skills for the opportunities that will certainly arise once the crisis is past;
- and to design learning that is relevant, responsive and open to the needs of people, of the labour market and of society at large.

This is crucial for maintaining and developing the skilled and flexible workforce which will be a platform for economic recovery.

This is why last year the Commission launched our New Skills for New Jobs initiative. Jobs, and skills needs, are constantly evolving. New Skills for New Jobs will build our capacity to understand where, and what, the new jobs will be, so that we can adapt education programmes to provide people with the right skills and knowledge mix.

With Ireland's National Skills Strategy examining these issues, too, our interlocking concerns will help us meet the challenge of upskilling Europeans for the demands of the future. We can help you define your skills needs; and we can learn from you, in turn.

Minister, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me congratulate Ireland for your leading role in the EQF, which will pay off for Irish and all European citizens alike. The crisis is biting deeply in Ireland and across Europe. But I am certain that our combined efforts – on European tools, on New Skills for New Jobs, on our EU Strategy for Growth and Jobs – will help lift us all out of the crisis, ready to face the future.

Thank you.