

Joint Ireland and UK Peer Learning Activity on upper secondary school leaving qualifications (SLQs) giving direct access to first cycle degree courses and their place in the EQF

Background Paper

1. Introduction

Most countries have now completed a referencing process where the levels of the national qualifications framework (NQF) are officially linked to levels in the EQF. In most of these countries the NQF contains school leaving qualifications (SLQs) and these are therefore linked to an EQF level. One feature of SLQs is that they can provide the holder with direct access, or even an entitlement, to the first cycle of higher education, for example a bachelors degree. As there have been steps through the Bologna process to harmonise the higher education cycles, and by definition SLQs are usually issued to young people of about 17 or 18 years who have successfully completed a full programme of schooling, it might be expected that these qualifications be referenced to the same EQF level. However we know that this is not always the case and that countries have encountered challenges in establishing the relationship between SLQs and their NQF (e.g. France, Germany and Austria).

Qualifications achieved in the school system that give direct access to the first cycle of higher education are not a homogeneous group. These SLQs include general education qualifications covering subjects and disciplines and vocational qualifications covering sectors and professions.

The Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications¹ concerning Higher Education in the European Region deals specifically with cross border recognition of SLQs that give access to higher education. Basically it says that SLQs used in one country for access to higher education should be recognised in another country unless it can be shown that substantial differences exist between the general requirements for access in the country where the qualification was achieved and in the country where recognition of the qualification is sought. Whilst there may be specific conditions when the recognition may be withheld; the argument is that SLQs that offer access to higher education should be treated in the same way in all countries. It might be expected therefore that all SLQs that give access to the first cycle of higher education would, through the country's NQF, be linked to the same EQF level.

The PLA explores the factors involved in allocating NQF levels to SLQs and aims for a deeper understanding of the process of giving a level to these qualifications. More specifically the participants will try to:

¹ See <http://www.coe.int/it/web/conventions/search-on-treaties/-/conventions/rms/090000168007f2c7>

- analyse the extent to which learning outcomes influence the levelling of SLQs within NQFs and identify other factors that are important in identifying a level for an SLQ;
- identify perceived cross national inconsistencies in the way SLQs are linked to NQF levels;
- inform the future development of the EQF referencing process, particularly the process of horizontal comparisons;
- explore the extent to which NQF and EQF levels of SLQs are used in valuing SLQs for cross border mobility purposes.

A PLA on a similar theme '*school leaving certificates giving access to HE*' was held in Tallinn in September 2011. For this PLA a survey undertaken by Cedefop (when only a few countries had referenced their NQF to the EQF), indicated that while the majority of countries were considering relating these qualifications (both general and vocational) to EQF level 4, some were considering relating these qualifications to levels 3 and 5. Five years on and another survey has been undertaken with the aim of providing a description and explanation of the current state of play in relation to the levelling of SLQs to NQF and therefore EQF levels. The results of this survey will be presented at the Belfast PLA.

2. The issues involved in allocating a level to SLQs

2.1 Learning outcomes are only part of the story

The qualifications frameworks in Europe have learning outcomes as the core of transparency. Level descriptors are based on learning outcomes and they form the basis of comparison with the learning outcomes expected in qualifications. In theory the comparison of learning outcomes of a qualification with those in the level descriptors would lead to a level being seen as the obvious best fit for the qualification. However learning outcomes are written in different ways and some are more clearly related to outcomes of learning than others. At the same time the breadth of a qualification, or its general nature, may make it difficult to pinpoint one NQF level as the natural reference point for the qualification. It may be that the learning outcomes in the level descriptor of the NQF are too general to make an uncontested link to the specific learning outcomes in a qualification. Whilst fundamentally useful, there are limits to the value of learning outcomes for levelling qualifications.

The recent PLA in Berlin² on the mastercraftman qualification showed that contextual factors play a key role in determining the level of a qualification and as these factors vary from country to country it is unsurprising that the matercraftsman qualifications do not relate to the same level of the EQF. The PLA concluded:

Levelling decisions are much more influenced by national context factors as well as the levelling method and criteria

² Report forthcoming

used by a given country rather than by differences in learning outcomes

The social dimension of referencing has been described in the 2nd edition of the European Commission Note on referencing³. National social factors such as the value of the qualification in gaining entry to a job, getting a better job and wages, or giving access to a study programme are important. Additionally the level of engagement of social partners can affect the perceived level of a qualification. The feedback on quality assurance can also be important and the assessment procedures used in a qualification can influence the perception of its value. All of these factors can influence the decision to allocate a NQF level to a qualification and all of them go beyond the simple consideration of learning outcomes.

2.2 Traditional positions of qualifications

SLQs are anchor points in a qualifications hierarchy. The general public know them and what they stand for – they know where they can lead in the labour market and in terms of access to study programmes. Qualifications achieved in upper secondary education interface with higher education and this is perhaps the best known of all the progression transitions that are supported by qualifications. There is often an implicit hierarchy of qualifications based on where each type of qualification leads. These hierarchies are based on long traditions and are deeply embedded in national cultures. When an NQF is introduced, countries have the choice to make the NQF independent of these hierarchies and traditions and evaluate each qualification type according to its learning outcomes, or they can accept the hierarchies and base the new NQF on them. When countries choose the latter and consider the learning outcomes of a qualification, there may be challenges in making a good fit to the level descriptor of NQF level.

2.3 Parity between general and vocational school leaving qualifications

In some countries there are distinct pathways in upper secondary education. A general route and a vocational route and each has its own qualification. These qualifications may exist in 'parallel' in the education structure but the qualifications reflect the traditions of general and vocational education and are markedly different in content, context, purpose, assessment and governance. When these two types of qualifications are compared to the NQF levels there can be disagreement on where they are located. Often the analysis of learning outcomes does not resolve these disagreements and social factors and long standing traditional positions are used to support the argument for one qualification being placed above another in terms of level. This issue has arisen in Austria, Germany and The Netherlands.

³ European Commission, 2013, Referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF: Note 5

2.4 Cross border recognition

Higher education evaluates the qualifications of new students as they apply for admission. The Lisbon convention on recognition of qualifications aims, within limits, for an open market for qualified students across countries. Whilst recognition is always in the hands of the receiving institution, the convention sets out that unless a substantial difference exists between a foreign SLQ and the home SLQ, the foreign SLQ should be accepted in the same way as the home SLQ would be. Therefore it is important that qualifications achieved in upper secondary education are comparable in terms of level of demand. Some groups of countries, often with similarities in their education and training systems, have entered into agreements on the acceptability of their SLQs for admission to higher education.

The EQF provides a reference point for all SLQs and it may become more useful for admissions officers in higher education institutions. However if the EQF level for SLQs is different from country to country (possibly due to the contextual factors in the country) the EQF will be seen as a weakened reference point because it will not be providing the transparency between qualifications systems that is required.

2.5 Learning from each other

Transparency in qualifications can lead to better understanding and higher levels of trust. Comparing SLQs from different countries involves reviewing both the learning outcomes expected by the qualification and the national context in which the qualification sits. The process of comparison, and the shared goal of comparability, means making national differences understandable and involves peer learning through mutual exchange between countries.

The outcome of this peer learning applies to the EQF as well as the participating countries. The EQF and its referencing positions and processes may need to evolve as we learn more and more about SLQs in different countries.

3. The PLA themes

3.1 How NQFs accommodate more than one major qualification giving direct access to first cycle degree courses

Upper secondary education often includes programmes that are general and some that are vocational. These programmes form tracks or pathways that cater for different aptitudes and ambitions of learners. The qualification that is designed to be fit for purpose for the programme aims will be based on different learning outcomes and different assessment arrangements. However both types of qualification support a progression route into higher education programmes. These programmes are also likely to be distinct from one another but some countries try to remove barriers for learners who wish to change their pathway into higher education, for example a vocationally oriented SLQ can support entry to a general (academic) bachelors degree.

Questions

1. Is the rationale for two pathways in upper secondary education always clear?
2. Are the two types of SLQs comparable in terms of their place at the same NQF level?
3. Do social partners see value in the two types of SLQs?
4. Does each type of SLQ provide recognition and progression in terms of entry to first cycle higher education?
5. Do NQFs provide flexibility in terms of facilitating changing pathways for learners?

3.2. Why do some Member States not include SLQs in their NQFs?

SLQs are anchor points of qualifications hierarchies; nevertheless some countries do not include them in their NQF. For the sake of mutual trust it is important to understand the reasons for not including SLQs in NQFs, the implications of the decision and to appreciate the views of the key stakeholders concerning the omission.

Questions

1. Is the rationale for leaving SLQs out of the NQF clear?
2. Is there a time when SLQs might be included?
3. What are the views of social partners about the omission of SLQs?
4. Does the omission of SLQs have implications for recognition, comparability, and progression?

3.3 The NQF levels for SLQs

Some countries have decided to distinguish between qualifications types at the same NQF/EQF level. They use sub levels to do this. One interpretation of this is that the qualifications are deemed to be in a hierarchy one to another and that the NQF levels are not sensitive enough to show this. Another interpretation is that the qualification types have similar learning outcomes but differ in the way social partners perceive them. A further distinction is that some countries wish to indicate that one qualification has a higher learning volume than another at the same NQF level.

Some countries allocate SLQs to two NQF levels or across two NQF levels. This may be done to reflect the breadth of expected learning outcomes or to differentiate actual attainment by SLQ graduates.

Questions

1. What is the rationale for using two levels or sub levels, is it the case that NQFs aim to differentiate qualifications on the basis of the 'volume' of learning outcomes in addition to the level of learning outcomes?
2. Will sub levels become separate NQF levels in time or will the difference in the sub levels gradually erode and mean they are no longer necessary? In the same way, could SLQs that cover two levels be allocated to one level in time?
3. Is it the case that there are too few or too many levels in some NQFs?

4. Does the levelling of SLQs across more than one NQF level or by using sub levels have implications for recognition, comparability, and progression?

3.4 To what extent do vocational SLQs give progression and further access?

General and vocational SLQs are designed for different purposes and to support different progression pathways. Nevertheless both types of SLQ support entry to first cycle programmes such as bachelors degree programmes in higher education. The range of first cycle programmes is wide and progression to them may be favoured by either general SLQs or by vocational SLQs.

Questions

1. What are the main first cycle programmes that are commonly accessible to people holding a vocational SLQ?
2. Are some first cycle programmes not accessible to people holding a vocational SLQ?
3. How do HEIs evaluate vocational SLQs for admission?
4. Does achieving a vocational SLQ have implications for recognition, comparability, and progression?

3.5 SLQs and mobility

Countries may vary by the degree of selectivity that operates in access to higher education. Some countries have more comprehensive access to HE than others. SLQs exist in different forms and are evaluated on a fit for purpose basis. According to the Lisbon convention on the recognition of qualifications it has to be proven that a qualification achieved in another country must be substantially different to the home qualification if it is not accepted as an entry requirement. Additionally specific bilateral or multilateral agreements exist between countries that state that certain SLQs from different countries may be treated in the same way as a local SLQ.

Questions

1. To what extent are SLQs facilitating cross border access to first cycle qualifications?
2. How are SLQs evaluated by HEIs and by ENIC-NARIC bodies?
3. What is the role of existing agreements between countries on the comparability and acceptability of SLQs?
4. If an SLQ from a country is not included in their NQF (and therefore does not have an EQF level) or an international agreement, are there implications for recognition, comparability, and progression?